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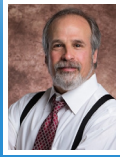
SEPTEMBER • OCTOBER 2024



**Diversity, Equity, Inclusion,
and Belonging**



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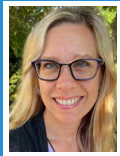
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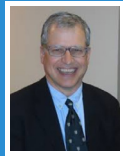
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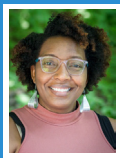
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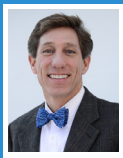
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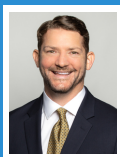
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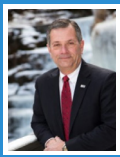
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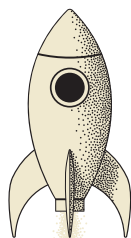
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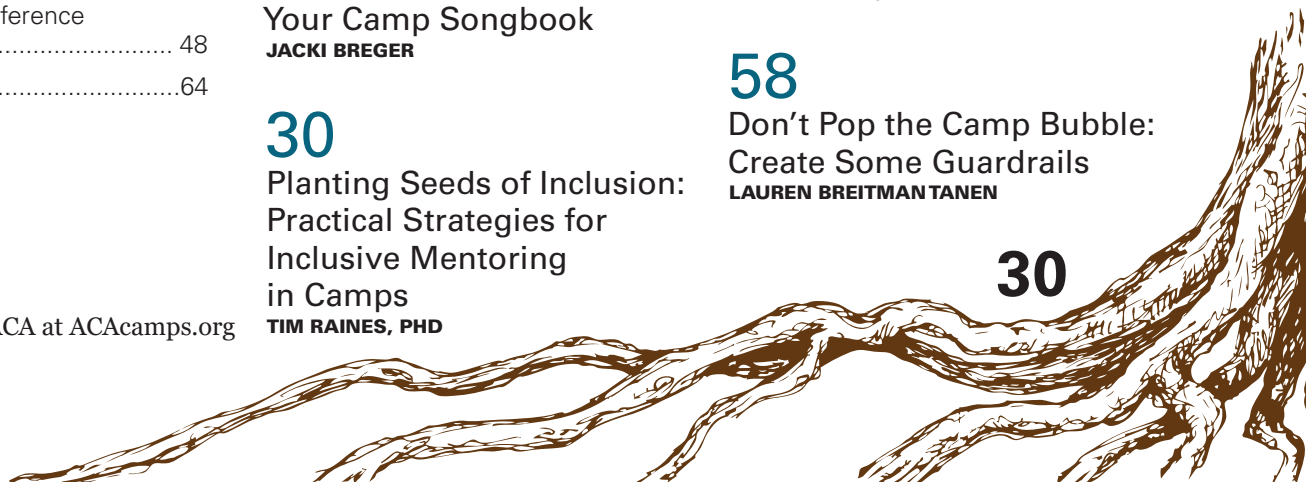
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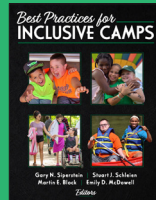
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BEST PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE CAMPS

Best Practices for Inclusive Camps

Editors: Gary N. Siperstein, Stuart J. Schleien,
Martin E. Block, and Emily D. McDowel

Book \$66.00

Written by practitioners for practitioners, this book provides a distinctively practical take on the inclusion of youth with and without disabilities at camp. Part I of the book addresses best practices in various aspects of camp, and Part II is a series of case studies about inclusive camps that represent both day and overnight programs across a range of organizational affiliations and geographical locations. Appendices include a self-reflection questionnaire for your camp and a collection of staff training activities specifically designed for promoting inclusion.

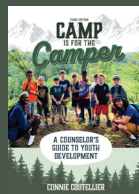


Camp Is for the Camper:

A Counselor's Guide to Youth Development, 3rd Edition
Connie Coutellier

\$19.95

Bestseller! Super important basics for your seasonal staff. Includes: being a role model, camper characteristics, positive reinforcements, understanding behavior clues, and group dynamics. Provide this book prior to your in-person or virtual staff training; build on any topic with your own twist. Corresponding online course available at ACAcamps.org/camp-is-for-the-camper.

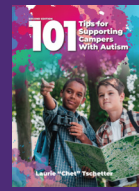


101 Tips for Supporting Campers with Autism

Laurie "Chet" Tschetter

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Practical tips for supporting someone with ASD. Autism is complex, and each person with autism is different. This book will help you understand some of the social, environmental, sensory, and other challenges a person with autism faces.

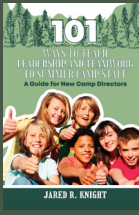


101 Ways to Teach Leadership and Teamwork to Summer Camp Staff

Jared Knight

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This book is "boots on the ground" and examines real and relevant issues in the current time, with insight into what staff need right now. Leadership principles addressed include crisis management, recruiting, supervising, motivating, and correcting.

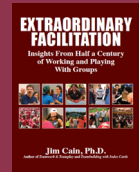


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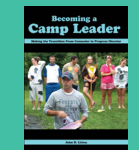


Becoming a Camp Leader

John D. Litten

\$19.95

Tips and advice for transitioning from a camp counselor to a program director and beyond. This is also a refresher for anyone already in a leadership role.



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Camping Magazine focuses on critical topics and emerging issues that affect its readers. As the premier resource for camp professionals, *Camping Magazine's* primary responsibility is to present new programming ideas, the latest trends in camp, current legislative and risk-management issues impacting camp management, and progressive information regarding child and youth development.

The views and opinions expressed in *Camping Magazine* by contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Camp Association or ACA employees.

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The mission of the American Camp Association is empowering camps to create quality experiences that build a world of belonging and growth.

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Learning to Know People at Camp



Tom ROSENBERG
President / CEO

“The real act of, say, building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete social actions well: disagreeing without poisoning the relationship; revealing vulnerability at the appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to end a conversation gracefully; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to let someone down without breaking their heart; knowing how to sit with someone who is suffering; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another’s point of view.”

– David Brooks

Congratulations on a successful 2024 camp season. I hope this issue of *Camping Magazine* finds you well and recuperating after an excellent summer. I recently read David Brooks’s new book, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, in which he challenges us to set aside our sense of self and look beyond other people’s superficialities to really get to know them. I admire Brooks for his honesty and thoughtful insights. I find myself aligned with his idealism in that we all can and should make time to improve the quality of human connections in our lives. In a time when our nation is fraught with rising depression, suicide, and polarization, this book is timely. I also know that this book will resonate with camp professionals, as it encourages us to lean into innovating camp programming and training around social connection, empathy, curiosity, cooperation, effective communications, collaboration, and fostering optimism.

Immersive camp experiences that are free from technological distraction and where campers and young staff can have a measure of independence from their parents are fruitful environments in which to learn to appreciate the diversity of personalities and create a deep sense of belonging.

In *How to Know a Person*, Brooks categorizes people as either diminishers or illuminators. Diminishers make people feel small and unseen, are often self-involved, use other people as tools, and often judge others in stereotypical ways. By contrast, illuminators are persistently curious about others in positive ways and lift people up and make them feel respected, seen, and important (Brooks, 2023).

So, what are effective ways to foster camp staff cultures that inspire illuminator staff and, in turn, cultivate illuminator camper communities? For starters, it helps when camps can limit use of cell phones and personal devices so everyone can more immersively focus on human skills. When a community is undistracted by social media, it creates space for vulnerable rapport, sharing feelings, and more compassion, which helps you really know someone. Social media creates an illusion of social connection with someone without having to invest in the interpersonal efforts that build trust, care, and affection. And on social media people tend to feel free to judge and diminish each other without empathy or authenticity.

Through creative programming and positive leadership, camp communities cultivate greater understanding of campers’ and staffs’ diverse cultures and backgrounds, helping them to see the world through each other’s eyes and to have empathy for one another’s struggles and challenges. Genuinely connecting and authentically acknowledging the realities of others’ situations with love and respect helps you figure out why a person might be experiencing particular emotions. We learn to understand that what others may need is often different from our own needs. Through happy days at camp, everyone works to care for and trust one another by being honest, vulnerable, dependable, and respectful of one another. And by extending ourselves to serve and know each other at camp, we begin to foster our own identity, values, and life purpose in transformative ways.

REFERENCE

Brooks, D. A. (2023). *How to know a person: The art of seeing others deeply and being deeply seen*. New York, NY: Random House.


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Youth Mental Health Crisis: US Surgeon General Calls for Warning Labels on Social Media

In a continued effort to acknowledge and address the youth mental health crisis, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, recently called for tobacco-style warning labels on social media (Murthy, 2024).

In an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, Vivek explained why he thought a warning label was necessary, stating: “It is time to require a surgeon general’s warning label on social media platforms, stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents. A surgeon general’s warning label, which requires congressional action, would regularly remind parents and adolescents that social media has not been proved safe. Evidence from tobacco studies show that warning labels can increase awareness and change behavior. When asked if a warning from the surgeon general would prompt them to limit or monitor their children’s social media use, 76 percent of people in one recent survey of Latino parents said yes” (Murthy, 2024).

Research has shown that adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of anxiety and depression

symptoms — and as of summer 2023, the average daily use in this age group was 4.8 hours (Murthy, 2024).

Dr. Murthy further acknowledged that a warning label on its own would not make social media safe for youth, and the Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory issued in 2023 — which offered recommendations for policymakers, platforms, and the public — should remain the priority (Murthy, 2024). That advisory resulted from a growing amount of research pointing out potential harms in social media use for youth, as well as research studying the high number of children who use social media (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

Dr. Murthy also called for collaboration from society, asking schools to ensure classroom learning and social time are phone-free experiences, and saying that meals and social gatherings in other settings should be without phones as well.



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US Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Social media and youth mental health: The US Surgeon General’s Advisory*. [hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf)

Obituaries

SALLY DANA

Sally Dana passed away on July 12, 2024. Sally joined ACA in 1969 and was a longtime accreditation volunteer. She served as director of Camp Humdinger in Oregon and later moved to Wisconsin, where she served as a visitor, standards chair, and as part of the Written Documentation Review team. Sally was 77 years old.

SUSAN GOLDMAN

Susan Goldman passed away on July 3, 2024. Susan was a longtime volunteer for ACA and served as an accreditation visitor. She was 73 years old.

JUDY SNELL

Judy Snell passed away on June 6, 2024. Judy joined ACA in 1983. She was active in ACA, New England and served as a conference chair, accreditation visitor, and board chair. She was a leader at YMCA Camp Huckins in New Hampshire for 14 summers and served as their executive director from 1990 to 2003. Judy was 84 years old.

Decline in Reading for Fun in Today's Youth



In June, writer and philosopher Liz Stillwaggon Swan, PhD, who teaches writing at the University of Colorado — Boulder, wrote an article in *Psychology Today* chronicling her experiences teaching incoming college freshmen (Swan, 2024).

Swan finds out her students' writing habits and experiences, and then talks about the best way to get better at writing: reading. Her students usually don't react well, Swan says, stating, "They don't like this. I hear things like, 'I haven't read a book in 10 years!' and 'I haven't read a book since 6th grade!' or even, 'I've never read a book'" (Swan, 2024).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)'s Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics' most recent report showed declines in reading for fun

among both 9- and 13-year-olds. As of 2022, only 39 percent of 9-year-olds stated they read *almost every day* — a decrease from 42 percent in 2020. Sixteen percent reported that they read for fun *never or hardly ever*. Meanwhile, as of 2023, only 14 percent of 13-year-olds reported they read for fun nearly every day — down from 17 percent in 2020. In addition, 31 percent of 13-year-olds reported that they read *never or hardly ever* in 2023, up from 29 percent in 2020 (NAEP, n.d.).

The report also found that reading for fun seemingly tied into academic performance. In both the 9-year-old and 13-year-old age ranges, high-performing students read for fun more often than lower-performing peers. Larger percentages of 13-year-olds scoring at or above the 75th percentile reported reading for fun *almost*

every day, once or twice a week, and once or twice a month compared to students performing below the 25th percentile. For example, 26 percent of students at or above the 75th percentile reported reading almost every day, while only 9 percent of students below the 25th percentile reported the same. Additionally, 42 percent of students below the 25th percentile reported reading *never or hardly ever* compared to 17 percent of students at or above the 75th percentile (NAEP, n.d.).

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NAEP. (n.d.). *NAEP long-term trend assessment results: reading and mathematics*. nationsreportcard.gov/ltr/reading/student-experiences/

Swan, E. S. (2024, June 1). The end of reading. *Psychology Today*. psychologytoday.com/us/blog/college-confidential/202405/the-end-of-reading

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Advancing Accessibility in Outdoor Recreation

Gina Tabasso

Imagine a camping experience where individuals of all abilities can connect with the beauty of nature. The demand for facilities that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been on the rise, which reflects a growing need for inclusive outdoor recreation. Meeting ADA standards is not just about legal compliance but also is an ethical responsibility. By providing accessible facilities, camps demonstrate their dedication to fostering an inclusive environment where individuals of all abilities can engage in camping and outdoor activities. Camps that prioritize ADA-compliant units also contribute to a positive industry reputation. This attracts a diverse camper base and positions the camp industry as a leader in accessibility.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADA-COMPLIANT UNITS AT CAMP

ADA-compliant units that conform to the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act play a pivotal role in ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities. In the camp industry, ADA-compliant units serve as a hallmark of superior business practices. These units convey a clear message that the camp is not just a place for recreation but is inclusive, welcoming, and sensitive to the needs of all individuals. This commitment to inclusivity can bolster a camp's reputation, attract a broader clientele, and foster a more diverse and enriching community.

When constructing ADA-compliant camps, several elements should be considered:

- **Path of travel:** Ensure a clear and unobstructed path of travel connecting all areas of the camp,

including cabins, dining hall, restrooms, and other facilities. This includes accessible parking spaces, ramps or lifts for elevation changes, and wide doorways.

- **Recreational areas:** Make all recreational areas, such as swimming pools and sports fields, accessible with entrances and pathways. Provide alternative options if the activities themselves are not accessible to individuals with disabilities.
- **Cabin design:** Design cabins with accessibility in mind by incorporating features such as wider doorways, lowered shelves and counters, and grab bars in bathrooms.

By incorporating these elements, camps can ensure that all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can fully participate in all activities and amenities.

ADA-COMPLIANT CABINS

What are the attributes of ADA-compliant cabins?

- **Accessible living spaces:** Designing cabins with wheelchair ramps, wider doorways, lowered thresholds, and spacious interiors to accommodate mobility devices ensures that campers can navigate living spaces comfortably.
- **Adaptive bathrooms and kitchens:** ADA-compliant bathrooms featuring transfer showers, grab bars, and wheelchair-friendly layouts enhance accessibility. Similarly, kitchens with front-controlled appliances and user-friendly designs cater to a diverse range of campers.
- **Innovative storage solutions:** Consideration of unique storage needs, such as raised water heaters for easy access, demonstrates

a commitment to accommodating guests with specific requirements.

To ensure accessible recreational experiences, camp leadership can take several proactive steps:

1. **Understand industry standards:** Familiarize camp employees with ADA standards for outdoor facilities. Provide training to ensure staff members are well-versed in creating an inclusive environment.
2. **Conduct regular accessibility audits:** Conduct regular audits of camp facilities to identify areas for improvement in accessibility. Implement necessary changes to enhance the overall inclusivity of the camp.
3. **Collaborate with accessibility experts:** Seek guidance from accessibility experts, including structure manufacturers, to ensure camp facilities meet or exceed ADA requirements.

