

Benefits of Summer Camp: What Do Parents Value?

Dan McCole

Michigan State University

Andrew J. Bobilya

Western Carolina University

Tom Holman

Southeast Missouri State University

Betsy Lindley

Utah Valley University

Abstract

This exploratory study examined parent perceptions about the benefits of and barriers to their child attending a residential summer camp. Researchers conducted a survey of 370 parents of summer camp attendees and 198 parents of camp-aged children who have never attended camp. Findings show that parents value different camp benefits depending on the gender of their child and whether any of their children have previously attended summer camp. Results from parents of camp-aged children who have never attended camp indicate that the most important reason they have not sent their children to residential summer camp is that they feel their child is not ready. Cost of summer camp tuition and busy summer schedules were seen as the greatest barriers to camp attendance. These findings can help inform the messages camps use in their promotional materials and help camps utilize a segmented approach for different target markets.

KEYWORDS: summer camp benefits; summer camp enrollment; summer camp marketing; parent perceptions of summer camp; barriers to camp attendance

Attracting and retaining children and adolescents to overnight summer camps has long been an important issue for most camp directors. In a recent survey of camp leaders, 75% indicated that increasing enrollment was a priority for them and 71% indicated that it is important for them to improve their marketing efforts (ACA, 2017). Increasing camp enrollment is as much about fulfilling a camp's mission as it is about the financial bottom line. Most camp mission statements include characteristics of positive youth development, and there is wide support for the positive benefits of attending summer camp (e.g., ACA, 2005; Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007; Mishna, Michalski, & Cummings, 2001; Readdick & Schaller, 2005; Wilson, Akiva, Sibthorp, & Browne, 2019; Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005). These benefits not only fulfill a camp's mission-related objectives but also are commonly used in advocating for the benefits of summer camp attendance.

An important factor in increasing camp enrollment is the ability of camps to send promotional messages that persuade parents to send their children to camp via websites, social media, brochures, presentations, and other formats. To do this successfully, camps must first understand which messages are likely to trigger the desired behavior and whether different messages are more appropriate for different audiences. It is well-established in the marketing literature that different market segments have distinct demand functions for the same product (Dickson & Ginter, 1987); however, to date, no known research has been conducted regarding whether certain messages used in summer camp promotions will be more effective with different segments of parents (e.g., parents of previous campers, parents of children who have never attended camp, parents of boys, parents of girls).

Many camps promote the benefits of camp attendance when communicating with parents in person and through marketing materials. Although the messages used are sometimes anecdotal, significant empirical evidence documents the benefits of summer camp attendance (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summer Camp Outcomes

Summer camp outcome	Citations
Confidence and self-esteem	ACA, 2005; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007; Meltzer et al., 2018; Readdick & Schaller, 2005; Wilson et al., 2019
Social skills and community building	ACA, 2005; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007; Mishna et al., 2001; Thurber et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2019; Yuen et al., 2005;
Independence and leadership qualities	ACA, 2005; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007
Willingness to try new things	ACA, 2005; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007
Spiritual growth	ACA, 2005; Bialeschki et al., 2007; Henderson et al., 2007
Decreased isolation	Mishna et al., 2001

Documented benefits such as these offer camp leaders compelling messages to communicate with parents in promotional materials, though it is unclear which of these might be more persuasive to parents who might consider sending their child to summer camp.

Camp trade magazines and popular press articles have documented several of the challenges to camp enrollment including overprotective parents, child's unwillingness to live without

electronics/social media, increase in summer hours spent training for sports, and disinterest in the outdoors. Several of these challenges have even been the topics of research involving camps (e.g., Garst & Gagnon, 2015; James, Henderson, & Garst, 2008). To overcome these barriers, camp leaders must provide to parents convincing messages that sending their child to camp is not only worth the financial and opportunity costs but also any psychological costs associated with leaving their child in the care of strangers, in novel environments that are often outside the comfort zones of both parents and child. Little research, however, has investigated which aspects of the camp experience parents of campers and noncampers most value. Such insights could inform promotional messages aimed to increase enrollment. In a large study of over 2,000 parents, Henderson et al. (2007) provided insight into parents' perceptions of changes in their children from a camp experience; however, their study focused only on parents who had already sent children to camp and did not rank which outcomes were most valued, something that would be important for the creation of effective promotional materials. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to better understand which outcomes of an overnight summer camp experience parents value and secondarily to examine whether those values are different for parents of campers than parents of camp-aged children who do not attend camp.

