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National Summer Learning Association-American Camp Association

Summer Learning Experiences Survey Findings



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Foreword

Dear Partners:

The summer months have always been one of the most unequal, high-impact yet under-leveraging times for student education in the U.S. Often, students and families with more resources are able to participate in life-changing experiences over the summer while millions of lower-income peers are unable to access or afford similar opportunities.

In recent years, due to the negative effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on the academic, mental health and physical wellbeing of America's young people, summer learning has emerged as a key national response strategy. Policymakers, educators and community leaders have made enormous investments to create, expand and support more creative, collaborative and effective programs to help prepare all students for success in their upcoming school year.

This new Gallup survey and report on the summer experiences of America's youth helps us better understand the moment we are in, where and what students are learning and doing over the summer months, and the key barriers to their participation. **National Summer Learning Association** (www.summerlearning.org) and **American Camp Association** (www.acacamps.org) look forward to using this information to better inform our strategies and practices as we work with and support numerous partners to provide quality, life-changing summer experiences to millions more students.



Aaron Philip Dworkin

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Background

What fills U.S. kids' summer days?

Summers can be challenging for parents, as they must search for ways to care for and engage their children while potentially working and managing their other family responsibilities.

Enrolling children in a structured summer program that allows them to learn or develop some skill — be it academic, artistic, athletic or social — can help solve this challenge while providing valuable experiences outside of school and reducing the likelihood of summer learning loss. How to offer these high-quality summer learning experiences to all students in the U.S., regardless of income, background and ZIP code, is an important and solvable question.

In May 2024, the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA), the American Camp Association (ACA) and Gallup partnered to survey parents of children in grades kindergarten through 12 to better understand how their children spend their summers and the barriers parents face when considering different programs. Parents were asked to report on their child's 2023 and future 2024 summer activities.



Main findings from this research include:

1



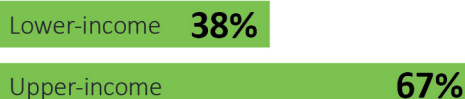
An estimated

30 million youth

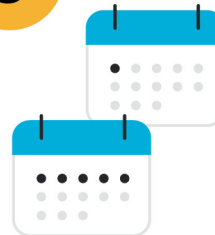
(55% of those surveyed) **participated in a structured summer program** in 2023.

2

Participation in organized summer programs **varies notably by income**, with 38% of lower-income children likely to participate in such opportunities, compared to 67% of upper-income children.



3



Day camps (22%) and weekly enrichment programs (20%)

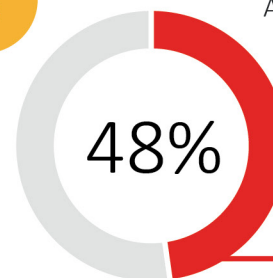
are the **most common** structured summer learning activities.

4

Most summer learning activities **take place in non-school settings (72%),**

such as outdoor locations, museums and theaters or private properties, including day cares.

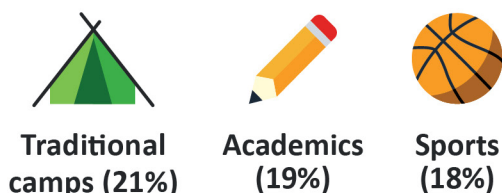
5



Almost half (48%) of K-12 parents had to **limit or forgo summer programs** for their children, primarily **due to cost.**

6

The focus of the program children participate in varies widely, including those focused on: **traditional camps (21%), academics (19%) or sports (18%).**



7

22%

Twenty-two percent of parents say the **main reason they enroll their children in summer activities** is for them to

have fun.