CHALLENGES FACED BY CAMPS

Despite the significant benefits of ADA-compliant units at camp, camp owners still face challenges implementing them. The most common challenge is the cost associated with constructing or upgrading existing structures to meet ADA requirements. This can be a significant financial burden for smaller camps or nonprofit organizations.

Another challenge is the lack of knowledge and understanding about ADA requirements among camp owners and staff. This can lead to mistakes in design or construction that result in cabins and other living spaces that are not fully compliant.

To address these challenges, camps can explore resources and



support from organizations specializing in ADA compliance for recreational facilities and seek guidance from other camps with successful ADA-compliant implementations.

In addition, an article from the ADA National Network (2024) highlights federal tax incentives for businesses making alterations to improve accessibility. The Disabled Access Credit (Internal Revenue Code, Section 44) provides assistance to small businesses, defined as those with revenues of \$1 million or less or 30 or fewer full-time workers in the previous tax year. This credit covers eligible access expenditures, such as removing barriers, providing interpreters, making audio and visual materials accessible, and acquiring or modifying equipment for individuals with disabilities. The credit is 50 percent of eligible access expenditures, up to a maximum of \$10,250, with

no credit for the first \$250, resulting in a maximum tax credit of \$5,000. Additionally, businesses of any size can take a tax deduction under Internal Revenue Code – Section 190 for the costs of removing architectural or transportation barriers, along with a business expense deduction of up to \$15,000 per year for barrier removal. Loans and grants are also available to small businesses.

There are many opportunities to remove barriers to campground owners and barriers to campers so that everyone benefits.

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Protecting Campers from Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Eric Spacek

This year's summer camp season is over, and you've brought joy to hundreds or thousands of children and an incredible experience to staff members. Congratulations! Now it's time to start thinking about next summer and the steps you can take to protect the people you will be serving.

One big — and preventable — threat to campers is carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. CO is a colorless, odorless gas found in the fumes that are produced any time you burn fuel in furnaces, vehicles, or other pieces of equipment. It can build up indoors and poison the people who are breathing it, which is why it is often called the “silent killer.” At low concentrations, CO can lead to fatigue in healthy people and chest pains in people who suffer from heart disease. If a person breathes in enough CO, it can be fatal.

If you don't already have specific preventive measures in place to avoid CO poisoning, now is a good time to start. You can create policies and procedures over the winter — well before your camp is again filled with young people — and present a safer, more prepared program to your campers and their parents.

PROVIDE TRAINING ON CARBON MONOXIDE

First, it's important to know why CO is such a risk. When you breathe it in, it binds to your blood's hemoglobin with an affinity 200–250 times more than oxygen. Your body then replaces the oxygen in its red blood cells with carbon monoxide, which can lead to a death similar to suffocation.

During your precamp training period, you should educate all staff

members about CO poisoning and how to recognize it. Some people can mistake CO poisoning for heat stroke.

Signs of carbon monoxide poisoning include:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Flu-like symptoms
- Tightness across the chest
- Shortness of breath
- Drowsiness
- Fatigue

If a staff member suspects one or more people are suffering from CO poisoning, they should immediately remove them from the area (for example, if they are in a tent, they should exit into the fresh air). Then they should call 911.

HOW CAMPERS CAN BE EXPOSED TO CO

Of course, the best treatment for CO poisoning is not to experience

it in the first place. You have a lot of control over that, and it starts with taking extra precautions when necessary.

At a summer camp, CO poisoning could occur in buildings — or it could happen outside, in places where you wouldn't expect an issue. The following are a few of the situations in which campers and staff members could fall prey to carbon monoxide:

- **Camping** — While tents may feel like they're mostly outdoors, they create enough of an enclosed space that they could represent a significant danger of poisoning. You should never use gas or propane stoves inside a tent because there's not enough proper ventilation.
- **Boats** — If you plan to take people out on the water, be aware of the exhaust area at the end of the boat. A person who sits close to that area and breathes in the fumes for any length of time could become sick or even lose consciousness because of CO poisoning. The best way to avoid those fumes is not to sit or swim anywhere near that



area. You should also be aware of the fumes from any neighboring boats and park well out of the direction any fumes are heading.

- **Backup generators** — The summer months are notorious for frequent power outages, especially during severe weather. At some point during your season, you may need to use a backup generator to provide power for your campers. Be aware that gas-powered generators can cause CO to build up inside a facility, and never use them indoors.
- **Space heaters and other heating appliances in your buildings** — Most CO poisoning happens in the winter, the most common source being unvented space heaters. But winter isn't the only time it gets cold. You may find you need to use space heaters during the summer, which can be dangerous because a space heater



vents the gases it makes into the building, instead of outdoors. Newer models of space heaters have a safety feature that shuts it off when the oxygen level in the room falls below a certain level, but older models don't. The best way to avoid CO poisoning is to only use fuel-burning space heaters in well-ventilated areas.

(Electrical space heaters do not cause CO poisoning.)

- **Campfires** — While campfires promote a sense of camaraderie and fellowship, they can also be deadly in many different ways. If campers or staff are sitting too close to the fire, or if they are directly in the path of the smoke

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from the fire, they are in danger of carbon monoxide poisoning. It's important to keep a close eye on anyone who is spending time around a fire.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF A CO PROBLEM

While it's difficult to physically see the danger of CO when you're around a campfire or taking campers on a boat, you can more easily spot problems inside buildings. The signs of a CO problem in an enclosed structure include:

- Streaks of soot around fuel-burning appliances
- Excess moisture found on windows, walls, or other cold surfaces
- Excessive rust on flue pipes, other pipe connections, or appliance jacks
- Orange or yellow flames (should be blue) in the combustion appliances
- Small amounts of water leaking from the base of the chimney vent or flue pipe

- Damaged or discolored bricks at the top of the chimney

The single best way to ensure you are alerted to a CO problem in time, though, is to have a carbon monoxide detector in every building that could possibly have a fuel-burning appliance. Make sure your device is certified to the most current Underwriters Laboratory (UL) standard 2034 or the International Approval Services (IAS) 6-96 standard.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A CO PROBLEM IN ONE OR MORE OF YOUR BUILDINGS

If you notice one or more of the preceding signs of a CO problem in a building, or if your CO alarm alerts you to a problem, the first step is to evacuate everyone from the facility.

Then call emergency services, which will send personnel to determine what the source of the carbon monoxide is and tell you what you need to do to make your building safe again. It could be a simple solution, such as turning off the gas burner on a stove, or you may need to completely remove an appliance from the building.

WHY YOU NEED INSURANCE PROTECTION

Even when you take every precaution and inspect every appliance regularly, there's still a possibility one of your campers or a staff member could experience CO poisoning. That's where a good insurance policy comes in.

The most common types of insurance that provide protection against carbon monoxide poisoning claims include comprehensive general liability policies, umbrella coverage, and excess liability policies. However, you shouldn't assume that just because you have insurance, a situation such as CO poisoning is covered.

Talk to your insurance agent about which scenarios are covered, what your limits are, and whether you have enough coverage based on the value of your camp and buildings.

CO poisoning may not be something you think about very often, but it's real — and it can be deadly. If you haven't taken the proper precautions yet, use this off-season to make a plan.

Eric Spacek is the assistant vice president — risk control for Church Mutual Insurance Company, S.I.



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Inclusive Camp: A Pathway toward Friendship between Campers with and without Disabilities

Lisa Drennan

In the summer of 2014, I was the association director of inclusion for the South Shore YMCA in Massachusetts, with oversight of the inclusive day camp sites. It was officially our first summer of welcoming and supporting campers with diverse abilities into our traditional day camp settings. After a challenging start, we quickly found ourselves in week five of the summer season. The attitudes and fear around inclusion at camp were beginning to soften.



It was 9:00 a.m. on a Wednesday when I received a text from our inclusion coordinator requesting that I come out to the red tent. Filled with apprehension, I excused myself to attend to the request. Being called out to a specific group this early in the day generally meant that there was some type of issue. On the way there I tried to remember, *Who's in the red group? Our buddy Kyle.* A wave of uneasiness washed over me as I assessed possible scenarios I might be walking into.

Kyle was new to our camp but not new to day camp situations. He had been kicked out of three summer camp programs before applying to ours — and we were determined to make it work. He had quickly become the face



of disability inclusion and a measurement of the success (or failure) of our program.

To be honest, he had a rocky start. During weeks one and two we were faced with many questions and doubts about our ability to help Kyle be successful in a typical day camp setting. The inclusion team heard more than once, “Maybe he should just go to a special camp. We can’t handle a kid like him.” This, of course, made us work doubly hard, as we were determined to help Kyle (and many other kids like him) be a successful camper, a valued member of the camp community — and, most importantly, to belong.

Weeks three and four we were diligent in utilizing every inclusion strategy we knew of. We worked closely with his camp counselors and family, and by week four things seemed to click for Kyle. *But had they?*

I braced for the “I told you so” looks and exclamations as I reached the red tent. I saw Kyle’s mom, and I could see that she had been crying. My heart sank.



Kyle’s mom did not speak; she simply handed me a piece of paper. Puzzled, I looked over at my inclusion coordinator, who also said nothing but nodded to indicate I should read it. It took me a moment to realize that I was looking at a birthday party invitation. To Kyle. From a peer he had befriended while at camp. His mother’s tears were tears of joy.

At 11 years old, this was Kyle’s first birthday party invitation — and a by-product of an authentic friendship he had formed at camp. A friend who also loved Lego-Robotics, archery, and their peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut into triangles with the crusts removed. A friend who was neurotypical, did not have disabilities, and who liked Kyle and enjoyed spending time with him. A friend who saw Kyle’s strengths and qualities, who shared his interests, and celebrated his passions. A friend Kyle met because the team at the South Shore YMCA saw the value of creating an inclusive camp environment.

BUILDING A PATHWAY FOR FRIENDSHIPS

We live in a world where isolation and loneliness are becoming increasing challenges for all communities, but especially for people with disabilities who, compared to the general population, have less social support

and are more socially isolated (Emerson et al., 2021).

It has been said that friendship is an antidote for loneliness, but making friends can also be more difficult for people with disabilities. (Emerson et al., 2021).

Inclusive camp and recreation enable children with diverse abilities to participate in community sports and activities that help them gain activity-specific skills, group participation skills, self-esteem, increased independence, and opportunities to engage in positive peer interactions (Wenner, 2016). This makes camp an ideal setting to begin a connection that could lead to an authentic friendship between a person with and a person without a disability.

THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP

Friends are good for our health. They help us celebrate good times, are supportive during bad times, and give us a reciprocal opportunity to offer needed companionship. Friends can also increase our sense of belonging and purpose, boost our happiness, and reduce our stress (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

However, we can hardly get to friendship without first taking the path through inclusion.

Through Kyle's story, we see the impact of committing to inclusion. We can recognize more clearly the end result, the opportunities — what's possible. When we focus on the gifts and values an individual can share with their community, we take the first step in facilitating and fostering a friendship based on mutual interest. But this doesn't just happen. It calls for proactive steps by camp counselors and leaders alike. It requires creating a welcoming and accessible environment for people with disabilities to participate — and intentional actions to foster authentic peer relationships. In doing so, we can create a culture in which developmentally typical campers and campers with disabilities alike can



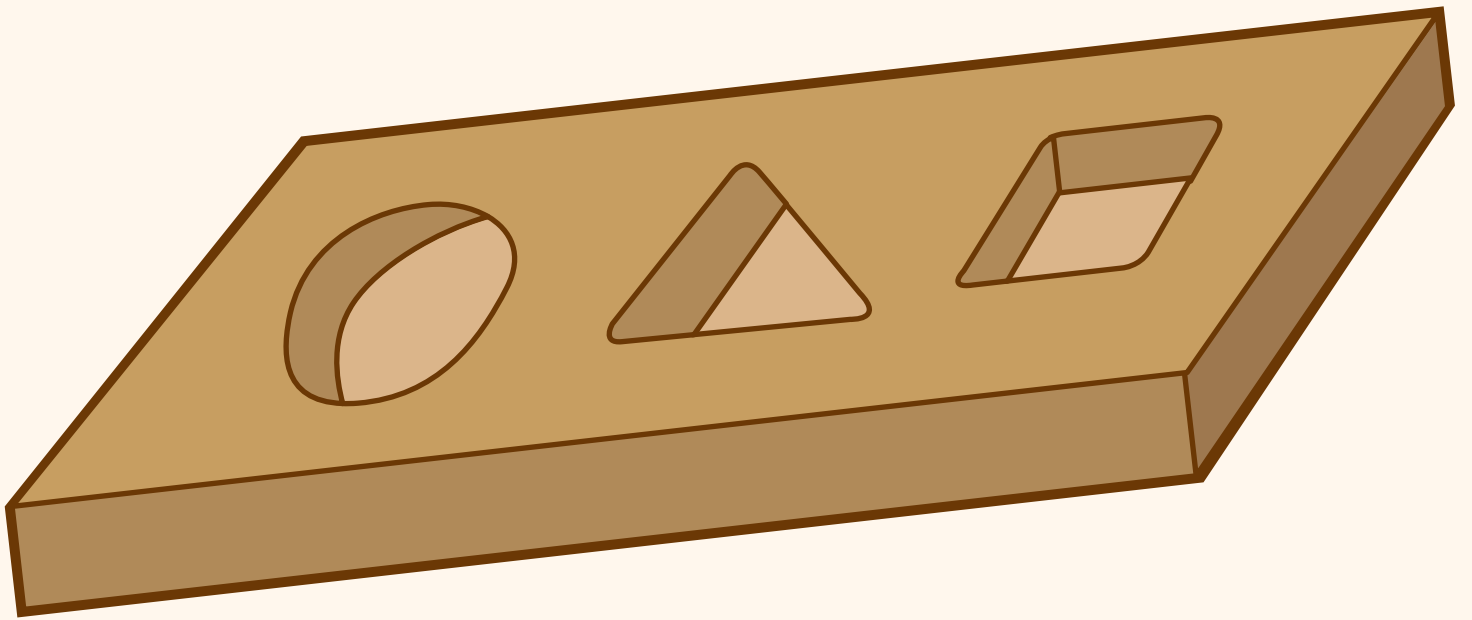
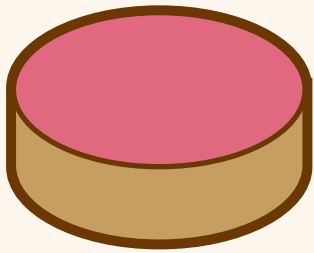
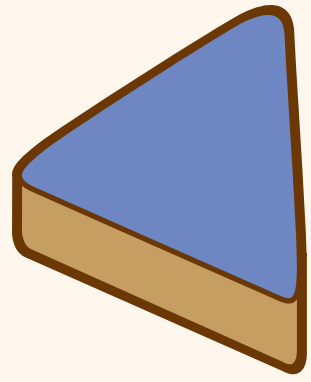
transition from simply participating to a place of actually belonging.

Photos courtesy of MERGE Diverse Abilities Inclusion Consulting, Pembroke, MA.

Lisa Drennan is the founder of MERGE Diverse Abilities Inclusion Consulting, providing staff training and expert consultation to recreation, camp, sport, and community organizations on how to be inclusive of people with diverse abilities. She is the primary author of Building Friendships between People with and People without Disabilities, made possible by The Arc Massachusetts. She can be reached at lisadrennan@mergeconsulting.org or (781) 724-1918.

