

**The Americans with Disabilities Act: Implications for Camp Programming**  
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*The Americans with Disabilities Act:*

# Implications for Camp Programming

by Leandra A. Bedini, Ph.D., M. Deborah Bialeschki, Ph.D.,  
and Karla A. Henderson, Ph.D.

**P**eople with disabilities represent all ages, classes, and races in our society. In fact, they form the only minority to which anyone can belong. Each of us is temporarily able-bodied and may become disabled at any moment.

In short, people with disabilities are a diverse group. They comprise 10 to 15 percent of America's population, including approximately 12 percent of the children in public schools. They cannot be treated as a single class of individuals with the same characteristics, needs, and abilities.

Consequently, developing camp programming that responds to the needs of people with disabilities is no easy task. But with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, camps are required to become more accessible to all people with disabilities.

Before camp administrators address the specific regulations set down by the ADA, they should consider the benefits their efforts may achieve. People with disabilities often are overprotected by society, separated from others and given few participation options. Camp is a place where they could become fully functioning members of a community. In fact, all the benefits of the camp experience would be extended to them. Furthermore, by integrating camp programs, camps will gain the opportunity to celebrate diversity and show how each individual, regardless of ability or disability, has something to contribute to the group outdoor living experience.

It's important to keep such benefits in mind when determining what changes your camp will need to make. What fol-



lows is an analysis of the ADA's effects on camp programming and strategies that can be used to improve accessibility. For an overview of the ADA and dates when specific provisions take effect, see "Better Camping for All," by Marge Scanlin, in the January/February issue of *Camping Magazine*.

## The ADA and Camps

Camp programming is most affected by the ADA's public accommodations provisions. They dictate that any agency providing education and/or recreation programs, such as a camp, may not exclude individuals with disabilities from those services on the basis of disability alone. While religious organizations are exempted from some provisions of the law, the requirements of the law must be met by other groups that might rent or use

facilities owned or operated by religious groups.

The broad definition of people with disabilities includes individuals with visual and/or hearing impairments, mental retardation and/or autism, physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and spina bifida, HIV infections, chemical dependence, or chronic health problems such as diabetes and cancer. Individuals are considered disabled when an impairment substantially limits one or more major life activities such as walking, dressing, feeding oneself, working, learning, recreating, and other daily physical or mental activities.

The ADA identifies three basic classes of discrimination against people with disabilities: denial of participation (in goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations), participation of unequal benefit (not

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equal to that afforded other individuals), and participation separate or different from that provided to others. All forms of discrimination are prohibited. The intent of the ADA is not to ban special programs for people with disabilities that are already in existence. However, an individual with a disability shall not be forced into that existing special program, and excluded from other similar camp programs for individuals who do not have disabilities.

The aim of the ADA, when applied to camp programs, is to include individuals with disabilities in the most integrated and least restrictive setting possible. These standards should be met to the fullest extent possible under the law. Programs must make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, and procedures for people with disabilities, unless those modifications would fundamentally alter the nature of the services provided.

Furthermore, requirements within a camping program must be the same for a person with a disability as they are for a person without a disability. These requirements may include the ability to pay camp fees, willingness to abide by the rules of conduct for the program, age requirements, and level of skills.

While these standards should be met to the fullest extent possible under the law, camps are not required to make programing changes overnight. Camp directors will need to consider a reasonable plan for coming into compliance with the ADA, based on the particular circumstances of the camp.

