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The Theoretical Influence of Praise Given to Teen Leaders at 4-H Camp on Their Feelings of Contribution and Motivation

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Praise in the context of behavior-specific encouragement, positive reinforcement, and recognition may provide a linkage in positive youth development to teen leaders' feelings of contribution and motivation at 4-H Camp. Existing literature on praise in academic settings, combined with literature related to positive youth development, organized camping programs, and 4-H, lends credibility to the theory that there is an influence on teen attitudes and participation regarding contributing to their community at 4-H Camp. Practical implications are presented, along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: positive youth development, praise, contribution, motivation, 4-H, teen leaders

Introduction

4-H is a positive youth development program that strives to help youth gain skills that will last a lifetime and enable them to function well in society. 4-H is a nonformal youth organization, meaning that much of the learning takes place outside of the standard academic environment. One of the signature 4-H programs in Virginia is 4-H Camp, where youth spend five days and four nights exploring the outdoors at one of the American Camping Association-accredited 4-H Educational Centers. Virginia 4-H Camps are structured so that in addition to the paid 4-H Center program staff and Extension Agents, trained teen and adult volunteer leaders play an integral part in camper supervision and program delivery.

This paper explores the potential for a relationship between the use of praise directed toward teen leaders at 4-H Camp and their feelings of contribution and motivation. Praise in this context refers to behavior-specific encouragement, positive reinforcement, and recognition. In a literature review, there were no findings related to this specific subject. However, there is research regarding praise in an academic setting, and there are direct linkages to using praise as a part of positive youth development, as an indicator of youth program quality, and as an integral part of the Essential Elements of 4-H. Tying these bodies of research together lends credibility to the theory that there may be a connection between providing praise to teen leaders at 4-H Camp and their feelings of contribution and motivation.

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In researching the subject, the author included search terms related to praise or recognition or positive reinforcement, positive youth development, motivation, contribution or community service or civic engagement, 4-H, 4-H Camp or camp or camping, teen leader, and teen or teenager or adolescent or youth. Articles focusing on using praise as a tool to redirect undesirable behaviors were excluded.

Basic Tenants of 4-H Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) is a set of practices that build on youth assets to help them develop positive outcomes (Moore, 2017). These positive outcomes of youth development are often characterized using the Five Cs model of positive youth development. This model is comprised of characteristics of competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection (Geldhof et al., 2015). Geldhof et al. (2015) indicated that youth will exhibit these Five Cs of youth development when their strengths align with resources and opportunities in their environment. Therefore, PYD professionals must build youth skill sets, provide opportunities for youth to use those skills, nurture skills related to setting and achieving goals and self-regulation, and improve opportunities for positive interactions. When the Five Cs are evident, it is thought that they result in a sixth C, that of contribution, where youth give back in meaningful ways to their communities (Geldhof et al., 2015; White et al., 2018).

4-H has a rich history of over 100 years working in the field of positive youth development even before the term was coined. In 4-H, as in many other youth development organizations, program leaders engage youth in activities where they feel a sense of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery. Originally termed the Circle of Courage (Brendtro et al., 2005), it is known internally to 4-H as the Essential Elements of 4-H. These four components provide the structure for PYD (Moore, 2017). However, for program leaders to fully develop these Essential Elements, the elements must be packaged in a quality program.

Youth Program Quality (YPQ) involves four basic tiers of a pyramid, with each building the foundation for the next successive tier. YPQ builds from providing a physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe environment in the base tier to a supportive environment with active engagement and skill-building in the second. Programs exhibiting quality characteristics from the third tier provide opportunities for interaction, and in the fourth tier or pinnacle of the pyramid, they fully engage youth in planning, making choices, and reflection (University of Minnesota Extension [UMN Extension], 2013). The components of quality youth programs and the Essential Elements of 4-H both embed intentionality in providing youth with encouragement and recognition (Kress, 2014; UMN Extension, 2013). Praise for specific behaviors and actions provides both.

Praising Teen Leaders at 4-H Camp

4-H Camp Teen Leaders in Virginia are committed and have proven themselves to be responsible role models. Teen leaders, who reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences, pay a small fee to attend 4-H Camp. Not only do they commit to the week of 4-H Camp, where they are on-duty during the approximately 17.5 waking hours and on-call during the nighttime hours, but they also commit to approximately 24 or more hours of training before camp. They serve in loco parentis at camp, providing supervision, guidance, and support in place of parents. Some are proven leaders, while others are testing the waters where their leadership skills are concerned.

