

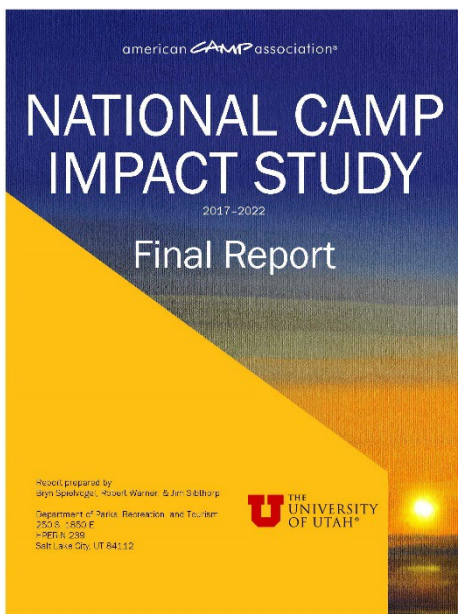
American Camp Association
**National Youth Impact
Study Summary Report**

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE STUDY

The five-year American Camp Association (ACA) National Impact Study began in January 2017 with the primary purpose of understanding the long-term impacts of organized summer camp experiences for youth participants and young adult staff members. The study, conducted in collaboration with the University of Utah’s Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism included three phases: (1) the exploratory phase did this; (2) the mapping phase did this; and (3) the longitudinal phase did this.



IN THIS REPORT

This summary report provides a concise overview of the primary findings from the study along with practical takeaways for camp practitioners. Readers are encouraged to review the full report that was prepared by the University of Utah research team, which can be found [here](#), along with the Staff Summary Report, which can be found [here](#).

PRIMARY FINDINGS

While many of the key findings from the National Impact Study have been documented in prior reports or published academic articles, both this summary report and [the full report](#) aim to highlight the essential takeaways based on a complete picture of the study from start to end.

The primary findings are thus organized around three overarching themes:

- 1) the importance of high-quality camp experiences,
- 2) understanding camp in context, and
- 3) decision-making about camp.





THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY CAMP EXPERIENCES

High-quality camp experiences are linked
to youth and staff development.



Features of a High-Quality Camp Experience

Youth participants who reported high levels of engagement at camp generally also reported high levels of belonging, supportive youth-staff relationships and opportunities for action-based experiential learning (and to a lesser extent, reflection-based experiential learning). On the other hand, youth participants who reported lower levels of engagement tended to report worse experiences in other areas as well. Looking at the camp experience holistically, across all features, youth’s experiences at camp generally fell into three categories: Good, Great, or Exceptional. And while youth often had consistent camp experiences across years (e.g., having a Great Experience in 2018, 2019, and 2021) there was also a good deal of variation in the types of

experiences youth had from year-to-year. For example, 30% of youth participants experienced improvements in the quality of their experiences from one year to the next, while 25% experienced declines.

How Camp Experiences Are Related to Youth Outcomes

Youth participants who had higher quality camp experiences throughout the duration of the study reported higher levels of affinity for nature, willingness to try new things, social awareness, independence, and grit when compared to youth participants who had lower quality camp experiences. Youth who had higher-quality camp experiences also tended to have higher levels of parent-reported affinity for nature and willingness to try new things. Similarly, youth reported higher affinity for nature,

