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## Positive Youth Development: What's Camp Counseling Got to Do With It? Findings from a Study of Ohio 4-H Camp Counselors

Theresa M. Ferrari

*Ohio State University*, ferrari.8@osu.edu

Niki Nestor McNeely

*Ohio State University Extension*, mcneely.1@osu.edu



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## Positive Youth Development: What's Camp Counseling Got to Do With It? Findings from a Study of Ohio 4-H Camp Counselors

### Abstract

The study reported here sought to identify contributions of 4-H camp counselor participation to positive youth development. Researcher-developed questions addressed intensity, duration, and breadth of camp counseling. The Youth Experiences Survey (YES) was used to measure personal, interpersonal, and negative experiences. Data were collected from 779 counselors in Ohio using a Web-based survey. They reported a high level of Teamwork and Social Skills, Initiative, Identity, and Interpersonal Relationships and very low levels of Negative Experiences. The more years teens were camp counselors, the higher their Leadership and Responsibility. The research suggests several important implications for those who work with camp programs.

### Theresa M. Ferrari

Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development  
Columbus, Ohio  
[ferrari.8@osu.edu](mailto:ferrari.8@osu.edu)

### Niki Nestor McNeely

Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development and Camping  
Extension Center at Lima  
Findlay, Ohio  
[mcneely.1@osu.edu](mailto:mcneely.1@osu.edu)

Ohio State University Extension

## Introduction

Camping has a long history within 4-H (Wessel & Wessel, 1982), and camp counselors are an important component of the program. However, most camping research has focused on camper outcomes (Mulkeen, Garst, & Bourdeau, 2003). Until recently, relatively little research had been done on camp counseling within 4-H.

Ohio has one of the largest 4-H camping programs in the country. Camping is county based, and teens serve as volunteer counselors, assuming significant responsibility for planning and conducting programs for younger campers during their weeklong county camp. County 4-H educators provide counselor training and facilitate the camping experience with these two audiences in mind. Considering the amount of resources invested, significance of the counselor's role, and concerns for accountability, further study of the 4-H camp counseling program is warranted.

## Review of Literature

Studies of camping programs have focused primarily on benefits to campers. Campers benefit in many ways that enhance their overall development, such as making new friends, learning new skills, and becoming more independent and responsible (American Camp Association, 2005; Arnold, Bourdeau, & Nagele, 2005; Garst & Bruce, 2003; Marsh, 1999). Similar benefits may pertain to camp counselors, because they also experience the camp environment. However, the added challenges faced by those who have planning, supervision, leadership, and teaching roles suggest that there are additional developmental benefits as well.

Past research with camp counselors suggests they have developed skills, particularly in relation to

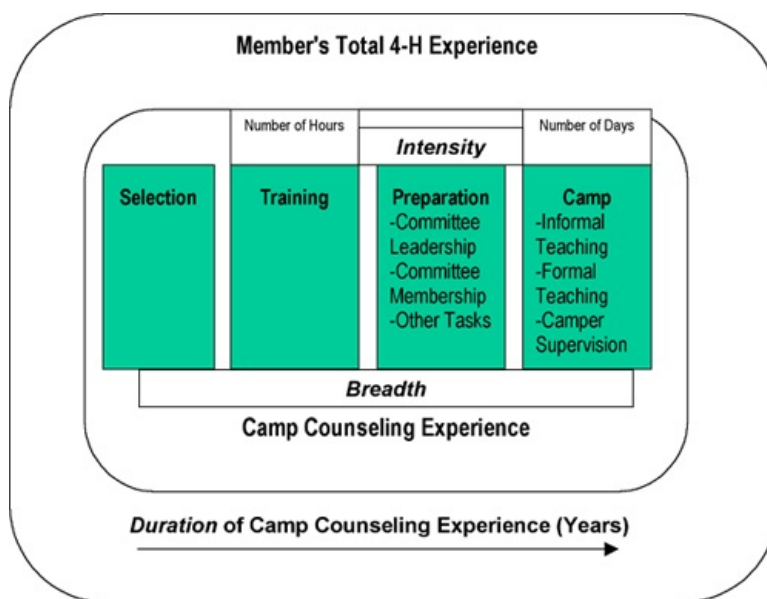
leadership and responsibility (DeGraaf & Glover, 2003; Dworken, 2004; Gerstein, 1992; James, 2003; Lyons, 2000; Powell, Bixler, & Switzer, 2003; Purcell, 1996). However, participants in this research have been paid staff who were older than the teens typical of many county-based 4-H counselor programs. Three studies of 4-H teen counselors found that they gained personal and interpersonal skills (Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson; 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003, 2005; Weese, 2002). However, these studies used qualitative methods, and thus another method to document potential benefits should be explored.

