

An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Life Skill Development in Missouri's 4-H Youth Resident Summer Camps

Camp – more than just fun and games and campfires - a prime environment for life skill development in youth.



Leadership Team

- Ina Metzger Linville, Ph.D., Interim Director, 4-H Center for Youth Development
- Michelle Klem, 4-H Youth Dev. Specialist
- Gerry Snapp, State 4-H Youth Specialist
- Kellie Ellerbusch, Research Associate, UMKC IHD
- Jan Schwarz, Research Associate, UMKC IHD
- Don Nicholson, 4-H Youth Dev. Specialist
- Dave Hileman, 4-H Youth Dev. Specialist
- Clara Green, 4-H Youth Dev. Specialist
- Sara Staude, 4-H Youth Dev. Specialist

Introduction & Background

It is generally accepted that camp is a great leisure activity for youth. Now, more than ever, it is also essential for practitioners to measure and verify that camp does much more: it develops essential life skills in youth. Each summer, University of Missouri Extension sponsors several 4-H resident camps throughout the state. The curriculum for these camps focuses on the development of a spectrum of life skills relating to **Head** (*managing and thinking*), **Heart** (*relating and caring*), **Hands** (*giving and working*), and **Health** (*living and being*).*

This study was to undertaken determine the effectiveness of the Missouri 4-H camp experience in increasing one particular life skill in each of four areas: Learning to Learn, Social Skills, Teamwork, and Self-Responsibility.*

*Targeting Life Skills Model; Iowa State University Extension

Methods

Two surveys, one for youth and one for parents, were developed by an evaluation team of several Extension field faculty and a faculty member of the UMKC Institute for Human Development (IHD). Questions for both surveys were developed based on the experience and knowledge of Youth Development Specialists with Missouri 4-H summer camp programs. The instruments and process were approved by University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research.

The Youth and Parent surveys each contained the same three sections. The camper survey was conducted at the conclusion of camp; the parent survey was administered by mail several weeks following camp. Both surveys gathered parallel quantitative and qualitative data.

Abstract

Camping is generally believed to be a context for positive youth development (Garst, 2003). The Missouri 4-H camp curriculum focuses on the development of life skills relating to Head (*managing and thinking*), Heart (*relating and caring*), Hands (*giving and working*), and Health (*living and being*) (Garst & Bruce, 2003; Hendricks, 1996). The purpose of this state-wide effort was to systematically measure the development of life skills in youth attending 4-H resident camps in Missouri.

In order to evaluate the efficacy of these camp programs, resident campers within the 10-13 year age range were surveyed about their camping experience. Parents of the same campers were also surveyed to gather their perceptions of 4-H camp's impact on their children in developing the life skill areas identified above.

Parents and youth agreed strongly that the 4-H Camp experience was substantially valuable in developing the life skills that are identified in the Targeting Life Skills Model.

The evaluation instruments and the institutionally-approved survey process proved to be valid, useful and will likely be easy to replicate and may be available to other camping programs.



Results & Conclusions

In the quantitative section of the surveys, parents reported that their child's Social Skills had improved more than any other because of attending 4-H Camp (Parent mean = 1.92 where 1 = "Strongly Agree"; 4 = "Strongly Disagree"). Youth agreed even more frequently (Youth mean = 1.89). Youth reported their Teamwork skills improved most because of attending 4-H Camp (Youth mean = 1.78). Parents agreed slightly less frequently (Parent mean = 1.98). In even the lowest-rated life skill (Learning to Learn), both parents and campers overwhelmingly agreed that this skill improved because of 4-H camp.

The overall evaluation of Missouri's 4-H Youth Resident Camp program is incredibly positive. The vast majority of parents and youth alike feel that the 4-H Camp experience provides a wealth of learning experiences for campers. It clearly does have perceived value to both parents and children in developing life skills.

Practical Applications

The instruments and process used in this study are sound and transferable to other camping programs. All have been academically reviewed and approved as meeting high ethical standards for use with children and their families.

Outcome data obtained from the instruments and process such as the ones used in Missouri could be used for:

- Program improvement
- Establishing baseline data
- Marketing purposes
- Educating financiers, decision-makers, and parents of potential participants.

Camps have a greater impact than most people may imagine—camp is more than "just fun and games and campfires".