

Camps Help Make Children Resilient

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When Jacob arrived at his city's day camp for his third season, the camp director was determined to avoid the problems Jacob was experiencing at school. Now eleven years old, Jacob had grown into a heavy child who spoke in a squeaky pre-pubescent voice. He had been tormented by bullies who thought him effeminate. The other boys in his group occasionally did the same, at least until staff intervened. Jacob's parents weren't his best allies either. A business woman and a university economics professor, neither seemed to have very much time for their son. Eight weeks at camp, five days a week, was supposed to be an experience that would be good for Jacob. His father insisted it was time away from the kids who teased him at school. A gruff good-bye each morning in the parking lot suggested to Jacob's camp director that maybe the little boy dragging his lunch bag into the recreation center would have liked a little more time at home and a few more connections with someone who loved him.

There are many children like Jacob who come to camp with problems that threaten their psychological and social development. Fortunately for most of these vulnerable individuals, a camp experience, whether a wilderness residential experience or an urban day camp, creates the perfect blend of conditions that give children what they need to be more resilient. Jacob may not have wanted to be at camp, but with the right programming, his camp could compensate for what he wasn't getting at home.

Why Camps Make Children Resilient

We've lived with a resilience myth since the concept began to become popular in the 1980s. We naively believe that resilient individuals are those who overcome adversity because of special individual qualities. Studies from fields as diverse as child development, cultural anthropology, epigenetics, and neuropsychology are all proving that resilience depends much more on what others do to shape the world around us than our own rugged individualism. (See additional resources on resilience and child development at the end of this article.) When it comes to resilience, *nurture trumps nature*. Camps, like good schools and loving families, immunize children against adversity by giving them manageable amounts of stress and the supports they

need to learn how to cope effectively and in ways that are adaptive rather than maladaptive (e.g., delinquent) over time.

In fact, a less blaming, more ecological understanding of resilience is showing that resilience happens when our interactions with others make psychological, social, and physical well-being possible. What we call resilience is actually the ability of individuals to navigate their way to the people and experiences they need to do well, which means families, schools, communities, and camps must provide what children need when children ask for help. It's a complex set of interactions. The better a child succeeds at finding the experiences that bolster his well-being, the better he will be able to cope with life stressors.

Seven Experiences Children Need

So which experiences, then, are most likely to make children resilient? The best camps do not provide cookie-cutter solutions to what kids need. Instead, great camps understand that the factors that make children resilient are cumulative. One experience contributes to others, expanding a child's psychosocial resources exponentially. In practice, this means camps need to offer children healthy amounts of some or all of the following seven experiences:

- 1) *New relationships*, not just with peers, but with trusted adults other than children's parents. These new relationships teach children social skills to cope with new situations. A cabin full of awkward kids can give them each a chance to play both leader and follower, depending on the activity they're doing. The adults who kids encounter at camp also offer the chance to learn how to deal with people different than their parents. A counselor that a child doesn't like needn't mean a failed camp experience. Instead, it can present an opportunity for the child to learn how to advocate for what she needs and get along in a tough situation. Just think about how useful a skill like that is: being able to negotiate with an adult on one's own to get what one needs.
- 2) *A powerful identity* that makes children feel confident in front of others provides children with something genuine to like about themselves. A child may not be the best on the ropes course, the fastest swimmer, or the next teen idol when he sings, but chances are that a good camp counselor is going to help a child find something to be proud of that he can do well. The camp experience not only helps the child discover what he can do, it

also provides him with an audience that shows appreciation. Identities that fortify a child during times of transition and crisis are those that have been acknowledged by others as positive and powerful.

- 3) Camps help children *feel in control of their lives*. Those experiences of self-efficacy travel home as easily as a special art project or the pine cone they carry in their backpack. Children who experience themselves as competent will be better problem solvers in new situations long after their laundry is cleaned and the smell of the campfire forgotten. The goal here is to encourage a child's sense of internality, their perception that they have some say over their world and that the sources of the problems they encounter are properly attributed to either themselves (when they are to blame) or others (when, in truth, the child is an innocent victim of someone else's mistake). The child who has some say over daily activities at a camp and learns to fix problems when they happen (cleaning up a mess when a group of campers get too rowdy) is the child who will take home with her a view of the world as manageable the next time she encounters trouble.
- 4) Camps make sure that all children are *treated fairly*. The wonderful thing about camp is that every child starts without the baggage they carry from home or school. He or she may be a geek or the child with dyslexia. At camp, both find opportunities to just be kids who are valued for who they are. Of course, for camps to achieve this, they must actively encourage the engagement of those who are more vulnerable or marginalized. The more inclusive activities are of individual campers' cultures, and the more activities show, rather than tell, each camper that they have something to contribute, the more children will feel fairly treated. The goal is to strive not only for equality, with every child treated equally, but also to instill a spirit of equity, in which each child receives that which she needs individually to feel valued.
- 5) At camp, children get *what they need to develop physically*. Ideally, they experience fresh air, exercise, a balance between routine and unstructured time, and all the good food their bodies need. Not that s'mores don't have a place at the campfire, but a good camp is also about helping children find healthy lifestyles. Counselors that care enough to look after a child's physical health, bringing out the child's best by encouraging manageable amounts of challenge, are also conveying to the child a belief in the child's physical capacity to cope. That's important for children's long-term physical development. We now know

that early experiences of exposure to risk, and poor health resulting from too little exercise when young, have long-term consequences for the child's healthy development.

