

## Access and inclusion in community leisure services. (recreation activities for handicapped people)

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### **Abstract:**

Handicapped people benefit from participating in mainstream recreational activities. Laws that require physical accessibility by handicapped people will likely increase their opportunities for participation and improve the societal attitudes towards people with disabilities.

### **Article:**

#### ***THREE CASE STUDIES***

##### ***Case Study #1***

Tim and his parents have a dream that Tim will become an adult who, though he has Down syndrome and is moderately mentally retarded, is able to live in his own apartment, hold a job and participate in community activities with peers. Tim will need to be able to interact successfully with roommates, bus drivers, store clerks, employers, coworkers and others. Each opportunity he has to interact with a nondisabled person today is valuable preparation for the transition to adult life in the community. For the past 18 years of his life, however, Tim has been sheltered by his parents with little opportunity to venture out or to make choices. The extent of his recreation and sports participation has been regular involvement in a Special Olympics program at high school. His favorite activity has been the softball throw.

Last summer, when an opportunity came along in the form of an integrated community recreation program, Tim and his parents jumped at the chance. He volunteered to learn to play bocce with a nondisabled partner, Dana. Tim was enthusiastic about the game and even more enthusiastic about participating with his new friend. They learned to appreciate each other's personalities, and have given each other support and encouragement.

##### ***Case Study #2***

Last summer, my son Tommy went to two weeks of Boy Scout camp. He had to choose between participating in two sports--baseball or soccer. In August, he began training for the school cross-country team and became active in a neighborhood Nintendo Exchange Club. Tommy's major frustration was the lack of time for pursuing all his interests. On the other hand, Tommy's brother Aaron, age 14, who has a developmental disability, also went to two weeks of special camp. Otherwise, his major summer activity was watching Tommy's activities. This summer, Aaron spends his Saturday and Sunday mornings pacing the front hall saying, "Bus, bus, ready, set go." When the bus doesn't come, he sometimes licks the front window, bites his hands and puts on his coat and backpack. He was on the waiting list for an Easter Seal program in August, the only other community recreation opportunity available to him in our rural county. He never did have the opportunity to go.

As I contrast the lives of my two boys, I can't help thinking, perhaps I wouldn't worry about Aaron's behaviors, physical condition, weight and stamina if he were occasionally an active participant, rather than always an observer. Perhaps our family will adjust eventually to the sadness (and stress) we feel knowing Aaron's only opportunities come from mom, dad or brother, and realizing it may always be that way. Last month, with much prompting from his mother, the local Boy Scout troop master finally agreed to welcome Aaron into his troop. Along with 12 other boys without disabilities, he has been busy cutting down and selling Christmas trees as a fund raiser, and preparing for the Minnesota Vikings playoff games at the Metrodome.

### *Case Study #3.*

While listening to the radio at her group home, Sue hears advertisements for an aerobics program at the local YWCA. Sue is a 22-year-old woman who is developmentally disabled, living with five other individuals also diagnosed as being developmentally disabled. She uses simple words and phrases, and frequently exhibits inappropriate social behaviors such as talking loudly at inappropriate times, touching others inappropriately and forgetting to attend to personal hygiene. The only consistently planned leisure activity in which Sue participates is a Tuesday evening Bible study sponsored by the local church and conducted solely for people with mental retardation. Occasionally, she participates in large group recreational field trips. Each time Sue hears the radio advertisement for the aerobics class, she becomes excited at the thought of participating in this exciting activity.

One evening, Sue expressed her desire to participate in the class. The careprovider explained to Sue that she would contact the YWCA to receive more information about the class. First, however, she discussed Sue's potential participation with the group home director and the other staff members. They identified several problems or potential barriers that could prevent Sue from participating, including the current staffing shortage, lack of personal and agency finances, and unavailability of transportation. The decision not to allow her to participate was shared with Sue, although she was not certain what the reasons were behind this decision. Sue remained hopeful, but as time progressed, she became frustrated and began to experience feelings of helplessness. Group home staff began to have difficulty controlling her inappropriate behaviors which included her throwing a tantrum every time the aerobics class advertisement was broadcast. The group home staff found they were unable to motivate her to participate in other recreational and social activities.

