

# Social-emotional and social competency development in children: An evaluation of a Collective Community Services children's camp program

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*Talwar Research Team - "Understanding Children's Behaviour Through Research"*

## Executive Summary

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Dr. Victoria Talwar and her research team at McGill University are researchers interested in children's social-cognitive development. Their research is informed by the disciplines of psychology, education and law to examine children's behaviours that are pertinent to children's adaptive development, child witness testimony and professionals who work with children. Dr. Talwar and her students conduct research on children's adaptive development by examining how children learn social rules and conventions, understand others feelings and beliefs, and how they develop social behaviours and manage social interactions.

### Collective Community Services (CCS)

CCS is a registered charity, and has served Montreal as a not-for-profit social agency for over 85 years. CCS improves the quality of life of individuals by significantly reducing isolation and effectively supporting children, youth, and families living in poverty, primarily within the English speaking community of Greater Montreal. One of CCS' programs is a sleep-away summer camp for at-risk children (Trail's End Camp). Over the course of 13 days (July 16 – July 28th 2017), 15 children participated in the "*One with the Wilderness*" sub - program (hereafter referred to as the Wilderness Program) as a component of the Trail's End Camp.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the social-emotional and competency growth of youth attending the 13 day Wilderness Program. Twelve children aged 13 to 16 years old took part in the evaluation. The total sample completed a baseline measure of self-concept

and an interview at the beginning of the program, while 10 children completed the post-test measure of self-concept and an exit interview at the end of the program. The camp counsellor in charge of the program completed social-emotional and behavioural questions at baseline and at post-test for all 12 campers.

Overall, the Wilderness Program improved campers' social-emotional and competency growth. In self-report measures, the campers themselves expressed increased self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as gains in social skills, friendships, group membership, and the ability to cope with their everyday challenges. Via external reports, the campers exhibited increased adaptability and functional communication abilities, and decreased symptoms of hyperactivity, somatization, attentional problems and atypical behaviours were reported. In some cases, however, there were minimal reported increases in aggressivity, depression, and withdrawal.

The following report details the Wilderness Program and its goals, the methods used to evaluate the Program, the evaluation's findings, the campers' suggestions to improve the program for future participants, and the report's conclusion.

## Program Description

As noted, over the course of 13 days (July 16 – July 28<sup>th</sup> 2017), 15 children participated in the Wilderness Program, as a component of the Trail's End Camp, run by Collective Community Services (CCS). Craig Sweeney, Interim Manager of Child and Family Services and Youth Educator at CCS, led the Wilderness Program. The aim of the Wilderness program was to empower youth to feel at ease with themselves and the natural world, by exploring their strengths and learn from the strengths and experiences of their peers. Some of the activities in which they participated included traditional and aboriginal skills (e.g., fire-lighting, shelter building), navigation and orienteering, search and rescue techniques, hiking, climbing, and raft building.

CCS' summer camps are part of their portfolio of programs that improve the quality of life for at-risk children and youth, by significantly reducing isolation and effectively supporting those living in poverty. This particular program was funded in part by Centraide of Greater Montreal, MEES (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur of the Province of Quebec) and the John Howard Society of Québec.

Research by Dr. Victoria Talwar and her team of psychology students from McGill University's Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology was conducted to measure the change in the children's social-emotional and competency growth.

## Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation

The aim and purpose of this report are to evaluate the Wilderness Program participants' social-emotional and competency growth over the course of the program. Specifically, we used self-report questionnaires to measure the campers' self-esteem and self-concept, as well as third-party questionnaires to examine their adaptive and problem behaviours. Additionally, we conducted interviews to examine campers' expectations for the camp experience, their thoughts about their daily challenges, group membership, and friendships. Aggregated results are provided in the report from the questionnaires and interviews. Campers' recommendations for improvements to the Program, as well as conclusions regarding the benefits of the program, are provided.

## Evaluation Methodology

### Participants

Children's eligibility for the Wilderness Program was based upon their family situations. The majority of the youth were from low income families and low income neighbourhoods. While a total of 15 youth (aged 12 to 16 years) participated in the Wilderness Program, the parent or legal guardians of 12 children agreed to have them participate in the program's evaluation. Therefore, cumulative findings based on the 12 children (4 girls, 8 boys; aged 13 – 16 years old) included in the program evaluation will be reported. However, the post-test self-report measure and interview were only conducted with 10 children (3 girls, 7 boys) as one boy was sent home early from camp for disruptive behaviour, and one girl refused to complete the post-test measures. Mr. Sweeney completed the measure of adaptive behaviour (*BASC-2*) at baseline and post-test for all 12 children.

