

Strengthening Families: Exploring the Impacts of Family Camp Experiences on Family Functioning and Parenting

Barry A. Garst, Sarah Baughman, Nancy K. Franz, and Richard W. Seidel

Research suggests that family camp experiences can enhance family relationships. Families often participate in family camp experiences for a vacation, as part of a therapeutic and/or intervention strategy, or to gain general enrichment or engagement. To better understand the impacts of family camp experiences on family functioning, a mixed-methods study was conducted with sixty families across eighteen camps. Respondents shared that family camp experiences benefit families because of the positive impacts of the camp staff, parenting reinforcement, and enhancement of family relationships, with 60 percent of respondents indicating that family camp experiences reinforced good parenting and 86 percent of respondents indicating that the family camp experience reinforced family relationships. Recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

KEYWORDS: family camp, family functioning, program outcomes, parenting, family leisure

Barry A. Garst, Ph.D. is [the Director of Program Development and Research Application](#) at the American Camp Association based in [Martinsville, Indiana](#), USA. Email: bgarst@ACAcamps.org

Sarah Baughman, Ph.D. is [a Research Assistant Professor](#) at [Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Virginia Tech](#) in [Blacksburg](#), Virginia, USA. Email: Baughman@vt.edu

Nancy K. Franz, Ph.D. is [Associate Dean for Extension and Outreach in College of Human Sciences](#) at [Iowa State University](#) in [Ames](#), Iowa, USA. Email: nfranz@iastate.edu

Richard W. Seidel, Ph.D., [LPC](#) is [Director of Research in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine in Roanoke, Virginia](#).

USA, XXXX at the Carilion Clinic of the VTS School of Medicine in XXXX, XXX, USA.

Email: rwseidel@carilionclinic.org

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Introduction

As a foundational structure of society, families play a critical role in the health and well-being of communities. Every aspect of the American family is experiencing change, including the number of adults who marry, the number of households that are formed by married people, the number of children that are conceived, the number of non-family households, and the importance of marriage in accounting for total births (Klein, 2004), and these trends have made families less central to American’s lives (Nock, 2007). Considering these trends, the development and implementation of programming to strengthen family relationships is both relevant and urgent. Research suggests that family camp—often defined as a residential multi-day camp experience designed for children and family members—can play a role in enhancing family functioning (Agate & Covey, 2007).

Family camp participation has grown steadily. The slowdown in the U.S. economy over the past few years has impacted the types of experiences families are exploring, with more families expressing an interest in close-to-home experiences rather than distant vacations, thereby potentially increasing the attractiveness of family camps. As more families seek opportunities to spend time together (Shaw & Dawson, 2001), camp providers have responded by developing additional family programs. Family camp experiences, which provide camps with an additional source of revenue, have also been identified as a promising strategy for involving youth from minority communities (Mapp, 2011), where issues of *personalism* and *familism* may limit participation (Magaña, Hosty, & Hobbs, 2005). The American Camp Association estimates that 53% of camps now offer family camp programs (American Camp Association, 2011a).

Agate and Covey (2007), in a comprehensive overview of the family camp experience published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, pointed out that family participation in the camp experience typically reflects three motivations: to experience camp as a vacation, to use camp as a therapy or intervention, or for general education, enrichment, or engagement (Agate & Covey, 2007; Lewicki, Goyette, & Marr, 1995; Smith, Gotlieb, Gurwitch,

& Blotcky, 1986; Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010). Family camp experiences offer a variety of activities that provide families with novel and engaging ways to spend time together.

