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Supporting Staff Supports Youth Well-being at Summer Camp

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Nurturing Staff Supports Youth Well-Being at Summer Camp

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Background

Youth today experience constant stressors related to mass shootings, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, politics, racial unrest, and social media, to name a few (Cavanagh & Obasi, 2022). These stressors likely have immediate and long-term effects on their mental and physical health, and physical health, and subsequently, on their overall well-being (Diener & Chan, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2011). Thus, more than ever, there is a need to identify and provide effective strategies for supporting youth well-being in all settings. Immersive summer youth development programs, such as summer camp, are well positioned to support youth well-being. Given that approximately 26 million American youth attend summer camp each year (ACA, 2023) and 1.5 million young adults and adults work at camp each summer, it behooves us to understand the components and characteristics of camp that support well-being. With over 15,000 day and overnight camps in the United States (ACA, 2023), it is equally important to understand what factors contribute to positive camp experiences and youth development.

A growing body of research suggests that attending camp can support youth development (Henderson, 2018). For example, attending camp can support youth's social-emotional learning (Whittington et al., 2017) and can have benefits that last for years (Richmond et al., 2019). Researchers have also examined the specific characteristics of camp that support youth development. For example, Sibthorp et al. (2020) identified the novel and supportive social environment as an important factor in supporting learning at camp. Relatedly, staff can be important facilitators of camp-related outcomes for youth (Wilson et al., 2019).

Researchers have also identified some positive outcomes of working at camp (for a review see Warner et al., 2020). Outcomes connected to camp employment include skill development (Duerden et al., 2021; Povilaitis et al., 2021) and career development (Warner et al., 2023). In addition, researchers have identified many characteristics of camp employment that support young adult development (Warner et al., 2023). For example, both Duerden et al. (2014) and Warner et al. (2023) found that the supportive social environment that often characterizes camp employment can support staff's learning and broader developmental needs. Despite this growing literature, little is known about how staff experiences are directly related to youth experiences at camp (cf. Owens & Browne, 2021).

Human development frameworks including relational developmental systems theory (Lerner & Callina, 2014) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) suggest that people develop through interactions with their environments. These frameworks recognize that human development occurs through reciprocal, bi-directional, and mutually reinforcing relationships that create ever-changing dynamics. Building from these ideas, one can imagine how changes in one part of the environment may create changes in another part of the environment. Considering the camp environment within these frameworks, we therefore can understand that campers influence one another, campers influence the staff, the staff influence campers, and camp administration and staffing practices may indirectly influence campers via the staff experience. These conceptualizations of bi-directional influence provide a useful model for this study.

The prosocial classroom model is another relevant framework for this study. This model posits that teacher well-being and socioemotional functioning influence teachers' capacity to effectively lead educational instruction and manage classroom behaviors, which, in turn, impact student motivation and performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Researchers have found that when teachers struggle with their well-being and experience burnout, they are more likely to have adversarial relationships and interactions with their students (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Conversely, researchers have found that teachers with greater well-being contribute to the social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical well-being of their students (Darling- Hammond, 2012). Though vastly understudied, the same may be true for camp environments.

Given the dynamic nature of social environments, the fact that camps are mainly staffed by young adults who are near-peer role models to youth campers, and the emphasis on the social environment and development of relationships at camp, it stands to reason that the quality of the staff experience likely influence the quality of youth's camp experiences. For example, it would make sense that staff who feel appreciated for their work by camp leaders are more likely to show up in a positive mood and express appreciation of their campers. However, little is known about the dynamic nature of these relationships. More specifically, researchers have yet to examine the factors that contribute to positive staff experiences, how staff experiences contribute to positive youth experiences at camp, and the indirect relationships between factors that support or detract from staff experiences and youth camper experiences. Significant indirect relationships between practices that support staff well-being and parents' perceptions of the camp environment may highlight some of the underlying reasons why staff well-being helps create positive youth camper experiences, making it a compounding investment.

The purpose of this study was to better understand if supporting staff's well-being also creates a camp environment that supports youth camper well-being. We hypothesized that staff well-being would be related to camp environments that support youth camper well-being. More specifically, we hypothesized that when staff felt they had been provided with resources to support their own social-emotional needs, they would report greater well-being, which, subsequently, would cause parents of campers to report a higher degree of support for their children's well-being.

