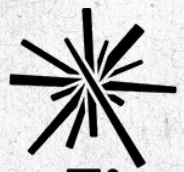


SPACE FOR IDENTITY EXPLORATION: THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER



Camp Fire

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FOREWORD

DR. KIA DARLING-HAMMOND

We humans are facing a historic moment of reckoning where the question of our very survival is front and center. A critical facet of that question is whether we can move beyond scarcity mindsets and fear to protect the civil and human rights of all members of the human family. Attacks—both interpersonal and legislative—on 2SLGBTQIA+ people have been accelerating over the past several years, reaching a stage now where families are fleeing states in search of safety. Some organizations have made the shortsighted decision to take a supposedly neutral stance, but Camp Fire has chosen to stand in the breach, insisting that all young people are entitled to thrive.

I was honored to be invited to guide the study you will read about below. Camp Fire’s research team spent countless hours lovingly crafting the surveys and focus group protocols, interviewing campers and their caregivers, poring over transcripts, and synthesizing participants’ wisdom. Their findings contribute to an increasingly inclusive literature that highlights the power of affirmation, relationships, relief, play, and spaciousness for enabling human flourishing. How this looks for young 2SLGBTQIA+ campers is particular, and knowing that empowers us to design with them in mind.

By grounding its programming in connection “to others, to nature, and to [self],” Camp Fire is acting at the root—contributing to the very aspects of life and living that hold the key to our survival. After all, our futures are mutually constituting. We are in this together, whether we like it or not. In this moment of reckoning, where so much is at stake, Camp Fire is enacting the wisdom of refusal—refusal to succumb to fear, refusal to sacrifice a community under threat, and refusal to lose focus—alongside the wisdom of hope. Our children are our teachers and they offer their genius most easily when they can be free, vibrant, and whole.

Dr. Kia Darling-Hammond (she/they) holds a doctorate in developmental and psychological sciences in education, is author of the Bridge to Thriving Framework©, and co-author of The Civil Rights Road to Deeper Learning: Five Essentials for Equity. She is the CEO of the research and education firm Wise Chipmunk LLC.

CAMP FIRE'S HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Camp Fire started as Camp Fire Girls in 1910, founded by Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick and his wife, Charlotte Vetter Gulick. They believed girls deserved the outdoor learning experiences that boys had and wanted to help “guide young people on their journey to self-discovery.” While Camp Fire was America’s first multiracial, multicultural, and nonsectarian organization for girls, it opened its programming to all genders in 1975. Since then, ALL youth are welcome at Camp Fire. This is why our organization is positioned to study how camps can create spaces that are affirming of identity and self-exploration¹, particularly through the lens of gender.

CAMP FIRE'S COMMITMENT TO THRIVING

At Camp Fire, we recognize that both access to and success in our programs requires intentional actions to cultivate respect, break down barriers, and address injustice. Camp Fire does this through a deep commitment to thriving. Our programs focus on connecting young people to to the outdoors, to others, and to themselves. We are inspired by Dr. Kia Darling-Hammond, creator of the Bridge to Thriving² framework, and use the following definition to guide our work:



When young people are thriving, they are connected to others, to nature, and to themselves with a loving awareness of their identities, dreams, passions, and needs. They are invited to imagine their whole selves and to grow, learn, and achieve in a self-determined, purpose-driven way. For young people in particular, finding a place where they can simply be —where they can exist fully— can be very difficult, especially when who they are is challenged by society. That's why Camp Fire designs identity-affirming, accessible environments in which youth can experience the relationships, fun, inspiration, acceptance, safety, and support they need in order to thrive.

Citing Dr. Kia Darling-Hammond: Darling-Hammond, K. (2021). Bridge to Thriving Framework. Wise Chipmunk.

Camp Fire has intentionally expanded access to our programs, prioritized inclusion, and created space for young people to explore their identities and feel like they belong.

¹Identity: One's internal sense of being. Identities are often based on or influenced by our lived and cultural experiences.

²Bridge to Thriving framework: <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/dimensions-of-thriving-learning-from-black-lgbtq-sgl-moments-spaces-and-practices/>

ABOUT THE STUDY

For this study we sought to answer the question, “What impact (if any) do gender-inclusive and gender-affirming measures have on young people, their caregivers, and their camp experience?” By framing our research question broadly, we attempted to allow participants to guide the conversation and to share what was true for them. What we found was that young people experienced high levels of belonging, community, relief, and pleasure during their time at camp because of the intentional space that was created. Youth had access to a community that embodied a commitment to inclusion and belonging, and for some young people, this contrasted with the isolation and judgment they encountered outside of camp. Some young people were better able to participate in camp as a result of the implementation of affirming practices such as: offering gender-neutral cabins and bathrooms, sharing pronouns, and providing the support of affirming adults. Caregivers largely described feeling a sense of relief that there was a safe and affirming space available to their child. This has implications for the camp and youth development fields and requires further study to better understand the long term impacts of an inclusive camp experience on 2SLGBTQIA+³ youth.

In order to synthesize and interpret the data, we used the Bridge to Thriving Framework as a guide. It is an inclusive, intersectional, and developmentally grounded model, but the main reason we chose it was because it focuses on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and young adults’ lives beyond surviving oppression. Camp Fire recognizes that for young people, it is not just about having the resources you need to get by. It is about having the resources you need to thrive. The Bridge to Thriving Framework made sense for this study, especially as we looked at evidence of thriving with particular attention to youth having opportunities to simply be.

For this study, we had nine lengthy, in-depth conversations: two focus groups and four interviews with youth, and two focus groups and one interview with caregivers. Throughout this report, we will use the term “caregivers” to encapsulate both parents and other types of guardians. We intentionally created spaces where youth and caregivers could share separately, so we could glean information from both groups of stakeholders effectively. We also offered participants an option to take a survey, so they could share information asynchronously if they wanted to. Fourteen youth and eight parents/caregivers were engaged.

The young people we spoke to, all on the older side of our typical age range, had a variety of experiences at Camp Fire. All had attended one of our “specialty camp” sessions where youth who

³2SLGBTQIA+ An acronym used to describe identities of gender and sexual variance. 2SLGBTQIA+ is an umbrella term that broadly describes various identities but also refers to the community of acceptance and support of people with similar lived experience.

An important note on identities: All of the identifiers within 2SLGBTQIA+ are SELF identifiers. Every person has their own understanding and interpretation of the words they use to describe themselves.

held 2SLGBTQIA+ identities could come together for a week of specifically identity-affirming camp. Many of them had previously attended “regular” camp for many years before more recently participating in what they called “gay camp.” Some of them participated in leadership week at camp, which is for teens who are interested in working with kids or who want to be camp counselors in the future. While there was something unique about the community that could form during the specialty week of camp, youth appreciated when affirming and inclusive practices were integrated into other weeks of camp.

THIS REPORT

In the sections that follow, we present our findings by theme, summarizing the big takeaways and questions that surfaced through our inquiry. We noticed that our participants highlighted aspects of their experience that related to:

1. Thriving (“Simply Being”), which was made possible by a sense of belonging or attachment to camp, access to diverse community, experiencing relief, and experiencing pleasure;
2. Gender Flexibility, with particular attention to opportunities to explore gender identity and performance;
3. Camp Structure, including support from adults, 2SLGBTQIA+ representation, and access to gender-neutral spaces; and
4. Accessibility, which fell under four key categories: Physical Health & Hygiene, Disability, Mental Health, and Geographic Access to Camp.

We close with a discussion of the study’s findings and offer implications for further exploration and camp design.



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THRIVING

SENSE OF BELONGING & ATTACHMENT AT CAMP (SELFHOOD AND COMMUNITY)

In Dr. Darling-Hammond's Bridge to Thriving Framework,⁶ they articulate six arenas (dimensions) in which people can find or cultivate thriving: community, selfhood, abundance, pleasure, relief, and a "composite" dimension of "simply being." Simply Being is marked by a sense of being able to exist fully or feel whole and is often made possible when the other five dimensions of thriving have also been fulfilled in some way. When we asked about what worked well, campers' responses aligned to the thriving dimensions

Some of our youth participants exhibited a strong "camper" identity that was a product of a deep attachment to the space and the experiences camp provided. Many campers displayed great pride as they boasted that they had attended the same camp for many years. One youth expressed her enthusiasm for camp saying, "as of this summer, I've been going [to camp] for six years. It means a lot to me. It's kind of like my entire personality, and I try and tell everyone about it. But it's something I've loved for as long as I've been going there." Knowing camp and all the things that went along with the camp experience allowed young people to solidify the concept of what it meant to be a "camper", which was something they could then share with others.

The consistency of the Camp Fire experience provided an opportunity for youth to become comfortable in the space. One parent shared that attending the same camp year after year benefited her child:

“ There is so much pride about going eight years. She tells people that. There is the longevity, knowing where 'this is' [and where] 'that is.' They need to be in familiar terrain, as all kids, but my kid especially will get overwhelmed and when they get lost. It's a place where usually they don't get overwhelmed.

Because camp was a place youth could return to over time, it became a dependable space. Youth who attended camp in years past had an opportunity to develop ownership over their experience because they were acquainted with the landscape and customs at camp.

For some youth, talking about camp went beyond explaining the physical experience; it became a way to also talk about themselves. This "camper identity" created a level of comfort at camp. In some cases, it led to youth feeling confident enough to pursue leadership roles, such as stepping

in to help when needed because they knew how things worked. A parent shared,

“ in normal times [my child is] pretty shy around people, like she won't open up, but when she's at camp, it doesn't matter if she doesn't know who you are. She's coming right up to you and going to be like, 'Oh, do you want to know where this is? Do you want to know where that is? I've been here, you know, so and so many years. I'd be happy to help you.' You know, it's like she's a completely different person.

The excitement over leaning into leadership at camp was apparent by the large number of campers who mentioned they desired to be counselors in the near future. The “camper identity” had the flexibility to grow with youth as they got older.

One repeat camper:

“ I know that my parents were super worried about me growing up being part of a minority, and what would happen? and would I be in danger? But it shows that, like there are some aspects of people not being great, but it can turn out fine. I mean my biggest thing for camp is I want to be a counselor this year. I'm doing leadership focus, so I can actually start on that path. I'm really excited for stuff like that.



See the full Development of Camper Identity in Figure A

For this camper in particular, having a “camp identity” provided an avenue for them to imagine themselves as a future leader. When discussing the fears their parents held, this young person immediately turned to discussing camp. Earlier in the conversation, this camper shared, “Camp has been like my safe space because that's where I first try things because it's in an enclosed environment.” Because camp was away from things like home, school, and their parent’s fears, this particular young person had the potential to offer their parents an alternative existence for themselves: “Look who I can be at camp.” They saw a future for themselves as a camper becoming a counselor in the safer environment of camp. For some gender non-binary and gender expansive youth, the joy of belonging to camp, and developing an identity as a camper, had the potential to offer a counter narrative to what they were experiencing in the “real world.”

A future study could explore further questions related to longevity, including: does having attended camp many times in the past lead youth to embody leadership traits such as being more likely to step in, help out others, etc.? Are youth empowered by that historical attachment to begin taking ownership of the camp space?

