

DECODING THE MAGIC OF CAMP:



In an era of rising youth mental health concerns and social disconnection, Farm & Wilderness presents a compelling case for the transformative power of immersive, device-free, nature-based summer camp experiences in fostering positive youth development.

Farm & Wilderness (F&W), an organization that has operated summer camps in central Vermont for 85 years, has conducted research to understand and codify the impact of their programs on youth development. Rooted in Quaker philosophy and a commitment to experiential learning, F&W camps have long focused on nurturing the whole child. F&W's 2024 report, "[Decoding the Magic of Camp](#)," presents key findings and insights from their research, shedding light on how intentional camp experiences can address critical gaps in youth development.

Key Impact Areas Observed

The research conducted by the F&W team revealed that F&W camps are helping campers develop in three key impact areas:

SELF-EFFICACY	COMMUNITY MINDEDNESS	AUTHENTIC IDENTITY
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Self-Efficacy

F&W camps provide diverse skill-building activities that boost campers' confidence and belief in their abilities (self-efficacy). Research shows self-efficacy influences how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave, affecting both immediate and long-term development, especially during adolescence.

- 71-87% of campers saw skill development as a key aspect of their summer camp experience.
- F&W camps' hands-on experiences, ranging from fire building to construction projects, push campers beyond their comfort zones and help them build confidence in real-world problem-solving.
- Campers reported increased independence, resilience, and willingness to try new things.



IN PRACTICE...

During multi-day backpacking trips at F&W's Saltash Mountain camp, campers build self-efficacy through comprehensive trip preparation, unpacking, restocking, and taking on leadership roles.

Community Mindedness

F&W's Quaker-inspired approach emphasizes communal effort and shared responsibility, countering trends of social isolation, and enhancing their understanding of interpersonal relationships, empathy, and cooperation. Key areas of focus include cultivating a culture of appreciation and acknowledgment, establishing communal norms, and embedding ideas of contribution and communal effort into all camp activities.

- 86% of campers at F&W's Tamarack Farm camp noted community development as important to their experience.
- Across camps, practices like daily appreciation rituals, collaborative projects, and camper-led town meetings foster strong community bonds and develop crucial interpersonal skills.
- Parents have reported noticeable improvements in their children's sense of responsibility and willingness to contribute at home.

IN PRACTICE...

At F&W's Flying Cloud and Red Spruce Grove camps, campers perform tasks that are essential to the camp community's functioning and well-being, such as pumping water and gathering firewood. Focusing on these essential tasks creates a culture of authentic interdependence, where campers' work is purposeful and contributory.



Authentic Identity

In a world where young people face intense pressure to conform, F&W provides tools for exploring individual and social identities in a supportive environment. F&W camps encourage campers to engage in ongoing reflection on their evolving identities and their interactions with others and the natural world.

- 1 in 5 campers across all F&W overnight camps identified identity development as an important part of their experience.
- F&W uses a progressive framework to guide age-appropriate learning about social identities and diversity, equipping campers to navigate complex social dynamics.
- Campers reported increased self-awareness, empathy, and confidence in expressing their authentic selves.



IN PRACTICE...

At F&W's Tamarack Farm camp, teen campers (ages 15-17) examine the multi-faceted nature of identity, with a heavy emphasis on critical thinking and action. They explore relationships between identity and power, discuss how those play out at camp and in other social contexts, and identify ways they personally and collectively can evolve to meet the needs of the diverse identities in their community.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and observations. The data and research that inform the findings in this report are drawn from:

- Anecdotal interviews and family feedback from F&W camps (2021-2023)
- Camp wide survey of 436 campers and staff members (2023)
- Literature review of research on camps and youth development

F&W used the Appreciative Inquiry method for this research, focusing on strengths and positive experiences to uncover the most impactful elements of their programs.

Implications

F&W's approach demonstrates the unique role summer camps can play in youth development. The findings suggest ways camps, schools, and other youth organizations can promote self-efficacy, community mindedness, and authentic identity development, potentially addressing broader societal challenges facing today's youth.

Future Direction

As F&W celebrates its 85th summer in 2024, it aims to continue refining its approach and share transferable lessons with other youth-serving organizations. By disseminating these insights, F&W hopes to contribute to a broader movement toward more holistic, empowering approaches to youth development in an increasingly complex world.

