

Best Practices for INCLUSIVE CAMPS



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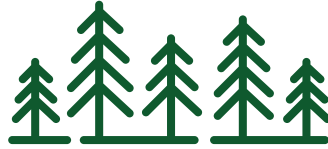
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**To the camp counselors, program staff, inclusion coordinators,
and administrators who work tirelessly for inclusion. And to
the children of all abilities, along with their families, who make
camps places of joy and belonging.**

Mary Stuart me: Emily

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Foreword

by Clay Aiken

Chairman and Co-Founder of the National Inclusion Project

Ever since I proclaimed myself an “adult” as a young teenager, I’ve found enjoyment in working with children. I might not be getting dirty in a campsite or teaching in the classroom anymore, but these experiences helped me become a lifelong advocate for children. Through the work of the National Inclusion Project (NIP), a nonprofit organization that I co-founded with Diane Bubel, I am proud to say that my advocacy continues today, as we are committed to the inclusion of children with disabilities.

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, but my passion for special education began while working at the YMCA in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was part of the Y’s summer camp staff as a high school student, and it didn’t take me long to realize that working with children with behavioral and emotional disabilities was something I was meant to do. As I was finishing college, the principal of the school that hosted the Y’s after-school program asked me to serve as the substitute teacher for students with autism while their teacher was on maternity leave, and I agreed. There was a student in my class who I will call “Molly.” In addition to being nonverbal, Molly frequently displayed self-stimulation behaviors and lacked functional communication skills. I loved her, but her behavior could be challenging, to say the least. At the end of the school year, I remember wondering what Molly and the rest of my students would do during the summer when school was out.

Before I knew it, the classroom was closed, and camp opened for the summer. I transitioned to working at the YMCA, where I supervised campers from second to fifth grades. On the first day of camp, as I walked around our campsite checking on huddle rosters (camp sub-groups), I met a fifth grade camper who I will call “Ana.” Ana had a very memorable last name that immediately

stood out to me; it was the same as Molly’s. I asked Ana if she had any brothers or sisters, and she told me that she had an older sister named Molly! Recognizing the connection, I got excited and told her I had a student by that name. Ana replied, “Yeah, I know. You’re my sister’s teacher!” It was simply an interesting coincidence, and I asked her what Molly was doing over the summer. To this day, I can clearly recall her reply: “She’s going to camp. She’s here.”

I felt a sinking in my stomach. No one in camp leadership had been informed that a child with autism had signed up to attend. No one was prepared. Somehow, Ana and Molly had arrived at camp with no one noticing Molly’s rather obvious special needs. My mind raced. I oversaw all 300 kids and camp huddles for campers 7 to 11 years old. Molly was 12. She must have been assigned to one of the 12-year-old huddles all the way on the other side of camp. My feet might have touched the ground two or three times on the way across the property to the older camp. What I do know is that I have never run faster!

When I got over to Molly’s campsite, both of her camp counselors and all of the other kids were clustered on one side, staring at Molly. She was standing over by a tree, flicking it with her fingers, self-stimulating and totally unconcerned about anyone else. Her counselors were confused; they had no idea what to do. My counterpart who supervised them was nowhere to be found at the time, so I took Molly with me.

When Molly and I got to the camp’s main office, my boss informed me that I would need to call Molly’s mother and ask her to come pick Molly up; he wasn’t willing to let her stay at camp. The staff and program were not prepared to accommodate her. My mind turned to Molly’s parents, who I knew relatively well. I knew that they both worked

full-time jobs and could not be prepared to find out that the plans they had made for childcare that summer were about to vanish into thin air. I imagined where Molly might end up spending her summer—almost certainly not in a place where she would have the benefit of any social interaction.

I told my supervisor that I wouldn't accept summarily sending Molly home. "We can make it work," I said confidently. After all, she was a child I knew well. I knew her specific needs and knew in detail what strategies worked well for her. He continued to push back, and our discussion turned into an argument that I am still surprised didn't end with both Molly and me being sent home. But the more I thought about the position I was being ordered to put Molly and her parents in, the more it became evident to me that perhaps I could turn the tables myself.

I finally told my boss that if Molly was sent home from camp, I would quit. What's more, I was certain that a large percentage of the counselors who worked for me (almost all of them idealistic high school and college-aged kids) would also leave once they heard that a camper was being banished simply due to a disability. That did the trick. He agreed to give me a chance to figure out how to make it work. Then the hard part began—or at least what you might assume would be the hard part.

Including Molly wasn't hard at all, though. I did move her out of the older kids' camp and into my camp with younger children. I didn't place her in my oldest huddle, either. Remember, Molly's sister, Ana, was in my oldest huddle. I knew that at 10 years old, Ana already spent much of her time helping her parents tend to Molly's needs. I didn't think it was fair to place Molly in her sister's huddle and expect Ana to tend to her sister all summer. Ana needed a summer vacation, too! So Molly joined one of the 9-year-old huddles. While this wasn't ideal for inclusion due to the age disparity, I knew that I would be able to have more direct involvement with Molly without taxing her sister. Since we didn't have the benefit of planning in advance, I felt this was the best way to move forward at the time.

I worked with Molly's new counselors to help them identify ways to support Molly when she needed it. They were thrilled to get to work with her to make sure she had a great experience. Those two counselors probably didn't realize how meaningful their willingness to adapt really was—for Molly, her family, and everyone else at camp that summer. Admittedly, Molly didn't participate nearly as much as we would like in an ideal situation, but she enjoyed almost the entire summer, made friends, and was a part of the camp family just like every other camper.

And you know what? The kids in that 9-year-old huddle—who in previous years had been difficult to get to follow directions and participate—behaved so much better! For the campers in that huddle, being positive examples for Molly became their joy and goal. The counselors would let them earn the chance to be Molly's "buddy" for the day. They all learned about disability and acceptance. It ended up being a great experience for everyone.

Inclusion at that camp was not difficult at all. By the end of the summer, even the supervisor who had been so hesitant initially, had to admit that allowing Molly to stay at camp was the right thing to do. Not only had her presence been free of the disruptions or complications he was worried about, but she had been an incredible addition to camp!

As for me, I decided that summer that during the coming school year, I wanted to begin laying some groundwork at the YMCA. I wanted to work toward developing a position at that branch for an inclusion director—someone who would be tasked with making sure all of the programs were prepared to accept and include kids with disabilities. Now, I must be honest here. I'd be lying if I said that was a totally selfless effort. The truth is, I wanted that job for myself. However, 2 months later, I auditioned for a new TV singing competition. Suffice to say, my path diverted.

To most people, that audition is where my story really begins. Nowadays most folks remember me as the guy who lost to Ruben Studdard on that season of *American Idol*. Even though this marked the beginning of a pattern of coming in second

place, I'm incredibly thankful for the platforms that have become available because of that opportunity. Singing is something that has always been a source of happiness in my life. It brought me to *American Idol*, allowed me to use my voice in ways I never expected, and ultimately sent me off on the unexpected journey that I'm still enjoying. But whether I'm singing, producing, or spending time with friends and family, I often check in with my "adult" self and think about how those early camp and classroom experiences still impact my life to this day.

