Growth in the volume and rigor of camp research over the past decade has led to improved understanding of the value of the camp experience as a setting for positive youth development and the developmental outcomes of camp experiences for youth and adults, suggesting innovations and opportunities in the exploration of the camp experience.

5

Youth development and the camp experience

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The organized camp experience has been an important part of the lives of children, youth, and adults for over 150 years and is a social institution that touches more lives than any other except for schools. From the beginning, the camp experience has been a way for young people to explore and search for an authenticity often missing in other parts of their lives that contributes to their healthy transition into adulthood. Although camps vary in their mission, goals, and objectives, there is great similarity in basic camp values, such as connecting with nature, group living experiences, fun, meaningful engagement, personal growth, and skill development.

Camp is more than a location or a program; it encompasses the affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social, and spiritual
benefits that youth receive during and after the camping experience. Over the past decade, tremendous growth in the volume and rigor of camp-related research has occurred, facilitated by a targeted research agenda conducted by the American Camp Association (ACA). This agenda was founded on three national research projects conducted between 2003 and 2007: a study to identify the developmental outcomes of the camp experience, a benchmarking study of the youth development supports and opportunities provided through camp experiences, and a program improvement project directed toward enhancing supports and opportunities provided by camps. Other national youth-serving agencies, such as 4-H, Boy Scouts of America, YMCA of the USA, and Girl Scouts of the USA, have also made important contributions to this body of knowledge. With these studies as a guide, this article explores the settings, structures, and program characteristics that appear to contribute to specific positive youth development experiences in camps, the developmental outcomes associated with camp experiences, and emergent innovations and opportunities in the study of camp experiences.

**Supports and opportunities for positive youth development in camps**

One way that a youth program provider might effectively target positive youth development (PYD) is by offering ample supports and opportunities for its participants. Supports include the people, programs, and intrapersonal skills that allow young people to seek new information and test their existing knowledge in a safe environment. They foster a young person’s natural growth trajectory by providing elements essential to this process, such as supportive relationships with staff. A supportive program climate, for example, promotes social inclusiveness, thereby supporting youth’s needs for belonging with a program setting. Opportunities foster positive development by offering novel, challenging, and engaging experiences that effectively open the learning pathways of young
people. Opportunities offer pathways by which youth participants might test and apply new knowledge and skills, which facilitate outcomes such as skill building, competence, and a sense of mattering. Together these supports and opportunities encompass the variety of ways a youth development program might foster healthy growth among its participants.

Researchers have studied effective experiences built on supports and opportunities in a number of youth settings, and in general, programmatic supports and opportunities have a positive effect on youth development in these settings. Using the Community Action Framework for Youth Development, the ACA and Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) examined the extent to which camp offers the supports and opportunities critical to healthy adolescent development. During summer 2004, 7,645 boys and girls ages ten to eighteen who were attending one of eighty day or resident camps completed questionnaires to measure four domains of developmental supports and opportunities: supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill building. The results indicated that the greatest strength of camp was supportive relationships between youth and adult staff.

Caring, supportive adults are critical to PYD since many children lack access to these types of adults because of fractured families, time constraints, and the erosion of neighborhood ties. As indicated by ACA’s Inspirations study, youth campers identified supportive relationships with camp staff as central to quality camp experiences. For example, in the Inspirations study, ACA found that 50 percent of camps had staff-to-camper ratios of one-to-three. Appropriate ratios allow ample opportunities for positive and meaningful interactions with adults. Furthermore, low staff-to-camper ratios may also play an important role in maintaining an emotionally and physically safe environment. The provision of safe places is foundational to all PYD settings, and most camps prioritize safety within their programs. One way the ACA supports these efforts is through its accreditation process. Standards for camp operations and programming provide a framework from which
camps might further support positive development among campers.

Camp characteristics that promote positive youth development

Research indicates that camps provide the supports and opportunities needed for PYD. Examining specific characteristics of the supports and opportunities afforded by camp experiences, including settings, structures, and programs and activities, provides a clearer understanding of camp as a PYD experience.

Setting characteristics

Camp experiences occur in settings characterized by unique features related to nature and time, which may play a particularly important role in shaping how camp experiences affect youth and adults.10 A considerable body of research suggests that natural environments are contexts for personal restoration, referred to as a reduction in stress, arousal, and anxiety.11 Restorative settings promote a sense of being away, that is, a change in the location and activities of daily life, and restoration associated with natural settings is greater than restoration received from nonnatural settings. The importance of being away—or escape—has been well documented in the literature on outdoor experiences.12 Camp involvement provides youth with the opportunity to escape their home environments and experience the novel camp setting. For example, the 93 percent of resident camps and 63 percent of day camps that are located in a nature-based setting allow youth to make meaningful connections with nature.13 Since many youth lack ongoing contact with nature, the remoteness of a nature-based camp experience provides them with a high degree of novelty.14 Because camps are often located in remote outdoor areas, camp experiences often contrast with the everyday setting in which many campers live.