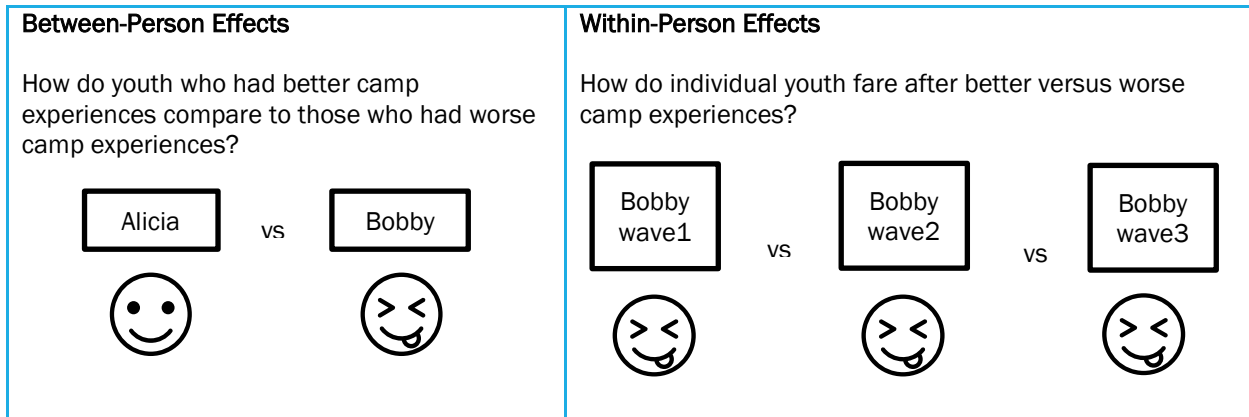


Table 1. Association Between Camp Experiences and Youth Outcomes

	Child Reported Outcomes					Parent Reported Outcomes			
	Affinity for nature	Willingness to try new things	Independence	Social awareness	Grit	Affinity for nature	Willingness to try new things	Independence	Friendships
Between person link	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
Within person link	X	+	X	X	+	-	-	-	X

Note: X indicates a significant relationship between overall camp experiences and the outcome. + indicates a marginally significant relationship. - indicates no relationship. Darker green represents stronger evidence of a causal association.

independence, and social awareness after a high-quality camp experience than they did after a lower quality camp experience. Parents also reported that their child had better friendships following a higher versus a lower quality camp experience.

Enduring Connections Between Camp Experiences and Youth Outcomes

Having a high-quality camp experience at the start of the study was connected to improved outcomes in the short-term *and* several years after camp attendance. The most enduring effects were among youth participants' affinity for nature, willingness to try new things, grit, and child friendships. Most of these improvements in youth outcomes were evident the Fall after camp, rather than emerging gradually, suggesting that positive experiences at camp give youth a boost in skills, perhaps akin to an intervention.

Lasting Camp Memories and Appreciation for Being Present

Positive peer relationships and new opportunities are part of what makes camp experiences memorable to youth. Memorable experiences like these may help explain the enduring effects of a high-quality camp experience. Furthermore, youth who had higher quality camp experiences in terms of engagement, belonging, youth-adult relationships, and experiential learning also reported higher levels of appreciation for being present after camp. That being said, the interconnected nature of these different aspects of the camp experience makes it difficult to determine whether high-quality camp experiences promote appreciation for being present, *or* if youth who already

appreciate being present are simply more likely to have positive experiences at camp.

Being sat down in the classroom and kind of being told this is how you work in a group, this is how those two interact with others when you're playing or doing project service...

I feel like that would not have been as effective as my time at camp where I was actually doing it and experiencing it and learning it in the real time.

– Former camper

Camp Experiences Related to Identity Development Among Staff

Staff participants' stories about their work at camp had more evidence of lasting meaning than their stories about non-camp early-life employment. Additionally, camp offered more opportunities to try new things, make a difference, and feel challenged than their other early-life employment. And camp employment was observed to support emerging adults' self-authorship development (such as making decisions on one's own and making decisions that are value-driven, particularly when camp sparked change or confirmed their values).

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

- **Look for ways to integrate opportunities for reflection into your programming!** Reflection-based experiential learning opportunities may be the key feature that bumps camper experiences from *great* to *exceptional*.
- **Continuously improve the quality of your camp programs.** High-quality camp experiences predict youth outcomes, with some connections enduring *years* after the camp experience. Improving camp quality may thus have short- and long-term benefits for your participants' development. *Not sure where to start? [Check out ACA's Camp Program Quality resources here!](#)*
- **Ensure your programming includes opportunities for participants to build peer relationships, to try new things, and to focus on the being in the present moment!** These are key assets of the camp environment!
- **Promote opportunities for identity development when recruiting new staff!** Remember, employment at camp provides young adults an avenue for exploring and solidifying their identities, and for making decisions that align with their values and beliefs. *Learn more specifically about our staff-related findings [here!](#)*



UNDERSTANDING CAMP IN CONTEXT

Summer camp is one piece of a larger developmental ecosystem. Though it may offer unique benefits compared to some settings, camp is best understood as a setting that can complement youths' other life experiences.



Connections Between Camp and School

In general, youth who had higher quality camp experiences than their peers also had better school experiences the following Spring. Additionally, youth who reported higher quality school experiences than their peers in Spring 2019 tended to have better camp experiences than those peers the following summer, even when comparing youth who had similar camp experiences in summer of 2018. Thus, experiences in camp and school settings appear to be mutually reinforcing.

