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## THE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT PROCESS: DEVELOPING OPTIMAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH THE CAMP EXPERIENCE

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### Introduction

Many camp professionals find themselves continually challenged to document the value of the camp experience for youth. Funders want to hold camps accountable to their goals, boards want to see evidence that camp programs result in benefits in line with the organization's mission, and directors themselves want to know if they achieved the desired outcomes as well the most effective "best practices". The American Camp Association (ACA) teamed with Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) in a project to look at how campers assessed their camp experiences on outcomes that contribute to positive youth development. The purpose of this study was to establish a baseline of supports and opportunities for youth development offered through the camp experience as defined by the Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). The specific research questions were: 1) do camps offer optimal developmental environments for supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill development and 2) are there any differences in these environments based on selected camp characteristics (i.e., sponsorship, type, length of stay, and clientele)? For each research question we had several hypotheses that were tested:

#### *Research Question #1:*

- H<sub>1</sub>: Camps will offer optimal environments for at least 50% of all campers in the areas of relationships, safety, youth involvement, and skill development.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Camps will have fewer than 15% of all campers in the insufficient area for the four supports and opportunities.

#### *Research Question #2:*

- H<sub>3</sub>: Camps will exhibit no differences in optimal and insufficient levels of the four supports and opportunities based on camper clientele (boys only, girls only, and co-ed) served.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Camps that are resident camps, offer sessions longer than 2 wks, and/or are independent for-profit camps will have higher percentages of campers in optimal areas of the four supports and opportunities.

### Background for the Project

The past work of YDSI has shown a high demand and clear need for assessment and organizational improvement processes. Of most concern to ACA was how to bring about effective change in the youth development environment provided through the camping experience. ACA was interested in campers' reports about the kinds of supports and opportunities they experienced while at camp, the ways camps might become more intentional and accountable for their outcomes, and ultimately how camps' organizational practices may need to be addressed. The partnership between ACA and YDSI has provided a unique and

important opportunity to examine the extent to which camps may provide the developmental experiences for youth that lead to their success as adults (see ACA, 2006). This benchmarking study was the first step toward results that articulate where camps excel with youth and where they can improve, as well as where potential broader applications may be made to other youth development organizations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This positivist study was situated within a positive youth development context that draws heavily on theories of change and intervention. A positive youth development approach emphasizes the recognition and affirmation of the strengths and positive future of youth as opposed to prevention of negative behaviors (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Witt, 2002). Evidence is emerging that well-designed and well-implemented youth centered programs that consciously use a positive youth development model are demonstrating positive change (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004).

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002) provided the model that served as the basis for the research questions (see Figure 1). This model asserts that increasing supports and opportunities for youth will result in improvements in developmental outcomes that ultimately help move a young person into a healthy adulthood. The theoretical foundation for the model is based on a theory of change that posits that an agency's organizational practices determine the kind of youth development experiences that young people have in the organization and that to improve these experiences requires making changes in organizational practice (ACA, 2006).

Four areas of supports and opportunities are critical to the model. These areas are:  
Supportive Relationships, so young people can experience:

- Guidance, emotional and practical support
- Adults and peers knowing who they are and what is important to them

Safety, so young people feel:

- Physically and emotionally secure

Youth Involvement, so that young people can:

- Be involved in meaningful roles with responsibility,
- Have input into decision-making,
- Have opportunities for leadership, and
- Feel a sense of belonging

Skill Building, so that young people can have:

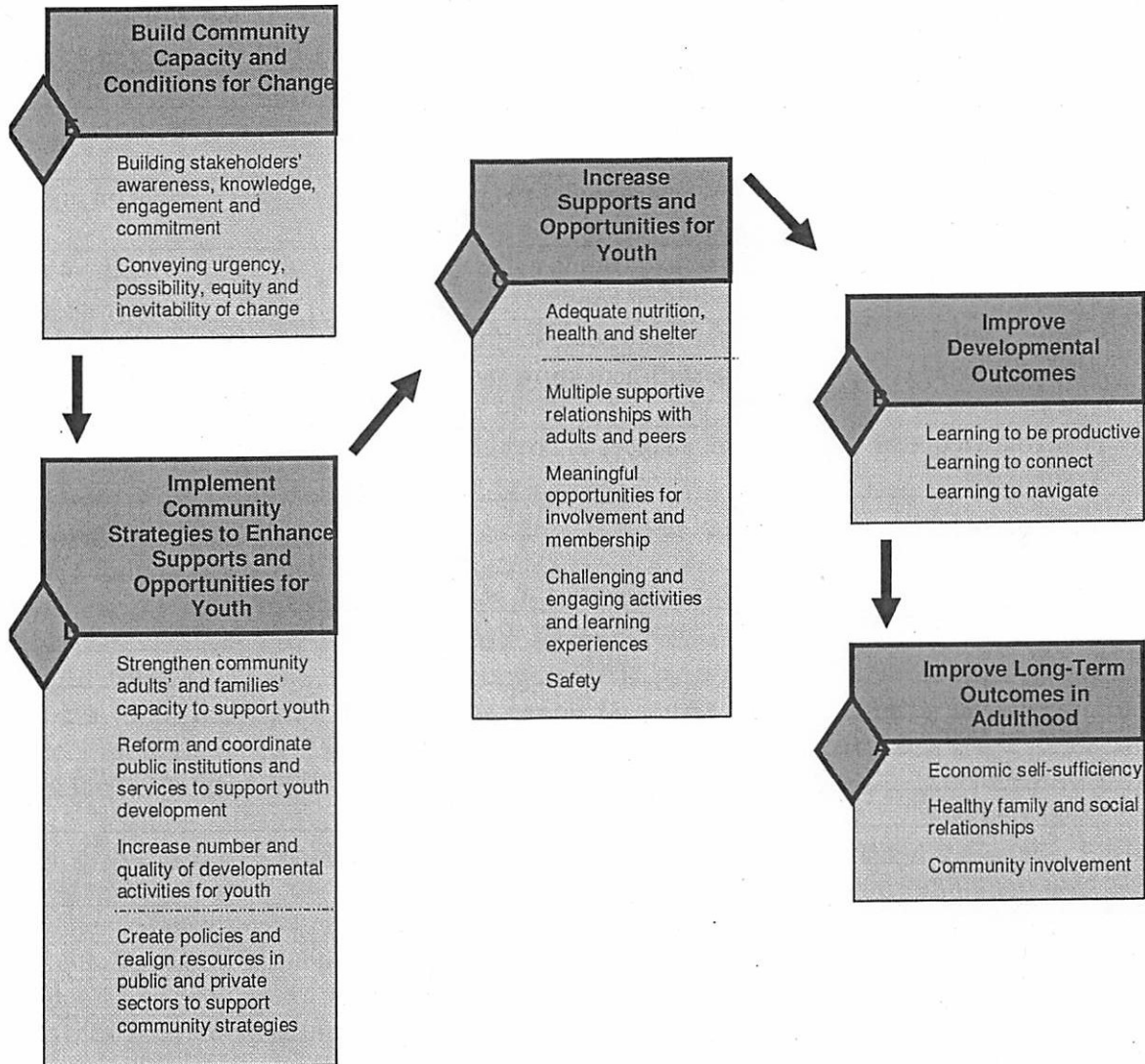
- Challenging and interesting learning experiences, which help them build a wide array of skills, and
- Experience a sense of growth and progress

This study explored how camps might make a difference within supports and opportunities by providing campers with multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers; offering challenging and engaging activities; providing meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership; and keeping campers feeling emotionally and physically safe.

FIGURE 1

**COMMUNITY ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

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**Methods**

The following section describes key aspects related to the methodology for this study. The subsections will address the questionnaire, the sampling procedures and resulting sample, and the data collection procedures and analysis strategies.

*Questionnaire*

The YDSI youth development questionnaire consisted of statements related to the four major domains assessed in this study: supportive relationships with adults and peers, challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, meaningful opportunities for involvement and

membership, and physical and emotional safety. Each statement offered a Likert scale response continuum. The survey has been subjected to extensive validity procedures and reliability checks with sub-scale reliabilities ranging from .8 and higher. Table 1 provides sample questions for each of the four supports and opportunities.

