

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Leadership; Positive Youth Development; Program Administration; Residential Camp; Youth Engagement

### POPULATION GROUPS

All Youth; Youth Workers

### STEPPING UP THEME

Health & Wellness

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

### SOURCE

Academic

**“...camp counsellors can engage campers in a number of different ways and these strategies are most effective when the camp counsellor takes into consideration various attributes of the camper such as personal preferences, demographic, skills, maturity, and level of engagement in program activities” (p. 32).**

# Facilitating Positive Youth Development Through Residential Camp: Exploring Perceived Characteristics of Effective Camp Counsellors and Strategies for Youth Engagement

## 1. What is the research about?

Research has shown that participation in summer camp has the potential to facilitate positive outcomes for youth, from an increased sense of identity and ability to handle responsibility, to enhanced self-esteem and improved social skills. Caring, supportive relationships between young people and adults have been identified as an extremely important part of positive youth development (PYD) programming. Moreover, researchers have identified that qualities and characteristics of adult leaders play an important role in positive outcomes for youth. The purpose of this study was to explore what leadership qualities camp counsellors believe they possess that have resulted in positive experiences for youth who have attended their summer camp.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place at a summer camp located in Eastern Ontario, outside of a major city. It is accredited by the Ontario Camps Association, run by a non-profit organization, and serves children and youth between the ages of eight and 16, mostly from low-income families. This camp was chosen because it has a long-standing, positive reputation and a strong camp counsellor training program, and previous studies have demonstrated that it has fostered many positive youth development outcomes.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about camp counsellors and their engagement with youth.

## 4. How was the research done?

Fifteen camp counsellors, including three senior staff, a manager, and a coordinator, participated in one-on-one interviews. The semi-structured interviews were led by an interview guide (a list of questions), which was designed to obtain demographic information and to explore the counsellors' motivation for working at camp, relationships with campers, and suggestions for improving the experience for both campers and counsellors. Themes were then identified from the participants' responses.

## 5. What are the key findings?

Participants identified four characteristics of effective camp counsellors:

- Being **understanding** and **compassionate**.
- Having the ability to **maintain equanimity** (to stay calm even in a difficult situation).
- Having a **sense of humour**.
- Being a **positive role model**.

Strategies to facilitate positive youth development included **individualizing activities**, **making activities fun**, creating environments that **support autonomy** (independence), and **providing leadership opportunities** to campers.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study sheds light on what camp counsellors perceive as essential traits for doing their jobs efficiently. Those recruiting counsellors may wish to seek staff with these qualities, and provide current staff with opportunities to either develop or enhance these traits.

Given that the ability to deal with stress was identified as a positive trait, camp counsellors should be given opportunities to engage in stress reduction or stress management. Staff should also be trained in positive youth development approaches to working with youth.

This research also provides suggestions for future research, including an examination of whether or not these traits in camp counsellors translate into positive outcomes for campers.



Halsall, T., Kendellen, K., Bean, C., & Forneris, T. (2016). Facilitating positive youth development through residential camp: Exploring perceived characteristics of effective camp counsellors and strategies for youth engagement. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 34(4), 20-35.

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