



REACH (formerly known as Reach for the Rainbow) is recognized as a critical support system for participants, families, partners and social service agencies. In 1987, REACH introduced integrated programs to overnight camps in Ontario. Rather than establish new camps or create bricks and mortar, REACH worked to support and modify existing camps to provide 1:1 support & integrated opportunities for children and youth with disabilities in spaces that were adapted to become accessible. The whole model of REACH is an achievable standard for recreational programs, with an expectation of how participants are engaged and included, which is an active participation involving the value of 1:1 support, active participation, personal care, dignity, belonging & independence.

Working with a variety of partners (36) in integration throughout the province of Ontario, REACH serves as a navigation support system for participants, families, partners and social service agencies that facilitate inclusive recreational opportunities and respite time for those with disabilities from ages 4 – 24. REACH provides comprehensive in-take assessments for participants, the specialized training of 1:1 support counsellors, both in a recreation setting and a camp setting to meet the individual needs of each participant, the arrangement of accessible transportation and the loan of special adaptive equipment (terra treks, harnesses, joggers, lifts, etc.).

REACH provides essential training to our one-to-one support counsellors and program delivery partners throughout the year. The training curriculum provides specific disability awareness knowledge and hands-on strategies on how to integrate participants with differing abilities into camp. Inclusion training is not just limited to the counsellors providing direct 1:1 support to program participants. REACH believes inclusion is an attitude therefore, we provide an “all program staff” training to ensure every staff member understands how to ensure there is full integration of the REACH participants. Our training comes in a variety of forms. We deliver regional training, we conduct customized training that is both site specific and participant specific, and there are on-going pre-camp training sessions and onsite resource visits by trained in-field staff. All activities include providing adaptive equipment, critical support and on-going consultations.

Our evidence based training materials engages the audience in a hands-on learning experience that provides them with the confidence to implement the tools and strategies into their own programs. The training modules cover best practices in five key areas; inclusion, differing abilities, communication, behavior and personal care. One can expect to walk away from one of our trainings sessions feeling confident in their ability how to take a fresh look at their existing recreation programs and make small modifications or adaptations to ensure participants of all abilities are involved in ways that are safe, challenging and—most importantly—inclusive. As well, learn the importance of recognizing sensory needs, how to recognize behavioural triggers and communication strategies that will enhance the learning for all campers.

The tools and strategies we provide in our training is the foundation to successful recreational programming. Utilizing a strength-based approach when working with individuals with differing abilities is vital. Recognizing their needs and implementing tools and strategies into programs to ensure everyone can best participate is when the magic occurs.

Allow me to share some success stories with you from counsellors implementing the tools and strategies they learned in our training:

1. “At camp in the summer a camper had always experienced difficulty when significant changes in the routine and schedule would occur. This meant they commonly did not participate in the camp outs as the change would cause an increase in undesired behaviours that could spiral out of control.” During the summer of 2017, the camp implemented a daily visual schedule that included planned breaks and choice in activity as learned during the REACH training. The camp also used the schedule to prepare them for the change that would occur when the camp out was scheduled. By following a consistent schedule and visually and verbally preparing the camper for a possible change in their routine, they participated in the camp out for the first time without any behavior occurrences.
2. “A camper with severe anxiety promised me (her counsellor) at the beginning of the week that there was no way she was getting in the canoe. She struggled to even step foot on the dock because she could feel it moving. We made a plan and each day we spent about 30 minutes working towards getting her in the canoe. On Day 1 we had her put one foot on the dock and tried to encourage her to stand on the dock on her own. On Day 2 we managed to get her out on the dock and standing near the boats. On Day 3 we had her sit on the dock with her feet in the canoe. On Day 4 she sat in the canoe holding the dock. On Day 5 we pushed off the dock, but stayed within arm’s reach, and floated for 10 minutes. It took a lot of encouragement throughout the whole process and we played towards her interests but playing her favourite songs when she reached a new milestone.” This counsellor used the goal setting model that REACH believes is key to a strength-based approach.
3. A young man who can, at times, becoming quite aggressive came to camp last year. This was his 5th summer at camp and there had always been challenges in the past around behaviour and aggression. We discussed his interests and personality ahead of time with the camp team and his 1:1 counsellor and tried to work through all the strategies we had tried in the past. What worked? What didn't? How should we move forward this year? We had tried all sorts of strategies until his counsellor simply implemented a "Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down" system. When he did something good, his counsellor would give him a thumbs up. When he was engaging in behaviours that were not desired, his counsellor would give him a thumbs down. He would be so proud of himself for receiving a thumbs up that he worked hard not to get a thumbs down. It certainly opened my eyes to how sometimes, the simplest ideas can be the brilliant ones.

From these stories you can acknowledge the staff for understanding the importance of the individual’s needs, creative thinking and goal setting that allowed their campers to be successful. A key message we like to share in our training is that inclusion looks different for everyone, but integration is everyone’s experience. Everyone has the right to be included in programming within their own community. We encourage organizations to adopt a mindset of “anything is possible!”

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