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## Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Programming at Overnight Summer Camps

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### Abstract

Overnight summer camps have previously been overlooked as settings for healthy eating and physical activity programming; however, recent summer camp research has begun to examine how summer camp programming can help fight childhood obesity. The purpose of this research was to identify and examine the efforts that Wisconsin overnight summer camps are taking to support campers in meeting national dietary and physical activity guidelines. Data were collected through in-person or phone interviews with 13 directors and owners of American Camp Association (ACA) accredited camps and were analyzed using a conventional content analysis and inductive thematic analysis approach. Results indicated that camp directors are trying to provide, or are already providing, healthy food that follows the national dietary recommendations and that campers who attend these overnight summer camps in Wisconsin are meeting or exceeding the national physical activity recommendations. Camp directors reported that their campers were physically active because of the amount of walking each camper had to complete in order to get from one activity to another (often across the camp property), in addition to their participation in a variety of program activities. Overnight summer camps are an ideal setting for the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity for children.

**Keywords:** healthy eating, physical activity, summer camp

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## Introduction

Overnight summer camps are often thought of as settings for school-aged children to have fun in the outdoors while participating in a variety of activities. Research on summer break for school-aged children has shown that this time period can contribute to an increase in children's sedentary activity (Carrel, Clark, Peterson, Eickhoff, & Allen, 2007) and cause weight gain (Moreno, Johnston, & Woehler, 2013). Yet overnight summer camps have previously been overlooked as settings for healthy eating and physical activity programming (Ventura & Garst, 2013). Recent summer camp research has begun to examine how summer camp programming can help fight childhood obesity. One study focused on camps as places that promote healthy eating and physical activity behaviors among children (Ventura & Garst, 2013). Another study focused on the role of the camp counselor in promoting healthy eating behaviors during camp mealtimes (Ventura, Anzman-Frasca, & Garst, 2014). Additionally, research examined the amount of physical activity at camps (Hickerson & Henderson, 2014) and that camp improves campers' attitudes toward physical activity (Glover, Chapeskie, Mock, Mannell, & Feldberg, 2011).

This study sought to build on prior research to determine how overnight summer camps in Wisconsin provide healthy eating and physical activity opportunities to their campers, and if they should be considered as a setting for the promotion of healthy eating and physical activity in children and adolescents. This study also considered whether a theoretical perspective such as social learning theory could be applied to the camp setting.

## Review of Literature

Previous overnight summer camp research has described camp characteristics promoting positive youth development and has identified developmental outcomes of the camp experience (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011; Thurber, Scanlin, & Scheuler, 2007). Thurber et al. (2007) suggested that future camp-related research should examine other impacts of attending a camp on youth.

The gap in research examining healthy eating and physical activity at camp has been identified by studies conducted by Ventura and Garst (2013), Hickerson and Henderson (2014), and Ventura et al. (2014). Using data from the ACA's 2007 Emerging Issues survey distributed online to camp professionals, Ventura and Garst (2013) discovered that camp professionals believe it is important to address healthy eating and physical activity at their

camp. As a result, Ventura and Garst (2013) suggested future research should investigate strategies that promote healthy eating and physical activity behaviors in children at camp.

To that end, Ventura et al. (2014) examined the role of summer camp staff in promoting camper healthy eating behavior at camp and found that camps are not providing direction to summer staff on their role of monitoring camper eating behaviors. The summer staff reported that they felt their main role was to ensure the campers ate and that some staff engaged in strategies such as reasoning, modeling behavior, setting limits, and even punishing their campers while eating meals. These results demonstrate the role of counselor modeling during meal times in an overnight summer camp setting.

While Ventura et al. (2014) focused on camper healthy eating behavior during meal times at camp, Hickerson and Henderson (2014) used pedometer data to examine the amount of physical activity occurring in day and overnight camps. They found that campers at day camps averaged 11,916 steps per day and resident campers averaged 19,699 steps per day, although day campers recorded a higher number of steps taken per hour compared to overnight campers. Hickerson and Henderson (2014) concluded that youth summer camps demonstrate the potential to provide ample opportunities for physical activity during the summer months and suggested further research to examine longitudinal physical activity participation patterns of summer campers. One such study is doing just that over five phases. Glover et. al (2011) interviewed camp directors on the value of the summer camp experience and found that attitudes toward physical activity was a key area that was expected for campers to experience personal growth. In the second phase, results indicated that camp improves campers' attitudes toward physical activity.

Although Hickerson and Henderson (2014) provided important research on the amount of physical activity that exists at a cross-section of camps, they did not describe the specific programmatic efforts made by the camps. Zarrett, Sorenson, & Skiles (2013) conducted systematic observations of play and leisure activity by youth at four recreational summer day camps. The researchers found that the social climate components (clarity of roles, autonomy, high engagement, inclusion, positive youth interactions, and bullying) were the most predictive of youth physical activity participation.

This social climate experience of a setting can be understood through social learning theory, or learning that can occur by observing others (Bandura, 1977). Overnight summer camp programs offer an ideal setting for the application of social learning theory. Camps offer many opportunities

for campers to try new activities, make new friends, and eat different foods. According to Bandura (1977), observation and direct experience contribute to an individual learning experience. Social learning theory describes human behavior as the constant interaction between a person, the environment, and a behavior. This study examined how overnight summer camps create an environment in which campers interact with and learn from their peers and counselors during meal times and physical activity periods.

