

Structuring Camp Experiences for Positive Youth Development

Karla Henderson, Ph.D. North Carolina State University
karla_henderson@ncsu.edu

Purpose

Positive youth development encompasses a strength based conception of adolescence (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Witt, 2002). Youth development specialists (e.g. Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Leffert, Benson, Scales, Sharma, Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, n.d.) have indicated that in addition to academic competence, youth need to have opportunities to grow toward physical, emotional, civic, and social competence. Summer camps for young people have been offering developmental opportunities to children for over 100 years. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe the components of camp programs that may be associated with positive youth development.

Sample

In 2002 and 2003, a major national study including over 5000 families and 92 camps was undertaken by researchers associated with the American Camp Association (ACA) to measure what changes occurred in young people as a result of their involvement in a summer camp experience offered for the duration of at least one week. The participating camps were selected from a stratified random sample of camps in different parts of the country representing different sponsorships and both day and resident camps. Documenting that positive changes occurred, the next step and the focus of this paper was to specifically explore a logical model that posited the program components led to proximate, distal, and ultimate outcomes (Baldwin et al, 2005).

Methods

The study design included pre, post, and follow-up questionnaires given to campers and parents, a pre and post observation checklist completed by staff during the session that the camper attended, and questionnaires to camp directors regarding the characteristics, outcome goals, and operations of their camps. The data from the camp directors was used in this presentation to identify what components of camp might lead to positive change in youth as a result of the camp experience.

Results

Positive development was evident because of the camp experience and a summary of those findings sets the stage for the analysis of the program structures and staffing. From the pre to the post test, campers reported that they gained on six of the 10 constructs. The greatest gains were in the outcomes of adventure/exploration skills followed by making friends, positive identity, independence, leadership, and spirituality. To the extent that youth development can be enhanced, however, the characteristics related to change were analyzed. Data analyses showed that camp characteristics such as session length, sponsorship, day or resident structure, staff to camper ratio, experience of the director, staff turnover, targeted goals or outcomes, camper fees, budget size, or program structure were not shown to be statistically related to outcome changes. Several aspects were evident in camps that showed positive outcomes. For example, almost 70% of the camp directors said they had a strategic plan in place for their camp. Over 45% of the directors indicated they were highly effective in carrying out their mission statement. The major ways that directors said they addressed

their mission were such strategies as focusing on the quality of staff and camper interaction (75%), staff training specific to the outcome (49%), camper roles in decision-making (33%), and the types (31%) and progression (26%) of activities offered. Other attributes of camps will be discussed further in the presentation.

Practical Implications

Peterson (2004) concluded from existing program evaluation literature that the several “truisms” exist that are relevant to understanding why camp experiences seem to be venues for positive youth development. He noted that more contact is better, a clear structures is needed, sophisticated programs are better if they are developmentally appropriate and impart skills and competencies, and programs work better when they are well done. Based on the responses given by camp directors, the aspects of contact and leadership in the form of trained staff and directors and the supportive relationships they provide coupled with program mission and structure with elements of accountability, assessment of outcomes, and opportunities for skill building were important. As noted previously, since no differences were statistically evident in terms of the relationship of types of camp and positive outcomes, these accredited camps had an overall approach that seemed to be working.

The human relations dimensions of camp in terms of administrative leadership as well as camp staff characteristics were important. First, most of the camp directors were employed year round and held at least a bachelors degree. These directors had extensive experience themselves as campers and as staff members prior to assuming their camp leadership role. Thus, they brought a combination of experience, education, and commitment to their positions. More importantly, they indicated that being a camp director meant engaging in continuing education to address the changing world in which young people live.

Just as important as the camp director was the contribution that staff made to enhancing youth development. These staff members were primarily young adults not too much older than some of the campers, but who seemed to have a desire to influence young people’s lives. Camp is an intense living situation and staff had many opportunities to spend time with campers. In addition, most camp directors were serious about strategic planning and embodying their mission statements. Almost all the camp directors indicated that they were regularly trying to make improvements in their camp operations. This analysis is not meant to say that all camps are perfect in their delivery of services to young people. We do argue, however, on the basis of this study that camp structures and the social interaction that occurs within camps are significantly contributing to positive youth development.

Components of Camp Experiences for Positive Youth Development

Karla A. Henderson, North Carolina State University
M. Deborah Bialeschki, American Camp Association
Margery M. Scanlin, American Camp Association
Christopher Thurber, Exeter Academy
Leslie Schueler Whitaker, Philliber Research Associates
Paul E. Marsh, Indiana University
Mark Burkhardt, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

ACA National Conference 2006

Strength Based Conception of Youth Development

- Evidence is mounting that well-designed, well-implemented youth centered programs that consciously use a youth development model can have positive outcomes for young people.
- Research should address the structures and settings that influence positive youth development.

