

# Camp Shriver

## A Model for Including Children With Intellectual Disabilities in Summer Camp

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The following study examines the impact of five multi-week day camps known as Camp Shriver, a program of Special Olympics Inc. Camp Shriver's focus is to improve sports skills and enrich the social relationships of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities (ID). Instead of using sports to focus only on competition, Camp Shriver used sports to promote fun, teamwork, and sportsmanship. Our results showed that these camps improved the existing sports skills of campers while also introducing campers to new sports. Further, we found that campers with ID were just as socially integrated in camp activities as campers without ID. Implications for how camp directors can learn from the Camp Shriver model and begin to implement more inclusive programming are discussed.

### **Inclusive Camp Programming Is on the Rise**

In today's society, summer camps are a typical life experience for children and youth. Camp is a setting where children can learn new skills, build friendships, and experience personal growth. Unlike the school setting, with its emphasis on academics, the camp setting provides a unique experience in which the emphasis is on sports, social interaction, and having fun. Recently, there has been a substantial increase in camp opportunities for children with disabilities, particularly children with ID. While the majority of summer camps available to children with ID have been segregated, more opportunities are becoming available for camp experiences that bring together children with and without ID, particularly for children with mild impairments (Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 1997; Goodwin & Staples, 2005).

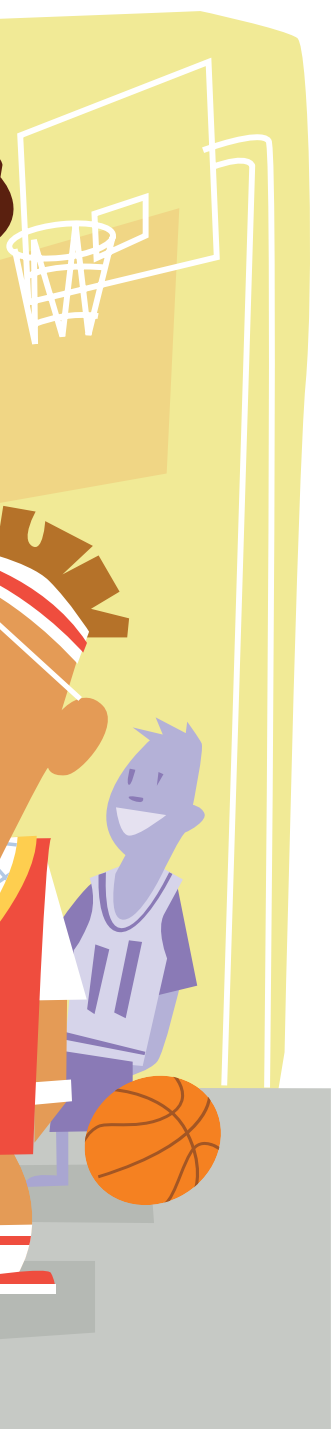
As opposed to dwelling on what are often only subtle differences that separate children with and without ID, inclusive camps stress the importance of recognizing the similarities that exist among all children who participate. It has been found that this type of camp programming can enhance the independence, resourcefulness, and social skills of children with ID through participation in integrated activities with children without ID (Mulvihill, Cotton, & Gyaben, 2004). In addition, children with ID have shown improvements in their self-esteem, self-reliance, and communication skills as a result of their participation in an inclusive camp setting (Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000). Such camps also give children with ID the opportunity to interact with their nondisabled peers outside of the school setting, where past research has consistently found that children with ID often experience social rejection or isolation (Sale & Carey, 1995; Heiman, 2000; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Frederickson & Furnham, 2004).

Finally, inclusive camps can also provide campers and staff without ID the opportunity to develop a more realistic understanding and appreciation of what it means to have an intellectual disability (Mulvihill, Cotton, & Gyaben, 2004). This in turn fosters in the entire camp community an awareness of and tolerance for all the differences that may exist among campers and staff, creating a community of acceptance.

