

FREEDOM 2 BE - A SUMMARY OF THE 2021 CAMP EVALUATION

Introduction

Freedom To Be (F2B) is a camp organised and delivered by CHIVA (the Children's HIV Association) annually, to provide a supportive, educational and relaxing environment for children and young people living with HIV in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It has three main aims:

- Reduce social isolation through building a peer support network
- Increase knowledge and understanding of HIV
- Build confidence, skills and create greater aspirations for the future

F2B 2021 was the first in-person camp since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were three separate camps in 2021, with 75 participants in total ranging from 11 – 17 years of age. For 33% of participants this was the first CHIVA camp they had been to.

Participants took part in a range of activities including:

- Outdoor activities
- HIV knowledge building workshops
- Wellbeing activities
- Creative expression workshops
- Group gatherings and informal socialising

Methods

An evaluation of camp used the following methods:

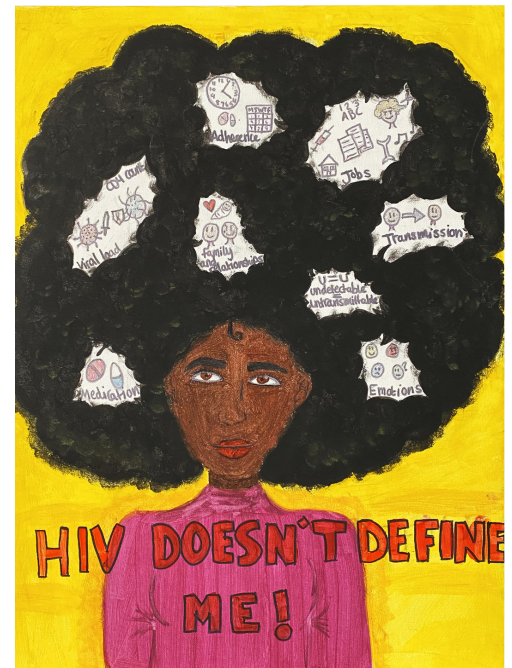
- Pre and post-camp questionnaires
- A brief questionnaire after each HIV knowledge workshop
- Interviews

F2B camp leaders (young adults living with HIV who volunteer at camp) interviewed approximately one third of participants at the end of camp, either individually or in groups of 2-3 people. Interviewers followed a general question guide developed by CHIVA staff, asking about participant's experiences at camp, what activities or workshops were best, highlights of their time at F2B and what could be improved.

Findings

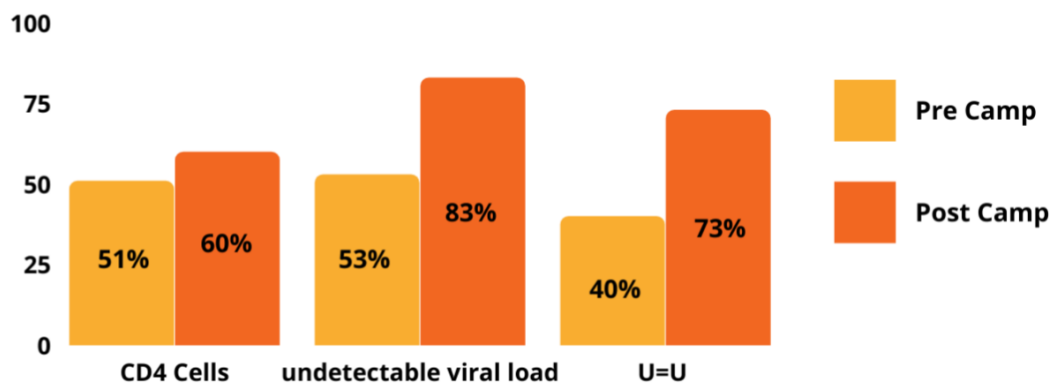
Quantitative data from the questionnaires showed positive feedback from participants and demonstrated a significant increase in knowledge.

