

IN BRIEF

Sorting Out What Makes a Difference *Youth Development Findings from Camp Settings*

The Question

In what ways does the camp setting—community living away from home in an outdoor recreational setting—offer a unique milieu for youth development and its evaluation?

The Bottom Line

Examining and evaluating youth development efforts in communities and community-based institutions have proved difficult. The discreteness of the camp setting allowed some of the dynamics of positive youth development in four domains—social skills, physical and thinking skills, positive identity, and positive values and spiritual growth—to be examined in more depth in two studies by the American Camp Association (ACA).

The Evidence

The two studies yielded a number of findings related to different aspects of the camp experience.

Finding #1: Growth Occurred in Youth Development Domains and Constructs. Reports from the groups of children and young people, parents, and camp counselors all indicated growth in the children and youth in various domains and constructs. Children's self-reports indicated statistically significant growth from precamp to postcamp in all four domains. In all cases, the growth that occurred during camp was more than would be expected by maturation alone.

Finding #2: Some Gains Were Maintained Over Time.

The gains realized at camp were mostly maintained

according to campers' self-reports at the six-month follow-up, particularly in the domains of positive identity.

Finding #3: Intentionality, Room for Growth, and Intrinsic Measures Were Related to Developmental Growth. The researchers found that campers at religiously affiliated camps evidenced more growth in the construct of spirituality; children whose self-report scores were lowest at the precamp stage showed the greatest gains from precamp to postcamp; and young people seemed to benefit at similar levels, regardless of gender or race/ethnicity.

Finding #4: Some Supports and Opportunities Were at Optimal Levels in Camps. The overall results showed that young people's optimal levels of supports and opportunities were highest in the domain of supportive relationships followed by skill building and safety, and disappointing in the domain of youth involvement.

Finding #5. Camp Type Mattered Related to Optimal Levels. When compared with day camps, resident camps had a higher percentage of youth with optimal levels of supportive relationships, skill building, and safety.

Finding #6. Camper Characteristics Were Related to Perceptions of Supports and Opportunities. Older campers (14–18 years) reported more optimal levels of supportive relationships, safety, and youth involvement than did younger campers (10–13 years). More white campers than nonwhite campers also reported optimal levels of supportive relationships, safety, and skill building.

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