### **Camp Shriver's Impact**

One of the major figures responsible for bringing the camp experience to those with ID is Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Known almost entirely for her role as the founder of Special Olympics, Shriver, the youngest sister of President John F. Kennedy, opened her home in Rockville, Maryland, to a camp for thirty-five individuals with ID in the summer of 1962. Camp Shriver, as it became known, grew into an annual event through the 1960s and served as the forerunner for the Special Olympics movement, which has since grown to reach more than two million athletes worldwide.

During the summer of 2006, in celebration of Shriver's 85th birthday, the Camp Shriver concept was rekindled and nationally implemented in five sites across the United States. We at the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) carried out an evaluation to examine the impact of Camp Shriver on the participating campers and camp staff.





### The Study Design

Specifically, this study describes the pilot year of five Camp Shriver sites located in Maryland, Florida, Oregon, Louisiana, and Boston, Massachusetts. It is important to note that in the spirit of Special Olympics, all camps were free to participants and thus contingent upon funding from external sources. While each site had its respective differences, all five camps emphasized skill development in multiple sports and the personal development of both campers and staff. In addition, each camp was carried out in an inclusive atmosphere where campers with and without ID participated together in the same activities.

This study sought to document the impact of Camp Shriver on:

1. The sports skills of campers.
2. The social relationships among campers with and without ID.
3. The attitudes and perceptions that camp staff hold towards individuals with ID.

### Camp Specifics

Each camp was organized in a day camp format in which individuals attended camp every weekday for two to three weeks. Camp programming was focused on daily lessons in multiple team sports. Campers were grouped into teams, each one rotating from sport to sport throughout the day, receiving group instruction. While camps varied in the sports they offered to campers, each camp offered lessons in soccer, basketball, and swimming. The sport lessons were focused on the fun and personal development inherent in playing sports rather than on competition.

In addition to daily sports lessons, each camp scheduled nonsport activities. For

example, Camp Shriver Oregon devoted an afternoon to fishing and hiking, Camp Shriver Florida held arts-and-crafts sessions several times throughout camp, and Camp Shriver Boston held a field trip to nearby Fenway Park. The integration of sports skills training with other traditional summer camp activities and special events provided campers with a well-rounded camp experience.

Though all the camps were inclusive, the five camps differed with regard to the level of inclusion they employed. For example, at Camp Shriver Maryland and Camp Shriver Louisiana, campers with ID were paired with counselors, in a ratio of one counselor, or “partner,” for every camper. Alternatively, Camp Shriver Florida and Camp Shriver Oregon used a peer buddy approach in which campers with ID were placed on teams with partners without ID of similar age. These camps created teams that worked well with each other in sports and other activities as opposed to a series of one-on-one camper-counselor dyads. (This partner concept originated in the Unified Sports™ program of Special Olympics, wherein athletes with ID are paired with a partner of similar age and gender who does not have ID to help promote their sports skill development.) In contrast to all other Camp Shriver sites, Camp Shriver Boston was totally inclusive; half of the campers were children with ID and the other half were children without ID. More specifically, rather than utilizing the partner concept, every child was considered an equal-status camper, regardless of whether he or she had an intellectual disability.

In addition, the camps also varied in the number of campers served as well as in terms of the age and level of impairment of campers. For example, while each camp accommodated between fifty and eighty campers, the Florida and Oregon camps served primarily high school-aged children, some of which had moderate to severe disabilities, while the Louisiana and Maryland camps recruited a wide range of participants between the ages of eight and thirty-five. Conversely, the Boston camp only recruited campers between the ages of eight to twelve with mild intellectual disabilities.

While the camps varied widely in the campers they served, most staff had some previous experience with Special Olympics or had received training in working with individuals with ID. Therefore, most Camp Shriver sites only provided one to two full days of training. Others with smaller staffs required even less time. However, in camps in which staff consisted largely of volunteers (many of whom did not attend the camp on a regular basis), programming an extensive training session proved challenging. All training sessions included information on camp policies and procedures, guidelines for sports instruction, and the unique demands of working with individuals with ID.

