

A Multi-Method Impact Evaluation of a Therapeutic Summer Camp Program

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ABSTRACT: This article reports on a multi-method impact evaluation of a therapeutic summer camp program for children and youth with learning disabilities and related psychosocial problems. The study examines the degree to which program objectives were achieved through a pre-camp, post-camp, follow-up design using a series of standardized instruments, camp evaluations, and interviews with parents. The results indicate that the campers reported less social isolation, experienced modest improvements in self-esteem, and expressed high levels of satisfaction with the camp. The measures for social skills generally failed to register significant changes, although parents reported improvements in the areas of cooperation, responsibility, and self-control.

KEY WORDS: Therapeutic Camp; Impact Evaluation; Multi-Method Design; Learning Disabilities.

Introduction

Although social work has a long historical association with the recreation field in general, and camping programs in particular, the practice literature has not been well developed. In general, analysts agree that camping and recreation programs are effective social work inter-

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ventions, and that they can and should be developed more fully (Breton, 1990; Kelk, 1994). Support for such programs, however, stems from the philosophical commitment of some practitioners to the ideals and values of group work. Rigorous evaluations of the efficacy of therapeutic camping and recreational programs are not commonly found in social work research (Marx, 1988). Hence the current article aims to address in part the gap in the literature by reporting the results of a multi-method evaluation of a therapeutic summer camp program in Ontario.

Literature Review

Over the past several decades, there has been phenomenal growth in the number and variety of camp programs offered to children and youth (Kelk, 1994; Schwartz, 1960). In addition to regular vacation summer camps, camping programs are used increasingly with specific population groups who have special medical, physical, or psychosocial needs or who are considered to be at risk (Byers, 1979; Kelk, 1994; Langdon & Kelk, 1994). These populations enjoy camping experiences either through camps established for individuals with special needs or, more recently, through integration into regular camps (Blake, 1996). The literature recognizes that summer camp programs offer participants valuable opportunities to grow and develop, as children and youth experience a range of psychological, social, emotional, and physical benefits (Byers, 1979; Kelk, 1994; Schwartz, 1960). The advantages consist of a return to nature and a break from life in the city, increased self-worth, improved relationships with both peers and adults, greater ability to take on responsibility, and better coordination and physical skills (Byers, 1979; Kelk, 1994; Levitt, 1994; Schwartz, 1960; Shasby, Heuchert, & Gansneder, 1984).

Kelk (1994) explains that camping programs designed as psychosocial interventions typically involve participants who have problems in new environments. A central component of these programs involves activities planned by staff to optimally challenge the participants. The process of meeting these challenges helps participants improve their self-esteem, sense of efficacy, social abilities and skills (Kelk, 1994; Kiewa, 1994; Tassé, 1978). The camp counselors utilize the social microcosm of the cabin groups and camp environment to promote beneficial changes (Berkovitz & Sugar, 1986; Vinter, 1965). The camp environment ideally provides the campers with positive and substantially different experiences from those that they typically encounter.

In the scant social work literature on camp and recreation programs, most writers agree both on their value as effective social work interventions and the lack of appreciation for their worth (Breton, 1990; Gentry, 1984; Marx, 1988; Redl, 1966). For example, Kelk (1994) has suggested that camping programs can be effective interventions for many client groups served by social workers. Davis-Berman and Berman (1989, p. 280) have argued that through environmentally-based camp approaches, "the uniqueness of the person-in-situation truly comes forth, which serves to define and distinguish the social work profession from other professional groups."

The literature recognizes that some programs for individuals with special needs already exist that utilize outdoor adventure as the primary means through which therapeutic goals are achieved (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1989; Marx, 1988). Yet systematic evaluations of these programs are elusive. For example, Marx (1988) highlighted the limitations of wilderness programs that do not offer counseling for teenagers with special needs, noting that regression can occur because of the likelihood that these teenagers may fail in traditional recreation programs. More commonly, the social work literature has simply emphasized programmatic approaches rather than systematic research to determine program effectiveness (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1989; Kiewa, 1994). The current article attempts to shed some light in this regard by evaluating the short- and medium-term effects of a therapeutic summer camp program.

Camp Setting

The camp setting for the current study involves a program operated through a children's mental health centre funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services in Toronto, Ontario. The agency provides services to children and adolescents between the ages of eight and eighteen who have learning disabilities coupled with social, emotional, and behavioral problems. The services offered include individual, family, and group treatment, as well as community outreach. The camp consists of a residential therapeutic program for children and adolescents from across Ontario who exhibit problems associated with their learning disabilities.

The camp has two separate three-week programs, with one targeting children 13 years and younger and the other targeting youth between the ages of 14 and 18. The camp counselors utilize a range of

therapeutic and outdoor recreational activities in a safe and secure environment to enhance the social skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem of the campers. The group-centred camping program includes activities such as swimming, canoeing, camping, arts and crafts, recreational sports, and adventure-based learning (e.g., ropes courses, climbing wall). In addition, the staff members provide group counseling to campers according to their therapeutic needs and goals. The camp has a low staff-to-camper ratio, considered vital to the success of therapeutic camp programs (see Wetzel, McNaboe, & McNaboe, 1995).

