

# A Review of Social Outcomes for Youth in Camp-Based Settings

*By Josh Kattsir and Kyle A. Rich*

## Introduction

Attending summer camp is a popular experience for Canadian youth. In Ontario alone, camps are attended by more than 500 000 children each year (Mosleh, 2021). Many Canadian teenagers also find their first employment at camps. Camp, and particularly residential camps (those where campers attend overnight, often for one or more weeks) are fairly unique environments—there are not many other times where children and youths are with the same group of people in semi-isolation for an extended length of time. As such, camps are also considered as context for psycho-social development. For example, the Ontario Camps Association (n.d., para. 1) suggests that,

Camp is an important life-changing experience for youths, and truly a Canadian tradition. In a safe and positive environment, not only do kids get to play and have fun, they are provided enriching opportunities to develop life skills like resilience, responsibility, independence, and self-confidence.



In a directed readings course conducted in the winter of 2021, we sought to identify what social outcomes these summer camps had on attending youths. We did so through a review of the literature. While not systematic in nature, our review provides a snapshot of the current literature pertaining to the social outcomes for youths in camp settings. In this article, we review the findings and suggest implications for academics and practitioners.

## Search Techniques

Several techniques were used to search for articles in this review. The search was conducted using the Brock University library as well as Google Scholar. We first searched for key terms related to camps including combinations of: camp, social, outcomes, youths, adolescents, and positive youth development. Search filters were set to include articles from peer-reviewed journals published in the last 10 years. We then looked through the abstracts of many results to identify which would be related to social outcomes and youths camp settings. Following an initial scan of these articles, we integrated other search terms which were common in the literature, such as: medical specialty camps, therapeutic youths camp, cancer camp, and residential inclusion camp. Between these searches, about 20 articles were identified for inclusion.

Following that, we used two additional strategies to find articles. First, using the same criteria, we used the forward citation function on Google Scholar to search for all of the articles that cited the previously identified articles. Some of these were relevant and therefore included in the review. Second, we also looked through the reference list of these initial articles and incorporated applicable ones into

the review, this time within a 15-year window (i.e., published since 2006). This was especially helpful for finding more influential and larger studies that we had not yet identified. Between these methods, we found the remaining articles used in this review. Ultimately, 36 articles were included.

All articles were read in their entirety by the first author and detailed notes were recorded in the form of an annotated bibliography. Throughout the process, the two authors met regularly to discuss themes in the articles related to methodology, theoretical orientations/approaches, research contexts, as well as the findings that were reported. Through this process, we discussed the research being reviewed and how they could be organized and represented. The results of our review are provided below.

### **Article Themes and Review**

There are two broad categories the research reviewed can be divided into: typical camps ( $n=16$ ) and camps for youths with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or other specific conditions ( $n=20$ ). There were articles which incorporated (one or several) perspectives of campers, counselor/staff perspectives, and parents. Of the 16 studies conducted in typical camp settings, most articles either explored youth development outcomes or specific elements of camps and the camp experience (e.g., structured vs unstructured time). The majority of studies in this area focused on campers' perspectives, with several studies also gauging parent or staff perspectives and three studies only gauging counselor or parent outlooks. The other 20 articles focused on camps for youths with various abilities or conditions. Considering these themes, the articles will be reviewed in six areas: (1) outcomes youths derive from typical camps; (2) outcomes youths with cancer derive from pediatric oncology camps; (3) outcomes youths glean from camps designed for participants with specific conditions; (4) parent and counselor perspectives of camps; and

(5) specific elements of camp associated with growth. Several of the articles had multiple research questions and therefore fit into more than one of these themes. In what follows, we review the themes that emerged in each of these five areas.

