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Summer Camp Experiences

Parental Perceptions of Youth Development Outcomes

Karla A. Henderson

North Carolina State University, Raleigh

Leslie Scheuler Whitaker

Philliber Research Associates, St. Louis, Missouri

M. Deborah Bialeschki

Margery M. Scanlin

American Camp Association, Martinsville, Indiana

Christopher Thurber

Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire

Every summer more than 10 million children attend day or resident (sleep-over) camps sponsored by churches, not-for-profit youth agencies, and independent operators. This study explored the outcomes of a 1-week or longer camp experience from the perspective of parents. A national sample of almost 2,300 parents responded to pre-, post-, and follow-up surveys about their children's growth experiences at camp. Parents perceived statistically significant gains from precamp to postcamp in 10 youth development constructs with the highest effect sizes related to adventure/exploration, independence, making friends, positive identity, and peer relationships. Additional gains from the precamp to the 6-month follow-up were noted for leadership. Parents also described what their children learned at camp and what changes they perceived occurred as a result of their child's camp experience.

Keywords: *developmental outcomes; parental perceptions; camp experience; positive youth development*

Authors' Note: Please address correspondence to Karla A. Henderson, Ph.D., Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, Box 8004 Biltmore, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-8004; e-mail: karla_henderson@ncsu.edu.

Introduction

In the March 6, 2005, issue of *The New York Times*, an article appeared on the angst of parents about sending a child to camp (Tugend, 2005). Parents are concerned about what their children do in the summer and expect their children to be safe and happy. In most communities, summer camp opportunities exist sponsored by park and recreation programs, church organizations, a myriad of youth agencies, and numerous private and independent groups. Children can go to day camp or resident (sleep-over or overnight) camps. Many parents see camp, especially a residential camp, as a step toward helping their children become independent. Yet little documented evidence exists about parents' perceptions of the outcomes of camp for their children. If a child does not enjoy camp, parents may not send the child back the next year, but parents' perceptions about opportunities for growth and development through camp experiences have not been systematically documented.

Nicholson, Collins, and Holmer (2004) noted that youth development organizations have a common commitment to young people's physical, emotional, and educational growth. Evidence is mounting (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Nicholson et al., 2004) that well-designed, well-implemented, youth-centered programs that consciously use a youth development model have positive outcomes for both young people and their communities. Most camp programs are considered part of the positive youth development movement and aim to offer experiences that are not only safe and enjoyable but also aid in children's progress toward adulthood.

The purpose of our research was to examine parents' perceptions of their children's summer camp experiences in relation to attributes of youth development. The perceptions of parents regarding the growth of a child attending a resident or day camp program of at least 1 week in duration were important elements in determining the value of camp experiences.

Background

Although many people believe that parents are responsible for positive youth development, many parents also realize that other caring adults in communities can assist them in guiding and nurturing their children in both school and nonschool experiences such as camp. A study by Scales et al. (2004) showed that parents as well as nonparents in communities

believed that other adults can be important in children's lives. Scales et al. stated,

Parents know better than do nonparents how difficult it is to raise children, how impossible it is for a parent always to be there to protect, help, and support their children, and how the expansion of children's worlds, including relationships with new peers and new adults, is an inevitable part of their children's growth. (p. 741)

Adults share a primary responsibility in supporting youth efforts to become successful adults (Witt, 2002). Parents are undeniably the most important force shaping many children's lives, but part of parenting is facilitating youth growth experiences outside the home under the guidance of other adults such as teachers, ministers, coaches, or camp staff. When parents send their children to camp, they are aware of the influence that other adults are going to have on their children.

Parents also have expectations about the out of school time of their children, especially in the summer. Most parents want their school-age children to have fun and relax in the summer. On a continuum from complete idleness to formal learning opportunities, most parents' desires are for their children to have a combination of both (Forum for Youth Investment, 2004). Although age of children and family income play somewhat into what children will do in the summer, camps offer a variety of opportunities for both fun and individual growth. Parents help their children make decisions about involvement in nonschool activities such as summer camps. They have a vested interest in their children and can offer information useful in providing better youth development experiences.

