

Potential Beneficial Effects of Summer Programs for Children from Low Income Families

Summer can add to the many disparities experienced by children from low-income families. Often mentioned are summer learning loss, insufficient childcare, and periods of limited access to positive physical, social, and enrichment activities (Stewart et al., 2018). This brief resource highlights the potential benefits of summer programs and offers a sample of summer programs available to those with low incomes.

Benefits of Summer Programs for Children from Low-SES Families

Research on summer programs has reported a variety of benefits. Here are some examples.

Self Esteem

Early in a summer camp session, participants' self-perceptions were measured using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale. This scale measured: popularity, physical appearance and attributes, intellectual and school status, happiness and satisfaction, behavior, and anxiety. At the end of 12 days, mean scores for each of the six aspects being observed increased significantly. The researchers conclude that the findings support the value of providing these children "an opportunity to be drawn into an intimate relationship with nature that is not part of their daily life in the city" (Readdick & Schaller, 2005).

Sense of Community

Studies have reported that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel more isolated and less of a sense of belonging to their community than their higher socioeconomic counterparts (Stewart et al., 2009). A study at a summer camp in New Jersey over a four-week period observed 32 eleven-year-old campers in terms of cooperation, communication, sharing, teaching, trust, conflict, leadership, inclusion, and exclusion during all their activities (Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005). Additionally, focus groups were established to take a deeper look at what the campers felt they were learning (participants were asked their thoughts about the camp's overall community, communication, learning experiences, and the importance of the learning experiences).

The researchers report that the findings from both components of this study showed leisurely activities were strongly related to enhanced connections among campers. In particular, friendships were fostered during camp organized activities (e.g., games, sports) as well as during private activities (e.g., chatting in rooms). Furthermore, the campers suggested that a sense of community was fostered through collective goals put into place by group activities. The researchers also note that analyses from the focus groups and other conversations with the campers revealed common concerns for the well-being of fellow campers and the overall camp community.

*The material in this document reflects work done by Kira McLean as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

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Peer Relationships

A summer program was assessed to determine if activities that focused on prosocial behaviors increased positive social interactions. Participating children were rated by researchers prior to attendance using the *Teacher-Child Rating Scale* to gather data related to shy/anxious behavior and peer sociability. Each child's parent/guardian also completed a similar assessment (Buskirk-Cohen, 2015).

Children attended the program four days a week for two weeks. Social skill goals were established at the beginning of each day. The day was devoted to participating in movement therapy, yoga, art, music, science projects and cooking with their peers. These activities were meant to facilitate self-expression, problem solving, and compromise within the groups of children. At the end of the day, children reviewed their goals with staff members.

At the end of the two weeks the children were reassessed. While the camp staff ratings indicated improvements in shy/anxious behaviors and peer sociability, parent/guardian ratings showed no significant differences.

Resiliency

In 2002 the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth conducted a summer day camp (Allen et al., 2006). Prior to participating in the program, children's resiliency levels were measured using the *Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile* for participants and a comparison group attending a summer program that had no intended focus on enhancing resiliency.

The task force's program operated during the week from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for eight weeks. Activities included journaling, drama, games/problem solving, and art. At the beginning of each activity the children participated in a guided discussion that centered on the following resiliency skills: creativity, humor, independence, initiative, insight, relationships, values orientation. At the end of the eight weeks, children in the resiliency program scored significantly higher than the comparison group. Additionally, positive findings were reported for the resiliency program children with respect to relationships, independence, insight, humor, and values orientation.

Accessing Summer Programs

Not surprisingly, most research has shown a range of potential benefits summer programs can have for children from low-income backgrounds. At the same time, it is evident that financial and other barriers need to be addressed to enable their attendance at the type of summer programs researchers have studied.

On the positive side, there are summer programs directly targeted towards families from low-income backgrounds (see Exhibit). To enhance accessibility, advocates indicate there is a need for outreach (e.g., directed at urban schools, after school programs, community recreational centers) and easy enrollment procedures, including provision for foreign languages.

A Sample of Summer Programs Serving Low-Income Children

Descriptions are from the program's website.
The listed website also provides access for applicants.

UCLA UniCamp

"UniCamp is an independently funded 501(c)3 that annually links 500 UCLA student volunteers with over 1,200 urban LA youth. UCLA UniCamp is the official philanthropy of the Students of UCLA. UniCamp is an independently funded non-profit that connects UCLA with the community. Each year, UCLA UniCamp inspires over 1,200 children from urban communities to envision brighter futures by sending them, along with 450 student volunteers, to its residential outdoor summer camp. Because of UniCamp, both volunteers and campers have a chance to: Lead, Play, Learn." (<https://www.unicamp.org/>)

Salvation Army's Annual Summer Program

"Many children from low-income families rarely experience life outside their immediate neighborhood. That's why The Salvation Army's annual summer programs for kids are so important. Every year, thousands of kids of all ages get a fresh perspective on life as they meet new friends, discover new activities, and get a taste of the great outdoors. As campers learn to swim, play sports, create music, make art, and scout, their trained counselors help them navigate the complicated emotions and struggles often associated with their lives back home." (<https://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/equip-families/>)

Children's Lifesaving Foundation Camp for All

"Since 1993, more than 75,000 children have attended Camp for All Summer Camp Enrichment Program, which provides crucial outdoor educational and social experiences to transitioning homeless and at-risk youth from urban and shelter environments. Camp for All is designed to provide positive, educational, enriching, life-affirming outdoor experiences, which highlight care for our natural environment and eco-systems, and learning about the magic of nature. Camp for All also helps to develop cognitive, social, and emotional learning skills that help youth become more vibrant and productive citizens. Our partner organizations-shelters, missions, Boys and Girls Clubs, foster care and schools-have access to this free program, and we invite up to 1,000 children to Camp for All every summer to our Wilderness Day Camps and Surf Camps. Camp for All also offers an incredible Summer Teen Counselor Program for high school students looking to volunteer and give back their time in a fun, effective and highly meaningful way." (<https://www.childrenlifesaving.org/campaign-1-1>)

SCOPE: Summer Camp Opportunities Promote Education

"SCOPE was established for one simple reason, to provide summer camp opportunities to ALL children, regardless of socio-economic background. Children who receive SCOPE camperships gain access to attend overnight summer camp throughout the United States, free of cost to their family. Camp teaches life skills that encourage children to reach their potential long after summer camp has ended. 100% of the children receiving SCOPE camperships commit to staying in school." (<https://scopeusa.org/>)

Resources Used in the Preparation of this Work

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For more on this topic, see the Center's Quick Find on

>Expanded Learning Opportunities -- After-School & Summer Programs

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/afterschool.htm>