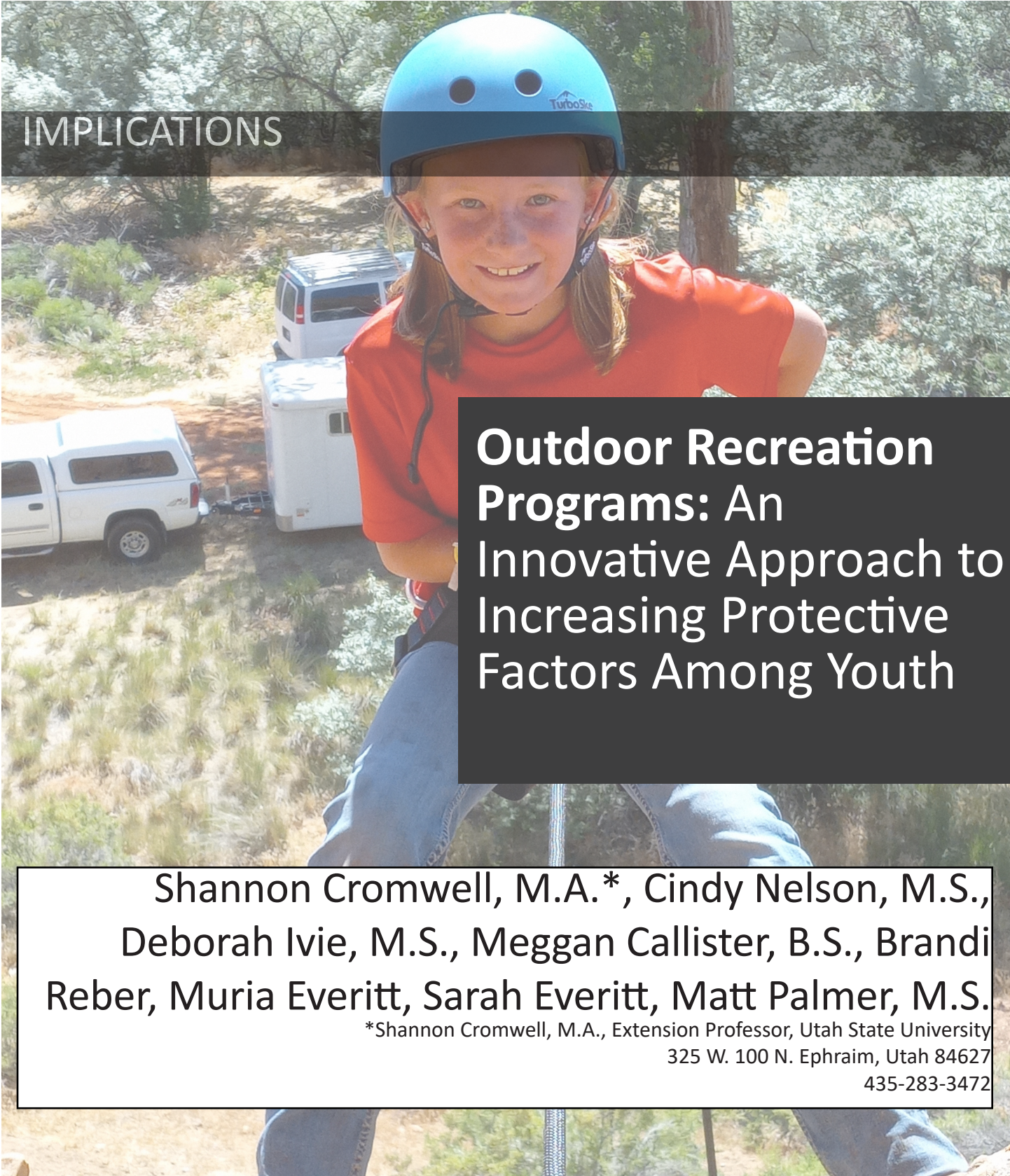


IMPLICATIONS



**Outdoor Recreation
Programs: An
Innovative Approach to
Increasing Protective
Factors Among Youth**

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Abstract

The Outdoor Recreation program was established in response to a county-wide needs assessment and was supported by research on the benefits of providing youth with activities that promote positive physical and mental health. Objectives included exposing youth to hands-on learning experiences that focused on increasing protective factors. Youth and parent evaluations indicated an increase in both external and internal developmental assets among youth participants.

