

## **The impact of outdoor youth programs on positive adolescent development: Study protocol for a controlled crossover trial**

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### Executive Summary

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Australian students commonly participate in led outdoor adventure programs such as camps and expeditions as a part of their school experience. There is an abundance of anecdotal evidence that supports the positive impact these programs have on student's social and emotional wellbeing, but there has been a lack of quality research based evidence to back this view up empirically.

The OYPRA (Outdoor Youth Program Research Alliance) research team set out to evaluate the effectiveness of such a program on year 9 students using a quasi-experimental research design, and to further explore factors that would predict greater effectiveness.

A number of questions directed the study:

- Do participants in the program show improvements in wellbeing compared to the non-participating control group?
- If so, are the improvements sustained at six months post program?
- Do teachers report student improvement following camp consistent with those reported by the participants?
- Are there any factors that reliably predict participant improvement (eg program design, participant demographic, leader characteristics, etc).

The outdoor program drew on the ChANGeS (Challenge, Activity, Nature, Guided experience and Social milieu) Framework and was designed to closely align with programs commonly delivered in Australia.

The study utilised a quasi-experimental crossover design comparing responses from 22 small groups from two schools taking part in a seven day outdoor program against control groups who did not take part. Each group was asked to complete an online survey on five occasions (twice before camp and three times after camp). The aim was to measure both the short and long term impact of the outdoor experience.

Student survey questions covered demographics, health behaviours, psychological strengths, emotional difficulties, interpersonal connectedness, nature relatedness and the camp experience. Accompanying teachers and outdoor leaders were also asked to complete their own specific surveys.

Treatment group differences and differential group changes from baseline to follow up for measured outcomes will be examined using linear mixed modelling.

### **OYPRA**

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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