

A photograph of a man and a woman outdoors at a camp event. The man, on the right, has a beard and is wearing a yellow t-shirt and grey shorts. He is holding a microphone and appears to be speaking or singing. The woman, on the left, is wearing a light-colored t-shirt with the text "BETHEL 2020 HOMECOMING" and blue denim shorts. She is laughing heartily. The background shows trees and a wooden fence.

ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIPS

How camp nurtures belonging and becoming

Just hours after we returned from a three-day camp for fathers and their kids, my 8-year-old son's eyes welled with tears. "Dad, at home, adults are always telling me what to do. But at camp, it's different. I get to decide things, try stuff with my friends and explore. It feels really good — like I matter."



Photo courtesy of Crowders Camps

In that moment, I knew he had experienced the power of camp. I had seen it unfold all weekend: his joy during silly games and camp rituals, his pride in taking on new challenges and his curiosity as he roamed the woods with friends. That short time was all it took for him to fall in love with camp — a love he soon passed on to his younger brother. ►

His words took me back to my own church camp experiences, spanning from early childhood through high school. I remember the ache of the last day — the deep sense that something meaningful was ending. I remember the people who shaped me and the wonder of being part of God's sacred story. At camp, I felt free. I felt grounded. I felt fully alive.

What made those memories powerful for both of us wasn't just the fun. It was the transformative connection to others, to nature and to something greater than ourselves.

The Lingering Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought widespread disruption and profound loss for countless families. Early in the pandemic, researchers began identifying links between social isolation and mental health challenges among children and youth. More recently, longitudinal studies have documented persistent increases in anxiety, depression and behavioral disruptions among today's young people. While further research is needed to better understand the specific factors contributing to these effects — for whom and under what circumstances — what is clear is this: Young people were deeply impacted.

At Search Institute, one concerning trend we've identified is a sharp decline in youth-reported indicators of positive identity when comparing data from 2016 to 2022. In the more recent period, young people reported feeling less confident in their self-worth, less hopeful about the future and less capable of shaping their own lives. These patterns point to disruptions in meeting core developmental needs of autonomy, belonging and competence.

Even before the pandemic, there were clear signs that young people's mental health needed urgent attention, with rising reports of depression, anxiety and loneliness. In many ways, the pandemic amplified unmet needs that existed long before school closures, canceled gatherings and the trauma and loss so many experienced during that time.

We have the opportunity now to come together and ensure that every young person not only has their developmental needs met, but also has their inherent value known, nurtured and activated so that young people and their communities can thrive together.

Wired for Connection

Human beings are wired for connection — not just to survive, but to thrive and flourish. For children and adolescents, these connections are especially critical. They help shape how young people see themselves and understand their place in the world. A young person's sense of identity and belonging is formed through relationships that answer two foundational questions: *Am I worthy?* and *Am I safe?* These answers aren't always spoken but are communicated through lived experiences of consistent love and trustworthiness in a young person's development ecosystem.

When young people feel seen, valued and secure — and have their basic needs met — they are remarkably resilient. Developmental scientist Ann Masten described this as the “ordinary magic” of resilience, based on decades of research into how young people navigate adversity. But, when these connections are missing or replaced by experiences that violate love and trust, young people can internalize fear, self-doubt and a diminished sense of identity. A growing body of research shows that the accumulation of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can lead to emotional dysregulation, disrupted social development and entrenched negative self-narratives.

The good news is that ACEs alone do not define a young person's future. Through intentional relationships and environments, we can offer protective and compensatory experiences (PACEs) that build resilience, reduce risk and promote healing and growth — even in the face of adversity. See the sidebar on page 35 for some examples of what PACEs may look like at camp. ►

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Putting PACEs Into Action at Camp

Ten practical examples to build resilience among campers

Protective and compensatory experiences (PACEs) build resilience, reduce risk and promote healing and growth — even in the face of adversity. These are research-backed protective factors that help young people build resilience and thrive, even when they’ve faced significant challenges. They fall into two key categories: supportive relationships and enriching resources.

Below, you’ll find examples of five relational-based and five resource-based PACEs, along with examples of what these might look like at camp, to help support the resilience of your campers.

