

# Ten Reasons Why Camp is Important for Child Development

Research Based Evidence of the Value of Camp Experiences

*Barry A. Garst, Ph.D.  
Director of Research Application  
bgarst@ACAamps.org*

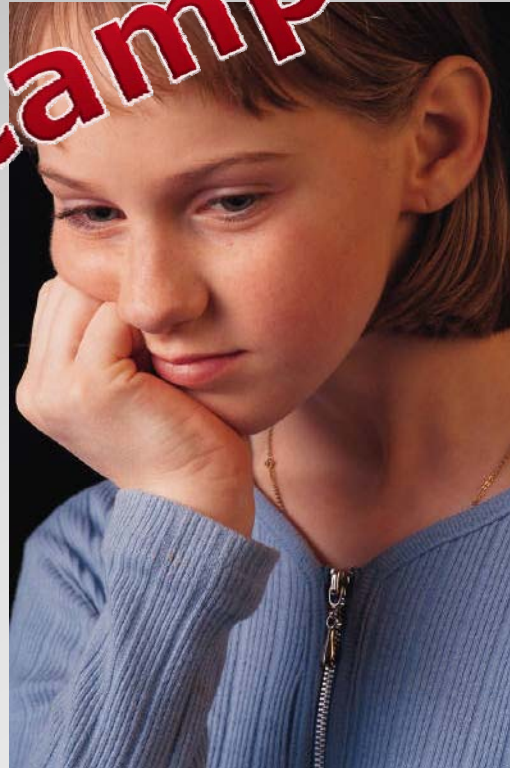
american **CAMP** association®

- Framing “Camp Experience”
- What does research tell us about camp?
  - Outcomes
  - Developmental supports and opportunities
  - Camp quality improvement
- 10 ways that camps are important for child development



## Overview

Camp



What do you think of?

- An American tradition since 1861
- 500 million children served
- 10 million children participate in camp each year
- Important component of out-of-school time
- More than a place or an activity, “camp” represents what happens to children during the experience



## Camp Experience

Camp improves the lives of children, youth,  
and families!

Camp makes children healthy!

Camp enables children to grow to be caring,  
contributing, successful members of society.



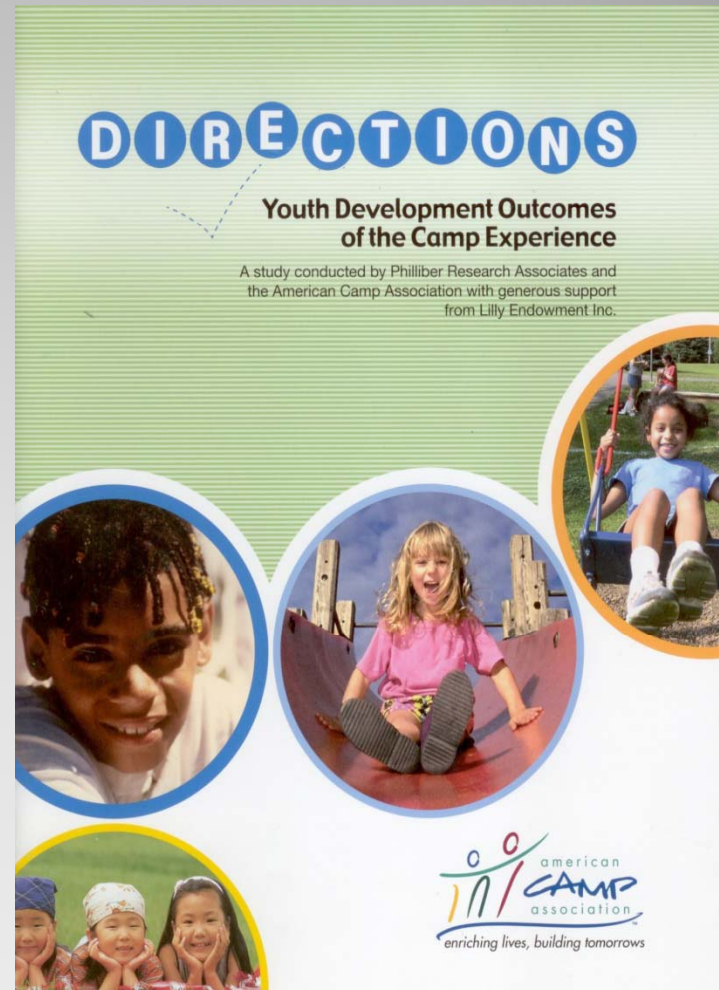
- Increased expectations to document program impacts and outcomes
- Securing camp funding and support; Reporting to donors
- Validating parents' and other caregivers' expectations for camp
- Emphasis on quality experiences