There is a concern for how youth spend their time, because youth who engaged in unstructured activities had less positive outcomes than those in structured activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). Conversely, participation in structured youth activities has been associated with positive functioning (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Mahoney et al., 2005). Larson (2000) contends that such activities are conducive to the development of initiative because they are voluntary and intrinsically motivating, yet they are challenging and demand concentration.

As well, current research reflects a trend to examine not only outcomes of youth programs, but also processes that lead to them (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Hansen et al., 2003). This is consistent with the concept of proximal processes from Bronfenbrenner's human ecological theory (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Such activities that occur regularly and are progressively more complex are said to be growth inducing.

In order to gain a more complete understanding of its potential benefits, the camp counseling experience can be described in terms of its intensity, duration, and breadth, reflecting the most contemporary trend in examining participation in youth activities (Chaput, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Fiester, Simpkins, & Bouffard, 2005). Previous research has suggested that the greater the intensity, duration, and breadth of the experiences, the more youth will gain from their participation. A model illustrating these concepts is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual Model of the 4-H Camp Counseling Experience



## Purpose

The study reported here sought to identify the contributions of camp counselor participation to positive youth development by:

1. Describing components of the 4-H camp counseling experience.
2. Examining the extent that counselors report personal, interpersonal, and negative experiences.
3. Examining the relationship of duration of camp counseling to personal, interpersonal, and negative domains.

## Methods

### Participants

We conducted a census of youth who served as camp counselors at Ohio 4-H residential and day

camps in 2004 ( $N = 2,575$ ). Counselors responding reported nearly 8 years of 4-H membership and 4 1/2 years of previous participation as a 4-H camper. Three-fourths were female, which is consistent with 4-H membership in this age group. The median grade was 10th grade, with an average age of 15.7 years (with a range from 12 to 20; however, the vast majority were between 14 and 18 years old). The respondents were from 83 of the 84 counties with camp counselor programs (out of a total of 88 counties).

## Measures

To collect study data we developed a Web-based survey using Dillman's (2000) and Archer's (2003) recommendations.

### Participation

Participation information was collected using a researcher-developed instrument (McNeely, 2004). We conceptualized the camp counseling experience to consist of (a) counselor training, (b) camp planning and preparation, and (c) counselor roles and responsibilities at camp. To measure duration, counselors provided the number of years they served as a camp counselor. Intensity was measured by questions related to amount of time spent in training, planning, and preparation, as well as number of days spent on-site at camp. Questions related to committee leadership and membership, formal and informal teaching, and camper supervision measured breadth of participation. These measures were reviewed by two camping experts and pilot tested with youth.

### Developmental Experiences

The Youth Experiences Survey (YES) measured six domains of personal and interpersonal development, as well as five negative aspects (Hansen & Larson, 2002). It contains 70 items organized into 17 subscales. All items used a four-point response scale, ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (Yes, definitely). The positive scales had Cronbach's alphas ranging from .72 to .87, with the exception of Identify Exploration (.54). Negative Experience scales ranged from .59 to .82. These figures are consistent with Hansen and Larson (2002).

