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Therapeutic Animal Camp for Children Affected by Cancer

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Therapeutic Animal Camp for Children Affected by Cancer

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Honors Research Project

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Honors Research Project Proposal

My Honors Research project incorporates my knowledge and interest in the field of child life by specifically looking at the therapeutic elements of an Animal Camp for children affected by cancer. I will be working in conjunction with The Gathering Place, an organization for individuals touched by cancer. As a past Animal Camp volunteer and a future child life specialist, this research project integrates many of my interests. The project will consist of researching current literature in relation to camps for children affected by cancer, the therapeutic use of animals, and other therapeutic activities, as well as interviewing children who have attended Animal Camp at The Gathering Place. Parents, grandparents and caretakers of the children will also be interviewed.

Animal Camp at The Gathering Place is a weeklong camp during the summer months. Five sessions are offered each summer, and each has a specific animal theme, which have consisted of horses, wild animals, puppies, and kittens. However, all camps incorporate many other activities as well that are both therapeutic and fun, including swimming, medical play, rock climbing, reiki, yoga, drumming, labyrinths and zentangle. The camp is free of charge for campers, as is everything at The Gathering Place, to best meet family needs. Each camp consists of only 10 campers, allowing children to get the maximum potential benefits from camp. Because of this, campers typically are only able to attend any Animal Camp once, unless certain circumstances allow otherwise.

The Gathering Place has two locations, one on the east side of Cleveland, Ohio, and one on the west. Each summer, the camps are divided between the two locations, to provide this service to a larger population. During the winter months, The Gathering Place will host two reunion parties, one at each location where I will interview campers
and their parents, grandparents or caregivers. Consent forms to be videotaped during the
terviews will be established and provided to families beforehand. I will also determine
what questions that will be asked during the interview, with a different set of questions
for children and adults. After the interviews have been conducted and recorded, the
videos will be edited and embedded into a PowerPoint to be a part of a presentation by
two child life specialists and employees of The Gathering Place at The 33rd Annual Child
Place will also use the videos for an overall video about Animal Camp.

From this experience, I expect to have a deeper understanding of the therapeutic
elements of camp for children touched by cancer, the therapeutic use of animals, and the
affects of loss on children. This project will serve the purpose of providing information
about and advocating for therapeutic animal camps for children. The final product will
consist of an updated literature review, a review of the interviews conducted, and a
PowerPoint presentation of the whole project to be presented to staff members at The
Gathering Place.
Introduction

Everyone is affected by cancer in some way, whether it is personally, or through a family member, a friend, a friend of a friend or even a stranger. Parents, grandparents, and children, the young and old; we all are likely touched by cancer at some point in our lives. All connections to cancer can be distressing and overwhelming. As adults, coping with the loss of a spouse, parent or child can be quite difficult and devastating. Perhaps even a more vulnerable population is children who have lost a parent to cancer, because they may not have the capabilities needed to cope on their own. Adults often struggle while coping with a loss, so we can only imagine how difficult it must be for children. Research shows that 22.2% of cancer diagnoses occur between the ages of 22-54 (Kornreich, Mannheim, & Axelrod, 2008). This group is uniquely affected by cancer, because the disease also affects their immediate family including their spouses and children (Kornreich et al., 2008). Because children respond differently to stressors related to parental illness and loss, it is crucial to understand possible responses in order to anticipate and meet children’s needs (Kornreich et al., 2008).

It is important for parents to recognize that children may have different reactions to their illness due to their age and development. Studies show that it is very important to be honest and open with children of all ages as they can already detect there is some sort of issue and being uniformed can cause additional anxiety (Kornreich et al., 2008). For young children, it is recommended to provide only basic information that they can understand so that the child doesn’t become too overwhelmed (Kornreich et al., 2008). A young child’s magical thinking may cause them to have irrational thoughts such as thinking that they caused their parent’s illness, so it is important to be aware of such
possible thinking and address possible concerns (Kornreich et al., 2008). Adolescents can benefit from having more factual and detailed information about the illness and report that it is easier to talk and share their feelings with family and friends (Kornreich et al., 2008). Simply being aware of such information can help parents to best meet their children’s needs. However, these parents obviously have a lot going on, and health care professionals such as child life specialists are able to help address and meet these psychosocial needs of children.
Literature Review