Methods

This cross-sectional study used data collected from parents of youth who attended one of 80 overnight Jewish camps in the USA and Canada that belong to a national Jewish camp organization (hereafter, "the Foundation"), as well as from staff who worked at these camps. The Foundation provides a variety of professional services to over 300 day and overnight camps across North America, including evaluation services and instruments that assess the experiences and impacts of camp on staff and campers each summer. Given that these data were not initially collected for research purposes, and that the data do not contain any identifying information, the authors did not seek IRB approval for this study.

Data

Population

We used data collected in the fall of 2022 as part of annual post-summer satisfaction surveys distributed to parents and staff by camps in the Foundation network. A total of 9,210 parents completed surveys about their perceptions of their children's experience at an overnight camp (n = 81). These surveys contained questions about parents' overall satisfaction with their child's camp experience and time at camp as well as more specific questions about their child's

camp experiences (i.e., quality of the activities). Parents reported that 53% of campers (n = 4,828) identified as female, most campers were between 4th and 10th grade (n = 7,729; Kindergarten–12th grade) and about 64% of campers (n = 5,895) had previously attended camp. Over half of youth attended camp for three to four weeks (53%; n = 4,489) and about a quarter of youth attended camp for one to two weeks (27%; n = 2,473). On average, most parents reported being satisfied with their child's camp experience (m = 4.43, SD = .88; range = 1–5). There was a statistically significant positive relationship between parent satisfaction and parent reports of camp as a one that fostered positive mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (MESSH) ($r = .69$, $p < .001$).

A total of 3,524 camp staff completed surveys and reported on their experiences working at a camp in summer 2022. These surveys included general questions about staff members' satisfaction with their experience working at camp and more specific questions about their employment experience (i.e., quality of interactions with management). Over 60% of staff were 18–22 years old, although staff ages ranged from 15 to 33+ years old. About 59% of staff (n = 2,069) identified as female, 38% of staff (n = 1,337) identified as male, 3% of staff (n = 108) identified as genderqueer / gender non-conforming, and less than 1% of staff preferred to self-describe (n = 15) or preferred not to answer (n = 39). In addition, 21% of the staff identified as LGBTQ+ and 6% self-identified as persons of color. On average, staff reported being satisfied with their camp employment experiences (m = 3.97, SD = 0.26). There was a statistically significant positive relationship between staff work satisfaction and staff reports of feeling supported and listened to ($r = .68$, $p < .001$).

Variables of Interest

In addition to providing demographic information, the Foundation leadership intended for the post-summer parent surveys to assess the experiences of campers and the staff surveys to assess the camp staff experience. For the purposes of this study, we focused on questions related to well-being, which the Foundation framed as mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (MESSH). Each variable was measured using a single survey item with a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent). All survey questions were developed by the Foundation staff and administered by Summation Research. The Foundation did not initially collect data for research purposes; thus, the leadership designed survey questions to leverage practitioner usability and minimize respondent burden.

In this study, we assessed supportive camp environments for youth well-being using one parent-reported question about their children's experiences at camp: "Please evaluate the environment of the camp based on: An environment that supported your child's mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (MESSH)." We measured three well-being variables for staff using three questions:

1) "Reflecting on the work environment, how would you evaluate the degree to which you felt supported and listened to?"
2) "Reflecting on your training/preparation, how would you evaluate the camp in terms of providing strategies, tools, and resources to increase your own well-being and resilience?"
3) "Reflecting on your training/preparation, how would you evaluate the camp in terms of how well the camp provided training to you on how to address the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (MESSH) needs of campers?"

Each of these questions measured more than one dimension of well-being (i.e., mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being), which has potential to bias responses; however, the measurement of MESSH as a singular construct has practical advantages and implications. Further, given that the dimensions of MESSH are likely highly related, they are difficult disentangle from a practical standpoint. For the purpose of this study, we felt that the best approach was to combine the dimensions of MESSH into one item.