TABLE 1  
*Sample Questions*

DIMENSIONS	SAMPLE QUESTIONS
<i>Overall Supportive Relationships</i>	
Guidance	Q. How many adult staff pay attention to what's going on in your life?
Emotional Support	Q. How many adult staff say something nice to you when you do something good?
Practical Support	Q. How many adult staff could you go to for help in a crisis?
Adult Knowledge of Youth	Q. The staff here know me well.
Peer Knowledge of Youth	Q. I get chances to do things with other people my age.
<i>Overall Safety</i>	
Physical	Q. I feel safe when I'm at this organization.
Emotional	Q. I feel respected by staff at this organization.
<i>Overall Youth Involvement</i>	
Decision Making	Q. I get to decide what activities I'm going to do here.
Leadership	Q. How often have you helped plan activities and events?
Belonging	Q. I feel like I belong here.
<i>Overall Skill Building</i>	
Interesting	Q. I get to do a lot of new things here.
Growth and Progress	Q. I have a chance to learn how to do new things here.
Challenging	Q. The staff here challenge me to do my best.

### *Sample*

When recruiting camps for this research, the intent was to compile a representative sample of ACA's membership in terms of geographic location, day and resident camps, camps with varying sponsorship (i.e., agency, religious affiliated, independent for profit and independent not-for-profit), co-ed and single gender camps as well as camps with session lengths that varied from one week to more than four weeks. Camps were selected for inclusion in the study to represent the overall membership of the American Camp Association.

Camps were recruited for the study in several ways. First, all of the random sample of camps that participated in ACA's earlier "outcomes" research were invited to participate in this project. About half of the 80 camps (44) that had participated in the earlier study agreed to participate in the current effort. Most of the remaining camps were recruited from among those camps who expressed an interest in the survey after seeing results from a pilot study (that was conducted in

2003) at ACA conferences in 2004. A few camps were directly recruited to balance the representation of specific camp types in the sample to match ACA's membership.

The recruited camps agreed to have campers 10 years and older complete a survey at the end of one camp session in 2004. Table 2 shows the comparison of the sample to the overall member camps' distribution in ACA. While day camps were slightly underrepresented in the sample, the reader is reminded that the questionnaire is only appropriate for youth aged 10 and older and many of these day camps served primarily younger children.

TABLE 2  
*Characteristics of Participating Camps*

	Number	Sample Distribution	ACA Membership
Day	16	20%	37%
Resident	64	80	62
Agency Sponsored	30	38	41
Religious Affiliated	16	20	23
Independent For Profit	17	21	22
Independent Not-for-Profit	17	21	14

#### *Administration and Data Analysis*

YDSI trained camp staff to administer the survey to campers between the ages of 10 and 17. Each camp was asked to select one camp session and administer the survey to all youth aged 10 and older who attended camp during that session. The number of youth surveyed in each camp ranged from 19 to 386, with an average of 134 youth per camp for a total of 7672. The breakdown of youth participating in the sample by gender, age and ethnicity is shown in Table 3. After the questionnaires were administered, camp staff collected and sent them to YDSI staff who then conducted the analysis.

The YDSI method of analyzing responses to the survey questions was not traditional. Instead of yielding an average score on the four constructs, the results were expressed in terms of youths' experiences measured against a standard. Participants' responses were combined according to a formula based on prior youth development research (Gambone et al., 2002). These combined responses fit into one of three categories: optimal, insufficient, or mixed. This scoring method was designed to measure the extent to which young people experienced the supports and opportunities at camp that are the necessary *prerequisites* to achieving the developmental outcomes central to youth development. (For details on scoring algorithms, see Gambone, et al., 2002, or visit [www.ydsi.org/publications](http://www.ydsi.org/publications).)

TABLE 3  
*Characteristics of Youth Completing the Survey*

Characteristic	% of Sample
Gender	
Boys	39
Girls	61
Age	
10-11 years old	31
12-13 years old	40
14-15 years old	23
16-18 years old	6
Ethnicity	
White	79
Non-white	21

The overall sample of youth (N= 7672) who completed the survey was relatively large; as a result many seemingly small differences were statistically significant. Rather than look only at statistical significance, a standard of differences was used. This process allowed the researchers to focus on results that were “substantively different” (defined as a 10 percentage point or greater difference between groups) in order to understand the relative strengths of the camp experience.

A report was generated that provided each camp with their individual scores as well as the aggregate scores. The key to this process was to learn how and where to modify program, staff training, and camper participation in ways that move campers from the insufficient and mixed areas into the optimal levels.

