

American Camp Association and University of Utah Youth Impact Study Oversample Report for SeriousFun Children’s Network Executive Summary

Quick Summary of Findings

1. The six learning outcomes that were most distinctly learned at camp and useful in daily life included

appreciation for diversity	perseverance
living in the moment	self-confidence
empathy and compassion	self-identity

These learning outcomes were primarily learned at camp compared to other non-camp settings (e.g., school or home).
2. Compared to two national samples, individuals from the SeriousFun sample generally reported significantly greater development for all learning outcomes at camp.
3. The most valuable learning outcomes from camp were related to social development (e.g., relationship skills, teamwork, and friendship).
4. The program elements at camp that supported the development of these outcomes were predominantly people (staff and peers).
5. Alumni who attended camp for four or more sessions reported greater development of nearly all learning outcomes compared to those who went to camp for three weeks or less.
6. Compared to alumni who were not counselors-in-training (CITs), alumni who attended CIT programs reported greater development for career orientation, self-identity, self-confidence, and leadership.

Background

The American Camp Association (ACA) partnered with the University of Utah on a national research project called the Youth Impact Study. The main purpose of the study was to understand former campers’ long-term learning from summer camp. After the first phase of this research, a questionnaire was created and given to two different nationally representative samples: 1) former campers not positively biased toward camp recruited through an online panel, and 2) former campers intending to work as a counselor the upcoming summer recruited through camps.

Shortly after these national studies concluded, some independent organizations expressed interest in conducting similar studies with former campers recruited through their affiliated camps. The University of Utah and ACA titled these series of independent research projects, Oversamples, as they allow generalization to subgroups through over-recruitment from targeted subpopulations. The SeriousFun Children’s Network (SeriousFun) was one of the organizations that partnered with ACA to conduct an oversample study. The main purpose of this oversample study was to investigate former campers’ long-term learning from SeriousFun camps. This report details the results from the SeriousFun’s oversample study and compares these data to the nationally representative samples.

Who Participated?

Participants in this study were 195 individuals aged 18-25 who attended a SeriousFun camp growing up. These individuals remained affiliated with a SeriousFun camp; they were either first-year staff intending to work as a counselor the upcoming summer or camper alumni. The average age of participants was 20. They were 55% female, 44% male, and 1% gender non-conforming. Respondents identified predominantly as Caucasian and completed some college credit. All participants had no previous work experience as counselors and were reporting on their experiences as former campers.

Camp Name	Frequency	Percentage
Bator Tabor	45	23%
Painted Turtle	41	21%
Barretstown	31	16%
Hole in the Wall Gang	30	15%
Victory Junction	17	9%
Flying Horse Farms	17	9%
Camp Boggy Creek	10	5%
Round Up River Ranch	4	2%
Total	195	100

What Was in the Survey?

The retrospective questionnaire included four sections: 1) a ten-point scale that measured the role summer camp had on developing 18 learning outcomes, 2) a ten-point scale that measured the importance of these 18 learning outcomes in participants' daily life, 3) the primary setting participants developed these 18 learning outcomes, and 4) open-ended questions.

Learning Outcome	Definition
Relationship Skills	Ability to form relationships with others
Teamwork	Ability to work as part of a team on a task
How to Live with Peers	Ability to live in close quarters with peers
Empathy and Compassion	Ability to empathize with others
Organization	Ability to be organized
Responsibility	Willingness to be responsible for own behaviors
Independence	Ability to function independently without reliance on family
Perseverance	Ability to persevere in the face of challenges
Career Orientation	Understanding of what to do for a career or in college
Self-Identity	Understanding of who I am and how I want to live my life
Emotion Regulation	Ability to control emotions
Self Confidence	Confidence in abilities to be successful
Appreciation for Diversity	Appreciation for different people and perspectives
Willingness to Try New Things	Willingness to try new things
Living in the Moment	Appreciation for being present in the moment
Leadership	Ability to lead a group of peers to complete a task
Leisure Skills	Ability to participate in sport and/or recreation activities
Affinity for Nature	Appreciation for the natural world/nature