The purpose of the camp is to provide a camp experience with all of the associated benefits for children and adolescents with learning disabilities and related psychosocial problems. These children and youth tend to be marginalized at regular camps, where they are ignored or bullied, with some having been "kicked out" of camps due to behavioral problems that many traditional camps are not equipped to handle (Tassé, 1978). The children's and adolescents' negative experiences at summer camps often mirror their lives in the community, resulting in further hurt and damage to their self-esteem (Redl, 1966; Schwartz, 1960). Consequently, they have been deprived of camp experiences that often prove helpful or even therapeutic for many young people.

Methodology

The current evaluation focused on the impact of the three-week therapeutic summer camp programs delivered in 1998, first for 48 children and then for 48 adolescents. The research focused on three main program objectives: 1) increasing campers' self-confidence and self-esteem; 2) decreasing their sense of isolation in a safe environment; and 3) enhancing social competence (social adjustment, performance, and skills). The multi-method evaluation strategy involved standardized instruments, feedback questionnaires, and telephone interviews with parents.

The basic framework called for a pre-test (T_1), post-test (T_2), follow-up (T_3) design to determine the extent to which the therapeutic camp program achieved the immediate objectives for the two groups of campers. The evaluation team selected three standardized instruments designed to measure self-esteem (Self-Esteem Index), loneliness or social isolation (Children's Loneliness Questionnaire), and a variety of social skills (Social Skills Rating System). The researchers first adminis-

tered these instruments to the campers within 48 hours of their arrival at the camp. The campers then completed the same questionnaires *plus* a camp evaluation the day before their last day at camp. Most campers then completed the same instruments 6–8 months following their return home from the camp.

The Self-Esteem Index (SEI) contains 80 items and produces an overall summative rating that can then be converted to a normed Self-Esteem Quotient with parallel distribution properties of typical intelligence tests (Brown & Alexander, 1991). More specifically, the raw scores are normalized into a distribution with a predetermined mean score of 100 and standard deviation of 15. These data allow one to average scores, test for mean differences, and report group data. In addition, the SEI has four sub-scales that measure different dimensions of self-esteem: perceptions of familial acceptance, academic competence, peer popularity, and personal security. Identical versions of the test were administered to both groups during all three testing periods.

The Children's Loneliness Questionnaire (CLQ) contains 16 primary items focused on children's feelings of loneliness, feelings of social adequacy and inadequacy, and subjective estimations of peer status. The items each use 5-point scales, meaning that individual scores can range from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 80. Higher scores reflect a higher degree of loneliness. The scale has performed well in the past in terms of internal consistency (alpha of .90) and test-retest reliability (Asher & Wheeler, 1985). There are no normed population data, however, with which to compare the campers.

The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) includes several complementary measurement systems with population norms established for both primary and secondary school levels (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). In general, the student forms of the SSRS emphasize positive behaviors or prosocial skills. Higher scores on any of the sub-scales indicate a greater tendency to exhibit prosocial behavior in the realms of cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control. In particular, higher scores mean that socially desirable behaviors occur with relatively greater frequency (e.g., "I control my temper when people are angry with me"). The campers completed the SSRS forms during all three waves of data collection.

The parents completed a parental version of the Social Skills Rating System for each wave of data collection. The parents filled out camp evaluation forms, while a random sample participated in brief telephone interviews during the follow-up period. The interviews captured

in a qualitative fashion parental perceptions of changes observed in their children's behavior immediately following and several months after attending the camp.

The analyses focus on over-time comparisons. Given the exploratory nature of the study, paired t-tests were chosen to examine changes from pre- to post-camp (T_1-T_2), pre-camp to the 6–8 month follow-up period (T_1-T_3), and post-camp to the 6–8 month follow-up period (T_2-T_3). Because multiple comparisons may inflate the type I error rate, exact p-values are provided in the tables in the results section of the paper. Readers who wish to be more strict with statistical significance levels may apply the Bonferroni correction (p-value/number of tests) to the analyses in each table.

The campers' participation rates in the study were between 90–93 percent during the first two waves of data collection, but dropped off to just under 70 percent for the follow-up period. The proportion of the parents who completed the standardized instruments declined with each successive wave of data collection: 95 percent at the outset, 74 percent at the one month follow-up period after camp, and 62 percent for the 6–8 month follow-up questionnaires. All but one of the parents who were contacted agreed to participate in supplemental telephone interviews.

Results

Self-Esteem

The campers mirrored the general population at the beginning of camp in terms of their average SEI scores of 99.5 ($s = 16.1$). To test for significant differences over time, paired t-tests summarize the average differences in scores for each observation period. Using the matched results for participants who completed the questionnaires for each time period produced a sample size of 65, or 68 percent of all campers. Table 1 presents separate analytic results for children and adolescents, including pre-camp, post-camp, and follow-up measurements, the sub-scale comparisons, and the Self-Esteem Quotients.

