

Camp Robin Hood

Supporting staff who have additional needs in a day camp setting

Camp Robin Hood is Canada's oldest privately established day camp. Our inclusion program, of both staff and campers, dates back to at least the early 1970's. On a typical day we have close to 1000 campers and 300 staff at our day camp. Campers start as young as 4 years of age and up to 13 ½ years of age at which point they can then take part in our two-year Leadership Training Program.

About 15% of our camper and staff populations have some additional needs where they require some sort of support to help them get the most out of their camp experience. We try and ensure that there is only one camper who has some additional needs within a cabin group. We keep all campers in their age appropriate group regardless of their cognitive/developmental level of function so as to benefit from peer role modeling. This is particularly important because some of our campers attend specialized schools and don't have the opportunity to work with their age appropriate peers.

Over the years we have noted a significant increase in the number of campers and staff that we support who have disabilities that are often referred to as "invisible" (such as intellectual, cognitive, mental health, and learning). In fact, the majority of campers and staff that we support tend to have a diagnosis that could be categorized as "invisible".

Our hope is that the campers and staff that we support participate fully in our camp day. We plan as best we can to accommodate and at times modify programs so that everyone in the group is safe and successful. Sometimes, depending on the needs of the individual, it may mean that they will require an extra staff in the group, or it could mean that the staff in the group are given strategies that work well at school and home to implement while at camp. We have a team of specialized staff, called our 'Camper Relations Team', made up of special education teachers, educational assistants and OT students. Members of this team liaise between the camper/staff, their family and support team such as therapists, teachers, etc. and our staff at camp – of course, all with proper written permission to do so. This team also provides training to our senior staff, our staff as a whole at pre-camp and in services, and they make themselves available throughout the camp day to answer questions, role model expectations, etc.

Introducing WS

This summer will mark the 19th year that WS, one of our staff members, has been part of our Robin Hood Family. He's going to be 37 years of age. It seems like only yesterday that his guidance counsellor from his high school called our office and asked if we would take the time to interview WS. She asked if there was some information that she could have to help "prep" WS for the interview which was very helpful for both WS and ourselves as his future employers. WS also granted us permission to speak with his mom and guidance counsellor and then, as the

years went on, we have had his permission to also speak to the staff that run some of the programs he attends in the community. This connection with his “team” has been beneficial in helping WS to understand what is expected of him at camp and even providing tips on things that he could practice during the “off season” in preparation for the next summer.

After WS’s first summer working as an extra support in the unit with boys finished kindergarten and grade 1, he made a beautiful drawing of camp staff holding hands and a bubble above the drawing of himself saying “this is me at my first job and I even got paid”. That drawing is framed and sits in my office to this day.

WS’s strength as extra staff in a unit went well as he loves routines, is very thorough about making sure that the change area was always clean and that kids were not forgetting their belongings as they moved between specialties.

WS spent a couple years working in a unit but the chlorine from twice a day swim was taking a toll on his body so we assigned him to the canoe specialty. There he thrived as he enjoyed getting the snack for the area, helping to set up between groups, and he loved meeting staff and campers from all over camp.

A number of years ago our camp decided to offer towel service to all of our campers. We felt that WS would be the perfect staff person for this responsibility. He loved meeting campers and staff and loved to keep things clean and organized. Our Camper Relations Team developed a system to help WS know numbers of towels that each unit needed and when the groups would be coming to get their towels, and more. WS did share with us that he missed being part of a specialty with a group of staff so he continued to keep some of his responsibilities he had when on canoe.

We have had some “bumps” along the way but with the support of WS’s team we were able to help WS to replace some of the behaviours that were not well suited for camp. As it turned out some of the things that we were concerned with impacted his daily life throughout the year as well – so once we were all aware of what was going on we were able to work with WS together to help him change less desired behaviours (for example he had an obsession for getting staff, campers and even parents to sign his year books – which he often made on his own).

WS lives for his summers. Some of our staff that we support have been able to use the experiences and references from camp to get into college programs or jobs but unfortunately this has not been the case with WS. He would be a great volunteer – in fact we often refer to him as a “gentle giant” who craves being with people and who truly loves his camp “family”. He is always present at our reunions and will often drop in at the office just to say hi!

He’s connected with many of our campers, staff and their families over the years but that is not always the case with some of our staff that we support. While most are accepting and understanding, we have, each year, had families who do not appreciate having staff who are supported and valued members of our camp community. At times, it is parents of campers with additional needs who are the most demanding. They don’t want a role model for their child

who is supported to be someone who has also special needs. It is heartbreaking that they don't see that this opportunity could be their own child's opportunity in the future! We don't let these attitudes deter us from doing what we do ... in fact, it makes us work even harder to help get the message across to everyone that we are community that supports and values one another.

We also have learned that often our young/new to camp culture staff can be the most accepting and understanding. They use the information/strategies shared by family and other team members to help support our campers and staff. We also make sure that everyone knows that we are continuing to learn and everyone is unique – so we just keep striving and learning throughout our experiences. Lastly, the value of the proper intake and having a strong team approach help make our inclusion program something we are very proud of.