Outdoor Recreation Programs: An Innovative Approach to Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth

Spending time in nature has many positive physical, mental, and social-emotional health outcomes. Based on research, regular physical activity can combat and prevent the negative consequences of indoor sedentary time for both youth and adults (Mutz et al., 2019). Studies show outdoor activities lower stress levels and blood pressure, decrease attention problems, reduce aggressive behavior, and increase positive emotions and social development among youth (Mutz & Muller, 2016; Mutz et al., 2019; Tillman et al., 2018). Additionally, the average child spends 7.5 hours a day in front of a screen and only seven minutes a day outside. Indoor sedentary time can lead to social isolation and chronic disease for children, including a higher risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, and early death (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promo-

tion, n.d.). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation for youth and families, creating financial strain, school closures, and reduced access to face-to-face services. These changes posed significant risks to the well-being of children and consequently increased the importance of providing families with activities that support healthy growth and development, enhance mental health, and foster the development of social skills (Gabriel et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Families often lack the necessary money, equipment, or experience so they rely on organizations to provide their family with a positive introduction to recreation and physical activity (Boat et al., 2022). Time spent with caring adults outside of the home and classroom can profoundly impact a child's development (Scales et al., 2022), and it has also been found that participation in activity clubs or teams have enhanced a sense of belonging and connection, as well as life skills development such as goal setting and teamwork (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). Youth need both external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time) and internal assets (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity) to succeed (Scales et al., 2022). Activities that increase protective factors among youth, such as self-regulation, positive coping skills, and positive peer engagement have been found to reduce risky behaviors (Syvertsen et al., 2019), and provide the building blocks of healthy development.

Purpose Needs Assessment

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved, countywide needs assessment was disseminated via a Qualtrics survey link to 77 parents, who served as 4-H volunteers. Fifty parents responded, resulting in a 65% response rate. When asked what type of activities they would like their child(ren) to have access to, two project areas came to the

forefront.

- 64% of parents felt their child(ren) would benefit from educational activities that focused on outdoor recreation.
- 40% of parents felt their child(ren) would benefit from activities that helped build peer relationships, interpersonal relationships, and developmental assets.

The Outdoor Recreation program was developed in rural Sanpete County, Utah as a response to needs-assessment data and as an innovative approach for implementing high-quality, outdoor-related learning experiences. The objective for the Outdoor Recreation program was to expose youth, ages 8-18, to hands-on experiential learning opportunities, focusing on increasing protective factors in partnership with caring adult mentors.

Methods

Program Implementation

Grant funding from the Utah Office of Outdoor Recreation provided the equipment and supplies to develop and implement weekly, hands-on, experiential-learning activities that engaged youth with the natural world, creating opportunities for positive physical, mental, and social-emotional health outcomes. The program was offered county-wide, with 35 youth participating in outdoor activities, including hiking, kayaking, outdoor cooking, fishing, rappelling, 4-H shooting sports, and GPS and compass skills. Additionally, 10 adult 4-H leaders volunteered to serve as mentors for the program and provided expertise and support for the activities. The weekly outdoor recreation club meetings were held year-round, utilizing community venues during winter months to focus on hands-on educational skills that did not require outdoor facilities, such as first-aid, knot-tying, and STEM activities. A core component of the program was the youth-driven nature, allowing youth members to provide feedback on outdoor activities and skills in which they would like to become involved; therefore, providing

opportunities for leadership development and peer mentoring. Throughout the program, Extension staff collaborated with 4-H adult volunteers and used input from youth members to solidify partnerships and implement weekly activities. Including youth in the decision-making process has benefited their development and has increased membership and involvement.

Knowing that providing youth with exposure to possible college and career opportunities has been shown to be effective in supporting youth transitions to higher education (Mitchell-Hawkins & Mellon, 2022), Extension staff and adult volunteers created a network of community partners with expertise in various areas, including Sanpete County Commissioners, local city councils, blacksmithing services, trapping services, fire departments, ambulance associations, parks and recreation departments, and forest service professionals. Program partners engaged youth in a variety of career-based learning opportunities, providing valuable skills that will be beneficial for their future college and career pathways (Fletcher, et al., 2018).

An IRB-approved Qualtrics evaluation was emailed to all youth program participants, with 28 of 35 youth filling out the evaluation, resulting in an 80% response rate. The evaluation was disseminated six months after the program started to determine areas needed for participant growth and program improvement. Evaluation questions centered around four external assets and four internal assets to determine the program effectiveness of building protective factors. The evaluation questions were based on the *Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for Middle Childhood, ages 8-12* (Search Institute©, 2006) because the majority of youth participants were in this age range. Additionally, Qualtrics evaluation data were collected from parents six months after the start of the program who had children participating in outdoor recreation activities to gauge their perceptions on how the program had benefited their child(ren).

Results

Evaluation results indicated that outdoor recreation club activities were successful in building external and internal assets among youth, therefore providing the building blocks of healthy development. Parent evaluation results also indicated an increase in protective factors among their child(ren).

Youth Evaluation Results

Using a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree), youth participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with statements pertaining to external and internal assets. Youth evaluation results indicated the following for external assets, including support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time:

- 84% strongly agreed that the program provided support from adults other than their parents, provided opportunities to communicate and seek advice from adults, and provided a safe, caring environment to learn new skills.
- 87% strongly agreed that the program provided empowerment by making them feel valued and appreciated, provided opportunities to make decisions, and provided opportunities to serve others.
- 90% strongly agreed that the program provided boundaries and expectations due to opportunities to learn from positive adult role models, opportunities to learn from peers, and opportunities to set goals and achieve them.
- 92% strongly agreed the program provided constructive use of time by providing opportunities to participate in creative, challenging activities that increased their physical, social-emotional, and mental health.

