



Best Practices in Inclusive Camping

A Roundtable Discussion on Programming

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Following the lead of educators in school communities, recreation professionals across the United States are opening their doors to increasingly diverse participants. There has been a particular focus on the inclusion of participants with disabilities to provide opportunities for these children and youth to attend day and resident camp programs alongside their peers without disabilities (Jaha-Echols, 2017). However, programs have different definitions and understandings of “inclusion.” One way to understand inclusion is to use a continuum that reflects level and quality of participation, peer interactions, and sense of belonging for all campers. This continuum is benchmarked by physical, functional, and social inclusion (Schleien, Miller, Walton, Roth, & Tobin, 2017).

- **Physical inclusion:** Campers with disabilities are present with other campers for some activities throughout the day. At best, they are in close physical proximity to their peers without disabilities.
- **Functional inclusion:** Campers with disabilities are not only physically included, but through accommodations and modifications they successfully participate in activities with other campers.
- **Social inclusion:** At the highest level of inclusion, campers of varying abilities participate in all aspects of camp together and engage socially throughout the day, with myriad social outcomes accrued by participants (Miller, Schleien, Walton, & Tobin, 2018). For example, in one successful model of an inclusive sports camp, comprehensive evaluations show that participants both with and without disabilities are socially accepted by their peers, make new friends, and improve their sports skills (Siperstein, Glick, Bardon, Harada, & Parker, 2007; Siperstein, Glick, & Parker, 2009).



As more program directors offer inclusive programs, an expanding compendium of evidence-based practices are known to promote inclusion at all three levels. An initiative (funded by the National Inclusion Project and directed by the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston) is underway to create an accreditation process for inclusive camps based on a set of standards and criteria. As an initial step in developing the standards, a series of four roundtable discussions was organized, each focusing on one of the major domains of camping: administration, facilities and resources, programming,

and evaluation. Discussed here are findings relevant to inclusive programmatic practices at camp.

Roundtable Participants

The roundtable participants were seven members of a team assembled to design, develop, and implement a national accreditation process for inclusive recreation programs. Participants possessed a range of perspectives on and experiences with inclusion. Two participants are full-time practitioners holding leadership roles in nationally recognized inclusive camp programs; one is responsible for providing inclusion training and support at the national level to program directors and

For More Information

The roundtable discussion findings described here (along with subsequent surveys of practitioners) and similar findings relating to administration, facilities and resources, staffing, and evaluation have led to the creation of standards and criteria that should guide promotion and implementation of inclusive practices across camp programs and other recreation settings (see below for examples). They should also provide prospective participants and family members with information that will help them make educated decisions about the most appropriate programs to attend. Following are several examples of such standards and criteria:

Example 1: Transitions promote positive social interactions and positive social behaviors among participants with and without disabilities.

- Adequate time and/or necessary support are provided for participants with disabilities to transition between activities (e.g., move to a different location, prepare for a different activity).
- Program staff create opportunities for participants with and without disabilities to engage in positive social interactions and positive social behaviors during transitions (e.g., helping to initiate conversations among participants, suggesting appropriate conversation topics, using the “buddy system” to encourage participants to support certain peers through the transition).

Example 2: When needed, accommodations are made to provide opportunities for all participants to engage in the same activity.

- If one or more participants experience challenges participating in an activity as it was planned, adjustments are made to the activity rules/requirements, materials/equipment, space, instruction (e.g., instructional prompts), and/or communication (e.g., sign language, pictures) to facilitate participation.

Example 3: Meaningful choices are offered to participants with and without disabilities.

- Participants are offered choices *among* activities (e.g., different types of activities, different variations/modifications).
- Participants are offered choices *during* activities (e.g., different equipment/materials, different locations, different partners/group members).

For more information on these standards and criteria, please contact Gary Siperstein, PhD, (director of UMass Boston’s Center for Social Development and Education) at gary.siperstein@umb.edu, or Nick Leisey (executive director of the National Inclusion Project) at nickleisey@inclusionproject.org.

staff; and four are professors at universities whose responsibilities include conducting research on inclusion and teaching at the graduate level in their respective fields. Participants’ areas of specialization included therapeutic recreation, adapted physical education, developmental psychology, and inclusive leisure services.

An interview guide was used to initiate and direct the roundtable conversation, beginning with the following lead request: *Please describe services you consider best practices to include individuals with disabilities into recreation opportunities.*

Roundtable Results

Two primary themes emerged from the roundtable discussion. These themes were associated with actions that camp staff should take to facilitate inclusion, particularly social inclusion that ensures full participation and promotes social connections.

