

# innovations

## Improving Youth Experiences in Summer Programs

A Program Improvement Project conducted by Youth Development Strategies, Inc.  
Commissioned by the American Camp Association  
with generous support from Lilly Endowment Inc.



## Acknowledgements

Twenty-three camps with their campers and staff plunged into a lake of opportunity and agreed to be PIPs. They are the Program Improvement Project camps. Our heartfelt thanks to them for risking change as they strove to increase the quality of the youth development environment in their camps. Our special appreciation is therefore expressed to the following camps and their leaders:

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May the *Innovations* explored by the camps in this project spur us on to new heights!

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## About YDSI

Youth Development Strategies, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization focused on how communities improve long-term outcomes for youth. YDSI works with government agencies, private foundations, school and out-of-school systems and programs. YDSI evaluates the effectiveness of strategies to improve youth outcomes; provides technical assistance and tools to measure and improve the quality of services; and conducts and disseminates general research on the developmental approach to serving youth. Visit [www.ydsi.org](http://www.ydsi.org) to learn more.

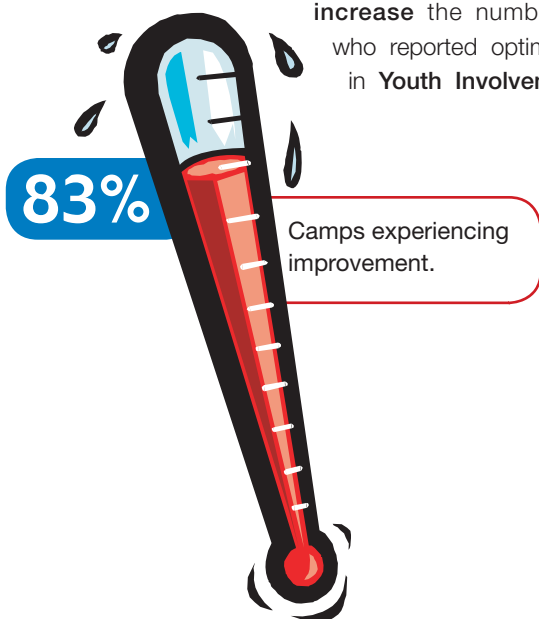
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What do you remember about the adult who had the most impact on you when you were growing up? What about the people who gave you your first opportunity to learn about leadership or helped you make your own decisions? We know that camp provides these types of experiences in a setting filled with influential people who come together to form a temporary youth-focused community. ACA committed to a multiyear project that helped us explore and identify effective strategies and practices that contributed to quality supports and opportunities for positive youth development in a camp setting.

ACA and YDSI completed research with 80 camps in 2004 that measured the degree to which camp programs provided optimal youth development experiences for campers. ACA then undertook a Program Improvement Project in 2005 to explore efforts that create even stronger developmental experiences for youth. It is important for youth to come to camp to have fun and learn new skills. Even more important and potentially life-changing, however, are the efforts by camps to provide youth with experiences that support their growth and help them develop the relationship, leadership, and decision-making skills necessary to be successful as adults.

ACA and YDSI worked with 23 of the 80 day and residential ACA-accredited camps from the 2004 sample (see *Inspirations*, 2006) to learn what strategies and approaches would help strengthen the experiences of youth in four important developmental areas: Supportive Relationships, Safety, Youth Involvement, and Skill Building. Over 2200 youth from these 23 camps provided the survey data that allowed camps to reflect, assess their practices and structures, and implement improvement strategies each camp deemed appropriate in these supports and opportunities.

The results were heartening and enlightening! Camps designed their strategies primarily to **increase** the number of campers who reported optimal experiences in **Youth Involvement and Skill**



**Building.** Eighty-three percent of the camps experienced improvement in one or both of these two areas. Even though camps designed fewer strategies related to **Supportive Relationships and Safety**, more than one third of the camps also strengthened these experiences for youth.

The consistent pattern of significant improvements in the developmental quality of youths' experience at camp showed that intentional, camper-center assessment and planning yielded a richer experience for youth. This pattern contributed to new knowledge regarding how change is created and supported.

Camps that implemented **changes** across **all three** areas of **organizational practice**—camp structure, policies, and activities—were **twice as successful** at producing change across the developmental supports and opportunities as camps that addressed only one or two of these practice areas. This finding provides an important lesson for all youth-serving organizations, because it sets parameters for how much and what type of organizational change is required to enrich youth experience and development.

This report describes results related to the developmental supports and opportunities as well as strategies that successfully addressed the organizational practice areas. Further, the report provides a blueprint camps can use to complete their own Program Improvement Process.



## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT \_\_\_\_\_

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### Background

The American Camp Association (ACA) began its quest for information about how youth development occurs in camp experiences with a first-of-its-kind national study on Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience ([www.ACAcamps.org/research/directions.pdf](http://www.ACAcamps.org/research/directions.pdf)). This study concluded that parents, campers, and/or camp staff saw positive growth in campers across a range of youth development outcomes including social skills and learning new skills.

Results from the Outcomes study showed differences existed among camps, which led us to ask “What makes some camps more effective than others?” and “What could camps do to promote more, consistent positive growth in campers?”

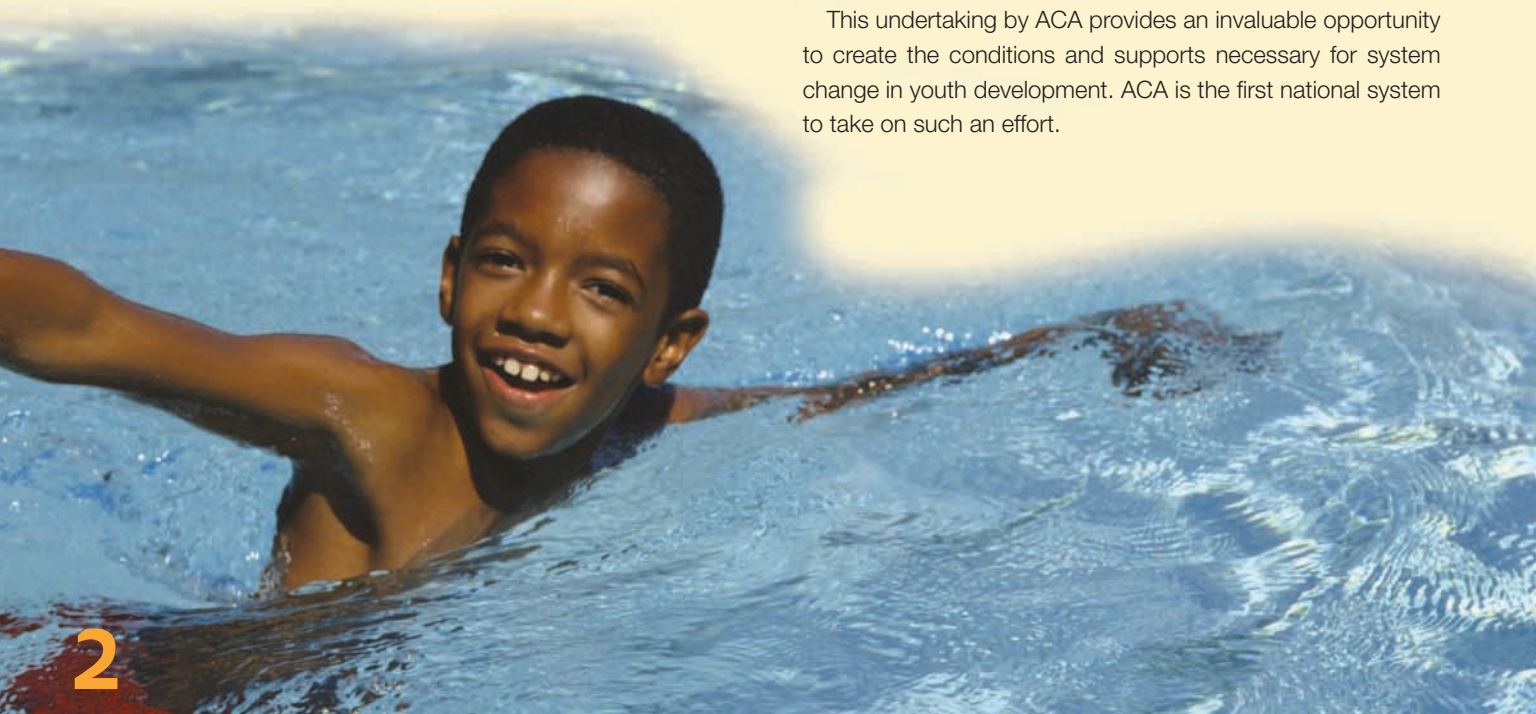
To explore these questions, ACA turned to YDSI and their Youth Survey and Program Improvement Process. In 2004, over 7,500 campers in 80 ACA camps across the country were asked about their developmental experiences at camp. The results of this study demonstrated areas of strength in youth development for camps (Supportive Relationships and Skill Building) and areas that needed improvement (Youth Involvement and Safety). The report of this benchmarking study can be found at [www.ACAcamps.org/research/Inspirations.pdf](http://www.ACAcamps.org/research/Inspirations.pdf).

Camp directors joined ACA in asking questions about what creates improvement. Consequently, ACA and YDSI undertook a Program Improvement Project that enabled 23 of the benchmark camps to complete a process of planning and action that led to the development and analysis of the effects of camp-determined program improvement strategies.

This undertaking by ACA provides an invaluable opportunity to create the conditions and supports necessary for system change in youth development. ACA is the first national system to take on such an effort.

*“Camp needs to be an experience in community for campers—so we need to figure out how they experience it!”*

— PIP Camp Director



## YDSI Program Improvement Process

YDSI has developed a process to guide youth-serving organizations through an assessment and organizational improvement process. The process is based on this theory of change:

- To improve what youth experience, you must change organizational practice.
- To change organizational practice requires structured, systematic, intentional review by and involvement of youth (campers) and staff.
- Reassessment of plans and strategies must occur following initial implementation.