The data were coded and analyzed with SPSS by the YDSI statistical expert. Basic descriptive statistics were run as well as logistic regressions. Logistic and linear regressions both help explain why a variable of interest changes as a function of the unique contributions from other variables. However, linear regression requires that the dependent variable be linearly related to the independent variables and that it is normally distributed. In this study, the key independent variable was binary (i.e., optimal/insufficient) rather than continuous. Thus, the use of logistic regression analysis techniques allowed us to analyze the unique contribution of independent variables related to camp characteristics (i.e. sponsorship, type, session length, and clientele) to youths’ optimal experiences.

### Findings

The research questions for this study focused on: 1) Do camps offer optimal youth development environments for the four supports and opportunities? And 2) Are there any differences based on camp characteristics? The results from the 7672 campers at the 80 camps in this study confirmed some of our beliefs while surprising us on others. The following sections will discuss the results of the analyses for the hypotheses for each of the research questions.

#### *Research Question #1*

The hypotheses tested for research question #1 was that at least 50% of all campers would be in optimal categories for all four supports and opportunity areas and no more than 15% would be in

the insufficient categories. Most camp professionals believe the camp community provides an excellent environment in which to build positive relationships between adults and youth as well as among the campers themselves. The data supported that notion. When the reports from campers related to questions about guidance, emotional and practical support, and knowledge of youth were calculated, 69% of the campers were in the optimal category while only 9% were in the insufficient group (see Table 4). This finding suggested that camps were doing a good job in meeting supportive relationship needs of their campers but still have room to improve.

TABLE 4  
*Overall Distribution of Developmental Experiences*  
(n=7672)

DIMENSIONS OF SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES	Percent Optimal	Percent Insufficient
Guidance	79%	15%
Emotional Support	89	8
Practical Support	81	13
Adult Knowledge	71	28
Peer Knowledge	65	34
Overall Supportive Relationships	69	9
Physical Safety	40	1
Emotional Safety	60	1
Overall Safety	30	1
Decision Making	9	28
Youth Leadership	2	66
Belonging	31	25
Overall Youth Involvement	5	39
Interesting	48	10
Growth & Progress	41	12
Challenging	44	17
Overall Skill Building	41	25

The second dimension measured how safe campers felt at camp. Surprisingly, just 30% of campers were in the optimal category; however, only 1% were in the insufficient area. This finding showed that campers experienced safety differently than directors/staff. The positive point in this finding was that almost none of the campers felt unsafe at camp.

The third dimension analyzed was youth involvement. This area focused on the campers' perceptions around decision-making, leadership, and belonging. The results showed only 5% of all campers in the optimal category and 39% in the insufficient group. This finding was the most surprising. Most camp professionals place high importance on leadership in camp programs. However, the campers' experiences did not support these adult perceptions.



The last dimension focused on skill-building and assessed aspects such as opportunities for challenging and interesting activities that had growth and progress options. The findings indicated that 41% of the campers were in the optimal category for this outcome; however, 26% of the campers were in the insufficient area. While camps offer opportunities and supports in skill-building, a significant number of children still do not achieve that optimal level for positive development.

The analyses indicated that both hypotheses for research question #1 were rejected. While supportive relationships met the criteria of at least 50% in optimal and supportive relationships and safety met the criteria of less than 15% classified in insufficient, the remaining areas did not meet the stated expectation.

#### *Research Question #2*

The research hypotheses for research question #2 were that camp characteristics would make no difference to the supports and opportunities except for type of camp, session length, and camp sponsorship. Therefore the data were analyzed through logistic regressions based on selected camp characteristics and levels of optimal and insufficient supports and opportunities. The analyses found significant differences based on all four camp characteristics (i.e., sponsorship of the camp, length of stay, type of camp, and clientele of campers) (see Table 5- Table 8).

#### *Type of Camp*

More youth who attended residential camps had optimal experiences compared with youth who went to day camps. Similar percentages of youth reported experiencing emotional safety at both residential and day camps and virtually no (less than 2%) youth had optimal experiences for leadership at either type of camp. On all other dimensions, youth at residential camps had more optimal experiences than did their day camp counterparts.

#### *Length of Session*

Length of the camp session was also an important factor that related to whether youth experienced the various supports and opportunities at optimal levels. For example, youth who went to camp for four or more weeks tended to have optimal experiences at higher rates than those campers who attended for less than 4 weeks. Only in the areas of opportunities for leadership (and overall youth involvement) and interesting activities (part of the skill building area) were percentages of youth who reported optimal experiences similar across varying camp session lengths.

