

# Off to Camp

m a g a z i n e



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- Kitchen adventurers
- From camper to leader
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**Camp Safety**  
Months before schools reopened, local camps pioneered pandemic-era practices and found that kids can handle it.  
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**Cooking**

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Action, singing and dance don't look the same on Zoom, but local theatrical groups find some upsides for youth online.  
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**Have a story idea for one of our magazines?**  
Email editor Bruce Barton at [bruceb@latc.com](mailto:bruceb@latc.com).

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**Cover photo:** Participants returned to Run for Fun Camps last summer with a new mask requirement, and they handled it magnificently, according to camp director Dave Barth.  
PHOTO BY ANDREW YEE/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

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# Masks first

*How camps are leading a return to in-person interaction*

**By Eliza Ridgeway**  
Staff Writer/elizar@latc.com

**Careful, compliant mask wearing** has proven hard for adult Americans to pull off – so it can't help seeming like an ominous obstacle for families and educators contemplating a return to classrooms, activities and, someday, summer camps.

But local program directors have been testing how to reopen small camp sessions since last June, and they, like local school districts testing the water with limited in-person attendance, have learned a lot about the capacity of kids to do better than we imagined.

"I remember talking with some camp director colleague friends over the summer – how can we expect kids to wear these face coverings? I can't envision this 6-year-old or 8-year-old or even 10-year-old wearing this all day. The reality is that the kids have been doing a wonderful job," said Los Altos native Dave Barth, who founded Run for Fun Camps. "The kids have been doing a really nice job wearing the mask the right way to the best of their ability and following the rules – I think they understand it's important."

Barth has continued, when permitted, to operate camps over the past eight months, supported by careful conversation with Santa Clara County to track evolving health rules for camps. Frequent phone calls to the county's business hotline helped clarify whether camps can operate right now (they can) and under what terms.

"I'm someone who feels deeply responsible for the health of the campers and families in our programs – we want to be as safe as possible," Barth said.

Parents are required to commit to only one camp/activity in any three-week period, so students aren't sharing exposure between communities. Run for Fun is operating exclusively outdoors, requires all participants to mask, and Barth said that Los Altos' Recreation and Community Services division "came through in the clutch recently" in issuing emergency permits for dis-



COURTESY OF KEVIN NGO

**Practicing at home and talking as a family about why it matters help kids learn to mask, according to local dad Kevin Ngo, who developed a filter mask with help from his family.**

placed businesses to use local parks.

"That, to me, was so awesome – we're all displaced right now," he said. "I've never worked with the city of Los Altos until this year, and both it and Palo Alto have been awesome to work with. It's been a heck of a journey. Like most camps out there, we shut down from March 17 to beginning of summer, then in early August before the schools reopened in person, we went for it and launched it."

Initially, the learning curve required making sure that campers arrived with a mask, and maintaining a stack of spare masks as backup.

"Kids in general were really good about showing up with their mask on before they checked in with our admin staff for health screening every day," Barth said. "There are times where it's a quick, 'Hey, can we tighten that up around the nose or tighten that up behind your ears to make sure that it's a firm fit that's appropriate?'"

## ***How to mask: Kids' edition***

The Los Altos School District set a mask requirement

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for all of its students, transitional kindergarten through eighth grade, and the limited return of younger classes provided a testing ground for mask compliance. Their observations can provide a rubric for other programs preparing to relaunch. Covington School Principal Wade Spenader said they weren't sure how the youngest learners would handle it, but virtual mask practice in the run-up to in-person classes helped, as did parent meetings that set out the policy and strategies for how to support children struggling with the new accessory. Creating opportunities for a mask break – when a child can step outside and take a breather – helped, Spenader added, but overall he's seen kids blithely staying masked not just in the classroom, but also running around at recess.

"I would credit our parents for setting the tone at home as far as what the expectation is," he said. "They do a great job."

The school has faced a few challenges when families struggled to find a mask that fits kids, completely covering the nose and mouth. Basic disposable masks, in a child's



ANDREW YEE/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

**Camps like Run for Fun find masks can stay in place during vigorous play.**

size, have worked well, but some kids like sporting funny or whimsical masks, Spenader observed.

