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Serving At-Risk Youth at Camp

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Understanding this population and meeting their needs

Camps are taking up the challenge from America's Promise, the American Camping Association, and society itself to serve more at-risk children through a camp experience. Whether you already serve at-risk youth, in part or total, or are thinking about including these children, this article will provide some necessary background information as well as specifics about how camps can serve this population.

Defining At-risk Youth?

The term "at-risk youth" has taken on broad connotations and must be specifically defined to be useful. In the current context, at risk youth are those who have some of the following characteristics:

- * live in chronic poverty
- * go to a poor school
- * have poor school performance
- * are in a negative peer group
- * have poor social skills
- * use drugs themselves or are with a caregiver who does
- * are a minority
- * have a family situation characterized by stress, excessive work load and hours, depressed caregiver, lack of structure and rules, poor parenting skills, or negative role models
- * live in a bad neighborhood (drugs, violence, lack of things to do, low community support)

Risk falls along a continuum. A child with one or two risk factors would likely fall in the minimal- or remote-risk category. A high-risk child, for example, might be one who goes to a poor school, hangs out with a bad crowd, is aggressive, and does gateway drugs such as smoking or alcohol. A child at imminent risk might be one who engages in early sexual behavior, has been in legal trouble, has dropped out of school, and does hard drugs.

Possible negative life outcomes for at-risk youth vary depending on the complex factors at work in the individual's life, but they might include teenage pregnancy, drug use, criminal or antisocial behavior (violence, theft, etc.), high school education or lower, marriage that ends in divorce or is unhealthy, low socioeconomic status, shorter life span, mental health problems, or lower I.Q. For the latter, it is interesting to note that children with only one or two risk factors have an average I.Q. However, as the number of risk factors goes up, children's I.Q. scores go down. For example, children with four risk factors have, on average, an I.Q. of 90, while children with six risk factors have an I.Q. of about 80.

Although the type of at-risk child served determines the kind of camp programming that would be successful, children who rise above

their circumstances have many characteristics in common that comprehensive camps can either increase or help compensate for.

Beating the Odds

About two-thirds of high-risk children will experience one or more negative life outcome. Looking at the glass half full, that also means that one-third will beat the odds and lead healthy, productive lives. How do we know this? Over one million children have been closely studied, often for several years, to discern this fact.

As an illustration, one famous landmark study followed all the children born in one year on the island of Kauai in Hawaii for thirty-two years. The family, child, community, and schools were all carefully measured, and medical records were thoroughly examined. The result of this massive analysis (as well as others) shows that resilient children, the one-third who beat the odds, have several things in common.

What Makes Children Resilient?

Resilient children possess several common characteristics. Readers will likely note a common-sense feel to the list; however, the following characteristics were culled from a much larger list of factors that seem equally likely to make a difference. Understand that children don't need all of these traits, but the more they have the better. Camps have many opportunities to make an impact, particularly in the personal characteristics resiliency domain.

Family

A warm, cohesive, family environment that has an absence of stress and conflict supports children. At least one caregiver should have good parenting skills and show a genuine love for the child. By default, single parent status is not a risk factor, but it is often correlated to a non-supportive environment.

Personal

The personal characteristics that seem to benefit children most are hope, self-confidence, independence, social skills (responsibility, empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, and interpersonal skill), delay gratification/impulse control/restraint, stress tolerance, problem-solving, and self-esteem.

Friends and mentors

Having a good, constant friend is important, and being in a prosocial peer group where one is accepted is even better. As folk wisdom and mother always said, who children hang out with makes a very big difference in the choices they make and how they mature into adults. It's also the case that social skills play a big part in who a child's friends are; children with high social skills are often part of more positive peer groups. This also points out the interdependent nature of many of these assets, since social skills is a personal quality and parents have a lot to do with their children's degree of social skills.

School

Many of the qualities that make a good school also make a good camp. These qualities include: high expectations of student achievement, an orderly climate, regular evaluations of students' progress with clear feedback, social support (counselors, homeroom teachers, etc.), ample use of praise of good performance, firm but not severe discipline, widespread opportunities for children to take responsibility, higher proportion of teacher time interacting with class as a whole, and active involvement in the learning process.

Community

Having a sense of community -- neighborhoods and neighbors -- is protective as there tend to be more caring people and less chance

to get into trouble. Opportunities for positive activity (religious community, after-school programs, and fun activities) help as well.

Fostering Resiliency at Camp

Following are some best practices that have been scientifically proven to make a difference in at-risk children's lives. Again, like the characteristics of resiliency themselves, the more elements a camp program has in place, the better the odds are that children will truly be benefited.

Focus on youth development

Instead of just treating teenage pregnancy, drug use, or school problems in silo efforts, successful programs try to build individual strengths. In social work, this is called strength-based practice. Camps often do a good job of this as they specialize in building people up in a holistic way. However, if children present such serious problems as in these examples, camps should partner with other agencies that have programs to address their unique issues.

