

A life transforming equation learned from a church camp in Uganda, Africa

How does a camp affect the social and spiritual development of vulnerable children and youth in a developing country? I knew about the effects of HIV and poverty, of violence and family breakdown, and I knew what I had experienced in my years of being a camper. But this was a question I wanted to know more about while recently serving at just such a camp in Kampala, Uganda.

Background on Africa Renewal Ministries and Ggaba Community Church

Africa Renewal Ministries (ARM) is a Christ Centered Faith-based organization that was birthed from Ggaba Community Church in Kampala, Uganda. Their mission is to develop and equip generations of transformational leaders through ARM initiatives, Churches, and other strategic partnerships for holistic societal transformation, such as their Child Development Programs (CDPs), a sponsorship program serving 8,000 orphans and vulnerable children across Uganda who have low family income or family assets, chronic illness or malnutrition, and physical or mental impairment. Every year, the CDPs require the children to attend a camp coordinated by Ggaba Community Church.

Why camp would be helpful for vulnerable children

In order to understand the impact of camp on the social and spiritual development of orphans and vulnerable children, it is important to understand the issues that these children face. As I had the opportunity to interact with many of these children, often they were hungry, living in slums, or coming from broken homes, living with one parent or a relative. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs,

many of these children are at the bottom rung, not even having their most basic needs consistently met.

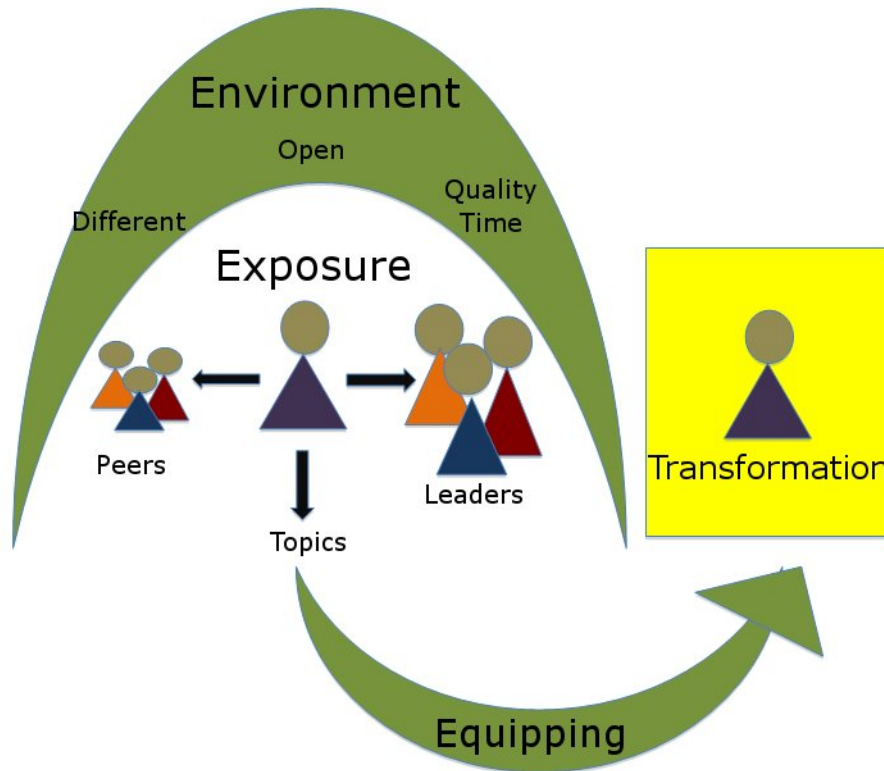
This doesn't even take into account the psychosocial factors that orphans who are affected by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa face, such as depression, anxiety, conduct problems, bereavement and grief. While these are symptoms specifically found in children who are affected by the AIDS epidemic, many of the issues that these vulnerable children face are faced by all vulnerable children whether they are directly affected by AIDS or not. While much more than a temporary camp program is necessary to effectively intervene with these children, camp settings still can make quite a difference in their lives.

There are several developmental needs that must be met for positive youth development, the first being adequate food and shelter. For many children that Africa Renewal Ministries' CDP program works with, daily food is not a guarantee. Thus, the opportunity to be in a camp setting where 3 meals are provided and the children stay in a facility that shields them from the environment and provides a safe place to sleep is a luxury for many. In this way, a camp setting is performing the preliminary steps to be able to focus effectively on social and spiritual development.

While interviewing 6 former campers, who are now young adults, and 6 staff members, including the youth and children's pastors and several camp volunteers who have been instrumental in the camp ministry, I was able to learn quite a few lessons about the real impact of camp in the lives of vulnerable children.

The most common responses that I gathered from these interviews were overwhelming about the positive life transformation that happens through the camp

experience. The results can be summed up in a simple equation: environment + exposure + equipping = positive life transformation (See Figure 1).



What does this look like for the vulnerable children of Uganda?

Environment

There were several aspects of a camp environment that participants talked about: the value of the children being in a different location, the openness of that environment, and the quality of the time spent there.

I asked how the experiences of camp are different from the experience of church, and the youth pastor said that when you *“change the place, you will find that their mind is open to what you have to teach them. You have been interacting with*

them, but at the camp it is different.”

A planning committee member pointed out how this plays out at camp, especially when comparing the environment to the church environment:

“Camp tears down walls and we become friends with [campers]. It helps them open up with us, so when we come back, church becomes a friendly place.”

