



DECODING THE **MAGIC** OF CAMP:

Designing for Self-Efficacy,
Community Mindedness, and Identity

A REPORT BY FARM & WILDERNESS
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INTRODUCTION

Today's youth face mounting challenges and pressure in many facets of their lives, such as identity, belonging, mental health, resilience, and connectedness. Educational institutions, families, policymakers, and non-profit organizations have been at the forefront, responding to these escalating concerns through various initiatives with varying degrees of success. Summer camps have witnessed parallel transformations in their campers and have taken steps to address these changes. This includes Farm & Wilderness (F&W), whose camps, nestled in the heart of central Vermont, have nurtured and supported children and teenagers since 1939, fostering their growth and development.

Camp alumni and parents often call the F&W experience “transformational,” sharing that attending camp has helped them navigate the challenges and pressures they face in their lives beyond camp. Some call it “camp magic.” To F&W, it is both an art and a science –

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a combination of unique factors that have had a demonstrable, positive impact on the lives of campers. Over the past four years, F&W's leaders have worked thoughtfully and intentionally to better understand this combination of factors. While summer camps are not known to collect extensive program data, F&W's leadership felt it was a valuable use of time and resources to identify and build on past successes, and share lessons learned with peers in the camp sector and beyond.

This report summarizes the research and data that have come out of this multi-year project. It specifically focuses on how F&W camps are helping campers develop in three “impact areas:” self-efficacy, community mindedness, and authentic identity. The report also shares the steps F&W camps are taking to support youth in these challenging times and offers insights and ideas to support other organizations seeking to do the same.

The research and implications shared in this report build on the current dialogue among researchers, families, educators, and others tackling the complex task of nurturing and developing today's youth in an increasingly uncertain world. The F&W story offers insights regarding youth development and well-being, outdoor education, experiential learning, and community building for a wide and diverse audience.

Much has changed since Ken and Susan Webb founded F&W camps in 1939. In a constantly evolving world, F&W's stories of impact serve as a testament to the power of intentional programmatic choices grounded in clear values — even in challenging times — to empower the next generation.

As F&W marks the opening of its 85th summer in 2024, the F&W leaders are thrilled to share the stories, data, and ideas included in this report.



FARM & WILDERNESS PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Farm & Wilderness (F&W) summer camps were founded by Ken and Susan Webb in 1939. Rooted in Quaker philosophy, F&W summer camps have been consistently focused on teaching campers timeless skills and kindling the spirit within through a combination of joyful play, purposeful work, and rugged outdoor living.

F&W camps have a strong focus on experiential, outdoor learning. Grounded in the values of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equity, and sustainability, F&W camps have always had at their heart the connection to others, and to the surrounding land, water, and wildlife.

Aligned with its model, F&W offers two types of camp programs:

- **Generalist programs** provide a wide range of skill development and programmatic areas for campers
- **Specialized programs** provide a limited, much more intensive set of programmatic areas for campers to explore.

In 2023, when much of the data for this report was collected, F&W operated a total of seven different camps in Plymouth and Mount Holly, Vermont. This included six overnight camps, which each offered two 3-week sessions, and one day camp, which ran one 1-week and three 2-week sessions. During the summer of 2023, 813 campers ages 4-17 participated in F&W camps. The specific details of each camp are outlined on the following page.



FARM & WILDERNESS CAMPS IN 2023

CAMP NAME	AGES	CAMP FOCUS	CAMPERS IN 2023*
Generalist Programs			
Barn Day Camp	All genders; ages 4-10	Focuses on nurturing early childhood development through playful exploration of nature and farm life.	249
Firefly Song	Girls & non-binary; ages 9-14	Concentrates on empowering campers through wilderness experiences and skill-building activities.	210
Timberlake	Boys & non-binary; ages 9-14	Emphasizes traditional outdoor skills, wilderness trips, and fostering a sense of community.	183
Specialized Programs			
Tamarack Farm	All genders; ages 15-17	Offers leadership development and community building through farm work, carpentry, and sustainability projects.	68
Saltash Mountain	All genders; ages 14-17	Provides adventure-based outdoor backpacking trips emphasizing leadership and independence.	49
Flying Cloud	Boys & non-binary; ages 11-14	Specializes in primitive skills, small community, and cultivating a deep connection with nature.	42
Red Spruce Grove	Girls & non-binary; ages 11-14	Focuses on wilderness living skills and creating a nurturing, inclusive community in a rustic setting.	12

TOTAL CAMPERS IN 2023: 813

* This table represents the total number of unique campers that attended F&W camps during the summer of 2023. During the period of study, many campers attended more than one session.

RESEARCH METHODS

The goal of F&W camps is to provide an open and affirming space for children and staff, where they feel welcomed for who they are, not pressured to be something else. While all of F&W's camps are rooted in the same core values, the way those values are integrated into each camp's programming varies, and thus, the impact on campers and their development varies as well.

Over the past several years, each of F&W's seven camps has been going through a process of identifying and codifying its unique "developmental outcomes" — the aspects of the F&W camp experience that have been particularly impactful on campers' development. This process has included collecting input from multiple sources. For the purposes of this report, the following inputs were used:

Camper, Staff, and Family Feedback
Feedback from campers, staff and families came in two different forms:

- **Anecdotal interviews and family feedback:** In 2021, F&W's leaders began the process of identifying developmental outcomes by collecting information through conversations and interviews with past campers, and noticing trends that emerged. F&W also began collecting parent feedback on programming through an annual family survey, which offered additional insights.

