



Indicators of Youth Development in Camps: An Analysis of Mixed Methods

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Key Concepts:

Resident and day camps offer opportunities to promote positive youth development through structured recreation activities. The purpose of this research was to explore indicators of youth development outcomes through a comparison of two forms of data collected at six camps. Quantitative data came from a study that sampled families representing American Camp Association (ACA) accredited camps from across the United States (see <http://www.acacamps.org/research/ydo.php>). Qualitative data came from onsite observations in six camps that had participated in the quantitative study the prior year.

Key Findings:

- Two of the three camps showing statistically positive developmental change in campers also were ranked higher in using the focused qualitative observation. Two camps of the three camps showing no statistically significant change were also identified as ranking lower through the observation process. (See Table)
- Opportunities for adventure and exploration activities as well as leadership and independence displayed by campers were easiest to observe. Observing indicators for developmental outcomes including environmental awareness, positive identity, and positive values were more difficult.
- This study provided an opportunity to explore the measurement of camp experiences from an external view along with an internal self-report approach. We examined the micro data obtained from the individual campers in relation to the social environmental macro structure of the camp.
- Implications exist for triangulating data and validating methods to better understand how and why youth development programs in camp settings work. Mixed methods and systematic multi-measure approaches offer information for supporting youth development.

Using this Information:

- ❖ The major way that most human services professional conceptualize research and evaluation is by using surveys. This research suggests that systematic observations may be a useful way to evaluate some types of positive youth development outcomes in camp.
- ❖ Examining the behavior of individual campers is important as is the observations of the social environments in which behaviors occur. Using mixed methods for evaluation enables camp staff to focus on individual campers as well as the social context of the camp setting.
- ❖ Observations must be systematically designed with specific criteria established for the observations. You cannot observe all behaviors, nor can you really observe change directly, but you can document behaviors like social skills (e.g., hugs, easy laughter, relaxed tone of interactions, and the knowing of and calling of first names) or physical skill development that might be important to systematically measure.
- ❖ The results obtained through the field observations may provide information that can be further refined in developing measures of positive youth development in camps.
- ❖ Inviting an outside observer or using key staff members to conduct structured systematic observations within a camp has potential for yielding information to complement and contrast pen and paper evaluations of staff, camper experience, and program structure.
- ❖ The process of discussing and refining observation criteria to investigate the goals and objectives behind a specific program can serve as a tool to achieve greater mutual understanding between administrators and front-line staff members. For years, the idea of “management by walking around” has been used. As more emphasis is placed on understanding the importance of intentional programming to reach desired objectives, knowing what to observe related to positive outcomes will be essential.

Source: Henderson, K.A., Powell, G., & Scanlin, M. (2005). Observing outcomes in youth development: An analysis of mixed methods. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 23(4), 58-77.

**Table:
Comparison of Results between Quantitative Questionnaires and Qualitative Observations**

| Camp | Quantitative Measures | | | Qualitative Observations | |
|------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | No. of Significant Items ^a | Positive Significant Item Descriptors | Effect Size ^b | No. of "High" Ratings ^c | Relative Rankings ^d |
| #1 | 5 | Positive Identity | .48 | 6 | 4 |
| | | Leadership | .32 | | |
| | | Making Friends | .54 | | |
| | | Adventure/Exploration | .55 | | |
| | | Environmental Awareness | .22 | | |
| #2 | 3 | Independence | .36 | 15 | 2 |
| | | Leadership | .25 | | |
| | | Adventure/Exploration | .36 | | |
| #3 | 3 | Adventure/Exploration | .44 | 16 | 1 |
| | | Environmental Awareness | .27 | | |
| | | Positive Values | .37 | | |
| #4 | 0 | - | | 11 | 3 |
| #5 | 0 | - | | 1 | 6 |
| #6 | 0 | - | | 5 | 5 |

^a Reflects only items that were statistically significant (Table 1 includes all items)

^b Effect size: Small = .10-.29; Moderate = .30-.49; Large > .50.

^c Number of "high" ratings on the observation matrix

^d Relative rank from highest to lowest of the six camps