

# A Necessary Evil: Technology in Modern American Sleepaway Camps

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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American sleepaway camps: oases where children play, grow, form communities, and escape distractions of everyday life. Since the 19th century, these institutions have provided natural escapes from society in parent-free adventurous spaces (M. B. Smith, 2006). As retreats, sleepaway camps are both physically and technologically removed from the campers' home lives. In the twentieth century, camps could regulate campers' access to telecommunications technology, particularly the telephone, radio, and television, with relative ease. Access to payphones or an office landline could serve for emergency calls. But twenty-first century technology has complicated this problem. Today, campers are likely to have their own smartphones, and their families may expect to be in frequent communication with them. As communications capacities have grown, so have disagreements about whether and how campers may retain access to technology. At American sleepaway camps, camp administrators, parents and children compete to draw the line between necessary and prohibited technology. Every camp strives to provide a perfect environment and experience for campers. The role of technology in this environment must be considered in relation to benefits provided versus impact detracted.

Participants, including campers, staff, and parents, vary in their relative evaluations of safety, the camping experience, and the camp community. Participants who prioritize safety and camper wellbeing favor more communication even at a significant cost to the camping experience or community. Others, however, highly value a screen-free experience and the community and therefore prioritize differently. Besides the direct participants, businesses offering technology for camps, campers, and their families are also influential. While camps, campers, and their families often disagree about the optimum extent to which campers may access technology, most settle upon an approximate normative consensus where campers have

much less access than they would have at home, but sometimes permitting communication and ensuring emergency communication is nearly always possible.

Understanding the sleepaway camp experience requires examining participant perspectives. Testimonials were collected by the author directly from campers and staff members for this research. To maintain transparency while ensuring participant confidentiality, anonymized transcripts of these testimonials are included in an appendix, along with the prompts given to each participant.

## **Review of Research**

Today's children spend less time outside playing and exploring, leading to what Louv (2005) describes as "nature-deficit disorder" (NDD). Beyond being helpful as a form of therapy for children with ADHD, nature nurtures creativity and encourages natural play, forging connections with the natural world as children grow (Louv, 2005). Louv (2012) later acknowledges NDD affects adults as well, noting humans must surround themselves with nature to live fulfilling lives. Dickinson (2013) acknowledges human-nature disconnectedness as a problem but contends providing a scientific name (NDD) to the idea that children separated from nature must return simplifies the issue and ignores cultural changes leading to this reality. Louv (2005) laments summer camps transitioning from places "where you camped, hiked in the woods, learned about plants and animals, or told firelight stories about ghosts or mountain lions" into weight-loss or computer focused facilities, resulting in nature as an abstraction instead of reality. In response, a pilot study investigating young adults at a wilderness camp found participants not only connected better with nature – evidenced by increased knowledge, skills, and perceived safety – but also experienced greater overall wellbeing, including reduced stress,

lower anxiety, and a heightened sense of wholeness (Warber et al., 2015). When intentionally designed, sleepaway camps can rekindle a connection with nature and enhance participants' well-being.

Children in the digital age are prone to cyber-addiction (a behavior some parents admit modeling themselves), dependent on technology and showing withdrawal symptoms when it is removed (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2024). American children over eight years old spend 4–9 hours daily watching or using screens (AACAP, 2024), meaning screentime accounts for 25%–64% of their waking hours, provided they achieve the recommended 8–10 hours of sleep (Paruthi et al., 2016). Besides enduring harmful behaviors like cyberbullying and nonconsensual sexting, Uzundağ et al. (2022) contend prolonged screentime negatively affects self-regulatory skills – such as managing thoughts, feelings, and actions to achieve goals – while Li et al. (2022) link it to a higher risk of depression. García et al. (2020) found the negative effects of significant screentime (over four hours per day) were slightly mitigated by daily physical activity, but children with frequent physical activity and less than two hours of screentime per day reported the highest life satisfaction and positive effect. Gorrell et al. (2024) had similar findings, but note “child age, parent-child co-play, parent stress, and family life satisfaction” were the best predictors of child health during the COVID-19 pandemic, concluding the child’s family and environment play a significant role in their wellbeing.