Typically, adults working with teen leaders do not give praise in the context of behavior interventions but rather in the context of support related to encouragement and recognition. Teen leaders at camp are under the supervision of adult volunteers, Extension Agents, and paid camp staff. They lead groups of younger youth, help with classes, and supervise campers in the cabins and during meals, recreation, and evening programs. However, these youth are also 4-H members who are still developing skills of their own. They have developmental needs (Search Institute, 2006), which caring adults in quality 4-H programs can help address. With the time spent in training activities and other teen 4-H programs during the year, the adult volunteers and Extension Agents often develop close working relationships and build camaraderie with the teens. Taking time to recognize when these youth have done well and praising them for the effort, skill improvement, handling of a situation, and achievement is a natural part of 4-H.

A few examples follow on to how to give behavior-specific praise to teen leaders at 4-H camp:

- After observing a teen leader respond to a heated argument in the cabin: “I was impressed with how you handled that tense situation by remaining calm and allowing each camper to give her side of the story, while at the same time demanding that they be respectful of you and each other.”
- During nature class: “I can see that you are getting more comfortable helping the campers find the macroinvertebrates in the stream. Your enthusiasm for the activity really helps to encourage the campers to keep trying.”
- During leathercraft class: “Your leathercraft skills have really progressed since you’ve been helping with this class. You do very nice work. Would you like to teach some of the texturing techniques you have mastered to the next group of campers?”
- During free recreation: “You did a great job setting expectations of behavior and reviewing the rules of the game before starting. That is so important in helping to prevent potential problems.”
- At flag-lowering: “Thank you for modeling such good etiquette and reminding the campers around you about proper flag ceremony behavior.”

Praise in Relation to Developmental Theories

The use of praise in high schools is most often associated with positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) as an effective way to encourage desired behaviors while reducing undesirable ones (Flannery & McGrath Kato, 2017). However, PBIS is not just a tool to encourage positive behaviors among students who most need redirection. It is universal, with tier one application involving all students (Flannery & McGrath Kato, 2017).

All youth need to be encouraged and supported; all youth need to feel valued (Search Institute, 2006). Teens are in a particular stage of development where building on their strengths can make a significant impact on shaping their futures (Ciocanel et al., 2017). Providing praise to adolescents is an integral part of many theories related to human development.

Maslow (1943) indicated that most individuals are motivated by many factors that influence their behavior. He developed a Hierarchy of Needs with the first three stages (psychological needs, safety needs, and love and belonging) classified as deficiency needs. The top stages in the hierarchy (esteem and self-actualization) are classified as growth needs (Atkins & Harmon, 2016). Growth needs occur when basic needs are met and individuals are ready to do something with their lives (Atkins & Harmon, 2016). Within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, teenagers are often at the stage of social and psychological needs where they seek companionship and are also able to consider giving of themselves to help others (Atkins & Harmon, 2016). This desire to make meaningful contributions, seek fulfillment, and experience personal growth fits what Maslow termed a healthy man (Maslow, 1943). Stated another way, these behaviors describe an individual motivated by a desire to reach his or her full capacity. Providing praise to 4-H Camp teen leaders helps to fulfill the basic motivational need for esteem from others, and it helps to give the teens recognition of their accomplishments.

Erikson's stages of psychosocial development identify that adolescents are concerned about how others view them. These teens "must apply the cognitive, decision making, and coping skills learned thus far to different everyday situations and determine the social values necessary to succeed in the adult world" (Darling-Fisher, 2018, p. 4). Providing praise to youth who are in the process of forming their personal identities can help shape their perceptions of how others view them and can support their confidence in themselves and their decisions.

The latest evolution of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development is viewed as a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner focused on the individual at the center of personal development but stressed that this development occurs in the context of social relationships, interaction with the surrounding environment, and over the scope of time. Looking at this theory in the context of 4-H Camp, 4-H teens develop, practice, and hone life skills during the week of camp and in the intervening 51 weeks of the year as they continue to grow. Interacting with campers, adults, Extension Agents, and camp staff, combined with the unique camp setting, creates an optimum environment for personal development.