## Data Collection and Analyses

The university's Institutional Review Board granted approval for the study. County 4-H Educators provided their current camp counselor lists. Information regarding the survey was mailed to parents of these counselors. The mailing indicated how to access the Web-based survey; parents then provided this information to their child. There was a 30% response rate ( $n = 779$ ) with two reminders. Chi-square analyses indicated no differences between early and late responders. Descriptive statistics, means,  $t$ -tests, and correlations were used to address the research questions.

## Results

### Duration, Intensity, and Breadth of Camp Counseling Experience

Teens participated as camp counselors from 1 to 6 years, with a mean of 2.2 years ( $SD = 1.21$ ). They spent an average of 20 hours ( $SD = 6.1$ ) in planning and training sessions. In addition, they spent more than 13 additional hours ( $SD = 14.4$ ) in camp preparation. Most spent between 4 to 5 days at camp. Three-fourths reported they had taught two or more formal topics and three or more informal topics; over half were required to prepare lesson plans. Two primary areas of responsibility were supervision in cabins and in groups. More than 60% provided leadership to committees ( $M = 2.4$  committees), and nearly 90% reported having served as members on two to three planning committees.

### Personal, Interpersonal, and Negative Experiences

The counselors reported a high level of Teamwork and Social Skills, Initiative, Identity, and Interpersonal Relationships (scale  $M$ s = 3.10 - 3.55; see Table 1). To a lesser extent, they reported having experiences related to developing Basic Skills and Adult Networks (scale  $M$ s = 2.60 - 2.96, except for the Emotional Regulation subscale,  $M = 3.26$ ). They reported a very low level of Negative Experiences (scale  $M$ s = 1.11 - 1.44), although several individual items in these scales had a higher frequency--presence of cliques, stress, unfair workload, interference with family activities, and presence of controlling adults.

**Table 1.**  
Means and Standard Deviations for Youth Experiences Survey (YES) Scales

Categories of Developmental Experience	M	SD
<b>Personal Development</b>		
<b>Identity</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>.58</b>
Identity Exploration	3.30	.60

Identity Reflection	3.10	.76
<b>Initiative</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>.53</b>
Goal Setting	3.29	.66
Effort	3.44	.60
Problem Solving	3.30	.65
Time Management	3.40	.62
<b>Basic Skills</b>	<b>2.87</b>	<b>.67</b>
Emotional Regulation	3.26	.73
Cognitive Skills	2.64	.69
Physical Skills	2.73	1.01
<b>Interpersonal Development</b>		
<b>Teamwork and Social Skills</b>	<b>3.46</b>	<b>.54</b>
Group Process Skills	3.55	.54
Feedback	3.29	.73
Leadership and Responsibility	3.55	.57
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>	<b>3.19</b>	<b>.59</b>
Diverse Peer Relationships	3.27	.67
Prosocial Norms	3.11	.67
<b>Adult Networks</b>	<b>2.72</b>	<b>.78</b>
Integration with Family	2.60	.93
Linkages to Community	2.96	.88
Linkages to Work and College	2.61	.93
<b>Negative Experiences</b>	<b>1.29</b>	<b>.37</b>
Stress	1.44	.54
Negative Peer Influence	1.13	.38
Social Exclusion	1.44	.59
Negative Group Dynamics	1.30	.49
Inappropriate Adult Behavior	1.11	.34
*Note: $n = 723-772$ . Hansen & Larson (2002) reported an aggregate score for the negative experiences domain, but not for the personal and interpersonal domains. The Youth Experiences Survey instrument may be found at the following Web site: <a href="http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/youthdev/yes.htm">http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/youthdev/yes.htm</a>		

## Relationship of Duration with Personal and Interpersonal Experiences

There was a significant positive relationship between the number of years as a camp counselor and the development of Leadership and Responsibility,  $r = .20$ ,  $t = 5.39$  (Bonferroni  $t$ -statistics were used in this computation due to the large number of comparisons; Miller, 1981). The more years teens served as camp counselors, the higher their mean score on the YES Leadership and Responsibility scale.

