

Family Camp Impacts Research Project

Analysis and Report

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Sarah Baughman, Ph.D. and Mary Elmer

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Study Team

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D. American Camp Association

Nancy Franz, Ph.D., Iowa State University

Sarah Baughman, Ph.D., Virginia Tech

Richard W. Seidel, Ph.D., LCP, Carilion Clinic

Study Partners

American Camp Association

Virginia Tech

University of Arizona 4-H Youth Development

Carilion Clinic, Roanoke, Virginia

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ANALYSIS AND REPORT

Project Description

Researchers from the American Camp Association[®], Virginia Tech and the Carilion Clinic collaborated to explore the impact of family camp experiences on youth and families. The purpose of the project was to explore families' motivations for participating in family camp, the benefits they attribute to the experience, and the overall extent to which families are changed because of family camp involvement.

Data Collection

Accredited camps in Virginia and West Virginia offering family camp(s) were solicited to participate in the study using the American Camp Association's database of accredited camps. A total of 67 camps offering family camp programs were identified and a convenience sample of 18 camps was selected. Camp directors were sent a sample email and link to the survey to send to participating families. The survey link was sent to families approximately one week after attending family camp with non-respondents receiving a second email two weeks later. The response rate was 24% with 60 families out of a sample of 250 responding.

Instrument

The instrument used both quantitative and qualitative questions to explore family motivations, camp experiences, positive and negative memories, program/facility ratings and benefits of attending family camp. Questions related to programming, facilities and general camp information were based on results of an inventory completed by the participating camps. The potential motivating factors were adapted from Covey's (2010) list of Importance-Performance factors. Three subscales from the Family Environment Scale (Moos, 2009) were used to explore the extent to which families changed as a result of attending family camp: *family cohesion*, *family expressiveness* and *family conflict*. The scales were modified to use in a retrospective post then pre format. Retrospective post tests are a common method used to assess intervention impacts in part because response shift bias is avoided (Howard & Dailey, 1979).

Analysis

Participating Camps

The original sample of 18 camps was sent a profile to assist in understanding the family camp setting. Eleven camps completed the profile. Participating camps were overwhelming residential camps (91%) with 70% reporting offering family camps for more than 10 years. Most of the camps were independent for-profit camps (55%) followed by religious organizations (27%), independent not-for-profit (18%) and agency camps (18%). The primary purpose of conducting family camps was for family recreation/vacation (70%) or education/enrichment (30%). None of the participating camps included family therapy or intervention as

the purpose. All participating camps indicated that nurturing family relationships was an intended outcome of the program (Table 1).

TABLE 1: INTENDED FAMILY CAMP OUTCOMES OF PARTICIPATING CAMPS

Intended Outcome	Percent	Count (N=10)
Improved family interaction	90%	9
Development of new skills/behaviors	50%	5
Nurtured family relationships	100%	10
Social benefits	60%	6
Physical/health benefits	30%	3
Address specific camper health/medical issues	10%	1
Enhanced knowledge	60%	6
Spiritual development	20%	2
Appreciation of nature	70%	7

Respondents

Survey respondents were predominately female (71%) between the ages of 40 and 49 (61%). All respondents identified themselves as a parent with 71% of surveys completed by the mother and 29% by the father. Respondents overwhelmingly reported being married (98%). Education levels were relatively high with 66% of respondents reporting college (33%) or professional degrees (33%). Of those respondents reporting annual incomes, 16% reported income between \$50,000 to \$74,999, 10% between \$75,000 and \$99,999, and 16.3% between \$100,000 and \$149,999.

Slightly more than half (52%) of families have participated in a family camp for more than five years and 26% of families were attending family camp for the first time. Most families (64%) attended camp for two to three days. Some families brought grandmothers (17%) or grandfathers (15%) to camp with them as well as adult friends (29%) and youth friends (27%).

Most families heard about family camp via word-of mouth (70.8%) and the camp website (43.8%). The least effective forms of advertising for family camp were through the camp brochure (29.2%) and print ads in newspapers or magazines (4.2%).

