Recreation Camp Attendance: A Way to Develop Social Skills?

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Abstract

Social competence is a necessary type of socializing which refers to the ability to get along with other people and knowing what kinds of behaviors are considered acceptable in various places and situations to avoiding embarrassing oneself or make others feel uncomfortable. As a result of social and cultural changes in the process of how children gain and develop social competence, more research is needed to determine where and how social competence is learned. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to see if social competence was different for college students who attended recreation camp consistently as children as compared to college students who never attended recreation camp when they were children. Participants were 48 college students split between those who did or did not attend a summer recreation camp during their youth. Each participant completed the Self-Efficacy Scale. There was no statistical difference between participants on Total Self-Efficacy and General Self-Efficacy, but participants who attended a recreation camp scored significantly higher on the Social Self-Efficacy subscale. Findings suggest that utilizing a well-organized recreation camp program can potentially produce long-term social and personal benefits to individuals, but further research is necessary with larger, and more diverse samples.
Literature Review

Developing the skills necessary for socializing with “strangers” is essential for parks and recreation professionals, specifically those working in recreation camp settings. Parks and Recreation directors have suggested that recreation camps have a deeper meaning. For example, one director stated,

I have worked in parks and recreation since 2002 and have seen several instances especially in a recreation camp setting where a child enhanced their self-confidence in a short time; the “nerd” trying a new sport like fencing and beat the “jock”; the “jock” learning how to play Chess or Mancala proving that they are more than just a good athlete; the “misfit” showing off their art skills and praised by their peers; and the “overweight” child who refused to take off their shirt at the pool, but went onto lose 40 lbs. in one summer and then has the confidence by the end of the summer to take off their shirt at the pool. I have had a few past participants or their parents reach out to me and tell me what a difference the recreation camp environment made for them and their child (A. Dobson, personal communication, July 7, 2016).

Social Competence

Research has suggested that social competence is an essential component to developing social skills for children in recreation camp settings (Belois & Mitchell, 2009). Social competence is a necessary type of socializing which refers to the ability to get along with other people and knowing what kinds of behaviors are considered acceptable in various places and situations to avoiding embarrassing oneself or make others feel uncomfortable.

Social competence includes characteristics such as self-efficacy, self-confidence, courtesy, and compassion. People can possess either high and low social competence. When
people possess high self-efficacy they often exhibit higher social competence and tend to develop positive relationships and achieve greater success in life when compared to individuals who lack appropriate social skills and social competencies (Belois & Mitchell, 2009; Gilmour & McDermott, 2008).

Social competence is a trait in children not frequently evaluated in today’s society (Gilmour & McDermott, 2008), and studies have demonstrated social competence and self-efficacy as a predictor for children to grow into adults better prepared to positively contribute to society. Therefore, social competence is a skill that can not only benefit the individual, but can benefit communities and society at large (Belois & Mitchell, 2009; Gilmour & McDermott, 2008). Self-efficacy as an indicator of social competence can be a predictor of disruptive behavior in classrooms, and a predictor of acceptance by peers, which is correlated with positive attitudes toward school and social adjustment through life (Colyn, DeGraaf, & Certan, 2008; Jalongo, 2006). These findings demonstrate the importance of understanding and developing self-competence throughout childhood.

Benefits of Recreation Camps

Summer recreation camps allow children to step out of their ordinary everyday lives and develop their own identity. Presence in nature allows children to feel a sense of peace, which assists with the therapeutic aspect of recreation, allowing children to more freely accept change (Groves, 1981). Additional skills and attributes reported to have developed from attending recreation camp include: increased teamwork skills, leadership skill development, self-confidence boosts, taking responsibility for oneself, and growth of specialized skills such as horseback riding, tennis, dance, and photography (Dworken, 2001). Past recreation campers have also reported that their experience provided them with lifelong skills, such as learning how to
have fun in nature without the use of technology, building confidence in trying new skills, and managing free time (Dworken, 2001). Additional aspects of social competency that can be developed in a recreation camp setting include self-concept/self-confidence, making good first impressions, values and morals, the ability to reciprocate appropriately, graciousness, respect, manners, character, courtesy, responding appropriately to authority figures, living and working well with others, compassion, and empathy (Gilmour, 2008).

It is a common belief that parents are the reason, and main resource, for positive youth development. However, even parents realize that it takes a village to assist in the process of nurturing and guiding children into adulthood in both educational and non-educational settings (Henderson et al., 2007). In the past, summer recreation camps have been known to contribute to a child’s education and recreational activity as well as working as a therapeutic environment (Groves, 1981). As society changes, recreation camps have to adjust their objectives and goals to meet the needs and goals of society (Groves, 1981). Parents have reported their children developing self-confidence and higher self-efficacy while away at recreation camp, and the children return home noticing changes in numerous aspects of their lives, including goal setting, being able to handle new and uncomfortable situations, being brave and willing to try new things, and how to rely and trust others within the community (Dworken, 2001). Colyn et al. (2008) proposed that skills needed in society are also needed in a summer recreation camp setting; therefore, recreation camps should look for ways to teach children the skills needed to be actively engaged in their communities and society, not only for themselves, but for the betterment of their neighborhoods, communities, and society as a whole.
Purpose of the Study

As a result of social and cultural changes in the process of how children gain and develop social competence, more research is needed to determine where and how social competence is learned. As well, further studies examining how professionals in the field of leisure and recreation can target the development of social competence through youth programs are needed. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to see if social competence was different for college students who attended recreation camp consistently as children as compared to college students who never attended recreation camp when they were children.