Method

Participants

The YMCA camp under study provided a list of contacts. After removing invalid addresses, researchers e-mailed survey invitations with a link to an online survey to 1,188 parents/guardians whose children had attended the camp the previous summer (henceforth referred to as "camper parents"). Similarly, to represent parents of camp-aged children who had *not* attended overnight summer camp (henceforth referred to as "never-been parents"), researchers e-mailed survey invitations to 1,082 parents/guardians whose children had participated in some program offered by the camp's YMCA association but had not attended the camp. Because it was possible that the parents/guardians on this list had sent their children to a different camp, a survey item asked whether the child had attended a different overnight camp. If respondents answered yes, they were removed from this study. Following Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2014) protocols for online research, researchers sent two reminder e-mails to those who had not yet responded. Participants were also offered the opportunity to enter a drawing to win a \$100 gift card. This method of incentive has been shown to increase response rate without altering the content of responses (McCole, 2016). A total of 568 surveys were completed with 370 of these (31.2% response rate) from the camper parent sample and 198 responses (18.3% response rate) from the never-been parent sample. After removing never-been parent responses that indicated children had attended other camps, 143 responses remained from parents whose children had never attended any overnight camp.

Survey Instrument

The survey in this study included background items about experience with summer camping, demographics, and specific questions of interest to the camp. It included a 5-point Likert scale for parents to rate the importance of several potential benefits of overnight summer camp. Respondents then ranked the three most important benefits. Additionally, the respondents rated items related to barriers and constraints to camp attendance, and never-been parents rated and ranked reasons they had not sent their child to camp. Researchers who have experience managing and researching summer camps developed the survey items, and a panel of camp leaders and board members established content validity. The survey was then piloted with a small sample of parents who had sent their children to camp ($n = 10$) and parents who had not sent their children

to camp ($n = 6$) so that the researchers could ensure correct interpretation of the survey items and accuracy of the branching and display functions of the online survey. Because some families send more than one child to camp and responses might differ for each child, the survey instructions directed respondents to answer relevant items with their oldest child in mind. For the scale-rated items, mean scores were calculated, and for the top-three ranking items, a weighted index score was calculated ranging from 0–100. Independent t tests tested significance of differences between groups.

Results and Discussion

Parents of Children Who Had Never Been to Camp

The most important reason the never-been parent respondents had not sent their children to camp was that they did not feel their child was ready (see Figure 1). Given that camp leaders are concerned about the impact of overparenting at their camps (ACA, 2017), this result raises the question of whether indeed it is the children or parents themselves who are not ready for camp. In fact, when the researchers shared the results of this study with camp leaders, there was unanimous suspicion that parents were projecting their own concerns about readiness for camp onto their children.

