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Family Camp Impacts on Family Functioning

Introduction
Families are a foundational structure of society that play a critical role in the health and well-being of communities. Every aspect of the American family is experiencing change, including the number of adults who marry, the number of households that are formed by married people, the number of children that are conceived, and the number of non-family households (Nock, 2005). Considering these trends, programming to strengthen family relationships is particularly relevant and urgent. Research suggests that family camps — typically a residential multi-day camp experience designed for children and family members — can play a role in enhancing family functioning (Agate & Covey, 2007).

Family camp participation has grown steadily with approximately 53 percent of ACA-accredited and affiliated camps offering family camp in 2010 (ACA, 2011). Motivations for family camp participation include: to experience camp as a vacation; to use camp as a therapy or intervention; or for general education, enrichment, or engagement (Agate & Covey, 2007). Family camps offer a range of activities that provide families with novel and engaging ways to spend time together.

Families benefit from family camp experiences in a number of ways. Family members nurture their relationships with each other during family camp by working and living together in a new and different setting (Rosenberg, 2006). By escaping everyday distractions in their home environment, family members are better able to focus on and listen to each other, greatly improving their communication and interaction as a family (Garst, Roggenbuck, & Williams, 2010; Toretta, 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore families’ motivations for participating in family camp, the benefits they attribute to the experience, and the overall extent to which families are changed because of family camp involvement.

Methods
To explore the impact of family camp experiences on youth and families, ACA collaborated with Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Virginia. Camps in Virginia and West Virginia offering family camp(s) were solicited to participate in the study using ACA’s database of accredited camps. Sixty-seven camps offering family camp programs were identified and a convenience sample of eighteen camps was selected.

A SurveyMonkey survey, with forced response and open-ended questions, explored families’ motivations to participate in camp, benefits of the family camp experience, and the extent to which families changed because of the camp experience. Directors were asked to send the SurveyMonkey link with an emailed letter to families approximately one week after the families attended family camp. Non-respondents received a reminder e-mail two weeks later. The response rate was 24 percent, with 60 out of 250 families responding.

The potential motivating factors in the survey were adapted from Covey’s (2010) list of “Importance-Performance” factors (such as “knowing someone at camp” and “located close to home”). Benefits of the camp experience were measured using open-ended questions such as “How was the family camp experience enjoyable for you or your family?” and “Describe how camp staff impacted your family’s experience at family camp.”

Three subscales from the Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos, 2009) were used to explore the extent to which families changed as a result of attending family camp: Family Cohesion examines degree of commitment, help, and support that family members provide for one another. Family Expressiveness measures the extent to which family members are encouraged to express their feelings directly. Family Conflict examines openly expressed anger and conflict among family members (Moos, 2009). These scales were modified into a retrospective design. Retrospective post tests are a common method used to assess intervention impacts in part because “response shift bias” is avoided (Howard & Dailey, 1979). Response shift bias is a change in a participant’s metric for answering questions from pre-test to post-test due to a new understanding of a concept being taught (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005).

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive and exploratory statistics, and qualitative survey data were analyzed using content analysis (Patton, 2002). A mixed method analysis involved first analyzing quantitative data and then analyzing qualitative data for themes related to the family camp experience, including benefits of and motivations for attending. Qualitative themes...
were categorized and quantified. The data were integrated in the final analysis to present a more complete picture of family experiences at family camp (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2007). Paired sample t-tests compared scores on the FES responses to examine how families changed as a result of their family camp experience.

**Results**

Survey respondents (n=67) were predominately female (71 percent) between the ages of forty and forty-nine (61 percent). All respondents identified themselves as a parent, with 71 percent of surveys completed by the mother and 29 percent by the father. Respondents overwhelmingly reported being married (98 percent). Education levels were relatively high, with 66 percent of respondents reporting college (33 percent) or professional degrees (33 percent). Of those respondents reporting annual income, approximately 41 percent reported income less than $100,000, and 31 percent reported income greater than $100,000. Slightly more than half (52 percent) of families had participated in a family camp for more than five years and 26 percent of families were first-time participants. Most families (64 percent) attended camp for two to three days. Some families brought grandmothers (17 percent) or grandfathers (15 percent) to camp with them as well as adult friends (29 percent) and youth friends (27 percent).

When asked what factors motivated them to participate in family camp, the top reasons were related to the setting and general experience rather than the camp facilities or program offerings (see Table 1, p. 10). Based on responses to the motivations checklist, the top two motivators were to have a fun and relaxing experience (88 percent) and enjoy a peaceful outdoor atmosphere (81 percent). Spending quality time with family (72 percent) and affordability (70 percent) were also strong motivations to attend family camp. Strengthening family relationships (68 percent), friendly staff (68 percent), reputation of the camp (65 percent), clean facilities (63 percent), provision of cabins and restrooms, (63 percent), and freedom to choose activities (63 percent) also influenced attendance.

