Ten Reasons Why Camp is Important for Child Development

Research Based Evidence of the Value of Camp Experiences

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american camp association®
Framing “Camp Experience”

What does research tell us about camp?
  ◦ Outcomes
  ◦ Developmental supports and opportunities
  ◦ Camp quality improvement

10 ways that camps are important for child development

Overview
What do you think of?
An American tradition since 1861

500 million children served

10 million children participate in camp each year

Important component of out-of-school time

More than a place or an activity, “camp” represents what happens to children during the experience

Camp Experience
Camp improves the lives of children, youth, and families!

Camp makes children healthy!

Camp enables children to grow to be caring, contributing, successful members of society.
• Increased expectations to document program impacts and outcomes

• Securing camp funding and support; Reporting to donors

• Validating parents’ and other caregivers’ expectations for camp

• Emphasis on quality experiences

Why care?
Developmental Outcomes
• 80 ACA camps from across U.S.
  ◦ Day/Resident
  ◦ One-week and multi-week
  ◦ Single gender and co-ed
  ◦ Private and agency

• 5,000+ families

• Largest national-level summer camp dataset

• Data collected from campers, staff, and parents
- Positive Identity
- Independence
- Leadership
- Social Skills (Friendship Skills)
- Social Skills (Social Comfort)
- Social Skills (Peer Relationships)
- Adventure and Exploration
- Environmental Awareness
- Positive Values and Decision-Making
- Spirituality

Outcomes Targeted
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>In which 3 outcome areas did <strong>campers</strong> identify the greatest gains?</th>
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## Construct Pre-Post Difference Effect Size

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These results suggest that summer camp benefits children in the following ways:

- Children develop more social skills that help them make new friends,
- Children grow more independent and show more leadership qualities,
- Children become more adventurous and willing to try new things,
• Age and session length were not reliable predictors of change. Which means....?
  ◦ Campers of all ages experienced change
  ◦ Campers don’t need to attend a four-week camp session in order to experience positive changes from camp....1 week can be enough.

By the way...
Camp can be a powerfully positive experience (especially for children who have the most growth to do)

Camps seem to be particularly good (on average) at helping children make friends and explore adventurous activities

Implications
Summer Learning
“The organized summer camp is the greatest contribution America has made to education.”

(former Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot, 1922)
All children learn at about the same rate (at least in terms of basic skills) during the school year.

True for all socio-economic groups

Differences in achievement between (poor/middle-class children) based in inequalities that children experience outside of school.

- Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996

Summer Learning
• Summer learning loss
  ◦ **Math skills** ⇒ Children lose an average of 2.6 months of grade equivalency in math skills.
  
  ◦ **Reading skills** ⇒ Middle-class children gain in the summer while lower-income children lose ground.

• **Faucet theory**
  ◦ **on** during school; **off** during summer
• Influence of camp on increases in developmental outcomes (previous slides) may lead to increased academic performance. *Children are in a good place to learn!*

• When camps have an **intentional focus on academic skills**, there can be important impacts on summer learning.

• Camp-school partnerships exist all around the country in many forms. Many **case studies** exemplify how camp experiences can address summer learning loss.

**Camps are Contexts for Summer Learning**
• Break-Aways Program (New York)

◦ School-camp partnership model conceived by the former chancellor of public schools in New York City.

◦ Summer of 1998 (20 camps and 1,500 children)- within 4 years, program grew to include 10,000 + students attending 100 camps.

◦ Students attend summer camp 21-28 days (20 students + 1 teacher per school).

◦ Each day’s activities include an equivalent of 3 hours of literacy education integrated into camp program.

◦ Children appear to score higher on standardized tests than those who did not attend camp. Campers also tend to demonstrate higher levels of emotional and social development and leadership skills.

Camps are Contexts for Summer Learning
Alternative Classroom Experience; Camp Pfeiffer; Little Rock, AR

- Camp Pfeiffer’s director approached local schools about ways the camp might play a larger role in students’ development.

- 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students were chosen by their teachers for a 5-week residential camping experience program based on their need for more intense academic and behavioral work.

- Students spent all of their time at camp—more opportunities to study and gain experiences that stimulate learning, leadership, and citizenship.

- Participating students achieved a one-grade-level improvement in both math and reading test scores.

Camps are Contexts for Summer Learning
Intimacy with Nature
• Fewer and fewer children are receiving authentic nature-based experiences

• Children are plugged into some kind of electronic medium an average of 5½ hours a day (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005)

• Parental fears about safety

• Barriers (limited spaces, limited knowledge, access)

Children are Disconnected
• Nature-based outdoor settings reduce ADHD symptoms in children.

• Nature-based experiences lower stress levels and improve mood.

• Direct experience in nature simultaneously stimulates all of a child's senses, and thus facilitate learning.

Benefits of Nature-Based Experiences for Children
Camps are perfect settings for...