PACEs	Camp Example
Unconditional love from a parent/caregiver	Camp staff model God’s unconditional love through consistent care, grace and acceptance.
Spending time with a best friend	Camp provides unstructured time and shared experiences that foster deep friendships and social bonding.
Volunteering or helping others	Campers participate in service projects, cabin responsibilities or community-building activities.
Being active in a social group	Small groups, cabin groups or teams create a sense of belonging and collective identity.
Having a mentor outside of the family	Caring counselors and leaders build one-on-one relationships, offering guidance, encouragement and support.
Living in a clean, safe home with enough food	Camp provides a stable, safe environment with reliable meals and structured routines.
Having opportunities to learn	Faith-based learning, nature education, leadership roles and reflection activities expand campers’ knowledge.
Having a hobby	Creative electives (arts, music, drama, crafts) help campers explore and grow personal interests.
Being active or playing sports	Recreation, games and outdoor challenges (like ropes courses or canoeing) support physical activity.
Having routines and fair rules at home	Daily camp schedules and clear, compassionate expectations create structure and safety.

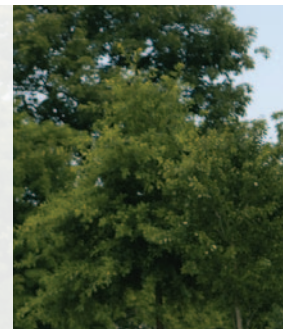


Photo courtesy of Barefoot Republic



Strengthening Relationships and Connections at Camp

Seven practical ideas

Below are seven practical ways to strengthen developmental relationships and transcendent connections at your camp. But keep in mind, the real power lies in your creativity and insight to bring them to life in your own unique setting.

1. **Design intentional moments for meaningful connection.** Build time into the daily rhythm for relationship building between campers and staff, between peers and across age groups. Use shared activities, small-group time and storytelling to foster trust and belonging.
2. **Integrate the five elements of developmental relationships into camp programming.** Map your existing camp activities to the five key elements — *express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power and expand possibilities* — and identify ways to strengthen each one throughout the week.
3. **Measure what matters.** Regularly seek feedback from campers — not just staff — about how they are experiencing camp relationships. This helps bridge the gap between intention and impact and ensures campers are feeling seen, valued and supported.
4. **Encourage transcendent thinking and self-reflection.** For older campers, build in quiet moments, journaling or guided discussions that prompt reflection on life purpose, values and moral questions. For younger campers, focus on awe-filled experiences like stargazing, campfires or shared rituals that foster connection beyond the self.
5. **Empower youth leadership and agency.** Invite campers to co-create experiences, lead activities or reflect publicly on their growth. When young people are trusted with meaningful roles, it strengthens *share power* (a key developmental relationship element), builds agency and deepens their sense of purpose, especially when linked to values or beliefs bigger than themselves.
6. **Link character strengths to a larger purpose.** When campers show kindness, courage, patience or generosity, help them connect those behaviors to a bigger story — how they want to show up in the world and the kind of person they're becoming.
7. **Help campers carry camp home.** Provide time and tools such as reflection prompts, letters to future selves or take-home affirmations to help campers think about what they've learned and how they can apply it in their everyday lives and relationships.

Developmental relationships are bi-directional connections that benefit both the adult and the young person. This mutual benefit is essential to understanding what it means to thrive.

A Framework for Thriving

For more than three decades, Search Institute has conducted applied research that integrates developmental science, practitioner insight and the lived experiences of young people to better understand what it takes for them to thrive.

We define thriving as “a dynamic and bi-directional interplay of: (a) a young person intrinsically energized by discovering their specialness, and (b) the developmental contexts — people and places — that know, affirm, celebrate, encourage, guide and benefit from its expression.” This definition invites us to move beyond a focus on risk prevention and instead explore the deeper drivers of human flourishing — including spirituality, meaning, purpose, connectedness and contribution.