Findings

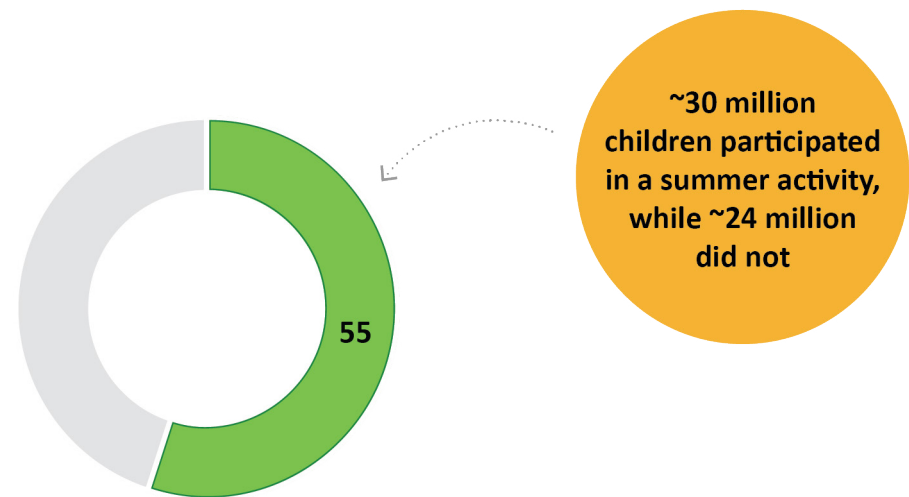
An estimated 30 million youth participated in a structured summer program in the summer of 2023.

That estimate is based on more than half (55%) of U.S. parents reporting that their school-aged children participated in at least one structured program¹ that provided opportunities to learn or refine academic, athletic, creative, social or other skills during the summer of 2023.

CHART 1

Participation in a Structured Summer Learning Experience, 2023

% Participated



Figures are the percentage of parents of K-12 children who did/did not have their child in one or more of the following activities in summer 2023: a local day camp; an overnight camp; summer school; weekly enrichment classes; a day care program; a summer job or internship.

¹ The latest American Community Survey estimates that 54 million children in the U.S. are enrolled in grades kindergarten through 12. Assuming each parent provides the same opportunities to all the children in their household, that translates to an estimated 30 million U.S. children participating in a structured summer program in 2023.

Participation in organized summer programs varies widely by family income. The gap in participation rates between families earning less than \$50,000 per year and those earning \$100,000 or more annually is nearly 30 percentage points, 67% versus 38%.²

CHART 2
Participation in a Structured Summer Learning Experience, by Parents' Income Level

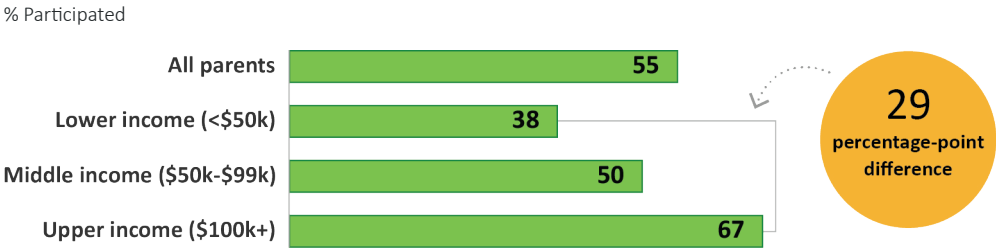
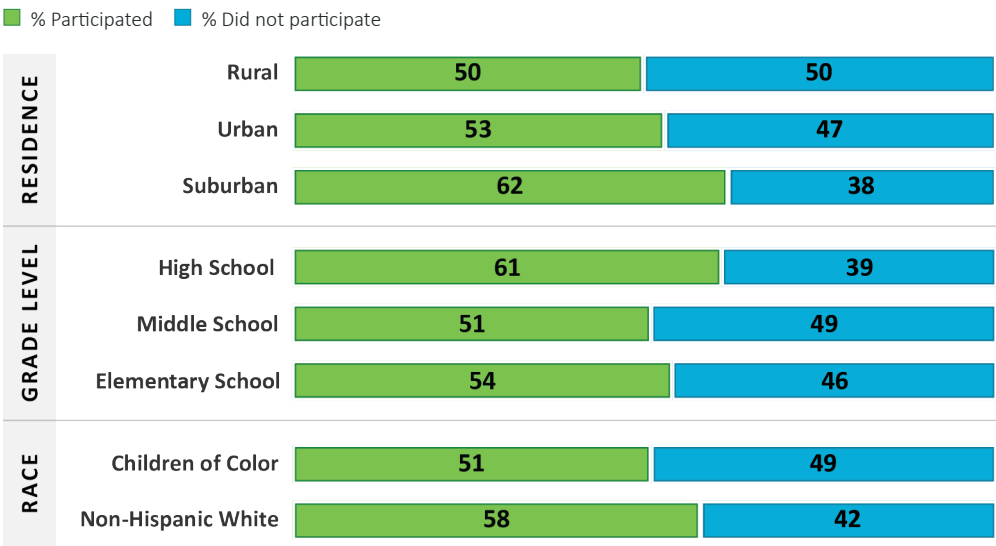


