

Dear Parents,

We have always taken the safety and well-being of our campers — your children — very seriously. After all, giving your children over to the care of other people is perhaps the greatest act of trust you as a parent can engage in. We aim to do everything we humanly can to earn and keep that trust. We also know we cannot do this without your help. With more and more children using the Internet, cell phones and other technologies at younger ages, we appeal to you as parents to partner with us to ensure that your children continue to have the safest, most wholesome experience with us at camp as possible.

Please read this letter carefully. It will help you understand the challenges some technologies pose to the continued health and safety of our camp community. Please also review and then read to your child the enclosed policies regarding the Internet, social networking sites and exchanging contact information with their counselors. As always we invite you to call us if you have any questions or concerns about any of these issues.

### **Cell Phones**

As you know we have a “no-cell phone” policy at camp. Aside from the fact that cell phones are expensive and can get lost or stolen and that the physical camp environment is not kind to such items, there is a fundamental problem with campers having cell phones at camp, and that is trust. When children come to camp they — and you — are making a leap of faith, temporarily transferring their primary care from you as their parents to us and their counselors. This is one of the growth-producing, yet challenging aspects of camp. As children learn to trust other caring adults, they grow and learn, little by little, to solve some of their own challenges. We believe this emerging independence is one of the greatest benefits of camp. It is one important way your child develops greater resilience. Contacting you by phone essentially means they have not made this transition. It prevents us from getting to problems that may arise and addressing them quickly. Sending a cell phone to camp is like saying to your child that you as the parent haven't truly come to peace with the notion of them being away from you and in our care.

We agree to tell you if your child is experiencing a challenge in their adjustment to camp. *You can help* by talking with your child *before they leave for camp* and telling them that there is always someone they can reach out to, whether it be their counselor, a trusted activity leader, their village director, the director, camp nurse or health care provider. We are all here to help, but if *you* don't trust us, your children certainly won't!

Another drawback of having cell phones at camp is many of them have built-in cameras. It has happened at some camps around the country that children have secretly taken photographs of other campers or staff during changing or showering times and later uploaded those images onto the Internet. (If you belong to a health club, chances are it has a “no cell phone” policy). We take photographs during the summer, which are available for viewing on our secure (password required) website. Please help us maintain a safe environment by explaining this to your child (see our accompanying note on “Policies for Campers.”) You should know that *any camper that takes a compromising photograph of another camper or staff member and uploads it on the Internet or makes it public in any*

*way may be subject to dismissal from camp or may not be allowed to return. If the law is broken, the appropriate authorities will be notified.*

### **Cyber-Bullying and Harassment**

It has happened at camps around the country that a few campers have sent rude, demeaning, intimidating or vulgar emails or IMs to other campers or have created false screen names to harass members of the camp community or spread false and damaging information about them. Most internet communication is fun, positive and should be one important way campers stay in touch with their friends. Our "Policy for Campers," which we are asking you to read over and then read with your child, covers our response to this problem. In addition, *we have outlined the steps you or your child should take should they receive an abusive, demeaning or otherwise threatening or inappropriate internet communication.* Being familiar with these steps is part of the overall safety and healthy practice you should have in place with your child if they are online, regardless of whether they attend camp or not. Sharing them with you is one way we felt we could support your effort to protect your children whether they are at camp or not.

### **Your Kids, Our Staff after Camp**

Our pledge is to put your children in the company of the most trustworthy and capable young adults we can hire—counselors who are well suited to the task of caring for campers. The effort we put into screening and selecting our staff is part of that pledge. Our staff work with your children in the context of a visible, well scrutinized environment that has many built-in checks and balances. Counselors are supervised by senior staff guided by clear, firm policies regarding behavior. Their actions are also visible to co-workers and campers. By hiring them we do not recommend them as baby-sitters, nannies or child companions outside of camp. *We hire our staff for the camp season. We do not take responsibility for their behavior off-season.* As a parent you are, of course, free to make your own choice in this matter. While we cannot keep you from allowing your child to visit with one of our staff members, in so doing you take full responsibility. We also know that many children exchange contact information (e.g., e-mail address, profile names, cell phone numbers) with counselors without our or your specific awareness or permission. *We recommend that you as the parent supervise your child's online activities just as you do other aspects of their life in your home, and oversee any off-season contact our staff members and your child. You take full responsibility to oversee any contact that results.*

### **Working Together to Keep Your Children Safe**

We see many positive, exciting ways for youngsters to enjoy the healthy benefits of the Internet and other technologies. As advocates for children we want to work with you to keep those experiences safe, healthy and positive. That is why we have taken the time to write these policies, include some resources for you and urge you to talk with your children — both about camp and their online activity in general.

## Birch Trail Camp Off-Season Camper-Staff Contact

At Birch Trail Camp our pledge is to put your children in the company of the most trustworthy and appropriate young adults we can hire—counselors who are well suited to the task of caring for campers. The effort we put into screening and selecting our staff is part of that pledge.