Camp Programs

Camp programs sometimes are overlooked as a venue for youth development even though the early camp directors saw their educational mission as positive youth development (Eells, 1986). Young people have participated in organized camp programs for 150 years. These camp programs offer fun, safe, outdoor experiences that can also be the basis for growth and development. Researchers (e.g., Bialeschki, Younger, Henderson, Ewing, & Casey, 2002; Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000; Chenery, 1991; Dworken, 1999; Marsh, 1999; Sekine, 1994) have examined the value and benefits of camp experiences mostly from the perspectives of campers or staff. Most studies have uncovered positive outcomes on a variety of developmental

dimensions. These studies however mainly have used convenience or purposive samples and have not applied consistent criteria and instrumentation in their assessments. Only a few studies (e.g., American Camp Association [ACA], 1998; Dworken, 2001; Garst & Bruce, 2003; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003) have accessed parents' perceptions of camp experiences for their children.

Dworken's (2001) evaluation of Connecticut 4-H camps focused on parents and included two open-ended questions: What did your child gain or learn from his or her camp experience, and has attending camp made a difference in your child's life? The analysis of these data used a comparison with the Search Institute developmental assets categories described as either internal or external (Leffert et al., 1998). Internal assets included commitment to learning, positive values, social competences, and positive identity. External assets included categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The parents in Dworken's study indicated that children improved the most at camp in social competencies. Parents described the value of their children meeting other campers from around the state as well as meeting international staff. Parents also noted that camp provided their children with opportunities for teamwork and decision making. A large percentage of parents reported that the camp experience provided opportunities for their child to develop self-confidence by facing new adventures and building new skills. Parents reported that having a caring staff was a major strength of the 4-H camp experience. Furthermore, Dworken found that parents perceived that camp gave their children an opportunity to develop lifelong recreational skills in areas such as camping, music, drama, and equestrian activities.

The ACA (1998) used camp directors to survey parents to ascertain the most important benefits for sending their children to camp. Parents reported increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, making new friendships and getting along with others, providing safe places, and offering fun activities were most important. Similarly, Garst and Bruce (2003) developed a standardized process to access outcomes from 4-H camping experiences from the perspective of campers and parents. Garst and Bruce found that parents and guardians identified seven statistically significant areas where they noted change from pre- to postcamp: taking care of his or her things, sharing work responsibilities, taking initiative, taking responsibility for actions, handling success and failures, having a good mental attitude, and adapting to change. These findings from the parents paralleled what campers said about the benefits including becoming more responsible and learning to take care of oneself.

Michalski et al. (2003) also examined a therapeutic summer camp program from the perspective of both children self-reports and parent evaluations and interviews. Parents rated their children higher at the end of the summer than at the beginning related to displaying more cooperation, responsibility, and self-control. These evaluations of the parents also were similar to the camper self-reports. In addition to written evaluations, personal interviews were also conducted with a sample of parents. Not all parents were positive about the camp experience for their children, but more than 90% were able to describe at least mildly positive impacts. The narratives given by the parents provided a means to better understand some of the positive quantitative changes found related to social skill development including cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, and self-control.

Some issues may be associated with parents' perceptions of outcomes. Parents were obviously not at camp and generally relied on what their children said about the camp experience as well as impressions of changed behavior after camp. Parents' opinions may not be objective, and clearly their expectations vary based on what they know about these out-of-school camp activities. Parents would not want to subject their children to an opportunity that was not positive or worthwhile. Parents' perceptions however can be confirmed or disconfirmed by triangulating them with campers. The studies by Garst and Bruce (2003) and Michalski et al. (2003) used both camper and parent evaluations and found somewhat similar results. Therefore, more information was corroborated about camp experiences. Furthermore, a commonality among the parents focused on how their campers had gained in self-confidence, ability to take care of the self and others, and new skills and abilities.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development served as the conceptual framework for this study with its elements drawn from a growing body of literature about the supports and opportunities that are needed for youth to grow into productive adulthood. Youth development encompasses a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood by providing supports and activities that contribute to their growth and development. Models of youth development today focus on creating opportunities and developing assets to move beyond simply problem prevention.

Positive youth development is based on theories of human development and links these theories to environments that promote youth development

(Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, & Theokas, 2005). The community action framework for youth development written by Gambone, Klem, and Connell (2002) for example used a logic model to explain how implementing community (or camp) strategies to enhance supports and opportunities for youth leads to improved developmental outcomes and long-term outcomes necessary to be a successful adult.

One prominent example of youth development is the work done by the Search Institute (Leffert et al., 1998). The Search Institute identified 40 assets or building blocks that appear to be the foundation for healthy and positive development in youth. The internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity, whereas the external assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. This framework provides a script for mobilizing community approaches to long-term efforts focused on youth development.