Goffman and Helmreich (2007) define social establishments as institutions where an activity regularly occurs. They proceed to identify spaces barring connection to the outside world with features preventing people from leaving (such as prisons and asylums) as “total institutions” where “all aspects of life are conducted in the same place,” everything is done with others around, the day is tightly scheduled, and everything is designed to fulfill the official aims of the

institution. In this framework, sleepaway camps exhibit characteristics of total institutions, including the supervisory staff being responsible for the managed group. As caregivers in camp environments, Wilson et al. (1998) use their experiences in a summer camp for ventilator-dependent children to argue staff must be deliberate in developing reciprocal trust to increase connections and strong relationships, which are leading reasons why campers return in subsequent summers. The physical space affects the experience as well: Enskär et al. (2021) found children from socially vulnerable areas feel safest in bright and beautiful environments where they may “do fun things with others” without risk of “being exposed to danger.” Because sleepaway camps control all aspects of the experience, these factors collectively shape a child's overall sense of safety, connection, and enjoyment.

Cowan (2012) proposes the “Consumption Junction” as a sociotechnical problem with the consumer at the center of the network, attempting to view it through their point of view from the inside out. She argues innovation and new technology does not mean the experience will be enhanced, but the consumer’s needs and expectations are more important. The Consumption Junction methodology focuses on the individuals affected by an artifact and their relation to it, identifying their needs and goals as collective recipients of the experience.

### **Camp-Specific Opportunities**

In the 21st century, children frequently see camp as a rare opportunity to be away from phones and technology: “I honestly have always loved the lack of technology at camp” (Camper D, see Appendix). The disconnection is not immediately easy; Ross (2010) compares the initial moment to “hitting [your] finger with a hammer” and calls it “excruciating.” But after taking this step, the camper may feel “liberated” and “blissful,” looking forward to the trial for future years

(Ross, 2010). While technology withdrawal is difficult, distance from screens fosters a deeper sense of presence and engagement - something increasingly rare in children's daily lives. With 73% of parents surveyed in a Pew Research Center study believing it is acceptable for children over 12 to have their own phone (Auxier et al., 2020), this is a common experience for campers not allowed personal devices at camp. This area of respite (while initially difficult) provides rare opportunities to play and grow, reinforcing the value of the sleepaway camp experience.

Not all camps entirely disallow technology. Allison (2015b) writes about a camp he created with the pitch "Kids can do what they want, with whom they want, for as long as they want," and how that extends to allowing children to bring any devices to camp. While it created opportunities for isolation (e.g. one camper only watched *The Office* during meals instead of interacting with others), it also enabled new ways to connect (e.g. a child with autism became a superstar for his Pokémon skills) and most campers only used the devices during nightly free time (Allison, 2015b). This highlights the challenges of technological balance: while it can foster connection and provide some opportunities, excessive use hinders the communal spirit. Reddit commenter Gr8AJ (2022) notes a similar value with technology at camp: outdoor exploration games such as Pokémon Go may create new incentives to explore and can be a casual activity during hikes. Sleepaway camps strive to provide new opportunities to thrive. In these cases, technology is a tool to connect and elevate individuals who do not always receive the same positive experience.

Beyond fostering social bonds, technology can also help enhance creative opportunities in sleepaway camps; for example, photography training is an opportunity campers may not have elsewhere. Allison (2015b) and Gr8AJ (2022) agree: allowing campers phone access can result in more pictures of the camp and free advertising. And many campers enjoy opportunities to take

pictures: “I was in the photography/video elective... I wasn't thinking ‘what would give me the most techie stuff’ but more like ‘this would be a cool hobby’” (Camper C, see Appendix). A surplus of photos means parents see more of their child having fun, camps gain promotional material, and campers capture memories. Campers recalling these positive memories are more likely to return, and seeing photos of their children having fun reassures parents and encourages word of mouth promotion.

Early sleepaway camps were envisioned as safe, controlled environments where children could be protected from harsh realities of the world (Paris, 2008). Today, campers enjoy the separation from news of the outside world: “There is peace in not knowing what is happening in the world over the summer” (Camper B, see Appendix). Another camper states, “I know it's important to be an informed citizen but it's nice to live in blissful ignorance for a couple months out of the year” (Camper D, see Appendix). Being away from news while at camp allows campers to embrace early ideals of play and regain the innocence early camps were designed to facilitate (Paris, 2008). In a world with constant updates and expectations, the ability to step away is invaluable.

