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## CHRISTIAN SUMMER CAMP ÁSTJÖRN IN ICELAND IN THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the research project was to present a phenomenon of the Ástjörn Christian summer camp in Iceland from the perspective of the campers. The research used qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and a document analyses). A content analysis technique was used to interpret the data. A total of 190 children (participants in the Ástjörn Christian Summer Camp in Iceland) aged 6 to 12 were surveyed. In order to find out the campers' opinions, they were asked three open questions that addressed: (1) favorite places and activities; (2) motives for coming to camp; and (3) peculiarities of the camp.

The study presents the main findings of the study detailing the emergent model of the Ástjörn Christian camps with six basic features: relationality, separation from home, care and safety, focus on faith, freedom, and connection to nature. The data analyzes carried out proved that among the important features determining the attractiveness and uniqueness of Camp Ástjörn, it is determined not only by its location and the beauty of the landscape, but above all by its interesting program, its participants and relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** *Christian camp, qualitative methods, children's experiences, spiritual development, recreation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Summer camps are generally seen as places for comprehensive personality development of children and adolescents (Bialeschki et al, 2007; Richmond et al, 2019, Thurber et al, 2007; Wilson et al, 2019). Researchers' interest in summer camps over the past two decades has shown significant growth, yet in academic research, the specifics of religious camps have been largely overlooked (Henderson, Bialeschki, 2008; Henderson, Oakleaf and Bialeschki, 2009; Sorenson, 2014, 2018). According to Eells (1986), the divergence between religious camps and secular camps has deep historical roots. She signals that secular professionals working in the field often condemn the lack of standards at many religious camps, while Christian professionals lament the lack of spirituality at secular camps. Sales and Saxe (2004) point out the peculiarity and effectiveness of Jewish camps, demonstrating the fruitfulness of research targeting specific types of religious camps. Smith (2009) documented the positive relationship between living by faith and connection to religious

communities and the well-being and life achievements of young people. He found three characteristics that distinguish religious camps from secular ones: (a) the emphasis on faith, (b) the language, and (c) the values they act on. Few studies show that religious camps score better than secular camps on overall measures of spirituality (Henderson, Oakleaf, and Bialeschki, 2009; Sorenson, 2014). Despite the differences, religious and secular camps share many characteristics such as their programs that provide a moral environment for children to grow and develop. Thomas (1997, p. 184) explains that *moral environment* means the social and physical conditions outside a person that affect the moral aspects of their mind. According to the researcher, a moral environment is one (a) where a person acquires moral values, or (b) where values a person already possesses are shaken, supported, or challenged (1997, p. 184). In Walicki's view (2019, p. 200), moral education is effective in many respects and makes it much easier for people to navigate the intricate world of moral values. However, it should not be equated with futile and often even harmful moralizing. True moral education involves expanding one's imagination and knowledge in the world of moral values (between complexity and simplicity), deepening personal sensitivity to otherness and moral nuance, and developing critical thinking skills. Another common feature of religious and secular camps is providing a temporary *home* for children (Garrod, 1993, p. 222). This home, which camp leaders seek to build, is a place where children can enjoy coexistence with peers, mentors, and nature while learning the values and principles necessary to live in a group. Grusec and Kuczynski (1997) identified factors that influence children outside the camp. Family members, media, music, school, peers, and the church are just a few sources of values (Grusec, Kuczynski, 1997, p. 307). They teach children either moral values or unethical values that contradict the standards of everyday life in a given social group. This creates opportunities for children to make choices, even if they are not always able to distinguish between positive and negative messages. Some sociologists refer to negative messages as *social toxicity* (Grusec, Kuczynski, 1997, p. 314). Both secular and religious camps try to eliminate the possibility of children making negative choices by providing them with only one type of influence present in the camp's environment, structure, and program (Garst, Browne, and Bialeschki, 2011).

