

## Victoria Povilaitis Briefing Paper

Please accept this briefing letter and the accompanying paper titled *Smartphone-free summer camp: Adolescent perspectives of a leisure context for social and emotional learning* as a submission to the Canadian Camping Association Research Award of Excellence for 2019. This paper was published in the *World Leisure Journal* in August 2019, and it is focused on original research that I conducted in an overnight summer camp setting during the summer of 2018. The purpose of this study was to understand campers' perspectives of an overnight summer camp experience without access to smartphones.

As adolescent reliance on smartphone use and engagement with social media is a topic of concern for parents and youth development practitioners, it is a relevant and timely area of interest for camp directors, board members, and other stakeholders, including program funders and sponsoring organizations. Research findings have indicated that summer camp is a positive developmental experience for youth and adolescents, especially in the development of social and emotional skills, such as relationship skills and social awareness (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Uhls et al., 2014). It has also been found that young people who spend significant amounts of time using smartphones have reduced opportunity to interact with similar aged peers and develop these important skills (Twenge, 2017; Twenge, Spitzberg, & Campbell, 2019). Summer camp provides multiple opportunities for campers to socially interact with others, and as many overnight summer camps have "no phone" policies for campers, the opportunities to may be more significant than any youth would have while at home with their smartphones. Thus, this unique "smartphone-free" setting and the outcomes it may offer adolescents was important to explore further.

In order to explore adolescent perspectives of the overnight camp experience without smartphones, participants from one specific senior camper program were invited to participate in the research study if they were attending a minimum of two weeks at an overnight camp program. Those who were eligible and agreed to participate (44 individuals) completed surveys at the beginning and end of their camp stay, and also spoke with myself during an interview near the end of their time at camp. Campers self-reported information about their phone use, including estimated total hourly use of their phone prior to going to camp for the season, social media apps they use, and their top three activities they do on their phone. Interviews were semi-structured and broad questions included (1) tell me about your experience at camp while apart from your smartphone, (2) how have you felt without your smartphone?, and (3) do you think camp would be different if smartphones were allowed?

Results indicated that most campers had a negative appraisal of what camp would be like with their smartphone, meaning all but one individual said that camp was "better" *without* access to their smartphone. Campers expressed that they feel if phones were allowed at camp, they would act as a barrier to social interaction with peers and staff. Campers explained that as they don't have access to their smartphones at camp, they are able to meet people offline, form closer connections with others, get a break from social media, and live in the moment. While some campers felt a bit nervous prior to going to camp knowing they would be without their phone, others actually looked forward to the experience and the break from the obligations of having a smartphone (i.e. responding to text messages, emails, and posting/liking/commenting on social

media). These findings have important implications for campers and parents, camp directors and staff, and program funders and decision makers overall.

Research has shown that camp is often a positive developmental experience for youth, however some parents may hesitate sending a child to overnight camp as their child is resistant to being away from their smartphone. Findings such as the ones outlined above, and in this paper, show that campers actually quite enjoy the experience of being away from their phone while at camp. They see the benefits of taking a break from their phone and social media in this setting. This information will be helpful for youth and parents to understand the experience of being apart from smartphones as a positive one.

Camp professionals and directors can use this study to understand what campers see as the benefits of being apart from their phones. With this information, they may better shape programming to focus on these elements, including providing activities during which campers can meet peers from a diversity of backgrounds, prompt them to form deep personal connections with others, and engage them in living in the moment.

Finally, program funders and other administrative stakeholders can use this information to position summer camp as a setting in which participants develop essential social and emotional skills. These skills are highly important for future life success and are desired by employers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As digital media use is quickly replacing in person social interactions for young people (Twenge et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2019), it is becoming increasingly difficult for youth to have opportunities to develop these essential social and emotional skills. Results from this study show that as youth are separated from their smartphones during an overnight summer camp experience, this is an important setting for them to develop social and emotional skills they may no longer have the opportunity to develop elsewhere.

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