CHART 3
Participation in a Structured Summer Learning Experience, by Parent Demographics



Using eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches as a proxy for lower-income households,³ these findings translate to an estimated 10.5 million lower-income children having a summer learning opportunity, compared to 18.5 million higher-income children.

² Figures are the percentage of parents of K-12 children who did/did not have their child in one or more of the following activities in summer 2023: a local day camp; an overnight camp; summer school; weekly enrichment classes; a day care program; a summer job or internship.

³ According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 25 million children are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs.

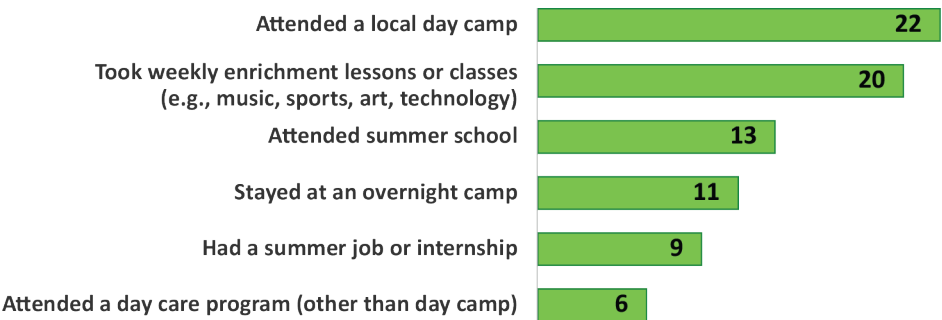
Day camps and weekly enrichment programs are the most common types of structured summer learning activities.

Among structured program options, parents are most likely to enroll their child in local day camps and weekly enrichment courses.

CHART 4

Types of Structured Summer Learning Programs Children Participated in During 2023

% Participated



Figures are the percentage of parents of children in grades kindergarten through grade 12 who had a child participate in the activity in summer 2023. Percentages sum to more than 55% of K-12 schoolchildren by accounting for those who participated in multiple structured activities.

Day camps are the most common activity for elementary and middle school children, while summer jobs are the top activity for high school children.