Camp experiences are also sustained for greater periods of time than many other youth experiences that may be short or spread
out over time. Day campers participate for up to eight hours a day for several days, and youth participating in resident camps are involved twenty-four hours a day for up to several weeks. These sustained experiences, which differ from many other common childhood experiences, have a duration, intensity, and breadth that may be particularly influential to developmental outcomes. Sustained experiences are important because they provide time for a camp to achieve its youth development goals. Immersive camp experiences also provide ample time for camp staff to reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors.

**Structural characteristics**

Structural components of the experience, such as camp norms, group organization, and traditions and rituals, are typically integrated into camp experiences to contribute to PYD. Norms are a camp structure that include rules for behavior, ways of doing things, values and morals, and obligations for service; they are part of high-quality youth experiences intentionally leading to PYD outcomes. Youth may adopt camp norms and rules through parent communications before camp, behavioral expectations posted around the camp property, and the ways that camp personnel demonstrate consistency and commitment to the camp policies. Camps establish norms through staff recruitment and training programs that teach staff how to model the camp’s desired norms. In addition, positive peer pressure supports adherence to camp norms, as do supportive relationships with camp staff. ACA’s research into program improvement in camps reflects the importance of high, clear, and fair normative standards as a component of quality supports and opportunities.

Group living is another important characteristic of camp experiences. At camp, children experience just about all aspects of their lives—eating, sleeping, playing, and working—in social groups. Successfully organizing children and adolescents in camp communities that can be as large as a small town is a key structural component of many camp experiences. Creating group cohesion using effective organization strategies is important because a natural
tendency exists for individuals to favor certain individuals (over others) after they have been divided into groups. Many camp strategies, including similar group clothing, creative group names, group symbols, and group language (for example, slogans, songs, and chants), foster a sense of community in organizational settings. These organizational elements have a positive influence on campers’ self-identity.

Erikson’s life cycle model of human development suggests that as young people move from childhood to adulthood, they consciously create a multidimensional image of their self, and they look to have their identity validated by others. As youth leave their homes and neighborhoods to enter into a camp community, they have an opportunity to leave their personal baggage (poor choices, bad decisions, negative influences from friends at home) at the camp entrance. Camp is thus an equalizing context for youth. Many of the status symbols for youth (for example, wearing certain clothing, possessing the latest gadgets and gear) are less prevalent at camp. Because campers eat the same food, participate in the same activities, and sleep in the same large, shared spaces, differences between the haves and the have-nots are minimized.

Research with adolescents suggests that young people reinvent themselves through the camp experience by escaping the negative impressions of others and revising their self-identity at camp. Undesirable personal characteristics can be shed in favor of new ways to think, feel, believe, and express themselves. Through camp groupings, campers also have opportunities to explore different social roles and build social capital. Supportive relationships through group living with peers and the presence of caring adults, combined with setting characteristics such as sustained experiences, foster deep friendships with peers and adults and therefore a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Traditions and rituals, such as opening ceremonies, competitive events, campfires, and even leadership programs, are some of the universal influential elements of the camp experience. Traditions and rituals foster group cohesion and community building, and
they connect youth and staff to camps as special places. Because traditions recognize both the passage of time and change over time, they convey the impact of the past on the present and the future. Positive experiences and memories, such as awards received or performances shared, become associated with camp traditions and rituals over time and are imbued with emotional significance. Traditions and rituals may also provide youth with additional opportunities for meaningful involvement, an important component PYD in camps. Campfire ceremonies are a common feature of the camp experience and an important example of traditions and rituals. Ceremonies like campfire programs foster personal reflection and recognition that appear to strengthen camp participants’ connection to the camp community. Campfires become symbolic and foundational to the construction of shared memories and storytelling.

Leadership development is another type of ritual in many camps, an important rite of passage that signals progression from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Leadership scaffolding, the creation of leadership development programs and opportunities such as counselor-in-training and leadership-in-training programs, is one example of how camps integrate rituals with program components. Scaffolding provides intermediate leadership opportunities that serve as a mechanism for recognizing both the age and developmental differences of youth and their progression as they develop knowledge, skills, and abilities toward mastery.

Program and activity characteristics
In their review of prominent youth development programs, Roth and Brooks-Gunn found that the most effective programs offered primarily structured activities and limited the amount of unstructured time. Unstructured time is one of the features that make camp distinctly different from other out-of-school-time programs, and recent studies suggest campers equate their most meaningful camp experiences to the time they spent outside structured activity. Hough and Browne found that campers gained skills and a sense of
competence from camp activities, but developed a strong sense of social self-confidence and formed meaningful relationships during unstructured time.\textsuperscript{30} It is possible that unstructured time, particularly when it is used intentionally to foster positive outcomes, is a unique way camps effectively promote positive youth development.

In contrast, structured camp activities promote youth development through features including experiential learning and choice. Direct, hands-on experience is a powerful medium for learning, and camp activities commonly provide youth with opportunities for holistic engagement.\textsuperscript{31} By choosing activities in which to participate, campers are more likely to engage their intrinsic interests, a central component of youth development. It is not surprising that many campers report an overall sense of competence following their experience in camp activities.\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly, they also highlight the opportunities for appropriate risk taking as a powerful means for personal growth at camp. Risk plays an important role in youth development, and many camps offer programs such as challenge courses and wilderness trips in order to safely support the learning and growth that occur as a result of positive risk taking. The experiential nature of camp activities, combined with the elements of choice, personal interest, skill development, and risk taking, allows structured camp activities to promote positive youth development.

