

Sorting Out What Makes a Difference

Youth Development Findings from Camp Settings

The camp setting—community living away from home in an outdoor recreational setting—offers a unique milieu for youth development and its evaluation.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ENCOMPASSES myriad efforts to create real-world organizations and communities for youth that support moving toward healthy adulthood.¹ Yet, examining and evaluating youth development efforts in communities and community-based institutions have proved difficult. Such settings are multidimensional, layered across time, interlocking, and filled with many embedded activities and relationships. This layering means that evaluation invariably involves a struggle to disentangle what really matters from what does not.

The camp setting—community living away from home in an outdoor recreational setting—offers a unique milieu for youth development and its evaluation. A number of variables are influenced by the discrete environment and the intensive experience. These differences allowed some of the dynamics of positive youth development (for example, 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 lessons learned can apply across multiple youth development contexts, adding insight into specific factors that may be difficult to tease out in a more complex community setting (Display 1). In addition, they offer evidence of the importance of camp experiences in young people's healthy development.

Camp and Positive Youth Development

Each year approximately 11 million children,

youth, and adults participate in traditional camp experiences that take place in outdoor settings. For nearly 150 years, such programs have provided safe environments, supportive adult role models, educational experiences, and opportunities for healthy ventures in the outdoors. The positive developmental outcomes have been known anecdotally and praised perennially by participants. The typical high year-to-year return rates for campers and staff suggest that camp is a powerful and positive experience.

Although research has been conducted in camps for decades, most of the work has been descriptive and applied primarily in the specific camp setting under study. Evaluation of youth programs benefits organizations when the organizations move away from “satisfaction surveys” toward feedback on deeper levels of participant perceptions about dimensions of youth development, as well as whether youth recognize the program's mission. Thus, the measurement of outcomes, although more difficult than measuring the satisfaction of campers and parents, is necessary to show how programs make a difference. Two recent studies, *Directions* and *Inspirations*, conducted by the American Camp Association used large, nationally representative samples and took advantage of the distinctive qualities of the camp setting and experience to delve deeper into youth development outcomes.²

A number of qualities distinguish camp from other youth development settings:

- Youth actually live in the outdoor camp setting rather than merely visit it;

DISPLAY 1

Two Studies of Youth Development Outcomes in Camp Settings

	STUDY 1: DIRECTIONS	STUDY 2: INSPIRATIONS
Purpose	To ascertain whether developmental change occurred as a result of camp experiences and to explore what camp attributes might be associated with change	To use a community action framework to determine how youth viewed their experience at camp and their characteristics relative to optimal experiences
Sample size	5,281 campers and parents in 80 camps	7,645 campers in 80 camps
Sample description	Youth ages 8–14 years; parents of campers; camp staff in camps accredited by ACA	Youth ages 10–18 years in camps accredited by ACA
Population surveyed	Multidimensional self-, parent-, and staff-report questionnaires as well as camp directors	Self-report of all campers in the accredited camps during designated session
Research design	(Longitudinal) Precamp, postcamp, follow-up for campers and parents; precamp and postcamp for staff	Postcamp only survey
Strengths	A national random sample; use of multiple reporters; use of reliable and valid instrument; longitudinal assessments that included precamp, postcamp, and follow-up data collection	A large, national, broadly representative sample; use of valid and reliable instrument; spotlighted areas of opportunity for strengthening the camp experience; some areas revealed where camp experiences differ greatly
Limitations	Only randomly sampled accredited camps were studied; the response rates were adequate for purposes of the study, but could have been better; no control group was used; undetermined were the structural factors (e.g., program design, training content) or child characteristics (e.g., temperament, adjustment) that best predict growth experiences at camp	Only accredited camps were studied that were not randomly drawn but broadly representative; the measure included only one point in time; campers younger than 10 were not included; cross-sectional nature of the study; the reasons why the results came as they did were not directly addressed
Sample items	<p>Positive Identity: I have a good life ahead of me; I feel confident in myself.</p> <p>Social Skills: I introduce myself to new kids; I talk to kids who are different than me.</p> <p>Physical and Thinking Skills: I like to go on new adventures; I like to try new activities.</p> <p>Positive Values: I follow the rules; I know how to make good decisions.</p>	<p>Supportive Relationships: How many adult staff could you go to in a crisis? I get chances to do things with other people my age.</p> <p>Safety: I feel safe when I'm at this camp; I feel respected by staff at this camp.</p> <p>Youth Involvement: I get to decide what activities I'm going to do here; I feel like I belong here.</p> <p>Skill Building: I get to do a lot of new things here; The staff here challenges me to do my best.</p>

- Youth attend for 1- to 8-week periods of intense experience rather than short experiences spread over a period of time;
- Staff and campers are with one another in camps for long periods of time, whether 8 hours each day in day camps or around the clock in resident camps;
- Ratios of staff to campers are low. At most day and resident camps, the staff-to-camper ratio is between 1:5 and 1:8, depending on the age and ability levels of the campers. Not only are these low ratios an important oper-

ational standard for a camp to qualify for ACA accreditation, they also are proven support indicators for positive youth development.