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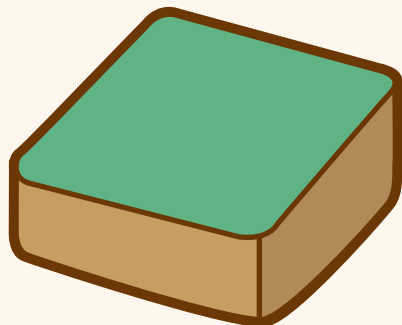
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DEI Snapshot:

*Assessing Diversity,
Equity, and Inclusion
Strategies across Camps*

LISA MEERTS-BRANDSMA, PHD

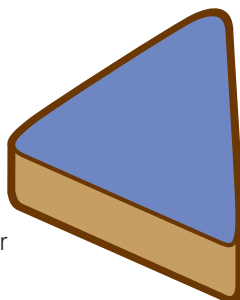


Working toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals can feel overwhelming. Where do you start, how do you begin, and how can you satisfy people who have different perspectives on the right approach? There's no one-size-fits-all answer. Research conducted by University of Utah researchers in partnership with the American Camp Association emphasized that each camp's approach to DEI needs to vary based on its context. Sure, a template would be easier to follow. But it would not account for your camp's specific needs and circumstances or the communities that have been marginalized in this space.

This research provides a platform for you to consider how your DEI efforts currently align with the broader camp industry and what strategies you might want to incorporate in the future. While it cannot tell you exactly what to do to achieve DEI goals at your camp, it offers valuable insights and opportunities for reflection. The study surveyed 390 camp staff across 39 states and asked them about which strategies they used to promote DEI and how effective they were at using them. (Strategies assessed are listed in Table 1.) They could say they did a strategy well, they tried to do a strategy, they did not do a strategy, or they did not know. Afterward, we interviewed 19 camp staff to hear more details about their responses. Here's what we learned.

Governance and Administration

Camp staff shared how crucial leadership support is for implementing DEI practices. Without backing from leadership, it's challenging to allocate staff time and resources for DEI efforts, especially when budgets are tight. Prioritizing DEI often starts with written policies for



equity and inclusion, along with clear goals and objectives. About a third of the camps reported doing this well. However, almost half admitted they didn't have a dedicated DEI resource person or an official DEI committee.

One interviewee who worked as a DEI and access manager at their camp described the importance of policies to creating an inclusive environment:

"This year, I had a camp call and say, 'Hey, we've never had an openly trans camper before. We don't have any policy around that. Here's what our housing situation is. What do we do?' And I said, 'OK. First, let's write a policy. And then we'll decide what to do in the situation based on the policy that we write.'"

Hiring and Training

Almost all camps reported that they were trying to train staff on DEI topics and hire diverse staff who reflect their camper populations, although only a quarter to a third felt they did it well. Camp staff in less diverse areas said it was often easier to hire seasonal workers than full-time staff with diverse identities. They could recruit seasonal staff from more diverse communities farther away from their camp, and potential recruits were willing to temporarily live at camps despite having limited opportunities to connect with other people who shared their identity.



"We typically do a very good job of hiring diverse staff, particularly at lower levels, but not so much at upper levels of our organization," said one interviewee. "So, that has been a focus of our organization the entire time I've been here. But our site is located in a rural part of New Jersey that is not particularly friendly to people of color. They wouldn't see many people [like them] reflected in the townspeople or shop folks, or any of that."

Staff training sessions for counselors often focused on behaviors, such as how staff could respond to campers in the moment when topics related to DEI arose, whereas training sessions for permanent staff were more likely to focus on attitudes and knowledge related to DEI. An important part of staff training was repetition, so that individuals could practice and reengage with content they learned.

Evaluation

Evaluating DEI efforts is a tough challenge for camps. Few camp staff said they excelled in this area. While many were trying to assess their DEI initiatives, a similar number were not. However, camp staff said they had limited access to effective tools to conduct evaluations, making it hard to track progress. They wished they had better ways to understand if and how their DEI efforts improved the camper experience. This conclusion aligns with a systematic review by Devine and Ash (2022), which highlights the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of DEI initiatives in achieving their goals across all industries, not just camp.

Programming and Climate

DEI efforts in programming and climate varied widely. Some initiatives, like accommodating diverse food choices, came easily to most camps. Others, such as providing all gender/nonbinary housing, were implemented by less than half of camps, and very few said they were doing it well. Often, programming and climate efforts were related to physical aspects of camp that were clearly visible to campers, such as hanging pride flags in a dining hall. These actions provided a visual cue to campers, potentially promoting emotional safety.

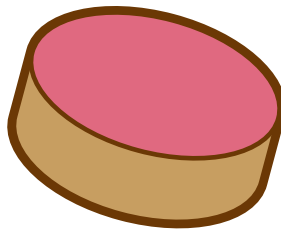
In describing their camp's success in programming and climate, an interviewee said they ask themselves, "What is the physical space that I can create that would help to make this place recognizable as a safe space?"

Camper Recruitment and Access

More than 80 percent of camp staff reported they did well at providing financial assistance to campers in need. Most either did well at recruiting or were trying to recruit campers who reflected the diversity of their community. However, fewer camp

staff said their camp excelled at providing transportation to campers who were unable to get to camp or outwardly communicating their commitment to DEI in marketing. Emphasizing DEI in marketing could have many significant impacts by welcoming diverse campers while also setting expectations for families less familiar with or tolerant of such efforts.

"I encourage people to put that [DEI goals] literally everywhere," said one interviewee. "We post it on our social media at least every couple of months. There's a reminder that, yes, this is who we are, and we do all of these things. One of my favorite examples of how to use it was actually at a camp that got a lot of pushback around queer stuff in 2021. They put it on their registration this year.



Parents had to check a box that they had read it before they could register their kids for camp, so there weren't any parents who were like, 'I didn't know there was going to be a pride flag, or that you let people use other pronouns.'"

Key Takeaways

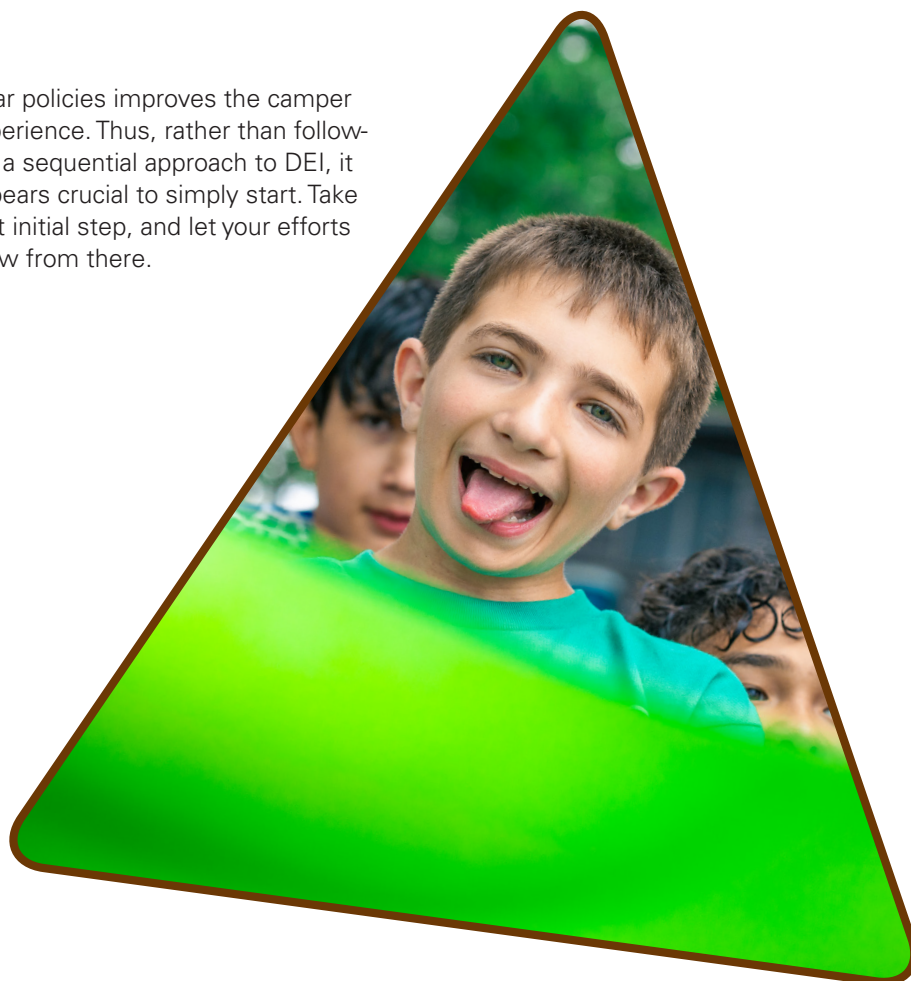
These findings describe camps' efforts to achieve DEI goals on a national scale. One limitation of this research is its broad perspective, aggregating stories across camps. While the findings highlight overarching trends, they likely do not capture any individual camp's experiences. We know that context matters. Camps in liberal areas have different challenges compared to those in conservative regions. Working toward DEI goals for youth of color looks different than for LGBTQ+ youth.



One camp director shared her discomfort as she wrestled with what she wished to do versus what seemed currently feasible within the camp structure: "In general, I think easing into it is going to be the best way . . . It's not how I would prefer to do it," she said. "But I don't know. I feel like we have to kind of meet people where they're at, and I don't want to push some people so far that we exclude a lot of our returning families or people who are like, 'This is new. This has never happened here before.'"

With these concerns in mind, some camps may struggle with where to begin. Which strategies are most important? What comes first? This study data does not prescribe answers to those questions, but they do point to iterative and mutually reinforcing effects once camps initiate change. Communicating DEI goals in marketing affects camper recruitment, recruiting diverse staff enriches the camp climate, and creating

clear policies improves the camper experience. Thus, rather than following a sequential approach to DEI, it appears crucial to simply start. Take that initial step, and let your efforts grow from there.



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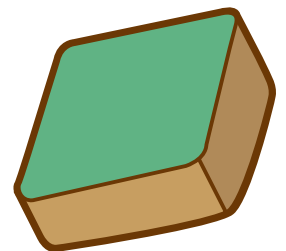
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Table 1. Strategies Assessed in the Benchmarking Survey

Category	DEI Strategy
Governance and Administration	Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards
	Written policies regarding equitable and inclusive practices at camp
	A staff member(s)/person who serves as a resource for campers who request accommodations for disabilities
	Written goals or objectives for DEI
	A staff member(s)/person who serves as a mental health resource for camp
	An official DEI committee or working group for our camp
A staff member(s)/person who serves as a DEI resource for camp	
Hiring and Training	Have formal training for staff on DEI topics
	Hire diverse staff who reflect our campers and community
	Explicitly screen staff for biases and bigotry
Evaluation	Collect information from stakeholders on how camp can serve community
	Collect data to inform DEI decisions
	Conduct (or have conducted) a formal DEI audit to identify potential problem areas for camp
Programming and Climate	Accommodate diverse food choices
	Invite campers and staff to share their pronouns (he/she/they)
	Make supplies and materials available to accommodate diverse campers' needs
	Eliminate cultural appropriation(s) at our camp
	Provide all gender and nonbinary housing options
Camper Recruitment and Access	Provide financial assistance for campers who can't afford to attend camp
	Have campers attend our camp(s) who reflect our community
	Provide busing or subsidized transportation to youth who need it
	Outwardly communicate commitment to DEI on website, in marketing, and during enrollment

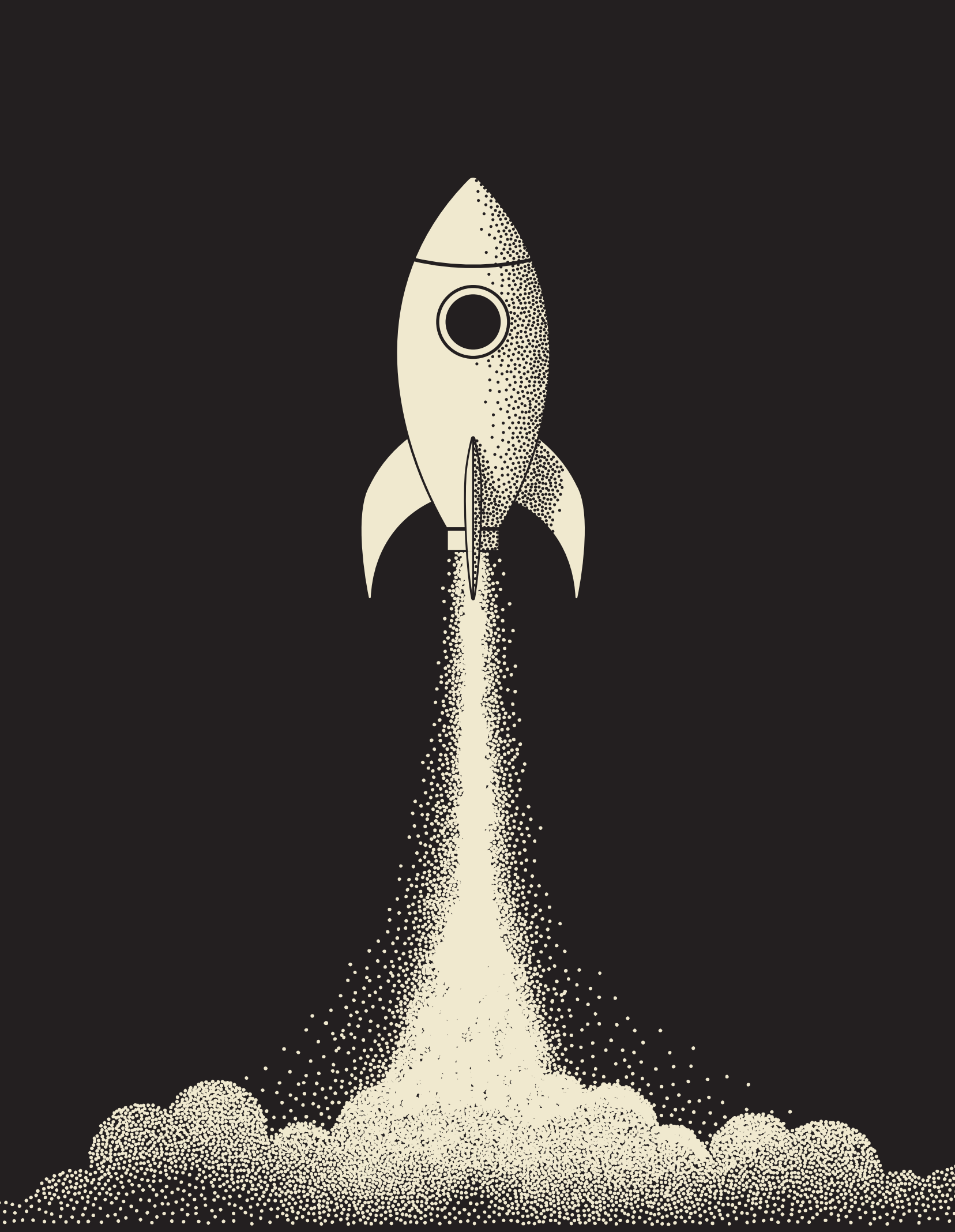


Photos courtesy of Camp Friendship, Palmyra, VA; Camp John Marc, Dallas, TX; Camp Awosting-Chinqueka, Bantam, CT.

