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Barry A. Garst

*Clemson University*, [bgarst@clemson.edu](mailto:bgarst@clemson.edu)

Ryan Gagnon

*Clemson University*, [rjgagno@clemson.edu](mailto:rjgagno@clemson.edu)

Troy Bennett

*University of Utah*

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**Parent Anxiety Causes and Consequences: Perspectives from Camp Program Providers**

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D., Clemson University  
Ryan J. Gagnon, M.A., Clemson University  
Troy Bennett, M.B.A., University of Utah

**Abstract**

Although out-of-school time experiences such as camp contribute to youth development, youth involvement in these developmental experiences is largely dependent on parents who determine which activities are appropriate for their children. A contributing factor to parents' decisions to send their child to camp is the amount of risk and non-clinical anxiety that parents associate with the camp experience, yet little attention has been paid to these issues, particularly from the perspective of camp program providers. It is unclear to what extent parent anxiety is an operational and programmatic concern for camp program providers. Informed by risk perception and parent involvement theories, this study explores (1) causes of parent anxiety from the perspective of camp program providers; (2) operational and programmatic consequences associated with the management of parent anxiety; and (3) camp program practices used to reduce parent anxiety. Data were collected from a sample of 248 camp program providers who completed an online survey that included open-ended questions related to perceptions and observations of parent anxiety, as well as strategies used to manage parents. Content analysis was used to code the data and to construct themes. Constructed themes suggested that parent anxiety is associated with parent-child separation, limited parent camp experience, lack of parent trust, the expression of overparenting behaviors, fear of lack of safety, and insufficient preparation. Constructed themes associated with operational or programmatic changes indicated that camp program providers use a range of strategies to reduce parent anxiety, broadly summarized as communication, staffing, access, and education. Implications for practice and future directions are explored.

**Key Words:** Parent anxiety, camp, overparenting, camp administration, youth programming

**Authors:** Please direct correspondence to Barry A. Garst, Ph.D., Clemson University, bgarst@clemson.edu

## Introduction

Camp is an important out-of-school time (OST) setting for promoting positive youth development. Defined as “organized experiences in group living in the outdoors that use trained leaders to accomplish intentional goals” (Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007, p. 755), American summer camps have served children and adolescents for more than a century (Paris, 2008). As noted by Garst, Browne, and Bialeschki (2011), “camp is more than a location or a program; it encompasses the affective, cognitive, behavioral, physical, social, and spiritual benefits that youth receive during and after the camping experience” (p. 73-74). Camp has been found to positively influence developmental outcomes related to social-emotional growth, skill building, and spirituality (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007).

While OST programs and experiences such as camp may contribute to youth growth and development, youth involvement in these developmental experiences is largely dependent on their parents because of the critical role parents play in determining which activities are appropriate for their children (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Beyer, Bizub, Szabo, Heller, Kistner, Shawgo, & Zetts, 2015). For example, factors that influence whether or not parents are comfortable with their children’s OST experiences may include a number of social and environmental risks parents could associate with OST experiences (Prezza, Alparaon, Cristallo, & Luigi, 2005). In some cases, parents may limit their child’s involvement in OST programs and experiences due to these perceived risks. Garst and Gagnon (2015) noted that:

Limits on children’s OST experiences such as involvement in youth development programs and experiences due to parent fears and risk anxiety may thus impede healthy child development, particularly when parents act as gatekeepers of their

child’s experiences to maintain power over their children or to somehow minimize real or perceived risks (p. 10).

It is within this context of parent risk perception that many camp program providers operate. Camp program providers take steps to reduce social and environmental risks youth are exposed to during camp experiences such as: recruiting, screening, and training staff; pursuing and attaining program accreditation by following recognized health, safety, and risk management standards, and addressing site and facility safety issues and concerns (American Camp Association, 2013a). Despite these steps, parents may still perceive camp as a risky experience that produces anxiety in their minds. Camp program providers generally view parents as their primary customers (Barstead, 2013) and are aware that understanding parent perceptions of camp experiences is important in providing camp experiences in which parents are willing to invest their money and a portion of their children’s lives.

Although many camps collect data about parent satisfaction with the camp experience (American Camp Association, 2011), and parent perceptions of camp-related benefits and youth outcomes have been studied (Baughman, Garst, & Fuhrman, 2009; Clary & Ferrari, 2015; Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003), little investigation has occurred relating to issues associated with parent risk and anxiety, with the exception of a few studies of camp-related homesickness (Kingery, Peneston, Rice, & Wormuth, 2012; Thurber & Sigman, 1998). Furthermore, a paucity of data exists regarding non-clinical parent anxiety (i.e., not diagnosed by a clinician) from the perspective of camp program providers, and it is unclear to what extent parent anxiety may be an operational and programmatic issue. In a 2013 survey of

camp program providers, the American Camp Association (ACA) (2013b) examined the nature of provider conversations with parents and their findings suggested that parent fears and anxiety were one of the top three concerns expressed by camp program providers. While these findings provided a snapshot of providers' perspectives of parents, no other data to our knowledge have been published on this topic. Given the lack of investigation into this area, the overall purpose of this study was to look deeper into parent perceptions of camp experiences. More specifically, through an analysis of qualitative data this study explored: (a) causes of parent anxiety from the perspective of camp program providers, (b) operational or programmatic consequences camp program providers associate with the management of parent anxiety, and (c) practices camp program providers use to manage and reduce parent anxiety.

