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# The impact of outdoor youth programs on positive adolescent development: Study protocol for a controlled crossover trial

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research protocol for a quasi-experimental crossover trial of an outdoor adventure program for Year 9 school students in Australia. Previous studies have reported a range of positive outcomes of outdoor camps and adventure programs but warrant cautious interpretation due to limitations in research methods typically employed. This study takes place over a period of 36 months and examines a purpose-designed, seven-day outdoor program (camp) intended to promote positive adjustment in young people. Up to 400 participants (ages 14–16 years) will be recruited from across two Victorian secondary schools. Outcome measures include self-reported social and emotional health, and teacher-reported ratings of academic performance and school conduct. Results will be of interest to educators internationally and those involved in improving social and emotional health in adolescents.

## 1. Introduction

Each year millions of adolescents internationally participate in outdoor adventure programs such as camps and journey-based nature experiences, often in the context of regular schooling. The outdoor programs sector, which includes education, government, not-for-profit, and commercial providers, is a large, multi-national industry providing tailored outdoor experiences across all corners of the globe. Motivating this significant level of activity and investment is a belief in the fundamental value of providing young people with the opportunity to engage in, and learn from, undertaking personally challenging activities in natural or wilderness environments.

Consistent with this belief, there is an abundance of anecdotal support for positive effects of participation across all developmental domains, in particular, around social and emotional wellbeing. In an Australian audit of outdoor youth programs conducted by the investigators and industry partners (Williams & Allen, 2012), practitioners who were surveyed ( $n = 388$ ) identified personal development (e.g., improving self-esteem, confidence, independence, well-being) and social development (e.g., improving relationships, group cooperation) as the two domains where participants in outdoor programs receive greatest perceived benefits. These benefits were cited more often than were benefits related to learning about the environment, or learning about regular classroom subjects (such as mathematics, English, geography, or science). It is noteworthy, however, that only 5% of program leaders cited

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quality research evidence as a basis for establishing participant benefits, with the vast majority referencing either their own personal observations or feedback from individual participants as the primary support for their practice (Williams & Allen, 2012).

Broadly speaking, the outdoors and camping sector operates on a strong belief that adventure programs have distinctive benefits for personal and social development of adolescents. However, given the extensive use of structured outdoor programs, and the associated costs involved, it is important that such beliefs continue to be tested empirically. Although knowledge gained by individual outdoor program leaders as part of their practice is undoubtedly an essential part of the development of effective practice models, formal studies incorporating more robust research methods are required in order to strengthen objective evidence.

### 1.1. Rationale

Adolescence is a watershed period in development that profoundly influences transition into adult life and subsequent patterns of functioning, health and wellbeing. As such, the adolescent years provide a unique opportunity to both prevent psychological disorders and positively influence developmental trajectories, with outcomes that will be felt long into the future (Patton et al., 2016).

Improving opportunities for personal and social development in students is of particular interest to schools. The last 20 years has seen a burgeoning interest in the multidisciplinary field of social and emotional learning (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Teachers and schools have come to recognize that social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical to success in school, work, and life for all students (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). SEL programs designed to promote positive adjustment, as well as prevent problem behaviours, are increasingly appearing in educational settings (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015), and a growing body of evidence points to a range of positive outcomes, not only in social and emotional skills, but also in academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

With a focus on enhancing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003), school-based SEL interventions target the same areas in which practitioners of outdoor programs report observing benefits. Programs and initiatives for young people that provide opportunities to develop and enhance emotional self-regulation, and that can be delivered on a wide scale, hold considerable appeal and may plausibly lead to savings in delivery of healthcare, welfare, and forensic services during adolescence and in later life. Current and extensive use of structured outdoor programs and camp experiences provides a well-resourced platform for promoting positive development in young people, with a capability for broad-scale implementation through secondary school systems. Results from a plethora of existing non-experimental evaluations and field trials are suggestive of a range of positive effects, including increased self-efficacy (e.g., Sibthorp, 2003) improved self-esteem (e.g., Herbert, 1998), improved rates of abstinence from substance use (Bennett, Cardone, & Jarczyk, 1998), reduced rates of recidivism (Wilson & Lipsey, 2000) and greater internal locus of control (Hans, 2000).

Such findings provide *prima facie* evidence that outdoor activities have the potential for significant positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of young people. However, interpretations of study findings (including inferences of causality) are frequently hampered by study design limitations including the lack of control groups, an absence of post-program follow-up assessments, failure to report participant attrition, small sample sizes, use of unsophisticated statistical procedures, use of non-validated measurement instruments, and lack of detail regarding participant characteristics and program procedures. Furthermore, very limited research has been conducted examining predictors of program effectiveness, such as attributes of program participants, characteristics of leaders and features of program design. Rigorous development of the research base in this area is therefore critical to transforming the field to one informed by evidence-based practice.

Previous authors have lamented the absence of theory and explanatory models referenced in published articles (e.g. Bandoroff, 1989; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1989; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Friese, Pittman & Hendee, 1995), thereby rendering it difficult to know exactly what processes and mechanisms are being evaluated in many of these studies. More simply, little attention has been given to describe in any detail *what* happens in outdoor programs and *why* any included components might lead to the benefits being sought. One model offering scope to inform theory-driven program design and evaluation is the ChANGeS Framework (Williams, 2009).

Based on a review of international adventure programming literature, the ChANGeS Framework identifies five key components of outdoor programs that are thought to be critical for enhancing participant outcomes: Challenge, Activity, Nature, Guided experience, Social milieu (see Fig. 1). Each of these five components represents a range of related factors that might be considered in planning and delivering effective outdoor programs. Examples include: experiences in which participants are extended and have their abilities and personal resources stretched in tasks that may appear at first to lie beyond their reach (Challenge); being actively engaged in a learning environment requiring physical, emotional, cognitive and psychological involvement (Activity); immersion in natural environments characterised by green space, fresh air, freedom from distraction and simple living (Nature); making meaning from experiences through leader guidance and reflection, goal setting, metaphor and debriefing (Guided experience); and being part of a functional community involving small-group living, social modelling, giving and receiving feedback, and negotiating new relationships (Social milieu).

While there is currently no single accepted method of conducting outdoor youth programs, there is some evidence suggesting that various informal combinations of the five ChANGeS components are commonly seen in typical outdoor programs, at least in Australia (Williams & Allen, 2012). In the intervention we describe below, we make explicit use of the ChANGeS Framework in the design and delivery of a new outdoor program aimed at enhancing health and wellbeing amongst adolescent participants.

Given the significant global investment in the area, and the potential for gains in social and emotional learning, new studies employing more robust research methods are needed. This study protocol describes a quasi-experimental, controlled crossover trial of a structured outdoor youth program with secondary school students in Australia. The trial will take place over a period of 36 months

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