"Our decision to say everybody's going to wear a mask took away the 'I don't want to wear a mask,' 'I'm worried that if I wear a mask, I'll stand out,'" he said. "It's what everybody's doing – there's that little peer pressure. . . . We get to go back to school because we are wearing our masks; if



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Camp programs like Champions, which is now open to all families living in the Los Altos School District, have evolved to meet the needs of essential workers by providing in-person masked programming for kids when schools are closed. They follow similar rules to the district, requiring masks and relying on “gentle reminders” to support good mask habits.

COURTESY OF CHAMPIONS

we don't wear our masks, we don't get to come back. They have been really, really happy to come back to school.”

Champions, which runs day care and holiday break camps at Covington and Santa Rita schools, has been providing in-person care with a similar mask policy. Enrollment is now open to any Los Altos School District student.

Stefanie Gindi, the site director for Champions at Covington, said students, particularly of essential workers, have been attending while their parents work since the initial re-opening last spring, even during periods when the district

is exclusively remote. She's observed that “gentle reminders” do the trick to support mask wearing, and that masks with straps that run behind the head are often easier to pull down than those with ear loops.

*Rethinking youth masks:  
Can we design for better safety?*

A particularly streamlined kid-sized mask that you may spot being tested in the Mountain View/Los Altos area debuted in December, thanks to a side project by

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Sunnyvale resident Kevin Ngo. He started designing a reusable mask for his children that could filter at an N95 level or better during smoke season two years ago. When the pandemic began, he realized that this niche project – designing a washable, nonslip mask with replaceable, high-quality filtration – could have a big community impact.

Ngo and a few friends experienced in product and industrial design developed Flo Masks by 3D scanning the faces of many children of various ages and ethnicities, an effort that required volunteers from friends and family and after-hours access, acquired on a rental basis, to a very expensive scanner a local company was willing to share for a good cause. The goal was to create a tailored fit – which could hug the skin around the mouth and nose – while still being comfortable for breathing and movement, and effective at protecting the user.

They confirmed that there was enough commonality among children’s faces that they could build a mask made of silicone molded to plastic, for which one size fits kindergartners to fifth-graders. After rapid prototyping with a 3D printer and adjusting based on how it felt for kids in the real world, they turned to a medical and aerospace filter manufacturer in Illinois to create the disposable filter inserts that complete the product.

Ngo said parents can set children up for success by taking



COURTESY OF KEVIN NGO

**Sunnyvale dad Kevin Ngo used 3D scanning to develop a mask with rigorous filtration carefully fitted to child faces.**

time in advance to make sure that a mask is comfortable, not just grabbing one when rushing out the door. Dr. Shelly Miller, one of the pediatricians the Ngo family ran their masks by during the development process, said some parents mistakenly make assumptions about their children’s resistance to masks in advance. Miller, who practices at Menlo Park-based Burgess Pediatrics, did a fellowship in pediatric infectious diseases and has followed the messaging around how and why we wear masks. She said that if an entire family demonstrates thoughtful behavior, children as young as 2 years old have no trouble joining in. Having a device like the Flo Mask, which stays snug over the nose and uses higher-grade filtration than cloth masks, is a bonus, but Miller said she’s seen families adopt consistent masking using many products.

“I think it’s totally doable, as with much else we have in behavior and kids,” she said, noting that kids can rally to meet an expectation – for better or for worse. “This is just a huge culture shift. In Asia, they wear a mask to protect those around them, and we’re obviously not very good at doing that.”

Ngo works in consumer electronics as a product manager by day. Developing the masks in his own time as a project for the public good aligns with his family’s interests – his wife manages COVID drug trials for pharmaceutical companies trying to secure U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval.

“Normally, I have to put myself in someone else’s shoes, but I was developing for myself as a parent,” Ngo said. “It makes me so sad when I hear my kids talk about ‘back before we needed to wear a mask, before coronavirus.’ I explain to them why it’s important for them to wear it. If it’s uncomfortable, they’re not going to want to do it – but they’re going to protect themselves and others.”

