George Will, the well-known newspaper columnist, wrote about picking up his 11-year-old son at the end of his first camping experience. He said:

"It is a summer well spent. But, it father feels, as fathers will, a pang that is an alloy of pride and regret. It comes with intimations that the world is calling his children, and they are acquiring competencies and independence and are outward bound."

His son was not the same child he had taken to camp. The father saw and sensed dramatic changes. For years, parents and camp directors have been recounting similar vignettes.

With the support of PIC (Private Independent Camps) and a group of PIC camps, a university-based research team evaluated the character and prosocial effects of camping as seen by campers, counselors, and parents. Like George Will, and all parents who ever sent their children to camp, the members of the evaluation team had witnessed changes in the behavior of their own children, and as counselors, had observed them in other children. Yet, like the George Will vignette, the primary documentation in the camping research literature of all these efforts has been largely anecdotal. What was needed, therefore, was an objective, comprehensive, systematic, quantitative, and qualitative evaluation on a national scale, and I resolved to do it.

The Setting. The assessment included six camps, Maine to California, 837 campers, ages 8-13, 98 percent Caucasian, 546 parents, and 274 counselors. One camp was a day camp, the others residential. Three were coed and three were single sex (two boys, 1 girls). The length of camp attendance ranged from two to eight weeks. Many children were first year campers; some were second and third year campers. A few were campers whose parents had attended these camps in their youth. All of these variables—age, sex, ethnicity, camp attendance, and parents' camp experience—were compared to see if they made any difference in the overall effect of camping. The evaluation team visited the camps during the summer of 1985 to assess their tone and atmosphere, and their program and personnel, in order to document what camps are like and what they do that results in proferred character effects on boys and girls. On our visits, we looked, we asked, we talked, we listened, and we recorded with pencils, photography, audio, and videotapes. We concluded that camps are what their brochures say they are: breathtaking physical environments filled with active, fun-loving days of new experiences and new challenges in a youth-dominated culture where caring, optimism, and espirit-de-corps predominate. This, then, was the "intervention" or "treatment" whose effects we sought to appraise.

Hunches. What did we hope to discover? Our major hypothesis was that the camp experience would result in differences in children's group-living/interpersonal skills, prosocial outlook, outdoor living skills, personal enjoyment, and environmental appreciation and understanding. We also expected that:

- younger children would show greater effects than older ones;
- repeat campers would show greater effects than first-year campers;

The author, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, headed the study which is reported here.
—those who attended for five to eight weeks would show greater effects than those who attended for two to four weeks;
—those who attended residential camps would show greater effects than those who attended day camps; and
—there would be differences based on sex and ethnicity of campers.

What did we discover and how did we do it?

Responsibility and Respecting the Rights of Others. On the first and last days of camp, children completed the Like-Me Profile, a 53-item, self-appraisal inventory we had developed and field-tested over the past three years. It was designed to find out campers’ views of their own level of skill in group-living/interpersonal relationships. The scale had an internal consistency of .91, meaning the results were reliable 91 percent of the time, considered excellent for a “paper and pencil” social relations instrument. Our finding was that campers made a statistically significant gain overall, and increases in the following characteristics:

—Responsibility—skill in being accountable for one’s own behavior
—Decision-Making—skill in thinking for one’s self
—Self-Concept—skill in getting along with others
—Interpersonal Relations—skill in making friends and being accepted
—Citizenship—skill in respecting the rights of others
—Environmental Concerns—skill in appreciating one’s natural surroundings

The overall gain and increases in these six skills were of a magnitude of p = .05, meaning that, if we repeated the study, we would get the same results 95 percent of the time. Not quite as good as the 99-44/100 percent claimed for Ivory Soap, but close!

Thus, with confidence, we now can say that the children were effected by the camp experience in a positive, measurable direction, proof positive that camp makes a difference in the character formation and prosocial tendencies of boys and girls.

Camper interviews

Eight hundred and twenty-five campers were interviewed at the end of the camp session. They were asked what they liked best and least about camp, would they come back next summer, and did they have suggestions for improving the camp. Three-fourths said they wanted to come back next year because “it was fun,” and most said that what they liked best about camp were the activities. This was closely followed by “making new friends or seeing old ones.” A typical comment was

“I learned that I can be myself. I broadened my horizons by making new friends. I learned how to waterski, how not to be shy, to appreciate everyone for what they are, and overall, I had a lot of fun.”

Half the campers said there was nothing that needed to be changed or improved. They said just “liked it the way it was.” At five of the camps, a few campers complained about “fighting, stealing, teasing, and swearing” that sometimes occurred.

(continued on next page)
**Case studies**

In addition to our direct measures, 11 case studies of campers depicted situations where staff were effective in dealing with specific concerns of campers. Over half of the studies focused on campers who had special emotional problems, rooted in family upheavals and crises. The cases documented how sympathetic counselors and understanding directors helped campers face their difficulties and overcome them. For example, a divorced father, whose daughter had been living with him, was killed in an automobile accident while she was at camp. With the love and understanding of a caring counselor and closely-knit cabin group, this sudden tragedy became bearable. One author of two case studies, a young woman who had been the site coordinator of the national study at her camp, wrote:

"Joni and Claudia were very cooperative and made doing this case study very enjoyable. I think they benefited from talking to me, by feeling 'special,' and by gaining a friend (me!). And I know I benefited and that I learned a lot about what kids are really like. I'm glad I got the opportunity to study these two girls more closely and to realize just how special they are. It really made my summer!"