Other researchers have identified necessary elements and protective factors that contribute to youth development in other ways apart from the Search model. Peterson (2004) summarized several components of "good" youth, including more positive than negative affect, satisfaction with his or her life as it is lived, identification of personal abilities and how to use those talents and strengths, and becoming a contributing member of the community. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) and Lerner et al. (2005) discussed the "Five Cs" of positive youth development that seemed to emerge in studies about youth: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. Lerner et al. argued that these Five Cs are supported when a youth program offers positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, youth skill-building activities, and opportunities for youth participation and leadership. Eccles and Gootman (2002) summarized the elements needed for positive youth development as physical and psychological safety, emotional-moral support, supportive adult relationships, opportunities to form close human relationships, a feeling of belonging and being valued, opportunities for skill building, personal efficacy, and opportunities to contribute to one's community. Gambone et al. (2002) concluded that the common outcome areas of youth development are physical and cognitive learning, social relationships, positive values, and positive identity. Thus, a good deal of research defines youth development as the opportunities that might facilitate this development and the outcomes that may result.

Because few studies about the camp experience have occurred on a large-scale basis and even fewer studies have included parents' perceptions of youth outcomes associated with camp, the ACA undertook a national project incorporating parent feedback to assess youth development outcomes of the

camp experience. The purpose of the Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience (YDOCE) Study (ACA, 2005) was to measure outcomes from the perspective of campers, parents, and staff relative to the structure and program of camps. The specific questions asked were:

1. Did parents perceive that their children attending camp changed from pre- to post- to follow-up measurements in the youth development constructs related to leadership, positive values and decision making, positive identity, making friends, spirituality, environmental awareness, social comfort, independence, peer relationships, and adventure/exploration?
2. How did parent perceptions relate to perceptions of change on the youth development constructs from the perspective of campers?
3. How did parents describe what their campers learned or how campers had changed?

This article focuses primarily on data from parent surveys. Data were collected from parents who sent their children to one of the randomly selected camps accredited by ACA during the summers of 2002 and 2003. The ACA currently accredits more than 2,300 camps nationwide that provide positive youth development environments focused on safety, positive adult role models, health and wellness, experiential education, and personal growth experiences in the outdoors.

Method

The primary instrument for measuring parents' perception of outcomes in this study included matched pre-, post-, and 6-month follow-up questionnaires. This instrument was developed in tandem with camper questionnaires that were also administered on a pre-, post-, and follow-up basis. A full description of the development of the camper questionnaire has been reported elsewhere (Henderson, Thurber, Whitaker, Bialeschki, & Scanlin, 2006). The camper, parent, and staff questionnaires were developed using items borrowed and adapted from other instruments in the field. The camper survey was the same as the parent survey with minor word changes to address the intended respondent. For example, campers were asked to respond on a 4-point scale (4 = *agree a lot*, 1 = *disagree a lot*) to the question, "Other kids think I'm fun to be with," whereas the parent survey stated, "My child believes that other kids think s/he is fun to be with."

Initial questionnaire items were generated by examining a variety of existing and widely used instruments in the field of youth development. In

addition, visits were conducted with camps, and parents were informally interviewed. Four major domains common in the literature (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone et al., 2002) relative to youth development served as the basis for survey development: positive identity, social skills, positive values and spiritual growth, and thinking and physical skills. Initial versions of the survey were pilot tested and field tested with parents during the summer of 2001. The final questionnaire consisted of 52 Likert-type response items with an overall reliability of .92 that measured 10 constructs (i.e., leadership, positive values and decision making, positive identity, making friends, spirituality, environmental awareness, social comfort, independence, peer relationships, and adventure/exploration) within the four domains. The 52 items are listed in Table 1. The four domains and the Cronbach's alpha reliability scores for parents for each of the constructs included the following: (a) positive identity, including positive identity (.81) and independence (.66); (b) social skills, including leadership (.84), making friends (.79), social comfort (.72), and peer relationships (.79); (c) positive values and spiritual growth, including positive values/decision making (.81) and spirituality (.81); and (d) thinking and physical skills, including adventure/exploration (.77) and environmental awareness (.84). All reliabilities were in the appropriate range.