## Methods

In this small, exploratory study, interviews were conducted with 13 camp directors or owners of ACA-accredited camps in Wisconsin. Participating camps included four agency, three independent not-for-profit, five independent for profit, and one religious camp. The sample of camp directors participating in the in-depth interviews consisted of camp directors selected purposefully and through snowball sampling. Purposefully selected camps were those that offered relevant programming and initiatives related to healthy eating and physical activity. Interview questions asked camp directors to explore how their camp incorporates healthy eating and physical activity into their programming, how personnel management decisions influence their camp's ability to provide healthy eating and physical activity at camp, and how the camp is organized in order to provide healthy eating and physical activity to campers. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo. Data were analyzed using a conventional content analysis and inductive thematic analysis approach and followed Creswell's (2014) sixth stage of coding. This approach allowed the researchers to interpret the findings that emerged from the study and compare them to what is already known from the literature. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point approved this research to work with human subjects.

## Results

Four themes emerged from the interviews with the camp directors: commitment to healthy food, physical activity participation, learning opportunities, and challenges.

### Commitment to Healthy Food

Camps were trying to provide, or were already providing, foods to their campers that are consistent with the national dietary recommendations. They did so either by providing healthy snack and menu options or by limiting dessert and visits to the camp store where less healthy food may be purchased. One director explained, “We had a big conversation this year about limiting sugar intake . . . focusing on getting extra sugars out of our foods” (Interview 6). Another director noted, “We participate in the summer program through the federal government . . . so that pushes you to have a healthy menu. To have whole grains, etc.” (Interview 9).

### Physical Activity Participation

Camp directors believed their campers were meeting or exceeding the physical activity recommendations through participating in their activity and program areas, walking to and from various activities throughout the day, and the varying physical layout of the camp. According to one camp director, “from one end of camp to the other of where the buildings are, it is a mile. So the kids are definitely hiking back and forth between activities” (Interview 1).

### Learning Opportunities

Camp directors identified different learning opportunities for campers during meal times and physically active program times. Camp directors recognized the importance of the younger campers observing table manners and eating behaviors from the older campers during meal times. One camp director noted that at meal times “you are naturally going to have those girls who say ‘I can cut this,’ or ‘you should try this, it’s really good’-that kind of thing” (Interview 11). Meal times in particular offer an opportunity for campers to hear about other campers’ achievements and what to look forward to in an activity as they progress in skill. During program times, camp directors noted campers learning skill development from other campers particularly in mixed age activity groups.

### Challenges

Although most camps reported a goal of offering healthier options during meal times and limiting the amount of access to unhealthy snacks, camp directors and owners identified their camp store as a place at camp that

still offers access to unhealthy food. One camp director explained that the campers “get two snacks while they are there. It could be like a pop and an ice cream or like a bag of chips or something, so they can get two snacks a day . . . and I’ll be honest: the snacks are not great” (Interview 12). In an effort to provide alternative snack options at the camp store, some camps have begun offering pretzels or nuts. “They can get a bag of pretzels . . . if they don’t want something sweet. Those don’t sell real well . . . we have a lot of pretzels left over” (Interview 5). Camps tried to offer an alternative to their campers, but most campers chose the candy bars and other high calorie snacks. There were no challenges to physical activity participation identified by this study.

## Discussion

The present study extends developmental outcome research into better understanding the efforts camps are making to foster healthy eating and physical activity as part of the camp experience. Overnight summer camps in this study were shifting their meal options to fresh, healthy foods. Research in school settings has discovered that students were more likely to take fruits and vegetables if they were displayed properly and had descriptive names (Hanks, Just, & Wansink, 2013; Cornish, Askelson, & Golembiewski, 2016). This suggests that if camp directors provided fruits and vegetables displayed and described in attractive ways, campers might be more willing to choose them while at camp. One potential place this could be tested is in the camp store.

The informal assessment by directors of camper physical activity participation at camps in Wisconsin are consistent with Hickerson and Henderson’s (2014) findings that campers met or exceeded the national physical activity guidelines. Overnight summer camps help keep their campers active through their participation in a variety of sports, fitness, and other outdoor activities held at locations across the camp’s property. The results suggest that overnight camps could broaden their marketing efforts, including to new parents who are considering sending their child to a program (e.g., a sports camp), specifically to keep their child physically active in the summer months (Carrel et al., 2007; Moreno et al., 2013).

Lastly, camp directors identified widespread social learning opportunities for campers that are provided either by the camp staff, older camper role models, or through direct participation in program activities. These results build upon Ventura et al.’s (2014) suggestion that counselors model eating behaviors during meal times. Clearly, campers are learning many things

during the camp experience including social skills and technical skills related to specific activities. This suggests that camps have great potential to address improved eating habits and increased activity among their campers. Healthy eating, physical activity knowledge, self-efficacy, and habits could be intended learning outcomes of the camp experience that could be delivered through staff, programming, and facility design.

This study explored the programmatic efforts made by camps to promote healthy eating and physical activity for children and adolescents and how social learning theory can apply to the camp setting. Although every effort was made to purposefully select a diversity of types of camps, a disproportionate amount of participants were from independent for profit camps, which typically have a higher operating budget and can therefore offer more diverse programming than independent not-for-profit and agency camps. A larger study is needed to further understand the lasting impacts of what campers learned from their experience at camp during meal and activity program times. Examining camper food intake and knowing whether campers are eating and enjoying the healthier menu and snack options that are provided is another area for future research.

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