

EMOTIONAL SAFETY AND CAMPS

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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

counselors know these statements are true. Yet, because many people agree, only recently have efforts documented the outcomes and benefits of camp. Further, change is often difficult to study and the intangible benefits of camp experiences are complex to analyze. Nevertheless, research is showing that camp embodies many aspects 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 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.

Emotional safety is an important but somewhat illusive concept to define. Safety connotes being secure and free from danger, injury, or damage. Safety may be considered as having the dimensions of physical as well as emotional safety. The American Camp Association has prided itself in its concern for safety issues at camp through the National Accreditation Program. Emotional safety for children is not as easy to "score."

Research Says

- According to America's Promise (2003), society should provide safe places with structured activities for all children.
- Search Institute (Lerner et al., 2001) suggested that "peaceful conflict resolution" is an internal asset with a focus on helping a young person resolve conflict nonviolently.
- Gambone and her colleagues (1997; 2002) say that youth must have a sense of safety that includes both physical and emotional safety.
- The National Academy of Sciences (2001) listed one important element of youth programs as including physical and psychological safety.
- Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified an essential feature of positive developmental settings as physical and psychological safety, which includes safe and health-promoting facilities, practices that increases safe peer group interaction, and decreases unsafe and confrontational peer interactions.
- When young people experience safety, they know they can depend on the surrounding adults to protect them from physical and emotional harm and that they will be accepted and valued by their peers. (Community Network for Youth Development, 2006)

Camp Research and Emotional Safety

As noted, camp programs have been highly focused on physical safety for campers but far less emphasis has been placed on issues related to emotional safety.

- Dworken (1999) showed that young people thought camp was a safe environment because safety was intentionally emphasized. Campers in Dworken's study said they also felt they were (physically) healthier when they were at camp because they ate better, exercised more, were outside in the fresh air, slept better, and enjoyed the pace of life. Campers also noted, however, that camp felt safe because "Lots of people care about you, and you don't have to worry about material or emotional needs," and "The world at camp is a lot nicer than on the outside." Campers mentioned that they enjoyed a structured atmosphere with some familiar routines and benefited from working in small groups. Emotionally, campers described several other positives about camp: "At camp we don't need to impress anyone and there isn't the peer pressure," "Here it is safe to be different, express myself, wear whatever I want, and say whatever I think, to be who we are," and "Actually, why I love camp so much is that it is a haven for a short period of time where you don't have to deal with all the emotional junk."
- Bialeschki and Scanlin (2005) described the research done with Youth Development Strategies Inc. with over 7600 campers. This preliminary study found that just 30 percent of campers were in the optimal category regarding feeling safe at camp. However, only 1 percent was in the insufficient area. Most place great importance on the safety of camp. The positive point is that almost no campers felt unsafe at camp.

Bottom Line

Although essential, little research has focused on elements of emotional safety for campers, this area appears to be essential for camper development. A great deal more research remains to be done about what constitutes emotional safety for campers and what camps do that directly results in these feelings for campers as well as staff.

Resources

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