

Strategies for using summer camps as a platform for Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility to youth



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Abstract

Youth development experts advocate that intentionally designed programs can facilitate a number of positive outcomes for youth (e.g., social skills, physical skills, positive self-identity). Summer camp is one unique setting that can provide opportunities for youth to learn these positive behaviours when school is not in session. The benefits of using a summer camp format as a platform for teaching youth development principles include the rich social setting, more opportunities to employ diverse learning methods, and freedom to tailor camp mission to community and school efforts. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe how the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 2011) can be integrated into a summer camp curriculum using one well-established summer camp program as a case example. The article describes Camp Play-A-Lot, a six week summer day camp in Chicago, Illinois that caters to ethnically and socioeconomically diverse families in the community. Specific TPSR program components from the summer camp experience will be identified and strategies for designing the curriculum, training staff, and evaluating the program will be offered. Several evidence-based strategies will also be described including connecting the camp mission to the curriculum, fostering relationship-building throughout camp activities, and structuring activities that integrate responsibility lessons into camp material. Reflections on overcoming challenges and strengthening program goals to align with the TPSR framework will also be discussed. Overall, this paper describes how camps can contribute to positive youth development through building their capacity for adopting the TPSR model youth development framework.

The idea that sport and physical activity can be used as tools to foster youth development has been gaining momentum in education. It has been well established in research that a key ingredient in the success of sport/physical activity programs with a youth development focus is the degree to which they have been developed and implemented with intentionality. Consequently, many physical educators, after school club coordinators, youth fitness leaders, and community-based program directors intentionally design programs to facilitate positive youth outcomes such as social skills, leadership, and responsibility. At educators' disposal are various instructional models that have been recognised as valuable methods for fostering positive youth outcomes. One such model is the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model (TPSR; Hellison, 2011) which uses sport and physical activity as

a vehicle to teach life skills with the ultimate goal of inspiring students to make use of those skills in other life contexts. Through this model, life skill lessons are integrated into the sport content rather than presented separately so students are receiving instruction that is both enjoyable and educational. For example, in teaching a lesson about executing a pass in soccer, the instructor could introduce the concept of goal setting by encouraging students to set a goal for how many assists they'd like to make. After the passing drill, the instructor could ask students to consider how goal setting can be useful in other areas of life such as at school with grades or at home with chores. Activities that structure life skill lessons integrated with sport lessons provide youth the opportunity to see the relevance of the material in their own lives.

Many physical education, after school, and community-based programs

have utilised the TPSR model in their curriculum, however in the United States (US) most of these programs do not have the benefit of being year round and students lose this structure and guidance in the summer months. Summer camp or school holiday recreation programs provide a unique setting that can provide opportunities for youth to learn these positive behaviours when school is not in session. There are several benefits of using a summer camp format as a platform for teaching youth development principles. Firstly, summer camp contains a rich social setting where learning outcomes are not tied to external performance standards or standardised academic achievement tests which are a major focus of the educational system in the US and many other countries. Summer camp curricula often revolve around meetings students' social and emotional needs through fun and engaging activities, which makes

the TPSR model an ideal method of instruction. Additionally, due to the resources available to summer camps, there are more opportunities to employ diverse learning methods such as adventure-based learning or experiential learning through field trips to locations like the local zoo, or other community landmarks. Finally, because summer camps are an extracurricular activity, program directors have the freedom to tailor the camp mission to align with other relevant areas in campers' environments such as community and school values. This delivers a holistic message to students which fits ideally with the TPSR model as youth are encouraged to make connections across their life domains (e.g., at school, home, or in their community). Thus, given the alignment of a summer camp setting with a youth development framework, the purpose of this paper is to describe how the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 2011) can be integrated into a summer camp curriculum using one well-established summer camp program as a case example.

Program description

Camp Play-A-Lot (PAL) is situated in the northern-most neighbourhood in Chicago, IL, USA, which is one of the most ethnically diverse locations in the city. Neighbourhood residents come from over 80 different countries and speak 40 different languages. Camp PAL was created six years ago to address the growing need of families looking for affordable and enriching summer programs in this part of the city. Before Camp PAL, offerings were limited to expensive, single activity camps (e.g., technology, art, sailing) catered to upper class families or federally subsidised camps catered to lower class families that had limited resources. Camp PAL sought to be a camp that attracted a variety of families from the area through an intentional focus on life skill building and through enjoyable activities such as sports, drama, music, art, and outdoor exploration. The



summer camp is hosted at a local public school and draws students from roughly a dozen schools across the city, both public and private. The camp runs during the day for six weeks in the summer and enrolls about 70 campers, ages 4 to 14 years old. Camp PAL is a tuition-based program, but roughly 20% of campers receive a full scholarship through the host school. Because of this and due to the diversity of the neighbourhood, the camp community draws students from different ethnic backgrounds, social classes, cultures, religions, and family structures. The diversity of camper backgrounds is a unique component of Camp PAL that is taken into consideration when developing activities that help facilitate appreciation of differences and contribute to the overall cohesion of the camp community.

