

OVERVIEW

An Overview of Three American Camp Association (ACA) Publications: *Directions*, *Inspirations*, and *Innovations**

Directions (Published in 2005)

This publication documents the results of the first large-scale national research project designed to measure outcomes of the camp experience. Eighty ACA-Accredited Camps® from across the country took part in the groundbreaking study, including day and resident camps, one-week and multi-week camps, single gender and co-ed camps, private and agency camps, and religiously and non-religiously affiliated camps. From this representative national sample, more than 5,000 families participated in the study that resulted in the largest set of data ever collected at summer camps. Data were collected from parents; children (between ages eight–fourteen); camp counselors; camp directors; and select senior staff. Significant growth in four areas was reported: Positive Identity, Social Skills, Physical & Thinking Skills, and Positive Values & Spirituality. The overall results of this study suggest that a stay at summer camp typically benefits children in the following ways: (a) Children become more confident and experience increased self-esteem; (b) Children develop more social skills that help them make new friends; (c) Children grow more independent and show more leadership qualities; (d) Children become more adventurous and willing to try new things; and (e) Children realize spiritual growth, particularly at camps that emphasize spirituality.

Inspirations (Published in 2006)

This publication documents an innovative study that examined the extent to which camp offers the kinds of experiences and elements that research has shown are critical to healthy adolescent development. This study answered the question, “How much does camp contribute to this developmental process?” During the summer of 2004, a total of 7,645 boys and girls (between ages ten–eighteen), who were attending one of eighty ACA-accredited day or resident camps, completed questionnaires during camp. The questions were developed by Youth Development Strategies Inc. (YDSI) to measure four critical domains of developmental supports and opportunities: Supportive Relationships, Safety, Youth Involvement, and Skill Building. The results indicated that the greatest strength of camp was Supportive Relationships, which reflected the quality of relationships between youth and adult staff. For example, nearly 70% of campers experienced the highest level of support (i.e., “developmentally optimal levels”) at camp compared to an average of 40% of youth in some community-based organizations and between 15%-20% in some secondary schools. This study provided important baseline data for selected program improvements at camp.

Innovations (Published in 2006)

Building off of the results reported in *Inspirations*, this publication documents the results of a multi-year research project to explore and identify effective practices that contributed to quality supports and opportunities for positive youth development in a camp setting. Following *Inspirations*, ACA undertook a Program Improvement Project in 2005 to explore efforts to create even stronger developmental experiences for youth. ACA and YDSI worked with a subset of twenty-three camps from the original eighty day and resident ACA-accredited camps in the 2004 sample to identify strategies that strengthen the experience of youth in four domains of developmental supports and opportunities: Supportive Relationships, Safety, Youth Involvement, and Skill Building. Over 2,200 youth from these twenty-three camps provided survey data that allowed camps to reflect, assess their practices and structures, and implement improvement strategies in these “supports and opportunities” areas that were appropriate for their individual camps. The results of the program improvement process suggested that camps were able to increase the number of campers who reported optimal experiences, particularly in Youth Involvement and Skill Building. For example, 83% of the camps experienced improvement in one or more areas of Youth Involvement. The consistent pattern of significant improvements in the developmental quality of youths’ experiences at camp showed that intentional assessment and planning yielded a better camper experience. Camps that implemented changes across all three areas of organizational practice (i.e., camp structure, camp policies, and camp activities) were twice as successful at producing change across the developmental supports and opportunities as camps that addressed only one or two of these areas.

* For more information about American Camp Association research, visit www.ACAcamps.org/research