

Kids participate in a Roblox class from CodeREV via Zoom.

ZOOMING TOWARD SUMMER

Many SoCal programs will be offering virtual camps this year

By Christina Elston

"All indicators point to the fact that this is not going to be a normal summer." That's how Korey Kalman, founder and CEO of [Got Game Sports](#), sums up the uncertainty that the coronavirus pandemic has brought to our family routines. Got Game runs after-school, physical education and summer camp programs at a host of SoCal locations, so Kalman was among program directors who had to pivot early toward the virtual realm.

What about summer camp? This year, many kids will be logging on from home.

The decision to pivot

As school closures were announced in March, Got Game started running after-school virtual programs within a week. "We pivoted very quickly," Kalman says. "We just kind of told ourselves it is not going to be perfect, but let's put a lot of time and thought into this. Let's create something that we think is going to be fun, and let's just go. And we're going to learn, and we're going to get better every single day. And that's what we did."

After cancellations of its spring sessions in New York and Paris, [Modeling Camp](#) founder/director Heather Cole was faced with how to handle the summer session in L.A. "I just decided that the safest thing to do was to opt for a virtual camp for this summer," Cole says, "because even if things open back up, I think there's still going to be a lot of nervousness." Modeling Camp sessions take place in hotels and involve close-contact hair and makeup tutorials. "Social distancing would have been quite hard to implement," says Cole. She adds that the parents she has spoken with seemed reluctant to send their kids to an in-person program. "They were sort of relieved when I said

PHOTO COURTESY CODEREV

we have a virtual option," she says.

Families might be breathing a sigh of relief that there will be some sort of camp this summer, but making that happen in some cases has required heavy lifting. "Before this whole thing, it was tough for me to get the majority of my art teachers to just check their email," says Jessica Slayback, founding director of [The Realm Creative Academy](#), a Santa Monica-based program that offers homeschool classes, tutoring, enrichment and summer camp. "We just reached out to every human being we knew in our community and said, 'Teach us, so that we can teach you.'" They closed the program for a day, learned the ins and outs of the Zoom platform – via Zoom – from parent volunteers, and reopened the next day with a virtual program.

In a better position to make the shift was [CodeREV](#), a STEM-based program that includes a spring camp and enrichment classes throughout the school year. "We already had a couple years of experience doing virtual camps and some classes at certain locations where we couldn't be there in person," says founder Evan Boorman. "High-tech game design, coding, game-based learning ... a lot of those types of classes lend themselves really well to a virtual format." He held out the possibility of some highly modified in-person summer programs at a couple of locations, but says the bulk of the camp program will be online. "We know that we will definitely be running full-steam with virtual."

Same camp, new format

Of course, not every aspect of every program can be recreated online. The Realm, for instance, had soccer teams, hiking, rock climbing, fencing and trapeze workshops that simply had to be paused. Modeling Camp delayed campers' photo shoots until the camp is able to hold in-person fashion shows, possibly in the fall. Camp days will also often be shorter – and tuition reduced – because of the online-only format.

Zoom, however, made many aspects of many camps – including Modeling Camp – fairly easy to replicate. "Within that platform, we have the ability to have instructors stream and demonstrate and instruct and basically do what they would do at camp," Cole says. The makeup artist and runway instructor will hold their demonstration classes, the health and fitness instructor will lead workouts and representatives from top modeling agencies will give talks and answer questions.

The Realm has been creatively adapting. Their musical theater instructor, for instance, reshaped a planned production of "Into the Woods," setting students up with virtual backgrounds and costumes so they could record their parts from home. The performances will be edited together into the finished production. "I'm really impressed with how people are adapting," Slayback says.

"It guides us to think outside the box, to find what works the best for kids online and to bring education to life again," says Victoria Forsman, also a founding director at The Realm. "A lot of our science classes, art classes, we just found different ways to do them where kids can still be in action experiencing things and adventuring in their learning."



PHOTO COURTESY GOT GAMESPORTS

As school closures were announced, Got Game Sports pivoted to virtual programs within a week.