Although staff members and campers spend hours together at camp, youth generally have little or no direct contact with staff once they leave camp. Hence, the experience of camp is bounded primarily by time, energy, and schedules rather than by community, geography, and resources.

Choosing Aspects of Youth Development to Study

In framing this research program, ACA staff and volunteers examined positive youth development and referred initially to Search Institute's framework of Developmental Assets with a particular focus on the internal assets. These assets provided a starting point for determining which youth development outcomes might be measured through camp programs. Since these Developmental Assets are based on the scientific literature on prevention, resilience, youth development, and protective factors,³ they offered a means for thinking about measuring such concepts as support, positive values, commitment to learning, social competencies, and positive identity. In addition, many camps are sponsored by organizations such as religious denominations, YMCA of the USA, Camp Fire USA, and others that use Developmental Assets in their programs. The potential outcomes of camps appeared highly compatible with the internal asset categories of the Search Institute framework: Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity.

Our conceptualization started with a careful look at the assets that could be nurtured at camp. Refinements were made to the constructs to encompass the camp experience more precisely. With the Developmental Assets framework currently targeted toward older children, additional refinements were made in our definition of outcomes so that we might study a range of campers from as young as 7 or 8 years of age to as old as 17 or 18 years.

In addition to the asset framework and related research, we examined the work of other youth development specialists⁴ that underlined the need to use a developmental framework to help youth acquire personal and social benefits through community and experiential opportunities. Among the elements described in this literature were physical and psychological safety, emotional moral support, supportive adult relationships, opportunities to form close human relationships, a feeling of belonging and being valued, opportunities for skill building, personal efficacy, and opportunities to contribute to one's community.

Other studies suggested that young people

need to receive supports, opportunities, and services to help them become competent, confident, connected, and contributing people of character.⁵ Gambone, Klem, and Connell's community action framework for youth development concurred that supports and opportunities provide one of the best ways to operationalize youth development outcomes.⁶ This work described how elements such as relationships, activities, and program structure become the tools for reaching the intended outcomes generally described as learning, social relationships, positive values, and positive identity. This model provided the specific context for ACA's second research undertaking.

The first study, *Directions*, provided a starting point for describing the outcomes of camp experiences. New multidimensional self-, parent-, and staff-report questionnaires were constructed and pilot-tested.⁷ Data were then collected from a national representative sample to ascertain whether: (a) developmental change occurred in key developmental domains and (b) some camp attributes (e.g., supervision ratios, program elements, staff training) were associated with change in outcomes.

The study was designed to determine any changes that occurred in children at camp in four broad domains made up of 10 constructs:

- **Positive Identity:** (1) positive identity; (2) independence
- **Social Skills:** (3) leadership; (4) making friends; (5) social comfort; (6) peer relationships
- **Physical and Thinking Skills:** (7) adventure and exploration; (8) environmental awareness
- **Positive Values and Spiritual Growth:** (9) positive values; (10) spirituality

These domains and the asset categories developed by Search Institute illustrated common links in the examination of youth development. Another purpose of the outcomes study was to determine why observed changes did or did not occur.

The second study, *Inspirations*, focused on the supports and opportunities for positive youth development in camp programs. Specifically, we examined how intentional youth development might occur as suggested by Gambone et al.'s

community action framework. In this second study, we asked the following questions to discover how youth viewed their experience at camp:

- How does the developmental quality of the camp experience vary by the type of camp?
- How does the developmental quality of the camp vary by characteristics of the camper?
- What contributes most to an optimal camp experience?

By examining both the developmental outcomes and the characteristics of campers and camps, our hope was to shed new light on how camps as well as other youth development settings can work to create optimal experiences for young people.

Impact

The two studies provide a number of findings related to different aspects of the camp experience. The primary purpose of the *Directions* study was to measure youth development outcomes among campers as perceived by the campers, their parents, and members of the camp staff.⁸

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 and with 6 of the 10 constructs: self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, adventure and exploration, and spirituality, with adventure and exploration showing the largest effect size. Campers noted a decrease in peer relationships from precamp to postcamp. In all cases of increase, the growth that occurred during camp was more than would be expected by maturation (i.e., the passage of time) alone, suggesting that camp accelerated growth in multiple domains.

