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Tying the Design of Your Camp Staff Training to the Delivery of Desired Youth Outcomes

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Tying the Design of Your Camp Staff Training to the Delivery of Desired Youth Outcomes

Abstract

As experience camp directors, we've seen the challenges faced by young camp counselors and inexperienced staff. Evaluations from staff at many camps motivated us to help our people be more effective with their campers. In response we created a comprehensive camp staff training. Lessons showed staff what we wanted them to do and say as they worked with campers. A key element of the training program was daily staff professional development sessions throughout camp. Evaluation results for both staff and campers show that intentional training on staff skills and behaviors supported the camp in achieving its identified youth development outcomes.

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Introduction

Camp is recognized as an important delivery mode in Extension education, and it has been the focus of several studies published in *Journal of Extension* and other venues. These studies are divided into two distinct groups. There are studies that focus on camper outcomes (Arnold, Bourdeau, & Nagele, 2005; Garst, & Bruce, 2003; Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2009) and studies that focus on the training and impacts of camp counselors, who are generally high school age youth in 4-H (Brandt, Arnold, 2006; Ferrari, & McNeely, 2007; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004; Garst, & Johnson, 2005; Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007).

Garst (2010) proposes the need to study the specific factors that influence camper outcomes by asking "how" questions that are relevant for the assessment of program quality. He suggested that research questions should hinge on point of service (such as the performance of camp staff) that can be controlled or influenced by the camp's leadership team. One question proposed by Garst (2010) for further study was "How do different staff behaviors influence the likely development of positive youth outcomes (in campers)?" This question focuses on the intersection of campers and counselors

at camp, which is missing in previous studies. It suggests the need to create a program logic model that takes into consideration the inputs and outcomes of two groups, the high school-age counselor staff and camper populations, rather than addressing each independently.

Beginning with specific desirable staff behaviors in mind, we set out to develop an improved camp staff professional development process that would provide positive camper outcomes.

Program Design and Delivery

The "atmosphere" of positive youth development is an essential component of high quality youth development programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The national 4-H program has outlined eight "essential" elements of high quality youth programs. These elements are: 1) a positive relationship with a caring adult; 2) a safe emotional and physical environment; 3) an inclusive environment; 4) engagement in learning; 5) opportunities for mastery; 6) opportunities to see oneself as an active participant in the future; 7) opportunities for self-determination; and 8) opportunities to value and practice service to others (United States Department of Agriculture, 2001). Questions on the camper post-camp survey would ask campers about their experience at camp related to: 1) camp being an emotionally and physically safe place and 2) feeling cared about at camp (Arnold, Nott, & Bourdeau, 2011).

To establish a common understanding of the atmosphere we wanted at camp, we used the American Camp Association's *Creating Positive Youth Outcomes* workbook (2007). The summer science camp had specific goals for youth outcomes. For each of these goals we identified eight to 10 specific actions staff could take to help campers achieve desired outcomes. These were stated using a couplet formula, "If staff will X, then campers will Y" as identified in the workbook. For example, one statement was, "If staff will teach campers how to resolve conflict with peers, then campers will experience higher quality interactions and social environments." The stated staff actions were selected to encompass the eight "essential" elements of high quality youth programs.

With our goals for staff training matched to our goals for camper outcomes, we delved into the plethora of camp staff training literature available. We recognized that we needed staff to learn not just *what* we wanted them to do but *how* we wanted them to do it. We selected or developed lessons that clearly showed staff what we wanted them to do as they worked with campers. We recognized that if we wanted staff to teach conflict resolution to campers, we had to teach the staff the needed skills. The comprehensive 25-hour staff training package we developed used the experiential education model that we wanted staff to use with campers.

