

RESOURCES & IDEAS FOR A MORE INCLUSIVE CAMP SPACE:

Questions? Feel free to email me (Lydia) at LGartner@eastersealsci.com

1) Social Media Resources: Social media has been incredibly important in the reclaiming of disability identity, community and pride. It provides accessible, digital platforms for disabled and neurodivergent individuals and activists to amplify their experiences and advocate for their own preferences and interests, as well as create powerful and supportive communities. Much of what we know about disability has been told to us by nondisabled and neurotypical folks, and although many have good intentions, it is vitally important that we learn and listen to the voices and lived experiences of those that identify as disabled and/or neurodivergent.

- Hashtags to explore:
 - #ActuallyAutistic
 - #DisabilityPride and #DisabledAndProud
 - #DisabilityAwareness
 - #DisabilityInclusion
 - #Neurodiversity and #Neurodivergent
- Some accounts to *start* with (there are SO many—I really suggest exploring the hashtags above to find more!):
 - @disabilityreframed
 - @mollyburkeofficial
 - @actuallyautistictiktoks
 - @mrsspeechiep
 - @theautisticlife
 - @autiennele
 - @jtknoxroxs
 - @spencer2thewest
 - @justkeepstimming
 - @keah_maria
 - @theotbutterfly

2) Examine your rules, policies and expectations: Ableism exists and operates at all levels of society, and is certainly present at camp. Here's some questions you can ask yourself/your team:

- a. Does everyone have to be seated and looking at you during staff trainings, staff meetings, and/or camper activity instructions? Or is it more important that everyone is listening/paying attention in a way that works for them (flexible seating, pacing in the back, utilizing fidgets, etc.).
- b. Are breaks allowed and encouraged?
- c. Are you stopping, blocking, or discouraging non-harmful stimming?
 - i. "Stimming" = self-stimulating actions that are repeated to stimulate the senses
 - ii. Although the majority of people stim at times (playing with hair, bouncing leg, chewing on nails/pens, etc.), stimming is generally more frequent and more intense for neurodivergent individuals. It helps them stay regulated—calm down, focus, communicate, express emotions, etc.! Stimming has a purpose.
- d. Do you have flexible options for any dress code in place?
- e. Are non-trauma informed behavioral strategies being allowed, encouraged or utilized? (seclusion, planned ignoring, etc.)
- f. Are neurotypical social skills being enforced on neurodivergent staff and/or campers? (eye contact, handshakes/hugs, "politeness" when someone is directly communicating or self-advocating)
- g. Are you refusing to make an adjustment because of how it will affect your non-disabled/neurotypical campers or staff?

3) No matter the population you serve, train your staff on the following:

- a. Ableism- what it is, what harm it causes, examples of ableism, etc.
- b. Language surrounding disability (should be in-line with what the disability community prefers). Euphemisms such as “special needs” or “handicapped,” functioning labels (high-functioning, low functioning), or terms such as “wheelchair-bound” and “nonverbal” should be replaced! Also, learn and teach the difference between identity-first and person-first language (autistic person vs. person with autism)... there has actually been a massive shift in the disability community towards utilizing and preferring identity-first language, BUT we should always use the language the person we’re referring to prefers us to use!
- c. The 7 senses, sensory needs, sensory supports, and the variances in sensory processing—ALL children’s sensory systems are more sensitive because everything is still developing! Also, SO many individuals of all ages experience sensory “quirks” or processing differences and don’t necessarily have an official diagnosis! **Understanding sensory input and needs should precede any training about behavioral methods/strategies—this training has been truly world-view-changing for our staff, and has actually helped many identify their own sensory needs and differences.**
 - i. There are 7 senses: visual, auditory, tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), vestibular (movement), proprioception (body position)
 - ii. Hypersensitivity vs. hyposensitivity—(P.S.- someone can be hypersensitive in one sense but hyposensitive in another). Hypersensitive individuals may avoid or have difficulty with sensory input (loud sounds, certain textures/foods, bathing/grooming, movement), hyposensitive individuals may not register or may under-register sensory input and *may* seek out sensory input.
 1. I like to go through each of the 7 senses and create a big flip-chart paper for each with 2 sections (hyposensitive and hypersensitive) and have staff generate ideas on what actions/behaviors we might see at camp from individuals who are hyper or hypo sensitive in that sense.
 - a. We discuss specific camp activities and what things we might want to think about or have ready for our friends who need sensory support, as well as how to redirect (or proactively assist with) harmful sensory seeking/avoiding behavior (head-banging, biting, elopement, etc.)
 - b. Ex: The zip line is going to provide an extreme amount of visual (trees/world flashing by quickly), vestibular (fast movement through the air), and proprioceptive (intense pressure of harness on body) sensory input. This could be overwhelming/overstimulating for a child who is hypersensitive in any of those senses, and on the flip side, incredibly rewarding and enticing for a child who is hyposensitive or sensory-seeking.
 - iii. There are awesome resources on this subject, including in the accounts referenced above (@mrsspeechiep and @theotbutterfly have some great posts on sensory processing), BUT the best thing to do is to reach out to an Occupational Therapist in your area and see if they can come lead a session during training! Our responsibility as camp professionals is to identify how this translates and presents in camp-specific routines, traditions, and activities!