### **Outcomes of Typical Camps**

The primary aim of this review was to explore social outcomes, so it was not surprising that the most prevalent theoretical perspective in the articles reviewed was a developmental one. Social development was the most prevalent outcome reported. Youth reported feeling more confident with their social/interpersonal skills following residential camp programs seven days or longer (Sibthorp et al., 2010; Thurber et al., 2007). Camp was reported to strengthen teamwork and leadership abilities (Sibthorp et al., 2020; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2017). Relationship skills, friendship, independence, compassion, and empathy were also found to be stronger post-camp (Sibthorp et al., 2020). Regardless of whether youths previously attended camp, they expressed more life satisfaction and perceived competence following one residential camp program (Tsitskari & Kouli, 2010). Youth became more confident and had more self-esteem through participating in residential camps (Seal & Seal, 2011; Schelbe et al., 2018; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2017).

Other reported outcomes included intrinsic motivation (Seal & Seal, 2011; Tsitskari & Kouli, 2010), confidence in problem solving abilities (Sibthorp et al., 2010; Thurber et al., 2007), and a more positive self-image (Thurber et al., 2007). Youth reported leaving camps holding more positive values (Thurber et al., 2007). Physical skills were honed (Thurber et al., 2007; Bean et al., 2016), and youths reported building overall character (Allen et al., 2011). After participating in a targeted camp program, children ate healthier, exercised a little more, and better identified healthy food (Seal & Seal, 2011). The general environment of leisure-

time away from phones was found to be peaceful, enable being present (defined as living in the moment) (Sibthorp et al., 2020), and overwhelmingly appreciated by surveyed campers (Povilaitis, 2019); youths were able to be themselves in safe spaces and try new things (Povilaitis et al., 2019; Schelbe et al., 2018). All studies reviewed in this area were published after 2006 so the results are recent. However, one thorough literature review by Bialeschki and colleagues (2007) explored many camp studies published prior to 2007, which covers where this review did not explore. Every single study reviewed by Bialeschki and colleagues (2007) found evidence of social outcomes, specifically demonstrating that camp helps with skill-building and social relationship formation. These camps also fostered a sense of belonging, maturation, and were generally seen as very enjoyable (Bialeschki et al., 2007). Residential camps appear to be effective environments for youths to glean various developmental outcomes.

### **Outcomes of Pediatric Oncology Camps**

Enough pediatric oncology camps—programs for youths with cancer—were studied to isolate specific outcomes. A longitudinal study found a weekend camp led to lasting friendships, connections, a more positive outlook on life, perceived social support, and youths with cancer as well as their families were better able to relax (Bashore & Bender, 2017). Another pediatric oncology camp led to sociability, feelings of freedom, confidence, and gratitude (Gillard & Watts, 2013). A multisite evaluation of 2000 youths from 19 camps found that many campers developed socially and left camp with a higher self-esteem — over 95% of these campers wished to return to camp the following year (Wu et al., 2016). One study sampling four pediatric oncology camps found that through camp, youths grew a desire to meet new people, make new friends; enjoyed spending time with friends more; became a greater friend to people in their company, and; learned to get along better with others in group environments

(Martiniuk et al., 2014). Specific to camps for youths with cancer, campers felt that the program taught them to better balance the difficulties of cancer with enjoying childhood, and they were able to offset feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation (Gillard & Watts, 2013). Neville and colleagues (2019) reviewed 18 studies on pediatric oncology camps; the strongest results were improved social health, a sense of normalcy, better attitude, and improved quality of life. Many of these outcomes overlap with those found in research on typical and specialized camp programs.

### **Outcomes of Specialty Camps Designed for Youth with Specific Conditions**

In this section, we review a broad scope of camp programs designed for youth with specific conditions. This includes programs for youths with chronic and severe conditions, programs for youths with mental health conditions, and youths who otherwise may struggle socially (such as those living in families affected by Huntington's disease). This is a broad scope, explored under the presumption that youths in these situations may require specific types of support in different social contexts. The majority of articles studying youths with chronic conditions and disabilities explored medical specialty camps, although several looked at separated camps that were broad or used an inclusive camp design. While the most prevalent outcomes from typical camps were social, outcomes from specialty camps were primarily related to feelings of inclusion and belonging. For example, Gillard and Allsop (2016) found adolescents with serious conditions who attended a residential camp program felt a sense of belonging, enjoyment, personal growth like improved confidence, a judgment-free zone to be themselves, and overall like they escaped and were taking a break from the stresses of their normal lives. Wozencroft and colleagues (2019) found that campers felt they were part of a 'family,' saw character growth such as independence and inner peace, and