### Built-In Evaluation

One unique and important aspect of Camp Shriver was its built-in evaluation



component. The instruments used to assess campers' sports skills were chosen to help document the camp's effectiveness as well as the campers' development. In three of the five camps, campers' sport skills were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the camp. Each camper was assessed by rating his/her proficiency in a particular sport on a scale from zero to five in the four or five skill components pertaining to that sport. For instance, basketball was composed of four skill components: dribbling, passing, shooting, and team play. Two of the camps that were not able to assess camper sport skills through direct assessments administered surveys at the end of camp that included items pertaining to whether or not campers felt their sport skills improved by the end of camp.

In addition to assessing sports skills, Camp Shriver Boston, with its emphasis on total inclusion, conducted a series of interviews at the end of camp to assess campers' social relationships. Each camper was asked "Who do you like to play with at camp?" and "Did you make any new friends at camp?" The responses to these questions showed the extent to which campers with ID were socially accepted by their fellow campers without ID.

## Results and Discussion

### Benefits of Camp Shriver

The benefits of the Camp Shriver day camp were most apparent in the significant improvement in sports skills made by campers. Across all camps, through direct assessment of campers, observations, and campers' self-report, we were able to conclude that almost all children made some progress. We were further encouraged that campers were able to improve their skills not only in one sport, but also in multiple sports within the confines of only a two- to three-week camp session. These results support the notion that campers can improve their skills in multiple sports at the same time, indicating that inclusive camps need not be devoted to the acquisition of skills in a single sport. More specifically, we found that campers in Florida showed significant improvement in sport skills in multiple sports, including soccer and softball. Similarly, campers attending Camp Shriver Boston showed improvements in both soccer and basketball, while at Camp Shriver Oregon campers improved not only in soccer and basketball, but also in kickball. (See Table 1 on page 26.)

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When we asked campers about their improvement, almost all of the campers attending the Louisiana camp (90 percent) reported that they improved in swimming and soccer. This mirrors the findings from Camp Shriver Maryland, where a large number of campers (more than 75 percent) indicated some improvement in swimming, basketball, soccer, and kickball. It is important to note that this camp served older campers who were more moderately impaired, including campers with autism. In addition to building their sport skills in familiar sports, a large number of campers (almost 75 percent at Camp Shriver Oregon and Louisiana, for example) reported that they learned a new sport while attending camp. We are especially encouraged by these self-reported results because they suggest that the campers themselves are aware of their own skill improvements.

Of the five Camp Shriver sites, the camp in Boston was unique in that for every child with ID there was a same-age, same-gender camper without ID. This unique structure provided us with the opportunity to not only focus on the improvements of campers with ID, but also the improvements made by the campers without ID. As we might expect, campers did differ significantly in terms of soccer skills at the beginning of camp, with campers with ID starting camp with less skill in soccer than campers without ID. However, by the end of camp, campers with ID “caught up” to their non-disabled peers. We were also encouraged to find that the non-disabled campers also improved their soccer skills. In fact, at Camp Shriver Boston we did not find that the inclusion of campers with ID detracted in any way from the ability of campers without ID to improve their sport skills. The finding that children with and without ID can improve at similar rates in the same recreational sport program demonstrates that the inclusive model of camp benefits all campers involved.

In addition to documenting the improvement of sports skills for all campers, we found striking evidence at Camp Shriver Boston that all campers formed positive social relationships, and even developed new friendships. In fact, we found that campers with and without ID were accepted by their peers equally. That is, when we asked campers who they liked to play with, campers with ID were mentioned as often as campers without ID. Eighty-six percent

## Practical Applications

Through the inclusive recreational model of camp programming offered by Camp Shriver, the five sites were able to provide an array of benefits to a wide range of individuals. We believe that existing camps can learn from the model of Camp Shriver and begin implementing more inclusive camp programming. When considering our recommendations, it is important to note that including children with ID in existing camp programs does not mean that the paradigm of what summer camp is, or how it operates, needs to be shifted. Including children with ID is feasible, and we offer these recommendations to improve upon existing camp programming, not to change it entirely. It is also our belief that the suggestions ultimately will benefit all campers, not just those with ID. Below we describe the important elements that should be considered when including children with ID into existing camp settings:

### **When moving toward a more inclusive camp structure, the implementation of a staff training model that focuses on the skills needed to work with the camp’s participants needs to be considered.**

How to provide the best training for staff is a question many camp directors must ask themselves. The answer is complicated when working with children with ID, as some staff may have limited past experience working with this population. Camps should consider a training model that addresses the unique demands of working with individuals with ID. In learning how to address these demands, staff will be better equipped to work with children without disabilities as well.

### **When programming an inclusive camp structure, consideration needs to be given to the abilities of all participants.**

For example, camps that seek to serve children with mild ID may not have to make many changes to programming and might consider a more fully inclusive structure that emphasizes the similarities between all participants. In contrast, a camp that includes more campers with impairments might consider a model that offers one-on-one, camper-partner pairings between those with and without ID. In addition, children with ID should be given individual support from staff when needed so that they may participate alongside their peers without ID. However, there is a delicate balance to strike in not wanting to single out children with ID as different while at the same time wanting to provide enough support to encourage their success.

### **When including campers with ID it would be beneficial for camp directors to review school records (with parental permission).**

In addition to information received from a camper’s parents, reviewing the school records of a camper with ID can provide staff with valuable information as to the current instructional, and more importantly, the social-emotional goals and objectives of the camper. These records can provide valuable information as to the limitations of each child and what challenges he or she might encounter while participating in camp.

### **Consider the importance of programming activities at the opening of the camp that provide opportunities for all campers to learn about each other and develop a sense of similarity.**

As camp begins, it is important that welcoming activities are structured in a way that not only promotes a sense of shared experience, but also a sense of similarity among the campers. This is especially important when including campers with ID, as it has been found that perceptions of similarity may help to buffer any differences—those that may be readily apparent or those that may emerge over time—between children with and without ID. When children without ID perceive themselves as similar to children with ID, they are likely to respond more favorably to that child. Activities that help children develop social relationships or promote a sense of similarity among one another would benefit all campers by strengthening their connection to camp and to each other. In the school setting for example, peer buddy systems are often used to promote positive social interactions between children with and without ID. It is also important, as camp progresses, to structure some nonsport activities that build upon these best practices.





of the campers without ID named at least one camper with ID. In addition, when we asked campers about any new friends they made while at camp, nondisabled campers were just as likely to name campers with ID as a “new friend” as they were those without ID. These findings show that the camp setting can accomplish what classrooms have struggled with for years—not just the physical inclusion of children with ID in the classroom but their social inclusion as well. It is our hope that these results will lead the way in demonstrating the value of the camp experience not only to camp directors, but to educators as well.

Finally, campers were not the only ones who experienced positive outcomes from their participation in Camp Shriver; the counselors and volunteers also benefited from the camp experience. Most notably, many staff mentioned the similarities they witnessed firsthand between campers with and without ID. In each of the camps, an overwhelming majority of staff cited something that they learned about individuals with ID by participating in the camp. Such responses included the following: “It was easy to forget disabilities when all were treated equal”; “Kids with and without disabilities blend right together”; and “People really underestimate their abilities, both physical and intellectual.” These findings showed that the Camp Shriver model can be an effective medium for the staff to gain a new appreciation for the capabilities of individuals with ID. As mentioned before

in previous research, the inclusive camp experience, besides fostering personal growth for the staff and campers, led to the creation of summer communities in which tolerance, acceptance, and camaraderie were the guiding principles.