- **Camp-wide survey:** In 2023, F&W expanded its research by launching a camp-wide survey to seek input from 2023 campers at the conclusion of their camp session about the outcomes of their camp experience. This was a three-question, open-ended survey sent to all campers from the six overnight camps, and to counselors from the Barn Day Camp (who were surveyed in lieu of their young campers). In total, this survey captured responses from 436 individuals — 401 campers (a majority of overnight campers) and 35 Barn Day Camp staff members. The questions asked of all participants were:

1. What were campers most proud of accomplishing/ doing this summer?
2. What would campers tell others about their time here this summer?
3. What would campers deem most impactful or meaningful about this summer?

Literature Review

After collecting these data, the F&W team conducted a literature review to create a framework that could help contextualize survey and research findings about the camp's developmental outcomes. A review of existing literature on youth development helped the F&W team confirm the developmental outcomes for each camp and find common threads in the data. These common threads became unifying themes called "impact areas."



THE VALUE OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY RESEARCH

F&W leaders employed the Appreciative Inquiry method for this research. As a research method, Appreciative Inquiry is utilized for its strengths-based, participatory approach. It involves collecting and analyzing data through positive questioning and dialogue, helping uncover an organization's or community's best qualities and potential. This method emphasizes co-creating knowledge and solutions, steering away from traditional deficit-focused research. It has been used in all kinds of settings: companies, schools, congregations, and non-profit organizations.

IMPACT AREAS OBSERVED

The “impact areas” are the areas where F&W campers across all F&W camps reported the program’s most transformational effects. The three impact areas for F&W are: self-efficacy, community mindedness, and authentic identity. The following sections detail the findings for each of these impact areas and discuss insights that can be gleaned from this research for other summer camps and organizations working to support youth development.

Each F&W camp has a distinct set of developmental outcomes that emerged from the camp’s conversations and surveys, and a literature review helped reveal the three unifying themes (impact areas) that bring them all together. This table maps each set of F&W camp outcomes to the three impact areas that emerged during the literature review.

CAMP NAME	CAMP DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES ALIGNED WITH EACH IMPACT AREA		
	Self-Efficacy	Community Mindedness	Authentic Identity
Barn Day Camp	Independence	Connection	Wonder
Timberlake	Audacity	Interdependence	Sincerity
Firefly Song	Agency	Interdependence	Identity
Flying Cloud	Responsibility	Appreciation	Courage
Red Spruce Grove	Independence	Accountability	Bravery
Saltash Mountain	Creativity	Community	Courage
Tamarack Farm	Growth	Belonging	Leadership

IMPACT AREA #1: SELF-EFFICACY

F&W camps are grounded in the belief that all humans are inherently worthy and are able to tap into their greatness. The camps have long focused on building skills that not only help campers develop technical aptitude, but also build their confidence, motivation, and belief in their own abilities (also known as self-efficacy).

Self-Efficacy's Immediate and Long-Lasting Positive Impacts

As described in the 2012 paper "Self-Efficacy as a Positive Youth Development Construct: A Conceptual Review," self-efficacy can be defined as "one's beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to achieve given results." (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2012) Tsang, Hui, & Law note that this belief influences how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave in various situations. They also examine existing research on the way self-efficacy influences immediate and long-term development, particularly during adolescence. They found that:

"There are numerous research studies showing that self-efficacy beliefs help determine both task performance (whether people choose to attempt certain tasks, how they attempt the tasks) and coping (how people tackle challenges arising from trying to complete the task, the degree of anxiety and frustration they experience in the process). In the case of

adolescents, Pajares and Urdan [29] showed that self-efficacy predicts academic areas and levels, while Brown and Lent [30] identified that self-efficacy predicts students' college major and career choices." (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2012)

Summer camp experiences, particularly those centered around experiential learning like F&W camps, have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on youth development. According to the American Camp Association's National Camp Impact Study:

"Having a high-quality camp experience at the start of the study was connected to improved outcomes in the short-term and several years after camp attendance, with the most enduring effects emerging for affinity for nature, willingness to try new things, grit, and child friendships. For most outcomes, these relationships were driven by significant short-term effects that carried forward over time. In other words, improvements in youth outcomes were evident the Fall after camp, rather than emerging gradually. This suggests that positive experiences at camp give youth a boost in skills, perhaps akin to an intervention." (American Camp Association, 2023)

Self-Efficacy at F&W Camps

All F&W camps have a variety of skill-building activities designed to promote self-efficacy. This includes outdoor living skills such as fire building, along with farming, gardening, swimming, rock climbing, backpacking, and skills related to creative and performing arts. These activities are all intentionally integrated into camp curriculum to not only support mastery of the skills themselves, but also to build campers' belief in themselves and their capabilities and create transformative moments that influence their self-efficacy. F&W's survey revealed campers' and counselors' personal perspectives on this:

"This summer, I am proud of working my butt off at the farm - Weeding, mucking, milking, etc. So many of Tamarack Farm's (TF) resources come from the farm. I'm glad I could be a part of that."
- Tamarack Farm camper

"It's really meaningful when campers accomplish things using a hammer at age 4, milking a goat at age 6, passing a knife test at age 8." - Barn Day Camp Counselor

Promoting self-efficacy through skill development is a focus of both the generalist and specialized programs at F&W camps. At generalist camps, campers develop skills by participating in a wide variety of activities that are structured both to promote mastery and also encourage exploration. Specialized camps provide an environment intensely focused on mastering specific outdoor skills through sustained immersion in select areas.