Motivation

When asked what factors motivated them to participate in family camp, the top reasons were related to the setting and general experience more than the camp facilities or program offerings. The top two motivators were to have a fun and relaxing experience (88%) and enjoy a peaceful outdoor atmosphere (81%). Spending quality time with family (72%) and affordability (70%) were also strong motivations to attend family camp. Strengthening family relationships (68%), friendly staff (68%) reputation of the camp, (65%), clean facilities (63%), that cabins and restrooms were

provided (63%), and lastly that participants had the freedom to choose activities (63%) also influenced attendance (Table 2).

TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF FACTORS MOTIVATING FAMILIES TO ATTEND FAMILY CAMP

Motivating Factor	Percentage	Count (N=57)
Fun and relaxing experience	88%	50
Peaceful outdoor atmosphere	81%	46
Spend greater quality time with family	72%	41
Cost	70%	40
Friendly staff	68%	39
Strengthen family relationships	68%	39
Reputation of camp	65%	37
Cabins provided	63%	36
Clean facility	63%	36
Freedom to choose activities	63%	36
Restrooms provided	63%	36
Meet other families	60%	34
Showers provided	56%	32
Variety of age appropriate activities	56%	32
Located close to home	54%	31
Adventure activities	54%	31
Values-based camp	49%	28
Campfire	49%	28
Meals included	49%	28
Staff clearly interested in children	42%	24
Scheduled on weekend	39%	22
Knowing someone at camp	39%	22
Craft activities	39%	22
Spend more time at camp	35%	20
Located close to a forest	33%	19

Quality/taste of food	30%	17
Improve family communication	26%	15
Increase camping skills	26%	15
Waterfront activities	23%	13
Staff appreciates diversity	21%	12
Located close to a lake	16%	9
Animal-related activities	14%	8
High staff to camper ratio	12%	7
Explicitly teaching of values	12%	7
Discounts provided	11%	6

Experiences at Family Camp

Activities

The majority of families who participated in family camp participated in traditional camp activities such as hiking (60.0%), arts/crafts (58.2%), swimming (recreational) (58.2), aquatic activities (41.8%), biking (36.4%), canoeing (34.5%), challenge/ropes course (34.5%), climbing/rappelling (32.7%), music (29.1%), archery (27.3%), team building (20.0%) and theater/drama (20.0%). Other activities included communication / family communication, religious study, shooting sports, healthy eating and general recreational activities.

Family Memories

Families were generally happy with their family camp experience and tended to rate the experience highly. Overall, 73% of participants rated their quality of family camp experience as excellent, 25% as good, and 2% as adequate. Spending time with family and friends was the most frequent vivid positive memory (n=13). Table 3 displays the frequency of responses to positive camp memories.

TABLE 3: FREQUENCY OF POSITIVE MEMORY STATEMENTS

Most vivid positive memory	Frequency (N=47)
Spending time with family and friends	13
Activities that keep everyone busy	10
Seeing child(ren) succeed	10
Being outdoors	8
Seeing child(ren) get along well w/others & be independent	6
Safe environment for children	5
Engaging staff	5
Camping / campfires	5
Christian atmosphere	4
Good fellowship	3
Relaxing	4
Being a good mother/father figure for child	2

Negative experiences most frequently cited focused on meals and facilities. The most vivid, negative family camp experience was described as meals (8), the showers (3), not enough time (2), having to leave (2), facilities needed some maintenance (2), and didn't sleep well (2).

Needs

Families generally felt that the needs of both parents and children were met and that they had sufficient time together as a family during the family camp. Table 4 shows the means and percentages of needs met.