Method

This study examined the self-efficacy of 48 college students, aged 18 to 22, who did and did not attend a summer recreation camp during their childhood. Participants completed a nine-item demographic survey in addition to the Self-Efficacy Scale, which consisted of 23 items, with 7 items focused on Social Self-Efficacy and 16 items focused on General Self-Efficacy. The construct validity for the Self-Efficacy Scale was reported by Sherer et al. (1982) to be correlated with measures of several other personality characteristics to assess construct validity. These measures included the Internal-External Control Scale (Rotter, 1966); the Personal Control Subscale of the I-E Scale (Gurin et al., 1969); the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964); the Ego Strength Scale (Barron, 1953); the Interpersonal Competency Scale (Holland & Baird, 1968); and a Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The correlations between the Self-Efficacy Scale and the other measures were obtained in prior research; all were moderate in magnitude in the appropriate direction (Sherer et al., 1982).
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This scale consists of 23 items assessing expectations in terms of willingness to initiate behaviors, willingness to expand effort in completing behaviors and persistence despite difficulties (Rice et al., 1997). Participants are asked to rate each of the 23 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), indicating the extent to which the statements describe themselves. Fourteen of the items in the Self-Efficacy Scale are reversed scored; 16 of the items are directed towards general self-efficacy and 7 items are directed towards social self-efficacy. Examples of statements in the Self-Efficacy Scale include, “I feel insecure about my ability to do things,” and “I have acquired my friends through my personal ability to make friends.”

Results

Data in this study were analyzed using a One-Way Analysis of Variance, in order to analyze the scores and data collected by the instruments listed above. This will compare the means of the competence scores within and between the categories of respondents: students who attended summer camp, and students who did not attend summer camp.

Forty-eight college students (11 males, 37 females) completed the survey, 35 of which reported attending summer recreation camp between the ages of 7 and 18. A variety of recreation camp types were reported including day recreation camps, residential recreation camps, church recreation camps, sports recreation camps, art recreation camps, and scout recreation camps. The average scores of all participants for the Self-Efficacy Scales revealed the following: Total Self-Efficacy ($M = 80.71$), General Self-Efficacy ($M = 45.58$), and Social Self-Efficacy ($M = 20.69$). One-way ANOVA statistical analysis revealed that college students who attended summer recreation camps as children scored higher on the Social Self-Efficacy subscale scores.
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than those who did not attend recreation camps ($p < .05$). No statistical differences were found between the groups for Total and General Self-Efficacy.

**Discussion**

Summer recreation camp settings have potential for providing opportunities for recreation campers to positively develop emotionally, mentally, and socially (Gilmour, 2008). Although a small study sample, we found that summer recreation camp attendance had a positive impact on social competence as measured by Social Self-Efficacy scores. Social competence is viewed as a universal concern of parents and families, and a predictor of acceptance by peers, which is in turn correlated with positive attitudes toward school and social adjustment through life (Jalongo, 2006). While further research is needed, our findings suggest that recreation camp experiences may impact the development of social competence and self-efficacy of attendees.

Given the benefits of a socially competent society, parks and recreation professionals should consider programming, including recreation camps, that specifically target the development of self-efficacy and social competency skills for staff, students, interns and participants. Social competence is sometimes taken for granted in parks and recreation camp settings. Therefore, self-efficacy and social competence could be a focus instead of assumed outcomes. For example, according to Aaron Dobson, Parks and Recreation Director of Maryville, Missouri, the impact a recreation camp may have on kids as they grow and go to college can be profound:

Parks and Recreation programs give a participant the opportunity to work with others (peers, coaches, counselors, officials, and others), experience new things (field trips, games, activities, crafts, and sports), learn the value of sportsmanship through winning and losing (athletics, recreation camp, programs, etc.), and how to adapt to new
surrounding and situations (athletics, recreation camps, aquatics, programs, etc.). All of these can help foster an increase of self-confidence in a participant and all our experiences we have as a child help mold us into the adult we will become. So, it would lead me to believe that the lessons learned through a program could stay with someone consciously or subconsciously into our adult years.” (A. Dobson, personal communication, July 7, 2016)

It is important to recognize that there are a variety of factors that affect an individual’s self-efficacy and social competence. Our study examined only the variable of recreation camp attendance and measured the self-efficacy of college students. The small sample size may have also impacted the results of the current study and therefore limits its generalizability. Therefore, future studies should consider different designs. Specifically, utilizing a pre-test/post-test design at the time of recreation camp attendance to examine immediate changes in the self-efficacy of recreation campers may be of value. Similarly, this proposed design eliminates the long wait period between recreation camp attendance and survey administration, better controlling for the possibility that other life experiences will not have impacted social competence, either negatively or positively.

In closing, we recognize that even though children consistently attending recreation camps, they may not be more socially competent or have higher self-efficacy while attending college. However, the results of this study suggest that utilizing a well-organized recreation camp program can potentially produce long-term social and personal benefits to individuals who are seeking undergraduate education.
References