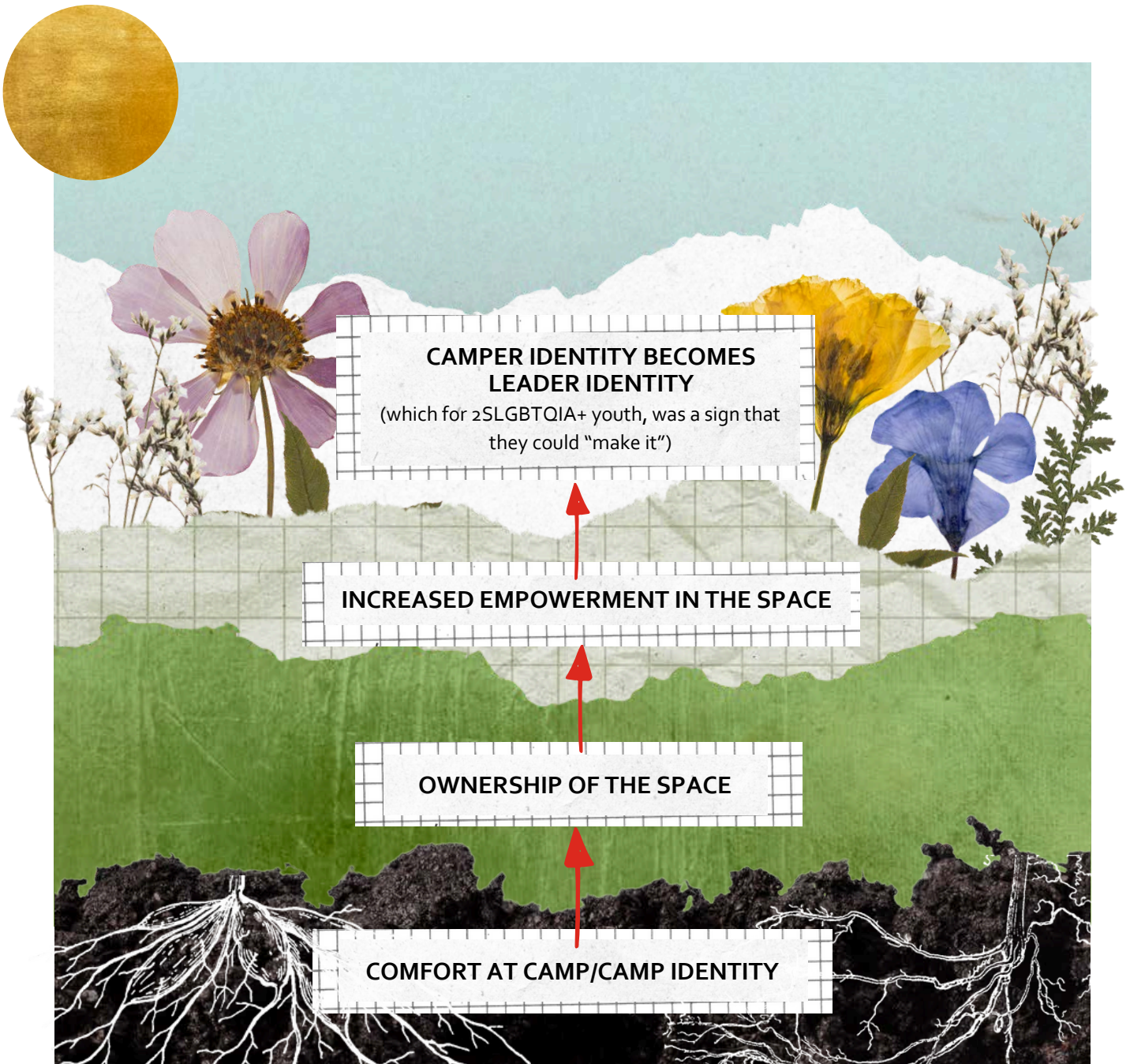


FIGURE A: DEVELOPMENT OF CAMPER IDENTITY

Comfort at camp/camp identity → ownership of the space → increased empowerment in the space → camper identity becomes leader identity (which for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, was a sign that they could "make it")

ACCESS TO A DIVERSE COMMUNITY (SELFHOOD & COMMUNITY)

It was within the camp community's diversity, a community that invited youth to be included rather than pushed them out, that youth found their own experiences could be shared more openly. Community was found on multiple levels within the camp. One being the fact that almost everyone at camp held what youth called a "queer identity,"⁴ so throughout camp, campers could sense that they were understood by others. The second is, when participants were allowed to talk about their identities, others were able to listen and relate to their stories.

Camp provided access to a 2SLGBTQIA+ affinity community, and this inclusion was in stark contrast to the distance youth sometimes felt from others outside of camp. One young person spoke about how their shared experiences with other campers offered an almost immediate sense of connection even when camp was just getting started. They explained, "We knew that we were around safe people already, even at the beginning when we were feeling a little awkward and we're trying to figure out what's going on, we knew there was at least that underlying connection of a person with a queer experience." For this camper, knowing that there were other people at camp who shared a similar experience made those first moments at camp feel safer.

A few parents explained that their children's personal identities sometimes made it difficult to find community in other areas of life. One stated,



... [my child's] school experiences [can be compared to] their camp experiences. They tend to feel a little bit more isolated [at school], and they'll talk about it, like, '[camp] felt like a community and we all jelled,' and doesn't use the language of affinity spaces or caucuses or something like that, but it was clear it just felt very relaxed to be in that space and not have to feel difference, which they often do.

It is hard to connect with other people when feeling othered or different.

The affirming space that camp provided by offering a place for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to gather alleviated some of the work they had to do in order to be accepted within a group. This granted participants a greater sense of peace and belonging.

⁴ Queer has historically been used as a derogatory term and a weapon against 2SLGBTQIA+ people. However; during the 1990s and the HIV and AIDS epidemic, a group of activists reclaimed the word. Originally meaning "different, quirky, unique" many people have reclaimed Queer as their personal identifier not only to reclaim the word's power, but as a way to identify themselves as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community without having to divulge the specifics of their gender, sex, sexual and/or romantic attraction like many other identifiers. To find out more about the reclamation of the word, check out this article https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/queer.php


Ways in which community was formed

While many youth shared similar lived experiences broadly, there was something specific in the way that gender exploration and expression connected participants together. When asked through a post-focus group survey “What, if anything, helped you feel more comfortable at camp?” one young person said, “The fact that I didn't need to worry about passing because I was among people like myself.” Camp offered space for an affinity community to form specifically for youth who identify as gender non-binary and gender expansive. This created space for campers to experience

the freedom of not needing to make themselves fit into a binary gender box or to pass as a certain gender in order to be accepted. One young person shared that they were comfortable with the group at camp specifically because people were so accepting. They said, “At one point, [my] friends and I drew some pictures on the chalk with our names and pronouns, and one of mine had a neo pronoun⁵ in it, and that was out there for anybody to see. And I'd be pretty baffled if somebody judged me for that at this camp.” Their ability to confidently create a drawing with friends that revealed an aspect of themselves shows this camper's comfort level with others at camp.

The authenticity some campers felt they could embody created opportunities for openness with their friends and the camp community more broadly. Youth could be themselves because they were surrounded by others, both youth and adults, who held similar understandings of gender and gender exploration. One parent shared that the gender-affirming community at camp factored into their decision to send their child to camp, saying, “My kid is still figuring out gender, and being with others in the same situation was helpful.” When other campers or staff shared a lived experience and/or a personal identity, it acted as a catalyst for community building because there was less work youth had to do to explain themselves. It was within the shared queer experiences, specifically around gender, that a community could form within a week at camp.

Sharing of stories at camp allowed campers to relate to aspects of gender exploration and expression that others discussed. The community became enriched as youth and staff narrated their lives and revealed diverse and nuanced experiences.



When other campers or staff shared a lived experience and/or a personal identity, it acted as a catalyst for community building because there was less work youth had to do to explain themselves.

⁵Neopronouns are simply newer, sometimes less common, personal pronouns. Some examples are: ze/hir, fae/faer, xe/xem/xir, or it/its.

One young person explained how they had an interesting conversation with a counselor who held a different gender identity than them, and it opened up an opportunity for the camper to realize they actually had a lot in common. The camper shared,

“ Yeah, one of the counselors in the [“gay camp”], she was a trans girl. I don't know many trans girls, because it's a lot less accepted to come out as one. And so it makes it harder to find people of that identity that you can share experiences with. It was a lot of fun to compare the differences that we've had [related to gender], and the opposite things of "this is really hard for me," and "that would be my dream." And it's really interesting.

This camper was able to relate to the counselor and not only learn about their experience but also share about themselves, the things that are hard and the things they dream of. The diversity of identities at camp led to a more accepting community that understood aspects of each other's experiences even if people didn't share a gender identity. One camper explained, “Everyone was different, but I found loads of people I could relate to in ways I can't relate to people at home.” It was because campers could relate so well to others within the diverse community at camp that they could form bonds with each other and the staff. For this young person, it was distinctly different from their experience at home.

Connections happened very quickly at camp because youth were around people who affirmed their experiences. Some youth shared this made them feel that they could be better understood. One youth explained,

“ Being in a gender-neutral cabin with other people who identified as non binary, or transgender, it was nice because there were other people who understood my experience... Those were generally the people that I tended to stick to. I made some pretty close friends, which was awesome. I think it definitely helped me connect with people.

Connecting deeply with others was dependent on the fact that the cabin was gender-neutral, because for this young person, being in that cabin meant they had something in common with everyone else there. Shared experiences, in this instance, led to closer relationships.

In a time when gender non-binary and gender expansive youth can feel alienated in school and other places, camp provided access to a community – one in which young people were able to get to know others who held different individual identities but shared collective lived experiences. Some of the barriers to connection were removed through the creation of an affinity space, and by offering gender-neutral cabins. These practices played a part in creating space for youth who identify as gender non-binary and gender expansive to explore and discuss the complexities of their personal identities at camp with others.

EXPERIENCING A SENSE OF RELIEF

When talking about camp and gender affirming practices, focus group participants used words such as:

- Freeing
- A lot less stressful
- A lot more comfortable
- Joy
- A lot less pressure

There were many factors at camp that allowed youth to exist more authentically, and this led many participants to experience a sense of relief. This sense came in a variety of ways, but youth talked the most about feeling comfortable at camp when there was less pressure to fit in a certain gendered box, when other people respected who they said they were, and when others did not judge their body. For some campers, these instances of relief were noticed by their parents and caregivers, who observed their teenagers returning home refreshed.

Relief - Less pressure to fit in a certain gender box

Camp, by creating spaces that were gender-neutral, offered youth opportunities to feel relief from carrying the burden of having to fit in or assimilate to a strict binary gender structure. One example of how camp created a more inclusive experience was through gender-neutral cabins. A young person explained how the cabins affirmed that gender is a spectrum, and lessened the demand to conform to just male or female identities. They shared:



I think there's a lot less pressure, because when you're put in a position to fit into one box or another, instead of having the option to be neither, or both, or something other than, there's a kind of weight on your shoulders. Especially if you're someone who doesn't experience that sort of thing, typically... And I don't know if there's more I can say about that other than just people being a lot more comfortable.

By intentionally offering gender-neutral structures, camp provided a pocket of relief. There was a release of pressure from having to act or be a certain way to match the gender of an assigned cabin, and this increased the accessibility for youth to express themselves in different ways.


Other youth mentioned feeling more comfortable because they were released from having to work hard to shift oneself to be accepted. Another camper shared, "The fact that I didn't need to worry about passing because I was among people like myself," was important. The community worked to include people rather than people having to work to be included. Parents echoed appreciation for gender-neutral cabins as well, and one shared that having that option "is such a huge relief and something that we have a lot of gratitude for. I don't think either of my kids would feel comfortable being in a single-sex cabin." It is clear that inclusive housing is an important part of camp design. Parents and youth both mentioned how this increased comfort and relief during the camp experience.

Relief - others respecting who youth said they were

A resounding sense of relief arose around the gender-affirming practice of sharing pronouns at camp because it allowed youth an opportunity to define themselves. Many participants shared they enjoyed not having to constantly remind others who they were by correcting pronouns. One young person compared their experience at camp to other youth groups they'd participated in, saying that they experienced less misgendering at Camp Fire because they were able to share their correct pronouns at the beginning. The camper said,



I really appreciated the pronouns thing, cuz I wouldn't consider myself someone who, quote-unquote, passes that well, as much as I don't really like that term. Versus Girl Scouts, I had to go around and tell people that, at the time, I used "they/them" pronouns. And I still got consistently misgendered. But while I was at camp, and being able to introduce myself with those pronouns, I feel like I didn't get misgendered as much. Like, very minimal misgendering, if there was any at all, which I don't even know if there was. But I think that definitely was something that made me feel a lot more comfortable as opposed to other youth groups situations.



Camp provided a space for young people to say "this is who I am and what I would like to be called."

Camp provided a space for young people to say "This is who I am and what I would like to be called." Building the intentional practice of introducing pronouns into camp did the important work of disrupting people's tendency to make assumptions about gender identity.

Assumptions are difficult to overcome. The act of misgendering can undermine a sense of belonging, especially when young people tell others how they would like to be referenced and it is disrespected. This can have detrimental effects on young people's ability to connect with others because the act of people not listening to you makes building developmental relationships more difficult. By being able to share their pronouns during introductions, youth had some agency over how people would refer to them. However, it was up to others at camp, adults and youth alike, to listen to what youth wanted to be called.

When others at camp created space for campers to share pronouns, youth experienced a greater comfort. One young person shared that they appreciated how the adults modeled pronouns saying, "I feel like [my counselor] introducing themselves first and having other people go and it's not just she/her and he/him in there, that it made me feel more comfortable to tell people [my pronouns]." The asking and the using of the correct pronouns played a role in creating a more enjoyable camp experience. Instead of having to carry the burden of constantly reminding people of who they were, youth had an opportunity to be more of themselves at camp.

