

UpSpring summer 360

IMPACT REPORT Summer 2023

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Executive Summary

UpSpring Summer 360° is a long-standing summer program that seeks to support the needs of children faced with homelessness. The emphasis is on combining fun-filled activities with social-emotional and academic enrichment. Strong leadership and skilled staff work seamlessly together to provide a caring surrounding. They do so via a trauma-informed approach to individualized care. As such, UpSpring Summer 360° is a positive force for children and their families, as well as the community at large. This report was carried out by the Children's Cognitive Research lab of the University of Cincinnati. It is based on data obtained from both quantitative and qualitative measures, including frequent observations and direct interactions with the children. Findings show the camp's positive effects on children's wellbeing, both when it comes to academic readiness and social-emotional learning. Attendance was stable, speaking to the strength of the program. Our own observations were exceedingly positive as well: Children were excited to be at the camp, connecting well with teachers and staff, and actively participating in the numerous activities that were planned for them

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Photo credit: Angie Lipscomb Photography



Overview

The summer camp UpSpring Summer 360° is a multi-week program for children faced with homelessness or transient living situations. The camp took place at two locations, one serving children from the Northern Kentucky region, and the second serving children from the Greater Cincinnati region. A bus service was in place to bring children to and from the program. Enrollment was near or at capacity, with 53 children attending the Kentucky location, and 73 children attending the Cincinnati location. Children ranged in age between 5 and 12 years. Depending on their age, they were organized into three groups. There was an average of 20 students per group. The camp also utilized Junior Counselors, former campers aged 13-14, to help facilitate the program.

The duration of the camp was six weeks, running five days a week for a total of 27 days during the months of June and July. At camp, children were offered breakfast and lunch, and they participated in various enrichment activities, including off-site field trips. One part of academic enrichment focused on reading. For example, children in Group 1 read short stories, practiced letter pronunciation, and used playdoh to make letters. Children in Group 2 read book chapters and non-fiction articles, focusing on comprehension, critical thinking, and discussions. And children in Group 3 become immersed in entire chapter books and made daily journal entries.

Another part of academic enrichment was daily math practice. For about 40 minutes each day, children had the opportunity to work on tablets to practice math on the IXL app. IXL contains a comprehensive assortment of math problems on all common-core topics across all grade levels. Children got to work on math problems that helped them get ready for the next school year.

Example topics include pattern recognition, adding, subtracting, multiplication, division, fractions, and geometry. College students were paired up with children to help them find math problems that were at an appropriate skill level. College students also helped children persist despite inevitable frustrations.

In addition to academics, the camp also emphasized social-emotional development. Children were immersed in various topics related to social-emotional learning, including gratitude, respect, kindness, self-awareness, empathy and responsibility. For example, children watched and discussed YouTube read-aloud clips of stories that focused on a specific social-emotional skill. The academic enrichment also incorporated social-emotional learning. For example, for reading, the game Scrabble allowed children to practice respect and responsibility (in addition to working on spelling and literacy). And for math, children had a say in what to work on, giving them the opportunity to practice self-awareness.

Academic and emotional enrichment took place four days a week before lunch (Monday-Thursday). The afternoons of those days, as well as all-day Friday, were reserved for child-centered experiences that might be missing from their typical day-to-day outside of camp. This includes a trip to Kings Island, Urban Air, golf, and the like. Children also got to spend time with games inside and outside the schools, the emphasis being on having fun. This mixture of formal and informal activities provided an ideal balance of structure and fun, allowing children to enjoy their summer while, at the same time, learning skills relevant to the upcoming school year.

Data-Informed approach

Several data points were collected to evaluate the program and point to ways in which it could be improved. This includes (1) an assessment of reading skills, (2) an assessment of math skills, and (3) a measure on social-emotional competencies.

Findings from the reading assessment

Children completed two reading assessments at the beginning and the end of the summer camp. The first assessment focused on exposure to books (i.e., whether children are familiar with common books). Our findings show highly positive results, with **80% of children retaining or improving** on this marker. In fact, all Group 1 children from the Kentucky location (Age 5-7) performed as well or better at the end of the summer, compared to the beginning of summer. This is impressive given that summer is known to lower proficiency scores (i.e., summer learning loss).