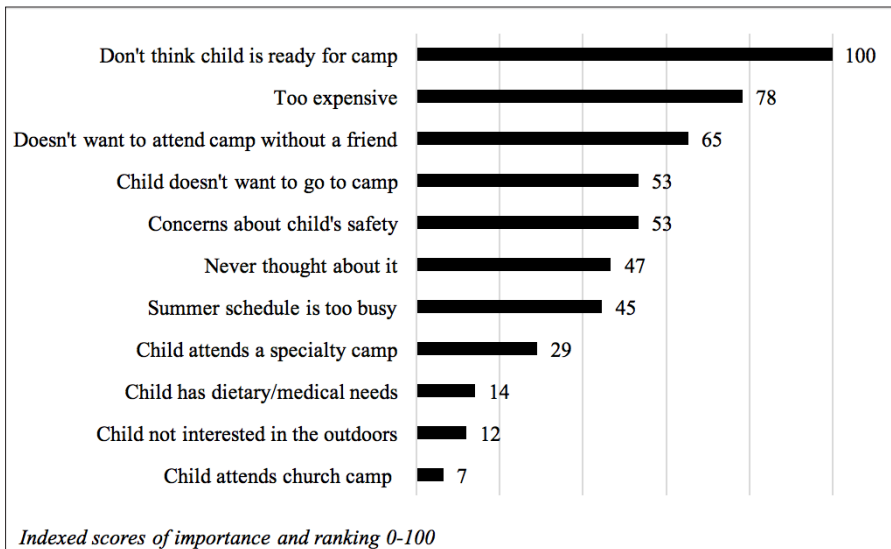


Figure 1. Reasons for not sending kids to camp (never-been parents).

It is, of course, possible that parents are genuinely intuitive about their children's readiness and their perceptions are accurate. It is also possible that there is an interaction between these positions and that a child might truly *not* feel ready for camp because the parent does not believe they are. Thurber and Malinowski (2000) suggest that parents' concerns about their children's readiness for camp could create apprehension among the children. If this perception is accurate, camps may consider using messages that reduce parents' anxieties about camp such as a list of child readiness signs and/or real-time updates on social media and photos of their child's experience.

The never-been parents were also asked about the most important criteria they would look for if they were to consider sending their child to camp. Of the listed criteria, the most important

was “safety and security” (see Figure 2). The second and third highest factors affecting parents’ decision to send their child to camp involved the camp staff, further supporting the importance of quality staff recruitment, training, and management.

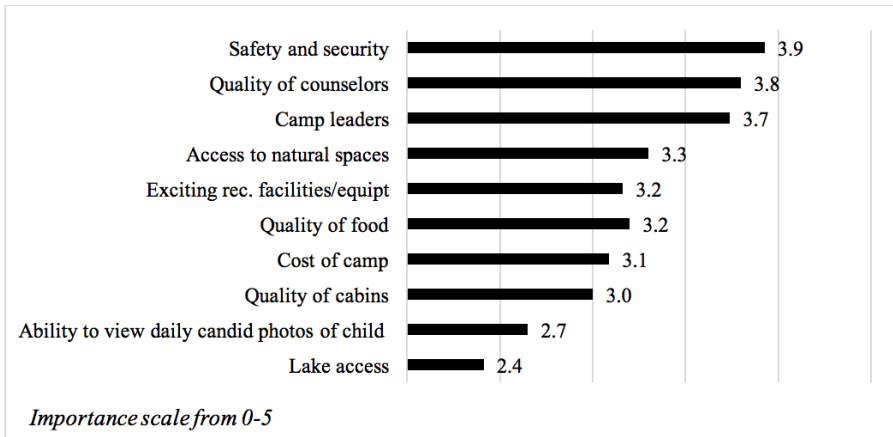


Figure 2. Importance of potential factors influencing camp decision (never-been parents).

Comparison of Desired Camp Benefits by Parent Group

Mean scores for both parent groups regarding the most important benefits of summer camp were calculated and compared via independent *t* tests (see Table 2). The results indicated that parents of campers placed more value on increasing self-esteem, reinforcing values, trying new things, and taking a break from technology. Given the limited space and focus of this Research Note, only statistically significant *t* test results have been included in Table 2.

Table 2

Desired Camp Benefits: *t* Test Comparisons by Parent Group

Parent group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (511)	<i>p</i>
Increase Self-Esteem					
Camp Parents	370	64.75	13.75	-25.352	< .001
Never-Been Parents	143	27.27	4.93		
Reinforce Values					
Camp Parents	370	77.14	15.63	-17.061	< .001
Never-Been Parents	143	48.18	6.90		
Try New Things					
Camp Parents	370	49.57	8.78	-22.371	< .001
Never-Been Parents	143	28.18	4.90		
Break From Technology					
Camp Parents	370	53.62	13.13	-14.200	< .001
Never-Been Parents	143	32.73	8.43		

When asked to rank the most important desired benefits of summer camp, the never-been parents rated “having fun” the highest (see Figure 3). “Having fun” was far and away the most important for both groups of parents (see Figure 3). The importance of safety and security combined with the desire for a fun experience suggests that summer camp promotional messages must strike the right balance between safety and fun.