*For more information on children and mask wearing from the American Academy of Pediatrics, visit [bit.ly/AAPmasks](https://bit.ly/AAPmasks). For more information on the Flo Mask and how it was developed, visit [flomask.com](https://flomask.com).* ✨

An advertisement for Peninsula Youth Theatre (PYT) in Silicon Valley. At the top, the letters 'PYT' are in a large, bold, serif font with stars around them. Below that, 'Peninsula Youth Theatre' and 'SILICON VALLEY' are written in a smaller font. The main headline reads 'Spend Your Summer on Stage!'. Below the text is a black and white photograph of a young girl with long hair, wearing a bunny-ear headband and a patterned dress, with her hands on her cheeks in a surprised or excited expression. At the bottom of the ad, it says 'drama camps and classes for ages 4 - 14' and 'summer internships for teens', followed by the website 'www.pyt.net.org'.



# Globetrotting through dishes

*Hands-on kitchen projects can still happen, even via Zoom*

By Melody Chen

Town Crier Editorial Intern

*It took a sprinkle of spellworking,* but a crew of young sous-chefs descended the peaks of Morocco, hovered over Cambodian rice paddies and surveyed the blue domes of Greece from their humble kitchens at home.

Armed with ladles and whisks, the Cooking Round the World campers made the most of this past year's captivity at home. The year-round sessions, which began in person in the Bay Area pre-COVID and have expanded to include online participants from as far

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In-person camps relied on careful spacing this year, but for Cooking Round the World, expanded online programming reached a new breadth of campers, extending beyond the Bay Area.

COURTESY OF MINDY MEYERS

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away as Ohio, New York and New Jersey, take young people on a field trip for their palates.

Students had the option to register for pre-recorded or live Zoom classes, choosing from among a range of countries and cuisines, and in-person classes reopened in Oakland and San Marcos when health protocols permitted.

“Embracing cultures that are not their own – that are new to them – is actually a beautiful thing, not a scary thing,” said Mindy Myers, founder and director of Cooking Round the World. “These classes have really helped children want to travel, see the world, open up their eyes to differences. I want them to embrace difference, not tolerate difference.”

Given a choice of three 10-country packages – including Lebanon, El Salvador, South Korea, Israel and Russia, among others – the pre-recorded videos offer a look at the countries’ history, language, geography, flag and famous landmarks before delving into the cuisines found among their peoples. After preparing a step-by-step cooking how-to on a chosen recipe, Myers spins a folklore from the traditions of the country in question.

Myers said combining storytelling with cooking skills helps her 6- to 14-year-old sous-chefs tell the difference between a ladle and a slotted spoon, but also appreciate the cultural undertones of the flavors and spices.

“I am hoping that children will see the world as reachable and beautiful,” she said. “I love it when children say, ‘I want to go to Morocco! I want to go to Spain!’ They are excited about what it is that they learned and tasted.”

A former principal of a public school in Alameda, Myers said children are just beginning to build awareness of the larger world around them, and they learn best with hands-on activities. Even in an online class, learning by doing builds understanding.

### ***Beyond frozen pizza***

Cooking Round the World camper Medha Rustagi, 10, said she enjoys baking cakes and muffins to the point that her mom only allows her to bake once a month.

“I’d always loved to bake, and I memorized one great recipe for banana bread,” the Cupertino resident said. “I always see my mom cooking in the kitchen, and sometimes I would just help out.”

Although her go-to dishes are Italian – macaroni and cheese, fettuccine alfredo – Medha said she loves to experiment with new dishes and expand her cooking repertoire. The camp’s focus on exploring new cuisines, and the stories behind food traditions, builds confidence in a world beyond processed foods and frozen pizzas.

“We refer to a class as a ‘cooking family,’ and then the kids sort of work in tandem and contribute as if they are a family,” Myers said. “I can say that we are educating kids in a way so that they ... can go out in the world and know how to make honey garlic chicken over saffron rice.”

***For more information on Cooking Round the World, visit [cookingroundtheworld.com](http://cookingroundtheworld.com).*** 🌱



COURTESY OF MINDY MYERS

**To learn about the larger world, Cooking Round the World campers pair hands-on cooking with storytelling about history and language.**



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# Leading from experience

*The camper-to-counselor pipeline lets teens stay at play*



**Decathlon Sports Club's adventures like a beach run, pictured here in 2019, draw special power from the teenage leaders who graduate from camper to counselor and return to share their traditions and continue to play, in a new role.**

COURTESY OF RYAN JURAN

**By Naomi Baron**

Town Crier Editorial Intern

***“Summer fun” makes a very broad promise***, but Decathlon Sports Club’s slogan captures a founding intent that has brought kids together to play for 40 years in Los Altos.