TABLE 4: MEANS AND PERCENTAGES OF FAMILY NEEDS BEING MET

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean (N=52)
Your needs as a parent were met at family camp	52%	44%	0%	4%	3.4
The needs of your child(ren) were met at family camp	62%	35%	0	4%	3.5
The amount of time that our family spent together as a family during family camp was sufficient	62%	31%	4%	4%	3.5

When asked to explain their answers to the question of having their needs met, respondents stated their reasons as; you can choose to be together or apart as a family (8), camp allows for positive family bonding time (8), there is freedom of activities (7), a great time was had by all (5), a safe atmosphere (3), the open schedule (3), Christian-based camp that teaches about God and Family (2), children learn to work together as a unit (2), being outdoors (2), it is a tradition (1), a week was a good amount of time (1), there need to be more activities for children under the age of 9 (1), dietary needs were not met (1), there needs to be more activities as a family (1), meeting new friends (1), and sign up for classes is not very well explained (1).

Spending time outdoors with family and friends in a family atmosphere made family camp enjoyable for many of the participants. Table 5 presents the most frequent responses to the question, “How was the family camp experience enjoyable for you or your family.”

TABLE 5: FREQUENCY OF STATEMENTS DESCRIBING ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCES AT FAMILY CAMP

Statement	Frequency (N=42)
Family atmosphere	11
Spending time with family/friends outdoors	10
It’s a great camp	8
There are great activities	6
There are family activities	6
A great way to spend time with family without electronics	5
Have noticed that children have matured	4
There is freedom of activities	4
Safe atmosphere	3
Great staff	2
Activities that push you outside your comfort zone	2
Christian environment	1
Affordable	1

Stressors

Further, most participants responded to the open-ended question of “Was there anything about the family camp experience that was stressful for you or your family” by saying nothing (19), the cabin/tent condition (4), some families could not control their children/inappropriate correcting of children (4), bring all the supplies needed for camp (2), not very good food (2), a disagreement at the beginning of the week but it was sorted out amongst themselves by the end of the week (1), a dog fight (1), having to leave (1), the Shakespeare play wasn't appropriate for children (Friday

night) (1), there was no clear person to contact in an emergency (1), there was no contingency plan for unexpected weather events (1), not informed on how to sign up for classes (1), and getting to events on time (1).

Ratings of Family Camp

Respondents were asked to rate various aspects of family camp. The staff and the fees were the highest rated aspects of family camp, though ratings were generally high. Table 6 displays means and percentages of certain aspects of family camp. The positive ratings are supported by 74% of families expressing certainty that they would attend a family camp in the future.

TABLE 6: CAMP RATINGS BY PERCENTAGES

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor	Unacceptable	N/A	Mean N=53
Lodging	30%	47%	17%	0%	0%	6%	3.91
Food	25%	32%	17%	7.5%	2%	9%	3.42
Staff	77%	17%	6%	0%	0%	0%	4.72
Amenities	32%	60%	7.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.25
Programming	32%	57%	11%	0%	0%	0%	4.21
Registration Process	44%	44%	10%	0%	0%	2%	4.27
Fee (compared with service)	60%	32%	6%	2%	0%	0%	4.57

Benefits of Family Camp

Families described many benefits of attending family camp including positive impacts of the camp staff, reinforcement of good parenting and reinforcement of good family relationships. Camp staff were reported to impact the experiences in generally positive ways by being helpful or friendly (17), great with kids (10), overall great (6), connecting with others (4), always positive (4), provided a safe environment (3), kept counselors on track (2), counselors were a positive influence (2), facilitated activities well (1), taught Bible lessons in ways that children were able to understand (1), good organization (1), maintenance of facilities during the camp is not the best (1), food wasn't as bad as expected (1), other staff stand offish but office staff were friendly (1), need food with more protein (1), made the experience more enjoyable (1), and n/a (1).

Families were asked if their camp experience helped reinforce good parenting. Of the respondents answering the question (n=33), 60% indicated that the family camp experience reinforced good parenting, 21% did not feel that it reinforced good parenting and 19% didn't feel strongly that it did or did not reinforce good parenting. Responses were analyzed for themes and categorized by

theme. Some responses included more than one theme while other responses were simple yes or no statements. Table 7 summarizes responses related to reinforcement of good parenting.

