



Movement and Being: The Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sports Studies

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Journal of the Christian Society for
Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies*

Article 1

May 2022

Spiritual Outcomes of a Faith-Based Camp Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Recommended Citation

Ellis, Raquel T.; Hays, Krystal; Hamilton, Jeff; and Reyes, Lemesis J. (2022) "Spiritual Outcomes of a Faith-Based Camp Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents," *Movement and Being: The Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sports Studies*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jcskls0752fn>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jcskls/vol7/iss1/1>

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Spiritual Outcomes of a Faith-Based Camp Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents

Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to extend appreciation to the staff at Camp Agape California for their partnership in the research study that is the focus of this article.

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Introduction & Background

There are an estimated five million children, ages birth through 17, in the United States who have one or more parents incarcerated (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). In other words, seven percent of all U.S. children have experienced parental incarceration (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). A growing body of literature indicates the negative implications of parental incarceration on a child's wellbeing (Hairston, 2007; Martin, 2017; Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Parental incarceration has been identified as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) which researchers have found to increase risk for future morbidity and mortality. ACEs are associated with negative outcomes related to chronic disease (Felitti, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2015; Sonu, Post & Feinglass, 2019), mental illness (Anda et al., 2007; Chapman et al., 2004; Davis & Schlafer, 2017; Whitfield et al., 2005), and lack of life opportunities (e.g., education, employment, and income potential) (Metzler et al., 2017). According to Turney (2018), children with incarcerated parents experience five times as many ACEs compared to their counterparts, which puts them at disproportionate risk of chronic illness and early death. Thus, children of incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population in need of supportive programs to mitigate these potential outcomes.

One type of supportive program that serves this population is faith-based camp programs, which are purposed to enhance the social-emotional, developmental, and spiritual wellbeing of children and adolescents. According to Pinckney and colleagues (2020), there is little attention within the recreation and leisure literature on the positive impact of faith-based recreation settings such as community recreation centers, day and residential camps, and sports programs on youth development. This article seeks to contribute to filling the gap in the recreational and leisure literature around the benefits of faith-based camp programs on the spiritual development of children and youth. Specifically, this article documents a study that suggests that faith-based camp experiences have the potential to be particularly effective in helping children of incarcerated parents initiate spiritual development, which has been associated with resilience in previous studies (Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

Spirituality and Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents

Faith-based programs for children of incarcerated parents are important to consider because of the known benefits of spirituality on improved wellbeing. Spirituality is a crucial factor in a young person's development and their search for meaning, significance, and connectedness (Cheon & Canda, 2010). The research literature supports the positive impact that spirituality has on the mental and behavioral health of adolescents. Spirituality is attributed to reduced mental health issues such as depression, suicide (Barton & Miller, 2015; Cotton et al., 2006) and anxiety (Steiner et al., 2017). Further, there is a wealth of literature that specifically highlights the relationship between a strong spiritual identity and lower risk of

engaging in violent acts, substance abuse, and unsafe sexual activity (Cotton et al., 2006). Research has also found that a young person's sense of spiritual well-being, which is supported by healthy behaviors and positive emotions, and reinforced by social familial connections, contributes to resilience (Smith, Webber, & DeFrain, 2013). Specifically, spiritual identity and practices has a protective effect on child symptomatology among at-risk children. For example, a study of 384 children (ages 6–12 years) from low-income families revealed that among the girls who had experienced maltreatment, those who viewed their faith as more important were less likely to exhibit high levels of stress compared to those who viewed their faith as less important (Kim, 2008). Also, among the boys who did not have a history of maltreatment, those who regularly attended religious services were less likely to exhibit externalizing behavioral problems compared to those who did not attend religious services as frequently. This research suggests that it is important to consider the spiritual identity and practices of young people whose parents are incarcerated as their spiritual wellbeing may buffer the impact of their negative life experiences.

Effects of Camp Experiences on Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents

Children have participated in camp programs since 1861 (i.e., summer camps) (Ferguson & Burch, 2011) and the American Camp Association (ACA) (2013) reports that more than 14 million children and adults participate in camp programs across the United States annually. For more than a century, “fresh air” and “serious” leisure have been key elements of the camp experience (Paris, 2008; Stebbins, 2010). Outdoor activities such as hiking and swimming provide direct contact and interaction with the natural world that regular day-to-day life may not. An American Camp Association's study affirms that the opportunity for community living away from home in an outdoor setting accelerates youth development beyond what would be expected by the maturation process alone (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007).