- 77% said they planned to keep in touch with people they had met
- Knowledge and understanding of key HIV terms increased (see graph)



- 92% of participants got four or more out of six questions correct post-camp compared to 72% pre-camp.
- The percentage of people who felt extremely or very comfortable talking about HIV increased from 12% pre-camp to 52% post-camp

Knowledge and understanding of key HIV terms increased



Feedback from interviews was overwhelmingly positive. Participants spoke highly of their time at camp, highlighting how much fun they had, particularly in light of increased social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I would definitely do this again. This is the funnest time ever. Because of COVID, it was really stressful [...] but at least I've done this CHIVA camp to make me feel really happy.”

Relationships and community

The most common theme that camp participants spoke about was the importance of the community cultivated at F2B. Almost all interviewees mentioned how great it was to meet new and diverse people and make friends. About two thirds of interviewed participants spoke about how much they enjoyed socialising with others, reflecting on the impact of being able to express themselves openly about (their) HIV and share their experiences with peers who understand them.

“[Camp is] A place where you all feel the same and everyone's been [through] what you've been through.”

“I got to hear like different stories from other people and tell people my own stories. And I found out things that I didn't know.”

Related to the theme of community, participants emphasized the sense of inclusion and acceptance they felt at F2B, which strongly contributed to their positive experience of camp.

“Where she [camp leader] opened up and she just made it feel more personal and intimate and I really liked that.”

“No one judges you here. There’s always someone you can talk to and have fun with. There's never anyone alone or feeling lonely.”

Camp participants felt very supported and comfortable around others which made them feel able to foster personal connections with people similar to them. It made them realise they are not alone.

“People are supportive in your activities. And everyone is on your side, and everyone is nice, caring and loving.”

“It's also nice to see people the same as you like living with HIV.”

New knowledge

Ten participants spoke specifically about how much they learned at camp. They gave examples related to the biology of HIV and about practical information that allowed them to feel more secure about the future (e.g. sexual health information, clarity about jobs they previously believed they couldn't do). Participants also felt that educational workshops at camp were much more effective, feeling like they retained more information compared to their lessons in school. Multiple young people were proud and excited about this new knowledge and stated that they would share what they learned with friends and family.

“I think I've really, really listened and educated myself on more things. [...] It's been a very good turning point in life to educate myself and also to educate others as well. [...] My experiences would help others, to educate them.”

“I learned a lot of stuff like U=U and at first I didn't really know much about HIV and what it stood for [but now I know] more about it.”

“And I think I've remembered more things here than I would ever pick up in school.”

Confidence and new experiences

Camp participants reported feeling more optimistic about the future and more confident in themselves as a result of F2B. One spoke specifically about how they had pushed themselves outside their comfort zone while others enjoyed the challenges during different sports and arts activities and workshops.

“Because [the climbing wall] it's quite high. It was like, am I gonna do this? I was like, Yes. Go on, do it. And then you don't have to do it again. So I was really proud of myself for doing it.”

This idea of giving new things a try and being open to the community and benefits of Camp was repeated when participants were asked how they would describe F2B to newcomers, encouraging them to trust the process.

“Camp is a place, if you sort of don't become resistant, you can actually fit into it quite well, without any difficulties.”

“It's worth it, it's really worth it [even though] you might be scared to come thinking I don't know what to expect.”

“Everyone here is kind and don't worry about not making friends because everyone here is basically like family.”

Logistics

When asked about what could be improved about camp, the most common answers were including more active/outdoor activities and sports, making camp last longer and having a larger group of participants. Any negative comments focused on logistics surrounding what participants were allowed to do while not in workshops (e.g. how they spend free time, who was allowed in their room and having to follow a bedtime), although these did not appear to take away from their overall camp experience.

Conclusions

Despite 2021 involving three smaller, separate camps due to COVID-19, instead of one large camp as in previous years, it was a positive experience for all young people. The evaluation findings suggest that F2B's aims were met and the 2021 camp provided an engaging, safe and educational space for young people living with HIV to learn more about how to live well with HIV, build meaningful relationship with new friends and increase their confidence and self-worth.

For more information and to find out what happens at camp visit: www.chiva.org.uk/camp
Watch the video about the 2021 camp at: www.chiva.org.uk/f2b2021

Thank you to the funders of the 2021 camp:

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MAC ViVA Glam Fund**