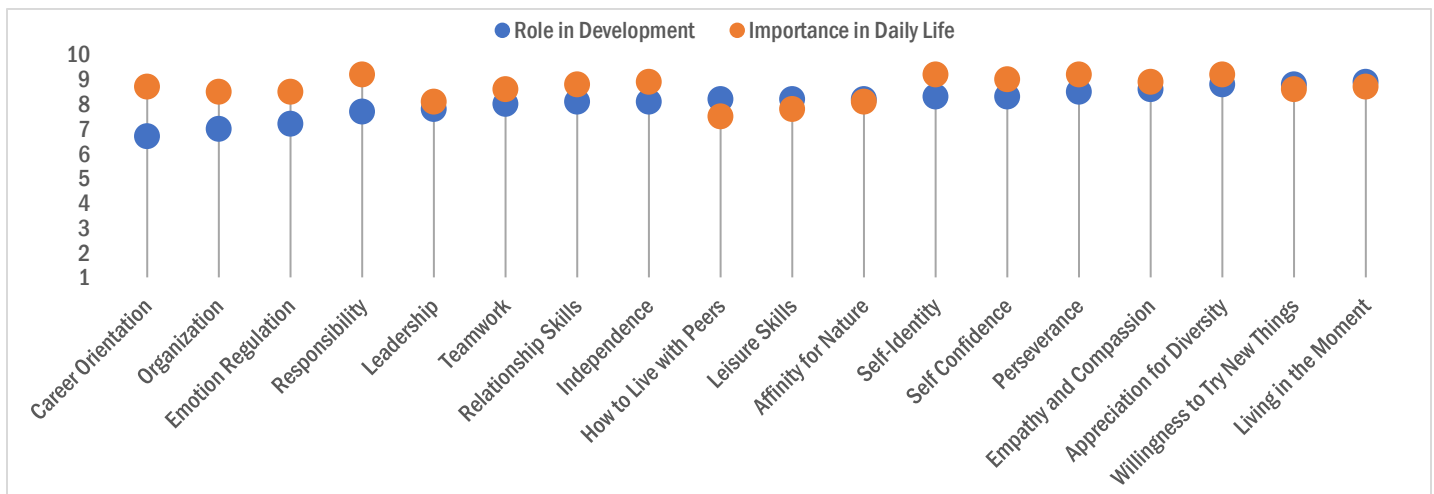
Example question set:

Section 1	Camp was critical to the development of my ability to form relationships with others.	Very False 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very True
Section 2	In your daily life, how important is your ability to form relationships with others?	Least Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most Important
Section 3	In what one setting did you primarily develop your ability to form relationships with others?	Camp Home School Work Sports Religious Org Other
Section 4	Of the things you learned while at summer camp, which one is the most valuable to you today?	

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and profile analysis to compare patterns of responses across groups.

Results

Learning outcomes most attributed to camp (compared to the average) and most important in daily life (compared to the average): living in the moment, appreciation for diversity, empathy and compassion, perseverance, self-confidence, and self-identity. Learning outcomes less attributed to camp but still considered important in daily life: independence, relationship skills, teamwork, responsibility, and career orientation. Learning outcomes most attributed to camp but less important in daily life: willingness to try new things, how to live with peers, affinity for nature, and leisure skills. Learning outcomes less attributed to camp and less important to individuals' daily lives compared to other outcomes: leadership, emotion regulation, and organization.



Note: "willingness to try new things" was slightly below the average for importance in daily life and therefore isn't included as a highlight, even though participants reported high scores for this outcome.

Where Did People Learn These Outcomes?