Program design

The logistics and structure of Camp Play-A-Lot are designed to maximise opportunities for youth development. For most activities, campers are divided into four age groups, with two counsellors per group. Many of the counsellors are college students studying education, criminal justice, or counselling and all of the executive staff hold advanced degrees in

education. For the hiring process, annual searches focus on recruiting staff that aren't just 'good with kids' but also understand and buy into the camp mission of youth development. Staff training is extensive and includes sessions on youth development principles, specifically how to incorporate responsibility-based lessons into camp activities, as well as strategies for building a safe and fun environment. Staff training includes many methods of instruction such as role playing situations that may come up in camp, team building exercises to increase staff cohesion, and problem-based learning games that encourage staff to reach solutions using resources available to them. While staff training is developed with the primary goal of enhancing Camp PAL's experience to youth, there is the added goal of instilling in staff valuable skills (e.g., leadership, communication, social skills) that they can continue to develop throughout their careers in their respective fields. Staff are encouraged to make connections between camp content and their university studies, exploring how their camp roles can inform their intended career.

Several TPSR-based components are incorporated into Camp PAL's curriculum. Each of the six weeks of camp revolve around certain themes



related to youth development and the TPSR model (i.e., self-expression, teamwork, appreciation for diversity, leadership, responsibility) that Camp PAL selects based on alignment with the program mission. Counsellor-led discussions start each week in order to familiarise campers with the theme in the context of their lives. For example, a group discussion should include descriptions of what the theme word means, how it can be observed, and how it is relevant to different life domains (e.g., home, school, community). The weekly theme is also integrated into activities throughout the week. For example, during 'teamwork' week, an art project focuses on teamwork where campers are in small groups and tasked with

using recycled cardboard to build a freestanding object. However, the key teamwork component is that each teammate must have one distinct role that others may not do (e.g., drawing the blueprint design, using the scissors, dispensing the tape) and language development is encouraged through introducing formal career terms that encompass these jobs (e.g., architect, foreman, labourer). This further facilitates the goal of youth transferring skills to other contexts as connections are being made between the activity and real world examples. Activities are then concluded with short debrief questions such as, "What skills did your team use to achieve their goal?" or "What was most challenging in this activity?"

Beyond integrating weekly themes into activities, an incentive program was developed to further motivate campers to understand and practise the weekly theme. While the main focus of the TPSR model is to intrinsically motivate youth to develop and practise life skills, given the range of ages and personalities in the camp setting, this more traditional incentive program approach was integrated into the camp design to reinforce the importance of the weekly themes. Using this approach, campers and counsellors can nominate each other for earning a 'sticker' based on carrying out a behaviour that relates to the theme, and then stickers may be turned in at the Camp PAL 'prize shop' for small trinkets or toys. This teaches campers to see the relevance of the theme in real life and practise humility in recognising others for their good deeds. The expectations for earning a sticker differ per age group; for example, a five year old may earn a sticker during leadership week for helping a camper get up after a fall on the playground, while a 12 year old camper will need to exemplify leadership in a more advanced manner such as through suggesting a rule change to make a sports activity more fair. While a reward system can help increase motivation for youth, it is recommended that staff discuss with campers the importance of adapting these behaviours for personal growth rather than to achieve the outcomes of a reward.

Instructional strategies

Several other TPSR-based strategies that inform the Camp PAL curriculum draw from a research instrument called the Tool for Assessing Responsibility-based Education (TARE; Wright & Craig, 2011). The TARE (explained in more detail in Paul Wright's article in this issue) includes descriptions of nine teaching strategies based on the TPSR model that have proven effective in fostering life skills in youth development programs. The nine strategies are *modelling respect, setting expectations, providing opportunities for success, fostering social*





interaction, assigning management tasks, promoting leadership, giving choices and voices, giving students a role in assessment, and addressing the transfer of life skills. Camp PAL's curriculum makes intentional use of many of these strategies. For example, to promote campers having a *role in assessment* a daily 'Check in and Choice' activity time occurs towards the end of the camp day. During 'Check in and Choice' campers meet in groups with their counsellors and self-assess their behaviour for the day with respect to the weekly theme. In a discussion format, campers vote as a group to assign themselves a rating of one (needs improvement), two (satisfactory), or three (really good). When campers provide a rationale for their rating and come to an agreement as a group, their rating dictates the particular activity they will do for the 'Check in and Choice' rotation (one means a relaxed activity that allows everyone to reset and get focused on the weekly theme; two means a choice between two activities chosen by the counsellors, and three means the group selects any activity they want). The 'Check in and Choice' discussion is modified based on the age group of the campers and counsellors are expected to prompt camper reflections but foster a camper-led discussion where youth can take on leadership roles among their peers. Appointing a discussion 'captain' or having a talking stick are ways to help facilitate this activity in an organised manner.