Study Participants and Settings

A multistage, random sampling strategy was used to identify camps for the study. Specifically, camps were selected from ACA lists of accredited camps to represent two types of selection criteria. The first set included day or resident camp status, camp sponsorship categories (agency such as Girl Scouts or YMCA, religious denomination such as Lutheran or Methodist and other faith-based organizations, independent nonprofit such as Easter Seals or Fresh Air Camps, and independent for-profit such as family-owned camps), regions of the country (East, South, Upper Midwest, and West), and gender served (boys, girls, and co-ed). The second set of criteria included camps of varying duration (session length), camp size (numbers of campers served), primary purposes of camp (e.g., general educational, specialized educational, recreational, athletic, therapeutic, etc.), and ages of campers. Camps serving significant percentages of racial/ethnic minorities were oversampled. A total of 92 camps participated in the study with camps in the Eastern half of the country ($n = 42$) collecting data in summer 2002 and camps from the Western half of the country ($n = 50$) participating in summer 2003.

After randomly selected camps agreed to participate in the study and camp staff received training in data collection activities, camp administrators were

Table 1
Correlations Between Camper and Parent Precamp
Survey Items (Examples Shown of
How Questions Were Worded)

Construct and Survey Items ^a	Pearson Correlation
Positive identity	.444***
I (My child feels he or she) have (has) a good life ahead of me (him/her).	.311***
I'm (My child believes he/she is) a special person.	.300***
(My child believes) Good things will happen to me (him/her).	.295***
I'm (My child believes he/she is) an important person.	.273***
I'm not worth much.	.253***
I feel confident in myself.	Camper survey only
Independence	.430***
I do just fine without my parents around.	.314***
I need help with most things I do.	.293***
I need my parents to help me do things.	.275***
I'm good at doing things on my own.	.263***
Leadership	.553***
I help lead a club or team.	.441***
I am a good leader.	.382***
If kids were choosing a leader, they might vote for me.	.381***
I'm pretty bad at leading activities.	.347***
I get other kids together for games.	.352***
Other kids look up to me.	.309***
Making friends	.488***
I introduce myself to new kids.	.451***
I like to talk to kids I don't know yet.	.338***
I like to play with new kids.	.309***
I talk to kids who are different from me.	.254***
Social comfort	.429***
It's hard to make new friends.	.316***
I worry about making friends.	.315***
It's hard to keep new friends.	.277***
I worry my feelings will be hurt if I like other people too much.	.257***
Peer relationships	.497***
Other kids think I'm fun to be with.	.424***
Other people like it when I'm around.	.346***
I get along with others.	.304***
My friends and I get along.	.291***

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Construct and Survey Items ^a	Pearson Correlation
Adventure/exploration	.443***
In the past week, I did a new activity.	.358***
I like to go on new adventures.	.358***
In the past week, I tried doing something new.	.341***
I like to try new activities. ^b	.322***
Environmental awareness	.431***
Recycling is important.	.370***
I care about nature.	.341***
Wild animals should be protected.	.295***
We should take care of our planet.	.268***
Positive values and decision making	.454***
I follow the rules.	.359***
I think about how I can help other kids.	.332***
I know how to make good decisions.	.300***
Before I make a decision, I think about what might happen.	.296***
I help other people.	.264***
Before I make a decision, I talk with other people.	.241***
I respect other people.	.239***
Spirituality	.675***
I like going to my church, synagogue, temple, or mosque.	.694***
I have a close relationship with God.	.593***
Other people help me feel closer to God.	.460***
Nature helps me feel closer to God.	.452***

Note: *n* varies from 3,477 to 5,112 score pairs.

a. Camper survey items are shown.

b. 2003 parent precamp survey says “new activities,” and postcamp survey says “new things.”

****p* < .001.

given target session lengths, numbers of respondents desired from a camp, and age groups for recruiting camper participants. Camp staff then mailed camper and parent precamp surveys along with permission forms and descriptions of the study to the selected households. One parent in each household was asked to complete the survey. We did not collect data about the parents but linked all data analysis to the camper in the family who was involved in the study.

The sample of 92 camps was broadly representative of the population of ACA-accredited camps. More than one third of the participating camps

were agency camps, whereas one quarter were independent for-profit camps. About 57% reported that their most popular sessions were 1-week camp sessions, but 12% indicated 6- to 8-week sessions were the most popular. As for fees, 30% of the camps charged families \$201 to \$300/week per child, 30% reported weekly fees from \$301 to \$600, and only 19% of the camps cost less than \$200 a week. One seventh of the camps were day camps, with the remainder resident camps. Almost half of the camps indicated the average number of campers at any one time was 100 to 200 young people. Of the camp directors, 60% reported overall staff-to-camper ratio was either 1 to 3 or 1 to 4.

