



Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience: Evidence for Multidimensional Growth

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SUMMARY: Families of children who attended summer camps completed questionnaires to evaluate growth in four domains of youth development: positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, and positive values and spirituality. Results indicated positive changes across domains and reporters that were sustained over time.

KEY FINDINGS

- Children and parents reported positive growth across the four developmental domains from pre-camp to post-camp, much of which was sustained or strengthened at the 6-month follow-up. Camp counselors reported similar growth among their campers during camp.
- Intentionally emphasizing an aspect of development affects greater change in that area.
- Campers reporting the lowest scores at pre-camp showed the most gains.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKING WITH MILITARY FAMILIES

Practitioners could:

- Encourage military youth to participate in summer camps
- Collaborate with camps to increase awareness of unique factors affecting military youth
- Aid military families in determining what type of summer camp would be best for their children

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Incorporate challenging, supportive activities in summer camps for military youth
- Educate families about summer camp opportunities that may fit their children's interests
- Develop year-round programs for military youth to foster positive development across domains

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Continue to support the development of camps for youth in military families
- Recommend developmental screening of young people in military families to identify those who might most benefit from participating in camps or other similar opportunities
- Encourage that camps for military youth intentionally emphasize important aspects of development

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Researchers first identified a representative sample of camps serving children aged 8-14 years; 37% of the camps included in this sample agreed to participate.
- Each camp collected data from campers and their caregivers at three time points: pre-camp, post-camp, and six months after camp had ended.
- Parents and campers completed questionnaires evaluating four domains: positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, and positive values and spirituality. Camp counselors also completed an observational checklist assessing development across the four developmental domains and directors completed a questionnaire about the camp programming and structure.
- Statistical analyses involved comparing domain scores across time points and reporters.

PARTICIPANTS

- A Participants from 80 camps included 5,729 children pre-camp, 3,395 immediately post-camp, and 2,293 at 6-month follow-up. Of the participants, 32% were boys and 68% were girls.
- The children ranged in age from 8 to 14 years old, with a mean age of 11.1 years old (SD= 1.9).
- Ethnic minority families ranged from 13% pre-camp to 11% post-camp to 9% at follow-up.

LIMITATIONS

- Campers are a self-selected sample of youth who may differ systematically from non-campers on the developmental domains evaluated in this study.
- Variables such as socioeconomic status, cognitive ability, or parental support, which have been shown to be associated with more positive youth outcomes, were not evaluated in this study.
- In the absence of a true control group, it is not possible to rule out the effect of maturation on observed changes in growth.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Evaluate which aspects of camp are most associated with positive developmental changes (e.g., relationships with campers and camp staff, certain types of programming).
- Include a comparison group of children not attending camp to more clearly parse out potential maturation effects versus growth related to the camp experience.
- Examine the impact of camps specifically for children of military families.

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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