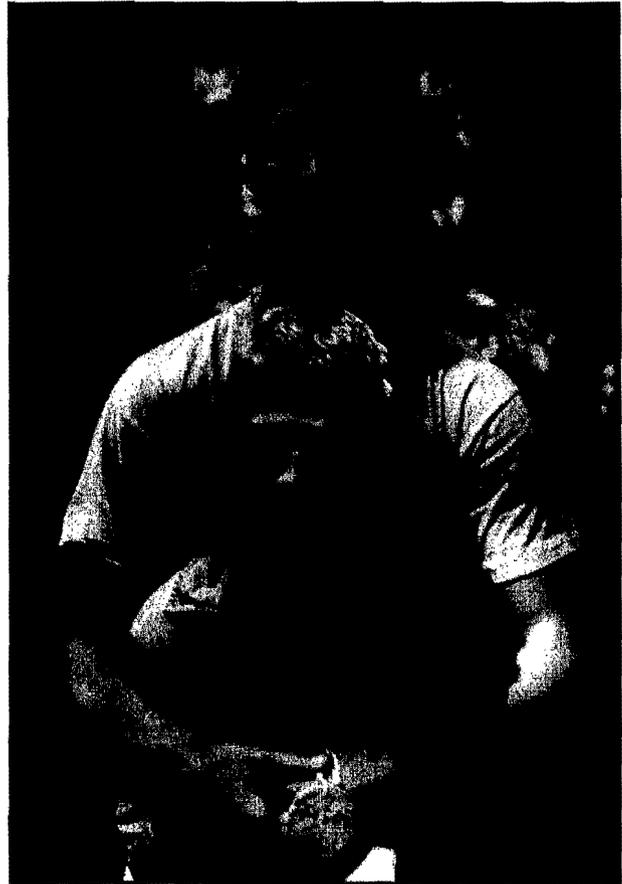
## Beginning Steps

Camp directors will want to consider what is readily achievable for their camp on a case-by-case basis. Compliance will take into account camp size, resources, clientele, and length of operation. One recommended way to begin is to conduct

a self evaluation of services, programs, activities, and facilities to determine where barriers exist and how they can be overcome.

It may be helpful to involve people with disabilities in the evaluation. A panel consisting of board members, staff, and consumers with disabilities will be able to help generate ideas about how to accommodate campers with disabilities. The campers themselves can often provide ideas for how they can best participate in an integrated experience. Camp directors may also want to consider hiring individuals with disabilities and/or individuals who have expertise and experience in working with people with disabilities to assist in identifying accessibility issues in camp programs.

Camp directors should keep in mind that program changes ought not and need not alter the basic camp experience. Consider instead how campers and staff with disabilities can be incorporated into the current program. Furthermore, camp di-



rectors do not need to make all existing facilities architecturally barrier free immediately. While the ADA requires any new facilities or areas to be constructed free from architectural barriers, camp directors should concentrate first on making services within existing facilities accessible.

For example, a camp eventually will need to make a waterfront area fully accessible, which will mean the provision of an independent entrance into the water. Until the time architectural changes such as a ramp or lift are constructed, however, other alternatives should be implemented. A swimming pool, for instance, can be made temporarily accessible by training staff or other campers in proper lifting techniques.

Doing a self evaluation to comply with the ADA may seem overwhelming to camp administrators who have not previously incorporated people with disabilities in their programs. One suggestion is to address "basic pathways" first. For example, a person with a disability needs to be able to move from a parking lot or drop off point to the main part of camp. Second, the major areas of the camp, such as sleeping cabins, bath facilities, health care facilities and the dining lodge, should be evaluated to ensure that they are accessible. Not every sleeping cabin must be accessible, but accessible cabins that do not segregate or isolate campers with disabilities must be provided. Third, the specific program areas should be appraised to determine changes needed for integrating people with disabilities into activities.

The self-evaluation plan should also consider whether staff education and training will be necessary to integrate people with disabilities into the camp program. Disability awareness training for all individuals employed or volunteering at the camp may be helpful in changing attitudes toward people with disabilities and in enabling comfortable and competent interactions. It is important to emphasize that working with campers with disabilities is not the responsibility of one or two specialized staff or volunteers, but is the responsibility of all staff members, including support staff such as maintenance workers and kitchen aides.



## **B**arriers to Integrated Camping

A self-evaluation is likely to yield a number of barriers to integrated camp programs. It is helpful to classify those barriers before determining strategies for addressing them. Strategies will vary according to the type of barrier and the resources of the camp.

### **Ecological and architectural barriers**

Ecological and architectural barriers, although easy to identify, pose great restrictions in camp programs for people with disabilities. Ecological barriers include any physical obstacles that are present in the natural environment, such as trees, roots, snow, and mud. Architectural barriers are constructed barriers such as stairs, or inaccessible restroom facilities.

To be true to the ADA intent, camps need to evaluate which barriers can be readily eliminated with little difficulty or expense and without fundamentally altering or diminishing the camp experience. If the elimination of a barrier is not readily achievable, however, camps should provide a means to accommodate individuals with disabilities through alternative methods.