Beyond the giggles and good times, research shows that inclusive recreation boosts children's confidence, independence, creativity, and self-concept. They learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They explore passions and expand interests. They learn to make choices and take risks. Camp positively impacts social-emotional, physical, and intellectual growth. It builds life-long friendships and fosters relationships. Therefore, when children with disabilities are excluded from opportunities like attending camp, they are missing out on essential developmental and social experiences. And it's not only summer camp experiences that children with disabilities often find themselves excluded from. After-school programs, extracurricular sports leagues and lessons, scouting programs, art programs, and even community center youth programs have all too often been inaccessible for children with disabilities.

Society has made notable progress in improving opportunities for individuals with disabilities in education, employment, and accessibility. Unfortunately, recreational and social experiences often remain isolated, limited, and segregated. Furthermore, camp professionals often don't get the tools or training needed to effectively serve children with diverse needs, leaving them underprepared and ill equipped. This lack of access is why we created NIP nearly 20 years ago and have worked diligently since then to provide organizations with the tools and training they need to meaningfully include all children in their programs.

This book addresses the disparity and variation of inclusive recreation experiences for children with disabilities. It helps bridge the gap between the philosophical and practical nature of creating inclusive camps. The authors and editors provide practical strategies, and validated resources that camp professionals can use in their programs right away. Each chapter will help you understand how to implement the "Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs," illustrated by real-camp examples of inclusive practices. NIP has been fortunate to collaborate with the editors of this book on numerous initiatives, and I can personally attest to the value of their cumulative experience and wisdom about inclusive recreation. They truly are among America's foremost experts in adaptive and inclusive practices, and it has been one of the honors of my life to know them.

What they would have thought about our "makeshift" inclusion with Molly some 20 years ago, I don't know. It was slapdash and untested. I only wish I had their guidance and expertise to help me back then. What I do believe they would have been proud of, though, was the effort and the intention. The buy-in and commitment from Molly's dedicated and passionate camp counselors was commendable. Their selflessness and eagerness to make sure she was included showed a wisdom and maturity that their older contemporaries took much longer to develop. The enthusiasm from the other campers to include Molly was remarkable. They enveloped her with love, helped teach her, and just as importantly, learned from her. That effort is the foundation of what it takes to make inclusion possible. The anxieties and concerns about the difficulty of making a program inclusive are almost always worse than the reality; the benefits and rewards are almost always greater than could ever be imagined.

I never got the chance to help create the inclusion director position at that YMCA branch, but a year after my season of *American Idol* ended, NIP began its first program partnership with that summer camp and provided resources and training to make sure the program was inclusive for all children. Within a year, after seeing how possible

and important inclusion is, they had created the position on their own. All it takes is the openness to try.

Believing that every child can and should be included may be the single most important belief

for you to hold onto as you work to embrace inclusion in your practices. I thank you for your commitment to inclusion and hope you find this book as informative and inspiring as I do. Together, we can all make a difference.



About the Editors



Gary N. Siperstein, PhD, is a Professor Emeritus in the College of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In 1976, he founded the Center for Social Development and Education, where he remains Director. Over the past five decades, he has published more than 100 articles, chapters in 23 edited books, and three co-authored books on teaching social skills at the elementary level. His research and program development focuses on the social inclusion of children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In 2006, in honor of the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver's 85th birthday, he founded Camp Shriver at UMass Boston. Throughout his career, Gary has served as associate editor and editor of peer-reviewed research journals, and he

has served on committees and received awards from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the Massachusetts Governor's Council on Disabilities, Harvard Law School, and the National Research Council (NRC), among others.



Stuart J. Schleien, PhD, LRT/CTRS, serves as an Executive Director for InFocus Advocacy, an organization that empowers individuals of varying abilities who are marginalized by society to create more welcoming, accessible, and accommodating communities. He was formerly Professor and Chair of the Department of Community and Therapeutic Recreation at the University of North Carolina Greensboro from 1997 to 2022, and currently holds Professor Emeritus status. As a Licensed Recreational Therapist and Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist, he pioneered innovative approaches that continue to help parents and professionals design inclusive recreation, physical activity, summer camp, peer companion, and volunteer programs for children and adults with

diverse skills and abilities. He has specific expertise as a systems change agent for inclusive service delivery, helping agencies manage successful organizational change and development. Dr. Schleien has published extensively on recreation, friendship, and advocacy skills development in support of the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in valued community roles and settings. He has written seven books and over 125 journal articles and book chapters on these topics. He was the recipient of the Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt Award for Excellence in Recreation and Park Research, the most prestigious award bestowed upon a researcher by the National Recreation and Park Association. Dr. Schleien has presented his work throughout the U.S. and Canada, and in Australia, England, Germany, Israel, Spain, and Sweden.



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Physical Education (now in its 4th edition), *Developmental and Adapted Physical Activity Assessment* (now in its 2nd edition), and *Inclusive Physical Education around the World: Origins, Cultures, Practices*. Dr. Block also was a consultant with Special Olympics, Inc., from 1988 to 2000, where he was the primary author of the *Motor Activities Training Program* (MATP), a sports program for athletes with severe disabilities. He has been the Editor of the journal *PALAESTRA* for the past 10 years, and he is Past President of the International Federation of Adapted Physical Activity (IFAPA) and the National Consortium for Physical Education for Individuals with Disabilities (NCPEID).



Emily D. McDowell, MS, is a Research and Evaluation Associate at the Utah Education Policy Center, where she supports the ongoing development and improvement of educational policies, programs, and practices. She completed her Master of Science in Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG). Prior to that, she was a Project Coordinator in the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston, leading a variety of research and evaluation initiatives focused on the inclusion of youth with disabilities in educational and recreational settings. Emily has worked with programs funded by Special Olympics, the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Science

Foundation, as well as state and local boards of education, K-12 schools, community colleges, STEM centers, out-of-school networks, and recreation programs. She is committed to helping organizations use data to effectively and equitably serve youth with diverse backgrounds, goals, and needs, and she enjoys partnering with educators and practitioners to promote data-driven growth.

Introduction

As the camp community knows, the joyous camp environment full of friendship, play, learning, and laughter is an experience that every child should have. Presently, there is a wide range of camps with both day and resident programs that serve children of all ages and interests. Some camps are designed to serve specific populations of children with disabilities or medical needs. While segregated programs play an important role in providing camp experiences for children with disabilities, some of these children dream of attending camp alongside their siblings or peers without disabilities.

Take Esther for example—a happy, outgoing, 14-year-old who loves playing basketball with her two older brothers, listening to music with her friends, and eating pizza. For the past two summers, Esther has gone to Camp Easter Seals, a camp for children with disabilities. Esther was born with spina bifida, which resulted in her being paralyzed from the waist down. She uses a wheelchair for mobility, but she can take care of her personal needs without any help. Her parents chose Camp Easter Seals because they felt the staff there would be best equipped to handle Esther's unique physical needs, especially since the camp facilities are fully accessible. They also felt that she would be more readily accepted by peers who had similar physical disabilities.

This year, as Esther's parents are getting ready to sign her up for camp, Esther says she would like to go to the same camp as her friends at school. Her friends go to a camp in the mountains and talk about how much fun they have hanging out in the cabins, riding horses, and going swimming and canoeing in the camp lake. While Esther has always enjoyed Camp Easter Seals, her parents understand why she wants to try a different camp with her school friends—after all, she has been in regular classrooms at public schools since she was in kindergarten, and she has always been successful and happy. However, Esther's parents begin to

question whether this camp in the mountains is equipped to serve a child who uses a wheelchair. Are the cabins and bathrooms accessible? Will the camp activities be designed (or adapted) to allow Esther to participate? Will the staff know how to help Esther and make her feel welcome? And perhaps most importantly, will the other campers be accepting of Esther and make her feel part of the social world of camp?

