With coronavirus sheltering, will there be summer camps for Bay Area kids?

Aidin Vaziri  
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With Bay Area schools shuttered through the end of the academic year and recreational sports programs canceled due to health concerns over the coronavirus pandemic, frazzled parents and kids are looking toward summer camps for relief.

Aaron Addis colors a paper medal for the summer camp Olympics during Camp Doodles in Larkspur.

Photo: Dan Evans
advance of the summer break are struggling to figure out how to move forward.

Girl Scouts of Northern California has decided to delay the start of its 2020 camp season to July 19, canceling the first four weeks of its scheduled nine-week program. But even eyeing a midsummer opening for its council-run camps, which require the hiring and training of 175 staff members, feels ambitious at this point.

“"The whole way through this, we’ve been leading with three principles: safety, trust and communication," said Mary-Jane Strom, the senior director of the group’s program. “We’re having weekly meetings, communicating when key decisions are being made.”

Other programs aren’t taking the risk, scrapping their summer sessions altogether.

Camp Galileo, one of the more popular Bay Area summer camps with 70 locations, left parents angry and contemplating lawsuits when it pulled the plug on its season on April 16 without giving families a refund option. The company, which said it was forced to furlough or lay off 80% of its year-round staff, is instead offering families future credit.

“We held out hope as long as possible, but we now have to acknowledge that this is where summer is headed,” Glen Tripp, the CEO and founder of Galileo, said in an email to registrants (Tripp declined to comment to The Chronicle), offering instead a free virtual Camp Galileo Anywhere, with weekly activities and parent resources.
Camp Edmo, which runs 30-plus summer day camps focused on STEAM (science, tech, engineering, arts and math) and social emotional learning in San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Rosa, Fremont and Sacramento, offered its families immediate refunds while switching over to an online model with special shelter-in-place pricing and instant financial aid based on the honor system.

“When the schools started closing we realized immediately that parents were going to need help,” said Ed Caballero, the co-founder of Edmo. He said there was a learning curve with moving their camps into the virtual world, and offered the first two weeks of instruction for free as they figured out the new model.

“We were very transparent,” Caballero said. “We told them, the cavalry is coming but the cavalry doesn’t know how to ride a horse. We’re going to learn how to do this with you.”

Edmo had to lay off 85% of its staff, keeping on three full-time people to run the online program. But Caballero said he hopes to hire back some counselors as its offering of group and one-on-one sessions continues to expand.

“We have coaches that can teach anything from saxophone to graphic design to French, all the way through high school,” he said. “The most important thing for a child in the camp experience is the relationship with the staff. If you have an amazing counselor, he can teach your child how to sail with a box of popsicle sticks and tape.”
Many regional camps — including those run by the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, YMCA and the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco — are still weighing their options for the summer, waiting to see what happens as we creep closer to planned lift dates for shelter-in-place orders.

Tamara Aparton, spokesperson for the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department. “We’re waiting to get a clearer forecast about the summer. There’s still too many unknowns for now.”

Kyle Winkel, communications director of the American Camp Association, which helps organize nearly 200 camps and 700 programs in Northern California, including Steve & Kate’s and Camp Winnarainbow, said they are also waiting to see how things progress.
“Currently, we have not received any guidance at the state or federal level that would indicate that summer camp will not happen this summer,” Winkel said. “The decision to postpone or readjust camp programs toward virtual or online mediums is still being determined among individual camps.”

But for some, moving the campfire experience onto a laptop isn’t the same.

“It’s heartbreaking,” said Strom, of the Girl Scouts. “For our girls and their families, this is their summer homes. You might think camp is about the ropes course and swimming, but it’s about sisterhood and community. That’s hard to re-create virtually.”

Aidin Vaziri is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: avaziri@sfchronicle.com
Life in the Bay Area has been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, as leaders have extended the shelter-in-place order through May. Tell us the questions you want answered, and the issues you think we should be investigating.

Tell us your questions; what should we investigate?
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