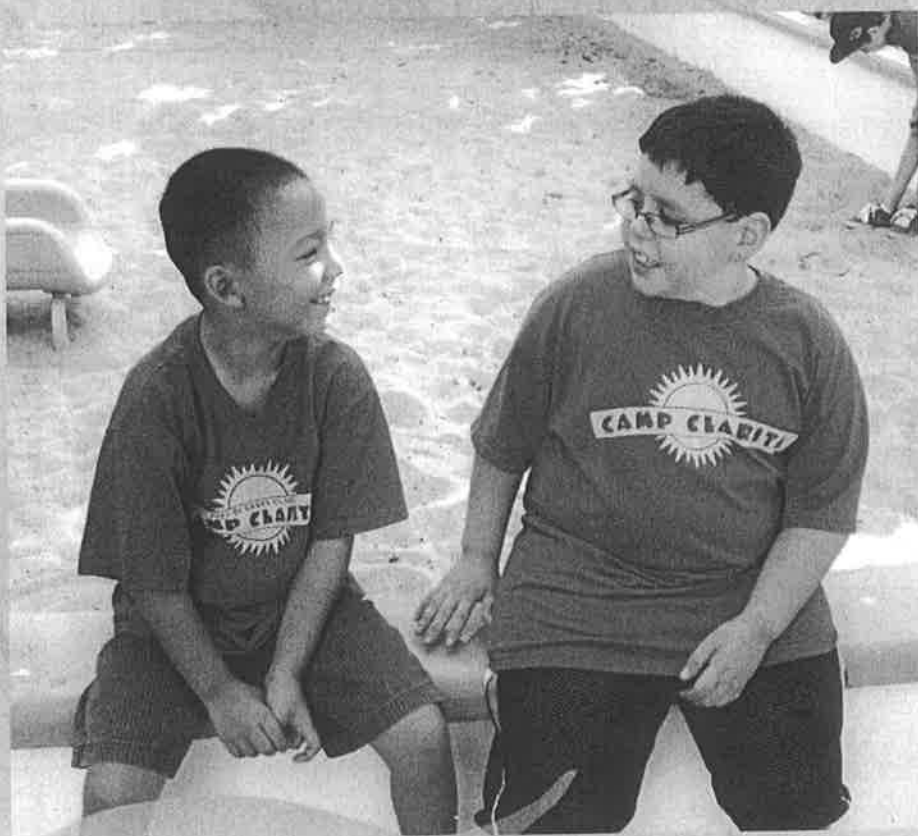


The Power of the Inclusive Camp Experience

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"Why can't I go, too?" He couldn't say the words, but the look in his eyes conveyed the message clearly as he watched his sister bound from the car to join the other children heading to day camp — swimming towels in hand, calling out to each other as they anticipated a full day of fun and activities.

From the rearview mirror, Diane saw the expression on Mike's face, and it pierced a mother's heart. For Mike — a young man with autism — this was another hurtful reminder.

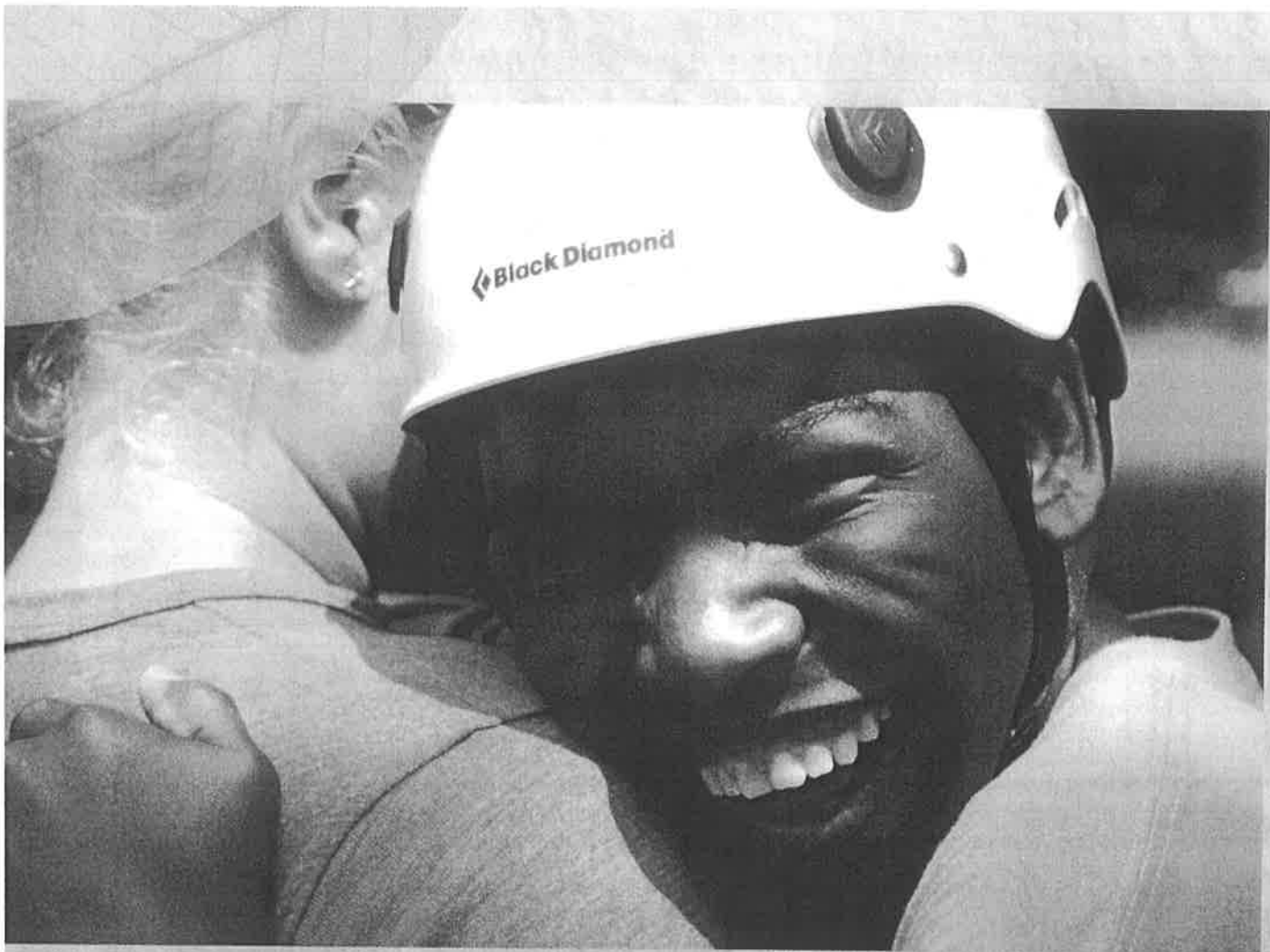
These are the moments many parents dread: recognizing a child's longing to be included, knowing all too keenly the profound pain of being left out, and wanting desperately to make it better.

