



# ASSESSING THE POWER OF CAMP

Using research results to further your ministry



“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the academy with the church?” An early church father named Tertullian penned these words in the 3rd century. He drew a sharp distinction between Greek philosophy, particularly empiricism, and Christian theology. Similar sentiments continue today and are particularly prevalent in our camps. Many of my camp friends have a certain level of suspicion or even disdain for research. Some of them are intimidated by the numbers and research terms, but many are convinced, like Tertullian, that the Gospel message is above such worldly wisdom. What has the academy to do with camp? ▶

Photo courtesy of Crowders Ridge Camp & Retreat Center



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship





Unfortunately, the disdain is often directed at camping ministries, as well. Camps are sometimes dismissed among church professionals as little more than fun and games, or a brief spiritual high that quickly fades. Parents may be unsure about the benefits of a Christian camp experience or sadly misinformed that Christian camps are unsafe, poorly run or manipulative. Camps of the 21st century need to reach donors and parents with more than anecdotes, no matter how compelling your stories are.

Using the logic of the world to spread the Gospel message has solid biblical support. In Acts 17, we find Paul in Athens reasoning with the Greek philosophers, the very people that Tertullian dismissed. Paul uses their philosophical language and even presents empirical evidence (Christ's resurrection) as proof of the Gospel message. I am not asking you to change your message or prioritize reason over the movement of the Holy Spirit. I am encouraging you to tell your stories in new ways, with empirical evidence and intentional evaluation to back up your claims.

#### **Begin with what you have**

You probably already have a solid start. You may have an end-of-week camper survey or other questionnaire designed to evaluate the camper experience. If you are like most camps, these have remained mostly unchanged for a number of years. I encourage you to look at these evaluation tools every year and assess whether they measure what you want to know. Begin with what you already have and expand from there.

One major problem with any evaluation tool is that it only assesses participant perspectives at a single moment in time. End-of-week camper surveys capture the camp experience in raw form before campers have the chance to begin processing the experience. They are great at assessing whether the campers had fun and enjoyed the food, but not very useful in measuring outcomes like growth in faith, leadership skills or increases in faith practices following camp.

This is where other assessment tools, such as parent surveys and pastor focus groups, come in. If you do not already conduct a parent survey, it is one of the most important and simplest assessment tools you can use. You already collect their email addresses and probably send them a message after camp thanking them for entrusting their children to you. Simply include a link to a questionnaire asking about their child's experience and observations of any changes they noticed.

#### **The steps of assessment**

Beginning new assessments can seem intimidating. Check out Rob Ribbe's article on evaluation in the August/September 2014 issue of *InSite*, and follow his six-step plan to assess your programs:

1. Develop a clear mission statement and desired outcomes
2. Form descriptive measurements to assess these outcomes
3. Design instruments
4. Collect data
5. Analyze data
6. Report data

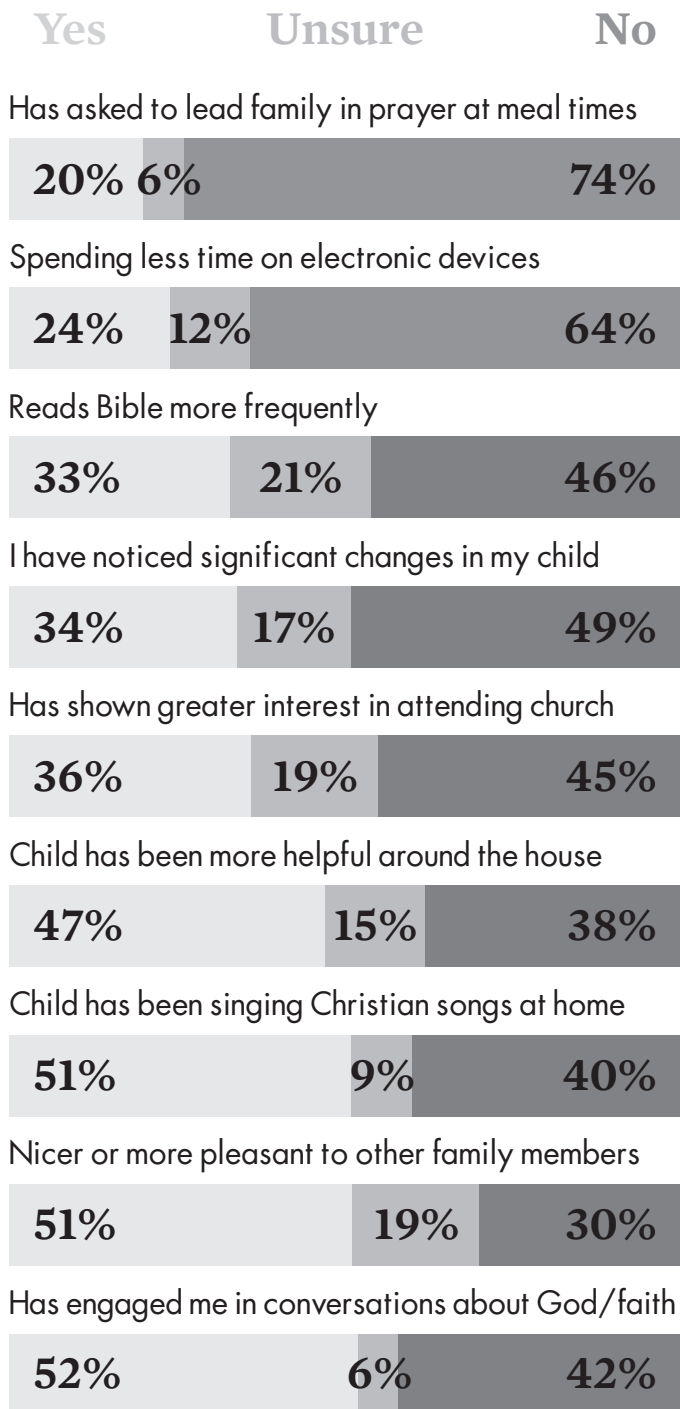
I want to focus specifically on step six because I think this is where many camps struggle. It does not matter how amazing the data that we collect is if we do not act on our findings. This involves developing clear action steps. The goal is not to write a report but rather to make disciples.