Social, Emotional, and Physical Wellbeing

At camp, children and youth engage in a variety of structured and unstructured activities intended to facilitate their social-emotional health and the positive effects of these experiences have been well-documented in the literature (Thurber et al., 2007). In a landmark, national study conducted by the ACA (2005) from 2001 to 2004, 5000 families associated with 80 ACA-accredited camps were invited to participate in surveys collected before, directly after, and at a 6-month follow-up post-camp. Based on an examination of pre and post-surveys from both parents and campers between the ages of 8 and 14, this study found statistically significant increases in positive identity, social skills, positive values, and physical and thinking skills. It was also found that most of these skills were maintained or increased at the 6-month follow-up (American Camping Association, 2005).

Other studies have also documented the positive impact of the camp experience on the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents. For example, studies indicate that campers experience physical health benefits as a result of being more active and having more regulated eating and sleeping routines (Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004). Another study found a positive developmental influence of the camp experience on campers' mental and physical skills, self-identity, and confidence (Thurber et al., 2007). Other studies have also documented the social-emotional benefits of camp programs as research suggests that the camp experience creates a sense of community and belonging and helps young people develop social skills such as communication and cooperation (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Henderson et al., 2006; Sweatman and Heintzman, 2004). This "sense of community" or "family" is a result of building relationships with peers as well as supportive adults such as camp directors and "counselors" (i.e., resident assistants) and engaging in activities that emphasize teamwork and cooperative problem solving. These are important experiences that facilitate healthy youth development (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007).

Spiritual Wellbeing

Camps are most influential when they combine experiences in community, development, and recreation (Henderson et al., 2006). However, the opportunity for spiritual development cannot be overlooked. As Ferguson (2007, p. 1) states, "As our consciousness as camp leaders is raised about the connection between camps and the spiritual development of children and youth, we can be more and more intentional about this important task." Camp directors and staff have an opportunity to promote the spiritual wellbeing of children and adolescents through camp participation.

The ACA's landmark national study (2005) included the collection of information about the spiritual outcomes of camp programs. On average, campers reported a statistically significant increase in spirituality between the pre and post-surveys, and parents reported that the increase was maintained in a 6-month follow-up survey. It is also important to note that campers at faith-based camps reported higher increases in spiritual growth compared to non-faith-based camps. Similarly, research by Thurber and colleagues (2007) found that there was more spiritual growth evidenced by campers from religiously affiliated camps, compared to the other kinds of camp sponsorships.

Although the longitudinal research on this topic is limited, there is some indication that the spiritual growth that takes place at camp has a long-term effect. In a study by Schnitker and colleagues (2014), research was conducted on adolescents attending camps run by Young Life, an evangelistic Christian group in Europe. The study revealed that the campers who had a religious/spiritual experience at camp demonstrated an increased sense of purpose for their lives, psychological well-being, community participation, and morality. Also, having a

religious/spiritual experience at camp was found to be a predictor of an increase in moral sociability (or acting morally towards others) a year post attending the camp (Schnitker, Felke, Barrett, & Emmons, 2014).

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation that guides this study is social ecological theory. Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) conducting a review of research literature on social ecology and resilience and concluded that an ecological model of resilience contributes to our understanding of resilience by seeing children's development in the context of their social and physical ecologies that help predict successful development under adversity (Ungar, et al., 2013). This theoretical perspective suggests that it is important to understand the dynamic factors that contribute to resilience among children of incarcerated parents. Camp programs that are designed to enhance the social, emotional, and spiritual growth of children through a change in their relationships and physical environment have the potential to increase resilience and promote positive development despite their challenging life circumstances.

Camp Agape California

Camp Agape California (CAC) is a 4-day, outdoor, faith-based camp program for children of incarcerated parents ages 7-17. The mission of the organization is to disrupt the cycle of inter-generational incarceration by helping campers begin the process of healing from traumatic experiences and initiate spiritual growth. There are four primary purposes of CAC: 1) provide an outdoor camping experience for this specific population of youth at risk of negative outcomes, 2) help campers build positive, long-lasting relationships with peers and caring adults, 3) help campers experience spiritual, social, and relational growth, and 4) prepare campers for a restorative relationship with their parents upon the parents' release from jail or prison.