This process has been used with more than 200 youth-serving organizations and more than 18,000 youth involved in programming and activities at these agencies. The process is based on the Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Connell and Gambone, 1998; 2000) (see Figure 1). The importance of appropriate developmental experiences in adolescence to achieve young adult outcomes has been demonstrated in longitudinal research (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002, and visit [www.ydsi.org/publications](http://www.ydsi.org/publications)).

The Framework focuses on four supports and opportunities that young people need to experience in order to move toward long-term outcomes in adulthood. The Framework advocates that program accountability should be measured by young people's experience of these supports and opportunities.

The four supports and opportunities are:

### Supportive Relationships, so youth can experience:

- Guidance, emotional and practical support; and
- Adults and peers knowing who they are and what's important to them.

### Safety, so youth feel:

- Physically and emotionally secure.

### Youth Involvement, so that young people can:

- Be involved in meaningful roles with responsibility;
- Have input into decision-making;
- Have opportunities for leadership; and
- Feel a sense of belonging.

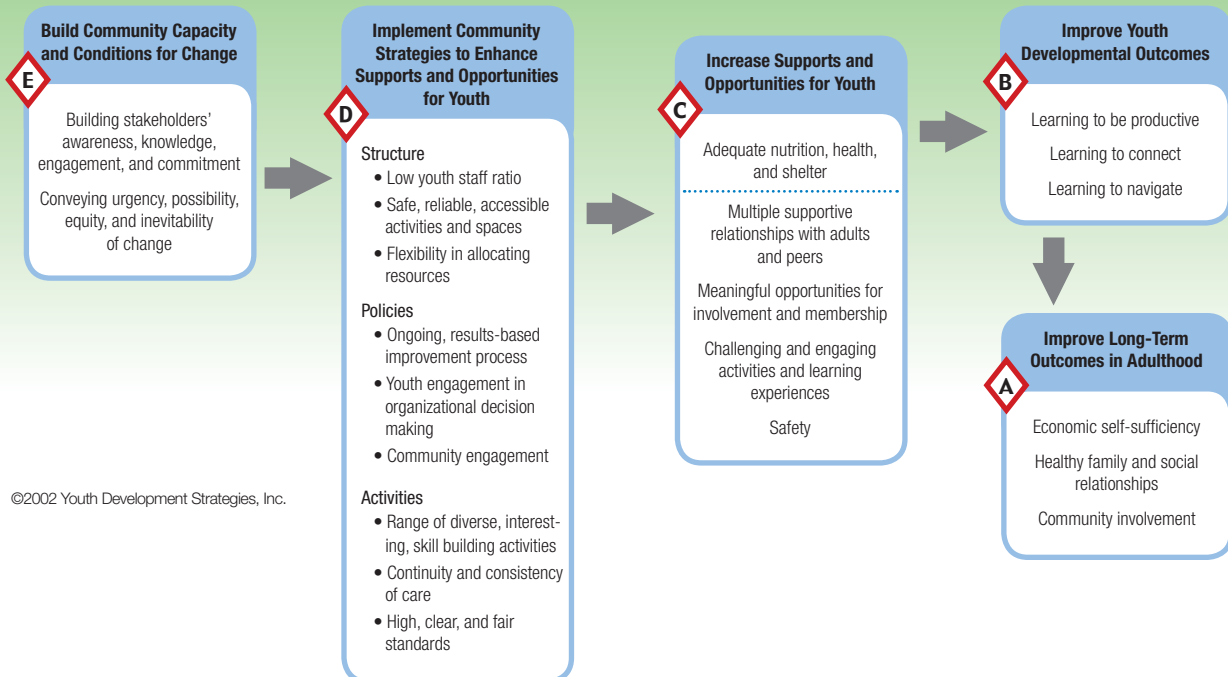
### Skill Building, so that youth can:

- Have challenging and interesting learning experiences that help them build a wide array of skills; and
- Experience a sense of growth and progress.

To create change in an organization through this kind of process requires capacity-building for the organization/camp so they learn to assess themselves and to create strategic change at an organizational level.

Figure 1

## COMMUNITY ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



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## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

### Steps in the Program Improvement Process (PIP) With Camps

#### Step 1. The Foundation: Measuring Program Quality

In order to target the improvement effort, camps needed a baseline measure of their current ability to provide young people with the supports and opportunities that constitute high-quality youth development programming (see Figure 1, Box C). The youth survey created by YDSI provided concrete measures of participants' program experiences and was administered in 80 camps in the summer of 2004. These data gave camps a starting point for setting improvement targets.

#### Step 2. Learning Through Doing: Organizational Assessment

Rather than randomly selecting things to “fix,” camps progressed through a systematic assessment of nine organizational practice areas—three structural, three policy, and three activity-based (see Figure 1, Box D). Strengthening these areas boosts participants' experience of critical supports and opportunities. Research has shown programs with strong practices across these three organizational areas were more effective at improving developmental outcomes for youth.

The nine organizational practices are:

##### Organizational Structure (S):

- Low youth to staff/volunteer ratios
- Safe, reliable, and accessible activities and spaces
- Continuity and consistency of care

##### Organizational Policies (P):

- Ongoing, results-based staff and organizational improvement process
- Flexibility in allocating available resources
- Community engagement

##### Organizational Activities (A):

- Range of diverse, interesting, and skill-building activities
- Youth engagement in organizational decision making
- High, clear, and fair standards

In order to explore the link between youth's experiences and organizational practices, camp leaders came together to review the results of their youth surveys and to reflect on the extent to which the current structure of their camps translated into supports and opportunities for their campers. This review developed an in-depth understanding of how their camps' organizational practices supported, or failed to support, desired youth outcomes.

#### Step 3. Creating Results: Action Planning

Camp leaders then developed action plans that guided program improvement efforts and served as the basis for accountability. Using youth-survey findings, camps set targets for improving the quality of campers' experiences and developed specific strategies to meet those targets. These “gap-closing” strategies defined where each camp would focus its energies and resources to increase the supports and opportunities campers experienced in their program. Each camp developed a plan that within a one-year framework required:

- A clear articulation of the desired outcomes in terms of improved youth experiences in the supports and opportunities;
- The development of gap-closing strategies at the level of organizational practice to achieve improved youth outcomes;
- A definition of how current resources could be reallocated as well as identification of new resources as needed; and
- A plan for ongoing self-assessment.



**Table 1. Characteristics of PIP Camps.**

	Number	Sample Distribution	ACA Membership
Day	3	13%	37%
Resident	20	87%	62%
Agency Sponsored	9	39%	41%
Religious Affiliated	3	13%	23%
Independent For-Profit	4	17%	22%
Independent Nonprofit	7	30%	14%
Single Sex	9	39%	33%
Co-Educational	14	61%	67%

These “outcome-driven” plans were developed by the 23 camps **after** they interviewed campers and staff members to clarify and deepen the camp leaders’ understanding of the survey results. Challenges, weaknesses, and opportunities were identified, and plans were developed to bring camp programs into alignment with their missions and stated camper needs. The plans were shared with YDSI staff who provided technical assistance and consultation.

#### **Step 4. Implementation and Ongoing Assessment**

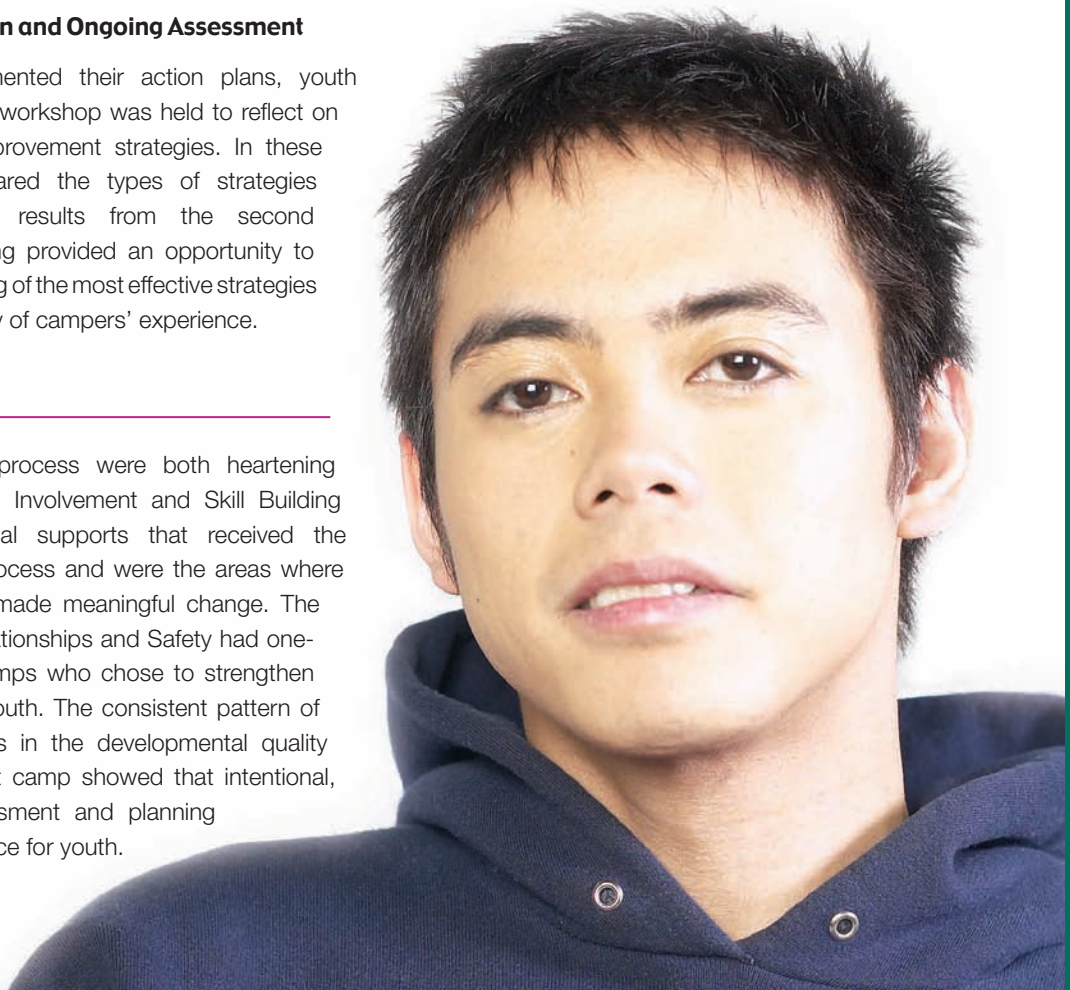
Once camps implemented their action plans, youth were resurveyed, and a workshop was held to reflect on the success of the improvement strategies. In these workshops, camps shared the types of strategies undertaken and their results from the second assessment. This sharing provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of the most effective strategies that increased the quality of campers’ experience.