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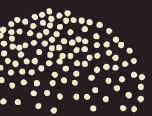
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Welcoming International Counselors Could Boost Campership in Marginalized and Immigrant Communities

KELSY MELTON



When I attend ACA conferences (which I do as a US Department of State Designated J-1 Sponsor for the Summer Camp Counselor Exchange Visitor Program), I make a point to attend sessions that include conversations about diversity. I do so hoping to gain some insight into how camps include international staff. Typically, though, the presenters talk about diversity in other ways, such as including more campers and staff of color and of varying abilities, or how to identify our own biases. Though these topics were not what I was initially looking for, they have been valuable for a deeper understanding of why international counselors should play a critical role in meeting camp and camper needs.

Another conversation brought to my attention has been how difficult it is for camps to reach families in marginalized communities.

I should acknowledge that I am not a member of the communities referred to in this article. My knowledge is based on listening to stories and advice from these community members. My aim is to bring a lens of cultural comprehension based on my own studies of cultural competency and dimensions, through my experience living abroad, and through relationships with people who do not share my geographical background.

I hope what I've learned might also be helpful to you and your camp. And toward that end, let's describe our needs for:

- Cultural competency
- Outreach and recruitment
- Representation
- Training and education

Cultural Competency

Developing cultural competence among staff and volunteers to effectively engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, such as understanding necessary accommodations and making consider-

ations such as food, clothing choices, and religious practices.

My favorite answer to the question, "What is culture?" is: "The need to communicate information and the basis of how it's done depending on the community." Anthropologists Edward T. Hall, Fons Trompenaars, and Geert Hofstede each developed their own structural definitions (AKA dimensions) of culture (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). The beautiful part of learning about culture is that no matter who we are, we can relate to it and see ourselves reflected in its essence.

Six cultural dimensions are particularly relevant to the camp space:

- **Context** refers to how much communication and information an individual can observe and utilize at any time. In a camp context: When we have counselors who have never worked at a camp, we must be aware of the codes/words we are using to communicate tasks, expectations, and our vision.
- **Chronic time** refers to the use and interpretation of time. Polychronic people have two main skills: multitasking and building and maintaining relationships. Monochronic people tend to take on one task at a time, and the schedule rules overall. In a camp context: One counselor may rush their campers to the next activity, while the other may be engaging in conversation with many



campers at a time on the way to the destination, resulting in their being late.

- **Space** refers to how different cultures organize, perceive, and use space, and how these cultural variations influence human behavior, communication, and social interactions. In a camp context: We all have our own individual space bubbles (called proxemics) that vary in circumference depending on our relationship with those in our proximity. We may find that one counselor has a tendency to stand a little too close to hug and hang off of others.
- **Power distance** refers to how a culture perceives and responds to hierarchical structures and authority figures. In a camp context, some counselors will use terms like "sir" or "ma'am," while others will call us by our first name. We know that camp is family style, and the directors are accessible and friendly. But to many, this is employment and hierarchy rules.

- **Individualism versus collectivism** refers to the degree to which individuals in a society are integrated into groups and the extent to which they prioritize individual or collective goals. In a camp context, while an individualistic counselor will expect and provide direct and assertive communication with an emphasis on expressing personal opinions and ideas, a collectivistic counselor will prioritize group harmony despite their personal needs remain unmet.
- **Uncertainty avoidance** refers to how a culture deals with ambiguity, unpredictability, and the unknown. In a camp context, some counselors may want to try new things, learn new skills, and provide innovative suggestions. Others, however, may want to stick to what they know, and being pushed into new situations or environments may cause stress and anxiety.

To answer that question, you need to gain insight about immigrant and marginalized communities. I suggest, first, reaching out to community leaders. That can be in the form of community centers, spiritual leaders, resource centers — any individual or organization that is already meeting the needs of these communities. It's important to understand that no one is required to provide you with such access, but going to them with genuine interest in getting to know the community and their customs will get you much further than a sales pitch, no matter how helpful your services.

Know that "Parents in refugee families face many obstacles to involvement in their children's education. These include illiteracy, not speaking English, heavy work schedules, unaccustomed to active school involvement, sense of embarrassment about their children's performance or

conduct, and unfamiliarity with how to support their child's education" (Weine, 2008).

Here are some questions to lead you in the right direction:

- What do these communities usually do over the summer and during school breaks — and is there a way to meet them and understand how to support them during those times?
- Do these communities feel at home in their cities?
- Does sending their children elsewhere feel like sending them to the moon?
- Do parents know what activities your camp offers?
- Have the parents seen or done camp activities before?
- Can they afford this sort of expense?

To learn more about these cultural dimensions and explore some real-world feedback from J-1 camp counselors, read the Project Real Job article "A New Kind of Camp Counselor" at ACA Camps.org/blog/new-kind-camp-culture.

Outreach and Recruitment

Actively reaching out to diverse communities, using inclusive language in recruitment materials, and implementing practices that attract a broad range of candidates for opportunities.

I encourage you to adopt a mindset that asks not "How do I get these kids and families to my camp?" but instead asks, "How can my camp meet the community?"

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Representation

Ensuring diverse representation in decision-making processes, leadership positions, and promotional opportunities within organizations or communities.

Once you start to build relationships with community leaders, they should be included in conversations at camp to ensure their community is represented. Ask for their participation and insight. Use leadership-in-training programs in camp to help identify young leaders in these communities and support them. The campers you want at your camp need to see themselves represented there, and their families need to know their community has their best interest at heart.

Use social media to engage with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) outdoor educators. As you hire international staff, engage them early with opportunities to contribute to programming. Provide examples and activity structure that enables them to take ownership of activities and demonstrate their cultural identities to the campers and their peers.

As you bring on international staff, have them connect with one another. This is a key element in cohesion. They can get to know each other prior to arrival and start to build a sense of community. You can also request their input and feedback to engage with them and build trust. You can easily create WhatsApp group chats, Slack channels, Discords, and Facebook groups for these purposes. The international staff are going to have a different experience compared to your domestic staff. Having others to connect with will give them a sense of control over this experience.

Training and Education

Providing training and education on diversity, equity, and inclusion to create awareness, build understanding, and develop skills for establishing diverse settings.

Cultural competency resources are available, including educational facilitators. Invite your camp leadership to take seminars and use the tools they learned in staff training. Encourage the conferences you attend to include international cultural training in the curriculum, and attend that training.

An interesting question to ask is, "Whose tradition is camping and summer camp?" In many parts of the world, camping is a mode of survival rather than recreation. So, for

some families, the idea of engaging in this sort of activity may be difficult. Consider generational trauma in relation to being outdoors. Other families prefer to have their children participate in activities that are more traditionally known to enhance their children academically, such as STEM extracurriculars.

And some see camping as a unique opportunity to build family relationships. Said first-generation immigrant Francis Mendoza: "I remember biking, picnicking, and taking long road trips with my cousins, 'play cousins' and 'Aunties' and 'Uncles' who weren't even related to us. This was our summer camp" (Mendoza, n.d.).



International counselors are a tool to connect with communities you may not normally reach. Engaging the international staff in programming, marketing, and cultural understanding can open a path for your camp to generate access for new communities. This creates a *world* of opportunities. Pun intended.

Photos courtesy of Wyonegonic Camps, Denmark, ME; YMCA Camp Carson, Princeton, IN.

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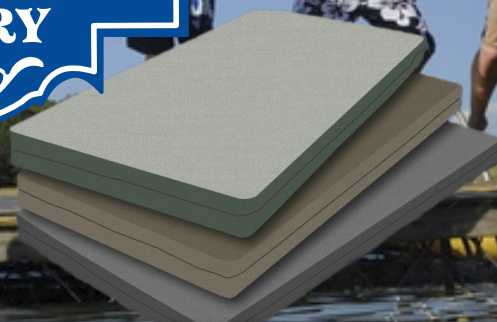
Kelsy has dedicated much of her life to culture exchange both personally and professionally. She has worked as a J-1 visa sponsor in the Intern, Trainee, and Camp Counselor visa categories. She has also worked with international recruitment agents producing candidates for these categories. Her educational background is in international management, earning her MBA at Université de Rennes (France) during which she took a Cultural Competency course that strengthened her foundation of cultural exchange. She has had the pleasure of living in Turkey, France, and The Netherlands, as well as extensive travel in neighboring areas. If interested in speaking to her more about culture competency for your camp, she can be emailed at Kelsy@Roamconsultant.com.



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8 QUICK AND EASY TIPS FOR REVIEWING AND UPDATING YOUR CAMP SONGBOOK

JACKI BREGER

Think about your camp songbook. If you don't have one, create one! It's the best way to formalize your song collection and to recognize songs that may have outlived their appropriateness. While analyzing every song in your collection may seem daunting, here are some simple suggestions for organizing, reviewing, updating, adding, and deleting your camp songs.

- 1. Think about your camp values:**
Define them, clarify them, write them down, determine how they apply to, and support, all areas of your operation, including your song collection. Include them in your songbook. This is really the most important part of the review process.
- 2. Organize your song collection:**
Create categories — is this an active song, a quiet song, a silly song, a round, a song with hand motions? Organize your songbook by category so you can easily find the right song for the right moment, and include an alphabetical index for quick reference.
- 3. Think about the content of your songs:**
Are there songs that seem dated or that use language someone might consider inappropriate? Do any have histories that ridicule groups of people or that work against your camp values?
- 4. Develop a thoughtful process for revisiting songs:**
Create a committee that includes members from all areas of your operation, including administration, program leadership, counselors, campers, parents, and community members. Be sure there is plenty of diversity, including age, gender, racial, and ethnic representation.
- 5. Define a procedure for reviewing songs:**
An annual review will help keep things up to date. And removing or modifying songs will be less daunting when it's part of the routine.
- 6. Make a list of questions that can guide your process:**
Does the song demean a person or a group? Does it perpetuate a stereotype? Does it reflect universal "truths" or cultural values of a specific group?
- 7. Determine a procedure for handling complaints about songs:**
Be sure to take complainants and song complaints seriously, and review them thoughtfully. A formal process normalizes questions and complaints about songs, which encourages people to express their concerns.
- 8. Practice having courageous conversations within the committee:**
Not only is this an important skill, but it is absolutely critical for having robust and respectful discussions and making thoughtful decisions.

Finally, it's important to remember that song review is tough but essential work — essential to building and maintaining a song collection that is broad, inclusive, fun, respectful, and supportive of your camp's values.

For more detailed information on creating and maintaining a formal songbook review process, check out *Singing Together: How to Teach Songs and Lead Singing* and "What's Wrong with This Song!" in the September/October 2021 issue of *Camping Magazine*.

Jacki Breger is a veteran song leader in camp, school, and concert settings, and has been a camp counselor/song leader and director in both day and resident camps. She authored Singing Together: How to Teach Songs and Lead Singing, hosted a radio program for kids about folk and classical music, and has produced five albums of songs for children. She has been working with camps to help them develop their own review

PLANTING SEEDS OF INCLUSION: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE MENTORING IN CAMPS

TIM RAINES, PHD







**“A SOCIETY GROWS GREAT WHEN ELDERS PLANT TREES IN WHOSE SHADE THEY SHALL NEVER SIT.”
— GREEK PROVERB.**

Growing up, my family always said it takes a village to raise a child, and it most definitely did for me. My village showed up as mentors with varying backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. Because of the many mentors I had throughout my journey, I am now Timothy A. Raines, PhD (aka Dr. Tim) — a first-generation Black scholar who grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the youngest of nine children. I am the first in my family to earn a bachelor, two masters, and a PhD in microbiology. It is because of the many mentors who guided and shaped my life by fostering an inclusive environment that celebrated me authentically and pushed me to grow beyond the limits of what I set for myself.

Mentoring is about planting the seeds of confidence, understanding, and growth that will support the mentee long after their camp has ended. Being an inclusive mentor means honoring each camper’s perspectives, experiences, culture, and identities. Think about the most influential mentor you’ve had during your life’s journey. What qualities made this individual so impactful? How did this individual foster a meaningful and lasting relationship with you? Hold tight to those qualities and add them to your mentoring toolbelt.

THE POWER OF INCLUSIVE MENTORING

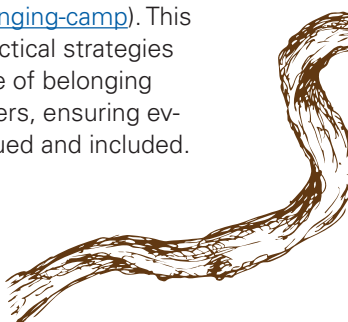
According to Cornell University faculty, “Inclusive mentorship is a co-constructed and reciprocal

relationship between a mentor and mentee who take a strengths-based and identity-informed approach to working together to support their mutual growth, development, and success” (Cornell University, n.d.).

Inclusive mentoring involves intentionally creating a supportive environment that respects and values all identities, acknowledges differences, and actively works to eliminate biases. This type of mentoring is essential in camps, where diverse groups of young people come together, bringing their unique backgrounds and experiences. Inclusive mentoring removes the inherent power dynamic between the mentor and mentee, allowing for a mutual exchange of knowledge, experience, and wisdom. It is about creating a mentoring relationship based on respect and shared learning, rather than one person being the giver and the other the receiver. The influence of a good, inclusive mentor can last a lifetime, providing youth with a positive self-image and self-worth to navigate the world confidently. Furthermore, the power of inclusive mentoring extends beyond the immediate benefits to the mentee. It cultivates a culture of empathy and understanding, fostering an environment where everyone feels valued and included — a true sense of belonging. This ripple effect can transform entire camp communities, as campers who have experienced inclusive mentoring often become mentors themselves and aspire to return as camp staff, continuing the cycle of support and inclusion.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE MENTORING

Mentors generally serve as guides, supporters, and role models. They play a pivotal role in helping campers navigate new experiences, develop skills, and build self-assurance. Inclusive mentors go a step further by:

- **Respecting all identities.** Recognize and honor the diverse identities of campers, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status. Check out this insightful article by Zeina Dagher on Medium, “The Power of Accepting Each Other’s Differences” (zeinahdagher.medium.com/the-power-of-accepting-each-others-differences-f38a2ab242b9). This piece explores the importance of embracing diversity and understanding the unique perspectives that everyone brings.
 - **Acknowledging differences.** Each camper brings unique experiences and perspectives, which should be recognized, celebrated, and incorporated. Read the article “Confronting Barriers to Belonging at Camp” by Christen Peterson, CYC-P, from the September/October 2023 *Camping Magazine* issue (ACAcamps.org/article/camping-magazine/confronting-barriers-belonging-camp). This article offers practical strategies to foster a sense of belonging among all campers, ensuring everyone feels valued and included.
- 

- Accessing unexamined biases:** Reflect on personal biases and assumptions to create a more inclusive environment. Project ABC, an Early Childhood System of Care Community, has developed this video, *Our Hidden Biases* (youtube.com/watch?v=ZV-gVs4qj1ho), to ignite meaningful discussions among child-serving professionals.
- Developing cultural competency.** Continuously learn and adapt to better understand and support campers from various cultural backgrounds. This engaging *What Is Cultural Competence?* video (youtube.com/watch?v=tsWbOD-QiDWs) features university students sharing their perspectives on cultural competency and its personal significance. It provides valuable insights into how cultural awareness and understanding can impact both personal and professional interactions (Arkansas Open Educational Resources, 2021).



STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE MENTORING IN CAMPS

As camp professionals, developing an inclusive mentoring practice that reflects your core values and how best to support your mentees is crucial. Here are actionable steps to get you started:

- Focusing on positive coping strategies.** Teach campers' healthy ways to cope with challenges and stress, emphasizing resilience and positive mental health. Explore the article "Reframing Mental Health at Camp" by Dave Brown, LCSW, from the January/February 2023 *Camping Magazine* issue (ACA Camps.org/article/camping-magazine/reframing-mental-health-camp). This insightful piece provides practical strategies for camp leaders to support the mental well-being of both campers and staff.

- Brainstorm elements of your philosophy.** Identify the key principles of your mentoring approach. Set aside dedicated time for reflection. Use prompts like "What experiences have shaped my views on inclusion?" or "What values do I hold most dear in mentoring?"

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Guiding Prompts: Consider these questions:

- What are your core values as an inclusive and equitable mentor?
- How do you define success in a mentoring relationship?
- What are your nonnegotiables in terms of creating a supportive environment?

2. Define your role clearly. When practicing inclusive mentoring, assess your level of comfort and ability to mentor your mentee. Consider the following:

- **Transparency.** Clearly communicate with your mentees about what you can and cannot provide. This sets realistic expectations and helps build trust.
- **Setting boundaries.** Establish and discuss boundaries early on. For example, clarify your availability, the scope of your support, and any limitations.

3. Access unexamined biases. Regularly engage in self-reflection exercises to identify and address your biases. Ask yourself, “What biases do I bring into this mentoring relationship?” and “How can I mitigate the impact of these biases?”

- **Implicit bias tool.** Project Implicit offers the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which measures unconscious biases. It helps individuals recognize and understand their implicit attitudes and stereotypes. You can explore and take these tests on the Project Implicit website: implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

- **Feedback loop.** Create a feedback loop where mentees can safely share their experiences and perceptions. Use this feedback to identify and address any unconscious biases.

4. Practice cultural humility.

Be open to learning from your campers’ diverse experiences and knowledge, and adjust your mentoring practices to support their cultural contexts better.

- **Recognizing limitations.** Acknowledge the limits of your cultural knowledge and show a willingness to learn from your mentees. Ask open-ended questions about their cultural background and experiences.

- **Centering experiences.**

Focus on understanding and valuing your mentee’s perspective. Make their experiences central to your mentoring approach and validate their feelings and viewpoints.

It is worth noting that you are not expected to be everything to everyone. This means you may not be able to mentor every camper you encounter effectively, which is OK. I believe in the idea of a mentoring network instead of a dyad mentoring — single mentor-mentee pairing (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). “Networking is the key to life,” and setting every youth up with a team of mentors and resources will set them up for success.

A TRAINING ANECDOTE

Once, during an inclusive mentoring training session I was facilitating, I had an older white gentleman ask how he could not show up as an “old white dude.” I responded that we inherently look at someone’s outward appearance first; however, the camper will learn if you are authentic and trustworthy. Once that has been established, they will not care that you are an “old white dude” and will be willing to connect and learn from you. So, the goal is to be who you are and stay authentically true to yourself in the mentor-mentee relationship. One of my best mentors was an “old white dude” who I trusted to help me navigate through my PhD, and to this day, I value him with my whole heart!

DR. TIM’S PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MENTORS

Here are a few strategies I have utilized to connect with youth from various backgrounds:

- 1. Cultivate a brave space.** Most people are familiar with the term “safe space”; however, I don’t believe every space can be safe. So, in your mentoring relationships, work to establish a brave space where you hope the youth you serve are empowered and courageous to share their authentic selves and identities with you, even when they are a bit scared. Do this by showing your humanity and being true to yourself.
- 2. Keep it 100.** Always be authentically yourself with the youth. Do this by staying true to who you are and allowing the youth to engage with you in ways that are authentically true to them, whether it is through language, mannerisms, or self-expression.
- 3. Trustworthiness.** If people don’t trust you, they won’t follow you or learn from you. Trust is hard to build and difficult to give, but once you have it, your mentor-mentee relationship will grow exponentially. In my experience, a great mentor is someone who I can trust completely, to the extent that I am willing to share even my social security number without fear or concern.

4. Intent vs. impact. Be conscious of the words you use and how they may land and affect someone. If they land negatively, focus on the impact first and apologize for the harm. This is so important with the youth we serve because if they trust you, they will recognize that your intent was not to harm or hurt, although the impact of your words in the moment may have done both. If they trust you, they are more willing to forgive you and to work to understand your intent.

5. “Vulnerability paradox.” Brené Brown tweeted about a “vulnerability paradox,” stating, “Vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I want you to see in me” (2019). We, the mentor and mentee, are looking for shared humanity and connection in each other. It is important as a mentor to be vulnerable and share your professional journey and some of your personal stories.

6. Say what you mean, and mean what you say: You must keep your word as much as possible. Once a youth learns you have broken a promise, they will quickly lose faith in you, and it can take a long time to rebuild that trust.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Mentoring offers a unique opportunity to positively influence young people. By adopting inclusive mentoring practices, camp professionals can create an environment where all campers feel

respected, valued, and supported. This inclusive approach benefits the campers and enriches the entire camp community.

As mentors, we are privileged and responsible for planting the seeds of inclusion and nur-

turing the growth of confident, compassionate, and empowered individuals. By respecting all identities, acknowledging differences, accessing unexamined biases, and developing cultural competency, we can create a camp environment embodying the spirit of inclusion.



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**REMEMBER, AT THE END OF THE DAY, "WE'RE ALL JUST WALKING EACH OTHER HOME."
- RAM DASS.**

Photos courtesy of YMCA Camp Carson, Princeton, IN; Black River Farm and Ranch, Croswell, MI; Cheley Colorado Camps, Estes Park, CO; Lake Valley Camp, Milwaukee, WI.

Timothy A. Raines, PhD, (he/him) is a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging consultant specializing in cultural competency and inclusive leadership principles. His journey as a scientist, cultural navigator, equity educator, and inclusion advocate has left an indelible mark in academia and beyond. With certifications as an Intercultural Development Inventory Qualified Administrator, a Leadership Practices Inventory Coach, and a Certified Diversity Executive (CDE), Dr. Tim brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the field. Passionate about fostering inclusive environments, he has dedicated his career to mentoring and coaching individuals and organizations to create spaces where everyone can thrive.

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Empowering Camp Conversations: Mastering “Difficult” Dialogues

LANCE W. OZIER, EDD, AND CHANIKA R. PERRY, EDD

As summer camp professionals, we've all experienced those unexpected moments when a camper or staff member raises a comment or question that catches us off guard. It could be related to a sensitive or controversial topic that seeps into the "bubble" of camp, such as discussions about racial injustice, gender identity, or climate change. While initially disorienting, these moments provide valuable opportunities for growth and learning for both our camp community and ourselves.

When faced with such situations, it's natural to experience a range of reactions. We may find ourselves wondering what is happening, struggling to understand the underlying message behind the camper's or staff member's words. This disorientation can be unsettling, disrupting the flow of our planned activities or discussions.

Moreover, the intensity of emotions expressed in these moments can be overwhelming. We may feel a surge of empathy, sadness, or frustration as we grapple with the camper's or staff member's feelings. In some cases, we may even feel unsure of how to navigate the situation or provide appropriate support.

When faced with unexpected moments triggered by comments or actions from campers or staff, our responses are often deeply connected to our identities, shaped by our values, beliefs, and experiences. For example, imagine a scenario where a camper raises a question about racial injustice, a topic deeply ingrained in current controversial events. As a camp professional, my response may be informed by my identity as someone who values social justice and equality. I may feel a strong sense of empathy toward the camper's concerns, given my personal experiences or beliefs about racial equity. Conversely, if a staff member expresses a dissenting opinion on climate change, another sensitive topic, my response might be influenced by my identity as an environmental advocate. I may feel a heightened sense of urgency to address misinformation or challenge alternative viewpoints, driven by my commitment to environmental stewardship.

In both scenarios, my identity shapes how I navigate these difficult conversations. Whether it's affirming their willingness to engage, acknowledging their perspectives, or providing additional information, my response is guided by my values and

experiences. I may also assess their response and my own reactions, considering how my identity influences the dynamics of the conversation.

Ultimately, by recognizing the impact of our identities on our responses, we can approach difficult conversations with empathy, openness, and a commitment to creating a safe and inclusive environment at summer camp. This awareness allows us to foster mutual understanding, respect, and growth among campers and staff, even in the face of challenging topics from the outside world.

In navigating these moments, it's essential to prioritize the well-being of our campers and staff. Feeling unsafe, either emotionally or physically, can heighten our instinct to protect ourselves and those around us from potential harm. However, it's crucial to approach these situations with empathy, openness, and a willingness to listen.

So, how do we effectively respond to unexpected moments at camp? First and foremost, we must create space for open dialogue and reflection. Encourage campers and staff to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Find a way to validate or remain curious about their experiences and perspectives, even if they differ from our own.



"/o from your perspective . . . "

Straight A's for Facilitating Crucial Conversations

Summer camp professionals can apply the Straight A's from *Facing History* to navigate complex conversations about controversial events that seep into the camp bubble from the outside world (Goodman, 2023):

- 1. Affirm:** Begin by affirming and appreciating people's willingness to engage in conversation. Use phrases like "I'm glad you brought that up" or "I'm glad we have the opportunity to talk about this" to create a supportive atmosphere.
- 2. Acknowledge:** Ensure that individuals feel heard and understood by acknowledging what they are saying. Paraphrase their words and feelings to demonstrate active listening. Use statements like "It sounds like you feel . . ." or "So from your perspective . . ." to reflect their viewpoint.
- 3. Ask:** Ask open-ended questions to better understand their behavior, feelings, and perspectives. Be open and curious, and watch your tone to maintain a nonjudgmental approach. Continue to explore until they feel heard, using prompts like "Can you tell me more about what you mean by that?" or "What experiences have led you to that belief?"
- 4. Add:** Relate to their perspective and then offer additional information or alternative viewpoints. Connect with what they are saying, and then broaden their perspective by sharing your experiences, information, or historical/social/political context. Challenge misinformation respectfully to encourage critical thinking.
- 5. Assess and address:** Assess their response and notice their body language to gauge their comfort level. Reflect on your own internal and external responses to ensure effective communication. Use prompts like "I'm wondering what you're thinking/feeling right now?" or "You look . . ." to address any tension or confusion. Decide on the best response based on the situation.
- 6. Appreciate:** Conclude the conversation by appreciating their willingness to engage and share their thoughts/feelings. Express gratitude for their openness and indicate any follow-up actions, such as sharing resources or continuing the conversation at a later time. Use phrases like "Thank you for taking the time to talk with me" or "I appreciate your willingness to hear my perspective."

By applying these steps, you can create a supportive environment for navigating complex conversations about controversial events, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and growth among campers and staff.

It's important to take time to listen actively and empathetically. Seek to understand the underlying emotions and motivations behind the camper's or staff member's words. Reflect on how your own identity and experiences may influence your response, and consider how you can use this awareness to support them effectively.

Finally, empower campers and staff to be active participants in finding solutions and addressing concerns. Collaborate with them to explore potential next steps and strategies for navigating similar situations in the future. By fostering a culture of mutual respect, empathy, and growth, we can transform unexpected moments into powerful opportunities for learning and connection at summer camp.

Meeting the Moment

Let's imagine a scenario where we gather in a program area. The excitement and anticipation are palpable, with the campers buzzing about a topic that's been making headlines lately. This subject is close to our hearts, something we've grappled with personally and professionally.

As the chatter grows louder and all eyes turn to us, we feel a mix of emotions — nervousness, excitement, and a sense of responsibility. The campers are looking to us for guidance and understanding, and we know our response will shape the tone of the conversation.

On one hand, we're apprehensive about delving into such a sensitive topic. We worry about saying the wrong thing or unintentionally alienating campers who may have differing opinions. We also don't want the conversation to escalate and poten-

tially tailspin into a shouting match. On the other hand, we also recognize the importance of fostering open dialogue and creating a safe space for campers to express themselves.

Taking a deep breath, we remind ourselves of the values that guide us as camp professionals — empathy, inclusivity, and respect for diverse perspectives. We know that stifling the conversation could lead to disappointment and frustration among the campers, so we decide to embrace the opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

With a calm and steady voice, we acknowledge the campers' curiosity and express our gratitude for their willingness to engage in discussion. We encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings openly, while probing them to envision how someone with the opposite viewpoint might see the situation.

Throughout the conversation, we strive to listen actively and empa-



"I appreciate your willingness to hear my perspective."

thetically, ensuring that every camper feels heard and respected. We ask open-ended questions to deepen everyone's understanding of the topic and remain neutral in our tone.

As the dialogue unfolds, we remain mindful of our role as facilitators, guiding the conversation while also allowing space for campers to lead. We challenge misinformation respectfully and provide additional context when necessary, always with the goal of promoting critical thinking and mutual understanding.

By the end of the discussion, we feel a sense of pride in the campers' willingness to engage thoughtfully and respectfully with a challenging topic. While there may still be differences of opinion, we know that we've created a space where campers feel valued, respected, and em-

powered to speak their truth. And as we wrap up the conversation, we're filled with hope for the future of our camp community — a future built on empathy, inclusivity, and a shared commitment to learning and growth.

The Caveat

Not every comment or topic will warrant this communal approach. When there are instances of blatant discrimination, hate speech, bullying, and fear mongering, the sanctity of the camp community has been violated, and the offending party needs an individualized conversation and response. The goal is not to ostracize them from the community, but to remain curious while making it clear that the language used is unacceptable and antithetical to the camp's values and beliefs.

If it's the first time you've heard the camper or staff member say something bigoted or discriminatory, it's possible they're operating from a space of ignorance that requires education. In this case, broadening their understanding is much more powerful than leaning on a punitive response. Keeping in mind that intention does not always equal impact, it's important to prepare the offending party to have a conversation to repair harm when necessary. Trained staff members can mediate this restorative conversation as a powerful signal of connection, unity, and inclusion at camp.

If there's a pattern of actions and language violating the camp community, however, there could be a misalignment in values and beliefs that requires parental intervention and removal from the camp commu-

nity. This is never the ideal, but there are times this extreme measure is warranted.

We intentionally place the word “difficult” in quotation marks when referencing conversations that are often uncomfortable, jarring, and destabilizing. These conversations can feel like conflict in all its negative connotations, but West African writer and elder Malidoma Patrice Somé offers an alternate interpretation worth considering: “Conflict is the spirit of the relationship asking itself to deepen.” In our work, we encourage everyone to embrace these candid, essential conversations. They do not have to be “difficult” at all, especially when you anticipate them, practice potential responses, and reflect on the strengths and limitations of each response pathway. These “difficult” conversations can indeed be opportunities to deepen our relationships with others, which inherently strengthens our communities.

Photos courtesy of MedCamps of Louisiana, West Monroe, LA Hoosier Burn Camp, Battleground, IN.

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She is also an adjunct professor in the SPA program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Prior to these roles, she was a high school principal in Atlanta. She has been involved in the fields of youth development and education for over 20 years, mostly in NYC and Atlanta.

Chanika and Lance have been friends for over 20 years, worked together at Project Morry for over a decade, and continue to enjoy working together as cofounders of conversationforward.org.

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This year, Brooklyn to Alaska — a nonprofit that leads urban youth on expeditions in the wilderness of Alaska — announced a team of all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) certified wilderness guides. The guides were trained through Brooklyn to Alaska's Graduate to Guide program, which aims to counter the underrepresentation of BIPOC individuals in outdoor spaces.