Relief - others did not judge young peoples' bodies

Some youth talked about experiencing relief whenever camp contributed to freedom from having to worry about how their body, voice, mannerisms, and other forms of gender expression were being perceived at camp. During a part of the focus group where others were talking about the level of acceptance at camp, one young person shared, "personally, being at camp for a week with people that I'll probably never see again is freeing because I don't fully have to worry about how I present myself or how I act around others." For them, the fact that camp was a transitional space helped relieve some of the pressure around monitoring their self-expression. Another young person talked about the pressure of being viewed or perceived, and explained that pool time was difficult for them because they were aware of how their body looked. They found some comfort when no one judged them at the pool, and they shared,

“ Another lack of judgment thing -- at pool time, no one was ever looking at anyone's bodies or anything like that. There was no judgment. I had really bad dysphoria on my legs, and so I was kind of scared to wear swim shorts in the pool. And I was also wearing a button-up top, and I was just nervous. But I felt fine. Nobody ever commented anything. And no one's eyes were anywhere other than [where] they should be. And it was really great pool time because, you know, water exposes everything and everyone was focusing on playing, not other people.

Even though this young person felt nervous at the pool, there was a sense of relief, outlined in the phrase “it was really great,” that came from the fact that others were not focused on their body. No one seemed to comment, look, or allude to anything that would have made this young person feel a need to be self-conscious about an aspect of themselves. According to the same young person, this created a bit of relief as it led to “not feeling like how I would in a normal public pool.” The pool time at camp was different from their experience outside of camp. Camp created opportunities for some youth to experience a bit of release from the tension of needing to worry about how their body could be perceived by other people, particularly during water activities.

Relief Remains After Camp Ends

As youth returned home after a whole week of camp, some of their parents and caregivers recognized a distinct sense of relief present in their young people. One parent talked about how camp eased some of her child’s sullenness, saying,

“ I think for us, especially after LGBT week, there is this light. And when they come back, they're happier. I mean for [my child], especially. He's just so happy because he's in that moody teenager age right now—he's 17—and everything can be a struggle for him sometimes, but, he came back and was laughing and happy. And it just made me happy.

This parent noticed a distinct change that, according to her, was especially felt after her child attended 2SLGBTQIA+ week of camp.

“ And this past summer was his first year as a counselor. And he had so much fun with it because he got to be his authentic self. But he also got to show that authentic self off to other people and other children, which he felt really good about. Because when you live in, kind of, your little vacuum world, getting to put yourself out there in a way that you want to is such a great feeling.

There was something about the ability to be the person this camper wanted to be, especially when they cannot always be that person in the “vacuum world” outside of camp, that connected them to the good feelings. Another parent, when asked about their camper’s emotional state when they returned home, said her child, “seemed recharged and even more comfortable being herself,” underscoring this idea that camp likely offered some chance for youth to experience rejuvenation and an opportunity to be their more authentic selves. Another parent explained how the post-camp high did not end right away, saying “They've been really consistent with the amount of joy that

they had [at camp] and appreciation.” The data indicates that, for some youth, the happiness that was generated at camp might have lasted even after camp ended and carried over into other aspects of their lives.

Camp, in addition to creating conditions that could lead to youth feeling relief, created opportunities for parents to experience a certain sense of relief themselves. Someone shared during the parent focus group about an upsetting event that occurred prior to camp, saying

“ I got ripped a new one 'cause [my child] wore a suit to my niece's wedding, instead of a dress, and I cried for three days... I had to take off work. I was so upset... [But camp is] just a breath of fresh air. It's awesome. You guys are doing a great, great thing.

It can be difficult as a parent or caregiver to witness others rejecting or judging your child. Camp provided a welcoming space, and for this parent, that was a relief in contrast to her experience with family who did not offer the same acceptance.



EXPERIENCING PLEASURE (MADE POSSIBLE BY RELIEF)

Merging humor, play, and nature, camp provided opportunities for youth to experience pleasure. Importantly, though, there was a lack of judgment at camp that invited campers to feel less burdened about worrying about how their bodies were being perceived, which gave them the space to enjoy themselves and what camp had to offer.

Merging humor, play, and nature, camp provided opportunities for youth to experience pleasure.



Some youth shared that camp was an opportunity to experience a space “away,” offering a psychological reprieve from other people’s assumptions. One young person explained “the lack of judgment, the freeing feeling in the air... no one was judging you or anything. There are never any hateful comments.” Terms like freedom were used a few times to describe camp and the feelings it evoked. Another young person talked about camp being an opportunity to get away from other people’s critical opinions, saying, “I live in the suburbs, and here there is a lot of judgment, and just judgmental people in the area. So when I go to camp every year, it’s just kind of like an escape from that.” In this way, camp offered an alternate reality to what young people were experiencing in other areas of their life. A reality in which a sense of relief made enjoyment possible.

This alternate reality that camp produced invited some campers to lean into abundance of silliness and humor, particularly around gender as a social construct. One young person shared,

“ I had someone who used he/him pronouns pretend to be a very fun Starbucks barista with me. That was an inside joke throughout the week. Like, “Oh, my God, Bethany!”, “Oh, my God, Jenny!”...We just didn’t care about gender. There was no issue with that. Everyone was just kind of having fun.

This quote particularly highlights the sense of levity at camp that allowed participants to joke about gender in a way that did not make fun of a person, but rather played with the idea of gender more broadly. Another camper talked about the freedom to joke at camp, saying “we could joke around and make other queer jokes with queer adults” alluding to the fact that this form of jovialness created camaraderie within the camp community, between youth and adults alike. There was something uniquely special about being about to laugh with other people who understood similar life experiences.

In addition to jokes and laughter, games and nature played an important role in evoking feelings of pleasure at camp. One young person shared that the time they felt the safest was when outside in a field where everyone was just focused on playing together. This time in the outdoors created an in-between space that could hold both their childlike self and their present self. They said,

“ Meadow games are fun, because it really took me back to my childhood, feeling like, you can be yourself completely, and you're just having fun running around in the meadow playing hide and seek or tag or balancing on a balance beam or making friendship bracelets. It was nice to not have to worry about the sort of things that you would worry about in an everyday situation like "oh, no, my chest is protruding a little bit", or "Oh, no, my voice sounds a bit too high-pitched.

The fact that they could feel completely themselves, and not think about the way their body was being perceived by others, outlines the level of relief this young person felt at that moment. There is something nostalgic about camp that offers participants space to remember what it was like when they were younger, when it was perhaps easier to solely focus on having fun. Time in the meadow, for this young person, was a catalyst to experiencing that feeling, as well a personal sense of authenticity. They could simply enjoy camp in community with others without the pressure of having to be aware of, or adjust, how their physical being was being perceived. Nature and games uniquely combine at camp and expand possibilities for youth who identify as gender non-binary or gender expansive to escape from the burdens of worrying about their bodies or gender expressions. This begs the question: How else does camp offer opportunities to revel in the pleasure of play?

Camp created an environment in which youth had potential to find pleasure in being authentically expressive. When asked about how comfortable youth felt in being their whole selves during camp, one camper immediately shared:

“ I certainly felt like I could be myself. I had somebody tell me after camp, they texted me, ‘...you were like, really, really expressive.’ But I'm like, ‘You know what? Maybe I was.’ Because I felt ready to be excited and loud and upbeat about everything.

There was something about the way that camp invited unbridled joy that allowed this young person to feel energized in the space. Sharing jokes, playing games together, and being outside all contributed to camp's ability to create time and space for engaging in feelings of pleasure. These aspects of camp, along with other factors such as a lack of judgment, invited some campers to feel more comfortable expressing themselves within the camp community.

GENDER AFFIRMATION AND THRIVING

Our data indicated clearly that the impact of gender affirming practices on young people was that they created space for multiple dimensions of thriving. By implementing practices that mitigated feelings of difference and judgment, camp allowed young people to enjoy the regular benefits of the camp experience. One parent shared, "It's just regular camp. For the most part, it's regular camp just with some people who are kind of struggling with the same things and in some of the same spaces as you are." Young people could participate in camp more comfortably, and because of this they experienced expanded opportunities for belonging, community, relief, and pleasure. The next section of this report will outline how Camp Fire created these intentional spaces for youth thriving.



GENDER FLEXIBILITY & EXPLORATION

Camp offered space for campers to explore their personal gender identities through various options to externally express gender in flexible ways. It is important to note here the traditional practice of choosing a camp name. This is a name youth might only use while at camp and is something campers pick for themselves. This practice of self-identification, along with the freedom to openly explore the intricacies of their identities with less judgment from others, helped youth solidify their understanding of who they were both at and outside camp.

One way young people were given space to explore their gender identities and expressions at camp was through the sharing of names and pronouns. There was room for campers to define for themselves who they were when they got to camp. This was one of the first indicators that there were no predetermined or imposed “boxes” for campers to fit into. The impact this had on youth was that it made them feel safer while living at camp, and one youth shared,

It was within the act of asking the question “What is your name and pronouns?”, rather than making an assumption, that youth were given the power to determine for themselves how they wanted to be referenced.




When I first got to camp, I didn't openly use any other pronouns. I live in a really small town, so I didn't really grow up in an environment where that's just something you share or that you can share. So, when I got to camp, and I realized I could experiment with different things, nobody would judge me, I could just be what I am, and nobody would judge me...I think that was really important for feeling safe and comfortable.

At camp, youth were asked, “What is your name and what are your pronouns?” This seems simple, but the specific question eliminates the chance that someone will just assume how one identifies. In asking, it gives young people the power to determine for themselves how they want to be referred to. And as the young person shared in the quote above, this gave space for campers to “just be” who they were and made camp feel safer. While there was an invitation to share names and pronouns, youth were not forced to identify in any particular way. There was flexibility in figuring out what fit best, and one parent mentioned, “[My child] tried out a different name and different pronouns while they were there. Neither of which stuck, but it was yet another attempt of trying to figure out who they are and who they want to be.”




Camp created spaces for youth to self-identify, but within this process, there was also space to experiment without being pushed one way or another. Self-identifying didn't automatically define who youth were, but instead provided an avenue to explore the flexibility of gender. According to the focus group participants, it was about inviting youth to become their most authentic self while having the support at camp to be respected for their own personal decisions without judgment.

Gender flexibility flowed into other decisions youth made at camp, including when and how to wear makeup or to wear clothes that matched their desired expression. The ability to express themselves in other ways, beyond their names and pronouns, created even more room for youth to explore who they were. One youth shared,

 I think everyone was really free to be themselves. I'm a trans guy who wears makeup and sometimes I don't feel safe enough to do that in certain spaces. But I could wear my super-amazing, out-there eyeshadow and still be called "he" and be recognized as a man. Instead of like "You're this dainty feminine woman" now suddenly, because you put some color on your eyes...I had a cabin member who wore a skirt at one point, and they were like, I can't do this back at home, but I can do this here, and it feels awesome.

Because of the lack of judgment and the lack of assumptions made at camp, campers had the opportunity to expand definitions of gender. There was flexibility for youth to play with stereotypical gender expressions in new ways that helped them better understand themselves and each other. One camper shared,

 I think there's a lot less pressure, because when you're put in a position to fit into one box or another, instead of having the option to be neither, or both, or something other than, there's a kind of weight on your shoulders. Especially if you're someone who doesn't experience that [gendered box], typically... And I don't know if there's more I can say about that other than just people being a lot more comfortable.

What was freeing for youth was not only that they could just be themselves, and not be forced to conform to an assumed type of gender expression, but they could flourish beyond the binary. They could dream and envision themselves presenting to others a more authentic expression of their unique gender. Because camp allowed them to wear clothes and makeup that affirmed their personal identities, youth were given space for self-discovery.

Camp was one of the first places some youth tried something new in relation to how they expressed their identity. The freedom for campers to discover themselves was partially attributed to the fact that they were away from home and from school. They had more opportunities to explore their identity without the pressures of dealing with presumptions of who they were or the

pressure of having labels put on them by other people. This allowed campers to test out aspects of their gender identity without having to fully commit if it didn't feel right. One youth shared,



The psychological safety at camp, and distance away from who they were at home, allowed campers to envision a more authentic version of themselves and provided them with context for how they wanted to present themselves outside of camp.

“Camp has been like my safe space because that's where I first try things because it's in an enclosed environment. If something doesn't work, like that's where I first tried this name because I didn't really know people there, so if it didn't work and I wanted to change my decision, that'd be easy because I wouldn't know anybody.