This information about the camp suggested that the parents involved in this study reflected middle-class, primarily White families. They sent their children to a variety of camps that served all incomes, but the data can best be associated with a mid socioeconomic status. The average age of the parents' children was 11 years, with 37% younger than the age of 11 and 62% 11 years and older. More than 85% of the campers were White or Caucasian. The initial sample of matched camper and parent pretest responses was 5,281. The posttest response rate was 3,400 for a 64% response rate. The 6-month follow-up had 2,294 participants for an overall response rate from pre- to follow-up of 43%.

Findings

The three research questions for this study examined parents' perceived changes on the 10 youth development constructs related to leadership, positive values and decision making, positive identity, making friends, spirituality, environmental awareness, social comfort, independence, peer relationships, and adventure/exploration; the relationships between parents and camper perceptions; and the descriptions parents provided about the changes they noted. Each of these questions will be discussed in the following.

Perceived Changes in Youth Development Constructs

Responses to items on the parent surveys were summed and then divided by the number of items used to measure the 10 construct areas. An analysis of parent precamp score statistics showed relatively high scores on all 10 outcome construct areas (see Table 2).

Parent postcamp surveys were mailed to campers' homes after the camp sessions were over, and parents were asked to complete the surveys after they had

Table 2
Parent Precamp Survey Score Statistics

Construct	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Skewness
Positive identity (<i>n</i> = 5,141)	3.69	3.80	.42	-1.633
Independence (<i>n</i> = 5,211)	3.43	3.50	.53	-0.769
Leadership (<i>n</i> = 5,037)	3.10	3.17	.62	-0.599
Making friends (<i>n</i> = 5,146)	3.28	3.25	.58	-0.737
Social comfort (<i>n</i> = 5,094)	3.19	3.25	.67	-0.607
Peer relationships (<i>n</i> = 5,132)	3.64	3.75	.44	-1.480
Adventure/exploration (<i>n</i> = 5,088)	3.41	3.50	.60	-1.086
Environmental awareness (<i>n</i> = 5,127)	3.55	3.75	.52	-1.219
Positive values/decision making (<i>n</i> = 5,089)	3.35	3.43	.46	-0.945
Spirituality (<i>n</i> = 4,029)	3.08	3.25	.73	-0.855

the opportunity to observe their children's postcamp attitudes and behaviors (approximately 1 month). As shown in Table 3, a comparison of parent pre-camp and postcamp surveys indicated statistically significant increases (representing improvement) for each of the 10 constructs. The effect sizes were modest but strongest for score increases in the areas of positive identity, independence, making friends, peer relationships, and adventure and exploration.

As an additional approach to understanding parent results, change scores were examined to determine the percentage of campers who showed statistically significant increases or decreases as well as no significant changes in the 10 constructs from pre- to postcamp (see Table 4). Significant score increases for the 10 constructs were observed for higher percentages of campers on parent surveys. According to parent surveys, at least 40% believed their children showed an increase in independence, social comfort, leadership skills, adventure/exploration, positive values/decision making, and making friends.

A comparison of the parent pre/post/6-month follow-up results showed that statistically significant pre- to postscore increases in positive identity, leadership, peer relationships, positive values/decision making, and spirituality were maintained or improved after 6 months (see Table 5). Although scores in 9 of the 10 constructs declined from postcamp to 6-month follow-up, only adventure/exploration went below the precamp baseline. Parents perceived that their child made the most significant gain in the dimension of leadership from precamp to 6-month follow-up.

Table 3
Parent Precamp/Postcamp Survey Results

Construct	Mean Score: Precamp Survey	Mean Score: Postcamp Survey	Difference	Effect Size ^a
Positive identity (<i>n</i> = 3,397)	3.70	3.74***	+04	.11
Independence (<i>n</i> = 3,484)	3.45	3.52***	+07	.13
Leadership (<i>n</i> = 3,295)	3.11	3.16***	+05	.08
Making friends (<i>n</i> = 3,405)	3.26	3.34***	+08	.14
Social comfort (<i>n</i> = 3,333)	3.22	3.26***	+04	.08
Peer relationships (<i>n</i> = 3,411)	3.65	3.70***	+05	.12
Adventure/exploration ^b (<i>n</i> = 3,370)	3.40	3.52***	+12	.19
Environmental awareness (<i>n</i> = 3,382)	3.57	3.59**	+02	.04
Positive values/decision making (<i>n</i> = 3,368)	3.36	3.39***	+03	.06
Spirituality (<i>n</i> = 2,481)	3.15	3.18**	+03	.04

a. Small effects = .10 to .29; moderate effects = .30 to .49; large effects = .50 and greater.

b. 2003 parent precamp survey says "new activities," and postcamp survey says "new things."
 p* < .01. *p* < .001.