Families report a number of benefits of participating in family camp experiences, including improving family interaction, nurturing family relationships, and addressing specific family issues (Agate & Covey, 2007). Family members enhance their relationships with each other during family camp experiences by working and living together in a new and different setting (Rosenberg, 2006). By escaping everyday distractions in their home environment, family members are better able to focus on and listen to each other, greatly improving their communication and interaction as a family (Toretta, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical approaches have informed family camp research: Family Systems Theory (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), Family Leisure Theory (Shaw & Dawson, 2001), and the Core and Balance Model of Family Functioning (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003). Family Systems Theory explains how families function and interact in ways that are goal-directed and dynamic. Family Leisure Theory describes how families intentionally plan and facilitate leisure activities to improve family relationships. The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning builds on Family Leisure Theory by suggesting that families use two patterns of family leisure—core activities and balance activities—to meet their needs for stability and change. Core activities include common, everyday home based actions such as family dinners, watching a movie together, or conversations around the kitchen table. Balance activities, which are novel, less frequent, and require a greater commitment of time and effort, include vacations, special events, and other such multi-day trips away from home (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003). In this way, family camps serve as family leisure that greatly increases family members' satisfaction with family life (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003).

A paucity of empirical research has been conducted on family camps and researchers have called for further study to examine how family camps strengthen family relationships and how they could more effectively do so (Agate & Covey, 2007). Researchers have also recognized the need for family camp program providers to be more intentional (Taylor, Covey, & Covey, 2006) and to teach families how to apply what they learn in camp to situations at home

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Barry's response: Yes, Agate and Covey summarized the three motivations, which are also supported by the listed citations.

after the camp experience. Expanding such research would allow family camps to be deliberately designed so that specific family outcomes are more likely to occur (Rogers, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of this study, which was informed by the Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning, ~~in which family camp experiences were viewed as balance activities which contributed to family functioning,~~ was to explore families' motivations for participating in family camp, the benefits they attribute to the experience, and the overall extent to which families are changed because of family camp involvement. The first research question was, "What motivates families to attend family camp?" The second research question was, "What benefits or outcomes do families attribute to their family camp experience?" The third research question was, "How are families changed as a result of family camp experiences?"

Methods

Sample

To explore the impact of family camp experiences on youth and families, the American Camp Association collaborated with Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at Carilion Clinic in Roanoke, Virginia. Camps in Virginia and West Virginia offering family camp(s) were solicited to participate in the study using the American Camp Association's database of accredited camps. Sixty-seven camps offering family camp programs were identified and a convenience sample of 18 camps was selected.

Data Collection

Camp Profile Survey

Camp directors from the participating camps were asked to complete a Camp Profile Survey before family camp experiences were offered to better understand the intended purpose and focus of the planned family camp experiences. Eleven camps completed the profile. Participating camps were overwhelming residential camps (91%) with 70% reporting offering family camps for more than 10 years. Most of the camps were independent for-profit camps (55%) followed by camps run by religious organizations (27%), independent not-for-profit

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Barry's response: Virginia Tech, which is located in Blacksburg, VA, has small satellite campuses located across Virginia, including Roanoke.

camps (18%) and agency camps (18%). The primary purpose of conducting family camps was for recreation/vacation (70%) or education/enrichment (30%). None of the participating camps identified therapy or intervention as the purpose of the program. All participating camps indicated that nurturing family relationships was an intended outcome of their family camps program (see Table 1).

Commented [A3]: The other 3 categories are more obvious – what is an agency camp? Boy Scouts camp, for example?

Barry's response: Yes, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, 4-H, etc. Should we include examples here?

<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Family Survey

A ~~SurveyMonkey~~ survey with forced-response and open-ended questions was used to explore families' motivations to participate in camp experiences, the benefits of family camp experiences, and the extent to which families changed as a result of family camp experiences.

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This survey was set up using SurveyMonkey, an electronic, easily accessible survey design tool.

~~Directors and directors~~ were asked to send the SurveyMonkey link, within an emailed letter, to families approximately one week after the family camp experience. Non-respondents received a second email two weeks later reminding them to complete the survey. The response rate overall was 24% with 60 out of 250 families responding.

The potential motivating factors of family camp participation were adapted from Covey's (2010) list of "Importance-Performance" factors and included response choices such as "knowing someone at camp," "[camp] located close to home," and "spending greater quality time with family." Family members selected from a checklist of motivating factors. Benefits of the family camp experience were measured using open-ended questions such as "How was the family camp experience enjoyable for you or your family?"