### Measures

*Camper Interviews (Baseline and Post-test).* The campers were individually interviewed privately on their first full day of camp (July 17<sup>th</sup>; Baseline). They were asked 10 questions including: what they expected to learn in the Program, why they had come to the camp/Program, the challenges that they face in everyday life, how they would describe themselves, what their thoughts on group membership are, and what makes a good friendship.

On their last full day at camp (July 27<sup>th</sup>; Post-test), the campers were asked 14 questions individually and privately. Some of the questions were the same as in Baseline, in order to compare possible changes in beliefs over the course of the Program. Other questions asked included what the campers thought the Program aimed to teach them, what did they learn,

what their expectations were and whether they were met, what their favourite thing about camp was, if they felt differently about their life challenges, further questions about their interest in group involvement, what they have learned about friendship and if they had new friends, if they would like to attend the camp in the future, and their overall thoughts and recommendations about the camp and the Wilderness Program.

*Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers-Harris 2; Piers & Herzberg, 2007)*: The *Piers-Harris 2* is a 60-item self-report questionnaire that allowed the children to express how they felt about themselves. They chose responses (Yes or No) to items that measured their overall self-concept, as well as six subdomains, namely, Behavioural Adjustment, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance and Attributes, Freedom from Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction.

The children completed the *Piers-Harris 2* twice – once on July 17<sup>th</sup>, as a baseline measure, and the second time at the end of the program, on July 27<sup>th</sup>, as a measure of change.

*Behaviour Assessment System for Children, Second Edition, Teacher Report (BASC-2 TRS-A; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004)*: The *BASC-2* is a 139-item questionnaire that was used to measure the changes in children's adaptive and problem behaviours. The items describe specific behaviors that are rated on a four-point scale of frequency, ranging from "Never" to "Almost Always." The items factor onto numerous scales including Aggression, Hyperactivity, Anxiety, Depression, and Withdrawal, as well as adaptive behaviours such as Adaptability, Functional Communication, Leadership, and Social Skills.

Mr. Sweeney completed the *BASC-2* for each camper twice (at the beginning and at the end of the camp; baseline- and post-test) to evaluate the changes in the campers' behaviours and attitudes over the course of the Wilderness Program.

## Findings

### Self-Concept

When measured at baseline on the *Piers-Harris 2*, campers' levels of overall self-concept indicated Average levels of self-esteem and self-regard, with 42% reporting Low Average levels and 17% of campers reporting High Average levels of self-concept. For example, when interviewed, some campers described themselves in a slightly negative light, such as "shy and quiet," "angry," and "hyper." However, most chose to describe themselves more positively, such as "responsible/mature," "nice and friendly," "fun, amazing, caring, funny," and "enthusiastic." One camper preferred to describe herself as "unique: not like anyone else, not ordinary, but extraordinary."

At the end of the camp, the campers' overall levels of self-concept remained in the Average range, but their scores indicated some improvement in the areas of Physical Appearance and Attributes, Freedom from Anxiety, and Happiness and Satisfaction.

Twenty percent of the children indicated increased Physical Appearance and Attributes scores (i.e., Above Average scores; see Figure 1). These campers felt better about their overall appearance, including their hair styles and facial attractiveness, as well as feeling stronger physically after the Wilderness Camp.

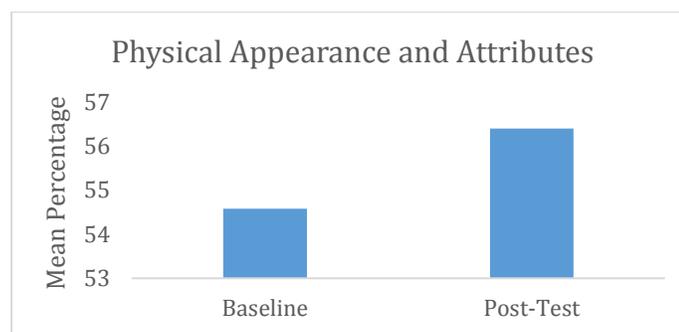


Figure 1. Mean Percentage Increase in Physical Appearance and Attributes

Almost half of the campers (40%) indicated increased Freedom from Anxiety at the end of the Wilderness Program (see Figure 2). For example, at the end of the camp experience, youth reported *not* feeling sad, unhappy, nervous, or afraid, that they cried less easily, and that they felt more like themselves and felt more included than they had felt at the beginning of camp.