The camp enrolls kids ages 6-12 with a focus on all types of sports, arts and crafts, and board games, but its impact extends to teenagers and beyond. A high return rate – families who come back year after year – as well as conversion of campers to staff has created a culture of friendship at a camp started by two friends.

Scott Berridge and Rich Wohlstadter decided in 1981 they wanted to create a camp that resembled the childhood they so loved, where kids would join together in the neighborhood and play activities such as kick the can and hide-and-seek.

Berridge and Wohlstadter now run two Decathlon camps, with Berridge overseeing the camp in Los Altos and Wohlstadter the camp in Woodside. I participated in the Los Altos camp for years. Jeff Berridge, Scott’s son, has been a camp director at the Los Altos camp for more than 25 years after attending the camp since he was 5 years old. He said camp is like a second home to him, a feeling that has become a central part of Decathlon’s identity as well.

“Camp is more like a community,” Jeff said. “People

meet up every summer to see some familiar faces where they can keep building relationships. It is centered around sports, so there is a lot of physical, athletic stuff going on, but there’s a lot of social things going on, too. You might have your friends who don’t go to your school but you go to camp with, so you get to see them every summer.”

## ***From camper to counselor***

Returning campers, family legacies and campers-turned-counselors give the camp a family feeling. After kids are too old to be campers, they have the option to apply to become a staff member, either a junior counselor in training, a junior counselor or a counselor. The Berridges said they think that approximately 80-90% of campers apply to become a staffer, and that continuity makes the camp special.

Joel Arcune, a junior at Homestead High School, grew from a camper to a junior counselor over the past decade and said the experience of “genuine care” from leaders kept him coming back.

“It’s just so different from any other camp because this camp really has such a great staff that helps every single kid,” Arcune said. “The connections that you build as a camper to your counselor and other campers is something no other camp can replicate.”

Similarly, the Webster sisters, Jenna and Julia, have been returning campers/counselors every summer.

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Jenna, a senior at Syracuse University who has been participating for 12 years, said the best part of progressing to counselor was watching campers experience the things she had loved. Both she and Julia, a junior at Mountain View High School, said forging deep connections outside their school community created an opportunity for friendships that last to this day.

“I wanted to work at Decathlon because I couldn’t imagine the camp not being part of my summer,” Jenna said. “Not being there this summer was the weirdest experience for me because Friday would come along and I’d be, like, ‘Oh, if I was at camp, we’d be at Raging Waters right now,’ or thinking about how it should be Olympic Week.”

Emma Price, a junior at Mountain View High who has participated in the Decathlon camp for the past decade, said being a counselor brings back memories of being a camper, and noted that counselors are really campers themselves.

“It feels like such a community, and you see a lot of the same people every year and so they become your close friends,” Price said. “The counselors and JCs make it so fun because they are participating with you, not just chaperoning.”

## Honoring traditions

Decathlon not only prides itself on its staff, but also on the appreciation shown to returning campers and staff.

The camp recognizes participants who have attended camp for at least seven years with a “Hall of Fame” tradition, complete with secret handshake.

“We have a lot of traditions that have kind of evolved over those 41 years, different little things that come up like that,” Scott said. “The Hall of Fame, which is one of my things I’m most proud of, is that the kids who have gone to camp are remembered. We immortalize them by keeping them with the camp from year to year, bringing the (photo) boards out and sharing that with the new campers.”

After each four-week session comes to a close, the group gathers and counselors honor each camper with an award in a category they feel the camper excels in.

“The counselors really get into it, and they tell these elaborate stories about things that happen in that session specific to each camper, and no one could know unless you were in that group,” Jeff said.

The camp’s focus on the camper-to-counselor cycle has become a central lesson of the experience for participants.

“People who help other people are generally happier. That’s exactly what our workers do at Decathlon,” Scott said. “They’re out there helping these kids to be better citizens. They are helping other people and then, in fact, that makes them happier.”

