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**Surfing for social integration: Mental health and well-being promotion through Surf  
Therapy among institutionalized young people**

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## **Abstract**

The Surf-Salva Camp 2016 project aimed at promoting social inclusion, wellbeing, and mental health, as well as developing beach security values and social citizenship in children and youth in foster care institutions, through surfing (Surf-Therapy). Participants were 48 adolescents aged 10 to 16, selected from 4 foster institutions in the Greater Lisbon district. Results suggest that intervention through Surf Therapy had a number of positive effects: exploration, effort and perseverance, problem-solving, time management, social competencies, interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation all developed among the participants throughout the project.

Results support the claim that within a suitable theoretical framework, with a solid and well trained team and with adequate psychotherapeutic supervision and evaluation, Surf Therapy can be a very promising possibility in the care of at- risk young people, and policy makers should consider this suggestion in the development of policies related to vulnerable institutionalized young people.

**Keywords:** adolescence, wellbeing, quality of life, mental health, psychosocial risk, Social inclusion, Surf; Surf Therapy

## **Surfing for social integration: Mental health and well-being promotion through Surf Therapy among institutionalized young people**

In 2015, there were 8600 children and adolescents in residential care in Portugal, of whom 4880 were between 10 and 17 years of age (Instituto da Segurança Social [ISS], 2016). Oriol, Sala-Roca, & Filella (2014) warn that adolescents in such care are more likely to have difficulties in social development and emotional skills. Studies show that institutionalized children have a higher prevalence of behavioral problems and deficits in adaptive functioning compared to children in the general population (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick & Litrownik, 1998; Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson & Ortiz, 2009). It is also observed a low level of cognitive development, weak social skills and difficulties in emotional regulation, being more probable the appearance of affective disorders, personality disorders and behavioral problems (Hukkanen, Sourander, Bergroth & Piha, 1999). The National Institute for Social Security (ISS, 2016) highlights the importance of interventions that contemplate the development of affective and social competencies, the development of programs adapted to the capacities and needs of these children and young people (ISS, 2016).

In this regard, Surf-Salva Camp 2016 was a pioneering Portuguese project undertaken during the summer of 2016, which aimed to contribute to the promotion of wellbeing and health, social inclusion, as well as developing beach security values and social citizenship in children and youth in foster care institutions. Surf can be used as a therapeutic mediator, and an increasing body of studies worldwide validate its use among vulnerable populations (Armitano, Clapham, Lamont, & Audette, 2015; Godfrey, Devine-Wright, & Taylor, 2015; Stuhl, & Porter, 2015). As examples of this practice, we highlight, in Australia, the “One Wave” project (<http://onewaveisallittakes.com>) and the “Waves for Change” project in South Africa (<http://www.waves-for-change.org>). With regard to the "Waves for Change" project, which had a major influence on the Surf-Salva Camp 2016 project, Snelling (2016) proposes

the term Surf Therapy to designate the benefits of the practice of surfing together with psychoeducational activities when working with children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion, as an alternative means to increase psychosocial wellbeing and to reduce the risk of social exclusion. .

In Europe, more specifically in the United Kingdom, there exists “The Wave Project” (<https://www.waveproject.co.uk>), whose authors report seven factors that interact and motivate a change among the individuals of the target population: 1) the sea provides a restorative environment; 2) individuals feel a connection with nature when they are in or by the sea; 3) surfing guarantees a sensory experience that assists in learning and promotes resilience; 4) a culture of acceptance allows young people to feel included; 5) recognition and positive reinforcement help in the development of a positive self-concept and self-esteem; 6) the existence of people with reference models proved to be beneficial; 7) regular contact between the participants and the instructors led to the building of trust and fostered learning (Godfrey, et al., 2015). Other studies report significant results in terms of assertiveness, empathy, responsibility and social involvement and positive results in social skills, as well as self-concept, self-control, cooperation, responsibility and involvement (Cavanaugh & Rademacher, 2014).

