Does Staff Training on Camper Friendship Skills Make a Difference to Campers With Serious Illness?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While an important developmental task for all young people is the formation of social support, youth with serious illnesses often experience barriers to making friends. In the youth development context of summer camp, there is interest in how camper-level outcomes might be influenced by setting-level factors. Further, while some research exists on camp staff training, no research exists on how the length of staff training might influence camper outcomes. The purpose of this study was to explore if campers' self-reported friendship skills changed from a summer when staff received no specialized training in camper friendship skills, to a summer when staff received a 45-minute training, to the next summer when staff attended a 90-minute training plus a mid-summer booster session. The setting for this study was a seven-day residential recreational camp in the Northeast United States serving children with serious illnesses and their siblings. Approximately 80 staff members worked at the camp each year of the study. Campers completed the American Camp Association's 14-item Friendship Skills scale in 2014, 2015, and 2016. No specialized staff training about camper friendship skills was offered in 2014. In 2015, a 45-minute session about how staff could promote camper friendship skills was provided to staff. In 2016, a 90-minute session about promoting camper friendship skills was provided, and a 20-minute booster session followed partway through the summer. The comparison of camper outcomes associated with a 45-minute friendship skills training for staff and no training for staff ($N = 866$) was significantly different ($F_{1, 866} = 139.66, p < .001$). This result is important because it provided evidence that intentional training affected camper outcomes. However, the comparison of camper outcomes associated with a 45-minute, 90-minute, and 90-minute plus 20-minute booster training for staff ($N = 1,047$) was not significantly different ($F_{1, 1047} = .07, p = .94$). This study provided evidence that each length of intentional training affected camper outcomes and informs us that the same goal for camper outcomes could be achievable using varying lengths of training. 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 as a mid-summer

booster and camps could use that time for other topics. Research and practice implications are discussed for camp programming and staff training.

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Introduction

An important developmental task for young people is to build social support. Friendship skills is a youth development outcome defined by the American Camp Association (ACA) as making friends and maintaining relationships (2011, p. 4). However, the experience of serious illness and disability can greatly affect friendships with other youth (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2015). 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). However, some research has shown that friendships made at camps for youth with cancer can have a positive impact on children's friendships by helping children identify with each other (Martiniuk, Silva, Amylon, & Barr, 2014) and form meaningful relationships and feel less isolated (Beckwitt, 2014). Many recreation and leisure experiences such as camp have been shown to support friendships, social connectedness, and belonging for children and youth with serious illnesses and disabilities (e.g., Gillard, Witt, & Watts, 2011; Powrie, Kolehmainen, Turpin, Ziviani, & Copley, 2015).

Social relationships is an area well-studied in the field of camp resarch. For example, in their review of research on the developmental outcomes of camp, Bialeschki, Henderson, and James (2007) identified several social relationship outcomes. These outcomes included caring and supportive relationships with adults and peers, communication, cooperation, closeness, connectedness, a sense of belonging, caring, and teamwork skills, among others. As the authors suggested, "Peer relationships focus on developing the means for making and keeping friends along with furthering a sense of belonging," (p. 776). The authors further pointed out that youth who would be marginalized in other settings due to disabilities or illnesses were able to experience decreased isolation and increased social interactions. In a study of youth at an oncology camp, Dawson, Knapp, and Farmer (2012) referred to friends made at camp as "camp war buddies," indicating that shared (if difficult) experiences can bring people together in the recreational setting of camp. Many studies on camps for youth with illnesses have found friendships to be a key outcome of the experience (e.g., Devine, 2015; Kiernan & Maclachlan, 2002; Martiniuk et al., 2014). What is less well-known is how camper friendship skills are affected by setting-level factors such as staff training.

Role of Employee Training

Camper friendships do not necessarily "just happen." As Smith, Akiva, Arrieux, and Jones (2006, p. 93) point out, "quality in youth programs happens at the point of service and is driven by staff intentionality, supportive professional communities, and aligned system priorities." The authors further note that "frontline intentionality" can lead to key developmental experiences for youth. One area for such intentionality is staff training. The utility of staff training can be maximized using principles of developmental psychology, learning theory, and self-monitoring (Schafer, 2007). However, more research attention on staff training is warranted.