Unfortunately, Esther's parents' concerns are not unique—they represent what is on the minds of many parents who have children with disabilities and are contemplating the transition into less segregated, more inclusive settings. This book is about creating camps that successfully bring children with and without disabilities together so that families like Esther's can send their child to any camp they choose, without hesitation.

During the past decade, there has been an exciting new focus on the inclusion of children and adolescents with disabilities in day and resident camps (Jaha-Echols, 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). When talking about inclusion, we focus on social inclusion, which involves both interpersonal relationships and community participation (Simplican et al., 2015). In the camp context, social inclusion occurs through the positive interpersonal relationships that develop and take place between campers across all activities that a camp provides.



These relationships often form naturally at camps. For example, two campers at a Boys & Girls Club day camp, one who happens to have a visual impairment, are huge basketball fans. They become good friends by playing and talking about basketball together at camp—their shared love of basketball unites them despite their differences in visual ability. Or take a group of girls, one of whom has an intellectual disability, sharing a cabin at a summer resident camp. These girls bond through their love of making bracelets during arts and crafts time, and one of the girls draws step-by-step pictures on the whiteboard each day to help her friend with a disability learn the new bracelet patterns. All of the girls find the pictures on the whiteboard to be helpful, and they decide to take turns picking new patterns and drawing them on the whiteboard each day.

These types of naturally occurring connections are wonderful when they happen, but physically including a child with a disability in a camp setting alongside children without disabilities does not guarantee positive social relationships. The focus of this book is to help camp leaders and staff create a camp environment that intentionally fosters and promotes social inclusion for all children.

There is a growing body of research describing the many benefits of inclusive settings for campers of all ability levels (Uhrman et al., 2019).

Campers with disabilities in inclusive programs demonstrate increased independence, self-esteem, socialization, and recreation skills (e.g., Brannan et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2018). Parents also report that inclusive recreation opportunities increase their children’s ability to communicate and play appropriately with peers while building social relationships (Mayer & Anderson, 2014).

Imagine a boy who is on the autism spectrum who struggles making friends. With support from camp counselors and understanding peers, this child eventually learns some of the social norms and behaviors of friendship, such as high-fiving a girl who makes a good shot in basketball or getting an extra brownie at dinner for his cabinmate. Over time, this boy is accepted as a friend by his peers, and at the end of the session, his cabinmates ask for his phone number so they can stay in touch and remain friends after camp.

Children without disabilities, like this boy’s cabinmates, also benefit from attending inclusive camps. They develop recreation skills, sportsmanship, and patience, and learn to recognize similarities among their peers, understand differences, and accept people for who they are (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Miller & Schleien, 2000; Siperstein et al., 2007). For example, it is easy for peers to see a child who uses crutches due to cerebral palsy as “the girl who walks funny,” focusing on her physical differences. However, as children without disabilities spend more time with this girl, the crutches and physical differences become less noticeable, and the similarities and joint interests become the foundation for friendship.

Given the extensive benefits of inclusion, many parents are opting to have their children attend previously noninclusive camps, and many of these camps are, in turn, welcoming and including children with disabilities. However, there are a variety of models and practices within the broad definition of “inclusive camp” (Siperstein et al., 2019). Sometimes campers with disabilities are present but only join other campers for certain activities throughout the day (Shefter et al., 2017). In this case, children with disabilities are, at best, in close physical proximity to their peers without



disabilities and participating alongside their peers at a basic level. On their continuum of inclusion, Schleien and colleagues (2017) call this physical integration. Unfortunately, at this level, social inclusion is limited.

At the second point along the continuum, which Schleien et al. (2017) refer to as functional inclusion, campers with and without disabilities are physically integrated and successfully participate in activities together, but they typically lack meaningful and ongoing social interactions. While better than simple physical integration, functional inclusion still results in less than desired socialization and friendship development. Increasingly, camps are reporting success at Schleien et al.'s (2017) third, and highest, level of inclusion—social inclusion. As we defined it previously, social inclusion focuses on participation and relationship development. It is only when campers of varying abilities participate in all aspects of camp together and engage socially throughout the day that social inclusion is achieved.

As children with disabilities and their parents gravitate toward more inclusive camping options, and camp administrators become more interested in facilitating diversity and inclusion within their programs, the movement to create socially inclusive camps for children with and without disabilities is gaining momentum. It is apparent, however, that inclusive programs often differ substantially in the resources they have to modify their programs and accommodate a broader range of participants through best practices (Uhrman et al., 2019).

For example, one resident camp may have accessible cabins and bunks, but many of the activity areas are still inaccessible to children who use wheelchairs. A different camp makes all facilities and activity areas accessible to children with physical disabilities, but the director does not have adequate knowledge or materials to train college-aged counselors to promote and facilitate social inclusion. With no “cookie-cutter” approach to creating and sustaining an inclusive camp, particularly in the face of every camp’s unique challenges, many directors struggle to consider new and different approaches to their camp’s

programming. As you will see in the examples throughout this book, we believe that any type of camp, with any level of resources, and regardless of where they begin in the process, can move along the inclusion continuum and take steps to becoming fully inclusive through the implementation of best practices.

Like the title suggests, this book provides camp leaders and staff with best practices to achieve physical, functional, and social inclusion of children with disabilities. The term *best practice* is defined as “a procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

In some areas of recreation, best practices are encompassed in standards that outline clear benchmarks to guide programs and are often used as the basis for national accreditation. For example, the American Camp Association (ACA) provides standards that focus on quality operation and safety in day and resident camps, and the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) provides standards for quality assurance across park and recreation programs. Following the structure and clarity of the ACA and CAPRA standards, and building on the content of the few existing tools for implementing and assessing inclusive practices in recreation settings, there was a strong foundation for the development of universal standards for inclusive camps and a clear need for standards like these as the inclusion movement continues to grow.

In early 2016, through a partnership between the University of Massachusetts Boston’s Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) and the National Inclusion Project (NIP), a team of scholars (including the editors of this book) and camp practitioners was established to review and compile best practices for inclusive camps and translate these practices into a concise set of standards. Over a period of 3 years, our team engaged in a series of programmatic steps, beginning with a comprehensive review of previous research and best practices in inclusion, as well

as existing guidelines for recreation programs. Subsequently, we conducted focus groups with nationally representative camp administrators, followed by surveys of practitioners from inclusive camps. Finally, with guidance from a committee of program directors from ACA-accredited inclusive camps, the preliminary standards that emanated from the focus groups and surveys were pilot tested.

This process involved observation and assessment of inclusive camp programs across the United States, leading to a final round of revisions based on the pilot data. After beginning the stepwise development process with over 100 standards, the validated set of 28 standards was completed in 2019. The “Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs” cover the five domains of administration, staffing, facilities and resources, programming, and evaluation. To ensure that the standards are practical and educational, they are accompanied by criteria outlining specific practices that camp leaders and staff should implement in order to meet each standard. The complete list of standards and criteria appear in Appendix A.

