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Beyond Archery And Arts And Crafts: New Research From UNH Finds Summer Camps Can Foster Social Development In Youth

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Summer camp can do "s'more" than teach kids to canoe, hike, and sing fun songs: New research indicates that summer camp can significantly enhance the social development of youth.

"Camp can make a critical difference in kids' lives," says Michael Gass, professor of outdoor education at University of New Hampshire and lead researcher on the project, conducted in cooperation with the American Youth Foundation at [AYF's Camp Merrowvista](#) in Tuftonboro, N.H.

Gass and researchers from UNH surveyed youth between the ages of 8 and 13 at the beginning and the end of the summer of 2004, comparing the inter- and intrapersonal skills of campers at Camp Merrowvista with youth who were awaiting attendance in a fall program at Merrowvista. The summer campers showed significantly greater improvement in a variety of social skills, including time management, initiating action in new situation, self-confidence, task leadership, and interpersonal skills.

Gass notes that such social skill development can lead to academic benefits and can build a resiliency against negative behaviors that may surface later in kids' lives. The U.S. Department of Education and other experts agree that middle childhood, the age of the youth surveyed, is a crucial stage at which children need to develop social skills of self-regulation, empathy, and caring to prepare for beneficial peer relationships and friendships.

Gass and the UNH researchers will return to Merrowvista this coming summer to further probe what about camp seems to provide these social development benefits, but he suspects that social development is fostered by intentional programming, which infuses traditional camp activities with guided discussion and reflection. "You can't just assume by sending your kid to camp that you're going to get these benefits," he says. "Kids left on their own don't just mature into social development. You've got to intentionally program experiences."

At American Youth Foundation camps, including Camp Merrowvista, "every time they do something at camp, there's an intentionality toward helping develop stronger kids, socially and emotionally," says Gass. While most camps hum with "lights-out" chatter, for instance, each Merrowvista camper "village" uses insight sessions throughout the day led by trained staff. Such sessions encourage reflection about the day's group dynamics or consensus building among fellow "villagers."

UNH and AYF will present this research to camping industry peers at the [American Camp Association](#) national conference in February, and AYF will disseminate its programming philosophy in hopes that it becomes widely adopted among summer camps. "AYF will be publishing and trying to influence the field with this research," says Gass. In addition to Camp Merrowvista, AYF, based in St. Louis, operates Camp Miniwanca in Michigan.

Gass, who has worked with AYF for nearly 15 years and is a leading researcher in adventure programming, offers

suggestions to finding a socially powerful summer camp. Accreditation by the American Camp Association (approximately 1,000 summer camps are ACA accredited) or the Association for Experiential Education is a good starting point, but Gass encourages parents to explore the camp's philosophy.

"Is the purpose of the camp strictly recreational, or is it focused on youth development?" he says. "Will the camp teach my kids to fish, or might it also help them develop socially?"

Editors: Photos can be downloaded here.

Merrowvista campers and counselors enjoy the Four Fold Tournament, a 10-day tournament where teams work together on wacky events like creating chariots of cardboard. Credit: Rebekah Seaman.

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/hhs/merrowvista1.jpg>

Merrowvista campers anxiously await a swimming relay race at Merrowvista's waterfront on a spring-fed lake. Credit: Rebekah Seaman. <http://www.unh.edu/news/img/hhs/merrowvista2.jpg>