Inspired by the projects mentioned above, the main objective of Surf-Salva Camp 2016 was the implementation of a surf camp for vulnerable adolescents with psychosocial risk, where group dynamics and training were added as part of the surfing experience, thus combining the practice of surfing and the benefits of contact with nature with a therapeutic environment in group dynamics. It was hypothesized that the 1) participants on Surf-Salva Camp 2016 would have decreased values on behavioural problems and 2) the majority of the participants would feel that had learned surfing skills, self-regulation strategies, social and emotional skills and feel part of the group.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The Surf-Salva Camp 2016 project included 48 adolescents (70.8% boys) between 10 and 16 years of age, with a mean age of 13 years ( $SD = 1.7$ ). It was a convenience sample including adolescents in a situation of vulnerability and psychosocial risk, living in institutions providing temporary or permanent residential care, with which a partnership had been established. There were four of these institutions whose young people were included in three Surf-Salva Camps.

### **Procedure**

The Surf-Salva Camp 2016 took place on Carcavelos beach (Cascais) between June 21<sup>st</sup> and September 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, with 3 Camps at different dates. In each Camp, 8 morning sessions were held twice a week each with a duration of 4 hours,

Before the Camps began, individual meetings were held between the care institutions and the Association responsible for the project, which included the formal presentation of the project, a description of the objectives, mission, and values.

The sessions included 1) activities to promote social and emotional skills, 2) group cohesion activities, 3) surfing lessons, 4) awareness actions for an active safety culture at the beach, and 5) training to know how to help people in danger of drowning. The young people's group sessions were attended by technicians from the surf and social areas, which allied with the practice of surfing and the contact with nature helped to build a sense of belonging and security, based on a logic of respect for themselves and others, as well as being a space to learn and to foster connections between youth and positive reference figures interspersed with action and reflection activities.

### **Instruments**

At the beginning and at the end of each camp an evaluation of the impact of the Surf-Salva Camp 2016 was carried out concerning the areas considered relevant and/or at risk for the target. The initial assessment consisted of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) applied to young people and their tutor or legal guardian. In the final assessment, besides SDQ, we used the Youth Experiences Survey (Hansen & Larson, 2002 translated and adapted by Matos et al, 2014 and adapted to this work by Matos, Branquinho, Fauvelet & Santos, 2016). The completion of the scales took place during the time of the session, in order to ensure that the adolescents had help in understanding the questions, if necessary.

### **Data Analysis**

A first analysis included 29 of the initial 48 youngsters, 17 of whom were male (58.6%) and by means of raw descriptive data (%), analysis was made of the perceptions of young people and staff about the way Surf-Salva Camp 2016 affected their lives and behaviours. This analysis included those who were able to complete a final evaluation (post-evaluation), paired with their tutors and Surf Staff.

A second analysis included 32 adolescents from the initial 48 youngsters. 20 of whom were male (62.5%). This analysis included those who were able to complete both the initial assessment (pre-evaluation) and the final evaluation (post-evaluation). Analyses included basic descriptive analyses and comparative analysis (paired t tests).

### **Results**

Regarding the first analysis - Youth Experiences Survey at Surf-Salva Camp 2016, there was a positive increase regarding the subscales effort and perseverance, problem-solving, time management, social competences and interpersonal relationships, suggesting that the youngsters felt that the project brought changes with regard to these dimensions. Emotional adjustment items also increased, suggesting that youngsters perceived that the

surfing had helped them. As to the scale of negative situations, most of the youngsters reported not having felt either stress, the negative influence of peers or social exclusion. Regarding the prospects for the future: "this activity made him / her want to continue surfing", 83% of young people answered affirmatively (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

These results also strongly suggest that the competences related to learning surfing (items 38-47) and learning safety at sea (items 48-50) were reported as a positive achievement for most of the youngsters. Youngsters' perceptions were corroborated by staff of the camp and tutors from the institutions and a majority of inter-judge reliability was highlighted grey.