Parents' reports concerning their children indicated statistically significant growth from precamp to postcamp in all four domains and all 10 constructs. Camp staff (i.e., counselors) reports on their campers also indicated modest growth

from the second day of camp until the penultimate day in all four of the developmental domains with Physical and Thinking Skills showing the largest effect size. Staff used an observation checklist for the four broad domains rather than using all 10 constructs.

Although parents and staff perceived that all domains and constructs increased from precamp to postcamp in the *Directions* study, not all camper scores supported positive change in all areas. The changes noted had mostly small effect sizes, which meant that the differences in changes were relatively small. Worthy of some note is that the scores for the construct of peer relationships went down from precamp to postcamp for campers. In general, based on a 4-point Likert scale, the scores at the beginning of camp were high for many campers. We did find that campers who started lower were likely to make the most gains. Nevertheless, the decrease in peer relationships at camp could be due to the types of negotiations that children must address when they are living and playing with other children over a period of time. Perhaps these children were socially challenged at camp in ways that they were not challenged at home or school. Or perhaps the difficulty was in being away from their usual friends.

Finding #2: Some Gains Were Maintained Over Time

The gains realized at camp were mostly maintained, according to campers' self-reports at the 6-month follow-up. In the domains of Positive Identity and Social Skills (including independence and leadership), additional statistically significant gains occurred over postcamp levels. None of the follow-up scores on the domains fell below precamp measures except for Physical and Thinking Skills, which included adventure and exploration. Parents' reports on their children at the 6-month follow-up also indicated that gains realized at camp were mostly maintained. For leadership, an additional statistically significant gain was evidenced beyond postcamp levels. In the case of adventure and exploration, however, statistically significant regression to precamp levels was found at follow-up. No 6-month follow-up observations were possible with the staff.

FIGURE 1

Comparison of Changes in Positive Identity Domain for Campers, Parents, and Staff

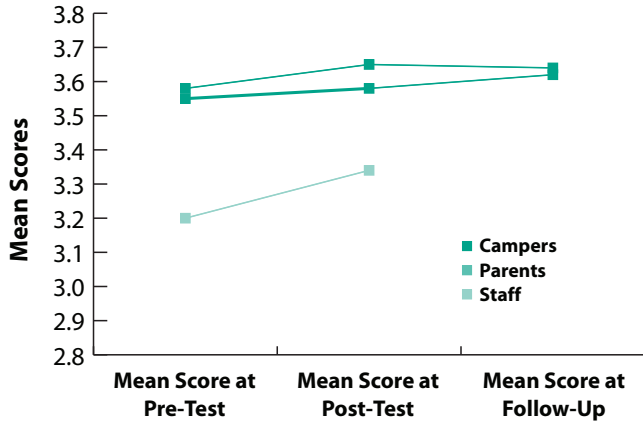


FIGURE 2

Comparison of Changes in Social Skills Domain for Campers, Parents, and Staff

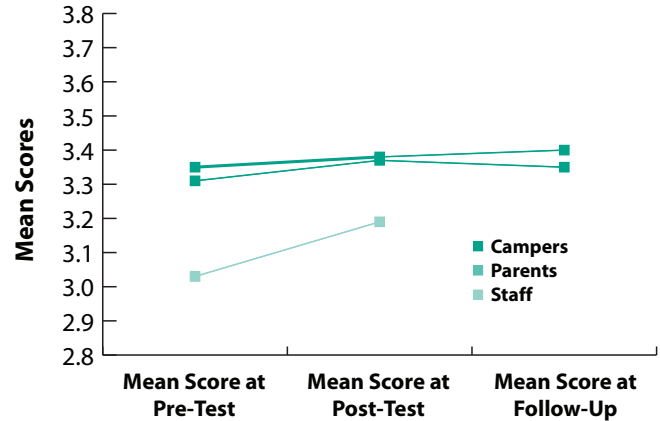


FIGURE 3

Comparison of Changes in Physical and Thinking Skills Domain for Campers, Parents, and Staff