**Why care?**

# Developmental Outcomes



- 80 ACA camps from across U.S.
  - Day/Resident
  - One-week and multi-week
  - Single gender and co-ed
  - Private and agency
- 5,000+ families
- Largest national-level summer camp dataset
- Data collected from campers, staff, and parents



- Positive Identity
- Independence
- Leadership
- Social Skills (*Friendship Skills*)
- Social Skills (*Social Comfort*)
- Social Skills (*Peer Relationships*)
- Adventure and Exploration
- Environmental Awareness
- Positive Values and Decision-Making
- Spirituality

## Outcomes Targeted

Construct	<p data-bbox="997 527 1785 771"><b>In which 3 outcome areas did <u>campers</u> identify the greatest gains?</b></p>
Positive identity	
Independence	
Leadership	
Make friends	
Feel Secure	
Peer relations	
Adventure/exploration	
Environmental awareness	
Values/decisions	
Spirituality	

## *(Campers)*

Construct	Pre-Post Difference		Effect Size
Positive identity	Yes	+.04	.08
Independence	Yes	+.02	.04
Leadership	Yes	+.03	.04
Make friends	Yes	+.09	.18
Feel Secure	No		
Peer relations	Yes	-.02	-.04
Adventure/exploration	Yes	+.17	.33
Environmental awareness	No		
Values/decisions	No		
Spirituality	Yes	+.03	.04

Construct	<p data-bbox="997 527 1785 771"><b>In which 3 outcome areas did <u>parents</u> identify the greatest gains?</b></p>
Positive identity	
Independence	
Leadership	
Make friends	
Feel Secure	
Peer relations	
Adventure/exploration	
Environmental awareness	
Values/decisions	
Spirituality	

## *(Parents)*

Construct	Pre-Post Difference		Effect Size
Positive identity	Yes	+ .04	.11
Independence	Yes	<b>+ .07</b>	<b>.13</b>
Leadership	Yes	+ .05	.08
Make friends	Yes	<b>+ .08</b>	<b>.14</b>
Feel Secure	Yes	+ .05	.08
Peer relations	Yes	+ .05	.12
Adventure/exploration	Yes	<b>+ .12</b>	<b>.19</b>
Environmental awareness	Yes	+ .02	.04
Values/decisions	Yes	+ .02	.06
Spirituality	Yes	+ .03	.05

- These results suggest that summer camp benefits children in the following ways:
  - Children develop more social skills that help them make new friends,
  - Children grow more independent and show more leadership qualities,
  - Children become more adventurous and willing to try new things,

- Age and session length were not reliable predictors of change. Which means....?
  - Campers of all ages experienced change
  - Campers don't need to attend a four-week camp session in order to experience positive changes from camp....1 week can be enough.

**By the way...**

- Camp can be a powerfully positive experience (especially for children who have the most growth to do)
- Camps seem to be particularly good (on average) at helping children make friends and explore adventurous activities



