

Evaluation Report

North Carolina 4-H Camps: A Snapshot

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EVALUATION SUMMARY

The most extensive evaluation to date of North Carolina summer resident camps confirmed what generations of campers and parents believe: Outdoor, hands-on learning experiences in close-knit cabin communities help build skills in target and water sports, and the experiences also build general life skills in relating to, leading, and serving others. Campers age 8 to 18 reported increased levels of confidence and independent responsibility. For all age groups and camp locations, youth reported that 4-H camp climates are safe, supportive, skill-building, and confidence-boosting.



Kayaking at 4-H Eastern Environmental Center

What we know about camping and youth development

Summer camp is a time-honored tradition for many youth, expanding horizons beyond their homes and offering opportunities to make new friends and enjoy the out-of-doors. The American Camp Association (ACA) found that camp experiences, such as swimming, archery, and team games, positively influenced kids' self-confidence, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (American Camp Association, 2006). A week away from home promotes independence. Shared cabin space requires personal organization and conflict resolution skills. Mounting a horse or climbing a tower inspires courage and perseverance.

Winning at "capture the flag" cultivates leadership and creativity. Multi-week and specialty camps, which focus on specific outdoor skills, tend to build skills and confidence better than single-week experiences. Either experience benefits youth so long as it provides a supportive and challenging environment. All 4-H camps in North Carolina are accredited by the American Camping Association, which indicates that they offer safe and high quality facilities, staff, procedures, and programming.

How the study was completed

The Summer Camp Study in 2006 represented the most extensive and in-depth evaluation of 4-H camps in North Carolina to date: 1,600 campers, age 8 to 18, at four North Carolina 4-H camps (Betsy-Jeff Penn, Eastern Center, Millstone, and Sertoma)

completed life skills surveys using Optiscan “bubble sheets.” Older youth (age 13 – 18) completed 37 items, including the Penn State Life Skills survey (Mincemoyer, 2006) and a Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwartzter and Jerusalem, 2000), pre- and post-camp. Younger youth (age 12 and under) completed a 25-item life skills and self-efficacy survey adapted from an existing tool as a retrospective post-camp survey. Both groups completed a 30-item retrospective survey on youth program quality, based on Eccles and Gootman’s traits of positive youth development programs. Camp counselors supervising water and target sports also documented that campers learned safety rules and basic skills in swimming, canoeing, archery, and riflery.

What youth gained through the camping experience

Life Skills

Life skills evaluated at the four camps included decision-making, problem solving, communication, and goal setting. In addition, self-efficacy, or confidence to do things effectively, was also surveyed. Older campers (N =123), most of whom participated in specialized camps, reported relatively high life skills at camp entry and showed slight improvement by the end of the week. Older youth improved most in problem-solving skills, but no skill area gain was statistically significant. Self-efficacy increased for 50 percent of the older youth. High initial scores may reflect the higher competence of youth attracted to specialized camps. Or the relatively small gains may reflect a response shift bias that results when skills are over-estimated at pre-test and estimated more accurately at post-test. Informal comments from counselors and camp directors indicated that more growth might have been reported if survey items mentioned specific skills or applications related to specialized camp experiences rather than general life skills. In addition, many youth disliked the “bubble sheet” survey forms, so they may have answered questions quickly and without much reflection.



Falconry at Millstone Fur, Fish, and Game camp



Swimming time at Betsy-Jeff Penn Conference Center

A majority of the younger campers (N = 1,477) reported some growth in all life skills areas. Areas of greatest growth, based on survey response categories, included Trying New Activities, with 40 – 50 percent reporting “a lot of growth” and 65 – 75 percent indicating “a little” or “a lot” of growth. Similar patterns were evident for Making Friends (45 percent “a lot of growth”, 70 percent “a little or a lot”). Across camps, 40 percent indicated “a lot” of growth in Self-Confidence, with 70 percent reporting “a little” or “a lot” of growth in Self-Confidence. These results are consistent with the national study of camp outcomes by the American

Camp Association. Informal comments from camp personnel indicated that younger youth also had difficulties with the “bubble sheets.” This may have contributed to a lower completion rate for younger youth than for older youth. It is unclear how completion rate may have influenced results. Suggestions for improving on evaluation methods are discussed below.

