

The Science of Camp

Considered a significant building block in children's development, camp's impact on self-esteem is being measured – and improved - by Toronto non-profit Moorelands Community Services

June 27, 2011 (TORONTO, ONTARIO) – An innovative evidence-based approach is guiding Toronto-based Moorelands Community Services re-design of its 94 year-old Wilderness Camp. With a 10-year rebuilding process finally complete, many of the changes have been initiated by self-esteem studies and associated interviews conducted during reconstruction. While initial findings were surprising – improvements aren't a given - changes to programming, counsellor training and the physical structure are significantly improving self-esteem scores.

“Maximizing the unique self-esteem opportunity camp provides meant reviewing and assessing in a very systematic way the Camp's true impact on campers,” said Patricia Jacobs, Executive Director, Moorelands. “The research has been illuminating and has continually pointed out places where positive changes could be made - improvements we couldn't anticipate. Without a doubt, we're better equipped to build confidence, competence and character, key goals for all Moorelands' programs.”

Since 2000 self-esteem scores have improved in a statistically significant way, a gain wholly attributed to the Camp's redesign. From adding character education and a community code to restructuring cabin space and time, the Camp's look and feel have changed markedly. Conducted with the help of Ann Marie Sorenson, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto, the studies highlight the elements essential for Moorelands' children to thrive at camp. “Taking advantage of camp's numerous growth opportunities requires, first and foremost, a safe and secure environment,” said Jacobs. “While our environment was typical of most camps, it was clear fairly simple changes would create an atmosphere even more conducive to self-esteem gains.”

Redesigning the cabins and washrooms to meet gender-specific needs has been a key change. “Cabins and washrooms are important facilities and have a big impact on individual well-being,” said Jacobs. “While the changes may seem small, they've been pivotal to helping cultivate a sense of security.” Specifically, girls now have cabins with a common area for gathering and modern washrooms. Privacy, a top concern for boys, has been the main focus of the boys' facilities redesign.

Better equipping counsellors to meet the specific needs of each gender was another key improvement. “We didn't realize it but boys have more anxiety coming to camp than girls,” said Jacobs. “So now male leadership training focuses more on nurturing, supporting and communicating, helpful strategies for decreasing anxiety.” Programming changes - such as adding gender-specific and non-athletic activities – are also reducing anxiety.

Since 2000 the camp has been totally rebuilt, beginning with the award-winning dining hall built by Shim-Sutcliffe Architects and finishing with the “Hub” - the Camp’s recreation facility - and sports field. “2011 marks a new chapter in the history of Moorelands’ Wilderness Camp. Not only has the Camp undergone a huge physical restructuring but thanks to the guidance provided by careful research, the Camp is delivering, better than ever before, on its commitment to make a positive and measureable difference in the lives of children.”

Founded in 1912, Moorelands is a Toronto-based non-profit helping children living in poverty. Focused on bridging the opportunity gap, Moorelands programs are aimed at helping children to develop confidence, competence and character. Its programs include Baby Bundles, Christmas Sharing, After-school programs, the Wilderness Camp, Summer Day Camps and Youth Leadership programs.

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