### **Review of Literature**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the first task was to begin to build a body of knowledge focused on issues associated with parent perceptions of camp experiences. This study was informed by theories and frameworks related to parent involvement (Casper, Traub, & Little, 2002; Garst & Gagnon, 2015; Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009) and parent risk perception (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Garst & Gagnon, 2015; Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, & Montgomery, 2013). Additionally, the literature associated with parent management (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2013; Coburn, 2006; Gibbs, 2009) informed this study.

### **Parent Involvement**

More than four decades of research supports the importance of parent and family involvement for youth success in both school and life (Weiss et al., 2006). Parents not only model positive behaviors, but also facilitate appropriate attachments and teach their children coping strategies in situations that may produce anxie-

ty and other negative emotions and behaviors (Bandura, 1986; Chorpita & Barlow, 1998). Research suggests that when program providers intentionally involved parents, program outcomes for youth are enhanced (Fan & Chen, 2001; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Hara & Burke 1998; Jeynes, 2005), yet many OST programs fail to include a parent involvement component (James & Partee, 2003).

Contemporary definitions of family involvement focus on how children learn in multiple settings, not just in school, and reflect the various ways in which families, schools, and OST program providers may engage with and support each other (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Moreover, in a research brief provided by the Harvard Family Research Project on family involvement in OST program, Caspe et al. (2002) identified four dimensions of family involvement in OST program, including: (1) enriching parents' adult educational development, (2) engaging parents and children in meaningful shared experiences, (3) providing parents with the opportunity to participate in program governance and community leadership, and (4) building stronger links between OST programs and schools (p. 2). Recognition of the importance of family involvement in outcome achievement is evidenced by the efforts of camp program providers who are developing ways to increase parent involvement through family camp programs in which parents and children participate in shared camp experiences (Garst, Baughman, Franz, & Seidel, 2013)

### **Risk Perception**

Although there is no universal conception of risk and no clear indicator of how much risk may be inherent in certain youth activities (Inouye, 2014), one definition of risk suggests that *risk* is "a measure of the probability and severity of adverse effects" (National Safety Council, 2003, p. 2). In other words, risk is a calculation of how likely an incident is to occur, and given its occurrence, how severe the conse-

quences would be. Accurately assessing risk in a given situation, or risk that may occur because of a particular set of actions or circumstances, is dependent upon how people perceive and tolerate risk (Inouye, 2014).

Theories of risk examine the construct at both group and societal levels. Parent perceptions of risk are often guided by an underlying belief in a construction of childhood as an age of innocence and vulnerability, in which adults have a responsibility to prevent and protect children from harm (Jenkins, 1998). Understanding a child's world involves not only appreciating the child's experiences, but also recognizing the broader social and cultural structures and relationships created and mediated by parents and other nonparental caring adults (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Bowers et al., 2012). Irrespective of their parenting style, all parents are influenced by the social and cultural structures in which they raise children, and much of what parents come to believe is socially and culturally inter-dependent. This constructivist view (Bruner, 1990) of parent perceptions of risk suggests that many parents may view a youth activity as risky because of their experience (or lack thereof) with that activity. To describe this social construction of risk, Giddens (1991) proposed the concept of a "risk society," a social state in which society is characterized by an increasing lack of trust in experts and institutions. Furthermore, he proposed that this social state is highly influence by *uncertainty*—a key feature of a risk society—in which society lacks consensus about what is true or correct. Thus, we propose that parent perceptions of risk are highly influenced by what other people (e.g., parents' social groups) believe is risky as well as a high degree of uncertainty brought about by the broader risk society in which they live.

Additional research has investigated risk perception from the perspective of individual parents. For example, Prezza et al. (2005) conducted interviews with 377 mothers of children

between the ages of 8-10 to examine parent perceptions of risk that influenced parents' willingness to allow their children to be autonomous in outdoor environments. The researchers studied *social risks* (i.e., negative social groups, bullying) as well as *environmental risks* (i.e., crime, traffic) associated with children's outdoor experiences, but only found empirical support for the influence of social risks. Scott, Jackson, and Backett-Milburn (1998) suggested that parent negotiation of risk involves both real and imagined fears. That is, parents may "know that some imagined hazards are unlikely to befall their children yet none the less [sic] feel anxious about them" (p. 700).