By hiring the staff that we do, however, we do not recommend them as baby-sitters, nannies or child companions outside of camp. Our staff works with your child in the context of a visible, well scrutinized community that has many built-in checks and balances. Counselors are supervised by senior staff and are guided by clear, firm policies regarding behavior. Their actions are also visible to a community full of co-workers and campers. In general we discourage our staff from having contact with your children after camp *since we cannot supervise it*. We hire our staff *for the camp season*. *We do not take responsibility for their behavior off-season*.

We also recognize that campers and counselors develop close, trusting relationships with one another at camp and that these relationships are healthy, wholesome and beneficial to campers and staff alike. We are aware that many campers will naturally want to keep in touch with their favorite counselors after camp.

Our recommendation is simply for you as parents to be aware of your child's online activities and supervise them as you would any other aspect of their life in your home. Likewise, if you as a parent or legal guardian wish your child to exchange such information with a camp staff member, that is, of course, your right. However, by doing so, you understand *you accept full responsibility for overseeing whatever contact occurs as a result*.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood Birch Trail Camp's Off Season Camper-Staff Contact policy and agree to abide by it. I understand that this is a contract that legally binds me.

Parent Name \_\_\_\_\_ Camper Name \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Regarding Your Child and their Online Activity

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Children today spend a lot of time each week online. While this can be healthy and positive, as an advocate for children and their safety, *we recommend that you as parents be knowledgeable about their online activities*. While your children may balk at your effort to supervise them or see their online profile, we also know children listen to their parent's advice and concern. We've gathered information from many sources and are providing you with a summary of that information as a way of supporting your effort to ensure your child's continued well-being, even outside of camp. We have included some helpful resources for further help or information.

### General Tips

- 1) If you aren't already, make it your business to become familiar with your child's computer and the Internet. You can't protect your children unless you know what is out there. If you want further help, contact [www.masterteacher.com/index.html](http://www.masterteacher.com/index.html)
- 2) Try to avoid using the computer as a baby-sitter. Leaving your child online for long periods of time without checking in with them or supervising them may result in activities that are risky, over-stimulating or inappropriate that you may not be aware of.
- 3) Set rules around the use of the computer and the Internet. You have rules about other aspects of conduct in your home. The computer and the Internet should be no exception. Kids who think their parents "don't care" often take higher risks than children who know their parents are interested, knowledgeable and involved.
- 4) Think about the location of the computer your child generally uses to go online. One significant question online predators ask children and Teens is the location of their computer. Predators are emboldened if they sense that the children they are communicating with online are not being supervised by an adult.
- 5) Inform your children of the dangers of the Internet and tell them that you intend to supervise or oversee their online activity. Then follow through on a regular basis! The following three items are specific examples of things you can do.
- 6) Check the browser history on your child's computer. This way you can see what sites they are visiting. Microsoft Explorer, AOL and Netscape all have history tabs or "my favorite places" that show you where your child has been. A survey in Boston in 2005 revealed that up to 70% of all boys ages 14-18 spend from between 3 to 6 hours a week on pornographic sites on the Internet *each week* without their parents knowledge!
- 7) Check down-loaded files by checking the directory that programs are downloaded into. This is another way you can see what your child has been up to.
- 8) Ask your child if they have an online social networking profile. (Kids don't call it that, so you may need to say, "You know, like MySpace or Facebook!" If they are being coy, they are hiding something from you). If they have one, look at it! The pictures and text may tell you a lot about what your child has been up to.

### **Safety Tips for Teens Online**

- 1) Avoid giving out your last name, phone number, address, name of your school, where you hang out or sports teams you are on.
- 2) Use the privacy features on your service.
- 3) Avoid meeting people in person who you have met on the Net that you don't know. If you do agree to meet someone, let your parents know and take some friends along.
- 4) Be careful of what you post online—pics and text are open for the world to see. Teens seem to forget this!
- 5) Remember that *anyone can pose as anyone else online!* Unless you are positive of the person's identity, be skeptical.

### **What to Tell Your Child If They Are Threatened Online**

- 1) Don't respond or retaliate. Doing so may only make matters worse or get you into trouble.
- 2) If you can, save the message on your hard drive and print out a copy. Then close the message or program.
- 3) Tell your parent or a trusted adult immediately.
- 4) If it is someone from camp, call the camp director.
- 5) If necessary, call your Internet service provider (e.g., AOL, Yahoo, g-mail, etc.)
- 6) If necessary, call the local police (like in cases of a threat on your life, a sexual advance, etc.)
- 7) Another resource: The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children ([www.ncmec.org](http://www.ncmec.org)).

### **Other Resources**

"Keeping It Safe—Nine Important Steps to Internet Safety and Protecting Our Children," [www.Westchestergov.com](http://www.Westchestergov.com). A handy, helpful pamphlet put out by the District Attorney's Office in Westchester County, New York. E-mail them for a copy.

*MySpace Unraveled: A Parent's Guide to Teen Social Networking*, Larry Magid and Anne Collier, Peachpit Press, 2006. Extremely helpful, informative and comprehensive, easy-to-read guide for parents. Paperback, about \$15.

[www.Wiredsafety.org](http://www.Wiredsafety.org) A set of Internet sites having to do with various online safety issues.

"What Parent's Need to Know about MySpace—Your Guide to a Kid's World on the Internet," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 18, 2006. Great, easy to read, all-in-one-place article. You can download it from their website for a small fee.