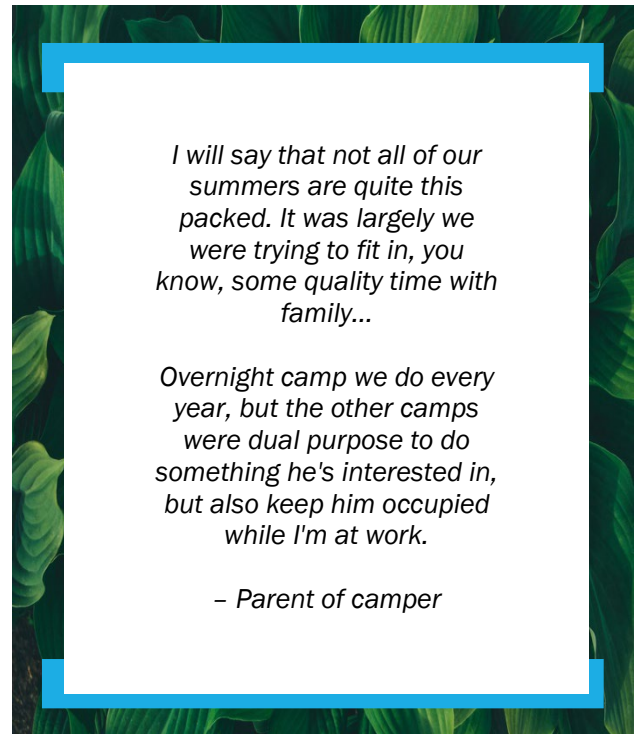
Furthermore, experiences at camp predicted *all* child-reported outcomes within the same wave (e.g., camp experiences reported in fall of 2018 predicted outcomes in fall of 2018). This held true for school experiences as well. That is, youth who reported higher-quality experiences in each of these settings compared to their peers generally reported higher outcome levels than those peers.

Finally, there were significant *indirect* effects of camp experiences on later outcomes *through* school experiences. By this we mean that “effects” of quality camp experiences on social awareness, grit, willingness to try new things, and affinity for nature were partly transmitted through improvements in school experiences.

Camp as Part of an Enriching Summer

Data on where youth spent time over summer were used to examine variation in how families construct youths’ summertime (i.e., their “summer activity landscape”). Findings revealed that many youth had balanced summers characterized by time in a variety of settings, including day camp, overnight camp, on vacation, at home, and – in some cases – in specialized activities (sports or arts/music focused). Still, some youth spent the majority of their time in only one enrichment setting, and there

was also a large portion who spent most of their summer at home.



Additionally, things like income and family size may impact how families decide to use their summer. For example, youth from families that had lower levels of income tended to spend more time at home than others, perhaps due to the expense of extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, youth in smaller households were more often in the Day Camper and Overnight Camper profiles, perhaps due to childcare needs.

Continuing, many youth and their families changed their approach to summertime at some point over the course of the study. Generally speaking, youth spent increasingly more time at home in later years, and youth who spent most of their summer at camp early in the study generally spent fewer weeks there by the end. These changes are likely explained by three factors:

- a) child maturation and interest development;
- b) pragmatic concerns related to childcare, expenses, and COVID-19; and

- c) parent views about how their kids should use summertime.

Finally, comparing the qualities of summer camp to those of other summertime settings, we found that camp offered similar levels of engagement, belonging, experiential learning, and youth-adult

relationships compared to specialized activities (such as sports and arts/music). However, camp settings were most differentiated from being at home, which was the least engaging, and from family vacation, which involved less experiential learning.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

- Promote positive experiences across settings by partnering with nearby schools!** An exceptional camp experience may support improvements in youths' school experiences, with benefits for developmental outcomes. This further underscores the importance of promoting high-quality camp experiences. That being said, it *also* suggests that youth having trouble at school may need **extra** support to benefit fully from the camp experience.
- Consider how the camp experience can complement other settings your participants spend time in!** Remember, camp is just one part of a larger summertime ecosystem. While evidence suggests that camp may offer developmental benefits to youth, other settings may offer similar benefits given shared qualities. Still, even youth who spent the majority of their time in these alternative settings tended to participate in a few weeks of camp. Therefore, it may useful to view these as complementary settings that offer engagement, belonging, experiential learning, and positive youth-adult relationships through different avenues.
- Recognize participants' natural developmental progression!** How youth use their summertime appears to change as they get older. While some youth de-prioritize time at summer camp in favor of other settings, others *will* continue to prioritize camp. However, it may help to be aware that even these youth generally spend less time at camp than they did in younger years and may therefore be more selective in choosing which camp(s) to attend as they get older.



DECISION-MAKING ABOUT CAMP

People consider a myriad of factors in making decisions about camp attendance and employment, from economic constraints to socioemotional needs.