It is well known that a cancer diagnosis creates enormous stress for not only the person who is sick, but for their family as well (Martiniuk, Silva, Amylon, & Barr, 2014). This stress can cause additional issues by putting each family member at risk of developing short and long-term physical and psychological problems, (Martiniuk et al., 2014). Less research has been done on interventions to address this stress, but camps for children touched by cancer are continuing to grow in popularity (Martiniuk et al., 2014). Camps for children with cancer and their families are now available globally, and typically include recreational activities such as boating, music, drama, photography, art, archery, rock climbing, swimming, horseback riding, and many other related activities (Martiniuk et al., 2014). These activities fall under the term “therapeutic recreation,” which is not a new idea; Freud, Erikson, and Bolig suggested that it helps children to master anxiety-producing events and learn to cope with experiences (Martiniuk et al., 2014). Research has shown that therapeutic recreation camps for children touched by cancer have a positive impact on cancer knowledge, mood, self-concept, empathy, friendship, quality of life, and emotional well being (Martiniuk et al., 2014). The benefits from such camps are invaluable as Martiniuk et al., (2014) found that experiencing positive peer interaction having opportunities to play and share experiences in a non-threatening environment is particularly important for children during this stage of cognitive and emotional development.

These camps can provide children with education, therapeutic activities, emotional expression, connections with children facing similar issues, relaxation, coping skills, and simply an opportunity to have fun. In addition, parents get a break while
knowing their child is having a valuable experience. Children related to someone with a cancer diagnoses certainly are in need of such interventions as they experience a myriad of emotional and behavioral changes, including sadness, anxiety, loneliness, depression, guilt, shame, and even post-traumatic stress symptoms (Hancock, 2011). According to Hancock (2011), camp provides short and long term positive outcomes in regards to physical symptoms, self-perception, and social support. Other positive outcomes found in this study included improved mental health outcomes, decreased post-traumatic stress symptoms, improved self-concept, acceptance of feelings as normal, increased social support, and more medical knowledge (Hancock, 2011).

There are many positive benefits that stem from these camps for children affected by cancer. A unique element to the camp at The Gathering Place, is that it focuses on the therapeutic use of animals for these children. Currently, there is limited research that specifically looks at this type of camp for this population, but there is plenty of research on the therapeutic use of animals in general. The different Animal Camps offered at The Gathering Place have included wild animals (such as turtles, snakes, skunks, opossums, and owls), puppies, kittens, and horses. Through the use of horses, equine-assisted psychotherapy has helped grieving individuals cope in a unique way by giving them the ability to find solutions to internal challenges they are facing (Symington, 2012). Clients of equine-assisted psychotherapy are able to participate in activities with horses that can be processed through discussion of emotions, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and actions, and the interactions between horses and people, and therefore can see the experience metaphorically (Symington, 2012). Through this process, clients start to understand how life changes and are able to find solutions to their own challenges (Symington, 2012).
Many, if not most individuals feel a powerful connection through interacting with the horses, and by feeling no judgment from the horses, are able to be honest and are given the opportunity to truly grieve (Symington, 2012). This unique relationship with a horse “allows clients to begin rebuilding their support system in a way that acknowledges the person they are becoming” (Symington, 2012, p. 167). Overall, equine-assisted psychotherapy provides individuals with a unique strategy for coping and a safe environment for acknowledging, expressing, and working through their own challenges (Symington, 2012).

Another study focusing on the therapeutic use of animals, found that the benefits of animal-assisted interventions include improving individual quality of life, reducing anxiety, reducing a sense of isolation, social support, and improved feelings of stability and self-worth (Mills & Sophie, 2014). This research study also found that the routine of taking care of an animal provides daily stability, feelings of worth as well as distraction from negative events” (Mills & Sophie, 2014). In fact, it has been found that cats can improve human moods as effectively as a human companion (Mills & Sophie, 2014). Other profound benefits of animals included facilitating development of empathy and learning, as well as higher autonomy, self-concept, self-esteem, motivation, and focus in children who are pet owners (Mills & Sophie, 2014). This study allows us to see the overall positive effects that animal companionship can have on human individuals, including evidence that suggests that those who own a dog or cat have improved psychological and physical health compared to non-owners (Mills & Sophie, 2014). Based on these research findings, it has been found that animals can serve individuals therapeutically in attempts to cope with emotions and feelings, as well as enhance one’s
overall general well being.