Analysis

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we cleaned the data, examined the data's distributions, and examined the data for univariate and multivariate outliers. We also computed descriptive statistics for all variables of interest. Although the parent and staff samples were from the same camps, meaning any observations about them could be seen as nested within camps, the difference in variables and absence of camper-staff identifying variables mean that we

were unable to analyze the data in its nested format. Therefore, we chose to calculate camp-level mean scores for the three staff variables. We integrated these data at the camper level, such that data at the camper level included both parent report data and staff data (as camp-level means). Given that individual parent reports were nested within camps, we used restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimation with the packages "psych" (Revelle, 2021) and "lme4" (Bates et al., 2015) in R 4.1.0 (R Core Team, 2021) in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2018) to compute an intra-class correlation (ICC) to determine if there was sufficient between-camp variance to warrant our use of multilevel modeling. We found that less than 10% of the variance in outcome scores occurred between camps (ICC = .08; ß0 = 4.45; S.E. = .03; t (74.68) = 157.4; p < .001); therefore, we did not use multilevel modeling.

We used maximum likelihood estimation in a path model to allow for simultaneous estimation of all paths between variables. Path analysis involves estimating all coefficients in a model simultaneously. All relationships between variables are thus conditioned on the other relationships specified in the model (Kline, 2016). To answer our research question, we specified a model in which parents' perceptions of the camp environment supporting their child's MESSH were predicted by staff's perceptions of feeling supported and listened to, which were predicted by staff perceptions of being provided strategies to support their MESSH and training on how to address the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health needs of campers (see fig. 1). We computed two indirect effects of the staff perceptions predicting parents' perceptions of the camp environment supporting MESSH via staff's perceptions of feeling supported and listened to. Indirect effects can be an effective strategy for understanding how variables may be related to other variables via an intermediary variable. To test the robustness of these indirect effects, we bootstrapped the model (1,000 new samples randomly drawn from the same sample), which yielded less biased estimates of standard errors. We used "lavaan" (Rosseel, 2012) in R 4.1.0 (R Core Team, 2021) in RStudio (RStudio Team, 2018) to test our hypotheses.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between staff-reported perceptions of the MESSH environment at camp (feeling supported themselves and well trained to support their campers' well-being) and parent-reported perceptions of the camp MESSH environment for their children. See table 1 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Overall, the final model corresponded well with the data (c2 (χ) = 2.7, p = .26; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .01; SRMR = .00), providing evidence that the model we imposed on our data may be a valid representation of the set of actual, non-substitutable relations between staff perceptions of well-being at camp and parents perceptions of the camp environment as supportive of their childrens well-being. The results suggest that at camps where staff felt supported and listened to parents reported that the camp environment supported their childs MESSH (b = .07, z = 2.12, p = .03, ß = .02). The results also suggested that at camps where staff felt they were provided strategies and tools to support their personal MESSH needs (b = .63, z = 34.42, p < .001, ß = .52) and were provided adequate training to meet camper MESSH needs (b = .21, z = 16.11, p < .001, ß = .22), staff also felt they were listened to and supported more than at camps where staff did not feel they were provided with strategies to support their own well-being. There were also significant indirect effects between staff reports of being provided with strategies to support their MESSH needs (b = .05, z = 2.13, p = .03, ß = .01) and staff reports of adequate training to meet camper MESSH needs (b = .02, z = 2.10, p = .04, ß = .01) to parents perceptions that the camp environment supported their childrens MESSH via staff reports of feeling listened to and supported. See figure 1 for a visual of the final model.

