



# The Camp Newsletter

Camp in the Time of Covid

January, 2021



With the camping season rapidly approaching, one of the central questions is “what are the effects of the pandemic on campers and how do we prepare for their return”? As with many things in life: with Covid and kids there is “good news and bad news”. In the good news, research has clearly shown that, in general, kids are incredibly resilient. With support, they can overcome a great deal of adversity. We know that they can – and will – get through this.

As for the “bad news”, we also know that we can expect a transition period on the way back to a sense of normalcy where kids will struggle to readjust to a new and different environment. The heart of this transition period may very well fall right about the time camps are scheduled to open for the summer.

As such, we will likely see an increase in mental health concerns at camps in the approaching summer. It is important to understand and recognize some of the major transition challenges that may become apparent in campers.

- **Separation Anxiety.** We are likely to see an increase in separation anxiety. This would result from kids staying at home for so many months, often doing school remotely, with parents who are typically also working from home. Families are together much more intensely, which is a double-edged sword. It can lead to greater conflict. But it also forms a strong bond of security that may feel threatened as the world begins to open up. There are significant benefits to more family interaction, but it is harder to separate when this extreme togetherness ends. Some campers may be unusually anxious and more prone than usual to seek isolation, withdraw or get into conflict.
- **Socialization Issues.** Separation anxiety will complicate the usual struggles campers may have dealing with socialization issues. Campers will have been away from friends and peers, by this summer, for well over a year. They have been warned to stay six feet apart, to look the other way, and to move away when someone comes close or passes them. Now they will be going to camp, a place with a strong emphasis on socialization – sports, games, teamwork, physical contact, hugging - and intense emotions.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).** Out of necessity during this pandemic, some young people have had to develop behaviors that are on the spectrum of obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD. Most won't be formally diagnosed with OCD. But if they did have a prior OCD diagnosis, the pandemic almost certainly exacerbated it. And even if they previously had no formal diagnosis, the pandemic most likely encouraged some behaviors along OCD lines such as increased fears and phobias around hand washing and personal hygiene, disinfecting surfaces, and not touching or standing too close. But

at camp kids will be in challenging settings every day - they sleep in cabins, eat at common dining halls, shower, swim and play in close proximity. Recently in my practice I'm seeing more kids who are afraid even to go outside, afraid they're going to catch the virus.

- **Eating Disorders.** The challenges some kids face may manifest themselves in eating disorders. These problems are often associated with loss of control. One of the major things kids do have control over is the food they ingest, what they allow themselves to put into their mouths. When they are dealing with a highly disturbing or threatening environment, some kids find that excessive control over their eating at least gives them a sense that they are in charge, even though the behavior is ultimately self-destructive. In my own practice, I've never been busier seeing kids and young adults who struggle with eating disorders.
- **Technology-Related Problems.** Many campers have been zooming or facetimeing all day, streaming movies, playing online games, going to school online, and engaging in intensive social media interactions. During this pandemic, parents struggled to set limits on time using technologies. Campers will likely have difficulties in weaning themselves from these technology habits. And, most kids have been engaged in far less physical activity. Camp is all about physically engaging with the outdoors, participating in water sports, games and outdoor activities with others, often at a fairly high level of intensity. Camp is not about being inside engaging with technology by yourself.
- **Substance Abuse.** Whenever we see an increase in societal stresses and challenges we can expect a parallel increase in substance abuse. In the increased anxiety and depression of the pandemic people are feeling very alone and isolated and find themselves turning to negative coping skills, many of which were discussed above. But one of the most destructive coping strategies is to abuse substances. Camp directors and staff should not be surprised to see campers attempting to sneak in substances such as alcohol, pills, weed, and vaping and nicotine products.

But enough of all this "bad news" - how about ending with a bit of the "good news" side of the coin? Camps already have the skills and abilities to address the types of issues raised above. They just may struggle to deal with the level of intensity they may see this summer. With the increase in mental health issues related to Covid, camps may want to bring in some reinforcements to help out. They may want to have additional staff available to address these concerns. They may want to conduct additional screenings with parents to assess the struggles their children have dealt with during Covid and determine if there are any recent changes in personality or behavior. Many camps already have resident social workers or psychologists and it is my recommendation, given the severity of this pandemic, that all camps bring a professional on staff, and continue to have ongoing relationships with local professional mental health providers to help deal with these issues.

Although there will be challenges, it is important to realize that camp directors, staff, parents, and most of all, the campers themselves, will most likely be excited to return to camp and motivated to make it work. However, there will be parents who are not comfortable sending their kids to camp at all this summer. There also will be campers that, despite parental comfort and encouragement, are not able or willing to go. These families may need more time to readjust. Patience, acceptance, awareness and support will be needed by all during this challenging return to pre-Covid camp experiences. The interactions and friendships that will be experienced at camp will help reinforce this positive cycle as the natural resilience of our campers increasingly asserts itself.

### **About the Author:**

\*Gwenn is a licensed social worker with over 30 years' experience working with children and adolescents. She has a Bachelor of Social Work from Cornell and a Master of Social Work from Columbia. She has been on staff at Schneider's Children's Hospital on Long Island and maintains a private practice as well. Gwenn was a camper for many years and stayed on as both a counselor and group leader. She is also an integral part of the Brown & Brown Camp Crisis Response Team.