Summer camp is also an ideal setting to foster *leadership, choice and voice, and social interaction* as ways to build social and personal responsibility. Older campers participate in camp elections for various leadership positions such as president, treasurer, equipment manager, peer mediator, and safety officer. Elections take place weekly and candidates must devise a short speech describing how their traits qualify them for their desired position. The elected individuals then work closely with camp staff to carry out their duties, participate in camp meetings, and communicate relevant material to the rest of camp. Campers are also given *choice and voice* in their activities through the morning 'U Pick' rotation. During 'U Pick', three consecutive activities run that campers can pick to attend, regardless of age. This has been especially beneficial for inter-age interactions as older campers naturally take on leadership roles with their younger peers.

Staff development

Finally, of utmost importance is the role staff have in fostering these youth development principles. Camp PAL's expectation is that counsellors participate in every activity with their campers, not as supervisors, but side-by-side. Counsellors participating in activities with campers enables them to model the weekly theme and foster other TPSR strategies. Beyond that, staff is challenged with minimising the power differential between camper

and counsellor so youth become inspired to solve problems and take on leadership roles on their own. For example, when a camper has a question about the rules of a game, a counsellor at Camp PAL might answer, "What do you think the rule should be? Should we vote on this as a group?" Counsellors shift power to campers by assigning them jobs to divide teams equally and make logistical decisions about activities (e.g., location, equipment needed, rules). This is an optimal strategy for empowering campers and making leadership an integral part of the camp experience.

Lessons learned

Regularly reflecting on how to overcome challenges and strengthen program goals is a necessary component of quality youth programs. While summer camps can be an ideal program setting for promoting youth development principles, their structure does introduce some challenges as well. One problem is the amount of time youth spend at camp, as campers can enrol for as little as one week or drop in and out throughout the summer. Due to the unique nature of the camp mission, brief exposures to the camp format can make it difficult for youth to adjust and feel comfortable in the program. One way Camp PAL has addressed this issue is to pair new campers up with seasoned campers so they have a 'buddy' to help them get acclimated.

Another challenge that can accompany a program with a youth development focus is getting staff to buy in to the framework. It requires significant planning and intentional implementation to integrate teaching principles into activities and there is likely the temptation for staff to cut corners in hopes that their job will take less effort. For instance, insufficient planning on their part may force staff to skip or abruptly end debrief discussions so that they can move onto their next activity on time. Staff are reminded that the debrief discussion is as important as the activity itself, so ample time

should be allowed for this to occur. Furthermore, it may be challenging for staff to shift their thinking about what healthy competition is. A youth development framework does not replace competition or the 'will to win', so staff are still encouraged to recognise performance accomplishments. However, they are challenged to do this in addition to recognising effort and other positive qualities in youth that don't result in winning. This may be difficult for staff to buy into if they were raised with a competitive mindset, or had coaches that subscribed to the 'winner-takes-all' attitude. However Camp PAL's mission requires staff to participate in significant training that involves 'adult development' as well, so sharing their personal mission for youth development and reflecting on their life experiences is an integral process in staff development. Overall, it's essential to make certain that the camp mission influences all aspects of camp from staff development,

to curriculum planning and implementation, to communication with campers, camp staff, parents and other community stakeholders.

Concluding remarks

This article offers insight on how summer camps and holiday programs can contribute to positive youth development through adopting the TPSR model. Several considerations and recommendations are discussed based on experiences from Camp Play-A-Lot, which specialises in life skill development for youth in Chicago. When incorporating the TPSR model into a camp curriculum, it is essential to consider how it connects with the program mission and utilises those components of the model that most foster program goals. Life skill building should be integrated into activities rather than completed separately. When recruiting staff, it is crucial to examine their philosophy on youth development, explore how

their approach connects with the camp mission and the staff member's ability to implement changes to their approaches to teaching and learning. Lastly, it is important to situate the camp or holiday program within the greater community context, appropriately addressing the needs of individual youth and maximising the unique features and differences found in the camp community. While these strategies were discussed in the context of summer programs, physical educators, fitness leaders, and teachers may consider the applicability of the TPSR model within their own context, as using sport and physical activity to build life skills has been a well-established approach across many learning domains.

References

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About the Author

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Strategies	Examples
Align curriculum with program mission	Develop a strong mission statement that is communicated to staff, parents, and youth Use the mission to inform all aspects of the program-staff training, curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation
Incorporate responsibility-based topics into program activities	Introduce weekly themes related to the program mission and TPSR model (leadership, effort, etc) and integrate them <u>into</u> activities, not separate from Have debrief discussions at the end of lessons or games so that youth can reflect on their behaviours related to the weekly theme
Maximise staff training by tapping into their personal youth development philosophy	Design teambuilding activities and icebreakers for staff training to build a safe and collaborative environment Recognise staff are developing their leadership and identity and encourage their reflection and input on important camp decisions
Foster social interaction to build an engaging atmosphere and teach social skills	Encourage counsellors to participate in all activities and share the decision-making process with youth for game related issues Provide a variety of activities for youth to engage in that set them up for success Encourage cross-age interactions to give opportunities for leadership
Give youth opportunities to demonstrate their personal opinions and autonomy within activities	Develop a rating system for youth to assess their group behaviour based on program values Provide incentives for exhibiting positive behaviours and encourage youth to recognise their peers instead of themselves

Table 1: Youth development instructional strategies for summer/school holiday programs