## **Results**

The results of this process were both heartening and enlightening. Youth Involvement and Skill Building were the developmental supports that received the greatest focus in the process and were the areas where the majority of camps made meaningful change. The areas of Supportive Relationships and Safety had one-third or more of the camps who chose to strengthen these experiences for youth. The consistent pattern of significant improvements in the developmental quality of youth’s experience at camp showed that intentional, camper-centered assessment and planning yielded a richer experience for youth.

The pattern of results also contributed to important new knowledge concerned with how to make change. Camps that sustained focus across all three key areas of organizational practice (i.e., organizational structure, policies, and activities) were markedly more successful at producing change than camps that addressed one or two of the practice areas. This lesson is important for all youth-serving organizations, because parameters can be set for how *much* and what *type* of organizational change is required to significantly enrich the contributions made to youth’s development.

The remainder of this report explores these findings related to intentionality and integrated practice. The next section explores the documented changes in each of the supports and opportunities. The section following discusses the pattern of changes within an organization’s practices to see how much and what kind of change was required to significantly improve the quality of experience for youth across the supports and opportunities. The final two sections of the report present lessons learned from camp directors’ reflections on the improvement process and a series of steps that can be taken by other camps (and other youth programs) interested in initiating their own improvement process.



## HOW THE SUPPORTS & OPPORTUNITIES IMPROVED



The improvement process had organizations focus their thinking and planning around organizational practices (see Figure 1, Box D) that were directly linked to the levels of supports and opportunities youth experience in camp (see Figure 1, Box C). However, this section of the report is organized around the supports and opportunities rather than the organizational practices. This format allows us to follow camps as they set their goals for improvement, observe the progress they made in each support and opportunity area, and examine examples of effective improvement strategies. In the next section, we organize the same strategies by the organizational practices.

### Supportive Relationships

Getting support and guidance from the people surrounding us, from infancy on, has a significant impact on how youth be-

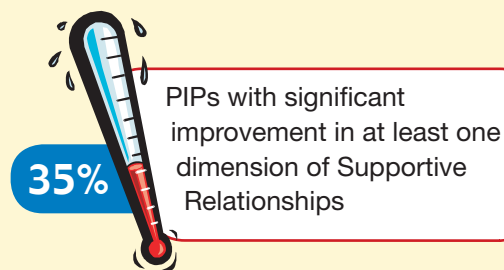
#### Camps and Supportive Relationships

Camps are intentional, youth-focused communities. Camps provide the opportunity for youth to come together, live and work together, build “community” with each other, and relate to adults in a non-competitive, non-graded environment. What occurs in relationship-building with peers and adults is critical to the success of the experience as measured by whether “development” really occurs.

rather than emphasize failure. Such supportive relationships contribute to better decision-making, lower levels of stress, higher academic achievement, healthier relationships, and lower levels of drug and alcohol use. All of these developmental outcomes are key to success in adulthood.

The results for Supportive Relationships in Camps were quite high at the start of the project (see Chart 1). The proportion of youth having optimal level experiences at camp ranged between 70 and 90 percent with nearly three quarters of youth having optimal experiences overall (across the five dimensions of Supportive Relationships). These results were the highest YDSI has measured across nearly 200 agencies that have conducted the youth survey.

With so many youth experiencing high quality relationships, few camps had much room for improvement in this area. Nevertheless, when campers were re-surveyed following the implementation of new camp strategies in year two, eight camps showed significant improvements in one or more dimensions of Supportive Relationships.



#### Supportive Relationships – What Worked?

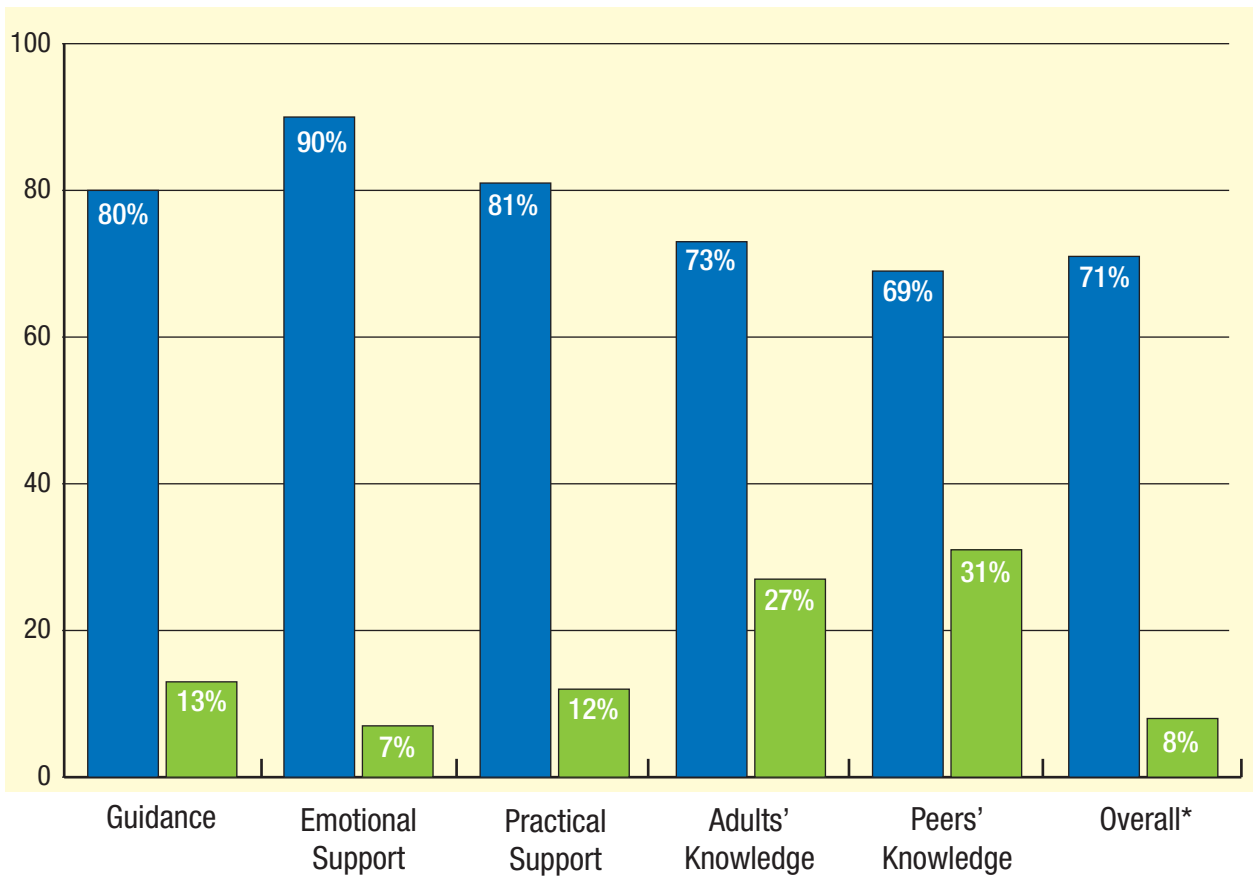
For the camps that showed significant improvements in relationships, examples of the effective strategies were:

- Changing focus in training, e.g., training on “camper-centered” approach, youth development, paying attention to each individual child, concept of cabin bonding.
- Adjusting hiring procedures to focus on obtaining staff who are strong in relationship building with youth.
- More flexible scheduling to allow for informal interaction between campers and staff.
- Careful matching of cabin staff with age groups.
- Posting photos of staff with names in accessible location so campers could learn staff names.
- Getting-to-know-you discussion starters at tables in the dining hall for each meal so that campers and staff selected questions from the center of the table and answered them.
- Creating a “Get to Know You” card that campers and counselors filled out before coming to camp and used for sharing information at camp.

Supportive Relationships was the strongest of the four areas for camps. Although camps were doing quite well in this area, all camps need to maintain their strength in this important aspect of supports and opportunities.



Chart 1. Baseline PIP Results in Supportive Relationships. (N=2245)



<b>Optimal Means</b>	Youth consistently experienced this dimension.
<b>Insufficient Means</b>	Youth consistently did NOT experience this dimension.

**Sample Questions**

- Guidance** – How many adult staff pay attention to what’s going on in your life?
- Emotional Support** – How many adult staff say something nice to you when you do something good?
- Practical Support** – How many adult staff could you go to for help in a crisis?
- Adult Knowledge of Youth** – The staff here know me well.
- Peer Knowledge of Youth** – I get chances to do things with other people my age.

\* Note that the summary percentages for each of the four domains are not numerical averages of the relevant dimensions. Rather, overall percentages for the four domains were computed separately, using a unique algorithm.

*“The [survey] results are worth going through the process. Good to know what campers are thinking and saying.”*

– PIP Camp Director



# HOW THE SUPPORTS & OPPORTUNITIES IMPROVED

## Safety

A sense of safety is basic and critical to youth. The absence of safety can have profound effects on campers' choices and decisions. They can doubt the prospect of a future and develop the "learned helplessness" often associated with victimization. When young people do feel safe, they are less likely to participate in many high-risk behaviors that can derail or delay healthy development.

