

Campers with Disabilities: Encouraging Positive Interaction

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Article:

Although Patty has a new wheelchair and the camp is now physically accessible to people with disabilities, Patty is not excited about going to camp. Despite assurances from her parents and the camp director that she will have a great time, her past experiences of being teased, laughed at, and left out of activities by other campers has dulled her expectations and dampened her anticipation.

For many campers and their families, camp is a safe environment in which children can learn about themselves and experience the world around them. It is also a place where they are exposed to the differences in our society and learn how to respond to these differences. For campers with disabilities, a camp has the potential to provide a place where one is accepted and allowed to be as "normal" as possible. Unfortunately, camp staff and campers are still learning how to interact with people with disabilities.

Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act, a civil rights act that enforces equal opportunities for individuals previously denied access and accommodations in mainstream society, misconceptions continue to hinder the true integration of people with disabilities. For most people with disabilities, these misconceptions are as much of a barrier to participation in leisure activities as a staircase is for a person in a wheel-chair. Behaviors such as taunting, staring, laughing, withdrawal, and fearful reactions are common among children who have had no previous exposure to people who are different.

Camp staff and administration who have not had exposure to or education about disabling conditions are also likely to be uncomfortable in an integrated situation. Most of us who have read *The Acorn People* remember the struggle that Ron Jones had in dealing with his fears and apprehensions toward his cabin of "misfits." Throughout the story, however, he learned to perceive his campers as people rather than their disability.

Changing perceptions

Ajzen defined attitude as "a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event." Attitudes and perceptions are developed early in one's life. Therefore, camps are the perfect arena for education and change. Taylor and Bogdan described an accepting relationship as a relationship between a person with a disability and a person with no disability, which has affection and closeness but in which the person without the disability does not stigmatize the person with the disability.

Children and youth who come to camp with negative or incorrect perceptions of children with disabilities should not be judged too harshly, however. There are many reasons for developing negative attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Body beautiful ethic

The ethic of body beautiful suggests everyone should look thin, fit, and physically attractive. In reality, only a small percentage of our society looks like the models and personalities we see in the media. These models, however, have become a false standard of appearance. Thus, outliers such as people in wheel-chairs, overweight

individuals, or people with disfiguring scars will never meet perceived societal standards because of their disability.

Success-oriented society

Everything in today's society is done quickly and must have a product. For those individuals who have to move or think slower than most people, competition is particularly stressful. Similarly, for those who cannot produce the quantity expected by society, failure is a common judgment. Although children and youth have not been exposed to the competition of the work force, they still are encouraged to be fast and strong, and to be winners when possible. This "success ethic" applied in a young person's world can have more negative effects than positive for those children and youth who cannot easily meet such high expectations.

Nondisabled guilt

Often people without disabilities feel uncomfortable that they can walk, see, or hear, when the person next to them cannot. This discomfort encourages them to avoid uncomfortable situations. Therefore, they choose to interact in environments where they will not encounter people with disabilities.

Spread

Spread suggests that we identify one discrediting characteristic, (e.g., inability to hear) and apply it to the entire person (e.g., mentally retarded). For example, a waiter or waitress may approach a table with two people - one nondisabled and one in a wheelchair. The server asks the nondisabled individual what the other one wants to eat. This is a classic case of spread, which can have a particularly negative effect on the self-esteem of the person with the disability.

Media stereotypes

The media specifically contributes to negative stereotyping. For example, television and movie villains are often portrayed with a disability. When is the last time we had a disabled hero? Similarly, comic book villains typically have a disability, while heroes have an extraordinary ability that saves the day. There are no average individuals with disabilities in comic books.

Educating staff and campers

Several strategies can be employed to alleviate misconceptions of people with disabilities and to instigate positive interaction among all campers and staff members.

Pre-camp training

Campers, camp staff, and administration must be given the opportunity to learn how to interact with people with different disabilities and to explore their own personal reactions to different situations.

Pre-camp training can teach campers and staff to be comfortable with people who are different from them. Rynders, Schleien, and Mustonen found that training sessions for nondisabled peers of children with disabilities, before the camp experience, contributed to increased friendships and networks between the two groups as well as increased skills acquisition among those with disabilities. This training should be conducted by or include individuals who have disabilities to allow direct interaction in a comfortable arena.

Positive interaction in camp can be promoted in two main ways:

*** *Social skills training***

Heyne, Schleien, and McAvoy studied friendships between children with and without disabilities. Social skill deficits in both groups were identified as one of the major barriers to friendships and accepting environments. Through friendship- and social skills-training at a pre-camp or school program, children with disabilities can develop the ability to initiate interactions, work toward developing friendships, and facilitate some of the awkward situations themselves. Teaching appropriate and inappropriate responses to common camp activities and situations can help those with poor social skills understand how to improve their interactions.

*** Role play opportunities**

Role play allows all campers to express their fears and ask and answer questions about disabilities. It can also reduce anxiety.

A good example of such a role play program is Kids on the Block. A group of puppets teach about accepting people with disabilities. The puppets have different disabilities and freely discuss how it feels to have a hearing impairment, or to use a wheelchair. Children, in particular, respond well to the puppets and ask very pointed and meaningful questions. Aiello, who did a 10-year review of the effectiveness of Kids on the Block program, concluded that the puppets were successful in addressing important issues and led to attitude change and acceptance in children without disabilities.

Positive camp philosophy

Camp literature, public relations, and overall philosophical attitude should demonstrate an environment of inclusion and acceptance for all campers. Often an unchecked barrier to inclusion is what is omitted rather than what is present.

For example, the lack of a TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf) prohibits equal access to communication for all campers.

If ramps are installed only to the cabins within which campers with disabilities reside, those campers may be perceived as not being a part of the whole "camp family."

Camp philosophy includes campers in activities, campers' families, and basic interactions. Proactively identify how your camp wants to act and be perceived and move assertively to enact that philosophy.

Role models

As children, many of us had the opportunity to find a hero at camp and emulate his or her behaviors. Very few, if any, of the camp counselors of 10 or 20 years ago had a disability, however. Unless camps aggressively attempt to include all types of people in their staff, children with disabilities will not have the opportunity to identify a "hero" who is like them. As youth serving professionals, we do these children an injustice if we do not try to provide an environment and staff that can relate and empower them.

Conclusions

Camp staff and administration have before them endless opportunities to affect campers' perceptions of and interactions with people with disabilities. This is not an overnight process, however. Camp professionals must establish systematic programming and planning, and evaluate and modify as needed.

It is a responsibility of camps to send a consistent message of inclusion to campers and community. Even when campers with disabilities are not present, educational programs and architectural changes can take place to prepare the children and youth for accepting others in non-camp situations. Daily in our society, we see inappropriate responses and behaviors to all sorts of differences. Literature and research suggest that recreation and education environments, such as camps, have a large impact on making better citizens of our children. We must make it our responsibility to utilize the opportunities and resources we have to make camp more enjoyable for all people.

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RELATED ARTICLE: Interaction Tips

A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc. A handicap is a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

* Speak of the person first, then the disability:

say "a child with a disability," not "a disabled child"

say "a person has...," not "is afflicted with, suffers from, or is a victim of"

say "uses a wheelchair," not "is confined to a wheelchair"

say "nondisabled," not "normal"

* Emphasize abilities, not limitations.

* Maintain eye contact. Position yourself at the same eye level.

* Do not use wheelchairs and other helping devices without permission.

* Offer assistance once.

* Speak in normal tone and volume.

* Do not avoid words related to the disability, for example, "run."