

PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND CAMPS

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Camp experiences enrich children's lives. Camp is a significant context for youth development. Many people who have gone to camp or served as camp

counselors know these statements are true. Yet, because many people agree, only recently have efforts documented the outcomes and benefits of camp. Further, change is often difficult to study, and the intangible benefits of camp experiences are complex to analyze. Nevertheless, research is showing that camp embodies many aspects of positive youth development.

Youth development focuses on supporting or promoting positive developmental processes such as competence, mastery, positive identity, resilience, caring, connection, and belonging that are known or assumed to advance health and well-being (Benson & Saito, 2006). Camps are considered youth development programs when they intentionally incorporate experiences, opportunities, and supports to address and advance the positive development of children and youth.

Developing **peer relationships** is a key element of youth development. Social skills involve a variety of processes including caring and supportive relationships with adults as well as peers, communication, cooperation, and teamwork skills. **Peer relationships**, however, focus primarily on means for making and keeping friends along with having a sense of belonging.

Research Says

- The National Academy of Sciences (2001) one key element of youth programs ought to be the opportunities to learn how to form close durable human relationships.
- Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified essential features of positive developmental settings including **supportive relationships** defined as warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, responsiveness. Bonding is the emotional attachment and commitment a child makes to social relationships in the family, peer group, community, or culture (Catalano et al., 2002).

- Interacting with peers who would normally be outside their existing network is one of the most important benefits to participating in structured youth activities (Dworkin, Larson, & Hanson (2003). **Peer relationships** should also emphasize an inclusive youth environment (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) for young people.
- Gambone et al. (1997: 2002) stated that youth must have multiple supportive relationships with adults and **peers** who are part of a young person's environment. Relationships are the basis for emotional support, guidance, and instrumental help. Further, young people need to have others depend on them for informal and formal roles of support and leadership.
- Developing teamwork skills is an important element of **peer relationships**.
- The National Academy of Sciences (2001) identified interpersonal development as an element of youth development that includes social connections to others and learning skills to cultivate these relationships. These relationships should also result in reinforcing prosocial norms (that is, the modeling of positive behaviors).
- **Peer relationship** skills include establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on clear communication, cooperation, resistance to inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed.

Camp Research and Peer Relationships

More research has been done in camps related to social skills development, including an analysis of peer relationships, than any other area. The results are highly positive.

- The 2005 national study of the outcomes of camp experiences (American Camp Association) showed that children develop social skills at camp that help them make **new friends**. In this same study, 96% of the parents said that camp helped their child make new friends and 93% of the campers said that camp helped them get to know kids who were different from them.
- Arnold et al. (2005) studied Oregon residential 4-H campers and found that campers said met **new people** and friends as a result of camp. Campers also indicated that camp helped them to cooperate with others, talk to others more easily, work with others as a team, and work through disagreements. Girls were more likely to learn to cooperate with others than were boys, although both said they learned that skill.

- Garst and Bruce (2003) also studied over 8000 4-H campers in Virginia and found that making **new friends** was the number one benefit of attending camp. Campers also believed that camp helped them develop closer friendships with people they already knew, improved their communication skills, and helped them see the world beyond their hometown.
- In a study of over 2000 campers with mild to severe disabilities who were ages 7-21 years, Brannon et al. (1997; 2000; n.d.) found significant growth related to abilities to communicate with others and to engage in **social interactions**. Moreover, they found these social gains carried over after the campers went home. Similar results were found related to how campers with disabilities participating in inclusive camps gained better social communication skills through camp. Improvement in the skills included time spent in appropriate peer interaction and the development of a respect for others.
- Research by Klem (2006) studying campers and parents in Missouri 4-H associated with summer camp found that both campers and parents thought that social and **teamwork** skills increased as a result of involvement with the summer camp.
- Using a quasi-experimental design that compared campers to non-campers, Reefe (2006) found that campers increased more than other non-campers over the summer in the areas of **interpersonal skills**, which included cooperation, trust, and communication.
- Sklar et al.'s (2006) qualitative study of an eight-day wilderness challenge trip resulted in the outcome of community building that was described as trust, group support, and friendship, which resulted in elements of youth **social capital**.
- Chenery's (1991) qualitative study of camps across the United States found that cooperation, getting along, being pushed to be the best one can be, independence, and **teamwork** all related to self-esteem building at camp.
- Durall (1997) uncovered that young people who attend camp experience beneficial factors that help them move toward healthy **social development**. Durall's study suggested that factors that can be fostered at camp include cohesion, interpersonal learning, and altruism if these aspects are the focus of the camp program.
- Dworken (1999) found that campers felt they learned "**people skills**" at camp that would be helpful to them in other aspects of life. These campers commented that the skills they learned at camp such as leadership, communication, organization, and decision-making were critical to being able to work with other people. In later research on **social competencies**, Dworken (2001) interviewed parents and found their children gained the most improvement in the area of social competencies. Parents' comments ranged from "my child learned to share experiences, open up in peer discussions, and make many new good friends with whom she still communicates" to "he learned to get along with all kinds of people, to be more accepting, and he has a greater insight into people." Parents also mentioned the camp experience as being an important contributor to learning teamwork.
- Bialeschki and Scanlin (2005) described the research done with Youth Development Strategies Inc. with over 7600 campers. This preliminary study found that when the campers' perceptions about guidance, emotional and practical support, and knowledge of youth were calculated, 69 percent of the campers were in the optimal category while only 9 percent were in the insufficient group. This finding suggests that camps are doing a good job in meeting **supportive relationship** needs of their campers.

Bottom Line

Camps are extraordinary opportunities for young people to develop positive **peer relationships**. A good deal of research supports the value of camps related to this dimension of social skills.

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