

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

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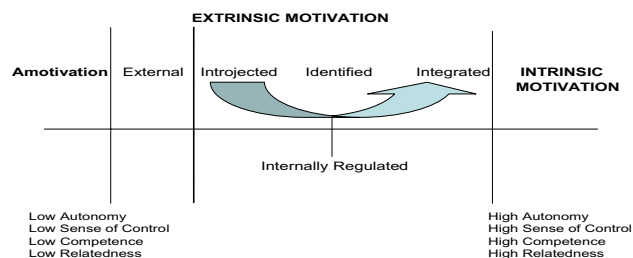
Camp is a place where young people can experience supports and opportunities for their social, psychological, and physical development. Experiences at camp can have far-reaching effects on people's lives. At camp, youth can explore identities, develop skills and interests, make choices, and experience intrinsic motivation. Opportunities to satisfy these developmental tasks can help youth in their transition to adulthood, as youth learn to persevere through challenges and discover how to make obligatory tasks personally meaningful.

One theory that can be useful in understanding how the context of camp supports youth development is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT examines psychological processes that occur within the social setting of camp. SDT is generally defined as "When self-determined, people experience a sense of freedom to do what is interesting, personally important, and vitalizing." The basic assumptions of SDT are that 1) human beings are active (rather than passive) in their development; 2) they are naturally inclined toward growth and development, and; 3) they have a set of basic psychological needs that is universal for all people.

There are two parts of SDT that are particularly useful to understanding youth development at camp: **motivation**, and support for the basic needs for **autonomy, relatedness, and competence**. SDT views **motivation** as being a dynamic, constantly evolving process, in contrast to a static, enduring one that is proposed by other motivational theories. 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 exists within an activity, such as attending camp to attain a reward or to avoid punishment. **Introjected motivation** describes internalization of behaviors based on the provision of relatedness, 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.

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



SDT also suggests that everyone has basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to the need to feel choice and control in one's behaviors. When acting with autonomy, one can use available information to guide their actions and achieve goals. The need for relatedness refers to the need to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with others. When young people feel that they have a secure relational base, they feel more self-determined to explore interests. The need for competence is met when one feels capable, such as when receiving positive and informational feedback, rather than negative, personally controlling feedback. When people feel that these needs are satisfactorily met, they internalize positive values and attitudes associated with a behavior. Frequent feelings of internal motivation enhance psychological health and overall well being.

Research Says

- A review of SDT-related literature revealed that **autonomously-motivated** students thrive in educational settings, and students benefit most when teachers support their **autonomy**, (Reeve, 2002).
- More **intrinsic** forms of **motivation** were fostered by **autonomy** supportive coaching relationships, and this state was associated with greater persistence in competitive swimming 22 months later. **Amotivated** swimmers had the highest rate of attrition over time, (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, Briere, 2002).
- Physical education (PE) teachers' support of their students' needs for **competence, relatedness, and autonomy** positively predicted self-determined motivation. This situation was further linked to positive affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, and positive intentions to engage in optional PE activities the next year. Students who felt **competent** in PE were more likely to find it inter-

esting and want to continue participation. Students also felt related to others in the friendships made through their PE participation. Motivation (especially for girls) was enhanced when students were offered choices (Ntoumanis, 2005).

- For early adolescents, feeling **related** to parents and teachers was associated with self-esteem and adaptive functioning in school, but feeling **related** to peer friends was not, (Ryan, Stiller, Lynch, 1994).
- Social activities such as meaningful talk and feeling understood and appreciated by interaction partners predicted satisfaction of **relatedness** needs, (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, Ryan, 2000).

Camp Research and Self-Determination

- Perceived **autonomy** support positively predicted campers' feeling **competent** at managing their diabetes (Hill & Sibthorp, 2006). Staff should be trained to create an autonomy supportive environment that includes opportunities for campers to evaluate their own performances, have choices, learn how to find information, and understand rationales for behavior change that are relevant to them.
- Campers with visual impairments reported low self-determination and feelings of control in all domains of their lives—home, school, friends, health care, and physical education classes. Over 40% of daily choices were made for them by counselors, teachers, parents, etc. Adults should provide more opportunities for self-determination in all aspects of youths' daily lives, such as through assisted and supportive recreation activities, social events, goal setting, and daily activities. Additionally, adults should increase their understanding of abilities and limitations of students, and provide instruction in self-determination skills, (Robinson & Lieberman, 2004).
- Ramsing & Sibthorp (2006) found that noncompetitive activities and camper-centered approaches to instruction predicted increased perceptions of **autonomy** support by girls and boys at diabetes camp. However, competitive activities and leader-centered approaches to instruction led to decreased perceptions of **autonomy** support for girls. Art activities led to more perceptions of autonomy support than sports, games, and athletics did, and older campers perceived more **autonomy** than younger campers. Camps should consider camper characteristics as they design and lead activities and interactions to foster feelings of autonomy.

Bottom Line

Learning how to internalize activities and make them relevant to one's self is a key developmental process. Internally motivated activities are thought to prepare young people for the roles and responsibilities of adulthood through tasks that develop self-direction, self-expression, and motivated involvement. Environments that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness are those environments where internalized motivations will emerge.

Resources

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