### Camps and Safety

Safety has always been a top concern of camps. State health inspections and the risk management requirements of accreditation support the public concern and the camp's moral and ethical obligation to provide environments conducive to health and safety. However, the camper view is often different. They come with unseen "baggage." It is not unusual for them to project the sense of vulnerability they sense in their school or neighborhood to their feelings about camp when they arrive. They often need time to adjust to living and playing with a group of strangers who become an instant, though temporary, family.

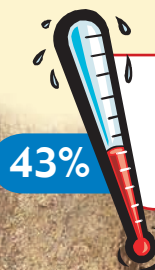
The starting levels for Safety in camps were surprising to PIP camp directors. Directors were particularly troubled that only 41 percent of youth were in the optimal category for physical safety (see Chart 2). Their concern stemmed in large part

from the fact that camps have extensive safety standards and procedures.

Similar to the experience of other agencies, directors found that young people's perceptions and feelings of safety were not necessarily governed by objective conditions, adult frameworks, or plans for risk management. As directors explored with campers what contributed to their feelings around safety they learned:

- Campers were often unaware of the extent of safety procedures in place and often did not recognize the safety intent behind many practices;
- The special circumstance of attending residential camps in rural areas (i.e., unfamiliarity, darkness, outdoor noises, intense contact with new people) contributed to youth feeling unsafe, particularly first-time campers;
- Building independence in campers means youth must take some risks that temporarily affect their sense of "safety"; and
- New activities in new locations with new kids and new adults cause more initial unease than typically acknowledged by adults.

Reflecting their concern that many campers were not experiencing Safety at optimal levels, most camps chose to focus significant efforts to developing improvement strategies in the organizational practice of "safe, reliable, and accessible spaces and activities." Consequently, 10 of the 23 camps had changes in at least one dimension of Safety with most improvements in physical safety.



PIPs with significant improvement in at least one dimension of Safety

*"Getting a more realistic look at what is happening at camp . . . was most important to us."*

— PIP Camp Director

## Safety – What Worked?

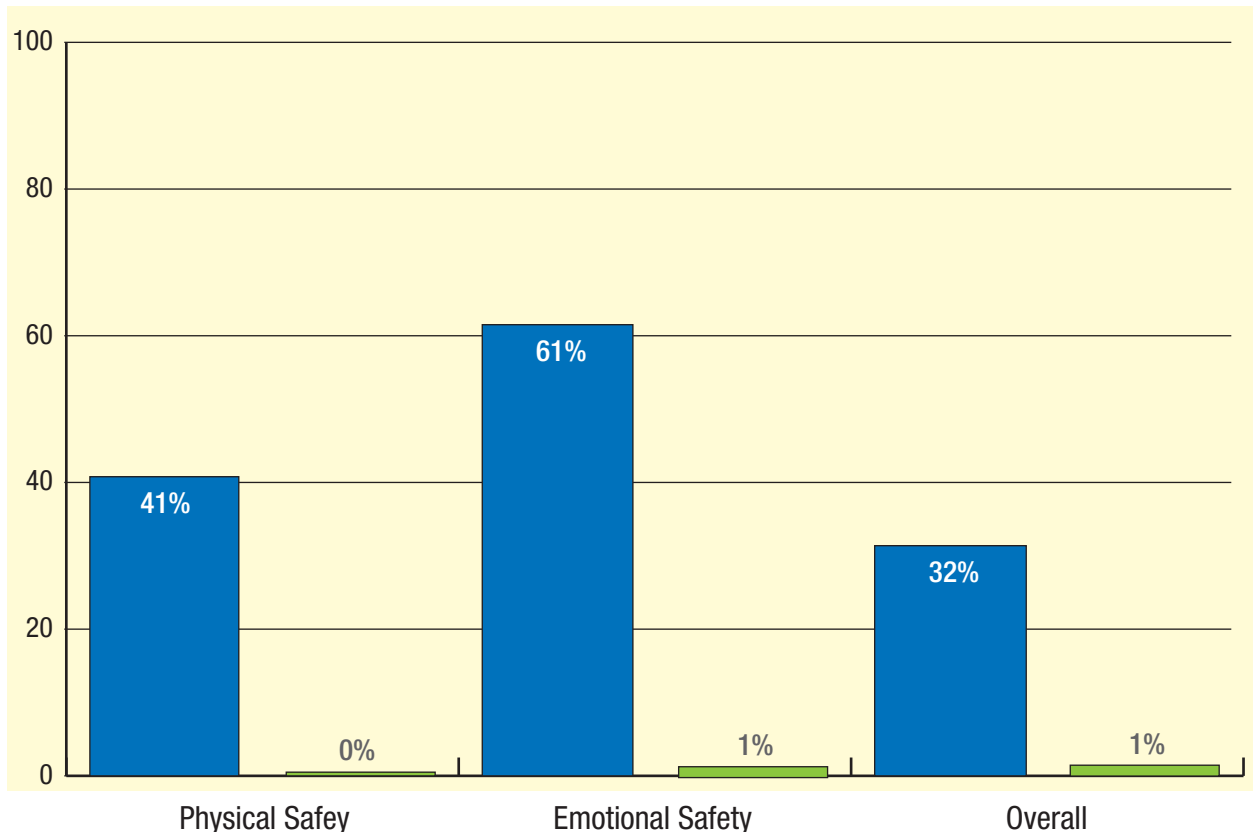
In the camps where Safety improved, some strategies were structural while others involved relationships among staff and campers. Examples of safety strategies include:

- Installing lights outside cabins, camp entrance, and retreat centers.
- Ensuring clear, open communication about safety.
- Having campers participate in setting cabin rules and camp rules and assisting in developing consequences for rule breaking.
- Having older campers mentor younger campers.
- Consistently enforcing rules and codes of conduct.
- Creating no more than six camp-wide rules/expectations that are used with all age groups.

Although camps' results in the area of Safety were high compared with most other youth programs, directors were concerned that less than half their campers felt physically safe while at camp. Several camps found that consistent enforcement of stated camp rules was an important step for all staff. Most strategies camps developed to improve safety at camp were straightforward and easy to implement, which should encourage all camps to explore this area with their campers.



Chart 2. Baseline PIP Results in Safety. (N=2245)



<b>Optimal Means</b>	Youth consistently experienced this dimension.
<b>Insufficient Means</b>	Youth consistently did NOT experience this dimension.

### Sample Questions

Physical – I feel safe when I'm at this camp.

Emotional – I feel respected by staff at this camp.

# HOW THE SUPPORTS & OPPORTUNITIES IMPROVED

## Skill Building

Youth, especially adolescents, need to experience a sense of progress in developing skills and abilities. Whether in school, sports, arts, or a job, young people are engaged by—and benefit from—activities in which they experience an increasing sense of competence and productivity. Conversely, they are bored by activities that do not challenge them in some way. In adolescence, “boredom” can lead to participation in high-risk activities (i.e., drug-use, vandalism, etc.). They are more likely to avoid these dangers if they have healthier options in their lives that contain the appropriate blend of challenge and accomplishment.

At the start of the project Skill Building occurred at optimal levels in camps for nearly half of the participants (42%-45%) as measured in the first survey (see Chart 3). This result is higher than previously measured by YDSI in community-based youth organizations. Traditionally the camp experience involves exposing young people to new activities as well as helping campers reach new skill levels in tennis, riding, environmental education, etc.

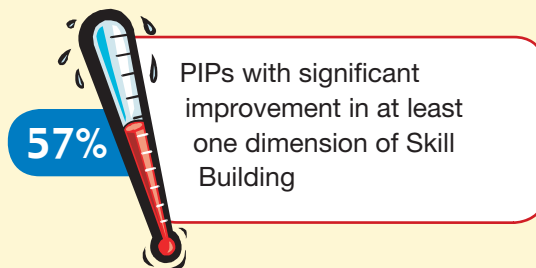
### Camps and Skill Building

While the missions of camps vary, their ability to attract and retain campers rests largely with the skill of the staff and the capacity of the camp environment to interest and challenge campers beyond simply doing different things than they do at home. Camps often feel that their activity offerings are marks of distinction. The PIP camps learned that activities can be a distraction instead of a distinction if they do not challenge campers to do their best and spark their sense of interest.

Some of the comments campers shared with staff about the Skill Building results included:

- That some activities were not challenging;
- That they were sometimes not interested in the activities offered; and
- Activities were often the same as ones they could do at home or were the same ones they did as younger campers so were no longer interesting.

When reflecting on the results and the perceptions shared by their campers, camp directors felt more structured progression in the activities was needed, especially for campers who return for multiple years. Many of the PIP camps scrutinized their offerings in terms of their match to the camp’s mission as well as the interests of youth. With this intentional planning for progression and challenge, thirteen camps improved in at least one dimension of Skill Building.



### Skill Building – What Worked?

For the camps that showed significant improvements in Skill Building, examples of the effective strategies were:

- Improving staff evaluations to focus on providing supports and opportunities in general and Skill Building in particular for campers and conducting these evaluations more often.
- Communicating past summer successes and challenges as an ongoing tool for staff development.
- Using time to develop/practice skills during staff orientation instead of focusing on program planning and purchasing supplies.
- Having special activities unique to different age groups.
- Ensuring adequate spaces and equipment were available so that campers had access to activities they were interested in or have never been exposed to.
- Setting weekly goals for individual camper improvement.
- Creating ways to document skill progression.
- Setting daily camper goals in each activity.
- Focusing on camper growth in the program (e.g., a “wheel” representing each of the camp goals that was used to reflect on what was accomplished each day).
- Revising lesson plans to build concrete, progressive skill development in activities with a goal for each camper.



- Defining core skills for each age group.
- Eliminating programs that were not meeting goals or interests of campers.
- Hiring staff with strong skills and teaching ability.
- Utilizing camper feedback about skills and programs on a regular basis.
- Establishing a new evening program for mixed ages with more choice/new activities.

