



## **The Camp Within A Camp Model: The Best of Both Worlds**

Established in 1982, Camp Awakening is an overnight summer camp for children and youth with physical disabilities. Our campers, ages 9-24, have a wide variety of disabilities such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida & hydrocephalus, muscular dystrophy, juvenile arthritis, epilepsy, spinal cord injury, vision loss and amputation. During their time at camp, campers succeed in conquering new challenges at their own pace and their own level of ability. They are given the opportunity to increase independence, make lasting friendships, develop confidence and accomplish things they never thought possible. The philosophy of Camp Awakening incorporates the idea that "No wall is too high to scale, but sometimes a ladder would help!"

Our program is unique in that it is a combination of specialized and inclusive camping programs. We work with three mainstream summer camps across Ontario from whom we rent a fully accessible cabin for our campers to stay in. In each session there are 7 campers with 3 Camp Awakening staff and a host camp Leaders In Training (LIT). Throughout their time at camp, our campers are given the opportunity to make friends with others in the Awakening cabin who are similarly-abled, as well as those in the host camp who do not have a disability. Our campers participate in camp activities independently as a cabin group, as well as being fully intermingled with host camp campers at some activities and meals. We believe that it is a great model of integration and that our campers experience the best of both worlds.

For many of our campers, they may be the only ones at their schools or in their communities to have a physical disability. Moreover, they may have never met anyone else with the same disability as them. When they come to Camp Awakening, they are able to develop friendships with peers who have had the same or similar experiences as them and relate to them on a deeper level. They also often feel more confident trying new activities without the fear of their new friends making fun of them based on their limitations. Alternatively, our campers are also able to spend time at camp with friends and family members who are able-bodied and attend the host camp.

While campers are encouraged to participate in both types of environments, the choice of where to spend a lot of their time is largely given to the campers. It changes session by session as to how much time they want to spend with campers from the host camp. The campers can voice their preferences and the staff follow their lead and will plan meals, activities, and evening programs accordingly.

We run our boys program out of Kilcoo Camp, our girls program at Camp Oconto, and our young adult program out of Cedar Ridge Camp. We have worked with Kilcoo for 35 years and Oconto for 17 years. This will be our first summer at Cedar Ridge. Because we have such an extensive history with Kilcoo and Oconto, their campers often view ours as fellow members of the camp community. They are largely included in the overall camp environment as their disability is normalized and they are rarely stigmatized based on their limitations.

Each member of our staff team receives 3 days of Awakening-specific training, where we cover inclusion and disability specific topics such as background knowledge on each of the disabilities our campers have, lifts and transfers, personal care routines, program modifications, and proper etiquette when working with people with disabilities. Our staff then have the opportunity to attend the host camp staff training week where they receive site specific training on things like the camp schedule, emergency procedures, and other leadership skills. During this training our Program Directors are given the opportunity to lead a session for host camp staff where they talk about Camp Awakening's mission and values, how to ensure programming is inclusive and how to talk to their campers about disability. Every year the host camp staff report that this training is beneficial as it gives them the tools to ensure our campers are included in their program.

During their time at camp, our leadership campers, ages 16-18, plan and carry out a presentation to the host camp LITs on disability. They talk about what disability is; stigmatization and exclusion; and how to create an inclusive environment. One of our goals from this presentation is to get the LITs thinking about pursuing a future placement or counsellor position with Camp Awakening. Not only is this a great opportunity for the host camp LITs to learn about disability and inclusion, but also gives our campers great advocacy skills and self-confidence.

We are lucky that at our camps we have the facility and equipment to play parasports with our campers. We have a tennis court, a basketball court and a ball-hockey rink, as well as sledge hockey equipment and sport wheelchairs. Many of our campers do not participate in other recreational activities outside of camp, so our motivation is to introduce them to new sports that they are passionate about and can play during the school year. While we play these sports often as a cabin group, we sometimes invite host camp campers to compete against us promoting 'reverse inclusion.' In this form of activity, individuals who may or may not experience disability compete with and against each other directly, in what have traditionally been known as disability sports. Instead of always modifying activities to ensure that our campers with disabilities can take part, this gives us the opportunity to modify the parasport so that their able-bodied peers can join in. Playing parasports at camp introduces host camp campers to new types of sports and skills while also allowing Camp Awakening campers to thrive, shine and be at an advantage. Hosting reverse inclusion at camp has also created a sense of commonality, empathy, and respect.

While we have discovered many ways to promote the inclusion of our campers into the daily life of our host camp, sometimes we still face challenges. There have been times when our campers have felt excluded from their host-camp peers due to their physical differences. We believe that the best way to overcome these challenges is to show the host camp campers the strengths and capabilities that people with disabilities possess and highlight the commonalities they share.

When trying to plan an inclusive program for your summer camp, we think the most important thing to remember is that your campers and their families are the experts. If you are ever unsure if a specific policy, procedure or activity is inclusive, consult your camper families for their opinions - they will be thrilled to be included in the process. We want Camp Awakening campers to have a say in what they get out of their camp session and therefore often let them choose how involved they want to be in the host camp activities. In order to ensure campers with disabilities are included while they are at camp, it is essential to involve them in the overall inclusion process.