4) Have regulation tools available and accessible to campers and staff!

- a. Flexible/alternative seating: exercise ball (important to teach that this is a TOOL, not a toy!), “wobble seats” that go on chairs, putting rubber exercise bands around the legs of a chair so camper can kick/play with it with their feet, and/or just allowing folks to stand, sit on a chair OR the floor, pace in the back, rock, etc.!
- b. NOISE-REDUCING HEADPHONES AND/OR EARPLUGS! Can buy super cheap on Amazon or find in Walmart!

- c. Keep some oranges in the walk-in freezer! As well as bags of ice. Frozen oranges are an incredibly affordable and useful grounding/regulation tool, particularly for individuals with anxiety or PTSD, because they not only provide extreme temperature sensations (tactile) that focus and “drown out” other alarm bells in the body, but also provide the citrus scent (olfactory system) AND a bright color (visual)!
- d. Fidgets (pop-its, putty/play-doh, squeeze balls, spinners, wire rings, etc.)
- e. TIMERS!!! This can be as simple as using your phone timer, it could be getting kitchen timers from the Dollar Tree, or purchasing visual timers off Amazon. I’d suggest having a few options available and accessible to counselors to grab/use. If you’re noticing a camper is struggling every time you transition between activities, or every time they are leaving a specific activity, a timer will be super useful to help them regulate and prepare. Empower them by helping you set the timer, but no matter what, ensure they KNOW you are setting the timer and give them verbal prompts throughout (there are now 2 minutes left on the timer) if they cannot visually see the timer going down in time.
- f. Items that can provide deep pressure input: weighted blanket, weighted lap-pad, weighted stuffed animal, beanbag or exercise ball (either camper can roll on it/crash onto it, or counselor can provide GENTLE pressure by rolling the ball or “squishing” the bean bag). Don’t have any of these tools? Have the camper press into a wall a certain amount of times/length of time, or have them do a “heavy work” task (ex: pushing a box or chair across the room—pro tip, make it into a “helper” task)!
- g. Break cards—If a camper is working on recognizing and expressing their need for a break independently, this can be a helpful step towards doing so. It can also be helpful for campers that get “embarrassed” by saying “I need a break” out loud in front of their peers. Break cards are physical reminders that campers can put in their pockets, empowering them to advocate for this need if it arises by giving it to their counselor (however “sneakily” they might need).

5) Be proactive! Inclusion should not be an afterthought, and we set ALL campers up for success by doing the following:

- a. Including and asking questions about sensory needs, potential triggers, and behavioral support needs on every camper’s application. A camper doesn’t need to have an official diagnosis to have greater support needs! Knowing this and being able to pass it along to their counselor is critical to helping both the camper and staff thrive!
- b. Include *actual* pictures of your camp, cabins, activities, dining space, etc. in your materials and on your website. This helps campers know what to expect and helps them visualize not only the space, but how they will interact with that space.
- c. Provide copies of the schedule to campers who need it, and/or ensure that it is accessible and available for them to see it if they want to. Be upfront about activities that may be cancelled/changed due to weather, staffing, supplies, etc. A really stellar move is creating a large visual schedule for each activity group out of Velcro and laminated pictures that can go on the wall. Campers can not only help change it for each day, but if an activity is cancelled/replaced/switched around, it is easily changeable!
- d. Ensure campers know where/how to access a safe space if they are overstimulated BEFORE they are overstimulated!
- e. Be honest and upfront about the support you can provide—if you have not provided the staff, training, ratios, or tools to successfully and safely support a camper, make that clear. However, do not use what you “have always done” or who “you have always served” or not served as an excuse to not acquire/adjust the staff, training, ratios, or tools at your camp. Accessibility and inclusivity are a human right. Everyone deserves camp.