Beyond fun, however, the two groups of parents prioritized their reasons differently. For instance, “increasing self-esteem” was the third highest ranked benefit among the camper parents (see Figure 3), while it ranked ninth among never-been parents (see Figure 3).

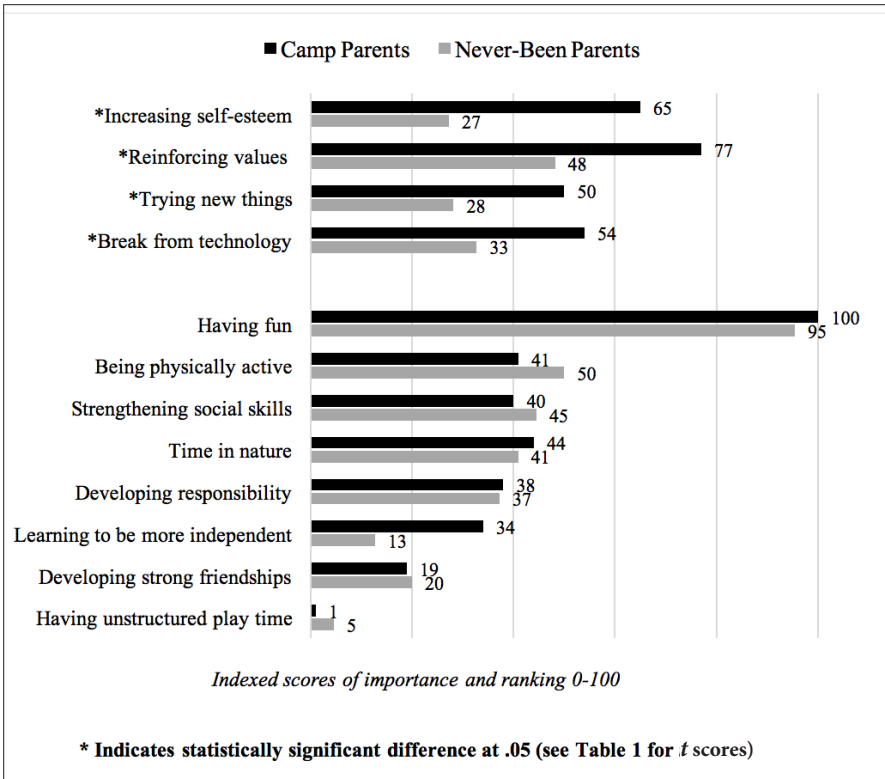


Figure 3. Desired camp benefits: Differences by parent group.

Another interesting result was that “getting a break from technology” was much more important to the camper parents than the never-been parents. If some of the never-been parents are projecting their own anxieties on their children, as previously discussed (Thurber & Malinowski, 2000), this result may be consistent with the other results showing that never-been parents think their children are not ready for camp. Most camps do not allow electronic devices, so the idea of a technology break might be less appealing to anxious parents who are concerned about the prospect of not being able to receive calls and texts from their child.

Comparison of Desired Camp Benefits by Camper Gender

The results also indicated that all parents valued different benefits of camp depending on whether their child identified as a boy or a girl. Mean scores for both camper gender groups regarding the most important benefits of summer camp were first calculated and compared via

independent *t* tests (see Table 3). Parents of girls placed more value on the importance of developing friendships and trying new things, whereas parents of boys valued the importance of taking a break from technology. As noted, because of the limited space and focus of this Research Note only statistically significant *t* test results have been included in Table 3.