**Critical incident reports**

One hundred and fifty-six counselors described one or two memorable moments they had experienced during the summer. Seventy-nine percent of the incidents involved campers, 18 percent other counselors, and three percent the camp administration. Through the counselor's eyes, the vitality and lifestyle of camp was revealed. The memorable moments cited by counselors were heartwarming and revealing. They reflected the counselor's job as being a time of challenge, caring, companionship, friendship, maturing, homesickness, reflection, and enjoyment. The eloquence of the counselor's stories allows the reader to enter into the life of the camp, to share their emotional moments, and to understand why the campers and their counselors regard this as being a most satisfying and positive personal experience—an experience important enough to pass down through the generations. The incidents provide substantive evidence that, like great teaching, camp affects eternity; for counselors as well as campers.

**Parents speak out**

By questionnaires and interviews a month after camp had closed, parents were asked to evaluate their child's experience of having attended camp. As shown in *Figure 1*, the 546 parents said they had sent their child to camp "to have a good time" (94 percent). A second reason was for him or her to learn to "understand and appreciate the out-of-doors" (70 percent). Putting to rest one of camp's alleged, if more cynical, attractions, barely three percent of the parents surveyed indicated that a summer at camp helped to provide their own vacation!

Of the nine reasons chosen by half or more of the parents for why they had sent their child to camp, four reasons involved social adjustment skills ("to make friends," "learn group-living skills," "become more responsible," and "get along with others"). Sounds strangely like the results of the Like-Me Profile of what campers actually achieved! Some typical parent comments were:

"Our son has learned tolerance of others, goal setting, self-responsibility, and has had the opportunity to participate on a regular basis in more activities than would be possible at home."

"Excellent; maturity and unselfishness are exhibited and expressed by my two children. I think camp had a lot to do with their positive development."

"My child needed the encouragement and support and/or forceful guidance in doing the unknown."
"Our daughter returns from camp happy, content, and much more self-assured. She is pleased with herself."

Nine of ten parents said their purpose in sending their child to camp had been achieved. As shown in Figure 2, 75 percent said they liked best the camp's "atmosphere and spirit," followed by "the variety of activities," and "the counselors." Least liked (Figure 3) were "food," "camper's letters home," and "communication with parents." It is significant that these latter three items were at the bottom of parent's most liked features of camp (Figure 2). Eighty percent of parents stated they would send their child to camp again and 96 percent would recommend the camp to other parents. A constantly recurring theme in parents' comments was that camps are "caring places" and "ideal environments" for growing children.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from our findings that camp was a fun, active, positive living/learning experience which brought about observable changes in group-living skills, and that these objectively measured changes in behavior were supported, corroborated, and supplemented by additional evidence gained from case studies, interviews, questionnaires, critical incident reports, and the evaluation team's own observations. Moreover, the qualitative data confirmed that the changes were not transient, but seen as lifelong in their impact. Our major hypothesis was confirmed, i.e., the social press exerted by the camp's unique living/learning environment (called the "uniforming process" by sociologists), brought about pre- to post-camp differences in children's group-living skills, prosocial tendencies, environmental outlook, and personal enjoyment. Our assumption about differences in the effect of age, sex, ethnicity, camp attendance, and parents' camp experience did not hold up. Apparently, the camp's "uniforming process" was so strong that the variable, which might ordinarily be expected to be taken into account, could not deter the kind of positive growth that camps appear to nurture.

To the extent that all camps are like the six camps studied, it can be said that similar results have been happening to all campers.

Yes, camping makes a difference.

Decidedly so.

Armand B. Ball, executive vice-president of ACA stated:

"While researchers and camp directors have always acknowledged the traditional values and supposed benefits of the camp experience, the Stone study is the first attempt to document camping's impact in a substantive manner. The researchers, as well as the camps involved in this project and in its support, deserve our praises and gratitude. The study's release on the eve of camping's 125th anniversary could not be more timely."

---

**Footnotes**

2. The camp and their directors were: Alan and Michelle Gridway, Camp Winona, Bridgton, ME; Carol and George Sudbrich, Wyonegonic Camp, Denmark, ME; Tim Hoile, Knob-L-Ching Camp, International Falls, MN; Tom and Robin Manion, Camp Manion, Fergusford, TX; Marian and Alex Caldwell, Kenadyn Camp, Sequel, CA; Anne and Hobie Wood, Troughing It, Orinda, CA. The other members of the evaluation team were: Dorothy Stone, Hobie Wood, and Gay Conn. The research assistants provided by the University of California were: Deborah Curtis, Debbie Mungo, Jeff Roberts, and Cindy Araki.
3. That literature review, originally done by Hobie Woods and reported at the 1985 ACA convention in Atlanta, is included in the Appendix of our study.
4. "Low-Camp Make a Difference: A report of the national lottery at Campfire Study. James C. Stone, Berkeley, CA: Graduate school of Education, 4607 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, 1986. (Copies are available for $10 and video rent is $2. Prices include postage and mailing.)
5. "I can think of no place ours if the family were harmonizing with group customs and ideals can affect character so profoundly as in the intimate contacts of camp, which is an isolated, harmonious society lived in day and night....To spend such a summer is sociological" one of the most influential experiences that can come into the life of any girl or boy." Bernard S. Mason, Camping and Education. New York: McGraw, 1930.