K-STATE Research and Extension

Making a Difference

2012–2013

Youth Counselor Training Improves Skill Level at 2013 Kansas 4-H Camps

The Situation

The Kansas 4-H camping program has been conducted at the Rock Springs 4-H Center since 1946. Local unit preparation of camp counselors had varied greatly: Some provided no pre-camp experience, others chose a simple orientation, while still others required a pre-camp course. Training targeted to both inexperienced and returning 4-H camp counselors was needed to equip them with the skills to supervise and meet the developmental needs of youths aged 7–13.

What We Did

A common Kansas 4-H Camp Counselor Training Curriculum was developed to help teens master specific leadership and communication skills.

Counselor training uses the Kansas 4-H Life Skills — positive self-concept, inquiring mind, concern for the community, healthy interpersonal relationships, and sound decision-making — and the 5 C's — competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring for others. Counseling training increases the quality of the residential camping experience by helping the campers have a safe and fun experience.

Deryl Waldren and Pam Van Horn, both 4-H Youth Development specialists, worked with camp counselor training chairs to evaluate outcomes in five of the eight 2013 training sessions: Great Northwest, Heart of Kansas, Pioneer Trails, Purple Power Pack, and Sunny Hills. The groups represent more than 80 Kansas counties.

During the 2013 residential camps, 428 teens served as counselors to children. They participated in pre-camp training and completed a *Retrospective Post- then Pre- Evaluation* to measure the perceived knowledge and attitudes acquired. Near the end of each camp, the counselors were administered a *Post-Camp (Post-Application)* survey to measure skill and behavior mastery in their roles.

Outcomes

Two hundred seventy-four counselors (64%) responded to the surveys. Mean scores increased for all 14 items included in the pre-training perceptions, both immediately after training and near the end of camp. Eight of the 14 training topics increased significantly:

1) Life skills
2) Ages and stages
3) Effective team membership
4) Transition techniques
5) Camper adjustment
6) Risk management
7) Cooperative problem-solving with supervisors
8) Leadership skills

Two open-ended questions were asked: "*What do you believe is the most valuable thing you gained from being a 4-H Camp counselo*r?" The responses aggregated around two themes: *leadership* and words such as *patience, skills,* and *responsibility*. These ideas seem to focus around the counselor's impacts on campers and how interaction with campers strengthened related skills and behaviors.

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The second open-ended question:
"*What is one specific aspect or skill associated with being a 4-H Camp Counselor you would improve or change if you were a camp counselor next year?*"
These responses — *communication, organized activities,* and *group management* —emphasized personal and organizational themes.

Mean scores for evaluations given near the end of camp were greater than those pre-training. All post-training and post-camp scores showed respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *"I was a self-motivated counselor."*

Conclusions

The preparation of 4-H Camp Counselors through participation in a standardized Pre-Camp training course is a positive experience that significantly increases the teenagers' knowledge of:

1) Positive Youth Development Life Skills
2) Pre-Adult Growth and Development Stages
3) Effective Team Membership
4) Transition Techniques for 4-H Camp
5) Camper Adjustment to the Residential Camp Environment (physical and social)
6) Risk Management
7) Cooperative Problem Solving with Adult Supervisors
8) General Leadership Skills

Although mean scores for the eight skills and behaviors diminished in the post-camp survey, they did not fall below pre-training scores.

Success Stories

Comments from camp counselors included these:

- I learned how to deal with conflict better and learned to be more outgoing.
- I learned about the leadership and patience balance that keeps everyone safe, yet still allows for fun.
- I gained the ability to lead young children, which I'll use as a teacher.
- I learned how to understand that not everyone does things the same way.
- I learned how to effectively work with others: campers, counselors, and agents.
- I learned how to communicate better with younger kids (campers), counselors, and agents.
- It helped me have more self-confidence because I realized I was a role model, and these girls thought I was amazing.
- I learned how to handle different personalities and how to get them to work together.

Contact

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