

Summer 'camp' with the neighborhood teens. Is it worth the risk?

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FULL TEXT

After months of seeing friends at Zoom school, on apps like Houseparty, and while playing video games like Minecraft, Kai Mizuno did something different in mid-June. The 12-year-old went to camp.

Or at least, that's what he and his friends called four afternoons of trailing one of the boys' older brothers around the bike trails in Minneapolis.

"We went to these cool places that I'd never been to before, and played games I'd never played before," he said.

"And it was all my friends, so it was fun like that, too."

Some parents this summer —fearing their kids will catch the coronavirus at a big day camp, worried about what isolation is doing to their children's mental health —are coming up with a compromise solution: hiring a teenager to run a "camp" that keeps their children busy and on the move for at least a few hours every day. This can also be a winning solution for teens and young adults, equally tired of screens and unable to get a job in this pandemic economy.

"I've been in this house for four months now," said Jordan Sachs-Amrami, 21, a senior at UC-Santa Cruz, who tried to organize a summer camp on his mom's driveway in San Rafael, Calif. "I'm desperate to do something."

But the idea is not without its risks. If someone hosts the camp at their own house, they may find homeowner's insurance doesn't cover them for claims arising from what is, after all, a day care business.

And perhaps more concerning: All families involved are putting their collective health in the hands of adolescents.

"I absolutely believe that, in the absence of physical danger, camp is the best thing you can do for your kids," said Deborah Gilboa, a family practitioner in Pittsburgh and a frequent writer and speaker on parenting and youth resilience. "But this summer, I would say, if you can't find a day camp running near you that keeps kids safe enough, then a pop-up camp run by teenagers is not a safe substitute."

Professionals have spent the last four months trying to figure out how to run a camp that's both safe and fun, said Gilboa, who has served as a consultant on some of these discussions. "But a young adult," she said, "no matter how great they are, they have not been coming up with a diarrhea plan, a scrapes and falls plan, or a rainy day plan."

In the summer of 2020, a counselor who offers a hug to a camper with a skinned knee may also transmit the coronavirus. Kids from different households who share art supplies or a hula hoop may spread covid-19. A camper who feels feverish could be overheated —or have a dangerous, highly infectious illness.

"Educators with decades of experience are struggling with this," Gilboa said.

Some parents consider all that —and decide it's a risk they're willing to take. Rachel is a therapist in Beverly Hills, Calif., and a mom to an 8-year-old son. She asked that her last name not be used because "there is so much judgment around adherence to social distancing!"

In May, after watching her son dissolve into tantrums "like I hadn't seen in years," and noticing he was growing weary of screens, Rachel sought out some parents of her son's school friends and suggested they start a camp for their boys. "I would rather do a smaller camp with families we know and expand our bubble," she said, "than deal

with the unknown."

They hired a 17-year-old boy they all know, and paid him \$20 per hour to be the "counselor." The camp started the third week in June, running 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. five days a week, rotating daily among the backyards of the six families involved.

When the kids met up the first morning, she said, they were "euphoric" just to be back together again. She soon noticed her son seemed more relaxed and well-adjusted. He also began to go to bed at a more normal time. Still, as the parents begin to plan the camp's third week, "I second-guess myself a lot," she said. Are the other families as careful outside camp as hers is? Some parents want to bring in coaches or other experts to liven up days that already have started to feel routine —but is that safe? "Even within this camp group, there are different comfort levels," she said.

The president of the American Camp Association, Tom Rosenberg, has navigated these waters for months. Many of his member camps derive their entire income from the summer season. This year, 20 percent of the day camps, and more than 80 percent of the overnight camps, don't plan to run at all, a revenue loss the ACA preliminarily estimates at \$16 billion. "We've been impacted in a terribly calamitous, unique way," he said.

It's been a struggle, he said, just to figure out what games campers can safely play in a covid era (no to tag, yes to scavenger hunts), what activities meet sanitary standards (no to handball, yes to archery, with the equipment wiped down between groups), whether parents can come onto the camp grounds (not this year), which and how many health screening questions to ask every day, and whether a group of kids can travel around together safely without masks, then return home, within a manageable degree of risk.

Many camp directors looked at all the variables, and they just said no. It's not surprising that in this situation, some parents would consider starting their own, hyperlocal group, Rosenberg said. But this summer, more than ever, "whoever's hosting that backyard babysitting program is really taking a lot of risks," he said.

Any parent hosting paid child monitoring on her property should contact her insurance company to see if she's got liability coverage, said Janet Ruiz, a spokeswoman with the Insurance Information Institute. If the insurance company also insures small businesses, coverage may be as simple as an inexpensive add-on to the existing policy. It can seem like an unnecessary added expense up front, but if an accident were to happen, "it would be worth every penny," she said.

As for coronavirus liability, that remains an unknown. Ruiz advises parents create some kind of liability waiver, cobbled together from information available online, as that may provide some degree of legal buffer.

Liability, screening of kids for illness, creating safe games for rowdy kids under a broiling sun —all these considerations and more began to alarm Sachs-Amrami as the college student dove deeper into the idea of running his own small camp. Still, he went ahead and advertised on Nextdoor, the social network for neighbors, which led to an unexpected offer: a job as a counselor at an official soccer day camp in his neighborhood. He starts July 6.

Meanwhile, Kai continues to savor memories of the bike camp. The boy who runs the camp, Zach Marquardt, 17, is pretty busy with sports practices for high school, but says he thinks he can slot in at least one more week in mid-July.

Kai can hardly wait. "I wish I could do it again next week."

Constance Sommer is a writer in Los Angeles.

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