

Promoting Adolescent Health and Wellbeing through Outdoor Youth Programs

Executive Summary

Authors: Dr Lauren Rose, Dr Ian Williams, Prof Craig Olsson, Prof Nicholas B Allen

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Introduction and purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which participation in structured outdoor programs is associated with improvements in adolescent health and wellbeing. The project is supported by the Outdoor Youth Programs Research Alliance (OYPRA), a primarily Victorian collaboration between academics and outdoor practitioners¹.

Methodology

Year 9 students (both boys and girls) participating in outdoor programs and camps from across three secondary schools were recruited to take part in this study. In order to address key limitations in previous study designs, the research team used (1) a repeated baseline design (baseline, pre and post program), (2) a large sample drawn from multiple schools and outdoor programs and (3) high quality questionnaire scales.

Students completed an online survey on three occasions: twice before camp and once after camp. The surveys measured three broad domains -psychological wellbeing, interpersonal connectedness and nature connectedness.

The students took part in various outdoor programs which all ranged from 5 – 9 days, included at least a component of overnight hiking and camping in a remote setting. Students worked in groups of 15 – 40.

The surveys gathered data covering:

1. Demographics (gender, age, socio-economic status)
2. Psychological strengths, measured via three components – the Generalized Self-efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), the Ryff Wellbeing Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire (Ellis & Rothbart, 2001).
3. Interpersonal Connectedness, which measured connectedness with friends, peers, teachers and school using the Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (MAC-5, Karcher, 2003)
4. Nature Relatedness, using the Nature Relatedness Scale (NRS, Nisbet, Zelenski & Murphy, 2009)

Outcomes

This multi-site repeated baseline study observed a small but meaningful positive impact on participants. Levels of fear (anxiety) decreased post camp, whilst levels of self-efficacy, peer connectedness and school connectedness increased. No changes were found in measures of

depression, aggression, wellbeing, friend connectedness, teacher connectedness or nature connectedness.

The findings are encouraging and lend support to the idea that outdoor youth programs may be useful for promoting adolescent psychological health and wellbeing within specific domains.

¹ The Outdoor Youth Programs Research Alliance (OYPRA) is an Australian group established in 2009 to investigate and document the benefits of outdoor programs for young people, which might include resilience, learning and wellbeing.

The Alliance is made up of a research team (comprising representatives from Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, the University of Melbourne, University of Oregon and Deacon University) and key stakeholders from the outdoor education / recreation and health research sectors (Australian Camps Association, Outdoor Council of Australia, Outdoor Education Group, United Church Camping, YMCA, Operation Newstart and Outward Bound). The Victorian state government is also represented.

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