

DIRECTIONS

Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience

A study conducted by Philliber Research Associates and
the American Camp Association with generous support
from Lilly Endowment Inc.



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Thanks to our Sponsors

Few funding organizations have the heart for youth development that is demonstrated by Lilly Endowment Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana. We express our appreciation for their encouragement, their prodding, their insights, and their unflagging commitment to the youth of America. Particular thanks is expressed to Willis K. Bright Jr., Director of Youth Programs and Education.

Hundreds of ACA members and friends have contributed to CAMPAign '07. Research support from this campaign covered camper and camp incentives to participate in the study and supported staff efforts.

Advisory Committee

No project is complete without the input and direction of experienced leaders in the field. Our appreciation is expressed to the following for their input at various junctures of the project:

- Dr. Peter Scales, Search Institute
- Dr. Elizabeth Fideler, Judge Baker Children's Center, Harvard University
- Dr. John Weisz, Harvard University
- Dr. Michael Conn, Girl Scouts of the USA
- Dr. Michelle Gambone, Youth Development Strategies, Inc.
- Dr. Myrtis Meyer, YMCA of the USA
- Ms. Nicole Yohalem, Forum for Youth Investment

Special Thanks is expressed to the following:

Sheila Dannemiller, Research Coordinator, American Camp Association; the staff at Philliber Research Associates who gave direction, input, and a keen eye and ear to aspects of this project: particularly Bill and Susan Philliber, Leslie S. Whitaker, Heather Hirsch, the data entry team, and Becky Welge. Other ACA committee members providing input included Connie Coutellier, Robert Telleen, and William Wealand.



RESEARCH MATTERS

ACA—Sharing Youth Development and Research—
Enriching the Lives of Children

- The largest research study of camper outcomes ever conducted in the United States supported in part by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.
- Conducted by Philliber Research Associates, a respected, independent research group
- More than 5000 families participated
- 80 ACA-accredited camps took part in this groundbreaking study

Parents, camp staff, and children reported significant growth in:

- Self-esteem
- Independence
- Leadership
- Friendship Skills
- Social Comfort
- Peer Relationships
- Adventure & Exploration
- Environmental Awareness
- Values & Decisions
- Spirituality

CAMPERS SAY

- Camp helped me make new friends. (96%)
- Camp helped me get to know other campers who were different from me. (94%)
- Camp helped me feel good about myself. (92%)
- At camp, I did things I was afraid to do at first. (74%)



PARENTS SAY

- My child gained self-confidence at camp. (70%)
- My child continues to participate in activities learned at camp. (63%)
- My child remains in contact with friends made at camp. (69%)

EXPECT MORE FROM THE AMERICAN CAMP ASSOCIATION

“Young people need environments that offer positive peer and adult relationships, guidance, structure, high expectations, and opportunities to try new things. This first-of-its-kind national study marks an important step in defining and demonstrating the value of camps as positive developmental contexts.”

– Nicole Yohalem
Director, Learning and Research
Forum for Youth Investment
Washington, D.C.



RESEARCH MATTERS

Inspiration

Motivated by a desire to better understand children's experience at camp, the American Camp Association (ACA) initiated the first large-scale national research project designed to measure outcomes of the camp experience. We envisioned this ambitious, pioneering work as fundamental to validating the long-held conventional wisdom that camp is a powerful growth experience for young people. We also anticipated this study would serve as a launching pad for future research designed to help individual camps assess their strengths, initiate program upgrades, and measure outcomes. Understanding how camps enrich the lives of children will help us all build a better tomorrow.

Science

Philliber Research Associates (PRA), an independent firm nationally recognized as a leader in youth development research, collaborated with ACA and its Research Committee to design, implement, and analyze an original set of surveys that measured youth development at camps across the country. PRA's expertise was complemented by an outside advisory board of professional researchers. We conducted pilot tests and field tests before launching three years of intensive data collection. Our research was funded by contributions from ACA members, as well as a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., a visionary benefactor of youth development research.

Innovation

Throughout this research, we remained focused on our goal of measuring change in key outcomes. To make the study efficient and feasible for busy families and camps, we designed customized surveys for children, their parents, camp counselors, and camp directors. We pilot-tested early versions of the surveys at 19 camps in order to find the combination of questions that reliably and validly measured campers' growth. To ensure consistent administration of the final surveys, we field-tested our research protocols at 23 camps before creating data collection training videos and research workshops for participating camps. In addition to written instructions for all surveys and procedures, PRA and ACA provided technical support for participating camps by phone.

Participation

In all, 80 ACA-accredited camps from across the country took part in the final version of this groundbreaking study. These camps included day and resident camps, one-week

and multi-week camps, single-gender and co-ed camps, private and agency camps, for-profit and nonprofit camps, and religiously- and non-religiously-affiliated camps. From this representative sample, more than 5000 families participated to produce the largest set of data ever collected from children at summer camp. Parents and children between the ages of 8 and 14 completed surveys before, after, and six months following a stay at camp. Camp counselors completed observational checklists early and late in the camp session under study. Finally, camp directors and select senior staff completed detailed descriptions of their camp and its programs.

Growth

Experiences at camp are as diverse as the children who attend. And yet anecdotal evidence suggested that for many youth, their camping experiences were most often associated with growth in one of these four domains: Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical & Thinking Skills, and Positive Values & Spirituality. Knowing that no single study could possibly capture all the facets of a camp experience, we restricted ourselves to measuring change in ten facets, or "constructs," that fell into one of these four domains. Also, by analyzing data from the directors' surveys, we were able to measure structural aspects of the camps and the demographics of their campers to determine what, if anything, was associated with change among campers.

Results

The results from this landmark study provide scientific evidence that camp—a unique educational institution—is a positive force in youth development. Parents, camp staff, and children themselves reported significant growth in all four domains (Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical & Thinking Skills, and Positive Values & Spirituality). The overall results of this study suggest that a stay at summer camp typically benefits children in the following ways:

- Children become more confident and experience increased self-esteem.
- 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.
- Especially at camps that emphasize spirituality, children realize spiritual growth.



“My experience helped me look at challenging situations differently. Instead of giving up, I find a way around them.” –Sarah, age 14

“At camp I learned how to be part of a team ... sometimes you have to rely on someone to do a task or goal. You have to trust each other.” –Sam, age 12

“I feel accepted, loved, and had lots of fun with people I didn’t know.” –Thais, age 11

“At camp, you learn new abilities for specific activities but you also learn lessons that will just generally help you sometime or other during camp and life.” –Seth, age 13

Commitment

The American Camp Association is committed to all children’s growth and development. Measuring how camps tap the potential of every child is an integral part of ACA’s mission. Camp is both a laboratory for monitoring growth and a catalyst for child development. By studying campers’ experiences and camp’s impact on the lives of young people, ACA provides parents with the knowledge to make good decisions, to thoughtfully guide their children, and to offer opportunities for powerful lessons in community, character building, skill development, and healthy living. Camp is a powerful, positive force!

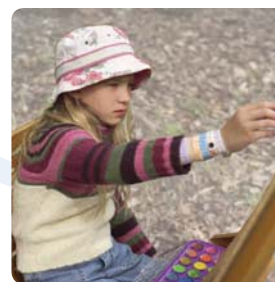
Inside

This booklet offers additional details on this unique study’s design, the four domains and ten constructs the study was designed to measure, first-person accounts of the camp experience, and directions for future research. Additional information is available on the research pages of ACA’s Web site, www.ACACamps.org/research/, or by contacting ACA at (765) 342-8456.



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“I have a conviction that a few weeks spent in a well-organized summer camp may be of more value educationally than a whole year of formal school work.”

