

What Do Alumni Say About the Influence of Attending SeriousFun Camps?



The Lasting Impacts of Camp Study

The SeriousFun Children’s Network was founded by Paul Newman in 1988 on the theory that camp can give all young people with serious illnesses the chance to escape the fear and isolation of their medical conditions and “raise a little hell.”¹ SeriousFun is an international network of 30 camps and programs that has served, free of charge, more than 1,185,000 youth with serious illnesses and their families. SeriousFun camps are designed to “create opportunities for children and their families to reach beyond serious illness and discover joy, confidence, and a new world of possibilities, always free of charge.”² SeriousFun camp aims to influence a variety of outcomes for attending youth, including helping children who are living with serious illnesses develop confidence, resilience, and social skills and try new things.

What Was the Study About?

In 2020, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) was contracted by the SeriousFun Children’s Network to conduct a descriptive study that examined

- the personal, social, and medical outcomes that are intended to be influenced by SeriousFun camps;
- differences in those outcomes based on the demographic characteristics and attendance of campers; and
- key elements of camp and other experiences of campers that may influence those outcomes.

Data were obtained from online surveys that were administered between January and March 2021 to alumni who attended SeriousFun summer residential camp. On the survey, alumni self-reported their outcomes and the extent to which they attributed their outcomes to participation in SeriousFun camps or to participation in other activities or programs. The survey was translated into 11 languages.

Survey Outcomes

- Friendship skills
- Empathy and compassion
- Perseverance
- Self-identity
- Emotion regulation
- Self-confidence
- Appreciation of diversity
- Willingness to try new things
- Responsibility
- Career orientation
- Health-related quality of life
- Medical-related self-care
- Medical independence
- Medical self-advocacy

¹ SeriousFun Children’s Network. (n.d.). About SeriousFun. <https://seriousfun.org/about/>

² SeriousFun Children’s Network. (n.d.). About SeriousFun. <https://seriousfun.org/about/>

Who Participated in the Study?



More than 2,200 alumni, 17–30 years of age, participated in the survey.



Alumni represented 16 camps and eight countries: France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, and United States.



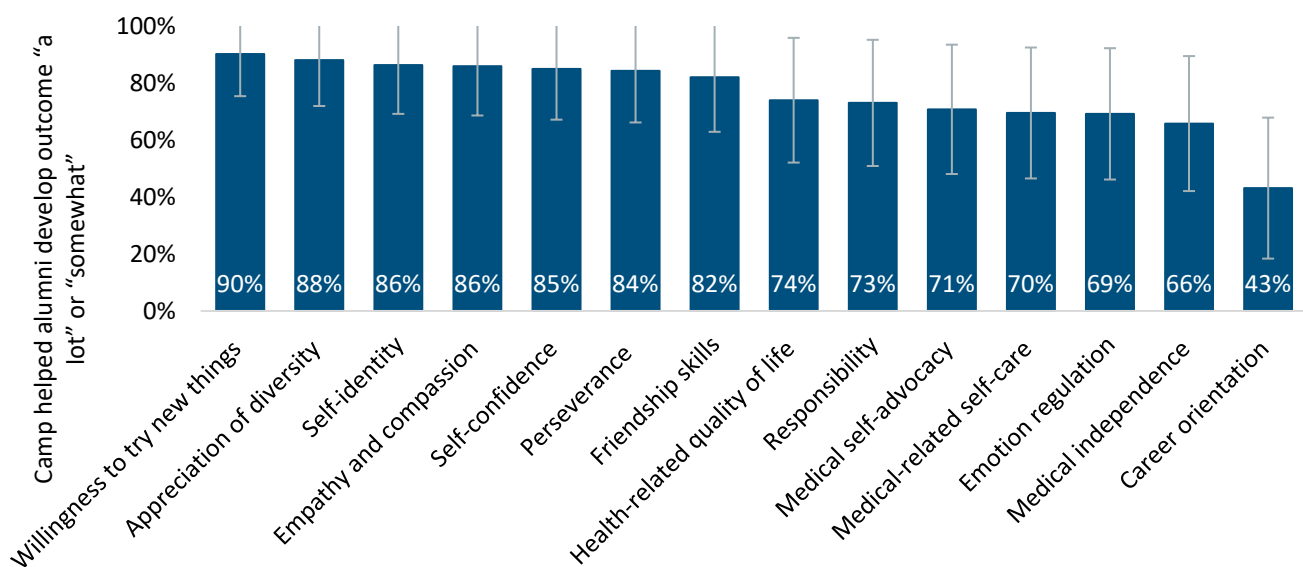
Alumni were from diverse backgrounds. Fifty-nine percent identified as female, 38% identified as male, and 3% identified as some other gender identity. Sixty-nine percent were White, 10% were Black, 7% were Hispanic, 6% were multiracial, 2% were Asian, 1% were American Indian or Alaska Native, and 5% identified as some other race.

What Were the Findings of the Study?

Which outcomes did camp alumni say were influenced by attending a SeriousFun camp and by how much?