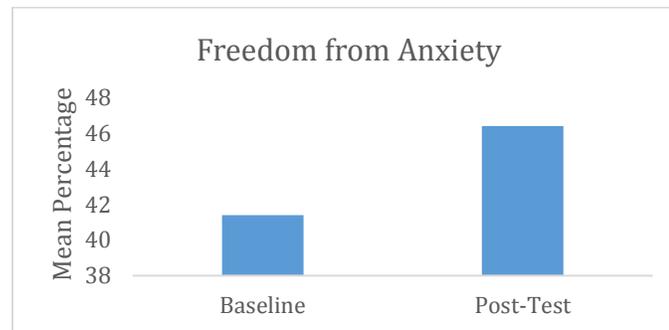


Figure 2. Mean Percentage Increase in Freedom from Anxiety

Fifty percent of the campers indicated increased Happiness and Satisfaction at the end of the Wilderness Program (see Figure 3). These children reported Low to Average levels of happiness at the beginning of camp but reported Average to Above Average levels by the end of camp. One female showed a significant increase in Happiness and Satisfaction, scoring Low at baseline, but Above Average by the end of the Program. She endorsed feelings of happiness and cheerfulness, that she was lucky, that she was easy to get along with, and that she felt she was a good person. Other campers also endorsed feelings of happiness, luck, and acceptance of who they are. In the interviews, one camper who described himself as “angry” and who had trouble controlling his outbursts at baseline described himself as “patient and less angry” at the end of the Wilderness Program.

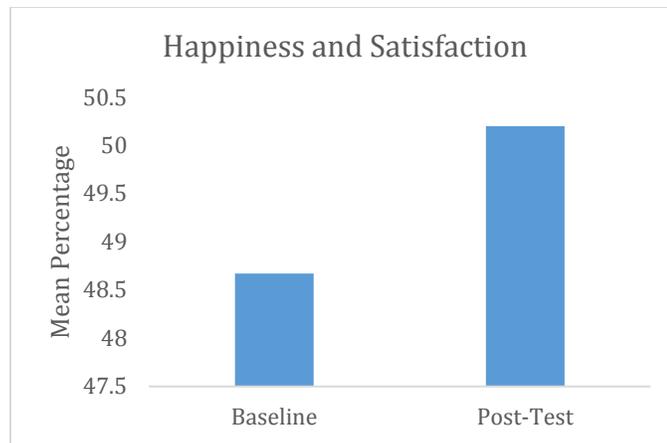


Figure 3. Mean Percentage Increase in Happiness and Satisfaction

Despite these positives, 30% did report lower levels of Happiness and Satisfaction at the end of the camp experience. However, it was noted during the post-test interviews that the campers had lower energy levels from physical exertion over the course of the Program, and that they were more tired than at baseline. Their lower scores might have been influenced by tiredness, and not necessarily reflective of a loss of happiness and satisfaction in themselves.

Campers also reported mixed changes to their Behavioural Adjustment (i.e., admission or denial of problematic behaviours). Forty percent of youth reported improved Behavioural Adjustment (e.g., endorsement of *not* causing trouble at home or to their families, *not* getting into trouble, and *not* being mean to others). However, 30% reported diminished levels at post-test and therefore admitted to problematic behaviour. For example, they endorsed that they are not well-behaved at school, that they do bad things, that they behave badly at home, and that they get into trouble and fights.

## Adaptive and Problem Behaviours

Mr. Sweeney's reports of adaptive and problem behaviours are based on his ratings of the baseline and post-test *BASC-2* questionnaires. Campers exhibited increases and decreases in both adaptive and problem behaviours over the course of the Wilderness Program.

Generally, campers showed the *greatest improvement* in the areas of Hyperactivity, Somatization (i.e., health-related complaints), Attention, Atypical Behaviours, Adaptability, and Functional Communication. This is especially so for the four female campers – all four campers showed improvement in these areas. However, at the end of the camp experience, approximately half of the campers showed slight increases in Aggressivity, Depression, and Withdrawal.