Many camps and campers’ parents value camping as an opportunity for children to develop self-efficacy. Campers typically engage in challenging activities where the risk (and occasional experience) of failure impart resilience. Overbearing or “hovering” parents don’t allow their children opportunities to navigate the real world and learn from their experiences (Rich, 2024). Purdum (2023) notes anecdotally how most campers sneaking in phones do so because their parents provided it to “maintain constant contact with ... the world’s longest umbilical cord.” But frequently, the camper voluntarily relinquishes the phone; most campers show “obvious relief” upon surrendering it (Purdum, 2023).

Counselors Seth Faberman and Zoe Fischman observe campers don't bring devices out of genuine desire but for "the fun of breaking the rules" (Faberman, see Appendix), described by Fischman as a "game to smuggle them in" (see Appendix). The Venture Free Foundation (n.d.) argues even one camper having a phone disrupts the camp experience for others. Being at camp provides the special opportunity to gain independence and fully immerse in personal growth.

Carter (2019) asked campers why they cannot distance themselves from phones at home when they love being away from them at camp; campers respond "at camp, there's simply no need for a phone." Campers have the opportunity to be together, embrace authentic camp days, and socialize face-to-face (Carter, 2019). At home, where conditions aren't the same, smartphones are used to pass time - not out of desire, but out of convenience. Carter (2019) describes the technology as a "burden" kids gain "relief" from giving up. When camps provide opportunities for technological distance, campers embrace it.

## **Healthcare Records**

While Clark et al. (2022) found less than half of parents consider safety policies important in their decision about which camp their child attends, they do consider factors such as staff to camper ratios, staff first aid training, safety ratings, and emergency preparedness plans. Parents care about their children's wellbeing at camp, and technology can be a tool to maintain camper welfare. The Alliance for Camp Health recommends at minimum a registered nurse be present on premises (ACH, 2013); highlighting the emphasis placed on healthcare.

Medical records and health systems can be digitized so camps operate more efficiently, and entire companies specialize in managing those records (CampDoc, n.d.). Camp administrator Pamela Kekst acknowledges the benefit of digitized records: "Being able to share the



information about who's gotten medication in camp and who hasn't digitally has made it so that we can keep campers safer and update everyone in real time" (see Appendix). Kekst explains how if a camper visits the doctor for a cold, in addition to medical staff retrieving those records to continue providing healthcare, other authorized camp staff may see certain updates so counselors can help the camper through their recovery (see Appendix). This interconnectedness streamlines systems, providing children with personalized experiences according to their needs.

Keeping digitized health records has challenges, too. In addition to possible challenges from loss of power or Internet, camp networks face the same risks as other organizations. "Camp computer networks are at risk" (Schirick, 2012). Camps must ensure they are properly protecting their data, using secure data storage, providers, and authorization practices; in the event of a data breach, the camp is usually held responsible, not the provider (Schirick, 2012). Hill echoes the American Camp Association's recommendation of a security audit to review security needs and annually assess the camp's risk level (ACA, 2024; Hill, 2015). While the recommendation to evaluate camp security practices is not new, doing so regarding technology in camps is essential.

An overreliance on these systems may lull administrators into a false sense of security. Campminder (a company offering solutions for camp forms, health management, transportation organization, and more) has a webpage dedicated to handling emergencies where users "lose online access to Campminder" (Campminder, n.d.). The primary recommendation is to have hard copies of medical information, rosters, and schedules, necessary in case of power outages, emergencies during off-site trips, or natural disasters (Campminder, n.d.). Technological systems for healthcare and camp management can be tools for efficiency and organization, but require contingency plans to avoid critical situations where access to technology is compromised.

## **Separation From Home**

People of all ages may experience homesickness, with symptoms ranging from sadness and loneliness to physical symptoms like stomachaches or headaches (MIT Health, n.d.).

Thurber (1995) found 83% of campers ages 8-16 at a residential sports camp suffered from homesickness, with over 5% experiencing “severe anxiety and depression.” This behavior was mostly internalized; only 63% of children self-reporting moderate to severe homesickness were judged by observers as homesick (Thurber, 1995). Camp staff are responsible for responding to homesick campers, offering care and compassion to integrate them into the program.