## Discussion

The current research is consistent with studies that document positive personal and interpersonal outcomes for 4-H camp counselors (Forsythe et al., 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003, 2005; Weese, 2002). In addition, the results are in alignment with studies of participation in other organized youth activities (Hansen et al., 2003).

Participation as a camp counselor enhanced teens' development through opportunities to practice teamwork, social skills, and initiative. These are important skills valued by employers in the workforce (Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003; SCANS, 1991). Yet, mid-range scores on the Linkages to Work and College subscale indicated that counselors, most of whom were 15-16 years old, may not be making this connection between the skills they are learning and their future applicability. This deserves further study.

Furthermore, teens reported opportunities that fostered identity development, which is a major adolescent developmental task (Harter, 1993; Kroger, 2000; McIntosh, Metz, & Youniss, 2005; Thomas, 1992). Critical to the development of both initiative and identity is the chance to have

meaningful roles and carry out real responsibilities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), conditions that were present in the camp experience. Thus, the experience of camp counseling is an example of *stage-environment fit*, that is, an activity that fits well with the developmental needs of its participants (Eccles et al., 1993).

Fortunately, low mean scores indicated that negative experiences were not prevalent. It is important to consider the potential for such negative experiences (Dubas & Snider, 1993). In some organized activities, specifically sports, youth have had negative interactions with peers and adults (Dworkin & Larson, 2004; Hansen et al., 2003). In other instances, participation in certain youth activities afforded the opportunity to associate with deviant peers and perpetuate negative behaviors (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004).

This study of 4-H camp counseling extended previous research by describing the experience in terms of a multifaceted view of participation. Leadership and responsibility was the only domain that showed a relationship with duration. The research design was cross-sectional, not longitudinal, and this should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study. However, the findings are consistent with the research in after-school programs that shows that participation over time is needed to produce benefits (Chaput et al., 2004).

This perspective of participation is important because Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) argued that for activities to effectively enhance development, they must take place on a regular basis, over an extended period of time, and become increasingly more complex. By describing the camp counseling in terms of its intensity, duration, and breadth, the study reported here documented that counselors spent a considerable time in training, planning, and preparation and had substantial responsibilities at camp. Accordingly, positive outcomes related to adolescent development were demonstrated.

It is important to note, however, that such benefits may be the result of natural maturation. A study using a control group of similar youth who did not participate in such experiences would allow for comparisons. Nevertheless, it is important to document the processes whereby such positive development occurs (Eccles, 2005). If counselors do not perform certain roles or responsibilities or perform them to a different extent, these benefits might not be realized.

## Implications

This research suggests several important implications for those who work with camp programs.

1. Capitalize on the potential to promote camp counseling as a workforce preparation experience. Specifically, camp counseling helps youth to develop valuable workforce skills, particularly leadership, teamwork, initiative, and interpersonal. Facilitators can assist teens in recognizing the importance of these skills now and in the future, and can design counselor training accordingly.
2. Address areas where counselors identified negative experiences through modifications to counselor training and the supervision provided by adult staff. Additional focus on team building prior to camp, purposeful mixing of camp counselors, and discussion of logistical and ethical questions prior to camp may help to address some of these negative experiences.
3. Deliberately include a variety of interesting and challenging activities as part of camp counseling experiences, as well as provide a balance of structure and youth responsibility and ownership (Larson et al., 2005). In doing so, the opportunity exists to increase the youth development benefits.

Camp provides a unique environment, offering intangibles that are often difficult to define. The study reported here shows that the 4-H camp counseling experience provides a rich context for positive youth development and workforce preparation. These findings should be communicated to a wide variety of stakeholders.

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