Further information is presented in Table 1 and Figure 4. Specifically, Table 1 depicts:

- (1) the behavioural measurement scale,
- (2) the percentage of campers who exhibited improvement, and
- (3) the specific areas of improvement:

Table 1: Adaptive and Behavioural Areas of Improvement

Scale	Percentage	Improvements in
<b>Hyperactivity</b>	50	Turn waiting Activity levels Acting out of control/self-control Seat maintenance Acting without thinking Interrupting others
<b>Attention</b>	58	Listening to directions Listening carefully Paying attention Less distracted
<b>Adaptability</b>	67	Adjusting to changes in routines/plans Taking and recovering from setbacks Being a good sport

<b>Functional Communication</b>	50	Tracking down information when needed Responding appropriately when asked a question Presenting ideas, personal experiences, and feelings more clearly Communicating clearly
<b>Scale</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Decreases in</b>
<b>Somatization</b>	42	Headaches Shortness of breath Pain Complaints about health Getting sick
<b>Atypical Behaviours</b>	42	Acting strangely/saying things that do not make sense Having strange ideas Picking at hair, nails or clothing Seeming unaware of others

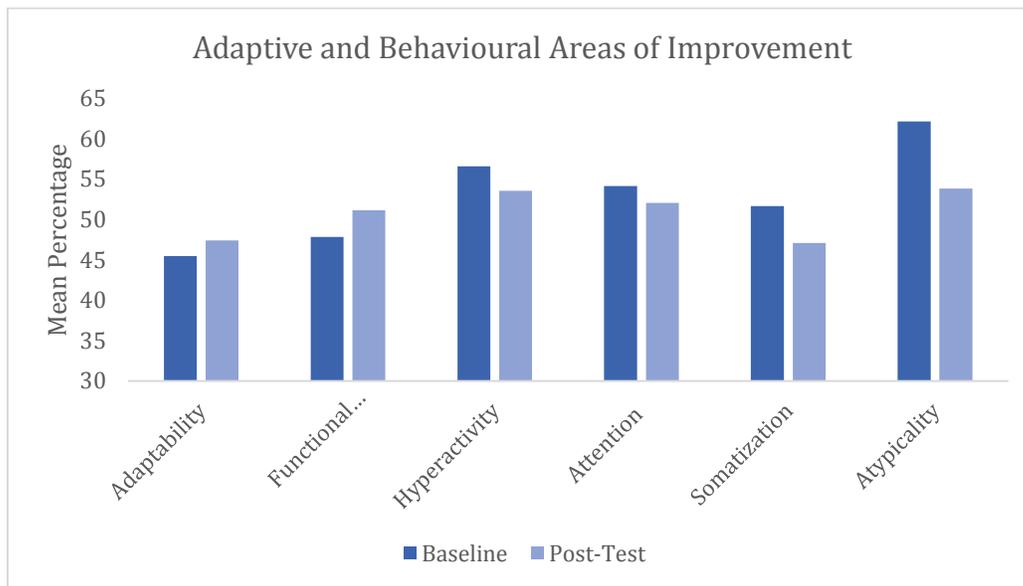


Figure 4. Mean Percentage Improvement for Adaptive and Problem Behaviours

*Note.* Improvement is indicated by increases in Adaptability and Functional Communication, and decreases in symptoms of Hyperactivity, Attention Problems, Somatization, and Atypicality

The campers did have slight setbacks in certain areas. Further information on the adaptive and behavioural areas of decline are presented in Table 2. Specifically, Table 2 depicts

(1) the behavioural measurement scale,

(2) the percentage of campers who exhibited a setback on the second measure and,

(3) the areas of decline

Table 2: Adaptive and Behavioural Areas of Decline

Scale	Percentage	Increases in
<b>Aggressivity</b>	50%*	Hurting or threatening to hurt others Calling each other names Teasing, bullying, or seeking revenge on others Annoying others Losing temper or arguing when denied own way
<b>Depression</b>	67%**	Pessimism Appearance of loneliness Sadness /easiness of becoming upset Negativity, complaints, lack of friends
<b>Withdrawal</b>	42%**	Refusing to join group activities Avoiding other adolescents Playing alone Refusing to talk

\* It should be noted that only 3 out of the 12 campers showed more than 2 increases in aggressive behaviour, thereby inflating the percentages. As this measure was completed by Mr. Sweeney for all campers, one of these 3 campers included the youth who was sent home early from the Wilderness Program due to negative behaviour. The second did not want to complete the post-test self-report measures, and the third camper had a noticeable negative disposition at both testing sessions.

