

Exploring belonging: Experiences of refugee children and families in Camp Cosmos



Source: A child participant during the individual interviews

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*Camp Cosmos aims to inspire and empower youth
to be a force for positive change in their communities.*

Our anti-oppressive philosophy is at the heart of everything we do.

*We recognise that each of our campers brings a different set of experiences and identities
and we aim to create an environment where every child's needs are met.¹*

INTRODUCTION

Camp Cosmos was founded in 1971 in Montreal to provide children from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds with a safe and fun environment to play, learn and grow. The summer camp is grounded on an anti-oppression philosophy that drives its enriching intercultural, accessibility, environmental, youth leadership and athletic programs. After 47 summers of empowering children, building communities with families, and fostering support networks with partner organizations, Camp Cosmos continues to be a vehicle of social transformation in Montreal.

Since 1971, more than 2000 children have participated in the Camp Cosmos summer camp program. In response to the Syrian refugee crises, Camp Cosmos expanded in 2016 to create a second camp on Montreal's West Island. That year, 23 Syrian children were welcomed at both the West Island and Downtown locations. In summer 2017, numbers rose, with 28 Syrian children and 12 children whose families had recently crossed the Canadian/USA border for a total of 40 (camp fees waived). The total number of campers in 2017 was 121 (up from 50 in 2014). In addition to welcoming Syrian campers, there were also 3 young Syrian counselors-in-training who had their first Canadian job experience.

In 2018, with the aim to continue adapting to the Montreal society's needs, Camp Cosmos welcomed 158 campers from diverse backgrounds, introduced a sliding scale payment system to welcome a greater diversity of campers, and extended the hours of care to improve access to camp. The camp adapted their 5-day staff training to include a greater focus on their anti-oppression mandate and a focus on accessibility by collaborating with Montreal-based organizations. For the first time, the camp welcomed 12 and 13-year-old campers, filling the previously existing age gap, to participate in a new program that included both activities with the whole camp as well as volunteer opportunities at community organizations.

PROJECT FRAMEWORK

From a government resettlement perspective, integration equals economic self-sufficiency, particularly in a North American context (Ives, 2007). Assessments of integration center on financial independence from government assistance and refugees' access to rights and services. Sustainable integration, however, is much broader than economic participation; long-term integration consists of social, economic, cultural, and political participation in the host country while maintaining a relationship with the country of origin (Berry, 2003; Valtonen, 2004). While

¹ <https://www.campcosmos.org/our-mission>

economic participation is critical to integration, “there is also a strong desire to belong in a more emotional and culturally meaningful way, a desire which is blocked ... by experiences of exclusion by the mainstream population and cultural differences” (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013, p. 139). Belonging has been conceptualized as a sense of attachment to people or places (Guo & Dalli, 2016) or an individual-level process of becoming familiar or “at home” in a particular setting (Antonsich, 2010); for refugees, this is the extent to which one feels like he or she is an accepted part of, that is, belongs to and in the new country. For refugee children, this creation of a sense of belonging in their new country typically happens when they participate in new educational contexts. Greater senses of belonging in schools has been found to be associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy, regardless of the extent to which they have been exposed to adversities in the past (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

There is very limited research on the sense of belonging held by refugee children and parents in early childhood educational and recreational settings. Study researchers have had experience in refugee resettlement and early childhood education and, therefore, deeply understand how the importance of quality recreational experiences can have substantial positive impacts on young children’s social and emotional, cognitive, and language development in the short term, on educational success and health in the long term, and on their feelings of belonging in and connectedness with their new communities. It is our hope that study findings inform research-based models and policy regarding culturally grounded recreational programs. Such programs would work towards developing a sense of belonging among refugee children and families by supporting integration, that is, purposefully weaving together their cultures from their countries of origin together with new cultural experiences in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to understanding processes of belonging for refugee children in a recreational setting is the most appropriate methodology for this exploratory investigation. This approach was adopted in order to explore subjective experiences of belonging and attachment (Spaaij, 2015) and how participants see their traditions and cultural knowledge woven into their stories of belonging. Researchers used in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to respond at length to open ended questions. In-depth interviewing holds great potential for obtaining rich, descriptive, and meaningful data on complex cultural issues (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study used “purposive” sampling, seeking out those who have direct experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

The study included individual interviews with 14 campers (C1-C14), 2 staff members (Staff1 and Staff2) and a CIT (counselor in training) as well as a parent focus group discussion (P-FGD) with 5 parents. Data collection with children included storytelling and drawings.