This camper had been to camp before, and relied on the program as a testing ground to better understand who they were. Young people were comfortable trying on aspects of their identity at camp. The psychological safety at camp, and distance away from who they were at home, allowed campers to envision a more authentic version of themselves and provided them with context for how they wanted to present themselves outside of camp. One parent shared the impact this had on their child, saying,

“I will say that my oldest shared that they were non-binary the summer before eighth grade. But it was actually during the [“gay week”] at camp that they came home and said, my name is now [removed identifying information]. But I do think it's significant, that part of that identity was able to come out and find space at camp that wanted to continue afterwards. So I think that was really significant for them, and for us, that they were in their community and they were just so much themselves. That was really great.

Youth were open about how camp shifted the way they understood themselves, and it was powerful to also hear from parents that this shift was noticed when campers returned home. Because of the freedom and support at camp, young people had the potential to become more authentic in how they presented themselves outside of camp.



CAMP STRUCTURE (SPACIOUSNESS)

ADULT SUPPORT

In our focus group data, we explored when and how young people talked about adult support at camp. Youth mainly focused on their camp counselors, who were working with young people most closely and for the longest amount of time. Campers shared gratitude for their counselors, citing feelings of safety and comfort attributed to adults building relationships with them, accommodating their needs, and creating spaces void of judgment about gender.

Campers shared that they felt comfortable and safe with most of their counselors. One youth explained their positive experience saying, “You felt comfortable with them. And you could choose to follow them because it made sense. It wasn’t an ordering situation, it was a ‘these people are welcoming’.” It can be difficult to balance both authority and fun within the counselor role, but when it’s done well, it can create a sense of fellowship and connection at camp. This connection with counselors can span years because camps are set up for youth to return summer after summer. A long-time camper in our youth focus group shared, “One of the main reasons I’ve gone back to [camp] for six years is because of the staff. They value me and my opinion, and getting to know the new ones while reconnecting with the old ones is great. They always look out for me, and it does feel great when they remember me from past summers.” Campers emphasized appreciation for counselors who exhibited caring qualities.

Adults who were intentional about connecting with youth, valuing young people’s opinions, and being a dependable leader had an impact on young peoples’ experiences. This reinforces what we know from research in the field of youth development about the components necessary for establishing developmental relationships.⁶ Youth also shared that the willingness of adults to accommodate camper needs contributed to feelings of safety. This often required open communication, and one camper explained, “If somebody was struggling with something, then the counselors could pull them aside and talk to them. And it was really good. It was very unexpected for the counselors to do that.” Having an avenue for youth to communicate with their counselors was crucial for accommodating a wide range of camper needs and making camp more accessible. Counselors cultivated safe camp environments when they put time and effort into appropriate interpersonal connections with campers and when they were prepared to accommodate campers’ needs as they arose.

⁶<https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/recent-research/>

Having an avenue for youth to communicate with their counselors was crucial for accommodating a wide range of camper needs and making camp more accessible.



Another theme that arose was related to staff support for gender identity or expression that coincided with a lack of judgment. In the campers' comments, this idea of "judgment" or "being judged" was an important one that came up often. They were specifically concerned with being perceived negatively. Camp counselors excelled when they created safe spaces void of judgment. One youth commented on how liberating these types of spaces felt, and they shared,

“ I definitely think I've mentioned this like three times already, but the lack of judgment, the freeing feeling in the air because all the counselors were just super nice. And no one was judging you or anything. There are never any hateful comments. And if there were, they were turned down by counselors almost immediately.

Counselors played a pivotal role in monitoring the tone of camp, and what worked well was when they focused on embracing a culture of acceptance with and amongst the campers.

Campers showed an appreciation for staff who were open to youth exploring different gender identities and expressions at camp. One youth outlined exactly how counselors played a supportive role in creating affirming environments by explaining,

“ There was this one period, in 2018, where I was seriously questioning what pronouns I used. And so when I asked my counselor to use different pronouns, just to be able to try out that identity, they were super like, "Yup all right! I'll give it a shot." And then I realized quickly that it wasn't for me, but it was really nice to be able to have that experience and not have to worry about judgment from the counselor.

By setting a tone of open-mindedness, instead of judgment, camp counselors formed opportunities for youth to experience self-discovery. Other camps could reap similar benefits by offering intentional training for all counselors to learn how to celebrate young people's identities and create judgment-free camp environments.



2SLGBTQIA+ REPRESENTATION

Representation at camp created a sense of acceptance. Having physical displays of 2SLGBTQIA+ support at camp and the visibility of openly 2SLGBTQIA+ staff created space for youth to feel safe and comfortable at camp.

Flag-raising was an integral part of the daily camp experience, and flying the Progress Pride flag was one of the first indicators to youth that camp was safe and comfortable. Youth often talked about not having the same amount of 2SLGBTQIA+ representation in their day-to-day lives as they did while at camp. One participant highlighted just how comforting it was to see the pride flag raised, saying,

“ Yeah, it kind of shocked me because I didn't know what [camp] was gonna be like, at all. When I saw that, it made me really excited. And I felt safer with the adults, because sometimes you never know how adults will react to things. But the adults are doing that. So it makes you feel much better, for me at least.

Other campers echoed that the flag showed that camp was accepting, allowing them to relax into the camp experience. Flag time also opened opportunities for youth to express themselves when different pride flags were flown on different days. It was shared in the focus groups that campers would exclaim, “Oh! the lesbian flag that's the one that applies to me,” or “Oh! the trans flag,” or “Oh! the non- binary flag!” because youth were excited to see something that specifically represented them. This visual signaled to campers that the space was inclusive and camp was a place where they could celebrate their identities.

Having openly queer counselors also played into safety at camp. Youth shared they were more inclined to talk to counselors they could relate to, with one camper saying,

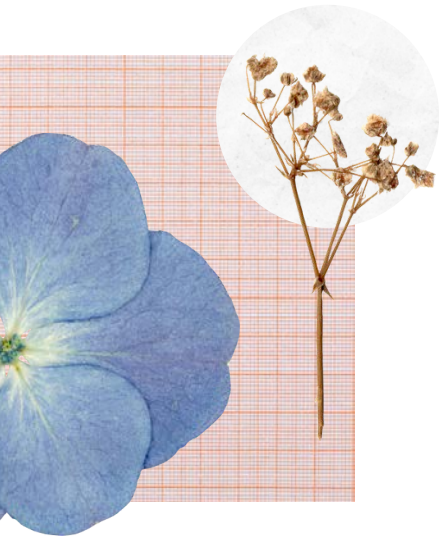
“ With people with similar identities, you feel more comfortable talking to them about your issues. I would feel a lot more comfortable personally talking to someone who had similar problems as me or who had similar identities to me, than someone who I felt like I couldn't relate to at all. So I think that [counselors talking about their identities] definitely did make an impact on campers safety.

The safety of the camp environment was partially attributed to staff being open and honest about who they were. For this camper, they were more likely to go to the adults with issues or concerns because they shared an identity that allowed for mutual understanding.

This celebration of identity at camp opened up a door for greater self-expression for the campers, and it was emphasized by staff members' transparency and candidness around their own identities. One youth noted that they felt they could be overt in their communications with others saying, "we could joke around and make other queer jokes with queer adults, and not just have to keep them to ourselves and the adults not get them." The openness to laugh and find joy in their queer identity was attached to the fact that staff were a part of the same community. Sharing jokes out loud showed that youth were able to truly be seen by the staff as their authentic selves, instead of having to conceal aspects of their identities.

Campers' could see themselves reflected in the older adults, which impacted how they saw their own futures. By modeling the existence of diverse identities, staff affirmed for the campers that people in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community can and do exist in the world. One youth shared "you don't see queer adults in your everyday life, especially not in the south." The access to people with an array of identities created space for youth to know they were not alone in their experiences. One camper shared the best part of camp was, "Definitely the social experience, being able to talk to other queer people and not having to desperately search for other queer people."

Parents reinforced the idea that camp was a haven for finding 2SLGBTQIA+ community for their youth, especially because many parents conveyed a sense of loneliness that can come with having a child who identified as gender non-binary. As researchers, we were not clear if it was the parents' or the child's loneliness being discussed but did note that parents talked about camp offering a reprieve from an isolating experience. One parent talked about the power of representation at camp saying, "[My child's] counselor last year was non-binary.. and we're like, 'finally!' it's not just you and your sibling. So just for them to be able to see some other folks modeling a different experience I think was really valuable and made us want to come back." It was because of this modeling of experience within the camp community that campers' identity exploration flourished. Youth had access to staff who held a wealth of knowledge and lived experience, and campers had the freedom to ask adults about their personal journeys in a safe way at camp. Youth were then able to see themselves reflected in the counselors' stories. One camper highlighted that, "The cabin leaders for the 'gay camps', they were all queer. There was one night where we could just ask them a bunch of questions. They could choose not to answer, but that was really cool [to] see people at different ages sharing our experiences." What specifically stood out for this young person was the fact that it was older 2SLGBTQIA+ adults validating something that they, as a youth, had experienced. This practice of intergenerational storytelling was affirming because it helped campers feel seen by their counselors while also creating space for further inquiry and understanding about different 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences. Representation in this way led to deeper connections, and helped reinforce that campers were not alone in the things they faced in their everyday lives.



"[My child's] counselor last year was non-binary.. and we're like, finally!, it's not just you and your sibling. So just for them to be able to see some other folks modeling a different experience I think was really valuable and made us want to come back.."

*Parent of a
2SLGBTQIA+ camper*

This had implications beyond just connecting with others at camp for a week because youth took the lessons they learned home. One youth mentioned that having representation at camp impacted the way they viewed their own future, and they shared, "For the cabin leaders and unit leaders of gay camp, it was enough to just be themselves and show us that you do grow up, and you can live with yourself." For young people who don't see themselves or their community represented often, envisioning a future, especially a future where they can be their authentic selves, is challenging. Having connections with 2SLGBTQIA+ adults at camp generated a sense of hope for youth that they could make it to adulthood without having to sacrifice their core identities. Whether it was having flags to honor different identities or having staff who were invited to share their individual identities through stories, representation at camp offered an affirmation of campers' identities, a sense of acceptance and safety, and a path forward for them to envision a future for themselves.

GENDER-NEUTRAL SPACES

Youth and parents consistently mentioned two main areas of camp that were gender-neutral: cabins and bathrooms. Both of these spaces offered freedom, with gender-neutral cabins opening the door for more authentic friendships, and gender-neutral bathrooms liberating youth from having to choose to identify with one gender or another when taking care of their needs. The only negative sentiments that were shared in regard to gender-neutral spaces were that they weren't available every week of camp.

Campers shared enthusiasm for the gender-neutral cabins and the opportunities they created at camp. They highlighted how the non-gendered sleeping arrangements created space for greater connection with others. Typically, youth talked about being uncomfortable in single gender spaces before they talked about the benefits of living in non-gendered spaces. When asked what it was like staying in a gender-neutral cabin, a camper shared,

“ [being non-binary in a gendered cabin is hard] because of the same reasons school sports are hard. If you are in a cabin with typically a group of girls, people are going to assume that you are a girl" By contrast, [When I stayed in a gender-neutral cabin], "It definitely felt a lot better...the big difference was that people didn't really assume [my gender].

It was a seemingly universal assertion by the campers in the focus groups that being in binary environments was strict and isolating, and they had to do more work to simply be in that space. It seemed harder for youth to connect with other people when one of the primary assumptions others made about them was wrong. What was profound, however, was that when camp offered an option to stay in gender-neutral cabins, and created space for a multi-gender group of youth to come together, those spaces generated more openness between campers and increased peer-to-peer relationship building. A camper cherished this opportunity for connection, saying, "It felt nice to be in a cabin that was of everyone because then I could go out and meet everyone. And I even did reach out and make friends outside the cabin because we were all just people. It wasn't quite about sticking with my gendered group." Because the "boy", "girl" restrictions were removed, youth felt freer to make friends and socialize with others in an authentic way. There was a distinct theme of being with everyone, meeting everyone, etc. More connections happened because the cabin housing structures allowed campers to get to know one another regardless of their gender identity or expression. This structure removed the assumption of gender within or between cabin groups, improving the conditions for friendships to form.

Campers also shared an appreciation for the freedom the gender-neutral bathrooms offered. The main word that surfaced as youth shared their experiences with the bathrooms was "comfortable".

This particular reference to comfort was not in regard to the quality of the facility. It was about the relief from having to consider multiple factors, such as which gendered side to use, in order to access a bathroom at all. As one youth shared,

More connections happened because the cabin housing structures allowed campers to get to know one another regardless of their gender identity or expression. This structure removed the assumption of gender within or between cabin groups, improving the conditions for friendships to form.