TABLE 1

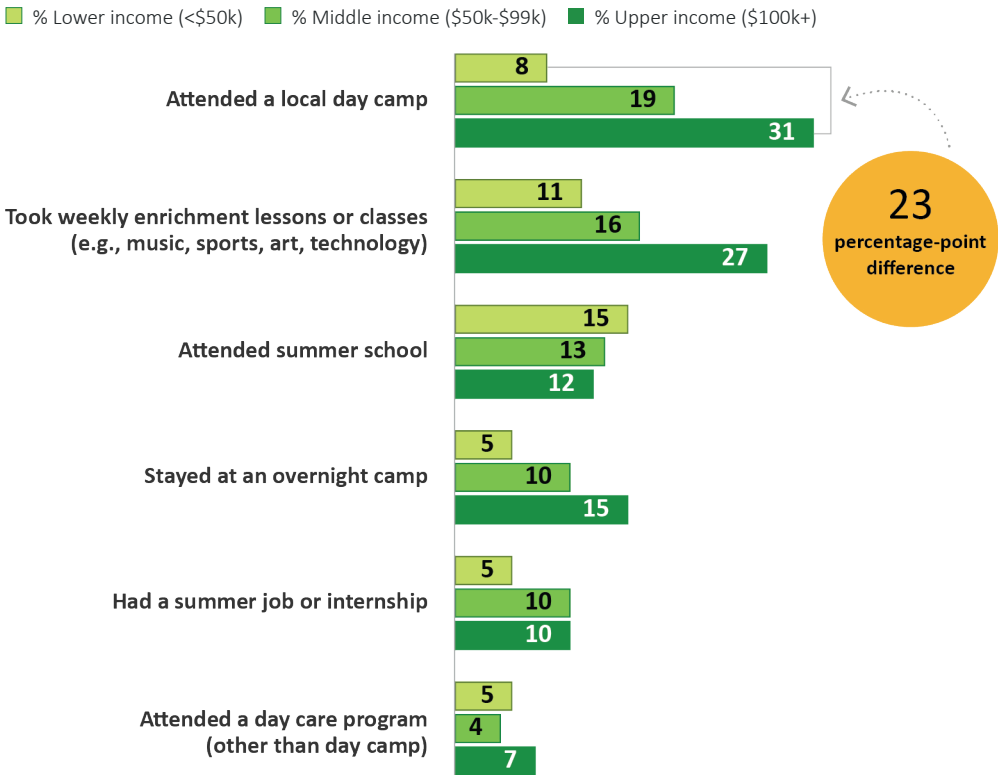
Types of Structured Summer Learning Programs Children Participated in During 2023, by School Level

	% GRADES K-5	% GRADES 6-8	% GRADES 9-12
Attended a local day camp	29	24	7
Took weekly enrichment lessons or classes (e.g., music, sports, art, technology)	21	21	18
Attended a summer learning program (e.g., summer school)	14	11	12
Stayed at an overnight camp	5	17	18
Had a summer job or internship	0	3	32
Performed community service	0	10	21
Attended a day care program (other than day camp)	9	3	1

On average, children who attended summer camps spent 19 days at camps. Children who attended summer school spent an average of 21 days in their program(s).

Upper-income parents are more likely than lower-income parents to have a child who participated in all the structured learning programs except summer school. The biggest income gap is seen in attendance at day camps.

CHART 5
Participation in Structured Summer Learning Programs, by Parents' Income Level



* Figures represent the percentage of parents of children in grades K-12 who had a child participate in each summer learning activity in summer 2023.

Most summer learning activities take place in a non-school setting.

Locations of summer programs are important because federal funds available to support summer programs for children typically go to school districts holding events at school buildings or school property. However, 72% of children (about 21 million) participated in a summer learning program outside of a K-12 school building setting in 2023. In comparison, 15%, or 4 million children, participated in an activity held at a school setting.⁴

TABLE 2
Venues for Children’s 2023 Summer Activities

Please indicate in which of the following settings your [grade] child’s 2023 summer activities took place.
Select all that apply.

	ALL K-12 CHILDREN	
	%	ESTIMATED MILLIONS
An outdoor setting (e.g., local park or sports field)	48	14m
A museum, theater, science center or zoo	28	8m
A private property, like a camp, day care or business	23	7m
Community/Recreation center (e.g., YMCA), library, public housing authority	21	6m
K-12 school building or classroom	15	4m
A religious institution building (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, temple)	15	4m
Online	11	3m
A college or university campus	6	2m
An office or job site	5	1.5m
Someone else’s house	22	7m
Net: in non-K-12 school building	72	21m
Did not list any summer activities/Did not specify location of activities	13	n/a

⁴ With 15% of parents reporting that their child had a summer learning opportunity in a school setting and 72% in a non-school setting, the remaining 13% did not have their children participate in any summer activities or did not specify where those activities took place.

When parents were asked in the May 2024 survey about their initial plans for the summer of 2024, the choices of venues were largely similar to what parents reported for 2023.