Most alumni reported that camp helped them develop the outcomes presented on the survey “a lot” or “somewhat”. As presented in Exhibit 1, the outcomes that alumni reported as most influenced by camp were willingness to try new things (90%), appreciation of diversity (88%), self-identity (86%), empathy and compassion (86%), self-confidence (85%), perseverance (84%), and friendship skills (82%). This finding aligns with the camp’s mission, as SeriousFun camps target these and other outcomes. Career orientation was the outcome that was least influenced (43%), which is consistent with expectations because this is not central to SeriousFun’s mission.

Exhibit 1. Influence of Camp on Outcomes



Note. Standard deviations are shown in grey bars.

To what extent are differences in the influence of camp on outcomes based on demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender)?

AIR examined differences in outcomes by alumni gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, employment status, and medical diagnosis to understand whether certain groups of campers perceived camp as more influential in developing outcomes than others. Analysis focused on two statistical measures—comparison of means³ and effect sizes. The comparison of means analysis provides information about whether group means differ based on demographic characteristic and whether the difference is statistically significant, while the effect sizes provide a measure of the magnitude of the effect—larger effect sizes indicate a stronger the relationship between the two variables.

Analyses showed that all sorts of people benefit from SeriousFun camps (Exhibit 2). Some comparisons between self-reported outcomes and demographic characteristics were significant; however, effect sizes were small across all comparisons indicating that the differences are too small to be policy relevant.

What is the relationship between attendance (i.e., number of times attended a summer residential program) and the perceived influence of camp on outcomes?

AIR conducted a linear regression to compare the extent to which SeriousFun camps positively influenced each outcome for alumni who had lower attendance in camp (one, two, or three sessions) to those who had higher attendance in camp (4 or more sessions).

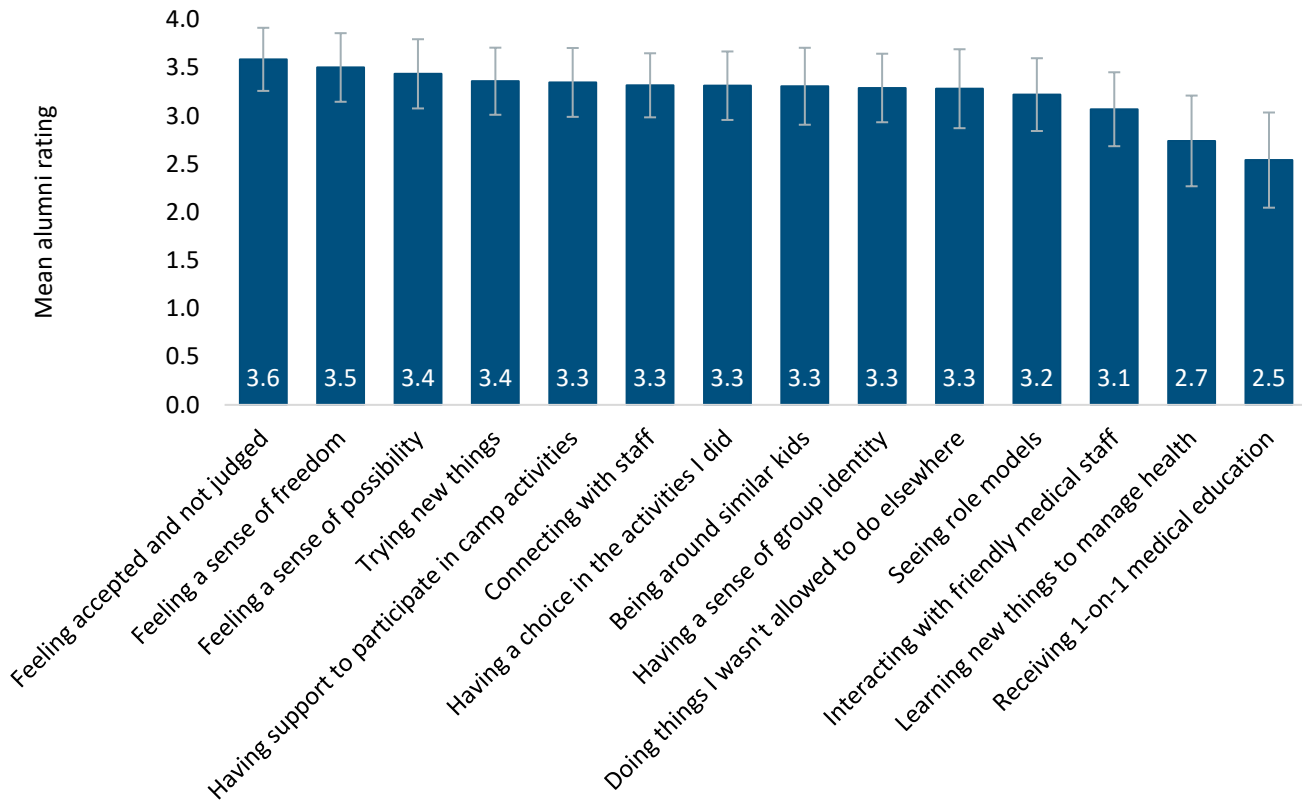
In general, all alumni indicated that camp influenced the outcomes, even those who attended one session of SeriousFun camp. A small relationship was observed between attendance at and influence of camp on outcomes: Alumni who had higher attendance reported a slightly greater influence compared with those who attended had lower attendance.