At the heart of this vision is a core conviction: Every young person has a fundamental right to the relationships and resources that help them thrive. This requires a responsiveness to each young person’s unique identity, experiences and needs. It’s not enough to create opportunities for some — we must have the courage to ask: Who might still be overlooked? Whose developmental needs are not being met? What are we missing about what matters most to them — their passions, their sparks, their sense of purpose?

Relationships are the catalyst for young people and communities to thrive together. Search Institute’s recent research has centered on identifying the types of relationships that help young people grow, learn, contribute and thrive. These developmental relationships are the close connections through which young people discover who they are, gain abilities to shape their own lives and learn to engage meaningfully with and contribute to the world around them. We’ve identified five key elements that make a relationship developmental, and in these relationships, the adult will:

- **Express care** — Show a young person they matter to you.
- **Challenge growth** — Push them to keep getting better.
- **Provide support** — Help them complete tasks and achieve goals.
- **Share power** — Treat them with respect and give them a say.
- **Expand possibilities** — Connect them with new ideas and opportunities.

Across more than a decade of research using both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and focus groups) methods, we’ve found that young people who report stronger experiences of developmental relationships consistently demonstrate better academic achievement, psychological well-being, social competence and behavioral outcomes. ►

Camp becomes a sacred space where young people explore who they are becoming and how their lives fit into a greater story.

Connecting to Something Bigger

Developmental relationships are not one-sided; they are bi-directional connections that benefit both the adult and the young person. This mutual benefit is essential to understanding what it means to thrive.

Young people are not simply passive recipients of adult guidance — they are active participants, shaping their environments and relationships as they grow. As they mature, their questions deepen — from *Am I valued and safe?* to *Why am I here?* and *How can I make a difference?* These questions signal a desire for purpose and social contribution, both of which are core components of thriving.

The role of transcendent connection — experiences and beliefs that point beyond the self — has been explored across various subfields of psychology. In a 2020 study, Sarah Schnitker and colleagues emphasize the importance of transcendent narrative identity — a way of making sense of one's life through a story rooted in meaning beyond the self. They argue that virtues like patience, generosity and gratitude are more than positive habits or traits; they require a sense of transcendent purpose.

More recently, developmental neuroscience has underscored the value of engaging adolescents in transcendent thinking — the capacity to reflect on moral questions, societal issues and one's place in the world — as a critical contributor to their social and emotional development.

While younger children may not yet engage in abstract reasoning to the same extent as adolescents, they still benefit profoundly from transcendent experiences — moments of awe, beauty and deep connection that stretch their awareness beyond themselves.

Whether standing beneath a redwood tree, watching waves crash along the shore or experiencing the affirming love of a trustworthy God, these moments do more than inspire wonder. They help root a young person's identity in something larger, revealing that their life has meaning and that they belong to a greater story.

Christian Camps as Fertile Ground for Thriving

Faith-based camps are uniquely positioned to offer the kinds of relationships and transcendent experiences that help meet young people's developmental needs while cultivating a deeper sense of purpose. Central to the Christian camp experience is a shared belief system that affirms the inherent worth of each young person — not because of what they achieve, but because they are unconditionally loved and created with unique purpose.

When this foundation is paired with intentional efforts to build developmental relationships and invite transcendent moments, the impact can be profound. Camp becomes more than just a fun getaway. It becomes a sacred space where young people explore who they are becoming and how their lives fit into a greater story. ■

■ To see the research behind this article, you can download the references here: www.ccca.org/go/rooted_ref.



Benjamin Houlberg, Ph.D., is a developmental scientist, former tenured faculty member, experienced marriage and family therapist and president and CEO of Search Institute. He is widely published on topics such as adolescent social and emotional competencies, resilience through relationships and character and identity development through sports. As a licensed counselor, Houlberg has worked extensively with youth living in socioeconomic disadvantage. He holds a Ph.D. in human development and family studies from Oklahoma State University and an M.A. in marriage and family therapy/counseling from Oral Roberts University.

About Search Institute

Search Institute collaborates with youth programs, schools and youth-serving organizations to conduct applied research, co-design solutions and create an environment where each and every young person can thrive. Through professional learning experiences, surveys, measurement tools and support for continuous improvement, they build capacity and inspire change. Learn more at searchinstitute.org.