

# Challenging Activities and Camps

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Camp experiences enrich children's lives. Camp is a significant context for youth development. Many people who have gone to camp or served as camp counselors

know these statements are true. Yet, because many people agree, only recently have efforts documented the outcomes and benefits of camp. Further, change is often difficult to study and the intangible benefits of camp experiences are complex to analyze. Nevertheless, research is showing that camp embodies many aspects of positive youth development.

Youth development focuses on supporting or promoting positive developmental processes such as competence, mastery, positive identity, resilience, caring, connection, and belonging that are known or assumed to advance health and well-being (Benson & Saito, 2006). Camps are considered youth development programs when they intentionally incorporate experiences, opportunities, and supports to address and advance the positive development of children and youth.

**Challenging activities** are a necessary component that aid in youth development. **Challenging** means that participants stretch beyond their current range of knowledge and skills and have opportunities to test and master their skills. Activities that tap into young people's natural curiosity and interest in discovery will motivate, rather than discourage, their eagerness to learn (Community Network for Youth Development, 2006)

## Research Says

- Gambone and her colleagues (1997; 2002) noted that youth must have **challenging** and interesting activities. These opportunities should result in **engaging activities** and learning experiences that result in a sense of growth and progress in skill and abilities. Youth can become bored if they are not challenged and boredom can lead to risky behaviors.
- National Academy of Sciences (2001) listed elements of youth programs including opportunities for **skill building and mastery**. Skill building encourages young people to expand their understanding and knowledge of themselves and

their environment and master specific new concepts and skills.

- Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified essential features of positive developmental settings that included opportunities for **skill building** (to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social skills, exposure to intentional learning experiences).
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992) reported that some activities are better than others and are considered "high yield activities." These activities typically are goal-oriented, offer **challenges** to overcome, build skills and increase competency, and require persistence, commitment, and continuity to participate over time. In addition, these activities need to be self-determined and intrinsically interesting.

## Camp Research and Challenging Activities

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% 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.
- Children have different participation styles and varying degrees of success related to **adventure**

**camp**s (Zmundy, Curtner-Smith, & Steffen, 2009). The researchers found, however, that no hierarchy of styles existed and there was no sign of bullying. They offered that the results may have been due to the heavy focus on affective objectives within adventure education, lower student–teacher ratios, higher levels of supervision and management, and greater instructional intent and skill

- Garst and Bruce (2003) surveyed 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.
- Identity development of youth participating in a 2-week outdoor adventure program was studied by Duerden, Taniguchi, and Widmer (2012). Among the categories that emerged regarding the program experiences were: **new experiences, challenge, acquisition of new skills and knowledge,** and new self-perceptions. The findings added to knowledge about identity formation antecedents and the intentional design of contexts, such as camp experiences, to promote identity development.
- 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.
- Adventure-based programming is an example of exemplary youth development practice according to Sibthorp and Morgan (2011). They suggested that certain activities afford greater developmental experiences for youth. These adventure activities are goal oriented, require discipline and attention, offer **challenge, build skills,** and require persistence over time.
- 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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