How important were specific camp elements?

Alumni indicated the elements of camp that were most important to their experience. **Feeling accepted and not judged, feeling a sense of freedom, feeling a sense of possibility, and trying new things were the top four essential elements of the SeriousFun camp experience reported by alumni; this finding aligns with the camp's mission.** Medical education was ranked the least important camp element, which is consistent with expectations because that element is not central to SeriousFun's mission (Exhibit 2).

³ T-test was used to compare the means among two groups; ANOVA was used to compare the means among three or more groups.

Exhibit 2. Importance of Camp Elements

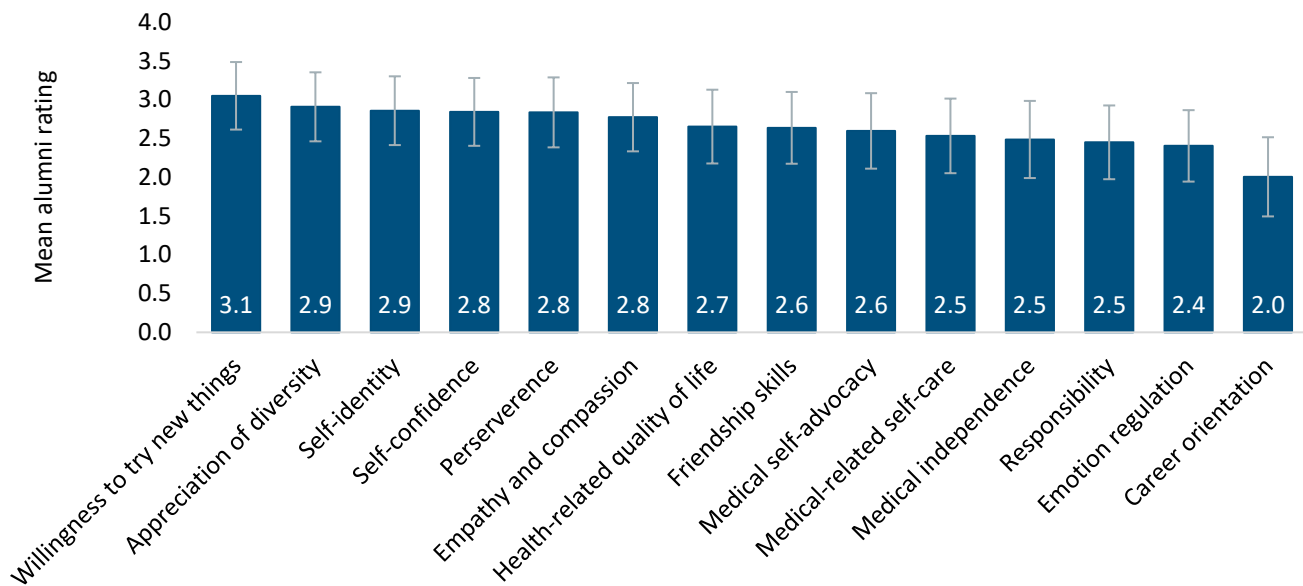


Note. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Somewhat important, 3 = Important, 4 = The most important.

To what extent do alumni perceive camp as influential compared to other activities or experiences (e.g., participation in afterschool programs, religious activities)?

Alumni indicated the extent to which camp was influential in changing their outcomes compared with other activities in which they participated during the time when they were in camp. **Alumni thought camp was “one of the biggest influences” on their willingness to try new things, appreciation of diversity, and self-identity (Exhibit 3).**

Exhibit 3. Influence of Camp on Outcomes Compared With Other Activities



Note. 1 = Not a big influence, 2 = One of many influences, 3 = One of the biggest influences, 4 = The biggest influence.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on survey responses from more than 2,200 alumni, 17–30 years of age, representing 16 SeriousFun camps, AIR makes three conclusions:

- Alumni believe that camp was influential in their development of various outcomes that SeriousFun identified as centrally aligned to their mission, including willingness to try new things, appreciation of diversity, self-identity, empathy and compassion, self-confidence, perseverance, and friendship skills.
- All sorts of people benefit from SeriousFun camps. Demographic characteristics—such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, employment status, and medical diagnosis—had no or minimal bearing on the perceptions of alumni about the influence of camp on outcomes.
- Alumni indicated several camp elements that were important to their experiences, including feeling accepted and not judged, feeling a sense of freedom, feeling a sense of possibility, and trying new things.

These findings have implications for how SeriousFun camps and staff can support campers. For example, given the findings SeriousFun programming should provide opportunities for choice, flexibility, and real connections to be made among campers.



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