REPORT OVERVIEW

The report describes and documents the experiences of children, parents and staff at Camp Cosmos during the 6-week program in summer 2018. The perspectives were collected through a research project lead by Dr. Nicole Ives (nicole.ives@mcgill.ca) and funded by The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC). Interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated by Hend Alqawasma. The participants' perspectives highlight the Camp's strengths and key benefits for children, their families and the communities in which they live. These perspectives also identify areas of improvement to continue growing and adapting to the ever-changing needs of the Montreal society. Through the stories of appreciation for the Camp Cosmos community, the feeling of belonging and being home, the reflections on child growth and wellbeing, the engagement with families, the empowerment of diversity, the learning of a new language, and the connections with staff, Camp Cosmos summer camp offers "a memorable and meaningful" (Staff2) experience to newly arrived children and their families.

1. Stories of Appreciation at Camp Cosmos

The camp did its best for my son. I will never be able to do for him what the camp did, and I am glad he was in the camp. I look forward to registering him next year (P-FGD).

Camp Cosmos received widespread praise and gratitude from campers, parents and staff. All campers interviewed mentioned they would return to camp, some of which added "I would like to be a group leader next year" (C4) and "I liked it so much (...) I will be happier if I can work next year in the camp" (C9). The parents shared similar comments such as "When the camp ended, [my child] kept asking me every day when the next summer is coming in order to go to the camp and I tell him we still have to wait a while before it" (P-FGD), adding that "my daughter (...) said that next year would like to participate as a volunteer, I hope they take her" (P-FGD). The families

were very, very grateful, no matter who they were. Even the parents with whom there were difficulties, at the end of the camp, they were very grateful. They would come see us and thank us. They had tears in their eyes and would tell us that what we did for their children is amazing. The gratefulness was very present (Staff1).

The appreciation for camp from children and families was also reflected by the staff, one of whom shared that "[Camp Cosmos] is a very special camp and it's very special to my heart because this camp is not like any other camp. (...) What we do there is just for the kids (...) It's always very meaningful" (Staff2). The stories of appreciation for Camp Cosmos and the excitement to return in future years shows that camp was memorable and meaningful to the campers, their families and the staff.

2. Camp Cosmos Fosters Belonging and Social Integration

I think, in all what they do is just make people feel that they are connected (...) It's very hard to explain because it's a feeling. It's not something that I can put in words (...) It's that connection between everybody and anybody that is related to Camp Cosmos (...) It's really validating people's existence.

You are here in front of me and I appreciate that you are here. It's very minimal but that's what we need as people. We do it with the kids and with the parents, and that's why they're so happy to be there. Because these people care, they genuinely care about us and want us to just feel good about ourselves (Staff2).

Camp Cosmos plays an important role in the social integration of newly arrived families in Montreal. The camp fosters unity and a sense of belonging for families, while creating spaces for children to make friends and learn social skills to continue building healthy relationships beyond camp.

The summer camp was a meeting point for families from diverse backgrounds to share “*a feeling of family and union, the feeling of belonging in the children themselves*” (Staff1). Another parent described the camp as “*a second home to [the children]*” (P-FGD). As a child mentioned, “*[the camp] made me feel like it's my country (...) I have friends and I know more places*” (C8) and a CIT added, “*the camp is what made me feel that I like Montreal and have sense of belonging. Without the camp I will be locked at home for the whole summer, learning nothing, but the camp helped me through its activities.*” This sense of unity and belonging is especially important when considering newly arrived refugee families that make up a large part of the camp population.

The summer program was also an important medium for children to learn about social norms and Canadian culture. One parent commented that

This is life and this their first time to be in a summer camp. In Gaza, life is totally different; of course, there are no summer camps, they have their school, the house, they sometimes go to a restaurant and that lifestyle is completely different from here. We have no public organizations there where they care about children (P-FGD).

