

Shade Structures: Staying out of the Sun

The public knows to guard against harmful sun exposure, but the options to do so may be confusing. Here are some suggestions.

by Mary Helen Sprecher

Times were, sunburns and peeling skin were as much a part of summer for kids as bare feet and cutoffs. Accordingly, parents thought it was a lot healthier for their kids to have color than it was for them to be palefaces.

Of course, decades before that, people thought regular smoking would strengthen the lungs of asthma patients, too.

A lot has changed in the way we view the sun and the way we protect ourselves from it. These days, sunscreen is routine (and even waterproof), and sports clothing carries sun protection factor ratings. And while much activity still goes on outdoors, those who are playing outside, those who are watching the action, or those who are just relaxing with friends and talking or doing an activity, don't mind being protected from burning (or at least from overexposure).

If you run a camp, you're as concerned about protecting your campers and staff as the next person. Fortunately, you can. And while beach umbrellas are still out there, so are a lot of newer and more easily maintained options.

Have It Made in the Shade, on Your Budget

Various options exist for creating shade in your camp spaces. They may be permanent shade shelters (like gazebos, pergolas, picnic shelters and more), or temporary shelters (like pop-up tents). There are shelters made with metal or wood posts and awnings, tension-supported structures, metal shelters, and those made out of regular building materials like brick and wood.

Structures may be as expensive as a custom-made shelter that fits over a specific area in camp colors, or as low-tech as a table with an umbrella on it that was purchased at a big-box store. No matter what the needs and budget of your camp, shade shelters will be available and will serve the purpose of keeping campers and staffers safe from the sun.

Shop carefully and wisely. A shelter that is too cheaply made may not hold up for more than one season (if it lasts that long). Wind, rain, sunlight and other factors can contribute to early wear and tear. Investigate warranties and read any consumer reviews regarding product performance.

Location, Location, Location

Remember that any place people gather, shade should be available. Of course, if your area is heavily wooded, the need for shade structures may be greatly decreased; however, shelters also come in handy in the event of rain.

Some areas where shade structures should be considered:

- Picnic areas
- Playgrounds
- Swimming pools or splash pads
- Athletic facilities (tennis courts, volleyball courts, sports fields, running tracks and more)
- Outside meal halls or community areas
- At various points along walking paths
- Outside cabins or lodges
- Outside any buildings such as offices for health professionals or guidance counselors where campers might have to wait for an appointment

Placement of shelters is essential, and for safety's sake, a few quick considerations should be kept in mind. If, for example, shade shelters are placed near a playground, they should be placed in a way that allows counselors or supervisors to see and hear children at all times. However, benches or shade shelters located outside offices for health professionals or guidance counselors should be placed far enough from the building as to ensure privacy of those within.

Remember that kids often get excited around facilities like swimming pools, and will run back and forth (despite lifeguards' repeated warnings not to do so). Make sure any shade shelters are set far enough back so that children don't accidentally run into them.

If a shade shelter is placed near a sports facility, its presence must not interfere with play or cause any danger to players. Although many sports areas, including but not limited to tennis courts, volleyball courts, sports fields, running tracks and more have areas bounded by playing lines, athletes who are in the midst of a game often overrun the area; therefore, it is essential never to place shade structures (nor any other equipment) too close to the playing area. Many sports have rules governing this overrun zone, and/or the placement of equipment outside the lines, and camp administrators should make sure they are using the most current version of the rules when making placement decisions.

For example, if your camp includes tennis courts, any shade structures must be placed outside the playing area. A clearance of 12' from the sideline to any fixed object is recommended. If shade structures are located between two courts, they should be placed within 12' of the net line and at least 10' from the sideline. Players are more likely to see and be aware of a structure located on the long side of the court toward the middle than they are of something located behind the baseline. In all cases, however, observe the rules, and if in doubt, allow more (rather than less) space.

If you're planning on adding a shade structure near one or more of your camp's sports facilities, ask the advice of a specialty contractor with expertise in that sport. That specialist will know the rules and be able to offer recommendations based on your player population, your budget and your facility.

A Little Shade, Or A Lot?

As mentioned previously, some shade shelters are no-frills, and some are more high-tech. Some are even specifically designed for sports, with seating areas for players and spectators and places to store equipment, as well as amenities like water fountains and outlets, room for coolers, trash receptacles and more.

Shade structures may be used for spot cover (meaning single areas, such as a table with an umbrella, or a pop-up tent that can be put up over a registration area at an event), for larger groups of people (such as a shelter that covers a set of bleachers, or perhaps an awning that covers a team bench that would otherwise be in the sun), or they can cover an entire area. An example of a very large permanent shade structure would be an outdoor pavilion where dozens of people can gather for picnics, meals or meetings.

Those whose camps are in areas where the weather is rainy will be asked about the possibility of putting canopies over facilities such as volleyball courts, tennis courts or other large areas. Is this possible? Yes, it is; however, remember that certain parameters exist. A playground can be 'tented' or covered relatively easily, provided the overhead space is adequate to ensure the safety of the children using the equipment.

A sports facility, though, is a different matter, since in most cases, overhead clearances are dictated by the same governing bodies who set all the other rules. Scrutinize the rules and speak with a sports facility contractor who has the proper expertise before making any promises to campers, parents or staff. Remember that covering a sports facility may create new needs such as lighting, electricity and more. A professional will be able to guide you in these matters as well.

You'll always have sun worshipers in your camp, but with any luck, you'll be able to teach them that shade can be pretty cool too.

Note: The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility construction. The ASBA publishes newsletters, books and technical construction guidelines for athletic facilities. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the Association, as well as the ASBA's Membership Directory. Info: 866-501-ASBA (2722) or www.sportsbuilders.org.