TABLE 3
Venues for Children’s 2024 Summer Activities

	%
An outdoor setting (e.g., local park or sports field)	54
A museum, theater, science center or zoo	30
A private property, like a camp, day care or business	25
Community/recreation center (e.g., YMCA), library, public housing authority	23
Someone else’s house	22
A religious institution building (e.g., church, synagogue, mosque, temple)	17
K-12 school building or classroom	15
Online	12
A college or university campus	8
An office or job site	8
None of these	10



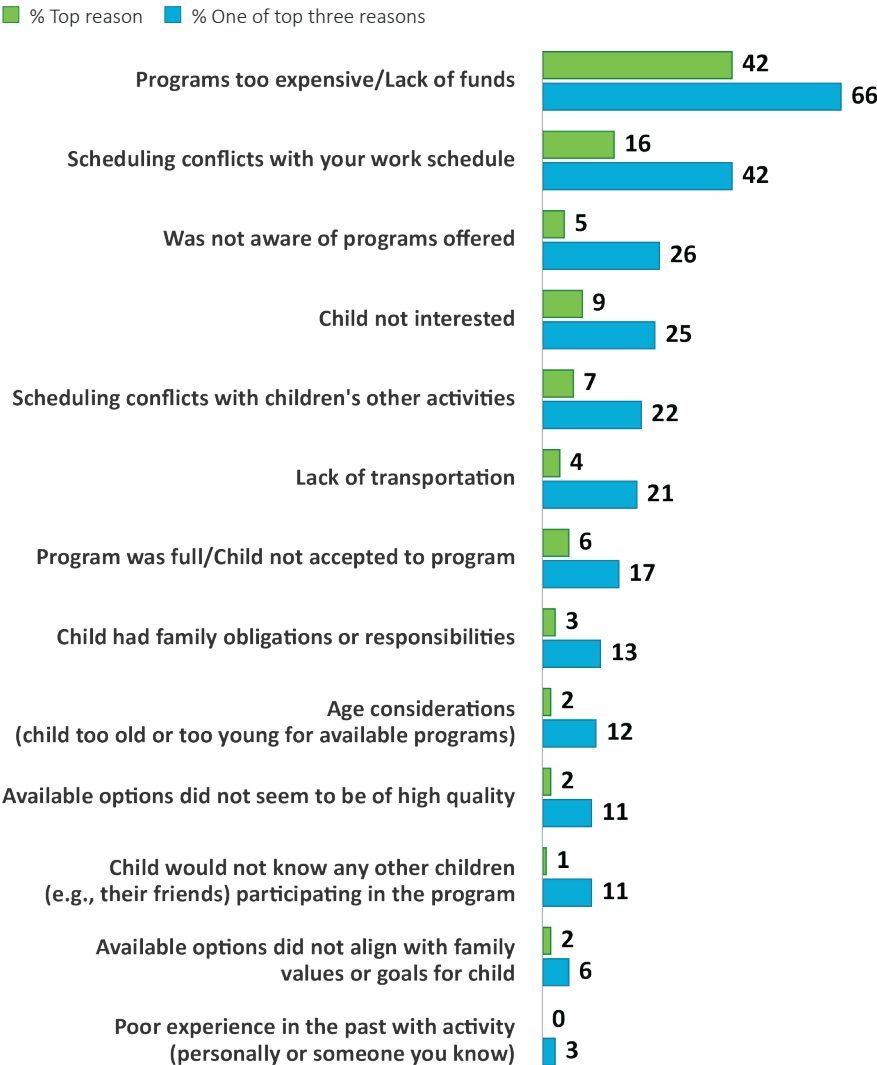
Cost is the primary barrier to summer learning participation.

Parents whose children didn't participate in as many summer activities in 2023 as they would have liked cite program costs as the main reason for their lack of participation. Forty-two percent of these parents rank cost as the most important barrier to their child's participation, and 66% rank it among the top three barriers for their family.

66% of parents rank cost as one of the top barriers preventing their children from participating in summer activities.

CHART 6

What are the most important reasons you were not able to have your [grade] child participate in certain summer activities last year as much as you would have liked? Please rank the top three reasons.



Almost half of K-12 parents had to limit or forgo summer programs for their children.