CAC recruits participants through a partnership established with Prison Fellowship Angel Tree. Prison Fellowship Angel Tree equips churches to support children and families impacted by parental incarceration by providing year-round support (Prison Fellowship, 2021). CAC administrators work with Angel Tree staff to identify children who meet the Camp criteria and invite them to participate in the 4-day camp program. Families are provided with information about the purpose and structure of the camp and asked to complete an application to request that their child(ren) participate. Families are made aware of the goals of camp and the focus on Christian spiritual development during the application process. The camp is free to attend, and participants are provided with a sleeping bag, pillow, towel, toiletries, four t-shirts and a backpack. These items are purchased and/or provided for the campers by donations from private individuals, local churches, small businesses, and foundation grants.

The camp program takes place at an outdoor nature-based camping center in Southern California. The camp includes activities and events that communicate Biblical principles through daily themes of love, trust, forgiveness and hope. Each day campers participate in nature-based activities that either directly support the theme for the day (e.g. trust) or help campers develop trusting relationships with peers and staff. For example, the camp provides workshops in dance, drama, and musicianship that help campers experience spiritual, social, and recreational growth. Activities such as swimming, hiking, archery, arts and crafts are also offered to camp participants to capitalize on the benefits of nature-based activities in building resiliency. These nature-based activities enhance the spiritual development elements that are central to the camp program. The spiritual development elements primarily consist of a morning “devotional” (i.e., Bible scripture reading and journaling) and a communal worship service each evening with singing, skits or drama, and an inspirational message from the Bible that is aligned with the daily theme.

The CAC staff facilitate the camp activities while the volunteer resident assistants (i.e., “mentors”) provide the adult supervision and serve as the primary relational support for the campers. All staff and mentors complete a strenuous vetting process including submitting to a criminal and child abuse background check, and providing personal character references and recommendations. All volunteers also receive basic training in spiritual direction, trauma awareness, and other matters necessary for their roles. CAC maintains a ratio of one mentor to every two campers. Although the age range for camp participants is large, campers are not segregated by age groups. This intentional strategy allows for familial-type bonds to develop between campers of different ages.

Volunteer mentors are essential in helping campers to acclimate to the camping environment, take advantage of the various growth activities, and provide supervision and support. Volunteer mentors facilitate daily conversation with campers regarding their thoughts and feelings about their parent’s incarceration. They also help guide participants through a daily journaling activity based on Biblical principles that prompts campers to explore their feelings and future hopes for restoring relationship with their parent upon release from jail or prison. Mentors also help campers develop a plan for ongoing spiritual development post-camp by providing them with a Bible reading plan and encouraging them to continue the practices they have learned during the camp program.

Current Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to: 1) examine the perceived impact of the Camp Agape program on the spiritual identity and practices of Camp participants and 2) examine whether there are differences in the perceived impact based on Camp participant demographics. This study is important because it purposes to reveal the spiritual impact of faith-based camp programs on children

with an incarcerated parent. If effective, these types of interventions could fill an important gap in supportive services for this vulnerable population.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

CAC collected survey data from the children and youth who attended the faith-based camp program during the summer of 2019. CAC mentors and staff invited camp attendees to complete a paper survey upon the conclusion of the 4-day summer camp program. A total of 162 surveys were collected, resulting in a response rate of 99%. Half of the camp attendees identified as boys (46.9%) while the other half (51.2%) identified as girls. One camper identified as transgender and two did not specify their gender identity. Their ages ranged from 6 to 19 years old¹ with a mean age of 11 years old. The number of times campers attended CAC ranged from one to three times, with an average of at least two times.

Measure

In partnership with CAC, researchers developed a self-administered survey to capture spiritual outcomes of the camp program. The survey assessed three specific domains: *confession of salvation*, *connection to God*, and *spiritual practices*. To assess confession of salvation participants were asked whether or not they accepted “Jesus as their Savior²” while attending Camp Agape.

Three Likert scale items measured the connection to God domain by inquiring about whether participants perceived their time at camp to have helped them to “feel closer to God”, “know that God forgives” them, and “know that God loves” them. The last three Likert scale items assessed the spiritual practices domain by inquiring about whether their time at camp has helped them forgive others as well as whether their post-camp plans involve continuing to “talk to and listen to God”, and engage in “daily devotions³”. The response options for each item were symbolized by a 3-point continuum (*true, kind of true, and not true*). Each response option was presented above an emoticon that graphically depicted each response. The survey also inquired about participant age, gender identity, and the number of times they attended the CAC program.

Special attention was given to the language in the survey given the expectation that camp attendees as young as age 7 were part of the targeted sample. The final survey yielded a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score of 3.8 due to the need to use specific language that is commonly used during camp (i.e., Jesus as Savior)

¹ Although the Camp officially serves the ages 7 through 17, exceptions are occasionally made to accommodate sibling groups.