The cumulative SEI scores were similar for both children and adolescents at the end of camp and for the follow-up period. A comparison of females and males revealed no differences in average SEI scores (results not shown). The results differed somewhat in examining children and adolescents separately. The summative SEI ratings for chil-

TABLE 1
Children's and Adolescents' SEI Mean Scores for Sub-Scales and Summative Ratings: Pre-Camp, Post-Camp, and Follow-up Comparisons (n = 65)

	Pre-Camp (T ₁)		Post-Camp (T ₂)		Follow-Up (T ₃)		Statistical Significance*		
	Mean (s.d.)		Mean (s.d.)		Mean (s.d.)		T ₁ -T ₂	T ₁ -T ₃	T ₂ -T ₃
<i>Children SEI Scales</i>									
Familial Acceptance	62.7 (9.1)		66.3 (7.9)		64.1 (8.9)		.001	.060	.060
Academic Competence	58.7 (9.7)		58.5 (7.7)		58.5 (7.5)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Peer Popularity	59.1 (8.5)		60.1 (8.1)		60.2 (6.8)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Personal Security	58.3 (8.4)		59.7 (8.3)		62.2 (6.9)		n.s.	.001	.025
Summative Ratings	236.6 (27.3)		243.7 (23.9)		243.9 (20.3)		.008	n.s.	n.s.
SEI Quotient	99.0 (12.3)		103.1 (14.0)		103.1 (12.3)		.008	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Adolescent SEI Scales</i>									
Familial Acceptance	64.3 (8.1)		64.7 (6.7)		64.1 (7.8)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Academic Competence	56.6 (9.2)		58.6 (8.6)		60.1 (8.2)		n.s.	n.s.	.029
Peer Popularity	57.8 (8.9)		59.4 (7.8)		59.3 (7.4)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Personal Security	61.3 (9.3)		60.2 (9.0)		61.4 (8.1)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Summative Ratings	243.2 (23.0)		244.5 (20.6)		245.8 (21.4)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
SEI Quotient	102.7 (13.4)		103.4 (12.0)		105.4 (11.3)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

*The notation n.s. indicates that no statistically significant difference (p < .05) occurs over the time period specified.

dren increased significantly in comparing their pre-camp (236.6) and post-camp scores (243.7). In addition, while the children as a whole were comparable initially to the general population in terms of their self-esteem, by the end of the camp their cumulative scores placed the children several points ahead of the general population. These differences continued to be evident even during the follow-up period.

The familial acceptance scores increased significantly from before camp (62.7) to the end of camp (66.3) for the full sample, but then declined somewhat by the follow-up contact (64.1). Children reported somewhat higher levels of familial acceptance in the months following camp. Regarding academic competence and peer popularity, the children did not display differences over the three testing periods. Finally, their self-reported scores of personal security increased over time, with an even more substantial increase following their participation in the camp. The cumulative results from these several sub-scales produce the observable difference in overall Self-Esteem Index scores for the children over time.

The analyses for adolescent campers revealed a different pattern. The summative ratings were higher for each testing period, although the results were not statistically significant. The one sub-scale that provided evidence of a positive change was academic competence. These scores increased across the three testing periods such that the final ratings were significantly higher than at the beginning of camp. Their self-reported peer popularity was slightly higher following camp as well, although the results were not statistically significant. The adolescents' scores were essentially unchanged across the three testing periods in regard to familial acceptance. The issue of personal security also produced similar results in comparing adolescent ratings before and following camp. On balance, then, the adolescents had self-esteem ratings that did not change appreciably over the testing periods. By the same token, these adolescents as a group, scored in the normal to slightly above normal range on self-esteem in comparison with the general population as indicated by the SEI Quotient scores.

Regarding gender differences, males and females were comparable as both groups had gains of six points. The effects on academic competence were slightly more pronounced among males, while females appeared to experience greater gains overall with respect to personal security. There were no changes observed over time with respect to peer popularity for any of the groups examined. In the final comparison, however, there were no statistically significant differences on any of the self-esteem measures in comparing the male and female campers.

Loneliness and Isolation

Although population data do not exist for the Children’s Loneliness Questionnaire (CLQ), it is possible to examine the results in the context of how the campers compared their experiences of school with that of camp. The results indicate a clear and unequivocal positive experience at the camp under study. The combined sample results, along with separate analyses for children and adolescents, appear in Table 2.

The internal consistency of the scale yielded consistently high reliability ratings: .91, .87, and .94. The largest substantive differences occurred in comparing pre-camp and post-camp experiences, which produced statistically significant changes in the expected direction. For example, the full sample results reveal a decline of almost 10 points (indicating *less* loneliness) in comparing CLQ ratings based on the previous year’s school experience with that of their three-week camp experience. These youths did not feel as lonely or inadequate while at camp. Moreover, the adolescents described an even more positive experience than their younger counterparts, as their scores improved by nearly one dozen points from 38.2 to 26.5.

The campers reported average CLQ scores of 37.9 prior to camp, which improved significantly to 28.2 by the end of camp. At the time of the follow-up surveys, the average score was 31.7 for their current school experience. Both children and adolescents displayed statisti-

TABLE 2
CLQ Full Sample, Children, and Adolescent Pre-,
Post- and Follow-up Results (*n* = 61)

	Pre-Camp (T ₁)	Post-Camp (T ₂)	Follow-Up (T ₃)	Statistical Significance*		
	<i>Mean (s.d.)</i>	<i>Mean (s.d.)</i>	<i>Mean (s.d.)</i>	<i>T₁-T₂</i>	<i>T₁-T₃</i>	<i>T₂-T₃</i>
Full Sample	37.9 (14.1)	28.2 (9.5)	31.7 (13.7)	.001	.001	.044
Children	37.6 (13.2)	29.5 (8.7)	33.3 (14.6)	.001	.031	n.s.
Adolescents	38.2 (15.4)	26.5 (9.5)	28.6 (11.7)	.001	.001	n.s.