Recently, a new careprovider, Beth, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist with a strong interest in leisure and fitness, was hired at Sue's group home. Beth sought permission to attend an aerobics class at the YWCA with a couple of her residents. Before actual participation, Beth met with the aerobics instructor to identify components of the beginner's class that may prove to be barriers to successful participation.

The case studies of Tim, Aaron and Sue illustrate that many children, youth and adults are prohibited from participating in neighborhood leisure services due to various attitudinal, architectural and programmatic constraints. However, with persistent, appropriate and effective advocacy by parents and professionals, individuals with disabilities can get their "feet in the doors" and become active members in neighborhood activities rather than being shunted to "special" or segregated programs.

The principles of normalization and zero-exclusion affirm their right to participate alongside nondisabled peers in leisure services that are offered to the general public. People with disabilities must be allowed to participate in activities, at least partially, without regard to degree of dependence or level of functioning. Furthermore, these principles assert that participation in these activities is advantageous to individuals with and without disabilities. Staff must pay close attention to the skills and abilities of the participants, as well as to the adaptations necessary to enhance successful participation.

The parents and community leisure service professionals who got together to advocate for their children were able to determine Tim's, Aaron's and Sue's appropriateness to participate in these activities, their current skills and abilities related to the activities, and the physical, cognitive and social needs that required individualized attention prior to participation.

Advocates of integrated community leisure services need not approach the general public apologetically; they are promoting something that will enrich the community at large. The chance to make friends and be involved in one's community, to learn and grow in supportive settings, to develop life-long, functional leisure skills and to have fun are some of the most important benefits of inclusive community leisure services. Participants can also experience personal growth and increased social sensitivity, including improved capacity for compassion, kindness and respect for others. Additional benefits include developing skills and attitudes needed to live harmoniously in neighborhoods that include people with and without disabilities and leisure opportunities that reward different levels of ability, valuing each individual's contribution to the effort. There is no need to hesitate

to propose inclusive programming to agencies. Inclusive programming offers organizations such as community parks and recreation, scouts, and YWCAs another means to carry out their missions: building better people--all kinds of people--not just better projects and services.

Inclusive programming is a challenge. Mistakes can and will be made, and there are many details not yet known about how to successfully conduct inclusive programming in every situation. But in spite of the possible mistakes, it is important to plunge ahead and put into action strategies that further those core values that are inherent in the inclusion philosophy: developing each individual's character, abilities, creativity and knowledge; fostering strong ties and relationships between people; and creating a multicultural, interdependent society where all are valued, productive, participating citizens. People in a democratic society like ours should be at their best: friends with equal opportunities.

### **Community Leisure Services for People with Disabilities**

Purposeful leisure and recreation did not play an important role in the lives of individuals with disabilities until the early 1900s. In 1906, the Playground Association of America was formed (later known as the Playground and Recreation Association, and re-named in 1965 as the National Recreation and Park Association). From its inception, the association declared its services were for all people, including those who had been discriminated against because of disabilities. During the 1920s and 1930s, public schools began offering a small number of after-school recreation programs for children with disabilities. Most of these were segregated, a practice that still exists today in many communities. In the 1940s, the use of outdoor and or wilderness areas as therapeutic environments became popular. Today, many national organizations, such as the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States (Arc-U.S.), National Easter Seal Society, and the United Cerebral Palsy Association provide camping and community leisure experiences for individuals with a wide gamut of abilities.