² Accepting Jesus as savior refers to the Christian belief that placing one’s faith in what Jesus did in submitting to death on a cross in order to pay for one’s sin debt restores one into relationship with God and saves one from eternal punishment in Hell.

³ This is a daily time set aside to devote oneself to bible study and prayer.

or used to describe specific activities (i.e., daily devotions). To establish face and content validity, CAC administrators reviewed and provided feedback on the draft survey. A Camp Pastor for Camp Agape and expert in faith-based camp programs also provided feedback on the survey.

To examine internal consistency reliability of scale items, Chronbach's alpha coefficients were computed. Table 1 presents the Chronbach's alpha results for the overall 6-item scale and the theoretically hypothesized subscales. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the researchers proceeded to use the two scales that resulted in an alpha of at least .65 (Connection to God subscale and overall Spiritual Assessment scale). Nunally and Bernstein (1994) suggests that values between .60 and .70 are acceptable alpha coefficients when conducting exploratory research.

Table 1

Internal Consistency Reliability of Scales and Subscales

Scale/Subscale	Scale Items	<i>n</i>	Alpha
Connection to God Subscale	My time at camp has helped me to feel closer to God.	161	.647
	My time at camp has helped me to know that God forgives me.		
	My time at camp has helped me to know that God loves me.		
Spiritual Practices Subscale	My time at camp has helped me to forgive others.	162	.501
	After camp, I plan to keep talking to and listening to God.		
	After camp, I plan to continue my daily devotions.		
Spiritual Assessment Scale	All 6 Items	161	.661

Institutional Review Board

The Camp Agape staff collected their own data using the survey developed in partnership with researchers. Subsequently, the Camp Agape administrators requested support from researchers in analyzing the survey data and interpreting the results. In February 2020, the University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

permitted the research team to access de-identified secondary survey data provided by CAC to analyze and disseminate for the purposes of the research project.

Analysis

Researchers used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS) version 26 to analyze the survey data. The data was cleaned, and univariate analyses were computed to analyze the demographic and scale items. Correlational coefficients were computed to examine the relationship between scale/subscale scores and continuous demographic variables (age and number of times attendees have been to camp). T-tests were computed to examine group differences in scale/subscale scores by gender identity (male vs. female).

Results

Nearly all of camp attendees (96%) reported confessing salvation by accepting Jesus as their Savior during their time at Camp Agape. All scale items yielded overwhelmingly positive responses. As depicted in Table 2, the vast majority of camp attendees selected a response of “true” when responding to the statements that attending Camp Agape has helped them to “feel closer to God” (91%), “forgive others” (85%), “know that God forgives” them (93%), and “know that God loves” them (96%). About 88% of attendees selected a response of “true” when responding to the statement that after camp, they “plan to keep talking to and listening to God”. Over half (63%) selected a response of “true” when responding to the statement that after camp, they “plan to continue with their daily devotion” activities of Bible reading and journaling as practiced at camp.

Relationships between Scale/Subscale Scores and Demographics

The correlational coefficient findings suggest a borderline, statistically significant relationship between the Spiritual Assessment scale scores and age. There is a weak, positive relationship between these two variables, [$r(160) = .152$, $p = .055$]. The t-tests yielded no statistically significant findings. The mean Spiritual Assessment scale scores and Connection to God subscale scores of the participants who identified as boys (2.85 and 2.94) were nearly identical to the attendees who identified as girls (2.86 and 2.93, respectively).

Table 2*Spiritual Assessment Items*

Item	n	%
My time at camp has helped me to feel closer to God (n=161)		
True	146	90.7
Kind of True	13	8.1
Not True	2	1.2
My time at camp has helped to know that God forgives me (n=162)		
True	150	92.6
Kind of True	10	6.2
Not True	2	1.2
My time at camp has helped me to forgive others (n=162)		
True	137	84.6
Kind of True	25	15.4
My time at camp has helped me to know that God loves me (n=162)		
True	155	95.7
Kind of True	7	4.3
After camp, I plan to keep talking to and listening to God (n=162)		
True	142	87.7
Kind of True	19	11.7
Not True	1	.6
After camp, I plan to continue my daily devotions (n=162)		
True	102	63
Kind of True	53	32.7
Not True	7	4.3