Skill Development in Generalist Programs

The generalist camp programs at F&W camps are generally larger and offer a diverse range of activities that allow campers to explore multiple areas. Campers progress through different levels of mastery using both structured and exploratory curricula. For example, Firefly Song and Timberlake feature a planned progression of skills and achievements campers can pursue. The schedules are designed to allow for a high degree of camper agency, enabling them to either broaden their skill set across many areas or delve deeply into a specific one. These camps provide ample opportunities for exploration alongside opportunities to work toward skill mastery, which often extend over multiple summers and camps.



Many campers at F&W's generalist camps reported that skill development was an important part of their camp experience, as well as a source of pride:

Of 297 campers surveyed from F&W generalist camps,

71%

cited skill development as a key aspect of their summer experience.

Among campers at Firefly Song,

74%

of those who valued skill development highlighted it as a source of pride or meaningfulness.

At Barn Day Camp,

89%

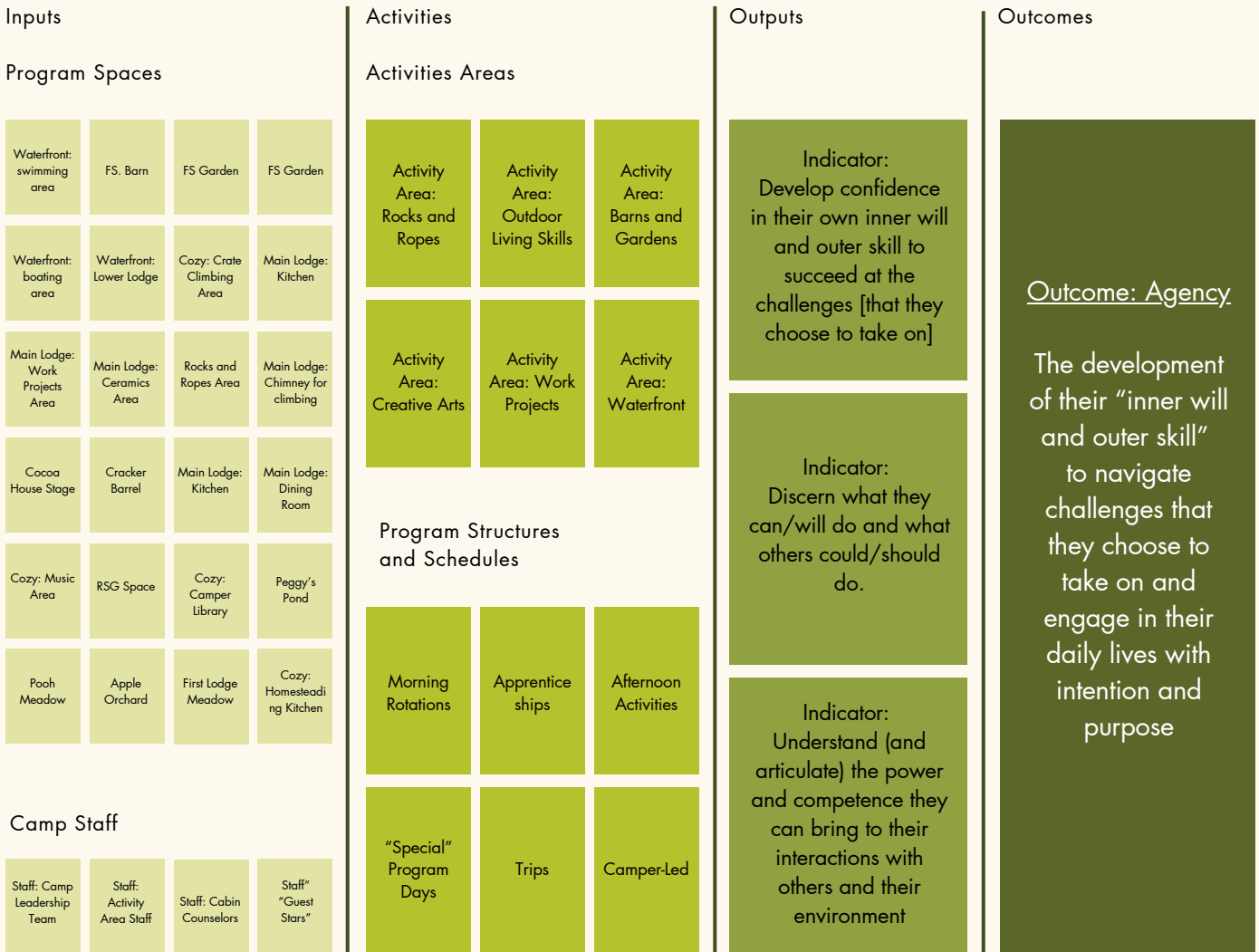
of staff reflections emphasized skill development as crucial to their campers' experience.

Self-Efficacy in Practice at Firefly Song

At Firefly Song, staff have identified agency as a key developmental outcome they seek for campers — an outcome that is highly aligned with self-efficacy. The team works to cultivate in each camper “the development of their ‘inner will and outer skill’ to navigate challenges that they choose to take on and engage in their daily lives with intention and purpose.”