TABLE 7: SUMMARY OF RESPONSE CATEGORIES BY FREQUENCY FOR REINFORCING GOOD PARENTING

Statement Category	Reinforce Good Parenting	Frequency
Spending time together with children and family	Yes	6
Relaxing outdoor environment	Yes	3
Not the purpose of attending	No	2
Mentoring from other parents	Yes	2
Getting along together	Yes	2
Creating family memories	Yes	2
Practicing teamwork	Yes	2
Reinforcing/practicing family values	Yes	2
Increased parents patience with child(ren)	Yes	2
Not the purpose of the camp program	No	1
Conflicting parenting styles	No	1

Families also indicated that their family camp experience reinforced positive family relationships. The majority of respondents answering the question (86%) indicated that they felt the experience reinforced positive family relationships. Only two respondents felt that it did not reinforce family relationships and three respondents were neutral. The most common explanations were the quality family time, the relaxing environment, spending time away from the stress of day to day routines and teamwork involved in activities or living together.

Respondents were also asked for suggestions for improving the camp experience. Answers tended to relate to providing better quality or healthier food, more options for different activities for all ages, and facilities.

Family Changes

The Family Environment Scale was used to measure perceptions of family functioning on three subscales before and after camp. A retrospective post-then-pre format was used to allow respondents to indicate agreement with a series of statements related to family functioning before camp and after camp. Three subscales measuring relationship dimensions were used. Family Cohesion examines “the degree of commitment, help and support family members provide for one another.” Family Expressiveness looks at the “extent to which family members are encouraged to express their feelings directly” and Family Conflict examines “openly expressed anger and conflict among family members” (Moos, 2009). The measures were reliable with Cronbach's alphas slightly

lower than reported by Moos but still within the acceptable range ($\alpha=.62$ for Family Cohesion, $\alpha=.59$ for Family Expressiveness and $\alpha=.63$ for Family Conflict).

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare raw scores before and after responses on each of the three subscales. There were significant differences in the before and after scores for all three subscales (Table 7). Family Cohesion ($t(40)=-3.77$, $p=.001$) mean scores increased from 7.9 (SD=1.38) to 8.4 (SD=1.34) indicating that attending family camp enhances the help and support that family members give each other. Family Expressiveness ($t(39)=-2.08$, $p=.044$) mean scores increased from 5.88 (SD=1.88) to 6.08 (SD=1.83) indicating positive benefits to family members encouraging expression of feelings from attending family camp. Family Conflict ($t(40)=2.08$, $p=.044$) mean scores decreased slightly 1.35 (SD=1.69) to 1.26 (SD=1.64) indicating that already low levels of family conflict decreased slightly after attending family camp. It should be noted that Family Conflict should be interpreted with caution as scores were low both before and after camp and the standard deviation is greater than the mean scores in both instances.

TABLE 8: PAIRED SAMPLE T-TEST FOR FAMILY COHESION, FAMILY EXPRESSIVENESS AND FAMILY CONFLICT

Subscale	Before Camp Mean (SD)	After Camp Mean (SD)	t(df)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Family Cohesion	7.9 (1.38)	8.4 (1.34)	-3.77 (40)	.001
Family Expressiveness	5.88 (1.88)	6.08 (1.83)	-2.08 (39)	.044
Family Conflict	1.35 (1.69)	1.26 (1.64)	2.08 (40)	.044

Conclusions

Role of Family Camp Experiences

The purpose of this study was to examine families' motivations for participating in family camp, explore perceived benefits of attending family camp and measure changes in family functioning as a result of involvement in family camp. These results may also be used to inform practice for camps offering family programs and development of curriculum for family camps. The key findings of this study included:

- The top four motivators of family camp participation were: a fun and relaxing experience, the peaceful outdoor atmosphere, greater quality time with family, and the cost of family camp.
- Respondents shared that family camp experiences benefit families because of the impacts of the camp staff, parenting reinforcement, and enhancement of family relationships.
 - 60% of respondents indicated that family camp experiences reinforced good parenting.
 - 86% of respondents indicated that the family camp experience reinforced family relationships.