–Charles Eliot, former president of Harvard University, in his 1922 treatise on education

STUDY DESIGN

Camp Selection

In the first phase of the study, more than 200 camps were randomly chosen from selected categories of ACA-accredited camps, such as resident and day, co-ed, and single-gender. We strove to include a representative mix of different camps and, in this first study of its kind, included children between the ages of 8 and 14 who did not have developmental disabilities. (Many important questions remain to be researched for campers with developmental disabilities and for other special populations. We hope that future research will teach us more about their experiences at camp.)

Of the camps we initially contacted, 103 chose to participate; 80 successfully completed data collection: 41 in the summer of 2002 and 39 in the summer of 2003. Camps serving significant percentages of racial or ethnic minorities were “oversampled.” The final sample was broadly representative of the population of ACA-accredited camps, as Table 1 shows. Session length at these 80 camps varied, with 57% collecting data during one-week sessions, 31% collecting data during two- and four-week sessions, and 12% collecting data during six-, seven-, or eight-week sessions.

Each camp chose a member of their experienced staff to be the on-site research coordinator. This person attended a full-day training at a national or regional ACA conference to understand the purposes of the study, how to administer surveys and checklists, and how to enlist the cooperation of campers and their families. Participation of selected camps was voluntary, of course, and a few chose to opt out of the study after attending the training workshop. Camps that did participate were reimbursed \$700 to help defray the administrative costs of the research.

Table 1. Comparison of ACA member camps and camps who participated in the research.

ACA Membership	Type of Camp	Research Sample
37%	Day Camp	29%
62%	Resident Camp	71%
41%	Agency Sponsorship	45%
23%	Religiously Affiliated	23%
22%	Independent For-Profit	21%
14%	Independent Nonprofit	11%
67%	Coeducational*	45%
23%	All-Boys*	16%
33%	All-Girls*	39%

** Note that some camps offer both co-ed and single-gender programs, at different times during the summer. Therefore, ACA Membership statistics on gender makeup add up to more than 100%.*

Pre-Camp Survey

In the second phase of the study, participating camps sent invitations and permission forms to campers aged 8 to 14 who planned to attend camp during the session when the research was to be conducted. Specifically, camps were asked to mail packets to a targeted number of campers, based on the size of the camp and the number of children in certain age groups that we hoped to recruit from that camp.

Those children and parents who chose to participate completed permission forms and pre-camp surveys at this time, approximately four weeks prior to camp. Of the approximately 15,000 families contacted, 5,281 completed pre-camp surveys. The pre-camp surveys were about 50 items long and asked children and their parents each to rate how much they agreed with statements about the ten constructs under study (Self-Esteem, Independence, Leadership, Friendship Skills, Social Comfort, Peer Relationships, Adventure & Exploration, Environmental Awareness, Values & Decisions, and Spirituality). Ratings were made on a four-point scale, an example of which appears below. Participation was voluntary, of course, and the participants could skip any item(s) that made them uncomfortable. As a token of appreciation, each child was given a new \$2 bill as an incentive to participate.

1 | 2 | 3 | 4
disagree a lot | disagree a little | agree a little | agree a lot



Each child's camp counselor also completed an "observational checklist" within 48 hours of the camper's arrival. This checklist was designed to measure counselors' initial impressions of campers' developmental strengths in the four domains under study: Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical & Thinking Skills, and Positive Values & Spirituality.



"I feel that I am better at interacting with friends and family. The people skills learned at camp affected me dramatically when I went home." –Luke, age 14

"I learned how to be patient and help out in every way I can (for me it was mostly at home). I had to deal with my anger." –Sandy, age 12

"I learned leadership, organization, water-skiing, make my bed, keep my stuff clean, to keep in touch with my friends, respect, and how to handle pressure." –Isabel, age 13

Post-Camp Surveys

The third phase of the study was a post-camp assessment. On the last day of camp, campers and camp staff completed surveys nearly identical to their pre-camp surveys. For their part, parents completed a post-camp survey a week or so after their child's return home. Every family who was sent a post-camp survey also received \$5.

Of those who completed pre-camp surveys, 3,400 campers and parents also completed post-camp surveys, for a response rate of 64%. The average age of these children was 11.1 years. Some 32% were boys; 68% were girls. About 89% were White, 4% were Black, 3% were Biracial; 2% were Hispanic; fewer than 1% were Native American; and 2% categorized their ethnicity as "Other." Both girls and campers who scored higher in the pre-camp survey were slightly more likely to stay in the study long enough to complete a post-camp survey.

Follow-Up Surveys

Six months after the conclusion of camp, participating families were asked to complete a nearly identical set of surveys designed to assess whether growth during camp was maintained. Again, each family was paid \$5 as an incentive to participate. In all, 2,294 campers and their parents completed the follow-up surveys, for a response rate of 67%. Age, gender, and ethnic composition of this follow-up sample mirrored the larger group of 3,400 families who had completed both pre-camp and post-camp surveys, though families of minority ethnicity were slightly less likely to complete follow-up surveys.

Analysis

Data were collected and analyzed by PRA, with input from the ACA Research Committee and our Advisory Board of professional youth development researchers. Readers with additional statistical or methodological questions are invited to contact ACA directly.

"I learned to clean my room and get along with others." –Byron, age 10

This study measured growth in ten constructs that we conceptualized as fitting into four developmental domains: Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical & Thinking Skills, and Positive Values & Spirituality. Naturally, these four domains overlap somewhat. However, when it came to measuring the ten constructs with surveys, we used statistical techniques to choose questions that overlapped as little as possible. This process, called "factor analysis," made the interpretation of results maximally clear.

POSITIVE IDENTITY

*Self-Esteem
Independence*

SOCIAL SKILLS

*Leadership
Friendship Skills
Social Comfort
Peer Relationships*

PHYSICAL & THINKING SKILLS

*Adventure & Exploration
Environmental Awareness*

POSITIVE VALUES & SPIRITUALITY

*Values & Decisions
Spirituality*

Overall Result

Individual campers' experiences at camp varied widely, of course. On average, however, the group results tell a consistent story of overall positive growth in all four domains and almost all of the ten constructs we measured. In addition, there was substantial evidence that much of this growth was maintained six months later.

POSITIVE IDENTITY

Self-Esteem

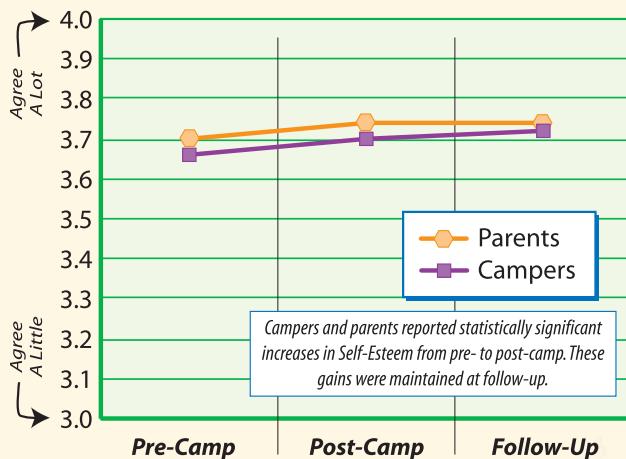
Feeling good about who you are is a goal that almost every camp, school, and parent has for the children in their care. Indeed, “increased self-esteem” is an outcome so commonly touted by youth development professionals that we often lose sight of its origins and meaning. We must understand that children do not feel worthy, confident, and optimistic by having someone tell them that they are special. Self-esteem does not come from empty praise, but from feeling competent; from having success experiences; from making genuine contributions. Camps are uniquely suited to provide these opportunities to young people.