## Implications

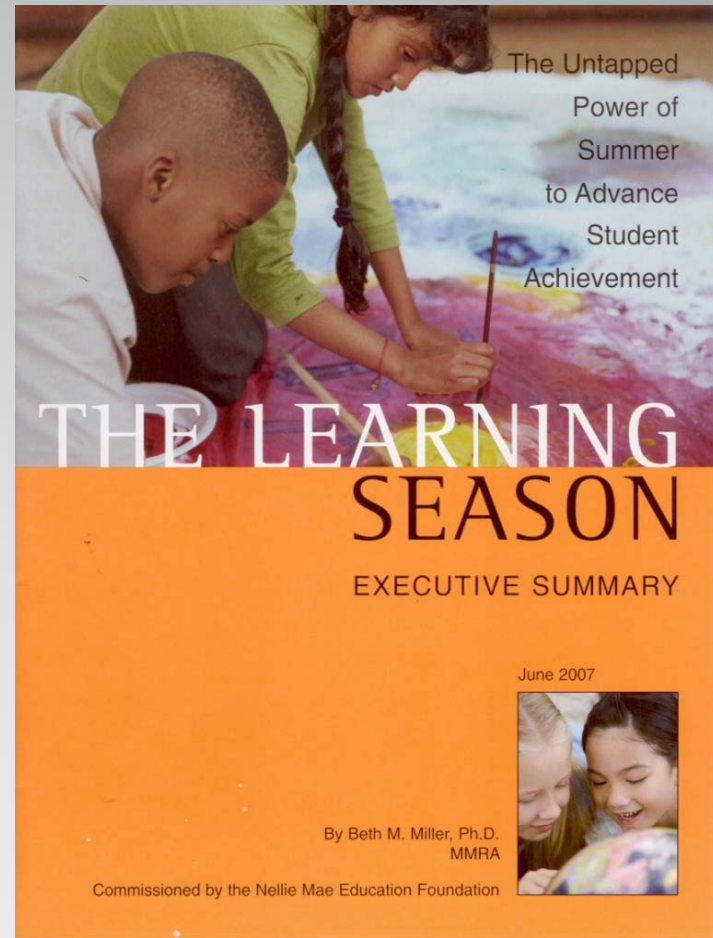
# Summer Learning



**“The organized summer camp is the  
greatest contribution America has  
made to education.”**

(former Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot, 1922)

- All children learn at about the same rate (at least in terms of basic skills) during the school year.
- True for all socio-economic groups
- Differences in achievement between (poor/middle-class children )based in inequalities that children experience outside of school.
  - Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996



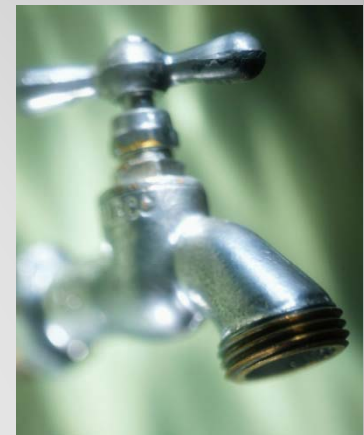
## Summer Learning

- Summer learning loss

- **Math skills** ⇒ Children lose an average of 2.6 months of grade equivalency in math skills.
- **Reading skills** ⇒ Middle-class children gain in the summer while lower-income children lose ground.

- Faucet theory

- on during school; off during summer



# Summer Learning

- Influence of camp on increases in developmental outcomes (previous slides) may lead to increased academic performance. (*Children are in a good place to learn!*)
- When camps have an **intentional focus on academic skills**, there can be important impacts on summer learning.
- Camp-school partnerships exist all around the country in many forms. Many **case studies** exemplify how camp experiences can address summer learning loss.

## Camps are Contexts for Summer Learning

- **Break-Aways Program (New York)**

- School-camp partnership model conceived by the former chancellor of public schools in New York City.
- Summer of 1998 (20 camps and 1,500 children)- within 4 years, program grew to include 10,000 + students attending 100 camps
- Students attend summer camp 21-28 days (20 students+1 teacher per school)
- Each day's activities include an equivalent of 3 hours of literacy education integrated into camp program
- Children appear to score higher on standardized tests than those who did not attend camp. Campers also tend to demonstrate higher levels of emotional and social development and leadership skills.