The scarcity of information on the features of Christian camps was the motive for this research project. The article presents the peculiarities of one of them: Camp Ástjörn in Iceland, organized continuously from 1946 until now, and its contribution to the Christian tradition.

## GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT CAMP ÁSTJÖRN

As Merriam (2009) notes, qualitative research should include rich information about the research setting. Thus, it is advisable to present the context of the summer camp and the study participants in detail. Ástjörn Summer Camp is located in northern Iceland, within the Jökulsárgljúfur National Park on the lake of the same name, adjacent to Ásbyrgi Canyon. It is located close to the Arctic Circle, 530 km from the island's capital Reykjavik and covers an area of 17 hectares, of which buildings take about 900 m<sup>2</sup>. During the camp, the entrance gate is opened every morning and closed before midnight. Also, each day, the flag of Iceland is hoisted on the mast located in the center of the camp (visible from everywhere in the camp) and lowered in the evening. On the first day, while discussing the rules of the stay, the group's leader reminds the children that if they get lost in the forest, they should climb the nearest hill and locate the flag fixed on the mast, which will show the way back. The camp is overgrown with dwarf birches (Latin: *betula nana*), characteristic of the tundra in the northern hemisphere, while a birch forest surrounds it on three sides. The Ástjörn Lake is located in the campsite. It has a zone for children marked by buoys. At the lake, there is a lifeguard observation tower, storage for life jackets, stilts, and other equipment, and a wooden pier. A beach with black, post-volcanic sand next to the pier is one of the children's favorite places. Between the lake and the main building, there is an extensive stretch of a grassy meadow, with swings, benches, and trampolines. The meadow is also used by children learning to walk on stilts. In front of the *Mariubud* building, there is a fenced mini gaga ball pit and pendulum swings. The terrace, adjacent to the building, is used for table football and as a place for those who want to paint or do other outdoor artwork. The two largest buildings (*Gamla hus* and *Mariubud*) serve mainly as dormitories: one for boys and the other for girls,

while *Gamla hus* also serves as a canteen and kitchen. Next to them, there are three staff cottages, a laundry building with showers, a builder's workshop with tools, and a depot where sports equipment, among other things, is stored. At the rear of the buildings are two playing fields: a grassy pitch for football and baseball and a paved basketball court.

Each summer there are three camps for children aged 6-12 and one camp for adolescents aged 13-15. Each lasts 7, 8, or 10 days. Between the camps, there is a 4-day break for staff who stay for the next camp. Camp participants come from a variety of backgrounds. Only some of them come from Christian families. The camp educators emphasize the right of every person to freedom and self-determination. Campers listen to the Christian message, transferred via Bible stories and songs sung by everyone.

Participants come to Ástjörn from all over Iceland.

#### *FIXED POINTS OF THE DAY*

Analysis of documents and interviews with camp staff determined that the organization of the day at Camp Ástjörn, consists of six essential elements: (1) getting up in the morning; (2) meals; (3) singing and prayer; (4) free activities; (5) Bible meetings; (6) arranging for sleep.

It is worth mentioning that during free time, campers can sign up for various sports competitions. There are also two disciplines that camp employees take part in. These are a football game between campers and employees, and a competition of welly-wanging: throwing a Wellington as far as possible. Several times during the camp the children may be offered the opportunity to take part in a hiking trip, sometimes a trip to the ocean, horseback riding at a friendly stud farm, a trip to the swimming pool, and a trip to the museum (at the tourist information center in nearby Ásbyrgi Canyon). Spending time at the lake, children can choose to use rowboats, sailboats, kayaks, pedal boats, and SUP paddle boards. Sometimes inflatable equipment like pontoons and mattresses are made available. Children in the lake must put on life jackets (with a built-in whistle) and notify the educator (lifeguard) that they are in the water. Since water activities are very popular, the lake is made available every day before noon and in the afternoon. The lake may be off-limits only due to strong winds, heavy rain, or excessively low air and water temperatures.