We measured the construct of Self-Esteem using a series of questions that assessed campers’ self-image, optimism, sense of worth, and perceived importance. Sample items included:

I feel confident in myself.
(Camper survey)

My child believes s/he is an important person.
(Parent survey)

On average, children reported a statistically significant increase in Self-Esteem by the end of camp compared to just before camp. Follow-up surveys suggested that this increase was maintained six months later. Parents also reported seeing an increase in Self-Esteem from pre-camp to post-camp, with gains maintained at the six-month mark.



More than 96% of parents agreed with the statement “The people at camp helped my child feel good about him/herself,” and 92% of campers agreed that people at camp helped them feel good about who they were.

Some 70% of parents reported their children were “different” after camp, mostly because they had gained more self-confidence or self-esteem through their camp experience.



“I feel better about myself. I think that I can do more and I’m proud of myself.” –Rachael, age 13

Independence

Whether at day or resident camp, the experience of achievement and social connection away from home can nurture children’s independence. Indeed, research on campers’ adjustment suggests that although mild homesickness is common, it is surmounted by a sense of self-sufficiency. Knowing this, camps can provide a culture of caring separate from home or school. Youth development specialists challenge young people to step out of their comfort zone to take healthy risks. When children meet challenges in a supportive environment, they can become more independent. Young people not only accept responsibility, they welcome it with a renewed sense of autonomy.

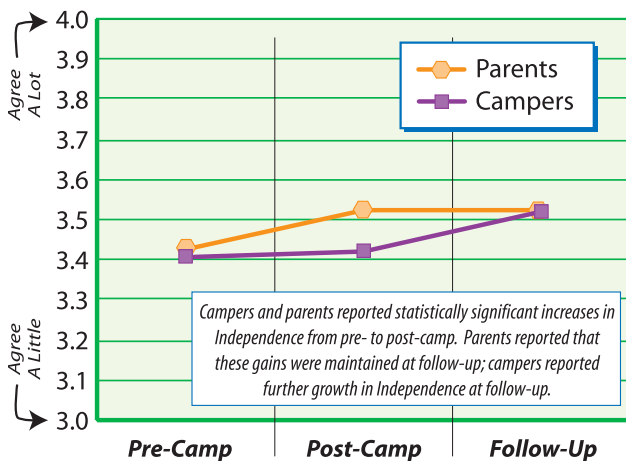
We measured the construct of Independence with a series of questions that assessed campers’ dependence on others and their perceived self-sufficiency. Sample items included:



I'm good at doing things on my own.
(Camper survey)

My child feels s/he needs help with most things s/he does.
(Parent survey)

On average, children reported a statistically significant increase in Independence by the end of camp compared to just before camp. Follow-up surveys suggested that a sense of independence continued to grow in the six months after camp. Parents also reported seeing an increase in independence from pre-camp to post-camp, with gains maintained at the six-month mark.



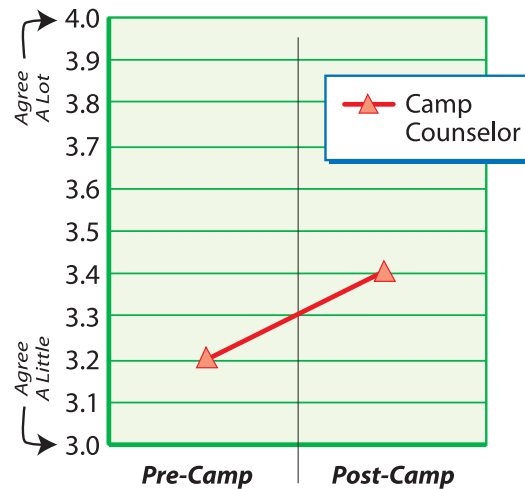
"I believe at camp I have an alternate personality that is different than at home. I'm less cautious to do fun or exciting things and while feeling independent I don't feel as alone as I sometimes do at home." –Christopher, age 14

Staff Perspectives on Campers' Positive Identity

Camp counselors were asked, early and late in the session under study, to report on the frequency of observable behaviors that demonstrated each participating camper:

- Believed that other people liked him or her
- Felt good about himself or herself
- Acted in a confident and optimistic way
- Acted maturely and independently for his or her age

Results from this observational checklist suggested statistically significant growth in the domain of Positive Identity.



"The first change I see in my campers is the transition from defensive to comfort. The comfort then leads to positive risk taking and self-confidence that increases daily." –Robert, age 22



SOCIAL SKILLS

Leadership

Leadership, like self-esteem, is not bestowed but earned. Camps can play a critical role in fostering leadership by giving young people responsibilities unavailable in other settings. At most camps, for example, the campers themselves are responsible for keeping the camp neat and clean by making sure their personal belongings, cubbies, and bunks are in order. They are often responsible for guiding younger campers, as with little brother/little sister programs, and are often involved in designing their activity schedule. Of course, in all cases, campers are also responsible for their own behavior. It is that behavior—and not certain possessions—that determines whether others view them as leaders or not.

We measured the construct of Leadership with a series of items that assessed campers' initiative, self-concept as a leader, and social respect. Sample items included:

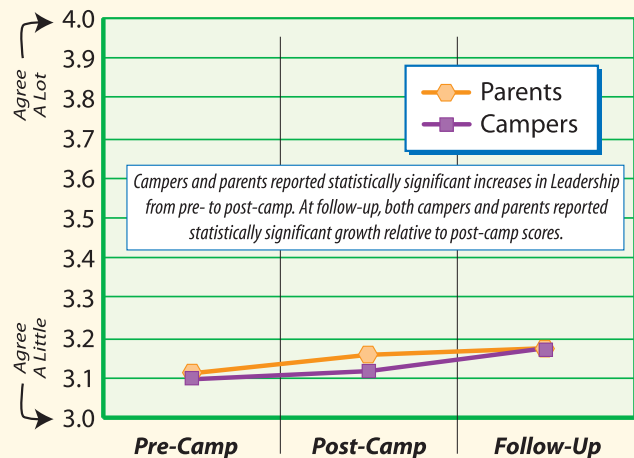
I get other kids together for games.

(Camper survey)

If kids were choosing a leader, they might vote for my child.

(Parent survey)

On average, both campers and parents reported statistically significant increases in Leadership from pre-camp to post-camp. Six months after camp, both campers and parents reported additional growth in Leadership, compared to post-camp levels. Perhaps children found new opportunities to take initiative at home, school, or in their communities.



"I hope that one day I can become a staff member, and do what the ones here have done for us."
—Ana, age 13

"I learned to take on more responsibilities, like managing a schedule, making my bed, and helping to take care of younger campers."
—Geordie, age 14

"This year at school, I was class vice president. And if I did not go to camp, I would have not even thought of trying for a high spot in my school. Camp teaches you so many things that you use in everyday life." —Richard, age 13



Friendship Skills

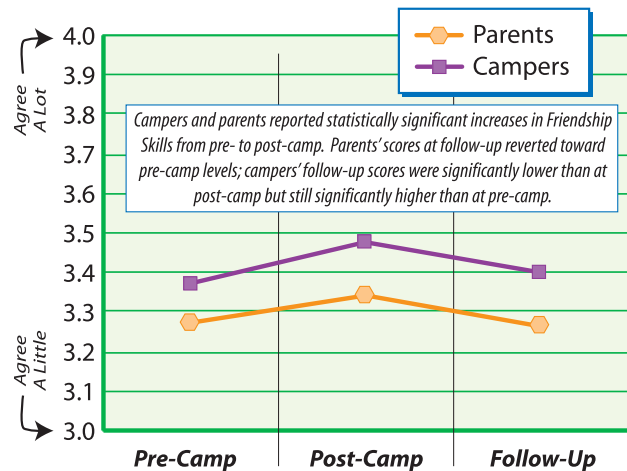
Few memories of the camp experience are more vivid and enduring than making friends. For most children, it's the friends—and not the facilities or fun activities—that make any experience unforgettable. The relationships that children form at camp can help erode their stereotypes, build trust and respect, and push them to be better people themselves. Some research on young people's mental health even suggests that relationships with peers rival the influence of the parent-child relationship. Indeed, young people's friendships may have a remarkably enduring influence on their functioning as adults. Ideally, camps create a culture where making friends blossoms in the absence of cliques, bullies, and materialism.