The Firefly Song Logic Model displayed below articulates a series of inputs (such as program spaces and camp staff), activities (including program elements and types) and outputs (indicators of successful development) that go into achieving this developmental outcome. This kind of intentional program design is common at F&W camps.

Firefly Song - Logic Model





LEARNING FROM CHALLENGES

Success and failure experiences, coping strategies, and positive reappraisal are fundamental to skill development that builds self-efficacy, and are integral components of a transformative camp experience. Jonathan Haidt's recent book *The Anxious Generation* notes that "As children become more competent, they become increasingly more intrigued by some of the things that frightened them" (Haidt, 2024). Each camp's focus on skills development inherently creates the conditions for campers to engage in increasingly challenging activities and situations, drawing on the experience they gained in mastering past activities.

F&W believes that summer camp is a good place to fail because it equips campers with skills to bounce back in other areas of their life. Camp can help young people turn tough situations into learning experiences. Wilson and Sibthorp give the example of how "camp counselors might engage in coaching during an emotional experience which involves validating or labeling their camper's negative emotions and teaching effective coping strategies" (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2017). Staff at F&W camps are trained to help youth manage and overcome difficulties instead of avoiding them, teaching them skills to handle emotions or solve problems and keep going, even when things get tough.

Immersive Learning Experiences Through Specialized Programs

The specialized camps at F&W, though smaller, provide an environment intensely focused on mastering specific outdoor skills through sustained immersion in select areas. Instead of engaging in a wide range of activities, campers are encouraged and, at times, required to dedicate their entire summer to one specific area of focus. Each area is designed with challenges that push campers beyond their comfort zones and support them as they navigate real impacts and consequences – approaching true mastery they can easily transfer to other aspects of their lives. This concentrated approach manifests in various forms, from intentional living practices and extended overnight trips to session-long deep dives into a single activity area. For example:



- **Primitive Learning Environment:** Campers in the Flying Cloud and Red Spruce Grove programs spend the bulk of the summer in temporary living structures, learning to live close to the earth. This experience immerses campers in primitive living and helps them rapidly master outdoor living skills, such as identifying wild edibles and using natural materials.
- **Backpacking Trips:** In the Saltash Mountain program, multi-day backpacking trips are the principal means for skill development and mastery. Campers engage in comprehensive trip preparation and take on leadership roles in their sessions. They also help design and then participate in extensive post-trip debriefs and are responsible for unpacking and restocking.
- **Focused Skill Building and Leadership:** The Tamarack Farm program provides teenagers with session-long immersions in diverse activity areas, enabling them to develop mastery in skills that may prepare them for summer staff roles. These sessions culminate in showcases of completed work, like final reveals of entirely camper-led cabin construction projects, and the awarding of certifications, like lifeguarding certifications, emphasizing the depth and breadth of their learning experience.

Each area is designed with challenges that push campers beyond their comfort zones and support them as they navigate real impacts and consequences



Survey data from F&W's specialized camps indicate that campers see skill development as important to their experience at camp:

Of 104 campers surveyed from F&W's specialized camps,

87%

cited skill development as a key aspect of their summer experience.

Among campers at Tamarack Farm,

1 in 2

who valued skill development highlighted it as a source of pride.

Among campers at Saltash Mountain who noted the the camp's backpacking trips as valuable,

82%

specifically noted it as a source of great pride or personal impact.

Purposeful skill development, supported by knowledgeable staff and an intentional curriculum, is central to the work at F&W camps, and demonstrates the unique role summer camps can play in promoting self-efficacy. Research suggests building self-efficacy is one of the most accessible ways to empower campers, and investing in dynamic program structures to offer these experiences proves worthwhile; the impacts are immediate and uniquely valuable.

INTENTIONAL FOCUS ON DURABLE AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

The Minerva Project has conducted extensive research on near and far transfer, which centers around developing a curriculum that imparts durable, transferable skills, preparing learners for an uncertain and interdisciplinary world. Their approach to curriculum design is skill-based, structured to facilitate skill transfer across various disciplines, and integrates learning experiences for deeper engagement. The curriculum intentionally interweaves durable skills applicable across multiple disciplines, transferable to new contexts, and likely to remain relevant as technology and society evolve (Minerva Project, n.d.).

F&W has modeled its programming such that it helps campers build skills that are relevant for the job at hand – being a camper – while also building awareness that those skills (and what it takes to learn them) are transferable to different contexts.



IMPACT AREA #2: COMMUNITY MINDEDNESS

F&W camps equip campers with the mindsets and skills necessary for building and sustaining communities. This part of the experience enhances their understanding of interpersonal relationships, empathy, and cooperation, preparing them to value communal efforts and recognize their unique contributions within various communities they become part of — their cabin, their lodge, their trip group, their camp.

Summer Camp's Unique Role in Building Community Mindedness

The distinct “third place” aspect of camp, being neither home nor school, amplifies this impact. Ingrid Hale’s “Understanding the Effectiveness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives at Youth Summer Camps” highlights the importance of community development skills in youth, and the valuable role of summer camp experiences in this effort:

“Research reveals that the summer camp experience can be a beneficial experience for youth, no matter their background, in terms of their positive youth development... Campers learn to take risks, explore new activities outside of their comfort zones, live independently from their parents, and cohabitate with and form lifelong friendships with peers (most often, strangers) from diverse backgrounds (Browne et al, 2019). However, all of this might not occur unless the camp

community is considered by its inhabitants as safe, supportive, and inclusive which is critical in fostering positive youth development.” (Hale, 2021)

Further, opportunities for communal effort play a critical role in how young people learn to navigate different social identities and relationships. Jodi B. Dworkin’s research into the role “growth experiences” can play in developing adolescents notes that youth articulated using youth activities to learn about teamwork and develop social skills.