- Significant differences were found in respondents' before and after scores for all three family functioning measures (family cohesion, family expressiveness, and family conflict).

Camp can be an important context for impacting the lives of children and families. As such, understanding motivations for attending family camp may help increase participation in family camp programs. Consistent with Lewicki, Goyette & Marr (1995) families are motivated to attend family camp as a way to relax, have fun and get away from day to day routines. Few of the families in this study were motivated to attend camp as therapy or an intervention for improving family relations although one of the benefits families enjoyed was reinforcement of good family relations. Families participating in this study may not be reflective of the larger family population as they are primarily white, middle class families with above average educational and income levels.

Agate & Covey (2007) describe benefits of family camp in four areas: improving family interaction, nurturing relationships, providing social benefits and addressing specific issues. This study supports the benefits of family camp including nurturing relationships through reinforcing positive parenting and family relationships. Families did not discuss social benefits or specific issues nor were they asked to do so. Family benefits were naturally enhanced by their overall enjoyment of the camp experience and the quality of the camp staff. The camp environment offers families a place to spend quality time together in an outdoor setting distinctly different from daily life that enhances reinforcement of positive parenting and reinforcement of family interactions.

Family camp may be an ideal environment to enhance family relationships. The dimensions of family cohesion, family expressiveness and family conflict all showed significant improvement after attending family camp. This improvement seems almost accidental as families did not express these as motivators for attending camp nor was it an explicit goal of the camp programs. Families in this study had relatively high levels of cohesion and expressiveness and low levels of conflict prior to attending camp illuminating the potential for greater increase with less functional families as well as the importance of generalized family camp programs potential impact on a wide range of youth and their families.

This study contributes to understanding the benefits of family camp and how family relationships can change. Future studies should consider measuring family dimension such as personal growth as well as collecting more detailed information on camp programs. Further study is needed to examine specific camp goals in relation to outcomes. Practitioners should be intentional in linking specific activities to family outcomes. Of particular importance to practitioners should be the relaxing outdoor setting, the staff, affordability and flexibility of daily schedules to accommodate differing ages and abilities. Recommendations for practice and future research are included below.

Recommendations for Practice

- Program providers should create intentional links between specific camp activities and desired family outcomes. The results of studies such as this should be used to guide programming efforts for families.

- Families enjoyed active experiences they can do together as well as the opportunity for separate activities. Family camps need to offer flexible programming with a combination of activities for whole families as well as activities for individual age groups.
- Most families reported that positive parenting was reinforced during their family camp experience. Families experienced reinforcement of good parenting through spending time together. Intentionally planning family times free of tight schedules, electronic distractions in an outdoor setting may further parents' reinforcement of positive parenting practices.
- Camp staffs play an important role in family camp. Of particular importance is a genuine interest in children and sense of fun. Training staff for family camp should emphasize the importance of creating a fun environment for the entire family with an emphasis on understanding and valuing each child as an individual.
- Most families learn of camp through word of mouth. Providing incentives for recruiting other families or redirecting print advertising resources toward more social media may result in higher enrollment.
- The physical setting of family camp experiences is important. Families value a relaxing outdoor setting. Site planning and property maintenance should focus on maintaining, creating or emphasizing the outdoor environment. An example may be adding front porches to cabins or creating seating areas overlooking natural features such as lakes or rivers.
- Families' negative experiences (such as meals, showers, not sleeping well) and stressors (cabin/tent condition) should be considered when planning family camp programs. Paying special attention to the provision of these services may enhance the family camp experience.

Recommendations for Research

- This study should be replicated with a larger, more diverse sample of families and camps.
- Additional research related to intentional programming would help illuminate specific factors that contribute to positive family outcomes. Furthermore, comparing families' received outcomes with camps' intended outcomes and the activities provided during family camp might provide additional information to aid in intentional programming.
- Future studies of family camps that target intervention or family therapy as a primary purpose may also yield results that can assist in the strengthening of family camps.
- The Family Environment Scale was a useful measure of family functioning. In the future additional FES subscales such as *personal growth* should be included.

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