**Camps are Contexts for  
Summer Learning**

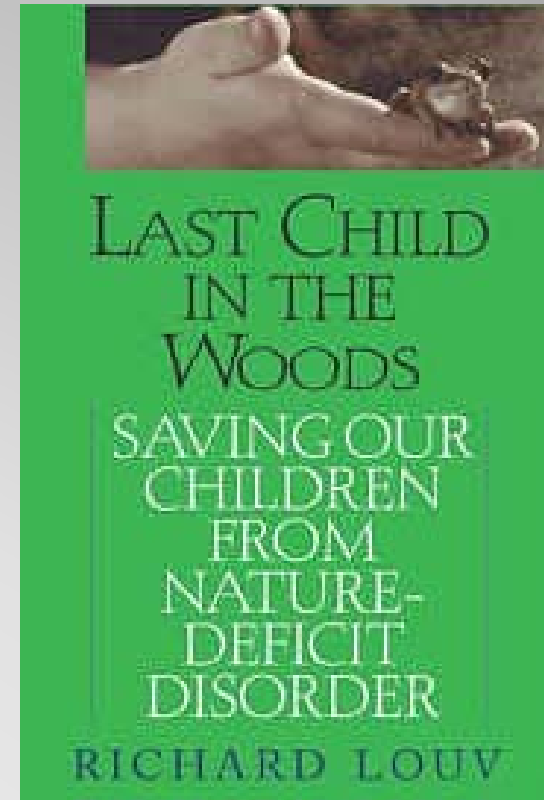
- Alternative Classroom Experience; Camp Pfeiffer; Little Rock, AR
  - Camp Pfeiffer's director approached local schools about ways the camp might play a larger role in students' development
  - 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students were chosen by their teachers for a 5-week residential camping experience program based on their need for more intense academic and behavioral work
  - Students spent all of their time at camp—more opportunities to study and gain experiences that stimulate learning, leadership, and citizenship
  - Participating students achieved a one-grade-level improvement in both math and reading test scores

## Camps are Contexts for Summer Learning

# Intimacy with Nature



- Fewer and fewer children are receiving authentic nature-based experiences
- Children are plugged into some kind of electronic medium an average of 5½ hours a day (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005)
- Parental fears about safety
- Barriers (limited spaces, limited knowledge, access)



## Children are Disconnected

- Nature-based outdoor settings reduce ADHD symptoms in children.
- Nature-based experiences lower stress levels and improve mood.
- Direct experience in nature simultaneously stimulates all of a child's senses, and thus facilitate learning.

## Benefits of Nature-Based Experiences for Children

- Camps are perfect settings for...
  - making children more aware of nature,
  - educating children about nature,
  - helping children to develop nature-based outdoor skills,  
and
  - facilitating in children an on-going appreciation and interest in nature

## Camps Provide Nature-Based Experiences

# (Positive) Risk-Taking



- Teens are hard-wired to take risks
- Risks don't have to be negative
  - Reckless driving; drinking; drug use; early sexual behavior
- Research suggests that young people often associate risk with positive activities.
  - Teens Today research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group

**Risk**

- Adolescence - incredible physical and cognitive growth. Teen boys and girls experience **neurological “rewiring,”** ⇒ explains changes in self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization, and planning.
- Risky behaviors that may have been attributed to hormones or lack of emotional maturity are increasingly linked to a **natural neurochemical process.** (National Institute of Mental Health and McLean Hospital in Massachusetts)
- As children grow, these risky behaviors tend to increase. **Teens are likely to take risks in order to assert their independence.**
- Creating **meaningful opportunities for positive risk taking** can not only decrease the likelihood of negative risk taking but also satisfy a developmentally driven desire for self-discovery and new experiences.
  - Teens Today; SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) / Liberty Mutual Group

## Teen Development

- Camp has long been viewed as an ideal environment for learning and self-exploration.
- Young people who take positive risks are less likely to take negative ones.
- Camp is an excellent environment to learn and practice positive risk taking.
  - Teens Today research; SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) / Liberty Mutual Group

## Positive Risks at Camp

Play!



- Over the last 20 years, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week; 8 of those lost hours were once spent in unstructured play and outdoor activities
- Amount of time children spend in organized sports has doubled
- # of minutes children devote to passive spectator leisure (not counting television, but including watching sports) has increased 5x from 30 min. to 3+ hours
  - David Elkind, *The Power of Play*, 2007

## Diminished Time for Play

- Physical/Health Consequences
  - “emotional, behavioral and developmental needs [of children] are not being met...” Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health, 2002
  - 2/3 children in U.S. suffer at least one health problem
  - 13% of children are obese
  - 2 million children on Ritalin and other ADHD medications
- Psychological Consequences
  - Children don't know how to play; to be spontaneous; to exercise their imaginations and predisposition for fantasy
    - David Elkind, *The Power of Play*, 2007