- making children more aware of nature,
- educating children about nature,
- helping children to develop nature-based outdoor skills,

and

- facilitating in children an on-going appreciation and interest in nature

Camps Provide Nature-Based Experiences
(Positive) Risk-Taking
• Teens are hard-wired to take risks

• Risks don’t have to be negative
  • Reckless driving; drinking; drug use; early sexual behavior

• Research suggests that young people often associate risk with positive activities.
  • Teens Today research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group
Adolescence - incredible physical and cognitive growth. Teen boys and girls experience neurological “rewiring,” which explains changes in self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization, and planning.

Risky behaviors that may have been attributed to hormones or lack of emotional maturity are increasingly linked to a natural neurochemical process. (National Institute of Mental Health and McLean Hospital in Massachusetts)

As children grow, these risky behaviors tend to increase. Teens are likely to take risks in order to assert their independence.

Creating meaningful opportunities for positive risk taking can not only decrease the likelihood of negative risk taking but also satisfy a developmentally driven desire for self-discovery and new experiences.

- Teens Today; SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) / Liberty Mutual Group
• Camp has long been viewed as an ideal environment for learning and self-exploration.

• Young people who take positive risks are less likely to take negative ones.

• Camp is an excellent environment to learn and practice positive risk taking.

  • Teens Today research; SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) / Liberty Mutual Group
Play!
Over the last 20 years, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week; 8 of those lost hours were once spent in unstructured play and outdoor activities.

- Amount of time children spend in organized sports has doubled.

- # of minutes children devote to passive spectator leisure (not counting television, but including watching sports) has increased 5x from 30 min. to 3+ hours.

• Physical/Health Consequences
  ◦ “emotional, behavioral and developmental needs [of children] are not being met…” Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health, 2002
  ◦ 2/3 children in U.S. suffer at least one health problem
  ◦ 13% of children are obese
  ◦ 2 million children on Ritalin and other ADHD medications

• Psychological Consequences
  ◦ Children don’t know how to play; to be spontaneous; to exercise their imaginations and predisposition for fantasy

Physical/Psychological Consequences
Camp provides the opportunity for physical activity and healthy choices (foods, activity, rest).

Camp exposes children to unstructured time and the opportunity to engage their imaginations and sense of wonder.

Camp gives children a chance to be “who they really are”
Developmental Supports and Opportunities
• Summer of 2004
  ◦ 7,645 boys and girls (ages 10-18)
  ◦ 80 accredited day / resident camps
  ◦ End-of-camp questionnaires
  ◦ Camps from this audience???

• Youth Development Strategies Incorporated (YDSI)

• Developmental “supports and opportunities”
  ◦ Supportive Relationships
  ◦ Safety (Physical and Emotional)
  ◦ Youth Involvement
  ◦ Skill Building
Community Action Framework for Youth Development

Build Community Capacity and Conditions for Change (E)

Implement Community Strategies to Enhance Supports and Opportunities for Youth (D)

Increase Supports and Opportunities for Youth (C)
- Adequate nutrition, health and shelter
- Multiple supportive relationships
- Meaningful involvement
- Challenging and engaging skill building activities
- Safety

Improve Youth Development Outcomes (B)

Improve Long-Term Outcomes in Adulthood (A)
(Based upon what we learned, this is a *likely* scenario for a given camp!)
• “Optimal” -- the level you are aiming for

• “Insufficient” -- you want to move kids from this point toward the optimal level

Measuring What Children Say About Supports and Opportunities
Overall Supports and Opportunities (n=80 day / resident camps)
Overall Supports and Opportunities  (n=80 day / resident camps)
• “Optimal” -- the level you are aiming for

• “Insufficient” -- you want to move kids from this point toward the optimal level

There is a very large gray area in-between. Many camps are in this area.

Shows the opportunity for improvement.
Camps, more than some other youth programs, provide positive developmental environments for youth, especially with regards to the development of supportive relationships (with adults and peers) and in skill building.

The value of camp for campers is enhanced when young people attend camps in multiple summers (or for sessions that are as long as is practical).
• Campers perceive safety at camp differently than adults.

• Directors were surprised to learn that their efforts in risk management address different safety issues than the ones that concern campers.

• Staff need training to help them think about the camp experience from the perspective of the camper. (Do campers feel safe throughout all parts of the day?)

Making Sense
• Campers (other than CITs) reported few opportunities for meaningful involvement in leadership and decision-making (about things that matter).

• Greatest challenge for camps (and other youth-serving organizations) is to provide meaningful opportunities for youth to learn and practice life-building skills in leadership and decision-making.

• Staff need training in helping youth be involved in leadership and decision-making.

Making Sense
10 Reasons Why Camp is Important for Children

- Adventure and exploration
- Friendships with peers and adults
- Reduced summer learning loss
- Connectedness with nature
- Positive risk-taking
- Increased physical activity
- Opportunities for play and imagination
- Safety
- Skill building
- Engagement and leadership opportunities
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