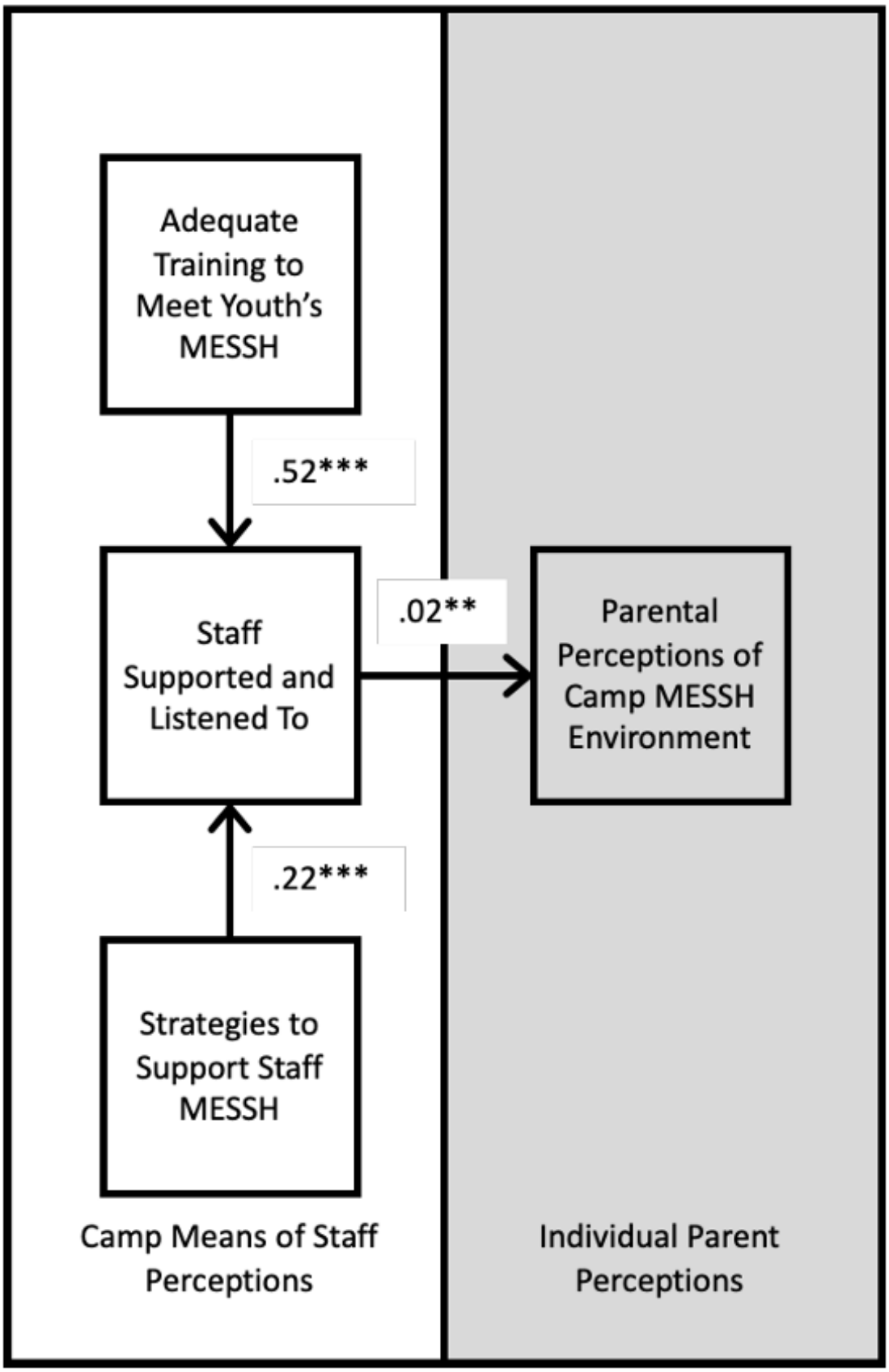

Figure 1. Final analytical model, showing only paths testing our hypotheses.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand if supporting staff's well-being also creates a camp environment that supports youth camper well-being. Overall, the results of this study suggest that efforts to support staff well-being at camp may also create camp environments that support the well-being of the youth campers.

Although some scholars have examined the camp staff experience and its relationship to stress and burnout (Bailey et al., 2012), there is little research specifically examining actionable mechanisms linked to supporting staff well-being and its impact on youth campers. That is, although researchers have identified how staff well-being likely decreases over the course of summer employment (Wahl-Alexander et al., 2017), scholars have yet to identify specific actions that camp administrators can use to improve staff well-being and keep staff in the necessary frame of mind to support campers and create healthy, supportive environments for youth.

The results of this study suggest that staff perceive potential efforts taken by camp leadership and administrators to support their well-being and that the relatively simple actions of listening to staff and providing staff with resources to increase their own MESSH can be related to indicators of camper well-being. More specifically, the results of this study suggest that at camps where staff perceived being provided strategies to support their well-being, staff also reported feeling more listened to and supported. Given the results of this study, camp leaders and administrators may consider being more intentional about providing staff opportunities to have their well-being needs met.

