

Camp is for Everyone: Intentional Inclusion of Gender-Expansive Teens at Camp

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Abstract

Camp remains a powerful experience for youth of any age, but special care must be taken to ensure camps are supportive of diverse audiences. This article describes the process by which 4-H camp organizers created a welcoming and affirming camp for teen dependents of active duty, retired, or veteran military personnel, especially those campers who identified as non-binary or LGBTQ+. This included careful consideration of language used in recruitment documents, evaluation documents, volunteer and staff training, as well as communication with campers and families. Through careful planning and implementation, the 4-H adventure camps engaged over 90 teens, and survey results showed statistically significant improvements in camper perceptions of self-worth and satisfaction after their camp experience.

Key words: gender-expansive youth, summer camp, LGBTQ+, inclusion, 4-H

Introduction

The Washington State University (WSU) and Glacier Peak Institute (GPI) Military Teen Adventure Camps (MTAC) were a series of three 4-day, 3-night camps that offered teens from military families a chance to bond while engaging in exciting adventure education such as river rafting, archery, and first aid and survival skills. Our MTAC utilized a growth mindset philosophy enabling teens to challenge themselves and their personal boundaries, while also respecting and supporting them if an activity was too far outside of their comfort zone (Ozier, 2018). The general goal of the MTAC was to ensure that a diverse group of youth would feel comfortable at



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this residential camp making friends, experiencing respite among youth exclusively from military families, and learning new skills. While institutional policies and procedures heavily emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion as essential for the MTAC, practical recommendations for accommodating gender-diverse teens and supporting families in a residential camp environment were not adequately developed or evaluated. Recognizing this gap, camp leadership conducted a thorough literature review and developed a plan for supporting gender-expansive youth. This article provides a case study of how to create a camp environment, utilizing inclusive language and practices, which is welcoming for gender expansive youth.

Foster an Inclusive Camp for Gender-Expansive Youth: Five Phases

This article will utilize the term “gender expansive” which is an umbrella term that refers to a range of gender identities, including genderqueer, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and transgender (Abramovich, & Cleverley, 2018). Actions for creating an inclusive environment for gender-expansive teens were systematically woven throughout five management phases:

1. Promotion and recruitment
2. Family engagement
3. Staff and volunteer training
4. Youth interactions and education
5. Camp evaluation

Each phase required careful consideration of camp decisions, processes, and communication to ensure care and intentionality of programming.

Phase 1: Camp Promotion and Recruitment

First impressions of inclusivity are vital. The promotion of camp, including advertisements as well as RSVP and enrollment forms, are often the first interaction with the program that youth and families experience. If enrollment forms ask questions in a non-inclusive way, or leave out important questions, it can be an indication to potential campers that they may not feel welcome or even safe at camp. Brigham (2022) provides guidelines for ensuring that this early communication is inclusive to gender-expansive youth, including emphasizing the importance of asking both legal and preferred names on registration forms. Kinney and Muzzey (2022) explain that name changes, whether legal or social, should be acknowledged and respected, as “chosen names are often a significant part of expression” (p. 55). The authors go on to explain that supporting a youth by using their chosen name can be “empowering and a source of coping and resilience” (p. 57). The MTAC provided space for youth and volunteers to enter both their legal

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and preferred names on enrollment documentation, and that information was transferred to all documents, including sign-in sheets and information sheets for counselors and camp staff.

The second suggestion from Brigham (2022) involves including a space for participants to indicate the personal pronoun that they use. This was not included in our registration documents; however, it was included as an option in our introductions when participants arrived at camp (discussed later). Given that teens would be sleeping overnight at camp, enrollment forms did include additional questions about gender identity and preferred sleeping arrangements. Registrants had an opportunity to select from the following gender identity options: boy, girl, non-binary/third gender, and choose not to disclose. This question indicated to registrants: *Camp cohorts will be grouped according to genders: boy and girl. If a teen identifies as non-binary, third gender, or chooses not to disclose, they will be given the option to choose their cohort.* Using skip-logic within the Qualtrics online survey system used for registration, any registrant who selected non-binary or who chose not to disclose their gender identity was directed to a question which asked them to indicate which gendered cabin cohort they preferred. It was our intention to provide families this choice of cabin assignment in order to reinforce that the MTAC would be supportive of the teen's gender identity. It is also important for camp managers to note that conflating sex (male/female) and gender (boy/girl) terms is a mistake that can easily happen (and did happen with the first round of MTAC camp enrollment forms). This is especially likely as camps attempt to develop documents that incorporate internal standard language and external evaluation language into cohesive registration documents. Special care should be taken by managers to carefully screen documents for accuracy and consistency when building inclusive enrollment and evaluation forms.