We measured the construct of Friendship Skills using a series of questions that assessed campers' desire to introduce themselves, and talk and play with new kids, including those different from themselves. Sample items included:

I like to play with new kids.
(Camper survey)

My child talks to other kids who are different from him/her.
(Parent survey)

On average, children reported a statistically significant increase in Friendship Skills by the end of camp compared to just before camp. Follow-up surveys suggested that those prosocial feelings faded somewhat in the six months after camp. Parents also reported seeing an increase in friendly behavior from pre-camp to post-camp. And like children, the parents observed the inclination to make new friends diminish slightly in the six months after camp.



More than 96% of parents agreed with the statement "Camp helped my child make new friends," and 93% of campers agreed that "Camp helped me get to know kids who are different from me."

"I would say that camp helped me be more outgoing." —Sheila, age 10

"I'd say that you learn mostly how to interact with different kinds of people and are open to different ideas. You learn how to cooperate well with others who share and don't share the same opinions as you." —Teo, age 14



SOCIAL SKILLS

Social Comfort

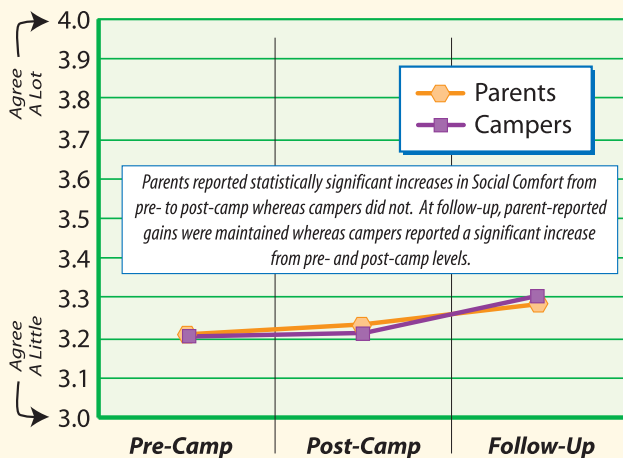
Often, children's narratives of camp include feeling more socially at ease than they did at school or in their neighborhood. Camps, of course, intentionally work to create cultures devoid of the negative social pressures prevalent in other settings. Indeed, the control that camps can exercise over their culture, especially the social culture, is striking. The result should be that campers feel they can be "more themselves" at camp. We sought to measure whether this experience translated to feeling more socially comfortable.

We measured the construct of Social Comfort using questions about social discomfort, and then we "reverse-scored" those items. We asked whether campers worried about making new friends or having their feelings hurt, or whether they found it hard to make or keep friends. Sample items included:

I worry my feelings will be hurt if I like other people too much.
(Camper survey)

My child worries about making friends.
(Parent survey)

On average, children reported no statistically significant change from pre-camp to post-camp in their feelings of social comfort. However, they did report a significant increase in Social Comfort six months after camp ended. We don't know whether this was a delayed effect of certain social skills they learned at camp or whether some other experience accounts for this positive change. Parents perceived their children to be more socially comfortable after camp compared to before, and reported that growth was maintained six months following camp.



"I feel I can completely be myself, and not change any part of me for anyone." –Elias, age 13

Peer Relationships

Just as making friends is a pillar of the social skill set, so is keeping friends. After the novelty of a new friendship group has worn off, the work of resolving conflicts, appreciating differences, and forgiving faults begins. Ideally, the adults at camp work hard to cultivate the skills necessary to maintain friendships, both in themselves and their campers. Not only can they set good examples of peer relationships, they can mediate disagreements and conscientiously include children who otherwise might be excluded in a non-camp setting.

We measured the construct of Peer Relationships by asking how well campers got along with their friends and whether other people liked it when they were around. Sample items included:

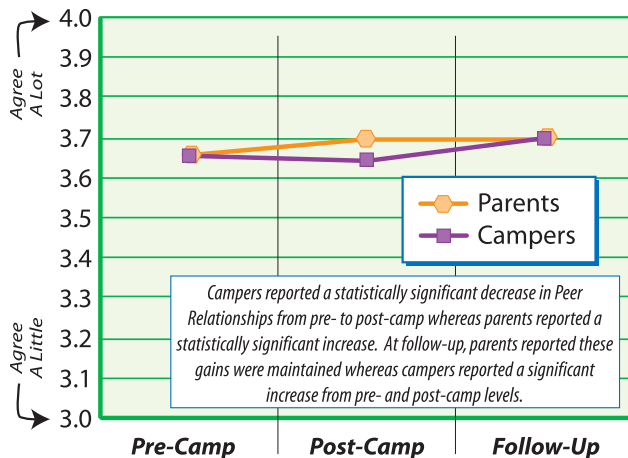
I get along with others.
(Camper survey)

My child feels that other people like it when s/he is around.
(Parent survey)



"When I'm at camp, I am totally at ease because of the constant fun, activities, and the emphasis on self-discovery. I feel totally comfortable." –Sophia, age 14

On average, children actually reported a slight decrease in their perceived ability to get along with others from pre-camp to post-camp. And yet, as with Social Comfort, there was a statistically significant increase in Peer Relationships six months after camp. It is unclear what accounts for this positive change, but it is interesting to note that on the six-month follow-up surveys, 66% of campers reported they had seen or gotten together with friends from camp in the six months after camp. It is certainly plausible that they were socially challenged at camp—in ways they were not at home or at school—and that they felt temporarily less skilled at camp. After camp, that feeling may have subsided. As with other constructs in the social skills domain, parents reported a statistically significant increase in Peer Relationships from pre-camp to post-camp. This perception persisted at the six-month mark.

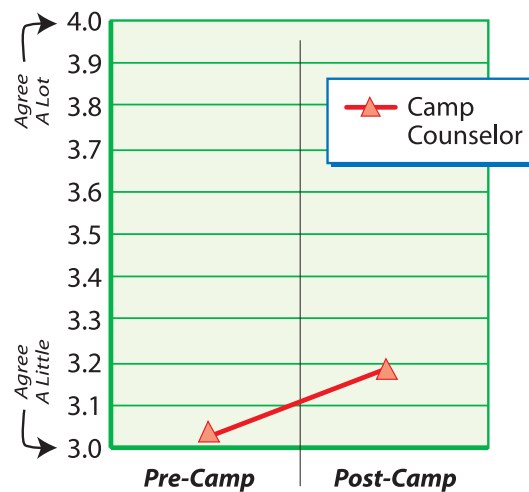


Staff Perspectives on Campers' Social Skills

Camp counselors were asked, early and late in the session under study, to report on the frequency of observable behaviors that demonstrated each participating camper:

- Made new friends easily
- Got along well with others
- Had few social problems or insecurities
- Demonstrated leadership among his or her peers

Results from this observational checklist suggested statistically significant growth in the domain of Social Skills.



