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## Transforming a Mental Health Camp from Hands-on to Virtual

Zurishaddai Garcia  
*Utah State University*, [zuri.garcia@usu.edu](mailto:zuri.garcia@usu.edu)

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## **Transforming a Mental Health Camp from Hands-on to Virtual Learning**

Zurishaddai Garcia  
Extension Associate Professor  
Davis County  
[zuri.garcia@usu.edu](mailto:zuri.garcia@usu.edu)

*Major program theme:* Youth and 4-H Programs

### **Abstract**

A virtual version of the Davis County annual youth Camp Thrive was developed and implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth interns were hired to guide the transition process. Evaluation results show that the camp was successful in the online format for teaching mental health awareness concepts to youth.

### **Introduction**

Human knot challenges, mindful walks, positivity Jenga, and other games are interactive hands-on activities that youth enjoy annually at Camp Thrive each summer. By May 2020, it was clear that the COVID-19 pandemic would affect the hands-on nature of the summer camp, and major adjustments were required to ensure continuation of the camp. Camp Thrive provides mental health awareness education to youth.

While a large number of Utah youth are resilient in the face of adversity and challenges (National 4-H, 2020), some youth face mental health challenges that can lead to suicidal ideation. Results of the 2019 Utah Youth Risk Behavior Survey of high school students show that 37% of youth felt sad or hopeless and 22% seriously considered suicide (Center for Health Data and Informatics, 2019). Among Utah youth, 62% of students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 also reported experiencing moderate depressive symptoms (Utah Department of Human Services, and Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, 2019). Mental health awareness education in a fun camp setting can be helpful to youth, particularly during a global pandemic.

### **Response**

The spring semester of 2020 can be characterized by uncertainty, online learning, and isolation for youth. Initially, adapting Camp Thrive to a virtual camp was a concern because of the amount of time youth had already spent in online learning. However, providing youth with access to this program was considered important given mental health concerns. As a result, youth interns were tasked with assisting in the creation of a virtual Camp Thrive. Their feedback was essential to

guiding decisions regarding the amount of screen time, overall length of the camp, and planned activities.

The camp was held over a five-day period and included camp workshops were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for one-hour sessions. The camp introduced the I THRIVE model which is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Youth were taught to use the model to assess their own physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs. Youth learned about the connection between these needs and their mental health and resilience. Using a camp workbook, an independent 15-30-minute homework activity was assigned after the first two sessions. This prepared the youth for the Tuesday and Thursday one-hour small group team meetings that reinforced concepts taught and unified youth. Camp ended with an "After Party" on Friday a couple hours after the last session. During this time teams had their final meeting, team cheers were shared, evaluation was captured, and a camp slide show was viewed. Camp Thrive was delivered twice to two different groups of youth.

### Participants

Youth ages 10-15 were the target audience for Camp Thrive. The concepts taught during camp were appropriate youth as young as 10, or youth who had just completed 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Youth ages 16-18 were recruited as youth interns. Interns had longer exposure to the concepts since they were partially responsible for teaching youth participants. Both youth participants and interns were expected to benefit from the camp experience.

### Outcomes and Impact

Two sessions of Camp Thrive were held in July and August of 2020. In total, thirty-seven youth registered for the camp. Evaluation data was gathered using a Zoom poll and an online survey. Table 1 shows the results from a post-camp survey ( $n = 16$ ) The table shows that a majority of youth learned the importance of aspiring to meet the needs listed in the I THRIVE Model. They also learned that by meeting these needs, they can experience positive mental health and improve their personal resilience.

*Table 1: Camp Thrive Participant and Youth Intern Evaluation Survey Responses*

Meeting the following needs helps me have good mental health and build my resilience:	% in Agreement
Physical needs such as sleep, nutrition, water, and exercise	88%
Identifying and managing my emotions	81%
Positive connections to home/family, friends, and community	75%
Learning, having a growth mindset, and succeeding	88%
Having hope, exploring my purpose, and growing my resilience	94%

The results from the Zoom polls ( $n = 17$ ) captured youth feedback on their intentions to apply what they learned from the camp. Results showed 71% planned to use the I THRIVE Model to identify their strengths. A key message of the camp was to encourage youth to focus on their strengths instead of looking for weaknesses. This message was communicated through intentional positive language. Results also showed 82% of youth participants planned to use the I THRIVE Model to identify ways to improve on their existing strengths. Lastly, 76% of youth said they planned to help others increase their sense of belonging.

Results from the Zoom polls also showed that youth were happy with their camp experience. Their favorite parts were the team meetings and the after-party event. During zoom meetings, youth had time in small groups to play games and review concepts learned during the sessions. This suggests there is value in virtual team-building activities to foster learning and a sense of belonging. Finally, youth liked that the camp Zoom sessions were limited to 1 hour each, and 82% indicated that they would attend the camp in-person if circumstances were different.

### **Public Value**

Canceling Camp Thrive was not an option as youth needed the additional support and opportunities to connect with others particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since safety guidelines encouraged families to stay at home during the pandemic, youth were isolated from friends and family. Camp Thrive provided youth with a connection to friends while learning about important mental health skills.

There were challenges to converting the in-person camp into an online format. However, some key elements of the camp, such as virtual camp teams and games, were effective strategies for keeping youth engaged in the activities. While the team meetings and after-party sessions were optional, these were highly favored by youth participants.

Prior to COVID-19, many youth development professionals did not offer virtual camps. However, Utah 4-H rapidly shifted to online learning during the pandemic and adopted innovated approaches to engage youth in online learning settings. Our results indicate efforts to shift traditional programs to online have been successful for positive youth development. Pre-pandemic, Camp Thrive was only offered to youth in one county. With the shift to the online format in 2020, youth from 13 different counties were able to participate in the camp – a silver lining in hard times.

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