The camp provided an inclusive space for families to share both familiar as well as new cultural concepts with each other, learn about resources in Montreal, and support each other in the new “*life here [that] needs a lot of courage to be able to deal with the change*” (P-FGD).

All children interviewed mentioned they made new friends at camp. Campers described their supportive relationships with other children. For example, “*if I am sad, she comes to help me (...) She cared more about me*” (C3), “*We always helped each other, played, laughed. Things like that (...) My friends, they are very important to me*” (C4), “*they stood beside me when the problems happened*” (C9), and “*if by mistake they did something wrong to me, it is impossible*

for them not to come to me and apologize. We also helped each other” (C11). One parent emphasized that “[camp] helped [her] daughter get girlfriends (...) It was difficult for her when we first arrived to Montreal. And all the people around her where mostly boys. The camp helped her to integrate into a girl group” (P-FGD). Furthermore, many of the campers were able maintain these friendships after camp through “groups on social media and (...) talk to each other via Instagram and WhatsApp, in order to make plans and meet up sometimes” (C5), even after camp ended. The friendships developed during the summer were a favourite part of camp for children, as well as an important aspect of social integration for their newly arrived families.

Children were also able to develop their social skills at Camp Cosmos. One camper learned *“how we can open conversations, how we can make new friends, etc. That was really helpful for [her]” (C3) while another camper shared that*

[camp] helped me integrate more. I learned how to deal better with people around me. Also, my communication skills are improved, I communicate more, and in a nicer way with anybody compared to before the camp. (...) This is one of the things that I noticed the camp changed in me (C4).

A third camper mentioned that *“The camp taught me many nice things that I would not have learned if I did not attend the camp. [For example,] most of the games and activities that I played with my friends I just learned at the camp” (C8). The examples above illustrate how Camp Cosmos fostered new supportive relationships between campers, while also teaching them social skills to continue making friends beyond their time at camp.*

3. Camp Cosmos Makes Montreal Feel Like Home

My children liked Montreal (...) the camp made my children refuse to leave Montreal. They took them to so many nice places, helped them feel as though they are part of Montreal and that they belong to it, took them to museums, made arts and crafts and taught them how to clean the garden. When they started going to the camp, they had less than a year in Montreal but the camp had a big influence on them, in a positive way, with their activities and staff who helped them feel that they belong here.

Now they know more than me in a lot of things thanks to the camp such as directions, transportation, how to depend on themselves, etc.... Anything my children like I will like without questioning...I have to learn how to like it. When I see them happy, that they like Montreal, I have no choice but to like Montreal (P-FGD).

Camp Cosmos played an essential role not only in the social integration of campers and their families, but also in the sense of belonging and feeling at home in the city of Montreal. Several campers mentioned that Camp Cosmos introduced to new places and activities in the city, fostering a sense of belonging in the city. For example, *“The camp in general helped me to integrate and to feel like I am part of Montreal. I know more spaces now, I know how to go to many places more independently (...) I didn’t just get to many new places, I also learned how to get to them. If I want to take my parents, I can go” (C3) and “we went to many places with the*

camp which helped me in getting to know the city more. It's no longer strange for me... I feel like I am not a stranger anymore" (C10). Being introduced to new places and organizations in Montreal fostered a sense of belonging in the city.

Additionally, campers felt proud that, through camp, they now better understand the public transportation system and that *"it helped [them] get to know Montreal better. (...) If I want to go to a certain place, I know what bus and metro I need to take"* (C4). Learning to navigate the city gave the campers not only a sense of belonging, but also independence, responsibility and an increased level of environmental mastery, as the parents shared during interviews and focus groups.

Even the CITs felt the camp introduced the children to new experiences in Montreal, commenting that *"What helped them was that the camp gave them a lot of exploratory experience by going to new different places. Integrating in the camp with these activities helped them have a sense of belonging in the camp and in Montreal"* (CIT). A parent added that *"the camp helped my son a lot to feel integrated in Montreal. When we arrived here, it was a hard time for us (...) However, when he started going to the camp things changed for better and he loved being in Montreal... I am so happy with the result of the camp in my son"* (P-FGD). The camp introduced its campers to new places and activities that they were then able to share with their families. Both the campers and their families benefited from these opportunities, giving them a greater sense of belonging in Montreal.

