



Effective Camp Research Project, Phase 2 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, conducted in summer 2015, consisted of site visits to three camps, focus groups, participant observation, and a survey of parents. The research uncovered **five fundamental characteristics** of the camp model: different from home, relational, safe space, faith centered, and participatory. The findings suggested that a dynamic interplay of these characteristics opened space for positive and lasting change for the primary participants and their supporting networks. **Phase 2** of the project, conducted in summer 2016, used a survey methodology to measure the camper outcomes and determine the extent to which impacts extended beyond the last day of camp. More than 1000 campers at six different camps completed questionnaires on the first and last days of camp. Campers received a follow-up questionnaire two months after returning home. All six camps were co-ed residential camps affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and located in Wisconsin.

Faith Background and 4 Camper Types

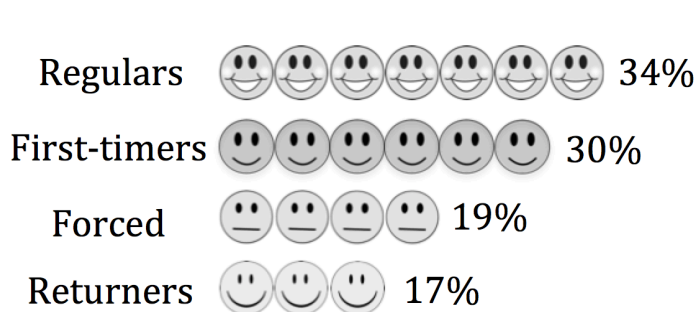


Figure 1: Four Camper Types

Campers came from varying intensities of faith backgrounds, but almost all had ongoing exposure to Christian teachings/practices prior to camp. Most were highly motivated to attend because they wanted to have fun (87%) or grow in faith (82%). Many were returners or *camp regulars*, for

whom camp had become part of the rhythm of their year for three or more years. Others were there, at least in part, because they felt *forced* to come, typically as part of a confirmation program.

The Camp Experience: Overwhelmingly Positive

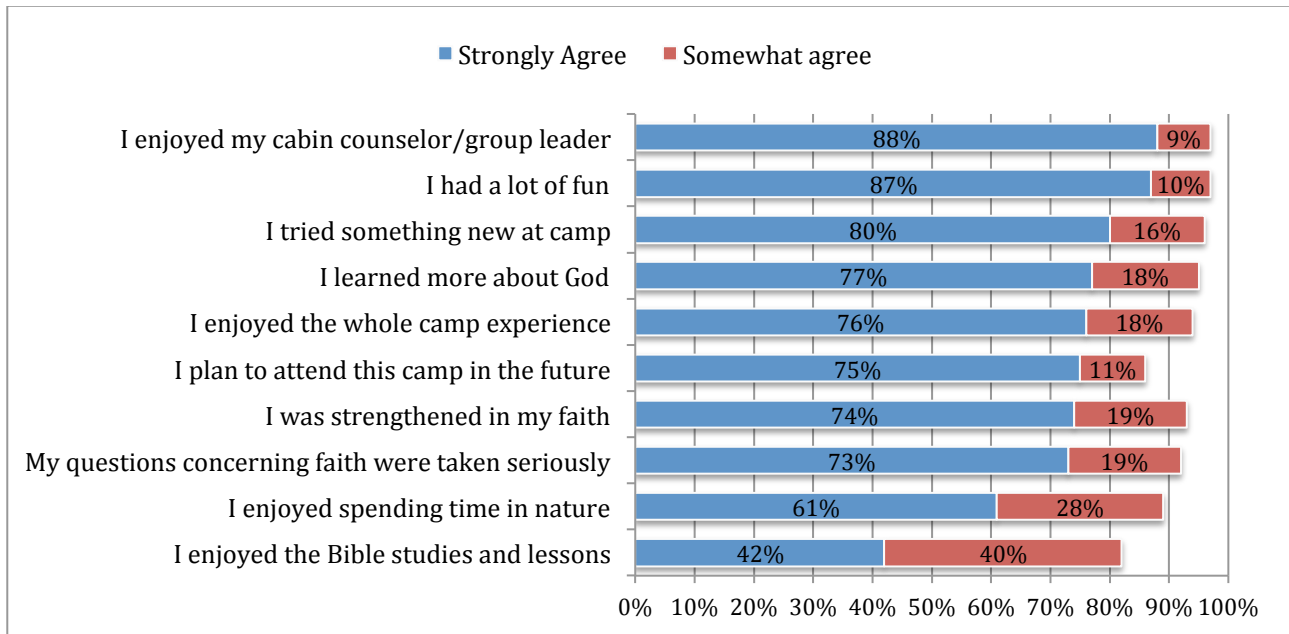


Figure 2: Camper Impressions on the Last Day of Camp (N=1134)

Participants indicated an overwhelmingly positive experience on the last day of camp, with 97% agreeing that they had a lot of fun and 93% agreeing that they were strengthened in their faith. The element of camp that campers agreed with enjoying the most was their cabin counselor or group leader, though a large majority also indicated enjoying the Bible studies (82%) and worship services (87%). Even those who were *forced* to come indicated having a positive experience and growing in their faith. In addition to positive reviews, campers indicated greater safety at camp than they reported feeling in their home or school environments. Fewer campers reported being picked on, left out, or that they had to hide their true selves at camp than those reporting the same at school or home. They also indicated at camp feeling more included in worship services and having more frequent conversations about God and faith than in the home environment.