Distance at sleepaway camp is challenging; children commonly want to call home and contact their parents. Two campers who discussed an appreciation about disconnecting from technology at camp simultaneously expressed a desire for two-way communication: “I do wish that I could be a little more in contact with my parents over the summer” (Camper B, see Appendix). Camper D stated “The lack of fast communication with my family and friends can get frustrating,” saying they wish to be “allowed to write emails once a week” (see Appendix).

Allowing a homesick camper to call home can be helpful. It demonstrates trust in the child knowing what’s best for themselves and expressing it, helps the camper feel in control (motivating them to try to stay at camp), and demonstrates the camp is not “a barrier between them and their plainly stated desires” (Allison, 2015a). Some camps which allow these calls work with parents to develop a plan for the conversation to reassure campers of their ability to overcome homesickness and remain at camp (Allison, 2015a; Kingswood Camp, 2020). For some campers, breaking the technological barrier to call home can be strongly beneficial, allowing them to hear their parents voice de-escalating the situation, reminding the child of coping tools with other camp resources (J. Smith, 2021).

However, many agree calling home should be the last resort (Kingswood Camp, 2020; Korlac11, 2019; J. Smith, 2021). Thurber and Walton (2007) anecdotally comment that phone calls and other real-time communication “exacerbate homesickness” when away from home for less than four weeks. Contrary to one purpose of sleepaway camps, “real-time correspondence also erodes the burgeoning independence that camps and trips are designed to nurture” (Thurber & Walton, 2007). Calling home allows children to revert to comfortable, safe, known solutions (which may only amplify homesickness) instead of taking risks and growing in an environment with a different support system. Modern technology makes it easier to encourage the possibility of calling home when an obstacle is met, but combating homesickness offline by making human connections (whether with staff or other campers) in a new space is often a more effective approach (this., 2019).

Real-time communication may be leveraged for other wellness services at camps. One camper interviewed shared they participated in virtual therapy appointments, using a tablet for weekly video calls with their therapist (Camper A, see Appendix). While waiting for these appointments, this camper used the tablet to play small online games which are part of their normal routine at home. They acknowledged not feeling a need to play the games, but because “it was right there, I did take advantage of the technology presented to me.” This highlights a key tension: while technology can support mental and emotional well-being, its presence can also lead to passive overuse, subtly pulling campers away from the immersive environment camps strive to create.

## **Community Building**

Sleepaway camps across the United States prioritize community atmosphere and building relationships, a principle frequently reflected in their mission statements. Live Oak Camp (2020) in Louisiana boasts over 90% of campers form new friendships with people different from them, and WeHaKee Camp for Girls (2016) in Wisconsin emphasizes embracing differences between participants to find acceptance at camp. The mission of Camp Horizons (2014) in Virginia is campers “make friends and achieve personal growth,” Camp Birch Hill (2015) in New Hampshire prioritizes “the Experience, Friendships and the Memories,” and Catalina Island Camps (2019) in California gives campers a positive identity and develops their social skills. Many camps go further, including River Way Ranch Camp (2021) in California and Camp Ramah in New England (CRNE) (2016), both stressing that unplugging from technology and screens is one of their core philosophies and reasons to attend the respective camp. River Way Ranch Camp (2021) partially credits campers ability to “be themselves” at camp to the intentional lack of technology, creating an environment where they are “celebrated for their positive character traits, kindness, and being a good friend to others.” CRNE co-director Josh Edelglass emphasized “it's more important than ever that camp be a place where kids can unplug and ... engage with nature and the people around them,” noting “parents identify this as a key benefit of the Ramah experience” (see Appendix). Camps strive to form communities, and many are recognizing the absence of technology contributes to stronger communities and overall camp experiences.

Megret (2023) found campers see a phone-free environment contributing to better social interactions and enjoy the moment more, even while separated from “digital allowances” such as music and news. Friedman (2022) concurs, concluding the absence of technology allows children

at camps to play together, leading to “social-emotional growth, developing social skills, and building strong friendships.” Counselor Etai Admi comments the lack of technology forces campers to interact with each other and build social connections (see Appendix). Especially when bored, Admi notes they don’t have the option to “sit on couches and scroll on their phone” and instead “interact with one another, making them much more social” (see Appendix).