#### *Camper Clientele*

In several areas, more youth who went to a single gender camp reported optimal experiences compared with campers who attended co-ed camps. In the areas of supportive relationships and skill building, boys in particular appeared to benefit from attending boys-only camps. More girls who went to girls-only camps reported optimal experiences in both physical and emotional safety than girls who attended co-ed camps.

#### *Camp Sponsorship*

Camp sponsorship appeared to be an important factor in several areas. In supportive relationships, more youth who went to independent for profit camps (IFPs) reported more

optimal experiences, followed by those children who attended religiously-affiliated camps. More youth who went to IFP and religiously-affiliated camps also reported optimal experiences of safety, particularly for physical safety, compared with agency-sponsored and independent not-for-profit camps (INPs).

TABLE 5  
*Proportion of Youth with Optimal Developmental Experiences  
by Camp Characteristics (% Optimal)*

Dimension	Sponsorship				Type		Session Length			Co-Ed vs. Single		
	Agency	Rel	IFP	INP	Day	Res	1 wk	2-3 wk	4+ wks	Co-ed	Boys	Girls
Guidance	74%	83%	84%	78%	63%	81%	75%	78%	84%	77%	85%	81%
Emotional Support	86	88	94	89	81	90	85	88	93	88	92	90
Practical Support	78	83	85	81	64	84	78	80	86	79	88	84
Adult Knowledge	66	70	80	69	60	72	63	68	80	69	81	72
Peer Knowledge	63	67	72	60	47	68	61	65	69	64	68	67
Overall Supportive Relationships	62	71	78	67	47	72	61	66	77	66	76	72
Physical Safety	36	45	45	35	30	41	36	37	45	36	39	49
Emotional Safety	57	63	65	54	58	60	58	58	63	56	61	68
Overall Safety	28	35	34	25	22	31	27	28	34	27	30	37
Decision Making	8	9	9	10	4	10	7	9	11	9	10	10
Leadership	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
Belonging	26	30	40	30	23	32	22	27	42	28	35	36
Overall Youth Involvement	4	5	6	6	3	6	4	5	7	5	6	6
Interesting	46	54	53	38	40	48	48	44	50	45	62	48
Growth & Progress	36	37	54	38	26	43	32	39	50	38	52	45
Challenging	39	49	50	42	31	46	42	43	47	43	56	42
Overall Skill Building	35	41	51	36	27	42	35	39	47	37	54	43
Sample Size	2584	1338	1974	1756	883	6771	2410	2302	2923	4773	814	2101

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TABLE 6  
*Proportion of Youth with Insufficient Developmental Experiences  
 by Camp Characteristics  
 (% Insufficient)*

Dimension	Sponsorship				Type		Session Length			Co-Ed vs. Single		
	Agency	Rel	IFP	INP	Day	Res	1 wk	2-3 wk	4+ wks	Co-ed	Boys	Girls
Guidance	19%	11%	11%	16%	30%	13%	17%	16%	11%	17%	10%	13%
Emotional Support	11	9	4	8	15	7	11	9	5	9	6	7
Practical Support	15	10	10	13	29	10	14	14	10	14	9	10
Adult Knowledge	33	30	19	31	39	27	36	32	19	30	18	28
Peer Knowledge	36	32	28	40	52	32	39	34	31	36	31	33
Overall Supportive Relationships	13	7	6	10	23	8	11	11	7	11	5	8
Physical Safety	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	.3	1	1	.1
Emotional Safety	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Overall Safety	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1
Decision Making	31	27	25	27	39	26	32	29	23	31	24	21
Leadership	66	73	68	60	77	65	72	64	64	68	69	62
Belonging	30	27	14	27	31	24	34	27	15	28	19	20
Overall Youth Involvement	45	40	31	40	50	38	48	41	30	44	35	32
Interesting	12	11	6	12	18	9	13	11	7	13	6	6
Growth & Progress	14	12	7	14	23	10	16	12	8	14	5	10
Challenging	20	15	13	17	31	15	20	18	13	19	9	15
Overall Skill Building	28	25	18	27	42	22	31	25	19	28	15	20
Sample Size	2584	1338	1974	1756	883	6771	2410	2302	2923	4773	814	2101

TABLE 7  
*Comparison of Likelihood of Youth Having  
 Optimal Developmental Experience*