Youth Program Climate

Youth rated all camps highly on several dimensions of quality: safety, support, skill-building, and belongingness, as well as empowerment to take responsibility and help others. In most camps, 40 – 50 percent of youth indicated that they “Always” felt the camp climate was positive. Overall, 60 – 80 percent saw the climate as positive “Often” or “Always.” Over 90 percent of youth indicated that they had fun. Younger youth were even more likely than their older peers to indicate that they hoped to return to camp (49 percent strongly agreed) and that they planned to become more involved in 4-H during the year (42 percent strongly agreed). Moreover, both groups of youth saw camp as a place to broaden not only their 4-H experience but their view of the world. Youth programs with these traits consistently promote positive outcomes in children and teens, and life skills growth at the camps, as measured by this survey, is consistent with these trends.



Outdoor learning and fun at Betsy-Jeff Penn Conference Center

Outdoor Skills

Activities counselors reported that 100 percent of youth who engaged in water sports and target sports learned safety rules related to their activities. Learning and practicing safety is a basic camp expectation. An estimated 75 percent of campers mastered basic skills in outdoor sports, with different skills offered at each camp. Campers do not become Olympic competitors in five days, but each camper has opportunities to enjoy small successes and improve understanding of outdoor skills.

Results and conclusions

Youth, ages 8 – 18, in a variety of 4-H camping venues, consistently reported gains in life skills, outdoor skills, and safety learning, and very positive experiences across a range of camps. These findings reinforce generations of positive testimonials about the quality of the 4-H camp experience in North Carolina. In particular, youth of all ages recognize the camp climate as safe, supportive, skill building, and service-oriented. Consistent with results of a national study by the American Camp Association, many NC 4-Hers learned independence, tried new activities, and made new friends from across the state. In addition, they learned to safely enjoy, if not master, one or more outdoor activities. The camp environment and campers’ personal successes increased self-confidence for new challenges.

Support from adults and peers as well as opportunities to take on new challenges are critical components of healthy youth development and preparation for adult success. 4-H camps clearly contribute to positive youth development through their activities and their impact on continued 4-H participation.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Camps provide a challenging and rewarding climate for growth and development. The results of the 2006 study document the fundamental strengths of 4-H camps in North Carolina. The results also highlighted challenges in programming and evaluation.



Ropes course at
4-H Eastern Environmental Center

Camp Programming

North Carolina 4-H camps provide a positive setting for youth development, although their impact on general life skills may be less obvious. Five days is an extremely brief time to significantly improve life skills unless the program is intensive and targeted. Specialty camps that provide specific training and practice for activities such as whitewater rafting, horsemanship, or money management, are more likely to produce significant gains in knowledge and skills within five days. All camps may need to invest additional resources in planning, training, and curriculum activities, as well as in refining measures of the specific skills to more effectively document knowledge and skill gains. Training that includes reviews of key facts and rehearsals of procedures might also boost gains in knowledge and skills. Specialty programs may need to consider selective admission of participants whose experience maximizes their readiness to benefit from the camp. Some programs may need to be extended to two or three weeks to produce optimal results. Specialized training linked to year-round learning and practice may yield significant results and help to define the unique contributions of specialty camps to the broader learning experience.



Sertoma Camp Challenge hikers reach new heights

Evaluation of Youth Programs

Four camps successfully completed the challenging task of systematically evaluating outcomes and climate with more than 100 campers per week. Although survey “bubble sheets” were efficient and cost-effective, that method may exceed the literacy competencies of many campers. In addition, informal comments from camp directors identified issues with time, organization, facilities, resources, and experience in evaluation as problematic for both counselors and campers. Efforts to collect pre- and post-test data exacerbated these difficulties. A retrospective

pretest (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000) may produce more reliable data with less stress. Sampling only some subjects or weeks of camp may reduce staff burden, but may require more rigorous management of time, people, and resources than a simple routine applied to all weeks and camps.

Continued efforts are needed to build professional and organizational evaluation capability. Additional training of counselors as expert observers and interviewers could decrease paperwork, increase staff competence, and enhance staff interaction with campers. Integrating enrollment and evaluation databases would facilitate more precise analysis of skills and program quality data by demographic categories. Use of technologies that enable quick transfer of responses to databases would provide camp staff with just-in-time feedback to sustain, correct, or improve programs from week to week. Integrating evaluation with educational and relational activities could improve both the camp experience and the data about campers' experiences.

Results from camp evaluations could be used to improve programs, recruit new delegates for succeeding years, and track youth throughout their 4-H careers. Sharing results with decision-makers and sponsors would offer evidence that 4-H programs are worthwhile investments.

References

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Support: NC 4-H camps are largely self-supporting, with camperships made available through local fund raising, county and state 4-H development funds and partner-sponsors.

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