

OYPRA

Outdoor Youth Programs Research Alliance

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

16% experienced reduced anxiety

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.

11% with increased confidence

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.



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.

Why are these findings important?

The incidence of mental illness in Australia continues to rise amongst young people. Camps and outdoor learning programs offer a solution to strengthen and support the mental health of young Australians as proven in research conducted by OYPRA.

Anxiety is becoming increasingly prevalent in students, impacting their mental health, wellbeing and academic performance. According to Mission Australia, almost a quarter (22.8 per cent) of young people aged 15 to 19 show symptoms of probable serious mental illness, up from 18.7 per cent five years ago.

Confidence and self-efficacy, the belief in achieving goals, in children and teenagers continues to be low in Australia. According to the KFC Youth Confidence Report 2018, only 1 in 5 of young people are confident that they will be able to achieve their 5 year plan. Furthermore, 70 per cent of young Australians say the most important people in building confidence are their friends ranking higher than mum (57 per cent) and dad (43 per cent).

When students participate in outdoor learning programs, they are encouraged and supported in developing friendships and confidence, as they solve challenges and face new experiences.

Friendships and confidence are essential to healthy and resilient young Australians.

Through OYPRA's research, it's clear that we can support the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians by encouraging participation in school camps and outdoor learning. Those who attend camps are challenged, get active, become immersed in nature, are guided by experienced outdoor leaders and form stronger relationships with their peers, all of which support improved mental health.

Outdoor learning experiences provide a much needed break for young Australians from their screens to experience something real. Australia has some of the most beautiful natural environments in the world, and they need to be made more accessible to younger people as part of their personal development and to support their mental health and wellbeing.



- > Students that went on camps were more independent, less anxious, work harder at school and felt more important in the school community.
- > An overwhelming majority of students (80 per cent) found that the camps provided opportunities to explore, discover, and learn new things. Over 60 per cent of students felt connected to and accepted by others during the camp.
- > The report also found that the majority (60 per cent) of students wanted to go on camp more often.
- > The statistics saw the same trends regardless of the school, the type of camp, or student's gender.

3 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.

4 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