### Successes of Implementation

At the conclusion of each camp, we conducted interviews with camp directors to ask them what they felt contributed to their camp’s success. Overwhelmingly, directors cited partnerships with external community groups as the primary attribute to the success. These partnerships drew from the following sources:

- Community-based organizations (i.e., Special Olympics, YMCA)
- Schools and universities
- Corporate sponsors

The Oregon and Louisiana camps drew upon support from local YMCAs to provide facilities for their various camp activities, particularly sports programming. This is especially useful as many YMCA facilities are already equipped to run similar camps. In addition, the camps drew from their respective state’s Special Olympics program to recruit campers and/or camp staff.

In forming a partnership with Louisiana State University, Camp Shriver Louisiana

was able to directly recruit staff who were pursuing degrees in special education. This partnership provided a camp staff that had experience working with individuals with ID and a genuine passion for continuing their work in the field. Similarly, Camp Shriver Boston was hosted by the University of Massachusetts Boston. This partnership gave the camp access to the array of resources afforded by a university setting (i.e., college-level facilities, assistance with food and transportation, staff recruitment). Camp Shriver Oregon attributed much of its success to a strong partnership with its surrounding public school system, which allowed the camp to be structured around an extended-school-year plan. This was found to be extremely beneficial, as it provided direct transportation of campers from school to camp and paid personal aides to assist more campers with severe impairments.

This summer there are many more opportunities to share in the success of Camp Shriver, as the five pilot sites have been scaled

**Table 1: Pre and Post Camp Sport Skill Ability Scores of Campers**

	Pre-Camp Mean Ability (SD)	Post-Camp Mean Ability (SD)	t-value
Camp Shriver Florida			
Basketball	9.95 (2.61)	10.26 (2.98)	-.584*
Soccer	11.96 (4.02)	13.33 (3.26)	3.07**
Softball	9.82 (2.34)	12.43 (2.94)	9.69**
Camp Shriver Oregon			
Basketball	7.67 (2.35)	8.83 (2.20)	4.37**
Soccer	10.11 (3.23)	12.22 (2.29)	6.01**
Kickball	16.08 (3.64)	17.40 (3.69)	5.43**
Camp Shriver Boston			
Basketball	9.61 (2.06)	10.96 (1.49)	4.24**
Soccer	11.27 (1.64)	13.23 (2.31)	4.51**

\*Not-significant    \*\* Significant at  $p < .01$  level.

up to fifteen sites across the continental United States, as well as sites in Haiti and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In the coming years, expectations are high that Camp Shriver will continue to blossom both within the United States and beyond to include a total of 150 camps worldwide. Financial support for start-up will be provided to those local community organizations and recreation programs who are interested in partnering with their state Special Olympics program to establish their own Camp Shriver site.

### Inspiring Lessons

While the benefits of inclusion for children with disabilities have long been recognized by our public schools, through our experiences with Camp Shriver we can already recognize the unique benefits for children with ID in attending an inclusive camp. It is also important to consider the benefits of an inclusive camp for the campers and staff without ID, such as the opportunity to develop a more realistic understanding of and more positive attitudes toward individuals with ID. At Camp Shriver Boston in particular, several parents of nondisabled campers reported a noticeable change in the attitudes of their children, citing increased patience and sportsmanship and a greater understanding and acceptance of difference when playing with others. One parent

shared that her nine-year-old son,

*“was on the verge of being banned from gym class because he was too competitive and got angry with the other kids. Since he’s come to camp his attitude has changed dramatically. He is so much more patient.”*

In addition, the camp experience also succeeded in improving the staff members’ understanding of and attitudes toward children with disabilities. One staff member commented:

*“I have learned that even though children really feel that they can’t do something, given the right situation and the right amount of support, they can achieve what even they didn’t think was possible.”*

Our study has shown that the benefits of an inclusive camp (e.g., improved sports skills and social relationships) extend to all children and staff who participate, but perhaps most importantly, inclusive camps give children with ID the opportunity to share in the normative life experience of camp with their nondisabled peers.

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*Photos on page 22 courtesy of Camp Shriver Boston and Camp Shriver Maryland.*

*Photos on page 25 courtesy of Camp Shriver Oregon, Camp Shriver Florida, and Camp Shriver Louisiana.*

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