“When kids first get here, they are quieter. After some time, they become more outgoing and independent. They also learn to get along with others and accept others since they are living together.” –Ruth, age 20

“At school, there are defined groups of people, but at camp, everyone feels wanted.” –Hali, age 14

“Sometimes at home I feel pressured, but at camp I don’t feel that people are judging me.” –Philip, age 11

“I would say you learn to work like a team.” –Alex, age 10

“Girls who have been here before help the new girls. I see children come together to help each other and have fun even when they are homesick.” –Kathy, age 43



PHYSICAL & THINKING SKILLS

Adventure & Exploration

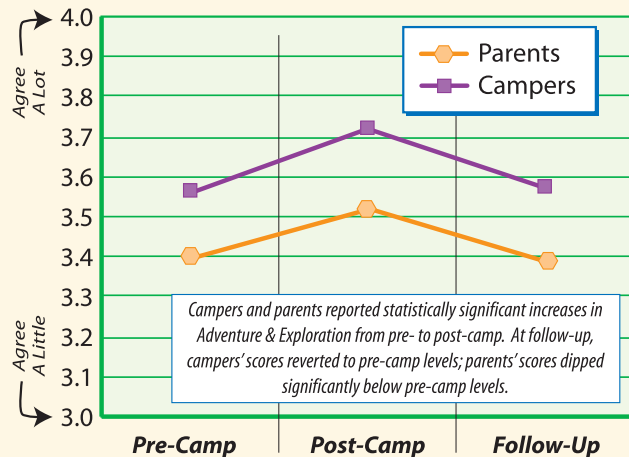
The promise of exploring beautiful landscapes, trying new activities, and taking healthy risks is often an outcome prominently featured in camps' promotional materials. The very origins of the camp movement in the United States have their roots in the pioneering spirit of the first settlers who explored the continent, and in the expressive traditions of the Native Americans. How fitting that camps should carry on a tradition of challenging young people to try new activities, learn new skills, and get caught up in the excitement of living outdoors and feeling ever more competent.

We measured the construct of Adventure & Exploration with a combination of items that primarily tapped into campers' willingness to try new things. Sample items included:

In the past week, I did a new activity.
(Camper survey)

My child likes to try new things.
(Parent survey)

Campers and parents reported the largest gains in any of the ten constructs for Adventure & Exploration. However, six months after camp, young people's self-reported willingness to try new things appeared to have reverted to pre-camp levels, and parents reported a slightly less adventuresome spirit in their children than before camp. The marked pre-camp to post-camp differences, as well as the decreases six months later, may highlight the role camps have in shifting children out of their ordinary routines and expectations.



About 75% of campers reported that they learned something new at camp, such as water sports, land sports, arts and crafts, or outdoor adventure activities.

"I learned sports, skills, and how to be a good friend." –Amy, age 8

"You are taught at least one new game every day. They have swimming lessons, free swim, and you'll have so much fun that you'd wish the day was extended." –Ben, age 11

Environmental Awareness

Environmental awareness is a central part of some camps' missions, through nature programs, guide programs, or conservation activities, while other camps promote environmental awareness more subtly. They may discourage campers from pulling leaves off trees, teach them to identify poison ivy, or have them participate in routine recycling. Many camps are situated in a beautiful, rural setting, which may also enhance campers' environmental awareness. No doubt there will be an ever greater need to teach children about the natural environment and humanity's role in conserving the earth's resources.

We measured the construct of Environmental Awareness with items that touched broadly on the protection of natural resources and the recycling of waste. Sample items included:

Wild animals should be protected.
(Camper survey)

My child cares about nature.
(Parent survey)





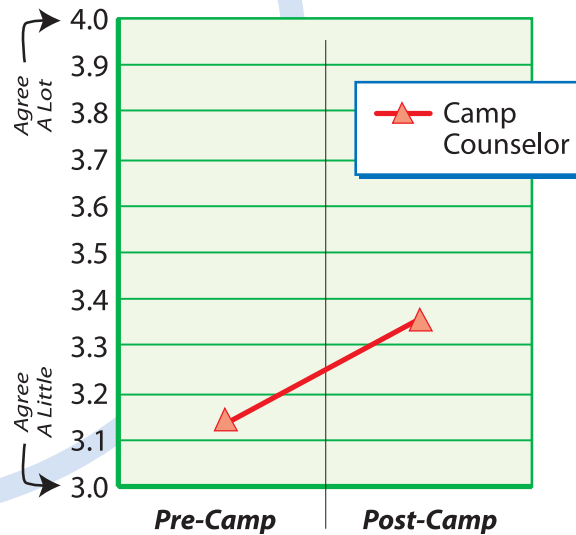
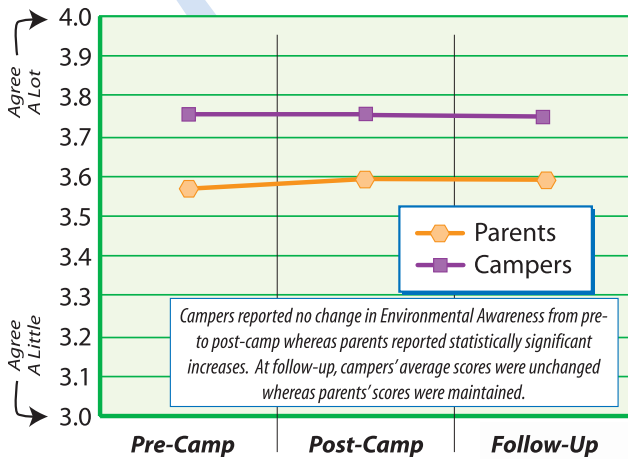
Staff Perspectives on Campers' Physical & Thinking Skills

Camp counselors were asked, early and late in the session under study, to report on the frequency of observable behaviors that demonstrated each participating camper:

- Was willing to try new activities
- Showed concern for nature and the environment
- Showed improvement in some activity
- Learned new skills easily

Results from this observational checklist suggested statistically significant growth in the domain of Physical & Thinking Skills.

On average, there were no pre-camp to post-camp differences in campers' self-reports of Environmental Awareness. Parents, however, reported a statistically significant increase in their children's sense of Environmental Awareness. There was no change from the post-camp score at the six-month follow-up. It is worth noting that while many camps incorporated environmental topics into their programs, very few camps cited an increase in Environmental Awareness as one of their top three targeted outcomes.



“Campers here gain confidence. They become less self-centered and more willing to try new things. They learn empathy; become less afraid of nature (bugs, spiders, raccoons, etc.), of new things in general. They learn that tantrums don’t get you anywhere, but that trying does.”

—Heather, age 20

“I learned about the outdoors and what poison ivy looks like and that the outdoors is fun.” —Emilie, age 9

“Don’t pick grass and don’t pull on branches.” —Hannah, age 9



POSITIVE VALUES & SPIRITUALITY

Values & Decisions

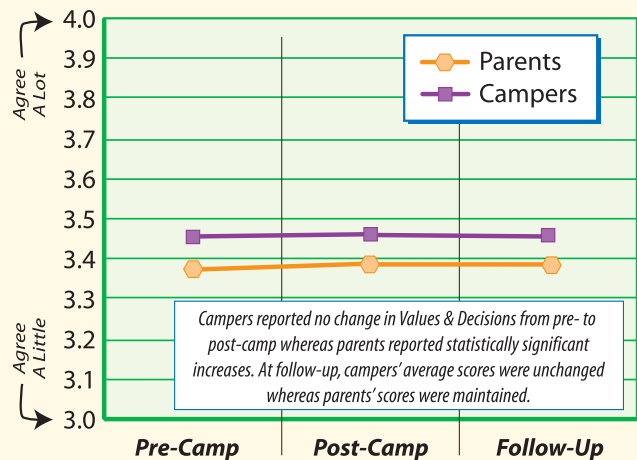
Many parents, camp directors, and camp staff share the hope that children will mature at camp. Many hope camp will infuse young people with positive values and the strength to choose the hard right over the easy wrong. Indeed, the relaxed intensity of the social environment, coupled with consistent adult attention and guidance can help campers test their decision-making skills, see the consequences of their choices, and hone a set of core values. Whereas some camps have an explicit mission statement, others work within an array of standards—some explicit, some implicit—for how one person should treat another, how collaborative decisions are made, and what the virtues of unselfishness are.