Parents commented that *"[children] got to know Canada through the camp"* (P-FGD) and that *"[the parents] were not able [themselves] to offer such activities when they stayed home"* (P-FGD). A parent acknowledged that getting to know new places had empowered her daughter, as *"She felt that she was doing something very important"* (P-FGD). Another parent added that, *"the camp helped my son a lot to feel integrated in Montreal. When we arrived here, it was a hard time for us (...) However, when he started going to the camp things changed for better and he loved being in Montreal... I am so happy with the result of the camp in my son"* (P-FGD).

4. Camp Cosmos Promotes Child Wellbeing and Growth

With our legal situation as asylum seekers and having no status nor an idea as to what will happen to them in the future, the camp made them feel that they have a status, that they are important, and their voices are heard. They left the camp with confidence. Camp and school supported them and helped them psychologically (P-FGD).

The camp had benefits on the wellbeing of campers and profound changes in their personality that went beyond their time at camp. Campers and parents shared the positive influences they noticed camp had on both the children and their families.

Several campers reflected on the positive ways camp affected them. One camper mentioned, *"We played. They taught us new things... Yes, I feel I am more positive about things"* (C3), while another commented that *"the way I communicate and deal with people changed for the*

better” (C4). A third camper shared that “[Camp] affected me in a positive way. I play more and participate in things more now... I feel like I became more energetic and like to participate in things more than before” (C11). Another camper mentioned she sees changes in her habits. “Yes, I have more close friends and organize my time better. It also helped me wake up early and focus on my time. I started to wake up without an alarm” (C5). A parent echoed this, commenting that “[her children] interacted in the camp, were very motivated, woke up by themselves in the morning to get ready and to go to the camp. Compared to their going to school, they were very motivated to go to the camp” (P-FGD).

The parents agreed that the campers learned positive things at camp compared to other camps they had attended. One parent described a negative experience at a previous camp, contrasting it with their experience of Camp Cosmos:

They learned a lot of bad words in that camp and it was a catastrophe. We did not finish the week we registered because of the amount of bad words they learned in 3 days. However, we did not see such a thing in Camp Cosmos. I was happy when I heard my children saying that the rules of the camp forbid them from saying any bad words... they did not bring any bad things home; on the contrary, they were better, and every day I saw them learning different things. They learned how to be responsible, organized, respectful and many other things.

Compared to the previous camp, “Camp Cosmos is an excellent camp” (P-FGD), one parent commented, while others agreed. Another parent added that as a result of camp, “[her son’s] behaviour is much better and much more elegant (...) I feel like he became wiser. It feels as though he got older” (P-FGD). Another parent added that

When [her children] started going to the camp, they had less than a year in Montreal but the camp had a big influence on them in a positive way with their activities and staff who helped them feel that they belong here (...) The camp increased their self-esteem, and confidence. They liked Montreal and Canada (P-FGD).

One parent mentioned that “The camp taught [her son] how to swim when, previously, he was scared of the water and swimming in it. He was so happy that there were a lot of different activities” (P-FGD). Another parent added that

My son told me that he learned things that he never knew about it before. He also mentioned to me that there are many things in life that he must learn. If he got caught somewhere, what to do how to react and stay safe, how to set up fire, build a tent, what to eat and not to eat. [He] never thought about learning these things and the possibility that he might need to do it one day (P-FGD).

Both parents and staff mentioned that camp was an alternative to “spending their time using mobiles and playing electronics. So, they can go out and see people” (CIT). One parent added that

Before the camp most of their time consisted of playing videogames or complaining that they don't know what to do. With the camp, they were busy in positive things. The camp took all their energy (...) This was great for us as parents. With the camp, things were more organized at home (P-FGD).

Camp Cosmos offered campers a positive supportive environment where they could learn and grow with confidence and motivation.

5. Camp Cosmos Engages the Family

When I was in the camp, I was so happy and at the end of the camp, there was a party that made me happier (...) All mothers and parents attended the summer camp including my mother. We danced, my mother saw me, we danced twice. One time we danced alone and another time we danced with the parents (C12).

