

Evidence Based Practice Day

Temple University, Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Recreation Therapy Program

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Building Self-Esteem of Youth with Developmental Disabilities through Camp Experiences

Search Terms: Summer Camp AND youth AND disabilities; Summer Camp AND self-esteem AND disabilities, Youth AND self-concept AND summer camp; therapeutic camps AND developmental disabilities; youth development programs AND self-concept.

Years: 2003-2011

Databases: Academic OneFile, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Google Scholar, Medline, PsychINFO

Number of articles: 8

Summary of Research Findings:

Positive youth development is dependent on opportunities for children to grow towards intellectual, physical, social, and emotional competence. Supports provided from family, community and other institutions are essential, and youth development specialists argue that camps are particularly well suited to provide the types of positive experiences that contribute to development in all of these areas. Additionally, camp experiences afford opportunities for youth to develop healthy self-constructs, including self-confidence, self-identity, self-efficacy, self-determination and self-esteem (Bialeschki, Henderson & James, 2007).

The purpose of this eight article literature review was to specifically examine the role of camp experiences in building self-esteem in youth with developmental disabilities. Developmental disabilities were broadly defined in this review to include individuals with a variety of different conditions affecting typical development. This included youth with visual impairments (Goodwin, Lieberman, Johnston & Leo, 2011; Goodwin & Staples, 2005), cerebral palsy (Goodwin & Staples, 2005), craniofacial differences (Devine, & Dawson, 2010), autism (Blas, 2007; Goodwin & Staples, 2005), learning disabilities (Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003), intellectual disabilities (Bialeschki, Henderson & James, 2007; Blass, 2007; Siperstein, Glick, Harada, Bardon & Parker, 2007), behavioral disorders (Larson, 2007) and neurological impairments (Blas, 2007).

Some of the camps were designed specifically for children with disabilities (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Devine & Dawson, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2011; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Larson, 2007; Michalski et al., 2003), while others focused on inclusive camp experiences (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Blas, 2007; Siperstein et al., 2007). Camp activities were diverse; however several typical camp activities were commonly cited. These included sailing, swimming, hiking, dancing, fitness/sports activities, ropes courses, horseback riding, archery, camp outs, arts & crafts, social activities, camping trips, and opening and closing ceremonies (Blas, 2007; Devine & Dawson, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2011; Goodwin, & Staples, 2005; Michalski et al., 2003). One camp focused specifically on adventure-based activities (Larson, 2007), while another focused primarily on sports activities (Siperstein et al., 2007).

A variety of significant outcomes were documented from these camp experiences. While some articles pointed directly to enhanced self-esteem in youth with developmental disabilities (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Devine & Dawson, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2011; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Larson, 2007; Michalski et al., 2003), other outcomes that are frequently linked to self-esteem were also documented. These included improvements in self-concept, social connections, independence, leadership qualities, insight to personal limits, skill building/acquisition, greater appreciation for others, improvements in a variety of athletic skills, strengthened relationships, & increased social acceptance (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Devine, & Dawson, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2011; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Larson, 2007; Michalski et al., 2003; Siperstein et al., 2007).

Given the complexity of camping experiences, a frequently noted limitation in camping research is the difficulty in determining which specific camp factors contribute most to improving the campers' self-esteem (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Blas, 2007; Devine, & Dawson, 2010; Larson, 2007). Additionally, since camps are typically experiences of short duration, information on the lasting effects of positive outcomes is limited (Goodwin et al., 2005; Michalski et al., 2003). Nonetheless, initial evidence indicates that camp experiences can play an important role in improving the self-esteem in youth with developmental disabilities, and additional research in this area is certainly warranted.

Knowledge Translation Plan:

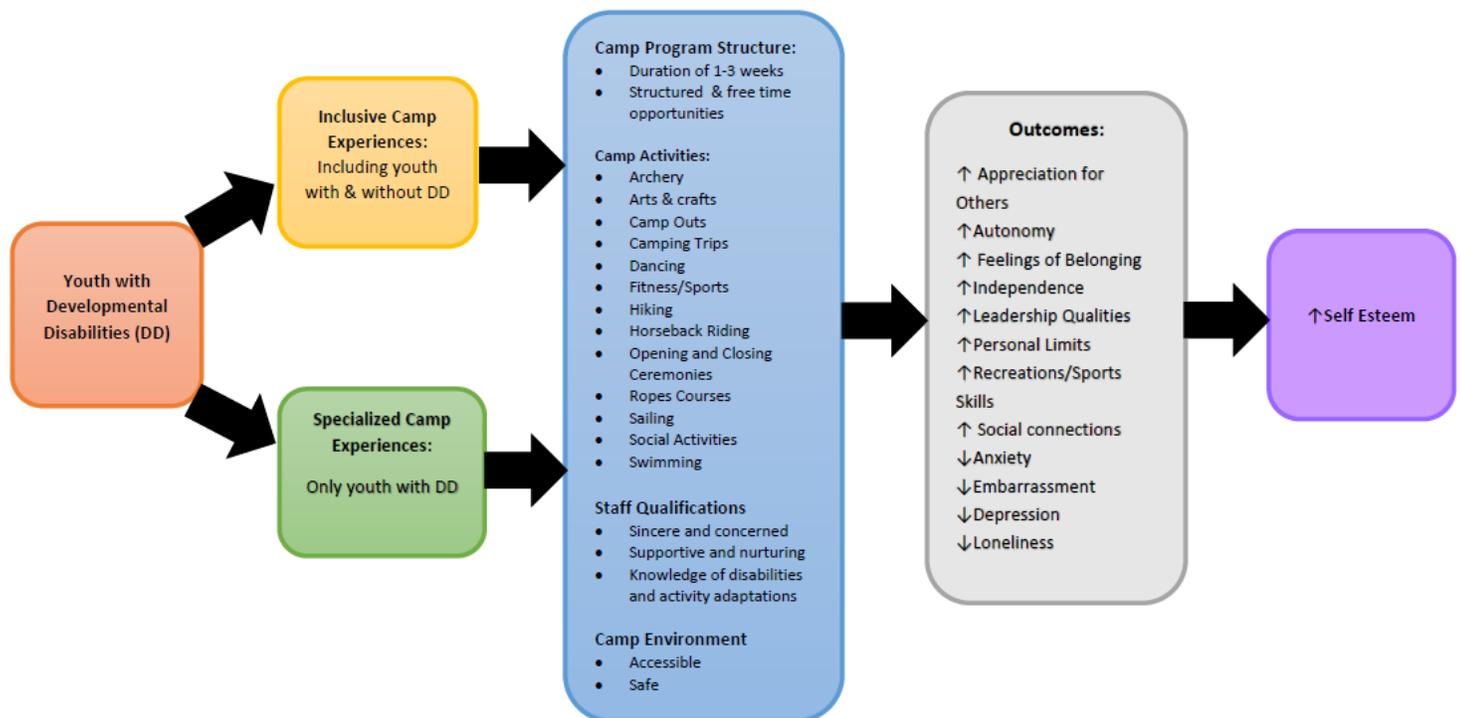
Camp experiences can play an important role in developing the self-esteem of youth with developmental disabilities, yet Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS's) should be aware that simply providing camp experiences will not automatically lead to positive outcomes. The goals, program activities, staff attention and physical and emotional safety of camps are what make outcome achievement possible (Bialeschki et al., 2007). Therefore, CTRS' need to recognize the importance of their professional training in setting individualized goals, selecting appropriate activities, training camp staff and ensuring a therapeutic environment.

Camp settings should be accessible and evaluated to ensure the environment and setting meets the needs of every camper. CTRS' should consider the context and structure of the camp in order to facilitate an impactful experience. To align with positive outcomes documented in the literature, camp experiences should be between 1-3 weeks in duration, and include developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize peer interaction and mastery of skills (Devine & Dawson, 2010; Michalski et al., 2003). Both

structured and free time activities should be included to increase autonomy, independence, self-direction, and ability to make choices. Campers should also have opportunities to learn and develop new skills through structured activities.

Staff members play an important role in the camper's experience, so individuals who can serve as role models are essential. Staff members who are perceived by campers as being trustworthy, supportive, and responsible are desired in order to maximize positive relationships. Specific training in disability awareness and activity programming skills will prepare the staff for the exact population they will be working with (Blas, 2007; Siperstein et al., 2007). Training will also enable staff to adapt activities based on each camper's unique circumstances. Extensive background checks on staff should be completed to ensure camper safety.

While traditional camping experiences afford many unique opportunities for youth with developmental disabilities, CTRS's should also look for ways to infuse camp-like experiences into after school activities and community – based recreation experiences in order to increase year round experiences that can contribute to the self-esteem of youth with developmental disabilities.



References:

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