

These kids' camps kept COVID out last year; now others plan to follow their lead

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February 12, 2021 More than 1,000 children attended the outdoor Liberty Lake Day Camp last summer in Burlington County — and not one contracted coronavirus. The same infection-free scenario was repeated at the YMCA of the Pines camps and Camp Creek Run and the JCC Camps at Medford, all also in Burlington County.

While most outdoor day camps nationwide canceled their summer programs for children in 2020, those that opened in South Jersey say they operated safely with overwhelming success in preventing coronavirus at their facilities. Now, they and some camps that stayed shut last summer, are preparing for the 2021 season, with directors reporting brisk reservations filling up camper slots quickly.

“This was pretty amazing outcome with no camper virus cases, but we had done everything we could to ensure kids did not get sick,” said Andy Pritikin, owner and camp director. Pritikin is past president of the American Camps Association, which partnered with YMCA of the USA and hired experts to develop the new safety practices.



Camp directors said they followed those guidelines calling for dividing campers into small groups of 10 to 20, daily health screenings that included temperature checks, social distancing, sanitizing and mandating masks inside buildings or in special circumstances.

Pritikin said the camp this year will continue following coronavirus prevention guidelines set by the two camping associations and adopted by the state board of health last year. "Last year we encouraged parents to advise us of campers who may have developed the virus or been exposed to it from family members and to keep them at home until it was safe for them to return to camp and we had great cooperation from the families about this," said Pritikin, who also hosts a day camp podcast.

Activities at Liberty Lake range from boating, fishing and swimming to athletics, zip-lining, a high rope challenge course, rock wall climbing, arts and sciences though activities vary from camp to camp. Day camps accept children ranging in age from as young as three at one camp to up to high school age.

There were no reported coronavirus cases last year among the 830 children at the YMCA of the Pines in Medford or the 400 at Camp Creek Run in Marlton or the 200 at a much shortened and modified JCC camp, according to their respective directors.

“We had a successful season. Kids had an amazing time and parents were so grateful we were open at all and the children were adaptable and flexible,” explained Keara Giannotti, director at Camp Creek Run in Marlton. While the guidelines did not require campers to wear masks within their small pods of up to 20 campers, Camp Creek Run did as an extra safety precaution, Giannotti added, and adhered to social distancing at lunchtime.

“We went above and beyond what the state asked us to do. We also developed the phrase ‘airplane wings plus a little more’” as the distance between campers and their outstretched arms as a way to remind them to be socially distant. Creek Run focuses on nature and environmental studies and has a lake and other activities such as crafts and cooking.





Pritikin said 70 percent of summer camps nationally were closed last year. Additionally, no overnight camps for children were permitted in New Jersey last year though camps are taking reservations for this summer and waiting to see if state guidelines change.

Besides outdoor exercise and nature experiences, Pritikin said camps develop new skills, friendships and independence that all contribute to a child's mental health—especially as the pandemic has kept children mostly indoors.

The two sons of Michel Sacks of Voorhees, 8-year-old Nathan and 6-year-old Ezra, have been going to Liberty Lake every summer the past few years.

“Liberty Lake is a highlight of my children's year. Last year when the pandemic hit, the children immediately expressed concern about whether or not they would be able to go to camp. They were so elated the first day, enjoyed every single minute and learned just as much at camp about teamwork and friendship as they do in school,” the father said.

Tall Pines Day Camp in Williamstown was among those camps closed last year. “We're open for this summer and looking forward to it,” said camp director Andrew Yankowitz, adding that Liberty Lake camp has served as a model for successfully operating under the coronavirus prevention guidelines. “We are already close to 90 percent capacity with reservations already. Two-thirds of our families rolled over their deposit money from last year to this year.’ The camp has dozens of activities on and off the water and one of the longest zip lines at 800 feet .

All three separate camps under the umbrella of the YMCA of the Pines — Matollionequay, Ockanickon and Lake Stockwell — all operated as day camps in 2020, serving a total 830 students. Normally the first two serve as overnight camps. “We followed a very, very strict protocol and had zero confirmed or suspected cases (of coronavirus) for the summer,” said camps CEO Mark Dibble. “Right now we are enrolling and have started hiring for day camp at Stockwell and for overnight camps in open-air cabins sleeping six each at the other two camps ,” he said.

Last year the JCC did not use its largest camp site and did not provide lunch or transportation for camp, which normally has more than 1,000 children. “This year we are offering our more typical camping experience and will provide transportation and lunch, which will be served at outdoor pavilions instead of indoor,” said camp director Sara Sideman.

Liberty Lake, like other camps, attracts children from a wide region and has a bus transport network to pick up children at several South Jersey locations and in Philadelphia and Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Adalyn Exley, 9, a Liberty Lake camper for its entire season, was the first child from Philadelphia to enroll there five years ago. “A co-worker in South Jersey told me it was the best camp ever with a lake, trees, woods and down home camp experience for an urban kid, so I drove her over the bridge to Cherry Hill to have the camp bus pick her up, but now it has a bus that picks her up in Philly,” said her mother, Grace Exley.



“For her it so vital to have an outdoor experience screen-free. It builds good character.”

If you go:

- Liberty Lake Day Camp: Visit <https://libertylakedaycamp.com> or call 609-499-7820
- YMCA Camp of the Pines: <https://ycamp.org> or 609- 654-8225
- Tall Pines Day Camp: <https://tallpinesdaycamp.com> or call 856-262-3900
- JCC Camps at Medford: <https://www.jccdaycamp.com> or 609- 654-5192
- Camp Creek Run: <https://www.campcreekrun.com> or 856-596-4250