



Guidelines for Virtual Youth Programs

The world of virtual camp is exploding exponentially due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Much of this is through messages, videos or activity sheets posted through a camp's social media platforms. Some of the programs are "live" in which staff & volunteers can interact through virtual platforms with their camper families. Below is a set of guidelines to consider when offering any virtual program.

Reminder: *Your organization already has quality policies, protocols and procedures in place. Virtual programs provide the opportunity to build and expand on these, but it is important to continue to follow your current protocols and practices to keep campers safe.*

Hiring and Screening

Your organization's [hiring and screening policies](#) still apply when operating virtual programming. Staff (paid or volunteers) approved to work at virtual camp should meet the camp's personnel policies, which should include:

- Completed/signed application on file
- References checked and documented, including one [personal family reference](#)
- Completed criminal background and [National Sex Offender Public Website](#) checks
- Completed Voluntary Disclosure Statement (per ACA Accreditation Standards)

Staff Training

Although staff training is going to look different, all virtual staff will still need to complete training, and that training will need to be documented for each attendee. The policies and principles of program design, as well as many of the ACA Accreditation Standards, continue to apply—even in a virtual setting. It will be important to consider, however, whether in-person training needs to be adapted for a virtual setting. The following are sample staff training topics to cover for programs providing virtual/online activities:

- Your organizations' Code of Conduct and Zero Tolerance Policy
- Supervision ratios—a minimum of 1 staff should be present in all breakout rooms or chats.
- Staff should never have 1-on-1 interactions—communication should always be in the open where everyone can be involved
- Program Rules and Guidelines—make sure that they are clear, discussed and posted, and that any failure to follow rules is flagged up and addressed
- How to talk to youth regarding boundaries with staff and who they should tell if the rules are broken or if they need help
- How programming will be supervised—there should be multiple layers of staff, including managers, to ensure high quality and safety
- How staff can report rule breaking and "red flag behaviors"—be sure to cover this, not only in onboarding, but also in regular refreshers
- How to keep campers engaged
- How to keep an eye out for 'wallflowers' and children with different learning styles and abilities
- How to include and value all campers and get in front of social alienation or bullying
- Specific instruction on how staff should handle the following:
 - What do staff do when a camper asks to DM them or for their social media handles?
 - What do staff do when a camper sends an email that indicates they are in potential danger at home?
 - How will the staff know if something is going on among the campers?

Child Abuse Prevention

During virtual programming, your abuse prevention practices and policies should not change. Below are some things to consider:

- Remind staff that they are mandated reporters
- Update your organization's reporting guidelines and ensure that all staff know who to report to, when to report and the method for reporting
- As mentioned previously, make sure that child abuse prevention is a part of training for staff prior to working with youth online

Platform Security

Whether using Zoom or other platforms, utilize the following security features:

- Have a registration process to account for who is in the room
- Utilize waiting room options
- Turn off private chat features to avoid inappropriate messaging between participants
- Record sessions if possible (with parent/guardian consent to record) and save per your organizations records retention policy
- Become familiar with the security features of the platform being used.

For specific guidance when using Zoom, we have [created a resource](#) that reviews different security measures your organization can take.

Code of Conduct & Social Media Policies

Before operating virtual programming, update/add to your current [Code of Conduct](#) and [Social Media Policies](#) to include steps specific to virtual programming. Some possible elements to include are:

- Staff will wear a camp uniform/staff shirt during all virtual programming
- A minimum of two staff will be present in all virtual programming spaces or "rooms"
- Staff will abide by all camp policies, including refraining from smoking, vaping, drinking alcoholic beverages, etc. during virtual program hours
- Staff will consider the background from which they broadcast from and gain director approval of background prior to going live
- No virtual programming will occur without the written consent of the director
- All virtual programming will occur through the camp/organization's professional accounts and not through staff personal accounts

Program Oversight

During virtual programming, staff supervision practices will still be necessary in order to ensure consistency and safety. Some things to consider are:

- Supervisory staff and the camp leadership team should drop-in on virtual programs to ensure all outlined practices are being followed
- If it is not possible for leadership to drop-in on virtual programming, supervisors should periodically review recordings

Parent/Guardian Involvement

While your camp may be offering programming activities, camps cannot "take supervision" of children in a virtual setting. Therefore, it is important to communicate the following with parents/guardians:

- Share supervision expectations and require parents/guardians to sign off that they understand these expectations
- Share room/space expectations
- Inform parents/guardians of the settings/materials needed to conduct virtual camp activities
- Encourage parent/guardians to be aware of their child's online activities

Consent and Waivers

All campers will need to sign a [participation waiver](#) to participate in camp virtual programming. If recording a session, camps need to collect a signed Consent to Record for minor participants. This statement can be as simple as: "I hereby give permission for [insert organization] to record all virtual programming sessions".

Program Activities

Due to the fact that programming is now being done virtually, some activities will not work in that setting. Consider the following:

- Virtual lifeguarding is not safe or even possible. Do not encourage campers to swim or get into the bathtub, pool or any body of water during virtual program time.
- Inform parent/guardians about the nature of the activities as part of the parent/guardian communication.
- If doing physical activities, it's important to ask parents/guardians to evaluate the space being used in the home to make sure it is free from hazards.

Program Supplies

If your organization is providing supplies to participants for activities at home (such as "Camp in a Box") inform parent/guardians of contents, age restrictions/recommendations and potential allergy triggers. Some practices your organization may follow are:

- Consider providing an option for parent/guardians to "opt-in" to receive supplies from camp, informing them of the contents beforehand
- If sending food, disclose and label common allergy triggers, such as nuts or gluten
- Label contents according to appropriate age guidelines, if applicable
- Prohibit lending or loaning equipment or supplies

Additional Resources

- [American Camp Association Virtual Program Resources—COVID-19](#)
- [Darkness to Light Digital Safety Tips](#)
- [Praesidium: Electronic Communications and Organization's Duty to Protect](#)