

Could summer camp be the key to world peace?

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According to findings from a new study by University of Chicago Booth School of Business Professor Jane Risen, and Chicago Booth doctoral student Juliana Schroeder, it may at least be a start.

Risen and Schroeder conducted research on Seeds of Peace, one of the largest peacebuilding programs that brings together teenagers from conflict regions, including Israelis and Palestinians, every year for three weeks in rural Maine. They tracked participants' feelings and attitudes toward the other national group for three years with three separate cohorts of campers. They found a profound effect of camp relationships: Campers who formed a close [relationship](#) with someone from the "other side" of their conflict (such as a Palestinian forming a relationship with a Jewish Israeli) developed more positive feelings toward all members of that group, and were more likely to retain those feelings long after returning home.

The researchers used surveys to measure campers' attitudes toward the other side both before and after camp. They then surveyed the campers again when they had been back in their home countries for nine months, and found that the camp still affected participants' attitudes about the other side. Their paper, "Befriending the enemy: Outgroup friendship longitudinally predicts intergroup attitudes in a co-existence program for Israelis and Palestinians," was published recently in *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*.

"Nearly every camper has a more positive attitude on the last day of

camp than he or she did on the first day," Risen says. "Of course, once the teenagers get home, the positive emotions they developed during their time away fades, but most showed more positive feelings toward the outgroup—even months later—than they did before they attended the program."

One of the things that makes the camp successful is that the young people are taken out of their homes to a neutral location, which allows them to get away from family and societal pressures. This relocation also offers them the opportunity to form new and different types of friendships, and it is these friendships that Schroeder and Risen demonstrate may be the key to improved relations between the two groups.

The researchers' data shows that campers who formed a close relationship with at least one member from the other side at camp, and especially those who maintained those relationships once the program was over, retained the strongest feelings of positivity toward the other side. In fact, they found that making and maintaining a relationship with an outgroup member for a year was one of the best predictors of warmer feelings toward the other group.

"When Seeds of Peace was started, its founder's advice to campers was that they should make one friend," Risen says. "But after looking at the results of our work, we would modify his advice slightly to: make and keep just one friend."

Provided by University of Chicago

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