

Disability Wisdom: Training Staff to Empower Campers with Disabilities

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Objectives

- Describe the goals of disability empowerment training.
- Compare and contrast training activities to identify those that best achieve the goals of empowerment training.
- Run through one possible empowerment training activity.

Why are people with disabilities excluded?

- Lack of knowledge about how to accommodate them.
- Belief that their needs exceed available resources.
- Safety and liability concerns.
- Discomfort or negative feelings toward them (less common).

Goals of Disability Empowerment

- Knowledge: Give accurate, balanced information about impairments and accommodations.
- Strengths: Emphasize ways people with disabilities self-manage and adapt.
- Solutions: Teach about practical solutions to allay worries.
- Ease: Foster comfortable interactions.

Guiding Principles of Disability Empowerment

1. People with disabilities are experts on their own situation.
2. Disability is not necessarily tragic. Many people with disabilities feel pride and a sense of cultural kinship with one another.
3. People with disabilities are ordinary people with the same range of interests, strengths and challenges as anyone else.
4. Many of the challenges to full inclusion are socially created. We can resolve them with creativity and open minds.

Step 1. Consult Disability Communities

- People with disabilities are experts on their own situation.
- They should be front and center in planning any disability training.
- Bring guest speakers (children, adults and families).
- At least, have people with disabilities review and sign off on any training activities.

Step 2. Highlight Strengths and Adaptations

- What do people with disabilities do well? How do they adapt?
- Examples: Braille, sign language, lip-reading, mobility devices, communication boards, adapted sports.
- Demonstrations or hands-on teaching.

Example 1. Guess That!

- Blindfold participants and have them guess the identity of common objects by smell, sound, touch or taste.
- Have them distinguish between two cans based on weight, size, and sound when shaken.
- Ideally, a blind person will be present to give hints and lead discussion.

Example 2. Teaching About Assistive Devices

- 1. Physical therapist taught students to “hop over” into a wheelchair and move across the room.
- 2. Students learned to make a sandwich using their non-dominant hand. Tools: jar opener, gripper, modified knife and cutting board.

What Not to Do: Simulate Problems Without Solutions

- Disability simulation can be a double-edged sword.
- It needs to be a positive experience for participants and respectful to people with disabilities.
- Do not use simulation to illustrate a problem unless you can also illustrate a solution.
- Test: Would I be comfortable showing this simulation to someone with the disability?

Example: Blindness Simulations

- Students are blindfolded or close their eyes.
- Walk around (often stumbling), alone or guided by a partner.
- How might this work against the empowerment principles?
- How could this simulation highlight solutions rather than problems?

Tips for Positive Role-Plays

- Include tasks that are easy for a disability novice to master.
- Involve expert teachers (people with disabilities or professionals in the field).
- Acknowledge that simulation cannot mimic what it is like to be a child with a disability or to have a longer history with the disability.

Step 3. Consider Solutions

- Many barriers to inclusion are socially created.
- If we can recognize barriers, we can implement solutions.
- Examples: access limitations; social attitudes and discrimination.

Example 3. Access Limitations

- Using assistive devices, practice navigating accessible and inaccessible environments.
- Example: Using a wheelchair, attempt to enter a standard bathroom. Then, enter and navigate an accessible bathroom.
- Using crutches, walk around rough camp terrain with steep steps. Then, walk on a paved sidewalk with ramps.
- Discussion: How do we make camp accessible for everyone?

Other Examples

- Lip-reading: Participants try to read a partner's lips, first while facing each other, then while facing away.
- Hearing loss: Have participants wear earmuffs and try to decipher spoken directions. Then, present the directions on a screen.
- Print disabilities: Present written directions in blurry type or backwards. Then, read the directions aloud.
- **Bottom line:** Presenting information multiple ways helps everyone participate.

Attitudes as Barriers

- Attitudes can have the strongest impact on inclusion and empowerment.
- Objective: educate about the effects of ableist attitudes and how to remove them from camp.

Types of Social Barriers

- Avoidance.
- Condescension, babying, low expectations.
- Teasing, harassment (less common, since it is more obviously wrong).

Example 4: Labels

- Each participant has a ridiculous label on the back of their shirt.
- Walk around the room conversing, and treat each other exactly as the label says.

Labels

- Shout everything you say to me.
- Repeat everything I say.
- Only talk to me about horses.
- Ask me if I'm feeling OK.
- Tap me on the shoulder every time you talk to me.
- Talk to me like I'm two years old.

Labels Discussion

- How does it feel to be treated strangely because of a label?
- How do labels affect how we treat each other?
- How can we reduce labeling at camp?

A Space Flight Gone Wrong

1. Show how “disability” is relative. A person can be “able-bodied” on Earth but “disabled” on another planet, or vice versa.
2. Think about how people with disabilities adapt, and how the world can adapt to their needs.
3. Consider how you would want to be treated by a community that perceives you as “disabled”. How can you treat all your campers the way you would want to be treated?