Some research exists on camp staff training. For example, in a study of camp staff's self-perceptions of skills, while there were differences between new and experienced staff before and right after formal training, these differences faded one month into their work as informal learning occurred (Powell, Bixler, & Switzer, 2003). The idea of informal learning is similar to Smith et al.'s (2006) notion of a "professional learning community" comprising shared priorities and values that can change the performances of staff and youth. In a study of youth physical activity at YMCA day camps, researchers used systematic observation to assess staff members' promotion of physical activity and related changes in campers' physical activity (Weaver, Beets, Turner-McGrievy, Webster, & Moore, 2014). Staff were trained to integrate physical activity principles into existing games with children. Many staff behaviors moved in the desired direction during the three-year study, and children's activity levels improved. These and a few other studies have examined camp staff training, but given the enhanced interest in youth development outcomes, more information is needed about how training might affect youth outcomes.

Duration of Employee Training

Other fields outside of camp and recreation have examined employee training. For example, the opportunities for hospitality employees to develop new skills and for advancement were found to be important determinants of employee company and job satisfaction, employee loyalty, and intent to stay (Costen & Salazar, 2011). In a sample of Hong Kong workers, employees' feelings of competence related to the outcome of job satisfaction, and training related to the outcomes of employees' intent to stay and customer satisfaction (Taormina, 1999). In a study of a geriatric rehabilitation setting, staff training about promising practices in pain assessment and monitoring was associated with positive patient outcomes such as lower length of hospital stay and improved functional outcomes (Klassen, Liu, & Warren, 2009). Much evidence exists that staff training can lead to positive staff engagement and skills, which could have effects on service recipients, but information about elements of the training (such as training length) is sometimes lacking.

Still, a few studies have examined training duration. For example, Schwalbe, Oh, and Zweben (2014) found that five hours of contact time over six months was sufficient to maintain motivational interviewing training effects. 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 study of social exchange among temporary call center workers, organizational investment in training positively related to the affective commitment of workers. However, workers attributed greater importance to the fact that training increased their employability than to the number of training hours received, and this perception mediated the relationship between training as a promoter of employability and workers' positive attitudes (Chambel & Sobral, 2011). 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, and the researchers suggested, "the trade-off between feasibility and efficacy has to be borne in mind," (Barth & Lannen, 2011, p. 1,035). More information on training length and its effects on participant outcomes is needed for the camp context.

Intentionality of Employee Training

Some research exists on intentionality in camp settings. "Antecedents" of outcomes have been examined in a few studies (e.g., Duerden, Taniguchi, & Widmer, 2012; Garst, Gagnon, & Whittington, 2016), but as Duerden et al. explained, there is a paucity of research on nonfamilial contexts affecting youth developmental outcomes. However, in a review of the impact of implementation on program outcomes, results from over 500 quantitative studies offered strong empirical support that the level of implementation positively affects the outcomes obtained in promotion and prevention programs (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Such research encourages finer parsing of specific implementation strategies such as staff training.

Delivering a program with intention has been associated with greater youth outcomes in several studies (e.g., Garst & Ozier, 2015; Hill & Sibthorp, 2004; Roark, Gillard, Wells, Evans, & Mikami Blauer, 2014). However, although Garst et al. (2016) examined antecedents of change in campers' developmental outcomes and staff attention and interaction from the perspectives of alumni campers, the researchers did not examine staff training. Trained staff can certainly be considered an antecedent to youth outcomes, but more information is needed about the mechanisms involved, and about how the purpose or intention of the training might lead to youth outcomes.