Table 3
Desired Camp Benefits: t Test Comparisons by Camper Gender

Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (393)	<i>p</i>
Break From Technology					
Girls	203	44.92	10.39	-13.254	< .001
Boys	192	63.24	16.55		
Develop Friendships					
Girls	203	28.45	4.44	56.815	< .001
Boys	192	10.01	7.60		
Try New Things					
Girls	203	58.40	10.98	19.156	< .001
Boys	192	40.58	6.95		

Figure 4 shows the opportunities provided by the camp that parents of boys and parents of girls valued most similarly and those that were uniquely different. The unique differences were of particular interest in this study. These results extend previous camp-related research that investigated camper experience outcomes by gender (Arnold, Bourdeau, & Nagele, 2005; Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2009) by providing insight into the desired benefits of camp participation as indicated by parents.

Barriers to Enrolling in Summer Camp

Never-been parents were also asked what barriers kept them from enrolling their child in summer camp. The number one reason provided was the cost of camp, closely followed by their family's summer schedule. The number one reason that those who had previously attended camp stopped doing so was that they "couldn't fit it into their summer." Not only do camps need to tailor their marketing strategies for specific camper parent populations, but they also need to continue to provide compelling reasons why the camp experience is a worthy financial investment and is important to schedule into a family's already overcommitted summer agenda (ACA, 2017).

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide evidence that parents do indeed value different aspects of the camp experience depending on the context, and therefore suggest that a differentiated marketing strategy would be effective. This study was completed with a sample from one YMCA summer camp, within one YMCA system, and therefore further research with additional camps is needed before generalizations can be made. Additionally, a future study that uses follow-up interviews with a sample of each parent group might help further explain their survey responses. This exploratory study improved our understanding of parent priorities related to summer camp attendance and suggests that further investigation of the value different parent segments place on the summer camp experience is warranted. Moreover, because sustainable camp enrollment is likely more effective when the parent *and* the child are eager to attend, a similar study about

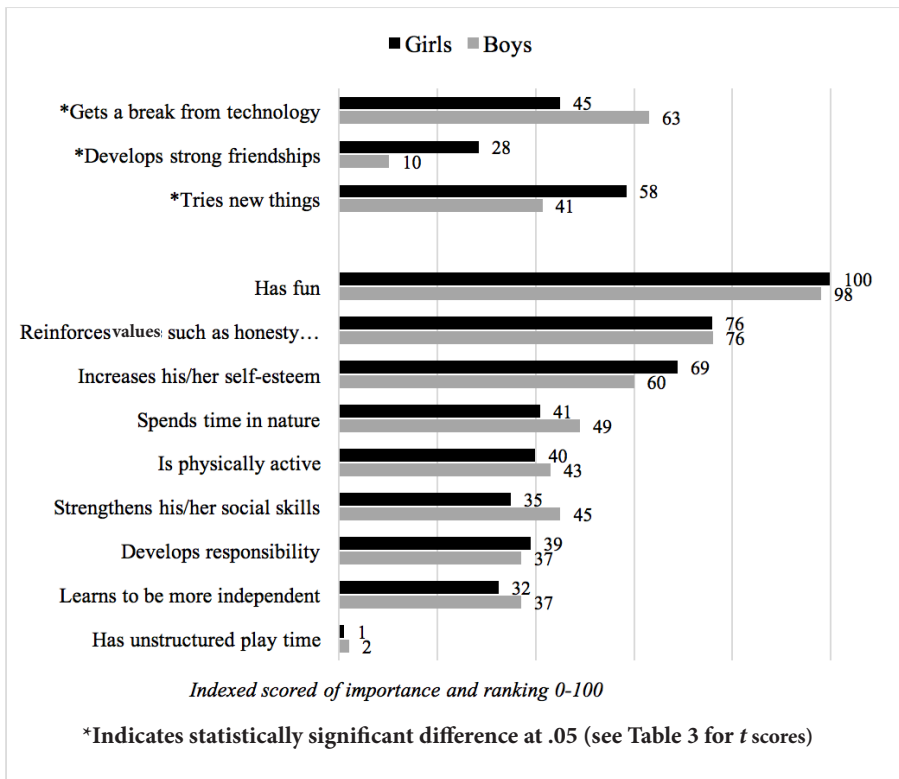


Figure 4. Desired camp benefits: Differences by camper gender.

youth perceptions of the camp experience seems equally worthwhile. We hope that this study prompts further inquiry into this important aspect of summer camp management to help inform practice among those making camp marketing decisions and to potentially improve the summer camp experience for campers and their parents.