Lerner et al. (2015) described positive youth development as a developmental process following the Relational-Developmental-Systems paradigm (RDSP). In this paradigm, individual development is seen as an interactive process with other individuals and the surrounding environment (Lerner et al., 2015). Teens have the tools they need in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and social-relational skills to actively influence their own development (Lerner et al., 2015). 4-H Camp experiences enable teen leaders to test these skills and develop them more fully. Caring adults working with them can provide coaching and recognition through the use of behavior-specific praise. Each of these developmental theories supports the idea that providing behavior-specific praise to teenagers may support their growth and development. Providing this praise to 4-H Camp teen leaders may help them gain confidence and support their motivation as they contribute to the 4-H camping program.

Praise as a Motivation Tool

In her study of how teens perceived praise from teachers in high school, Gurney (2015) found evidence that praise is a source of motivation for many students and that the students preferred receiving behavior-specific praise. Many students in the study also expressed appreciation that the teachers took time to express praise. They valued this positive relationship, which motivated them to do better (Gurney, 2015).

In a study of classroom teachers' natural rates of praise for their students, Floress et al. (2018) found that the most effective praise given by teachers was behavior-specific praise (detailing what specific action the student did to warrant the praise) rather than general praise, such as "good job" or "well done." Haydon and Kroeger (2016) also stressed a guiding principle for classroom management as the need for teachers to use behavior-specific praise to recognize students.

Praise can occur publicly, where it can be heard by others, or privately, where only the intended recipient is aware of it. Blaze et al. (2014) studied these two types of praise, termed loud and quiet, respectively, to determine the effectiveness of praise and compare the two types. In their study of four high school classrooms, they found a less than 1% difference between the effectiveness of the two types of praise for increasing desired behaviors and decreasing undesirable ones. They found that praise, regardless of the type given, increased positive behaviors in their study by 31% and reduced negative behaviors by 20% (Blaze et al., 2014). Fefer et al. (2016) also studied praise in high school classrooms and concluded that students appreciated receiving both praise and rewards. They found that many students in their study expressed a desire to receive more praise than what they actually did, also noting that the students received less praise in high school than they had in elementary school (Fefer et al., 2016). This reduction in the amount of praise given to high school students mimics findings from Jenkins et al. (2015) in their literature review about teacher use of praise.

Philossaint Wells (2018) studied factors motivating high school students and found one factor to be nurturing relationships. Within the context of these relationships, teens expressed that verbal encouragement from caring adults in their lives, such as parents and teachers, helped to motivate them to succeed (Philossaint Wells, 2018). Praise can be a powerful factor in the lives of developing adolescents.

Praise as it Relates to Teen Contribution

Hershberg et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative analysis of youths' open-ended responses in the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Study participants expressed a strong sense of the importance of contribution with components of self, others, and community. However, only some of the youth in the study were currently finding ways to contribute (Hershburg et al., 2014).

Mainieri and Anderson (2015) recognized camp as a unique setting that could promote skills related to future contribution and studied one particular camp program as an antecedent toward youth civic engagement. In their review of the literature, four essential skills emerged for successful civic engagement: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and management and leadership skills (Mainieri & Anderson, 2015). These are all skills that teen leaders hone at 4-H Camp while working in partnership with caring adults to deliver a quality camping experience for younger youth. Although much of their research focused on parent-teen relationships, Callina et al. (2014) found that parents and other important nonparental adults could help promote civic engagement among adolescents through developing and maintaining positive and trusting relationships with teens. Relationships, trust, skill-building, and recognition of those skills through praise are all interconnected in the camping environment.

Theory of Connection Between Praise and Teen Feelings of Contribution and Motivation

Hershburg et al. (2014) found that teens viewed making connections with nonparental adults as meaningful and that these connections helped them envision their future selves. The 4-H model, incorporating the Essential Elements of 4-H into a quality youth program, and developing caring and supportive relationships with 4-H members, provides the opportunity to develop meaningful connections. These connections grow stronger as adults provide support and encouragement through giving behavior-specific praise to teens when appropriate. It can motivate teens to push a little harder and continue modeling and improving their developing leadership skills.

Teens have an ideological belief in contributing to others and their communities (Hershburg et al., 2014). 4-H Camp provides an outlet for teens to make a positive contribution. The camp environment is unique to youth development in that it provides a period of intense youth-adult interaction with relatively low staff to youth ratios (Garst et al., 2016). In Virginia 4-H camping, teen leaders build on the skills they have developed over their 4-H careers, including leadership, teamwork, independence, positive self-image, confidence, caring for others, and more. They then

employ these skills while contributing to the success of their 4-H camp week(s). Epley et al. (2017) stated, “although camp counselors are expected to have at least a basic level of competence, 4-H professionals must provide appropriate training and coaching to enhance these teens’ development” (p. 52).