Careful planning and creative thinking can be used to overcome these ecological and architectural barriers. For example, for people with mobility restrictions, a

hike on a trail with roots and mud might be the challenge in itself. It would not be necessary to chop down trees and dig up roots. Camp staff might take the opportunity to conduct activities where campers solve their own problem of mobility. Or if this is not an option, careful planning to avoid particularly dangerous or difficult trails or paths might be all that is necessary to deal with ecological barriers.

In some cases, a small modification is all that is needed. A latrine could be widened and provided with a small wooden ramp for wheelchair access. Similarly, wheelchairs can travel across beaches or muddy areas with minimum difficulty if snow fencing or material like pine straw is laid down on the ground. This provision enhances traction for the wheels of the chair and prevents sinking into the soil or sand.

The key concept to remember is that most ecological and architectural barriers can be overcome, at least temporarily, with some creative problem solving and ingenuity until more permanent accessibility is provided. It is also important to note that access is not something that is universal; it will vary from person to person and from camp to camp.

### **Attitudinal barriers**

Accessibility to camp programs relies on more than just physical factors. Social  
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integration must also be considered in providing full accessibility. The attitudes of staff, parents, and potential campers will all have an impact on whether children with disabilities consider coming to an integrated camp. Camp administrators, boards, and staff who do not consider how their programs may be discriminatory are creating the basis for attitudinal barriers.

People's attitudes can be a greater obstacle than the steepest trail if those attitudes are negative. Negative attitudes about campers with disabilities exist for many reasons. For example, some people are uncertain of how to act around someone with a disability, so they avoid the interactions. Negative attitudes which result in discriminatory practices are usually due to a lack of exposure to people with disabilities and lack of education about them.

Training for camp staff in conjunction with the exposure gained through integration can provide the basis to overcome attitudinal barriers. In addition, the more interaction with people who have disabilities, the easier it becomes to remember that they are people first.

### Transportation barriers

Transportation cannot be used as a way to deny a person with a disability access to a program. For example, if transportation

is required to reach a camp program site, such as a stable or a river access, a camper with a disability cannot be denied that program experience because of inaccessible transportation. Not every path or vehicle needs to be accessible for people with restricted mobility; however, all campers must be provided with similar experiences.

It's important to note that a person with a physical disability may not want or need special transportation somewhere. For example, a camper with cerebral palsy may be just as capable of hiking a trail as a nondisabled camper. Sometimes it just takes a little longer than it may for an able-bodied camper. Camp staff and other campers may need to plan a little more time and patience during an activity to accommodate all speeds and abilities. Often this acceptance is much more valuable than the \$20,000 adapted van.

### Barriers of omission

Barriers of omission include those elements within a camp setting whose absence hinders accessibility. For example, not promoting the fact that campers with disabilities are welcomed and can be accommodated at a camp is a barrier of omission. The ADA, in its discussion of discriminatory practices, states that no individual with a disability is to be excluded, denied services, segregated, or otherwise treated differently than



other individuals because of the absence of auxiliary aids and services.

Another barrier of omission is failing to provide additional staff for campers with cognitive impairments. Camps may need to lower the staff-to-camper ratio through hiring additional staff or using volunteers to ensure that a camper with a disability receives a camp experience equivalent to that of any able-bodied camper. In some cases, a "buddy program" that pairs an able-bodied camper with a camper with a disability can suffice. It also provides a meaningful experience for the children.

The lack of appropriate role models is another example of a barrier of omission. Children often learn by modeling. But while able-bodied children generally find role models in staff, children with disabilities often have no role models with whom to identify. Hiring more people with disabilities to work as staff can help remove that barrier.

### Economic barriers

The greatest perceived barrier to accommodating campers with disabilities is the cost involved. Since many of the adaptations required to make the camp permanently architecturally and programmatically accessible will cost money, a camp's economic limitations may form a barrier. However, camp directors will want to keep in mind that not



all changes and modifications must be made immediately. Some changes can be readily achievable with minimal expenditures. Major changes and modification of programs and facilities may be implemented over a period of time, thus spreading the costs over several years.

It's important to note that the ADA prohibits camps from passing on the cost of accommodations to only the campers with disabilities. Costs associated with complying with the ADA must be absorbed by all campers or the camp. It bears repeating that great amounts of money may not be needed, at least not initially. And by thinking ahead and planning creatively, many financial burdens can be eased.