Discussion

This study sought to examine the spiritual outcomes of CAC, a faith-based camp program for children of incarcerated parents. The findings from this current study suggests that CAC is achieving its mission to help campers initiate spiritual growth. The vast majority of participants reported that their camp experience has helped them develop their spiritual identity through the acceptance of Jesus as their Savior. Likewise, the majority of participants reported that their camp experience has had a positive impact on their connection to God and engagement in spiritual practices. The findings of this study are consistent with the positive spiritual outcomes of faith-based camp programs reported in previous research (American Camping Association, 2005; Schnitker, Felke, Barrett, & Emmons, 2014). Findings also lend support to the literature on social ecological theory that suggests that a multi-faceted approach to promoting wellbeing and resilience is effective (Ungar, et al., 2013). In this case, a camping program designed to address the physical environment, relationships, emotional development, and spiritual development of campers resulted in enhanced spiritual outcomes which prior literature has demonstrated to be an important component of resilience.

It is also important to note that most participants reported a plan to continue to engage in spiritual practices after leaving camp. This is significant as the ultimate goal is for these practices to support continued spiritual development overtime which, in turn, supports overall wellbeing and resilience (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Smith, Webber, & DeFrain, 2013). Interestingly, among the spiritual practices assessed, participants were less committed to continuing with devotions (63%) compared to continuing to forgive others (85%) and talking to and listening to God (88%) post their camp experience. At CAC, devotions are completed in sessions with other participants and with support from the CAC mentors. Participants are also provided a workbook to take home to support engagement in ongoing devotionals, and Bibles are given to participants upon request. However, participants may have been less confident that someone at home would be willing, or able, to support them in engaging in routine devotions.

Although participants of all ages reported positive outcomes, the study found a borderline, statistically significant relationship between the Spiritual Assessment scale scores and participant age. More positive spiritual outcomes were associated with older participants. This is to be expected as adolescents are at a psychosocial developmental stage where the development of personal identity is the focus (Knight, 2017) along with a search for the meaning of life. Likewise, adolescents have increased capacity to understand such abstract concepts as spirituality (Kim & Esquivel, 2014).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although exploratory studies often involve less rigorous research designs, it is important to acknowledge that the use of a post-test only design limits the

control for any of the threats to internal validity (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Likewise, solely using participant perceptions of outcomes can limit the validity of the findings as they could be impacted by social desirability bias (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). There were also limitations with the survey questions. For example, of the participants who attended the camp more than once (which makes up 65% of the sample) and who reported accepting “Jesus as their Savior” at the camp, there was no question that inquired about which camp experience this decision occurred. Last, although most participants reported having the intent to continue spiritual practices after camp, there was no follow-up to determine if they followed through with their intentions.

It would be beneficial for future research on this topic to involve use of a baseline measure to assess spiritual identity and practices prior to camp participation. Having the ability to compare spiritual practices at baseline with post-camp practices can increase the validity of the study findings. Using a mixed-method approach may also be useful of the data through the collection of qualitative feedback from participants on their spiritual outcomes. This will provide more information that can help in understanding such questions as whether there are unexpected barriers to participants continuing with their daily devotions. It would also be beneficial to discern in future research whether there are specific camp activities that most contribute to spiritual development.

Future research should also examine the long-term impact of faith-based camp programs by engaging in post-camp follow-up surveys. Participants and their caregivers should be asked to complete follow-up surveys to gather data on involvement in spiritual practices and other proximal indicators of well-being over time. A longitudinal study that follows CAC participants through adulthood would also be useful in examining whether the CAC is carrying out their mission of disrupting the cycle of inter-generational incarceration.

Implications for CAC and Similar Camps

Given the positive spiritual outcomes of this study, Camp Agape California could serve as a model for faith-based camp programs for children of incarcerated parents. The program’s emphasis on creating a family-type environment focused on building relationships with the volunteers and their peers, while introducing the biblical themes of trust, hope, love and forgiveness, appears to be valuable to this population. Children of incarcerated parents have experienced a significant disruption in their relationship with their parents. Creating a safe, familial environment for this population to learn principles that support healing and resilience is beneficial. It is important that these children leave camp with the spiritual resources necessary to continue in the healing process and ultimately, support positive long-term outcomes. The results of this study suggest that CAC should continue with this approach and that other faith-based camps may want to explore the use of similar camp practices to support this population.

In conclusion, this study highlights the spiritual benefits of CAC for children of incarcerated parents. Given the relationship between spiritual development and resilience, this program offers spiritual resources that could potentially support positive long-term outcomes for this vulnerable population. Faith-based camps seeking to benefit this population may want to explore the program elements of CAC to support spiritual development.

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