*The notation n.s. indicates that no statistically significant difference (*p* < .05) occurs over the time period specified.

cally significant improvements of several points between the previous and the current school year. These results indicate that campers experienced lower levels of loneliness and social inadequacy at school in the year following camp as compared with the previous academic year. How many of the campers appeared to be substantially less lonely at camp? The question cannot be answered definitively, but the results suggest that nearly three in five campers reported a large improvement of at least five points while attending camp. Another 27 percent reported only minor fluctuations in their CLQ scores, while almost 15 percent reported feeling *more* lonely at camp. During the follow-up period, some 38 percent of campers once again reported being lonelier at school compared to their camp experiences. On the other hand, compared to their school experiences the previous year, 60 percent of the campers were substantially less lonely.

A gender comparison helps to elaborate further on the observed changes. In Table 3, the CLQ scores are presented for all female and male campers, followed by separate gender comparisons of children and adolescents. Every group registered a statistically significant change in the expected direction after participating in the camp. Regardless of which age group and gender, the campers reported less loneliness and social inadequacy at the camp in comparison with their ratings of their school experiences. While females entered camp with higher CLQ scores than males (i.e., more negative feelings in this regard), their scores dropped much more than those of either group of males. Both female children and female adolescents were even more positive than males in their assessments of loneliness while at camp.

Once the campers returned to their school environments, loneliness scores were higher than those reported at camp. At the follow-up period, the CLQ scores of the females in particular were much closer to what they had been originally (37.5). Based on the small sample size for females, the evidence indicates that the difference over time was not statistically significant. For males, however, their CLQ scores declined significantly between T_1 – T_2 (36.0 to 28.9), but levelled off at T_3 to 29.8. The results suggest that the immediate effects were more dramatic for female campers, but the medium-term effects were more sustained for male campers.

Social Competence

The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) for the full sample, including those for each of the four sub-scales and a summative rating, showed

TABLE 3
Pre, Post- and Follow-up Comparison of CLQ Scores by Gender (n = 61)

	Pre-Camp (T ₁)	Post-Camp (T ₂)	Follow-Up (T ₃)	Statistical Significance*		
	Mean (s.d.)	Mean (s.d.)	Mean (s.d.)	T ₁ -T ₂	T ₁ -T ₃	T ₂ -T ₃
All Female Campers	42.7 (16.7)	23.6 (6.9)	37.5 (15.8)	.001	n.s.	.013
All Male Campers	36.0 (12.7)	28.9 (8.6)	29.8 (12.7)	.001	.001	n.s.
Female Children	44.1 (16.6)	25.6 (10.1)	42.3 (15.8)	.006	n.s.	.034
Male Children	35.3 (11.2)	30.9 (7.9)	30.6 (13.3)	.039	.016	n.s.
Female Adolescents	41.2 (17.6)	23.0 (8.9)	28.8 (12.8)	.001	.067	n.s.
Male Adolescents	37.0 (14.5)	27.6 (10.7)	28.3 (11.5)	.005	.002	n.s.

*The notation n.s. indicates that no statistically significant difference (p < .05) occurs over the time period specified.

no significant changes in the campers' self-reports of their behaviors over the three data collection periods. The summative scores for each measure were consistent for each period: 51.6, 51.8, and 51.4. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences observed among campers across the three periods for any of the specific self-reported social skills. The results differ somewhat, however, in more detailed comparisons of the two sub-samples of children and adolescents.

With respect to the children aged 10–13 who attended the camp, nearly 80 percent completed the SSRS for each of the three time periods. Their individual results were matched via paired t-tests to determine whether or not there were significant changes on any of the social skills self reports over time. The full results of various SSRS analyses are presented in Table 4.

The children's summative rating scores increased by nearly two points from before camp to several months following their participation, though the results were not statistically significant. The children's self-reported behaviors relating to co-operation, assertion, empathy, and self-control did not change measurably over the three weeks at camp. Over the longer term (from T_1 – T_3), however, there were some notable changes for two of the social skills: the children displayed positive changes in both co-operation and self-control by the end of the testing period, compared to where they were entering the camp. While these changes were not as readily evident immediately following camp, they cannot be simply dismissed as somehow unconnected to the children's camping experiences.

In contrast, the adolescents appeared to show slightly more variation over time in their self-reported behaviors. These campers experienced more immediate benefits from the camp, with statistically significant improvements in the areas of assertion and self-control. The gains were substantial enough to produce overall improvements in their summative ratings from 52.5 at the beginning of camp to 55.6 following camp. The other sub-scales for co-operation and empathy did not change markedly over the two periods. The results further reveal that the immediate gains from the camp dissipated in the intervening months. The summative ratings and each of the sub-scales returned to their pre-camp levels, such that there were no statistically significant differences on any of the measures in comparing the pre-camp results with those obtained during the follow-up period. The challenge of sustaining whatever positive gains occurred from camp in these areas appears to be somewhat greater for the adolescents than for the children.

