

Parent Anxiety Causes and Consequences

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D.

Ryan J. Gagnon, M.A.

Clemson University

Youth Development Leadership

Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management





Background

- ▶ Parents have high expectations for camp program providers. They want their children to have experiences that are both safe and developmental.
- ▶ Camp directors manage potential risks in many ways, yet some parents view the camp experience as risky in spite of these efforts.
- ▶ Little attention paid to parental anxiety associated with camp experiences except for a few homesickness studies (Kingery, Peneston, Rice, & Wormuth, 2012; Thurber & Walton, 2007).

Purpose



To explore how parental anxiety is perceived by camp directors as well as the possible influence of parental anxiety on camp operations and programming.

Theoretical Frame

- ▶ *Parent involvement* (Casper, Traub, & Little 2002; Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009)
- ▶ *Risk perception* (Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; Garst & Gagnon, 2015; Giddens, 1991; Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, & Montgomery, 2013)
- ▶ *Parental anxiety* (Scott, Jackson, & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Prezza et al., 2005)
- ▶ *Parent management* (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2013; Thurber & Malinowski, 2000; Torretta & Bovitz, 2005)



Research Questions



1. How do camp directors perceive parental anxiety and causes of parental anxiety?
2. What operational and programmatic changes do camp directors implement to address perceived causes of parental anxiety?



Method

- ▶ **Convenience sample** of 248 camp directors responded to an electronic survey distributed through ACA (14% response rate)
- ▶ Questions from the **Camp Emerging Issues Survey** analyzed:
 - ▶ “If you have observed or experienced parents with moderate to significant levels of anxiety, then describe what you believe was the cause of parents' anxiety?”
 - ▶ “If you have made operational or programmatic changes at your camp due to the concern or anxiety expressed by parents, then explain the type of changes made.”
- ▶ 3-person team used **content analysis** (Patton, 2002) to code qualitative responses to these questions and identify patterns and associations across the codes
- ▶ **12 themes constructed** using an inductive approach—from data to broader generalizations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).



Results

Q#1: If you have observed or experienced parents with moderate to significant levels of anxiety, then describe what you believe was the cause of parents' anxiety.

Table 1

Themes associated with director perceptions of parental anxiety.

Theme 1	Anxiety is influenced by parental separation and related loss of communication
Theme 2	Parents without camp experience are more anxious
Theme 3	Parental anxiety is associated with a lack of trust in camp administration and staff
Theme 4	Parents who show overparenting behaviors are more anxious
Theme 5	Parents fear for their child's physical, emotional, and social safety
Theme 6	Parents concerned that their child is not properly prepared for camp



Results

Q#2: If you made any operational or programmatic changes at your camp due to concerns or anxiety expressed by parents, then explain the type of changes made.

Table 2

Themes associated with operational and programmatic changes to address director perceptions of parental anxiety.

Theme 1 Enhanced parent communication strategies

Theme 2 Increased parent access to the camp

Theme 3 Strengthened staffing patterns, staff training, and preparation

Theme 4 Increased social media web strategies to give parents virtual admission into camp life

Theme 5 Enhanced parent outreach, programs, and pre-camp training

Theme 6 Reinforced camp policies and procedures



Implications

- ▶ Causes of parental anxiety identified in this study included: *separation, lack of experience, lack of trust, overparenting, fear of lack of safety, and fear of a lack of preparation*. Some are within a camp director's sphere of influence, others are outside of the a director's control.
- ▶ Camp directors should compare their experiences with parents to those shared by respondents in this study to *identify areas of similarity and difference*.
- ▶ Causes of parental anxiety experienced by the respondents in this study, although perhaps not universal, may represent a *trend that could emerge* across a broader group of camps.

Implications



- ▶ Emergent strategies for managing parental anxiety included **communication (most common)**, **access**, **staffing**, **education**, and **policy development**. These are strategies for potential adoption.
- ▶ Using strategies such as **parent education and communication** to reduce parental anxiety, particularly prior to the camp experiences, is recognized as important.
- ▶ **“Paradox of information”** (Thompson, 2009)- Efforts by camp directors to minimize parent anxiety (i.e., providing information, photos, videos) may in fact be driving parent anxiety. Some directors may struggle with setting limits on the extent of information that will be shared with parents.

Future Directions

- ▶ Little evidence of the *influence of overparenting on a child's development during the elementary, middle, or high-school years* (Garst & Gagnon, 2015).
- ▶ *Collect data from parents* about their involvement in camp programs, the extent to which parents experience anxiety when sending their children to camp, and the extent to which they exhibit overparenting perceptions and behaviors.
- ▶ Need *better measures* of parental anxiety specific to camp experiences as well as valid and reliable measures of overparenting in camps.