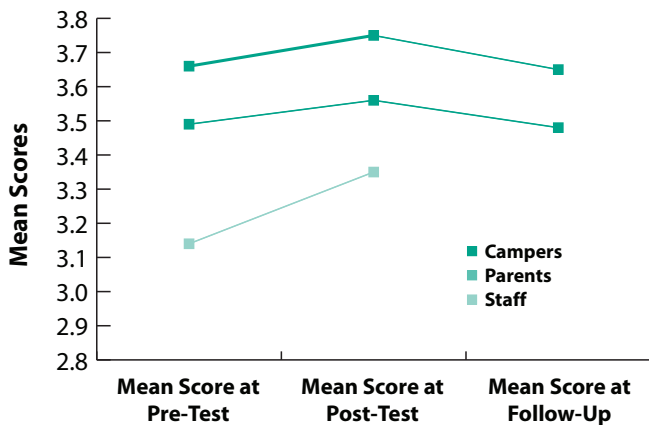
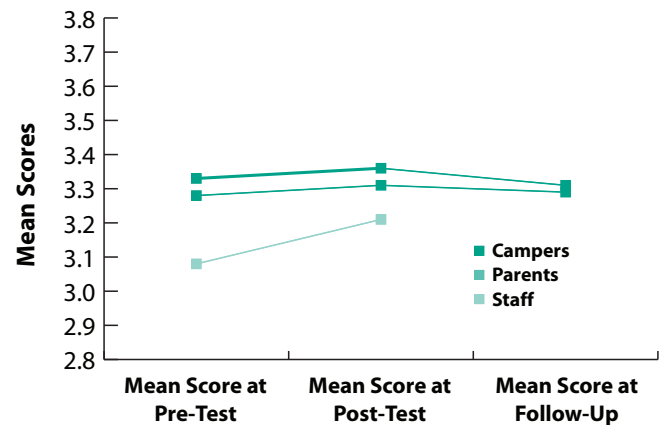


FIGURE 4

Comparison of Changes in Positive Values and Spiritual Growth Domain for Campers, Parents, and Staff



Finding #3: Intentionality, Room for Growth, and Intrinsic Measures Were Related to Developmental Growth

In addition to measuring growth in campers as viewed by campers, parents, and staff, we also explored correlates of change. Specifically, we were interested in five questions:

1. *Were longer camp stays associated with greater changes?* The analyses of campers' reports of changes from precamp to postcamp with days of stay at camp were mostly not statistically significant.⁹ Two weak correlations suggested that longer session lengths slightly strained peer relations and slightly diminished exploration of new activities. Overall, correlations

with session length did not support a dosage effect for change at camp.

2. *Did intentionally emphasizing an aspect of development—namely, spirituality—affect greater change in that area?* The comparison of campers' change scores between religiously affiliated and nonreligious camps supported the hypothesis that campers at religiously affiliated camps evidenced more growth in the construct of spirituality. The items included were: "I like going to my church, synagogue, temple, or mosque"; "I have a close relationship with God"; "Other people help me feel closer to God"; and "Nature helps me feel closer to God." Parent reports on spirituality

TABLE 1

Intrinsic Aspects of Camp from the Perspectives of Children and Parents (in %)

ITEMS	CAMPERS WHO AGREED	PARENTS WHO AGREED
Camp helped me (my child) make new friends.	96	97
Camp helped me (my child) get to know kids who were different from me (him/her).	93	93
The people at camp helped me (my child) feel good about myself (him-/herself).	92	97
At camp, I (my child) did things I (my child) was afraid to do at first.	74	81

also suggested that children evidenced more spiritual growth at religiously affiliated camps compared to the other three kinds of camp sponsorships. Thus, for at least the construct of spirituality, evidence indicated that intentional programming to emphasize that outcome was related to greater camper change.

3. *Did boys and girls who had more room for growth show the greatest gains?* Children whose self-report scores were lowest at precamp showed the greatest gains from precamp to postcamp. In other words, campers who started out with the lowest scores tended to gain the most. Those children who started out high may have encountered a ceiling effect in the measurements.
4. *Did characteristics of children and camps relate to developmental growth?* Young people seemed to benefit at similar levels, regardless of their gender or race/ethnicity. Older campers showed slightly more change on some constructs than younger campers, but the differences were small. Camp seemed to be having an impact on young people at similar levels, regardless of their sponsorship, fee, type, or session length.
5. *How did enjoyment of camp and other perceptions of camp relate to developmental growth?* Children were asked on their postcamp ques-

tionnaire to rate enjoyment in their overall camp stay on a numerical scale from 0 = *terrible* to 10 = *excellent* with *so-so* as the midpoint anchor. The mean score was almost 9. Only a modest relationship was found between growth at camp and children's enjoyment of the experience.¹⁰

The second national ACA study, *Inspirations*, sought to understand how youth participants viewed camps' provision of developmental supports and opportunities. We also wanted to discover how the developmental quality of camp experiences varied by type of camp and characteristics of the camper, as well as what contributed most to optimal camp experiences. Results were tabulated as percentages of participants who fell into each of three categories: optimal for development, insufficient for development, or mixed.¹¹

Finding #4. Some Supports and Opportunities Were at Optimal Levels in Camps

Table 2 compares the percentages of young people whose levels of supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill building were optimal or insufficient. 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. Levels of youth involvement, especially in decision making and youth leadership, fell below camp directors' expectations, with 39% of the campers reporting insufficient levels of involvement.