We accomplish this goal by using our data to reach more people with the Gospel message (marketing) and applying our findings to make our discipleship ministries more effective. To get an idea of what data application looks like in practice, we turn to fresh research findings from the Power of Camp Study in 2018.

**I am not asking you to change your message or prioritize reason over the movement of the Holy Spirit. I am encouraging you to tell your stories in new ways, with empirical evidence and intentional evaluation to back up your claims.**

the power of camp<sup>®</sup>  
STUDY

## Changes that Power of Camp Parents Identified in their Children



### Sharing the Gospel message with data

Part of the research included surveys of more than 300 parents from nine different CCCA camps. These parents identified changes they observed in their children in the weeks following camp, including 94 percent agreeing that it was clear camp had an impact on their child, and 89 percent agreeing that their child grew in faith. More than half of these parents (52 percent) said that their child was nicer or more pleasant to family members after camp; over a third (36 percent) said their child was showing greater interest in attending church and another third (33 percent) said that their child was reading the Bible more frequently.

Imagine using these numbers in combination with your most powerful stories as you make a case for camp to parents and donors. It will be even more persuasive if you can use numbers from your camp!

Let's take the specific case of the parent who is worried about sending a child to camp because it might be unsafe or the child might get picked on. Tell them about the more than 1,500 campers in the Power of Camp study who completed surveys on the first day, last day and two to three months after camp. At camp, they reported significantly less frequency of being picked on, left out or having to hide their true self than at home or school. Additionally, they reported feeling significantly more supported and happy at camp than they did at home. These campers found camp safer than their home and school environments. Maybe a concerned parent's child will as well.

Using research data effectively can help you bring more young people to camp and encourage thoughtful donors to support your ministries. This is our marketing angle.

### Data makes ministries more effective

The summer staff portion of the study, conducted by the HoneyRock/Wheaton Graduate School, has included 29 camps as of 2018. Not only has the study found significant growth among summer staff members in multiple outcomes, but it has also identified one of the major contributors to higher outcomes: increased staff supervision and support. There are two distinct ways to respond to these findings. First, we can let young Christians know that serving on staff is a great way to grow in leadership, spirituality and other outcomes (marketing). Second, we can change the way we do ministry so that we increase our effectiveness in forming young disciples on summer staff. We can do this by spending more time intentionally supporting and directly supervising our summer staff. For your camp, maybe this means hiring an additional leadership member or being more intentional about conducting mid-summer evaluations and offering feedback. By applying the research, you can increase staff growth.

In the parent survey, only 20 percent of parents reported that a change they noticed in their child was asking to lead prayer at mealtime. This was in spite of

# It does not matter how amazing the data that we collect is if we do not act on our findings. This involves developing clear action steps.

the fact that more than a third of camper families did not regularly pray together before camp. These camps might respond by being more intentional during meal times of teaching prayers that campers can lead at home, and encouraging them to do so. This is one simple way that camps can follow the research findings to impact family faith practices directly.

## Get started

Don't leave those camper surveys in a box somewhere in the corner of your office! Take the time to go through them and compile the results. Look for patterns. Think about what is missing and include it in next year's evaluation. If you are not asking camper parents to evaluate the camp experience, start now. It has never been easier. Isolate the results that make your camp look amazing, and share them with your constituents. More importantly, find the areas that you know you can improve in and come up

with your action steps. Don't keep these things to yourself. Plan a staff meeting or retreat during which you go over these assessments and brainstorm action steps. Do the same with your board of directors.

■ ■ ■

What does the academy have to do with camp? As it turns out, quite a bit. Our mission is to make disciples of all nations, and the Lord has given us tools to do this more effectively. Let's use them. ■



Jacob Sorenson, Ph.D., is director of Sacred Playgrounds, a ministry offering research and training to camps and congregations. He has directed numerous research projects, including the Effective Camp Project and Power of Camp Study, and is co-author of Cultivating Teen Faith. He lives in rural Wisconsin with his amazing family.

**"They are a Godsend...  
I expect these to last 20 years!"**  
- Seth Weimer,  
Green Valley Lake Christian Camp

Custom  
colors  
available!

**ESS**  
universal

**ADULT  
HEAVY  
DUTY  
BUNK BEDS**

Rated: 500lbs/platform  
No Springs, No Squeaks  
Bed Bug Proof

**HEAVYDUTYBUNKBEDS.COM**  
Dick@ESSuniversal.com  
616.229.0597

CHRISTIAN CAMP  
& CONFERENCE  
ASSOCIATION  
BUSINESS MEMBER