Along with the editors, the following individuals represent the team of scholars and practitioners who played an instrumental role in the development of the standards:

- **Jessie Bari**, Child Care Program Executive Director, YMCA Buffalo Niagara
- **John Dattilo**, Professor, Department of Recreation, Park, & Tourism Management, Pennsylvania State University
- **Aron Hall**, Executive Director, The Play Brigade
- **Nick Leisey**, Executive Director, National Inclusion Project
- **Mark Spolidoro**, Director of Camp Shriver, Center for Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts Boston

The following directors of ACA-accredited inclusive camps guided the pilot testing process and provided insight to ensure the feasibility of the standards:

- **Terrie Campbell**, Executive Director, Camp Howe
- **Bill Hinton**, Director, YMCA Camp Hayo-Went-Ha
- **Michelle Koplan**, Chief Executive Officer, B'nai B'rith Camp
- **Phil Liebson**, Director, Camp JCC at the Bender JCC of Greater Washington
- **Jon Meisenbach**, Training and Facilitation Specialist, The Field Museum
- **Kerrie Sampelayo**, Owner and Director, 1UP Recreation
- **Audi Stroup**, former Administrative Director, Camp Winnebago at the YMCA of Rock River Valley

As the foundation for this book, the “Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs” operationally define inclusion with the intent to create a common language and understanding of best practices. Consistent with the topics covered in the standards, Part I of the book, “Creating an Inclusive Camp,” is organized into five chapters: Administration and Leadership; Staff Roles and Training; Facilities, Equipment, and Accessibility; Programming; and Evaluation and Camper Outcomes.

The best practices you will read about through these chapters span the inclusion continuum, making them relevant and useful to camps that are just beginning to include children with disabilities, to those with established inclusive programming. The best practices reflect our belief that to achieve true social inclusion, it must be a shared responsibility that is prioritized by all staff and intentionally integrated into all aspects of a camp’s operations—from marketing, to physical accessibility, to activity design—an approach known as the “decentralized model” of inclusion (Schleien et al., 2017).

Collectively, the chapters in Part I also communicate the importance of Universal Design and the idea that inclusion benefits all campers. Consider the Mainstreet YMCA's after-school art camp, which has never been attended by a child with a disability. One fall, a 10-year-old girl with Down syndrome, which is a genetic disorder that leads to intellectual disability and other physical and health challenges, wants to attend the art camp. The art camp staff have no experience working with children with intellectual disabilities, but they believe all children should experience the benefits of art. The camp director at the Mainstreet YMCA brings in this child's special education teacher and parents to talk to the staff about her strengths and needs, as well as ways to organize the environment and instruction to accommodate her.

Suggestions include relatively simple accommodations such as offering her a variety of paint brushes and markers, providing instructions verbally and also through extra demonstrations, offering physical help as needed, and allowing for a flexible schedule, including additional breaks. The art camp staff integrate these practices into their plans and welcome this child into art camp. Not only is this child with Down syndrome successful, but also the staff find that the extra demonstrations help two other girls who are English Language Learners and have struggled in the past when given verbal directions only. In addition, the art camp staff learn that most of the participants like having choices in the art materials they use, and many appreciate having more frequent breaks throughout the session. Accommodations that were first implemented for the new child with a disability became universal designs that were used and appreciated by all campers.

Throughout Part I, you will be introduced to some of the practical challenges associated with implementing best practices in inclusion. Barriers to creating and sustaining inclusive day and resident camps have been identified by scholars in the past few decades. In some cases, parents of children with disabilities prefer segregated camps and are leery of so-called inclusive camps (Darcy et al., 2020; Mayer & Anderson, 2014; Miller et

al., 2009). However, besides environmental and physical constraints, the most prevalent barriers to inclusive service delivery are negative attitudes and resistance by camp leaders and staff, as well as peers without disabilities and their family members (Long & Robertson, 2010). The Mainstreet YMCA, for example, would not have been successful including the girl with Down syndrome if the director believed in inclusion but the art camp staff said they did not have time to meet with her parents and teacher to discuss accommodations. We address these barriers because it is important to know that to achieve inclusive service delivery is not an easy process—but it is possible, and it is worthwhile.

While the Mainstreet YMCA is a hypothetical example, it represents how the inclusion journey begins for many camp programs that transition from noninclusive to inclusive. Part II of the book, titled "Exemplary Inclusive Camps," begins with a similar story about six resident camps throughout the United States. These camps had never included children with disabilities in their regular programs, but by taking steps such as hiring inclusion coordinators, adopting principles of Universal Design, and partnering with other agencies, they efficiently and effectively created decentralized cultures of inclusion.

In the subsequent chapters of Part II, you will read a series of case studies about inclusive camps representing both day and overnight programs across a broad range of geographical locations



and organizational affiliations. These camps were purposefully selected to present varied approaches to inclusion in an array of settings. Each case study illustrates how the best practices described in Part I are implemented in a unique context with unique challenges, creating six inclusive programs that are all different but are all exemplary. You will read stories about day camps run by large municipalities and rustic overnight camps that prioritize the natural environment, as well as camps that are based around partnerships with local universities and advocacy groups.

Highlighted across Part II of the book are the ways that these camps have gradually and intentionally woven social inclusion into the fabric of their camp cultures, from focusing on the value of “welcoming the stranger,” to ensuring that all children—with and without disabilities—are able to experience “the magic of camp.” We hope that you will be able to see aspects of your own camp in these chapters and begin to envision how social inclusion can work at your camp, too.

This book is written *by* practitioners *for* practitioners. The array of chapter authors, representing decades of combined experience in the camping field, provides a distinctively practical take on inclusion. With co-authored chapters, the best practices and case studies are presented from multiple perspectives that include major recreation organizations across North America, such as the American Camp Association (ACA), YMCA of the USA (Y-USA), and Jewish Community Centers Association (JCCA) of North America. Overall, this book aims to help camp leaders and staff establish and act on a commitment to inclusion by a) presenting information that will help you understand and communicate the benefits of welcoming children with disabilities into your camp; b) providing specific and useful best practices for you to implement, including suggestions for effectively interacting with and communicating about inclusion to your staff, campers, and families; and c) sharing stories of how leaders and staff from successful inclusive camps have overcome challenges throughout their inclusion journeys.

To help apply what you learn to your own camp, Appendix B includes a self-reflection questionnaire that is based on the “Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs.” At the end of each chapter in Part I, you will be directed to the self-reflection questions for the standards that were covered in that chapter. By completing the self-reflection, you can determine where your camp currently is on the inclusion continuum and how you can expand your day-to-day practices to move further along the continuum toward social inclusion. In addition, as an extension of Chapter 2, Staff Roles and Training, there is a short compilation of inclusion-focused staff training activities in Appendix C that can be used to help camp staff at all levels understand the importance of inclusion and how they can implement inclusive practices in their respective roles.

It is our hope that the information presented in this book can be widely disseminated and replicated throughout the camp community. As a validated, comprehensive collection of best practices, the “Standards for Inclusive Recreation” provide a model for camp leaders and staff, like you, who want to welcome children with



disabilities into their programs for the benefit of all campers. In addition to being an educational tool, the standards serve as the basis for the National Inclusion Project's accreditation process, which recognizes, promotes, and accredits quality inclusive recreation programs.