From a camper’s perspective, camp environment does indeed change things. Camp leaders are more approachable as campers are able to have quality time with leaders. As the director of programs pointed out, camp is the time for the project staff to leave the administrative tasks of running a sponsorship program behind and focus on building relationships with the kids. Even though the period of time for camp is shorter than the time spent at school or church, the quality of the time there makes all the difference. The Children’s Pastor pointed out:

“At church, we have limited time. But at camp we spend more time with them, we are with them all day, during the night... So it gives a lot of room for interaction, getting to know more about them, to socialize. Things can happen while at camp that can't at just church.”

What a difference the camp environment makes!

Plus Exposure

Exposure refers to the fact that campers have the opportunity to be exposed to new peers, leaders, concepts and experiences. This allows campers to learn and practice concepts at a deeper level, which is one of the pillars of camp ministry—experiential education. For example, the following quote from a male camper shows how praying for hours at camp changed him and affected him more than just

praying once a week for several weeks in a row.

“At camp, I think, I don't know how it's done. But when you do something for a long time at a specific moment, you get to love it. More than when you do something today then spend time away. But at camp we pray continuously-- ...so I get used to doing it. But at church, I may come on Sunday, go back home, relax, you know. Camp there is no distraction. 5 days. Prayer time.”

Interestingly, this particular camper, since having this experience at camp, made the decision to start every morning and end every night with at least 15 minutes of prayer!

Exposure to deeper peer relationships is a huge motivator and part of healthy development for youth and children. Camp gives children an opportunity to meet new people, form meaningful relationships, and develop their own social skills. One of the church leaders said it best, *“When they are coming back from camp, you realize that you are speaking to a different set of people than when you were going to camp.”*

Plus Equipping

A different environment matters, what the children are exposed to matters, and yet there are specific actions that camp leaders engage in at camp that result in positive growth: equipping. From the camp leaders' perspective, when asked about the long-term impact of camp on these campers' lives, the youth pastor made this idea clear:

“[after camp] you are getting a more equipped person, a more stable person, a more skilled person, and somebody who is more knowledgeable about what

they are dealing with in their lives.”

Campers are equipped with spiritual disciplines like how to pray or read their Bibles as well as practical skills. The young man who made a commitment to pray said he was equipped for real life in new ways as well:

“Last camp we were taught how to be good business managers... In the long run, I learned them. I can develop as a person. I think when I grow up it won't be hard for me; I can just apply that knowledge.”

Campers are equipped by the opportunity to put their new knowledge into practice, and thus discover their potential. As they discover the good within themselves, they leave camp changed and more ready to face life as an adult. A female camper who had been going to camp for 8 years says:

“I was taught how to make goals at camp. This year when I was starting, I got my diary and made some goals. I learned that from camp. It was in camp that I decided I should be a lawyer. In camp I also discovered that I can be a leader. I realized for the many times I went to camp, I found myself being a leader of workshops or other things. It helped me discover the leader within myself.”

Equals Positive Life Transformation

The result is that these aspects—the environment, exposure, and equipping—not only provide assets that contribute to normal healthy development, but it results in life transformation for poor and vulnerable children who would not be able to experience these things otherwise. One female camper who has been attending camp for 11 years says simply, *“Me being what I am today is because of camp.”*

Another female camper, whose musical talent was discovered at camp, leading to her opportunity to travel with Africa Renewal Ministries' children's choir for 6 months in Holland adds this perspective:

"It was from Bethany that I built up my life. Actually I think I can give it 60% of the credit for how I've come out, to what I am now."

When asked if campers had made any important life decisions at camp, even the male camper who seemed the most apathetic out of all the interviews I conducted stated:

"Ya, that's why I accepted Christ as my savior. I became a born again at camp."

The female camper who stated that she is what she is because of camp stated:

"ya, I made a commitment to just serve God. That was a moment of great prayer at a deliverance service... That's when I said I want to know You more. ...this year, I have the dream of working hard because everything is possible."

This young woman currently works at ARM's Early Childhood Development Program, a project that works with 0-3 year old children coming from extremely vulnerable backgrounds.

Conclusion

When working with vulnerable children in Africa, the needs feel endless, but this study shows that even a yearly one week camp experience has made a difference in the lives of the sponsored children who attend Africa Renewal Ministries/Ggaba Community Church camps in Kampala, Uganda. Campers are transformed by connections they make with each other and with camp leaders, and moreover by the core life decisions to follow Christ and to pursue a sense of Christ's

calling in their lives.

While this study is a Ugandan story of a Ugandan camp, the results can teach people who work with children anywhere the importance of the Ggaba Community Church Camp equation: environment + exposure + equipping = positive life transformation. This equation obviously has made a difference in the lives of the vulnerable children that Africa Renewal Ministries works with and it can apply to other camp settings that work with children and youth. The importance of creating environments that are rich in factors that promote positive development can not be overrated regardless of the target population. As camp professionals, we can't necessarily change a person in one week, but we can create environments that are conducive to facilitating change. We can create environments where environment + exposure + equipping = positive life transformation!

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the leadership of African Renewal Ministries and Ggaba Community Church for this opportunity to conduct this research. To learn more about this organization or to find information on how to donate towards ARM's sponsorship program, visit:

<http://africarenewalministries.org>.