Documenting the Value of Organized Camp Experiences

- Bialeschki, Younger, Henderson, Ewing, & Casey, 2002; Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000; Cartwright, Tabatabai, Beaudoin, & Naidoo, 2000; Chenery, 1991; Dimock, & Hendry, 1929; Durkin, 1988; Dworkin, 1999; Groves, 1981; Marsh, 1999; Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1986; Mishna, Michalski, & Cummings, 2001; Sekine, 1994

ACA Outcomes Study

- To measure youth development outcomes among campers as perceived by the campers, their parents, and staff
- To ascertain which camp program elements were related to camper outcomes
- To develop measurement instruments and training materials to use in future evaluations
- To use the data to promote the role of camps in positive youth development.

Components of Programs

- a developmental framework
- the commitment to accountability and assessment of outcomes
- trained staff
- physical and psychological safety
- appropriate structure
- supportive relationships
- opportunities to belong
- positive social norms
- opportunities to matter or make a difference
- opportunities for skill building
- integration of family, school, and community efforts

Background

- Pre, post, and 6-month follow-up questionnaires to campers
- Pre, post, and 6-month follow-up questionnaires to parents
- Pre and post observations by staff
- Camp Director questionnaire about camp structure and program

Instrument for Outcome Measures

- Based on an evaluation of literature, camp visits, and expert opinion, four major domains evolved:
 - Positive Identity
 - Social Skills
 - Positive Values & Spiritual Growth
 - Thinking & Physical Skills

Instrument Format

- Designed for pre, post, and six-month follow-up administration
- Minimum reading level of a third grader (i.e., an 8-year old camper)
- 4-point Likert scale (1=disagree a lot, 2=disagree a little, 3=agree a little, 4=agree a lot)
- Coded to a particular camp
- Post-camp administration included open-ended questions (how the campers felt about themselves at camp as well as away from camp, their friendships at camp, new things they learned at camp, and their rating of their stay at camp on a scale 0=terrible to10=excellent)
- The six-month follow-up administration also included additional items

Stratified Random Sample

- Day or resident camp status
- Camp sponsorship categories (i.e., agency, religious, independent nonprofit, and independent for-profit)
- Regions of the country
- Gender served (i.e., boys, girls, and coed)

- Camps of varying duration (i.e., session length)
- Camp size (i.e., numbers of campers served per camp session)
- Primary purposes of camp (e.g., general, specialized)
- Age
- (Over sampled racial/ethnic minorities)

Constructs and Reliability

- **Positive Identity**
 - positive identity (.75)
 - independence (.63)
- **Social Skills**
 - leadership (.76)
 - making friends (.69)
 - social comfort (.66)
 - peer relationships (.71)
- **Positive Values and Spiritual Growth**
 - positive values (.76),
 - spirituality (.81)
- **Thinking and Physical Skills**
 - adventure exploration (.66)
 - environmental awareness (.76)

Sample Description

- N= 92 camps from 5281 campers
- Camps broadly representative of ACA
- Average age of the campers was 11 years with age ranges from 8 to 14 years (38% under the age of 11 and 62% age 11 and older)
- 68% of the campers were female
- 89% were white

Comparison of Sample

■ Sample		ACA Camps
■ 37%	Day Camp	29%
■ 62%	Resident Camp	71%
■ 41%	Agency Sponsor	45%
■ 23%	Religiously Affil	23%
■ 22%	Independent FP	21%
■ 14%	Independent NFP	11%
■ 67%	Coeducational	45%
■ 23%	All-Boys	16%
■ 33%	All-Girls	39%
■ 51%	One-week Sessions	57%
■ 27%	2-4week Sessions	31%
■ 10%	6-8week Sessions	12%

Pre-Post Changes

- Table 1 Change in Campers from Beginning to End of a Camp Session Based on Youth Development Domains and Outcomes

■ Domain/ Outcomes	Pre X	Post X	Change	Effect Size ^a
■ Positive Identity (Construct) ■ (n = 2889)	3.20	3.34***	+.14	.23
■ Positive Identity (n = 3020)	3.36	3.44	+.02	.08
■ Independence (n = 3178)	3.42	3.44*	+.02	.04
■ Social Skills (n = 2881)	3.03	3.19***	+.16	.25
■ Leadership (n = 2992)	3.10	3.13**	+.03	.04
■ Making Friends (n = 3124)	3.37	3.46***	+.09	.18
■ Social Anxiety (n = 3073)	3.22	3.21	-.01	--
■ Peer Relationships (n = 3143)	3.65	3.63*	-.02	-.04
■ Positive Values/Spiritual Growth ■ (n = 2694)	3.08	3.21***	+.13	.21
■ Decision Making (n = 2789)	3.45	3.46	+.01	--
■ Spirituality (n = 2197)	3.15	3.18**	+.03	.04
■ Physical and Thinking Skills ■ (n = 2831)	3.14	3.35***	+.21	.41
■ Adventure/Exploration (n = 3173)	3.56	3.73***	+.17	.33
■ Environment Awareness (n = 3189)	3.75	3.75	--	--

- (*sig ≤ .05; **sig < .01; ***sig ≤ .001.
- a Small effects = .10 to .29; moderate effects = .30 to .49; large effects = .50 and greater)

What do Structures Contribute?