In the follow-up survey two months after camp, agreement declined somewhat with items such as “I had a lot of fun” and “I was strengthened in my faith,” though the responses remained overwhelmingly positive. Participants had time and distance to consider the impacts of the experience, and the vast majority agreed that they grew in independence (81%), self-confidence (82%), faith (96%), and knowledge of God (94%). They were also asked directly if they agreed that the camp experience had a significant impact on their lives, and 86% agreed. These findings indicate that some of the effects of camps were temporary, while others can be considered lasting change.

Lasting Change and the Camp High

Campers responded to seventeen identical items on all three surveys in order to determine if there were changes during the camp week and if those changes lasted at least two months after camp. Campers on average showed significant positive growth in sixteen of the survey items, with the remaining one (“I have trouble getting along with and working with others”) showing no change. The follow-up survey indicated there were both lasting and temporary effects of the camp experience. This study was able to identify specific characteristics that showed the temporary change consistent with the so-called *camp high* and differentiate these from the much more compelling evidence that positive impacts of camp were ongoing. Of the sixteen items showing positive change during camp, ten of these remained positive two months after camp, while the remaining six regressed to pre-camp levels.

The Camp High

Increased positivity
More interest in worship services
Participatory learning
Increased *vertical faith*
(cognitive belief)

Lasting Change

Increased self-confidence
More frequent devotional practices
Increased church attendance
Faith conversations/practices
in the home
Increased *horizontal faith*
(faith relevance)

The increased positivity and emotional boost at the end of camp were temporary, but the increased self-confidence persisted. The increased interest in worship services may have been confined to the participatory atmosphere of camp, but campers still attended church more frequently following camp than they did before camp. It is fascinating that three of the six items showing the temporary high were the only ones related to cognitive belief, or *vertical faith* (e.g. “God created the world” and “I believe that Jesus rose from the dead”). All of the items related to *horizontal faith* or faith that is relevant in daily life (e.g. “Faith in God helps me in my daily life” and “It is important for me to belong to my church or congregation”) retained their growth long-term. Camps apparently did not cause lasting change in general belief or overall agreement with doctrinal statements, but they showed clear and lasting impacts on campers’ understanding that faith matters and that the communal elements of faith are important. The theological depth of camp, it turns out, lies not in doctrine but rather in connecting young people to Christian community, fostering increased devotional practices, promoting faith conversations, and providing experience-based evidence that faith is relevant in everyday life.

The Effectiveness or Breakdown of the Camp Model

There was remarkable consistency in outcomes across different camps and programs. Programmatic variations and physical characteristics of the sites did not produce significantly different results. For example, campers at one camp slept in rustic housing accommodations and cooked many meals over the open fire, while those at another had modern cabins and ate in a dining hall, but the campers at these camps showed no difference in growth related to enjoyment of the outdoors or association of nature with their faith. Forced campers were just as likely to exhibit growth as camp regulars, returners, and first-time campers who came willingly. The pattern also remained unchanged whether or not campers reported enjoying the large group games, spending time in nature, or even the Bible studies. These were not the make-it or break-it elements of the experience.

The pattern of growth broke down when one of the five fundamental characteristics of the camp model broke down. The clearest breakdown was related to camp as a *safe space*. Campers who reported being picked on or left out or reported feeling like they had to hide their true selves exhibited no growth in faith or self-confidence. There were also indications that a strain in *relationships* among cabin mates or especially with the counselor altered the experience to the point that the outcomes were affected. The same was true for campers who did not agree with “I tried something new at camp” or reported having difficulty being away from technology, indicating breakdowns in the characteristics *participatory* and *away from home*. While some breakdowns happened on an individual level, there were also cases in which whole cabin groups or entire weeks of campers were affected together. It was difficult to account for these systemic breakdowns, though they appear to be related to insufficient training of summer staff in at least one of the cases and overfilling the housing units in at least two of the cases. There were also two weeks in which campers showed particularly high outcomes. Again, it is difficult to demonstrate causality, but there were significant unexpected events (both weather-related) during these two weeks that elicited creative responses from the staff members. These unique circumstances appear to have boosted the *participatory* characteristic of camp, as well as fostered deeper *relational* connections, resulting in more positive outcomes.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Phase 2 has confirmed the validity of the camp model, characterized the elements of the *camp high*, and identified specific camp outcomes showing lasting change. It is clear that the outcomes related to faith formation operate within a network that includes faith conversations and practices in the home, connection to congregational ministries, and more. Future research can expand outside Wisconsin and beyond the Lutheran church and assess camp’s role within the faith formation network.