



Camp Fire USA

Outdoor Program Philosophy

Camp Fire USA was established with a strong foundation and belief in providing positive outdoor experiences for youth. The Camp Fire USA mission, core values and the belief that children need a connection with the natural world is fundamental to all Camp Fire USA programs.

Nearly a century of experience as a leader in providing programs and services to youth and their families has allowed Camp Fire USA to carve out a unique niche in the youth development movement in America. The mission statement adopted in 1999, ***“Camp Fire USA builds caring, confident youth and future leaders,”*** assures that we continue to meet the needs of young people and their families into the 21st century.

Our Core Values:

- We believe that children and youth are our most precious resources.
- We believe in an approach to youth development that builds assets and empowers individuals.
- We believe that the best youth development occurs in small groups where children and youth are actively involved in creating their own learning.
- We are committed to coeducation, providing opportunities for boys, girls and families to develop together.
- We provide caring, trained mentors to work with children and youth.
- We are inclusive, welcoming children, youth and adults regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation or other aspect of diversity.
- We believe in the power of nature to awaken a child's senses, curiosity, and desire to learn.
- We foster leadership, engaging children and youth to give service and make decisions in a democratic society.
- We provide safe, fun and nurturing environments for children and youth.
- We enrich parents' and other adults' lives by expanding their skills and encouraging them to share their talents and build relationships with children and youth.

- We respond to community needs with our programs and expertise.
- We advocate on behalf of children, youth and families.

Whether the outdoor program is a day camp, resident camp, environmental education or a short-term small-group outdoor experience, these national values guide program philosophy, outcomes, content, management, leadership, training, health and safety.

Achieving Outcomes Specific to Outdoor Programs

As in all Camp Fire USA programs, youth development outcomes reflect the program philosophy and provide the framework for program design in the outdoor setting.

Youth development outcomes are the benefits young people receive, or the changes in their behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes through participation in a program. The following outcomes provide the foundation for the design of all outdoor programs:

- Greater self-awareness and positive values
- Increased social skills and sense of belonging
- Increased knowledge of and appreciation for the natural environment
- Increased sense of competency and empowerment

Some outdoor programs may have additional outcomes depending on the type of program, ages of the participants, location or other variables.

Outcomes are best achieved through purposeful design, structure and implementation in a positive environment. Identifying activities or curricula is only one part of this process. The site design, selection and training of staff, housing, food service, and health and safety procedures are all part of the program and are important to achieving the desired outcomes. In other words, outcomes

are not just the activities completed, but what has changed in the life of the young person because of the entire experience.

The program setting helps achieve outcomes.

The outdoors provides a rich environment that is a departure from the home and school environment. The relaxed, open atmosphere of the outdoor environment provides young people relief from the pressure and stress of daily experiences. It is a neutral and unique setting for everyone. It is not one person's home or territory. There is a feeling of wonder, fear and excitement common to all. Moving children from constricting walls and schedules to the outdoor environment should be comfortable and add a sense of adventure, freedom and beauty. To benefit from the experience, children need supportive adults that will help them feel secure and safe in their new environment.

The natural environment is a model of interdependency at the highest level. Like the interdependency found within a group, the natural environment is fragile and must be nurtured and protected. Real nurturing in nature comes from real involvement, rather than from viewing displays and reading identification cards. Children need this interaction with nature for healthy development. The physical and emotional exercise that children enjoy when they play in nature is more creative and less time-bound than organized sports. Camp Fire USA outdoor experiences teach young people how to respect and enjoy the natural environment while developing a stewardship ethic.

Creating community helps achieve outcomes.

It is not just the outdoor site that creates a special place. The place creates a sense of community. Like many communities, it provides the basic essentials of living, including safety, wellness, love, and often food and shelter. Some young people do not have adequate access to these essentials in their home environment, while others take them for granted. In a self-contained, neutral environment, Camp Fire USA camps and outdoor programs provide young people with a rich group living experience and a community for positive youth development. They have the opportunity to know and develop a concern for the community members and all creatures that share their natural environment. It becomes their home—a place where they can belong and feel secure.

Camp Fire USA believes the best youth development occurs in small groups. The individual's ability to relate and work within the group grows and develops. Individuals have the opportunity to build interpersonal and leadership skills. Knowing and working with others helps children know themselves better. Individuals become friends, and feelings and involvement create understanding and trust in other human beings.