Phase 2: Family Engagement

Once the MTAC promotion and registration became live, family engagement began in earnest. The majority of interactions with families involved questions about camp processes, travel arrangements, etc. We were prepared, however, for questions about our policy allowing youth to select their preferred-gendered cabin. Over the course of our grant period (March 2021 to July 2021) we received at least three questions/concerns from parents or potential volunteers about the gendered cabin assignments. In general, there were concerns that teens would be housed in cabins with youth whose biological sex differed from that of other campers in the same cabin. Multiple meetings were held to discuss how staff would handle these questions, and practice sessions helped to prepare staff to speak confidently about our policies. In general,

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our first response was to let concerned parents/volunteers know that the main goal of camp was to ensure that all teens feel safe, accepted, and welcome, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religious or cultural background. We also engaged in a brief conversation in which we explained that research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth are at a greater risk of negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicide (Collier et al., 2013; Garofalo et al., 1999; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Marshal et al., 2011; White et al., 2018), and that providing a safe and inclusive environment for those youth helps to mitigate some of those negative outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Marshal et al., 2011; Poirier et al., 2008).

Two of the three adults we engaged with were satisfied with the conversation described above, but one adult was persistent in expressing discomfort with our camp cabin assignment policies. Prior to publicizing our camp, we recognized that working with gender-expansive youth might require camp staff to act as advocates on behalf of potential campers. Gambardella (2022) specifically advises practitioners working with youth and families to educate themselves on policies, procedures, and laws that pertain to protections and support of trans and gender-expansive youth. This role was undertaken by the camp managers, and a thorough review of available policies regarding sleeping quarters was completed. When deep concerns from the adult were raised, and a discussion of the benefits of an affirming policy was not enough to assuage concerns, we were able to respond confidently that established policies require youth to sleep in gender quarters they identify with, rather than quarters based on gender assigned at birth. We also found that being honest and succinct was the most effective method of explaining this policy. This required explaining that the MTAC accepts the gender identity that the youth and families provided on registration forms, and that camp staff are not in a position to verify the biological sex of any camper attending. Additional assurances, including the presence of two same-gendered camp counselors in cabins, helped to ease the minds of concerned parents; however, we acknowledge that this inclusive policy may have led some families to opt out of the camp program.

Phase 3: Staff and Volunteer Training

Training for volunteers, interns, and camp staff included topics such as mental health and suicide prevention, growth mindset introduction, empathy and active listening, emergency procedures, and how to foster safe and inclusive spaces for teens. To address the latter, camp managers followed the lead of Wallace et al. (2017) by describing the values of the MTAC, and by allowing for non-judgmental question and answer sessions acknowledging that personal

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values held by staff and volunteers may differ from those described for the program. Discussions about personal preferences, potential biases, and prejudices were honest and open, but circled back to MTAC policy of inclusivity and safety for all youth.

For specific inclusive practices, Shelton et al. (2022) suggest working towards fluency with nonbinary and gender-inclusive language, so that adults working with gender-expansive youth are comfortable using appropriate terminology, asking questions, or engaging in conversation that might include gender identity discussions (p.47). This was accomplished through both formal and informal training with volunteers and staff prior to the arrival of campers. For example, regarding disclosure of pronouns by adults, some volunteers had no experience verbally identifying their pronouns during a group introduction. In cases like these, we provided space for volunteers to learn why we state our pronouns during introductions and worked one-on-one with volunteers who wanted to use their pronouns as a part of their introduction but were worried about doing so incorrectly. It is important to note, not all volunteers chose to disclose their pronouns during introductions, and this was accepted and respected by camp management.