for many it was the first place they made genuine friends. Many youths reported developing relationships through camp (Gillard & Allsop, 2016; Beesley et al., 2018), and in some cases lasting friendships and connections (Bashore & Bender, 2017). Campers felt accepted socially (McGregor et al., 2017), a sense of community (Bultas et al., 2015; Wozencroft et al., 2019), and truly included (Bultas et al., 2015) — feelings many were lacking in regular life (Wozencroft et al., 2019). Perhaps due to this increased sociability, campers felt more confident after spending time at medical specialty camps (Meltzer et al., 2018; Wozencroft et al., 2019; Gillard & Watts, 2013; Bultas et al., 2015). Youths left camp with a more positive outlook on life (Bashore & Bender, 2017; Bultas et al., 2015). Camp was seen as a place to experience the social interactions many youths with various abilities were missing in their day-to-day experiences (Meltzer et al., 2018; Bultas et al., 2015), and one seven-year study sampling over 1000 campers found that one year of camp led to vastly improved social skills — development mostly retained year-to-year (Flynn et al., 2019). Disease-specific knowledge was also found to improve and be retained (Beesley et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2016; Kavanaugh et al., 2017). Youth learned new coping strategies (Nicholas et al., 2016), had more stable moods (Meltzer et al., 2018), and felt less shy, less isolated, more supported, and more resilient (Kavanaugh et al., 2017). Overall, the research suggests camps for youths with specific conditions derive social development, feelings of belonging and inclusion, disease-specific knowledge, and other positive developmental outcomes from camp experiences.

### **Parent and Counselor Perspectives of Camps**

Most of the studies in this review gauged outcomes from the child's perspective, but several surveyed how counselors or parents perceived a camp's impact on youths. Counselors felt the primary outcomes of camp were confidence, self-

esteem, teamwork, leadership, and positive relationship formation, that youths could try new activities in a safe space, and that they could get outside of their comfort zone (Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2017; Schelbe et al., 2018). Parents observed growth in confidence, independence, social skills, positive self-image, positive values, and feelings of belonging (Thurber et al., 2007; Bultas et al., 2015). Parents participating in one longitudinal multicamp study felt that their children most developed leadership skills, decision making abilities, a sense of adventure, independence, social comfort, and peer relationships (Henderson et al., 2007). These reported outcomes align with youths' perspectives in the same camps.

### **Specific Elements of Camp Associated with Social Outcomes**

The literature strongly suggested that camps are beneficial to youth, and some researchers have tried to isolate specific aspects or components of camp programs that impact this positive youth development. The enclosed setting with full accommodations—and overall separation from regular life—was found to be helpful (Gillard & Watts, 2013; Sibthorp et al., 2010; Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2020). The balance between order and autonomy—through unstructured and structured time—was also identified as important (Halsall et al., 2016; Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2010). Other aspects examined were related to the youths' interactions with other people at camp (Sibthorp et al., 2020), such as through supportive and constructive environments, positive relationships with leaders and peers, and viewing staff as role models (Sibthorp et al., 2010; Sibthorp et al., 2020; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2017). Halsall and colleagues (2016) identified good counselors as understanding, compassionate, and adaptable. However, much of the research on camp elements is debated; a large multisite study by Henderson and colleagues (2007) found that many elements of camp did not affect camp outcomes, including session length, day or residential camp structure,

camper fees, budget size, staff and training, supportive relationships, nor developmental frameworks.