According to the results of the second analysis (see Table 2), there was an improvement in the difficulties perceived by the youngsters, and these were corroborated by the staff of the Camp and the tutors of the institutions. What is more, for overall skills, positive effects were verified. However, the latter was only true with regard to self-perception. The t-test of paired samples was performed to evaluate the impact of the Surf-Salva Camp 2016 on the subscales of the Capacities and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-PT), using both the self-report versions and by the parents (tutors) versions. Considering the self-report, there is a statistically significant decrease in the subscale behaviour problems between the initial evaluation ( $M = 8.60$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) and the final evaluation [ $M = 8.60$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ,  $t(29) = 2.57$ ,  $.05$ ].

Insert Table 2 about here

According to the evaluation of the tutors from the institutions, there is a statistically significant decrease in the emotional symptoms subscale between the initial evaluation ( $M = 8.63$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ) and the final evaluation [ $M = 7.63$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ,  $t(29) = 2.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ], a

statistically significant decrease in subscale behavioural problems, between the initial evaluation (M = 8.47, SD = 2.08) and the final evaluation [M = 7.60, SD = 1.59,  $t(29) = 2.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ] and also a statistically significant decrease in the total scale of difficulties between the initial evaluation (M = 37.11, SD = 5.79) and the final evaluation [M = 34.46, SD = 3.61,  $t(27) = 2.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

## **Discussion**

Surf-Salva Camp 2016 was an innovative project in Portugal. Our aim was to understand the impact of the program on a group of adolescents between 10 and 17 years old, living in care homes. It was hypothesized that the 1) participants in Surf-Salva Camp 2016 would have decreased values on behavioural problems and 2) the majority of the participants would feel that had learned surfing skills, self-regulation strategies, social and emotional skills and would feel part of the group.

The Surf-Salva Camp 2016 project design followed previous similar projects, namely “Waves for Change”, in South Africa and “The Wave Project”, in the United Kingdom. Like the above-mentioned programs, Surf-Salva Camp 2016 aimed to promote health and well-being in vulnerable youth. According to research in the field, these adolescents present a higher prevalence of difficulties in social, cognitive, affective and emotional development, as well as behavioural problems (Clausen, et al., 1998; Hukkanen, et al., 1999; Oriol, et al., 2014; Pecora, et al., 2009).

Snelling (2016) states that surf can be used as a therapeutic tool with children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion and names this procedure Surf-therapy, aiming at reducing social psychological symptoms and increasing psychosocial well-being through Surf. The Surf-Salva Camp 2016 was implemented in three camps each one with 16 participants. The sessions combined the practice of surf together with psychoeducational activities that aimed to promote social and emotional competencies and group cohesion.



With regard to the first analysis, it was possible to find positive results, according to what was expected. Regarding the items related to emotional regulation, most of the participants felt improvements and reported that they did learn about social and emotional competences. Group integration had also a positive result with 89.3% of the participants indicating that they felt included. They also reported not having felt stress and having succeeded in establishing positive relationships with significant adults. These data are in agreement with Godfrey, et al. (2015), who states that the sea provides a refreshing environment, that subjects feel in connection with nature when they are in the sea and this experience promotes resilience, a sense of inclusion, development of self-concept and self-esteem, and contact that with the other participants and coaches facilitates building trust and promotes learning.

Regarding the second analysis, which was related to the impact of surfing on maladaptive behaviours, positive results were also found. There was a statistically significant decrease in the subscale behaviour problems, for the self-report version, which was corroborated by the institutions' technicians. According to the tutors' perception, there was also a decrease in the subscale of emotional symptoms and in the scale referring to total difficulties. There were a number of difficulties during the implementation and evaluation of this process that must be overcome in future Camps as for instance the difficulties of interaction with the care Institutions, the fact that the evaluation team was not present from the very beginning of the project design, and also the difficulties in having the evaluations completed by both the participants and their tutors. Nevertheless the positive impact of Surf Therapy was evident at the Surf-Salva Camp 2016, where 83% of young people, who were not always very easy to motivate and who found it difficult at times to comply with extra activities, responded that they want to continue practicing Surf.

## **Conclusion**

According to the evaluation carried out, the intervention had a positive impact among the youth who took part. The areas of self-knowledge, exploration, effort and perseverance, problem-solving, time management, group competencies, interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation, all developed positively throughout the project. As for the future perspectives, the great majority expressed great interest in continuing to surf. The analysis of the SDQ-For questionnaires suggests a significant decrease in the variable behaviour problems between the two assessment moments, a result corroborated by the institutions' technicians. In the opinion of the institutions' technicians there was also a significant decrease in the subscale emotional symptoms and globally, in total perceived difficulties.