\*\* It should also be noted that the majority of changes within the items on this scale were from “Never” at baseline, to “Sometimes” at Post-test, thereby inflating the percentages.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the campers were less energetic and overall more negative

towards the end of the Program/camp, so these results may also be biased, as the changes in scores might be a result of the campers' reactions to their environment and not necessarily changes in behaviour.

## Campers' Expectations, Reasons, and What They Learned from the Camp/Wilderness Program

When interviewed on their first full day of the Wilderness Program, campers were asked what they expected to learn over the course of their experience. The most popular answer was "survival skills" or "about the environment/nature," but half of the youth also said "how to make friends," "meet new people," and "gain new skills, such as leadership and listening." One person also mentioned learning how to be "away from school and technology."

When asked why they wanted to attend the camp and the Wilderness Program, almost half expressed not having a choice to come, and some said that given a choice, they would not have signed up. However, a quarter of the campers had attended the Trail End Camp previously and expressed an interest in wanting to come back to the camp because they had enjoyed the experience. Two campers mentioned that they wanted to meet new people and make friends as their major reason for attending, and one camper said that he wanted to learn about the environment, and "learn about how your actions affect things around you; expand your knowledge, and learn different points of view."

At the end of the Wilderness Program, the campers were asked what they had expected they would do and if their expectations had been met. Again, many campers expected to do activities and "nature things" and the majority said they did learn survival skills. Half of the campers reported that they enjoyed the nature activities, especially because "we don't get them at home." Socially, half of the campers said they had expected to make friends, which they said they had been able to do by the end of the camp experience. Generally, 60% of the

campers agreed that their expectations of the camp were met: that they had made new friends, that they tried new things, and that they had participated in nature activities.

Campers also mentioned that they learned social skills and that they experienced personal growth while at the Wilderness Camp. One male camper, who had a history of angry outbursts and difficulty with emotion regulation said: “I learned patience, how not to lash out, and how to keep calm.” Another camper also said that he had learned “patience and respect for all people,” while another said that he had learned about responsibility and “how to do things on my own.” One boy said that he learned to “have less fights with people” and one of the girls said that she found the camp experience rewarding because “I learned that I can make friends easier than in the city because there are less people and less social media.”

Therefore, an important reason for the youth to attend the Wilderness Program was to foster and develop friendships. In fact, 70% of responses indicated that campers’ favourite thing about the experience was meeting new people and making friends. One camper said that having the opportunity to meet new people “took me out of my comfort zone because usually you have your own group of people that you’re used to” while another said making new friends meant that “I can be here without feeling alone.”

### Daily Challenges

Of particular interest was whether campers felt they had learned strategies or seen changes in the way that they deal with their challenges in everyday life. When asked about their challenges, the most common answer was school-related challenges, including course work, passing courses, and learning languages (60%). Relationships, including familial and amorous relationships, and friendships, were also frequent challenges for the campers. They mentioned having difficulty talking to other people, families not always getting along, trust issues, and bullying as everyday challenges that they face. Additionally, one camper

said that his biggest challenge is emotion regulation, while another said “doing new things” is hard for him.

Although the majority of campers did not feel that the camp changed their feelings about their challenges (i.e., their challenges were still waiting for them at home), they did report gaining from the experience by learning resources that would help them deal with these challenges. For example, the boy with anger issues said that “I met new people that are there for me when I get angry.” Another found that the experience helped him make friends: “I can socialize more easily. Talking is easier to me”. Another prevalent theme was that camp helped them with their daily challenges by giving them time to escape and recharge: “Camp helped me get away from (my challenge) so it might change when I go back, but it was a good escape”; “I’m still worried a little, I think about it less. It’s why I come to camp every year – I come to camp to chill”; “I don’t think about (my challenge) here, I’m aware, like on vacation, like I’m in Hawaii. I don’t have to deal”. Therefore, the campers found the Wilderness Program to be beneficial, especially since it gave them a chance to put their challenges to rest for a few days and focus on fun activities and adopt a more positive outlook on their lives.