For children challenged with physical and developmental disabilities and for those who love them, there is a strong desire to belong, but the obstacles can seem insurmountable.

The Power of Choice

Most, if not all, in our society would likely agree that an important element of our freedom is our right to choice and self-determination in our own lives. As free people, we have the ability to choose where we live, what we do for employment, where and when we recreate, and with whom we spend our leisure time.





However, families who have children with disabilities often find their recreational choices significantly limited, as they are directed toward programs that are segregated — “special” programs just for children with disabilities. Many of these programs come from an assumption that children with disabilities are optional members of the community. This assumption is dangerous, as it says to the families of

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children with disabilities: “We, the broader community, can choose to include your child or not based on our choice, not yours. Your child is optional to us — not a rightful and essential member of the community.”

Inclusion gives families the opportunity to choose recreational programs that are right for them and offer them the ability to be a part of a diverse, rich community. Inclusive options often make it possible for children with disabilities to recreate and

play with other children from their neighborhood, and they give siblings a shared experience. ❑ Inclusive programs provide places where children, regardless of ability, race, language, and income, are integral members of a community, feel a connection to their peers, have access to meaningful educational activities, and receive the collaborative support to succeed. In inclusive programs, children are not segregated or separated or excluded or sent to separate programs because of disability; rather, services and supports are brought directly to them. ❑

In order to give families the choice to have their child involved in that kind of program, more recreational programs must make the intentional choice to include all children. According to the American Camp Association’s (ACA) Find a Camp database, only 7 percent of ACA-accredited programs currently offer inclusive services so that children with and without disabilities can participate together in activities that have tremendous extrinsic and intrinsic value.

There are very few camp professionals who believe that all children should not have the opportunity to participate in

activities with their peers. Most programs that do not offer inclusive supports typically do not because they feel inadequate and unprepared. Many people feel you have to be an “expert” to meet the needs of children with disabilities in a camp program.

However, the biggest barrier to creating an inclusive recreation or camping program

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is not the lack of resources, knowledge, or accessible facilities. The biggest barrier is actually one of attitude. In order to provide a recreation or camp program that is authentically inclusive, we must understand that inclusion is first and foremost a philosophy. It is a mindset and a belief that everyone has value and something to contribute. It is a willingness to see the ability in everyone and match skill with challenge. It is an understanding that what our programs really provide at their heart

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the opportunity to build relationships, learn who we are, and develop skills. It is being committed to the process of making programs accessible — not only in the physical sense, but also by ensuring that each person's participation is meaningful. Simply, it is the belief that all children can make friends, all children can participate, and all children can be successful.

Once we understand that inclusion is not a place, a program, or a time-limited opportunity, and that it is a state of being and a way of operating that says "all are welcome," we can overcome the practical barriers of resources, knowledge, and accessible facilities.

To successfully include all children requires effort, creativity, and a unique commitment to the success of each child in a program.

