



The SAGE Encyclopedia of  
Intellectual and  
Developmental Disorders

Edited by  
Ellen Braaten





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## **Camp Shriver**

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This entry describes Camp Shriver, an inclusive summer camp that enrolls children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) and offers a look at the practice of social inclusion. The entry begins by discussing how inclusion has been conceptualized in schools and describing research on inclusion in summer camps and other nonacademic settings. It then discusses the history of Camp Shriver and looks at how the Camp Shriver site at the University of Massachusetts Boston implements inclusion. Finally, it discusses research findings on the benefits of the Camp Shriver model for campers and the implications of these findings for schools.

### **The Inclusion Movement**

The movement toward inclusion of children with disabilities in U.S. schools began in the 1970s and was reflected in landmark legislation, most notably the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education reported that over 50% of students with ID/DD spend 40% or more of their day in general education classrooms (physical inclusion) and are learning side by side with their peers without disabilities (instructional inclusion).

Nevertheless, despite these seemingly positive numbers from across the country, there is much research over the past 50 years that has shown that students with disabilities are not well accepted by their typically developing peers and do not experience all of the normative aspects of school (social inclusion). The promise of full inclusion in the classroom and school communities remains elusive. Social inclusion is challenging, especially as it is defined in terms of students with disabilities participating in all aspects of the school and being socially accepted and welcomed in these activities by their typically developing peers.

Although social inclusion has been elusive in many school communities, there is every indication that children with and without disabilities can learn and play as equals in community recreational programs, particularly summer camps. In these settings, children with disabilities are afforded opportunities to participate in activities with their peers on a daily basis. Inclusive summer camps have used activities such as team games and arts and crafts projects in ways that allow children with disabilities to cooperate and contribute through the same means of effort and teamwork as children without disabilities. Moreover, these activities put the focus on fun and games, not the mastery of academic skills or overall academic success.

A growing body of research suggests that summer camps and other nonacademic community settings are effective not only in achieving social inclusion (defined in such settings as full participation in all program activities along with the development of positive interpersonal relationships) but also in promoting a number of positive outcomes for those who participate, including improved social skills, communication skills, and self-esteem. These positive outcomes for children with disabilities are matched by the positive changes in children without disabilities. By participating in an inclusive environment, children without disabilities learn to see beyond differences and what it means to have a disability. The benefits of inclusion in recreational settings can be far reaching. However, these benefits are not widespread; just 6% of all camps listed on the website of the American Camp Association offer services for campers with disabilities.

## **Eunice Kennedy Shriver and the Birth of Camp Shriver**

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, known as founder of the Special Olympics, is one of the key figures responsible for bringing the camp experience to those with intellectual disabilities. In the summer of 1962, Shriver, the youngest sister of President John F. Kennedy, opened her home in Rockville, Maryland, to a camp for 35 individuals with intellectual disabilities. Camp Shriver, as it is referred to now, became an annual summer event during the 1960s and served as the forerunner for the Special Olympics movement.

In celebration of Shriver's 85th birthday, the Camp Shriver concept was rekindled in the summer of 2006 and implemented in six sites located in Maryland, Florida, Oregon, Louisiana, Missouri, and Massachusetts. The University of Massachusetts Boston has developed and implemented an efficacy-based inclusion model at the Massachusetts site of Camp Shriver that since 2006 has served over 1,000 children with and without disabilities. Camp Shriver at UMass Boston provides a recreational summer program that uses sports as a platform and emphasizes cooperatively structured activities in which all children, regardless of ability level, can participate and contribute equally.

### **Implementing the Inclusion Model**

The design of Camp Shriver at UMass Boston's recreational sports program ensures that all of the participating children, half of whom have ID/DD, participate fully in all sports and nonsport activities. During sports activities every effort is made to balance the cooperative aspects of sports with skills instruction by emphasizing personal skill development, achievement, and effort as well as the fun aspects of playing sports. In addition, the nonsport activities in the program require children to work together, support one another, and achieve a common goal, all while having fun.

Unique to the inclusion model is that children are grouped into teams of approximately 16 similar-age campers, half of whom have a disability. Counselors, usually in a 4:1 camper-to-staff ratio, focus on the motor development and social skills of each individual child with an emphasis on all children being supported in participating with their team members. The entire camp staff, including bus drivers, food servers, and nurses, is instructed in best practices for promoting social inclusion. Thus, inclusion is a whole camp/staff focus, a focus that begins the moment campers board the bus in the morning and ends when they step off the bus in the afternoon.

### **Benefits**

Evidence clearly demonstrates that children with ID/DD are able to form positive social relationships when participating equally alongside their nondisabled peers in cooperatively structured recreational activities. When children with ID/DD participate alongside their nondisabled peers in a recreational sports program, social inclusion is possible. A supportive, inclusive structure creates a sense of belonging among all campers: Consistently since 2006, almost all campers have reported feeling included in activities and feeling proud of belonging to their team. Even more indicative of the inclusive environment established at Camp Shriver, nearly all campers reported feeling that their teammates—with and without disabilities—liked them the way they are.

Almost all children attending the program were socially accepted and made new friends. Lastly, all children, irrespective of ability level, said that the best part of the camp experience

was having “fun.” It might seem self-evident that the key outcome of a child’s successful camp experience is “fun,” but all one needs to do is to turn to developmental models of friendship to see the pivotal role that “having fun” plays in developing and sustaining friendship between children. Children given the opportunity to learn and play together as equals in a fun environment is the first important step toward social inclusion, and “fun” is that key ingredient for bringing all children together, with and without disabilities.

### Implications for Schools

Findings from the research on Camp Shriver at UMass Boston lend themselves most readily to supporting the expansion of inclusive recreational programs nationally, but they also can offer guidance to the school setting, where children spend the majority of their time outside of the home. For example, highlighting the individual strengths and talents of children and emphasizing those skills that are attainable by children with and without ID/DD, such as teamwork, improvement, and sports skills, allows all children positive recognition. The ideal settings in the school context for these nonacademic talents to be acknowledged are clearly those most similar to a recreational setting, such as recess and physical education. For example, programming team sports and cooperative games that allow for the participation and inclusion of all students during recess or gym could easily provide a way to showcase a wider variety of children’s nonacademic skills.

It is precisely during the less structured times of the school day that children report having the most fun. Fun has often been referred to as a great equalizer because children can experience it together and contribute to it regardless of their intellectual and developmental challenges. The research on Camp Shriver indicates that when the focus is on recreation and having fun together, the social inclusion of children with disabilities is possible.

**See also** [Elementary Education for Students With Developmental Disabilities](#); [Free Appropriate Public Education](#); [Functional Inclusion](#); [Inclusion](#); [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#); [Social Inclusion](#)

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#### Further Readings

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