



Effective Camp Research Project, Phase 1: Executive Summary

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The Effective Camp Research Project set out to answer: *What is the impact of the one-week summer camp experience on the lives of the primary participants and their supporting networks?* Phase 1 of the project explored this question by examining a cohort of three camps in Wisconsin affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Sugar Creek Bible Camp, Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp (“Wapo”), and Lutherdale Bible Camp. The project used the methodology of *grounded theory*. Data were gathered from 11-14 year-old camp participants, their parents, summer staff members, camp directors, church professionals who were visiting camp, and direct observation during site visits.

Positive Impacts of Camp

I have a different child after just one week of camp! – Sugar Creek parent

The major finding of this study is: *The Christian summer camp experience directly impacted the participants in empirically recognizable ways, and these impacts extended to their supporting networks.* This finding was clear across all data sources and all three camps. Participants experienced real and identifiable changes that were interpreted in overwhelmingly positive terms. There is evidence that these changes continued after the camp experience. The impacts varied in degree and type, indicating that camp does not have a single determinative outcome but rather a set of potential impacts. It is misleading and erroneous to say that the camp experience causes change. Camp is not a magic formula. The data show, rather, that the camp model, when faithfully practiced, opens the possibility for change in individuals and their supporting networks. The degree and duration of the impacts are unique to the individual participants and are largely dependent on their specific life circumstances. The potential impacts are directly related to the five fundamental characteristics of the camp experience.

5 Fundamental Characteristics of Camp

The data suggest that the positive impacts of camp result from a dynamic interplay of five characteristics that can be considered fundamental to the camp model of these three camps. It is notable that a breakdown in one of the five characteristics seems to constitute a breakdown in the model itself, leading to interpretation of the experience as negative or even harmful. These five characteristics have no set order, and they manifest differently in various contexts. The camp model may look very different from camp to camp, from week to week at the same camp, and even from person to person within a single camp group. Context and individual experiences matter. There is tremendous and almost unshakeable buy-in to the camp model among the camp faithful who have witnessed or experienced the impacts. There is also a clear preference for the specific way an individual experienced the camp model. This can lead to a narrow view of what qualifies as camp or the notion that a specific camp is better than all others. These data counter that claim, instead suggesting a highly adaptive model that functions in a space where all five characteristics are present.

1) Camp is Relational

We're all so different, but we all came together and it was a puzzle that fit perfectly together. –
Lutherdale camper

The entire camp experience is framed in an intensely relational environment that includes living together, meeting new people, practicing reconciliation, and encountering the other in face-to-face interaction. The potential impacts of this characteristic include improved social competency, increased self-confidence, and more positive attitudes toward Christian communities.

2) Camp is Participatory

They're teaching us without us knowing that we're being taught! – Sugar Creek camper

The camp environment emphasizes experience and agency. Participants learn and grow through active, kinesthetic activities. These experiences are multi-sensory and often include new or novel experiences (especially in the outdoors) that participants characterize as fun. Participants even characterized the absence of technological devices as a positive aspect of camp that facilitated participatory encounter. The potential impacts of this characteristic include willingness to try new things, increased creativity, and more positive attitudes toward life.

3) Camp is Different from Home

Once you actually get away from your life, you can see a whole different angle, and it can be a lot more fun and exciting. – Lutherdale camper

Camp exists in a set apart location that provides physical and emotional distance from environments that participants consider normal. The differences highlight the special nature of the camp environment and provide perspective on the places participants left behind and to which they will return. The potential impacts of this characteristic include increased independence and differentiation from parents.

4) Camp is a Safe Space

The whole camp is like a huge safe zone. – Wapo camper

The strong sense of safety at camp includes physical safety, but there is a special emphasis on emotional safety. Participants described camp as a place where they could be themselves without fear of judgment or ridicule. The potential impacts of this characteristic that manifest themselves in the data include more positive self-understanding, increased self-esteem, and a desire to seek out safe places and relationships.

5) Camp is Faith-Centered

Each time you go to camp, you run another mile in your race of faith! – Wapo camper

Faith teachings and practices are not peripheral or intermittent aspects of the camp experience but rather are experienced as intertwined in all other characteristics. The potential impacts of this characteristic include increased frequency of faith practices in the home, stronger identification with faith traditions, and ability to interpret life through the lens of faith.

Conclusions and Next Steps

These findings are not proof of camp's effectiveness. They provide, rather, a blueprint for future research. The data suggest a specific camp model present at these three camps that is highly adaptive and facilitates empirically recognizable and lasting impacts in participants. The next step is to expand the number of camps and conduct a quantitative assessment to test the theory of the five fundamental characteristics and to determine the degree and duration of impact. Future studies should assess whether the camp model and impacts are present at camps from other denominations and regions of the country.

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