“Issues of respect for leaders, getting along with those different than you, learning how different individuals and their personalities affect the group, and the benefits of working together were mentioned as important dimensions of their experience in activities. Youth were clearly not only aware of these numerous aspects of group dynamics, but also how these dynamics impacted the operation or accomplishment of the group.” (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003)

Group settings such as summer camp allow campers the chance to become part of group discussions and practice group decision-making. This not only impacts their ability to be community-minded members of their group, but also deepens their understanding of themselves.

Community Mindedness at F&W Camps

F&W camps, with roots in Quaker philosophy, underscore the importance of community. Quaker practice deeply values the concept of community, evident in the commitment to mutual obligations and relationships, emphasizing sharing and inclusivity. Historically, Quakers have demonstrated this value through involvement in social causes such as mental health and prison reform, social inclusion, fair trade, and environmental health.

F&W camps take a values-led approach to teach intentional community mindedness through cultivating appreciation and acknowledgment, fostering community building and norm crafting, and contribution and communal effort. Campers have shared their personal reflections on this:

“I am proud of myself for working hard and being cooperative with chores in my community service because it feels really good to help others.”

-Flying Cloud camper

“When I am at F&W, I feel compelled to help my community members more than any other space. I’ve stepped up and embodied ‘work is love made visible’ on chores, construction, and almost all facets of all life at TF.”

- Tamarack Farm camper

From social media to political polarization and other dividing forces, youth today face a great deal of pressure that can make community mindedness challenging. The commitment of F&W camps to build intentional and cooperative community is among the camps’ most important work.



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Cultivating Appreciation and Acknowledgment

Each F&W camp cultivates a culture of appreciation and acknowledgment. This culture manifests through various expressions, from grand public celebrations to simple daily acts of gratitude. This is particularly evident in the Flying Cloud and Red Spruce Grove programs, where daily appreciation rituals significantly strengthen community bonds and enhance campers' abilities to articulate gratitude and comprehend its deeper implications.

Flying Cloud builds this culture by hosting grand celebrations multiple times a session, publicly honoring each community member. These events transform routine gratitude into a meaningful rite of passage that deeply connects campers to an enduring community. Each celebration requires a substantial collective effort, uniting the camp in a largely camper-driven experience. This practice celebrates individuals and strengthens communal bonds.

The impact of these experiences on campers is evident in the survey data from Flying Cloud's 2023 summer camp:

90%

of the campers surveyed at Flying Cloud note these appreciation practices, in particular their public celebration of their community members, as an important part of their summer camp experience.

79%

highlight it as something they take pride in or find uniquely meaningful.





Past surveys and interviews from F&W campers revealed several quotes with themes of mindfulness and reflection as it relates to appreciation.

"At [Red Spruce Grove], we embraced a slower pace, taking moments to appreciate the morning dew on ferns and bask in the midsummer sun." – Red Spruce Grove Camper, 2019

"Being honored at camp was transformative. Hearing others express what I meant to them inspired me to embody those traits more fully, fundamentally shaping me into a better person." – Flying Cloud Camper, 2016

The structured yet novel appreciation practices at Flying Cloud and Red Spruce Grove are designed to help campers discover new aspects of themselves as well as how to show gratitude frequently and sincerely toward others. Based on feedback from campers, this appears to be having an impact.

PRIORITIZING PERSON-TO-PERSON INTERACTION

The focus on person-to-person interaction at F&W camps is a deliberate strategy to build community mindedness. As Jonathan Haidt describes in his book *The Anxious Generation*, “attunement (person to person interaction) forms the foundation for later emotional regulation.” He shares that “face to face, physical interactions and rituals are a deep ancient and underappreciated part of human evolution. Adults enjoy them, and children need them for healthy development” (Haidt, 2024). Moments focused on celebrating each other as a community, adds to one’s feeling of belonging to a community and celebrating others.

Fostering Community Building and Norm Crafting

Across all F&W programs, campers actively work to establish communal norms, starting with empathetic communication and collaborative activities for the youngest at Barn Day Camp. This foundation evolves through F&W's programs and culminates at Tamarack Farm, where older campers independently lead camper-driven Town Meetings, discussing and reaching consensus on communal issues. This progression from foundational skills to self-led application equips campers with vital life skills for positive community impact that will stick with them well into adulthood. For example, 2023 camper surveys from Tamarack Farm reveal that:

86%

of surveyed Tamarack Farm campers noted that community development moments were important to their camp experience. These included formal and informal opportunities to build new relationships, deepen understanding across identities, and collaborate on/ around community challenges.

Contribution and Communal Effort

The concepts of contribution and communal effort are embedded in all camp activities at F&W camps, from chores to large-scale projects. Rooted in Quaker values, these practices focus programming on collaboration over competition, distinguishing F&W from many other summer camps.

Activities range in type. They include essential tasks at Flying Cloud and Red Spruce Grove like pumping water and gathering firewood. They also include larger projects at Firefly Song, Timberlake, and Tamarack Farm like building giant celebratory bonfires or constructing new camp furnishings and structures — from folding tables and benches to camper cabins, barns, and program buildings. These practices instill a sense of pride and ownership in campers as they see their efforts directly contributing to the community's well-being, a unique aspect of F&W's educational approach.