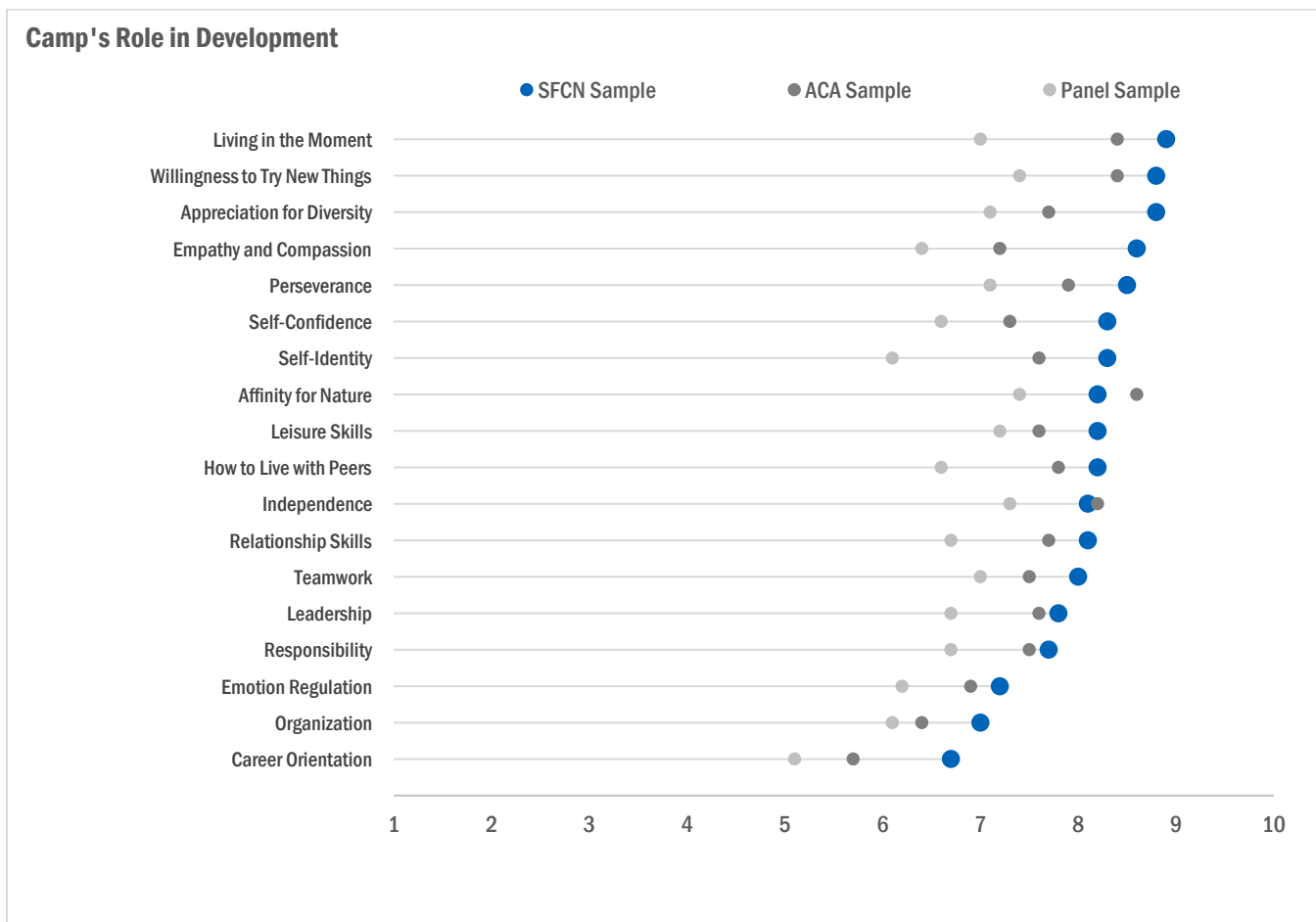
With the exception of “organization” and “responsibility” which were learned at home, study participants reported primarily learning all other outcomes at camp.

How Does SeriousFun Compare to Two Nationally Representative Samples?

Please note, the SeriousFun sample met different inclusion criteria than the national samples (i.e., participants attended a SeriousFun camp for any number of weeks and some were from countries other than the US). This should be considered when comparing the findings.