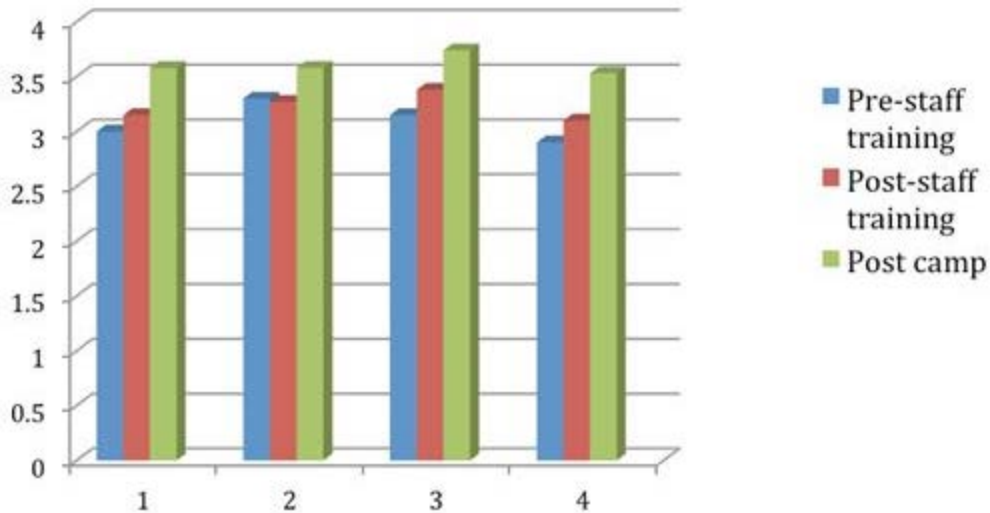
Methods and Results

Staff completed an evaluation three times over the course of 15 days at camp. Evaluations were given pre-staff training, post-staff training, and post camp. A 40-item questionnaire measured self-reported knowledge, attitude, skills, and abilities we identified as necessary to help campers achieve our stated goals. Staff were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a one to four scale: 1) strongly disagree; 2) disagree; 3) agree; and 4) strongly agree.

The pre-staff training and post-staff training evaluation results were and used to identify continued

training during camp. These two pre-camp training evaluations helped us identify specific knowledge or skills where staff indicated lower than desirable confidence. During camp we had a daily staff meeting, which included a brief professional development session on an item identified from the pre-camp evaluations. Staff ratings of four items on the questionnaire that were addressed by professional development sessions during camp are presented in Figure 1. They show that staff continued to gain confidence in their abilities in these important topics as camp progressed.

Figure 1.
Evaluation Data



1. I used "Leader Lingo" to ask campers to think about solutions instead of solving problems for them.
2. I encouraged campers to listen to each other to handle conflict.
3. I used my skills to support campers in building skills and qualities to become their best.
4. I can list some Social, Emotional and Intellectual characteristics of 12- 14 year olds.

Camper Evaluation Results

Results from the camper evaluation showed that overall campers had a positive experience with camp, both in terms of what they learned and the camp atmosphere itself. By and large, campers reported experiencing a safe environment and feeling cared about. Camper ratings of these experiences are presented in Tables 1 and 2 (percentages of participants are in parentheses and italicized).

Table 1.
A Safe Environment

	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always

Feel safe and respected	1 (2%)	8 (17%)	15 (33%)	22 (48%)
Afraid will be embarrassed or put down	17 (37%)	20 (44%)	7 (15%)	2 (4%)
Okay to make mistakes	1 (2%)	6 (13%)	17 (37%)	22 (48%)

Table 2.
Feeling Cared About at Camp

	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Everyone welcome	0 (0%)	9 (20%)	6 (13%)	31 (67%)
Adults listen	0 (0%)	11 (24%)	10 (22%)	25 (54%)
Feel comfortable getting adult's advice	0 (0%)	7 (15%)	13 (28%)	26 (57%)
Other kids care	3 (7%)	9 (20%)	17 (37%)	17 (37%)
Counselors like being with campers	2 (5%)	5 (11%)	12 (27%)	25 (57%)
Felt welcomed and included	0 (0%)	8 (17%)	13 (28%)	25 (54%)

Conclusion

Results from the staff evaluations and the camper post-camp evaluation indicate that the time invested in development of a comprehensive staff training package that focuses on camper outcomes reaps benefits. Staff continued to gain skills through practice and additional training over the course of the camp. The post-camp camper evaluations helped identify opportunities to make additional improvements in the staff training program. Intentionally identifying and training on desired staff skills and behaviors were important to achieving the camp's identified youth development outcomes.

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