Communal effort is woven into the fabric of daily life at camp through activities and chores shared by all campers and staff. This includes stocking compost toilets with sawdust, washing dishes, preparing meals, caring for farm animals and crops, tidying up activity areas such as workshops, camper kitchens, and art studios, as well as maintaining a wide range of equipment — from axes and camp stoves to paintbrushes. Collaborative tasks like these are more than just work; they embody the principle that “Work is love made visible.”

Communal effort is woven into the fabric of daily life at camp through activities and chores shared by all campers and staff. [...]

Collaborative tasks like these are more than just work; they embody the principle that “Work is love made visible.”

Many of the campers included in the 2023 summer survey noted this aspect of the camp experience:

1 in 3

campers (31% of all campers surveyed) pointed to the communal effort as a highlight of their camp experience. This includes small tasks like managing and maintaining chores and large initiatives like building cross-campfires, barns, and garden events.

Additionally, F&W has heard from many families over the years about a marked difference in the individual responsibility and accountability observed in their campers upon return. Some reflections from families whose children participated in F&W camps in 2023 include:

"[Camp] Helps my kid learn how to be in a meaningful community with other girls. Relationships between girls can be challenging, and F&W allows girls to explore all the facets of this, drawing out how they can care for one another and build and create things together. My daughter's counselor wrote an incredible affirmation for her, and I love the way the counselor-camper relationship is another model for relationships for the girls." – Firefly Song Parent, 2023

"I LOVE that TL embodies the value of 'work is love made visible' and helps kids to internalize this. [Our child] continues to develop into the kid who we can always depend on to lend a hand, and to step up and help out where needed. His teachers comment on it! I credit TL as a huge aspect of reinforcing what we try and teach and [hone] from a peer stand-point. It is incredibly valuable." – Timberlake Parent, 2023

"At FS it's great that campers get space to explore their own interests, get to have responsibilities like sharing the farm chores and taking care of the campgrounds and each other, and develop close relationships with their cabin-mates and counselors. I see my camper being more receptive to chores around the house, and more independent in her daily routine, and showing more interest in helping others." - Firefly Song Parent, 2023

By cultivating robust community-building practices, F&W camps provide numerous opportunities for campers to feel valued and appreciated.

IMPACT AREA #3: AUTHENTIC IDENTITY

The third impact area at F&W camps is authentic identity development. F&W camp programs encourage campers to engage in ongoing reflection of their evolving identities and their interactions with others and the natural world.

Identity Development in Adolescents

According to Erik Erikson's theory of adolescent identity development, adolescents explore and experiment with different roles and identities, which can influence their academic interests, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships. This exploration may lead to changes in their performance, interests, and social groups as they seek to establish their own identities (Erikson, 2018). Summer camps often provide opportunities for this exploration through diverse experiences, challenges, and social interactions — helping adolescents in their journey of self-discovery and identity formation.

Ariel E. Harman's "Exploring Identity Development in a Summer Residential Camp for Adolescent Girls" underscores the importance of intentional program design for identity development, emphasizing the need for activities that support skill-building and engagement in identity-related topics.

"To impact identity development in a residential camp setting, programmers may need to incorporate intentionally designed experiences for identity development... The deliberate action to create opportunities for developmental outcomes, in this case identity development, are the responsibility of the program workers. If a camp programmer plans and implements a program based on a desired outcome, then that outcome is more likely to be obtained (Roark, Gillard, Wells, Evans, & Blauer, 2014). Therefore, intentional design to facilitate identity development is likely to lead to change in identity development." (Hartman, 2016)



Identity Development at F&W Camps

At F&W camps, campers are given unique opportunities to discover and shape themselves. F&W camps provide tools for exploring individual and social identities, laying the groundwork for positive self-advocacy and empathetic engagement.

This type of personal development, often an afterthought in more traditional settings, is central to F&W's ethos. All F&W camps, rich with diverse role models and experiences, are built on the core belief (backed by research) that campers will embrace opportunities to challenge and affirm themselves in a supportive environment. Many campers see this as central to their experience:

"Every year I come to F&W, I learn about different types of people and this year I have worked really hard to keep an open mind and trying to put myself in others' shoes." - Timberlake camper

"Making friends, trying new skills, opening up to strangers, exploring myself!" - Red Spruce Grove camper

F&W prides itself on creating spaces for campers to explore, evolve, and experiment with new or better versions of themselves and who they want to be. It is the cornerstone of the camps' ultimate value. F&W believes this equips campers to maintain the impact of the other two impact areas (self-efficacy and community mindedness) well into the future.

F&W's approach to Authentic Identity is twofold. First, the camps focus on individual identity, inviting campers to understand and assess who they are today across various dimensions – as leaders, individuals with unique skills and interests, members offering value to the community, and more. Second, the camps help campers connect new understandings of themselves to their broader social identities. The communal aspect of the camp experience is the perfect space for this as campers learn how their identities impact others in the community and take that knowledge to their lives outside of camp.



Developing Individual Identity

Community mindedness at F&W camps requires campers to know themselves and align their beliefs with their actions. Campers are encouraged to envision and strive to become their best through engagement with F&W's programming, activities, and staff. This process is integral to the camp design at F&W and critical in achieving its developmental outcomes. It enables campers to be affirmed and supported as they navigate through the diverse forms their identities may take.