Disability will touch most of our lives. If you do not identify as a person with a disability right now, or if you don't have a friend or family member who does, you likely will at some point in your life. In order to understand inclusion, consider the choices, opportunities, and acceptance that you would want for yourself or your family. And know that any effort you put into making the world more inclusive for people with disabilities now may serve you in a very personal way in the future.

Leaders play an important role in the journey to inclusion. It is organizational leadership that can change policies and procedures that open the doors for a diverse range of people. Leaders can find resources to help make physical changes to facilities or provide needed training for staff. The commitment and support from leadership is critical to success and will make a powerful statement to the community at large that everyone is welcome.

The Power of Hiring and Training

There are very few groups of people who are more passionate about what they do than camp professionals and frontline staff. When making the intentional move to include children with and without disabilities, that passion becomes the greatest asset to making inclusion work.

Hiring people who value success for all children and training all staff is vitally important. Programs that segment their training automatically create de facto labels of "those" counselors for "those" kids.

Throughout the hiring process, a program's philosophy of inclusion should be clear. It is much easier to fine tune an existing belief and passion through training rather than try to convince someone to believe that inclusion is the right thing to do.

Create an atmosphere in which staff can openly discuss their concerns and questions. If staff members feel like they can express their opinions and fears, they will feel more committed to what their programs are trying to accomplish.

When an entire staff has the mindset and belief system firmly in place that all children can make friends, all children can participate, and all children can be

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Resources

- Organizations like Kids Included Together (www.kitonline.org), Schools of Promise (soe.syr.edu/centers_institutes/schools_of_promise/default.aspx), and the National Inclusion Project (www.inclusionproject.org) stand at the ready with best practices, inclusive activities, suggestions, and consulting to help programs navigate the paths to successful inclusion more effectively and efficiently. Programs like the National Inclusion Project's Let's ALL Play initiative provide support, funding, and training for recreational programs committed to inclusion.
- Let's ALL Play and similar initiatives include inclusive modifications that work for programs overall or individuals in your program as well as inclusive games and activities that benefit all children. Counselors have reported that Let's ALL Play modifications and games have made an overwhelmingly positive difference in the recreational experience for all children. Children with and without disabilities have seen dramatic growth in motor skills as well as improvement in social skills, self-esteem, compassion, and understanding.
- Both Kids Included Together and the National Inclusion Project host inclusion conferences for camp professionals seeking foundational and "next level" information. In 2013, Kids Included Together's International Conference on Inclusion will be held in San Diego, California, March 13-15 (www.KITconference.org). The National Inclusion Project's National Inclusion Conference will be held in Raleigh, North Carolina, April 4-5 (www.inclusionproject.org/conference).

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successful, they will feel more equipped and empowered to be creative in making accommodations and positively supporting children's connections and behaviors.

The Power of Inclusion

No one is under any illusion that inclusion is easy. To successfully include all children requires effort, creativity, and a unique commitment to the success of each child in a program.

Inclusion is built on the premise that all children should be valued for their unique abilities and included as essential members of a community. Inclusion is not a place or a practice; it is a way of thinking. Norman Kunc (1992) defines inclusion as

the valuing of diversity within the human community. When [inclusion] is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become "normal" in order to contribute to the world . . . We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging. (pp. 38–39)

Inclusion is more than a "feel-good" experience supported by positive anecdotes and stories — it is a well-established practice supported by research. A compelling body of research documents that children with and without disabilities benefit both socially and academically from inclusive services (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). And in the classroom as well, research has consistently shown the academic and social benefits of placing students with and without disabilities together (Fischer, Pumpian, & Sax, 2000; McDonnell, Thorson, Disher, & Mathot-Buckner, 2001). Inclusion increases the rates of learning when children with and without disabilities are together (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). Additionally, inclusion enhances children with disabilities' ability to make and maintain friendships (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995) as well as provides children without disabilities increased powerful friendship opportunities. In addition to the academic gains and friendships, children with disabilities in inclusive settings have higher performance in areas of social competence (Fisher & Meyer, 2002).

If we want a world where all people can live, work, and play together, where will they learn to do that if they live, work, and play in separate settings? In short, the research in this area is clear: Inclusion is better for all involved. It is worth any additional effort to be sure that students are working and playing ALL together.

The Power of Belonging

By teaching children to welcome others into their worlds, the principles of inclusion can help foster a greater sense of cooperation and empathy in the next generation.

Some limitations to inclusion are practical (such as staff, training, equipment, and curriculum); others are less tangible (public awareness and shifts in mindset and belief). With the help of recognized leaders in the inclusion movement, programs can address both the practical and philosophical nature of creating a world where all children can enjoy a sense of belonging — no longer on the outside looking in, but always included.

Realistically, it takes time and preparation to include children with and without disabilities in a program. But an equal reality is that the benefits of inclusion are priceless.

Not only does inclusion place a high value on the life of each person, it ennobles society by demonstrating what it means to be kind and accepting. It supports the timeless and golden ideal: to treat others as you would want to be treated.

Photos on pages 60–61 courtesy of Aron Hall, National Inclusion Project.

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