Regarding the results obtained, it can be concluded that surfing can be used as an instrument of psychotherapeutic intervention since our results show that it seems to be beneficial for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, wellbeing and personal and social skills in young people in contexts of psychosocial vulnerability.

Results suggest that this procedure, which Snelling (2016) termed Surf Therapy, had a number of positive effects: as seen, exploration, effort and perseverance, problem-solving, time management, social competencies, interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation had a positive evolution among the participants throughout the project.

Results support the claim that within a suitable theoretical framework, with a solid and well trained team and with adequate psychotherapeutic supervision and evaluation, Surf Therapy can be a very promising alternative in the psychosocial care of at a risk young people and public policies should consider this suggestion in the development of policies related to vulnerable institutionalized young people.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank LIDL Portugal (financial and promoting sponsor) and the Instituto de Socorro a Náufragos (promoting institution) for making the Surf Salva Camp 2016 possible; the authors would also like to thank all of the staff from Pensamento Vivo, namely the ones who worked in the camps, Aventura Social, FMH/ University of Lisbon; all of the staff at Waves for Change; and all the young people and tutors and staff from the institutions involved: Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Cascais (Centro de Acolhimento Temporário de Tercena), Associação Novo Futuro (Casas Amarela, Azul, Branca, Laminga, Laranja, Lilás e Verde), Casa Pia de Lisboa, Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa (Lar S. Francisco de Assis).

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Table 1 – Questionnaire Youth Experiences Survey at *Surf-Salva Camp 2016*, from youth, institutional Tutors and camp team staff (Hansen & Larson, 2002, translated and adapted by Matos et al, 2014 and adapted to this work by Matos, Branquinho, Fauvelet & Santos, 2016).

<i>Youth Experiences Survey at Surf-Salva Camp 2016</i>	Youth		Institutional Tutors		Camp Team staff	
	Yes F (%)	No F (%)	Yes F (%)	No F (%)	Yes F (%)	No F (%)
<b>Exploration</b>						
3. Tried doing new things	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)	27(96.4)	1(3.6)		
4. Tried a new way of acting	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
5. Did things that he/she does not do anywhere else	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)		
<b>Identity</b>						
6. Started thinking about the future	20 (64.5)	9 (29.0)	10 (34.5)	19 (65.5)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)
7. Started thinking about self	20 (64.5)	9 (29.0)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
8. Felt that he (or she) can make a difference	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	16(55.2)	13 (44.8)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)
9. This was a positive experience	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	22 (71)	7 (22.6)		
10. Thought about ethnic or racial heritage	11 (42.3)	15 57.7)	5 (17.2)	24 (82.8)		
<b>Goals</b>						
11. Set goals	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
12. Learned ways to achieve goals	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
13. Learned how to consider obstacles	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	26 (92.9)	2 (7.1)
14. Learned how to include others in the plan	16 (55.2)	13(44.8)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
<b>Effort</b>						
15. Put all energy into this activity	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
16. Learned to push him/herself	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
17. Learned that hard work pays off	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)	29 (100)		27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
18. Learned to focus attention	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
<b>Problem Solving</b>						
19. Observed others solving problems	19 (65.5)	10 (34.5)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)