Many other therapeutic activities were facilitated at The Gathering Place’s Animal Camp, including reiki, zentangle, labyrinths, yoga and drumming. Reiki is a form of touch therapy that is described as “a means of channeling universal life energy through the hands of the practitioner into the body of the recipient” (Israel, 2014, p. 1). Reiki has been growing in its popularity and is now offered in over 25% of United States hospitals (Israel, 2014). Reiki is a powerful, yet gentle practice that serves the purpose of balancing the body’s energy centers, known as chakras (Israel, 2014). At Animal Camp, children were able to practice reiki on each other as well the animals. Zentangle is a style of drawing and another therapeutic activity that children engaged in at Animal Camp. Zentangle is an abstract drawing style that is created using repetitive patterns, encompassing the motto that “anything is possible one stroke at a time” (Tate, 2014, p. 1). Zentangle focuses on the process of creating something, rather than the end product, and produces many benefits including relaxation, a sense of self-confidence, increased focus, emotional expression, and new perspectives and creative insights (Tate, 2014). Tate (2014) also describes how zentangle can provide release of tension and distraction from feelings of anxiousness, by being able to “shift your focus from something unpleasant to something peaceful” and allowing you to feel “the anxiety and anger slip away as you focus on the drawing” (p. 1).

During camp, a large labyrinth was set up for children to walk through. Labyrinths have been in existence for over four thousand years, and today they are often used for relaxation and meditation techniques (Dunphy, Borsdorf, & Chambliss, 2000), as they were at The Gathering Place. Research supports the effectiveness of the use of
labyrinths as wellness tools, with results that show labyrinth walking to be positively correlated with overall wellness (Dunphy et al., 2000). Yoga was another activity facilitated for children during camp, and the research available about the therapeutic use of yoga is numerous. In regards to grief alone, yoga has been found to help transform the effects of grief by “promoting body, mind, and spirit integration and rejuvenation” (“Yoga for Grief Relief,” 2014, p. 79), as well as improve acceptance of the loss, body appreciation, perceptions of loss, and positivity (Philbin, 2009). Yet another therapeutic activity provided at camp was a drum circle. One study has found that for children and adolescents facing a variety of social and emotional challenges, a drumming program consisting of six sessions increased self-esteem, self-awareness, and personal empowerment (Clements-Cortes, 2013). All of these additional activities clearly served the children therapeutically through relaxation methods and opportunities to express emotions.

The Gathering Place’s Animal Camp has many therapeutic benefits that are supported by the research discussed in this literature review. Through interaction with animals, and therapeutic and recreational activities, children attending Animal Camp have the opportunity to have a unique and rewarding experience. There really is no other camp like Animal Camp for children touched by cancer. This updated review of current research can serve to promote and advocate for similar camps, so that more children may have the chance to experience the many benefits that it has to offer and leave a lasting impact on their lives.
Interviews

A total of twelve individuals were interviewed about Animal Camp. Of those twelve individuals, eight were campers, while four were caregivers including two grandmothers, a father and mother (See Appendix A). A total of nine interviews were conducted, as three of the campers chose to be interviewed with their caregiver. The interviews were video recorded, so they can be used for a PowerPoint presentation at The 33rd Annual Child Life Council National Conference. Interviews took place during two Animal Camp reunion parties hosted by The Gathering Place, one at each of their locations. Fewer interviews were conducted than expected, due to a snowstorm that occurred the day of the second reunion party, with only one family attending. Regardless, the videos taken gave valuable feedback about the effectiveness of Animal Camp.
Findings

Most campers commented that the camp was “fun” and enjoyed talking about the different activities they participated in, especially swimming and rock climbing. Many campers also talked about the different therapeutic activities such as zentangle, reiki, and the labyrinth. Some discussed how they used reiki on their loved ones battling cancer at home and how it helped them and the relaxing feeling of walking around the labyrinth. One camper explained how zentangle allowed her to express feelings like anger and frustration by drawing harder and lighter. Many campers also talked about how it was nice to be at a camp with other children facing similar issues; they didn’t have to explain anything and didn’t feel alone. Although some of the children were nervous to be interviewed and videotaped, it was obvious that each child enjoyed talking about their camp experience and would smile as they remembered and discussed some of the fond memories they made at camp.