We can apply these risk perception theories to the ways in which parents may perceive the camp experience. From the risk society perspective, the concept of *uncertainty* is important. As research suggests, up to 40% of parents did not attend camp as a child (Garst & Gagnon, 2016). Experiences such as overnight camp are novel to many parents and therefore parents may be uncertain about what their child will experience at camp. Additionally, many parents are unaware, beyond a cursory level, of daily camp life and the ebbs and flows that their children may be experiencing as they move from activity to activity, and social group to social group. Due to this uncertainty and lack of experience with the camp environment, we may be able to consider parent perceptions of camp through a "risk society" lens, and recognize that the degree to which parents come to trust camp (as both an institution as well as specific camp program providers) can greatly influence whether or not they perceive the experiences as risky for their children. From the individual risk perspective, we can acknowledge that parents may perceive a variety of social and environmental risks, both real and imagined, that they associate with the camp experience.

At the most basic level, we need to understand what makes parents anxious when it comes to camp experiences such as providing

their child with the opportunity to be autonomous in the outdoors, or separating from their child for an extended period of time [what Paris (2008) described as “ritualized separation” (p. 141)]. On one hand, are parents’ fears physical and environmental, likely including wild animals [real or imagined, per Scott et al. (1998)], strangers, or that their child will get dirty? On the other hand, are parents’ fears mostly social or emotional in nature; do they fear that their child will be socially isolated, experience failure, or in some way be generally disappointed in or sad about their involvement in camp? Little contemporary literature exists specific to parent perceptions of anxiety associated with camp experiences (Gagnon & Garst, 2015) to help us understand the answers to these questions.

### **Parent Management Strategies**

The relationship between what camp program providers do and how parents are served has a profound influence on later program success. *Parent management strategies* represents practices used by camp program providers to recognize, resolve, or in some other way address parents’ expressed expectations and concerns. Examples of such strategies might include: answering parent’s questions about programs and activities; normalizing parent concerns about unknown elements of the program; helping parents feel valued and respected; and providing parents with opportunities for involvement or shared leadership when appropriate (Thurber & Malinowski, 2000; Torretta & Bovitz, 2005). Research related to parent management strategies in camps is limited (American Camp Association, 2013b), yet there is evidence that it is an important issue in camps in need of further study.

Parent management strategies have not been explicitly studied in the camp literature; however, parent management strategies are proposed in literature addressing the overparenting trend in higher education

(Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2013). Overparents are described as displaying “excessive advice, problem solving, and provision of abundant and unnecessary tangible assistance” in combination with “risk aversion, anxiety, and parent involvement in the child’s emotional well-being to the point of enmeshment” (Segrin et al., 2013, p. 569). Coburn (2006) noted many parent management strategies common in colleges and universities, including: parent orientation sessions, family weekend programs, and letters written to parents throughout the student’s first academic year informing them of campus events and challenges that students may be facing. The emphasis, according to Coburn, has been on educating parents about the basics of college student development and the importance of the parent’s role in contributing to this development. Gibbs (2009) reported that, in response to parents’ expectations for increasing involvement and engagement, colleges are creating new staff positions (e.g., “director of parent programs”) to run social groups that provide parents the opportunity to meet other parents and offering special classes during which parents can learn school cheers. The parent management strategies being employed in college and university settings are revealing yet curious, calling into question whether or not parents are being treated similarly in camps.

Research on camp-related homesickness prevention suggests strategies that may be relevant for parent management. For example, Thurber and Walton (2007) identified steps camp program providers could use to reduce both parent and child anxiety associated with overnight camp, including having parents involve children in the decision to spend time away from home, educating children to normalize homesickness, providing explicit instructions for coping, and arranging for practice overnight stays away from home. Thompson (2009), in a discussion of child homesickness, noted the influence of the *paradox of information* on how

program providers should manage parents during homesickness situations. This paradox suggests that parents believe they should know everything all the time, yet Thompson stressed the need for camp program providers to set limits with parents because providing increasing amount of information will not necessarily ease parents' minds. Somewhat echoing this work in a camp rather than a school setting, Kingery et al. (2012) called for future research to examine parent expectations and pre-camp planning strategies that included how information is provided to parents prior to camp.

As noted in this review, research that specifically addresses risks that parents associate with the camp experience that influence non-clinical parent anxiety, as well as literature that addresses how camp program providers manage non-clinical parent anxiety is limited, but growing. Most of the research uncovered is either non-existent or drawn from research associated with non-camp groups and/or college age samples. To address these gaps, this study examined causes of non-clinical parent anxiety from the perspective of camp program providers, operational or programmatic consequences camp program providers associated with the management of parent anxiety, and practices camp program providers used to manage and reduce parent anxiety.

## Method

### Sample and Instrument

In 2007, ACA began a biennial process of surveying camp program providers to identify emerging issues and trends faced by the camp industry. Data used for the current study were secondary data acquired through a research collaboration with ACA to gain access to select data from the 2015 emerging issues survey. In the spring of 2015, 1,792 primary contacts at ACA member camps were sent an email invitation to complete a web-based survey through SurveyMonkey. Thirty-eight percent of the contacts opened the page (674 unique opens) and

13% clicked on the survey (244 unique clicks). In addition to this strategy, ACA advertised the survey through a general announcement in their weekly electronic newsletter. Twenty-six percent of contacts receiving the newsletter opened it (4,049 opens) and 4% clicked on the survey link (90 unique clicks). The combination of these methods over a five-week period resulted in 248 completed surveys for a 14% response rate. Due to the secondary nature of the data, descriptive information (e.g., years of experience in current role, education, salary) were unavailable to the research team. Analysis of the secondary data does indicate that the sample was primarily female ( $n = 123$ , 57.2%) and Caucasian ( $n = 197$ , 79.4%).

