



# An Exploration of Children's Experiences in the Overcoming Barriers Family Camp

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## Background

Empirical research reports that children of divorce show better overall functioning, psychological adjustment and long term well-being when they maintain close emotional bonds, frequent contact and quality relationships with both parents (Lamb, 2012; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan & Diamond, 2012).

In the past decade, family courts have seen a significant increase in the number of parent-child contact problems and allegations of alienation in child custody disputes (Bala, Hunt & McCarney, 2010).

Children who resist or refuse contact with a parent post separation or divorce represent one of the greatest challenges for parents, legal and mental health professionals and the court. Professionals are challenged with how to appropriately assess, manage and treat these complex cases (Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013).

## Overcoming Barriers Family Camp

Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (OCB) is a multi overnight family camp experience held in Arizona, California and Vermont.

The Overcoming Barriers Approach:

- Is a whole family approach that builds effective co-parenting structures which are in the child's best interests
- Offers an alternative to ongoing litigation
- Includes psycho-education and a team of clinicians providing interventions in a safe supported environment outside the comfort zone of "home"
- Creates recreational activities that foster positive connections between family members, from parallel activities to direct engagement activities
- Provides for legal and therapeutic follow-up and aftercare as necessary components to success
- The program delivers intensive treatment for high conflict families where children resist or refuse contact with a parent.



## Purpose of Evaluation

To determine:

- OBC's implementation relative to the program objectives.
- The experiences and outcomes of children and families who have participated in the program.
- Clients' satisfaction of the program and overall camp experience.

## Evaluation Design

- All camp participants were invited to take part in the evaluation.
- A mixed methods evaluation including a pre-experimental pre-post test within group design and qualitative interviews.
- Parents individually completed pre and post anonymous online surveys via Fluidsurvey.
- Children also completed post anonymous surveys.
- Qualitative interviews were conducted with all camp participants on the last day by a third party independent evaluation team.

## Demographics

- 5 families participated in the camp.
- 5 fathers and mothers completed pre-post test surveys.
- All parent dyads were previously married.
- 100% of parties report no intentions of reconciling with the other parent.
- In this group, fathers were the rejected parents in the sample.
- 11 children participated in the interviews.
- Children ranged in ages from 10 to 17 years of age, with a mean age of 14 years.



## Major Findings from Interviews with the Children

### What I liked best about camp:

- Bonding with the other kids who have similar experiences, giving and receiving support and advice from each other, acting as confidants.

*"I liked best that the kids were very supportive and understood what I was going through."*

*"I also enjoyed bonding with the other kids, helping them with difficult problems, and receiving advice from them as well." (92.3% of the kids ranked other kids as being the most important thing about camp)*

- Support from counselors and therapists.

### What I would improve about the camp:

- More downtime in the cabins to unwind, rest, read, write, listen to music, play games, talk with the other kids.
- Some alone time to recuperate mentally/physically.
- Have desires taken into greater consideration by the camp.

*"I would like to have a rest time in the cabin area after group to unwind and talk to the other kids or sleep."*

*"The green shirt badger you to always stay active and play activities and sometimes you need a break."*

### The important things I learned at camp:

- You're not alone and other kids understand and can relate to your situation.
- Support from others with similar experiences is helpful and helps you stay strong.
- It's important to go at your own pace and things will eventually work out.



### What I learned new about my...

#### Father

- He wants to protect me from the divorce.
- He feels bad for the pain he has caused me.
- He will never change.
- He has a serious problem and is finally getting the help he needs.

#### Mother

- She's there for me and truly cares about me.
- She's strong, loving, resilient.
- Nothing, she will never change.

### My favourite memory from camp:

- Late night talks and games in the cabin with the other kids.
- "Talking and playing games with all the other kids in the camp."*  
*"Being able to hangout in the cabin with all the kids before bed, talking and playing games to just relaxing from the day."*

### Things I plan on doing differently after I leave camp:

- Focus on myself more and what makes me happy.
- "I plan to concentrate on my life and do things that will benefit my future."*
- Communicate better and be more open-minded.
- "Explaining my worries more."*
- Restore some sort of relationship with my parent.

### Advice I would give other kids attending the camp:

Take risks Stay strong  
Be open minded Learn together  
Stay positive Express yourself  
Share your thoughts Be active  
Support each other

### What other kids should do to get the most out of camp:

- Express themselves and communicate with the other kids.
- Keep a positive, open-minded attitude.

*"Don't shut yourself off from everyone. Be open and talk to the other kids...Ask questions and get to know each other."*

### I was hoping that by attending the camp...

- I would not have to have a relationship with my west parent.
- I would meet other kids in similar situations.
- My voice would be finally heard.
- There would be less family conflict.
- There would be changes in my parents' behaviours.

### I would also like you to know that...

- I felt my interaction with my east parent was restricted and frowned upon.
- Some activities were too difficult to participate in with the aggressive parent.
- I would open up more if less professionals (such as social workers) were around.
- I believe no great changes could be made in such a short amount of time.

## Implications

- Results suggest a need to provide more information about expectations of camp prior to attending the program.
- Limitation of this study includes a small sample size, which increases risk of Type II error for quantitative results.
- This evaluation provides a blueprint for evaluating the complexity of reintegration interventions.

## Next Steps

- Create fidelity checklist for process and implementation of the intervention to better capture outcomes.
- Replicate pre/post test with future camp participants.
- Complete follow-up surveys with previous participants.

## References

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