

Kids value support at disability specific camp [?]— want similar experiences in home communities

June 19 2014, by Charles Rondot



Camp Riley camper is congratulated by his counselor after successfully climbing a 40-foot climbing wall. Credit: Indiana University

Camps for children with disabilities or life-threatening illnesses can provide fantastic social and self-affirming opportunities for campers that just can't be matched outside of camp—and this can be a problem, found Indiana University researchers.

At Camp Riley, held each summer at the IU School of Public Health-Bloomington's Bradford Woods outdoor center in partnership with the sponsoring organization Riley Children's Foundation, campers can interact daily with other "camp war buddies," as they call each other, as they take on various challenges, including wheel-chair races, ropes courses and swimming goals.

"The social interaction of the [kids](#) with other kids with the same disabilities provides enormous support," said Doug Knapp, associate professor in the School of Public Health. "Kids with terminal cancer can say, 'Yes, I've got that,' and they can talk about it like any normal thing. The kids can't even get this with their family."

Knapp's study, "Examining Perceptions of Social Acceptance and Quality of Life of Pediatric Campers with Physical Disabilities," was published in the journal *Children's Health Care*.

For the study, researchers asked campers and their families to fill out a questionnaire before and immediate following their one-week stay at Camp Riley; researchers followed up with campers three to seven months later for more feedback. Many campers, they found, expressed frustration about the lack of similar activities and experiences in their home communities.


"They see their week at Camp Riley as right next to Christmas," Knapp said. "I didn't expect the intensity of the peer aspect, how important it was to be with kids like themselves. They don't have this when they return home."

The researchers repeated the study the following year and have expanded it to include eight other camps across the country. They are finding similar frustrations, but these findings have not gone unnoticed.

Riley Children's Foundation has created a [pilot program](#) to begin to address the needs of these youth. Ongoing research and program development are taking place currently to develop the program to address the needs identified in the research.

"This project is a good example of how research and community collaboration can make a real difference," said Shay Dawson, director of Bradford Woods. "The findings not only add to our knowledge on the value of medically specific camps as a social support vehicle for youth, it has also led to the creation of a pilot program to help address the long-term needs of these same youth as they return to their Indiana communities. "

Provided by Indiana University

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