- 6) Perhaps best of all, camps offer children a chance *to feel like they belong*. All those goofy chants and team songs, the sense of common purpose, and the attachment to the identity that camps promote go a long way to offering children a sense of being rooted. For children from the most risky environments, it's this sense of belonging to a prosocial set of peers and the institution of the camp itself that is a buffer against future feelings of isolation. It's this isolation that contributes to substance abuse and other problem behaviors.
- 7) Finally, camps can offer children *a better sense of their culture*. Camps are places where children can think about their values and share with others the everyday practices that make them feel a part of their families, communities, or ethnic group. It might be skit night, or a special camp program that reflects the values of the community that sponsors the camp, or maybe it's just a chance for children to understand themselves a bit more as they learn about others. Camps give young people both cultural roots and the chance to understand children who have cultures very different than their own.

The Impact on Children of the Seven Experiences

Research on resilience (see the additional resources at the end of this article) shows that the impact of each of these seven experiences will, first, be greatest for children who face the greatest number of challenges. This is the principal of *differential impact*. For example, while all children need a secure attachment with an adult, for a child such as Jacob, the impact of a summer spent with a counselor who engages him and helps him feel special is more important than it might be to a child who already has the attention of a caregiver elsewhere in his life.

Second, we know from the research that resilience factors are *cumulative*. One of these seven experiences will benefit a child for certain, but as the child has one experience, other experiences tend to come along, too. For example, a child who can show her talents at camp will likely be one who feels more in control of her life and that she belongs at her camp. She will know that she has something special to contribute, which brings with it a powerful sense of one's self as someone valued by others.

It's for reasons like these that camps can become places for personal development, especially for children who face the most risks. While it is easy to see how camp can offer a child who self-identifies as lesbian or gay or is from a minority racial group a safe (or at least, safer) place to grow up, even children from contexts in which they are privileged can also find at camp opportunities to learn how to cope better with the risk factors that sometimes accompany privilege.

For example, Veronique was a spoiled fourteen-year-old whose divorced father "dumped" her at camp four weeks of every summer. At least that's how Veronique described it. The camp was sponsored by a religious group to instill values in the campers while letting them have a summer of good fun. Veronique did whatever she could to belittle others' beliefs while breaking as many rules as she could get away with, but, curiously, never enough to be sent home. To make matters worse, almost all the campers came from wealthy families, which meant that, often, Veronique's cabin mates had an upside-down sense of entitlement. Veronique quickly turned them into followers by painting herself as a revolutionary resisting the control of the staff.

Thankfully, Veronique's counselor was a calm young woman with a healthy sense of humor. Beneath the haughty attitudes of her campers, she could see children desperate for some positive attention. The older Veronique became, though, the harder it had become to see the softer side of this emotionally neglected little girl, especially when she preferred to model herself on Hollywood brats with too much fame and no responsibility.

Instead of getting angry with her, Veronique's counselor offered her opportunities to help with the younger children so that she wouldn't feel so much like a kid herself. She engaged Veronique in mature conversations about what Veronique believed and why. She let Veronique tease her and the other staff, as long as Veronique did it respectfully. And she made sure Veronique had one-on-one time with her to show Veronique she really mattered. It wasn't always easy to like the girl, especially as it got closer to the end of her four weeks. It was as if everyone could feel the girl's anxiety about going home. Her counselor promised to write, but that did little to calm Veronique or help her behave.

Structured Interventions

It would take a book to fully describe how camp counselors can work effectively with children like Jacob and Veronique. However, interventions that build resilience generally reflect efforts by staff to structure a camp experience so that children can access all seven of the experiences discussed earlier. Those experiences, of course, must be tailored to the developmental stage of the child and the contextual risk the child faces. For example, based on our understanding of resilience, a child's need for an experience of belonging at camp is going to change depending on the child's age and level of neglect or attachment elsewhere in his life.

Younger children tend to feel a greater connection at home and may not need, nor want, as strong a connection to their camp counselor. Ironically, it is the younger teen, preparing to slowly disengage from her family, who may appreciate the inclusive feeling of belonging at camp. Likewise, the neglected child may find his counselor a rare adult he can trust and cling to him with a death grip, while the child who has suffered more severe and prolonged neglect may so lack the skills to join with others, or be so insecure, that counselors are rejected no matter how caring they appear to be.

It's this complexity that makes giving children these seven experiences challenging. While camps can't provide every camper an entirely individual program, bolstering resilience does require some intentional strategies to tailor programming to a child's needs. It might be just a few hours engaging a shy but artistic child in painting props for the end-of-camp festival, or offering a particularly skilled athlete the chance to do a lake swim that is reserved for only the strongest swimmers. Whatever the plan of intervention, camps offer children the foundation stones for resilience when they match programming to the child's psychosocial needs.

Additional Resources

Ungar, M. (2011). Community resilience for youth and families: Facilitative physical and social capital in contexts of adversity. *Children and Youth Social Services Review*, 33, 1742-1748.

Ungar, M. (2009). *We generation: Raising socially responsible kids*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.

Ungar, M. (2007). *Playing at being bad: The hidden resilience of troubled teens*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

Ungar, M. (2007). *Too safe for their own good: How risk and responsibility help teens thrive*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.

BIO:

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