The gender markers on the restroom signs and shower houses being covered up was really, really nice. Because I have always, even before I knew I was trans, there's always anxiety walking into a restroom and looking at the gender marker. With the weight of fitting into one box or another...I much prefer a gender-neutral restroom.

When camp had gender-neutral bathrooms, it eliminated some of the calculations and worries youth had to go through when considering when and how to use a public restroom. The concept of not having to choose, but rather having the opportunity to simply use a restroom when it was open or available, was instrumental in creating an affirming and accepting environment. Another camper shared, "With non-gendered bathrooms and activities, camp felt very welcoming." The bathroom structure contributed to the overall camp experience, because youth could focus on being present in the moment rather than on the fears that would amass around gendered bathrooms. Put simply, gender-neutral bathrooms were more accessible and contributed to the enjoyment of camp.

This appreciation for gender-neutral cabins and bathrooms was echoed by the parents, who focused more on the ability to access and attend camp, rather than the experience of actually being at camp. One parent shared that having a gender-neutral cabin option at camp was a,



tipping point because [my child has] been non-binary and been transparent about that since second grade. Particularly [with] kids that age like, they have felt sort of isolated. They experienced a lot of school bullying around [being gender non-binary]. They were like, 'I do not want to just spend another few days with a bunch of dudes in a cabin' and really didn't want to do that. And that selling point was that we were able to have them have a different and more inclusive experience.

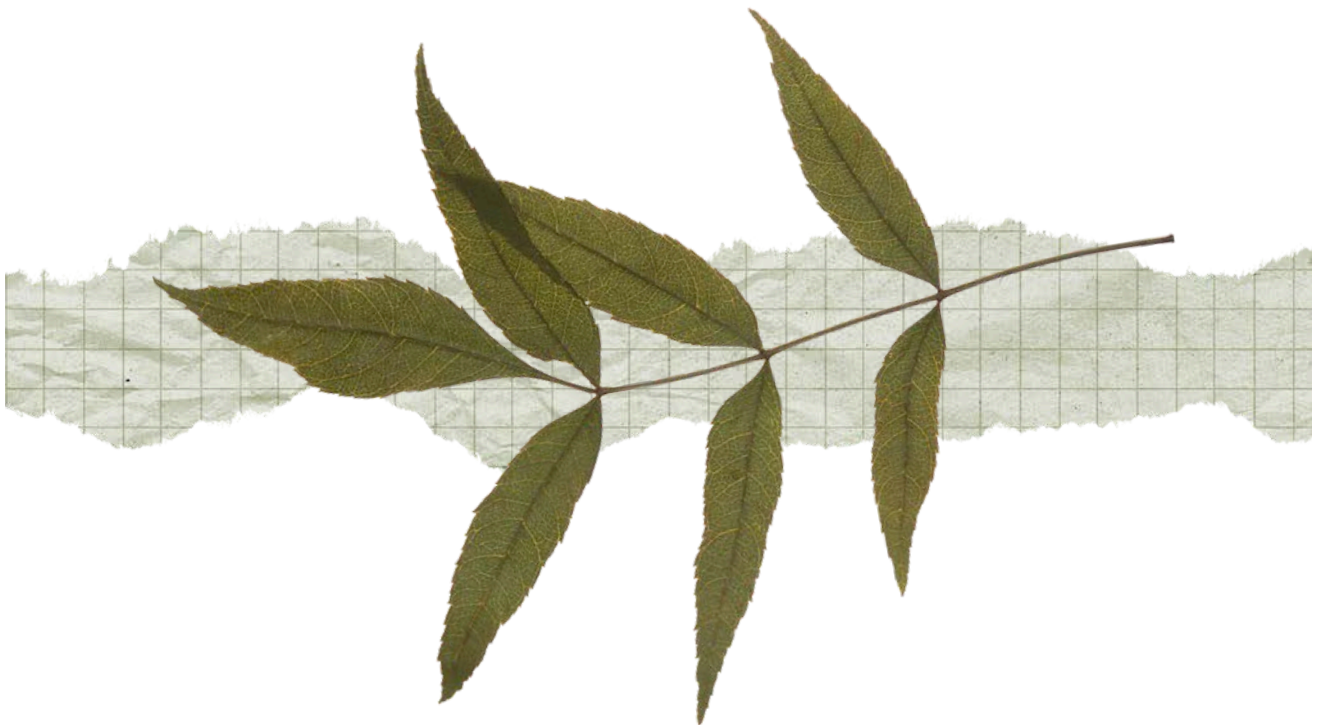
For this camper, spending a week in a single-gender cabin that did not match their gender identity was a reason not to attend camp. Having the option to choose a more inclusive space encouraged this camper, and their family, to consider attending. This concept, choosing to go to camp because the environment is gender-affirming, came up in other parent comments as well. One



parent shared that her child typically attends two different camps each year, but said,

“ The other camp actually just kind of became a bust for us this year. Part of it is actually that there was greater comfort at [the Camp Fire camp], a lot more out trans-identified, non-binary-identified... and bathrooms was like not a big deal. And at this other camp... there's a dividing line, there's a driveway or some path, between the boys' side and the girls' side. Much more traditional. It just looked more traditional. And [my child] just said, I just want to do [the Camp Fire camp] this year. So that was the idea. And in the past, they have been absolutely great about the gender stuff.

This family chose the Camp Fire camp over another camp in part because of their campers' desire to be in a space that didn't divide boys and girls, and a need to be at a camp where structural things like bathrooms were less complicated to use. While youth focused on how gender-neutral spaces influenced their personal experiences once they got to camp, parents focused on how these spaces fit into the checklists they go through before having their children arrive at camp. These aspects of camp became deciding factors for families of gender non-binary and gender expansive young people because they impacted their child's camp participation, including but not limited to making friends and taking care of personal hygiene. In both instances, having the option to use gender-neutral cabins and bathrooms created a more comfortable experience for both campers and their families.

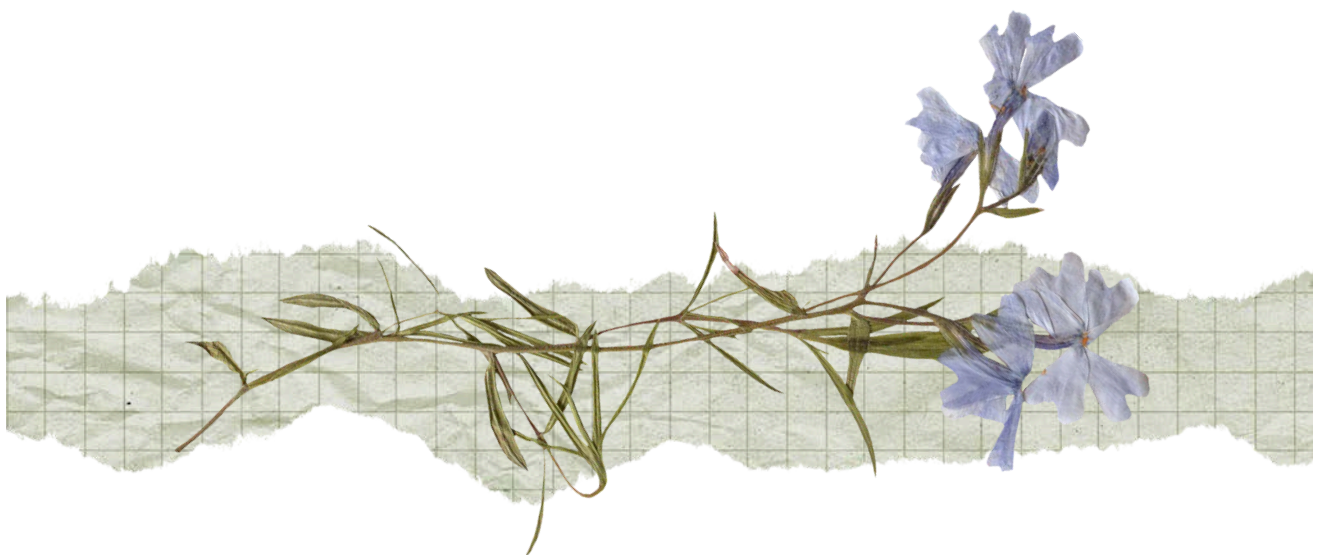


A BRIEF NOTE ON SUPERVISION

It's important to note that, in general, camps that implemented gender-neutral cabins and restrooms also had specific child safety training and supervision rules surrounding the usage of those structures. Campers and their parents never mentioned this, which is interesting to note in and of itself. Their main focus was on the existence of the spaces. It may be worth further exploration to determine the impact of the adult supervision surrounding the usage of gender-neutral cabins and bathrooms.

NEED FOR INTEGRATING PRACTICES IN LEADERSHIP WEEKS OF CAMP

The practice of having gender-neutral cabins and bathrooms wasn't consistent across all aspects of camp. Youth shared that specific leadership tracks or weeks of camp didn't include the gender-neutral cabin option, with one youth explaining, "I have a friend... and they said they really would have preferred to have been in a gender-neutral cabin, because leadership focus is still gendered... they said that they felt much more comfortable [at "gay camp"] than in leadership focus because all the cabins were gender-neutral... And so just from their experience, it did impact it, because they said they felt more like an outcast. So it just kind of dampened their experience." Camps have an opportunity to examine all aspects of camp for gendered spaces and create more accessible housing and bathroom options for youth who seek to become counselors.



ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility came up in a myriad of ways throughout young people's stories of camp, as well as parent and caregiver narratives. We specifically noticed participants mention access related to health and hygiene, physical and cognitive disability, mental health, and the geographic access to the camp property itself. This section of the report will highlight the ways in which Camp Fire met the needs of young people as well as some areas for growth to better meet the needs of young people in the future.

PHYSICAL HEALTH & HYGIENE

The factors that surfaced in the data related to managing camper health and hygiene included monitoring dietary restrictions, taking medication, binding, menstruation, showering, and using the bathrooms.

In the instances of monitoring dietary restrictions and taking medication, having supportive staff who understood the campers' needs created a sense of safety for both parents and youth. One parent shared that her child has a gluten allergy, and after finding Camp Fire's gluten-free camp, which was the same facility that offered "gay camp," she talked to the staff and said, "They just made me feel so good about what they would be doing." Cooks at camp, although not considered direct service staff, often do interact with campers and play a crucial role in ensuring youth with dietary restrictions are comfortable. One youth shared how positive their experience was after telling the cooks they were pescetarian, saying, "The cooks were so, so, so, nice. They were like, "why don't you tell us sooner?" And so after a while, I just got the fish options and it was awesome. I felt respected." It's important for youth to have open communication with staff, so they can share what they need while being away from home.

Nurses also play a critical support role at camp. One parent shared, "They just made me feel so good about what they would be doing... that they would have a nurse on site, because my daughter also has to take medicine every single morning." Having a trained professional dedicated to ensuring medication is taken while youth are at camp is important, particularly for youth experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression. When medical staff are trained properly, it can make some parents feel more comfortable sending their young person to camp. When support staff do not understand campers needs, it can upend that sense of safety for parents. One parent shared that her child did not take their medication because they resisted, and staff didn't know what to do in the situation. It greatly impacted her child's ability to participate in camp activities, and she shared, "Of course a kid off of Prozac for two days, yeah, it's gonna happen."

And of course, a kid off of stimulants for ADHD.” Youth at camp are focused on participating in camp, and a trained nurse can help maintain consistency in taking medications.

When medical staff are trained properly, it can make some parents feel more comfortable sending their young person to camp.

Both cooks and nurses play a role in the camp experience and in ensuring that young people’s health needs are carefully considered. How staff are equipped and trained to meet the needs of youth when it comes to their health impacts the comfort in which youth can participate in camp. Young people’s camp experiences can be made better if staff take into account their various dietary and medication needs and also have open communication with campers.

How staff are equipped and trained to meet the needs of youth when it comes to their health impacts the comfort in which youth can participate in camp.