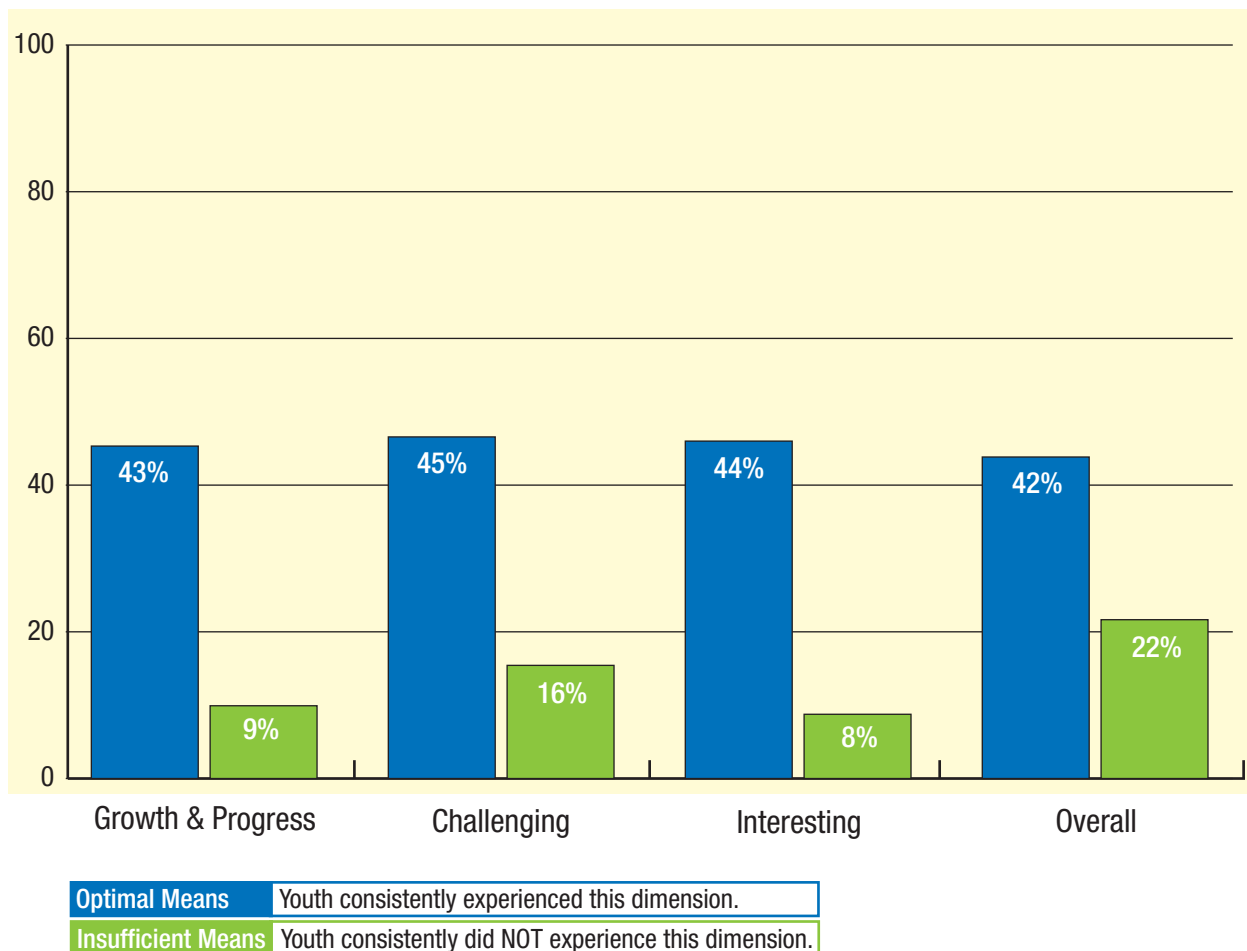
Despite the fact that many camps were doing quite well on Skill Building with nearly half of the campers reporting optimal experiences initially, most camps' plans included strategies

aimed at improving the organizational practice of "range of diverse, skill building activities." Camps' successes in this area suggest that camps can be both "fun" and more intentional about developing skills. A focus on Skill Building requires planning and insight in staff hiring as well as in schedule-building (having enough time for learning and progression to occur); quality of equipment and facility; quality of lesson plans; and preparation of the staff member to instruct in ways that allow for progression to occur. A number of the PIP camps placed considerable time and energy into strengthening the quality of their lesson plans and reaped positive rewards from that effort.

*“A good intentional process of setting goals . . . we have made real changes that will stick with us.”*

– PIP Camp Director

**Chart 3. Baseline PIP Results in Skill Building. (N=2245)**



**Sample Questions**

Interesting – Get to do a lot of new things here.

Growth and Progress – I have a chance to learn how to do new things here.

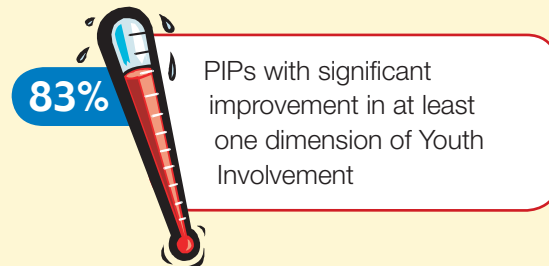
Challenging – The staff here challenge me to do my best.

# HOW THE SUPPORTS & OPPORTUNITIES IMPROVED

## Youth Involvement

As young people move into adolescence, they need opportunities to try on the adult roles that they eventually must assume. They need to make age-appropriate decisions for themselves and others. They need to decide which activities interest them and choose responsible alternatives when needed. They need opportunities to help set policies. Young people also need opportunities to take on leadership roles such as peer leaders, team captains, or council members. These opportunities help foster a greater sense of shared responsibility,

opportunities into a short period of time for a large number of their campers, the most consistent improvement was seen in this area with 19 of the 23 camps (82%) showing improvements in one or more dimensions of youth involvement.



### Camps and Youth Involvement

Camps, like other youth organizations, are challenged by Youth Involvement. Campers and parents have high expectations for the experiences that will take place at camp. The most **efficient** way to see that those expectations are met is to highly schedule the camp experience. However, this structured approach is not the most **effective** way to build skills that help youth learn to make decisions, assume leadership roles, and be meaningfully involved. Counselor in Training (CIT) programs can help with older youth. The question remains unanswered as to how best to provide developmentally appropriate decision making and leadership opportunities for younger campers.

respect, self-efficacy, better decision-making, fewer risk behaviors, and a greater sense of belonging and membership. A sense of belonging is key to forming feelings of attachment and responsibility to something outside oneself. Young people develop these connections through active participation in groups. Such participation fosters a greater ability to consider the perspective of others and develop a greater sense of responsibility, which are critical aspects to decision-making, a sense of competence, better performance in school, and a decreased likelihood of gang involvement and delinquency.

The starting levels for Youth Involvement in camps were most disappointing to camp directors and the most challenging to address (see Chart 4). The proportion of youth who experienced optimal levels of decision-making and

leadership were quite low (11% and 1%, respectively). Unlike the other supports and opportunities, significant proportions of youth fell into the insufficient levels of experience in this area, which indicated they consistently did not experience Youth Involvement opportunities at camp.

PIP camp directors devoted a significant amount of time to exploring ways in which camps could build more meaningful opportunities for youth to contribute to decisions and leadership during their camp experiences. Despite the special challenges faced by camps in building decision-making and leadership

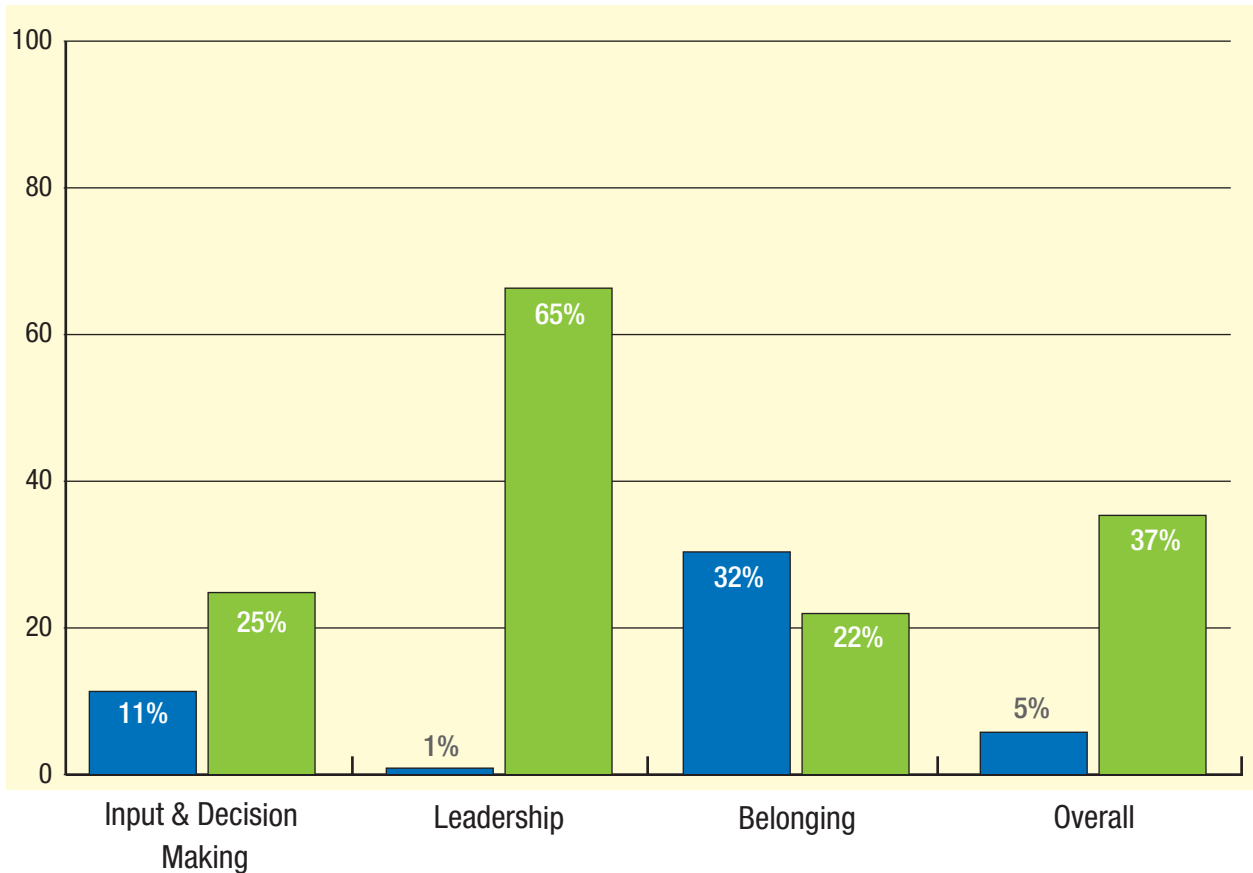
### Youth Involvement—What Worked?

