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.

Emotional safety is an important but somewhat illusive concept to define. Safety connotes being secure and free from danger, injury, or damage. Safety may be considered as having the dimensions of physical as well as emotional safety. The American Camp Association has prided itself in its concern for safety issues at camp through the National Accreditation Program.

Emotional safety for children is not as easy to “score,” but in the past few years much more has been written about bullying in many contexts including camps. Bullying is any intentional hurtful act committed by one or more kids against another. It exploits a person’s vulnerability and creates an imbalance of power (Haber, 2006). Bullying is emotionally devastating for victims. Further, it can also occur before or after camp in the form of cyber bullying. Camp staff training focuses heavily on bullying prevention based on the wealth of research that now exists related to this topic.

Research Says
- Search Institute (Lerner et al., 2001) suggested that “peaceful conflict resolution” is an internal asset with a focus on helping a young person resolve conflict nonviolently.
- Gambone and her colleagues (1997; 2002) emphasized that youth must have a sense of safety that includes both physical and emotional safety.
- The National Academy of Sciences (2001) listed one important element of youth programs as including physical and psychological safety.
- Buhs, Ladd and Herald (2006) found that social exclusion by peers can send kids spiraling down both socially and academically. Exclusion can independently add to or increase problems linked to social withdrawal.
- Gossip as a form of social aggression and hurts the giver and the taker (Underwood, 2003). This research showed that children who were victimized by social aggression had poor self-concept, especially girls, which may also be connected to loneliness, depression, and anxiety.
- Fry et al.’s (2012) study called attention to the importance of creating a caring climate in youth sport programs to foster positive mental well-being in young athletes via their affective self-regulatory efficacy.
- Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified an essential feature of positive developmental settings as physical and psychological safety, which includes safe and health-promoting facilities, practices that increase safe peer group interaction, and decreases unsafe and confrontational peer interactions (e.g., bullying).
- When young people experience safety, they know they can depend on the surrounding adults to protect them from physical and emotional harm and that they will be accepted and valued by their peers. (Community Network for Youth Development, 2006)

Camp Research and Emotional Safety
- Dworken (1999) showed that young people thought camp was a safe environment because safety was intentionally emphasized. Campers in Dworken’s study said they also felt they were (physically) healthier when they were at camp because they ate better, exercised more, were outside in the fresh air, slept better, and enjoyed the pace of life. Campers also noted, however, that camp felt safe because “Lots of people care about you, and you don’t have to worry about material or emotional needs,” and “The world at camp is a lot nicer than on the outside.”
Bialeschki and Scanlin (2005) described the research done with Youth Development Strategies Inc. with over 7600 campers. This preliminary study found that just 30% of campers were in the optimal category regarding feeling safe at camp. However, only 1% was in the insufficient area. The positive point is that almost no campers felt unsafe at camp.

Haber (2006) described how creating positive relationships is key to preventing bullying at camp. Becoming aware through training allows a camp staff member to become knowledgeable of what goes on both overtly and subtly. With training and education, a staff member has the power to deal with it quickly and successfully.

Bottom Line

Although essential, little research has focused on elements of emotional safety for campers aside from bullying. The concerted effort of the camp community to address bullying based on research that has been conducted in other contexts is necessary. ACA has a reference available that contains more information about bullying and where additional resources can be obtained. See http://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/images/Bullying%20Prevention%20Bibliography.pdf

Resources


Recommended Citation