We measured the construct of Values & Decisions by asking questions about respect, thoughtful and collaborative action, consideration for others, and following rules. Sample items included:

Before I make a decision, I think about what might happen.
(Camper survey)

My child thinks about how s/he can help other kids.
(Parent survey)

On average, campers themselves reported no pre-camp to post-camp changes in Values & Decisions, and no differences at the six-month follow-up. However, parents noticed and reported an increase in this construct from pre-camp to post-camp. This growth appeared to be maintained six months after camp. Given the emphasis camps purport to place on instilling positive values, campers' null results are difficult to understand. Although many individual campers did report significant growth in this construct from pre-camp to post-camp, the overall absence of self-reported change here deserves further study.



"I learned how to be honest about stuff."
—Abigail, age 9

"I learned a lot about respect and my real values in life, what they really should be." —Louise, age 14

"I learned better sportsmanship and listening skills that helped bring my grades up in behavior."
—Chuck, age 12

Spirituality

In some way, all camps have a spiritual component. Either because of the beautiful natural setting, the opportunities for bonding with others, or meaningful religious practices, young people have an opportunity to connect to the earth, to each other, and perhaps to a higher power. Moreover, all camps provide the unique experience of group living away from home in a non-academic setting. For many young people, this in itself is a spiritually moving experience. Of course, like the other nine constructs we studied, the construct of spirituality was challenging to measure using just a few questions on a survey. Nevertheless, we felt it was important to gather data on an aspect of growth so central to some camps' missions.

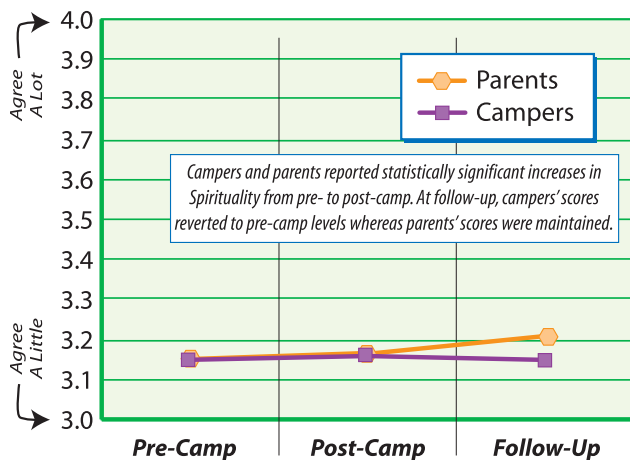
As with every other item on the surveys we administered, participants were instructed to skip questions about Spirituality if they wished. Interestingly, no camper or parent reported discomfort with any of the Spirituality items, though about a quarter of the participants chose not to answer this set of questions. Mostly, the items assessed feelings of closeness with God and participation in religious services. Sample items included:



I have a close relationship with God.
(Camper survey)

**My child likes going to church,
synagogue, or mosque.**
(Parent survey)

Average results from campers and their parents suggested a statistically significant increase in Spirituality from pre-camp to post-camp. For campers, that did not persist to the time the six-month follow-up surveys were completed. However, parent surveys suggested that spiritual growth at camp was maintained.



“Camp makes you feel more free to be yourself and not have others judge you. At home, many people think I’m a punk, but at camp, I’m just a Christian and people don’t judge me the way the world does.”

–Daniela, age 14

“I learn more about Judaism at camp than at school because there are more kids there who are Jewish . . . plus the food is kosher.”

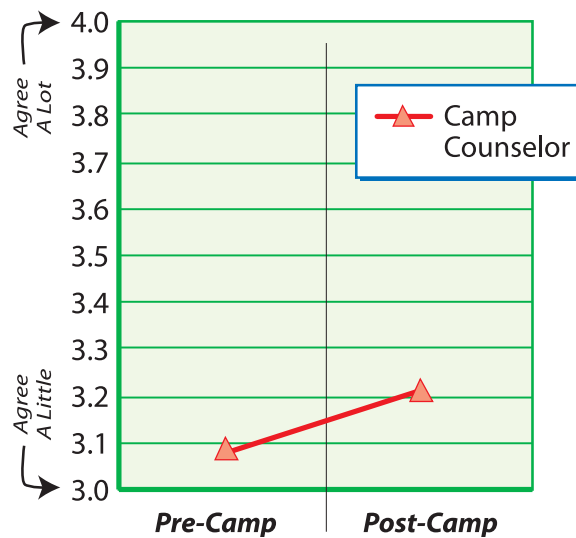
–Joel, age 11

Staff Perspectives on Campers’ Values & Spirituality

Camp counselors were asked, early and late in the session under study, to report on the frequency of observable behaviors that demonstrated each participating camper:

- Acted helpfully and respectfully
- Followed the rules and played fairly
- Made decisions thoughtfully
- Demonstrated spirituality in some way

Results from this observational checklist suggested statistically significant growth in the domain of Values & Spirituality.



“Most of all, campers mature. They find themselves making good, sound decisions without realizing how wonderful those decisions are, or how difficult they would have been to make at the beginning of the session.” –Mark, age 18

“The kids are often challenged at camp, and it makes them grow and become more sure of themselves. I have seen many kids have a change in their attitude and outlook on life due to their new relationship with Christ.” –Charlotte, age 20

CONSIDERATIONS & LIMITATIONS

Good science proceeds in carefully measured steps. This is the first in what we hope will be a series of thoughtful studies designed to understand the outcomes of the camp experience on youth. Like any study, this one had limitations that must be considered when looking at the results.

- This initial study included no comparison group. Our intention was to measure whatever growth occurred while children attended camp, not to compare camp to other ways young people spend their time. To sequester an equally large group of children who were not attending camp and have them all participate in some non-camp activity would have been complex and much more costly than the current study. Perhaps future research will focus on how camps are uniquely suited to promote certain developmental outcomes. Certainly, research with comparison or control groups is needed to confidently attribute positive change in campers to their camp experiences.
- We know little about campers' activities in the six months following camp. It is possible that post-camp programs or activities affected some of the growth campers seemed to have maintained at the six-month mark. Future research should assess other, intervening variables, as well as the normal rates of maturation along the ten constructs we studied. These issues could be addressed, in part, by the inclusion of comparison or control groups in future studies.
- Data presented in this report are group averages. Naturally, individual campers' experiences vary widely. Whereas some campers may evidence little growth because they are already well developed in that area, others may have an experience at camp that causes them to recalibrate their self-concept. Future studies should examine the outcomes of different groups of campers to understand why camp promotes positive development in some young people but not in others.



- Most of the pre-camp scores reported by campers and their parents were relatively high, so the potential for growth was somewhat limited. (Statisticians call this a “ceiling effect.”) Analyses of the data suggest that campers who evidenced the most growth were those whose pre-camp scores were lowest. Future research should explore how camps can best meet the needs of incoming campers, given their current state of development.

- Some campers, parents, and staff reported a decrease in some of the ten constructs from pre-camp to post-camp. Even so, most post-camp scores were well above the middle point on the survey’s scale. In other words, almost all participants still agreed with the items on the survey, but some agreed less enthusiastically. It is important to note that of more than 3000 campers who completed both pre-camp and post-camp surveys, just 9 dipped from an average of 3 or 4 (“agree a little” or “agree a lot”) on one of the constructs to a 1 (“disagree a lot”) on that same construct.