Paralleling those developments, legislation passed over the last 20 years has had a dramatic impact on the quality of life of people with disabilities and has championed the principle of normalization. This principle states that people with disabilities should experience lives similar to those of community members without disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and its recent amendments, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), address the need to provide inclusive leisure services to all people with disabilities, mandating services in least restrictive environments (LRE). The LRE concept advocates that people with disabilities are to work, recreate and be educated, to the maximum extent possible, alongside peers without disabilities.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted to eliminate discrimination against people with disabilities in the areas of employment, transportation, public accommodations, public services and telecommunications. Of great importance to providers of leisure services, Section 302 of the act prohibits denying full and equal access of any public facilities or services to an individual on the basis of disability. The mandate defines separate, albeit equal, programs and services, as discriminatory practices.

Although recent laws have provided the impetus for agencies to accommodate individuals of varying abilities both architecturally and programmatically, often these agencies have done nothing but remove architectural barriers. Many administrators, in their initial efforts, find inconvenient or inaccessible facilities to be the major stumbling block to integration. To overcome physical obstacles, many leisure services agencies are currently engaged in assessing and adapting their physical environments, especially because guidelines on physical barrier-free evaluation and design are readily available. However, physical accessibility and physical proximity between people with and without disabilities does not, in and of itself, ensure positive results. In fact, current research suggests that without programmatic access, participants without disabilities continue to view their peers with disabilities and integration efforts negatively. As of now, community efforts and strategies to make programs accessible remain few. Leisure service providers must integrate people with disabilities into social barrier-free, as well as physical barrier-free environments; that is, totally barrier-free, zero-exclusion environments, where no one is rejected.

## **Inclusive Community Leisure Services**

For the most part, two approaches to social inclusion are in practice today whereby people with disabilities can become active leisure participants. The selection of these approaches depends upon individual needs and program availability, and should not be dictated by the preferences of service providers or the service delivery system itself.

### ***Integration of generic programs approach***

This approach can be defined as helping an individual with a disability to select an existing age-appropriate community leisure service that was designed originally for participants without disabilities. The support person works in cooperation with a program leader to identify and eliminate the differences between program skill requirements and the individual's capabilities. People with disabilities participate in activities alongside a natural proportion of peers without disabilities. Participation in existing age-appropriate leisure services has the potential to help people with disabilities to acquire skills required for contemporary, appropriate, high-interest activities in the community. A significant advantage offered by this approach is the potential to develop social relationships between participants with and without disabilities. Generic programs serve the majority community culture unlike segregated programs that often exist in relative isolation, outside the usual community network.

### ***Reverse mainstreaming approach***

A second approach is referred to as "reverse mainstreaming." In this approach, segregated programs exclusively for people with disabilities are modified to attract peers without disabilities. This approach is currently practiced by Special Olympics International through their Unified Sports Program. Unified Sports combines, on the same team, approximately equal numbers of athletes with disabilities and without, similar in age and ability. Unified Sports leagues have been developed throughout the country in basketball, bowling, soccer, softball and volleyball. The success of reverse mainstreaming often depends on restructuring a program to make it highly attractive to all participants. Once the participants without disabilities are "in the door," participating alongside their peers with disabilities, we can facilitate social interactions and friendship. For participants with disabilities, interactions and exposure in familiar surroundings and among friends with disabilities remains manageable.

## **Inclusive Leisure Programming Process**

In the future, the majority of leisure service providers, efforts will not be spent on programming for predetermined groups, such as children with autism or adults with sensory impairments, but on creating a community in which all members are included. Promising intervention practices have been developed and validated in recent years that give leisure service providers, integration facilitators and families/consumers the necessary strategies they need to make full social inclusion of all members of a community a reality. The following seven-step process identifies some of those practices:

### ***\* Assessing individual leisure preferences and needs.***

The first step in identifying leisure services for participation is to assess carefully what a person does or wants to do in her or his free time, identifying activities that could be enjoyed at home, in the community and with friends and family.