TABLE 4
SSRS Pre-Camp, Post-Camp, and Follow-Up Reports

SSRS Scales	Pre-Camp (T ₁)		Post-Camp (T ₂)		Follow-Up (T ₃)		Statistical Significance*		
	Mean (s.d.)		Mean (s.d.)		Mean (s.d.)		T ₁ -T ₂	T ₁ -T ₃	T ₂ -T ₃
<i>Children's Results (n = 38)</i>									
Co-operation	13.3 (3.1)		13.3 (2.5)		14.5 (2.7)		n.s.	.029	.002
Assertion	12.9 (2.9)		12.9 (2.4)		12.5 (3.6)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Empathy	14.7 (3.2)		14.4 (3.3)		14.4 (3.3)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Self-Control	10.9 (3.1)		11.5 (2.9)		12.3 (3.4)		n.s.	.013	n.s.
Summative Ratings	51.8 (9.9)		52.1 (9.3)		53.6 (10.4)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Adolescent's Results (n = 24)</i>									
Co-operation	13.9 (2.9)		13.6 (3.0)		13.2 (3.2)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Assertion	12.1 (4.2)		13.3 (3.6)		11.9 (3.2)		.054	n.s.	n.s.
Empathy	14.9 (3.6)		15.7 (3.6)		13.6 (4.8)		n.s.	n.s.	.014
Self-Control	11.6 (2.4)		13.0 (3.1)		11.7 (3.9)		.007	n.s.	n.s.
Summative Ratings	52.5 (8.6)		55.6 (10.1)		50.4 (11.8)		.029	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Report, Full Sample (n = 57)</i>									
Co-operation	8.8 (3.5)		9.5 (3.1)		9.6 (3.1)		n.s.	.034	n.s.
Assertion	11.4 (3.7)		11.4 (3.4)		11.4 (3.2)		n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Responsibility	12.8 (2.8)		13.7 (2.3)		14.1 (2.4)		n.s.	.001	n.s.
Self-Control	10.6 (2.9)		12.1 (3.5)		12.1 (3.0)		.006	.003	n.s.
Summative Ratings	43.2 (8.9)		46.8 (8.7)		47.6 (7.4)		.031	.004	n.s.

*The notation n.s. indicates that no statistically significant difference (p < .05) occurs over the time period specified.

Finally, the researchers explored the possibility that the camp may have had a differential impact, depending upon whether or not one had attended previously. The results indicated that prior attendance appeared to be related to the various factors examined in an interesting way. Those campers who had attended before scored significantly *lower* during the pre-test phase on their social skills rating system (46.2 vs. 53.2) and self-esteem index (93.6 vs. 101.4) scores than those attending for the first time. In effect, the selection process for camp participants meant that children and adolescents who attended in previous years (one in four campers) rated themselves as having fewer social skills and lower self-esteem than those attending for the first time.

By the end of camp, the gap between these two groups had not changed appreciably on the standardized measures. Those who were attending for the first time continued to rate themselves as having more social skills and higher self-esteem than those who had attended in years past. There were no differences on the measure of social isolation or loneliness. The follow-up test, however, revealed that the gap had closed significantly. While those who had attended before continued to rate themselves slightly higher in terms of social skills on average, the difference in mean scores was no longer statistically significant. The self-esteem index scores were now virtually identical. In summation, the children and youth who had attended camp previously displayed a greater long-term improvement than those who were attending for the first time. These campers essentially had a longer climb, but they clearly benefited from having had a chance to repeat the camp experience.

Camper Self-Reported Satisfaction

In addition to the standardized measures, the campers offered their personal assessments of the camp by completing a camp satisfaction questionnaire with five-point scaled items, ranging from a low of "1" ("not at all") to a maximum of "5" (i.e., "very much"). The first five questions focused on issues related to "How I Developed" while at camp. Roughly two-thirds of the campers viewed the program as having had a positive effect in terms of their development, i.e., rated each of the five statements as either a "4" or a "5." The one statement that elicited the strongest agreement was "The program helped me to form relationships with other adolescents," to which three-fourths responded favorably. The two statements that elicited more mixed responses were the following: "The program helped me control my behavior bet-

ter” and “The program helped me express my feelings better.” For both of these statements, a majority suggested either “pretty much” or “very much,” but another 11 percent chose the middling category (“somewhat”) and about one in four suggested that the program had little impact on expressing their feelings or controlling their behavior.

Other questions dealt with the campers’ satisfaction with various aspects of camp. The ratings for these items were even higher than those items pertaining to their development. The campers expressed considerable enthusiasm for the program staff in particular, with two-thirds offering the maximum positive rating. The statement about feeling “safe” at camp elicited high satisfaction ratings as well. For all but one of six items, at least 80 percent of campers offered a positive rating of either “4” or “5.” The only item that received a slightly less favorable rating was satisfaction with the length of the program, which for some was not long enough.

Parental Evaluations of the Camp’s Impact

Another dimension of the current evaluation involved parental assessments of their children’s behaviors and the impact of the camp. Most of the parents agreed to assess their children’s behaviors by completing parent versions of the Social Skills Ratings System, as well as camp evaluation forms. The parental SSRS ratings paint an even more positive picture in terms of observed changes measured along four dimensions: co-operation, assertiveness, responsibility and self-control (see Table 4).