As administrators and practitioners gain the commitment, knowledge, and resources to create inclusive camps, there will be a growing group of programs that embody these best practices, both collectively and individually, ultimately demonstrating that social inclusion is achievable across camp contexts and paving the way for a future in which inclusive camps are the norm.

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PART I

Creating an Inclusive Camp



Chapter 1

Administration and Leadership

by Phil Liebson and Jenni ZefTel



Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- Assemble a robust and appropriately scaffolded leadership team to support a culture of inclusion.
- Create and define counselor and other staff roles to implement your inclusive vision.
- Recruit the best candidates to fill the important camp roles.
- Communicate your camp's inclusion mission and offerings appropriately and succinctly to your target audience.
- Identify community partners and other experts to support and complement your camp inclusion efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural shifts, like the shift to be an inclusive camp community, require the buy-in and support of a well-defined and capable leadership team. Summer camps considering how to become more inclusive must first contend with the questions: “Who are our leaders?,” and “How will they lead us toward an inclusive culture?” Examples of camp leadership may include the director, assistant director, and sometimes the director’s supervisor if camp is part of a larger agency (e.g., a JCC or YMCA). If camp is indeed part of a larger agency, then other examples of camp leadership who need to be identified may include the host agency’s inclusion coordinator, early childhood director, or anyone else whose buy-in and touchpoints with families could impact the success of the inclusion initiative. In some cases, additional members of camp leadership may need to be identified and hired externally.

A robust administration is necessary because inclusion needs to be a full culture shift in an organization. If done right, it should change the very fabric of a camp community. Culture shifts cannot be administered by one director. The leadership team must be scaffolded enough—meaning multilayered and strong enough—to ensure that the change is supported and systemic. In this chapter, we discuss how camp administrators establish and lead the culture of inclusion but also share this responsibility with staff and families through the relationships and processes that

underlie day-to-day camp operations. Throughout each section of the chapter, you will see how the content and examples correspond to the seven standards found in the Administration and Leadership section of the “Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs” (Appendix A). Specifically, we will address the role of camp leadership in staff recruitment and hiring, outreach and marketing to the community, partnering with community organizations, and partnering with campers with disabilities and their families.

GOING ALL IN ON INCLUSION

We will begin with some important areas of reflection for camp leadership teams who are eager to establish a culture of inclusion. This starts with your camp’s mission, and purpose. While no inclusion journey is perfectly linear, developing a shared mission that clearly prioritizes inclusion and is communicated both internally and externally



is critical for a successful cultural shift. Read on for questions to ponder as you consider how to create and articulate a true sense of belonging for everyone in your camp community.

Commit to Inclusion in the Mission Statement

STANDARD A.1: The mission of the agency or purpose of the program reflects a commitment to inclusion.

A camp leadership team is tasked with communicating and reflecting the mission of a camp program. For an inclusive camp, the agency mission statement or program purpose statement should explicitly reflect a commitment to inclusion by communicating that the camp serves campers of all abilities. It is camp leadership's responsibility to live this practice. Camp leadership teams must therefore agree upon the answer to the following questions in order to move forward with an inclusion initiative:

1. Who holds the vision?
2. How will that vision get shared with the broader community?
3. Who will communicate the vision?
4. How will decisions be made regarding inclusive practices?
5. Who has the final say in making inclusion-informed decisions for camp?

This list is not exhaustive, and it is our recommendation that leadership teams be consistently reflective, asking more questions of themselves regarding their commitment to inclusion over time.

In 2014, New Country Day Camp (NCDC) of the 14th Street Y in New York City made a pivotal decision to flip an existing camp culture to be an inclusive one. Jenni Zefel, co-author of this chapter, was the camp director at the time. An administrative steering committee was assembled that included Jenni, NCDC's two assistant directors, and the 14th Street Y's inclusion coordinator and

senior program director. Also crucial to the culture transformation, though somewhat removed from the nuts and bolts of building an inclusive program, were the 14th Street Y's executive director and associate director for business and operations. The core steering committee met regularly and was privileged to participate in a specialty camp incubator program at Foundation for Jewish Camp, alongside other NY-area day camp professionals beginning new specialty programs. There, the steering committee participated in a series of trainings that brought them to consensus around a new mission and vision for the camp, as well as thoughtful plans for marketing and recruitment, programmatic content, staff training and hiring, and more.

Throughout the year-long effort (which, of course, is ongoing and continues to this day under the leadership of an almost entirely new team), new administrative positions were added to help keep the effort on track. Most notably, the leadership created a new full-time, year-round Head of Camper Care position. Also of note, leadership created a new part-time, year-round/full-time summer role for multiple Support Supervisors. To this day, Support Supervisors at NCDC oversee the intake and implementation of individualized camper plans, as well as hiring and training specialized support counselors, and one-to-one summer communications with families.

For 35 years, the lay and executive leadership of the Bender JCC in Rockville, Maryland, have been committed to ensuring that camp is an inclusive environment. Phil Liebson, the other co-author of this chapter, has been the director of the Bender JCC Day Camp for 5 years. The Bender JCC has a strong and established camp culture of inclusion, which Phil learned about early on by talking to staff who knew the history of the program, attending inclusion tracks at conferences, and listening carefully to the families who had been involved for years. Conversations with the families, staff, and leadership at Bender illustrate just how much the culture of inclusion permeated the entire camp program (and JCC as a whole). Everyone from first-year counselors to the CEO of the agency is crucial to, and invested in, the camp's inclusive philosophy.

Currently, the Bender JCC offers an inclusive camp program for children aged 4–15 and a self-contained program for campers aged 12–21 for whom that is the most appropriate placement. Operating a day camp with over 500 campers at a time, 20% of whom have known diagnoses, requires buy-in and mission alignment from everyone on staff. It took years to establish that buy-in, and even more time for the camp to reach so many campers and families.

In the early days of the camp, the inclusive camp program was a small program with camp leaders and a small handful of parents working together to figure out how to “make it work.” In those days, campers generally required a few uniform accommodations based on their needs. Through the years, camp has expanded to include campers with physical needs; social, emotional, and behavioral needs; medical concerns; and more. Now, Camp JCC employs multiple, year-round staff to oversee our various inclusion programs. These year-round staff operate as a team within a team and importantly, are not their own unique division of camp. During the camp season, the inclusion and self-containment team expands to include additional roles such as head counselors, support staff, one-to-one aides, registered nurses, and consulting physicians.



Over the years, the culture of inclusion grew through the JCC as a whole and led to several important developments along the way. First off, the commitment by camp leadership, the CEO, and the board of directors to ensure that camp should be available to all with the added concept that no matter how a camper participates, they will not be charged extra, was crucial to success. From the family side, having a child with special needs has many additional costs from therapies to specialists. Having to pay more for camp was not a place that these added costs were going to be incurred. This simple but important philosophy shows just how much of a shared mentality is needed to run an inclusive program. To knowingly add three to five times more cost per camper without having the funds lined up ahead of time is a huge leap, and one that can only be achieved through like-minded and mission-driven teams. Fortunately, as camp started to grow, “The Dinner of Champions” was established. This event is the premier fundraiser for the year for the camp/agency, and all proceeds go to offset the added costs and fees to run Camp JCC as an inclusive environment. These funds are used to hire additional staff, pay for the costs incurred for field trips such as admissions and lift-equipped buses, and to make facility adjustments such as door openers, ramps for increased access, accessible trailers, and most recently, an accessible climbing tower. Without the buy-in from all of the administration and leadership of Camp JCC, the Bender JCC, and its board of directors, there would be no way to offer such an inclusive program.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN STAFF RECRUITMENT AND HIRING

As you will read about in Chapter 2, Staff Roles and Training, staff are the foundation of inclusion at camp. Every experience that your campers have is shaped by your staff. In recruiting and hiring staff, camp leadership has the opportunity to model for young people the type of world they can help create: one in which people of all abilities can form relationships and build community together.