Camp Cosmos values and continuously fosters a relationship between the staff and the families that is based on trust, which takes time to develop and maintain. As one CIT mentioned, *"The children and their parents took a lot of time to trust us...For the children, when you tell them something, they respond you who are you I don't know you"* (CIT). Camp cosmos strived to connect and build trust with parents through activities and an emphasis on open communication. However, as mentioned by several parents, there is room for improvement in the ways Camp Cosmos involve the parents.

The camp reflects this value of engaging the family in the community by participating in certain activities that bridge the camp and home spaces. Campers made candles and planted seeds that were given as gifts to the families (C5). A parent commented that *"They brought home their yoga sessions, and many other things they worked on in the camp home and felt happy with it"* (P-FGD). Another way in which the camp engaged the parents was by maintaining open and constant communication with them by sending weekly newsletters that informed parents about daily activities, and allowing time in the morning for them to ask *"all the questions that they wanted; what's planned for the day or any concerns or issues they might have (...) it came up to us being able to connect with the parents. That did the most for them"* (Staff2).

A third way to connect with parents was by sharing resources about the city with them. One staff mentioned that *"the mother would come up to me and ask me after camp, what activities can my children do outside of camp? So, I told her to try to find extra-curricular activities at school itself because it makes it easier for both the kids and the parents. There are sports, book clubs, etc."* (Staff1). Lastly, the end of year show was *"special in the camp"* (CIT) for the Camp Cosmos community, where parents, children and staff shared traditional dishes.

As a recommendation, the parents mentioned that they would like to be more engaged in the camp. They mentioned that *"As a parent, I would like to participate if needed but they should just inform us"* (P-FGD) and that *"We did not participate in anything. We did not know we can do so, and nobody asked us to"* (P-FGD). Focusing on ways to further involve the family would

benefit camp, as it is both meaningful for the children and desired by the parents, keeping in mind boundaries between the staff's personal and professional lives, as pointed out by Staff2.

6. Camp Cosmos Connects Through Diversity

What I feel about Camp Cosmos, which I've experienced at Camp Cosmos and seen less at other camps is the diversity—not only amongst the campers but also amongst the staff. That really helps a lot to break any preconceived barriers or misconceptions that they may have facing certain ethnic backgrounds and sometimes racial issues that they bring from home. I feel that Camp Cosmos and its diversity allows those barriers to be broken and remodeled (Staff1)

Camp Cosmos has shown great success in its work on diversity, both with the staff and the with the families. The diversity at camp is important as it helps break preconceived cultural barriers, offers children from diverse backgrounds both representative role models they can look up to and friends with similar experiences they can relate to, and presents the opportunity to share cultural norms and social values. Diversity in the staff at camp, with regard to gender and cultural/social/economic background, is very

symbolic (...) [because] by being who they are, not changing anything, and in a matter of a week, they broke any preconceived barriers that these young children might have had (...) It really made a difference. So, by exposing the children to this diversity, you break any pre-conceived racial preconceptions or whatsoever (Staff1).

The broad ethnocultural and religious representation is something to be proud of at camp. As a staff mentioned, “*We feel that every kid could find if not a role model, at least someone that they could look up to*” (Staff1), showing the importance for children to interact with older children and staff that they can identify with and admire.

Campers also mentioned the importance of meeting children and staff from similar backgrounds. One camper shared that

I had a close friend from the same area where I came from... We got to know each other and became close friends through the camp (...) We were in the same group when we met each other. I felt that her personality and the way she thinks was similar to mine. We match in a lot of things (...) She is also from Gaza, from my neighborhood. She knows the places I liked there. I felt we shared a lot of things and that we had many similarities. We have fun together, because of all the similarities we shared and because we came from the same culture, we laughed at the same things. We enjoyed the same things and had fun together” (C5).

She also mentioned that “*At the beginning, [the small Arab campers] did not know anybody, so they were sitting with us until they got used to the camp and its program*” (C5). These examples illustrate the connection and support that campers feel when they meet other campers with similar experiences and backgrounds, which has a positive effect on their camp experience.

