# Self-Determination Theory and Camp

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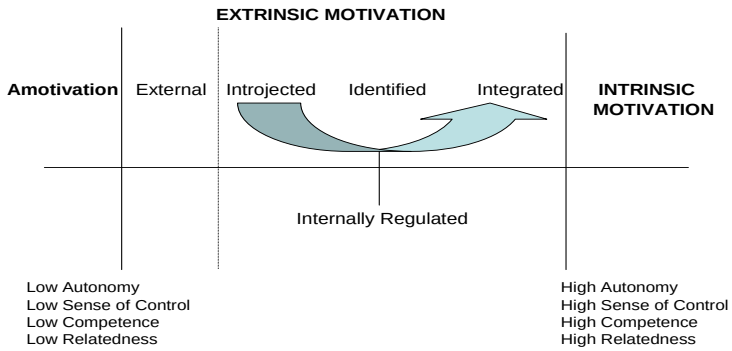
Hole in the Wall Gang Camp

At camp, youth can connect to others, develop skills and interests, be responsible, and make choices. Opportunities to satisfy these developmental tasks can help youth in their transition to adulthood, as youth learn to persevere through challenges, develop values, and discover how to make activities personally meaningful.

One theory that has been well-tested in a variety of contexts and with a variety of populations is **Self-Determination Theory** (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). "To be self-determined is to endorse one's actions at the highest level of reflection. When self-determined, people experience a sense of freedom to do what is interesting, personally important, and vitalizing," (http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/). **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** suggests that the psychological processes that occur within the social context influence reasons or motivations to act or behave, (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

There are two parts of **SDT** that are particularly useful to understanding youth development at camp: motivation, and support for the basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. **SDT** views motivation as being a dynamic, constantly evolving process. There are six types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). **Amotivation** is inaction, or action without intent; i.e. being at camp without feeling it was their choice or within their control. **Extrinsic motivation** refers to behaviors that are done to attain some outcome separate from what inherently exists within an activity, such as attending camp to attain a reward or to avoid punishment. **Introjected motivation** describes engaging in behaviors because of one's relationship to another, such as going to camp to avoid the anxiety associated with disappointing loved ones. **Identified motivation** occurs when the goal of an activity is accepted as personally important, such as attending camp to build particular skills. **Integrated motivation** occurs when motives for camp attendance are fully in line with one's personal values and needs. **Intrinsic motivation** occurs when the activity is inherently satisfying and enjoyable. Figure 1 graphically displays these types of motivations.

Figure 1. Motivation Continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000).




**SDT** also suggests that everyone has basic psychological needs for **autonomy, competence, and relatedness** (Deci & Ryan, 2000). **Autonomy** refers to people's need to experience choice and control in their behaviors. When acting with autonomy, people use available information to guide their actions and achieve their goals. **Relatedness** refers to the need to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with significant others. When people feel securely connected to others, they feel more self-determined and confident to explore interests. The need for **competence** is met when people feel capable and self-efficacious in their goal pursuits, such as when receiving positive and informational feedback, rather than negative and controlling feedback. When social contexts facilitate satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, people are more optimally motivated and can achieve positive psychological, developmental, and behavioral outcomes. Support of basic needs is critical to people's well-being.

## Research Says

- Adolescents' perceived psychological need support from parents is important for the development of adolescents' **autonomous** self-regulation and well-being, (Niemiec et al., 2006).

- Students who perceived an **autonomy** supportive environment in physical education classes experienced greater levels of **autonomy, competence, and relatedness** and had higher scores on **self-determination**. Student-reported levels of **self-determined motivation** positively predicted teacher ratings of effort and persistence in physical education, (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2006).
- In a study of adolescents with type 1 diabetes, perceived **autonomous** motivation and self-efficacy indicated greater **autonomy** support, and led to better dietary self-care, (Austin, Senécal, Guay, & Nouwen, 2011).
- For teachers, satisfaction of the need for **relatedness** with students lead to higher levels of engagement and positive emotions, and lower levels of negative emotions, than did satisfaction of the need for **relatedness** with peers, (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2011).
- In a study of leisure activities of South African adolescents, adolescents most frequently reported participating in socializing, media use, sports, risk behavior, and performing arts. Free time was most strongly characterized by **intrinsic motivations**, such as **competence, relatedness** and positive affect. Activities were also seen as a way to achieve outside goals, (Palen, Caldwell, Smith, Gleeson, & Patrick, 2011).
- In a school-based eating and activity mentoring program, non-obese adolescents showed higher **intrinsic motivation** scores than obese adolescents. Differences in physical activity motivation related to adolescent weight status, but only for **intrinsic motivation**. Adolescents who were **intrinsically motivated** for physical activity were more fit and less likely to be obese, (Power, Ullrich-French, Steele, Daratha, & Bindler, 2011).
- When HIV+ adolescents perceived more support for their basic psychological needs for **autonomy, relatedness, and competence** in disclosing their HIV status, they reported more **self-determined** motivation to disclose their status and better satisfaction with their decisions, (Gillard & Roark, 2013).

## Camp Research and

Research about camping has indicated the essential value of activities that are challenging to young people. Camp is a venue where numerous out of the ordinary and interesting opportunities provide challenge for young people.

- The 2005 national study of the outcomes of camp experiences (American Camp Association) showed that children become more adventurous at camp and that enabled them to try new things. About 75 percent of campers reported that they learned something new at camp.
- Hattie et al. (1997) did a meta-analysis of adventure activities that the use of outdoor activities that were challenging resulted in the strongest effect sizes for self-control such as independence, self-efficacy, assertiveness, internal locus of control, and decision-making. Further, these outcomes increased 25 months later. Hattie et al. concluded that this study showed compelling evidence that structured voluntary challenging activities can have a powerful sustainable effect on development.
- Arnold et al. (2005) studied Oregon residential 4-H campers and found campers said they learned new things that they liked to do, and that camp made them want to try new things. Girls were more likely than boys to learn new things and to want to try new things.
- Garst and Bruce (2003) studied over 8000 4-H campers in Virginia and found that the second most often rated benefit of camp was developing new skills in an area that the camper enjoyed. They also said they learned more about different subjects.
- Brannan et al. (1997; 2000; n.d.) studied over 2000 campers with mild to severe disabilities who were ages 7-21 and found significant growth related to achievement in activities related to outdoor activities. Campers with more severe disabilities also reported enjoyment and achievement in participating in these activities.
- Bialeschki and Scanlin (2005) described the research done with Youth Development Strategies Inc. with over 7600 campers. This preliminary study focused on skill–building and opportunities for challenging and interesting activities as one important element. The findings indicated that 41 percent of the campers were in the optimal category for skill building and opportunities for challenging and interesting activities; however, 26 percent were in the insufficient area. Although camps offer opportunities

in skill-building, more work is needed to help children get better at things that matter to them.

## Bottom Line

Quite a bit is known about the importance of challenging activities as a modality for camp programs. More is yet to be examined about what makes an activity challenging and how young people can transfer the challenge they encounter in camp back to their daily lives.

### Resources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http://www.acacamps.org/volunteers/care/carebriefings.