Camp’s Role in Development

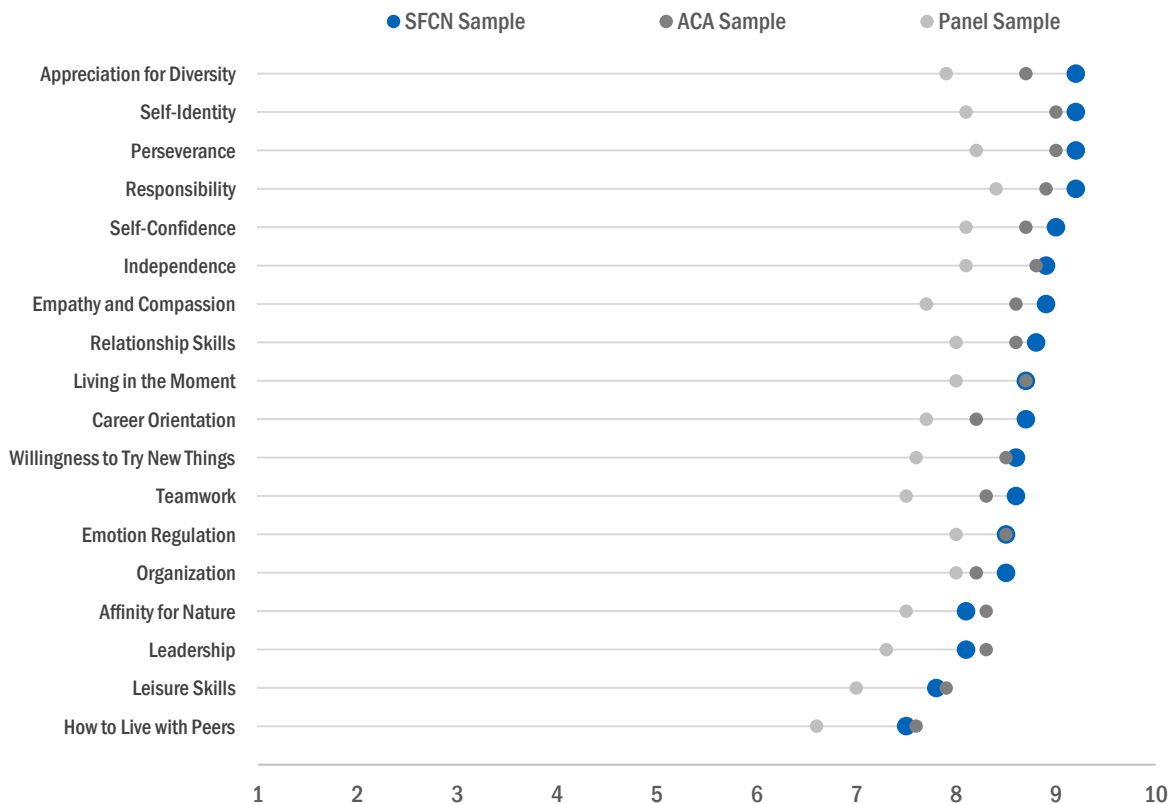
There were some statistically significant differences between the SeriousFun sample and the national samples for the development of certain learning outcomes. The SeriousFun sample had higher means compared to the panel sample for responsibility, independence, emotion regulation, leadership, and affinity for nature. The SeriousFun sample had higher means compared to the ACA accredited and panel sample for relationship skills, teamwork, how to live with peers, empathy and compassion, organization, perseverance, career orientation, self-identity, self-confidence, appreciation for diversity, willingness to try new things, living in the moment, and leisure skills. The SeriousFun sample had a lower mean for affinity for nature compared to the ACA accredited sample.



Camp’s Importance in Daily Life

There were some statistically significant differences between the SeriousFun sample and the national samples for the importance of certain outcomes in everyday life. The SeriousFun sample had higher means compared to the panel sample for relationship skills, how to live with peers, independence, self-identity, emotion regulation, willingness to try new things, living in the moment, leadership, leisure skills, and affinity for nature. The SeriousFun sample had higher means compared to the ACA accredited and panel sample for teamwork, empathy and compassion, organization, responsibility, perseverance, career orientation, self-confidence, and appreciation for diversity.