Examples of the strategies that were linked with improvements in this area included:

- Training staff in ways to involve youth in decision making.
- Involving campers and staff in decision-making through camp-wide or unit camper councils as well as allowing them more opportunities to plan cabin/camp activities.
- Asking campers (and staff) how they want funds to be used.
- Having counselors ask campers for input on their upcoming week and then meeting together to plan the rest of the week.
- Giving older campers and/or CITs more management opportunities in the day to day running of camp.
- Having campers participate in schedule planning for their small group.
- Scheduling time to allow for individual decisions by campers.
- Using one night a week for camper-planned cabin activities.
- Instituting new evening program for mixed ages with more choice/new activities.
- Posting daily schedules in each cabin/public spaces and posting camper program area choices in cabin.
- Providing early adolescent campers with an unstructured hang-out time.
- Having older campers mentor younger campers.
- Using camper feedback on a regular basis.

Of the four areas of supports and opportunities, the area of Youth Involvement started as the weakest for camps with more than a third of the campers experiencing insufficient levels overall and only five percent experiencing optimal levels. These results were similar to findings in other youth programs but may be particularly challenging for camps to address given the short time period many youth attend camp. Despite the challenge, however, camps were most successful in achieving improvements in campers' experiences in this area.

Chart 4. Baseline PIP Results in Youth Involvement. (N=2245)



<b>Optimal Means</b>	Youth consistently experienced this dimension.
<b>Insufficient Means</b>	Youth consistently did NOT experience this dimension.

**Sample Questions**

Decision Making – I get to decide what activities I’m going to do here.

Leadership – How often have you helped plan activities and events?

Belonging – I feel like I belong here.

*“The process helped us do strategic planning in direct relationship to youth development. We thought about youth development but this helped us focus . . . and re-motivated us around youth development principles.”*

– PIP Camp Director



# IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL CHANGE: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, POLICY, AND ACTIVITIES (SPA)

The preceding section showed the overall success of the PIP group in changing youth's experiences. To better understand how a camp made significant strides in quality improvement, we need to return to the organizational practices. These practices create the environment that youth experience while at camp.

Many strategies implemented by a PIP camp with the intention of improving one area of youth development often had effects in multiple supports and opportunities. For example,

- Strategies designed to improve levels of youth involvement often also yielded higher levels of perceived safety.
- Strategies focused on strengthening “continuity and consistency of care” and “ratios” improved both youth's experience of relationships and safety.
- Training staff to increase their capacity to provide a “range of diverse skill building opportunities” also yielded improvements in youth involvement.
- A focus on high, clear, and fair standards primarily aimed at improving emotional and physical safety also led to improvements in skill building.

This result is one reason that the YDSI Improvement Process is structured to have organizations do their improvement plans based on the nine organizational practices. In this way strategies are developed that affect the overall quality of youth's experiences. (See Charts 7-9, pages 21-23.)

An important lesson from this study (and other similar projects) is that *organizations that focus on improvements in at least one structural (S), one policy (P) and one activity (A) organizational practice are more likely* than those organizations who *do not to see improvements* in the supports and opportunities across the board.



**STAT SMART:** When comparing percentages of optimal experiences, YDSI researchers use a threshold of 10 percentage points or higher to indicate significant differences. Although differences of less than 10 percentage points may be real (i.e., not statistical error). Ten percentage points or greater suggests a more meaningful, substantive difference in terms of the number of campers affected.

The camps that focused across S, P, and A in their improvements were *twice as likely* (64% vs. 33%) to have improvements in at least three of the four supports and opportunities. Conversely, one third of the PIP camps that focused on only one or two organizational practice areas showed no improvements in campers' experiences. Examples from specific camps illustrate this trend.

Chart 5 shows the actual improvement strategies for a camp that showed significant improvements (of 10 percentage points or more) across all of the supports and opportunities. At least one improvement in each organizational area (S, P, and A) was implemented. Camps with a similar configuration of strategies were more likely to see widespread change in youth's experiences than camps with a more limited approach.

In contrast, Chart 6 (see page 16) shows a camp that implemented improvements clustered in only two of the organizational areas: policies and activities (P, A). Campers' experience improved only in Youth Involvement at this camp. Camps with similar strategy patterns were most likely to show either no improvements or limited change in camper's developmental experiences.





**Chart 5.**  
**Sample Camp Plan Using S-P-A Strategies That Resulted in Improvements in All Supports and Opportunities**

Structure	
Ratios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the number of staff supervising daily camper free time. This staff member will be specifically available to chat informally with campers.</li> </ul>
Safe, Reliable, Accessible Activities and Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post daily schedule in each cabin and other public places.</li> <li>• Post camper program area choices in cabins.</li> <li>• Post staff photos and names in central location so campers can learn staff names.</li> <li>• Create and use a “Getting to Know You” card that the counselor has a camper fill out.</li> </ul>
Continuity and Consistency of Care	No New Strategies Implemented
Policy	
On-going, Results-based, Staff and Organizational Improvement Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include a definition of “camper-centered” and why that is important in staff orientation.</li> <li>• During staff orientation, use most program area planning time to develop and practices skills instead of purchasing supplies.</li> </ul>
Flexibility in Allocating Available Resources	No New Strategies Implemented
Community Engagement	No New Strategies Implemented
Activities	
High, Clear, and Fair Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create no more than six camp-wide rules/expectations that will be used with all groups.</li> </ul>
Range of Diverse, Interesting, Skill Building Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach and encourage the use of a Thursday evening devotion that intentionally focuses on individual camper growth throughout the week.</li> <li>• Assess morning program areas to see which could build in progressive levels of skill development.</li> <li>• Create consistent and concrete goals for camper skill development in program areas—create binder for each program area.</li> <li>• Eliminate morning program areas which aren’t meeting goals and objectives or are not interesting to campers and add new programs.</li> <li>• Define core skills that we want campers to learn. Implement programs that meet these goals.</li> </ul>
Youth Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide early adolescent campers with afternoon of unstructured “hang-out” time in which they can choose from special activities.</li> <li>• Have early-adolescent counselors ask campers for input on their upcoming week then meet on Monday to plan the rest of the week.</li> <li>• Have one evening program each week be “cabin time” and let campers decide what the group will do for the evening.</li> <li>• Implement new Monday evening program with the “vertical” divisions among age groups with more interesting activities and more choices.</li> </ul>

*“This really brought to the forefront what we are there for . . . and helped us focus on what we needed to target.”*

– PIP Camp Director

# IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL CHANGE: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, POLICY, AND ACTIVITIES (SPA)

Chart 6.  
Sample Camp Plan Without S-P-A Strategies That Resulted in Improvement in Only One Support and Opportunity

Structure	
Ratios	No New Strategies Implemented
Safe, Reliable, Accessible Activities and Spaces	No New Strategies Implemented
Continuity and Consistency of Care	No New Strategies Implemented
Policy	
Ongoing, Results-based, Staff and Organizational Improvement Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach staff outcomes, mission, and intentionality of program in staff training and throughout the summer.</li> <li>• Increase accountability and quality programming.</li> <li>• Conduct an afternoon open house run by camp volunteers for community and prospective campers to tour the camp, meet the director, and ask questions.</li> </ul>
Flexibility in Allocating Available Resources	No New Strategies Implemented
Community Engagement	No New Strategies Implemented
Activities	
High, Clear, and Fair Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a Camper Conduct Code that is a standardized form describing what is and is not acceptable at camp and the consequences of not following the guidelines.</li> </ul>
Range of Diverse, Interesting, Skill Building Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase accountability for activities including lesson planning.</li> </ul>
Youth Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase camper input in planning camp programs, events, and activities.</li> </ul>

*The bottom line is camps that were more holistic in the changes they implemented had better results than those camps that were not holistic.*

This finding may seem simplistic. However, the reality of the complexity and time demands of an improvement process often lead organizations to prioritize certain organizational areas in which they will work in a given year. They often choose an area based on where they are most dissatisfied with the results from the youth survey. Although this reasoning makes practical sense, it appears to be a less effective strategy for successfully changing youth's experiences. Ultimately, organizations that focus too narrowly may be discouraged from attempting further improvement based on their lack of early success.



# PLANNING FOR CHANGE: LESSONS ON WHAT TO CONSIDER

This section of the report conveys some of the personal perspectives and lessons learned by camp directors concerning aspects of the process that were most important to achieving their goals for improvement. The subsequent section lays out practical advice on strategies that other camps and youth organizations could use to initiate an improvement process of their own.

Interviews were conducted at the end of the project with PIP camp directors to collect information on implementation strategies and the directors' thoughts about the usefulness of the process. Regardless of whether a camp was successful in improving the supports and opportunities during this project, the directors nearly unanimously felt their organization benefited from participation in this improvement process. A few common themes about the important features of the process emerged in these interviews.

## • Start with Systematic Data

Starting the process with systematic data on how youth experienced camp in terms of developmental opportunities made the process meaningful and engaging for directors and staff. While camps regularly collect "satisfaction" data from campers, the type of data included in this improvement process was new to the organizations and provided a different perspective on the camp environment that changed directors' perspectives on change.

