

# Emotional Safety 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.

**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 increases 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

America's Promise (2006). Retrieved on May 30, 2006 from <http://www.americaspromise.org>.

Benson, P.L., & Saito, R.N. (2006). *The scientific foundations of youth development*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. Retrieved on May 29, 2006 from [http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publication/assets/74\\_sup/ydv\\_4.pdf](http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publication/assets/74_sup/ydv_4.pdf)

Bialeschki, M.D., & Scanlin, M. (2005). The camp experience: Being all that you can be. *Camping Magazine*, 78(5) retrieved on May 29, 2006 from <http://www.acacamps.org/campmag/0509camp.php>

Buhs, E., Ladd, G., & Herald, S. (2006). Peer exclusion and victimization: Processes that mediate the relation between peer group rejection and children's

classroom engagement and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(1).

Community Network for Youth Development (2006).

Accessed on May 11, 2006 from

<http://www.cnyd.org/definitions/index.php>

Dworken, B. S. (1999). Campers speak: New England youth share ideas on societal issues. *Camping Magazine*, 72(5), 30-34.

Dworken, B. S. (2001). Research reveals the assets of camp. *Camping Magazine*, 74 (5).

Eccles, J. & Gootman, J.A. (Eds.) (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Fry, M. D., Guivernau, M., Kim, M., Newton, M., Gano-Overway, L. A., & Magyar, T. (2012). Youth perceptions of a caring climate, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, 1(1), 44-57.

Gambone, M.A., & Arbreton, A.J.A. (1997). *Safe havens: The contributions of youth organizations to healthy adolescent development*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M., & Connell, J.P. (2002). *Finding out what matters for youth: Testing key links in a community action framework for youth development*. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc. and Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

Haber, J. (2006, January/February). Bullying prevention at camp. *Camping Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://www.acacamps.org/campmag/0601bullying>

Lerner, R.M., Lerner, J.V., DeStefanis, I., & Apfel, A. (2001). Understanding developmental systems in adolescence: Implications for methodological strategies, data analytic approaches, and training. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 16, 9-27.

National Academy of Sciences. (2001). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences.

Underwood, M. K. (2003). *Social aggression among girls*. New York: The Guilford Press.

## Recommended Citation

Henderson, K.A. (2012). Emotional Safety and Camps. ACA Briefing Papers Series. Retrieved from <http://www.acacamps.org/volunteers/care/carebriefings>.