Research from schools suggests that teachers need a well-being strategy in place for better teacher retention and teacher effectiveness (McCallum & Price, 2010). Additionally, researchers have found that teachers with high well-being are more likely to assist children with mental health challenges (Sisask et al., 2014). Researchers have also found that the conditions needed for teachers to improve students' mental health were valuing teacher well-being and providing adequate teacher training (Opfer, 2016; Roffey, 2012; Salter-Jones, 2012; Tyson et al., 2009). While a systematic literature search of 14 studies that included 5,311 teachers and 50,616 of their students found some evidence that teacher burnout was associated with poor academic outcomes and decreased student motivation, more research is needed to understand how educators' well-being impacts student well-being (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

This study is the first to look at the impact of staff well-being on how a camp environment supports camper well-being. The results of this study, which examined 81 individual overnight camp settings, suggest that efforts to support staff well-being are indirectly related to parents' perceptions that the camp environment supports youth well-being. These results suggest that camp administrators' efforts to invest in and support staff well-being likely impact youth participants' experiences too. From a practical standpoint, the results of this study suggest that committing resources to support staff may be a worthwhile investment linked to more than one stakeholder group.

While we suggested that parents fill out the survey with their children, the Foundation's measurement of youth well-being relied upon parents completing the surveys, meaning that the data collected represent parent perceptions of youth well-being. This assessment of youth well-being outcomes is one step removed from the youth experiences. Other camp researchers (e.g., Henderson et al., 2007) have also used outcomes reported by campers' parents. Thus, parent perceptions of youth well-being at camp may be related to youth perceptions of their own well-being at camp. In addition to likely resembling the results we may have found from surveying youth campers, the results of this study highlight the perceptions of another critical stakeholder of camps—parents. Efforts taken by camp administrators to support staff well-being, it seems, may have ripple effects that can be felt by those not even in attendance. Although such considerations are well beyond the scope of this study, it is possible that efforts to support staff may ultimately support camper retention, which ultimately may affect camps' bottom lines.

Although our study has potentially interesting findings, readers should also consider the study limitations when interpreting the results. First, because the Foundation did not collect the data we used in this study for research purposes, each construct has only a single item. As a result, these items may not have accurately captured the full scope of each of the constructs, which reduces the validity of the findings. In the future, researchers should consider measuring camper and staff well-being using multi-item scales (e.g., Cohen et al., 1983; Topp et al., 2015).

Second, we operationalized youth well-being via parents' perceptions of the camp environment supporting their child's well-being. Although researchers have used parent-perceptions of youth outcomes in other camp studies (e.g., Henderson et al., 2007), this approach to measuring youth well-being is one step removed from measuring youth's self-reported well-being. In the future, researchers should consider measuring youth well-being through self-report data collected from the youth themselves.

Third, staff and parent responses were not matched and, therefore, could only be mapped back to the camp level. Our choice to aggregate staff responses via estimated means at the camp level reduced the variability in staff variables and may have influenced the results in a way that may not have otherwise occurred if we had used staff responses in an unaggregated format. Lastly, our large sample size resulted in more power to detect small effect sizes, meaning that the practical significance of the statistically significant effects may be limited. Relatedly, we chose to not utilize multilevel modeling given the relatively small amount of variance between camps. An alternative analysis approach would have been to aggregate parent responses at the camp level (similar to our approach with staff data). Doing so would have eliminated the potential biases introduced from the variance being split within and between camps. However, given the smaller sample size, we would have been severely underpowered to detect small effects, thus limiting our ability to identify potential relationships to suggest future inquiry.

Given these limitations, we encourage readers to consider the results of this study as a launching point for future research examining how supporting staff well-being supports youth camper well-being. While more understanding and additional studies of the drivers of well-being at camp are needed in order to support staff and camper well-being, evidence from this study suggests that creating an environment where staff feel supported and listened to can have an impact on campers. Given that relationships in an environment impact one another, and that well-being is an individual, collective, and community responsibility (McCallum & Price, 2016), it follows that camp staff well-being is an important factor in youth camper outcomes.

Conclusion

There is a clear need to address the decreasing well-being among youth. Given that camp is a common summertime setting for youth, we must ensure that camps are places where youth campers and young-adult staff receive positive mental, emotional, social, spiritual support that will increase their ability to thrive. The results of this study suggest that camp is a setting that can support young-adult and youth well-being, and, more specifically, that supporting staff well-being also benefits youth well-being at camp.

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