Personal hygiene needs that surfaced in the data revolved around bathrooms, showers, and binders. When it came to accessing the bathrooms or showers, an issue of physical privacy arose. Multiple parents shared that their children did not shower the entire week of camp. One commented that this may be attributed to the privacy her child needed when using facilities, saying, “I didn’t know, if you need your personal space to be with your own body, if there is the space to do that.” This indicates that the practices surrounding the use of bathrooms and showers could be explored further to determine the amount of privacy campers need when taking care of their physical hygiene. Another parent shared that her child had an accident while at camp and never asked for help to clean up their sleeping bag. She said, “They don’t even like using the bathroom, they won’t use public bathrooms if they can avoid it, which is one of the reasons they every once in a while have a little bit of an accident.” Using a populated, public space for individual health and hygiene needs can be anxiety-inducing, and some parents shared that their children just opted out of showering altogether. The specific hygiene practice of youth handling periods while at camp also came up, and a parent shared that their child was annoyed that the gender-neutral bathrooms didn’t include trash

cans for period product disposal. It is an immensely private situation when a young person needs to dispose of products discreetly, particularly for trans* and gender non-binary youth who experience higher rates of menstrual-related dysphoria.⁷ Young people said very little in terms of the practices surrounding bathroom and shower usage, but consistently shared their enthusiasm for the existence of gender-neutral bathrooms at camp. One youth shared, “Everyone was talking about the bathrooms being gender-neutral making it more comfortable to be there.” So while there is potential for more exploration around the practices surrounding gender-neutral showers and bathrooms, the mere existence of the space was greatly appreciated by the campers.



⁷Menstrual-related dysphoria: General sense of unease, dissatisfaction, or discomfort directly related to menstrual cycles, or lack of menstruation. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1083318822000377>.



Some counselors were cognizant of the needs of their campers, and created space and time for youth to take care of their personal hygiene needs. Having the option to discuss binder breaks openly was considered healthy by a camper.

Youth were more interested in discussing practices surrounding binder care at camp. See the footnote for an explanation of binding and binding breaks.⁸ One youth shared, “My counselor would often give time for those of us who use binders to take a binder break before going on a long hike or walk. I liked how that wasn’t looked over.” This sentiment was reiterated by other youth, with one saying camp was open about binder breaks and that it was healthy. Another camper shared that their cabin didn’t stop specifically for binder breaks, but were allowed to take hiking breaks as needed. Some counselors were cognizant of the needs of their campers, and created space and time for youth to take care of their personal hygiene needs. Having the option to discuss binder breaks openly was considered healthy by a camper. Camps could consider being intentional about training staff on how to implement binder breaks to ensure that all counselors are prepared to consistently manage the practice safely and in a way that allows youth privacy. Ensuring youth have freedom to manage physical health and hygiene privately requires a specific examination of camp practices related to showering, going to the bathroom, and taking binder breaks.



⁸*Binding: is usually the act of compressing or displacing breast tissue to create a more masculine chest. This is done with the use of tight fitting undershirts of sports bras, post-surgical compression vests, cloth bandages, tape, or compression shirts and vests known as “binders” that are made specifically for that purpose.*

Binding Breaks: Binding can be uncomfortable, especially over long periods of time or when being active. Binding and tucking breaks are intentionally scheduled time where additional privacy is afforded so that binding garments can be removed, and the wearer can experience some relief from physical discomfort. For more on binder care, see here: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/safe-chest-binding/>

DISABILITY

Focus group participants mentioned a wide range of disabilities, including ADHD, Autism, physical disability, language processing/expression, sensory sensitivities, misophonia, having IEPs, etc. Many young people talked about neurodivergence⁹ which is often experienced as a disability. Camp can be an overwhelming place with lots of sensory components and pressure to participate in activities. According to focus group participants, camp can meet the needs of campers by providing opportunities for them to voice needs and distance themselves from any overwhelming aspects of camp when needed (including both sensory and situational aspects).

As long as the camper was able to voice their needs and let folks know when something wasn't working, they often were accommodated.



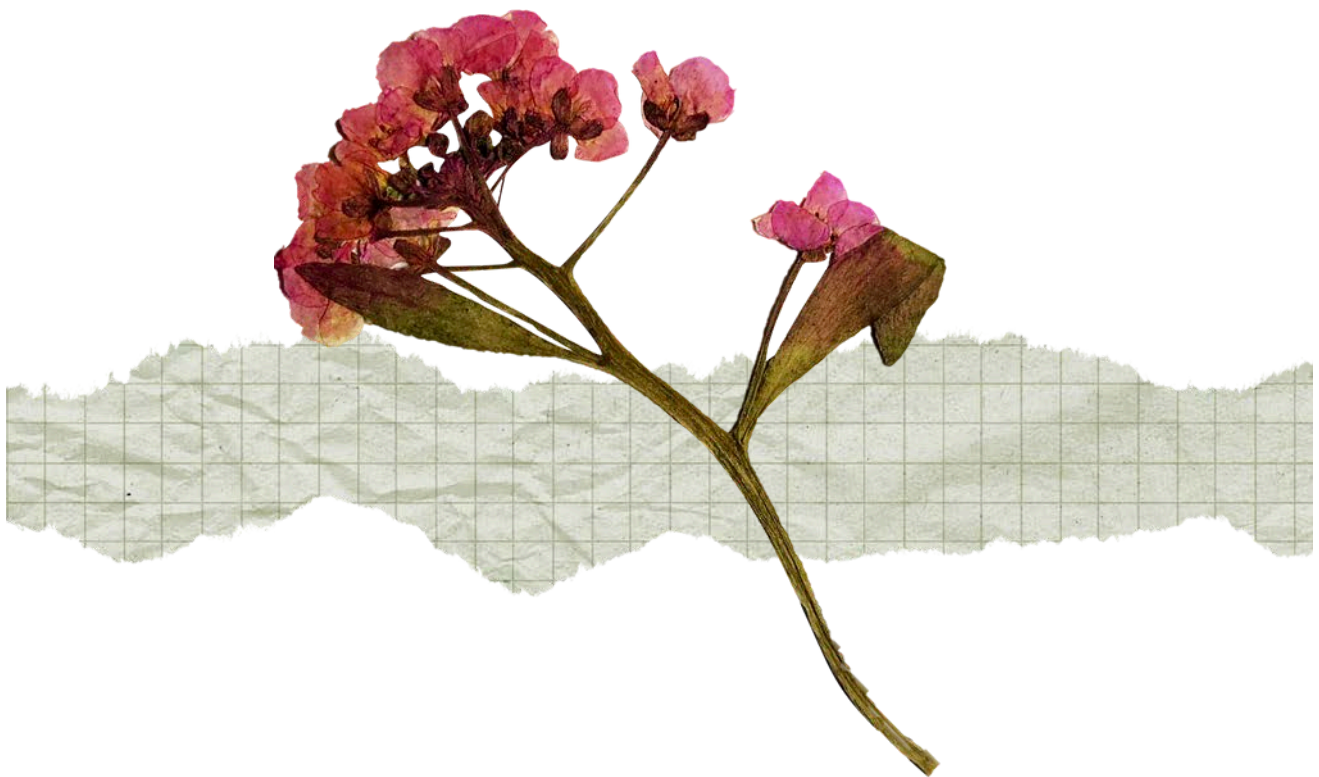
One young person shared they had misophonia, a disorder which causes extreme sensitivity to sounds. On their first day at the dining hall, they shared, "I was able to say on the first day 'I need to sit at the end of the table so that I'm not sitting directly next to those sounds.'" They were able to voice their needs and move away from others in order to safely experience dining with their group. Another youth shared, "I have OCD, I've been diagnosed by a doctor, and sometimes that just becomes a little much for people. But everyone in leadership focus was super understanding. And they knew it's okay, if there's something that we're doing, just let us know, and we'll do our best to fix it." As long as the camper was able to voice their needs and let folks know when something wasn't working, they often were accommodated. However, not all youth could so easily voice their needs. One parent shared that their child had language processing delays in addition to other disabilities. The camp called home to figure out adaptations in order to meet the needs of the young person. The parent recommended just letting her child be, and not making them do things they didn't want to do (such as playing GaGa ball or speaking in front of a larger group). The leadership track of camp, which was for teenagers who were interested in becoming counselors, was highlighted as one of the more

inaccessible aspects, as it was built with one type of youth leader in mind who had specific cognitive and physical abilities. Two questions that arise are – how can youth with disabilities who can't voice their needs be asked what they need in a way that accommodates them? How can they be supported as leaders at camp?

Another theme arose in the data around youth relating to others at camp. One youth who identified as neurodivergent mentioned, "I know one of the counselors had a very happy, bouncy energy...it felt like my energy was matched, at least with the weird things that came out of my brain." Another young person who identified as having ADHD and social anxiety shared, "The

⁹Neurodivergence: A term referring to people whose brains take in and process information differently than "typical" brains. Being neurodiverse is not a mental health issue, but is often experienced as a disability.

people around me could either relate to that or would do their best to understand and accommodate me.” While there was not enough evidence in the data to conclude that this level of community around disability at camp, what did start to surface in the data was an indication that some social connections were weaved together by young people sharing aspects of their neurodivergent experiences with each other. As other research shows, there are high rates of neurodivergence in gender non-binary and gender expansive communities. Our research aligned with these findings, with many gender non-binary and gender expansive campers identifying as having neurodivergence. This signals an area of potential training and support for camp and youth development professionals.



MENTAL HEALTH

In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General declared children’s mental health a national crisis and released a Youth Mental Health advisory.¹⁰ We paid particular attention to the ways in which mental health showed up in the data, which included mentions of social anxiety, panic attacks, breakdowns, depression, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed. We also noticed that youth with gender dysphoria could experience an increase in that feeling when there was a lack of privacy. As a rule, having at least some level of privacy mattered a great deal to youth across the board.

The power of having a calm adult notice and intervene whenever youth were struggling was particularly emphasized.



The data indicates that there is a need for mental health training to prepare adults at camp to respond to situations where campers experience high levels of anxiety or overwhelm.

Focus group participants mentioned anxiety and general feelings of overwhelm at camp. Many youth shared that they anticipated these feelings and didn’t find them surprising because they struggle with them often outside of camp. One youth highlighted just how integrated struggles with mental health are in their life, saying “I have a panic attack every couple of weeks at home, so I pretty much just accept it’s going to happen at some point at camp because it’s a lot of sensory stuff.” Other youth shared similar sentiments in regard to consistent anxiety, with one saying, “I’m not sure there’s a way to completely get rid of the feeling of just being anxious in any sort of space.” Our data confirms many of the findings in the Surgeon General’s advisory. Youth shared that one of the ways they felt safer during more difficult moments at camp was when a trained staff person was there. The power of having a calm adult notice and intervene whenever youth were struggling was particularly emphasized in one camper’s story, and they shared, “I had a breakdown the second week last year during the overnight but a staff member stayed with me and helped me calm down. He spoke with me and helped me feel better and safer.” When staff were equipped to support young people through difficult moments, it offered a sense of relief for some campers. There was a specific focus on the capacity of counselors in particular to handle situations. A parent shared matter-of-factly that, “Some kids get overwhelmed, and it really requires a counselor.” The data indicates that there is a need for mental health training to prepare adults at camp to respond to situations where campers experience high levels of anxiety or overwhelm.

Another theme that arose in the data related to mental health was gender dysphoria.¹¹ There was a

¹⁰<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

¹¹Dysphoria: General sense of unease, dissatisfaction, or discomfort. Can escalate to anxiety and panic in some situations.

Gender Dysphoria: Dysphoria directly related to one’s gender identity, expression, or how their gender is perceived by others.

sensitivity to campers allowing their bodies to be uncovered around other people, whether it be while taking a binder break in a group, showering in the public showers, or while swimming at the pool in front of other people. These types of instances were particularly anxiety-inducing. One camper shared that on an overnight trip, where they spent one night in the woods with other cabin groups, “one of the kids in my cabin had to take a binder break, but he really didn't want to because, I mean, it was overnight. It wasn't just alone in the cabin, it was with a lot of other kids. And so he ended up sleeping in the medicine room. I think he had a panic attack because of it.” The lack of privacy available in the overnight camp led to an increased sense of panic for the young person, who after hiking up to the camp spot likely required a binder break for health reasons. A parent shared how dysphoria and binding intersected for their child, saying, “It has become very clear that they've got some body dysphoria and they don't want to ever take their binder off. And they have these very private moments, that I'm not sure what it looks like in their day to day when they're in that living environment.” Camp creates new situations that gender non-binary and gender expansive youth must navigate for themselves, and this can be challenging when they are around lots of other people.