Research goals:

1. What places and activities do children prefer at the Christian summer camp in Iceland?
2. What is unique about the Christian summer camp in Iceland?
3. What model of a Christian summer camp in Iceland emerges from the campers' statements?

## METHODS

### RESEARCH METHODS AND RESEARCH TOOLS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children to find their opinions about the summer camp. Patton (2002) suggests that unobservable processes in terms of experiences, attitudes and perceptions can be understood through interviews. In order to find out campers' opinions, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was prepared based on predetermined themes (favorite places and activities; peculiarities of the camp). The interview schedule included an introduction explaining the purpose of the study and questions necessary to obtain demographic information. The interview included five open-ended questions consistent with the research topic, as well as follow-up questions. For example, one of the main questions was: *what do you think is least interesting about Ástjörn?* The interview questionnaires were checked by two competent judges. The duration of the interviews with children ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. Data were obtained through face-to-face meetings.

### RESPONDENTS

The study group consisted of 190 children (108 boys and 82 girls) aged 6 to 13 whose parents consented to the study. All the names of the respondents, for reasons of data protection, were changed (encrypted), to preserve the confidentiality of the obtained information. The data collected was also secured – only the authors of the research project have access to the data. The research material was collected between 2019 and 2023.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A qualitative content analysis, which uncovers patterns, themes and categories important to social reality, was used as a method (Schilling, 2006). The collected research material was transcribed, thoroughly analyzed and interpreted (Silveman, 2009). In accordance with common practice in presenting data (Schilling, 2006), typical excerpts from respondents' statements were used to substantiate conclusions.

In addition to interviews with campers, an analysis of documents such as the program, camp rules and regulations, and daily schedule was additionally used.

## RESULTS

### (1) FAVORITE PLACES AND ACTIVITIES

According to Tuan (1987, p. 13), a place is a tame, safe space to which people give their own meanings and significance. The analysis of the interviews showed that at Camp Ástjörn the children had many favorite places to pursue their passions and interests. The children's preferred place was the lake, and their favorite activity was boating on the lake and swimming in the lake. Although, this activity particularly loved by children could prove risky, the staff, placing great trust in the campers, under the watchful supervision of lifeguards, allows such activities. Axel (age 11) told of his adventure on the lake:

*It was few years ago when I was about 6 years old. I got into a boat with oars and went out to the lake. There were swans farther out there, I thought to myself that I would get closer to them. I don't know how it happened, but after a while, I realized that I was already behind the buoy, where you couldn't go by yourself. It was far from the shore, and I could hardly see Gamla hus anymore. I started paddling hard, but it was difficult because the wind was holding me in place. On top of that, it started to rain. Suddenly I saw a boat coming towards me. It turned out that the lifeguard saw that I was far away and sent someone to help. They got close to me and threw me a rope, I tied it and jumped on their boat myself. Then they towed my boat to shore, and I sat with them. I was frozen but happy (...)*

The second place valued by the campers turned out to be the art studio, which, the interviewees said, encourages them to discover the secrets of painting, sculpture, drawing, ceramics, to learn how to design and make various objects. An excerpt from one participant's statement can be used as an example of interest in this place:

*I really like the art studio activity of arranging beads. You arrange them according to your idea and then seal them, using an iron. This way you can create various unique works (boy, 12 years old).*

Other favorite places of the children surveyed were: a section of space with a trampoline, a playground, a prayer meeting room, a playground, a room with table games and a dining room. According to the campers, the mentioned places allowed such activities as jumping on the trampoline, playing sports, playing outside, praying and singing together, fishing, eating a meal together, helping the staff and learning various new skills. For several children, all the places and the activities associated with them were favorites.

A sample statement of children was as follows:

*My favorite sport at the camp is baseball. I play baseball with other Icelanders, and the rules are usually explained to us by one American (boy, 12).*

*I love playing in nature, because you can have a lot of surprises! Here is an ant, there is a snail, a bird or other animal. Everyone is in a hurry somewhere. Here you can look at the clouds or a rainbow in the sky. This is my favorite place (girl, 12 years old).*

For several children, all the places and the activities associated with them were favorites.

