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Parents Scrutinize Online Camp Photos to Check on Kids

One Mom Gets Up at 3 a.m. Each Day to See if Her Son Gives the Thumbs-Up

By **AMY GAMERMAN**

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Before Nancy Corson Schwartz put her 10-year-old son, Harry, on a bus bound for sleep-away camp in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, she gave him a warning: "If you don't give me the thumbs-up, I'm never going to sleep."

At 3 a.m. ever since, Ms. Corson Schwartz has rolled over in her bed in Franklin Lakes, N.J., logged into the camp's photo gallery on her laptop and started scrolling through the day's feed of 800 pictures. Her reward? Photos of Harry hanging with his bunkmates, playing roller hockey and bouncing on a floating trampoline—all with his thumb in the air.

"That thumb has to be so tired, it's up there in every picture," said Ms. Corson Schwartz. "I told him, 'You want a phone? You want a TV in your room? It is priceless what you've done for me this summer.' "

Stalking the camp photo gallery has become a rite of summer for parents. Most residential camps upload images and videos shot by staff photographers to secure websites every day.

The idea was to provide a window into camp, where cellphones and email are often restricted. Instead, parents who have paid upward of \$10,000 so their kids can unplug for a screen-free summer, spend hours on camp websites to catch glimpses of them.

Once proof of life has been established, parents analyze facial expressions and body language with the intensity of Cold War Kremlinologists. Is that smile real or fake? Why



A Tyler Hill Camp photographer takes pictures of campers during an event in July. DAVE WELSFORD

is she standing apart from her bunk-mates? Whose shirt is he wearing?

Camp directors have discovered that a picture can be worth a thousand words to an anxious mom

or dad. "I had a parent say that although she spoke to her son and everything sounded fine...the housekeeper felt he didn't look like himself—he looked sad," said Jay Jacobs, owner of Timber Lake Camp in Shandaken, N.Y.

The usual response to such calls is to dispatch a staff member to ask the child why he or she wasn't smiling. "I'll say, 'You didn't look so happy' and they'll say 'Yeah, we just lost the soccer game,'" said Debby Shriber, director of Crane Lake Camp in West Stockbridge, Mass.



Reassurance can be costly. Some parents had complained that there weren't enough photos of their kids on the website for Camp Harlam in Kunkletown, Pa. To appease them, director Aaron Selkow spent an extra \$15,000 this year to hire two more photographers and a communications coordinator. At Tyler Hill Camp in the Poconos, owner Wendy Siegel

invested \$8,000 in iPads and training for head counselors, so they could use the devices to email pictures and short movies to parents this summer.

"They can video Jack water skiing for the first time, and five seconds later, the parents are able to see it," Ms. Siegel said.

There are a few holdouts. "Part of being independent and having your own experience ends when the parent has a bird's-eye view into your life," said Christine Seving, director of Camp Fernwood in Poland, Maine. The camp doesn't post pictures.

"I was kind of a little bummed," said Lisa Kleinfeld of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., whose three children attend gallery-free camps in the Berkshire Mountains. "But I see how my friends are so addicted. I would probably be glued to the website."

Most camp pros see the gallery as powerful advertising. "You're reminding them their kids are having a good time, and to sign up for next year," said Matthew Basinet, director of Adirondack Camp in Putnam Station, N.Y. But even pictures of happy campers can cause alarm. At Cheley Colorado Camps in the Rocky Mountains, Jeff Cheley has fielded complaints from parents who have seen their child wearing the same shirt too many days in a row.

For Samantha Fruhling, it was the sight of "gross, athlete's foot-ridden sneakers" on her 8-year-old son Aidan's feet that prompted "a quick, friendly little email" to his head counselor at Camp Lokanda in New York's Catskills, asking him to find Aidan's two new pair. Counselors located them in Aidan's shoe bag. "They were very thankful that I had attached pictures from Zappos," said Ms. Fruhling.

Some campers have had enough. Thirteen-year-old Sophie Richman, who didn't have "the best-est experience" at her old camp, chafed at the constant presence of a photographer. "He would say, 'Put your arms around each other and smile...smile really big,' " she said. By the end of her camp session, she made a point of frowning in group shots.

Sophie's younger brother is at Camp Greylock in the Berkshires, which doesn't post pictures. "There are certain things you want to see," said their mother Abbie Richman. "He had bug bites on visiting day, and he was scratching them till they bleed. I want to see a picture and zoom in to see if they're infected."

Soon after the 2000 debut of website Bunk1, which manages photos for 1,500 camps, founder Ari Ackerman spotted a trend: pictures of kids with their thumbs pointing skyward, an all-clear sign for the folks back home.

Now, when a child gives a thumbs-down—or simply forgets to give a thumbs-up—the

camp director often gets a call, which is why many of them have banned the gesture. Michelle Pinkert of Chicago asked her 11-year-old son to pose thumbs-up to signal that he got to bunk with his friends at Trail's End Camp in the Poconos.

"He said 'We're not allowed to....We can't.' " She told him to wear his hat backward instead.

Campers at Stagedoor Manor, a theater camp in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., send signals to stage mothers through pictures on the camp's Twitter feed. "They'll say to their mom, 'If I have my hands clasped on my lap, that means I have the lead, if I have my hands on my knees, I'm supporting,' " said camp director Barb Martin. Her phone rings soon after.

This summer's most sought-after trophy is the happy-sibling shot.

"I offered my children money before they left for camp for every picture they took together," said Beth Glazer of Montvale, N.J., whose 10-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son are attending Camp Starlight in the Poconos together. At last count, they had earned \$29 apiece.

"I know it will stop as soon as they get home," Ms. Glazer said. "But just seeing them with their arms around each other, smiling, I would pay \$100 for it."

Corrections & Amplifications

Beth Glazer lives in Montvale, N.J. An earlier version of this article about summer camp incorrectly said she lived in Montville, N.J.

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