

# Decision-Making and Camps

Karla A. Henderson, Ph.D.  
North Carolina State University



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.

One important outcome of camp is for children and adolescents to become better **decision-makers**. **Decision-making** is defined as taking personal responsibility for one's life and taking control of one's behavior. **Decision-making** involves thinking for oneself and taking action consistent with that thought (Catalano et al., 2002). **Decision-making** also is linked to goal-setting and problem-solving. Making good decisions and carrying them out is a life skill essential for development into adulthood.

## Research Says

- Young people need choice and voice (Witt & Caldwell, 2005)
- Youth development researchers such as Gambone and her colleagues (2002) demonstrated that youth need to have opportunities to make age-appropriate **decisions** for themselves and others. They need to be able to decide what activities to participate in, choose responsible alternatives, and take part in implementing the choices.
- As children get older, poor **decisions** have greater consequences than when they are younger. For example, in adolescence, poor **decisions** (e.g., school, sex) have more negative consequences than in childhood (Lerner, 1995) and the adolescent is more responsible for those **decisions** and their consequences than in childhood.
- The ability for a youth to take an active role in **decisions** and circumstances that impact their lives is sometimes called autonomy or self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Preserving choice and initiative is critical.
- Adolescents can be characterized as poor **decision makers**. Yet, little research exists that examines how people learn to make decisions. **Decision-making** does not follow a single trajectory. It includes both an experiential and analytic cognitive system. Even as children develop the competencies to reason effectively and make normative **decisions**, they also develop shortcut and biased judgment strategies that can be used inappropriately in some situations.
- The process of responsible **decision-making** generally involves an assessment of goals or purposes, an analysis of the alternatives, a consideration of the information about and consequences for each alternative (including how decisions may effect the self as well as others), a decision about a course of action, and the opportunity to carry out and take responsibility for the decision.
- **Decision-making** may be understood in terms of a cost-verses-benefit approach, where behavior is chosen that maximizes gains and minimizes losses (Gordon, 1996). It involves cognitive development but also cultural and societal factors.
- Research about age differences in affective decision-making showed that willingness to engage in a risky behavior because it appears advantageous (and not negative) is highest in preadolescents and adolescents with adults more avoidant because of the negative possibilities (Cauffman et al., 2010). Similarly, Albert and Steinberg (2011) concluded, based on a review of studies conducted in the past 10 years, that information processing related to making risky decisions by adolescents included analytic (i.e., cold) approaches as well as experiential (i.e., hot) approaches. Developmental neuroscience suggests patterns in maturation influence the propensity to make risky decisions among adolescents.
- Too often youth believe that adults plan for them rather than with them. Therefore, youth do not always get opportunities to practice **decision-making** and problem-solving. Youth programs like camps can help empower youth to take ownership and responsibility for developing and sustaining programs (Witt & Caldwell, 2005).
- Hattie et al. (1997) did a meta-analysis and found that the strongest effect sizes were for self control such as independence, self-efficacy, assertiveness, internal locus of control, and **decision-making**. Effect sizes increased 25 months later –compelling evidence that structured voluntary activities can have a powerful sustainable effect on development.

## Camp Research and Decision-Making

Research is somewhat limited regarding the influence of camps on assisting youth to become responsible **decision-makers**. The little research that exists has shown mixed results in terms of the role of camps.

- Chenery's (1991) qualitative study of camps across the United States found that cooperation, getting along, achievement, being allowed to **make choices**, being pushed to be the best one can be, independence and teamwork all related to self-esteem. Children reported how free they felt at camp.
- Dworken (2001) interviewed parents and found they thought that camp provided campers with many opportunities for **decision-making** as a small group as well as making personal choices. "Campers are encouraged to use their initiative instead of the staff taking control of every situation," commented one parent.
- Bialeschki and Scanlin (2005) described in the preliminary research done with Youth Development Strategies Inc with over 7600 campers that youth involvement, which focused on campers' perceptions around **decision-making**, leadership, and belonging showed only 5 percent of all campers in the optimal category and 39 percent in the insufficient group. Thus, camps do not seem to be targeting this area, or alternatively, measurement of this construct has not been adequate.
- Free-choice has been shown to facilitate positive developmental outcomes for youth. Research done at a residential girls camp with a free-choice philosophy indicated that the outcomes were congruent and the free-choice program was integral to the process (Schmalz, Kerstetter, & Kleiber, 2011).

### Bottom Line

**Decision-making** is a key developmental process needed for positive youth development. The youth development literature has not addressed this process fully. What constitutes the cognitive as well as experiential aspects of decision-making? Camp research has only limited information available about the roles that camp can play. This area of **decision-making** offers great potential for youth development and numerous opportunities for further youth development and camp research.

### Resources

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