In other words, camp seemed hardly ever to be an aversive experience. Also, only 114 campers out of 3400 moved from an average of 3 or 4 on some construct to an average at or below 2.5. In other words, fewer than 4% of the sample moved from “agree” territory into “disagree” territory on one of the constructs. Future research should seek to learn more about the children for whom camp was not an optimal growth experience in some way. Future research should also investigate how individual camps can improve to better meet the developmental needs of all campers.

- All types of self-report and observer reports have limitations. In this study, our pilot tests and field tests confirmed that the reading level of the surveys was appropriate to the camper population between 8 and 14. Still, it’s important to note that self-reports are sometimes inaccurate; that parents are not unbiased raters; and that staff had only initial impressions on which to base their early ratings of campers’ behavior. Nevertheless, one immense strength of this study is its multi-rater format. The fact that all three raters—campers, parents, and staff—were almost always in agreement about children’s growth and development at camp adds essential validity to our results.



ABOUT CHANGE

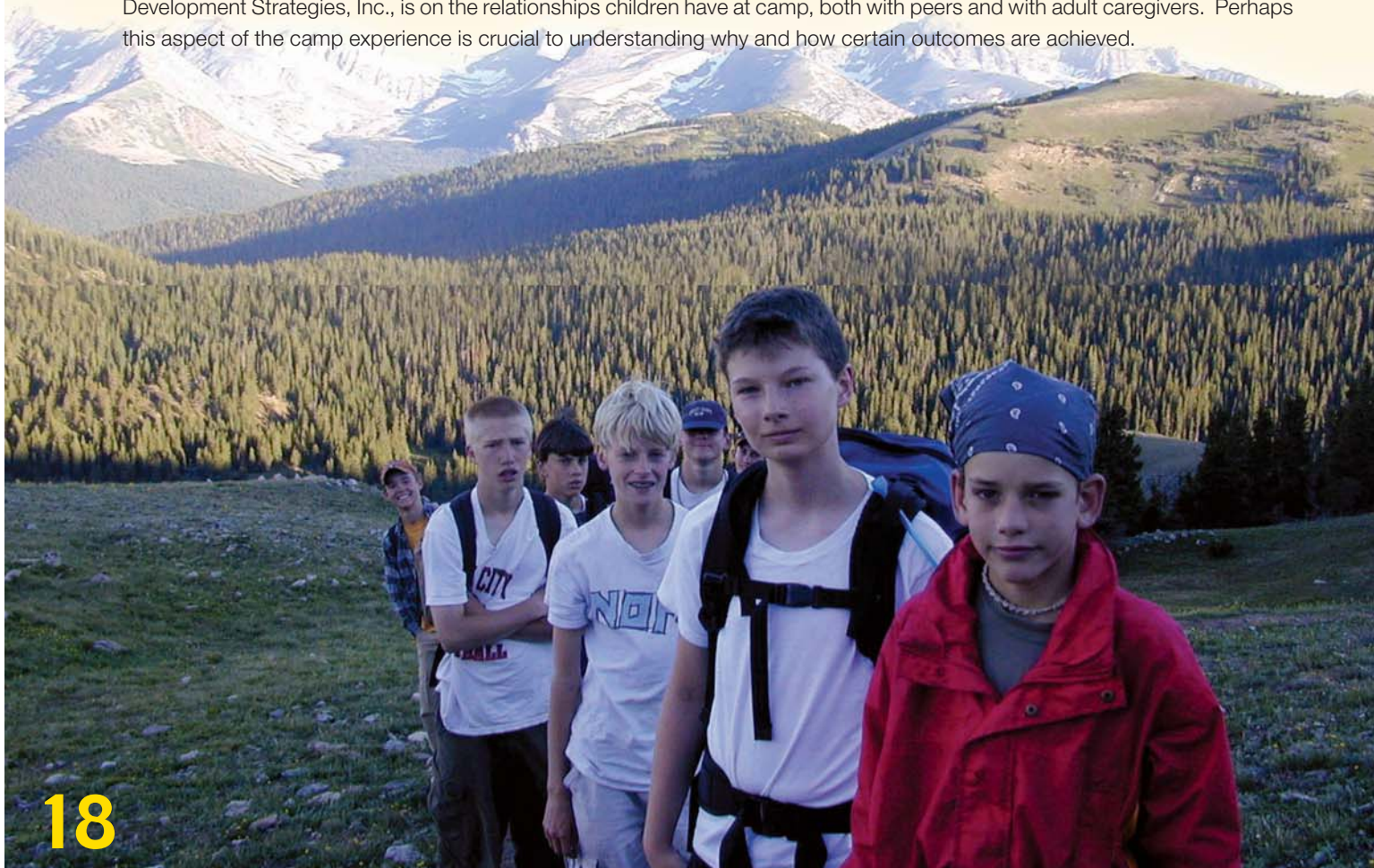
Although measuring change in ten constructs of youth development was the primary purpose of this first study, we did carefully measure structural and demographic aspects of camps to see whether any were associated with change. For example, we asked directors to report on session length, their years as a camp director, the camp's sponsorship, the tenure of staff, and what outcomes they intentionally trained staff to promote.

One factor reliably associated with change was age, but to a small degree. Older campers (10 years and older) tended to show slightly more positive change from pre-camp to post-camp, compared to younger children. On a few constructs, such as Self-Esteem and Social Comfort on the camper surveys, and Peer Relationships on the parent surveys, white campers showed a bit more growth than non-white campers. And according to parent surveys, boys showed a bit more growth in the construct of Values & Decisions than girls.

Growth, as measured by the surveys used in this study, was not associated with session length, director tenure, staff tenure, or weekly camp fee. Sponsorship, however, did make a difference in one construct. Campers at religiously affiliated camps tended to report more growth in spirituality than campers at other camps. And campers at resident camps reported slightly more growth in the constructs of Adventure & Exploration and Environmental Awareness than campers at day camps.

While some youth development professionals may be surprised that this study identified few structural elements associated with growth at camp, it is important to keep in mind that all the participating camps were accredited programs. It is quite possible that structural elements of the camp matter little when the industry standards for the program and operation of the camp are met or exceeded. It is also important to keep in mind that our analyses looked at average experiences of a very large sample. Many youth development professionals can point to anecdotal evidence of certain structural elements of their programs—such as the tenure of the staff, the layout of the physical plant, or the type of staff training—as contributing to an individual child's or group's success. However, this study did not identify specific camp features linked to change.

None of our results is a justification for changing anything about any accredited camp's structure just yet. In fact, our results suggest that different camping formats may promote similar growth in similar ways. That said, research currently underway at ACA is aimed at assessing campers' experiences early in the camp season and then measuring the beneficial effects of key programmatic and structural enhancements. The focus of this research, which is being conducted in collaboration with Youth Development Strategies, Inc., is on the relationships children have at camp, both with peers and with adult caregivers. Perhaps this aspect of the camp experience is crucial to understanding why and how certain outcomes are achieved.



SUMMARY

Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience, a study conducted by Philliber Research Associates and the American Camp Association, is the first-ever, large-scale national research project on camp outcomes. The study is the result of a four-year effort involving instrument development, instrument and protocol testing at dozens of camps, and data collection and analysis from two cohorts of camps. During the summers of 2002 and 2003, more than 5000 campers and their parents, along with staff from 80 camps across the country, participated. This sample was generally representative of ACA-accredited camps and the families they serve.