Prioritize Inclusion in Staff Recruitment and Hiring

STANDARD A.2: Staff recruitment and hiring processes reflect a commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

To intentionally create an inclusive camp culture, staff recruitment and hiring processes should reflect a commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities. To that end, leadership must:

- Get clear about staffing structure needs
 - Who beyond the administrative level will need to carry out the mission in the summer? Additional counselors? Junior counselors too? Additional medical staff? Any new lifeguards?
 - What kind of support model will you use, one-to-one or group?
- Get clear about the required and preferred qualifications for each role

- Master’s degree? Bachelor’s degree?
- What can you provide/teach? CPR? First aid? Youth mental health first aid (YMHFA)?

It is also important to note that a recruitment and hiring process that reflects a commitment to inclusion begins with focused, specific, and illustrative job descriptions. For example, job descriptions and postings should clearly communicate that all staff are responsible for serving and including participants with disabilities. This means that every job description should clearly state the camp’s commitment to inclusion, regardless of the role it is written for, as everyone in an inclusive culture is responsible for sustaining that culture.

Populations to consider for finding and targeting the right staff applicants for an inclusive camp culture include:

- Former campers without disabilities
- Former campers with disabilities, with reasonable accommodations written into job descriptions
- Students at local high schools and colleges



While it is valuable to hire college-age special education, physical education, or therapeutic recreation majors, it can be equally valuable to look for other candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences including theater, science, and more. We have found that often, the most eccentric characters make the most positive impact on an inclusive camp culture. Finally, it is imperative to model inclusivity from the onset of hiring through clear anti-discrimination clauses on paperwork and interview processes that accommodate people with learning differences.

All this is to say that identifying a strong staffing plan is critical to the success of any camp inclusion initiative. Some camps may decide that a one-to-one model is the most appropriate choice (one counselor per individual camper with a disability), and many camps employ this personalized care for their campers. Others may choose to train all the staff in a group on best practices and simply hire additional staff for the group and everyone cares for all the campers. Both can have the potential for great results, but it is up to the leadership of the camp to identify the best of what their path for them will be. To do this you will need to take into consideration many factors such as the makeup of your campers and their needs. What will the program look like in terms of activities and timing? Will a group care system work, or will you have campers who need to travel in waves from area to area, making a one-to-one model more effective? These are all great questions, and you will read more about staffing plans in the next chapter. Hopefully by now you see the value of a true leadership team mentality—no one person should make these important decisions alone. As you develop your team, it will start to become clear how to set your program up for success.

Once a staffing plan is agreed upon, take a step back. Consider the exact roles you need to fill, and the number of vacancies you need to open based on your staff-to-camper ratio. You may also consider hiring designated substitutes or floaters if your camper population is robust enough to call for those types of “extra” staff. Young staff members often have to leave camp early for school, as has been our experience with Camp

JCC. College visits, orientations, and leadership and honors programming can put a cap on young counselors’ time at camp. For this reason, Camp JCC created two “floater” positions to serve as extra hands and role models on days when staff were all in attendance. On days when staff were absent, these extra staff would step in and become counselors. We looked to our returners of several years when trying to decide who would staff these roles. This allowed us to retain great staff and provide an aspirational growth role so they could stay connected to camp and not feel as though they were falling behind in the “real-world” job markets. See Chapter 2, Staff Roles and Training, for more information about developing a staffing plan.

Adding layers of scaffolding to your staffing structure to support campers with disabilities can at times feel overwhelming and never ending. It is important to therefore become aware of resources outside of personnel that can aid your camp in becoming an inclusive environment. The Bender JCC Day Camp, for example, has had success in finding a community of practice of other camps on similar missions to be inclusive. Umbrella agencies such as the American Camp Association (ACA) can help match camp professionals with one another to learn and reflect together as they work toward similar visions. Not only that, but for camps just starting out on their quest to become more inclusive, there are veteran camps who have been operating inclusively for years, and those camp professionals may be willing to act as mentors to those just starting out.

In order to support campers with disabilities, you will need to do at least some scaffolding of your staff and add some new positions. Back when NCDC was first establishing its inclusive culture, the leadership team created a new staff position of “support counselor.” This position is akin to a shadow or paraprofessional in a school setting, albeit slightly different because NCDC leadership never intended or endeavored to support campers requiring a 1:1 ratio. A “support counselor” was meant to be an extra counselor in a group where there were two to three children who required additional support. The entire group of campers,

however, was meant to view and understand the support counselor as simply one of their counselors.

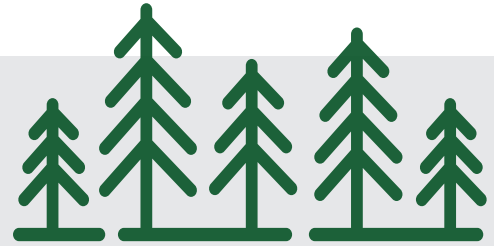
At first, the job description for this role was almost identical to the preexisting counselor job description with small tweaks. After one summer, leadership quickly realized that the job description for this position needed to be more differentiated and that there was a need to recruit more experienced counselors to staff this role. To date, the role of “support counselor” at NCDC has become aspirational. Young staff in traditional counselor roles now aspire to gain more experience in and outside of camp, and eventually become support counselors. That is true success. See **Figure 1.1** for

the essential functions of a “support counselor” position.

The Bender JCC Day Camp requires over 100 dedicated staff to serve campers in a 1:1 or 2:1 setting. To find this many staff who have previous experience is starting to change as our local school system models have changed, but many of the staff we hire are young, eager, and willing. Training our own staff has been vital to our success. Just like at NCDC, at Bender, the role of Inclusion staff is one that many staff aspire to hold. Those that work at camp or attend as campers often make their way into the role.

Figure 1.1

Sample Job Description For a Support Counselor



Position Title: Inclusion Counselor

Title of Supervisor: Inclusion Director

Position Summary: Responsible for the supervision and safety of campers and activities at Camp JCC within the guidelines set by the Bender JCC of Greater Washington.

Essential Functions of the Position:

- Engage and supervise the campers in programs and activities.
- Be present at arrival and dismissal locations as scheduled. Ensure all children have been picked up by an authorized adult or guardian.
- Know how many participants are under the position’s care and know who and where they are at all times. Safely escort children to and from activities.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of campers of all ages, interact appropriately with campers in a variety of situations, appropriately model behavior and use positive behavior-management techniques - enthusiasm, sense of humor, patience, good sportsmanship, and self-control.
- Work with Leadership Team and co-counselors to plan activities that ensure the success of all campers. Utilize active supervision at all times.
- Creatively adapt and individualize activities to the specific needs of campers.
- Understand and implement the behavior plan specific to the campers as needed.
- Obtain and distribute snacks at appropriate time, and clean area when finished.
- Ensure that campers are brought to the health room daily for medications, and that appropriate medications are taken with group on any off-site activities.
- Provide daily written communication with campers’ parents concerning campers’ daily progress and other pertinent information.
- Effectively communicate with supervisor, staff, and campers.
- Comply with and participate in the County, State, and American Camp Association requirements.
- Recognize, respond to, and report to Inclusion Director any environmental and/or other hazards related to the activity or the program.
- Attend all required orientation meetings, staff meetings and trainings.