Counselors frequently recognize the importance of disconnection for their campers. Counselor Jacob Spence reflected on leading Boy Scout groups through the Florida Keys, noting differences between groups allowing technology and those prohibiting it. Groups with devices were less social, more irritable, and less likely to engage in activities, while groups without were “much more involved ... and would enthusiastically participate in the activities” (see Appendix). Spence commented the adult leaders were also more involved without technology and more willing to share about their personal lives, creating “strong bonds throughout” (see Appendix). Kekst shared it is a “shame that staff are not protected in this bubble from technology” at CRNE because they “really do end up asking them to use it” for communication and tracking attendance. Edelglass has a similar sentiment, recognizing connections between staff and campers form by staff demonstrating they care about their campers, but “phones can be a major obstacle to this” (see Appendix). DeHudy et al. (2021) found phones in camps prevent camper social engagement and encourage staff distraction; technology forms obstacles to camp community.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of technology in sleepaway camps is more complicated than prohibition or acceptance; competing expectations and goals from camp staff, campers, and families influence

how camps are run. As camps are intended to foster independence and personal growth, camps may be tempted to allow campers to have access to personal devices as desired with the assumption campers will use them responsibly, but devices detract from the camp experience. It is difficult to avoid technological influences and they may be necessary to promote health and safety, but their usage should be limited to avoid a downstream influence where staff usage of technology affects campers.

Cowan (2012) reminds that just because something is better in technical terms does not mean it will be better for the consumer; as technology continues to evolve, its usage at sleepaway camps must be considered by how it will change the camp mission and impact the experience of campers, staff, and families. Sleepaway camps continue adapting to the modern world and grappling with the challenge of balancing innovation and tradition. Future research could explore the effectiveness of enforcement policies or focus more on staff usage, but there is also a need to continue studying how campers and staff perceive the evolving role of technology to inform best practices.

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## **Appendix**

### **Complete Transcripts of Collected Testimonies**

To incorporate commentary from individuals directly affected by sleepaway camps, testimonies were collected from numerous campers and staff members asked to “share your thoughts on technology at camp as a personal testimonial” (IRB-SBS 7355) Participants were invited to include “anecdotes regarding your personal experiences, how you see the camp using technology, or other thoughts and opinions about the topic.” Complete transcripts of those unedited testimonials are included below, but all identifying information removed about participants under age 18.

#### ***Etai Admi, Camp Ramah in New England - Counselor (March, 2025)***

My belief is that the less campers interact with technology, the better. There are times where it's useful: jeopardy might be played using a computer, which the staff member is using, a movie when things are hectic and things should be calmed, or for certain productions (color war or a play). I think that technology is so commonplace in the kids' daily lives throughout the year, that camp is a breath of fresh air where it is mostly gone from their perspective.

I think that a lack of technology required campers to truly interact with one another and build social connections. When they go to a friend's house during the year they might sit in couches and scroll on their phone, but at camp when they are bored they interact with one another making them much more social.

***Josh Edelglass, Camp Ramah in New England - Co-Director (February, 2025)***

- It's more important than ever that camp be a place where kids can unplug and step away from technology, screens, social media, and engage with nature and the people around them (their counselors and their peers/friends)
- Many parents identify this as a key benefit of the Ramah experience
- For counselors to make a connection with their campers, they have to show the kids they care about them and are engaged with them. They have to be present and not distracted. Phones can be a major obstacle to this. If counselors are constantly on their phones, kids notice that and it negatively affects their perception of their counselors and their relationship.
- There are many ways in which phones are very helpful to the safe, efficient running of camp. Being able to communicate quickly and easily across camp is helpful in a myriad of ways. Being able to have updated attendance lists digitally (as opposed to paper lists which are so wasteful of paper, easily get lost, and are so easily out of date any time there's a switch) is a benefit in many ways.
- There are other programs we offer at camp that involve technology that are very cool, special opportunities for campers — video animation, digital photo editing, musical production — these are special and popular programs for campers with a lot of value.
- Our policies and approaches are designed to thread the needle of these competing positive values, to maintain the "bubble" of camp while also taking advantage of the technology options of 2025 and getting the most benefits we can from them.