Of particular interest was the overall safety rating from campers. ACA prides itself on the accreditation program that sets a high bar for the physical safety, in particular, of campers. Yet, two-thirds of the campers did not perceive safety at an optimal level while at camp. Another area in need of substantial improvement effort was youth involvement, particularly decision making and youth leadership. Youth who were older (16–18 years) reported more optimal levels compared with 10- to 11-year-olds.

Finding #5. Camp Type Mattered Related to Optimal Levels

The second set of analyses looked at how youth experiences varied by camp type. Although only

spirituality construct differences had been found among the sponsorship types of camps (agency, religiously affiliated, independent for-profit, independent nonprofit) and the type (day or resident) in the outcomes study, some differences were found in the second study. For example, when compared with day camps, resident camps had a higher percentage of youth with optimal levels of supportive relationships, skill building, and safety. Independent for-profit camps had the highest percentage of optimal levels for supportive relationships and skill building.

Analysis of other camp characteristics also revealed differences in youth's experiences. For example, youth at all-boy camps reported higher levels in supportive relationships and skill building. Youth at all-girl camps had the highest percentage of optimal levels in safety. In addition, camps with longer session lengths had a higher percentage of youth with optimal experiences on all four dimensions. Longer session lengths are generally offered by independent for-profit resident camps (Table 3).¹²

Finding #6. Camper Characteristics Were Related to Perceptions of Supports and Opportunities

Similar to the modest results of the first study, older campers (14–18 years) reported more optimal levels of supportive relationships, safety, and youth involvement than did younger campers (10–13 years). In the second study, more youth who had attended camp for multiple summers reported optimal levels of supportive relationships and safety compared to first-year campers. This finding covaried somewhat with age. More white campers than nonwhite campers also reported optimal levels of supportive relationships, safety, and skill building (Table 4).

Holding all other factors constant, the camper characteristics more strongly associated with high levels of optimal experiences were (a) being a girl, (b) being white, (c) being older (14–18 years), and (d) having spent multiple summers (four or more) at camp.

Implications

In addition to marking the outcomes of the camp experience and benchmarking youth's experiences of the supports and opportunities neces-

TABLE 2		
Overall Distribution of Developmental Experiences (in %)		
DIMENSIONS OF SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES	OPTIMAL	INSUFFICIENT
Guidance	79	15
Emotional support	89	8
Practical support	81	13
Adult knowledge	71	28
Peer knowledge	65	34
Overall supportive relationships	69	9
Safety		
Physical safety	40	1
Emotional safety	60	1
Overall safety	30	1
Youth Involvement		
Decision making	9	28
Youth leadership	2	66
Belonging	31	25
Overall youth involvement	5	39
Skill Building		
Interesting	48	10
Growth and progress	41	12
Challenging	44	17
Overall skill building	41	25

sary for those outcomes, some implications can be drawn about the ways camp program experiences can better contribute to positive youth development, not only for campers, but also for youth in other organizations. Almost every “delivery vehicle” for positive youth development has strengths. The results of our research will hopefully spark discussion—among camp professionals, teachers, coaches, clergy, parents, and policy makers—and potential actions.

- Design youth development opportunities that take advantage of the unique strengths of the setting, and train staff to be inten-

TABLE 3

Proportion of Youth with Optimal Developmental Experiences by Camp Characteristics (in %)

Dimensions	SPONSORSHIP				TYPE		LENGTH			COED VS. SINGLE		
	Agency	Rel ¹	IFP ²	INP ³	Day	Res	1 week	2-3 weeks	4+ weeks	Coed	Boys	Girls
Supportive	62	71	78	67	47	72	61	66	77	66	76	72
Safety	28	35	34	25	22	31	27	28	34	27	30	37
Youth Involvement	4	5	6	6	3	6	4	5	7	5	6	6
Skill Building	35	41	51	36	27	42	35	39	47	37	54	43

¹Rel = religiously affiliated camps; ²IFP = independent for-profit camps; ³INP = independent nonprofit camps.

tional about accessing those strengths to build Developmental Assets for and with the young people. An organization will want to cultivate its greatest strengths. For many ACA camps, for example, supportive relationships and skill building were central to their programs. But the strengths should be maintained while at the same time determining areas where improvement is needed. For example, more could be done at camps to increase campers' feelings of physical and emotional safety as well as youth involvement.

- A wide variety of camps can have a positive impact; there is no one "perfect" type of camp. The opportunity comes in matching a young person with the right camp for her or him. The same holds true in community contexts. Convening focus groups of girls and boys as well as different racial and ethnic groups might be a way to brainstorm options for customizing programs to best suit participants' needs. Explore with youth and then among staff the best ways that the full diversity of youth within a camp or organization can be reached.
- Camps and youth organizations have the opportunity to build links that can reinforce the gains made in camp. Congregations, schools, clubs, and so on could have regular contact with camps to create intentional follow-up programs and ongoing relationships. Youth workers may want to seek opportunities to spend time in other programs, examining how staff put missions into action.