So how do you go about training all of your staff to carry this inclusive mindset and ensure that everyone wants to be a part of your culture? We will explore this in more detail in Chapter 2, Staff Roles and Training, but as a leadership team, every person involved must speak to the importance of inclusion. As part of staff training, you have to carve out time to address the value of an inclusive camp. Talk about the benefits for all campers and staff, and incorporate some success stories that demonstrate what all the praise is about. Bring in former campers and counselors that can present so new staff can see the way that inclusion permeates to more than just a “top-down mentality.”

Another important and often overlooked potential of growing and training is in your Counselor in Training, or CIT, program, if you have one. Does the leadership of your camp ensure that future counselors in your program are getting some of the same important trainings and experiences that your entire staff are receiving? Training your future staff over time can only help to make your program stronger, and teaching great habits starting at 14 or 15 years of age gives them a leg up.

OUTREACH AND MARKETING TO THE COMMUNITY

We have now discussed the role of leadership as an internal process that opens your camp’s gates to inclusive communities, but that is not enough. To make your camp an inclusive environment, you have to reach out intentionally to your target audience.

Recruit and Serve Campers With and Without Disabilities

STANDARD A.3: The composition of participants reflects a commitment to serving people with and without disabilities.

The composition of participants at an inclusive camp should reflect a commitment to serving people with and without disabilities, with between 5% and 50% of campers having identified disabilities. Without proper outreach and marketing, your camp will remain noninclusive, or with very few campers with disabilities, and that’s



a disservice not only to the campers and families you're not reaching, but also to those you are serving. Inclusion is for everyone, and if you make the leap to bring it to your camp, the new diversity of campers and families will breathe new life into your camp community that will benefit everyone. Therefore, when you market camp and recruit campers, you should do so from that perspective. Celebrate and promote camp's inclusive nature and support services as a culture that lifts community members of all abilities.

Communicate Commitment to Inclusion through Outreach Materials

STANDARD A.4: Outreach materials communicate that participants with and without disabilities belong.

In addition to creating an inclusive community through your population of campers, inclusion should be reflected in the language and content of *all* outreach materials. To that end, it's important for camp professionals to share their camp's inclusion story with everyone, not just with the families you think want to hear it most (those who have children with disabilities). Talk about your camp's inclusive nature with every family who attends an information session, every prospective staff person you meet at a job fair, and every funder to whom you are connected. Ensure that all outreach materials communicate that participants with and without disabilities belong, and that these materials contain text describing activities that involve participants with and without disabilities engaging together. In addition, camp websites and brochures should show campers with disabilities, and materials should use people-first language and sensitive terms that describe participants with disabilities respectfully. NCDC uses the imagery and photographs of the tented outdoor amphitheater to talk about inclusion. It's the place where everyone comes together, under one open tent, to have their needs met and be with the full camp community, regardless of the diversity of those needs.

One challenge you might encounter if you are just starting out on this journey is pushback from returning families who have been at camp for years. They may be turned off by the changes needed to make camp more accessible to those with disabilities. To proactively address these types of concerns, it is important to tell the story of inclusion in your camp in a way that shows how the changes you're making will lift everyone up and make camp a more supportive environment for every community member, not just campers with disabilities. For example, at NCDC, leadership had to contend with the concern that families who had been at camp for years would be turned off by the intention to make camp more accessible to those with disabilities. We are pleased to tell you that this was definitely not the case! The leadership of NCDC told the story of inclusion as one that would lift everyone up and make camp a more supportive environment for every community member, not just campers with disabilities. Indeed, camper enrollment across a diversity of abilities boomed as a result. From the point at which the decision was made to move to an inclusive model to today, nearly 6 years later, the NCDC community nearly doubled in size. Big change is always a risk, and transforming camp culture to an inclusive model is a big change that will reap greater rewards if done with care and intention.

Throughout the transformation to become an inclusive environment, look for opportunities to be thoughtful and creative about the language and imagery you use to tell the new story of camp. Take advantage of focus groups, surveys, and thoughtful discussions as a team and with outside marketing experts. As mentioned previously, the leadership of NCDC landed on the imagery of an open tent as central to the visual and oral story of camp. Their campgrounds are punctuated not only with the aforementioned amphitheater, but also by large home base structures that are open on all four sides to all who would like to enter. Additionally, because NCDC is a Jewish camp, the leadership found themselves especially inspired by the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was also open on four sides to welcome all who approached. That story became inextricably linked with the

elevator pitch about the NCDC community used in marketing collateral, formal parlor meetings, and even informal conversations with stakeholders. It even inspired a campaign to fundraise for the shade-sail to cover the outdoor amphitheater, the only space in camp where the entire community could fit and gather as one (see **Figure 1.2**). Today, that space remains a comfortable open tent for all who come and sit (and a great photo op to boot).

As previously stated, when planning and preparing your marketing strategy for camp, the idea of an inclusive program needs to be part of your pitch for all campers. That said, a challenge you may face is the shifting of a culture. Not all of the families in your current camp model or prospective families may understand your desire to have an intentionally inclusive camp. Some people may want to shy away from having this open and up-front marketing strategy. An important figure to keep in mind is that in the United States approximately 18% of children aged 3–17 have developmental disabilities (Zablotsky et

al., 2019). By not running a program with an intentional inclusion mindset you are potentially eliminating almost one-fifth of your potential campers. When you factor in families that have multiple children both with and without needs, you are engaging in a terrible business model.

In addition, be prepared to talk about all the benefits an inclusive and diverse program can create for all participants. For example, in Camp JCC's recruitment process and materials, the idea of inclusion and who we are is always at the forefront. Being proud and confident about our program allows us to sell camp in a way that goes beyond the level of fun and skill development. To be able to share all of the amazing benefits previously mentioned to all members of our camp community is a value add that can't be replicated by an activity or piece of equipment. When you are selling camp to a family, you have to stand out. Many camps teach swimming, have sports, theater, art, and more; but the opportunity to engage with a prospective family and talk about the human

Figure 1.2

NCDC's Outdoor Amphitheater



values and life lessons that come with being a part of an inclusive community, and to be able to tell the stories of campers or staff members who have grown because of their experiences at a camp that opened their doors to everyone—that’s what makes inclusive camp special.

PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Identifying and leveraging the right partnerships can only benefit your mission. Potential partner agencies may include philanthropies, educational resource and professional development providers, third-party evaluators, local schools and universities, and even other camps or enrichment programs. Finding the right partners can be challenging. We suggest turning to umbrella and resource organizations such as the ACA for help identifying the right opportunities. A website browse can help, but the most impactful result will come from picking up the phone and asking to be connected with organizations with which you might have a beneficial relationship.