The web survey asked a range of questions about current and emerging issues and trends. Respondents were also asked to compare the relative importance of specific emerging issues as well as to provide an explanation of their experiences. This study explored responses to the following short answer questions:

1. If you have observed or experienced parents with moderate to significant levels of anxiety, then describe what you believe was the cause of parents' anxiety.
2. If you made any operational or programmatic changes at your camp due to concerns or anxiety expressed by parents, then explain the type of changes made.

### Methods

Data from the open-ended questions were exported directly from SurveyMonkey into a spreadsheet in preparation for analysis. Content analysis (Patton, 2002) was then used to code the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions. As noted by Patton, *content analysis* "refers to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative materials and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 452). After initial codes were identified

through a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), patterns and associations across the initial codes were ascertained. Researchers constructed twelve themes across the two questions using an inductive approach moving from the data to broader generalizations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Trustworthiness procedures included the development of triangulation with multiple analysts (Patton, 2002) and researcher reflection to acknowledge and minimize bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process produced a codebook that included descriptions of each of the 12 themes and subthemes in addition to exemplar quotes or responses to define the themes (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998). After coding, the codebook was then used to reanalyze the data and ensure themes were representative, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive. Reflexivity involved meetings between members of the research team whereby members adopted the role of devil's advocate, challenging rationale and reinforcing a system of checks and balances that minimized the intrusion of personal bias. Where rationale was weak, the team revisited the data to ensure that the themes represented the respondent's perspectives and not those of the researchers.

## Results

### Directors' Perceptions of Parent Anxiety

Respondents were asked, "If you have observed/experienced parents with moderate to significant levels of anxiety, then describe what you believe was the cause of parents' anxiety."

Two overall themes associated with director perceptions of parent anxiety were identified, including: (1) parent anxiety associated with parent characteristics and parenting styles and (2) parent anxiety associated with concerns and fears. Constructed subthemes under parent anxiety associated with parent characteristics and parenting styles included: parents without camp experience are more anxious, and parents who show overparenting behaviors are more anxious. Constructed subthemes under parent anxiety associated with concerns and fears included: parent anxiety is influenced by parent separation and related loss of communication; parent anxiety is associated with a lack of trust in camp administration and staff; parents fear for their child's physical, emotional, and social safety; and parents are concerned about their child's preparation for camp (Table 1). Representative quotes were selected for each subtheme and are reflected as they were expressed by participants.

Table 1  
*Themes associated with director perceptions of parent anxiety (N = 248)*

Primary Theme	Subtheme	Response Count
Parent anxiety associated with parent characteristics and parenting styles	Parents without camp experience are more anxious.	28
	Parents who show overparenting behaviors are more anxious.	21
Parent anxiety associated with concerns and fears	Parent anxiety is influenced by parental separation of related loss of communication.	27
	Parent anxiety is associated with a lack of trust in camp administration and staff.	16
	Parents fear for their child's physical, emotional, and social safety.	21
	Parents are concerned about their child's preparation for camp	2



### **Anxiety associated with parent characteristics and parenting styles.**

**Parents without camp experience are more anxious.** In this theme “experience” had two different connotations. The first connotation of experience represented respondent (camp director) perceptions of parents’ lack of experience attending camp as a child. The inexperienced parents were described as more anxious and their anxiety stemmed from camp being perceived as an unfamiliar experience. Respondents described parent anxiety associated with the “unknown aspects” of the camp experience. The second connotation of experience described parents’ lack of experience with a specific camp. In that aspect of this theme, the camp administrators were the unknown element rather than the camp experience itself.

**Parents who show overparenting behaviors are more anxious.** Some respondents noted specific over-controlling and overprotective parenting styles that illustrated their experience with anxious parents. The terms “helicopter parents” and “helicopter parenting” were both used by respondents to describe this cause of parent anxiety. Helicopter parents were described by respondents as “afraid to let their children out of their sight” and not having “confidence in their child to be successful without them.” Control was central to this theme. As one respondent shared, parents feel “... anxiety about being able to control all aspects of their child's life. Anxiety that their child will not get enough attention. Anxiety that their child will not be with the ‘right’ children. Inability to “let go.”

### **Parent anxiety associated with concerns and fears**

**Anxiety is influenced by parent separation and related loss of communication.** Respondents indicated that a major cause of parent anxiety is the separation that parents experience when their children attend camp. Several respondents indicated a “fear of disconnected-

ness” when a parent’s child attended camp due to the lack of common forms of communication such as cell phones and social media. One respondent suggested the difficulties that parents face when “adjusting from being in constant touch with their child during the school-year to the perception of almost no communication.” This respondent noted that the separation and loss of communication also represented a loss of control for parents.