\textbf{Developmental outcomes of the camp experience}

The most dramatic shift in camp research in the past decade has occurred in the areas of measuring developmental outcomes of camp experiences and developing reliable and valid measurement approaches for these outcomes. Several developmental models have guided the study of youth outcomes in camps, including the Search Institute’s forty assets model, the targeting life skills model, the five Cs of positive youth development, and the Community Action Framework for Youth Development.\textsuperscript{33}
**Youth developmental outcomes**

The developmental outcomes of the camp experience are well documented. One of the first large-scale efforts was ACA's National Youth Development Outcomes study, in which five thousand youth, staff, and parents from a representative national sample of camps were asked about the ways in which campers benefited from the camp experience. Results from this study indicated that campers experienced growth in a wide variety of areas, including self-esteem, peer relationships, independence, adventure and exploration, leadership, environmental awareness, friendship skills, values and decisions, social comfort, and spirituality. In addition to providing evidence of the value of the camp experience, these results also supported existing youth outcomes studies from other youth-serving organizations, thereby situating camp as an important context for positive youth development.

**Staff developmental outcomes**

Staff outcomes, like camper outcomes, are an increasingly recognized value of the camp experience. Each year, close to a quarter-million older adolescents and emerging adults work as staff in ACA-accredited day and resident camps, and a large percentage of these staff members return to work in camps over multiple summers. Trained as frontline leaders, staff members (most often between eighteen and twenty-five years old) provide youth with supervision and instruction in camp activities, and they bear much of the responsibility for making camp a setting for positive youth development. Since these emerging adults are themselves part of the youth development continuum, documenting staff outcomes also is important for research and practice. Research on camp staff outcomes suggests that camp experiences may contribute toward young adults' becoming fully functioning adults, characterized by the ability to find employment, form a lasting and gratifying partnership, and become a community contributor.

Research into the developmental outcomes of camp experiences for staff has generally explored outcomes for either young adult
paid staff or older adolescent teen staff. The most common developmental outcomes for staff can be described as instrumental learning, which includes social and life skills development, and transformative learning, which describes how camp experiences promote deep change in young adult staff. For example, camp staff report that they developed personal standards for their own behavior and learned to feel confident in showing their true personality and identity at camp. Young adults who have worked at camp also appear to gain skills that affect their personal relationships, careers, and civic engagement outside camp. Two studies that focused on the long-term impacts of working at camp found that alumni staff believed that camp experiences contributed to twenty-first-century workforce skills such as planning, decision making, communication, and teamwork, and that these experiences helped them explore new opportunities and try out new roles that they could apply in other settings. Given the expansion of the definition of adolescence into the mid- to late twenties, many camp staff are in a developmental life stage much like the campers they serve. Like camper outcomes, the duration and intensity of the camp experience may have a positive impact on young adults’ transition into adulthood.

Measurement strategies for developmental outcomes in camps

The creation of PYD frameworks for understanding camp experiences has also led to the development of specific outcomes measurement approaches. Three such resources are the Tool Kit for Measuring Outcomes of Girl Scout Resident Camp, the National 4-H Camp Toolkit for Program Planning and Evaluation, and the ACA Youth Outcomes Battery. ACA’s Youth Outcomes Battery is a set of scales designed to be used by individual camps as a part of their evaluation efforts. The scales, developed and tested in day and resident camps, are age appropriate, reliable, and valid, and they allow camps to select which outcomes they want to target. To
date, individual scales are available for friendship skills, responsibility, independence, family citizenship, teamwork, competence, exploration, affinity for nature, camp connectedness, problem-solving confidence, and spiritual well-being. Despite growth in the breadth of outcome measurement tools, survey research in camps can pose challenges. Short camp sessions, normal development (maturation), and demographics and individual differences can confound accurate measurement. Because of these limitations youth researchers have begun to investigate how a focus on quality program improvement might allow camp programs greater control over the processes that target developmental outcomes. Program quality efforts acknowledge the role of outcomes while investigating aspects such as staff behaviors that are more under the control of the camp to influence through training and coaching.

**Conclusion**

The expansion of our understanding of the camp experience over the past decade has been remarkable, and the emphasis on the developmental outcomes of camp experiences and the specific settings, structures, and programs and activities that foster positive youth development has been important and productive. The camp community has a much better appreciation for the fact that positive outcomes do not just occur because children attend camp; these desired outcomes must be planned, measured, and then incorporated into future program planning efforts. Although many more research questions must be answered in order to provide the field with practical strategies and resources to enhance program quality, the momentum built from this research has demonstrated the value and importance of the camp experience for positive youth development for all children.

**Notes**


YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND THE CAMP EXPERIENCE


34. Bialeschki et al. (2007); Thurber et al. (2007).


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