Responses given by the caregivers were invaluable as well. One grandmother shared how she saw her grandson come out of his shell and make friends, and try new things that he wouldn’t have before. Another grandmother shared how her granddaughter was so happy to attend camp each day and how valuable it was to have a “whole week of happiness” and know that her granddaughter is in good hands. Each caregiver showed such delight in sharing about the benefits that the camp had on their child or grandchild and it really reflected what a positive experience it was for these families. The research discussed on each of the components relating to Animal Camp found each to be beneficial and therapeutic, and the responses given in these interviews only further clarify that in all the positive comments that were said about all the aspects of camp.
Personal Reflection

Conducting these interviews was a learning process for me. I began by establishing questions to ask both children and adults. For children, I decided to ask them about their animal at animal camp, other activities they did at camp, and how Animal Camp helped them cope with cancer in their family. I quickly learned that each child would have a unique interview and end up taking it in their own direction. I was able to adjust by this and if a child would put emphasis on a certain topic, I would provide follow up questions to continue discussion about that topic. I most stuck to the original questions with campers, but just added questions throughout the interviews, as I found necessary. I also found that asking if there was anything else they’d like to share about camp was another way for them to discuss anything that hadn’t come up in the interview. Most children would say no at this point, but a few shared more with me that provided valuable feedback.

For adults, I planned to ask how Animal Camp helped their child (or grandchild) cope with cancer, how camp impacted their child, and if there is anything else they’d like to share. I quickly found that most of the adults needed little prompting and if I simply began by asking them what they’d like to share with me about Animal Camp, they felt comfortable sharing how they feel it most impacted their child and family.

Interviewing children and adults is obviously quite a different experience, which I quickly recognized. Children tended to need more prompting, while the adults felt more comfortable sharing about a variety of topics from the beginning. I was prepared that children would need prompting, and I found myself doing too much of it in the first few interviews. I then started to prompt less and allow silence for them to think, and often
even if the silence felt awkward, the children would continue talking. I also discovered that telling interviewees beforehand that the videos would be edited so they don’t have to worry if they make a mistake helped them feel less nervous and more relaxed. Overall, I learned a lot about the interviewing process, especially when it involves video recording as well, and feel more confident in my own interviewing skills.

As an Animal Camp volunteer, this was a unique project for me to learn more about this camp than I would have otherwise. The research component of this project allowed me to discover valuable information about populations affected by cancer, interventions available for those touched by cancer, the therapeutic components of camp for children affected by cancer, the therapeutic use of animals, and other therapeutic activities such as drumming, reiki, labyrinths, yoga, and zentangle. The research I conducted will also serve as an updated literature review in regards to Animal Camp for The Gathering Place. By conducting the interviews, I was able to connect the research findings with personal insights into animal camp. For instance, research suggests that animals can serve a wide variety of therapeutic uses, and each camper enjoyed talking about their animal and things they did with them. Some even mentioned how it was hard to say goodbye to their animal at the end of the week. Making a close connection like this and having to let go can be hard, but for many children this was yet another therapeutic component of camp, because this often reflects relationships in their own lives with a loved battling cancer. As a volunteer, I was able to witness first hand the connections children made with animals and observe the therapeutic process it provided simply through the process of attachment and separation. Other research promotes the therapeutic use of activities such as drumming and zentangle, and a few campers talked
about how they enjoyed these relaxing activities that allowed them to express their emotions. I also learned indirectly about video editing from the audiovisual department at The University Akron and how lengthy yet rewarding of a process it can be once it is completed. A few technical difficulties were encountered such as videos not recording, but everything was able to be re-recorded for a successful final product.

I am both happy and proud with the final product of this project. I enjoyed learning more about the therapeutic aspects of camp and now an updated literature review is available. The interviews with their videos took a lot of time and effort and the product is a DVD with each interview available as well as other videos taken at Animal Camp of the various activities the children engaged in, as well as clips of each interview available to be embedded into a PowerPoint presentation. I am excited that my hard work has paid off and will be put to good use, and am honored I had part in promoting such camps for children touched by cancer in our community.


## Appendix A: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Camp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Kitten Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Kitten Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Kitten Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arianne &amp; Grandmother</td>
<td>Kitten Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Wild Animal Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavior &amp; Grandmother</td>
<td>Wild Animal Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Horse Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia &amp; Father</td>
<td>Kitten Camp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>