The Bender JCC Day Camp has found valuable partners in both state and county resources, community care practitioners, and schools that serve students with special needs. NCDC has found partnerships with their local Jewish Federation, UJA-Federation of New York, as well as other umbrella agencies who have connected them with further opportunities to expand and build upon their inclusion program. It is also quite possible to find a partner organization to assist with and outsource some of your staff training needs. For example, NCDC has partnered with Ramapo for Children and Mainstages Theatre Company, both of which helped them to develop and implement inclusion-based staff training.

If your program allows for it, don’t forget to invite your partners to see camp in action. To really get those aforementioned referrals, nothing helps more than seeing how amazing the camp experience is and the smiles on campers’ faces.

For example, at Camp JCC there are times when different caregivers or therapists are able to join camp JCC and watch from the “sidelines” how campers are getting along and progressing in the camp model. Whether it is an organized event for multiple participants to attend or a single person, make sure these times are scheduled with the campers’ day in mind. Everyone involved has the campers’ best interests in mind, and all should understand that these visits should help and not detract or set the camper in motion to have a negative day. Another great partner opportunity is to look to your local universities with programs serving youth with different needs. These programs can become a great resource and network to help you recruit those all-important staff members, and if you can create a field-study relationship even better!

If you find yourself struggling to find partners, your camper families are some of your most valuable resources. While this may be your starting point in connecting with local industry experts, government agencies, and specialists, some families have been navigating their children’s entire lives with these groups and are more than happy to help you find ways to help. Just as the camp professional network loves to share, so too, do families who know the benefits that a truly inclusive camp can have on a community and their family.



PARTNERING WITH CAMPER AND THEIR FAMILIES

As part of the set-up of creating an inclusive camp program, you need to think about what it will take to fully serve a camper in your environment. This means involving campers and families as partners in the process of setting up the right plans and accommodations.

Solicit Input from Campers and Families about Accommodations

STANDARD A.5: Input is solicited from participants and/or their family members/guardians about accommodations that the participant may require in order to participate.

It is important to solicit input from campers with disabilities and their family members about specific accommodations or practices suggested to help the camper successfully participate in camp activities. To accomplish this, the camp experience should start with an intake process to get a whole picture of that camper, and this intake process should involve teachers, caregivers, and outside service providers. In doing this, you are not only setting up that camper for success, but you are building your network for referrals and creating a partner to help your program grow. Consider familiarizing yourself with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) template of your local school district, and adapt it to fit the needs of an intake process to set campers up for success at your program. Create a process by which multiple external stakeholders contribute to the building of the plan (therapists, teachers, etc.), and by which members of camp leadership observe the camper in their home or other comfortable environment to better understand what supports that child will need to be successful at camp.

Provide Assistance to Families in Preparing for Camp

STANDARD A.6: Assistance is provided to family members/guardians to prepare participants for the program.

During the intake process, you should share social stories and provide pictures and information about the camp experience to prepare campers and families for what it will be like, and to extract specific anxieties they may have or challenges they foresee in the experience. Your intake template, which you may choose to call an Individualized Camper Plan (as NCDC has), should indicate when and how you will partner with the family members to update them on the progress of each individual camper to whom you are providing additional support. Never let a whole summer or camp session go by without discussing the child's experience with the family and adjusting the plan as necessary.

Provide Feedback to Families

STANDARD A.7: Feedback is provided to participants' family members/guardians throughout the program.

It is imperative to partner with family members in real time over the summer in order to ensure the best experience possible. As outlined above, an individualized camper plan should clearly state how often you will regularly check in with family members to discuss the camper's progress toward any goals you wrote into the plan. We recommend weekly check-ins for this purpose, in addition to any off-the-cuff communications you will have to make should any new challenges (or successes!) arise for the camper. At NCDC, we utilized the "rose and thorn" analogy for check-ins with families, letting them know ahead of time that we would update them weekly to highlight a rose (a success) that the camper was celebrating, as well as

a thorn (an area that required some redirection), and how we planned to learn from and both the rose and the thorn of the week to adapt our plans for including the camper into the program.

At Camp JCC, we utilize a daily notebook that travels back and forth with the camper. Each day the counselor has a few minutes to highlight similar things that went well or moments that a parent should know about. Parents also have the opportunity to write back to the counselors to share any updates, tips, or tricks and things that may be able to help campers have an even better day in the future. While low tech, the notebook allows families and staff to communicate in a way that may not be possible with speed and pace of the camp day.



SUMMARY

Including campers with disabilities has come a long way since many of us camp leaders were campers, but there is still more work to do. Creating camp environments where everyone is valued, cared for, and seen as an integral part of the community is difficult but critical work. Luckily, camp is an interconnected industry with some of the most dedicated professionals in the world,

and by leaning on one another and seeking the right resources, we can collectively make sure that everyone who wants to be at camp can not only gain access but is successful in their experience there. It begins by identifying and assembling a strong leadership team with a shared vision. That team will then be responsible for ensuring the other key elements—robust and intentional staff hiring and recruitment practices, and age-appropriate training that orients staff toward a culture of inclusion. With a leadership team and well-trained staff in place, along with a communication strategy that shines a light on why inclusion matters for every camp community member, you will be well on your way to creating positive long-term change. It can be done!

For a self-reflection on the Administration standards, turn to page 208.



What Would You Do?

1. What would you do if you heard that two group counselors had concerns about the impact of one camper with a disability on the experience of the other children in the group?

Answer: This scenario is one that will be more common than you would expect, even if you have educated your staff through the hiring and training process and everyone is bought in. The best thing to do in this scenario is to get to the heart of the question. What is the camper doing that is making counselors feel that other campers' summers will be impacted? By knowing this information, your leadership team (e.g., camp director, inclusion coordinator, camp guidance counselor) can help come up with a plan that can bring the group back on track to the desired behaviors and outcomes. It may be about refocusing unwanted behaviors or actions, adding in extra transition times, adjusting group expectations,

or reframing goals to avoid triggers, as a few examples. In the end, the added planning can benefit everyone in the group and not just the campers with disabilities.

2. What would you do if a parent revealed to you mid-summer that their child has a disability and needs specific accommodations that you had not planned for?

Answer: What do you do indeed! There are many scenarios that can lead us to this additional information, but when you are faced with it, the first suggestion is to meet the parent with compassion and understanding. This is important because it is hard to know why a parent waited so long to divulge this—it could be anything from a previous experience where their camper was turned away or removed from an experience, to denial. Either way, you have to look at your program and determine a few things. First, do you have the resources and capacity to support this camper during their time at camp? Some of your considerations may include: whether you have a staff person to serve as a possible one-to-one aide or group that can accommodate another camper with this specific profile; whether the camper is far enough along on their own journey with supports to help provide the background and information needed to work with them in a safe and productive manor; or whether you have the financial capabilities to take on additional things like staffing, bussing, and admissions for field trips. Again, if you can support this camper, and their parents are now

being a partner to the camper's success, then you would treat them like any other camper that joined you for the summer. Start with a parent/camper intake, formulate a plan, and monitor support throughout the coming days and weeks.

References

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Jenni ZefTel is the Director of Day Camp Initiatives at Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC). Jenni holds a master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Hunter College, and prior to her role at FJC she directed youth programs for the 14th Street Y, including the Y's largest inclusive summer camp program, New Country Day Camp.