

Making Camps Accessible for All

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Families of children with an autism spectrum disorder are often faced with the dilemma of what to do over the summer. Where can my child go? What can he/she do? The answer is... just about anything, anywhere. And if a child is included in general education settings during the school year, why shouldn't that child be given the opportunity and chance to be included with those same classmates and friends during the summer at the same camps or activity programs? Just because it has not been done or thought of previously, does not mean it can't be an option now.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) "gives civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and federal government services, and telecommunications." Furthermore, public accommodations which include day care centers, private schools, recreation centers, restaurants, hotels, movie theaters and banks must comply with Title III of the ADA (United States Department of Justice, Commonly Asked Questions About Child Care Centers and the ADA). Activities controlled by religious organizations are not covered in Title III. However, activities that are operating on the premises of religious organizations are generally not exempt from Title III.

The requirements that apply to child-care centers can be applied to recreation programs or camps since they are considered "public accommodations." Below are the basic requirements of Title III related to public accommodations. (Centers in this article refers to all public accommodations, including camps and recreation programs.)

- Centers cannot exclude children with disabilities unless their presence would pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others or require a fundamental alteration of the program.
- Centers have to make reasonable modifications to their policies and practices to integrate children, parents, and guardians with disabilities into their programs unless doing so would constitute a fundamental alteration.
- Centers must provide appropriate auxiliary aids and services needed for effective communication with children or adults with disabilities when doing so would not constitute an undue burden.
- Centers must generally make their facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. Existing facilities are subject to the readily achievable standard for barrier removal, while newly constructed facilities and any altered portions of existing facilities must be fully accessible.

Programs cannot just assume that a child's disabilities are too severe for the child to be integrated successfully into the program. An individualized assessment must be done to determine if the particular needs of the child can be met without fundamentally altering the program. In making this assessment, the program providers must not react to unfounded preconceptions or stereotypes about what children with disabilities can or cannot do, or how much assistance they may require. This may mean talking with parents or guardians, or the child to discern what the options are for that particular individual.

Children who may have challenging behaviors are especially difficult to support. Some programs want to expel children who hit or bite others. The ADA suggests that first the program should work with the parents to see if there are reasonable ways of curbing the child's behavior. He may need extra naps, more instruction, or changes in diet or medication. If reasonable efforts have been made and the child continues the challenging behaviors, he may be expelled from the program even if he has a disability. The ADA does not require providers to take any action that would pose a direct threat—a substantial risk of serious harm—to the health or safety of others. It should be remembered that each child is unique. Simply because one child with a specific diagnosis acts in challenging ways

does not mean that other children with the same diagnosis will act in the same manner. That is discrimination.

Medications, lack of toilet training, HIV or AIDS, mental retardation, life threatening allergies, diabetes, children with leg braces, and others are covered under ADA. These factors cannot be reasons to exclude anyone. There are precautions and training that can increase the comfort level of those who provide services. Education and information are powerful, and can alleviate the fears that often are the real reason people are excluded or experience discrimination.

Playgrounds are also covered in Title III stating that even if programs do not have children with disabilities enrolled presently, they have the ongoing obligation to remove barriers to promote access. Architectural barriers that limit the participation of children with disabilities must be removed if removing those barriers is readily achievable. Barrier removal is readily achievable if it can be easily accomplished and carried out without much difficulty and expense.

Although Indiana does have many "special summer camps" for children with various disabilities, some families may wonder if their child should or could attend other camps; camps that are not just for "special" children. Special camps may have staff who have had some experience or training regarding the specific disability or possibly some behavior support techniques. However, that training does not give them information about your specific child, his or her likes, dislikes, fears or frustrations. Those trainings may provide general information, but tells them nothing about who your child actually is as a human being. While there may be benefits to attending a camp that is especially designed for children with specific disabilities, there may also be many benefits from attending other camps.

Children with autism spectrum disorders can attend regular camps with other children and be successful, if camp staff are open and willing to receive some basic training in autism spectrum disorders. Many times a general overview along with some information about teaching strategies can provide the staff with enough confidence to begin to include these children. Sharing information with camp staff about the strengths, preferences, and interests of your son or daughter allows them to focus on their abilities rather than the challenges. All too often only the challenges are shared; the hard issues are highlighted so that the child is preceded by a "reputation" that may not be the whole picture.

Activities may be adapted or modified to promote your child's success and involvement in any camp. ADA is in place to ensure that accommodations happen everywhere, including camps. Below are possible accommodations:

Provide routines that are somewhat consistent.

Each day has scheduled activities at a camp. Be sure routines are explained to the individual daily. These routines may serve to comfort the individual and lessen anxiety.

Present visual schedules to help the individual understand the routine.

Providing a visual schedule each morning of the days events can assist the camper in knowing what to expect as the day progresses. For example, write out or have pictures of the various activity sites and put them on a schedule board attached with velcro. As the camper moves through the day, the activities can be removed from the board so they know what has been done and what is next.

Warn of any transitions or changes.

Using the visual schedule as support, point out the next activity and verbally tell the camper what will be happening next. Allow them time to process the information as well as prepare themselves for transitions or schedule changes which can be challenging in many ways for individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Consistently use the child's communication system. When necessary, provide training on how to use it properly.

Communication is key for everyone. If students come with any form of augmentative communication such as picture boards, signing, facilitated communication, written language or other means, all staff should learn how to use that system. Their communication system should always be available to the camper and they should be encouraged to use it throughout the day.

State limits, boundaries and rules to provide clear and consistent expectations.

Any boundaries, rules, or limits should be made clear to each camper by using their visual schedule board, their communication system, or by using other means available. By telling them how long they will be in the canoe, how many campfire songs they will sing or how many pine cones to glue on the cardboard, the campers will know exactly what is expected and there will be less chance for misunderstandings. The use of time limits or visual notations of "how much, how many or how long" is helpful in most circumstances.

Finally, consider the following when designing accommodations around specific activities.

Amount and type of materials that are preferred by the individual:

Does the camper prefer crayons or colored pencils? Will 10 colors be used for the art project or 3? Will the colors be in paint, pencil or chalk? What type of paper does the camper prefer?

How instructions are given to the individual:

Are verbal instructions enough or does the camper need visual cues through writing, pictures, or models or is physical assistance needed to begin?

The level of participation one should expect:

Will the camper participate in the full 30 minutes of the swimming lesson or only be required to be there for 10? What do they have available if they leave? Can they be on the basketball court with their team and run up and down the court without handling the ball? Are they allowed to simply sit with the group for activities that are more challenging for them?

How much support is required:

Do they need to have an adult there to get them involved? Can peers offer more natural support throughout the day? If peers offer support, they should have additional support offered to them.

There is no magic answer! Just as it is important to get to know each individual who attends any camp, the same holds true for children with autism spectrum disorders. Help staff learn the positive aspects of your child, what reinforces him or her, what their interests are, what they are good at doing, as well as other issues that might arise. Help them to understand the strategies that calm your child, or what to do when your son or daughter is having a difficult time. The best thing you can do is openly communicate with staff well ahead of time. The more people know, the less they will fear. As many of us have learned, there really is nothing to fear, just a lot to understand.

Davis, K. (2000). Making camps accessible for all. *The Reporter*, 5(3), 1-6.