References

- American Camp Association. (2005). *Directions: Youth development outcomes of the camp experience*. Martinsville, IN: Author.
- American Camp Association. (2017). *2017 emerging issues survey data and analyses*. Retrieved from https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/resource_library/2017-Emerging-Issues-Full-Report.pdf
- Arnold, M. E., Bourdeau, V. D., & Nagele, J. (2005). Fun and friendship in the natural world: The impact of Oregon 4-H residential camping programs on girl and boy campers. *Journal of Extension*, 43(6). Retrieved from <https://www.joe.org/joe/2005december/rb1.php>
- Bialeschki, M. D., Henderson, K. A., & James, P. A. (2007). Camp experiences and developmental outcomes for youth. *Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 16(4), 769–788. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2007.05.011>
- Dickson, P. R., & Ginter, J. L. (1987). Market segmentation, product differentiation, and marketing strategy. *Journal of Marketing*, 51(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251125>

- Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731509359779>
- Garst, B., & Gagnon, R. J. (2015). Exploring overparenting within the context of youth development programs. *Journal of Youth Development, 10*(1), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2015.416>
- Hedrick, J., Homan, G., & Dick, J. (2009). Exploring the positive impact of 4-H camp on youth: Identifying differences based on a camper's gender, years of attendance, and age. *Journal of Extension, 47*(6). Retrieved from <https://www.joe.org/joe/2009december/a5.php>
- Henderson, K. A., Bialeschki, M. D., & James, P. A. (2007). Overview of camp research. *Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 16*(4), 755–767. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2007.05.010>
- James, P. A., Henderson, K. A., & Garst, B. (2008). An exploration of camp directors' affective connection to nature and camp programming. *Research in Outdoor Education, 9*, 26–42.
- McCole, D. T. (2016, April). *Increasing survey response rates*. Paper presented at the Northeast Recreation Research Symposium, Annapolis, MD.
- Meltzer, L. J., Graham, D. M., Sterling, L., Genery, D., Booster, T. C., Seeger, B., & Bledsoe, M. (2018). Benefits of disease-specific summer camps: Results from quantitative and qualitative studies at Roundup River Ranch. *Children and Youth Services Review, 89*, 272–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.046>
- Mishna, F., Michalski, J., & Cummings, R. (2001). Camps as social work interventions: Returning to our roots. *Social Work with Groups, 24*(3–4), 153–171. https://doi.org/10.1300/j009v24n03_11
- Readdick, C. A., & Schaller, G. R. (2005). Summer camp and self-esteem of school-age inner-city children. *Perceptual Motor Skills, 101*(5), 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.101.5.121-130>
- Thurber, C. A., & Malinowski, J. C. (2000). *The summer camp handbook*. Los Angeles, CA: Perspective.
- Thurber, C. A., Scanlin, M. M., Scheuler, L., & Henderson, K. A. (2007). Youth development outcomes of the camp experience: Evidence for multidimensional growth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36*(3), 241–254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-006-9142-6>
- Wilson, C., Akiva, T., Sibthorp, J., & Browne, L. (2019, March). Fostering distinct and transferable learning via summer camp. *Children and Youth Service Review, 98*, 269–277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.017>
- Yuen, F. C., Pedlar, A., & Mannell, R. C. (2005). Building community and social capital through children's leisure in the context of an international camp. *Journal of Leisure Research, 37*(4), 494–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2005.11950064>