- "We always thought we were camper centered . . . this process brought meat to what it means to be camper centered."
- "Got us to look at the evaluations we normally give out . . . were fine . . . but really lacking in other youth development areas . . . we are not getting useful things to look at."

## • Use a Youth Development Framework

The youth development framework and the process structure were useful in keeping staff focused on youth development. The structure of camp allows for annual off-season planning, but the focus of this planning is often on accreditation requirements, regulations, and satisfaction surveys. This process shifted the focus to the organizational practices linked directly to providing more campers with developmental supports and opportunities.

- "Having a framework and model I can implement everywhere brought a consistent process to analyze and make changes."
- "The process helped us do strategic planning in direct relationship to youth development. We thought about youth development but this helped us focus . . . and re-motivated us around youth development principles."

## • Focus on Intentionality and Accountability

The process provided an intentionality and accountability to the work of the camps that strengthened their planning and often their relationships with the summer staff and with campers.

- "Leaders felt more confident about knowing their job—better prepared to provide the emotional support. What we covered and how we covered it was different . . . felt prepared to focus on the campers. There was a different attitude through camp because of intentionality on a fun safe summer."
- "A good intentional process of setting goals . . . we have made real changes that will stick with us."

In the workshop where the PIP camps' staff reviewed the success of their implementation of improvement strategies, they also reflected on some of the factors that created challenges and/or barriers to change. These issues should be considered by any camp undertaking an improvement process.

## • Staff Buy-In

Any significant changes in approach or practices can lead to resistance among staff if they haven't invested in the process. The PIP directors believed that the process was mainly positive for staff, but some of the directors encountered challenges.

- "Staff may be hesitant to give up the power and control, because they often perceive power and control to be 'leadership.' This problem is often prevalent with staff who were former campers."



# PLANNING FOR CHANGE: LESSONS ON WHAT TO CONSIDER

## • Staff Skills

The increased emphasis on facilitating activities rather than controlling them, building a progression of skill with youth, and putting more intentional effort into building relationships with and among campers put higher demands on staff.

- “A lot depends on the skills of your staff to be able to talk with the kids (i.e., framing) in ways that address youth development outcomes.”

## • Camp Structure

Camps have youth for relatively short periods of time (some only one or two weeks) so they face special challenges in how to implement strong youth development practices.

- “Camp culture is steeped in traditions that may be hard to change, particularly when it means moving away from the way things were ‘always done.’”

## • Youth Buy-In

Just as staff can be resistant to change, youth who are accustomed to particular camp traditions can present a challenge to implementing different practices.

- “Campers sometimes don’t want leadership opportunities. Gave the kids a chance to take leadership but not sure they saw it as a leadership opportunity (saw as chore)—leadership comes in many different forms, and the kids have to be trained and given the skills to do it.”

## • Unexpected Events

In any particular timeframe in an organization, events can occur that interfere with plans and intentions. During this project, some camps had unforeseen events that had an impact on their ability to implement their plans such as: staff shortages due to illness, changes in directors, or leeches in the swimming lake.

Even before the results were available for the second year, directors knew camp had changed for the better. Initial data, camper and staff input, the framework, and intentional planning had made a difference that directors wanted to continue into the future. Of the 23 camps, 83% had positive change of ten points or more in at least one dimension of the Supports and Opportunities areas. Most of the remaining camps had either very strong results from the initial youth surveys with little room for significant change or had positive change that fell just short of the ten point criterion.

*The bottom line from these directors’ perspectives was that intentional planning across all organizational practice areas made a difference.*

*“Camp is not something you do to kids.  
We must do it with them.”*

– PIP Camp Director

# STEPS FOR BEGINNING AN IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Some youth groups are able to acquire the resources needed to have organizations like ACA or YDSI structure and assist in an improvement process. Other organizations, however, may need to work on their own to assess youth development practices and plan intentional improvements around youth's developmental experiences. The following suggestions are for camps (and other youth organizations) that want to undertake a similar improvement process on their own.

## Step 1: Gather information on youth's experience of camp

The Improvement Process with camps started with the YDSI youth survey. PIP camp directors cited the youth survey as one of the most useful aspects of the improvement process. Collecting systematic data on how youth experience camp in terms of developmental opportunities is different than the satisfaction data the camps typically collect from campers. The YDSI survey data allowed directors to see where they needed to focus change efforts so that more campers might experience improved developmental opportunities.



A systematic method (like the YDSI survey) is the best way to collect information on campers' experience, because the perspectives of *all* campers are used as the starting point of the improvement process. If an organization is unable to use the YDSI survey, then a series of discussions with campers about their experience of Supports and Opportunities at camp can provide information from at least *some* campers.

Camps can use some time during the summer to talk to campers about how they experience Supportive Relationships, Safety, Skill Building, and Youth Involvement. Like the PIP camps they also can use various strategies to reach their youth during the school year. PIP camps used a variety of ways to reach their campers including the camp's Web sites/chat rooms, e-mail, reunions, or their holiday parties.

Staff could have a discussion with their campers. For example, staff could focus on safety and ask questions like:

- What helps you to feel safe at camp? What do you think might make kids feel unsafe here? What else could staff do to help you feel safe at camp?

## How to Seek Camper Input

Facilitators of discussion groups with youth should keep the following in mind:

### • Do Not Respond to Youth Input in the Information Gathering Process

Not responding to the information you are hearing lets campers know that you are really listening to them. By "not responding" we mean do not react to what they are saying. For example, although you know what staff do when a rule is broken at camp, when you ask the campers what happens when someone breaks a rule, they might tell you "nothing happens." If a facilitator responds and says "that isn't true," it will invalidate their experience and will shut down the conversation. Instead, ask follow-up questions like: "Can you tell me about a specific time? What is it like for you when staff do nothing?"

### • Record the Discussion in Writing

Writing down what campers say on big pieces of flip chart paper indicates that you are seriously interested in campers' input and provides a document that can be shared with other staff members.

### • When to Have the Conversations

Think about having these conversations during cabin time when the campers are relaxed or create a special activity session during the day that gets publicized as a "Tell Us Like it *is*" or "Camp from *Your Eyes*."

### • How to Have the Conversations

It is best to only ask three to five questions in one sitting. After about 20 minutes youth might find the conversation boring. It is also best to use a series of small groups (8-10 youth) so the campers feel comfortable and all have a chance to speak. Some questions can be on a "Graffiti Board," and campers can write their answers. Another strategy might be to give an assignment for each camper to "interview" five other campers on topics that you feel need more input.

- When someone breaks a rule at camp, what happens? What do you think staff should do when someone breaks a rule?
- If you got into a disagreement with another camper, what would the staff do? What do you think staff should do when they see campers are having a disagreement?

For a list of possible questions on each of the Supports and Opportunities, go to [www.cnyd.org/trainingtools/media/YDGuide.pdf](http://www.cnyd.org/trainingtools/media/YDGuide.pdf).

# STEPS FOR BEGINNING AN IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

## Step 2: Gather Input from Staff

PIP camps faced difficulties with soliciting input from camp staff since the planning was often done during the “off season,” and counselors and other seasonal staff were generally not local. The majority of PIP camps solicited input from counselors via Web sites and e-mails or reunions. Some camps discussed survey results with counselors at the beginning of the next summer’s precamp training. As mentioned in the previous section, some directors of PIP camps reported that attaining buy-in from counselors and encountering some resistance were among the issues that impeded implementation of improvement strategies. This observation reinforces the importance of involving staff in planning for change. Ideally discussion groups should be held in person and involve as many staff as possible.

### How to Seek Staff Input

These discussions can use many of the process guidelines outlined for campers.

- **Discuss the key points of a youth development framework**

For instance, discuss the elements in Box C of the Community Action Framework for Youth Development. (See page 3.)

- **Identify your camp’s strengths and weaknesses**

Have counselors provide input on what they think the strengths and weaknesses of your camp might be related to these key components of positive youth development. Share with them the input you have gotten from campers in the process.

## Step 3: Assess Each of the Nine Organizational Practices

In addition to understanding how youth experience camp, an effective improvement process requires an understanding of the camp’s organizational structures, policies, and activities that are critical to the support of a developmental environment. As seen with the PIP camps, a focus on making prioritized changes in limited areas of the supports and opportunities is not enough. Meaningful change in young people’s experiences result from a thorough assessment of all of the organizational practices (see Charts 7-9 for definitions and examples) with a plan that includes changing at least one structure, one policy, and one activity practice in any given program cycle.

The director and staff can assess each of these organizational practices by having discussion groups address: what practices do we currently have in place in this area, and what needs to be strengthened or added?

### How to Assess Organizational Practices

Focus planning on organizational practices linked directly to providing campers with the Supports and Opportunities. Typically off-season planning is focused on accreditation requirements, regulations, and satisfaction surveys. While these aspects support overall camp success, they do not specifically strengthen developmental supports and opportunities.

When facilitating the organizational practice assessment, keep the following in mind:

- Sometimes it is helpful to have smaller groups of staff work on one or two of the organizational practices and then come back to the full staff and share their findings. Staff can do this activity during a staff meeting.

Another way to approach the assessment is to have each individual staff member answer the questions:

- To what extent is each organizational practice currently in place?
- What needs to be strengthened in each organizational area?
- What new organizational practices need to be put in place in each organizational area?

These perspectives can be handed over to the camp director who can compile staff input, add their own input, and report back to staff. Strategies to be implemented can be organized in a chart similar to Chart 7.