## **(2) PECULIARITIES OF THE CAMP**

Based on the analysis of the children's statements about the characteristics of Camp Ástjörn, it can be concluded that it provides a relaxed, respectful and caring atmosphere, taking into account the bringing of the Good News of God's love to every person. The most frequently mentioned features with



positive overtones are: respect for each person's right to his or her own beliefs and faith; a climate conducive to having fun, developing creativity, learning, making and nurturing friendships, and, above all, educating for freedom.

*Ástjörn Christian Camp is friendly, somewhat similar to a regular camp, only the songs are sometimes different. I'm definitely going back next summer to the same place. Best vacation ever! (girl, 8 years old)*

*No one was forced to change their views. I felt especially appreciated and motivated to achieve my dreams! (boy, 12 years old).*

*I learned a lot at the camp, but in a different way than at my school. I could ask questions and I wasn't criticized. I was myself, I didn't pretend. I didn't know how to pray to God and how to listen to him. That's what I didn't understand. Now it's different (girl, 12 years old).*

*I have new friends, they like to do what I do. I feel that I am important to them. We talk and exchange ideas. We are arranged next year to meet in the same place (boy, 11 years old).*

Another important for respondents feature of a camp was the disconnection from technology, especially the social media, cell phones, television and video games. Surprisingly, the overall assessment of the lack of technology was positive, as evidenced by the following statement:

*In various places you can find a large proportion of people walking around and talking on their phones. You don't really see those who just stop and look around, and the camp gives us a chance to do that (boy, 11 years old).*

The surveyed campers said they expanded their knowledge of God and the Bible, learned the 10 Commandments, new stories and Bible verses. In addition, they practiced swimming on a paddle board and rowing faster on a boat. One child said he learned to eat everything off the plate. Among the characteristics that respondents identified as negative were going to bed too early and waking up too early, morning prayer, Bible meetings, lack of meal choices and waiting for food.

### (3) *ÁSTJÖRN CHRISTIAN SUMMER CAMP MODEL*

Sorenson (2018, 2021, p. 64) identified five key characteristics of Christian summer camps based on a number of studies: safe space, relationships, disconnection from home, participation and faith focus. Ástjörn's model of Christian summer camp, which emerged in the present research, turned out to be richer with an additional feature – freedom.

In the Ástjörn summer camp concept six peculiar qualities can be distinguished: relationships, disconnection from home, care and safety, focus on faith, freedom, and connection to nature (Figure 3). Each of the listed characteristics is briefly described and supported by an excerpt from statements made by the children surveyed or by camp staff.

**Figure 1.** *Six basic features of Ástjörn camp*



**Source:** based on Sorenson, 2021, p. 64.

#### (1) *RELATIONALITY*

Relationality is the most recognizable feature of the model. It is commonly found in the literature on all types of camps (American Camp Association, 2006) and was clearly present at the research site. The participants played, prayed, ate meals, rested, worked, and learned about and worshiped God together. The camp program included purposeful activities for children

and staff that build social relationships. There were group meetings, including daily Bible studies in small and larger groups, and numerous conversations.

Some researchers suggest (Ladd, 1999; West, 1992) that children make friends and colleagues through social play, which is essential for their mental and emotional development. Most (88.9%) of the surveyed staff said there was a lot of this type of contact at Camp Ástjörn.

## **(2) SEPARATION FROM HOME**

This feature, which is characteristic of all camps, has been assessed by researchers as a developmental potential for children (Thompson, 2012). In the present study, the biggest differences between home and camp were noticed in the physical aspects, such as the arrangement of the dormitories. In addition, the campers felt a greater sense of agency and responsibility for their actions when they were away from their parents and parental expectations. One girl (age 9) said, *I am treated as a person here, not as a small child*. This increased agency and independence extends to the campers' faith:

*I feel that the educators help us grow in our faith in Jesus. Although they help us do this, I feel that we also take responsibility. We can grow in our faith on our own, independently* (girl, 12).