*For more information on Decathlon Sports Club and its 2021 camp dates, visit [decathlonsportsclub.com](http://decathlonsportsclub.com).* ✨

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# Putting the webcam to work

*Through Reader's Theater and musicals on Twitch, performing arts camps adapt*



The rare in-person studio dance session did occur this year for youth programs like Palo Alto Children's Theatre, but vastly expanded, sometimes experimental online offerings made the biggest mark.

COURTESY OF PALO ALTO CHILDREN'S THEATRE

**By Eliza Ridgeway**  
Staff Writer/elizar@latc.com

*Performance intersected with technology* a little too much this year for most of us, as many of our most personal and professional moments had to happen through a screen. But for local theater camps, the digital stage spawned a new range of options that had never been available to prospective young thespians.

Marieke Gaboury, director of theater operations at Palo Alto Children's Theatre, co-taught a timely camp last summer for high school seniors and college freshmen on how to translate theater into a virtual environment. A group of dads asked the theater company to put together a "dads and daughters" improv class. Private studies – one-on-one acting and vocal lessons – have been an unexpected smash and have particularly expanded access for children who had transportation problems when it came to booking in-person lessons. Gaboury said that of all the age groups, it was surprising to note that teens seemed to be experiencing the most Zoom fatigue.

"They're dying to be in-person and connect with each other," she said of the fading novelty of new options online. "We are finding that the in-person classes are the rare opportunity to be in proximity to their peers."

Facing stark cuts, Palo Alto Children's Theatre has been aware of an inclusive silver lining as its online expansion includes participants and artists who never would have

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been as accessible in person. In-person programming for January was called off as the pandemic surged last month, but the theater has been preparing for in-person camps later in the winter, spring and summer that follow guidelines for physically active performance activities, which face particular restrictions.

“It’ll be a very different experience,” Gaboury said of a future with smaller casts, smaller audiences and an extreme emphasis on outdoor activities.

A hybrid theater format will keep singing and dancing virtual, while other aspects of preparing a show can be done in person for youth participants.

Gaboury said that structuring an interactive class where children feel seen and heard by the instructors – while not totally distracted by other participants – has taken some trial and error to finesse. When the children collaborate on performances, they record themselves individually, using a pre-recorded track as their cue, and the theater mixes the final product.

### ***Building relationships – virtually***

Gary Ferguson, education director for Los Altos Youth Theatre, said running their performances through Twitch, more commonly known as a gaming platform, has provided a handy route to syncing up audio, adding in creative backgrounds and reaching a young audience often already familiar with the service.

“The kids realized that I’m not going to be able to dance fully like I normally do, but I’m responsible for putting on my own costumes, changing my own costumes, changing my backgrounds – the kids loved it,” he recounted of staging “Moana” with a youth cast and “The Drowsy Chaperone” with a group of teens. “The adults may find these platforms challenging – they want to see what they’re expecting to see, the television – but kids love new things, and the little hiccups that we had didn’t concern the kids.”

Los Altos Youth Theatre is pushing out plans for a Rockette boot camp to one of the upcoming school holiday sessions, and preparing a spring musical selection that allows participants to thrive in an online setting: less dancing, no need to budget for lavish costumes and sets, and a chance for young people to delve into the digital production process, Ferguson said.

They’ve been looking for places that a small local theater can shine, in a peculiarly competitive camps season when young people can book online classes with working Broadway performers. Personally connecting students to each other has become a strength of the program, and the dissolution of commute time means students from Oakland public schools joined the youth theater this year.



COURTESY OF PALO ALTO CHILDREN'S THEATRE

**Outdoor productions are scheduled to resume this summer for groups like Palo Alto Children’s Theatre, with smaller casts and audiences.**

“The kids get a bigger sense of community,” Ferguson said. “That was something I never thought I’d be able to do. Being able to build these relationships that don’t go to school with you, don’t live on the Peninsula with you, is really exciting, and these kids are now thick as thieves. I don’t ever want to get rid of the online in the future, I just want to add it in.”

### ***Family-friendly fun***

San Jose-based Playful People Productions pivoted to exclusively online projects last March and has developed programming for all ages to “play and feel comfortable and nurtured,” according to artistic director Katie D’Arcey. The amateur theater group is unusual in including opportunities for families to perform together, in addition to age-group-specific activities ranging from musicals to prop workshops and family game nights.