In the summer of 2023, F&W's impact survey results show that 1 in 5 campers across all of F&W overnight camps (ages 9-17) identified identity development as an important part of their camp experience. Their responses revealed that the opportunities to evolve their individual identities happened in the following ways:

Self-Discovery and Confidence Building:

Campers expressed pride in learning about themselves and others, gaining new interests, and overcoming personal fears like the fear of lakes or bugs. They also mentioned becoming more comfortable with their identities, embracing leadership roles, and developing confidence.

Independence and Personal Growth:

Independence was a key theme, with campers taking pride in staying away from family, handling responsibilities, and learning life skills like fire management and nature exploration. They also noted personal growth in areas like handling consequences and managing homesickness.

Resilience and Emotional Maturity:

Many campers felt proud of their ability to thrive despite challenges such as injuries, panic attacks, and personal losses. They also mentioned growing emotionally, learning to handle discomfort, and developing resilience.

Creativity and Expression:

Campers were proud of engaging in creative activities like writing music, building fairy houses, and participating in puppet shows. They appreciated the opportunity to express themselves and explore artistic pursuits.

Leadership and Responsibility:

Campers were proud of taking on leadership roles and being responsible in the camp community, such as leading activities and helping newer campers.

Health and Well-being:

Some campers noted improvements in their physical and emotional well-being, including eating healthier and feeling better about themselves.



The parents of Farm & Wilderness campers have said:

“The camp operates on our values but with a sense of community and silly fun that instilled those values in our son in a way we never could.” -Timberlake Parent

“We see [our son’s] emotional growth each year, but especially this year. Having faced his fears and stuck with camp for three weeks, he sees he can do hard things and simultaneously hold sad and happy feelings.” - Timberlake Parent

*“FS gives her access to an unabashedly queer and trans-friendly space and one that is free of the internet/devices.”
-Firefly Song Parent*

“I love how social disagreements or hurt feelings were confronted and spoken about before they amplified. This is important to learn in life! The greatest thing, though, was knowing my child was safe, making social connections, and receiving a wilderness education.” - Saltash Mountain Parent

*“Our camper came home with a greater sense of independence, responsibility, and eagerness to help the family. He is quicker to clean up after himself, help with his younger sister, and even try new foods!”
- Timberlake Parent*

Cultivating Understanding of Social Identities

F&W camps also invest considerable effort in supporting campers as they explore and affirm their social identities. The focus is on equipping campers with developmentally-appropriate language and tools to understand the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation related to their experience at camp and in their lives beyond. A meaningful portion of program time is dedicated to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) topics alongside comprehensive, age-appropriate learning experiences across sessions and summers. F&W camps want all campers to advocate for a more peaceful, equitable, and loving world.

To achieve this, F&W camps use a framework (shown on the following page) for campers to learn more about their social identities and those of others. This framework clarifies the progression of learning outcomes for campers related to identity and belonging, and enables campers to learn about their social identities and how those identities interact within communities and beyond in developmentally-appropriate ways. The belief is that the identity process unfolds in four broad phases as a child grows: identity, empathy, critical thinking, and action. Although this progression is not always linear, it can be adapted to meet the unique needs of each camp, guiding the programming with intention.

Combined with F&W values and the experiential nature of the camp programs, F&W has a distinct perspective on guiding campers in understanding and navigating the complexities of social identity. This framework has and will continue to evolve over time.



2023 DRAFT F&W I&E TRAINING OUTCOMES BY AGE

Ages are approximate & suggestions. Movement through the four steps can be different for different groups and individuals.

- Colors = throughlines -

CORE IDEAS	Identity	Empathy	Critical Thinking	Action
AGE	4 - 10	11 - 12	13 - 14	15 - 17
COMPETENCY STRANDS	Understand that identity is multi-faceted; it is made up of multiple parts for each person.	Recognize that others' identities are multi-faceted.	Analyze how identities impact each other to amplify or mitigate in predictable and unpredictable ways.	Take action to shift my camp/society/world to be thoughtful of the multi-faceted nature of identities.
	Recognize that your identity is true and valid for you and is not dependent on others' validation.	Develop empathy for others' identities without adopting them as your own.	Distinguish between bias and -isms, understanding that -isms are rooted in power and one-up identities.	Understand that tolerance is different from celebration and embracing, and connect this to a sense of belonging.
	Claim your identity, understanding that you are not stuck with it.	Cultivate curiosity towards others empathetically, without automatically shutting down.	Ask who is not being seen.	Commit to using your power to help others be seen at your camp.
	Understand that identity is either born, chosen, or both at the same time.	Recognize that with multifaceted identities, some have more power than others.	Acknowledge that your identity can give you power, even if you don't feel powerful or don't intend to have that power.	Begin to understand the roots of power in certain identities and analyze systems of power rooted in identity.
		Experience being one-down in your identity through an activity.	Ask whether this is how society should respond to this identity (learn, but don't have to adopt).	
		Understand the difference between empathy/sympathy and equity/equality.		

This plays out at different levels of development:

- At Timberlake, the youngest campers (ages 9-10) are exploring what identities they choose vs. those they are born with.
- Older campers (ages 13-14) are wrestling with the different ways society can view their identities. Each camper progresses at their own pace and is supported by an intentionally diverse staff.
- At Tamarack Farm (ages 15-17), there is a heavier focus on critical thinking and action, allowing teens, when possible, to be leaders in their discussions about their social identities and the ways their norms should evolve to meet the needs of the diverse identities in their community.

