

## **DOES A 45-MINUTE STAFF TRAINING SESSION ON CAMPER FRIENDSHIP SKILLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO CAMPER OUTCOMES?**

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This study investigated if campers' self-reported friendship skills changed from a summer when staff received no training about camper friendship skills to the next summer when staff attended a 45-minute training on this topic. Findings from this study could be used to make decisions about the amount and quality of camp staff training on camper friendship skills. The setting for this study was a seven-day residential recreational camp serving children with serious illnesses (e.g., cancer, sickle cell, HIV/AIDS, metabolic disease, and other serious illnesses) and their siblings.

Friendship skills is a youth development outcome defined by the American Camp Association as making friends and maintaining relationships (2011, p. 4). The experience of serious illness can greatly affect friendships with other youth. Developing and maintaining friendships is complicated by hospitalizations, differences in appearance, and decisions about disclosing or sharing information about the illness (Taylor, Gibson, & Franck, 2008). Friendships made at camp can help participants of camps for children with cancer identify with each other, have a positive impact on children's friendships (Martiniuk, Silva, Amylon, & Barr, 2014), and form meaningful relationships and feel less isolated (Beckwitt, 2014).

Published research using ACA's friendship skills scale is small but increasing. In an afterschool program, intentionally designed experiences were effective in increasing participants' friendship skills (Roark, Gillard, Evans, Wells, & Blauer, 2012). In a study of a camp for youth with cancer, Martiniuk et al. (2014) found that a high proportion of the older campers felt that their friendship skills increased significantly during their time at camp. Less is known about how staff training might influence campers' friendship skills.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Developmental Systems Theory (DST) was used in this study to consider the processes between campers and their context in camp. According to DST, the nature of the systems in which campers are embedded likely has bearing on their development. Youth development involves changing *relations* between the developing youth and their shifting contexts, and acknowledges that youth exist in a larger social context (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). A key element of DST is *fit*: activities and experiences that are developmentally appropriate, interesting, and engaging, and that provide support via interactions with caring others and opportunities for building skills. In DST, youth thrive when there is alignment between their strengths and ecological resources in their context (Lerner et al., 2014). For example, changing the adults in the camp system by influencing their knowledge and attitudes through training could affect campers within the system. Other research has shown youth-level effects of staff-level intentional outcomes training (e.g., Galloway, Bourdeau, Arnold, & Nott, 2013; Roark, Gillard, Evans, Wells, & Blauer, 2012). For this study, we intervened in the camp system by adding a staff training session and examined if that intervention had any effect on the developmental outcome of camper friendship skills.

## Methods

The first author designed and delivered a 45-minute training about friendship skills to approximately 80 summer staff during orientation in June 2015. Elements of the training included:

- a. introduction about why friendship skills are important to youth living with serious illness
- b. paired discussion about what people look for in a friend
- c. large group discussion about specific steps staff could take on camper arrival day to help them make friends
- d. paired discussion about what staff could do during camp to promote friendship between campers, followed by a large group discussion of favorite ideas
- e. a role playing scenario showing three different types of friendship building- or thwarting interactions (aggressive, passive, and productive)
- f. interactive building block activity of the 14 items from the friendship skills scale

No other staff training on friendship skills was conducted, although there were related training sessions about managing camper behavior, welcoming campers, and conflict management.

Parent or caregiver consent was obtained for campers to participate in evaluation activities in 2014 and 2015. Campers, aged 10-15 years, completed the friendship skills survey on their last full day at camp including 399 campers in 2014 and 467 campers in 2015.

In 2014, friendship skills were measured from -1 (decreased), 0 (did not increase or decrease), 1 (increased some) and 2 (increased a lot). In 2015, a third “increase” option was offered so that the increase part of the scale was 1 (increased a little), 2 (increased some) and 3 (increased a lot). The reason for the initial 4-point scale in 2014 was for camper ease in filling out the survey, but we recognized the potential for ceiling or floor effects. Thus, the third response category was added to comply with the original ACA response categories. The data were standardized prior to analyses.

Camper data for both years were analyzed using descriptive and reliability statistics. Differences between years with and without training were tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures with the following hypothesis,  $H_0: \mu_{\text{train}} = \mu_{\text{no train}}$ . The covariate included was age. Adjusted means, standard deviations, and strength of relationship statistics were calculated. Homogeneity of variance assumptions was tested.

## Results

The test between friendship skills training and no training ( $N = 866$ ) was significantly different ( $F_{1, 866} = 139.66, p < .001$ ). This result is important because it provided evidence that intentional training affected camper outcomes. Descriptive statistics indicated the adjusted friendship mean for the friendship skills training ( $M = .43, SD = .99$ ) was higher than training without a friendship focus ( $M = -.55, SD = .69$ ). Levene’s test rejected the hypothesis that group variances were equal for friendship skills ( $F = 42.54, p < .001$ ).

*Table 1*

*ANCOVA for the Effect of Training vs. No Training on Friendship Skills*

	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Corrected Model	209.39	2	104.70	139.66	<.001	.245
Age	.90	1	.90	2.38	.274	.001
Training vs. No Training	208.08	1	208.08	4.33	<.001	.243

$R^2 = .245$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = .243$ )

## Camp Applications

This study showed that intentional training for staff about camper friendship skills made a difference to this youth development outcome. This study adds to the growing literature on training interventions and youth outcomes. A key finding was that a relatively short training of 45 minutes still had an effect on camper outcomes. Future research will examine if longer and more frequent and complex friendship skills trainings will further enhance camper friendship skills. Understanding the effectiveness of training interventions of different lengths can inform how camps allocate training time and resources for different topics.

If camps aim to promote friendship skills or other positive youth development outcomes, they should train staff specifically in these areas. Using wording from the ACA Friendship Skills scale to focus on specific skills and encouraging staff to consider scenarios relevant to their camp seem to be good practices for staff training. As camps envision a world in which they are an essential part of youth development, intentionally training staff to promote positive youth outcomes is one key step toward this vision.

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