Using training to build skills and efficacy of adults and youth to affect the social climate could be an effective method to promote camper outcomes, as seen in other studies such as a randomized control trial to promote youth physical activity (Dzewaltowski et al., 2009). Mainieri and Anderson (2015b) found that features of teens' leadership experiences included program structure, opportunities for bonding, and camp context, and these features paralleled the intentions of the programs' designers to promote civic engagment in campers. Hill and Sibthorp (2004) found that intentionally providing an autonomy-supportive camp environment for youth with Type 1 diabetes related to campers' post-camp perceptions of self-determination. Roark and Evans (2010) wrote a book about youth activities designed to elicit specific youth outcomes such as teamwork and friendship skills. These and many other studies provide evidence of keen interest in how intentionality about youth outcomes could affect those outcomes.

Study Purpose

While there is some published research using ACA's friendship scale (e.g., Martiniuk et al., 2014; Roark, Gillard, Evans, Wells, & Blauer, 2012), and some research on employee training program lengths, to our knowledge nothing is yet 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 no specialized training in camper friendship skills to a summer when they received a 45-minute training, 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.

Theoretical Framework

Developmental Systems Theory (DST) was used in this study to consider the interactions between campers and their context in camp. In DST, the systems in which campers are embedded likely affect their development. Youth development involves changing relations between developing youth and their shifting systems, and acknowledges that youth grow as part of a larger social context (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). A key element of DST is the fit between activities and experiences that are developmentally appropriate, interesting, and engaging, and provide support via interactions with caring others and opportunities for building skills.

In DST, youth thrive when their strengths align with ecological resources in their context (Lerner et al., 2014). For example, using training to influence the ecological resources of adult staff members' knowledge and attitudes could change the system which could affect campers within that system. Staff are major creators of the camp system because of their roles and responsibilities to enact camp culture by passing on to campers formal and informal beliefs, customs, and rules. Staff-level intentional outcomes training has been linked to youth-level effects (Galloway, Bourdeau, Arnold, & Nott, 2013; Roark et al., 2012). For this study, we intervened in the camp system by increasing staff training from no training to 45 to 90 minutes and added a 20-minute mid-summer booster training, and examined if those interventions had any effect on the developmental outcome of camper friendship skills.

Methods

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a seven-day residential recreational camp in the Northeast United States serving children with serious illnesses (e.g., cancer, sickle cell, HIV/AIDS, metabolic disease, and other serious illnesses) and their siblings. No formal medical- or psychosocial-related educational or intervention activities were offered to campers. Each summer, approximately 1,000 children aged 7-15 attended the camp, with about 65% new campers each summer. Approximately 80 staff members worked at the camp, with about 50%-60% new staff each summer.

The camp's culture and social atmosphere reflected a mix of structured and unstructured program activities. Structured activities included talent shows, archery, swimming, and other typical camp activities. Unstructured activities occurred during meals, transition times, and in cabins. As a medical specialty camp, camper health was highly structured and supervised, with the intention that campers' fun would be prioritized while medical concerns were deemphasized whenever possible. Staff had autonomy in terms of their decision making and setting of tone with campers as they created and managed positive and inclusive social groups.

Parent or caregiver consent was obtained for campers to participate in evaluation activities in 2014, 2015, and 2016. All camper applications contained an evaluation permission statement for parents/caregivers to sign if they consented to their children participating in "anonymous and voluntary program evaluation activities." Campers whose parents/caregivers did not consent did not complete evaluations. Parent/caregiver permission response rates ranged from 96%-98%, and 85%-90% of campers with consent assented to participating each year. There seemed to be no systemic patterns in the missing data for any variables examined so missing data were ignored. Only campers aged 10-15 years completed the ACA friendship skills scale on their last full day at camp.

Measures

The ACA friendship skills outcome scale was used in this study to measure changes in camper friendship skills. The 5-point Likert-type scale is a 14-item self-report measure written for youth aged 9 to 17 (α =.94; Ellis & Sibthorp, 2006). Campers completed the friendship skills questionnaire in 2014 (n = 399), 2015 (n = 467), and in 2016 (before booster, n = 236) and (after booster, n = 339).

In 2014, friendship skills were measured from -1 (decreased), 0 (did not increase or decrease), 1 (increased some) to 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.