▲ = significantly more likely

▼ = significantly less likely

CAMP CHARACTERISTICS	SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS	SAFETY	YOUTH INVOLVEMENT	SKILL BUILDING
DAY compared to resident	▼	▼	▼	▼
BOYS ONLY compared to coed	▲	▲		▲
GIRLS ONLY compared to coed	▼			
AGENCY compared to INP		▲		▲
RELIGIOUS compared to INP	▲	▲		▲
IND FOR PROFIT compared to INP	▲	▲		▲
1 WEEK compared to 4+ weeks	▼	▼	▼	▼
2-3 WEEKS compared to 4+ weeks	▼	▼		▼

TABLE 8  
*Comparison of Likelihood of Youth Having  
 Insufficient Developmental Experience*

▲ = significantly more likely

▼ = significantly less likely

CAMP CHARACTERISTICS	SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS	SAFETY	YOUTH INVOLVEMENT	SKILL BUILDING
DAY compared to resident	▲	▲	▲	▲
BOYS ONLY compared to coed	▼		▼	▼
GIRLS ONLY compared to coed			▼	
AGENCY compared to INP				
RELIGIOUS compared to INP	▼		▼	▼
IND FOR PROFIT compared to INP		▼	▼	▼
1 WEEK compared to 4+ weeks	▲		▲	▲
2-3 WEEKS compared to 4+ weeks	▲		▲	▲

In summary, the first hypothesis for research question #2 that no differences would be found based on clientele was rejected. Whether a child went to a girls' or boys' camp versus a co-ed camp did make a difference in some areas of supports and opportunities. The second hypothesis for research question #2 that stated a difference would be found based on camp type, session length, and sponsorship was substantiated.

### Discussion

Several conclusions emerged from this study. First, in general, camps can offer a positive environment in which to address outcomes related to positive youth development. However, the areas of youth involvement and safety were experienced with less consistency by the campers than expected. Secondly, differences based on sponsorship, type of camp, length of stay, and clientele further affected the provision of optimal developmental environments. The findings seemed to indicate that parameters existed in these areas of supports and opportunities that reflected issues related to the organizational structures and administration of the camps.

The one factor among the camp characteristics that played a critical role in the likelihood of youth having optimal or insufficient experiences across all four of the supports and opportunities was whether youth attended a day or residential camp. In all cases residential campers had an advantage over day campers, even when controlling for all other camp characteristics. This finding indicated that a fundamental difference in these two experiences exists. Since residential camp is a "self-contained" community where youth spend 24 hours a day away from other home and community influences, maybe this structure has some role to play in the differences. But it is also worth examining the basic structures of what activities were offered and how time was structured in both settings to see if some of the practices in residential camps can be adapted to the day setting in order to provide more of these youth with high quality developmental settings.

The role of session length in the likelihood of youth having optimal experiences at camp in all four areas has an intuitive explanation. It seemed obvious that the extended time period provided camp staff with more opportunities to develop relationships and create engaging and safe environments for youth. The challenge that faces one week camps is how to creatively structure their time with youth so that their settings contain as much developmental richness as camps with longer sessions. Another consideration is that while a child may attend sessions that are one week long, they may actually attend several of these sessions over the course of the summer. Again the challenge to staff is how to capitalize and build on previous sessions a child may have attended that summer.

Other challenges to the camp professional include training issues related to gender considerations in camp programs/leadership, youth involvement in leadership and decision-making, and processing skills needed to help staff understand the experiences from the campers' viewpoints. The findings also raise issues related to the best strategies and practices that result in effective outcome development.

The theoretical implications from the findings seemed to support the supports and opportunities model of the Community Action Framework for Youth Development. The framework was useful as a means for identifying areas in the camp experience that could be improved with more intentional strategies developed to move youth from the insufficient categories into the optimal

areas. The theory of change suggests that intentional practices that address pre-determined outcomes through such applications as the logic model are likely to show greater congruence between desired and actual results. This area would be a valuable contribution in future research efforts.

Camps are viable settings for promoting positive youth development because of their ability to custom tailor the programs and target key camper outcomes. Theoretically, camps that deliberately focus on critical goals and outcomes as a way to build the assets of their youth should see short term as well as long term gains in their youth (Henderson, 2001; Hurtes, Allen, Stevens, & Lee, 2000; Marsh, 1999). This benchmark study served as a first step toward helping camps understand their potential importance in the youth development process and the challenges to be addressed as they begin to consider strategies for program improvement.

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