

AN EVALUATION OF APPRECIATION, POSSIBILITY, AND FRIENDSHIP SKILLS AT A CAMP FOR YOUTH WITH SERIOUS ILLNESS

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The purpose of this study was to understand the outcomes of appreciation, possibility, and friendship skills in a traditional camp program for youth with serious and life threatening illnesses. A second purpose was to use American Camp Association's (ACA) Friendship Skills outcome measures with a specific population of campers: youth with serious illness. A third purpose was to explore potential relations between camper self-reports of appreciation, possibility, and friendship skills, and reports from parents/caregivers on these measures.

The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp is dedicated to providing "a different kind of healing" to seriously ill children and their families throughout the Northeast, free of charge. Campers were youth living with cancer, sickle cell, HIV/AIDS, metabolic disease, hemophilia, and other life-threatening illnesses, and their siblings. Nine camp sessions ran for seven days each, and Hole in the Wall served 1,061 youth aged 7-15 in the summer of 2014. Hole in the Wall offered traditional camp activities such as arts and crafts, fishing, theater, and campfires, but no specific medical or psychosocial educational activities were conducted.

Other studies have been done with Hole in the Wall (e.g., Carlson & Cook, 2007; Gillard, 2014), yet none have examined its core values of appreciation and possibility nor used standardized measures. Appreciation is defined by Hole in the Wall as "We recognize the generosity and gratitude of others and intend to exemplify that in all our decisions and actions," and possibility is defined as "All aspects of our community are designed to allow every individual inspired by Camp to believe that the impossible can be possible." The development of friendship skills (i.e., making friends and maintaining relationships; ACA, 2011) is not a core value, but members of Hole in the Wall believe this to be an important potential outcome of camp.

Appreciation is important to consider at Hole in the Wall because this is one possible protective factor for campers living with serious illness needing resilience. Possibility is important because a driving philosophy of Hole in the Wall is that at camp, youth can do that which they have been told they cannot do because of their illnesses. Serious illness affects friendships with others, such as connecting with peers and disclosing their illnesses to others, and youth with serious illness typically lack many opportunities to develop friendship skills due to hospitalizations, bullying, and delays in meeting developmental milestones.

Theoretical Framework

Because of their life experiences, youth with disabilities such as chronic and serious illnesses can particularly benefit from supported camp experiences (e.g., Brannan, Arick, & Fullerton, 1996; Goodwin & Staples, 2005). Developmental Systems Theory was the foundation for understanding individual-context interactions. The essential process of development involves changing *relations* between the developing youth and their changing contexts, and acknowledges that youth are embedded in a larger social context (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). In a camp setting, the context created by counselors and other adults has bearing on campers' developmental progression, and in turn, campers' development helps shape the camp context. Hole in the Wall's program approach contained key elements of the Developmental Systems Theory notion of "fit":

activities and experiences that were developmentally appropriate, interesting, and engaging, and that provided support via interactions with caring others and opportunities for building skills.

The purpose of this study was to explore from the two perspectives of campers and parents/caregivers the extent to which campers experienced appreciation and possibility and increased in friendship skills.

The evaluation questions were:

1. To what extent did campers experience appreciation and possibility?
2. Did campers' friendship skills increase?
3. How did parents/caregivers perceive changes in their children's friendship skills compared to campers' perceptions?

Methods

Parent or caregiver consent was obtained for camper study participants. Camper study participants completed questionnaires on their last afternoon at camp, using iPads with the iSurvey app. A collaborative approach toward scale creation included conversations and review of the camper survey with key program staff. Seven questions comprised the outcome scale of "appreciation." Examples of questions included "During Camp, I had a strong feeling of being thankful" and "I reflect on how important my friends at Camp are to me." Six questions comprised the outcome scale of "possibility." Examples of questions included "I'm good at doing the activities at Camp" and "Everyone at Camp could do all the activities." Six-hundred and forty-two camper study participants completed appreciation and possibility questions. Four-hundred and ten campers study participants aged 10 and older also completed the 14-item friendship skills scale (ACA, 2011).

Two-hundred and twenty parents/caregivers completed online surveys after each session. Parents/caregivers answered one item each about their perceived changes in their children's appreciation and possibility, and completed the four-item ACA parent-perception friendship skills scale. Examples of questions were "My child makes friends," and "My child empathizes with friends." Camper and parent/caregiver data on the three outcomes were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Relationships between camper and parent data were explored using t-tests.

Results

Campers reported gains in all the outcomes measured. Appreciation ($M = 4.48$, $SD = .56$, $\alpha = .695$), and possibility ($M = 4.26$, $SD = .60$, $\alpha = .686$) were both out of 5. Friendship skills ($M = 2.49$, $SD = .58$, $\alpha = .943$) were measured from -1 to 3, and campers also had fun (scale of 0-3; $M = 2.49$, $SD = .59$, $\alpha = .975$). Regarding parent/caregiver and camper perceptions of friendship skills, there was a notable difference between camper ($M = 1.38$) and parent/caregiver perceptions of friendship skills gained ($M = 2.01$). This difference between means of .63, $CI [.52, .75]$ was significant ($t(627) = 10.8$, $p < .001$).

Discussion and Implications

Campers agreed that they experienced appreciation and possibility at camp, and reported that their friendship skills increased and they had fun during camp. That so many campers experienced such positive outcomes is important for youth with serious illnesses who typically struggle to develop social and personal outcomes because of their isolation and delays in development due to illness (Miauton et al., 2003; Woods, Mayes, Bartley, Fedele, & Ryan, 2013). The findings from this study provide evidence of alignment between camp's values and camper outcomes.

The finding that parents perceived that their children gained more than the campers thought they did was interesting but not surprising. Initial psychometric testing of the parent

perceptions tool (Sibthorp & Bennett, 2013) indicated low correlations between camper and parent reports, meaning that what makes camp successful for campers is not always well-aligned with parents. Another possibility is that in our study, the time between when campers completed their surveys (at the end of camp) might have magnified outcomes a few days or weeks later when parents/caregivers completed surveys. A third possibility is that parents/caregivers had an inflated perception of the effect of camp on children because they wanted to believe that their investment of time and effort in sending their children to camp was warranted.

This study contributes to the camp profession by sharing tested tools to examine the outcomes of appreciation and possibility, expanding the use of the friendship skills scale to a medical specialty camp, and providing encouragement to collect data from multiple perspectives. Future considerations include measuring campers' changes in appreciation, possibility, and friendship skills from the additional perspective of adult counselors and relating these data to data from campers and parents/caregivers. As camp professionals continue to find ways to "imagine, inspire, and impact" through the power of camp, this study provides additional documentation of the impact of camp from the perspectives of campers and parents/caregivers while providing inspiration for intentional and imaginative programming.

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