### Communication barriers

The ADA also dictates that communication barriers be overcome. To improve accessibility for people with hearing, speech, and visual impairments, camp administrators may want to consider putting some of their communications in a new format. Written publications, such as reports and program brochures, could be offered in braille, or an audio recording could be made available. Telephone systems could be modified with the purchase of a telecommunication device for the deaf (TDD) or a fax machine. Alternately, a camp could be connected to a network that already uses a TDD or a fax.

Communications during camp should also be considered. It may be necessary to provide a sign-language interpreter as a reasonable accommodation for a camper with a hearing impairment. Or one could teach basic sign-language skills to staff during pre-camp training. Again, the overall financial resources of the camp will determine what means are readily achievable.

### Programming for the Future

The extent to which camps must accommodate individuals with disabilities is yet to be determined. Further interpretation of the law is still necessary. It is clear, however, that camps will need to consider

*(continued on next page)*

## Quick look BARRIERS CHECKLIST

*This checklist is designed to give camps a quick appraisal of potential problem areas for accessibility. For detailed review standards, contact the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board at 1-800-872-2253 and/or obtain a copy of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) for current specifications.*

Yes No Item To Be Performed

### Building Access

- |                          |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Are 96" wide parking spaces designated with a 60" access aisle? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Are parking spaces near main building entrance?                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Is there a "drop off" zone at building entrance?                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Is the gradient from parking or path to building 1:12 or less?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Is the entrance doorway at least 32" wide?                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Is door handle easy to grasp?                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Is door easy to open (less than 8 lbs. pressure)?               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. Are other than revolving doors available?                       |

### Building Corridors

- |                          |                          |   |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Is path of travel free of obstruction and wide enough for a wheel chair? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Is floor surface hard and not slippery?                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Do obstacles (phones, fountains) protrude no more than 4"?               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Do hallways provide a turning area of at least 51" for a wheel chair?    |

### Restrooms

- |                          |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. Are restrooms near building entrance?                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Do doors have lever handles?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Are doors at least 32" wide?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Is restroom large enough for wheelchair turnaround (51" minimum)?     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Are stall doors at least 32" wide?                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Are grab bars provided in toilet stalls?                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. Are sinks at least 30" high with room for a wheelchair to roll under? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. Are sink handles easily reached and used?                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9. Are soap dispensers, towels, no more than 48" from floor?             |

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how to provide programs in the most integrated setting possible.

To reiterate, when developing plans for incorporating people with disabilities into camp programs, camp administrators should keep some basic principles in mind. First, all people have a right to participate in normal recreation and camp programs. As citizens, people with disabilities should be afforded the same privileges and accesses as any able-bodied individual.

Second, people with disabilities are people first, and disabled second. They can enjoy and benefit from the camp experience as much as anyone. Finally, camps would be cheating themselves of invaluable contributions, perspectives, and viewpoints if they do not budget for changes and adaptations required to adequately accommodate people with disabilities.

The value of integrated camp programming was vividly captured in Ron Jones's book, *Acorn People*. The book is about

children with disabilities who were integrated into a nondisabled camp. With hope, Jones's reality will become the reality of all camp directors:

"I walked around thanking stairs, bunk beds and hills, because they made all of us behave a little more normally. The camp was not a place for handicapped [sic] children and the kids knew it. Camp Wiggin was a summer camp for children who could shoot arrows, cook goulash, take hikes and sing songs . . . It was a place for children and their expectations and fantasies for life." □

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- The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions to this article made by Jeff Smith, program specialist for the North Carolina Easter Seal Society.

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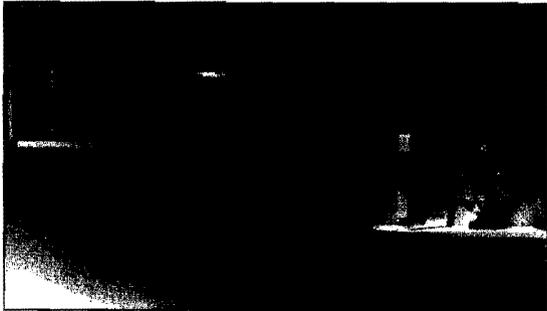
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