The second reading assessment is designed to capture children’s sensitivity to statistical letter regularities in print. Such sensitivity to letter regularities develops implicitly, as children are read words. It is a known predictor of reading fluency, which, in turn, is a predictor of school success. Our findings show again that a majority of children were able to retain their skills (55%). This finding is impressive given that there was no formal reading instruction during the summer that could have sensitized children to letter patterns explicitly.



Figure 1. Proportion of children who retained or improved in recognizing common children’s books.

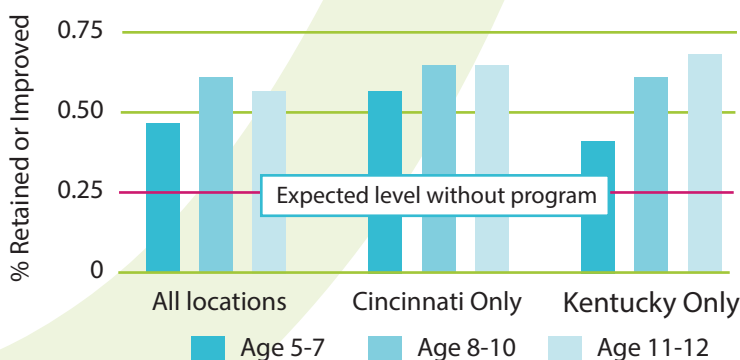
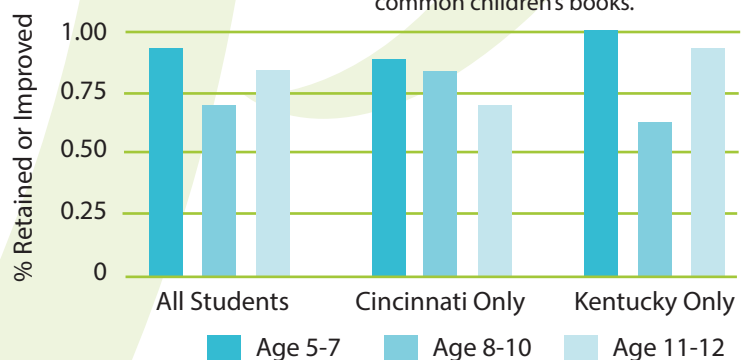


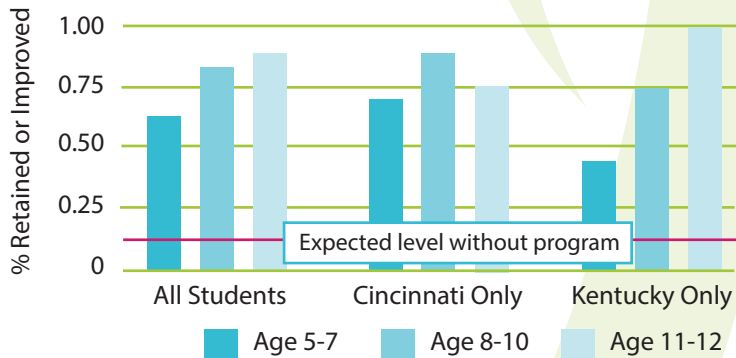
Figure 2. Proportion of children who retained or improved their ability to recognize common letter combination. Without the summer program, fewer than 25% of children are expected to retain their math proficiency over the summer. This expectation is shown with the red line. All groups surpassed this expectation.

Findings from the math assessment

Children completed a package of math assessments at the beginning and the end of the summer camp. The assessments were geared towards estimating children’s computational skills and math fluency – two skills that are central to math proficiency. These skills are difficult to acquire for many children, especially children who experience poverty. We found this to be true for campers as well. The oldest group, Group 3, fared the worst, the average being more than one year below these children’s actual age. The camp’s math enrichment was specifically designed to accommodate such low initial proficiency.

As we found with reading skills, comparisons of children’s math skills before and after the summer camp revealed positive results: **A majority of children either retained their math skills or saw them improve (76%).** Notably, all children in Group 3 at the Kentucky location were found to retain or improve on their math skills (N = 13). National trends show a pronounced decrease in math skills over the summer for children who live in poverty (known as summer learning loss). Thus, it is noteworthy that many UpSpring Summer 360° children could retain their math skills.