**Chart 7.**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE PRACTICES: Definitions and Sample Organizational Improvement Strategies**

Structure	
Ratios	① Youth spend at least part of their time at the agency in one-on-one or small group interactions.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More flexible scheduling to allow for informal interactions between campers and staff</li> <li>• Have older campers mentor younger campers</li> </ul>
Safe, Reliable, Accessible Activities and Spaces	① Activities and space are secure and supervised. Schedules of activities, available space, and staffing of activities are predictable and clearly communicated. Activities and spaces are physically accessible, offered during appropriate hours, and affordable to all participants.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Install lights outside cabins, camp entrance, and retreat centers</li> <li>• Ensure clear, open communication about safety</li> <li>• Ensure adequate spaces and equipment are available so campers have access to activities they are interested in or new to them</li> </ul>
Continuity and Consistency of Care	① Structures like regular staff meetings exist to talk about youth. The organization and staff use the same discipline and behavioral management system. Messages about how people treat each other at the organization are consistent from all staff members.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post photos of staff with names in accessible location so campers can learn staff names</li> <li>• Carefully match cabin staff with age groups</li> <li>• Getting-to Know-You discussion starters at tables in the dining hall for each meal so that campers and staff select questions from the center of the table and answer them</li> <li>• Create a ‘Get to Know You’ card that campers and counselors fill out before camp</li> </ul>

① = Definition

#### Step 4: Brainstorm Strategies

At this point, an organization has information from campers on **improvements** that would benefit their experience of the Supports and Opportunities, information from staff about how they try to provide the supports and opportunities, and a list of changes that need to be made within the organizational practices.

The next step should be to brainstorm additional **actions** you could take in each of the nine organizational practices. For example, if campers said having flashlights at night would make them feel safer, put that under Safe, Reliable and Accessible Spaces and Activities. You might then determine several more things you could do to make it lighter at night like putting outdoor lighting in several key places. Continue to brainstorm ideas in each of the practice areas (see Charts 7-9 for a list of examples of strategies used by PIP camps).

*Note that these strategies aren't meant to be picked up and randomly implemented. The strategies that will work for you are the ones designed by your campers and staff and applied to your setting to intentionally accomplish your goals and mission.*

#### Step 5: Choose What to Implement in the Next Camp Cycle

The full list of every improvement strategy that could benefit your camp is likely to be overwhelming and far too much to accomplish in any one year. The next step is to determine which strategies can and should be implemented in the next camp cycle. As the PIP process showed, significant changes in camper experiences were much more likely if you implement strategies in at least one Structure, one Policy and one Activity organizational practice area.

The ideas you develop may require resources. Make sure that those resources can be allocated to implement the ideas. Resources include time and people as well as dollars. Many ideas, however, will not require additional money. In fact, very few of the PIP strategy changes required financial resources. Most strategies were able to be done by modifying training, involving campers, and listening to youth. Make sure to think about how people, time, and dollars can be reallocated to implement strategies.

# STEPS FOR BEGINNING AN IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

## Step 6: Tell Campers and Staff What You Will Do

Return to the campers and staff with your plan of action. This step lets them know that you have taken their input seriously and gives them an opportunity to comment on the strategies you have prioritized for the next camp cycle.

This communication can be done by sending letters to campers before they arrive to let them know about the exciting new changes at camp. It can also be done once youth arrive at camp at a whole camp meeting or in cabin groups.

Staff should be made aware of the planned changes during precamp training. Talking about changes as exciting opportunities helps to lessen resistance to change and get buy-in for a great camp season.

## Step 7: Take Stock

After implementing changes take stock of where you are by again collecting information from youth on how they experienced supports and opportunities. Ask questions similar to the ones in step #1. Remember to debrief with staff on how they thought the new strategies worked and how to continue the improvements.

You can improve your program even if it is already a good one. As one director put it, “Everything you do must focus on **safe and intentional relationships within the family. EVERYTHING must be intentional.**”



**Chart 8.**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY PRACTICES: Definitions and Sample Organizational Improvement Strategies**

Policy	
Ongoing, Results-based, Staff and Organizational Improvement Process	① The organization and all its participants regularly evaluate supports and opportunities and make adjustments in resource allocation, policies, and practices based on these assessments.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjust hiring procedures to recruit staff with the ability to develop strong relationships with and among campers, good activity skills, and strong teaching ability</li> <li>• Change focus of staff training to include: “camper-centered” approaches, youth development, paying attention to each individual child, concept of cabin bonding, and building “a family”</li> <li>• Use time to develop/practice teaching skills during staff orientation instead of focusing on planning and purchasing supplies</li> <li>• Train staff to involve youth in decision-making</li> <li>• Improve and institute more frequent staff evaluations focused on youth development</li> <li>• Communicate past summer successes and challenges as an ongoing tool for staff development</li> <li>• Use camper feedback on a regular basis</li> <li>• Eliminate programs that do not meet camp goals or interests of campers</li> </ul>
Flexibility in Allocating Available Resources	① Staff, money, program supplies, space, and time are allocated according to agreed upon principles of maximizing youth supports and opportunities.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do program planning during staff training and allocate resources after the planning is completed</li> <li>• Adjust camp activities if campers show no interest or want a new interest</li> </ul>
Community Engagement	① Organization and its staff/volunteers and management are committed to linking youth to their communities and linking the organization to other community institutions and activities that support youth development.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in service projects in the local community</li> </ul>

① = Definition



**Chart 9.**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY PRACTICES: Definitions and Sample Organizational Improvement Strategies**

Activities	
High, Clear, and Fair Standards	<p>① All organizational participants are clear about what is expected of them and what they should expect from the organization.</p> <p>Expectations for youth (behavior towards self and others) while participating in organization activities is clearly and regularly communicated and linked to predictable and consistently applied consequences.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistently enforce rules and codes of conduct</li> <li>• Create no more than six camp-wide rules/expectations and use with all age groups</li> <li>• Develop and enforce a more consistent policy for poor performance in paid and volunteer staff</li> </ul>
Range of Diverse, Interesting, Skill Building Activities	<p>① Activities offered reflect and respect diverse interests, skills, and needs of youth participants.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have senior camper-only activities</li> <li>• Set weekly camper goals</li> <li>• Set daily camper goals in each activity</li> <li>• Create activity (e.g., swimming) record sheets to document progression</li> <li>• Focus intentionally with campers on their growth in the program (e.g., a “wheel” representing each of the camp goals is used to reflect on what was accomplished in each goal area each day)</li> <li>• Add progressive, concrete skill development into lesson plans and programs</li> <li>• Define core skills for each age group</li> <li>• Establish a new evening program for mixed ages with more choice/new activities</li> <li>• Post daily schedules in each cabin/public spaces and post camper program area choices in cabin</li> <li>• Provide early adolescent campers with an unstructured hang-out time</li> </ul>
Youth Engagement	<p>① The organization uses age-appropriate strategies to involve youth in organizational operations, governance, and identity.</p>
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have campers participate in setting cabin and camp rules and assist in developing consequences for rule breaking</li> <li>• Ask campers (and staff) how they want funds to be used</li> <li>• Use camp councils to design and plan usage of new activity space with camp administration</li> <li>• Hold camper panel meetings during camp week</li> <li>• Initiate guidance in LIT, CIT, SIT programs and empower them to create and run programs</li> <li>• Give older campers more management opportunities in the day to day running of camp</li> <li>• Have counselors ask campers for input on their upcoming week and then meet to plan the rest of the week</li> <li>• Have campers participate in schedule planning for their small group</li> <li>• Use one night a week for cabin activities that are camper planned</li> </ul>

① = Definition

*“Staff seemed to enjoy themselves more. They felt we had stronger programs. Improving the planning made a difference.”*

– PIP Camp Director

## EMERGING INNOVATIONS


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There is no doubt the world is changing at warp speed. Just read *The World is Flat. A Brief History of the 21st Century* (Friedman 2005) to understand the importance of creative imagination and acting on dreams with the belief that you can make a difference. Camp is an institution steeped in tradition and values that are sometimes not in synch with a fast-changing world, yet is a place where caring adults can make a difference in the lives of young people.

The challenge is to hold to those values that resonate with positive human development while recognizing that some change is necessary if we want to be relevant to youth growing up in a whole new world. Change for the sake of change is not the answer. No magic solutions exist when choosing strategies, nor will it work to merely adopt a set of practices that worked in some other setting.

What will work is to be open to exploring change in youth programs. The *process* of taking an integrated, holistic approach to organizational practices must become the routine in any camp that wants to improve and continue to meet the developmental needs of campers. The inclusion of meaningful input from campers and staff is foundational if a camp program is to be relevant and effective. To do less than take this type of youth-based approach denies the fundamental tenets of youth development.

**Innovations** provide the opportunity to develop America's youth and be part of the creative imagining of solutions for the future.



*“Got us to look at the evaluations we normally give out. They were fine as satisfaction surveys, but they didn’t give us helpful information in understanding whether we met our youth development goals or mission.”*

— PIP Camp Director



## ABOUT ACA

- Founded in 1910, the American Camp Association (ACA) is a community of professionals dedicated to enriching the lives of children and adults through the camp experience, reaching nearly 3,000,000 children through ACA-accredited camp programs.
- ACA is the largest association serving the organized camp industry and represents all segments of the camp profession, including agencies serving youth and adults, independent camps, religious and fraternal organizations, and public/municipal agencies.
- ACA serves as the knowledge resource center for the camp industry, educating camp owners and directors in the administration of camp operations—particularly program quality, health, and safety—and assisting parents, families, and caregivers nationwide in selecting camps that meet industry-accepted and government-recognized standards.
- ACA is the only organization that provides accreditation for camps, a process with a fifty-year history. Based on 300 national standards for health and safety, the value of ACA accreditation is recognized by courts of law and government regulators.
- ACA works in close conjunction with the many nonprofit organizations which operate three-quarters of the camps nationwide—including the YMCA, YWCA, Camp Fire USA, Girl Scouts of the USA, and Boy Scouts of America—as well as individual churches and synagogues, and a large number of private, independent camps throughout the United States and Canada.
- *Camping Magazine*, the premier resource for camp professionals, is published by ACA and is the primary resource for the most recent trends in the camp industry—the latest research in the field of youth development, critical management tools, and innovative programming ideas.
- *CAMP*, published by ACA, is an authoritative and comprehensive resource for parents who want their children to benefit from a positive and expanding camp experience. *CAMP* reached consumers in January 2005 and 2006, becoming a must-read magazine for parents exploring camps for their children.



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