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Families described many benefits of attending family camp, including positive impacts of the camp staff, the opportunity to enjoy activities alone and with other family members, reinforcement of good parenting, and enhancement of family relationships. Camp staff were reported to impact the experience in generally positive ways by being helpful or friendly.

Families were asked if their family camp experience helped reinforce good parenting. Of the respondents answering the question (n=33), 60 percent indicated that the family camp experience reinforced good parenting. Furthermore, 85 percent of respondents indicated that they felt the experience reinforced positive family relationships. The most common camp-related factors that influenced positive family relationships were quality family time, the relaxing environment, spending time away from the stress of day-to-day routines, and teamwork involved in activities or living together.

The reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) of the three family functioning FES subscale measures were slightly lower than reported by Moos (α=.62 for Family Cohesion, α=.59 for Family Expressiveness, and α=.63 for Family Conflict) (Saucier, Wilson, & Warka, 2007). A paired-samples t-test demonstrated significant differences with small to medium effect sizes in the before and after scores for all three subscales. Family Cohesion had the greatest effect (d=.36) while Family Expressiveness (d=.12) and Family Conflict (d=.05) had a small effect.

**Implications**

Family camp may be an ideal environment to enhance family relationships. A majority of respondents indicated that family camp experiences benefit families because of parenting reinforcement and enhancement of family relationships. The FES dimensions of Family Cohesion, Family Expressiveness, and Family Conflict all showed significant improvement after attending family camp.

The results of studies such as the one reported here can guide family programming efforts. Because families reported enjoying active experiences they could complete together as well as the opportunity for separate activities, family camp providers need to consider flexible programming with a combination of activities for whole families as well as activities for individual age groups.

Over half of participating families reported that positive parenting was reinforced during their family camp experience. Program providers should create intentional links between specific camp activities and desired family outcomes (Tucker & Rheingold, 2010). Intentionally planning family times free of tight schedules and electronic distractions in an outdoor setting might further promote parents’ reinforcement of positive parenting practices. These family functioning outcomes indicate an important way that family camp providers may promote healthier families.

Camp staff play an important role in the quality of family camp experiences. Of particular importance is the demonstration of genuine interest in children and sense of fun. Training staff for family camp should emphasize the importance of creating a fun environment for the entire family with an emphasis on understanding and valuing each child as an individual.

Residential family camps, such as those examined in this study, can offer an effective and popular programming approach to promote positive family outcomes. The impact of family camps on positive family parenting is particularly promising and suggests that family camp experiences can play a role in family enhancement programs. Future research comparing families’ received outcomes with camps’ intended outcomes and the specific family camp activities provided might offer additional information to aid in intentional programming.

**References**


Howard, G.S., & Dailey, P.R. (1979). Response-shift bias: A source of contamination of...


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there state regulations that impact the response to this question? The second scenario drives the need to explicitly lay out your camp policy regarding confidentiality and privacy of personal health information so your health center staff members understand their responsibility. Are there some things the health center staff might, indeed, hold in confidence but other topics that must be shared with the camp director?

A growing number of camp health history forms include written information that lays out the camp’s philosophy regarding health confidentiality and privacy. For example: Your camper’s health information is reviewed by our health center staff and program leaders. It is shared with other staff on a need-to-know basis in an effort to safely support your child’s participation. We can be effective only if you share information with us. We are not responsible if you fail to disclose something. Use the health form to communicate your child’s needs. Contact [insert appropriate name and phone number] should you have questions or concerns. Such statements help parents understand the importance of disclosing complete information about their camper.

While a camper’s pregnancy triggers a variety of questions, it’s also important to recognize that one will never have protocols to cover every contingency — something new will always come up. With this in mind, provide guidance to your health center staff by adding a statement to their written protocols and/or health center manual that directs them to consult with the camp director/administrator when new, unique, and/or unusual situations arise. This keeps the vested parties in conversation, which is definitely helpful when the unforeseen occurs.

**Bats and Rabies Exposure**

The friendly bat has become *persona non grata* in camp sleeping quarters. State Departments of Health consider a person presumptively exposed to rabies when that person wakes up in a room in which a bat is flying. If the bat can be captured and submitted for rabies testing, the concern about human rabies exposure waits for the results of that testing. But when the bat cannot be tested, presumptive exposure triggers the need for rabies

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