



Disability Inclusion At Camp

Make it the
expectation
not the
exception

By Amanda Kloo



Camp is community.
Camp is friendship.
Camp is childhood.

As camps advance their diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, practices, and programming, it is imperative that children with disabilities are at the forefront of these efforts. Because all kids should camp!

Unfortunately, children with disabilities aren't part of the "all." Families of children with disabilities often find recreation options limited to specialized or therapeutic programs and camps, as compared to the array of thousands of recreation options available to siblings and peers without disabilities. This disparity can cause feelings of segregation, isolation, and separation. Moreover, definitions of inclusion differ widely among providers and across settings—a disconnect that causes feelings of confusion, worry, and anxiety. What can camps do to level the playing field?



1

Believe that inclusion is important and possible.

It sounds simple, but research shows inclusion is successful when people believe it is the right thing to do, and it is possible to achieve mindset and methodology interplay to fuel equitable change. First, envision your camp as a place where everyone belongs:

- ▶ A space that offers both physical access and meaningful participation
- ▶ An environment where connections are intentional and responsive
- ▶ A community where children with and without disabilities thrive together
- ▶ An experience where each child's strengths and needs are embraced and supported
- ▶ A mission that not only speaks of inclusion but takes steps to include.

Then, spur that vision into action.

2

Adopt and implement inclusion standards.

In 2017, the National Inclusion Project, The Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and expert practitioners from recreation, community programming, and camp developed and validated the “Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs”—a collection of best practices clearly defining successful disability inclusion in recreation and leisure settings. The standards detail measurable criteria and clear implementation guidelines to help organizations enhance inclusion of participants with disabilities across five domains including:

- ▶ Administration
- ▶ Facilities and resources
- ▶ Staffing
- ▶ Programming
- ▶ Evaluation.



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The standards are a practical, educational tool to define, assess, and inform inclusivity. Camps can use them to evaluate how effectively they meet the diverse needs of all campers. Professionals can use the standards pedagogically to inform how they accommodate each child. Families can use them to understand specifically how a child's needs are met. As more camps adhere to the Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs, the number, quality, and efficacy of inclusive opportunities available to all children, families, and communities increase, thereby leveling the playing field so more children can play.



3

Pursue accreditation as an inclusive camp.

These standards are also the foundation of National Inclusion Project's accreditation process, focused on disability inclusion. Accreditation is a universally recognizable benchmark confirming that a camp practices full, meaningful inclusion that meets the highest of standards. Camps that voluntarily pursue accreditation demonstrate their commitment to serving all youth. The process is informative, rigorous, and objective in order to help camps measure their alignment to and implementation

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of each standard, and to identify strengths, plan improvements, and celebrate successes. It offers a clearly defined methodology showing specifically how achievable inclusion of children with disabilities is. Inclusive recreation accreditation helps families make informed decisions about the best fit for their children because it confirms a camp intentionally and successfully accommodates each child's needs so everyone participates in the joys of camp together, regardless of ability. It defines what inclusion is and what it looks like—easing fears, decreasing anxiety, and eliminating confusion. Ultimately, as more camps are accredited, inclusion becomes the expectation, not the exception, ultimately making all fields level. Because all kids should camp!

National Inclusion Project (NIP) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that serves to bridge the gap between young people with disabilities and the world around them. Since 2003, the organization has provided thousands of programs and practitioners with the training, tools, and support needed to expertly include children with disabilities and their families in leisure and social experiences. For more information, The Standards for Inclusive Recreation Programs, or accreditation, visit www.inclusionproject.org. **CB**

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