

Family Camp Experiences

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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 staff know

these statements are true. Although many positive anecdotes exist, efforts to systematically document the outcomes and benefits of camp are needed. Behavior changes regarding many of the intangible benefits of camp experience are complex and not always easy to measure. Nevertheless, researchers are showing the growing relationships between camp experiences and 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.

Camp experiences are also a strategy for strengthening families. As a foundational structure of society, families play a critical role in the health and well-being of communities. The development and implementation of programming to strengthen family relationships is relevant and urgent. Research suggests that family camps—typically a residential multi-day camp experience designed for children and family members—can play a role in enhancing family functioning (Agate & Covey, 2007). Family camp participation has grown steadily with approximately 53% of ACA-accredited and affiliated camps offering family camp in 2010 (American Camp Association, 2011).

Research Says

- Every aspect of the American family is experiencing change, including the number of adults who marry, the number of households that are formed by married people, the number of children that are conceived, the number of non-family households, and the importance of marriage in accounting for total births (Nock, 2007; Klein, 2004).
- The slowdown in the U.S. economy over the past few years has impacted the types of experiences families are exploring, with more families expressing an interest in close-to-home experiences—labeled *staycations*—

rather than distant vacations, thereby potentially increasing the attractiveness of family camps (Sharma, 2009).

- As more families seek opportunities to spend time together (Shaw & Dawson, 2001), camp providers have responded by developing additional family programs.

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- Family camp experiences, which provide camps with an additional source of revenue, have also been identified as a promising strategy for involving youth from minority communities (Mapp, 2011), where issues of personalism and familism may limit participation (Magaña, Hosty, & Hobbs, 2005).
- Family participation in the camp experience typically reflects three motivations: to experience camp as a vacation, to use camp as a therapy or intervention, or for general education, enrichment, or engagement (Agate & Covey, 2007).
- Family camps offer a range of activities that provide families with novel and engaging ways to spend time together. Family members nurture their relationships with each other during family camp by working and living together in a new and different setting (Rosenberg, 2006).
- Families have benefited from family camp experiences in four ways: improving family interaction, nurturing relationships, providing social benefits, and addressing specific family issues (Agate & Covey, 2007). Family camp experiences also promote positive parenting (Garst, Baughman, Franz, & Seidel, in press). By escaping everyday distractions in their home environment, family members are better able to focus on and listen to each other, greatly improving their communication and interaction as a family (Toretta 2004).
- Three theoretical approaches have informed family camp research: *Family Systems Theory* (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), *Family Leisure Theory* (Shaw & Dawson, 2001), and the *Core and Balance Model of Family Functioning* (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003). Family Systems Theory explains how families function and interact in ways that are goal-directed and dynamic. Family Leisure Theory describes how families intentionally plan and facilitate leisure activities to improve family relationships. The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning suggests that

families use two patterns of family leisure—core activities and balance activities—to meet their needs for both stability and change.

- Promising practices based on family camp research include: (a) providing flexible programming with a combination of activities for entire families as well as activities for individual family members and age groups; (b) establishing themes for programs and activities that will resonate with different family members, (c) planning activities in which family members have to practice communication or teamwork skills, and (d) intentionally planning family times free of tight schedules and electronic distractions in the outdoors.

Bottom Line

Family camp experiences offer an effective and popular programming approach to promote positive family outcomes. With the growing interest in family camp experiences and the indication that family camp experiences improve family functioning, additional research would help improve family camp practices. One, there is a need to understand why some families are unable to participate in order to develop family recruitment and retention strategies that camps can use. Two, barriers for families from different socio-cultural backgrounds may differ and it would be useful to examine how family camp experiences are, or are not, meeting the needs of different types of families (i.e., single-parent families, families with special needs children, and adoptive families). Three, closely examining families' received outcomes with camps' intended outcomes and the activities provided during family camp might provide additional information to aid in intentional programming. Four, research has identified several challenges associated with providing family camp experiences (i.e., serving parents as program participants, enforcing rules with parents, parent communication), but more research is needed to clarify how such challenges are successfully negotiated by participants and program providers.

Resources

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