The results suggest a convergence of opinion from campers, parents, and staff that scientifically validates long-held beliefs about the positive value of camp experiences. As the graphs below illustrate, campers evidenced growth in all four developmentally important domains included in the study: **Positive Identity**, **Social Skills**, **Physical & Thinking Skills**, and **Positive Values & Spirituality**.

CAMPER SURVEY

Camper Survey	Mean Score at Pre-Test	Mean Score at Post-Test	Mean Score at Follow-Up	Effect Size ¹
Positive Identity	3.55	3.58 ^a	3.62 ^{bc}	a = .07 b = .12 c = .20
Social Skills	3.35	3.38 ^a	3.40 ^{bc}	a = .08 b = .04 c = .13
Physical & Thinking Skills	3.66	3.75 ^a	3.65 ^b	a = .24 b = -.30
Positive Values & Spiritual Growth	3.33	3.36 ^a	3.31 ^{bc}	a = .05 b = -.09 c = -.05

^a difference between pre-test and post-test is significant at $p < .05$; ^b difference between post-test and follow-up is significant at $p < .05$; ^c difference between pre-test and follow-up is significant at $p < .05$.

¹By convention, effect sizes $\leq .29$ are considered small; between $.30$ and $.49$ are considered medium; and $\geq .50$ are considered large.

PARENT SURVEY

Parent Survey	Mean Score at Pre-Test	Mean Score at Post-Test	Mean Score at Follow-Up	Effect Size ¹
Positive Identity	3.58	3.65 ^a	3.64 ^c	a = .17 c = .14
Social Skills	3.31	3.37 ^a	3.35 ^{bc}	a = .14 b = -.04 c = .10
Physical & Thinking Skills	3.49	3.56 ^a	3.48 ^b	a = .16 b = -.19
Positive Values & Spiritual Growth	3.28	3.31 ^a	3.29 ^c	a = .06 c = .03

^a difference between pre-test and post-test is significant at $p < .05$; ^b difference between post-test and follow-up is significant at $p < .05$; ^c difference between pre-test and follow-up is significant at $p < .05$.

¹By convention, effect sizes $\leq .29$ are considered small; between $.30$ and $.49$ are considered medium; and $\geq .50$ are considered large.

SUMMARY

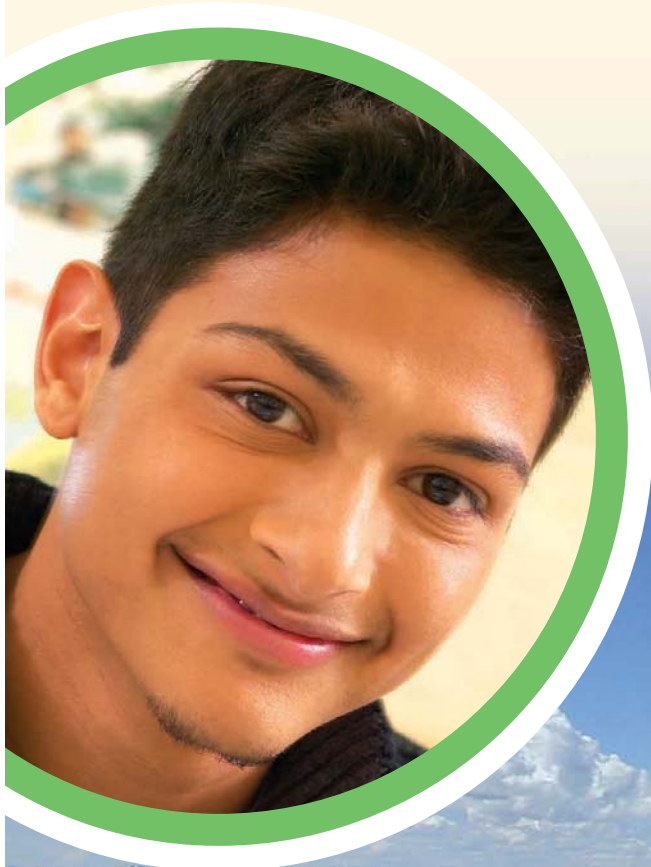
STAFF CHECKLIST

Observation Checklist	Mean Score at Pre-Test	Mean Score at Post-Test	Difference	Effect Size ¹
Positive Identity	3.20	3.34***	+.14	.23
Social Skills	3.03	3.19***	+.16	.25
Physical and Thinking Skills	3.14	3.35***	+.21	.41
Positive Values and Spiritual Growth	3.08	3.21***	+.13	.21

***difference is significant at $p < .001$.

¹By convention, effect sizes $\leq .29$ are considered small; between .30 and .49 are considered medium; and $\geq .50$ are considered large.

Beyond the quantitative results, it was impressive to review the qualitative descriptions of the camp experience offered by study participants. (Samples appear throughout this report.) In addition to noting the wonderful array of activities at camp, most open-ended responses on surveys from both parents and campers emphasized the strong positive influence of the people at camp. For parents, the special relationship their children formed with camp counselors and leaders was deeply appreciated; for campers, their new and returning camp friends were of paramount importance.



NEW DIRECTIONS

The results presented in this report are extremely encouraging and validate camp's purpose. Understanding the areas where camps already contribute to positive youth development was an essential first step in raising the performance bar for camps and in identifying areas to build further capacity. We appreciate more than ever how camp experiences nurture substantial growth in young people. We are also cognizant of how much more there is to learn.

Since relationships are at the core of youth development in general and camping specifically, ACA will continue with program improvement projects aimed at enhancing young people's relationship experiences at camp. Following the "Community Action Framework for Youth Development" (Youth Development Strategies, Inc.: *What Matters for Youth*, 2002), ACA joins other youth development organizations in identifying strategies to help youth become productive, connected, and able to navigate our complex world.

Work is under way to listen to the voice of youth in determining the degree to which developmental supports and opportunities are present in camps. This work will help camps—and other youth development programs—provide even more supportive relationships and even better program and leadership opportunities.

We believe this process of evidence-based program enhancement to be crucial to camps' ongoing role in assisting young people's journey to becoming productive adults. Indeed, all youth organizations must rise to the challenge of creating the supports and opportunities that enhance youth development and that help young people acquire the strength and resilience they need to assume the responsibilities of adulthood.



ABOUT ACA

- Founded in 1910, the American Camp Association (ACA) is a community of professionals dedicated to enriching the lives of children and adults through the camp experience, reaching nearly 3,000,000 children through ACA-accredited camp programs.
- ACA is the largest association serving the organized camp industry and represents all segments of the camp profession, including agencies serving youth and adults, independent camps, religious and fraternal organizations, and public/municipal agencies.
- ACA serves as the knowledge resource center for the camp industry, educating camp owners and directors in the administration of camp operations—particularly program quality, health, and safety—and assisting parents, families, and caregivers nationwide in selecting camps that meet industry-accepted and government-recognized standards.
- ACA is the only organization that provides accreditation for camps, a process with a fifty-year history. Based on 300 national standards for health and safety, the value of ACA accreditation is recognized by courts of law and government regulators.
- ACA works in close conjunction with the many nonprofit organizations which operate three-quarters of the camps nationwide—including the YMCA, YWCA, Camp Fire USA, Girl Scouts of the USA, and Boy Scouts of America—as well as individual churches and synagogues, and a large number of private, independent camps throughout the United States and Canada.
- *Camping Magazine*, the premier resource for camp professionals, is published by ACA and is the primary resource for the most recent trends in the camp industry—the latest research in the field of youth development, critical management tools, and innovative programming ideas.
- *CAMP*, published by ACA, is an authoritative and comprehensive resource for parents who want their children to benefit from a positive and expanding camp experience. *CAMP* reached consumers in January 2005, becoming a must-read magazine for parents exploring camps for their children.



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