The full sample rated their children more than three points higher on the summative ratings for the SSRS at the end of camp than ratings before their children attended. Moreover, these gains were sustained through the follow-up period: whatever changes that these parents perceived in their children following the camp seemed to have endured. From the parents’ perspectives, campers displayed more co-operation, responsibility, and self-control following camp. These changes were statistically significant for the full sample, but slightly more pronounced among the adolescents. The only area that had not changed from the standpoint of the parents was in the level of assertion that their children exhibited. Parents indicated that their children displayed more self-control both immediately after camp and in the months since that time. With respect to co-operation and self-control, the positive effects were most notable in comparing parents’ pre-camp ratings versus their most recent assessments.

Parent Camp Evaluation Questionnaires

In addition to the standardized measures, most parents completed the camp evaluation questionnaire approximately 3–4 weeks following the end of camp. The parents generally mailed these questionnaires back along with their Social Skills Ratings System forms. In total, the response rate was 75 percent. The evaluation forms contained a total of 18 statements to which the parents responded “not at all,” “just a little,” “somewhat,” “pretty much,” or “very much.” In addition, the questionnaires were broken down into two main sections with nine items each that dealt with “social and emotional development” and their satisfaction with various aspects of “program development.”

In terms of parental perceptions of the extent to which the camp enhanced their children’s social and emotional development, the strongest levels of agreement occurred in four areas: improved self-esteem (63 percent), increased independence and self-reliance (53 percent), improved awareness of self and/or others (50 percent), and better expression of emotions (49 percent). More than 40 percent observed significant improvement in the areas of their children’s ability to take social risks and to work out their problems more effectively. The areas in which more than one in three parents saw little or no improvement included forming relationships with peers, controlling feelings and actions, and taking responsibility for feelings and behavior.

The parents’ written comments further reinforced the overall positive impression that they tended to have regarding the immediate impact of the camp on their children’s social and emotional development. For example, some parents clearly believed that the camp experience enhanced their children’s abilities to take social risks:

Making a friend is probably (my child’s) most fearful issue and by his going to camp he faced his greatest fear since he didn’t know *anyone* and was pleasantly surprised. After (a negative experience with) a couple of his cabin-mates, his first reaction was to come home/escape. But he was convinced to stay and deal with important issues which made (him) feel that his last week was amazing. He was happy he decided to stay.

One parent discussed how the camp helped her child to develop problem-solving skills, explaining that “she is quoting positive things she learned at camp.” Another commented on how her child seemed “more caring toward others (and) was offering to be helpful to others.” One other parent commented that her adolescent improved in several areas after camp:

Although impatient at times, he listens and is more tolerant of others' actions, reactions and comments. (He) seems more mature and considerate of others, (but) with some relapses. (He has a) much more positive attitude and dedication in what he does. He is smiling more often and expresses himself more.

A number of parents displayed a cautious optimism in their assessments of changes observed as a result of the camp. For example, a parent would tentatively suggest some progress in the form of a comment such as "He seems to be a little more aware." For most parents, their impressions were generally favorable, even though their positive comments were often tempered with a "but" statement as a way of trying to convey a fuller picture. As an example, one parent commented that his child "expresses (himself) more, however he still lies." Another parent offered the following detailed assessment:

There was immediate improvement but it diminished as time went on. (She is) still having some trouble with the "worries" and in dealing with anger. She has gained a little confidence but hesitates to initiate interaction. (She) knows herself better, but still has trouble understanding the needs of others. She is very proud of her accomplishments and carries all her treasures around in a bag to show others. (She) still has trouble with frustration, hitting out when angry at ourselves and her siblings. She is crying less, but still gets angry when thwarted. She is better able to talk about her feelings and knows her behavior can be inappropriate.

Finally, in some instances, parents expressed some disappointment about what impact the camp had or perhaps *failed* to have on their children. While most written comments were quite positive about the camp experience, the few instances where parental expectations were not met usually came from parents whose children had attended the camp previously. One parent explained that the camp had *not* helped his child to improve his self-esteem or express his emotions, at least "not this year; he came home pretty upset . . . as a matter of fact, he said it was confusing this year." In commenting on a specific problem encountered with another child, the parent believed that the counselors did not help the child to work out problems effectively, i.e., "if anything, the opposite. There were no effective strategies given beyond *ignore the other kid*."

Other questionnaire items inquired about parental satisfaction with various aspects of the camp program. The highest levels of satisfaction were expressed in support of the overall program, facilities, camp staff, program activities, and the agency's assistance in preparing the

children for camp. A common summary response was: "The staff at the camp were wonderful. (My child) flourished with positive attention from the staff." Another parent described the staff as "an excellent and caring group." Yet another parent wrote that "from what we saw and those we met, (they were) very professional . . . (The) time seemed well spent and well-organized."

In summary, most parents viewed the camp as having had at least a mildly positive impact. In some cases, parents expressed an unabashed enthusiasm for what they believed to be profoundly significant changes. For the most part, though, parents expressed a cautious optimism that there had been some noticeable changes for the better, even as their children continued to struggle with a number of personal issues. Only one in ten parents expressed some concerns about the camp or conveyed a sense that their expectations had not been met.

