

The Dutchman's Rope, Helicopter Arms and Other Useful Techniques for Maintaining Physical Distancing in Groups

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"Summer 2021 is going to be all about wearing masks and physical distancing."

Jeff Merhige, Executive Director
YMCA Camp Widjiwagan, Nashville, TN



Anytime a group of people gather together there is an atavistic human instinct to draw closer. Closer to the speaker so to be able to hear what is being said. Closer to friends and family. Close enough to shake hands (if you still remember doing such things). Close enough to hug.

Hopefully we'll be able to return to such things in the near future, but for the next year or so, maintaining physical distance and wearing appropriate face coverings is going to be the norm for many summer camps, conferences and group gatherings.

Not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination, but do-able, if your organization is willing to do some very intentional planning and preparation.

The tendency of campers and staff to come within close proximity of each other has been an essential part of the camp experience for more than a hundred years and the strength of that tradition is being tested in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Maintaining physical distancing and following recommended guidelines and best practices are challenging but necessary. To do anything less would be socially irresponsible.

But physical distancing is neither simple nor automatic and in fact it flies in the face of everything we know about creating connection and building positive relationships. Assemble any group of people and as they get comfortable with each other, they are sure to violate several if not all of the currently established guidelines and best practices for physical distancing.

It's going to take some intentionality to overcome the tendency of campers and staff to huddle together. Not forever, not indefinitely, but just for the next year or two until we get Covid-19 under control. Then we'll have the biggest hug-fest that camp has ever seen.

Preliminary data from Camp Counts research by the American Camp Association indicates that both campers and staff found maintaining physical distancing one of the most challenging facets of summer camps that operated in 2020. So, to help make physical distancing a little more convenient for your camp this coming year, I'd like to share the following techniques.

The Dutchman's Rope

In the 17th century mariners measured the speed of their vessels at sea using a wedge-shaped piece of wood, a long rope with knots tied at specific intervals and a sand-filled hourglass timer. This measurement technique came to be known by a variety of names including the common log and the Dutchman's Log. One nautical mile per hour is equivalent to one knot, a terminology that is still used today.



If ancient mariners could use materials that were readily available to solve complex problems in navigation, perhaps we can do the same with regard to physical distancing. The Dutchman's Rope (which I've named after the Dutchman's Log technique mentioned above) is any standard rope with knots tied every seven feet. If you place such ropes on the ground at your camp, anytime campers and counselors gather together, they can automatically stand near one of the available knots, maintaining physical distancing in the process. You can use multiple ropes for various group sizes, or simply coil any unneeded rope and knots into a pile where the counselor stands. Best of all, ropes are flexible and easily transported, so the counselor can take their Dutchman's rope with them and use it as needed throughout the day.

Years ago, Dr. Tom Smith introduced me to the concept of Raccoon Circles as the perfect way to invite groups to come together. Since that time, hundreds of Raccoon Circle activities have been invented by creative camp professionals and facilitators around the world. Perhaps the Dutchman's Rope will become the new *must have* group facilitation prop, and just to get you started, here is a familiar teambuilding activity modified for physical distancing that you can play with a Dutchman's Rope.

Have You Ever?

In the tradition version of *Have You Ever?* players form a circle and stand on a marker, such as an index card, paper plate or gym spot. One player, standing slightly inside the circle introduces themselves to the group and then says "Have you ever...." followed by something interesting that they have done. Everyone in the group that has also done that particular thing is invited to move from their present location to a new location. The last player to find a new location becomes the speaker for the next round.

This version of the game generally begins in close proximity and during the mayhem of finding a new location, players generally violate multiple physical distancing guidelines as they bump into each other in close proximity within the circle.

The modified version of *Have You Ever?* incorporates the Dutchman's Rope as the basic layout of the game. The speaker position is where the additional rope is coiled. In this version of the game, players

move to a new location by traversing the wide-open space outside the Dutchman's Rope, rather than the more crowded space in the interior region of the rope.

For more information about creating and using your own Dutchman's Rope, including a collection of twenty-five additional activities, see the new ACA publication *The Dutchman's Rope – A unique way to maintain physical distancing during real-world in-person gatherings*, by Jim Cain (ISBN 978-1-6067-9519-4). Available from the American Camp Association bookstore (ACABookstore.org). You can also purchase this publication and hand-crafted Dutchman's Ropes from Training-Wheels, Inc. (Training-Wheels.com).

Chicken Circles

Chris Cavert is a creative guy and years ago invented a technique for always forming the perfectly sized circle for any group activity. Chris mused that no matter how many times he invited a group to circle up, they never quite formed the perfectly sized circle. So he introduced the concept of *Chicken Circles* as a way to always organize his flock.

Chicken Soup – players stand in a circle shoulder to shoulder

Chicken Wings – players stand in a circle, hands on hips, elbow to elbow

Flying Chickens – players stand in a circle, arms outstretched, fingertip to fingertip

Free Range Chickens – players stand apart from each other

Sam Sikes, another innovative teambuilding author modified *Chicken Circles* and created a westward expansion theme he calls *The Great Round Up*. In this version, the following phrases apply:

Wagon Wheel – players stand in a circle shoulder to shoulder

Elbow Room – players stand in a circle, hands on hips, elbow to elbow

Urban Sprawl – players stand in a circle, arms outstretched, fingertip to fingertip

Free Range – players scatter, extend their arms and keep repositioning until they have sufficient free space without touching any other players

You can find both of these group formation activities (and many more) in the book *The More the Merrier* (ISBN 978-0-9646-5419-8) by Cavert, Evans and Sikes.

Helicopter Arms

One of the easiest no-prop techniques for maintaining physical distancing at camp is for a counselor to say "helicopter arms" and instruct campers to stretch both arms out and slowly twirl one 360-degree revolution. If campers make physical contact with each other, then they are standing too close together.

Personalize Your Camp's Physical Distancing Technique

Many camps have themes for each week of camp or for specific programs or events. I would encourage all camps to invent creative physical distancing activities based upon the theme, setting or focus of their camp. Just make sure to create a technique that doesn't grow old after a dozen or more uses each day. Maintaining physical distance is challenging, especially as campers and staff get to know each other.

Teambuilding Guru Dr. Jim Cain is the author of nearly two dozen books filled with team and community building activities from around the world. For the past year, he has been hard at work inventing virtual and real-world in-person activities to help create connection, even during a global pandemic. You can find out more about this work at: www.teamworkandteamplay.com.

For more activities and techniques for creating social connection while maintaining physical distance see the new ACA bookstore publication, *Connection Without Contact* by Jim Cain (ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x). Available Spring 2020 from ACABookstore.org.



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