

DOES EXTRA STAFF TRAINING ON CAMPER FRIENDSHIP SKILLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO CAMPER OUTCOMES?

This study investigated if campers' self-reported friendship skills changed from a summer when staff received a 45-minute training about camper friendship skills to the next summer when staff attended a 90-minute training plus a mid-summer booster session. Findings from this study could be used to make decisions about the amount 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 and their siblings. One thousand and forty-seven campers completed the friendship skills scale in both summers.

The 2016 study builds on a 2015 study that showed camper friendship skills were higher during a summer when staff participated in a 45-minute friendship skills-specific training session compared to the previous year when staff did not have any friendship skills-specific training. While it was important that staff training mattered to camper friendship skills, what was still unclear was *how much* training would matter.

Fields outside of camp have examined employee training duration. For example, a study of emergency physicians found that a short training provided basic skill proficiency and a longer training led to advanced skill proficiency (Chisholm et al., 2013). In a systematic review and meta-analysis of research on communication in oncology, no clear cut-off for duration for efficacious training courses could be determined (Barth & Lannen, 2011). More information on training length and its effects on participant outcomes is needed for the camp context.

While there is some published research using ACA's friendship scale, and there is some research on employee training program lengths, less is known about how the length of staff training might influence campers' friendship skills. The purpose of this study was to explore if campers' self-reported friendship skills changed from a summer when staff received a 45-minute training about camper friendship skills to the next summer when staff attended a 90-minute training plus a mid-summer booster session.

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 (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.

Methods

The first author designed and delivered a 45-minute training about friendship skills to summer staff during orientation in June 2015. In June 2016, a representative from Yale University's Center for Emotional Intelligence delivered a 90-minute training on friendship skills and the first author delivered a 20-minute booster session after the third session of the eight-session camp season. Thus, the treatments were (a) 45-minute session, (b) 90 minute session, and (c) 90 minute session plus booster session.

Parent or caregiver consent was obtained for campers to participate in evaluation activities in 2015 and 2016. Campers, aged 10-15 years, completed the friendship skills survey on their last full day at camp: 467 campers in 2015, and in 2016 there were 236 campers before and 339 after the booster session.

Camper data for all three time points were analyzed using descriptive statistics and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Differences between trainings were tested using procedures with the following hypothesis, $H_0: \mu_{\text{extra train+booster}} = \mu_{\text{extra train}} = \mu_{\text{train}}$. The covariate included was age. Means, standard deviations, and strength of relationship statistics were calculated. Homogeneity of variance assumptions was tested.

Results

The test between a 45 minute, 90 minute, and 90 minute plus 20 minute booster training ($N = 1,047$) was not significantly different ($F_{1, 1047} = .07, p = .94$). Descriptive statistics indicated the adjusted friendship mean for the 45 minute ($M = 2.2, SD = .82$), 90 minute ($M = 2.18, SD = .81$) and 90 minute with booster ($M = 2.19, SD = .81$) were all effective in increasing camper friendship skills. Levene's test did not reject the hypothesis that group variances were equal for friendship skills ($F = .088, p = .92$).

Table 1

ANCOVA for the Effect of 45 Minute vs. 90 Minute vs. Booster Trainings on Friendship Skills.

	SS	df	MS	F	p	η_p^2
Corrected Model	.217	3	.072	.07	.97	<.001
Age	.087	1	.087	.09	.77	<.001
Training Length	.126	2	.063	.07	.94	<.001

$R^2 < .001$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .003$)

Camp Applications

This study provided evidence that each length of intentional training affected camper outcomes and informs us that the same goal for camper outcomes can be reached using varying lengths of training. Adding to the growing literature on training interventions and youth outcomes, this study contradicted conventional wisdom and previous research showing that skills developed during the course of traditional training workshops erode quickly when additional post-workshop training inputs are not provided (Schwalbe et al., 2014). Perhaps there is a saturation point for learning how to support campers' friendship skills.

Understanding the effectiveness of training interventions of different lengths can inform how camps allocate training time and resources for different topics. While many camps aim to provide mid-summer booster sessions, this study showed that it might not be necessary to deliver additional friendship skills training and camps could use that time for other topics. While additional training did not decrease campers' friendship skills, it did not enhance them either, so camps can choose how much staff training on this topic to provide, with the assurance that some intentional training is likely to have an effect on campers.

Several implications exist for future research. This study could be replicated with another outcome variable from ACA's Youth Outcomes Battery to see if different training lengths affect other camper outcomes, or with other populations. Examining the *quality* of training elements such as the amount of experiential or didactic content or other metrics can further explicate the relations between staff-level variables and camper outcomes. Finally, future research could examine other aspects of camp culture besides staff training that might promote camper friendships skills.