Exchanges between camps or among youth organizations might be a way to further understand how structure and mission relate to youth development.

- Determine the goals of a program and then design the program to address those goals. While this action is seemingly simple, it too seldom happens. Yet, organizations that intentionally take this action can measure the outcomes associated with those goals.
- Never discount the value of the element of fun in youth programming. Enjoyment serves as a motivator for young people and appears to be a prerequisite for developmental outcomes.
- Work with staff to ensure that youth are getting opportunities to make decisions within the youth program. As young people feel comfortable in situations, staff might consider offering more opportunities to provide leadership in small as well as big ways. The definitions that young people have regarding what "leadership" means should also be taken into account. Many camps have programs aimed at developing internal leadership by enabling campers to come through the ranks from camper to staff. This process might be applied in other youth organizations formally or informally as a way to enable young people to remain connected to an organization as they age as well as develop leadership skills.
- Youth perceptions of safety in programs can be markedly different from adult percep-

TABLE 4

Proportion of Youth with Optimal Developmental Experiences by Camper Characteristics (in %)

Dimensions	AGE				GENDER		ETHNICITY		NUMBER OF SUMMERS AT CAMP		
	10–11 Years	12–13 Years	14–15 Years	16–18 Years	Male	Female	White	Non-white	1 Year	2–3 Years	4 or More
Overall supportive relationships	62	69	75	82	64	72	72	56	59	70	76
Overall safety	25	29	34	44	22	35	33	20	20	30	38
Overall youth involvement	3	4	7	15	4	6	6	3	3	5	7
Overall skill building	42	40	39	46	39	42	43	33	37	42	43

tions of safety. Give young people an opportunity to talk about what safety means to them and how they see it addressed at camp or in any type of youth organization.

- Longer experiences were sometimes associated with optimal levels of supports and opportunities. However, the first study did not show that length of camp session made a difference related to outcomes. Although neither study measured program quality, perhaps quality is an important element in addition to quantity or the length of a camp experience. Not all organizations can provide these longer experiences. Therefore, agencies may want to think about how shorter experiences might be intensified, reorganized, or restructured to provide even more positive quality experiences. A part of this rethinking concerning program will also influence the staff training needed to bring about these changes.
- Gender issues are salient in society and are reflected in camps and other youth organizations. Females in gender-specific programs reported more feelings of safety than did girls who were in coed camps. This finding suggests the need to examine how girls as well as boys are treated in all types of situations. Although single-sex activities are not a panacea, they may be appropriate at least for short-term programs in all youth organizations from time to time.

Remaining Questions

These two national camp studies also raise new intriguing questions about how best to provide the most advantageous youth development experiences. Areas that might be considered for future research include:

- Understanding the structural and interpersonal mediators and moderators of positive youth development at camp as well as in other youth organizations.
- Determining how different program formats within camps and among other youth organizations result in greater developmental growth.
- Examining why camp or participation in any type of youth organization promotes positive development in some young people but not in others.
- Assessing the effects of a youth organization or camp over time; more research should be conducted on first-time participants as well as returning participants.
- Analyzing the use of multiple data sources (campers, parents, staff) and determining why these sources converged and yet differed somewhat in their perceptions.
- Finding out how change occurs for individuals who may not start out at high levels.
- Looking at how neighborhood and school environments may shape the expectations at camp or in any youth organization.
- Reflecting on what components of the “liv-

Sharing empirically based information on assessments, strategies, staff training needs, and evaluation strategies that result in supportive settings and desired outcomes is not only good for any profession but also imperative for our youth.

ing away from home” experience, which does not typically occur in most other youth organizations, might still be applied in other youth organizations.

- Ongoing research seeks to shed light on these questions and on the best ways to improve existing camp programs and related opportunities for youth.¹³

The findings from this research seem to support the value of the camp experience in the positive development of youth. Many of the implications have relevance for other youth organizations that confront similar issues on ways to encourage the development of positive relation-

ships between adults and young people, provide safe settings, encourage meaningful engagement of young people, and develop skills important to them as contributing adults in society. Sharing empirically based information on assessments, strategies, staff training needs, and evaluation strategies that result in supportive settings and desired outcomes is not only good for any profession but also imperative for our youth.

Karla A. Henderson, Christopher A. Thurber, Marge Scanlin, and M. Deborah Bialeschki, with assistance from Leslie Scheuler and Michelle Gambone

Notes

¹ Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Witt, P. A. (2002). Youth development: Going to the next level. *Parks & Recreation*, 37(3), 52–59.