**Parent anxiety is associated with a lack of trust in camp administration and frontline staff.** Lack of trust was a central theme in respondents’ explanations of parent anxiety. As one respondent noted, parents have a “fear of entrusting their child to someone else for a week” and are concerned over “who may be influencing their child.” Trust was often associated with administrators and staff being able to provide appropriate camper supervision, as well as being “aware of and accepting of campers’ behavior, personal care needs, and supervision needs.” This theme was particularly salient for respondents working with special need camper populations. Another respondent reflected that parents who send their children to her camp are concerned that the administrators and staff can “handle their child’s specific needs (medical, behavior, and dietary).”

**Parents fear for their child’s physical, emotional, and social safety.** Some respondents specifically attributed parent anxiety to parents’ fear for “the safety of their children.” Although physical, emotional, and social safety may be embedded in respondents’ expressions about their parents in other themes, within this theme safety was more explicit. Respondents talked about “health and safety” as well as parent “fear of injury” and “fear of a traumatic incident.” Disconnection and control also emerged, with directors noting parents’ concerns with “dangers that a child can face away from home.” In most cases, expressions about safety were general and lacked an identified cause. In other instances, respondents said that parents

were concerned about safety specific to a particular program area, such as “swimming pool safety.”

**Parents are concerned about their child’s preparation for camp.** The final theme associated with causes of parent anxiety attributed to their child’s camp experience is related to preparedness. Two respondents identified that parents were concerned that their child had packed “the 'right' gear.” This concern was associated with parents’ belief that their child would somehow be left out if their child was not properly equipped and prepared for camp activities.

**Directors’ Operational or Programmatic Strategies to Address Parent Anxiety**

Respondents were asked, “If you have made any operational or programmatic changes at your camp due to concerns or anxiety expressed by parents, then explain the type of changes made.” Two overall themes associated with operational or programmatic changes to address parent concerns or anxiety were identified, including: (1) parent communication and access; and (2) programs, policies, and staffing.

Subthemes under parent communication and access included: enhanced parent communication strategies; increased social media and web strategies to provide parents with virtual exposure to camp; and increased parent and family physical access to camp. Subthemes under program, policies, and staffing included: reinforced camp policies and procedures; enhanced parent outreach, programs, and pre-camp training; and strengthened staffing patterns, staff training, and staff preparation (Table 2). Representative quotes selected for each subtheme and are reflected as they were expressed by participants.

**Parent communication and access to address parent concerns or anxiety.**

**Enhanced parent communication strategies.**

The most common strategy directors used to manage parent anxiety was increased communication. The importance of communication was exemplified by the respondent who shared, “We are always seeking ways to improve our level of communication and forthrightness with our parents so they can know what to expect...” Parent communication took many forms. Some communication occurred

**Table 2**

*Themes associated with operational and programmatic changes to address director perceptions of parent anxiety (N = 248)*

Overall Theme	Subtheme	Response Count
Parent communication and access to address parent concerns or anxiety	Enhanced parent communication strategies	32
	Increased social media and web strategies to provide parents with virtual exposure to camp	9
	Increased parent and family physical access to camp	4
Programs, policies, and staffing to address parent concerns or anxiety	Reinforced camp policies and procedures	20
	Enhanced parent outreach, programs, and pre-camp training	10
	Strengthened staffing patterns, staff training, and staff preparation	7

prior to camp, as described by the respondent who said their camp “started calling all new families during pre-camp to assist with questions on forms and packing” and also used “an additional phone call generated by the director to new parents each three-week session.” A hand-written letter was also a communication strategy used before the start of camp. One respondent shared,

“We send a letter with the camper registration (early in the process) suggesting ways to prepare the child for the camp experience. Two weeks prior to the camp session we send another letter with pictures of the facilities, definitions of camp jargon, more detailed suggestions for preparing for camp, and reassurance that if there is a problem we will contact the parent.”

Other forms of communication were used while the camp was in session. Email was an important parent communication strategy. A respondent noted,

“Last year we added weekly emails. They go out the Thursday before the camp week starts. They include the camp director contact information, and the weekly schedule for the child's camp - their travel days, their swim days, the lunch menu, etc. This allows parents to plan accordingly and reply to the email with any specific questions or concerns they may have. They generally feel better knowing they have a direct line to me prior to the camp week starting and an email to refer to throughout the week...”

Another respondent shared that their camp had implemented “a nightly email that recaps the day’s activities.” The emphasis within this communication theme was clearly addressing parent needs, as highlighted by the respondent who described their camp’s “mandate that if a parent calls our office, that is the most important thing at that point.”

