

Why It's Good to Go to Camp

by Matthew Howell

I had just taken a new job at a ski resort in south central Ontario and I'd spent my first day being toured all over the resort property. By 3 pm I had become friendly with my supervisor. As she knew of my summer camp experience from my résumé and interview, she decided to ask me what facility I would recommend for her ten-year-old son who was itching to go to a camp. I gathered a little more information about his hobbies and was able to recommend a camp where I thought he would be quite comfortable. As we walked and talked about camps I asked her why she had decided to send him to camp. She thought for a few seconds before saying, "... It's just good for him."

This was not the first time I had received that response. Having the pleasure of spending seven of my previous eight summers working at summer camps I had asked this question of parents numerous times, frequently receiving the same type of response: "It's just good for them." I usually tried to find out why parents felt camp was good for their kids, and while most would come up with answers such as their child learning to be independent and making friends, learning new skills or being part of a group, it seemed that there was simply an assumed benefit to camp. People shared a belief that there are some good results due to sending children to summer camp, but no one I talked with could produce any sort of proof beyond their own experience or that of a friend or relative.

In this day where evidence-based research rules, I wondered what the actual benefits of a summer camp experience were for a child. In my fourth year of undergraduate studies at the University of Waterloo I had the opportunity to explore the benefits attained by children attending a summer camp by way of an academic literature review. I worked with Dr. Troy Glover who has

been commissioned by a group of camping associations to perform a study on the benefits realized by children who attend summer camps. My review focused on the literature regarding overnight or sleep-away camps.

During this review I realized that studies on the outcomes of summer camps dated as far back as 1909 (Stone, 1986) and covered topics as diverse as race relations within children's play (Moore, 2002) and the physical effects of attending summer camp on children with cystic fibrosis (Blau et al., 2002). I divided the 26 studies I reviewed into four general themes:

- sociological research that excludes the camp environment as a study variable
- medical research that examines medical interventions administered at specialized summer camps for youth with specific illnesses
- work experiences (e.g., how employment at summer camps benefits employees)
- benefits of camp for campers.

I was able to identify areas of both strengths and weaknesses in camping research, providing guidance for future studies.

Camp as a Context for Sociological Processes

Four of the 26 studies I reviewed made use of camp as a *context or location* for sociological research, yet excluded camp as an actual variable in the research. Studies representing this theme addressed such topics as how children cope with homesickness (Thurber & Weisz, 1997), and how a group of adolescent girls, some with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, interact and form friendships (Blachman & Hinshaw, 2002). While research of this nature can and should be taken into consideration by summer camp professionals, as it provides guidance in producing strategies for addressing

specific behaviours such as homesickness or dominance structures within groups, it only indirectly, if at all, speaks to the benefits of summer camp. Future research should perhaps give consideration to the camp environment as an actual variable in the social processes under investigation.

Camps for Children with Disabilities

Camps that serve children with special needs play a crucial role within the summer camp field facilitating opportunities for children with a variety of medical conditions, including cancer, blindness, hearing impairments, and attention deficit disorders. In so doing, they enable youth who might not otherwise have such an opportunity to participate in specialized camp programming under the supervision of trained staff at inclusive facilities that cater to the unique needs of their clientele. The benefits of these camp programs seem evident, yet few studies have been conducted to demonstrate the positive outcomes one would expect.

Some of these medical studies conducted in summer camp environments recognized the social benefits of a camp experience. There were fewer studies that focused solely on the medical aspect of the camp experience rather than the sociological. One, Blau et al. (2002), found that cross-infection among campers with cystic fibrosis is avoidable. Their research provided evidence to support re-opening a number of camps for children with cystic fibrosis that had been shut down due to perceived risks of cross-infection among campers.

Both types of studies led me to the conclusion that applying the findings to the masses is less than appropriate as none encompassed more than a single medically specialized camp. One issue that was identified repeatedly within the various medically oriented studies I reviewed was the need for a larger sample size and longitudinal research aimed at demonstrating the psychosocial and medical benefits of attending medically specialized camp before the results could be considered conclusive (Briery & Rabian, 1999; Meltzer & Rourke, 2003; Epstein, Stinson & Stevens, 2005; Martiniuk, 2003).

Benefits of Working at Camp

Two of the four studies I reviewed under the theme of benefits of working at summer



camps were focused solely on the benefits of working at camps operating under the 4-H philosophy. This approach focuses on developing mental knowledge and reasoning ability (head), emotional development (heart), the learning of new skills (hands) and the development of an understanding and appreciation of the human body (health), thus creating the 4-H paradigm of “Head, Heart, Hands, Health” (Klem & Nicholson, 2006). This philosophy appears to be prominent among American camps, or at least the 4-H organization has taken an active role in researching the benefits of 4-H camps, based on the number articles I reviewed with a 4-H focus. Findings from this modest body of research show the benefits of camp in the development of soft skills, such as leadership, decision making and conflict resolution (Dworken, 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003).

Dworken (2004) surveyed a wide spectrum of alumni between one and 40 years after their camp experience and found over half of the people who were camp staff felt their experiences at camp directly influenced their career choices. Forsythe, Matysik and Nelson (2004) found that 96% of the camp staff they studied had learned a skill they used at subsequent jobs, demonstrating the influence of the camp experience on career preparation and choices and indicating that camp is a place of learning and growth for staff.

Benefits of Camp for Campers

I did find that the benefits of increased self-esteem, independence, environmental awareness as well as social skills such as making friends (Philliber Research Associates & American Camp Association, 2005; Bialeschki, Henderson, Krehbiel & Ewing, 2003; Henderson et al., 2006; Place, 2006) corresponded quite closely with the list of benefits parents look for when sending their children to camp. In addition, Jacobs’ (2005) study on parents’ motives for sending their kids to camp included a desire to see increased self-esteem and respect for peers

and independence. I question the statistical reliability of these studies’ findings if applied en masse since they have a limited sample size, usually including participants and or parents from a single camp.

Conclusion

As a result of conducting this review I feel not only comfortable, but also confident, in telling parents that summer camp is beneficial for youth based on my personal experience and the amalgamation of the results of a number of studies. It will take a few more large-sample, longitudinal research studies that provide quantitative measurements of changes in a person’s abilities, skills and self-perceptions, similar to Philliber Research Associates’ (2005) ground-breaking study of 5,000 diverse families from 80 camps of varying characteristics and associations, before I will be comfortable and confident in telling parents that summer camp is academically proven to be of benefit to their children.

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