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Occupational Therapy's Role in Adapting Residential Youth Camps for Increased Inclusion

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BACKGROUND

Each year, summer camps serve more than 11 million youth in the (Wilson, Sibthorp, & Brusseau, 2017). Occupational therapy (OT) is an emerging area of practice (Hanscom & Schoen, 2014). Hanscom and Schoen (2014) recommended strategically combining OT with traditional camp programming to create an emotionally, physically, and spiritually safe environment that promotes optimal attending and task follow through. Individualized intervention strategies can be infused into the day to support each camper's successful participation.

PROBLEM

Residential youth camp enhances positive youth development, as it meets motivational needs and promotes intrinsic engagement (Halsall, Kendellen, Bean, & Forneris, 2016). However, the number of inclusive camps is limited (Shefter, Uhrman, Tobin, & Kress, 2017). Further problems include seasonal staff turnover and lack of inclusion training (Harper, 2017).

PURPOSE

To explore the populations served within Pathfinder Ranch, a residential youth camp, identify barriers to participation, and recommend adaptations to the environment to promote a more inclusive environment.



PROJECT RESULTS

Camp Staff Survey: Four Themes Emerged

Theme one

Increase Training on Inclusion Methods

Theme two

Challenging and Diverse Terrain

All staff 11/11 or 100% agreed the environment was the most challenge aspect to promote inclusion

Theme three

Increase Discussion on Inclusion

Theme four

Increase Knowledge of Students' Needs

Camp Staff Interview Responses

- "We get limited information on how to support each student" (Camp Staff #8)
- "I wish the parents would provide more details on how to help their child adapt to being away from home, especially if their child has any limitations" (Camp Staff #9)
- "I'm just not sure how to modify or adapt my orienteering class so that all the students will be able to participate. I could really use the [OT student's] guidance" (Camp Staff #2)

Camp Survey Responses

- "Need more staff to utilize the specialized equipment and need additional training on things like the adaptive climbing gear" (Camp Staff #5)
- "Hikes are the most challenging, whether it's with including kids with mental, emotional, or physical differences that may require adaptation" (Camp Staff #7)
- "Including campers with physical limitations on hikes is challenging because of the terrain and time limits" (Camp Staff #11)
- "We don't talk about what inclusion means or how to put it into practice often enough" (Camp Staff #3)
- "Team Challenge can be difficult to plan when caregivers are not clear about different physical abilities or challenges" (Camp Staff #1)

Teacher and Parent Chaperone Interview Responses

- "Camp has given my child opportunities to learn life skills and has challenged him outside of his comfort zone" (Parent #1)
- "This morning, she was dressed and had her water bottle filled before the bell rang. At home, we struggle with time management" (Parent #2)
- "My students have never been on a hike and the rocky terrain is especially challenging for the students with low muscle tone or cerebral palsy" (Teacher #3)
- "Pathfinder Ranch helped create a strong sense of community within our school and ensures each student has an ample opportunity to feel included" (Teacher #2)

Explored barriers within the camp environment and transitions from academic setting to overnight camp. Inclusion methods were implemented with the direct support of the special education teachers and then taught to the camp staff.

Intended duration versus actual: Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the facility and all California schools were temporarily closed, which abruptly hindered the ability to observe the impact of the in-service and proposed recommendations.

Capstone Products: Recommendations to increase inclusion and associated lesson plan

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METHODS

Project completed over eight weeks. Included observations, reflective journaling, interviews, survey, staff feedback, and an in-service.

- Observations of activities elicited program strengths, limitations, and adaptation recommendations
- Participation in activities built rapport and provided an opportunity to give real-time feedback to staff on inclusion techniques
- Participants drawn from the pool of seasonal staff at Pathfinder Ranch
- Staff in-service on inclusion techniques with the use of a trivia game to match camp culture

OT IMPLICATIONS

Occupational therapy (OT) has a unique understanding of adapting activities and environments to match task demands which could assist the staff in promoting inclusivity (Braveman & Suarez-Balcazar, 2009). OT was supported through positive feedback from Pathfinder Ranch staff as well as the participants' engagement in meaningful inclusive tasks.

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