#### ***Increased use of social media and web***

***strategies to provide parents with virtual exposure to camp life.*** Another constructed theme representing a strategy camp program providers are using to manage parent anxiety involves the use of social media and website postings to give parents virtual admission into camp life. Respondents described posting “more daily photos” and the importance of “sharing ‘goings-on’ on Facebook daily” with parents. In general, respondent after respondent mentioned the ubiquity of photos and videos and how these strategies helped respondents reduce parent anxiety by making parents more aware of what was going on in camp. As exemplified in this anecdote that one respondent revealed, “a parent had a great idea to take a picture of each group and post it to Facebook once the bus arrives so parents can see their camper has made it to camp (with their own eyes, not just an email) and see who else their camper will be spending the week with.” Some respondents felt that the movement toward providing parents with more and more information about daily camp life was a negative trend. One respondent noted,

We started a twitter account 4-5 years ago, and we tweet once a day during the summer. It just gives the parents who want it a daily message that could be translated as “The camp hasn't burned down. No kids have died today.” Things like one-way email and photos on the website during summer, in my opinion, fuel the fire of parent anxiety. Separation is a fundamental part of the camp experience, and when we make attempts to reduce the separation from the parents' perspective, we're taking away from the genuineness of that experience.

***Facilitated parent and family physical access to the camp.*** Another strategy used by camp directors to manage parent anxiety was providing parents and families with greater access to the camp property and facilities. Scheduling ‘open house’ events prior to the start of camp was a commonly expressed strategy, during which “the director can speak directly to par-

ents and allay fears.” One respondent shared that their camp offers “three open houses as well as arrange[s] private tours” and hosts a “meet and greet” event. Respondents described open-door approaches for access and communication. For example, a respondent emphasized that they encourage parents to meet them (the director) in person and to complete an initial camp tour, and then complete a second tour along with their child. This respondent also encouraged parents to “spend time on property and to come to any off season events/vacation camps we offer.” Access to camp staff before camp was a second dimension of this theme. For example, a respondent noted that their camp has “certain dates scheduled for parents to come meet staff before they send their camper to camp.”

#### **Programs, policies, and staffing to address parent concerns or anxiety.**

**Reinforced camp policies and procedures.** This subtheme referred to policies and procedures that camps were developing or reinforcing which respondents felt were helping them manage parent anxiety. This strategy sometimes involved better documentation procedures, from “introducing a communication log for day camp parents” to “obtaining information about all campers in order to closely supervise those campers who need it.” Other respondents mentioned the benefit of a simplified registration process and improved drop-off and pick up procedures for managing parent anxiety. One respondent described their camp’s acquisition of American Camp Association accreditation as a strategy to formalize swimming procedures and improve pool safety systems.

**Strengthened staffing patterns, staff training, and preparation.** Another salient theme associated with camp director management of parent anxiety reflected enhanced or increased staffing patterns and/or staff training and preparation. New or enhanced staff posi-

tions included additional security staff, additional camp photographers, and the hiring of “parent liaisons.” New camp staff training programs included modesty training (how to provide privacy during clothes-changing times) and sensitivity training. Respondents also talked about making staff increasingly visible to parents, particularly during drop off and pick up periods.

**Enhanced parent outreach, programs, and pre-camp training.** Parent outreach was an important strategy for addressing parents’ concerns or anxiety mentioned by the respondents in this study. Some information was communicated formally, through structured outreach like webinars, “formal meetings with parents,” and face-to-face pre-camp trainings. As reflected in the comment of one of the respondents, “we do pre summer webinars for first time camp families to go over all their questions and concerns and let them know exactly what to expect from camp.” An example of the more structured and formal programs offered to parents was the respondent who shared, “we are instituting a new Child Protection Plan that will influence how we supervise kids. It is comprehensive in nature and includes pre-camp training for campers and parents.

## **Discussion**

This exploratory study examined parent anxiety associated with camp experiences from the perspective of camp program providers, as well as effective strategies for managing parent expectations and concerns. This study represented the first time these types of questions were explored among a sample of camp program providers and builds on earlier conceptual work by Garst and Gagnon (2015) exploring overparenting trends within the context of OST youth development programs.

### **Causes of Parent Anxiety**

This study adds to the body of knowledge associated with camp experiences

as an OST experience that produces anxiety in parents (Kingery et al., 2012). Potential causes of parent anxiety identified by respondents in this study included: parent-child separation, limited parent camp experience, lack of parent trust, the expression of overparenting behaviors, fear of lack of safety, and parental concern about their child's preparedness. It is not surprising that separation was a major theme that emerged in this study, as parent-child separation has been a central feature of the overnight camp experience from its earliest beginnings, and Paris (2008) noted that "enduring this separation was as difficult for some adults as it was for campers" (p. 141). The concept of separation is embedded in research on parent/child attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982), suggesting that a warm and ongoing relationship with a caregiver promotes psychological health and well-being throughout one's life. Yet, as Munnich and Munnich (2009) point out, attachment (and corresponding separation) can also be maladaptive. For example, some parents have considerable difficulty separating from their children, to the point where they become more concerned with their own experience of separation rather than the experience of their child (2009). This study suggests that to some degree parent feelings of separation were non-normative, at least from the perspective of camp program providers.