MAKING OUTDOOR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES MORE INCLUSIVE



AN INTERVIEW WITH NONPROFIT BROOKLYN TO ALASKA

In this interview, ACA talks to Brooklyn to Alaska's founder Sam Gregory, certified guide James Ambroise, and volunteer Matt Stokes about the history of the program, their experiences, and the steps they are taking to make outdoor wilderness experiences more accessible to BIPOC youth.



WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START BROOKLYN TO ALASKA?

Sam Gregory: When I was very young, and into adulthood, I observed city kids spending their summers playing in the street with water from fire hydrants, and I always dreamed of helping provide opportunities for an adventure of a lifetime. I had always hoped to be able to have a place of my own in the wilderness, and in 1996 I bought a beautiful place in the middle of the Wrangell St. Elias National Park. Soon after, I started the Brooklyn to Alaska Project.



HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME INVOLVED WITH BROOKLYN TO ALASKA?

James Ambrose: My mom is involved in running the girl's program at Brooklyn to Alaska, so I was aware of the organization and was compelled by a video trailer I saw. In 2019, I was invited to join as a participant and immediately fell in love with it. When offered the opportunity to return as a leader, I jumped at the chance.

Matt Stokes: I was teaching math in Brooklyn and a few of Sam Gregory's children attended my school. They recommended me to their dad, and Sam invited me out to coffee. I was inspired by the organization and have been here for 10 years and want to help it live on. My life is much richer, and I am a much more complete person because of my experience with the program.

CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE GRADUATE TO GUIDE PROGRAM, WHAT IT ENTAILS, AND WHY YOU STARTED IT?

Sam Gregory: The Graduate to Guide Program trains BIPOC youth to become the next generation of wilderness leaders and guides. The program was inaugurated in 2020 with a focus on white water rafting and wilderness training.

WHAT TYPE OF PREPARATION DID YOU HAVE TO DO TO BECOME A GUIDE?

James Ambrose: I have completed training in Wilderness First Responder, CPR, First Aid, and Swiftwater Rescue training.

This year you have a certified wilderness guide team of all BIPOC individuals.

WHY WAS THAT IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Matt Stokes: Because there is not representation of young BIPOC youth leading . . . it's a very white-led space. Over the years we watched the transformation of young people in Brooklyn and felt the disparity between the current leaders/guides and the BIPOC youth. We looked at each other and realized we did a great job of bringing kids into the woods, but what if we helped kids become leaders in the woods? So that people with the same cultural background can inspire each other to embrace these experiences and pursue a passion in wilderness if that's what they want.

Sam Gregory: The rivers we raft on are extremely cold and safety is paramount. Important as it is to navigate the wilderness safely, it is as important to train up leaders of various backgrounds to carry this tradition. Providing the opportunity to equip young people with these certification skills will build a legacy to span generations of BIPOC families in the genre of outdoor adventure.



You are part of an all-BIPOC team of wilderness guides at a time when research shows that members of BIPOC communities are underrepresented in outdoor spaces.

WHAT IS IT LIKE BEING PART OF A TEAM THAT IS WORKING TO MAKE OUTDOOR SPACES MORE ACCESSIBLE, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU TO BE A LEADER IN THIS TYPE OF WORK?

James Ambrose: Being a part of the leadership team has been a dream come true for me. After falling in love with rafting and the outdoors, I now get to come back every year and work with my best friends while inspiring future generations. Outdoor adventure has given me confidence in my abilities and confidence in myself as a person, as well as made me more outgoing and willing to try new things. Being able to watch these kids go through the same sort of transformations is such a soul-filling experience for me. Even if it is something as simple as getting them to try a new cuisine, watching their eyes light up allows me to relive that same transformation. This program is giving them role models and opening their eyes to dreams they may not have even known they had.



WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF BEING INVOLVED IN A PROGRAM LIKE THIS – BEING IN OUTDOOR SPACES?

James Ambrose: One of my favorite things about being involved with this program is being able to see the arc of the kids' experience. We have kids who stick to themselves and struggle with self-confidence, some of whom barely say anything at all, but as the trip goes on, I get to watch them open up. Not only to us leaders and their peers, but to the idea that they can make their dreams come true if they put their mind to it. After completing a five-hour uphill hike, they get to the peak of the mountain and they're looking at the rest of the range saying, "I want to climb those too!" Or they see us leaders running a rapid, and they're immediately asking about how we're reading the water or if they can try rowing.

WHAT STEPS ARE YOU TAKING TO MAKE OUTDOOR WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES MORE ACCESSIBLE TO BIPOC YOUTH?

Sam Gregory: I created the organization with the central aim to close the gap to outdoor adventure by increasing exposure to the outdoors through these annual trips. Enabling team members to become certified wilderness guides through a rigorous four-year program has been a crucial step in widening the path to accessibility for all.

Matt Stokes: [We're doing] the adaptive work of figuring out how to help kids who get off a plane 2,500 miles from home feel safe. We are also considering how we will continue to come up with the funds to buy the flights or pay for maintenance for vans. What we do is so remote. We are not operating in any major city, so there is the technical navigation of building a structure to serve more kids and grow. It is such a lift to get kids from New York to Alaska then Anchorage to McCarthy with 75 miles of it on gravel road. We then consider private places for kids to stay in the national park and how to reduce technical limitations. So we are focusing on the programming side of things.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR THE PROGRAM'S FUTURE?

Sam Gregory: My hope for the future is that our team of exceptionally serious leaders can take over this entire program and continue to serve city kids with passion and commitment.

Matt Stokes: To build the economic structure that will allow us more time to focus on the experiences for the kids. We would like to maximize the amount of kids we can bring to Alaska and train more kids to be guides. Everyone who participates is volunteering their time. We dream of our guides being able to run rivers in Africa, the Andes, and Colorado.

Photos courtesy of Brooklyn to Alaska.

Interview conducted by Kaley Amonett, the American Camp Association's editorial communications manager.

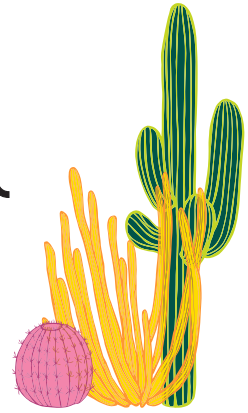
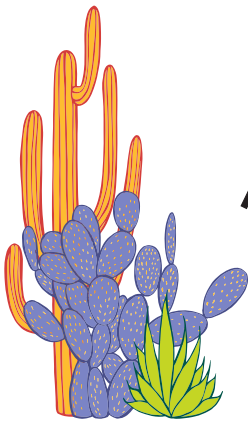


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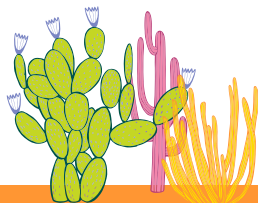
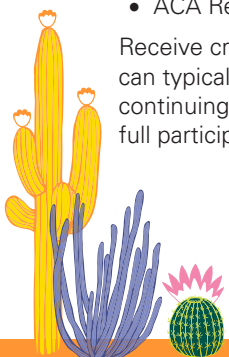
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Schedule at a Glance

Subject to Change

The conference officially begins on Tuesday, February 18, at 2:00 p.m. local time. We will end the conference by 1:00 p.m. on Friday, February 21, with a closing event luncheon. Many groups host meetings and conferences prior to the national conference official start day and time. Check ACAcamps.org/conference for the most current schedule.

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Afternoon and Evening

Co-Located Conferences and Kindred Events

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17

Morning and Midday

Co-Located Conferences and Kindred Events

ACA Board Meeting

Afternoon and Evening

Registration, Resource Center Open

Preconference Events

Co-Located Conferences and Kindred Events



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18

Morning and Midday

Registration, Resource Center, and Bookstore Open

National Council of Leaders Meeting

Co-Located Conferences and Kindred Events

Preconference Events

Afternoon and Evening

First-Time Conference Goers Welcome Session — *Sponsored by Cliq*

Opening Keynote — *Sponsored by The Redwoods Group*

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 1

Field Office and Affiliate Groups Meetings and Networking

Gathering of Internationals

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19

Morning and Midday

Informal Discussion Cafés with Bagels and Coffee

Not-For-Profit (NFP) Council Breakfast

Registration, Resource Center, and Bookstore Open

Keynote Lecture — *Sponsored by Church Mutual Insurance, S.I.*

Exhibitor Setup

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 2

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 3

Afternoon and Evening

Pioneers in Camping Luncheon

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 4

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 5

Grand Opening of Exhibit Hall with Reception — *Sponsored by Chaco and Camp Scheduling Pro*

Free Time for Social Networking



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20

Morning and Midday

Informal Discussion Cafés with Bagels and Coffee — *Sponsored by Camp Scheduling Pro*



Registration, Resource Center, and Bookstore Open

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 6

Exhibits Open

Unopposed Time in Exhibit Hall with Bagels and Coffee

American Camping Foundation (ACF) Meeting

Research Poster Presentations — *Sponsored by The Redwoods Group*

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 7

Afternoon and Evening

Lunch in the Exhibit Hall for Attendees and Exhibitors (unopposed time in exhibits)

Commerce Sessions

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 8

Exhibitor Teardown

Night on Your Own to Explore Dallas

Acorn Society Dinner

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21

Morning through Early Afternoon

Registration, Resource Center, and Bookstore Open

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 9

Educational Breakout Sessions, Group 10

Closing Luncheon Event

Group Departures

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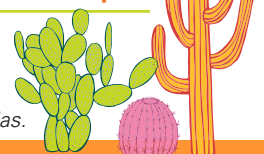


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Photos courtesy of Visit Dallas.





Is Belonging Enough?

Making a Case for Mattering within Camps' DEI Efforts

MANDI BAKER, PHD

Belonging is a concept that has long been held as a solution for redressing the exclusion of diverse people. On the surface, this concept makes sense. The assumption is that if all members of a group or community feel like they belong, then the interpersonal disparities that would normally exclude a person or group will not occur. Unfortunately, the research on belonging, particularly for the function of reducing exclusion, suggests otherwise (Flett, 2018). Likewise, belonging is not enough when it comes to camps' efforts to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

What Is Belonging?

Belonging is defined as “the feeling of connectedness” we have with others, particularly feelings of friendship, family, and intimacy (Crawford, 2024). The research on belonging has been organized in three categories: place-based, identity-based, and interpersonal belonging. The first of these, place-based belonging, is something most camps excel at.

Place-based Belonging: Where We Belong

Place-based belonging is based on the relationships we have with a place, the way we feel when in that place, and the significance that place holds for us. Campers and staff connect meaningful camp experiences with various buildings, natural features, and nooks of camp space. Sunset bridge, whispering pines, kissing rock, the walk-in fridge, and the lake hold memories and meanings in the minds of camp participants.

Identity-based Belonging: What We Belong To

Identity-based belonging suggests that we connect with people who share similar elements of identity (e.g., demographic characteristics, temperaments, attitudes, values, experiences, and personal interests) and how we signal these things (Crawford, 2024). Camp shirts, impromptu camp songs, water bottle

stickers, and friendship bracelets can all signal to other camp folk the possibility of shared values, sense of humor, and work ethic, among others. By producing camp merchandise and crafts, camps are signalling identity-based belonging. Camp experiences, whether a specific one (in time and space) or as a generalized imagining, tend to elicit a recognition of camp folk to camp folk — and easily generate identity-based belonging.

Interpersonal Belonging: To Whom We Belong

At the heart of belonging is the understanding that “for people to belong, they need a small number of high-quality relationships” (Crawford, 2024). That is, we all need relationships that are characterized by respect, care, consistency (over time and space), reliability, and regular communication. The social connectedness of these relationships is what it means to experience interpersonal belonging — a bit trickier for camps, because the seasonality and short participant stays make it difficult to achieve the consistency criteria. Camps try to address this by hosting off-season events, distributing regular newsletters, fostering online communities, and maintaining the same (leadership) staff year to year. These efforts cannot, however, replace the intimacy and bond of close and regular relationships and contact. Since the interpersonal belonging construct has the most research support for its utility and effectiveness among the three belonging frameworks, camps' inability to fully meet the belonging criteria creates some challenges.

The Problems with the Belonging Concept for DEI Efforts at Camp

The intimacy of relationships formed at camp are often accelerated but short (Baker, 2020). Friendships are made quickly and become meaningful at an expedited rate. This is due, in part, to the phenomena

that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner calls “liminality” and that sociologist Emile Durkheim names “collective effervescence” (Olaveson, 2001). (The latter is one of my favorite descriptors of camp life; a community where we bubble together.) Camp is a place where belonging can be and is achieved quickly but can also end abruptly. Relying on the concept of belonging, alone, to redress experiences of exclusion within camp settings is problematic.

Three relevant problems exist with the assumptions about how belonging is used to address DEI at camp:

1. Belonging is often “conflated with inclusion, engagement, connection, and relatedness” (Crawford, 2024). Belonging and inclusion are not the same. Even when you think you have one covered, it does *not* mean you have the others. Multipronged efforts are necessary for DEI to be effective at camp (see Meerts, Wycoff and Sibthorp, 2024 for further discussion).
2. Belonging is experienced differently by different people at different times and to different degrees. Trying to capture all the ways belonging is experienced is like trying to put oblivion in a Ziploc bag. Impossible! Belonging is experienced fluidly and, when applying it to the inclusion of diverse and marginalized people, requires respect for and sensitivity to the context in which belonging is and is not experienced.
3. The criteria for measuring and/or identifying belonging at camp is often set in accordance with the values and beliefs of the dominant group.

While the belonging concept is valuable and necessary when addressing inclusion at camp, it also raises questions. Why do some people feel like they don't belong at camp? How can we help more folks feel like they not only belong at camp but are a meaningful part of camp?

The Founding Ideals of Early Camps

The founding of summer camps was a response to particular changes at the turn of the last century in America. Industrialization, urbanization, war, and the emergence of childhood and adolescence as distinct periods of life contributed to the development of a welfare agenda motivated to address child development (Paris, 2008). The question being posed might have been, “How can positive child development be achieved during a time of significant global change and the need for unification of a diverse immigrant nation?” One answer was summer camps. Groups like Camp Fire Girls, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) made camps “affordable, mainstream, and national” (Paris, 2008). These groups, among others, saw camp as an opportunity to promote “virtuous American citizenship” to reform immigrant and domestic children alike (Paris, 2008).

The foundational ideals of camps included pastoral care provision; wholesome, nature-based settings; and positive character development for children and youth (Paris, 2008). These objectives largely remain at the heart of camp and camp-like experiences today (Baker, 2020). However, the ideals, routines, and structures of early summer camps reflected that of the dominant groups that founded them (Paris, 2008). That is, summer camps reflect the ideals of white, heterosexual, able-bodied masculinity (Gray & Mitten, 2018; Baker, Carr, & Stewart, 2021). Consequently, the early foundations of camp were exclusionary. Unfortunately, many of the systems and assumptions that underpin camp practices haven’t changed much since their inception, despite the drastic societal changes since (Gray & Mitten, 2018). Today’s camp professionals are both well positioned and ethically compelled to peel back and radically “undo” the foundational discourses and practices that exclude, harm, and oppress.

