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Family Camp: Strengthening At-Risk Families Through Adventure-Based Initiatives

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Family Camp: Strengthening At-Risk Families Through Adventure-Based Initiatives

Abstract

Family Camp weekend creates an innovative, supportive, educational, and fun environment for at-risk families, using experiential learning activities to forge positive changes in communication within the family structure. The program allows cognitive restructuring and opportunities for rehearsal by combining supportive recreation activities with structured experiential education activities. Working with the family as a whole, positive changes are systemic, and there is a greater likelihood of sustainability. Though a once-a-year experience may not resolve ubiquitous family problems, it does shed light on strengths that exist within that family that can combat the problematic situation and help prevent negative outcomes.

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Families who meet any of USDA's poverty risk factors typically have children who are susceptible to a number of negative outcomes such as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, violence, poor health, and underachievement (Sherman, 1998). Family camp was specifically designed to strengthen at-risk families.

According to the 1990 U.S. Census Current Population Reports, individuals are considered to be at risk if they meet one or more of the poverty risk factors:

1. Participation in a public assistance program,
2. Family income falls below the poverty threshold, and/or
3. Family income is less than 75% of the state or county median income.

The family-strengthening program attempts to incorporate skills that, according to U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention (USDJ, 1998), deter these negative outcomes, including improving communication among family members, increasing trust, and redefining values.

The basic structure of Family Camp's delivery mode centers on adventure-based counseling techniques (Rohnke, 1995; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988), which focus on building skills such as trust, communication, and positive self-concepts through activities, games, and discussions (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). Individuals are involved in the whole "human experience," including thinking, feeling, and doing (Schoel et al., 1988). The goal of this voluntary program is for individuals to enhance their strengths by learning, growing, and developing through experiential activities.

Funding for the program came from the New Jersey Children Youth and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) State Strengthening (STST) Initiative. Eligible families resided in New Jersey's identified CYFAR STST communities. Recruitment for Family Camp consisted of flyers distributed through the CYFAR STST Local Coalitions and inclusion in the local Housing Authorities' newsletter. In addition, Extension staff recruited participants in the community garden projects in the Housing Authority and distributed flyers at the elementary schools where staff conducted school enrichment programs.

Twelve families participated in Family Camp from the three identified CYFAR cities in Dover, Paterson, and Phillipsburg. Four were Hispanic, four African American, and four Caucasian.

Program Description

In 2001, Extension faculty and staff received a 1-day training from the Family Camp coordinator covering the value of adventure-based counseling, the structure, and the goals for the weekend. The coordinator received 5-day adventure training from Project Adventure, Inc.

The vision of Family Camp is to provide experiential, hands-on activities in forging positive changes within the family structure. Karl Rohnke (1995) identifies four basic elements of a successful adventure experience: trust, communication, cooperation, and fun. Based on these elements, Family Camp goals are to:

1. Increase communication among family members.
2. Provide opportunities for family socialization and fun.
3. Identify barriers to positive communication.
4. Identify values the family feels are important.
5. Identify barriers to family values.
6. Provide opportunities in which the family may implement values.

To enhance the adventure experience, facilitators are responsible for ensuring that families achieve the four elements. Like all adventure programs with any audience, sequencing of activities is important when using challenge initiatives. It allows for a successful group experience with limited frustration while progressing to a heightened level of cooperation and safety. The problem initiatives, adventure games, and trust activities, when used in an appropriate sequential order, provide a framework in which the facilitators present new information and demonstrate concepts.

Recruited to facilitate the experiential activities for the program were well-respected adventure facilitators from one of the internationally recognized authority on adventure programming, Project Adventure, Inc. Chosen for their reputation in the field and abilities to work with children and families, these facilitators were the nucleus of the program.

To enhance bonding, family members are expected to share lodgings during the weekend. The goal of the first evening's programming is to help the individuals feel comfortable with the group and camp surroundings while the staff familiarize themselves with recognizing the family units on sight and assess briefly how families communicate and problem solve.

The next morning, families gather for the activities. During the next few hours (approximately 4 hours total, 2 before lunch and 2 after) of carefully sequenced ice breakers and socializing warm-ups, adventure initiatives, and trust activities, the participants begin the process of trusting, learning, and having fun.

A "Family Memory Book" activity internalizes for the families how to apply to their lives the concepts learned during the day (Torretta, 2003). It is an excellent supplemental activity for family-strengthening programs where strengthening healthy communication skills is the goal. All members of the family are encouraged to participate in the completion of the book. When sequenced after the families had the entire day of unique challenges in adventure programming, it prompts positive communication and interaction. Family members are less likely to be defensive or mask their feelings for fear of ridicule and can write freely about their emotions.

Supporting Recreation Activities

Non-structured recreational camping activities scheduled the evening of and day after the adventure activities provide a balance for the structured activities in order to ensure the fun and enjoyment of the camp experience, as well as offer an opening for rehearsal of newly learned concepts. These recreational activities become therapeutic in nature as they offer families an opportunity to implement newly acquired communication skills under the guidance and support of Extension staff.

Impact on Youth

Evaluation for the 2001 Family Camp consisted of a self-reported questionnaire in a pre/post test design for all family members who had completed third grade and above. Families completed the pretest before adventure activities began on Friday evening at the camp and again at 2 months post camp. There were not enough adult posttest survey responses to include in these results. Table 1 reveals that youth feel they are more aware of family members feelings, family patterns of communicating and of obstacles that "get in the way" of communication.

Table 1.

Youths' Awareness of Family Member Feelings and Family Patterns of Communicating

	Before camp	After camp
My family lets me have my own thoughts and feelings.	68%	89%
I can tell by looking when a family member has had a good/bad day.	74%	89%
We have set ways of making up after a fight.	72%	89%
We interrupt each other a lot.	58%	56%

From the youths' perspective (Table 2), parents became more understanding, nurturing, and enthusiastic with their children, as well as becoming better role models.

Table 2.
Youths' Perspective on Parents (scale of 1 - 5, 5 + max)

	Before camp mean	After camp mean
My parents behave the way they tell me to behave.	3.00	3.44
My parents listen to my stories and how my day went.	2.63	2.67
My family asks me about my feelings.	2.16	2.56
I understand what my parents ask me to do.	2.74	3.22

Facilitation, metaphorically framing, and processing of activities is key in a successful adventure camp such as this. Allowing the participants to generalize an activity into their life cultivates fertile ground for making positive changes in their lives. Working with the family as a whole, positive changes are systemic, and there is a greater likelihood of sustainability.

There is potential for many different activities with family-strengthening qualities to provide an unlimited supply of fresh and challenging initiatives for families who attend more than once. Though a once-a-year experience may not resolve a ubiquitous family problem, it sheds light on the strengths that exist within that family that can combat the problematic situation and help prevent negative outcomes.

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