Additionally, as Staff2 mentioned, the ability for parents to connect with staff through their language and culture also made them more comfortable in keeping their children at camp.

Parents reflected on the importance of interactions between their children and children from diverse backgrounds, including those who have been in Montreal for a long time. One parent commented that everyone was a newcomer in the welcoming class her son attended, which was not the case in Camp Cosmos. She shared that *“In the camp he had the chance to know Canadian people who speak the language, know the rules and how things here work which was new for him and helped him a lot to integrate in Montreal”* (P-FGD). The exposure to campers with diverse backgrounds allowed children to learn about social norms in Canada.

A challenge brought forward by several campers was the distinction between play and violence, with one specific case that was mentioned by several participants (C5, C9, C10, C11).

First of all, my friend and I liked to play wrestling in the camp which is forbidden, and we did not know it. We wrestled twice, then they said that I have one last chance. After, we went to the beach and while we were swimming, I kicked someone by accident. We were all beside each other and I kicked her by my mistake. I apologised, and I explained to her that I did not mean it and that it was by mistake. However, she did not believe me and went to the leader of the group to tell her. Then, the leader of the group dismissed me from the camp. But gave me a chance to register next year (C9).

Another camper described another situation: *“He used to play in an annoying way. He has fun by pulling other people’s hair, or he slaps the other children in their legs. He thinks he is playing but the girls got hurt a lot from his behaviour”* (C5). The camp offered both campers and their families an opportunity to learn social norms and ways to play that are acceptable in Montreal.

Additionally, one parent expressed that she had the opportunity to teach his child about differences in playing in Montreal compared to Syria. She noted that

Playing in the street in Syria is not like playing in the camp and he must be more careful and stick to the rules. Afterwards he understood, and things went smoothly for him in the camp (...) The challenge of the games and how they played with each other as I mentioned before. This was a challenge for us. We had to explain to him that the situation is different than Syria and what is accepted in Syria might be forbidden in Montreal. And then things went well after that (P-FGD).

Through camp activities and play with other children, this camper had the opportunity to learn about cultural norms and safety when playing with other children.

7. Learning Language at Camp Cosmos

Most of our staff was able to at least understand the Arabic language. So, during the first 2 weeks, they could communicate in Arabic to get along. We were able to understand how they felt, what they needed and communicate with them. The beauty of these children is that they learn so fast.

By the end of the summer, we were animating games fully in French or English and they would even speak amongst themselves in French or English. That was a way to make them feel included; we started with what they knew and built on that (Staff1).

The staff ensured that, during the beginning of camp, children who did not speak English or French were accompanied by someone who spoke their native tongue in the group to translate for them. Often it was the campers themselves who helped translate activities and games for other campers. A staff mentioned that even with language barriers, “[campers] figure out ways to talk to each other and those language barriers don’t even exist anymore. They’ll just play at each other, point at things and be like “come on!” They know each other’s names or they’ll simply use a word that they both know and use it” (Staff2).

Many campers (C3, C7, C8, C12) mentioned that English and/or French language skills improved at camp, and several added that they were proud to be able to speak several languages. For example, one camper shared “I only knew French before, but I feel like the summer camp was like a school for me where they taught me English” (C12). This was also reflected by the parents and staff. One parent shared that

For my children, their language improved so much, at the beginning they complained and found it hard, but then, they found their own way to understand and communicate. It means that they were obliged to listen, to hear people talking and to talk them. (...) When he entered the camp, his language improved (P-FGD).

A staff member commented that “seeing [the campers] grow after a one-year difference, they were very, very fluent in French. They were doing theater in French and they were very vocal and good at it. That’s the beauty of children, they learn so quick and that’s something that we got to see” (Staff1).

8. Building Relationships with the Camp Cosmos Staff

The number one answer was that [the campers] loved the staff. Each of them said it; that they loved this trip and this activity but that the best thing was the staff. They said: the staff always make us feel special and look out for us, they know how to have fun, even if they are older, they swim with us, play with us and spend time with us (Staff2)

The staff played an essential role in the community building at Camp Cosmos. The campers developed trust-based relationships with the counselors, whom they saw as “our friends or like our brothers and sisters” (C4). One camper mentioned she felt listened to by her counselors, and felt they supported her when she needed it. She noted that the counselors

were good and listened to us. They helped us in doing the things that we were not able to do (...) when I wasn’t able to finish [an activity] or do it in the right way. They helped me by giving me the steps or explaining more. They were very helpful (C3).