Impact data from the summer of 2023 shows that many campers have a sense of pride in this aspect of camp.

68%

of campers across all F&W camps who see identity development as an important part of their summer experience identify it as a point of pride.

The emphasis on skill and community development at F&W camps provides campers with immediate and enduring benefits. But the camps' dedication to fostering campers' identity development is what sets it apart from many other summer camps. Given the numerous social and political challenges today, the effort to equip young people to understand themselves and trust in their capacity to change, grow, and to create change, is more important than ever. F&W is at the beginning of exploring this aspect and looks forward to deeper future exploration and development.



A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Emerging research highlights the difficulties young people face in schools today and how ill-equipped they are to navigate the transition from high school to what comes next. Additionally, youth face a prolonged transition to adulthood, an experience exacerbated for kids belonging to vulnerable communities (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

This research supports the direct value of summer camp as a means for youth development. Further, the impact data collected by F&W demonstrates that the camps' approach — aligned with F&W's values and grounded in youth development research — is having a meaningful impact on campers' self-efficacy, community mindedness, and identity.

F&W hopes the findings included in this report will contribute to the conversation about the future direction of summer camps, and the unique role camps like F&W can play in preparing young people for the future. F&W also seeks to share transferable lessons and effective practices that can help other youth-serving organizations beyond summer camps — including school systems and after-school programs, among others — further promote positive youth development. The following ideas are designed to support this effort.

“Find a sleepaway camp with no devices and no safetyism. Many summer camps offer children and adolescents the chance to be out in nature and away from their devices and the internet for a month or two. Under those conditions, young people attend fully to each other, forming friendships and engaging in slightly risky and exciting outdoor activities that may bond them together tightly... Try to find a camp that embraces the values of independence and responsibility” (Haidt, 2024).

Ideas for Promoting Self-Efficacy Among Youth

F&W camps have achieved significant success through the integration of skill development, immersive programming, and experiences that foster self-efficacy in campers. This approach not only enhances immediate skill application but also instills a long-term belief in campers' ability to learn new things. Building on the lessons learned from F&W camps, the following insights are intended to help guide other camp organizations and schools or other educational settings in their effort to promote self-efficacy:



Camps and Peer Organizations

- Offer campers challenges with tangible outcomes, supporting them in learning from failures and successes in real-time.
-
- Provide a supportive environment that encourages learning through experience, with fewer safeguards, allowing campers to discover their capabilities in new and challenging situations.

Schools

- Whenever possible, minimize strict adherence to schedules to allow students to immerse themselves deeply in their tasks.
-
- Break down barriers between different subjects, presenting students with complex, interdisciplinary challenges that leverage their diverse learning areas.
-
- Deepen connections with out-of-school organizations such as afterschool programs, extended day programs, and summer camps. Cultivate these organizations as partners in the work who are able to provide diverse and complementary experiences to your students.
-

Ideas for Promoting Community Mindedness Among Youth

Community is central to everything at F&W camps. The camps foster a culture of community mindedness, deeply rooted in recognizing and valuing the innate dignity and worth of every person. The following are suggestions based on insights from community building efforts and findings at F&W camps:



Camps and Peer Organizations

- Seek ways to foster a sense of community based on more than just enjoyment. Incorporate elements of shared responsibility and accountability into the camp experience, emphasizing their importance.
-
- Reorient your program’s focus from highlighting personal accomplishments to celebrating collective successes. Redefine “winning” as achieving objectives that campers can only accomplish collaboratively.

Schools

- Find ways to develop shared community norms and rituals in your classroom, such as weekly appreciation moments or shared chores.
-
- Invest in authentic interdependence where students can find purpose in the actions they take on the behalf of their peers – consider shared responsibilities or peer accountability systems as part of their class experience.

Ideas for Supporting Authentic Identity

F&W has been on a long journey to help young people understand their own identities and their interactions with the identities of others. F&W camps have identified emerging strategies to celebrate the complex nature of these identities and what it requires to grow them with care and purpose. Following are some suggestions for how this work can be prioritized by other organizations seeking to achieve a similar goal:



Camp and Peer Organizations

- Establish formal peer leadership roles within your programs to offer campers clear paths for growth and becoming positive influences. Focus on helping campers become the best versions of themselves.
-
- Focus on staff development to ensure they are effective role models. Staff members, often being closer in age and experience to campers, naturally assume a mentor-like role. Strive for a staff that represents a diverse array of potential futures for your campers to aspire to.

Schools

- Increase the availability of elective courses for students. Acknowledge their multifaceted development by providing diverse opportunities for them to explore and shape their identities.
-
- Implement formal mechanisms to recognize students for who they are, equipping them with the tools and vocabulary to acknowledge their worth and the aspects of their identity they are developing.
-



CONCLUSIONS

F&W is excited to continue the journey of defining the art and science of creating the magic at the heart of the F&W camp programs. The last 85 years have been a profound learning experience, yet the past four years have shown that there's still so much more to discover and anticipate. The F&W leaders hope this report will be a valuable resource to fellow camps and educational organizations dedicated to creating transformative experiences for youth, to peer educators grappling with the challenges of a swiftly evolving landscape, and to families who entrust F&W with a significant role in their children's growth.

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