Themes identified in this study including lack of parent trust, limited parent camp experience, and fear of a lack of safety are particularly reflective of Giddens' (1990) and Scott et al.'s (1998) discussion of a risk society. More specifically, parent feelings of uncertainty as well as their lack of trust in camp program providers and staff (as youth development experts) and camp (as an institution) support the general trend that others have noted in the evolution of this risk society (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Scott et al., 1998). In this study, respondents' perceptions

of parent anxiety as associated with both programmatic causes as well as being left out of an activity because of a lack of preparation for camp, is suggestive of Prezza et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of social and environmental risks.

Some of the causes of parent anxiety may be within a camp director's sphere of influence such as building relationships with parents to reduce parent anxiety associated with parents' inexperience with camp or their lack of trust in camp administrators. Others, such as the expression of overparenting behaviors, may be more peripheral to camp program providers' control. The fact that some parents were described by respondents in this study as helicopter parents reaffirms the expression of overparenting within camp settings as suggested by Garst and Gagnon (2015). This study represents the first evidence of how overparenting may be expressed by the parents of youth attending camp. The findings associated with causes of parent anxiety may reflect factors that contribute to overparenting, at least from the perspective of camp program providers.

### **Parent Management Strategies Used by Camp Program Providers**

In this study, communication, access, staffing, education, and policy development emerged as strategies for managing parent anxiety. In general, parent management strategies identified by the respondents in this study, such as communication, access, staffing, social media, and education, are consistent with strategies used in higher education settings to manage the parents of undergraduate students (Coburn, 2006). It appears that program providers in OST settings (in this case, camps) serving elementary to high-school aged youth rather than college-aged students, are using many of the same parent management strategies used by higher education administrators.

Utilizing strategies such as parent education and communication to reduce parent anxiety, particularly prior to the camp experiences, is important. Kingery et al. (2012) reflected on the negative influences that parent anxiety can have on children, proposing that parents communicate anxious messages to their children in the weeks leading up to camp, resulting in children becoming more worried about going to camp and then experiencing homesickness. Mitigating the possible negative influence of parent anxiety by properly educating them about the camp experiences and addressing their concerns is likely central to reducing child anxiety as well as homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2007).

The most frequently expressed theme reflected changes in, or enhancements to, parent communication. This finding is somewhat intuitive, given that camp program providers are motivated to identify effective parent communication practices, recognizing that parents are the actual “consumers” of camp. Communicating with parents becomes the most effective way to gauge and address customer needs. As previously noted, ACA (2015) reported that 64 percent of camp program providers have identified parent communication as the most important issue they faced over the past two years.

Still, one has to wonder if the ways in which program providers communicate with parents has fundamentally changed and may thus be impacting the essence of the camp experience. As technology has increased access to daily camp life, through the posting of pictures on camp websites, distribution of daily or weekly camp updates via email, and the hosting of videos on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, the management of parents may in fact be feeding the flame of today’s overly anxious, overly controlling, and overly-involved parents. Earlier we discussed Thompson’s (2009) paradox of information, in which giving parents more and more infor-

mation does not appease the anxious parent, but actually creates a greater appetite for more information. Some efforts by camp program providers to minimize parent anxiety may in fact be driving it, and some camp program providers may struggle with setting limits on the extent of information that will be shared with parents.

Furthermore, what are the implications of shaping the camp experience so that parents feel more comfortable? Paris (2008) noted that historically, “for children, camp life represented an important rite of passage, often a first experience of community and self-reliance beyond the physical boundaries of families and home neighborhoods” (p. 136). In fact, as early as the late 1920s camp leaders recognized the difficulties that children can experience in adjusting to overnight camp (Paris, 2008). Today, many camps are attempting to broaden the populations of youth and families that they serve (Ditter, 2013), which can be particularly challenging when data suggests that youth interest in outdoor experiences is changing (Larson, Green, & Cordell, 2011). Within this broader context of youth and family involvement in programs promoting time spent outdoors, ignoring ways to make the camp experience more comfortable for parents is not only counter to a successful business strategy, it may also be counter to successful family engagement.

### **Limitations**

The study design introduced a number of limitations. First, the respondents in this study represented a purposeful sample of ACA camp contacts and may not be representative of the entire population of U.S. camp program providers, or even the entire population of ACA camp program providers. For example, many of the directors sampled may represent ACA accredited camps—camps that have met a set of health, safety, and risk management

standards—and as such, may differ in some meaningful way compared with non-ACA accredited camps.

Second, these data were collected using a self-reported web survey approach. Self-report has a number of inherent weaknesses related to the perspective of the person completing the survey, including: honesty/image management, lack of introspective ability, lack of understanding, and response bias (Austin, Gibson, Deary, McGregor, & Dent, 1998); however, it is possible that some of these weaknesses were mitigated due to the anonymous nature of the survey. In addition, the data analyzed in this study were secondary data collected as part of a larger ACA study of emerging issues in camps. The dataset from which the conclusions in this article were drawn is small.