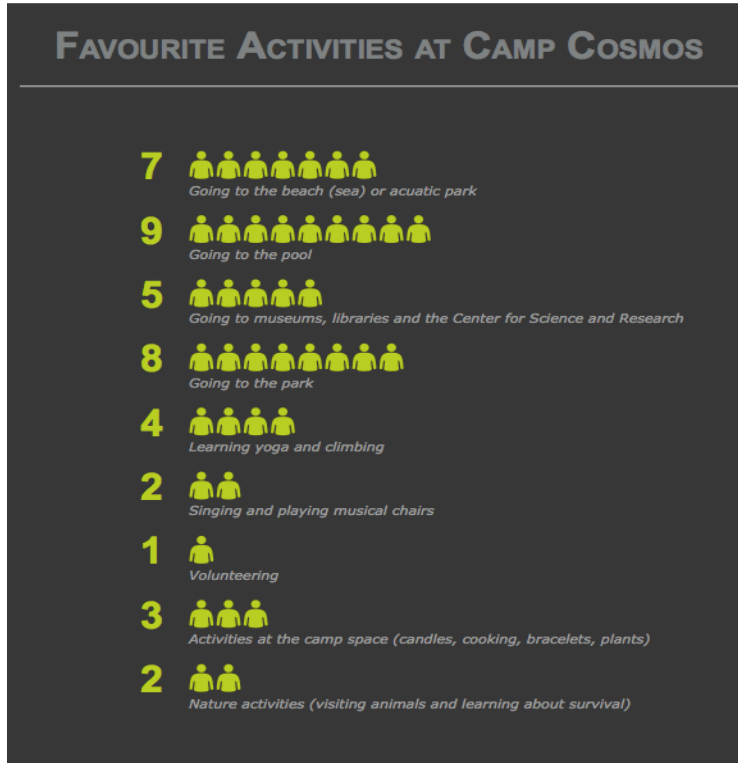
Another camper described her interactions with the staff, “[W]e sat and chatted together. We asked them questions they asked us questions. We really felt comfortable talking to them. If anything happened, we would tell them right away because they understood us” (C5).

The staff were also role models for the campers. As one staff member commented, “We always tried to treat them with respect, no matter what. They could see that and they respected that as well. It helped them feel valued, important and integrated” (Staff1).

9. Camp Cosmos’ Strengths and Recommendations for Future Summers

This section includes strengths and timely recommendations for Camp Cosmos mentioned by campers, their parents and camp staff. Highlighting areas for improvement and possible solutions is important to help Camp Cosmos in continuing to grow and adapt to the ever-changing needs of Montreal society.

Program



⇒ Parents and the CIT suggest that camp should be extended to eight (or nine) weeks rather than six to fill the gap of time between camp and school.

⇒ Going to the pool is the most popular activities at camp (see Graph). Campers recommended going to extend the time spent at the pool to one hour and a half to have more time to complete the swim test, swim and change. They also recommended to visit the pool more often (twice per week). The CIT added that more people should be present during the swim test to speed up the process.

- ⇒ Campers also mentioned that morning free time was important to them, as they were able to play and connect with other campers during this time. Staff mentioned that campers enjoyed activities that incorporated the whole camp.
- ⇒ Most campers and parents mentioned that they went to McGill Park too often and that there are no games to play there. They recommended going to different parks that may offer a variety of activities to the campers, such as soccer and basketball, swings, and a water park.
- ⇒ Campers mentioned they were discouraged when staff promised an activity and did not follow through, such as playing a game or going to the pool. Staff should be consistent and accountable with their promises towards campers.
- ⇒ Campers felt empowered when they felt they had a say in what games were played. The staff should do their best consider take campers' views and opinions when making decisions about programming.
- ⇒ Campers and parents pointed out the importance of paying attention to children's individual needs and adapting activities to ensure all campers would feel included and want to participate, with special consideration to differences in personalities and physical needs.
- ⇒ Parents recommended that the camp offer information about the education system in Canada as they knew very little about it.