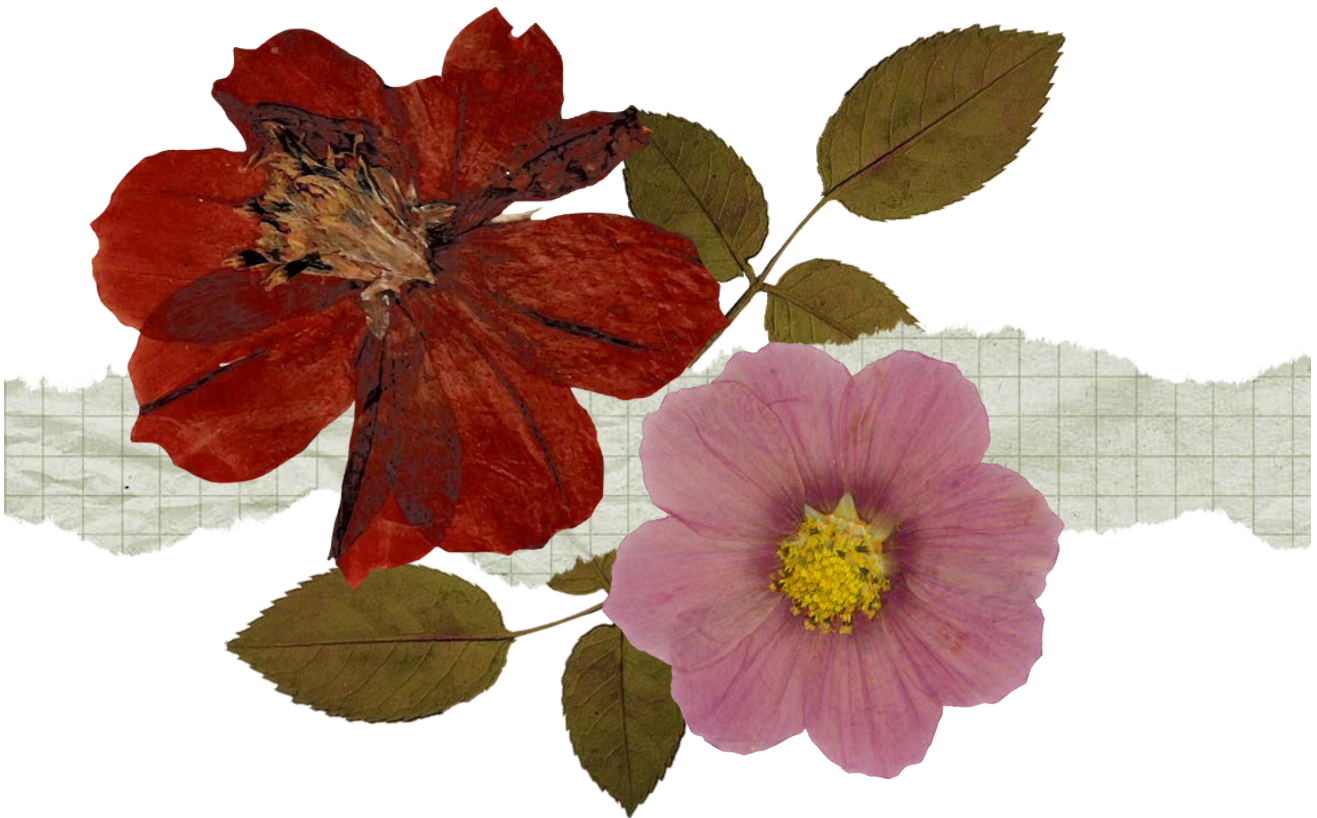
Camp Fire has observed some success with everyone wearing the same shirt or top for swim time. One camp, which is not included in this study but that has made efforts to be gender affirming, implemented a non-gendered swim shirt policy where all campers were required to wear the same thing. The camp director of that overnight camp noticed that having a uniform garb for youth - such as a swim shirt - can increase belonging at camp. The question remains whether or not that would hold true across the board in other camps.

Swim time arose as an instance where there was limited privacy, and some campers shared that they didn't go in water at all because it was uncomfortable for them. Campers shared feelings of fear around part of their body being visible, with one youth saying, “I had really bad dysphoria¹² on my legs, and so I was kind of scared to wear swim shorts in the pool. And I was also wearing a button-up top, and I was just nervous.” The idea of other youth looking at them created feelings of anxiety. This young person went on to say that, despite the fear and dysphoria they felt, what made pool time better was that “Nobody ever commented anything. And no one's eyes were anywhere other than they should be. And it was really great pool time because, you know, water exposes everything and everyone was focusing on playing, not other people.” Campers focusing on the activity, rather than on each other, created a more comfortable environment for this young person.



¹² *Body Dysphoria: Dysphoria directly related to one's body. This may be in relation to someone's size, shape, skin-tone, or specific body part or characteristic.*

Gender non-binary and gender expansive youth experience gender dysphoria in unique ways, but in our data we found that there were higher instances of gender dysphoria when activities involved large groups where clothing changes or exposure was included, such as binder breaks on an overnight trip, showering, or swimming. Camps can explore ways to increase privacy for campers and ways to create safe spaces for gender non-binary and gender expansive youth to participate in activities.



GEOGRAPHIC ACCESS TO CAMP EXPERIENCES

Camp design was considered a motivating factor for families seeking an affirming camp experience, and in one case, camp being gender-affirming overrode geographic accessibility and ease of attending camp.

One youth traveled 14 hours to camp, and shared that, “there's not many camps like this one anywhere near Alabama.” For this camper, the gender-affirming aspects of camp were specifically impactful. They explained during the youth focus group, “I live in like ‘south south’ Alabama, where everything is like ‘ehmehmehme’ [grumbling sound]... especially about gender. And so it was a big deal to be able to go with whichever bathroom I wanted to.” For this camper, and their family, finding a camp that offered a gender affirming experience was an important part of their decision making process, even if they had to drive far. The parent of this camper shared,



[My child] read a book about an LGBTQ summer camp [a couple years ago], and she thought it was just the most amazing thing ever. [And after she read this book,] she really wanted to find a camp like that. So I told her that I would do my best. I searched online for what felt like forever. And all the camps were just so expensive and far away. And we just weren't sure how we were going to make it happen. And then, when we had kind of given up, I was like, ‘You know what, let's look one more time.’ And I found this camp and she will go, you know, forever from now on.

The American Camp Association’s five-year National Impact Study,¹³ which culminated in 2022, identified five main “camp fit factors” including: Logistics/Cost, Program Quality, Child Fit, Institutional Ties, and Social Connection. Camp proximity to home and the location of camp were highlighted under “logistics and cost” as core drivers for camp attendance because parents often use these factors to determine if their child should go to camp.

In this family’s case, those factors were present, but it was ultimately determined that a camp 14 hours away was worth it. The parent shared just how impactful the experience was for their child by saying, “To have this space for them to go away from some of the conservative situations that we experience a lot in this area.

That was the first time for them to be in a place like that.” Camp can create some powerful and affirming experiences when youth are able to access them. There is opportunity to explore how gender-affirming factors affect other “camp fit” factors and the role camp acceptance and affirmation of gender non-binary and gender expansive youth plays in parent motivations to send their youth to camp.

¹³<https://acacamps.app.box.com/s/nj81bl4ogog2vcibvffz9ajm4iiz51gh>

DISCUSSION

LISTENING TO YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS

Young people and their caregivers told us that the following practices were instrumental in creating space for identity exploration. These practices are consistent with other research findings that clearly show gender non-binary and gender expansive young people benefit from supportive adults and communities¹⁴

- Setting a tone of open-mindedness, instead of judgment, at camp
- Offering gender-neutral cabin options
- Having gender-neutral bathrooms
- Respecting people’s names and pronouns and intentionally providing a space for young people to say “this is who I am and what I would like to be called.”
- Having an avenue for youth to communicate with their counselors to accommodate a wide range of camper needs
- Having diverse staff who hold a wealth of knowledge and lived experiences
- Creating time for community building and connection with 2SLGBTQIA+ adults at camp
 - We noticed in some instances this generated a sense of hope for youth that they could make it to adulthood without having to sacrifice their core identities
- Training staff on the mental and physical needs of young people, paying particular attention to the health and hygiene needs of gender non-binary and gender expansive youth
- Ensuring privacy for all young people, particularly when they need to take care of their health and hygiene needs

In these ways, camps can expand access to programs, expand inclusion, and expand the ability for young people to feel like they can belong. These practices create space for identity exploration.



¹⁴<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/acceptance-from-adults-is-associated-with-lower-rates-of-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-young-people-sep-2023/>

LIMITATIONS IN THE DATA

We were able to glean an immense amount of information from talking to young people and their caregivers; however, we had a small sample size of participants and were only able to include two Camp Fire affiliates in the study. This led to some limitations in our data.

In terms of race, our sample size was made up of predominantly white youth and caregivers. The few young people of color we talked to self-identified in their responses and were some of the only participants who talked about race and/or ethnicity. We did not engage many campers who were assigned male at birth, meaning some topics related to that lived experience did not surface in the data (e.g. mentions of tucking). Further research would benefit from including a more diverse network of campers and camps in order to better understand the impact of identity-affirming practices at camp.

Of the campers we interviewed, all of their parents allowed them to participate in a 2SLGBTQIA+ affinity week of camp and were open to participation in this study to continue talking about their experiences at camp. Additional studies could explore how youth who do not have supportive parents or caregivers, or who cannot attend an openly inclusive camp, could be impacted by an inclusive camp experience.

Lastly, we tried to include staff members in this study, but it ultimately became too difficult to coordinate end-of-summer schedules as staff returned home or back to college. Understanding the staff perspective would have helped create a more robust understanding of affirming practices in connection to camp training and supervisor support.



LOOKING AHEAD

In order to improve collective understanding of how programs can empower youth to explore their own identities, researchers must continue to ask young people directly. The qualitative analysis from this study demonstrates that there is a great opportunity for continued research on the impact of gender-affirming practices on young people.

In the vein of understanding what makes campers more comfortable being themselves at camp, researchers could continue to study the issue of privacy that arose in the data. The question could be asked “How do privacy breaks during overnight camp or during hikes impact all young people’s ability to feel more comfortable?” Imagine the possibilities if everyone had access to intentionally created space and time to take care of their private needs during camp. (i.e. time to privately take off multiple layers of clothing or change into something more comfortable as days get hot in the afternoons, having time for binding breaks, allowing privacy to readjust or change menstrual pads or tampons, offering down time for youth to sit and reflect privately, etc.)

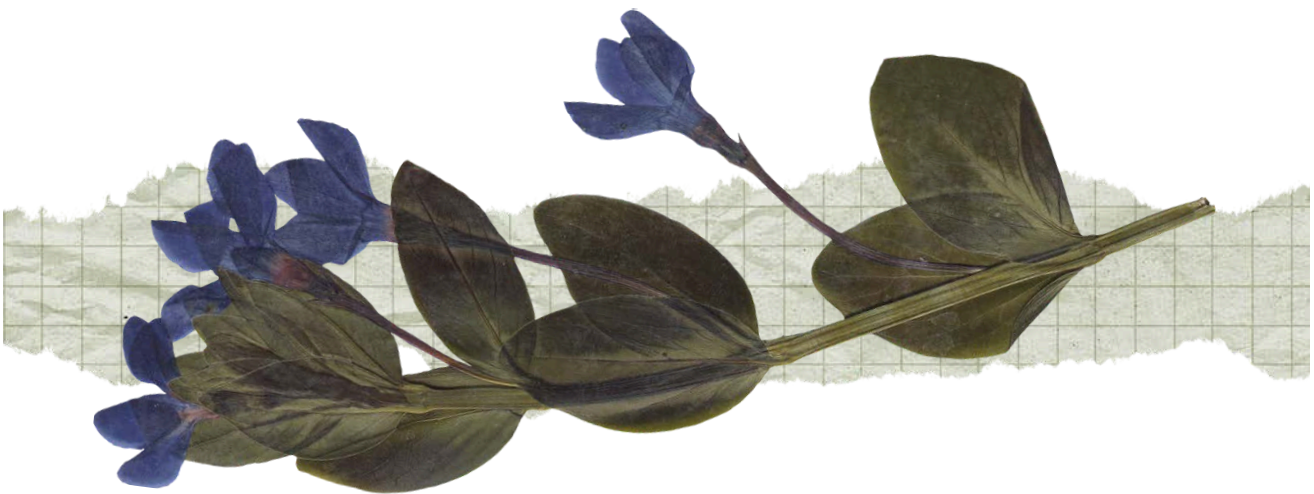
There is also opportunity to better understand how nature and games uniquely combine at camp to expand possibilities for youth who identify as gender non-binary or gender expansive to escape from the burdens of worrying about how their bodies or gender expressions are being perceived by others. This was indicated in our data, but the question could still be asked, “How else does camp uniquely create conditions for youth who are historically excluded to experience pleasure and joy?”

