

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Delivering Positive Youth Development at a Residential Summer Sport Camp

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Positive Youth Development; Residential Sport Camp; Summer Camp

POPULATION GROUPS

All Youth; Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness; Strong, Supportive Friends & Families; Coordinated & Youth-Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Summer camps may be a particularly fruitful setting for intentionally structuring adult- and youth-led Positive Youth Development experiences, as they engage older campers and young adults to act as mentors for younger campers” (p. 21).

1. What is the research about?

In the summer months, more than 10 million children in the US attend some kind of camp, making the camp context a rich setting to foster positive youth development (PYD). While researchers have demonstrated a connection between attendance of structured summer day camps and PYD, little research has been conducted in regards to sports-oriented residential camps and their effects on youth development. The researchers in this study tried to identify the specific characteristics and processes used by a residential summer sport camp to create an environment rooted in a PYD framework.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in the US at a privately-owned, residential, waterfront youth summer sport camp. The camp offers three diverse co-ed programs to campers: all-sport, extreme, and soccer. This camp was chosen based on its inherent interest in facilitating various aspects of PYD through sport, and its demonstrated inclusivity to people of all capabilities.

3. Who is this research about?

This research focused on youth, aged 15-20, enrolled in the nine week ‘extreme’ program, which offers older youth opportunities to build various life skills while engaging in more ‘extreme’ sport activities (i.e. laser tag, dune buggies).

4. How was the research done?

The researchers designed their case study to identify the presence and facilitation of the **8 Settings Features**, which, when present in a youth context, are evidence of a positive developmental setting for youth.

The 8 Settings Features are:

- physical and psychological safety
- appropriate structure
- supportive relationships
- opportunities to belong
- positive social norms
- support for efficacy and mattering
- opportunities for skill building
- integration of family, school, and community efforts

For this study, three sets of participants were gathered: three management staff (aged 25-30), 30 camp staff (aged 20-28), and 24 youth (aged 15-20; 16 ‘extreme’ campers and eight Counsellors-in-Training, or CITs).

Data came from loosely-structured interviews with camp and management staff and through youth focus groups, field notes collected by the primary author, and analysis of the employee handbook. Interviews and observations were transcribed (tape recorded and written out word-for-word) and analyzed using the 8 Settings Features.

5. What are the key findings?

Categorized by the 8 Settings Features, the findings focus on the ways the leaders and staff members created an environment that offered PYD opportunities among campers:

- All staff members acknowledged their responsibility to provide a **physically and psychologically safe environment** for youth in order to facilitate the development of interpersonal and social skills.
- Sport sessions were **appropriately structured to campers' ages and needs**, and were **inclusive to youth of all abilities**, which allowed for the development of physical and sport skills, as well as leadership and team-building skills.
- The **supportive relationships** fostered between all levels of the camp (management, counsellors, leaders, and campers) provided an environment in which personal traits – like caring, compassion, and self-confidence – were developed.
- Leaders and coaches **maintained an inclusive atmosphere** in which campers felt free to be themselves, with a goal of strengthening campers' sense of belonging, transferrable to settings outside of camp.
- To promote **positive social norms**, behavioural expectations were explained to campers and maintained through **multi-level role modeling**.
- During both sport activities and downtime, counsellors and coaches **facilitated opportunities for campers to develop interpersonal skills**, such as a sense of fair play and team-building, physical skills, and opportunities for self-improvement.
- Because of the **immersive structure** of this camp (campers lived onsite for the duration of the program), the skills and values they learned became **expectations of self**, which are transferrable to aspects of life outside of camp.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Because such a high number of youth attend day and residential camps every summer, the structure of summer camp programming is an important area of focus. Although most camps structure their programming to provide campers with enjoyable experiences, it is important to understand how to facilitate PYD opportunities throughout these experiences. The immersive nature of a residential sport camp dedicated to developing youth assets provides a context rich in opportunity for PYD. Guided encouragement from adults allows youth to grow, explore, and discover their strengths and abilities.

The results from this study may help sports administrators and residential camp directors appropriately structure camp programming to facilitate PYD opportunities. The results could also support the creation of policy and accreditation standards for the inclusion of PYD programming and staff training at all summer camps.



Povilaitis, V., & Tamminen, K. A. (2017). Delivering positive youth development at a residential summer sport camp. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 33(4), 470-495.