### Group Membership

The campers also learned about the benefits of working in a group. Some said they were able to be more sociable and talk to people in groups, and that their social skills improved after taking part in all of the group activities. The ease of communication was also mentioned in the post-test interview by campers. One camper said it was “easier to start conversations with people. Now I’m less shy to talk to others,” and another reported that “if you communicate you can get more things done (in a group).” Another camper said that being in a group “gives you a sense of belonging” while another said, “I don’t like being

alone, so being in a group is nice so I can interact with people.” Additionally, one girl said, “I learned that I can learn with other people without fights.” Another embraced the positivity of group membership, saying, “If you are part of a group, you will be a winner!” Half of the campers said that they would join more group activities, and one indicated that he “really enjoyed being in a group and I want to be part of it again.” However, it is important to note that some campers felt overwhelmed by the constant group contact, and would have preferred some alone time, especially when they were interacting with the same people every day.

## Friendship

Another important construct measured via camper interviews was their ideas about friendship and what it means to be a good friend. At baseline, almost half of the campers reported that a good friendship is characterized by “having your back,” “having someone you can rely on/ stick by you no matter what,” and “always being there for each other.” A third of campers also reported that certain characteristics are important for friendship, such as trustworthiness, respect, and honesty, and a quarter said that friends “help each other out.” Only one camper said friendship is characterized by having the same interests. One female camper emphasized acceptance and closeness as markers of a good friendship: “If you see them as your family, then that’s a good friendship.”

At the end of the Wilderness Program, the campers were again asked about friendship. Again, the idea of having someone’s back and not leaving a friend behind were important themes. Additionally, campers also said that they now recognized that friends can help with emotion regulation and tolerance (e.g., “When I was angry, my friends talked to me and helped”) and that it might take time to get to know someone, but that acceptance is key: “You need to get to know someone to a level instead of making assumptions about others

because you don't know what they've been through". One female camper also learned about herself, saying "I learned that I can trust more people, in a smaller area. But I can't trust more people at home, there's too much social media".

When asked about new friendships made at camp, all campers said that they had made at least two new friends, and 4 out of 10 said that they had made close friends. However, the majority said that these new friends were "camp friends." When asked if they would like to spend time with these new friends outside of camp, 40% said that they would, but most campers mentioned that it would be hard to see each other given the lack of geographical proximity and the lack of available transport. They reported it would be hard to connect and get together, but that they would attempt to stay in touch via social media.

## Campers' Suggestions for Improvement

During the post-interview, the campers also suggested some improvements to the Wilderness Program experience. They would have appreciated less structure and more free time in the Program's activities. They also would have liked to have been able to choose the activities they wanted to do (out of X possible choices) and to have more free play time. They found the intense structure of each day to be tiring; they would have liked fewer nature activities and more sports or arts and crafts.

The campers also suggested that the camp counsellors be stricter on the bullying policies of the camp; their zero violence policy needed to be enforced. Finally, given that these campers were older than many of the other children at the Trail End Camp, they would have liked more opportunities to interact with the younger children and serve as mentors to them in the overall Camp program.

## Conclusions

The results of the current evaluation found that overall, the Wilderness Program did improve campers' social-emotional and competency growth. Campers expressed increased self-esteem and self-confidence, increased adaptability and functional communication abilities, and decreased symptoms of hyperactivity, somatization, attentional problems and atypical behaviours were reported. Campers also reported gains in social skills, friendships, group membership, and the ability to cope with their everyday challenges. In some cases, however, there were reported increases in aggressivity, depression, and withdrawal, but these increases were minimal, and mostly in a subset of the population.

The campers found the camp to be beneficial, and 80% expressed an interest in returning next year. Three campers said that they would like to continue as camp counsellors. One boy summarized his experience as rewarding “because you get away from the city and home, and you try new things here.”

The results of this evaluation allude to a lack of self-reflection on the part of the campers. They had difficulty associating personal gains that they made at the camp to real life. The inclusion of more “quiet time” and choice would allow the campers more time to self-reflect. If the campers had had more opportunity to reflect on what they were learning, they might have been able to apply skills learned at the camp to their real life, or they might have been able to notice changes in their behaviours and personality. Likewise, the addition of more activities that promote self-reflection, positive psychology, and social skills more overtly would perhaps have been beneficial to the campers and would have had a stronger impact on their social-emotional and competency growth, as well as been more useful to their everyday life and challenges.

Despite these suggestions, overall, most of the campers grew socially and behaviourally, and as one camper put it, “the experience is a good change from home that I like.” The evaluation showed that overall, campers had improvements in self-esteem and adaptive behaviours and that they took this opportunity to make new friends, socialize, and gain personal growth.

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