Staff Training Treatments

Approximately 80 staff members attended the training sessions each year of this study. In 2014, no friendship skills-focused training occurred. In 2015, a 45-minute staff training session occurred. In 2016, a 90-minute staff training session and a 20-minute booster session occurred. Next we describe the trainings for 2015 and 2016.

In June 2015, the first author designed and delivered a 45-minute training about friendship skills. Elements of the training included the following:

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.

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. Elements of the 90-minute training included the following:

a.   Overview of camp research on friendships and social support
b.   Rationale for why friendships are important for youth with serious illnesses
c.   Interactive activities about emotions related to "energy" and "pleasantness," and how they relate to campers
d.   Large group brainstorming about strategies to shift campers' emotions
e.   Role playing scenarios about camper friendships
f.   Large group development of specific strategies to help campers connect with each other.

Elements of the 20-minute booster session included the following:

a.   Reminders of strategies to help campers connect with each other
b.   Sharing stories of successful times when campers connected with each other

In both years, no other staff training on friendship skills was conducted, although there were related training sessions about managing camper behavior, welcoming campers, and conflict management. Further, over the three years of the study, no significant changes were made to the camp program, operations, or camper population.

Data Analysis

Camper data for all four 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: $\mu_{\text{extra train+booster}} = \mu_{\text{extra train}} = \mu_{\text{train}}$ and covariate of age. Means, standard deviations, and strength of relationship statistics were calculated. Homogeneity of variance assumptions was tested.

Results

2015 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 ($F = 42.54$, $p < .001$). See Table 1.

Table 1

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

	SS	df	MS	F	p	η_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 $R^2 = .243$)

2016 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). See Table 2.

Table 2

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)

Discussion and Implications

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 appears to contradict conventional wisdom and previous research showing that skills developed during traditional training workshops erode quickly when additional post-workshop training inputs are not provided (e.g., Schwalbe et al., 2014). Perhaps there is a saturation point among camp staff for learning how to support campers' friendship skills.

Understanding influences on youth outcomes is the cornerstone of developmental systems theory. Developmental systems theory (DST) was a particularly helpful theoretical frame for this study because one element in the developmental system of campers–staff– was manipulated by training and shown to be likely influential on the camper outcome of friendship skills. This study can inform future camp research framed from the perspective of DST. More research is needed about how different factors or aspects of youth settings have influence on youth, such as examining how specific camp cultures help or hinder staffs' implementation of strategies to improve camper friendship skills.

Further, 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 camp administrators could use that time for other topics. While additional training did not decrease campers' friendship skills, it did not enhance them either, so camp administrators can choose how much staff training on this topic to provide, with the assurance that some intentional training seems likely to influence campers. Given the complexities of providing camp for youth with serious illnesses, efficiency in training is paramount. Informal training throughout the summer could be one reason that these 'booster' sessions might not be as effective as previously assumed. That is, staff might gain more knowledge about improving camper friendship skills while on the job rather than from a booster training. More research is needed about the efficacy of different training models.

Other elements embedded within the camp context besides staff training might more strongly influence camper friendship skills. For example, Powell et al. (2003) found that informal training during the camp season seemed to be powerful enough to eliminate differences between new and experienced staff members' self-perceptions of skills. Although the present study did not include assessing differences in new versus experienced

staff, future research could examine camper outcomes in cabins led by new or experienced staff. However, evaluations of the camp showed no meaningful differences in friendship skills between cabins, units, or sessions for all three years of this study (Gillard, 2014; 2015; 2016), indicating consistency in camp program implementation. Still, other potential contributing setting-level factors should be examined.

Program-level intervention designs could include intentional efforts beyond staff training to promote camper friendship skills such as songs, games, posters, skits, etc. Other studies on youth programs have utilized structured curriculum to intentionally promote youth outcomes, such as Camp2Grow and environmental stewardship (Browne, Garst, & Bialeschki, 2011), Teens Leading and Connecting and civic engagement (Mainieri & Anderson, 2015a), and an after-school program for middle school youth and teamwork (Roark et al., 2014). Additionally, the present 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 replicated with other camper populations besides youth with serious illness.