Oppression: How It “Plays” at Camp

Many hurts have been caused by the assumption that the way one person, or group, sees the world is not only the *right way*, but the *only way*. Globally, we are experiencing both acceptance of plurality and resistance, including extremist responses, to the multiplicity and diversity of world views, approaches, and practices. The United States is no stranger to navigating through social, political, and geographical differences and tensions. Yet, when one group/population dominates the decision-making, access to resources, goods and services, and opportunities for advancement, then they are likely to structure the rules, mechanisms, and systems in their favor. Or, at least, in ways that make the most sense to them and that are dependent on their way of thinking. This is often done exclusively, even when representatives from marginalized groups are consulted (Ahmed, 2016). This is how systems of oppression work and, for this discussion, play at camp. That is, when the dominant group “owns” access to opportunities, decision-making,

and resources, then they can shape the systems and structures in ways that provide them, and only them, advantage and privilege. Systemic oppression is the (re)production of processes and thinking that serve the dominant group and excludes, limits, and/or erases others, by the very same mechanisms, from gaining access and opportunity. Consequently, systemic and structural oppression is hard (but not impossible) to change.

The same assumptions that are inherent to the foundation of camp (i.e., whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and masculinity) continue to function in ways that limit and exclude participation of diverse children, youth, and adults in camps today. Much camp-related literature demonstrates the prevalence and exclusionary nature of camps (see Baker & Hannant-Minchel, 2022; Browne, Gillard, & Garst, 2019; Harvey, Seo, & Logan, 2022; Cousineau & Roth, 2012; Rose & Paisley, 2012).



Consider this: arduous physical challenges that strain the body and push the mind to breaking, or the edges of comfort, are often revered at camp. Remote canoe trips, high ropes challenges, and Olympic-style games are all examples of activities that are celebrated and take up significant space in camp folklore, dining hall wall recognitions, and award ceremonies. The prioritization of these feats is founded on notions of masculine physicality and can be traced back to early camp discourses of muscular Christian (i.e., YMCA and Boy Scouts) where physical labor was assumed to lead to the purification of the soul (Paris, 2008). Activities that are traditionally associated with femininity — like crafts, domestic tasks, and social connectedness — are not given the same space or reverence in many camp environments. Because masculine-associated achievements are set as the baseline of *all* achievements at camp, the gendering of achievement becomes obscured. Add 150 or so years of camp and societal change, and the patriarchal hegemony of camp activities can be hard to spot — especially when people of all genders engage in their reproduction uncritically. This is, unfortunately, an example of how oppression continues to play in camps.

While this example focuses on binary assumptions of gender, there are examples for every aspect of exclusion, injustice, and oppression (i.e., race/ethnicity, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, religious practice, age, body shape, nonbinary gender identification, etc.).

Camps Are Well Positioned to Do DEI, and Not Just for Campers

It can be discomfoting to reflect on the ways that something we love, like camp, may have hurt people — and not just strangers but the people we care about. However, our willingness to dialogue about and within this discomfort signals our maturity as a profession and as a cultural institution. Rather than demoralize, this wander down camp's memory lane is to (re)surface the ways that the foundational aims of the summer camp movement at the turn of the last century created systemic and structural aspects of exclusion and injustice. Consequently, camp folks, from decision-makers to frontline staff, can better target their efforts to make camps inclusive and just.

The power of camp experiences cannot be underestimated. Heaps of evidence attest that camp experiences support positive benefits and are transformative for all participants, campers and staff alike. Consequently, camps are well positioned to shape the social fabric of America in how diversity, equity, and inclusion can be envisioned and enacted. Given their ability to develop ideal community environments where the social objectives of inclusion and

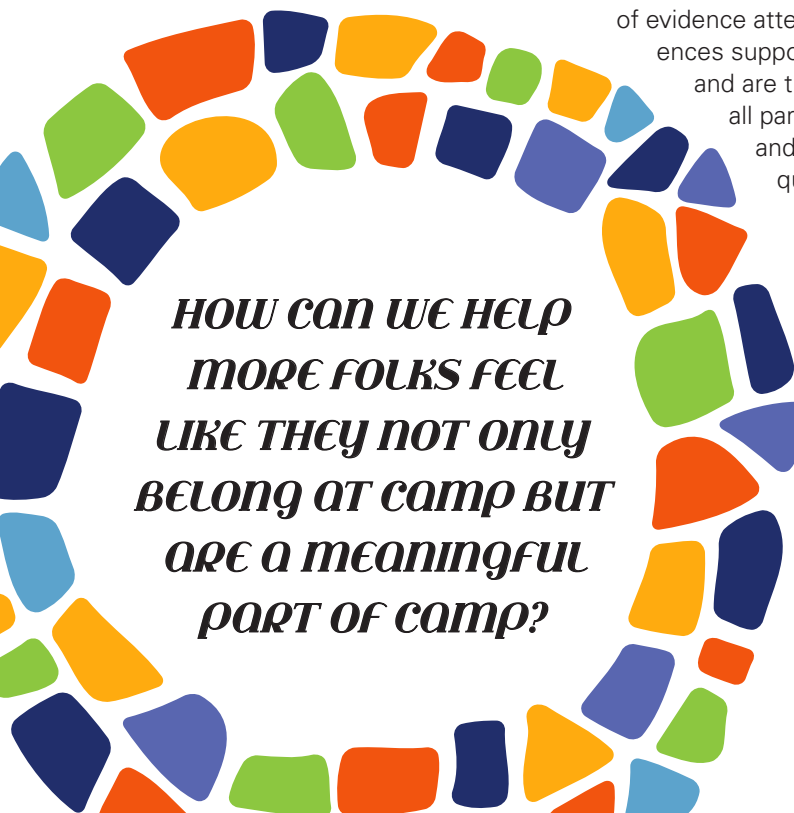
belonging are intentionally set and pursued, camps can significantly influence how the nation's social fabric with regard to DEI is knitted together.

Mattering: Being Seen and Valued

There are precious moments in life when we recognize that we matter to the people who matter to us. A homemade gift given and received, a burst of laughter in response to a joke or antic, a warm embrace at journey's end — this is what mattering is about. Mattering is described as when "you know that you are valued and that you count in the world" (Flett, 2018). Like Crawford's (2024) notion of "connection anchors," who are people who facilitate interpersonal belonging, we only need to matter to a few important people who matter to us for it to have health promotion and protective value in our lives (Flett, 2018).

Flett (2018) explains that the development of the mattering concept was in tandem with the concept of self-esteem, but it is the latter that has been propelled into popular discourse and has enjoyed much research exploration. However, mattering was always proposed to be a partner to understanding and supporting mental, social, and emotional well-being. As Flett (2018) states in his book, *The Psychology of Mattering*, "Mattering is essential to well-being and, unfortunately, it has been largely neglected by the academic community." Yet, the research on mattering that has been done shows that it matters — a lot.

Where belonging tends to focus on individual experiences, mattering is helpful in capturing the complexity of social interactions and their impact on how we see ourselves. For the purposes of camp, this approach to DEI illuminates the benefits of mattering within the social fabric of camps: "At a collective level, people who feel as though they matter and that this is appreciated by other people will be an energized and engaged



**HOW CAN WE HELP
MORE FOLKS FEEL
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PART OF CAMP?**

group of people who are capable of offering many things to their communities” (Flett, 2018).

Whether a camper connects with just one counselor, a cabin gels over a challenging or fun activity, or a counselor-in-training bonds with the assistant cook over shared music interests, being seen and valued supports efforts to include diverse people in a camp’s social fabric and function. Mattering is a social concept that captures “the powerful impact that other people have on us, and it reflects our need to be valued by the people in our lives” (Flett, 2018).

A Few Things to Know about Mattering

No one likes to feel or “be made to feel as if they are invisible or insignificant” (Flett, 2018). Flett goes on to describe how *not* mattering, or “anti-mattering,” is harmful and can cause “abject feelings of psychological pain” for individuals. Consequently, mattering should be understood as being “double-edged” (Flett, 2018). Tokenistic, ignorant, or disingenuous gestures of mattering can do more harm than good. Camp’s efforts to ensure camp community members feel that they matter must be authentic and would benefit from being intentional and reflexive.

Mattering is experienced in a relatively stable way, but it can fluctuate in the face of social interactions within a given environment. A person might have a solid sense of mattering within their family unit but be hesitant or anxious in a new camp environment. Like the belonging concept, it is important for camp leaders and decision-makers to remember that mattering and belonging *during* camp is different from mattering *to* camp. That is, individuals’ sense of mattering at camp should not be to the exclusion of mattering in other spheres of the campers’ or staff members’ lives beyond camp. The social isolation of camp is part

of how camps can generate such tightknit communities; however, the relationships in which individuals matter outside of camp are important protective and promotion factors for their overall well-being. Thus, ensuring that campers and staff get emails and messages from home and can reply, in a timely manner, is important to maintaining a sense of mattering on a global level. In turn, this helps with resilience within camp and transitions from camp back home.

Mattering: A Way Forward for DEI and Well-being at Camps

Mattering is complex, distinct from other concepts (i.e., belonging), and is significant to whether an individual feels genuinely included at camp. Mattering doesn’t mean that campers and staff must make loads of friends at camp or that they have to belong to the whole of camp

culture, rather that campers and staff will thrive by being valued by a few key people in the camp environment. Mattering supports the inclusion of diversity at camps by valuing the unique contribution of every member and, with intentionality, valuing individuals on their own merits rather than (white, heterosexual, gender binary, able-bodied, and masculine) assumed criteria that limits and excludes. My hope is that the mattering concept equips camp leaders with a fresh and proven approach to deliver camp objectives within an inclusive social environment.

Camps already practice, promote, and deliver opportunities for mattering in so many ways. Here is a short brainstorm of “camp things” that align with an approach to mattering:

- Learning and using individuals’ names
- Playing games where speaking, sharing, and listening is taken in turns

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- Giving warm fuzzies where individuals receive personal praise and encouragement
- Organizing interpersonal connection via one-on-one relationships and small groups (like cabins)
- Allocating staff buddies and mentors among staff
- Providing “connection anchors” that are designated with pastoral care responsibilities among staff (like group leaders, well-being staff, and directors)
- Leadership role modeling gratefulness and expressing thanks for the “unseen” and undervalued work of camps (i.e., kitchen, administration, and maintenance)
- Camp leadership providing and safeguarding staffs’ rest and time off
- Offering shared experiences among campers and small groups whether active or quiet, big or small
- Giving every community member a personalized award. One that “sees” and appreciates each individual for who they are (and not using generic wording or themes)
- Keeping up correspondence and regular out-of-season communication
- Maintaining alumni affiliation and recognition

Much work is yet to be done in dismantling camp systems and discourse that oppress and exclude many. I encourage you to explore research, like that of Meerts, Wycoff, and Sibthorp (2024), to gain more practical and thoughtful insights about how to do this for camps. (It’s free.) Additionally, I encourage you to consider mattering as a philosophical approach to bringing DEI practices to life.

Mattering can really happen anywhere and anytime, in big or small moments. It only takes one or two people to recognize the specialness and value of a camp member for that member to be more engaged, resilient, and well. Equally, the knowledge of being valued, even by people outside of camp, promotes and protects a participant’s health and well-being. In a social time of division, particularly along lines of race, religion, and sexual and gender identification in America, establishing and maintaining cultures of mattering at camp offers a way for engagement in justice work and change for the social fabric of the nation. Perhaps the experience and memory of mattering at camp can generate the momentum to make DEI changes more broadly. Mattering at camp matters.

Photos courtesy of MedCamps of Louisiana, West Monroe, LA; Camps Airy & Louise, Baltimore, MD; Kinder Skog, Petersburg, AK; Appel Farm Arts Camp, Elmer, NJ.

Mandi Baker, PhD, runs Lamped Research and is a passionate researcher and lecturer with a special interest in the emotional demands, people skills, and networks of power-involved, people-centric service work. She explores these concepts in organized outdoor experiences, youth and community development, recreation, and leisure contexts. She uses sociological concepts to explore everyday work experiences and to offer fresh insights to ethical and just employment, leadership, and education. Mandi is a university professor and serves on the American Camp Association’s Research and Evaluation Council, among other duties.

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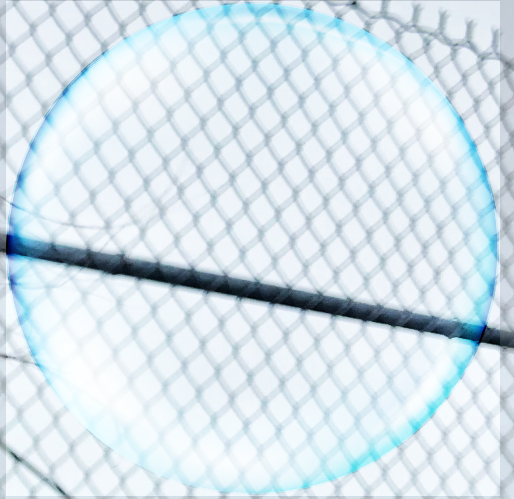
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**DON'T POP
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BUBBLE:
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LAUREN BREITMAN TANEN

“Komal” got her coveted summer job. Head counselor of Senior Village at Camp ALotofFun (“Camp ALF”). She wowed the director and owners and is ready to show up and help lead Camp ALF’s most senior campers. Komal has dreamed of this type of job after being a counselor and group leader for many summers at a prominent day camp in her hometown of Scarsdale, New York. She is a leader, an enthusiast of fun, and is highly creative at making up song mashups and parodies.

Komal is also a Jain Indian, believes in nonviolence, does not eat meat (or eggs), and meditates daily. She was the first of her generation born in the United States, and while some of her family are here with her, many relatives are in her home country of India. She’s proud of her ancestry, heritage, and religious customs. She’s thrilled to have grown up in the United States, though being here has not been without its challenges. Komal is used to people asking if there were actually cows walking around in the street in her hometown in India. People almost always hold up cheeseburgers and try to get her to take a bite: “Komal, trust me, you don’t know what you’re missing.” She’s used to grabbing a slice of watermelon and “ahhing” over its sweetness to divert attention away from the dreaded cheeseburger. While Komal is overwhelmingly excited to be at Camp ALF, she’s anxious about living at her first residential overnight camp.

We, the directors at Camp ALF, are excited to welcome Komal (and the rest of the staff) to camp. We have been preparing for this moment for months and have been eagerly awaiting everyone’s arrival through the camp gates. We have prepared a robust orientation that will set the tone for the summer. This marks the beginning of induction into that beautiful camp spirit and a warm welcome into the camp bubble.

RECOGNIZING THE CAMP BUBBLE

For all who know, love, work, and attend (or have attended) sleepaway camps, there’s a common term for being at camp — existing in the camp “bubble.” The bubble is an affectionate way to highlight the camp environment as a sheltered, happy, carefree place in which kids can be kids and play without the concerns of the school year. The bubble is meant to allow all who pass through the camp gates to leave their cares behind, be authentically themselves (silly and uninhibited), and live with dear friends for the time spent there. For parents, the bubble is known as a fun, safe, secure, and inclusive place for their children to spend four to seven weeks away from home.

Yet, what does that actually mean to us as we welcome staff members for whom the bubble is a new concept — and importantly, for staff members who come from broadly different cultures than the campers (and us, in most cases)?

How do we:

- Describe the bubble?
- Highlight guardrails for the bubble?
- Communicate expectations for staff while at camp?
- Create an inclusive work environment?

DESCRIBING THE BUBBLE

Several groups of people within the camp environment must be considered when evaluating and describing the bubble:

- Directors
- Camp leadership

- Parents (and prospective parents)
- Staff (so-called “Cohorts”)

Each Cohort has a different hope for the bubble, though one common theme generally arises — create an idyllic home away from home for all who live in those bunks.

