



PRESS RELEASE

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Summer camps promote altruism in children

A UNIGE team shows that participating in camps helps develop valuable socio-emotional skills.

Be able to control oneself, cooperate or help others: having socio-emotional abilities is essential for those who wish to interact positively with their peers. These skills are largely acquired during childhood and can be trained in different contexts, such as school, family or leisure. A team from the University of Geneva (UNIGE) has shown that holiday camps favour their development. They found an increase in altruism among children returning from camps, unlike those who did not participate in this type of stay during their holidays. These results can be found in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

Knowing how to recognise and manage our own emotions, as well as those of others, and adapting our behaviour accordingly: socio-emotional abilities play a key role in our daily lives. They enable us to make decisions that are beneficial to our own well-being and that of our peers, and to establish quality relationships with them. Fostering their development in children, from an early age, is therefore essential.

These skills can be acquired and trained directly or indirectly. They can also be learned in a variety of contexts, such as school, family or leisure. By stimulating prosocial acts such as altruistic behaviour, they are a prime target for the prevention of antisocial behaviour, i.e. behaviour that is confrontational towards others and society. A team from the UNIGE has studied the development of these abilities in a specific context: holiday camps.

“These overnight camps are spaces of socialisation and experimentation, outside the family, which take place over a more or less long period of time and integrate all daily life. They involve permanent interactions with adults and other children, rich in informal learning. We wanted to show that such a context is favourable to the development of socio-emotional skills”, explains Edouard Gentaz, full professor at the UNIGE’s Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and at the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences.

Altruism Peak

More specifically, the UNIGE team wanted to find out to what extent participation in these camps could increase children’s altruism and self-esteem. The researchers also wanted to identify whether specific elements - such as going with friends - could make participation more or less beneficial. To find out, they used a sample of 256 children aged 6 to 16 - both camp and non-camp participants - who were asked to complete a standardised questionnaire.



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After two weeks of camp, the participants’ level of altruism had increased significantly, while that of the other children had decreased.

High resolution pictures

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“Among the questions asked were, for example, ‘to what extent would you help a stranger find his way?’ or ‘to what extent would you help a friend with his homework?’. The possible answers ranged from ‘never’ to ‘very often’ on a five-point scale”, explains Yves Gerber, Research and Teaching Assistant and PhD Student at the Section of Educational Sciences of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the UNIGE, and first author of the study. The children had to answer these questions on two occasions: at the beginning and end of the camp period.

“The answers of the 145 children who took part in the camps were compared with those of the 111 children in the ‘control’ group who did not participate in this type of activity. These revealed an increase in the level of altruism in the former and a decrease in the latter”, says Jennifer Malsert, Senior Lecturer and Senior Research Associate at the Psychology Section of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the UNIGE, Lecturer in the Teaching and Research Unit Special Education at the University of Teacher Education, State of Vaud, and co-author of the study.

Stable self-esteem

These answers also seem to show that having had a positive camp experience in the past, or participating in this type of activity with friends, favours the development of altruism in this context. “As for the level of self-esteem, we observe that it remained stable in both groups of children. It is possible that this element is more stable than altruism and that its modulations are therefore less apparent. The response scale we used may not be specific enough to assess this”, explains Yves Gerber.

The results of this exploratory study demonstrate the usefulness of summer camps as a tool for developing socio-emotional abilities. They indicate that the context of these camps, even over stays of 10 to 15 days, influences these skills by increasing altruistic intentions. “The next step will be to study the duration of the benefits obtained. It will also be a question of evaluating whether there is a correlation between the duration of the stay and the level of these benefits,” concludes Edouard Gentaz.

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