Parent Interviews

The willingness of parents to volunteer detailed written information, including a range of comments about how the camp may have had an impact on their children, prompted the researchers to follow up with a series of telephone interviews. In addition, the researchers noticed a discrepancy between the results of the standardized instruments and some of the parents' written comments. Specifically, in some instances the parents wrote about positive changes they had observed in their children that were not revealed in the standardized measures. A random sample of 30 telephone interviews was completed eight months after the end of the camp, which thereby aided in assessing potential longer-term effects of camp participation. These interviews further confirmed the positive net impact of the camp from the perspective of parents. A clear majority reported witnessing sustained improvements in at least one or more areas, from increased self-confidence and self-esteem to their children thinking more about their actions. Some parents viewed the camp as having produced only minor or short-term changes, while 10 percent viewed the camp as having been a negative experience for their children. Interestingly, the most negative comments came from a parent whose child actually improved in terms of several of the standardized measures over time, which highlights an important point about evaluating program impacts.

First, where the standardized measures registered significant positive changes, the parents nearly always rated the camp as having had a positive impact as well. For example, consider the reaction of one

parent in describing her impressions of the camp on her son, who displayed positive changes on each of the standardized measures:

I felt it was a very positive experience. We were very impressed with how much more independent he seemed and that continued at least initially. Normally (our son) would have a lot of difficulty speaking in front of a group, but we had everyone over for his birthday and asked him to tell about his camp experience and he had no problems telling everyone what happened . . . He knows what it takes to get along. He just has a lot of trouble getting back there. Given the thought process, he knows what's inappropriate, but does not always make it happen initially. Just tonight (my son) mentioned the camp. It was somewhere he could feel safe and be with kids who were also having learning difficulties . . . The staff was so supportive and so there for each and every one of them . . . (There was) lots of support and encouragement to go beyond what they thought they could handle.

While some parents were thrilled to talk about their children and the impact of the camp, others initially were reluctant to discuss the details of their situation or their children's experiences. Once the parent could be engaged, however, the comments tended to flow more freely and generally emphasized the benefits. For example, one parent responded first to a question about what were the most noticeable changes in the first month after camp with the following: "I didn't notice a huge difference . . . a little calmer and less demanding . . . There were instances, but I can't retrieve them, but I do remember going, '*Oh, that was different*'." The parent later commented that "I tend to start making notes when we get into trouble with her, and for a while in September I wasn't making notes." By the end of the interview, the parent remarked about how "wonderful" the camp was and that it was "fabulous that there was somebody that knew what these kids are like . . . I wish it were available for more kids, and for a longer period."

The interviews demonstrated as well that the standardized instruments did not always tell the full story. As an example, one of the children registered a slight improvement on her social skills questionnaire, a small decline as measured by the self-esteem instrument, and a larger improvement with respect to the loneliness questionnaire. From the perspective of her parents, however, the changes were quite dramatic:

My goodness, I think there were noticeable changes. (The camp) had a large effect. Just the total experience of being away gave her a lot of confidence. Really, the main thing was that they made her feel really

special . . . so different from her friendships at home. Just the experience of being away from home helped with maturing. She overcame certain fears, and she had a bit of bed-wetting before, but didn't do that away from home. It could be coincidence, or could be related to confidence. (She) was able to comfort (another girl). She felt like she was the most popular person. She even said, 'For once, I was popular.' It was great for her to see she could be liked. They fought over who sat beside her; that's a big deal when you're 11.

Even when the standardized measures declined for a camper, the parent typically had something to report. One parent, whose son experienced declines on each of the instruments, nevertheless stated that her son ". . . seemed an awful lot calmer. The reaction to people around him was that he had matured a great deal. (His) teacher noticed the difference as well in terms of him being an 'entirely different kid.' The parent then further suggested that "he had a wonderful experience. In fact, he's saving his money from his part-time job to try to help pay for camp this year. It was that positive an experience for him."

Some parents commented on the modest or even negligible impact of the camp, only to suggest at some point an interesting effect that the camp may have had. For instance, one parent suggested that "nothing really changed, but I did notice that he decided he wasn't going to beat up his brother anymore." Whatever seed may have been planted at the camp, a number of parents offered evidence to suggest that certain changes had begun to take root in their children.

In the end, only three parents interviewed (10 percent) offered a negative evaluation of the camp experience. Yet these parents still usually ended up providing a testimonial about how the camp made an impact. One parent opened up the interview by commenting how her son "hated (camp). There were several reasons why. He has a problem with wetting his pants, and he was on medication, and he is afraid of storms. When they went on outings, he was made fun of and totally humiliated. They taunted and teased him . . . It was a total disaster." The parent noted further that her son seemed to be upset with her for the decision to attend the camp and "blamed" her for making a bad decision. She then followed up with an anecdote about how ". . . one of the counselors did mention that when he was 'caught off guard' on the second outing, he showed some leadership qualities, whether from enjoying the outdoor activities, or the canoeing, and he showed someone how to do something, but he would never tell me that."

Nearly every parent interviewed would recommend that other chil-

dren attend the camp, with most offering unqualified support for the program. Most praised the program for the quality of the counselors, the counselor-to-camper ratio, the positive and supportive environment of the camp, and the manner in which the campers were challenged constructively to confront some of their fears and learn how to interact more appropriately with others. Many noted that their children would often refer back to lessons learned at camp in monitoring their behavior, especially in the immediate aftermath of the camp. Several parents appreciated the camp as well because their children were “made to feel special” rather than receiving negative attention.

