



Summer Camp Impact Seen High In New Study

[Do camps cultivate a stronger Jewish future?](#)

Strongest evidence yet of effect of camping on Jewish identity, adult engagement.

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When your child grows up, do you want him or her to feel an emotional attachment to Israel, go to synagogue and donate regularly to Jewish causes?

Then start packing a duffel bag, and load it on a bus bound for a Jewish sleep-away camp.

A just-released report — the most comprehensive analysis so far of the impact of Jewish camp experiences — offers the strongest evidence yet that a summer of bug juice, fresh air and color war leads to significantly stronger adult Jewish engagement.

While there have long been many anecdotal and other reports about the life-changing and positive effects of Jewish camps, this study, commissioned by the Foundation for Jewish Camp and led by sociologist Steven M. Cohen, is the first to employ a “regression analysis” that statistically controls for influences other than Jewish camp, such as prior Jewish education and family background, on a person’s adult behavior and determine the camp-related effect.

“I am impressed not only with the size of the effect, but with the variation of the effect,” said Cohen, in a conference call unveiling the study.

The study, based on data from 26 demographic studies including the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, found that camp alumni when compared to Jews of similar family, educational and denominational backgrounds show higher levels of Jewish engagement in everything from ritual observance to Jewish charitable giving to marrying within the faith.

Behaviors on which camp had the greatest impact: emotional attachment to Israel (55 percent higher for camp alumni), attending synagogue at least monthly (45 percent higher) and always/usually lighting Shabbat candles (37 percent). Camp alumni were 30 percent more likely to donate to Jewish federations and 26 percent more likely to affiliate with synagogue.

Still affected, but less dramatically, were intermarriage rates (camp alumni were 10 percent more likely than their peers to marry other Jews), always/usually participating in a Passover seder (8 percent) and always/usually lighting Chanukah candles (5 percent).

Seventy thousand North American Jewish children (an estimated 10 percent of the eligible population) attended Jewish summer camps this past summer, according to the FJC, and the study will be a powerful tool in the group's efforts to raise money to dramatically increase camp enrollment.

Even without the new research, Jewish summer camps have been a popular cause in recent years.

The FJC, which had a budget of over \$18 million in 2009, the last year for which tax forms are available, already enjoys support from the Jewish community's biggest philanthropists and donors, including the Jim Joseph Foundation, which has poured in more than \$20 million since 2006, and the Avi Chai Foundation.

Its board of trustees includes power hitters like Leslie Wexner, the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, the Samuel Bronfman Foundation and the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

Last summer the foundation helped launch five new "specialty" Jewish summer camps, including the environmentally themed Eden Village Camp and the Six Points Sports Academy. It has also partnered with other funders to offer various incentive scholarships to encourage new families to enroll their children in Jewish camps. It also works with existing camps to improve their Jewish education, management and business practices, and is exploring other specialty and lower-cost summer camp options.

"This report is a tool that really proves Jewish camp is the major contributor to a vibrant Jewish future," said Jeremy Fingerman, the FJC's chief executive officer, adding that "We have hard facts that prove camp works, and we believe this highlights the impact on the individual Jewish identity of campers but even more, what this indicates, is that camps create a clear sense of belonging and identity to a larger community ... Camp is a community development tool."

Elisa Spungen Bildner, who together with her husband Robert founded the FJC in 1998, said, "There have been studies that have talked in a less strong way about the relationship between going to Jewish camp and the adults that come out, but this takes it so much farther."

Noting that some donors she has approached over the years have been skeptical about the impact of Jewish camp, Bildner said, "I can't wait to go back to some of them and show them this research."

Asked whether there are examples of other research isolating the impact of a specific Jewish experience on adult behavior, Cohen, the researcher said "the closest model" is research Brandeis' Steinhardt Social Research Institute is doing measuring the impact of Birthright Israel trips.

“Similar analyses show that day schools have an even more powerful impact” than summer camps, he said.

However, “the policy issue with day schools is that they reach a small fraction of the Jewish population and non-Orthodox population,” he said.

In looking for “the major policy instrument available” to engage non-Orthodox Jews “we’ve suspected that Jewish camp is that option. Now I’m convinced.”

“If, like 80 to 95 percent of [non-Orthodox Jews] you are not going to send your kid to day school then my No. 1 advice to you is send your kid to a Jewish camp where the staff is proficient and well-trained,” Cohen said. “It really makes a big difference after the Jewish home, which is the first line of intervention in modeling intensive Jewish life.”

Asked why he believes summer camp attendance has less impact on one’s chances of marrying a Jew than it does on other key Jewish behaviors, such as ritual observance, Cohen, who has frequently described intermarriage as “the greatest single threat” to Jewish continuity, emphasized that camp alumni are 10 percent less likely than their peers to intermarry.

“There’s an impact and you see it,” he said.

However, the greatest factor influencing whether or not someone intermarries, Cohen said, is geography: Jews who live in neighborhoods with large Jewish populations are less likely to intermarry.

“Camps are competing against the geographic influence, and as I’ve quipped with some seriousness, I’d rather know about the ZIP code than education” in assessing one’s likelihood of intermarrying, he said.