

Research Report

The Efficacy of Family Camp Experience for Families Who Have Children with Visual Impairments

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Professionals agree that providing support to families and helping them become more involved in the lives of their visually impaired children are important components of providing effective services to individuals with various types of impairments (Bailey & Smith, 2000; Hanssen & Zimany, 2000; Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001). One method of offering support to families is through family camps and workshops, which are believed to be effective ways to provide services and engage families in the special supports that children with impairments need. Another benefit of family camps is that they offer families the opportunity to network with other families with children with visual impairments, which provides families the opportunity to exchange information, discuss issues, offer assistance, and provide and receive support. However, few, if any, studies of the

efficacy of these types of activities and services have been conducted, although there are many family support programs, workshops, and camps (Chapman, Moore, & Smith, 1996; Frey & Baumgarner, 1997; Georgia State Department of Education, 1999; Helmrich, 1982; Minkin, 1997; Rafael, Park, Meyer, Crull, & Thompson, 1972; South Carolina State Department of Education, 1996; Wiley, 2000). Some of these family camps and workshops have established goals and objectives (Rafael et al., 1972; South Carolina State Department of Education, 1996), and some have surveyed parents about their satisfaction at conferences (Georgia State Department of Education, 1999).

This study was designed to address the paucity of research on the efficacy of camps for children with visual impairments and their families. The study evaluated the performance of a two-day camp for families with young visually impaired children at the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind whose program was based on perceived family needs and successful previous camp activities. The agenda for the camp included lectures by professionals, workshops to learn specific skills, recreational activities, and leisure time for families to interact with each other. The study used surveys and interviews to provide information from the parents' perspectives about the effectiveness and outcomes of the camp. It included the evaluation of the parents' perceptions of participating in the camp and the impact of the camp's activities, as defined by

the camp organizers for both immediate and long-range outcomes.

Method

Participants

Parents who attended a summer camp sponsored by the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind Parent Infant [Early Intervention] Program for families with children with visual impairments (PIP VI) participated in this study. The PIP VI program serves families across Utah who have children from birth through age 3 who are visually impaired, both those with and without additional impairments. The family camp was open to all families who were receiving PIP VI early intervention services. The families paid a nominal fee of \$15 to attend the two-day camp. The fee included overnight accommodation at the student cottages of the Utah School for the Blind and all meals. If a family was unable to pay the fee, the fee was waived.

Procedure

The parents were surveyed using a pre- and a postcamp survey and a six-month follow-up telephone interview. They were asked to complete and return only one survey form per family. Both the survey and interview questions were based on the goals and objectives of the camp (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)). Both the pre- and postcamp surveys were one page and were designed to take only

5-10 minutes to complete. It was hoped that the abbreviated form would encourage the parents to participate without placing an undue time burden on their busy schedules or detracting from their camp activities. The initial precamp survey was mailed to the parents who had preregistered and included a flier describing the study, a study permission form that included contact information for the researchers, the precamp survey, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for returning the survey. At the opening session of the camp, the researchers introduced the study to the parents who had not preregistered, answered questions, and requested that the parents consider participating in the postcamp survey and the follow-up telephone interview.

The postcamp survey was distributed at the final large family session of the camp. All the participants in attendance were provided with the postcamp survey and were requested to complete it. The six-month follow-up telephone interview cards were available at the survey drop-off table. The parents could complete either or both the postcamp survey and the interview card if they wanted to participate in the six-month follow-up telephone interview.

The camp objectives were established from informal satisfaction and informational surveys from previous camps, as well as from information from interviews with the PIP VI director and coordinator. Eight precamp questions were developed, and a five-point

Likert scale was assigned to each question, with a range of from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The postcamp survey included the eight questions from the precamp survey and two additional questions on the adequacy of the information the parents received at the camp. Both the pre- and postcamp surveys included three open-ended questions and a comments section. The follow-up interview questions were based on the eight questions in the pre- and postcamp surveys and were designed in a yes-or-no format with opportunities to elaborate.

