

February 2022

## **An open letter to parents and caregivers in Aotearoa New Zealand**

We get it. We are parents too.

It takes the wisdom of Solomon sometimes, to know what is 'more' safe, and what is 'less' safe. And wisdom is not easy to come by in a world where the information overload about what should or should not happen, what must or must not happen, or simply what is 'discretionary' to parents, schools or our children themselves, is vague or confusing.

We the undersigned, are responsible for the country's biggest outdoor camps and the largest number of young participants learning outside in Aotearoa every year. We have two core areas of business. The first is to provide holiday camps for children and teens that expand their horizons, build independence, and well, just have awesome fun for a week or two when there is not much else to do at home. The second is to provide for many hundreds of schools safe, developmental education outside the classroom – by way of that classic kiwi rite of passage – 'school camp.'

Our goal is simple, but complex. As most goals are. Simplistically, we want to see young people get outside and engage with the environment and their peers in a way which just isn't possible online or in a classroom. However it is so much more complicated, meaningful and nuanced than that. We think core memories are made at camp. We design our camps to be memorable due to rich experience combined with deep learning – about self, or about others, or the connectedness of the world. And we do it in an environment which amplifies that learning.

There is no classroom or online substitute for falling out of a kayak. There is no substitute for pitching a tent in the rain, or sharing stories or music around a campfire circle. For trying to figure out how to cook spaghetti bolognese on a gas cooker with only one pot. There is no substitute for a morning walk in the bush for the simple purpose of listening to the dawn chorus and watching the sun rise.

Add to this the dynamic of doing these things with your peers, not Mum and Dad. There is something fundamental, even sometimes transcendental, about big moments of reflection or overcoming adversity when it is done without the wrap around protection of your parents. Without parents bearing witness, the experience has a different flavour.

We get it. We get that in this moment and in this time, we as parents are fearful of what we cannot control, so we seek to control as much as possible. That makes sense.

So some reassurance. Even without Covid-19 and Omicron in the mix, we as outdoor educational professionals are always balancing benefits with risk. We balance the benefit, with the risk, of falling out of that kayak, (for example). Running a camp is synonymous with continual review and reflection of how we manage risk: weather, heights, speed, water, the physical capability and emotional comfort levels of our diverse participants.... the list goes on. All of it is central to what our staff teams do day in day out and are not only highly qualified to do so, they are also seriously passionate about every young person having an absolutely fantastic time.

On balance, there is no more or less risk of catching Covid at camp as there is from catching Covid at school, but there is little doubt that it provides a very different set of opportunities for learning, for fun, for friendship and for wellbeing. We didn't need a global pandemic to know that! Kids have been going on camp for generations for a reason.

The Ministry of Education has provided clear guidelines as to how to minimise the spread of Covid in the camping environment. It is all of the common sense variety that we have over the past two years become familiar with. Bubbles, enhanced hygiene, masks, vaccinations and so on. All of our staff are fully vaccinated, but more importantly, all of them are highly skilled agents of safety so adding these extra precautions to how we operate is not a stretch for us.

What is a stretch for us is hearing from some schools and parents that school camp is 'too risky' in the current Omicron environment. We argue that camp is the best possible place for your children to be. It is, quite literally, a 'bubble' in the bush. A bubble with more bubble-wrap than ever before as we've learned to adapt our safety systems in this new normal.

In times of chaos, we should look to experiences that both create a sense of 'business as usual' as well as enhance our young people's inherent individual ability to cope with change and the challenges that the world throws at them.

Covid-19 has created much change to our society. We have come together as a community as the 'team of 5 million' and we have also seen some people excluded and reviled for their beliefs. The extreme nature of the virus we are fighting is polarising our society. Potentially changing it forever. As leaders who strive to enhance social connection, these ironies are not lost on us.

And because of this, we think now is the time that the outdoor camp experience has the most important role to play ever.

We hope you agree.

With best regards,



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