² In the past 10 years, ACA has renewed its commitment to the foundational aspects of the camp experience through its youth development focus. The organization board, staff, and membership recognized that more evidence was needed to understand how camp experiences contribute to youth development. Thus, ACA has identified research as a central component necessary to understand the value of camp and to improve the quality of the camp experience. The research undertaken by ACA was funded by membership donations and support from Lilly Endowment Inc. Thus far, the program of research has yielded three major national studies on the developmental aspects of camp experiences. In this edition of *Search Institute Insights & Evidence*, we provide a summary of two studies: American Camp Association (2005), *Directions: Youth development outcomes of the camp experience* (hereafter *Directions* or, occasionally, the first study; www.acacamps.org/research/ydo.pdf), with a focus on the outcomes of the camp experience; and American Camp Association (2006), *Inspirations: Developmental supports and opportunities of youths' experiences at camp* (hereafter *Inspirations* or, occasionally, the second study; www.acacamps.org/research/Inspirations.pdf), with a focus on benchmarking dimensions of youth development reported by youth.

³ Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Sesma, A., Jr. (2004). Tapping the power of community: Building assets to strengthen substance abuse prevention. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence*, 2(1), 1–14. Retrieved on August 28, 2006, from www.search-institute.org/research/Insights/Insights-ATOD-03-04.pdf

⁴ For example, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992). *A matter of time: Risk and opportunity in the nonschool hours*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York; and Catalano, R. F., Berglund, J. A. M., Ryan, H. C., Lonczak, H. C., & Hawkins, J. D. (1998). *Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs*. Paper submitted to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

⁵ E.g., Borden, L., Wilson-Ahlstrom, A., Jones, K., & Yohalem, N. (2003). *Bridging the gap between research and practice: Creating common ground in youth development*. Retrieved on June 13, 2005, from www.forumfyi.org/Files/BridgingGap.pdf

⁶ Gambone, M. A., Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2002). *Finding out what matters for youth: Testing key links in a community action framework for youth development*. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education (www.ydsi.org/YDSI/pdf/Whatmatters.pdf).

⁷ Henderson, K. A., Thurber, C. A., Whitaker, L. S., Bialeschki, M. D., & Scanlin, M. (2006). Development and application of a camper growth index for youth. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 29(1), 1–17.

⁸ *Instrument development*. A 52-item youth self-report instrument called the Camper Growth Index-Child version (CGI-C) was developed to measure four domains deemed to be the most important outcomes that camp directors sought to achieve (for more information about instrument development see Henderson et al., 2006). These four domains and the 10 constructs they address are listed in text.

The CGI-C used a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = *disagree a lot*, 2 = *disagree a little*, 3 = *agree a little*, and 4 = *agree a lot*. Sample items included: “I feel confident in myself” (Self-esteem); “I’m good at doing things on my own” (Independence); “I get other kids together for games” (Leadership); “I like to talk to kids I don’t know yet” (Friendship Skills); “I worry about making friends” (Social Comfort); “I get along with others” (Peer Relationships); “In the past week, I did a new activity” (Adventure and Exploration); “We should take care of our planet” (Environmental Awareness); “Before I make a decision, I think about what might happen” (Values and Decisions); and “I have a close relationship with God” (Spirituality). Campers’ perceptions were measured a few weeks before camp, on the penultimate day of the camp session, and 6 months later.

Parents’ perceptions were also indexed a few weeks before camp, a few weeks after camp, and again 6 months later. The parents’ pre-, post-, and follow-up design used a version of the CGI-C called the Camper Growth Index-Parent version (CGI-P). The only differences were changes to personal pronouns and syntax. For example, “I get along with others” was changed to “My child gets along with others,” and “Camp helped me make new friends” was changed to “Camp helped my child make new friends.”

SEARCH INSTITUTE INSIGHTS & EVIDENCE is a Web-based publication that presents the latest research from Search Institute on healthy children, youth, and communities in a format that is useful to community leaders and policy makers.

Copyright © 2007 by Search Institute. All rights reserved. Each issue may be reproduced for local, noncommercial use, provided that it is properly credited to Search Institute. For additional permission, visit www.search-institute.org/permission.htm

Subscriptions: Anyone who is interested is encouraged to download each issue, and to pass along information to others. To be notified when new issues are released, sign up at www.search-institute.org/research/Insights

Recommended citation: Henderson, K. A., Thurber, C. A., Scanlin, M., and Bialeschki, M. D., with assistance from Leslie Scheuler and Michelle Gambone. (2007). Sorting out what makes a difference: Youth development findings from camp settings. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence*, 4(1), 1–11.

Editor: Kathryn L. Hong

Graphic Designer: Nancy Johansen-Wester

Search Institute is a national nonprofit organization with a mission to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities.