***Seth Faberman, Camp Owego - Counselor (March, 2025)***

My name is Seth Faberman. I was a camper at Lake Owego Camp for 7 years (2013-19) and a Counselor/Unit Leader for 2 years (2021-22).

I have generally mixed feelings about technology at camp. I think the first area is to define what “technology” is in this case. I am going to take technology as being screen devices and devices with access to the internet. While there are some camps that may eschew things like electricity altogether, I do not think this is common and people going to those camps know what they are signing up for. Additionally, I think that those types of camps are pursuing a certain identity in it of themselves and is a separate issue altogether. I never had any issues with having electricity and running water for most of the summer (but I like a camping trip as much as anyone, and some of my fondest camp memories were in those environments). I am not sure that a camp experience without that basic “technology” would have been right for me anyway over the course of an entire summer.

The main issue as I see it is how summer camps adapt to the rise of the internet and the associated devices created over the last 20 or so years. I generally think that modern technology use at camp such as phones and internet access is a bad thing. As a camper, one of my favorite things about camp was the opportunity to disconnect. While I missed having access to the sports news and managing my fantasy baseball team, fantasy baseball was something that I could live without, and I got my news through other means. Some of my friends brought their iPods and phones to hide during camp, but I never really understood why they needed those devices. I think part of it was just the fun of breaking the rules and playing keep-away from the counselors and unit leaders. I’ll be the first to admit, it was funny. However, I never really felt that other than being able to listen to new music that they were getting much out of it. I definitely feel that it

helped me to live in the moment more without my technology, and to prioritize healthier habits like reading and actually going to my activities.

I started bringing my technology in 2019 as a CA. That was the first year we were allowed to, and at that point with college prep and other things in the cards there was actually business I needed to deal with in the summer for the first time. The technology was useful to keep in touch with my parents in Costa Rica, do college applications, stay up to date with important information, and even do my college orientation in 2021 (the power went out at my camp so I had to do it at the sister camp nearby). I also used my phone as a counselor. It helped me stay in contact with other counselors, coordinate time off, and work behind the scenes to make things like Olympics and Frontier Week possible behind the scenes. I would say that even though I probably used my phone too much at times, that it was definitely used a lot less than normal, that it did not detract from my experience as a counselor. I fondly remember watching a new show as it came out at night with my other co-counselors and the NBA playoffs in 2021. I think that going without my phone for 6 years helped me keep my technology use within control. I think that using technology is a good thing for counselors even if not so for the campers. It is a privilege but also a responsibility.

It's crazy how things have changed so much since I started camp 12 years ago. The internet is way more pervasive now than it used to be. I did not have a phone to be detached from when I started camp, and it remained that way for a couple of years. I think as kids, we were on the internet less. I got to witness the takeover of the internet and social media in the 2010s as I grew up at camp. Every year, kids would get bolder and bolder to bring their phones, and I think that the usage became worse and worse. However, I still think that before COVID, the buy in from about 75% of campers was still there. It was refreshing to be unplugged from current

internet trends. There was also the three year cycle of counselor phone restrictions. New rules would be made, and over three years enforcement would go away until three years passed and new enforcement rules returned. Everything changed in 2020.

COVID totally changed how camp operated. The kids were noticeably different from a year and a quarter of staying at home. My camp director even said as such. The kids were more affected by the internet, even if they did not have their devices. I was surprised by how drastic the unfettered internet access had on the kids. My junior campers were discussing various sexual and behavioral topics that we would not have known about at that age. The attention span was a major issue. The internet trends were diffusing their way into camp. It did not seem like taking the technology away really mattered much. Another key factor in this was that the political moment demanded that all institutions, camp included, not ignore the politics of the outside world. While politics was certainly not pervasive within camp, the bubble that had prevented politics and current events from breaching the camp walls was over. Things definitely got more lax, and enforcement went down. Older kids brought phones and other devices into camp. It is sad to see really, but at this point I think the post-COVID world means that we can't truly unplug like we used to. That being said, I would like to see parents be more proactive in preventing their kids bringing a device to camp and limiting their internet access at home to help preserve the camp environment.