In the outdoor program, groups include both young people and adults. Similar to society, the small group is a part of a larger unit or "neighborhood" group, and neighborhoods join to form the community. The experience provides one of the few opportunities to participate in an intense, informal, coeducational community. When boys and girls plan and participate in activities together, they develop a mutual respect and trust that is deeper than roles based on one's gender. They learn that the capabilities of each will enhance and complement the other for the good of the group.

Even how the group is formed is intentional. In Camp Fire USA outdoor programs such as a resident and day camp where new groups are put together, the group is deliberately formed to reflect the demographic composition of the total group of camp participants. The camper has an opportunity to have a group living experience with young people from other socioeconomic, racial, cultural and religious groups and disabled populations. This diversity represents the continuum of human experience. This is a new experience for many young people. Some have always had to share a bed, while others have never had to share a bedroom.

When the outdoor program is designed for an existing group, such as a Camp Fire USA after-school group or an environmental education class from a neighborhood or school, it is a group enrichment experience. It provides a new environment for the existing group to learn to work together and may forever change how the group relates to each other when they return to their home or indoor environment.

Program structure helps achieve outcomes.

Young people enjoy and need to practice being on their own, making decisions, having fun, building positive relationships and feeling a sense

of adventure.

The actual program activities the group does together are less important than being together with a supportive adult and being able to share feelings and learn from the experience. Camp Fire USA outdoor programs begin with selecting activities that grow out of the interest of the group, more than the convenience of schedules. Planning, decision-making and both individual and group choices are important elements of all activities. Camp Fire provides trained counselors and leaders to help the group choose a balance of activities that allow for creativity and provide challenge and adventure. The outdoor setting stimulates an interest and joy in the world around them.

Planning activities together helps the group decide not only what and how to do things, but why. Both the group and the individual feel a sense of empowerment. The normal conflicts and stresses of living together are dealt with wisely, openly and continually so that individuals grow emotionally and socially. When group members interact together and share both success and failures, they develop a closeness and level of friendship that can only come from such shared experiences.

A sense of individual competency and belief in one's abilities comes from the learning derived from trying new things and progressing in accomplishments and acquiring new skills. Progression in the Camp Fire USA outdoor program refers to sequential learning. Progression is not just practicing the same thing over and over, but improving or acquiring a new skill level. One experience builds on another. Real progression begins where the individual is and builds at a rate unique to each individual's ability.

A child may do something he or she never dreamed of doing and do it well. The encouragement of an adult and other members of the group give him or her the confidence to try a little harder. There is excitement and satisfaction in accomplishing a difficult task, learning a new skill, climbing a little higher, swimming a little farther, cooking a special meal to perfection or making a special project for a new friend.

Variety in activities gives each participant more of an opportunity to find something at which he or she can succeed. However, both success and failure in a supportive environment provides

greater self-awareness and more responsibility for individual actions and decisions. Even small successes build a feeling of self-confidence and competency and a desire to further develop newly acquired skills. The feeling of personal accomplishment is exceeded only by the knowledge that someone else important in the person's life has also recognized the accomplishment.

Being intentional helps achieve outcomes.

Using the specific outcomes identified for the outdoor program and understanding how the natural environment is an intentional part of the program design is essential to helping Camp Fire USA achieve its mission.

We will have succeeded when both parents and children understand the contribution such an outdoor experience has made to their lives...and when boards, funders, volunteers, and staff understand how they have contributed to helping young people, as they grow into adults, acquire the skills to be caring, confident youth, and future leaders.

Where can a child:

- be truly involved with life,
- model inclusiveness in a diverse group,
- feel in concert with the natural environment,
- know the support of a caring adult,
- have the freedom to be both contemplative and spontaneous,
- develop self-reliance, resourcefulness and a sense of belonging,
- balance mundane tasks with adventure,
- have a fresh start in life?

Where can a child:

- have quality life experiences that are sustaining through the trying times,
- test ideas, compete and cooperate,
- share riotous laughter and quiet moments,
- spend time outdoors without fear,
- share the successes and failures of individual and group decisions,
- openly express joy and sadness,
- become a participating citizen of the world?

All these things can happen together in a Camp Fire USA camp or outdoor program.