### ***\* Selecting an age-appropriate, community leisure activity***

Consider the following variables when helping an individual select an age-appropriate, community leisure service functioning level and learning needs; physical characteristics and age-appropriateness of activities; availability of leisure materials and access to agency; home environment (e.g., presence of siblings, family socio-economic status); the indicated preference of the consumer herself or himself; safety; long-term versus short-term relevance; and potential for social inclusion and making friends.

***\* Determining the environmental constraints and demands of the activity***

Conduct an environmental analysis inventory for determining the constraints and demands of an activity. The inventory should include a general analysis of the program and a determination of how well the participants, current abilities match the physical, cognitive and social demands necessary to participate in the activity.

***\* Assessing skill levels and deficits relative to the identified demands of the activity***

A commonly used method of measuring leisure skills and skill deficits is a task analytic assessment. You can compare the results of this assessment, that is, the identified individual skills and skill deficits, to the demands of the targeted leisure activity.

***\* Developing strategies to overcome individual deficits and program barriers***

You can identify strategies as extrinsic or intrinsic, based on the identified barrier to participation. Intrinsic strategies, intended to prepare or educate the individual, center around skills instruction. These strategies may include behavioral teaching methods, such as task analysis, that break down an activity into smaller components for easier learning. Extrinsic strategies for social inclusion are strategies that are designed to prepare the social environment to accommodate the participants. Extrinsic strategies (described in Extrinsic Strategies for Inclusive Programming section) that could be used to socially integrate people of varying abilities include: sociometry, circle of friends and cooperative learning.

***\* Implementing by integration specialists***

Integration specialists should work in collaboration with service providers when implementing strategies to promote relationships. Whereas leisure service providers contribute expertise in programming, teaching and leadership, the integration specialist assumes a "facilitator" or "bridge-builder" role. This role involves helping participants connect with other people in the program by providing long-term, interactive support. In this manner, the provider assumes the role of a participant and interacts equally with all members, not just with individuals who are disabled.

***\* Evaluating integrated programs***

Accurate participant performance data are vital for monitoring progress and improving program strategies that are not working. A variety of evaluation methods-interviews, observations, scientific inquiry--to provide continuous feedback and flexibility in the program is required. This ongoing evaluation process allows the programmer to modify the program, as necessary, in order to maximize all of the participants, leisure and social experiences. Extrinsic Strategies for Inclusive Programming Extrinsic strategies are designed to modify the leisure environment and empower program participants, nondisabled and disabled alike, to help each other build friendships as they develop leisure and social skills.

***\* Sociometry***

Sociometry is a group restructuring process that identifies the social make-up of a given group of individuals. These social dimensions could include group cohesiveness, the existence of subgroups or cliques, interpersonal attractions and rejections between members, and the social ranking of each group member by his or her peers.

The sociometric process allows a leisure service provider to assess a group and identify isolated and excluded members. The provider can then restructure and integrate these individuals back into the group. Each group member helps to restructure the group by using a carefully constructed set of questions that request, in a confidential manner, specific information concerning the individual's social relationships. Providers use this information to alter grouping arrangements (e.g., seating arrangements, partner arrangements, teammates) to enhance the social dynamics of the group. Furthermore, they take sociometric measurements to evaluate the process of inclusion of the original and excluded group members. This process should be ongoing throughout the group's duration to ensure the most positive group structure and to continue to empower members to enhance their own social experiences.

### *\* Circle of friends*

Sometimes an individual has great difficulty gaining access to a group, perhaps because of an interfering disability. In such a case, it may be useful to use a "circle of friends" intervention technique. This process prepares a small group or circle of friends to assist the individual or focus person. The circle of friends is comprised of volunteer group members, friends and significant people in the focus person's life (e.g., parents, siblings). These new and old friends have intimate knowledge of the focus person. A group leader can prepare a collection of nondisabled peers by orchestrating a group discussion of the new member's dreams, nightmares, likes, strengths, gifts, abilities and needs. By carefully directing the discussion, the leader can guide the group through the perceived barriers to inclusion, helping the group create solutions that could promote group acceptance. The circle of friends, the focus person and the group leader work together to create successful participation for all.

