Child-Adult Relationships Are the Active Ingredient

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Research supports what camp leaders have known for decades: Child-adult interaction is at the heart of camp experiences. This is not only true in camps. Studies across multiple settings suggest that the quality of human relationships in some cases predicts long-term child outcomes *more than any other* environmental variable (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2014; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007; Sabol, Soliday Hong, Pianta, & Burchinal, 2013; The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008). Indeed, several researchers have called child-adult relationships the essential or *active ingredient*: the primary factor that determines the effectiveness of developmental settings (Hamre, 2014; Li & Julian, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2014).

Let us imagine a child or youth who, in the course of a camp experience, may encounter a number of camp staff, from registration to activity facilitators to cabin leaders. At each of these touch points where adult-child interactions take place, there is the possibility that such interactions can be "developmental" — that is, they help a child "develop." If a particular adult and child have multiple opportunities for developmental interactions day in and day out, a "developmental relationship" may emerge and sustain between them. A camp setting where children have one or more developmental relationships with adults could become a "developmental setting." =Seeing child development through this lens, the quality of a camp rests on the quality of relationships within the setting, and the quality of relationships is determined by the quality of everyday interactions between adults and children or youth.

What do these "developmental interactions" look like and feel like? They tend to embody one or more of the following characteristics (for more detail, see www.simpleinteractions.org).

Connection refers to the mutual presence and awareness between two people; the "harmony" of an interaction. Connection involves a sense of being "in-tune" with each other and is sometimes referred to with terms like "warmth" and "positivity" (Dumbo, Stetson, & Jablon, 2011; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Hundreds of studies find links between adult-youth connection and positive outcomes. However, a high level of connection does not always require positivity; rather it requires "being present" to one another's attention and emotion. Connection directly affects children's experience, helps them feel "seen and heard," and creates openness to learning and exploring.

Reciprocity refers to a relative balance in the back-and-forth of an interaction. You can think of this with the tennis metaphor of serve and return: The goal is a back-and-forth toggle of control between children and adults, with each person's move responsive to that which came before from the other (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). This dimension is fundamentally different from the idea of "child-directed" vs. "adult-directed" interaction. Rather, the idea of reciprocity aligns with the vision of a balanced, reciprocal partnership between adult staff and children — the notion of shared control described by Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker (2010) or youth-adult partnership (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016).

Participation refers to intentional efforts to invite, include, and involve all children and youth, especially those who may have difficulty engaging on their own. This awareness can make a world of difference for campers. Ensuring participation can increase the likelihood that *all* children will feel a sense of belonging (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008). In practice, this may mean extending opportunities and support to children that do not fully join in activities on their own, due to ability, temperament, or other factors. It also potentially models and teaches the more "able" children what it means to help build an inclusive community.

Progression refers to matching incrementally more complex challenges with appropriately scaffolded or "faded" support, akin to Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) notion of "progressively more complex patterns of interaction." The idea is to try to provide tasks just out of reach of what children can do — or requiring "stretch" — and to gradually increase difficulty as they get better at tasks. Traditionally, this aspect may be regarded "instructional" rather than "relational." However, when we consider the emotional safety and trust a child needs to take a leap of faith beyond *known* comfort zones towards unknown, we may see how offering opportunities to grow can be central to building relationships.

Research Says

We know that child-adult interactions can make the difference between a wonderful and terrible camp experience. What else do we know about those interactions?

- Jones & Deutsch (2010) specifically studied "relational strategies" in an urban youth program. They identified three powerful strategies: minimizing relational distance (finding ways to not seem distant from children or youth), actively including all youth (participation as described above), and helping kids bridge developmental settings (i.e., talking with them about connections between camp and other settings).
- Research on mentoring has provided both evidence of the importance of child-adult relationships (e.g., DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011) and effective strategies (e.g., Garringer & Jucovy, 2007). A recent study identifies the varied *roles* adult mentors can play for youth and this list is particularly salient for camp adults: supporter, teacher, compass (help with life direction), role model, connector (to helpful people & organizations), and challenger (encouraging achievement; Hamilton, Hamilton, DuBois, & Sellers, 2016).
- The common practice of providing general praise — like saying "good job!" — is at best ineffective (Brophy, 1981), and some argue it may even do long-term harm (Kohn, 1993). Intelligence-based praise ("You're so smart!") can be particularly counterproductive for children as it encourages them to think of intelligence as

fixed rather than something you can build (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). However, attention, feedback, or encouragement based on the learning process and effort can build relationships and support learning (Brophy, 1981).
- Asking good questions can be a good way to build relationships, understand youth challenge levels, and promote motivation (Hattie, 2009).

Bottom Line

Camp directors and staff employ all sorts of important ingredients to support positive and meaningful experiences for campers. These ingredients — like having an awesome ropes course, great songs at meals, a safe swimming area, qualified staff — all can contribute to a positive experience. However, these things matter *through*, not apart from, the everyday interactions between campers and adults. In other words, "active ingredient" means that facilities, staff credentials, curricula, activities, and other elements of camps become impactful *if and only if* the active ingredient — caring, responsive, and supportive human relationship — is present to facilitate the best use of the rest of the ingredients.

Resources

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