

# NONCOGNITIVE LEARNING AND CAMP

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What does it take for a young person to become a successful, contributing member of society?

- Research suggests the answer to this question is long and extends far beyond content knowledge and academic content learned in school, and includes many outcomes commonly associated with a camp experience, developing what economists call “noncognitive” factors known to be predictors of life success.
- Education and industry leaders indicate academic knowledge and skills alone will not enable students to successfully navigate a rapidly changing world, therefore the seemingly fun and playful activities that engage kids at camp not only serve as important skill builders that mitigate “summer learning loss,” intentional camp programs also develop noncognitive factors ([Ozier, 2014](#)).

## What are noncognitive skills?

Research has identified noncognitive skills as the behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that are critical for success in school and in later life and allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands ([Farrington, C.A. & Roderick, M., et. al, 2012](#)). Noncognitive factors commonly considered important by researchers include:

- persistence,
- resilience,
- grit,
- goal-setting,
- help-seeking,
- cooperation,
- conscientiousness,
- self-efficacy,

- self-regulation,
- self-control,
- self-discipline,
- motivation,
- mindsets,
- effort,
- work habits, and
- organization, among others.

Interestingly, some education researchers have called for noncognitive factors to be renamed, claiming the name suggests “not-thinking,” and suggesting the term “metacognitive factors” be used instead ([Conley, 2013](#)). As others have pointed out, contrasting cognitive and noncognitive factors can be confusing because “few aspects of human behavior are devoid of cognition” (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & Weel, 2008, p. 974).

## Do camps foster noncognitive skills?

Paul Tough (2012) suggests the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible, emphasizing that [noncognitive skills](#) are more crucial than sheer brain power to achieving success, including:

- persistence
- self-control
- curiosity
- conscientiousness
- self-confidence

Although much of the existing research on noncognitive factors is correlational (merely showing a relationship between two factors) rather than causal, ACA has conducted important [studies](#) with conclusions aligning closely with this list of noncognitive factors — 3,395 families whose child attended one of eighty different day or resident summer camps measured growth from precamp to postcamp surveys in four domains:

- positive identity
- social skills
- physical and thinking skills
- and positive values (Thurber, C. & Scanlin, M., et. al, 2007)

While a critical tension in research on noncognitive factors is the question of which factors can be intentionally developed, and which are traits or dispositions malleable in schools, it does not necessarily follow that camps do not change the factor to improve outcomes for young people.

The 6 month follow-up for this study showed a consistent story of overall positive growth in the four domains and ten constructs with changes maintained: positive identity (self-esteem and independence), social skills (leadership, friendship skills, social comfort, peer relationships), physical and thinking skills (adventure and exploration, environmental awareness), and positive values and spirituality (values and decisions, spirituality) (Directions, 2005).

### Camps are leaders in learning:

- Learning is a complex phenomenon, shaped by a wide variety of factors intrinsic to young people and in their external environments in places like camp and school. In addition to content knowledge and academic skills, the learning process includes noncognitive skills--or more broadly noncognitive factors--including strategies, attitudes, and behaviors that consider the ways students interact with the educational context within which they are situated and the effects of these interactions on learners' attitudes, motivation, and performance ([Farrington, C.A. & Roderick, M., et. al, 2012](#)).
- Summer camps are increasingly recognized as locations for young people and adults to acquire and practice these important noncognitive behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies so they can imagine ways they might participate in a complex and increasingly diverse democracy, and engage fully in the ever-evolving [21st century workplace](#).
- Summer camps are well positioned to be an important element on the educational spectrum necessary to succeed in this century and beyond by providing the "[supplementary education](#)" necessary for high academic achievement in school and life

(Gordon, E., & Bridglall, et. al, 2005).

- In 2013 ACA convened a task force to examine the link between the research on meta/noncognitive factors and the ways camps develop these skills each summer in millions of young people and adults.
- "Play It, Measure It," is a terrific resource for leaders wanting to determine the results of activities that target specific noncognitive outcomes. With step-by-step activity instructions and over 40 digital resources, leaders are fully equipped with all the tools for activities sure to elicit friendship skills, teamwork, and affinity for exploration (Roark, M. & Evans, F., 2010).

### Conclusions:

- The economy and society of the 21st century has already shown itself to be one that demands competent, adaptive learners who can drive their own learning processes. Although content knowledge is clearly important, the new expectations for learners is that they will be able to use content knowledge in novel, non-routine ways and to acquire necessary information on their own as needed. They will be expected to understand how experts in a field of study think and go about solving problems. They will need to be able to manage themselves, their time, and their personal organization to complete more complex and demanding learning tasks. They will need to be able to set goals, monitor their progress toward achieving those goals, reflect on their effectiveness, and persist when they encounter tasks or challenges that demand more than a one-and-done approach (Conley, 2014).
- Camps have long been a landscape for learning by offering fun summer activities that increase important strategies, attitudes, and behaviors young people need to be successful in school and life (Ozier, 2012).
- In reviewing the lists of 21st-century skills, character skills, and other intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, it is easy to spot skills that camps have been helping children develop for over 150 years. At camp and you are almost certain to see activities to foster leadership, teamwork, friendship,

responsibility, independence, and motivation. Helping children develop their social and emotional intelligence — their interpersonal skills — involves refining and strengthening their critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities. This happens every day at camps across the country, as does the nurturing of creativity, the growth of communication skills, the building of resilience, and the development of grit. In truth, for most camps, these skills are our bread and butter — our core subjects — and they lie in our traditional zone of expertise as experiential educators (Brody, 2013).

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Recommended Citation:

Ozier, L.. (2015). Noncognitive learning and camp. Briefing paper prepared for the American Camp Association.  
<http://www.acacamps.org/volunteers/care/carebriefings>