20. Learned to make plans	19 (65.5)	10 (34.5)	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
21. Tried creative problem solving	18 (64.3)	10 (35.7)	20 (74.1)	7 (25.9)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)
<b>Time Management</b>						
22. Learned about organizing time	21 (72.4)	8 (27.6)	17 (60.7)	11 (39.3)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
23. Learned about setting priorities	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	18 (64.3)	10 (35.7)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
24. Practiced self-discipline	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	18 (64.3)	10 (35.7)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
<b>Emotional Regulation</b>						
25. Self-control	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	17 (58.6)	12 (41.4)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)
26. Dealt with fear and anxiety	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	19 (65.5)	10 (34.5)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
27. Handled stress	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
28. Learned to relax	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)
29. Learned that his/her emotions affect others	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	21 (72.4)	8 (27.6)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)
30. Learned when to express emotions	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	17 (58.6)	12 (41.4)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)
<b>Stress</b>						
31. Felt stress in this activity	4 (13.8)	25 (86.2)	3 (10.3)	26 (89.7)	13 (44.8)	16 (55.2)
32. Felt pressure	7 (24.1)	22 (75.9)	2 (6.9)	27 (93.1)	7 (24.1)	22 (75.9)
<b>Negative Peer Interaction</b>						
33. Negative influence	6 (20.7)	23 (79.3)	1 (3.4)	28 (96.6)	5 (17.2)	24 (82.8)
34. Felt bullying	3 (10.3)	26 (89.7)	1 (3.4)	28 (96.6)	4 (13.8)	25 (86.2)
<b>Social Exclusion</b>						
35. Felt like he/she doesn't belong	3 (10.7)	25 (89.3)	4 (13.8)	25 (86.2)		
36. Felt excluded	4 (13.8)	25 (86.2)	1 (3.4)	28 (96.6)	2 (6.9)	27 (93.1)
37. There were cliques in this activity	11 (40.7)	16 (59.3)	2 (7.4)	25 (92.6)	12 (41.4)	17 (58.6)
<b>Technical skills</b>						
38. Purposes of warming up exercises	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)
39. Learned how to prevent injury	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
40. Was able to get into water	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)
41. Felt good in the water	25 (89.3)	3(10.7)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)
42. Was able to lie on the surfboard	27 (96.4)	1 (3.6)	25 (92.6)	2 (7.4)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)

43. Step 1	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)	24 (100)		27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
44. Step 2	25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)	24 (100)		22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)
45. Step 3	25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)	23 (92.0)	2 (8.0)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)
46. Line up	24 (85.7)	4 (14.3)	23 (92.0)	2 (8.0)	6 (20.7)	23 (79.3)
47. Learned technical terms	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)			25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)
<b>Safety at the Sea</b>						
48. Learned how to help others	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	18 (62.1)	11 (37.9)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)
49. Learned how to be safe at the beach	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)
50. Felt satisfaction about being able to help	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
<b>Group Skills (Social Competences)</b>						
51. To be part of the group	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	28 (96.6)	1 (3.4)		
52. Team work	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)
53. Help others	26 (92.9)	2 (7.1)	23 (79.3)	6 (20.7)	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)
54. Shared responsibilities	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)
55. Was patient with friends	27 (93.1)	2 (6.9)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	25 (86.2)	4 (13.8)
56. Manage others influence	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>						
57. Made friendships	22 (78.6)	6 (21.4)	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)
58. Have something in common with someone	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)	22 (75.9)	7 (24.1)		
<b>Relations with important adults</b>						
59. Had good relationships with adults	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	15 (51.7)	14 (48.3)		
60. Had good talks with adults	19 (65.5)	10 (34.5)	19 (65.5)	10 (34.5)		
<b>Future Expectations</b>						
61. Thought about the future	20 (69.0)	9 (31.0)	12 (41.4)	17 (58.6)	25 (89.3)	3 (10.7)
62. Wants to continue surfing	24 (82.8)	5 (17.2)	26 (89.7)	3 (10.3)		



**Table 2 – Results of the SDQ-PT (Goodman, 1997), pre and post-evaluation: self-perception and institutional tutors**

<i>Subscales SDQ-PT</i>	Self-perceptions				Tutors			
	<i>Initial (X)</i>	<i>Final (X)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Initial (X)</i>	<i>Final (X)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Emotional Problems	8.64	8.54	0.27		8.61	7.65	2.60	.05
Behavioural Problems	7.47	6.63	2.39	.05	7.77	6.84	2.10	.05
Hyperactivity	8.62	8.20	0.97		8.74	8.42	0.69	
Peer Problems	7.86	7.32	1.68		7.86	7.24	1.90	
<b>Total of Difficulties</b>	32.48	30.63	1.68		32.9	29.97	2.50	.05