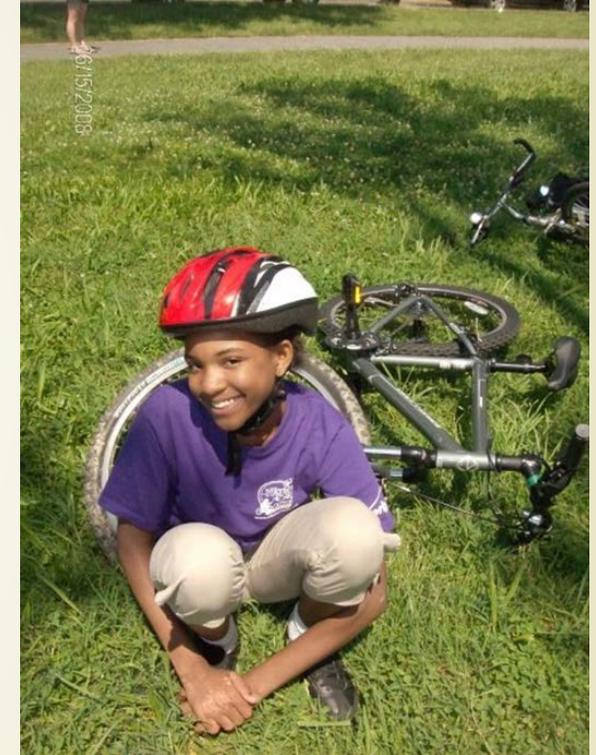
Future Directions



- ▶ Need to *better understand strategies parents are implementing at home to reduce their own anxiety as well as the anxiety of their children* prior to camp, as well as an assessment of the effectiveness of those strategies.
- ▶ An *inventory and assessment of parents' expectations and preparation strategies* in the weeks and months leading up to camp may reveal other aspects of child, parent, or family behaviors that will help us better understand the causes of camp-related anxiety (parental verbal instructions, practice overnight visits with family or friends, and so on).

Future Directions

- ▶ Study concepts (risk perception, parental anxiety; overparenting) may be culturally situated. More research is needed to ***understand risk perception, parental anxiety and overparenting within the context of camp experiences outside of Western cultures.***
- ▶ Need to understand the ***impact of parental influences on operational and/or programming decisions.***
 1. What is the resource impact of camp directors hiring more staff (parent liaisons, security personnel) in response to parental concerns and expectations?
 2. If funding is shifted toward increased personnel, what areas of operations or programs are receiving less funding?
 3. What return-on-investment do camps realize when they invest in third party email communications or video sharing systems?





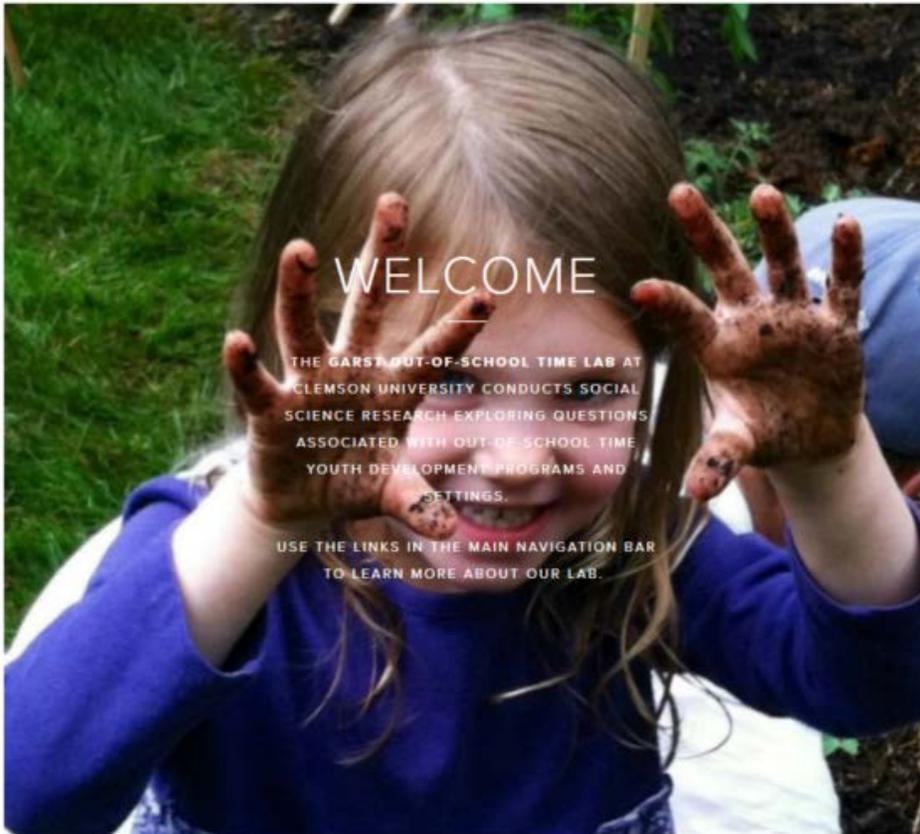
Limitations

- ▶ **Purposeful sample** of ACA camp contacts may not be representative of the entire population of U.S. camp director or even the entire population of ACA camp directors
- ▶ **Self-report method** has inherent weaknesses from the perspective of the respondent (honesty/image management, lack of introspective ability, lack of understanding, response bias)(Austin, Gibson, Deary, McGregor, & Dent, 1998). Anonymity may have mitigated this limitation.
- ▶ Parental anxiety measured based on the **perspective of a third party** (camp directors), who may have incorrectly attributed parent behaviors as being reflective of anxiety, overparenting, and so on, when in fact the behaviors were representative of some other latent or direct cause.

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CONTACT US:

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D.
bgarst@clemson.edu

Ryan J. Gagnon, M.A.
rjgagno@clemson.edu

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