ENSURE FULL PARTICIPATION

One of the most prominent themes that participants addressed and appeared most passionate about, was the importance of all campers’ full participation in program activities. Participants consistently emphasized that a major goal of inclusive camping is for all individuals to participate actively in equitable experiences. To facilitate this level of engagement, participants identified the need for staff to accommodate campers with diverse skill levels and make adaptations to promote the inclusion of all participants. To achieve this, a fundamental principle emerged: “Counselors should plan for children with the highest level of need, as opposed to the opposite. This way, you ensure that everyone is included.” Additionally, it was recognized that not all campers have to participate in camp activities in identical ways but should be granted opportunities to participate in similar activities that are equitable in nature (Miller et al., 2018). An example of this planning was captured in the following explanation:

We’re planning a basketball activity for the gym, but rather than assuming that every child has some motor skills to participate in dribbling the basketball, we are going to have balloons and beach balls on hand for that activity, so that we know that whatever kid comes in is going to be able to participate.

However, planning for full participation is not the reality for many camp programs:

Planning should . . . start with the needs of the camper and progress from there, rather than, as is often more common, you sometimes start from your budget, from the staff already there, from your facilities. Then you end up with a program or activity nobody comes to or benefits from.

When offering swimming opportunities, most camps group campers according to their abilities (e.g., beginner, middle, and advanced swimmers). This practice can be applied to many other normative camp activities; “by doing so, the program will naturally account for campers with disabilities who fall into one or more ability groupings,” ultimately promoting full participation. A connected point made by participants was the clarification of what is meant by full participation: campers with disabilities should “have an equal opportunity [to participate in an activity], rather than having to do it identically.” For example:

“Well, this kid really hates to swim, he’s going to have a major tantrum every time you bring him to the water, but . . . we could figure something out that’s equitable. Maybe he gets his exercise a different way, by walking around the swimming pool while the other kids swim.” Just for a simple idea, that’s equitable participation . . . He’s getting exercise; he sees the other kids; he’s walking with a buddy while the other kids swim.

Simply stated, there needs to be equitable participation of campers with and without disabilities. Even with maximal planning to fully include campers with disabilities, all things may not be successful. So, participants agreed:

It’s adapt, overcome, and improvise. If something’s not working, let’s quickly think about what you can change in the activity. Do you try a different activity, or do you throw the activity out and start with something new? Giving [counselors] that strategy in orientation is empowering them to just say, “Oh, it’s cool to do

this, and it’s OK to do this. I’ll go ahead and do it.”

Full participation in camp programs need not be limited to structured activities. As one of the participants pointed out, to promote participation in unstructured activities and free play, “establish simple rules. For example, ‘you must be moving around; you must be trying to play with a friend; you cannot be sitting down.’ So even though it’s unstructured, there are rules that go with it.”

Another participant elaborated with additional examples of “rules” that counselors can offer campers during unstructured time:

“These are the options today: Try to play a game that you haven’t played before or play with someone you haven’t played with before.” At the end of the activity, counselors should reconvene the group and review the activity. For example, “Raise your hand if you played with someone new

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today; raise your hand if you played a new game today." The routine is the structure within free play, so even an unstructured activity has an element of structure.

As illustrated in these examples, even during unstructured time, counselors play a critical role in ensuring that all campers are engaged and included:

The staff is part of the activity. So they are there either participating as full participants, or a staff person is there to get the game started and then back away and let the kids develop as they go along . . . The key to the whole free play, unstructured free time is that [campers] think it's cool, but the staff is involved, making sure [the activity] goes the way it should go.

It takes a comprehensive set of camp practices to successfully include children and youth of varying abilities. During the roundtable discussion, participants repeatedly identified the importance of "full participation" as the starting point for best practices in inclusive programming. When campers are welcomed and accommodated in all camp activities — even though several may be modified for equitable participation — inclusion becomes a reality. It is only then that campers of all abilities gain opportunities to connect meaningfully with their peers.

PROMOTE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The second prominent theme addressed by participants was the social aspect of inclusion in particular — the importance of campers with and without disabilities developing meaningful relationships with their peers. To achieve this outcome, participants advocated that camp staff focus their attention on fostering social connections between participants, explaining that, "counselors need to be intentional in the way they help campers make friends." Acting intentionally means that counselors need to know their campers:

The key from the get-go is that there is intention, which includes knowing your participants . . . and the goals, and figuring out how we're going to get [campers] to accept each other and enjoy each other.

One participant explained that with a foundation of social connection and a sense of belonging among campers, everything else falls into place: "Once you have the social piece, then participation gets better, behavior gets better, you know, everything improves because kids feel connected and have ownership in that."

To promote social connections in camp settings, participants stated that it is important for campers both with and without disabilities to be continually learning the social skills that make friendships successful. In turn, friendships help with the continual development of social skills: "Social skills instruction is always happening . . . No matter what is taking place, children are learning in activities throughout the day."