Search Institute
615 First Avenue Northeast, Suite 125
Minneapolis, MN 55413 USA
612-376-8955
www.search-institute.org

This publication is made possible through the generous support of Lilly Endowment Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana.

To assess staff members' perceptions of youth, an observational checklist called the Staff Observational Checklist (SOC) was developed for counselors working with each of the participating children. As with the camper and parent questionnaires, we focused on the four developmental domains of Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical and Thinking Skills, and Positive Values and Spiritual Growth. A training video was developed and presented to all participating staff prior to their initial observations. For each of the behavioral indicators in each of the four domains, counselors used a 4-point Likert scale anchored from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Counselors completed the SOC within 48 hours of campers' arrival and again on the penultimate day of the camp session.

Finally, a questionnaire was designed for camp directors that assessed each director's experience and qualifications. This questionnaire also included items whereby the camp director could report on the camp's clientele, structure, programs, and desired outcomes. Directors completed part of this questionnaire before camp, relative to camp structure and purposes, and part during the camp season, concerning information such as numbers of staff hired, programs offered, and training provided.

Sample. This study's sample was composed of camps accredited by ACA that served normally developing children ages 8 to 14 years (i.e., some children with physical disabilities were part of the sample, but no children with cognitive impairments that influenced their ability to complete the questionnaire were part of the sample). A stratified sample was constructed based on (a) camp type (i.e., resident or day), (b) sponsorship category (i.e., agency-sponsored, religiously affiliated, independent for-profit, or independent nonprofit), (c) gender served (coeducational, all-boys, or all-girls), (d) session length (i.e., 1 week, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, or 4 or more weeks), (e) geographic location (i.e., East, South, Midwest, West), and (f) age of campers (between 8 and 14 years old). Camps serving significant percentages of racial or ethnic minorities were oversampled. The final sample of camps represented the composition of ACA-member camps fairly closely. Of the 200 camps initially contacted, 103 camps chose to participate. Eighty camps successfully completed data collection with 41 from the eastern U.S. in the summer of 2002, and 39 from the western U.S. in the summer of 2003.

Of the approximately 15,000 families initially contacted at the 80 participating camps, we received data from 5,279 parents and children at precamp; 3,395 parents and children immediately postcamp; and 2,293 parents and children at the 6-month follow-up. Thus, the initial return rate was 40% for precamp, then 64% at postcamp, and 67% at follow-up. Demographic characteristics of campers at the three time points did not differ significantly except on one dimension: The proportion of families of minority ethnicity dropped from 13% at precamp to 11% at postcamp to 9% at follow-up. At the precamp CGI administration, 36% of

the sample was boys and 64% was girls. The percentages of boys and girls shifted to 32% and 68% in both the postcamp and follow-up samples. Mean age was 11.1 years ($SD = 1.9$), which stayed constant across all three time points.

This study was longitudinal in nature rather than an experiment or quasi experiment. Randomly assigning some children to camp and others to an equally well-defined different activity would have been prohibitively expensive and unethical. Using a comparison group would have required rigorous quantification of the comparison group's activities to determine the factors that differentially affected children's growth. The nonexperimental design diminished the strength of a possible conclusion from "growth occurs because of camp experiences" or "camp experiences result in more growth than this other experience" to "growth occurs at camp." Despite this design limitation, the first step in ACA's research program and the purpose of the the first study was to determine whether or not children developed at camp, and in what ways.⁹ For more information, see Thurber, C. A., Scanlin, M., Scheuler, L., & Henderson, K. A. (2007). Youth development outcomes of the camp experience: Evidence for multidimensional growth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36(3), 241–254.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Some limitations of the second study, *Inspirations*, should be mentioned. The sample was not randomly drawn even though it was broadly representative of the population of ACA camps. This study measured campers only at one point in time and included only older youth (10 years and over). The second study was, however, a valuable extension of the first study, *Directions*, in further describing the experiences of youth at camp and elucidating what possible relationships might exist between camp types, camper characteristics, and youth's experiences of supports and opportunities.

¹² Additional analyses (i.e., logistic regressions) were performed to see which camp characteristics most strongly correlated with optimal experiences at camp. The camp characteristics more strongly associated with high proportions of optimal experiences included: (a) being a resident camp, (b) being an all-boys camp, (c) offering a session of 4 weeks or longer, and (d) being an independent for-profit camp, a religious camp, or an agency camp versus an independent nonprofit camp.

¹³ For example, the ACA recently completed a study titled *Innovations: Improving Youth Experiences in Summer Programs*, which examined how systematic interventions in the form of program improvement possibilities were linked to campers' optimal experiences. We hope to better understand young people's experience at camp and to improve the delivery of the kinds of supports and opportunities they need to become competent and caring adults in any setting.