Examining program quality in other youth development settings is an area of increasing interest. For example, in a meta-analysis of afterschool programs seeking to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) found that youths' personal and social well-being and adjustment were most affected in the presence of staff who taught skills that were sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. In the present study, friendship skills were not taught using these four features, but rather informally promoted by staff. Structured program opportunities could be offered for campers to discuss friendship skills, such as during the nightly cabin debrief session or during teambuilding activities. Future research could engage staff in teaching campers friendship skills in ways that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit and examine if camper outcomes are further optimized by these programmatic elements.

Training Quality

Moving beyond quantity and examining the quality of training elements such as fidelity, dosage, participant responsiveness, program uniqueness, the amount of experiential or didactic content, or other aspects can further explicate the relations between staff-level variables and camper outcomes. Specifically, implementation could be examined in the areas of fidelity (adherence to curriculum), quality of delivery (facilitator skills), program adaptation (changes made to the program), and participant responsiveness (enthusiasm, engagement, and participation; Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011). On-the-job training could include peer or supervisory feedback on promoting friendship skills and staff goal setting on this topic. Pre-post training surveys could be used with staff to assess changes in their knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding promoting friendship skills in campers. Durability of training could be assessed at multiple points throughout the summer.

Further research could examine facilitators and barriers to the transfer of training such as staff characteristics and experience, training design, and work environment characteristics (Keller, 2007). Although focused on a different type of youth program (mentoring), Keller further suggested that youth organizations offer their staff the following:

- An orientation to the program and work environment
- Initial training on specific duties required for the position
- An overview of research on the effectiveness and best practices
- Training on positive youth development strategies
- Opportunities to transfer knowledge gained from training into action
- An individual professional development plan
- Supervisory skills training for those who oversee other staff
- A role in evaluating the effectiveness of training received

Keller's suggestions can be easily applied to youth-serving organizations employing summer camp staff. Similarly, in a research review of training and development, Aguinis and Kraiger (2009) found that effective training programs are characterized by (1) conducting a thorough needs assessment to justify training investments; (2) engaging participants in the learning process using multiple methods of instruction that account for different learner attitudes, motivations, and abilities; (3) using multi-level criteria and longitudinal procedures for assessing training impact; and (4) adapting to a variety of individual and contextual factors beyond content and design that might mitigate or enhance the extent to which training objectives can be realized. Future research and practice could adapt these suggestions for the context of camp staff promoting camper friendship skills.

Limitations

While there are strengths of this study including use of a natural experiment, large numbers of respondents, and focus on the potential interplay between implementation and outcomes using developmental systems theory, limitations do exist. First, the composition of staff and campers differed across the years so it is possible that the particular mix of individuals affected results. While the overall camper ages, illnesses, and other demographic variables did not differ, nor did the staff demographics, it is important to acknowledge this potential limitation.

Second, the two trainings provided in 2015 and 2016 were somewhat dissimilar in focus, with the 2016 training including a little more emphasis on emotions which could have affected staff members' learning about promoting friendship skills. However, we argue that awareness of emotions in self and others is a building block for friendships, and several items in the ACA Friendship Skills scale reflect emotional awareness.

Third, the first author's involvement as a staff trainer in 2015 could have affected results because of a bias toward finding positive results. While the second author (not affiliated with the camp) served to help mitigate this bias, confirmation bias could exist.

Finally, although the results of this study cannot be generalized, our hope is that camp and other youth development practitioners can use the results to design and assess similar efforts at their own sites. Further examination of setting-level factors such as staff characteristics or levels of structured and unstructured camper activities is needed.

Conclusion

Many camps aim to promote friendship skills or other positive youth development outcomes. Trained staff is one element in the developmental system of campers. Camps should continue to contemplate staff training and other elements that lead to camper outcomes, and adjust those elements to maximize campers' developmental experiences. 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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