One example of ongoing, informal social skills instruction is "when a child is sitting on the sidelines and a counselor helps the camper into an ongoing group and models the social behavior . . ." Counselors can provide social support through modeling that focuses on social skills such as "cheer[ing] each other on," more broadly, "reward[ing] good sports, not just good athletes;" and, finally, helping campers "recognize fair play, good deeds, and being a good friend."

Counselors act as role models to prepare campers to be accepting of others, "so that when they see one of their peers sitting out, they encourage them to join the group, bringing them back into the group. That behavior creates the group sense."

Counselors can also convey the expectation of social support from the beginning of an activity: "Any time counselors introduce a game, the basic rule of the game is we take care of each other."

Expanding on this point, participants felt that "a very important part of programming is preparing peers for interacting with their fellow campers with disabilities . . . Programs are so much more effective when [counselors] are intentionally speaking to the non-disabled peers . . . [They] need to learn . . . specifically how to be a good friend to somebody who's very different than [they] are."

One defining aspect of friendship is the opportunity to be a helper: "For campers with and without disabilities, sometimes learning how to be a friend means learning how to help your peer." Moreover, "it's important to recognize that there are times when the camper with a disability is going to be the helper and not the helpee . . . Sometimes,

when we start assigning buddies, we think, 'Okay, this camper [without a disability] can help this camper with a disability,' and not necessarily vice versa."

Some of the most social time in camp is when campers are involved in unstructured activities, including, and often most importantly, transitions between activities. The importance of the counselor is especially prominent during transitions:

[Staff] need to be intentional in planning for transitions . . . and it's dealing with not just promoting social connections but addressing social problems. If there is a problem area at camp, it's typically not during the activities; it's typically on the way to and from activities.

Overall, through their examples, participants elucidated specific best practices in camp settings that help campers connect with each other in meaningful, social ways. It is when these programmatic practices are set in motion that campers with and without disabilities have opportunities to fully participate together and develop

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positive social relationships as teammates, bunkmates, and genuine friends.

OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

In identifying practices that camp staff should implement to achieve social inclusion, participants addressed not only how inclusion looks when it works, but also what campers both with and without disabilities gain from inclusive camp programming. Threaded throughout the conversation was the idea that *inclusion benefits all campers*, which is the essence of universal design. The participants emphasized that by planning for a range of ability levels, all children can have fun and enjoy their experience: "I think [modified activities] can be more fun for everybody too. Even if I'm really good at dribbling a regular basketball, I really enjoy playing around with a big one too."

Incorporating choice into programming also "allows children to . . . enjoy themselves regardless of their abilities or skills." Furthermore, by ensuring that all campers have a place in every camp activity, they develop a sense of competence — they "feel like they have the skills and abilities to participate." The idea of competence was captured in the following example about volleyball:

When it's your turn to serve, I have poly spots at different places, and if you need to, we'll have someone pull the net down for you, to make it over. So some of them say, "Oh, wow, I think I can do it this way."

As a result, the "sense of competence" that is created among participants is "ongoing":

It's about feedback, about progress, feedback in terms of benchmarks of, "Wow, you got to this! You're now holding on and kicking!" It's basically providing the child, who often comes with a fear of failure, with a sense of "I can do it." The key is to be able to provide a mirror to the child for her to see that she is making progress.

With fun and enjoyment being the major tenets of any camp, the discussion of best practices highlighted the importance of all campers having positive experiences that ultimately lead to increased competence and confidence.

Further Discussion

Social inclusion is rarely a naturally occurring process for people with disabilities. However, when administrators and staff demonstrate the organizational will to create a socially inclusive culture, inclusive camps become a reality. Fundamental to organizational will is that all camp staff are guided by the importance of intentionality — intentionality of leadership staff in planning activities and empowering counselors, and intentionality of counselors in ensuring full participation and promoting social connections (Schleien et al., 2017). In a successful inclusive camp, social inclusion is threaded throughout everything that happens — structured activities, unstructured activities, and transitions. At any given time, campers who need extra support, regardless of their ability, receive the accommodations needed to facilitate equitable participation. Each camp is different, each activity is different, and each camper's needs are different; but with ingenuity to generate new ideas and alternative solutions, and a willingness to keep trying if something fails the first time, camp staff can make it possible for every camper to enjoy the summer camp experience (Means & McIntire, 2017). To reiterate the words of one participant, "it's adapt, overcome, improvise." Inclusive camps will become a widespread opportunity across our communities only when best practices in support of social inclusion become customary. This is when many more campers with disabilities will enjoy the wonders of camp alongside peers without disabilities.

Photos on pages 52–53 courtesy of Camp John Marc, Dallas, Texas.

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Aron Hall is the director of programs for the National Inclusion Project. In his 13 years with the project, Aron has developed and implemented its partnering model with over 125 partners in 38 states.

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