Third, this study took a unique approach in that it measured non-clinical parent anxiety based on the very subjective perspective of a third party (camp program providers), and camp program providers may have incorrectly attributed specific parent behaviors as being reflective of anxiety, overparenting, and so on, when in fact the behaviors were representative of some other latent or direct cause. In addition, the definitions and meanings of key terms such as anxiety may have differed across respondents. The survey did not provide an operational definition for specific terms and therefore differences across respondents may reflect differences in the meanings associated with the key terms rather than true differences across the parents they were describing.

### **Future Directions**

The study findings supported previous researchers' recommendations to better understand how parent anxiety and

overparenting may be influencing the provision of youth programs (Garst & Gagnon, 2015). As discussed, very little research has been published on parent perceptions of OST experiences, and in particular, potentially anxiety-producing experiences such as camp. Researchers are encouraged to replicate and build on this study with additional investigation into camp program provider and parent perceptions.

A logical next step is to collect data from parents about their involvement in camp programs, the extent to which parents experience anxiety when sending their children to camp, and the extent to which they exhibit overparenting perceptions and behaviors. Because overparenting research has been confined to clinical (Locke, Campbell, & Kavanagh, 2012) or higher education settings (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012), there is little evidence of the influence of overparenting on developmental outcomes during the elementary, middle, or high-school years (Garst & Gagnon, 2015). Better measures of parent anxiety specific to OST experiences such as camp are needed as well as valid and reliable measures of overparenting in camp.

This study also highlights the need to better understand behaviors and strategies parents are implementing at home to reduce their own anxiety as well as the anxiety of their children prior to camp. This study supports the work of Kingery et al. (2012), who pointed out the need to better understand how parents are preparing their children for camp. A detailed inventory and assessment of parents' expectations and family preparations in the weeks and months leading up to camp may reveal other aspects of child, parent, or family behaviors that will help us better understand the causes and consequences of camp-related anxiety. For example, Thurber and Malinowski (2000) highlighted particular

parent verbal instructions that can be detrimental for youth adjustment to camp (e.g., “Have a great time at camp...I don’t know what I’ll do without you.”) and pre-camp preparations that can be beneficial (e.g., practice overnight visits with family or friends).

Notable concepts explored in this study included risk perception, parent anxiety, and overparenting. While these are important topics in the human and family development literature in the U.S., there is evidence that these concepts are culturally situated and may differ across countries (and even within the U.S.). For example, family attachment theory (which has informed the literature on parent anxiety transfer to children) is firmly grounded in Western assumptions about relationships (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002). Other literature suggests that behaviors indicative of overparenting may manifest differently, and have different causes and meanings, in families of different national origins (Carlson & Harwood, 2003). For example, as suggested by Rothbaum et al. (2002) a Japanese mother may appear overinvolved and intrusive by Western standards because she is more likely than a U.S. mother to anticipate an infant’s needs and to take proactive measures to minimize distress rather than to delay their response. Therefore, more research is needed to understand risk perception, parent anxiety and overparenting within the context of OST experiences outside of Western cultures.

We also have more to learn about the ways in which parents may influence operational and/or programming decisions in OST settings. For example, what is the resource impact of camp program providers hiring more staff (parent liaisons, security personnel, and so on) in response to parent concerns and expectations? If funding is shifted toward increased personnel, what areas of

operations or programs are receiving less funding? What is the impact on the overall budget? How are these resource allocation decisions made? These questions suggest an opportunity to look at the economic impacts of specific camp business decisions. What return-on-investment do camps realize when they invest, for example, in third party email systems or video sharing systems to better communicate with parents? On the other hand, increases in funding associated with parent management may increase parent satisfaction with the camp experience, leading to positive word of mouth between parents, which could positively impact both camper enrollment and camp revenue.

### **Conclusions**

Because this was the first study to examine causes of parent anxiety from the perspective of camp program providers, this study serves as a meaningful starting point for a closer examination of the influence of parent anxiety and overparenting on the ways that OST programs are planned and implemented. Camp program providers should compare their experiences with parents to those shared by respondents in this study to identify areas of similarity and difference. Likewise, strategies used by the respondents in this study to address parent anxiety and to effectively manage and inhibit parent concerns and expectations may represent options for potential adoption.

While OST programs have a long history of positively influencing youth development, it is recognized that parents are primarily responsible for enrollment decisions. In order to continue to attract parents as customers, OST programs need to be aware of, and responsive to, changing social characteristics related to parenting behaviors and parent anxiety. Camp programs, due to the unique nature of the camp experience, are especially vulnerable to changing trends related to parent anxiety.



ety and overparenting. Camp program providers are negotiating these trends through increased pre-camp communication, hiring additional staff primarily for the benefit of parents, and expanding the use of social media to communicate with parents while their children are away. These practices are not without risk; as camp program providers may inadvertently influence increases in overparenting behaviors among their parents while attempting to reduce parent anxiety. Successfully negotiating parents' concerns and anxieties may be another defining feature of a high-quality camp provider. Future study in this area is rich with opportunity.

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