The managers of the camp point out that usually at every camp few children (ca 5-10%) feel homesick. Children arrive at Ástjörn. without phones, computers or other media. The very moment, when they feel so homesick, there is always an additional staff member that listens and talks to the child and tries to involve him/her in some activities. It was noticed that giving these homesick children metal/wooden puzzle solutions are very helpful. Conversations with parents are only possible on the fourth/fifth day of their stay, depending on the length of the camp. From their long experience the camp management knows that children (especially those arriving for the first time) feel comfortable and confident only after a few days. Some of the children who abuse the use of electronic equipment on a daily basis cut off from the media, feel irritable for the first few days. Other children (especially younger ones) get homesick and can't quite find their place. After a couple of days, all the sadness usually passes. Parents call landline numbers. Children are called

by microphone (there is a radio speaker installed throughout the campsite, and a megaphone is used on the lake).

Sorenson (2021) draws attention to the fact that there are several meanings of *being separated from home*. In his book with a meaningful title and a lovely starry cover *Sacred Playgrounds* he describes separation from home as a disconnection from daily life. Sorenson emphasizes how important for campers is to be away from home, outside of their comfort zones just to see their life from a different perspective.

### **(3) CARE AND SAFETY**

According to some researchers (Żywczok, 2018), caring is a reflex that stems from the need and desire to take care of someone with respect and attention to the other person's needs and expectations. When someone cares for us, we do not doubt their intentions, we trust them, and we feel safe. Thus, feeling safe is determined by caring.

### **(4) FOCUS ON FAITH**

In Christianity, faith refers to an attitude toward God, who reveals himself and his saving will to the individual. As a mystery, faith is a supernatural gift from God and at the same time the individual's response to this gift. Focus on faith is the main feature that distinguishes Christian camps from secular camps. The collected data show that the practice of faith at the camp is not separated from games and other activities: it is included in every element of the program. Sample statements from participants illustrate that:

*Listening to stories about Jesus can help us deepen our faith. Jesus says that even a little faith is strong enough to do great things* (girl, 10).

*The most important thing is deeds and what we can give to other people, such as being good, helping, sharing joy, and comforting* (boy, 9).

### **(5) FREEDOM**

Every person can learn God's will and decide how to wisely use the freedom given to them. Reason, based on conscience, allows individuals to discern what God's will is. It is necessary to nurture faith and good role models

in children and later in adolescents. Parents, guardians, and teachers should give young people the tools so that they can use freedom wisely. As Tozer (2016, p. 197) notes, *The ideal Christian is someone who knows he is free to do what he wants, and wants to be a servant. This is the path that Christ took: blessed is the man who follows Him!*

In their statements, campers emphasize the importance of the sense of freedom they have during their stay. Although the day is structured, campers are free to choose free time activities. They decide what space of the camp they want to be in and what they will do there. The opportunity to decide shapes in them a belief in their agency and builds self-esteem. The intention of the camp is, above all, to ensure the safety of the children, so educators supervise the places that are made available to children discreetly. The camp provides a relaxed, respectful, and caring atmosphere, and teaches the Good News of God's love towards every child. At the same time, each person's right to his or her own beliefs and faith is emphasized. Ástjörn's climate is conducive to having fun, developing creativity, learning, establishing and nurturing friendships, and, above all, educating for freedom.