The main concerns that parents expressed were related to follow-up opportunities to reinforce what had been learned at camp, or to “re-charge the batteries” once the children were back in the “real world.” Some of those who were not from the city but from other areas around the province expressed concerns that their only contact with the agency was through the camp. Many such parents would have preferred to continue the relationship to help build upon whatever positive changes occurred at camp. Still others were concerned that three weeks was not long enough, while one or two were concerned that the period was too long for their children.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

In combination, the results from the multi-method evaluation suggest that both groups of campers generally had positive experiences at camp and expressed high levels of satisfaction. The CLQ measure demonstrated the extent to which the campers displayed a fair degree of bonding and felt less isolated and more adequate in the camp context. Other measures suggested that the short-term impacts in terms of social skills and various dimensions of self-esteem were quite modest. The children themselves nearly always evaluated the camp highly, often referring back to their camp experiences in conversations with their parents. Many wanted to have an opportunity to return to the camp.

The parents provide another perspective on their children’s behaviors. Their summative SSRS ratings were more than three points higher at the end of the camp program than their ratings before their children attended. These gains were sustained through the follow-up period. From the parents’ perspectives, campers were more co-operative and responsible, and exhibited greater self-control compared to

their pre-camp ratings. Moreover, parents expressed extremely high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of the program. The telephone interviews provided further testimony of the extent to which more enduring changes appeared to have taken root.

The cumulative evidence suggests, therefore, that a three-week therapeutic camp can have a limited but positive net effect on children and adolescents. But what do these results mean in the context of professional social work practice? The current evaluation study determined that campers' participation in the therapeutic summer camp not only provides valuable experiences and memories for the children, but also offers important knowledge that can inform future treatment planning, according to those who have worked with the program.

In particular, the clinicians complete a report on every participant after camp that reviews the camper's goals, progress, and strengths, as well as identifies any areas for further work. Each agency case manager receives a copy of the report, along with the camper and his/her family. Shortly after camp, each child and family meets with their case manager to discuss the camp experience and the information contained in the report. The intensely social experience at camp affords staff an opportunity to know the child's strengths, difficulties, and needs, which the case managers use to foster deeper understanding of the child or adolescent and to guide treatment.

As an example, one boy who avoided his peers was able to relate significantly better at camp when involved in certain activities, such as "lego." When he returned home, discussions with this boy and his family led to the case manager and parents working with the school to create opportunities that would allow him to continue to relate with peers effectively. The outcome was the development of a "lego club," through which he had regular peer contact and which reinforced his slowly developing comfort and social confidence. Since the campers often lack friends in their school settings, case managers often encourage campers to stay in touch and some previous campers have remained friends into adulthood. With parental consent, outside case managers who refer children to the camp also receive ongoing feedback and the final report on the child's camp experience, which can similarly be used in treatment planning.

In addition to the case managers' individual meetings with campers and their families in which specific issues for campers are identified, the camp director and agency clinical director invite the parents of all campers in each session to attend a meeting shortly after camp. The purpose is to help the parents build on the positive changes made by

the children and on the increased understanding gained of the children's needs. This meeting draws on the mutual support among the parents and focuses on generic themes that emerge. Certain perspectives are encouraged, such as recognizing the children's hard work and achievements and honouring their steps towards independence. Generally, an important feature for campers is the atmosphere in which their achievements are celebrated, whether in the form of climbing a wall, supporting another child who climbs a wall, going on an out-trip, or helping a peer. Another common area of growth for most of the children consists of increased independence and initiative at each child's own level. For example, the fact that some children manage to be okay while away from their family for three weeks represents a significant move toward independence for them.

Parents are encouraged to respond to their children in ways that complement the children's gains at camp. To illustrate, one boy who suffered with extreme anxiety typically avoided situations at home and school that triggered his fears. As one might expect, comparable situations arose at camp. For instance, he was so afraid of deep water and of sitting in a canoe that he could not join his cabin on their five-day out-trip. During the first few days that his group was on the trip, staff worked intensely with this boy in a canoe, progressing slowly from shallow to deeper water. When he finally felt prepared to join his group on their last day, his fellow cabin-mates were so happy to see him that they cheered and staff members were moved to tears—all of which was communicated to his parents. After camp, the case manager together with the boy and his family identified analogous situations at home and in the community, as well as viable strategies to help him overcome his fears. Seeing their son as capable of surmounting the obstacles despite the pain involved entailed a shift on the parents' part.

In conclusion, the current evaluation has provided evidence that therapeutic summer camp programs can be effective with special needs populations, i.e., those children and youth who are not able to manage in more traditional camp settings. There appear to be precious few such "sanctuaries" to which parents and children alike can turn for the types of support, learning and growth opportunities provided by therapeutic camp programs. The multiple measures confirmed that the campers and their parents experienced a variety of benefits. Further research will be necessary, however, to document more precisely the nature of these benefits and to open up the proverbial "black box" to determine which facets of intervention tend to pro-

duce the more sustained, positive effects and under what circumstances.

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