Youth evaluation results indicated the following for internal assets, including commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity:

- 91% strongly agreed the program provided commitment to learning by increasing their desire to

learn new things, share new skills and knowledge with others, and actively engage in learning.

- 82% strongly agreed the program provided positive values by including positive healthy habits, opportunities to gain responsibility, and opportunities to care about their peers, community, and the environment.
- 88% strongly agreed the program provided social competencies by helping them make healthy decisions, opportunities to meet new people from different backgrounds, and provided critical thinking skills.
- 91% strongly agreed the program provided positive identity by introducing opportunities to gain confidence and increase their self-esteem, helped them gain skills that can be used in the future, and provided opportunities to learn about future careers.

Additionally, youth were asked open-ended questions to gauge improvements in their social and emotional health after program participation.

Table 1 displays youth verbatim responses detailing increases in confidence, problem solving skills, and peer and community engagement.

Parent Evaluation Results

Parent evaluations were also based on the same 4-point Likert scale and asked parents to indicate how much they agreed with the statements based on what they have witnessed through having their child(ren) participate in the outdoor recreation program. Parent evaluation results indicated the following for external assets:

- 85% strongly agreed the program provided support.
- 80% strongly agreed the program provided opportunities for empowerment.
- 85% strongly agreed the program provided boundaries and expectations.
- 83% strongly agreed the program provided constructive use of time.

Parent evaluation results indicated the following for internal assets:

- 90% strongly agreed the program provided commitment to learning.
- 78% strongly agreed the program provided positive values.
- 80% strongly agreed the program provided social competencies.
- 80% strongly agreed the program provided positive identity.

Additionally, parents were asked open-ended questions to gauge changes in their child(ren)'s social and emotional health after program participation. Table 2 displays parent verbatim responses describing increases in emotion regulation, confidence, and social interactions among their child(ren).

Discussion

Results indicated that organized, experiential outdoor recreation activities implemented by caring adult mentors were an effective venue for providing positive youth experiences that support an increase in healthy habits and prosocial behaviors, as well as provided opportunities for career exploration. Furthermore, outdoor recreation activities were an innovative, effective approach by providing positive peer and adult mentor support, increasing self-efficacy, and developing constructive decision-making skills. Both youth and parents recognized an increase in external and internal assets among youth participants, thereby increasing protective factors and solidifying the building blocks of healthy development.2013).

Implications

While available outdoor recreation activities may vary in different states or regional areas, results indicated that this approach is innovative and effective across many types of outdoor recreation activities. Furthermore, there are many outdoor recreation activities such as walking and hiking, that can be implemented at very low cost and with few or no equipment requirements. Extension

professionals have the opportunity to positively impact youth by providing outdoor recreation activities, and versatility in programming increases the ease with which this program model can be adapted for use in diverse communities and settings to impact youth.

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Appendix

Pictures of Participants



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Table 1

Youth Participant Feedback on Social and Emotional Health Improvements

4-H Outdoor Recreation activities have helped my social and emotional health a lot. We are around a lot of other kids that I didn't know but now I have learned a lot about them. All the kids in 4-H Outdoor Recreation activities are really funny so we are always laughing. That has helped my confidence a lot.
I learned skills such as working with others that I can use in the future.
I feel more involved with my community and friends
Learned how to work together to solve problems and achieve goals
make good choices for the environment and me
I got to understand my strengths and put them to use
I feel more confident around my peers and made new friends
I didn't know I could do something, but I tried and now I know and will try new things.
I use what I learned at school.
I feel like I have an outlet when I'm upset. I can try new things outdoors.
Yes, they have helped me get out of my comfort zone. It has really made me look forward to going every week.

Table 2

Parent Perceptions of Child(ren)'s Social and Emotional Health

She gained confidence and learned how to solve real-world problems because of the club.
We see them developing healthy relationships with kids their age and adults in the community.
Increased responsibility and improved social interactions with peers
The outdoor recreation program has provided a healthy outlet for controlling his emotions. He now enjoys activities that he has been involved in through the club that make him happy when he gets upset.
More outgoing and more comfortable with speaking in front of people.
This program is perfect for all types of kids, and I feel it was made for my 11 yr old boy. I have seen him take time to share his knowledge in the outdoors, and archery to help his peers, which is huge, where he typically tends to keep to himself. He has a positive attitude and looks forward to his weekly Thursday nights.
My child has learned to trust others.
I love it encourages the kids to be self-sufficient, cooking in dutch ovens, seeing ingredients, and being responsible for a meal for the whole group.
This program is amazing! Feel like there is a wide variety on personalities, and skill levels, and everyone helps out. The biggest part of the program's success is our leaders. They are priceless. They do such a great job giving the kids unique experiences. So happy that they volunteer their time to this awesome program.