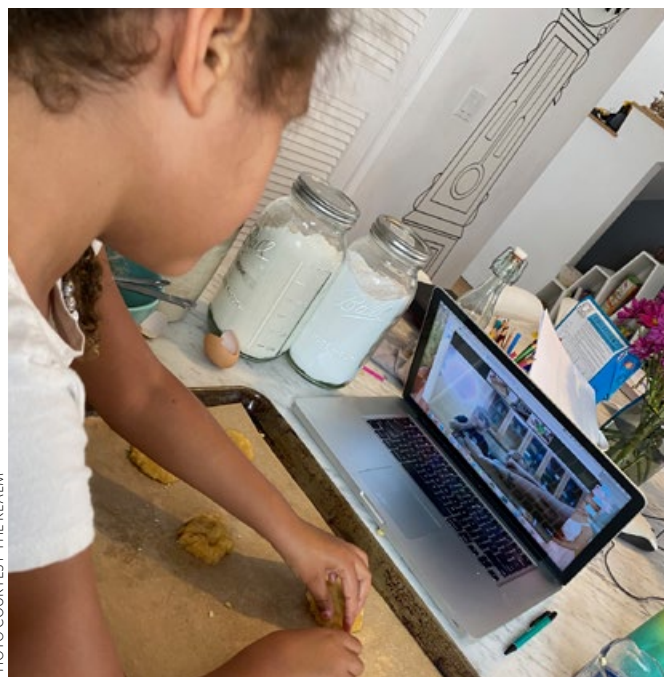


PHOTO COURTESY THE REALM

The Realm has been creatively adapting instruction and helping students explore online.

Camp staff and teachers have been adapting to the new formats. "Teachers just need to learn what's different about that format, how to keep an eye on the content that you're teaching and then keep a close eye on – in our case – the Zoom window, so you can see how your students are responding, their facial cues, if they have their hand up, so that you can adjust your instruction as needed," Boorman says. "And that just takes a little coaching and getting used to."



PHOTO COURTESY THE REALM

Virtual counselors need to pay extra attention to keep kids engaged and make learning interactive.

Students, Boorman says, are pretty familiar with the platforms at this point because most schools are using them. So, they know how to use the white board, screen sharing and other tools.

To keep those students engaged throughout the summer will be key. “You’ve got to keep it very interactive because kids have been sitting online for the last three months studying,” says Cole. “It’s about coming up with something that they’re interested in.” Modeling Camp online will feature polls, quizzes and breakout activities for campers to do so they don’t get bored. “Our secret is to be changing up what we’re doing,” Cole says. “Every 45 minutes or so, we’re moving on to a totally different topic.”

Topic and togetherness

Topic is key if you want to get your Zoom-weary kids to log on for doses of virtual camp. “If your child is really interested in whatever

that virtual camp is – for example, if your daughter is dying to model and really wants to do it – I think that it’s going to maintain their interest,” says Cole.

The Realm is planning summer classes that use this moment in history as a vehicle for teaching. Sew Important is one that campers can try. “They’re sewing face masks for people who need them,” says Slayback. “They’re sewing dog beds for dogs in shelters. Or they’re sewing little hearts or little monsters that then get sent to nursing homes.” She also wants to create classes where campers write cards and letters to frontline workers battling the pandemic, or “chalk bomb” their neighborhood sidewalks with encouraging quotes.

CodeREV will take advantage of its students’ natural love of the online environment. “This format allows for kids – in our program, at least – to really dive into things that they’re really excited about: building their own video games, learning to program apps and web-

Questions to Consider for In-Person Camps

Safer-at-home guidelines are continually evolving, and there is a chance that some camp programs might be able to re-open and welcome campers in person for all or part of this summer. If you are considering one of these programs, Ryan Rosen, director of Camp Kinneret Summer Day Camp in Agoura Hills, suggests asking these questions:

- Is the camp permitted, regulated by the local health department and accredited by the American Camp Association?
- What will the morning drop-off procedures be and what screening procedures will be in place?
- Will staff and/or campers be wearing masks all day?
- Will the staff and campers be practicing social distancing?
- How will the camp be sanitizing community surfaces such as handrails, ball bins, water fountains and equipment?
- Will campers be in stable, consistent groups of no more than 10 to 12 campers each day?
- How will the camp limit congestion in areas such as drinking fountains and restrooms, and at arrival and dismissal?
- How will the camp ensure that staff are practicing social distancing away from camp?
- How will the camp respond to illness, including illness not related to COVID-19? Will there be a first-aid provider?
- What will the camp’s communication be related to COVID-19? How will they inform families about positive tests or possible exposure among campers or staff?

sites, building adventures in Minecraft or solving math in Minecraft,” says Boorman. “And doing that with your peers, led by an expert (who’s kind of like a magician because these experts know so much) is an incredibly exciting experience for most kids.”

Also essential will be interactivity. “The socialization that’s offered when you have a class of six or eight students together, working on a common project, the camaraderie, is still there and it’s needed now more than ever for these kids,” Boorman says.

Other program directors seem to agree. “That was where everything started,” says Kalman. “How do we create something where they’re going to have a chance to interact? They have to get in those rooms and they have to work together.” One example is Got Game’s Lego engineering social club. Kids are in different breakout rooms, in small groups of four or five, with adults bouncing between rooms. “As they’re building, they’re talking and making friends,” Kalman says. “It’s all about connecting the children.”

And those connections have been forming in some unexpected ways. Modeling Camp, which has traditionally been girls-only because campers make wardrobe changes in close quarters, has opened its online program to boys. CodeREV has seen campers logging in from across the U.S., western Europe and even Singapore. Got Game has seen students from the East Coast and Northeast mingling with West Coast online participants. And The Realm has had log-ons from London and Taiwan, among other places.

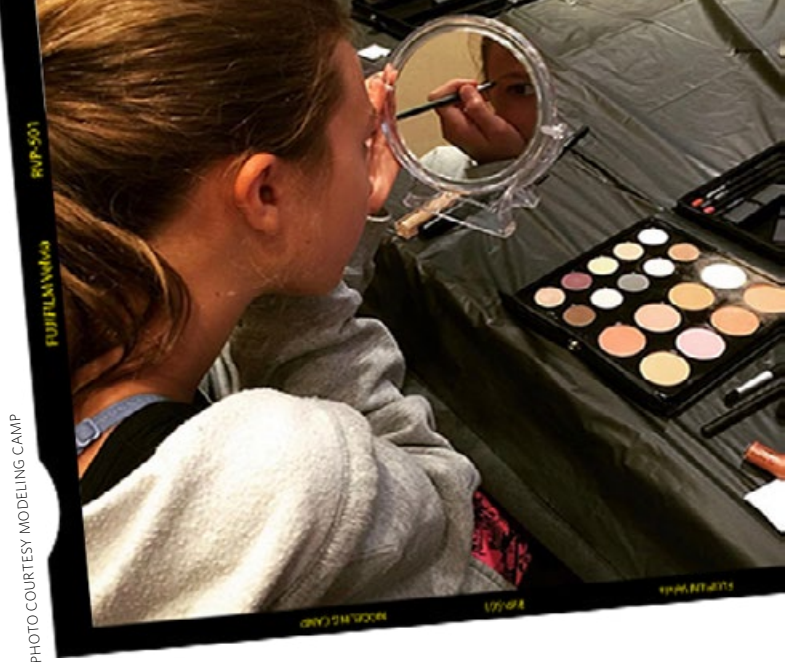


PHOTO COURTESY MODELING CAMP

Makeup tutorials are among the many aspects of Modeling Camp that translated well to a virtual format.

“In this moment, we realized something that’s so important is kids still connecting – connecting with their friends, connecting with their teachers, feeling part of a community,” Slayback says. “Hosting those classes, I feel like we can at least connect with our community and everybody can kind of weather the storm together.” ♦

Christina Elston is Editor of L.A. Parent.

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