We noticed a saturation point around sense of relief, as many campers spoke to experiencing relief during their time at camp. This finding could be explored over time to better understand what an affirming experience can mean as gender non-binary and gender expansive youth shift into adulthood. Particular attention could be paid to better understanding the community-building that happens at camp, and researchers could study the ways that an inclusive camp community could potentially mitigate the harm of psychological threats against 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

One last note on further research. While this study took place through the lens of gender, we recognized that young people can hold many intersectional identities. In the preparations for the study, we decided to include this question, “Each of us carries several identities along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and more. To what extent do you feel you could express your personal identities freely at camp?” With this brief sentence, we gleaned helpful information from our participants to better understand their full camp experience. In further research, it will be imperative to recognize that young people have a multitude of identities that intersect. We must hold space for that reality in research.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report indicate that when camps invest time and training into building a team and program that holds space for gender non-binary and gender expansive youth, it creates an environment where youth can simply be. There is great hope in that! Youth can experience belonging at camp and access a shared community that accepts them. They can receive relief and experience the pleasure of being outdoors and connecting with other young people through play. These are all things young people need in order to thrive. The key is to be knowledgeable about young people's needs, and make sure that those needs get met. Because when they do, young people have the opportunity to exist in the fullness of their potential and promise.



GLOSSARY

We intend this glossary to be used as something to help you understand the responses from participants.

- SEX:** Sex refers to physical reproductive anatomy, such as penis or vagina. Historically used to assign gender at birth based on the physical characteristics of a newborn's body.
- GENDER:** Refers to the social aspects of femininity and masculinity.
- IDENTITY:** One's internal sense of being. Identities are often based on or influenced by our lived and cultural experiences.
- 2SLGBTQIA+:** An acronym used to describe identities of gender and sexual variance. 2SLGBTQ+ is an umbrella term that broadly describes various identities but also refers to the community of acceptance and support of people with similar lived experience. You may see variations of this acronym in varying order and or with more or fewer letters: LGBTQ, 2SLGBTQIA+, LGBTQ2S+
- 2S:** 2 or 2S if for Two Spirit. Two Spirit refers to Native American/Alaska Native lesbian, gay, bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals. "Two Spirit" has a different meaning in different communities but is reserved for people holding both LGBTQ+ and Native identities.
- L:** L is for lesbian. "Lesbian" typically refers to someone who identifies as female, and is primarily (though not necessarily exclusively) romantically or sexually attracted to other female identified people. The word lesbian denotes both the gender AND sexuality of the person using the term. It tells you that they identify as a woman, and that they are primarily attracted to or interested in relationships with other women.
- G:** G is for Gay. Gay, while historically used as an umbrella term for the 2SLGBTQ+ community, also typically describes a male-identified person who is primarily romantically or sexually attracted to another male-identified person. While gay has been used in the past to describe the entire 2SLGBTQ+ community, it is not used that
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broadly in most current contexts. Many folks within the 2SLGBTQ+ community have moved away from using it that way in an effort to de-center men, and more equitably represent the entire community.

- B:** B is for bisexual. Unlike Gay or Lesbian, the word bisexual ONLY refers to someone's sexuality, and does not tell you their gender identity. Bisexual refers to folks who find more than one type of person attractive. Bisexuality can look a lot of different ways, and does not mean that someone is equally attracted to both men, women, or people of other genders. The prefix "bi" mean two, suggesting that someone is attracted to two or more different types of people. The word bisexual is often used interchangeably with pansexual. The prefix "pan" means all, encompassing more than two strict gender identities. Pansexuality is a broader term for folks who are attracted to a range of people, emphasizing that gender plays a small or insignificant role in their attraction to individuals.
- T:** T is for Transgender. Transgender does NOT refer in any way to sexual orientation. Transgender (sometimes abbreviated trans*) describes a range of experiences in which a person does not feel congruence with the sex they were assigned at birth. Not all transgender people experience this incongruence in the same ways. Not all transgender people desire social or medical transition. Social transition is changing one's expression through hair, names, pronouns, etc., while medical transition often consists of hormone therapy or surgeries.
- Q:** Q is for Queer. "Queer" has historically been used as a derogatory term and a weapon against 2SLGBTQ+ people. However; during the 1990s and the HIV and AIDS epidemic, a group of activists reclaimed the word. Originally meaning "different, quirky, unique" many people have reclaimed "queer" as their personal identifier not only to reclaim the word's power, but as a way to identify themselves as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community without having to divulge the specifics of their gender, sex, sexual and/or romantic attraction like many other identifiers.

To find out more about the reclamation of the word, check out this article https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/queer.php

I: I is for intersex. "Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types—for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of her cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY" -Definition from [Intersex Society of North America](#)

A: A is for Asexual or Agender

Asexual refers to people who may not experience sexual attraction, or experience attraction differently. This does not mean that asexual folks will not ever experience sexual attraction or engage in sexual activity, it simply means they experience it differently or do not prioritize sex and sexual attraction.

Agender refers to individuals who do not subscribe to gender norms or roles, and may identify as neither male or female. Some similar identities that reject the rigidity of "male" and "female" gender roles and labels are genderqueer, non-binary, gender-fluid, androgynous.

+ The plus sign at the end of 2SLGBTQ+ is there to signify a very wide and ever-expanding list of identities. As access to different communities and identities grows, so does our understanding of ourselves and the experiences we share. Like all language, the language of 2SLGBTQ+ identities continues to grow and expand. The plus sign signifies identities beyond 2SLGBTQ and those for which language does not exist to describe yet.

Check out this list for more identities and other language used to describe 2SLGBTQ+ experiences!

<https://itgetsbetter.org/blog/lesson/glossary/>

I: **An important note on identities: All of the identifiers within 2SLGBTQIA+ are SELF identifiers. Every person has their own understanding and interpretation of the words they use to describe themselves. None of these identifiers should be placed upon others, but rather shared from a person to describe themselves.

PRONOUNS: Merriam-Webster defines a pronoun as “any of a small set of words in a language that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases and whose referents are named or understood in the context.” Personal pronouns are the words an individual uses or would like others to use when referring to them in the third person, and in many languages pronouns also carry gender association. Some common pronouns are he/him/his, often referred to as “masculine pronouns,” she/her/hers, referred to as “feminine pronouns,” or they/them/theirs, a neutral pronouns not associated with a specific gender.

Neopronouns are simply newer, sometimes less common, personal pronouns. Neopronouns are typically used by people who do not feel like the above mentioned personal pronouns do not adequately express their gender. Some examples are: ze/hir, fae/faer, xe/xem/xir, or even it/its.

GENDER AFFIRMING: Any practice, item, act, or procedure that affirms one’s sense of gender identity. Gender-affirming medical care may look like hormone therapy. Gender-affirming clothing is clothing and sometimes medical devices that increase one’s sense of comfort and congruence with their gender identity.

QUEER: Queer, while used in the past as a slur or insult toward 2SLGBTQ+ people, has been reclaimed as an umbrella-term for 2SLGBTQ+ community, and as an individual identity. The Queer community is made up of all types of people on varying spectrums of gender identity and expression and sexual and romantic orientation. *Also see definition under 2SLGBTQ+

TRANSGENDER: Transgender (sometimes abbreviated Trans*) describes a range of experiences in which a person does not feel congruency with the sex they were assigned at birth. Not all transgender people experience this incongruency in the same ways. Not all transgender people desire social or medical transition. Social transition is changing one’s expression through hair, names, pronouns, etc. while medical transition often consists of hormone therapy or surgeries.

CISGENDER:	Cisgender is a term that refers to anyone who is not transgender. Cisgender means that a person is comfortable with and finds congruency between their body and internal identity. Cisgender simply provides information about a person's experience and is not a slur.
GENDER NON-BINARY:	An identifier used by many people who do not feel explicitly "male" or "female." Non-binary refers to those who do not subscribe to the rigid binary of only two genders.
GENDER EXPANSIVE:	Refers to identities and experiences that are beyond common understanding of binary gender based on physical sex.
GENDER QUEER:	Genderqueer is often used by people who do not identify as exclusively "male" or "female." Based on the concept of 'queer' being existing outside or "traditional" heterosexual or normative identities and experiences.
GENDER IDENTITY:	An individual's sense of their own gender.
GENDER EXPRESSION:	The way in which an individual presents their gender outwardly to the world, made up of socially constructed cues like hair, clothing, makeup, and mannerisms.
GENDER EXPLORATION:	The act of questioning one's gender identity and exploring the identifiers and experiences different from those assigned to them at birth.
ASSIGNED SEX AT BIRTH:	Assigned sex at birth is based solely on the physical, visual representation of genitalia. Doctors identify newborns as "boys" and "girls" based on the appearance of their sexual anatomy.
NEURODIVERGENCE:	A term referring to people whose brains take in and process information differently than "typical" brains. Being neurodiverse is not a mental health issue, but is often experienced as a disability. Some examples of neurodiversity are people on the autism spectrum, or those living with attention deficit or sensory processing disorders.
OCD:	Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a long-lasting disorder in which a person experiences uncontrollable and recurring thoughts (obsessions), engages in repetitive behaviors (compulsions), or both. People with OCD have time-consuming symptoms that can cause significant distress or interfere with daily life. From the National Institute of Mental Health

ADHD: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. People with ADHD experience an ongoing pattern of the following types of symptoms:

Inattention means a person may have difficulty staying on task, sustaining focus, and staying organized, and these problems are not due to defiance or lack of comprehension.

Hyperactivity means a person may seem to move about constantly, including in situations when it is not appropriate, or excessively fidgets, taps, or talks. In adults, hyperactivity may mean extreme restlessness or talking too much.

Impulsivity means a person may act without thinking or have difficulty with self-control. Impulsivity could also include a desire for immediate rewards or the inability to delay gratification. An impulsive person may interrupt others or make important decisions without considering long-term consequences.

From the [National Institute of Mental Health](#)

AUTISM: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is described as a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life. From the [National Institute of Mental Health](#)

MISOPHONIA: a condition in which one or more common sounds (such as the ticking of a clock, the hum of a fluorescent light, or the chewing or breathing of another person) cause an atypical emotional response (such as disgust, distress, panic, or anger) in the affected person hearing the sound. From [Merriam-Webster](#).

BINDING: Binding is usually the act of compressing or displacing breast tissue to create a more masculine chest. This is done with the use of tight fitting undershirts or sports bras, post-surgical compression vests, cloth bandages, tape, or compression shirts and vests known as “binders” that are made specifically for that purpose. Some people are unable to or do not wish to bind due to physical discomfort or medical conditions. People may instead

wear multiple, bulky layers in order to minimize the appearance of breasts.

TUCKING: Tucking typically refers to placement and/or compression of the groin to appear flat and/or more feminine. Tucking is typically achieved with the use of a gaff, dance belt, body tape, specialized tucking underwear, or layering under garments.

BINDING AND TUCKING BREAKS: Binding and tucking can be uncomfortable, especially over long periods of time or when being active. Binding and tucking breaks are intentionally scheduled time where additional privacy is afforded so that binding and tucking garments can be removed, and the wearer can experience some relief from physical discomfort.

PASSING: Passing refers to an individual being assumed to be of a certain identity or experience. In the context of queerness, passing can mean that an individual moves through the world without being outwardly identifiable as queer. A feminine presenting woman may “pass” as a heterosexual, cisgender woman based on stereotypes and perceived social cues, even if she is a lesbian and transgender.

This concept also exists within other identities such as people with invisible disabilities, or light-skinned people of color being assumed to be white.

COMING OUT: the process of disclosing information about one’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Coming out is not a one-time thing, but something that 2SLGBTQ+ people are expected to do throughout their lives, even when the information is not relevant. It is incredibly important to realize that coming out, or disclosing this information is very personal and can sometimes garner negative reactions and even put someone’s safety at risk. You should NEVER force anyone to come out, or share their personal information without their express consent.

DYSPHORIA: General sense of unease, dissatisfaction, or discomfort. Can escalate to anxiety and panic in some situations.

GENDER DYSPHORIA: Dysphoria directly related to one’s gender identity, expression, or how their gender is perceived by others.

MENSTRUAL-RELATED DYSPHORIA: Dysphoria directly related to menstrual cycles, or lack of menstruation.

BODY DYSPHORIA: Dysphoria directly related to one's body. This may be in relation to someone's size, shape, skin tone, or specific body part or characteristic.

DIETARY RESTRICTIONS: Dietary restrictions refer to an individual's limitations or tolerance of certain foods. Some common dietary restrictions are lactose intolerance, vegetarianism, and gluten intolerance.

FOR DEFINITIONS SPECIFIC TO DR. KIA DARLING-HAMMOND'S WORK, LOOK TO HER ARTICLE "DIMENSIONS OF THRIVING: LEARNING FROM BLACK LGBTQ+/SGL MOMENTS, SPACES AND PRACTICES".



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