Why and how can we have Summer Camp in the time of Covid-19?

We all need the positive interaction camp can provide now more than ever and there are many protocols we can put in place at camp to make it a low-risk activity. Camp is and remains a special place set apart from the rest of our existence. It is a place where we come for respite, to connect with other people in a genuine way that is not the same in other settings, and it is a thin place where we feel closer to God and can strengthen our relationship with Him in ways no other setting can.

Living through this Covid-19 pandemic for almost a year now has been challenging on everyone, whether it be physically, emotionally, socially, financially, or all of these and more. We know from research prior to this pandemic that people who have spent extended periods of time alone have difficulty when they return to normal life. It appears that social skills are like muscles that atrophy form lack of use. Scientist now are saying this is happening now to all of us because of the pandemic. “The first thing to understand is that there are biological reasons for this.” Said Stephanie Cacioppo, the director of the Brain Dynamics Laboratory at the University of Chicago. “It’s not a pathology or mental disorder.” In the New York Times article “We’re all socially awkward now,” Kate Murphy gives us a good overview of the research in this area.

So, what do we do? How do we survive and thrive, when we know this is not going away tomorrow and we may have another year or more under these conditions? I believe we need to find opportunities to meet our social and emotional needs as well as keep the risk of spreading or contracting the virus low. I also believe that each of us have a different need for interaction, different medical needs, and different levels of risk tolerance. If you want to read more about “Summer Camp: Our kids’ antidote to Pandemic Living”, check out the American Camp Association parent’s blog post by Andy Pritikin with the same name here (https://www.acacamps.org/campers-families/parent-blog/summer-camp-our-kids-antidote-pandemic-living).

Next let me tell you how Heartland Conference’s plans are going to help you and your family not only survive but thrive this summer and the research that is guiding our decisions. First, we are creating a variety of opportunities along a spectrum of risk comfort in an effort to meet your family’s needs. Please be aware that all offerings this year will have a fee associated with them in an attempt to cover the direct expenses of the opportunity. This in no way will cover the overhead expenses nor the ongoing expenses of maintaining Templied Hills Camp and so we will be inviting donations to the “Camp 2.0” Campaign with every registration as well as separately. (You can donate on our website by clicking the "Give Today" button at the bottom of any page on the site.)
The theme this year for summer camp will be “Branching Out: Connecting through Christ.” Connecting through Christ is exactly what we need in the time of Pandemic.

In the Lowest level of risk – no contact category we are planning a “Camp in the Box” and virtual opportunities similar to last year, but with a fee.

At Templed Hills Camp we are offering on site opportunities with different levels of risk. We will offer self-contained family camp, structured group Grands/Family camp, as well as individual resident camp.

**Resident Camp! Really?! Why? How? Read more to find out:**

The positive social interactions we get at camp help us thrive and so it is worth it to do whatever it takes to allow children and adults to experience that in the safest environment possible. While we cannot guarantee that you won’t be exposed at camp, we can guarantee that we will take every precaution possible using protocols proven and recommended by scientific research. We are very thankful to summer camps who ran in person camps last summer, tried the recommended procedures and participated in the research studies so that we can benefit.

**Scientific Research:**

Effectiveness of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) on COVID-19 Cases in US Summer Camps’, was authored by H. Suh, J. Meehan, L. Blaisdell, L. Browne with the American Camp Association and Tufts University. This study’s objective was to estimate Covid-19 case rates for children and staff in day and overnight summer camps and to assess whether and which NPIs reduced risks of COVID-19 cases. This is important information to us because although vaccinations have begun, it is unlikely that enough people will be vaccinated by summer for full protection. In summary, this study found that cases were low with on-site camps during summer 2020 and that a combination of NPIs did significantly reduce the risk of cases. They found that campers and staff consistently wearing face covering was the most effective risk reduction method. They also found that when combined with other measures such as targeted physical distancing, modified programs (such as outdoor programming with low-contact sports/activities and use of activity cohorts and pods), and home quarantine prior to camp, the risk was reduced further.
Camp will look different than 2019 and before:

We will be following the State of Ohio requirement for Resident camps. We will also be implementing NPIs as recommended in the above research study as well as other CDC recommendations, including but not limited to consistent wearing of face coverings by campers and staff, targeted physical distancing through cohort/pod programming, home quarantine prior to camp, and more.

What’s next?

We will be continuing to monitor the COVID-19 landscape through local and national health officials and change our processes as new information emerges, as necessary. We will be holding information sessions via zoom for parents and participants to explain the new processes in more detail. Watch the weekly eblasts and social media for dates and times starting later in February. Registration will open by early March. We hope you are thinking about summer camp 2021 and plan to join us. Visit our website's Outdoor Ministries page to see the 2021 camp preview so you can save the dates. If you have any further questions please contact Jill Frey, Executive Director of Outdoor Ministries at jill@heartlanducc.org or 1-800-282-0740, ext. 3.