Drivers of Camp Attendance

Parents – often mothers – contributed most to camp-related decision-making, with youth contributing more to the initiation phase than other phases. While quantitative data showed minimal changes in youth contributions to decision-making about camp over time, interview findings suggest that caregivers provide their children more leeway in deciding what they want to do during summer as they get older.

Parents had three types of **camp-related goals** for their children:

- a) interactive learning,
- b) intrapersonal development,
- c) and fun/belonging.

At the same time, caregivers also considered “**camp fit**” factors in deciding where to send their child to camp. These factors included:

- a) logistics/cost,
- b) program quality,
- c) child fit,
- d) institutional ties, and
- e) social connections.

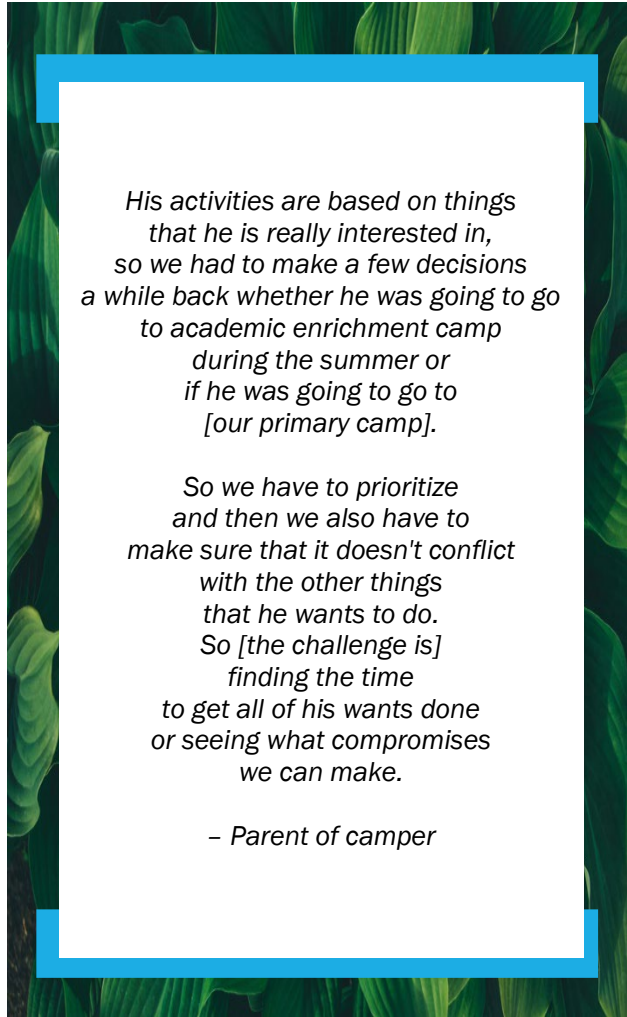


Table 2. Types of Parent Goals for Children at Camp

Interactive Learning	Intrapersonal Development	Fun and belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learns to appreciate nature • Learns to get along with others • Learns to be a leader • Meets kids that are different from them • Able to disconnect from technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learns to be more independent • Learns to be more responsible • Able to learn about who they are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has fun • Feels like they belong at camp • Makes new friends • Has new experiences • Is able to live in the moment

Table 3. Camp Fit Factors

Logistics/cost	Program quality	Child fit	Institutional ties	Social connections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Camp proximity to home • Location of camp • Cost of camp fits in the family budget • Need for summer childcare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputation of the camp • Quality of staff • Programming and activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child was interested • Child was ready for camp 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious or spiritual affiliation • Connection to child’s school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child has friends attending the camp • Recommendations from other parents

Parents with low levels of income generally wanted their children to get more out of camp than did parents with high levels of income, but they were more constrained in terms of costs and logistics. They also valued institutional ties more than higher income families.

Select groups of youth, including Black and Asian youth, and youth from families with fewer socioeconomic resources attended camp over fewer years than their

peers. Put another way, camp attendance was less “enduring” for these youth.

Lastly, youth from families with fewer socioeconomic resources, those with less family history with camp, and those in larger households attended camp for fewer weeks than their peers over the course of the study. That is, camp attendance was less “intense” for these youth.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

- **Look for ways to reduce barriers to camp attendance for children from low-income homes and families with fewer socioeconomic resources!** Consider scholarship programs and/or building relationships with local institutions like churches and school. Remember, families balance a variety of competing needs and interests when making decisions about sending their children to camp. And unfortunately, some families must navigate more constraints than others, resulting in key inequities in camp attendance even *within a sample of families that send their children to camp.*