Three relationship subscales from the Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos, 2009) were used to explore the extent to which families changed as a result of attending family camp in the areas of family cohesion, family expressiveness, and family conflict. Family Cohesion measures degree of commitment, help and support that family members provide for one another. Family Expressiveness measures the extent to which family members are encouraged to express their feelings directly. Family Conflict measures openly expressed anger and conflict among family members (Moos, 2009). These scales were modified into a retrospective design (Davis, 2003). Retrospective post tests are a common method used to assess intervention impacts in part because "response shift bias" is avoided (Howard & Dailey, 1979; Sibthorp, Paisley, Gookin, & Ward, 2007). Response shift bias is a change in a participant's metric for answering questions

from the pre-test to post-test due to a new understanding of a concept being taught (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005). As described by Sibthorp et al. (2007, [p.295](#)), with self-report measures, the metric resides within the study participants and, thus, can be directly affected by the intervention. If participants' levels of self-knowledge change as the result of a recreation program, then this metric may also shift, making comparisons between measures from before and after the program problematic ([p. 295](#)).

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive and exploratory statistics and qualitative survey data were analyzed using content analysis (Patton, 2002). A mixed method analysis was used by first analyzing quantitative data and then analyzing qualitative data for themes related to the family camp experience including benefits of and motivations for attending. Qualitative themes were categorized and quantified. The data were integrated in the final analysis to present a more complete picture of family experiences at family camp (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The first research question was, “What motivates families to attend family camp?” Motivation was measured using a “check all that apply” list and results were summarized with descriptive counts and percentages.

The second research question was, “What benefits or outcomes do families attribute to their family camp experience?” Respondents were asked if their experience reinforced good parenting and good family relationships. The open ended responses were analyzed for overall themes. The themes were then categorized and responses including each category were compiled and counted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

Responses to the Family Environment Scale subscale questions provided the data for the third research question, “How are families changed as a result of family camp experiences?” Paired sample t-tests compared FES subscale raw scores on the before and after responses to examine how families changed as a result of their family camp experience.

Results

Participant Demographics

Survey respondents (N=67) were predominately female (71%) between the ages of 40 and 49 (61%). All respondents identified themselves as a parent with 71% of surveys completed by the mother and 29% by the father. Respondents overwhelmingly reported being married (98%). Education levels were relatively high, with 66% of respondents reporting college (33%) or professional degrees (33%). Of those respondents reporting annual income, approximately 41% reported income less than \$100,000 and 31% reported income greater than \$100,000.

Family Camp Involvement

A series of questions explored families' involvement in family camp experiences. Most families heard about the family camp experience via word-of mouth (70.8%) and/or the camp website (43.8%). Slightly more than half (52%) of families had participated in a family camp experience for more than five years and 26% of families were first-time participants. Most families (64%) attended camp for two to three days. Some families brought grandmothers (17%) or grandfathers (15%) to camp with them as well as adult friends (29%) and youth friends (27%).

Family Camp Motivations

Based on responses to the motivations checklist, the top two motivators for family camp involvement were to have a fun and relaxing experience (88%) and enjoy a peaceful outdoor atmosphere (81%). Spending quality time with family (72%) and affordability (70%) were also strong motivations to attend family camp. Strengthening family relationships (68%), friendly staff (68%), reputation of the camp (65%), clean facilities (63%), that cabins with restrooms were provided (63%), and lastly that participants had the freedom to choose activities (63%) also influenced attendance.

Family Camp Ratings

Respondents were asked to rate satisfaction (i.e., service expected versus service provided) with various aspects of family camp on a scale of 1-5 where 1 equaled poor and 5 equaled excellent. Although these ratings are output measures (i.e., participant ratings of program components) rather than outcomes measures, these satisfaction ratings were viewed as important because family retention can be influenced by participant perception of dimensions

such as the camp fee (Agate & Schmalz, 2010). The staff (4.72) and the fees (4.57) were the highest rated aspects of family camp, followed by registration (4.27), amenities (4.25), programming (4.21), lodging (3.91), and food (3.42). These generally positive ratings are supported by 74% of families expressing certainty that they would attend another family camp in the future.

