



# Impact of summer camps for children with chronic skin conditions

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## Background

- Summer camps for children with chronic skin conditions allow them to thrive in a setting where their condition is the norm, thereby mitigating the isolation and bullying associated with their disease.
- Despite the mainstreaming movement in the 1970s that sought to integrate people with disabilities with their non-disabled peers, children who participate in disease-specific camps can improve adaptive behaviors and social interactions.<sup>1</sup>
- Since Camp Discovery opened its doors in 1993, numerous dermatology camps have been established internationally. We sought to characterize the literature on pediatric dermatology summer camps to identify similarities in programming between various camps, as well as the effects of skin camp on children and volunteer staff.

## Methods

- This review was designed to identify all articles describing skin camp programming and outcomes.
- Pubmed and PsycInfo search phrase: (pediatric) AND (skin OR dermatology) AND (camp OR summer camp) AND (disorder OR disease).

## Results

Study Design	Campers	Outcomes	
		Counselors with skin disease	Other volunteers (medical students, residents, dermatologists)
Descriptive; pre- and/or post-camp questionnaire	<p>Self-perception: learned that skin condition not unique</p> <p>Social skills: learned teamwork, decreased loneliness and stigma, acquired skills to cope with bullying</p> <p>Program satisfaction: almost all wanted to return, 100% liked doctors, older campers enjoyed educational activities and gained more knowledge than younger campers</p> <p>Skincare improvement: increased frequency of moisturizer application</p>	<p>Body image: counselors accepted their skin conditions and no longer felt need to conceal diseases</p>	
Descriptive	<p>Self-esteem: affirmed that they can take risks by leaving caregivers and live full lives</p> <p>Body image: decreased need to hide skin condition</p> <p>Social skills: improved through peer interaction and new friendships</p> <p>Self-direction: former campers desired to become counselors to help kids like them</p>	<p>Self-perception: developed sense of self through helping others</p> <p>Self-esteem: inspired to try new activities with campers</p>	<p>Education: dermatology residents observed rare diseases; medical students appreciated repetitive daily routine of patient care</p> <p>Humanism: renewed empathy through daily reminder of patients' suffering</p>
Cross-sectional	<p>Medical outcome: &gt;75% improvement in psoriasis severity in 35% of campers</p>		<p>Humanism: all volunteers developed increased empathy; most felt less burned out after camp and greater sense of purpose regarding their work</p> <p>Education: improved understanding of pediatric patients</p>

## Discussion

- The multitude of benefits derived from skin camp attendance for campers, most notably improvement in self-esteem, is consistent with the greater body of literature that suggests children with “invisible” conditions such as epilepsy benefit from disease-specific camps.<sup>2</sup>
- For children with skin diseases, comorbid psychiatric disease is common<sup>3</sup> due to perceived helplessness and minimal social support.<sup>4</sup>
- A retrospective cohort study comparing children with skin conditions who attended skin camp to those who did not may yield important insights on the long-term psychosocial benefits of skin camp. Future studies should assess whether pediatric skin camp attendance improves the wellbeing of other family members.

## Conclusions

Skin camp attendance leads to improvements in self-esteem and body image for campers and counselors alike. Dermatologists should refer appropriate patients to skin camps and consider volunteer opportunities.

## References

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