Parents hope that their children leave their anxiety at home, make new friends, increase independence and confidence, and maybe ride a zip-line. Prospective parents, too, look for a place in which their children feel seen, heard, and encouraged while they’re not at home. Universally, the goal is to allow the kids to be authentically themselves.

As directors, you and your camp leadership underscore these bubble goals by:

- Creating a safe and secure environment for camper expression
- Encouraging camper exploration of interests and friendships



- Hiring staff who support the camper experience

This is what sets the tone for the entire summer, such that if you were to visit any residential summer camp from June through August, you'd feel a special energy. The bubble begins as soon as directors open the gates for staff and camp leadership. And, running up to camper arrival, you work hard to ensure that you bring camp leadership and staff along for the journey — going so far as to have inaugural campfires with s'mores to remind all that we're here to help create memories of a lifetime in the most secure and least judgmental environment.

Then there's training you provide for your staff so they can understand what the camper experience *should* look like when campers arrive and live at Camp ALF. One of the keys is for them to learn the camp "vibe." Not every camp has the same personality — it's why many say there's a camp for every child. Indeed, no camp is one-size-fits-all.

Given this background, camps meaningfully choose staff members and anoint camp leadership carefully to align with camp values, missions, and the type of vibe each camp is looking to achieve.

The tricky part is how to welcome a staff person, like Komal, who comes from a different background than the campers and directors and other staff. Fortunately, there are practical guidelines for placing guardrails around achieving the bubble environment and sensitively communicating expectations to staff while creating an inclusive and safe summer home.

BUBBLE GUARDRAILS

Keep in mind that the bubble is multilayered and, in some cases, can represent different things to campers and staff. Foundationally critical to creating any bubble is ensuring that you create an inclusive camp environment. Building and maintaining an inclusive environment, as we know, is a multichapter book (complete with plot twists and growth opportunities) that can change year to year depending on the staff group that is hired. At its base are the nonnegotiables — a safe and secure environment where kids can be kids. We embrace the bubble and welcome all into its fold by doing the following:

- **Practice empathetic listening toward staff upon arrival.**
 - Learn about staff's home culture.
 - Listen to their experiences that brought them to your camp.
 - Tap into how they wish to grow during the summer.
- **Encourage understanding of culture and values.**
 - Use orientation ice-breakers.
 - Conduct interactive and engaging training about inclusion, allyship, and bias.
 - Emphasize a growth mindset at camp.
 - Hold safe roundtable discussion spaces for staff to express challenges.
 - Be upfront about the cultural values of the campers (and their parents).
 - Prep staff for how campers and parents show up.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about creating safe, inclusive spaces at camp, read "Let's Play Nicely: Eight Tips for Creating Safe Spaces at Camp" in the September/October 2023 issue of *Camping Magazine* (ACA Camps.org/article/camping-magazine/lets-play-nicely-eight-tips-creating-safe-spaces-camp).

COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF STAFF AND SET PROPER BOUNDARIES

With the backdrop of the preceding guardrails, the table is set to create boundaries and lay the foundation for proper behavior through the summer, predominantly within the bubble, and encompassing behavior outside of the camp gates. The goal here is to *create clear expectations, to permit space (and grace) for staff to express themselves, and to continue to build upon an inclusive environment.*

SET THE BUBBLE TONE

Here are some practical tips for setting the tone for your camp bubble.

ACTION ZONES

Highlight action zones for communication with campers.

- **Red** action zones are nonnegotiable and can include:
 - proselytizing
 - debating religion/politics/culture/sex with campers (or fellow staff/leadership in front of campers)

- o judging others for their beliefs
- o poking fun at campers' culture/socio-economic class

Note: Though not covered here, harassment, sexual-predator or abusive behavior, or other such criminal and illegal acts that are governed by law, are red zone issues that should be brought to the immediate attention of camp leadership and the authorities, as appropriate.

- **Yellow** action zones include the above and include gray-area actions.
- **Green** action zones tend to be the fun, silly, quirky bubble behavior.

TALKING POINTS

Here are some important points to make clear to staff:

- Judgments are to be kept out of the bubble — “When in doubt, leave it out.”



- Staff are to be reminded that *they are the adult in the bunk.*
- You can appreciate staff cultural differences, and also require that staff leave explanations/discussions out of camp.
- Staff cannot be sources of information for campers on sex, religion, politics, or other hot zone issues. This is a hard boundary for parents, who should (and do) communicate with their children as they wish.

SAFE ZONES

Maintain an open gazebo policy. Keep the lines of communication open, safe, and nonjudgmental, and create safe zones for staff to “take a minute” should it be needed.

- A quiet place near the lake
- Campfire area
- Quietly on the bunk porch

- A shady tree in front of the bunk
- A private prayer or meditation spot

EXPRESSION OF UNIQUENESS

Permit staff to express who they are:

- Permit wearing of cultural clothing, as appropriate and necessary.
- Create staff-specific swag to encourage community for staff.

Indeed, the road to welcoming and ensuring that both staff and campers feel the magic of the bubble is challenging. Komal’s journey may have some potholes as she gets used to living in an environment that may challenge her. Yet, with a warm and open welcome from camp directors and fellow staff, she will hopefully open her mind to a beautiful and friendly experience at Camp ALF.

As a camp professional, you may feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable as you navigate these important matters. But take the journey — employ the steps that are authentic to your leadership, your camp values, and your camp’s vibe. Tap into the support of your fellow energetic and conscientious directors, your talented camp leadership, and enthusiastic staff to create the extraordinary summer environment you’re hoping for year after year. And enjoy the challenge of evolving your incredible director mindset to create the bubble we are all hoping that everyone will enjoy.

Photos courtesy of Camp Fire Alaska’s Rural Alaska Program, Anchorage, AK; Camp Aranzazu, Rockport, TX; Camp Howe, Goshen, MA; West End House Girls Camp, Parsonsfield, ME.

Lauren Breitman Tanen is a highly collaborative diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), legal, and human resources thought leader and sounding partner with over 20 years of experience in building

inclusive, fast-paced, and high-performing workplaces. Lauren designs and delivers DEIB training for directors, leaders, and staff on inclusion, employee morale, belonging, and allyship initiatives to drive positive, safe, and communicative environments. Lauren specializes in providing high-impact, practical, and effective advice in educational, residential, and day camping settings. She understands keenly the unique challenges presented to educators and regularly coaches community and camp leaders through challenging issues. By training, Lauren is a management-side employment lawyer and DEIB and employee relations expert. She has spent over a decade in-house at Shopify, Spotify, PVH (Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger parent company), and Action Network leading employment law, data privacy, employee and labor relations, and human resources teams.



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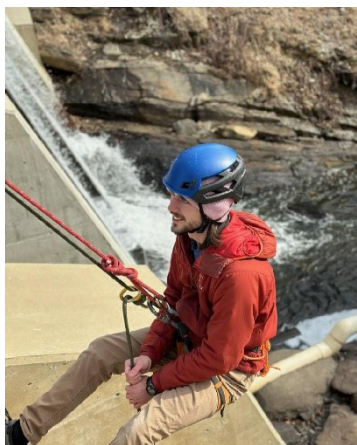
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Growth through Play

Cooper Metzger

About a year and a half ago, as I was nearing the completion of my college degree, I faced the reality of beginning my true adult life and was largely overwhelmed by the idea of it all. I surfed online job boards and read a dizzying number of job descriptions until I came across a posting for a place called the Princeton-Blairstown Center (PBC).

“Wait a second, I know that place,” I thought as I opened the posting and recalled the two three-day trips I’d taken to PBC while in high school. Those trips had been such positive experiences for my peers and me that we continued to talk about them long afterwards. The shared group experiences of those trips allowed for great opportunities to learn about each other and work better together back in the classroom. Powered perhaps more by nostalgia than anything else, I sent in an application to be a Summer Bridge facilitator for my last summer before finishing my undergraduate degree in Adventure Education.



I was offered the job, and a few months later I arrived at PBC excited to meet my coworkers and begin training for the coming summer. That summer was the final year of the hybrid Summer Bridge program, which brought Summer Bridge from Blairstown to the communities we

serve and delivered the program in local schools or community parks from Monday through Thursday. Then, at the end of the week, the kids traveled to Blairstown for a day of adventure, hiking, canoeing, and climbing.



One week, I had a participant named Carmen, who spent Monday through Thursday pretending to be uninterested and bored. But on Friday, while at the PBC campus, something changed. She chose to let people see her having fun and enjoying herself. Once she allowed herself to be seen, a capable and natural leader emerged. Maybe it was being in the forest and out of Trenton, New Jersey. Maybe she was tired of keeping up appearances. Or maybe a week of learning social-emotional skills equipped her to view and interact with her world differently. Whatever the root of the change, she went back home more comfortable being herself and more capable of productively engaging with others.

That summer was hard, but when I stepped back and looked at all we had accomplished, I was proud of my work. I was able to see the difference that PBC made in the lives of Carmen and all the other kids who had grown and changed for the better.

After completing my degree, I returned to PBC to work as a seasonal facilitator for the 2023 season and had the opportunity to see Carmen return to PBC. This time, while I was not her facilitator, I witnessed her learning even more new skills. The previously uninterested girl I had met the year before, who sat by herself or gossiped rather than allowing

herself to have fun, was no more. From day one, she was a loud voice full of excitement, and she no longer cared what others thought of her enthusiasm for PBC. When I saw that growth, I had to smile.

There have been many days when I finished work with a smile because I spent a day helping children grow into the best versions of themselves through play and exploration. When kids have the opportunity to play, they have the opportunity to learn and grow. That is not only fun, but it is beautiful too.

Cooper Metzger joined the Princeton-Blairstown Center in 2022 as a member of the summer staff. He returned in early 2023 to complete an internship and became an experiential education facilitator, moving into a senior facilitator role in March of 2024. He holds a degree in Adventure Education from Plymouth State University. An avid climber and outdoorsman, Cooper has worked as a zipline tour guide at Catamount Ski Area and with youth at Camp Speers. He is a certified Wilderness First Responder and ACCT Level II practitioner as well as a Leave No Trace Trainer.



“I teach my daughter to love everyone. But Camp helped her put that into practice...”

—**Queron Smith**, Chief Underwriting Officer

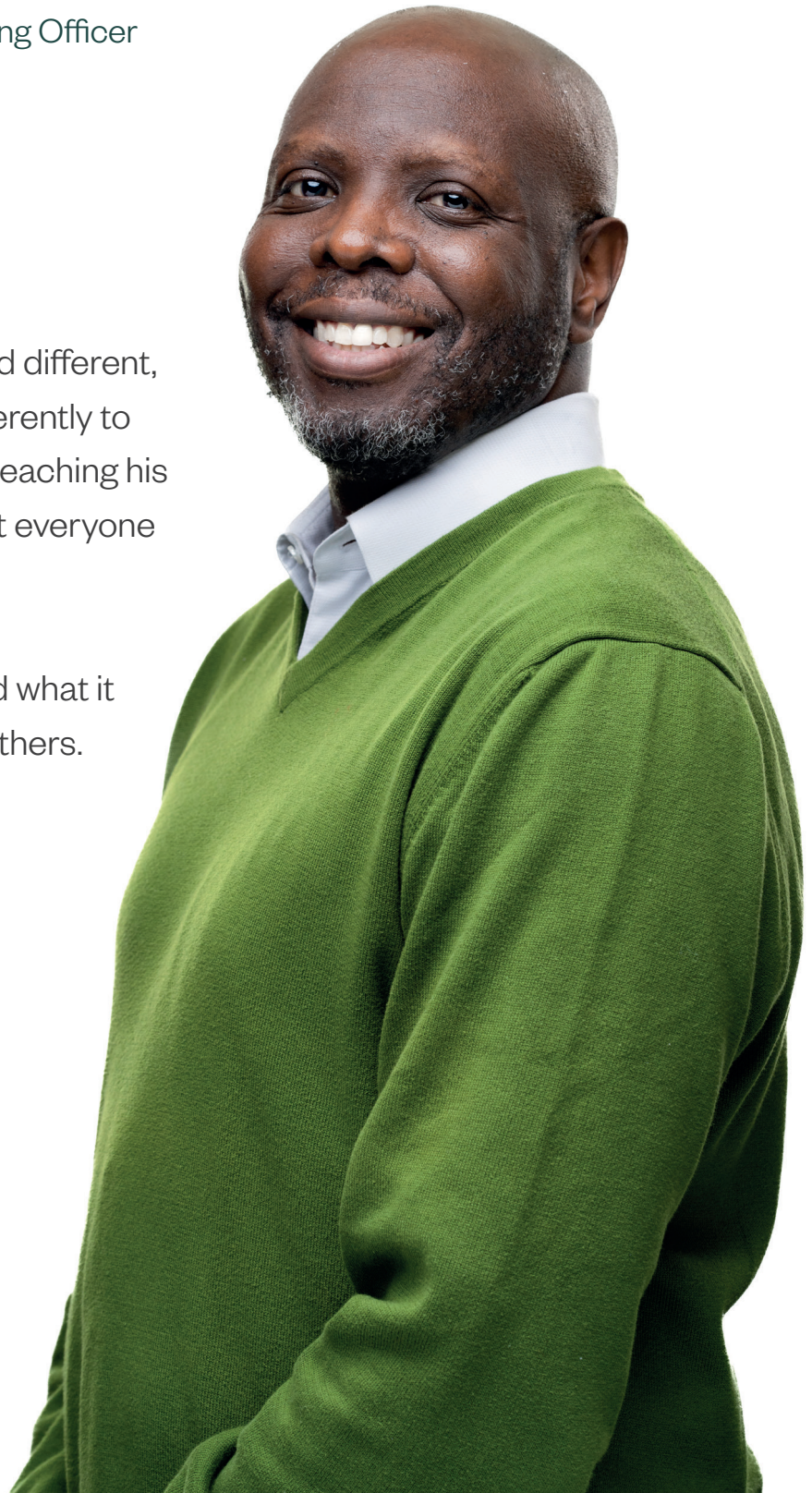
Whether it was people who looked different, identified differently, or loved differently to her—Queron credits camp with teaching his daughter what it looks like to treat everyone with love and respect.

Every year, camps help to expand what it means to be in community with others.

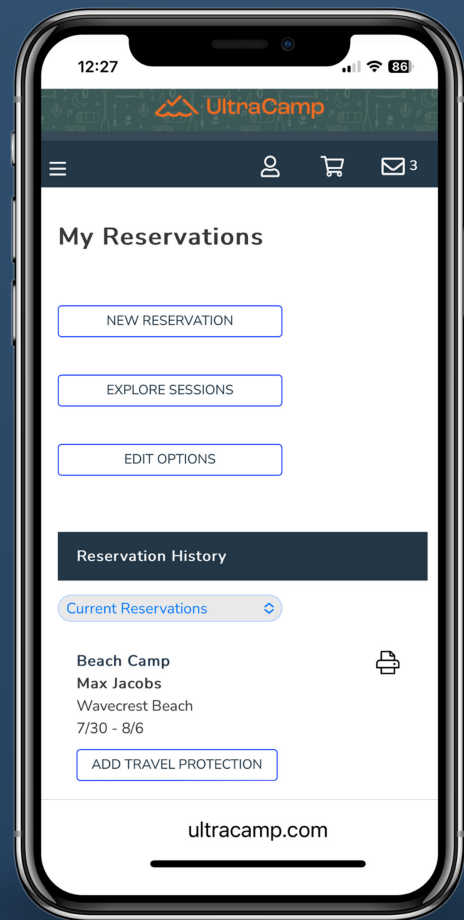
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