## Physical/Psychological Consequences

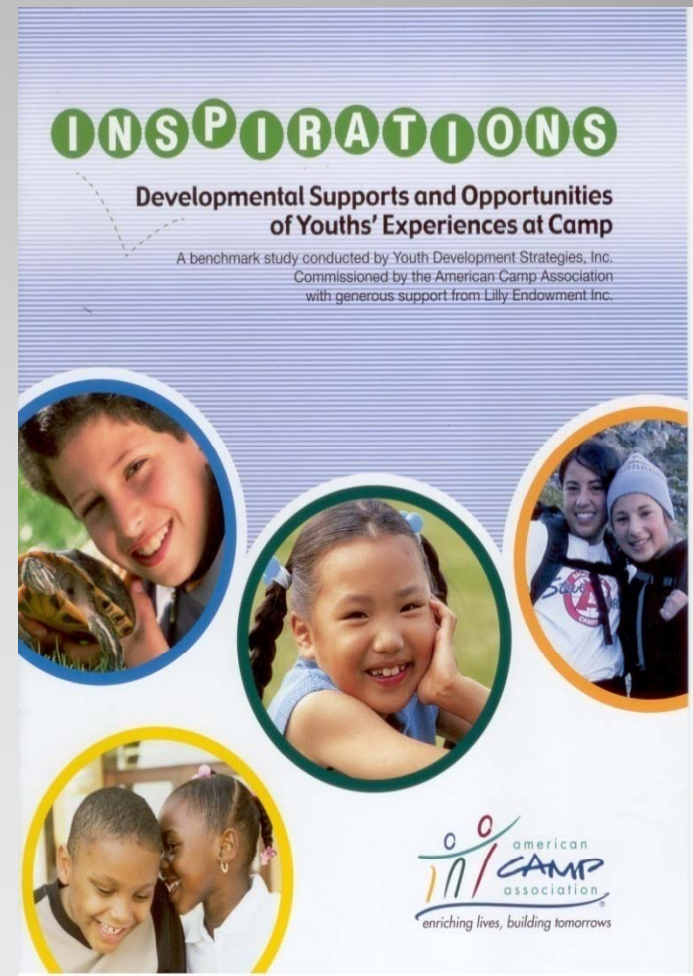
- Camp provides the opportunity for physical activity and healthy choices (foods, activity, rest).
- Camp exposes children to unstructured time and the opportunity to engage their imaginations and sense of wonder.
- Camp gives children a chance to be “who they really are”

## Play and Physical Activity at Camp

# Developmental Supports and Opportunities



- Summer of 2004
  - 7,645 boys and girls (ages 10-18)
  - 80 accredited day / resident camps
  - End-of-camp questionnaires
  - *Camps from this audience???*
  
- Youth Development Strategies Incorporated (YDSI)
  
- Developmental “supports and opportunities”
  - Supportive Relationships
  - Safety (Physical and Emotional)
  - Youth Involvement
  - Skill Building



**Build Community  
Capacity and Conditions  
for Change (E)**



**Implement Community  
Strategies to Enhance  
Supports and Opportunities  
for Youth (D)**



**Increase Supports  
and Opportunities  
for Youth (C)**

- Adequate nutrition, health and shelter
- Multiple supportive relationships
- Meaningful involvement
- Challenging and engaging skill building activities
- Safety