Table 4
**Parent Perceptions of Significant^a Change
 From Pre- to Postcamp (%)**

Construct	Significant Increase	No Significant Change	Significant Decrease
Positive identity (<i>n</i> = 3,397)	32	46	22
Independence (<i>n</i> = 3,484)	41	31	28
Leadership (<i>n</i> = 3,295)	45	19	36
Making friends (<i>n</i> = 3,405)	42	29	29
Social comfort (<i>n</i> = 3,333)	40	26	34
Peer relationships (<i>n</i> = 3,411)	32	46	22
Adventure/exploration (<i>n</i> = 3,370)	43	30	27
Environmental awareness (<i>n</i> = 3,382)	29	46	25
Positive values/decision making (<i>n</i> = 3,368)	43	20	37
Spirituality (<i>n</i> = 2,481)	39	29	32

a. Significant change is calculated to be 1.64 times the standard error.

Table 5
Parent Pre/Post/6-Month Follow-Up Results^a

	Mean Score: Precamp Survey	Mean Score: Postcamp Survey	Mean Score: 6-Month Follow-Up Survey	Effect Size
Positive identity (<i>n</i> = 2,552)	3.70	3.75 ^b	3.74 ^d	.12 ^b .10 ^d
Independence (<i>n</i> = 2,657)	3.46	3.54 ^b	3.52 ^d	.15 ^b .13 ^d
Leadership (<i>n</i> = 2,465)	3.11	3.16 ^b	3.18 ^{c,d}	.09 ^b .04 ^c .12 ^d
Making friends (<i>n</i> = 2,558)	3.26	3.33 ^b	3.27 ^c	.12 ^b -.12 ^c
Social comfort (<i>n</i> = 2,499)	3.22	3.28 ^b	3.26 ^d	.09 ^b .05 ^d
Peer relationships (<i>n</i> = 2,576)	3.66	3.70 ^b	3.70 ^d	.11 ^b .10 ^d
Adventure/exploration ^e (<i>n</i> = 2,511)	3.40	3.52 ^b	3.38 ^{c,d}	.19 ^b -.26 ^c -.04 ^d
Environmental awareness (<i>n</i> = 2,546)	3.58	3.61 ^b	3.59 ^c	.06 ^b -.04 ^c
Positive values/decision making (<i>n</i> = 2,526)	3.36	3.40 ^b	3.39 ^d	.07 ^b .06 ^d
Spirituality (<i>n</i> = 1,773)	3.19	3.23 ^b	3.21	.05 ^b

Note: Small effects = .10 to .29; moderate effects = .30 to .49; large effects = .50 and greater.
 a. ANOVA for repeated measures on a matched sample was used to control for error in multiple comparisons.

b. Difference between precamp survey and postcamp survey is significant.

c. Difference between postcamp survey and 6-month follow-up survey is significant.

d. Difference between precamp survey and 6-month follow-up survey is significant.

e. 2003 parent precamp survey says "new activities," and postcamp survey says "new things."

Relationship Between Parents and Campers Outcome Measurements

We were interested in determining how closely related parent and camper surveys were to one another. Positive relationships existed between the parent precamp and the camper precamp surveys. Table 1 shows correlations between camper and parent responses on individual survey items as well as between scores in the 10 construct areas. All correlations were statistically

significant, but they tended to be modest for most items and constructs, ranging from .239 to .694. Therefore, we concluded that camper responses were moderately correlated to matched parent responses on the items measuring the 10 constructs. However, their relatively modest magnitude may also suggest that campers and parents either interpreted some of the items differently or that campers and parents differed in their perceptions of camper attitudes and behaviors. The magnitude of these correlations may have been restricted by the limited range in survey responses (i.e., a 4-point Likert scale).

As noted earlier, parents perceived positive changes from pre- to posttest on all 10 constructs. However, campers reported changes on the pre- to post-surveys only on self-esteem, independence, leadership, friendship skills, adventure and exploration, and spirituality (ACA, 2005).