Coaching may take the form of support and encouragement through praise, which can help motivate teen leaders to succeed in their assigned duties. Lawford and Ramey (2017) identified the youth development components of initiative, self-esteem, and empathy for others as factors in youth contribution. They linked youth contribution to initiative and described initiative as motivation combined with the ability to progress toward a set goal (Lawford & Ramey, 2017).

Implications for Practice and Research

The Essential Elements of 4-H call for youth to feel a sense of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery. Giving praise ties into the Essential Elements of 4-H in that it provides youth with an opportunity to establish connections (belonging), encourages responsible citizenship (generosity), contributes to increased self-esteem and sense of purpose (independence), and recognizes their developing skills (mastery). There are many ways for caring adults interacting with youth to help them achieve these developmental relationships. If praise is thought to influence youth feelings of contribution and motivation, and if praise is also a tool that adults can use to provide support and recognition, then it naturally flows that giving praise in the form of behavior-specific encouragement, positive reinforcement, and recognition is to be encouraged.

For the youth development professional in the nonformal educational field, praise should be a tool that is dispensed appropriately and in moderation so that it retains meaning and is not overused. Praise is a significant component of positive youth development. It likely has direct linkages to 4-H Camp teen leader feelings of contribution and motivation.

In their international study of cross-cultural youth development and measurement, Scales et al. (2017) determined that positive youth development is best achieved when promoted holistically, “across the ecological contexts of their lives, including families, schools, programs, and communities” (p. 1,168). They emphasized that “investment in providing supports and opportunities through which young people develop critical skills, attitudes, and other strengths is a critical strategy to advance human well-being” (Scales et al., 2017, p. 1,146). Research has documented that developmental assets are universally important for youth regardless of diversity in race, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, geography, or culture (Scales et al., 2017), although the strategies and supports to develop them may differ (Benson & Scales, 2018). These developmental assets have a cumulative effect and contribute to youth thriving, with youth who have fewer developmental assets being more likely to engage in risky behaviors. At the same time, those who are developmentally asset-rich tend to exhibit healthy, prosocial behaviors and express having a sense of purpose (Benson & Scales, 2018).

In providing behavior-specific praise to teen leaders at 4-H Camp, the caring adults who work with them can contribute to several of the developmental assets of youth identified by the Search Institute. These assets, from the Search Institute (2006), include the following:

1. Receiving support from caring adults
2. Feeling valued by adults in the community
3. Being viewed as a useful resource with a contributing role in the community
4. Placing a high value on helping others
5. Being comfortable working with others of different backgrounds
6. Having a sense of purpose

Through contributing to teen positive youth development during the 4-H Camp experience, caring adults can direct youth toward positive outcomes. This process often includes giving praise in the form of support, encouragement, and recognition of specific behaviors or actions. In theory, this praise-giving process may influence teens' feelings of contribution and motivation. Future research could explore this theory by investigating 4-H teen leaders' perceptions related to receiving praise and whether or not receiving praise (or lack thereof) has any impact upon them.

Conclusion

Praise given in the context of behavior-specific encouragement, positive reinforcement, and recognition may contribute to 4-H Camp teen leader feelings of motivation and contribution. The use of praise in this fashion meshes with existing tenants of 4-H Youth Development inherent in quality programs and incorporating the 4-H Essential Elements of belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery. Although much of the current research regarding the effects of praise upon teens is seated within the formal educational setting, there is a direct application to its use in the nonformal 4-H Camp setting.

Praising youth has roots in many educational theories, including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development. The more recent Relational-Developmental-Systems paradigm also supports the use of praise as individuals interact with each other inside the backdrop of a particular environment. This praise, given by caring adults who the teens trust, can help reaffirm skills, maintain positive trajectories, and reinforce the teens' views on how others perceive them.

Providing praise to teen leaders at 4-H Camp is a natural fit within positive youth development. Paid and volunteer Extension staff have a pivotal role in helping young people develop skills and abilities that will stick with them the rest of their lives. Although there is limited research relating the use of praise with teen leaders at 4-H Camp to their feelings of contribution and motivation, existing literature on praise in academic settings, combined with literature related to positive youth development, organized camping programs, and 4-H, lends credibility to the

theory that there is an influence. This theory invites future research on the subject. Possible areas of study include how 4-H Camp teens perceive praise, how praise is given, and the impact receiving praise has upon them.

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