

Combating COVID-19 Risk at Summer Camps

RJ Frasca | *June 1, 2021*



According to the American Camp Association (ACA), only 20% to 30% of summer camps operated in 2020. Preliminary estimates show that the camp industry lost as much as $16 billion in revenue because of the pandemic. As with other physical venues and workplaces, many enterprises that operate summer camps and education programs are currently facing the challenges of reopening while ensuring safe operations that comply with local requirements and medical guidance.

"The pandemic has accelerated the need for powerful, easy-to-use digital information tools for organizations to confidently reopen under safe operating conditions," said Rick Kurland, CEO of employment screening and technology firm EBI, Inc. "The best tools will have a built-in framework that adheres to local and national safety standards and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, and mitigates the risk of an illness outbreak that not only puts your staff and campers at risk, but also impacts your financial operations."

This year, automated distance monitoring and contact tracing technology, nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), and vaccines are providing both sleepaway and day camps with new ways to manage risk and safely welcome campers and staff back.

Distance Monitoring and Contact Tracing

Social distancing remains one of the biggest challenges for camps to enforce. While many may choose not to operate at full capacity, they will still likely need to abide by CDC guidance and keep campers physically distanced from one another. According to the CDC, the more people a camper or staff member interacts with and the longer that interaction is, the higher the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Last summer, South Breeze Day Camp was among the few summer camps that operated a successful—albeit smaller—program. The camp is based in Florida, a state that maintained relatively looser COVID-19 restrictions than most of the nation. According to Eric Meyer, camp owner and director, South Breeze followed the ACA's recommendations to create a lower-risk camp setting. This included creating small groups of no more than 11 campers who stayed together all day, each day. Instead of having the campers travel to art and science rooms, those teachers would go to the assigned room for each small grouping of campers.

South Breeze's smaller size and decision to operate at two-thirds capacity helped make this approach work, but a larger camp or overnight camp may not be able to deliver the same level of small group containment and traffic redirection. In such cases, an automated contact tracing process can help stem the spread of illness and, in the event of potential exposure, decrease the notification time from days to minutes.

The latest distance monitoring and contact tracing technology can ensure social distancing compliance through lightweight ultra-wideband sensors that campers wear. These sensors pinpoint campers' proximity to one another within centimeters and alert them when they are too close. This technology also allows for instant contact tracing if anyone is exposed to COVID-19.

Ultra-wideband contact tracing technology may better protect people's privacy than other methods—an important consideration when outfitting staffers and campers, many of whom are under 18 years old. Some tracking technology, like GPS, collects location data from users. Digital contact tracing through ultra-wideband does not record people's movements, just the proximity of people at a pre-set distance.

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Ultra-wideband technology only collects data that is necessary for contact detection and evaluation, and personal data is only processed when people need to be informed of a potential issue. This level of privacy protection is in accordance with the principles of "privacy by design," where developers embed privacy into the design of the technology, and "privacy by default," where privacy settings are set to the strictest guidelines by factory default.

Pre-Screening

One of the most effective nonpharmaceutical interventions is conducting daily screening for staff and campers. While screening does not address the risk posed by asymptomatic cases, using a multi-tiered process that screens a staffer or camper before they depart for camp can help reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission on-site. From the comfort of home, for example, a staffer or parent (on behalf of their child) can log into an app on their mobile device and respond to CDC-recommended questions to screen for signs of infection.

The system can also require a body temperature self-check using a smart thermometer that transmits temperature to a mobile device. If a question response or elevated temperature suggests an infection risk, the app can automatically notify the camp's management, and these tools can be customized to advise the at-risk individual on next steps. Staff and campers who pass this initial screening are free to come to camp.

Other technology can help conduct ongoing screening measures on-site, such as no-contact thermal scanners at camp entrance points for staff and campers. Some of these scanners can also screen to ensure people are wearing face masks.

"We will definitely keep doing temperature checks on arrival at camp this year, and we will continue to have a nurse up front at check-in to ensure kids are healthy and have masks on when they show up," Meyer said.

Early Detection

As of May 10, all approved COVID-19 vaccines in the United States are available for individuals aged 16 years and older, and the Pfizer-BioN-Tech vaccine was also authorized for children ages 12 and up. Camps should review their immunization policies and provide space to indicate vaccine status on camp intake and personnel forms. As there are limitations related to accessing the vaccine and age restrictions for vaccination, it is not recommended to exclude campers or staff who have not been vaccinated.

Many camps are introducing routine COVID-19 testing as part of their operational best practices. Environmental Health and Engineering, Inc., a Boston-based consulting firm specializing in environmental health, recommends COVID-19 rapid tests once or twice a week for campers and staff to identify infectious cases as promptly as possible. Saliva-based molecular tests that can be self-collected and shipped to authorized labs have a fast turnaround time of one to three days, and staffers or campers' parents can be notified via text as soon as the results are available. This helps camps isolate potentially ill children and staff and begin the quarantine and contact tracing procedures.

Modeling studies indicate that, together, these testing and quarantine controls have the potential to reduce transmission by 50% to 80%. When used in conjunction with early screening measures and automated ultra-wideband distance monitoring and contact tracing devices, these measures can help camps get ahead of outbreaks before they become widespread.

2021 Summer Camp Outlook

The ACA recommended a vigorous risk mitigation strategy when the COVID-19 pandemic began and, so far, camp directors' efforts appear to be paying off. A recent ACA study of 486 camps serving 90,000 campers found that only 30 campers and 72 camp staff across 74 camps had confirmed COVID-19 cases in 2020.

"The science demonstrates that camps that have implemented strict, layered mitigation strategies—including masking, cohorting, physical distancing, cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, proper handwashing, and respiratory etiquette—have been able to safely operate in person," said Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of ACA.

Proactively implementing these risk mitigation measures can help ensure the safety of staff, campers and their families, and give camps a successful and profitable season this summer.

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