***Zoe Fischman, Camp Ramah in New England - Counselor (March, 2025)***

basically i think that having no phones increases the sense of community and allows stronger connections to be made

and even though the campers will recognize how much they don't like their phones, they will always revert back to their original ways when they get their phones back

and even when so many of them say that they appreciate having the camp environment with no phones, it's still a game to try to hide them and smuggle them in

***Pamela Kekst, Camp Ramah in New England – Assistant Director (February, 2025)***

*Note: Kekst provided an audio recording which was transcribed by the author*

Necessary and prohibited technology, it's a really great question. I think what I would say as a camp professional is that camps are getting more and more complicated as we serve more people and as our campers needs adjust. And so there has been really an increased need in the necessary technology that we use to care for campers.

Another example I can think of for this is that in the last few summers we've transitioned to using electronic medical records to track in real time campers getting medications and how they're being administered and then when campers see a doctor; being able to share the information about who's gotten medication in camp and who hasn't digitally has made it so that we can (again) keep campers safer and update everyone in real time.

Also in camp, if a yoetzet and a doctor and a nurse are all interacting with a camper who saw a doctor yesterday about a cold, its great that everyone has access to the notes from that so that everyone can provide the best care.



I think one of the main tradeoffs that I really see today is that camp remains a place that is really technology free for campers, and I do think that preserving that is really important, really good for the mental health of campers in today's world and still really connects to the mission of why summer camp started.

However, for staff, I would say it is more and more unavoidable to protect them from technology and there is technology that we need to ask them to use to do their role to the best of their ability. I find it to be a little bit of a shame that staff are not protected in this bubble from technology in the same way, but we really do end up asking them to use it. Whether it's WhatsApp to communicate, or computer systems to take attendance, or using our nurses to track medications, or the way that we're tracking pick-up times and drop-off times and luggage, all of those systems are electronic now. And I think that's really the only way that we can serve the population that we're trying to serve at the scale that we're operating at. So I wish we lived in a world where staff could come to camp and have it be this bubble away from technology, but realistically that's not what it is for staff, and we are asking staff to use this technology so I think that's sort of a necessary evil.

***Jacob Spence, Florida National High Adventure Sea Base - Sailing Mate (March, 2025)***

I started working at Florida National High Adventure Sea Base in the summer of 2022 and continued with the program in the summer of 2023. My position was an ECO sailing mate a live-aboard educator lecturing about the particular ecosystems of the Florida Keys. In my two summers there were two vastly different approaches to the use of technology during the experience. The first were the crews that chose to allow their scouts to use technology including phones throughout the trip. Typically these crews were less interested in the talks regarding the

environment as well as the activities that I would lead. I remember a particular crew from Columbus, Ohio that after the second day underway they would not even participate in the dives or snorkeling on some of the Keys' most popular reefs, they simply were not interested. Furthermore, they [the scouts] would be more irritable as their phones lost power, as the vessel had a limited amount of power, and create arguments within the group. The second approach was the crews that chose to disallow the use of phones for the duration of the trip. These crews would be much more involved in the process and would enthusiastically participate in the activities. These crews would want to engage in more conversations about nearly everything and many of the scouts would find that they held a deeper appreciation of their fellow scouts. Even the adult leaders would participate more and revealed more about their lives to the scouts which created strong bonds throughout.

There is one slight caveat to this exclusion of phones amongst the crews the full time staff, the vessel's captains and myself, were required to have our devices and we would frequently play music while underway or communicate with the other vessel/ other vessels in the vicinity. I personally would only use my phone after I had retired to my bunk to communicate with other staff members and check the news. With these experiences in mind I prefer the second approach due to the aforementioned reasons as well as the fact that it appeared that message that I was attempting to elucidate was better understood and taken to heart by those crews. I think that they would go back to their hometowns and talk about their experiences and the importance of responsible stewardship of the Floridian ecosystems. This was important to me since many of these crews were from towns and cities, Northeast Nebraska; St. Louis, Missouri; Nashville, Tennessee; St. Paul, Minnesota, where this did not seem a serious issue since it did not effect them directly.

***Camper A (February, 2025)***

I think that for me personally when I attended camp I did not have any social media, and that in turn made me miss my phone a lot less especially as someone who doesn't text or call that much anyway. I also don't have games on my phone or watch a lot of tv or movies. Therefore, the lack of a cell phone didn't feel as big of a challenge to me as it might have to others.