No Statistically Significant Differences
were found!!

Overall Ratios

Ratio	All	Coun
■ Less than 1 to 1	4%	4%
■ 1 to 1/ 1 to 2	15%	
■ 1 to 3	41%	
■ 1 to 4	19%	40%
■ 1 to 5 or higher	21%	40%
■ 1 to 7 or 8		16%

Camp Directors

- **Age:**
 - 30 years or younger 16%
 - 31 – 40 years 35%
 - 41 – 50 years 19%
 - 51 – 60 years 22%
 - 61 years or older 8%
- **Gender:** Male 47% Female 53%
- **Years experience as camp director at this camp:**
 - 1 to 3 years 39%
 - 4 to 9 years 26%
 - 10 to 19 years 20%
 - 20 to 40 years 15%
- **Total years of experience:**
 - 1 to 4 years 34%
 - 5 to 10 years 24%
 - 11 to 20 years 20%
 - 21 to 40 years 22%
- **Educational attainment:**
 - High school, some college, or bachelors degree 59%
 - Masters or doctoral degree 41%
- **Position type:**
 - Seasona 19%
 - Year-round, full-time 79%
 - Year round, part-time 12%

Type of Camp

- Specialty camp 18%
- General camp 82%

Mission and Outcomes

- **Written mission statement and a written statement of the desired outcomes**

Neither statement or outcomes	8%
Statement and outcomes	61%
One or the other	31%

- **Effectiveness in implementing written mission and outcomes**

Ineffective/Somewhat effective	54%
Highly effective	46%

Outcomes

- 64% of the camp directors said positive identity was one of their top two outcome goals
- 38% chose social skills
- 26% chose personal values

Ways to Address Anticipated Outcomes

- quality of staff and camper interaction (75%)
- provide staff training specific to the outcome (49%)
- give camper roles in decision-making (33%)
- offer specific types of activities (31%)
- provide progression in camp activities (26%)
- consider staff to camper ratios (25%)
- teach specific skills to campers (24%)
- design program structure to address the outcomes (24%)
- offer religious or spiritual activities (i.e., primarily indicated for those camps that were religiously-affiliated) (20%)
- purposely group campers (12%)

Program Structures

- **Program structure:**
- Campers choose most of their daily activities= 49%
- Staff choose most of the daily activities=51%

Activities

How do campers participate in most activities

- With assigned living group 65%
- With groups other than their 35%

How many different activities

1 to 13 activities	38%
14 to 20 activities	29%
21 or more activities	33%

Involvement in Camp Programming

- **Campers involved the planning of the camp programming**
 - Not at all 13%
 - A little bit of input 52%
 - Considerable involvement 35%
- **Campers involved in delivery**
 - Not at all 13%
 - A little bit of input 64%
 - Considerable involvement 23%
- **Campers involved in evaluation**
 - Not at all 0%
 - A little bit of input 40%
 - Considerable involvement 60%

Attendance and Fees

- **Average fee per camper:**

- \$0 -\$200 19%
- \$201-\$300 30%
- \$301-\$600 30%
- \$601-\$1200 21%

- **Average number of campers at one time:**

- 60-99 21%
- 100-199 47%
- 200-299 15%
- 300-1375 17%

Expenditures per Day

- \$11 to \$45 per day 34%
- \$46 to \$55 per day 23%
- \$56 to \$100 per day 23%
- \$101 or more per day 20%

Staff Characteristics

- The majority of staff working at camp was between the ages of 18-24 years.
 - Under 18 years (5%)
 - 18-20 years (48%)
 - 21-23 years (27%)
 - 24 years or older (14%)
- About a quarter of the staff at camp held a bachelors degree.
- 10% of their staff were international (i.e., were in camp on a J-1 visa).

Staff Training

- The average time spent in instruction for camp staff prior to camp beginning (i.e. pre-camp training) was 60 hours.
- About one third of the directors felt that the amount of time spent in staff training was not enough with 58% believing the time was adequate.

Camp Staff Turnover

■ 30% or less	22%
■ 31% to 50%	34%
■ 51% to 70%	28%
■ 71% to 100%	16%

Staff Training

- **Amount of time spent in specific training for staff in their day-to-day interactions with campers that support the desired outcomes of camp**
 - Too little time/Not quite enough time 38%
 - Adequate/More than enough time 62%

Supportive Relationships

- The camp directors indicated that 65-75% of the time their staff was participating with their assigned group of campers.
- Over 50% of the camps had counselors who slept in the same cabin or room as the campers with another 20% sleeping in the same building as the campers.
- Cabin size varied but the average number of staff per cabin was two.

Discussion

- Peterson (2004):
 - more contact is better
 - clear structures are needed
 - sophisticated programs are better if they are developmentally appropriate and impart skills and competencies
 - programs work best when they are well planned and implemented.

Eccles and Gootman (2002):

programs that have the most potential to influence youth development are based on a developmental framework, use trained staff, provide appropriate structures, and encourage supportive relationships

How and Why Do Camps Make a Difference?

- Study raised more questions than answered
- More research is needed