Additional Parent Descriptions of Change in Campers

Parent postcamp surveys contained additional items that asked respondents to "sum up" the camp experience by agreeing or disagreeing with a set of general statements about camp. Almost all (93% or more) agreed "a little" or "a lot" with the following statements: "Camp helped my children make new friends," "Camp helped my child get to know kids who were different from him/her," and "The people at camp helped my child feel good about him/herself."

Parent postcamp questionnaires also included an item that asked, "At camp my child learned how to do something s/he has never done before. S/he learned how to . . ." Table 6 provides examples of the frequencies of the types of statements parents indicated. We included this table as an illustration of the specific dimensions tied to the construct of adventure/exploration. These parents emphasized the recreational skills learned, although some examples were given related to social and personal skills.

Another statement on the posttest survey sent to the parents asked, "My child is different because of what s/he learned at camp. S/he is different by . . ." As shown in the Table 7, 70% of parents reported their children were "different" because they had gained more self-confidence or self-esteem by going to camp. This open-ended question was coded to reflect a number of the outcomes that were studied in this project as well as related perceptions held by the parents.

Discussion

This study of the Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience, conducted by the American Camp Association in collaboration with Philliber Research Associates, was a systematic longitudinal national research project

Table 6
New Camper Activities as Noted From Parent
Postcamp Surveys (*n* = 2,779)

At camp my child learned how to do something s/he has never done before. S/he learned . . .	<i>n</i>	% ^a
Outdoor adventure (e.g., archery, spelunking, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, rock climbing, rope course)	1,131	40
Boating activity (e.g., boating, canoeing, funyak, kayak)	782	28
Craft activity/skills (e.g., pottery, sign language, starting a fire, tie a knot, whittling)	542	19
Water sport/activities (e.g., diving, swimming, water polo)	370	13
Arts (e.g., acting, creative writing, foreign language, painting, plays, singing)	310	11
Sports (e.g., baseball, basketball, dancing, football, gymnastics, karate, lacrosse, running, soccer, softball)	241	9
Social skills (e.g., getting along with others, having fun, helping each other, making friends, problem-solving skills, sleeping away from home)	175	6
Domestic skills (e.g., cooking, keep room/area clean)	150	5
Self-confidence/esteem (e.g., being a better person, challenge myself, independence, less self-doubt, maturity, not to give up, overcome fear of heights, respect)	113	4
Nonphysical games (e.g., board games, checkers)	98	4
About nature (e.g., learning about bugs or any type of animal, survival in woods)	93	3
Physical games (e.g., Frisbee, hopping, juggling, kickball, street hockey, tetherball)	79	3
Religion (e.g., scriptures, praying)	42	2
Health awareness (e.g., diabetes awareness)	29	1
Other responses	130	5

a. Responses were coded. Examples are given as to what the categories included. Total adds to more than 100% because multiple responses were given by many parents.

focused on camp outcomes as perceived by campers, parents, and staff. Almost 2,300 campers and their parents at more than 90 camps from across the country participated in the study, which led to samples that were generally representative of ACA-accredited camps and the families these camps serve.

The analysis showed that parents believed their children changed positively from the beginning of a camp session to the end of camp on the 10 youth development constructs measured: leadership, positive values and

Table 7
Camper Changes Perceived by Parents (*n* = 1,756)

My child is different because of what s/he learned at camp. S/he is different by . . .	<i>n</i>	% ^a
Self-confidence/esteem (e.g., being a better person, challenge self, independence, less self-doubt, maturity, overcome fear of heights, respect)	1,230	70
Social skills (e.g., getting along with others, having fun, helping each other, making friends, problem-solving skills, sleeping away from home)	322	18
Religion (e.g., praying)	72	4
Showing more interest	41	2
Improved relationship with parents	40	2
Arts (e.g., acting, creative writing, foreign language, painting, plays, singing)	20	1
Water sport/activity (e.g., diving, swimming, water polo)	11	1
Outdoor adventure (e.g., archery, spelunking, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, rock climbing, rope course)	11	1
Domestic skills (e.g., cooking, keep room/area clean)	9	1
Nature (e.g., learning about bugs or any type of animal, survival in woods)	8	1
Other responses	77	4

a. Responses were coded. Examples are given as to what the categories included. Total adds to more than 100% because multiple responses were given by many parents.

decision making, positive identity, making friends, spirituality, environmental awareness, social comfort, independence, peer relationships, and adventure/exploration. These changes held relatively stable into the 6-month follow-up. Scores on all outcome constructs were relatively high on the precamp survey, which suggested that parents already perceived their children to be functioning at fairly high levels before the camp experience.