Camp's Importance in Daily Life



Primary Learning Outcomes from SeriousFun Camps

While many outcomes are attributable to camp, interpersonal outcomes such as relationship skills, teamwork, and friendship makes up 30% of the data and illustrates the strength of SeriousFun camps as a setting for social development. Additionally, participants reported developing outcomes such as self-confidence (13%), the ability to live in the moment (9%), a sense of belonging (9%), an appreciation for diversity (8%), and self-identity (8%). *Please note, these and the following qualitative findings do not include the participants from Hungary.*

Why Were These Outcomes More Valuable Than Other Things Experienced at Camp?

The reasons given include: transferable to everyday life (23%, regular applicable and useful), belief that the outcome was an important skill to have (19%), learning that stayed with participants long after camp ended (14%), camp offered a unique opportunity for learning that couldn't be easily learned elsewhere (14%), modified their developmental trajectory (12%, fundamentally changed who they were and their developmental path), personal growth and development (10%, helped them grow into a more well-rounded person), and building blocks to other benefits (7%, a skill that led to the development of other valuable outcomes).

What Program Elements Were Associated with These Outcomes?

Three main patterns emerged. First, people at camp (leaders and peers) were frequently identified as the active ingredient across a range of outcomes. Especially camp staff/leaders were reported as central to the learning process at camp. One respondent said, "the counselors allowed us to feel normal despite us being different from everyone else." Another participant commented that "being around other people who had similar ailments as me" was important for their learning. Second, programming was a driver for some of the lessons, especially developing relationship skills and self-confidence. A camper said, "we sat around a campfire [at night] and shared our stories. Sometimes it was very emotional." Third, some outcomes were linked to specific mechanisms in expected ways. For example, empathy and compassion was disproportionately attributed to the diversity of people. Campers met "people with all sorts of disabilities" at camp. Living in the moment and appreciation for diversity was a function of the safe and supportive environment at camp. One former camper said, "the vibe of camp, it's such an open arms and caring place that I opened up."

Why Were the Program Elements Important to Learning at Camp?

First, people at camp (including leaders and peers) were critical sources of support and encouragement at camp (39%). Second, camp was a novel or new experience for campers that allowed them to develop important learning outcomes (11%) Third, campers learned through direct hands-on experiences and had opportunities to practice skills at camp (9%).

What Were Negative Experiences at Camp?

The majority of campers said they did not have any negative experiences at camp (88%). The primary challenges campers faced at camp were related to social challenges such as bullying or not fitting in with peers (8%). There were some campers who reiterated that they only had a positive overall experience at camp (3%). Additionally, campers had negative experiences due to not being happy with the staff (1%).

Does Length of Time at SeriousFun Camps Make a Difference?

Respondents who went to camp for 4 sessions or more reported greater development than those who went for 3 or fewer sessions on the outcomes of teamwork, organization, career orientation, emotion regulation, appreciation for diversity, living in the moment, leadership, and affinity for nature.

Does Being a CIT Make a Difference?

Respondents who were CITs reported greater development than non-CITs on the outcomes of career orientation, self-identity, self-confidence, and leadership.

Conclusions

The results shared above should be placed into the context of the population of SeriousFun campers. Exposure to others with serious illnesses may be an especially powerful driver of feelings of empathy and compassion, and a sense of belonging. SeriousFun campers may be seen as different than the norm in daily life and may feel it's especially important to have an appreciation for diversity and empathy and compassion for others who are different as well. Being surrounded by peers with similar circumstances at camp may also allow campers to explore their self-identity and who they are separate from their illness. SeriousFun camps seemed to offer youth a novel experience compared to other contexts (e.g., school or home) to interact with other young people living with similar serious illnesses.

The people at camp (e.g., staff and peers) drive young peoples' learning of these important outcomes. Notably, the camp staff remain critical catalysts of growth by offering support and encouragement to campers. SeriousFun camps seem to cultivate a safe and supportive environment for campers who have serious illnesses.