Another important aspect of staff and volunteer training was incorporating knowledge of the challenges faced by the camp's target population. Many of the registered campers had experienced a parental deployment, which research has shown increases stress and the likelihood of anxiety and depression (Barnes et al. 2007; Chandra et al., 2008). This is compounded if the youth in question is also facing social or familial challenges due to their gender identity and/or their sexual orientation. This awareness was stressed to adults; however, camp managers were also concerned about staff and volunteers viewing campers from this deficit perspective. Wagaman et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of challenging the assumption that minority youth, specifically those youth who identify as LGBTQ+, are "solely vulnerable or deficient" and advise that practitioners work on "incorporating additional perspectives of LGBTQ youth as resourceful, resilient, and thriving" (p. 173). Special attention was paid to coaching adults on how to acknowledge and accept that campers have strengths and talents. Training for adults emphasized encouraging a growth mindset when campers were faced with challenges or experiences that were new, including emphasizing praise for effort and improvement over praise for talent or perceived intelligence, while simultaneously describing and acknowledging the challenges faced by the camp's target population (Mueller & Dweck, 1998).

Phase 4: Youth Interactions and Education

Sharing gender pronouns was an optional exercise, modeled by some, but not all, camp staff and volunteers. While research on the best practices for sharing gender pronouns is limited, a qualitative study by McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) points to the potential negative consequences of sharing gender pronouns in groups when participants might be “questioning or changing their gender identity” including the potential for participants to find the naming of pronouns as “affronting and non-inclusive” (p. 250). The authors go on to suggest “gender pronouns may work as all labels should—as optional, self-assigned and shared at the discretion of the individuals themselves” (p. 250). While camp staff and volunteers were encouraged to share their pronouns in introductions if they chose, campers were given the option, but not pushed to do the same. Passive modeling was the primary method of sharing pronouns used, and some campers chose to disclose their pronouns when they introduced themselves in small groups. In addition, campers were given an opportunity to write their pronouns on their name badges, but again, this was done through modeling (with samples at the sign-in table) as opposed to overt direction. Campers who had identified themselves as nonbinary or another gender identity, or who chose not to disclose their gender on their registration, were asked by the camp director which pronoun they would prefer camp volunteers and staff use when addressing them, and this preference was noted on documents held by camp counselors and staff. It is important to note, the MTAC Director had extensive professional experience working with gender-expansive youth prior to accepting their position as camp director, and this experience was used to gently discuss gender identity with campers, as necessary. While the director did not have a camper who used pronouns other than he, she, or they, nor any camper who changed their pronouns based on which group or situation they were in, professionals working with gender-expansive youth should be prepared to accommodate such scenarios, as some nonbinary youth “may claim a range of sexual identity labels” (Shelton et al., 2022, p. 42).

Phase 5: Evaluation

Evaluations for the three camps took the form of paper pre- and post-camp surveys, with questions that were dictated by the grant funders for the camp. However, camp managers recognized that the survey question asking respondents to indicate their gender was limited to only a boy/girl option. While program providers sometimes make minor changes to evaluation documents based on their needs, we chose to engage with grant funders and advocated for that question to be changed to be more inclusive of gender-expansive youth. Through that advocacy, the official camp evaluation was changed to include boy/girl and prefer not to

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respond, as well as a gender not listed option for youth who do not identify exclusively as boy or girl. The extra effort put into changing this evaluation tool ensured that other camps utilizing the same funding would have an evaluation tool that was representative of gender-expansive youth.

Outcomes

Registration and Evaluation Language

While most campers' registration forms utilized the preferred name field for nicknames or shortened version of the campers' given name, two of the 95 registrants utilized the preferred name to provide a name that was significantly different from their given name, one of whom utilized a gender pronoun other than that which was assigned to them at birth. While these numbers are small, the impacts that an affirming environment had on the teens who attended the MTAC are potentially significant.