### **Looking Ahead: Implications for Practice and Future Research Needed**

Camps and specifically residential camps are relatively unique social environments. Modern society is very connected through globalisation, industry, and technology, and camp offers an increasingly-rare enclosed social setting wherein youths generally interact with the same people—and only those people—for days at a time. Camps have been associated with positive outcomes, many of which are social. Practitioners need to be aware of how they can facilitate environments for these social experiences to occur. As summarized in the theme-by-theme review, the strongest benefits associated with attending camp programs for youths with chronic conditions and disabilities are related to feelings of inclusion and belonging. These benefits are also associated with other camps, but these programs are places where youths with various abilities and conditions can feel accepted. In terms of typical camps, parents most valued increasing self-esteem, reinforcing values, trying new things, a break from technology, and learning to be more independent (McCole et al., 2019). Camp is therefore a place children learn to be confident in themselves and their actions. When designing programs, directors, programmers, and counselors should ensure their camp's identity is one of acceptance and support. Although much effort is often expended on logistics of programming, the literature suggests that the social environment of camp (rather than the type of programming) is a key element in facilitating outcomes for youths. As a result, practitioners should not only consider how their program seeks to develop these outcomes for youth, but also how they communicate these processes and outcomes to various stakeholders (e.g., other programmers, parents, etc.) engaged in the process.

Several elements of camp programs have been identified as beneficial—regardless of the type of camp—as discussed in the review above. Camp directors should ensure days blend in structured and unstructured time. In all types of camps, children seem to benefit from having both. Structured time provides order and stability, and unstructured time fosters feelings of autonomy and provides opportunities for creativity and leadership. However, structured time should be adaptable, as youths's enjoyment can be impacted with overly rigid programming — camp should be a fun place. Camps should generally minimize personal electronics such as cell phones. Benefits of camp are linked with the enclosed setting, being separate from society, and disconnecting with their friends virtually. Povilaitis (2019) found that youths were able to see the benefits of being away from technology for themselves and appreciated the break. Studies like the one by Henderson and colleagues (2007) have examined many individual elements of camps, such as session length and staff and training, and have yet to show that they have any direct effect on outcomes for youths. While further research should be done, this indicates that the overall camp environment is beneficial. Although research has struggled to isolate the effect on outcomes that any specific element of camp programming has on youth outcomes, ensuring that the comprehensive camp environment contains all individual elements that contribute towards the overall camp experience may help youths get the most out of their time at camp.

In 2006, the American Camps Association conducted a large, national study of camps across the United States. Several studies reviewed in this project used data from that study. A lot has changed in 15 years, and a similar study conducted today in order to update these data would be beneficial. Future researchers should conduct a national camp study in Canada as well — there are hundreds of residential and day Canadian camps for youths across all 13 provinces and territories. Generally, camp literature lacks longitudinal research. This

is an area that researchers should explore, looking at whether outcomes from camp are retained for months or years. It may be beneficial to conduct a long-term study on whether youths who attend camp perform better in school, controlling for factors such as demographics and interests. Relatedly, as indicated in the passage in our introduction, camp appears to be linked to ideas of Canadianness or nationalism. Despite this assumption, little research has taken a broader sociological approach to examine the role of camp in the construction of Canadianness or other broader social processes.

There is a bastion of research on specialty camps for youths with specific conditions. The two main models of these programs are inclusive (a program integrated in a typical camp) and separated (D'Eloia & Price, 2016). Camps for youths with special needs have increasingly been trending towards inclusive models and the strongest positive outcomes derived from camp by these youths are related to inclusion and belonging. D'Eloia and Price (2016) highlighted a lack of understanding regarding inclusive camp models, where separated camps are well-researched. Future research should explore the efficacy of inclusive camp models specifically, to understand how they work and the best ways to design programming to maximize these experiences of all youths in attendance.

## Conclusion

In this article, we provided a review of current literature pertaining to social outcomes of youth camp programs. We explored themes related to camp and program structure, and their relationship to reported outcomes of these programs for youths. Our findings highlight several implications for researchers and practitioners working in camp-based settings. It is our hope that this article is informative and provides a platform for discussion and reflection on how we can design and improve camp programming for youths.

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