Family Camp Benefits

Through their responses to open-ended questions, families described many benefits of attending family camp including positive impacts of the camp staff, the opportunity to enjoy activities alone and with other family members, reinforcement of good parenting, and reinforcement of good family relationships. Camp staff positively impacted families' experiences during family camp in several ways, including: were reported to impact the experience in generally positive ways by being helpful or friendly ~~(17)~~, interacting positively with ~~great~~ with kids ~~(10)~~, overall great ~~(6)~~, helping families connecting with other families ~~(4)~~, always being positive and enthusiastic ~~(4)~~, and, providing a safe environment ~~(3)~~, kept counselors on track ~~(2)~~, counselors were a positive influence ~~(2)~~, facilitated ~~activates well (1)~~, taught Bible lessons in ways that children were able to understand ~~(1)~~, good organization ~~(1)~~, maintenance of facilities during the camp is not the best ~~(1)~~, food wasn't as bad as expected ~~(1)~~, other staff stand-offish but office staff were friendly ~~(1)~~, need food with more protein ~~(1)~~, and made the experience more enjoyable.

Families were asked if their family camp experience helped reinforce good parenting. Of the respondents answering the question (n=33), 60% indicated that the family camp experience reinforced good parenting. Furthermore, 85% of respondents indicated that they felt the experience reinforced positive family relationships. The most common camp-related factors that influenced positive family relationships were quality family time, the relaxing outdoor environment, spending time away from the stress of day-to-day routines, and teamwork involved in activities or living together. Mentoring from other parents was also identified as reinforcing good parenting.

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Barry's response: Good point. I took the opportunity to tighten this paragraph. In the process, I've removed the brackets and numbers.

Family Functioning

Three subscales of the FES were used to measure perceptions of family functioning before and after camp. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of the three family functioning subscale measures were slightly lower than reported as acceptable by Moos (1990). ($\alpha=.62$ for Family Cohesion, $\alpha=.59$ for Family Expressiveness and $\alpha=.63$ for Family Conflict). (~~Saucier, Wilson, & Warka, 2007~~). A paired-samples t-test demonstrated significant differences with small to medium effect sizes in the before and after scores for all three subscales (see Table 2). Family Cohesion had greatest effect ($d=.36$) while Family Expressiveness ($d=.12$) and Family Conflict ($d=.05$) had a small effect. Family Cohesion ($t(40)=-3.77$, $p=.001$) mean scores increased from 7.9 ($SD=1.38$) to 8.4 ($SD=1.34$), indicating that attending family camp experiences enhanced the help and support that family members give each other. Family Expressiveness ($t(39)=-2.08$, $p=.044$) mean scores increased from 5.88 ($SD=1.88$) to 6.08 ($SD=1.83$) indicating positive benefits to family members encouraging expression of feelings from participation in family camp experiences. Family Conflict ($t(40)=2.08$, $p=.044$) mean scores decreased slightly 1.35 ($SD=1.69$) to 1.26 ($SD=1.64$), indicating that already low levels of family conflict decreased slightly because of the family camp experience. It should be noted that Family Conflict should be interpreted with caution as scores were low both before and after camp and the standard deviation is greater than the mean scores in both instances.

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Discussion and Conclusion

Impacts of Family Camp Experiences

The purpose of this study was to examine families' motivations for participating in family camp, explore perceived benefits of attending family camp, and understand how families changed as a result of family camp experiences. Families were motivated to participate in family camp experiences primarily to have a fun and relaxing experience, to enjoy a peaceful outdoor atmosphere, to spend quality time with family, and because of the affordability of family camp. This study supports the benefits of family camp experiences identified by other researchers (Agate & Covey, 2007; Taylor, Covey, & Covey, 2006). Participating in novel activities as a

Commented [A5]: Year? Again are these Moos numbers of Saucier et al. – confusing citation.