Some relationship existed between camper and parent perceptions of outcomes. Correlations between camper survey items and parent survey items were statistically significant but modest. Campers indicated less positive change than did their parents. Campers and their parents may have differed in their interpretation of some survey items, or the perspectives between camper and parents attitudes and behaviors may have been somewhat incongruent. Although a safe and enjoyable environment is expected at camp, parents also saw additional positive values in the camp experience that

campers did not necessarily see. Furthermore, parents were able to describe qualitatively some of the changes they saw in campers as a result of the camp experience of 1 week or more.

The results confirmed some of the earlier research done regarding parents' perceptions about youth development through camp experiences. For example, Dworken (2001) found that opportunities to try new skills and to develop recreation skills were important, which confirmed the results regarding physical and thinking skills found in our study. Garst and Bruce's (2003) discovery that many of the characteristics associated with parents' perceptions of the development of positive values in camp were also corroborated in the results from our study. Furthermore, Michalski et al. (2003) found that camper self-reports and parent reports were linked to one another as our study also confirmed through moderate correlations between the pre-camp questionnaires. The value of our study however lies in its national scope using randomly selected camps.

This study provided a means for examining further the meanings 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 help young people become successful adults. 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. This study indicated that parents believed their campers demonstrated growth in a number of dimensions as a result of a weeklong or longer experience at camp. Parents in this study reported that camp appeared to be a significant context for youth development. More research is needed, but this national study provided a starting point for further research about parents' perceptions and motivations related to helping their children have positive and safe summer opportunities.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, this study measured change over the course of only one camp session (i.e., one summer) rather than measuring change over the entire time a young person attended camp (i.e., over the course of many summers). We hypothesize that change scores and effect sizes might be stronger if measured over multiple seasons. Second, the primary study instruments contained items with four-category Likert-type responses that limited score range and sensitivity. Although we determined at the beginning of the study that a four-category response set was appropriate given the participation of younger children, future studies may consider using more sensitive instruments, especially given the finding that many campers and their parents rated camper attitudes and behaviors

high on presurveys, which left limited room for improvement (i.e., ceiling effect). Another limitation of the study was the attrition rate. From the original sample, only 64% of campers and parents who completed precamp surveys completed postcamp surveys. Only 43% also completed 6-month follow-up surveys. A final limitation was the lack of information available about the parents who completed the surveys. The unit of analysis was the camper, and all data were linked to that camper and the setting of the camp. Therefore, we did not ascertain any information about the parents' income level, age, or other demographic information.

The study indicated that parents believed their children changed mostly in positive ways as a result of their involvement in camp. Bias however must be considered because parents may have favored a particular camp or had a history with it. People do not like to be wrong, so if parents thought their children did not have a positive experience at camp, they might be admitting that they made a poor decision in selecting that particular camp. Many parents also invest substantial money in assuring positive experiences for their children and do not want to admit that they did not "get their money's worth." Furthermore, parents may not be accurate assessors of outcomes. Self-constructs may be better assessed by the youth themselves and not by others. In our study, however, campers and staff agreed on positive change in the same developmental areas as parents. Therefore, we have a reasonable level of confidence in these results.

This study provided additional information about how parents evaluate their children's camp experiences. Although more is yet to be learned about the specific qualities of camps (e.g., activities offered, training of the staff, camper ratios) that result in these positive outcomes, the corroboration of parents and campers regarding the positive influence of camp is important. This study also raised a number of new questions about youth development and camp experiences and the perceptions of parents. As Michalski et al. (2003) suggested, using both interviews and paper-and-pencil evaluations may be useful in future studies in uncovering "the full story" (p. 71) about what was happening to children in camp from the parents' perspective. More qualitative data may be useful to collect in future studies.

This study suggested that camps are making discernible differences in the lives of many campers, and parents notice these changes. The literature emphasizes that supportive adults are needed for youth to grow in positive directions. Camps aim to provide supportive relationships for young people, and parents recognize the outcomes. When faced with choices in opportunities for their children, parents seem to be aware that camp experiences can provide unique youth development environments for their children to learn and grow.

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