Secondly I do feel like there is a sufficient amount of technology at camp, but I did not use it nor interact with it much unless it was helpful like the allergy board. I did however use technology at camp in other ways than other campers might have as I had a few online therapy appointments that were through an Ipad. When I would go to my meeting I often played games like the wordle, and a crossword while I waited. I know I probably shouldn't have done it but before camp it was a part of my daily routine. I didn't feel the need to do it but since it was right there I did take advantage of the technology presented to me.

***Camper B (February, 2025)***

Tech allowed at camp:

- MP3 players
- Cameras
- Smaller video game consoles that do not have wifi

Tech prohibited at camp:

- Anything with Wifi
- Phones
- Computers
- Large video games

How I feel about not being connected:

- Boundless
  - Not limited to showing the best of the best and leaving the worst behind
  - No stress or rush of anxiety with current news
- There is peace in not knowing what is happening in the world over the summer
  - If something super important did happen, we would know especially the older kids.

At the same time though, I do wish that I could be a little more in contact with my parents over the summer. This year, for all campers, we got access to an emailing system. When our parents or anyone authorized on their account for emails sent us an email, We would get a printout of the email and a response sheet. We could then write a reply on paper and supposedly within a day or two, it would be sent to our parents.

### ***Camper C (February, 2025)***

**Chugs without a phone.** Okay so, on a-side I was in the photography/video chug. When I was leveling my chugs I wasn't thinking “what would give me the most techie stuff” but more like “this would be a cool hobby”. When I was actually at the chug, it was the most relaxed environment regarding having bright screens and cameras with kids who haven’t been on a screen in weeks. I felt like no one was going out of their way to get a screen. And once we had them it’s not a big deal to put the screen/camera down.

**Counselors with tech.** I’ve always wondered how camp functioned when phones and computers weren’t a thing. Like how did an urgent message get to who it needed. Or how did a

spontaneous activity by the campers occur with the counselors knowing about if not all there. Anyways, I found it interesting that counselors now must use their tech to work while they functioned just fine in the past without it.

I feel like there is a relationship between the camper, the counselor, and the counselor's phone. Like there's a certain vibe that has to occur for the camper to use their phone. Like idk but there is one. Like utilizing the features of their phone is an option.

**More.** When it's visiting day and I think my parents are able to get my phone back, I like don't want it. It seems kinda useless to have for those three or so hours. When it's the end of camp and I do get my phone back it takes me a bit to turn it back on. And when it is on I don't go to social media, I call my parents and say hi. When I get back home I try to use my phone a bit less. Cause at camp I start to realize how unnecessary having my phone can be at times. Like at home with my phone I would be waiting in line for something probably being on my phone, but at camp the thought doesn't cross my mind.

**More but different.** I don't feel isolated from the world without my phone at camp. Cause we are still told things by the people who do have them. Like we might miss some stupid trend that only lasts for like a month, but it just doesn't really matter. And there's not a feeling of pressure and worry to ask for the news. If we needed to know it, we would be told it.

**Moreeeeeeeeeeee.** Tech is nice for after camp cause you can still talk to others since we are from all over. It is really nice to see all the instagram posts from the camp pics the week after it ends. It's nice seeing camp matters to others as much as it mattered to you that way. Like it's a way to have camp without being at camp. But Like camp itself uses tech too. They send emails and use social media. Like I feel like at time camp relies on counselors having phones. Like when they stopped the photographer so counselors were needed to take photos of the campers.

Even doing chug leveling at camp is on a counselors phone. Like what if the counselor doesn't have a phone

**Some more.** I feel like if I did have my phone at camp, camp would have to change. Cause it would be really sucky. Like no one would look up, everyone would be on it, they would take a picture but it would just sit in their camera roll never to be looked at again. A phone would get in the way of what makes camp, camp. But like I have only ever known camp with counselors having phones and my parents get update emails.

***Camper D (February, 2025)***

i honestly have always loved the lack of technology at camp. i don't really do any of the chugim that require computers so my only access to technology is if we do a movie or someone is playing songs on spotify. i know it's important to be an informed citizen but it's nice to live in blissful ignorance for a couple months out of the year. all that being said, the lack of fast communication with my family and friends can get frustrating. even if we were allowed to write emails once a week.