Results

Pre- and postcamp surveys

Of the 39 parents who preregistered and received mailed precamp surveys, 22 returned the precamp survey, for a response rate of 56%. Of the 40 parents who attended some or all of the camp, 27 (68%) responded to the postcamp survey. Of the 18 parents who completed follow-up interview cards at the camp, 14 were located and interviewed by telephone six months later. In one follow-up interview, both the father and the mother responded (the father was counted because he was the spokesperson on the telephone). All the other telephone interviews were with either the mother or the father.

Table 1 presents the questions (based on the camp's goals) and responses to the precamp survey and

indicates that, on all except one identified camp goal, the vast majority of the parents agreed or strongly agreed that these goals were important to them. Table 2 provides information on the postcamp survey, and once again the majority of the families either agreed or strongly agreed that the camp experience resulted in the attainment of the identified goals.

Overall, 89% of the parents in both surveys either agreed or strongly agreed that the eight identified camp goals were important to them; only 9% selected "undecided" or did not agree with the goals. For all the responses, there was a 1% nonresponse rate to one or more of the questions. Moreover, on the postcamp survey, 86% of the parents' responses indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the camp goals had been met. Furthermore, 21 of 22 parents took time to add written responses to the precamp survey, and 23 of 27 parents wrote additional responses on the postcamp survey. The responses written on the pre-and postcamp surveys included statements related to the three open-ended questions and additional comment sections that were presented at the bottom of the surveys. The responses in these sections could be classified as either informational statements or positive statements about the overall camp experience. The following are some of the descriptors that the parents used: "tickled," "loved coming," "informative," "beneficial," and "keep up the great work."

Follow-up interviews

The follow-up telephone interviews focused on the family camp experience and its effect on home activities and interactions. Thus, the researchers gained additional information about the long-term effectiveness and impact of the camp. The responses to the telephone interviews suggest that the families continued to benefit from the camp experience after they returned to their daily routines. Specifically, 71% percent, or 10 of 14 parents, reported that they had contacted or interacted with other families with visually impaired children after the camp experience; 57%, or 8 of 14 parents, used at least one community resource after the camp experience that they learned about at camp; and all the parents reported that they had a positive camp experience and expressed plans to attend the camp the following year or a desire for a similar camp for their older children.

Conclusion

This was a limited study, and its results are intended to be used as a resource to others who are contemplating strategies and programs to support families who have children with visual impairments. At the PIP VI camps that are held each year in Utah, an overall theme is selected for creating an atmosphere for the children's activities, for family photographs, for planning meals, and for use in the sessions for parents. The camps provide assistance to parents in learning about their children's unique abilities and needs as affected by the

children's specific visual conditions, access to resources and available technology, and opportunities to build networks and supports for families. The camp includes opportunities for families to play, learn, and work together through family activities, workshops for parents, and day camp-type activities for siblings.

The camp theme for 2001, "Aloha," included a Hawaiian luau with Polynesian dancers, music, decorations, and food. The agenda for parents included a keynote address by a successful blind musician and presentations on early literacy, the impact of vision loss on the development of young children, a presentation by an ophthalmologist on common eye conditions in children, and perspectives on what parents can expect as their children transition from early intervention services to school-age services. The parents could check on their children at any time and keep infants with them if they desired. The children's activities included a braille Olympics, South Sea Island dances, and tactile art activities that were based on a Polynesian theme. The highlight for every year's camp has been family swimming, which provides the perfect opportunity for parents to network with other parents.

This study evaluated only one camp and was therefore circumscribed in scope. The first limitation is that participating parents were self-selected. Therefore, the parents who chose to participate may have been an overrepresentation of those who view family camps favorably, are more involved in family support

activities, or are more knowledgeable than is typical of parents of young children with visual impairments. In addition, the return rates for both the pre-and postcamp surveys (56% and 68%, respectively) did not meet the targeted 80% response rate that the researchers desired. However, because research on family support activities and the use of family camps is limited, this study provides a preliminary look at the outcomes of a family camp experience for families of children with visual impairments.

Although care should be taken in interpreting the results, the overwhelming majority of the responses were in favor of the camp experience. In addition, it is interesting to note that there were continued benefits for the families six months after the camp ended. Thus, this well-planned camp experience had both immediate and long-term benefits and appeared to be an effective way to provide service and information to families.

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[Previous Article](#) | [Next Article](#) | [Table of Contents](#)

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