Barry's response: Yes, I see how this is confusing. To simplify this, I'm adding another citation for Moos and removing the one for Saucier et al.

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Barry's response: The final paragraph was, at one point, the conclusion section. I expanded that paragraph a bit more. See below.

family in relaxing outdoor settings supported by high quality camp staff provided opportunities for positive family interactions and reinforced good parenting. Specifically, sixty percent respondents in this study indicated that family camp experiences reinforced good parenting and eighty six percent of respondents indicated that the family camp experience reinforced family relationships.

The Family Environment Scale (FES) was useful for measuring family functioning changes associated with family camp experiences. The dimensions of family cohesion, family expressiveness, and family conflict showed significant improvement after attending family camp. This improvement seems unintentional as families did not express these as motivators for attending camp nor was it an explicit goal of the camp program providers as indicated by directors' responses to the Camp Profile Survey. Families in this study had relatively high levels of cohesion and expressiveness and low levels of conflict prior to attending camp, suggesting the potential for an even greater increase for less functional families, particularly when program providers are intentional in targeting these outcomes.

Recommendations for Practice

The results of studies such as the one reported here can guide camp programming efforts for families. Because families reported enjoying active experiences they could complete together as well as the opportunity for separate activities, family camp providers need to consider flexible programming with a combination of activities for entire families as well as activities for individual family members and age groups. Family camp providers might also establish themes for programs and activities that will resonate with different family members.

Family camp providers should establish goals and objectives for family camp experiences that are then translated into specific activities designed to intentionally produce specific desired outcomes, based on what program providers want family members to learn, develop, or achieve (Tucker & Rheingold, 2010). For example, in this study over half of participating families reported that positive parenting was reinforced during their family camp experience. Planning activities in which family members have to practice communication or teamwork skills might facilitate family communication or cohesion. Intentionally planning family times free of tight schedules and electronic distractions in the outdoors might further promote parents' reinforcement of positive parenting practices.

The fact that parents identified camp staff as an important component of their family camp experiences comes as no surprise. The role of staff in contributing to high-quality camp experiences is broadly recognized (American Camp Association, 2006). Of particular importance in this study were camp staff members' expressions of genuine interest in children and the sense of fun that staff contributed to family camp activities. Staff training for leading and facilitating family camp experiences should emphasize the importance of creating a fun environment for the entire family with an emphasis on understanding and valuing each child.

In this study families appreciated the relaxing outdoor setting and they indicated that the outdoor setting was a primary motivator for participating in family camp experiences. Over the past ~~several years~~~~decade~~ there has been increased interest among ~~youth and family~~ youth serving organizations~~program providers~~ to engage children, youth, and families in quality developmental programs that also enhance contact with nature which has coalesced in national strategic initiatives (Outdoor Alliance for Kids, 2012). Family camp experiences may be an effective strategy for providing families with meaningful and prolonged contact with nature. Camp site planning and property management should focus on creating, maintaining, or emphasizing access to the outdoors. Examples include adding front porches to cabins, creating seating areas overlooking natural features such as forests, lakes or rivers, and/or providing access to walking or hiking trails. By doing so family camp providers can connect with a growing number of family nature initiatives which have emerged over the past several years, from Nature Clubs for Families promoted by the Children and Nature Network (2010) to the Great American Backyard Campout initiative developed by the National Wildlife Federation (2012). Greater outcomes related to family members' feelings of affinity for, or emotional connection to, nature may be achieved by aligning family camp goals with nature-focused programming efforts. Instruments such as the Affinity for Nature Youth Outcome Scale (American Camp Association, 2011b) or the Children's Environmental Perceptions Scale (Larson, Green, & Castleberry, 2009) might be useful tools for family camp providers in this regard.