For people who find it overwhelming to see themselves pictured on Zoom day in and day out, radio shows give a chance for Playful Productions participants to speak up without feeling as self-conscious. Reader’s Theater sessions – both for youth and adults – provide a moment to stretch a little, and try out new voices and new skills.

“The teacher who started that one has started to encourage the kids to write their own scenes, so every week the kids would bring back their own scenes and then work on those instead of just the script pieces she would send them,” D’Arcey said. “The kids were given this opportunity to be creative and took it.”

In summer camps and year-round programming, the group sends craft materials and books to participating homes so that as kids do a live online class, they’re talking about books they have in hand, and doing crafts with their bodies as well.

“When kids are just in front of their screens, they can zone out and just aren’t engaged,” D’Arcey said.

She said that though people miss the in-person experience, she doesn't think remote programming will disappear after the pandemic wanes.

Although her youngest students, in the 5- to 10-year-old range, can struggle, "I think that this format really works for a lot of folks," D'Arcey observed, particularly for teen participants.

"We've actually had three kids come out as transgender since we went into lockdown, and I think they felt that it was an easier way they could express themselves – they could change their name on Zoom, they could keep the camera off until they were feeling accepted – which with us was quickly," she said. "If someone can feel they can be themselves completely, that is an ultimate goal."

**Pandemic pivot**

Peninsula Youth Theatre executive director Karen Simpson said that while you can't replicate performing with another actor in person, "I think we're getting really good at making it more entertaining for our audiences, and also we know how to work with kids to make that more fun and rewarding."

Like Los Altos Youth Theatre, PYT has turned to gaming software, OBS, to produce its shows this year, and the troupe is planning a full production of "The Little Mermaid" this spring for youth participants, as well as two

Stories on Stage shows.

One of PYT's most successful innovations last year was scriptwriting and performance work for teens, which has been scaling up to directing and scriptwriting debuts at the theater.

"The great thing about virtual programming is that when you are doing a show at a (physical) theater, there is a lot of expense tied into the show," said Simpson, adding that now the theater is "doing original work, so you can take a risk on something new, and it's exciting in that way."

PYT has seen its overall age of participation skew higher, as teens find a creative niche while younger kids – tapped out by online school during the day-to-day – feel finished with screen time before they get to camp. PYT is still hoping to run in-person camps in spring and summer, as outdoor spaces become increasingly accessible with warmer weather. Typically, PYT would already be enrolling for the year by January, but organizers haven't yet published a camp schedule for the year because they feel a need to respond flexibly to the shelter-in-place orders.

"You have to really pivot on a dime in this environment," Simpson said.

*For more information on camps, productions and classes, visit [bit.ly/PACchildrenstheatre](http://bit.ly/PACchildrenstheatre), [losaltosstage.org/los-altos-youth-theatre](http://losaltosstage.org/los-altos-youth-theatre), [playfulpeople.org](http://playfulpeople.org) and [pyt.net](http://pyt.net).* ✨



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## STABLE-GROUP DAY & OVERNIGHT SUMMER CAMPS IN THE LOS ALTOS/PALO ALTO AREA

Run for Fun's mission is to provide creative and engaging play for all youth by getting kids active in an inclusive community centered around outdoor fun!

# ON-CAMPUS SUMMER DAY CAMP

SUMMER 2021 FEATURES THREE SESSIONS THAT SPAN 2- TO 3-WEEKS IN LENGTH, FROM 6/7 TO 7/9!



Run for Fun has spent the Fall semester leading Afterschool Programs for Youth, which has given us a strong understanding of best, and realistic, practices that can be applied to working with our Campers during COVID-19. In Summer '21, we will continue to follow guidelines laid out by Santa Clara County. This is a fully "on campus" experience that will be engaging and will be sure to keep your kids moving, laughing and having a great time. The weeks feature sports, games, crafts and theme days within stable groups. Camp runs from 8:30am to 2:45pm, with Morning-Care at 8:00am; Extended-Care available until 5:30pm. Ages 5-12.

# OVERNIGHT CAMP PINECREST

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