#### **(6) CONNECTION TO NATURE**

Research shows that the connection to nature is stronger in people who experienced frequent contact with it in childhood (Hinds, Sparks, 2008). Closer, healthier and longer-lasting relationships with nature result from noticing it, feeling its emotions, beauty and meaning, as well as empathy, which sensitizes one to the Other, to the situation found in a given place, and to one's actions directed by concern for nature. Contact with nature provides balance to the emotion regulation system, as well as control of the nervous system over body and organ functions, including the heart (Kaplan, 1995). It is also important that nature can contribute to supporting two different dimensions of happiness: joy and peace.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Christian summer camps organized for children, are a valued and practiced form of recreation in many countries, including Iceland. The present project fills the gap in research on Christian summer camps. In many respects, the obtained data confirms the previous findings that have shown the positive impact of the camp experience on many issues (American Camp Association, 2005; Thurber et al., 2007; Sorenson, 2021).

Based on the campers' statements, a number of motives that prompted the children to come to Camp Ástjörn were identified: the desire to experience a new place, to develop interests; the chance for new experiences; the desire to get to know Jesus better; the hope of making lasting friendships; the need to experience independence and strengthen self-confidence; the fear of boredom. Among the features of the camp mentioned by the children, the most common were terms of a positive nature: respect for each person's right to his or her own beliefs and faith, a climate conducive to having fun, developing creativity, learning, making and nurturing friendships, and, above all, educating for freedom. There were also negative voices, such as going to bed too early and waking up too early, morning prayer, Bible meetings, lack of meal choices and waiting too long for meals. The analysis of the data showed that at the camp the children had many favorite places to pursue their passions and interests. The children's preferred place was the lake, and their favorite activity was boating on the lake and swimming in the lake. Other favorite places were: the art studio, the playground, the prayer meeting room, the playground, the room with table games and the dining room. The mentioned places allowed for playing outside praying and singing together, helping out (e.g. in the laundry room) and learning various new skills.

The analyses made it possible to chalk out a model of the Ástjörn Christian summer camp, in which the following features were distinguished: (1) relationships; (2) disconnection with home; (3) care and safety; (4) focus on faith; (5) freedom; and (6) connection to nature.

Christian summer camps organized for children are a valued and practiced form of recreation in many countries, including Iceland. They offer unique and valuable experiences of discovery, learning, and development that are often

impossible to achieve in a school classroom or at home. The conducted research proved that among the important features that determine the attractiveness and uniqueness of Ástjörn, are not only its location and the beauty of the landscape, but above all the people (campers and staff) and their relationships. Because of them, ordinary camp life takes on a glow and becomes an extraordinary adventure, a meaningful event, sinking into hearts for years to come. The goal of the creators of the camp has always been to provide the children with an opportunity to stay in a charming place and teach them about Jesus Christ. These assumptions, as research shows, are still successfully pursued. Ástjörn has been attracting people of all ages with its atmosphere, space, and mission for more than 77 years. Children and adolescents go there out of a need to establish relationships, have fun together, and joyfully experience summer vacations, while teenagers and older people come for selfless work that, despite being physically very hard, gives them fulfillment and satisfaction. As the analysis of the qualitative data showed, the camp's model is built on six features. In this model, faith is grounded in theology and integrated into all aspects of camp life. Yust (2006) noted that many Christian camps have separated aspects of faith from other camp activities and criticized this approach as largely resembling secular camps.

Ástjörn Summer Camp is worthy of interest and recommendation for at least two reasons. First, the location of the camp in a national park area, adjacent to Ásbyrgi Canyon, makes the place special. In addition to the buildings and the playing field, the camp includes a forest, a lake with a marina, and numerous hiking routes. Campers have the opportunity to host national park employees who introduce the peculiarities of nature by conducting field activities. Secondly, the diverse space helps campers develop spirituality and awe of God's creation. The model created at Camp Ástjörn helps campers broaden their perspective of the Christian worldview, changing their approach to prayer and religion, showing it as enriching, life-changing, and hopeful.

The presented camp is a friendly, symbol-marked space, called by children *a magical place, an oasis, a second home*. These are examples of good pedagogical practices that offer valuable experiences of discovery, learning and development in ways that are often not possible in the classroom or home environment. They are therefore worthy of deeper exploration and dissemination, not only in Iceland, but also in other countries.

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