Improving resilience, learning and wellbeing among young people.

A new study by the Outdoor Youth Programs Research Alliance (OYPRA) developed and conducted over nine years has shown camps and outdoor education programs can lead to improved mental health and wellbeing in young people.

Founded in 2009, OYPRA is an alliance of researchers from Australia’s top universities led by the Murdoch Research Children’s Institute and supported by the Victorian Government, together with not-for profit community organisations, and key representatives from the outdoor sector.

The extensive research undertaken by OYPRA will help inform policy and practice, and lead to more strategic investment in Australia’s outdoor programs for learning, healthy living and positive youth development.
**Camps lead to better health outcomes**

 Australians who have gone on school camps know firsthand that outdoor learning programs support personal development and learning new skills.

Now, through world-first research undertaken by OYPRA, there is clear evidence that camps can improve the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians.

The study took place over a 3 year period involving almost 335 young Australians aged 14–16.

OYPRA’s research measured both the short and long-term impacts of outdoor education by evaluating the wellbeing of year 9 students who participated in purpose-designed camps compared to those who did not.

The six month trial surveyed students on how they measured their physical and mental health, confidence, connectedness and other measures five times before and after they participated on a 5 day camp program.

OYPRA’s study identified that students with higher levels of anxiety and those with low confidence are likely to benefit the most from outdoor learning programs.

The comprehensive research by OYPRA showed there are different benefits depending on the student’s state of wellbeing and mental health before attending camp, supporting the idea that specialised outdoor learning programs could be delivered to support those suffering mental illness.

### OYPRA Research Findings

<table>
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<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced reduced anxiety</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>With increased confidence</td>
<td>11%</td>
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16 per cent of surveyed students suffered from higher levels of anxiety. Participation in the five day outdoor program was shown to reduce this anxiety significantly.

OYPRA found that 11 per cent of students surveyed had low levels of self-efficacy; however following a five day school camp their confidence levels were significantly boosted.

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### The journey to discovery – OYPRA’s Research Program

There were four phases to OYPRA’s research which comprehensively analysed the benefits of outdoor programs for young people.

1 **PHASE 1:** A national survey of 380 Australian outdoor youth programs was carried out in 2011 by OYPRA creating a comprehensive picture of the scope and diversity of camp programs across the country.

2 **PHASE 2:** OYPRA established ‘The Camping, Adventure, Nature: Outdoor Programs for Youth’ study examining the self-reported experiences of young people participating in a range of secondary school-based outdoor and camping programs.

   - The report found students who had been on a camp for at least five days, who started with lower levels of self efficacy and/or higher levels of anxiety, showed significantly higher self-efficacy, substantially lower levels of anxiety, and statistically significant increases in peer and school connectedness after they returned to school.
PHASE 3: OYPRA collated and reviewed empirical literature, analysing the benefits of outdoor learning across five domains: challenge, activity, nature, guided experience, and social milieu. The research concluded that each of the domains presented different but complimentary benefits to participants.

PHASE 4: Through the key learnings of the first three phases, OYPRA designed and delivered a control-tested outdoor youth program which evaluated whether participants showed immediate and medium term improvements in wellbeing compared to students who did not attend the camp.

Each group of students completed surveys on five occasions: twice before camp and three times after camp. The surveys covered topics including health behaviours, psychological strengths, emotional difficulties, interpersonal connectedness, nature relatedness and the camp experience.
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OYPRA Members