**Improve Youth  
Development  
Outcomes (B)**



**Improve Long-  
Term Outcomes  
in Adulthood (A)**

# Community Action Framework for Youth Development

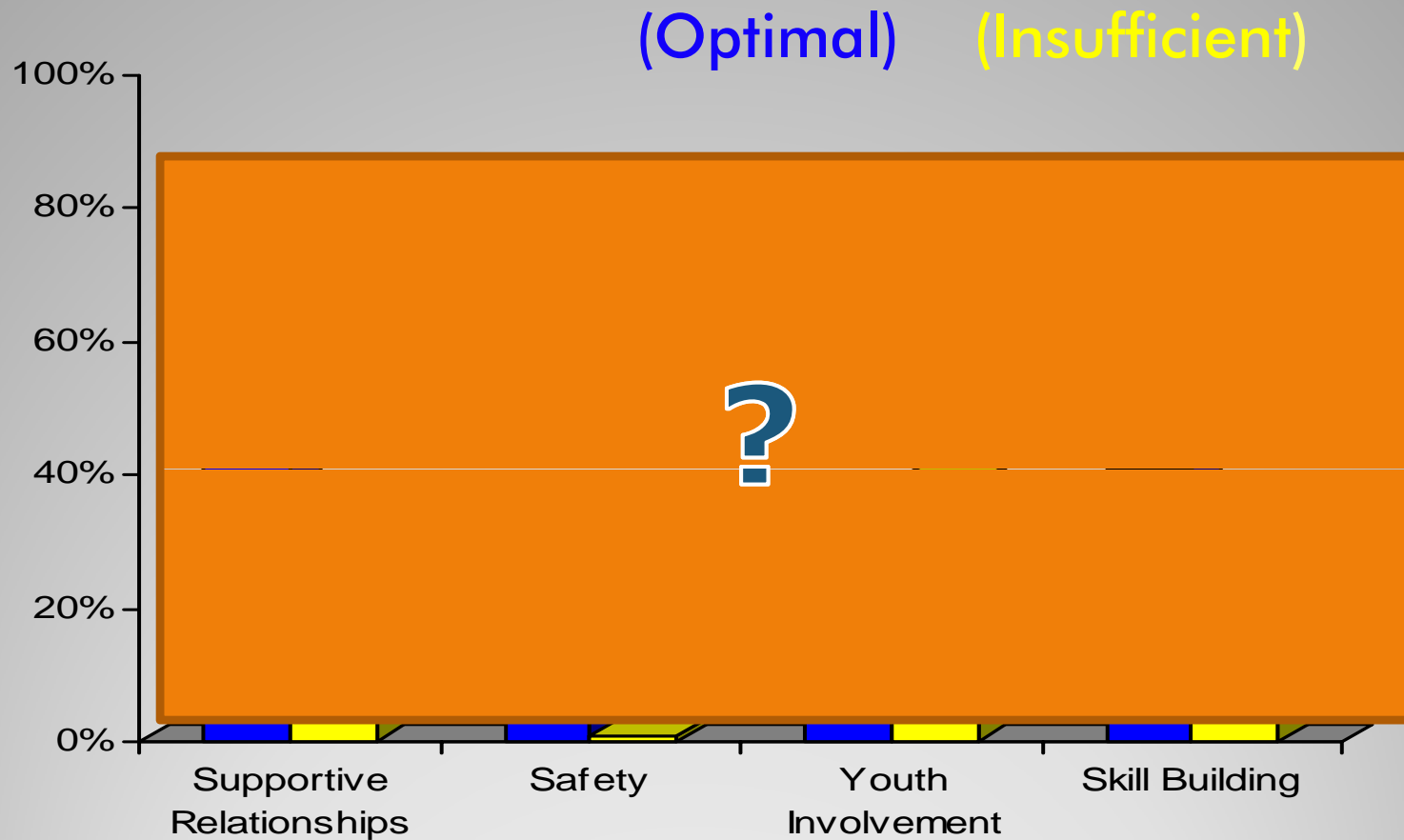
© Connell & Gambone 1998



