
INCLUSION TRAINING GUIDE FOR JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS

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CHAPTER 5: SUMMER COMMUNICATION

Ongoing Communication with Parents/Communicating About Campers within Camp

The intake process section of this resource guide stresses the importance of working collaboratively with parents. It takes a great deal of trust and faith for parents of a child with a disability to be ready to send them to summer camp. Until now, they have seen and interacted in person with their child every day. They know his or her eating preferences and habits, as well as showering and other self-care needs. Parents instantly understand what a child is feeling and understand what he or she is communicating or asking, even if the child is nonverbal. Now, perhaps for the first time other than school, which is only for a few hours per day, parents are finding themselves in a position where they must entrust their precious child to strangers—us! With this trust comes a responsibility on the part of camp to communicate with parents. How do we keep parents in the loop? How much, how often, and through what communication mechanisms do we stay in touch?

Consider the camp experience from the parents' perspective. They dropped off their child on the first day of camp and have absolutely no way to really hear how the experience is going. Most camps do not allow phone calls. Campers must write home but what camper, typically developing or otherwise, communicates much in writing? Campers with disabilities may write a few words, which is exciting for the parents, but they can't really capture the camp experience in a handwritten letter.

So what is a parent to do? All camp parents wake up each morning and check the camp website/photo gallery for photos of their children. They scroll through often hundreds of photos until they find a photo or two of their child. And they proceed to carefully study each photo! Why does he look sad? How come no kids are near him? Doesn't he have any friends? Is that a bug bite? Is that sunburn? Where is his sunscreen?

How and when do inclusion directors keep in touch with parents?

(All directors have different styles but here are some suggestions)

- Call or send an email to parents of all new campers by the first morning. Parents sigh a sigh of relief just knowing their child ate dinner and slept through the night! And directors, proceed to drop a note to all parents, one by one, within the first few days of camp.
- Send out a global, general weekly update to all families, including a few paragraphs about the happenings of the division and about the welfare of the entire division. A few well-chosen photographs of happy children never hurt as well!
- Start a Facebook group open only to parents of campers in the disabilities program; it is a way for parents to view photos and connect with each other as well as with the inclusion director.
- Tell parents how you prefer to be contacted and when they can realistically expect a reply. Some inclusion directors don't have an office and don't go by the main office more than once a day. A message left in the coordinators' mailbox may not get returned for a day or two, which is insufferably long for a parent. Some directors prefer a parent to take their chances and call the director's cell phone. Others prefer an email. Some actually prefer text messages. Decide on your preferred method of communication and share this with parents. And if parents do leave a message, be sure to return it promptly. There are times when it may be necessary to set limits with parents and to let them know that, if you are on the phone or online returning emails, then you are NOT with the campers and staff, which is crucial for the safe running of the program. They will appreciate the honesty and candor and in most cases will be respectful and understanding.
- Tell parents who on the team will be their "point person."

It may be counterintuitive but the MORE you share with parents, the LESS they will call, write, and text to ask about their children! This is why regular updates go a long way. Once per four week session, the bunk counselors should write a camp-issued postcard to each parent. Such postcards are always upbeat and share a few details about the campers' activities. Be sure the division head or director approves the content before it is sent out.

Communicating About Campers Within Camp: Some “Who’s” and “How’s”

For a parent, the only thing worse than having a child sent home is learning that the child is having difficulties only when the fateful call comes. It is extremely important for camps to devise and utilize systems for keeping timely track of camper issues and then communicating them to parents.

Some camps utilize some version of weekly camper care meetings. The camp director, the director of camper care or inclusion director, and other support personnel participate in one staff meeting per week where each camper is briefly reviewed. In some camps, they are assigned a color: green (all is well), yellow (minor concerns) or red (major concerns). All yellows and reds are discussed at length. Perspectives of bunk counselors, specialists, etc. are shared and this information is documented. In some cases, notes are written in the camper file (Camp Minder, etc.) and the yoetz (advisor) or other designated staff member may call the parent. It is always useful to have a written record about each camper. While certain events and interactions may be fresh in one’s mind during the summer, it will be a distant, unclear memory when discussing this camper or event in the fall or winter. It will also provide a useful script for conversations in the off-season with parents.

Calls home do not always mean the camper is going to be sent home. They are opportunities to share information, invite parental input, and elicit information about similar behaviors in the past. In some cases, the call is the continuation of an already collaborative relationship. Camp staff may be put in contact with the child’s therapist for additional problem solving and consultation. It is crucial that inclusion directors be proactive in reaching out to parents rather than waiting until a problem is beyond repair and the child is being sent home. It is also advisable for each camp to have a clear policy of behavior that will not be tolerated at camp and under what circumstances a camper might be sent home. This policy should be shared with all parents prior to the start of camp.

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