Target the personal domain

Building the personal characteristics of resiliency is a very powerful approach as children will carry those strengths with them to school, at home, with their peers, and in the community. Camps have the greatest degree of influence on the personal level. For example, camps often already have programs and structures in place to improve self-confidence, self-esteem, and social skills.

Solid processes in place

Programs that serve at-risk youth claim to improve many personal, academic, or family issues; however, only programs that have solid processes that are in line with best practices and theory actually make a difference. While a study shows that the average camp makes virtually no impact, camps with solid processes do have the potential to make a difference. Successful programs understand exactly what their outcomes are and precisely what elements need to be in place to achieve them.

Borrowing organizational elements from schools

As noted in the school domain, the organizational elements that make a successful school would also make a great camp. Some camps target the school domain further by providing academic components to their program, while still being true to the camp modality.

Highly trained staff

Programs that can point to research-proven outcomes for their participants generally have highly trained staff. Programs that utilize staff with good intentions and good hearts, but without the hard and soft skills necessary to impact children's lives, are rarely successful in the long term. In one case, even a two-week precamp training was insufficient.

Individualized approach

Successful programs focus on the individual child. Each child has a unique situation and individual strengths and weaknesses. Understanding those and developing an individual treatment plan is often necessary. Camps should gather specific information about each child and use that in meetings with counselors and supervisors. Throughout the session, follow-up meetings, perhaps even involving the child, are very helpful.

Similarly, camps should be careful to match the child entering their doors with their program and staff. Carefully assess what level of at-risk children your camp can successfully handle and help, which are not necessarily the same thing!

Year-round programming

At-risk children are best served by programs that go beyond a summer session. This offers both continuity and an opportunity to more directly influence domains beyond the personal level. Providing children with mentors is extremely beneficial. Having after-school programs gives children something constructive to do, keeps them in touch with positive role models, and often targets academic skills. To address the family domain, parent effectiveness training is sometimes utilized. These are often outside the scope of what most camps can handle, but they might be able to partner with other social service agencies to provide such services for the children they serve.

Long-term focus

The best practice is to work with at-risk children for several years, as short and one-shot programs are rarely successful in the long term. Camps could make a commitment to the at-risk children they serve for three to four years/summers, which would greatly increase the likelihood that the children's lives would truly be changed.

"Alternative" Outcomes

The focus here has been on influencing the characteristics of resiliency, because those are the elements that have been proven to place children squarely in the one-third that make it in life. Beyond that framework, camps have the opportunity to make a difference in these children's lives in other ways.

* Children may receive a respite from a negative environment - family, school, or community. That reprieve alone may be the best gift a child receives all year. In addition, they likely received love and healthy attention from positive mentors.

* Children may also see that there is an alternative, healthy way of existing, which might broaden their horizons or expectations as to what is good, possible, and desirable.

* For perhaps the first time, children may have been exposed to what a healthy community is and understand why it is such an important element and worthy goal.

* Some children might alter what they do in their free time at home and/or expand what they view as fun if given the option.

* Camp as prevention - children are not at home or in risky neighborhoods with little positive to do over the summer.

There are a lot of at-risk children who could benefit from a camp experience and not enough camp programs that are dedicated to serving them (in part or total). The information provided in this article will help well-intentioned programs meet their objectives. While changing a child's life is not easy, it is definitely worthwhile.

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Two Camps Serving At-Risk Youth

Following are two very different camps that embody many of the qualities discussed here.

Morry's Camp (www.morriscamp.org)

Morry's Camp utilizes a centralized program similar to many high-end private camps. Campers live in platform tents, and there are a variety of typical camp activities to choose from, as well as a strong educational component. The summer session lasts for four weeks, and children are guaranteed to be able to return for at least four years (90 percent return rate). Campers are generally low- to moderate-risk and are carefully screened by agencies and the camp. The camper-to-counselor ratio is 2:1. All children receive full scholarships. Individualized programs are utilized throughout the year. Year-round components include parent education, tutoring,

group outings for fun, close agency-camp communication, and meetings every six weeks (goal setting, checking in, and an academic component).

Trail Blazers (www.trailblazers.org)

This is a decentralized program where campers live in small groups and make up their own program, which includes educational components. It is extremely rustic with open canvas shelters and virtually no modern amenities. The summer session is just over three weeks long, and children are guaranteed to be able to return for at least three years (60 percent return rate). Campers are high-to-moderate-risk and are briefly screened by the camp and agencies. The camper-to-counselor ratio is 3:1. All children receive full scholarships. Individual treatment plans are utilized during the summer. Year-round components include a small mentoring and after-school program, leadership activities for older children, and a winter weekend back at camp.

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