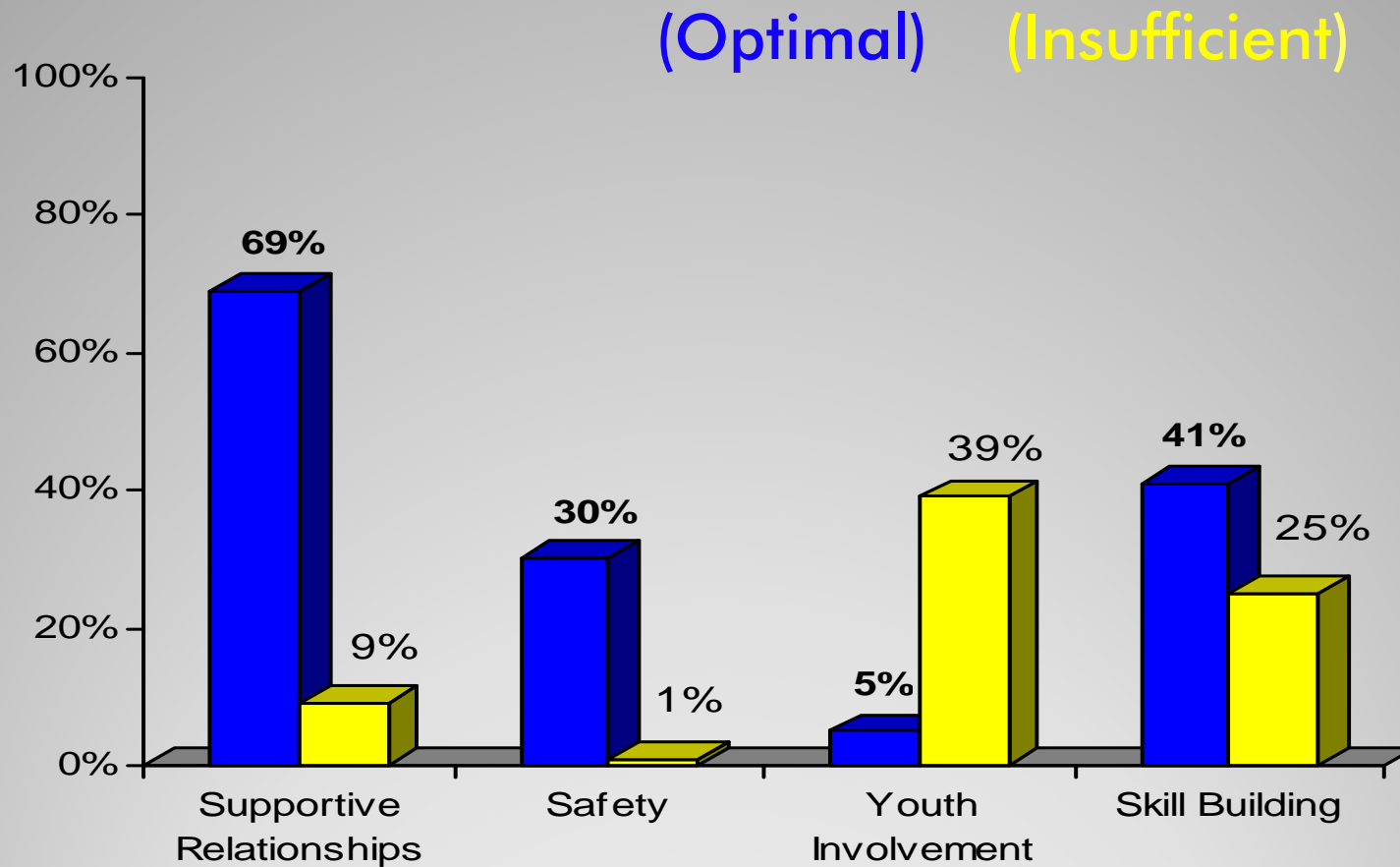
(Based upon what we learned, this is a likely scenario for a given camp!)

- “Optimal” -- the level you are aiming for
- “Insufficient” -- you want to move kids from this point toward the optimal level