### *\* Cooperative learning*

The primary focus of the sociometric and circle-of-friends strategies is to encourage nondisabled participants to think creatively about how they can improve opportunities for peers who are disabled and then to empower them to implement their plans and act upon their own ideas. Cooperative learning is, in part, also a planning vehicle, but its emphasis is upon actively promoting person-to-person interactions through three interrelated processes: preparing nondisabled participants to interact as friends of a participant with a disability, structuring group instructions and dynamics to promote cooperative or team-oriented outcomes and preparing program instructors to promote and sustain positive interactions within groups. Cooperative learning by its very nature creates camaraderie and positive interactions.

### **Revisiting Tim's, Aaron's and Sue's Community Leisure Participation**

As Tim continues to play bocce at the community recreation site, he shows steady progress in his social development and bocce skills. Though it may seem that learning to play bocce with a nondisabled partner has little to do with Tim's ability to live on his own in the community, the interpersonal skills, experience and confidence he gains through the program are important parts of his preparation for graduation day and beyond. Aaron has had a successful experience in Boy Scouts. He helped his troop raise more than \$1,000 selling Christmas trees and became an avid football fan (Minnesota Vikings fan, that is!). Several of his peers in scouts befriended him and have included Aaron in other social activities outside of the organized program. His social network is fast approaching that of his nondisabled peers.

With a certified therapeutic recreation specialist serving as her advocate, Sue has lost eight pounds since joining the Y's aerobics class. In addition to various physical benefits, Sue's diet is becoming healthier and her self-esteem is improving. Her tantrums are almost nonexistent and her visits to the YWGA and other community leisure facilities are frequent.

Tim, Aaron and Sue are proof that participation in inclusive leisure programming can make life-changing differences for individuals with disabilities. And, it is not only people with disabilities who benefit. In bocce, scouts and aerobics programs, the waiting lists of people without disabilities who want to participate continue to grow. As a result of these positive experiences, program personnel at these agencies are considering using other types of inclusive leisure programming.

The nondisabled community has also benefitted from these integration efforts. Recreators continue to grow more accepting toward individuals with disabilities, demonstrating the long-term effects inclusion has on shaping positive attitudes of nondisabled people.

Integration also has had an impact on program staff. On attitude assessments, staff members have indicated that inclusion has taught them not to be afraid of people who are differently abled, that individuals with disabilities are disabled only to the extent that we perceive them to be disabled, and that with careful planning, inclusion works to everyone's benefit.

In the early days of inclusive community leisure services, it was commonly believed that by simply changing the physical environment of an agency to remove its architectural barriers and by putting people with and without disabilities together in that setting, participants would interact positively and have successful experiences. Sometimes, these strategies alone did have that fortunate effect. However, physical accommodation and physical proximity do not usually produce positive interactions and interpersonal attraction. The seeds of positive attitudes in citizens without disabilities do not automatically exist, they must be sown and then cultivated in carefully structured programmatic manners.

As leisure service professionals--practitioners as well as researchers--improve inclusive leisure programming for children and adults with and without disabilities, they help to advance the development of community life itself. No longer shunted off to self-contained environments, individuals with disabilities, living, learning and playing in the community, also "teach" their nondisabled counterparts new lessons in personal growth and about enjoying life more deeply. The time has come to adapt a new way of thinking, one founded on the premise that the community belongs, to everyone, and everyone--regardless of level and type of ability--belongs to the community. Inclusive community leisure services can be powerful vehicles for promoting this ideal. When everyone is involved actively and positively, from policy-makers and administrators to parents and actual participants in the community, everyone benefits. Equity is attained and excellence is achieved. Some day--in the not too distant future--equal and excellent community leisure services will be available to all of our citizens.