Figure 3. Proportion of children who retained or improved their math skills. Without the summer program, fewer than 15% of children are expected to retain their math proficiency over the summer. This expectation is shown with the red line. All groups surpassed this expectation.



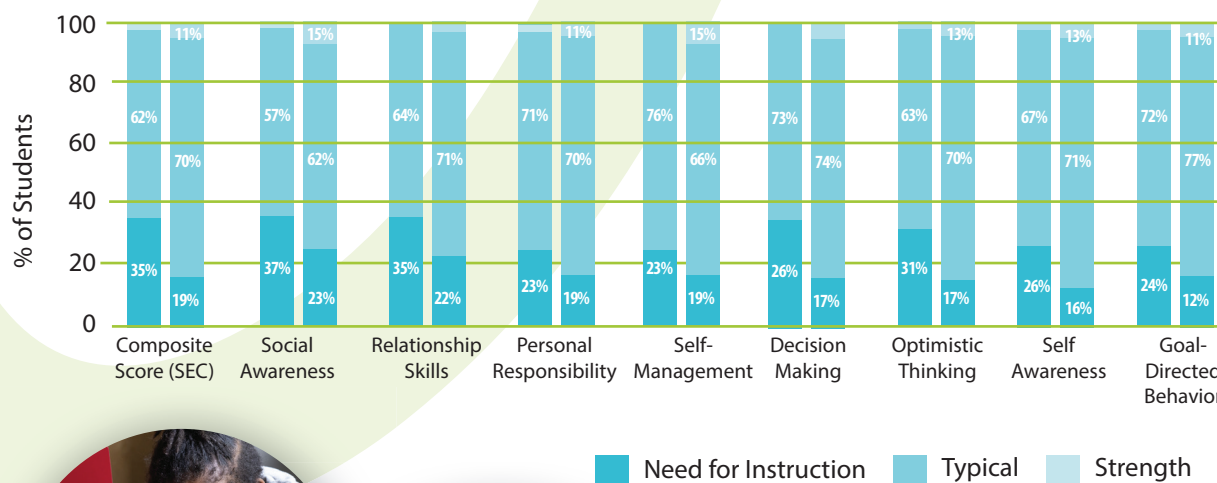
Findings from the measure on social-emotional competencies:

The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) was used to capture children’s social-emotional competencies. It pertains to children’s ability to successfully interact with others by being aware of their emotions and appropriately manage them). The tool consists of 72 survey questions on skills in self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, goal-directed behavior, relationship-building, personal responsibility, decision-making, and optimistic thinking.

Teachers assessed each child of each of the DESSA items at two time points (i.e., at the beginning and the end of the summer). Children’s scores were then combined within each of the eight content areas. Results were then mined to determine whether a child’s competence level is within, below, or above the typical range.

Findings show that almost all of the children retained or increased their social-emotional skills (95%). There were three areas of greatest improvement. One area was optimistic thinking, a skill that is predictive of breaking through the negative spiral of poverty. Here, the percentage of children scoring at or above the typical range went from 69% to 83%. The second area of improvement was self-awareness, a competence known to be particularly low for children faced with poverty. Here the percentage of children scoring at or above the typical range went from 72% to 84%. Finally, the third area was goal-directed behavior. Here the percentage of children scoring at or above the typical range went from 76% to 88%.

Figure 4. Proportion of students (a) in need for instruction, (b) within the typical range, or (c) displaying a strength in socio-emotional competences. Scoring happened before and after the summer program (left and right column, respectively).



Conclusion

We found numerous ways in which UpSpring Summer 360° contributed positively to children's lives. Beyond providing goods and a safe surrounding, this included a large assortment of activities to target children's academic and emotional-readiness skills. UpSpring Summer 360° was all around a success, whether in strengthening children's academic skills or in improving their emotional competence. Staff created a climate of care and support that is likely to have a lasting impact.

Parent Testimonials

"I just want to thank everyone at or with UpSpring for providing my daughter with the best summer camp experience ever."

"Can't wait to go back next summer!"

"My child learned a lot from camp."





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