Family camp providers also need to assess the amenities and services provided during family camp experiences. In this study family motivations indicated a preference for cabins with restrooms and showers. Other researchers have found that family camp participants may expect access to the Internet, cell phones, or other electronics (Agate & Schmalz, 2010; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2011). When technology access is found to be particularly important to family camp

participants, program providers might consider limiting technology use to specific times of the day through scheduled technology time or even incorporating access to a “technology café” (Agate & Schmalz, 2010). Paying attention to the provision of these specific amenities and services may enhance family camp experiences.

Recommendations for Research

Families participating in this study may not be reflective of the larger family population as they were primarily white, middle class families with above average educational and income levels. This study should be replicated with a larger, more diverse sample of families and camps. Additional research related to intentional programming to enhance family functioning would help illuminate specific factors that contribute to positive family outcomes. Furthermore, a close examination of families’ received outcomes with camps’ intended outcomes and the activities provided during family camp might provide additional information to aid in intentional programming.

Research that identifies solutions to family camp programming challenges is also needed to guide practice. Although some research has explored the challenges associated with providing family camp experiences, such as serving parents as program participants, enforcing rules with parents during family camp, and overall family retention (Agate & Schmalz, 2010), such research has been limited. With recent research indicating that parent communication is the most important issue that camp directors face (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2011), additional research may clarify how parent communication challenges are successfully negotiated during family camp programs.

Although the FES relationship subscales showed promise for measuring family functioning associated with family camp experiences, future studies should consider the use of other FES family dimensions such as personal growth (Moos, 2009). Collecting more detailed information on camp programs and examining the relationship between specific targeted outcomes, programs and activities provided, and received outcomes will help family camp providers better understand the antecedents of change (Garst, 2010). Emerging measures like the Family Leisure Outcomes Scale (Poff & Zabriskie, 2011) might prove effective in such evaluation and research efforts.

With the growing interest in family camp experiences and the indication that family camp experiences improve family functioning, there is a need to understand why some families are unable to participate in order to develop family recruitment and retention strategies. Barriers for families from different socio-cultural backgrounds may differ. For example, financial constraints have been found to limit camp participation, particularly in the Latino community (Magaña, Hosty, & Hobbs, 2005). It would also be useful to examine how family camp experiences are, or are not, meeting the needs of different types of families. As Taylor, Covey, and Covey (2006) suggest, single-parent families, families with special needs children, and adoptive families may have unique needs when it comes to family camp programming.

As interest in family programming grows, program providers will have increasing opportunities to support families' needs and interests. Residential family camps, such as those examined in this study, can offer an effective and popular programming approach to promote positive family outcomes. Although family camp outcomes need to be explored with a more diverse sample families, and we have more to learn about the mechanisms of change, ~~t~~The impact of family camps on positive family parenting is particularly promising and suggests that family camp experiences ~~can~~ play a role in strengthening families, family enhancement programs.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this work, written for a popular audience, ~~was has been~~ published in the January/February 2012 issue of *Camping Magazine*.

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Barry's response: I believe that this is now correct for an unpublished conference paper.

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Barry's response: I believe that this is now correct for a published conference paper in conference proceedings.

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Barry's response: JOE is only available online.

Table 1: Intended Family Camp Outcomes of Participating Camps (n=11)

<u>Intended Outcome</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Count</u>
Nurtured family relationships	100%	10
Improved family interaction	90%	9
Appreciation of nature	70%	7
Social benefits	60%	6
Enhanced knowledge	60%	6
Development of new skills/behaviors	50%	5
Physical/health benefits	30%	3
Spiritual development	20%	2
Address specific camper health/medical issues	10%	1

Table 2: Paired Sample T-Test for Family Cohesion, Family Expressiveness, and Family Conflict

Subscale	Before Camp	After Camp	t(df)	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
Family Cohesion	7.9 (1.38)	8.4 (1.34)	-3.77 (40)	.001
Family Expressiveness	5.88 (1.88)	6.08 (1.83)	-2.08 (39)	.044
Family Conflict	1.35 (1.69)	1.26 (1.64)	2.08 (40)	.044