

Speaking with Our Campers

Spring 2020

Supporting our campers and greater community begins with our understanding that everyone's needs are different. Factors like age-specific maturity and whether or not they have been to camp before will affect how each child receives the news, and can guide how you tell them and comfort them.

This document serves as a resource to guide you and your family in the ongoing discussions with children during the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers specific language you can use when responding to children about the heartbreaking news that we cannot offer in-person activities at camp this summer.

Parent Role Based on a Child's Age:

For all ages, the greatest gift we can give our children is to listen to them and provide validation. Resist the urge to "fix" the situation or problem-solve for them, as it will leave children feeling unsupported and fear that you do not think they can manage things on their own. Showing children empathy and giving assurance that you will help them through a challenging time will often be all a child needs to get through uncertainty. Kids need empathy when uncomfortable more than anything else!

Elementary Aged Children: Be the *Director*—You need a plan of what to say and how to say it. Anticipate what questions they might have and what responses you might give.

Middle School Aged Children: Be the *Tour Guide*—You need to lead but can change course depending on your child's response and tolerance for the conversation.

High School Aged Children: Be the *Torch Passer*—More is less with this age, so share the information and then pass the torch and let your child lead the conversation while you listen.

Elementary-Aged Children:

Kids of this age need information shared with them with few words that are direct and to the point. Every time you have a conversation with your child about a difficult topic, you are helping your child to grow and learn, and with children of this age, parents need to be in charge and direct the conversation.

It is helpful to remember that words are not always an elementary-aged child's best friend, and children of this age cannot always express how they are feeling. Remember that behavior is communication, and often

you can tell how a child is tolerating the information you are sharing by watching their behavior (during and after) and then asking them about it without judgment.

"I notice you are stomping your feet a lot and that isn't like you."

"I see your eyes are tearing up and I wonder if that means you are sad?"

The tone of your question helps to assure your child that they are safe to share their feelings. It is fine to help your child label their feelings, if you feel confident that you are labeling those feelings correctly.

Be sure that once your child begins talking, you stop talking to give your child the opportunity to share what's on their mind. Feel proud of yourself that you got your child to express their feelings!

What to Say to Your Returning Elementary-Aged Camper

- "It's hard when you don't get to do what you thought you'd be doing."
- "I'm so sorry that you won't get to experience camp because I know you love it."
- "I know you will miss camp and I am always here to talk with you about it."
- "We will work together to fill your time this summer with activities that make you happy."
- "I know you're sad and I'll do everything I can to help you to feel better."
- "It's normal to feel sad about this, I am sad too for you."
- "Camp cares so much about everyone being safe and healthy, and this summer it will be too difficult to keep everyone safe."
- "We will keep talking about camp since it's so important to us and so we don't forget all the wonderful things about it."
- "Camp is such a special place, and everyone is so disappointed because so many people love camp and will miss it."
- "I know it doesn't feel good, but I also know that there will be a time when you feel better."
- "It's hard to imagine that this feeling will pass, and I hope you are okay."
- "This is such a loss, and I'm so sorry."
- "Sometimes when things are hard, it's okay to give yourself permission to not think about it for a little bit. How about we don't think about camp not happening again until after dinner...?"

What to Say to Your New Elementary-Aged Camper

- "I'm so sorry this won't be the summer you get to experience camp."
- "I can't imagine how you're feeling; but I know you're good at explaining it."
- "I do hope that you'll be as excited in the future to try something new as you were about camp for this summer."
- "We're going to work together to come up with fun things for you to do this summer."

Middle/High School Aged Children (Returning Campers):

Teens need information in an honest and frank manner. By allowing yourself to have a difficult conversation with your teen, you are strengthening your relationship with them as well as their ability to work through conflict and challenge. The conversation should be collaborative, with you sharing the information and then following the lead of your teen. Teens may be interested in talking about the situation all at once or may need time to process and then revisit.

Remember that behavior is communication, and often you can tell how your teen is tolerating the information you are sharing by watching their behavior (during and after the conversation). It is important to remember that teens often need time and space in order to fully engage in a conversation after receiving difficult information. It is also important to acknowledge that at this age, peer relationships are very important, and teens may want to talk with their friends before they talk with you. You can help support their camp friendships in the time they need them most by suggesting they talk to their camp friends about the situation.

Some statements that might be helpful are:

“Hey, I see that you’re really sad right now. I know you may not want to talk about it, but I’m here for you, when and if you do want to talk.”

“I know you may want to talk with your friends first, let me know if you want to chat with me about camp later.”

The tone of your question can help assure your teen that they are safe to share their feelings. Acknowledge that this is a grieving process for your teen and validate the emotions that they are experiencing. It may be helpful to avoid using words like “I understand” and instead use statements such as “I can imagine...” or “It sounds like...”.

What to Say to Your Middle/High School-Aged Camper:

- “I know how much you were looking forward to returning to camp, are there things we can do at home that will be helpful to you during this time?
 - *It may be helpful for you to ask your teen what their favorite camp activities are and ways in which these might be able to be recreated virtually.*
- “Camp’s biggest concern is always your health and safety, in this time camp is not able to provide that same safe environment that it would normally because of COVID-19.”
- “It is so normal to be upset and experience a lot of emotions around this news, I’m here to talk about it anytime you need.”

- “Camp has been doing a lot of virtual programming in the last several months, I bet they are going to come up with all kinds of ways for you to stay connected to your friends this summer. I know this won’t be the same for you, and maybe there will be some new types of activities for you to experience.”
- “There will be opportunities for you to talk with and hear directly from the camp’s directors about this decision and plans for moving forward.”
 - If your camper has specific questions for camp leadership, it might be helpful to have them write these down.

Helpful Resources

Supporting Families During COVID-19

<https://childmind.org/coping-during-covid-19-resources-for-parents/>

Judaism Under Quarantine: Resources from ReformJudaism.org

<https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-life/covid-19-judaism-under-quarantine>

JED’s COVID-19 Resource Guide

<https://www.jedfoundation.org/jeds-covid-19-resource-guide/>

How to Talk to Your Kids About Scary Situations

<https://pjlibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/january-2017/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-scary-situations>

Parenting in a Pandemic: Tips to Keep the Calm at Home

https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Positive-Parenting-and-COVID-19_10-Tips.aspx

How to Be Your Best Self in Times of Crisis

https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_how_to_be_your_best_self_in_times_of_crisis

Emotional Regulation Worksheets: A Coping Skill Activity

<https://www.centervention.com/emotional-regulation-worksheets/>

51 Mindfulness Activities for Kids

<https://www.waterford.org/resources/mindfulness-activities-for-kids/>