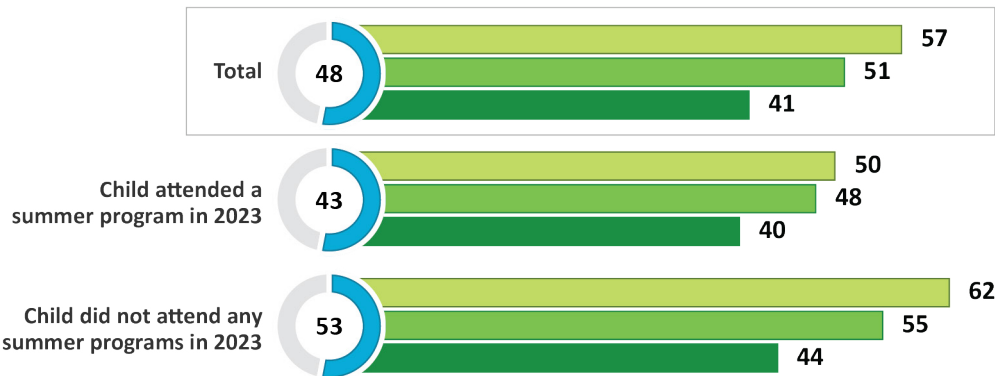
About half of K-12 parents (48%) wish their children could have participated in summer programs in 2023 or in more than they did the previous year. More than six in 10 lower-income parents (62%) whose children did not participate in any summer activities wanted their children to.

CHART 7

Parents Who Had to Limit or Forgo Summer Programs in 2023

Were there any activities that you wanted your [grade] child to participate in last summer, but were not able to (either at all, or as much as you would have liked)?

■ % Lower income (<\$50k) ■ % Middle income (\$50k-\$99k) ■ % Upper income (\$100k+)
● % All K-12 Parents



Figures show the percentage of people who said they were unable to have a child participate in a desired summer program.

With 48% of parents having to limit their children’s activities and two-thirds of those parents citing cost as a major reason for doing so, nearly one in three U.S. parents (32%) say their child’s participation in a desired summer program was limited or prevented because of cost.

32%, or nearly one in three, of U.S. parents were unable to have their child participate in a desired summer program specifically because of cost.

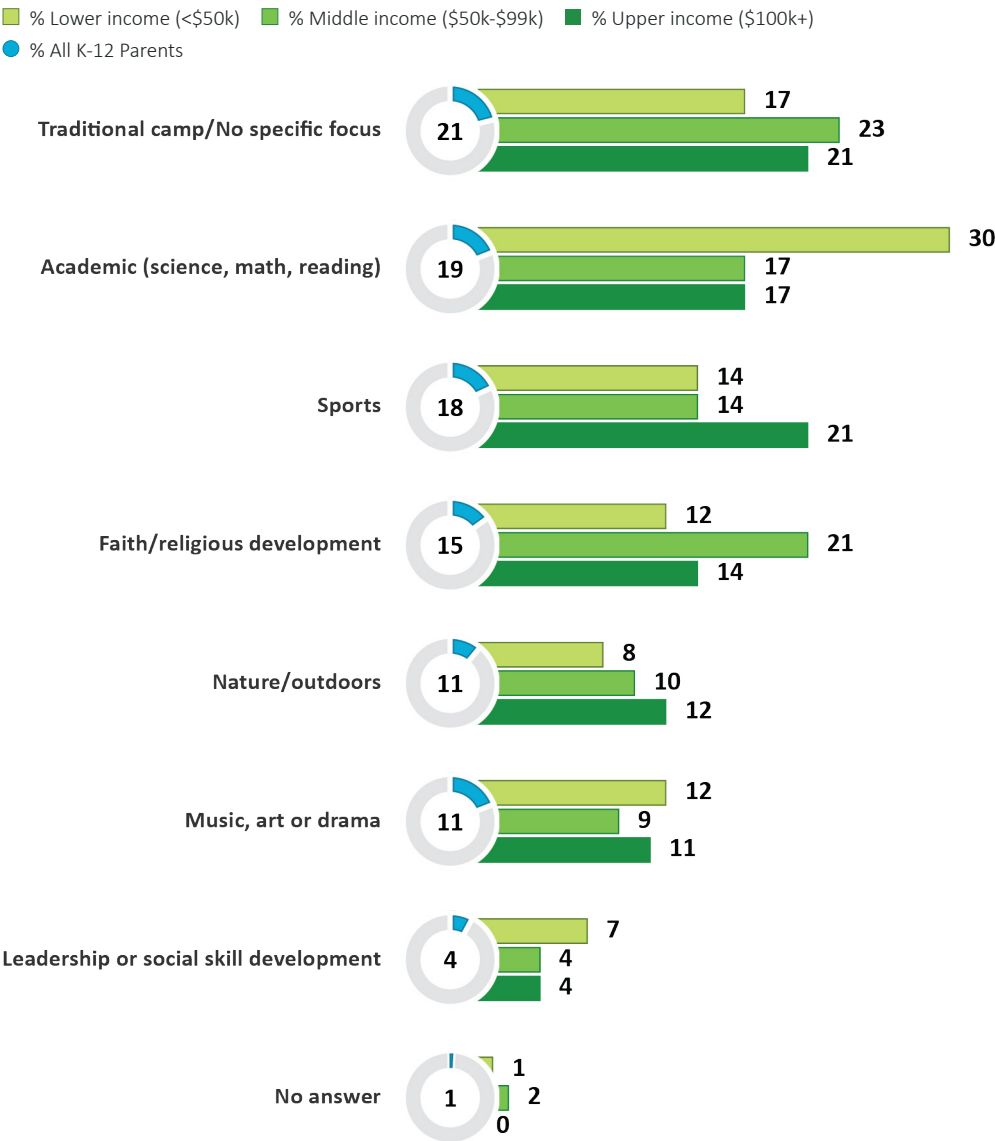
The focus of the program children participate in varies widely.