## Measuring What Children Say About Supports and Opportunities



## Overall Supports and Opportunities (n=80 day / resident camps)



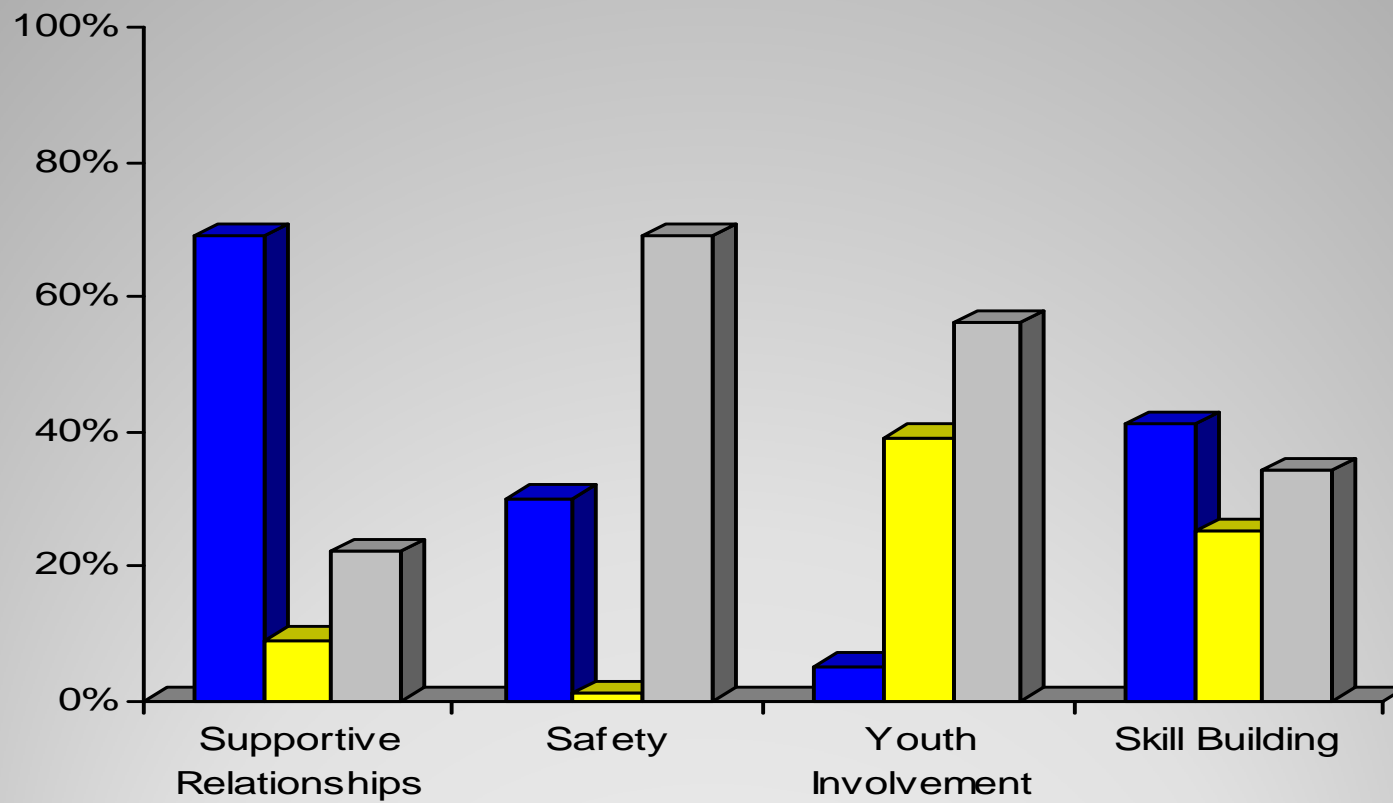
# Overall Supports and Opportunities (n=80 day / resident camps)

- “Optimal” -- the level you are aiming for
- “Insufficient” -- you want to move kids from this point toward the optimal level

There is a very large gray area in-between. Many camps are in this area.

Shows the opportunity for improvement.

(Optimal) (Insufficient)



- Camps, more than some other youth programs, provide positive developmental environments for youth, especially with regards to the development of supportive relationships (with adults and peers) and in skill building.
- The value of camp for campers is enhanced when young people attend camps in multiple summers (or for sessions that are as long as is practical).

## Making Sense

- Campers perceive safety at camp differently than adults.
- Directors were surprised to learn that their efforts in risk management address different safety issues than the ones that concern campers.
- Staff need training to help them think about the camp experience from the perspective of the camper. (Do campers feel safe throughout all parts of the day?)

## Making Sense

- Campers (other than CITs) reported few opportunities for meaningful involvement in leadership and decision-making (about things that matter).
- Greatest challenge for camps (and other youth-serving organizations) is to provide meaningful opportunities for youth to learn and practice life-building skills in leadership and decision-making.
- Staff need training in helping youth be involved in leadership and decision-making.

## Making Sense

- Adventure and exploration
- Friendships with peers and adults
- Reduced summer learning loss
- Connectedness with nature
- Positive risk-taking
- Increased physical activity
- Opportunities for play and imagination
- Safety
- Skill building
- Engagement and leadership opportunities

## 10 Reasons Why Camp is Important for Children



*Barry A. Garst, Ph.D.*  
*Director of Research Application*  
*[bgarst@ACAcamps.org](mailto:bgarst@ACAcamps.org)*

american **CAMP** association®