For the evaluation survey data, three youth identified as nonbinary or transgender in the pre-camp evaluation survey and two of those completed the post-camp survey. While this is not enough data to draw generalizable conclusions, focusing on these survey results, as well as those results from other marginalized and minority youth, as case studies can help managers modify and improve programming for future campers. The MTAC will collect the same survey data over multiple years to continue evaluating the effectiveness of camp procedures on campers' sense of safety and inclusion at camp.

Family Engagement

While an evaluation was not done specifically with parents and families of campers, they were encouraged to provide feedback via email or letter. Many families provided verbal appreciation for the camp when they picked up their campers, and two parents provided letters expressing their appreciation for the MTAC. Both letters exemplified the importance of the social connections that the campers experienced, with one parent explaining that her daughter "has been to camps before and had fun but never really connected with anyone. She never came home with phone numbers and/or addresses of the kids she's met . . . this makes my heart so happy!!!" Another parent described a teen who is a child of a disabled veteran, who is "quite wary" and has "anxiety and . . . difficulty taking the first step toward a new experience." This parent went on to explain that the camper enjoyed camp so much, he wrote that he wants to go back next year. These quotes are not tied to identifiable campers, so we were unable to link

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them with demographic information. They do, however, point to an accepting and welcoming camp environment, even for a teen who was described by a parent as “wary.”

Staff and Volunteer Training

Staff and volunteers frequently sought out assistance for issues that they felt unprepared or too inexperienced to manage alone, a tactic that was taught as a part of their training. Some of these issues included guidance on how to manage situations where a teen was not using affirming language with their fellow campers. By relying on more experienced camp staff, the volunteers and interns were able to confidently intervene when their skillset and training allowed, while comfortably leaning on the camp director and other managers when they needed additional support. This method of managing unique and challenging camper issues ensured adequate attention was paid to the camp social environment, especially those situations related to gender identity, and this focus on a welcoming environment was emphasized by all staff and volunteers.

Teen Camp Experience

While specific evaluation was not conducted asking teens about the inclusive camp environment, two survey questions helped us evaluate this concept: “I feel good about myself” and “I feel valued and appreciated by others.” Both questions were asked via pre- and post-camp surveys, and responses were matched via assigned survey ID numbers that campers wrote on their surveys. An exact sign test was used to compare pre- and post-camp survey responses, and both survey questions show statistically significant increases in camper agreement with each statement [$p = .012$ and $p < .001$ respectively (2-tailed)].

Teens identifying as nonbinary who completed the post survey (2 teens) indicated that they would like to return to camp if it is held in the future, and both selected “totally true” with regard to the statement, “I enjoyed this camp.” (92% of all campers selected mostly or totally true for the same two survey questions). One of the two campers identifying as nonbinary showed a one-point increase in the statement, “I feel good about myself” while the other camper remained unchanged, though their selection on the pre-camp survey was “very or often” for both the pre- and post-camp surveys (the second highest option). One camper did not provide a response to the statement, “I feel valued and appreciated by others” and the other camper’s score remained unchanged at “very or often” for both the pre and post surveys.

Conclusions

Creating an inclusive space for diverse youth to participate in camp was the highest priority for the MTAC and its partners. Through intentional planning around registration documents, advocacy regarding mandatory evaluation forms, training for camp volunteers, interns, and staff, as well as supportive and educational communication with families and teens, we were able to deliver camp programming that encouraged a growth mindset while being inclusive of gender-expansive youth. Pre- and post-camp evaluations show that campers' level of agreement with two statements, "I feel valued and appreciated by others" and "I feel good about myself" increased by a statistically significant amount. In addition, feedback from parents described a camp that allowed their youth to make genuine connections with friends, and two campers who identified as nonbinary indicated that they enjoyed camp and would return in the future. Future MTAC will include additional evaluation questions that will ask campers about their perceptions of the camp's work toward creating a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment, so that additional work can be done to ensure that gender-expansive youth have positive camp experiences.

Author Note

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