Among parents whose child attended a summer learning experience in 2023, the primary focus of the summer learning opportunity varied widely, with traditional camps, academics, sports programs or faith development representing the most common themes.

Thirty percent of low-income parents sent their child to a summer learning program with an academic focus, compared to 17% of middle- and upper-income parents.

CHART 8

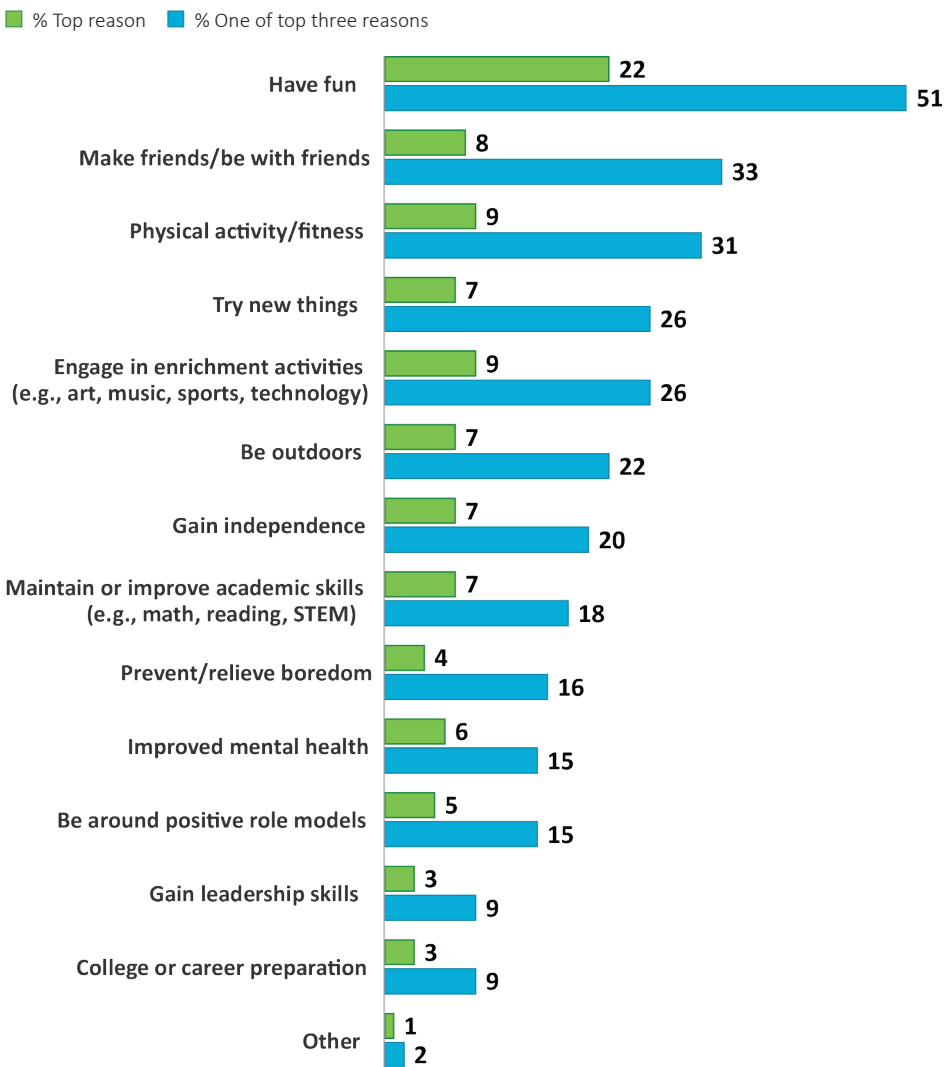
Primary Focus of Camp/Summer Learning Program Participated in During Summer 2023