Accessibility

- ⇒ The camp should remain close to a metro station, as many families and staff use public transportation services to commute to and from camp.
- ⇒ For future (new) camp locations, consideration of where the families are located should be taken into account. Many families mentioned they were not able to attend camp the six weeks because they live too far.
- ⇒ Extending camp hours to accommodate for work schedules may facilitate access to camp.
- ⇒ The sliding scale introduced this year made camp more accessible for families. The low camp fees allow campers from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds to benefit from camp.

Staff

- ⇒ Staff should continue to be supportive towards each other, building off each other's strengths and weaknesses, and listening to each other's needs and perspectives.
- ⇒ Negative attitudes from individual staff members towards camp, other staff or the program may affect other staff's attitudes. Several parents commented on the importance of a positive and judgement-free attitude from staff towards campers, especially those who might have had negative encounters at camp and may have been asked to take some time off.

- ⇒ Camp should hire both new and returning staff with a diversity of experience and professional training.
- ⇒ CITs should be included in meetings and their opinions should be taken into account when making decisions that affect them. This will empower the CITs and create a more connected team between the staff.
- ⇒ Increasing the number of CITs would reduce their workload and responsibilities, allowing them to have more energy during camp activities.
- ⇒ The CIT mentioned it was useful to receive information about the activities that were happening throughout the week on Monday morning. The CITs played an important supportive role in integrating campers into activities they did not want to participate in.

Staff Training

- ⇒ Staff recommend that the training include more information about hands on games that they could apply during camp.
- ⇒ Parents suggest an intensive training on how to work with trauma and children who have lived through traumatic experiences. They also suggest having a professional on sight as support for both the staff and campers throughout camp.
- ⇒ The training should include distinct trainings for each location, as the camps run in very different ways under different leadership styles.
- ⇒ A staff mentioned that although sensibility to gender differences is important, gender pronoun identification it does not need to be repeated before every activity.
- ⇒ The staff mentioned the importance of teaching the staff the mandate during the training and ensuring it is applied throughout camp.
- ⇒ A staff suggested to extend the training to two weeks to ensure enough time to cover more material.

Camp Space

- ⇒ Several children and the CIT mentioned the camp space was too small in order to carry out the camp activities. They recommend a larger space for people to feel more comfortable.
- ⇒ Another camper also mentioned they did not feel comfortable in mixed bathrooms. She recommended to have separate bathrooms for girls so that they can feel more comfortable.

Group Dynamics

- ⇒ It was common for children with older siblings to want to be in the same group as them, making the beginning of camp difficult for both the children and the staff. However, with the support of the parents and the older siblings, the campers were able to adapt and enjoy their time with their respective age groups. It is best for campers to remain in their respective age groups.

- ⇒ It is also important for staff to judge the amount of responsibility and independence they give their campers. While some older campers may feel they are mature enough to carry out certain tasks, the staff should establish boundaries to ensure the safety of the camper.
- ⇒ Pre-existing camper-staff relationships should be taken into account to avoid biased treatment and negative experiences throughout camp. The staff should be professional and act as team when addressing issues that have to do with pre-existing relationships.
- ⇒ A parent commented that the distribution of camp was not well thought out, and recommended that “volunteers who lead[] older groups should not be close to the group members ages” (P-FGD).

CONCLUSION

We focus so much on accessibility and anti-oppression and it's essential to what we do at our camp (...) because [Camp Cosmos is] very inclusive no matter where you are coming from in Montreal or what your background is (...) We are all very different people with different profiles from different places around the world. I think that's what makes it really special (Staff2)

This report has described and documented the experiences of campers, parents and staff who were a part of the Camp Cosmos community in the summer 2018. Their perspectives demonstrate that the camp is a special space in Montreal that connects people from diverse backgrounds, fosters a sense of belonging to a new city, empowers children to play, learn and grow, nurtures and flourishes from diversity, and provides families with a “*a memorable and meaningful*” (Staff2) summer in Montreal.

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