Having fun is the main reason parents enroll their children in summer activities.

The most important goal parents have for their child’s participation in summer activities is to have fun — 22% name this as their top overall goal, and 51% rank it among their top three goals. Aside from having fun, parents commonly cite wanting their children to make or be with friends, engage in physical fitness, try new things, engage in enrichment opportunities and be outdoors.

CHART 9
Parents’ Main Goals for Their Child’s Summer Activities



Methodology

Results for this Gallup poll are based on self-administered web surveys conducted May 1-15, 2024, with a random sample of 6,899 adults aged 18 and older who are parents of a child in grades kindergarten through 12 and members of the Gallup Panel™. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones. Parents of multiple children were instructed to answer questions about just one child randomly selected during the interview.

Gallup weighted the obtained samples to correct for nonresponse. Nonresponse adjustments were made by adjusting the sample to match the national demographics of parents on gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets were based on 2022 American Community Survey five-year estimates for the aged 18-and-older U.S. population with a child between the ages of five and 18.

For results based on the sample of K-12 parents, the margin of sampling error is ± 2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.



About National Summer Learning Association

Celebrating 30 years of impact, NSLA has worked to combat summer learning loss and close the opportunity gap, which research shows grows most dramatically between lower- and higher-income students over the summer months. NSLA works to ensure all of America's students, regardless of background, income or ZIP code, can access and benefit from a high-quality summer learning experience every year. NSLA supports and collaborates with a broad and ever-growing network of 25,000+ leaders of school districts, youth-serving government agencies, and nonprofit and corporate partners from across the country focused on improving the lives of youth. Learn more at summerlearning.org.

About American Camp Association

The American Camp Association® (ACA) is a national organization serving the more than 20,000 year-round and summer camps in the U.S. that annually serve 26 million campers. ACA is committed to collaborating with those who believe in quality camp and outdoor experiences for children, youth and adults. ACA provides advocacy, evidence-based education and professional development, and is the only independent national accrediting body for the organized camp experience. ACA accreditation provides public evidence of a camp's voluntary commitment to the health, safety, risk management and overall wellbeing of campers and staff. For more information, visit ACAcamps.org.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world. Gallup has served more than 1,000 education organizations with advice and analytics based on over 85 years of research, including nearly half a million interviews with education leaders and their teams about their workplace experiences and the perspectives of more than 6 million students and alumni captured by the Gallup Student Poll and Gallup Alumni Survey. Gallup assists districts, schools, universities and institutions nationwide with research-based strategies to provide a culture shift in education to help students on their path toward great careers and great lives.

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