

The Forum section of the Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions is presented to provide for an exchange of opinions, perspectives, ideas, and informative personal accounts. We welcome brief articles from family members, professionals, friends, advocates, administrators, researchers, and other individuals who are concerned with behavioral support issues. The purpose of the Forum is to facilitate a constructive dialogue among our many stakeholders regarding important issues in practice, research, training, program development, and policy.

In this issue, we are pleased to share a brief description of a program that supported students with autism during their participation in a regular summer camp. This program was the direct result of requests by parents, who (as the summer approached) were becoming increasingly stressed about the lack of available options

for their child with autism during the summer months. The authors briefly describe the different methods used to facilitate social interaction and integration on an individual basis. In addition, they briefly touch upon some of the systemic factors that may have facilitated the implementation of the program, such as “buy-in” from the director and close communication with the parents both prior to and during the camp. The resulting positive experiences for campers, camp staff, and parents may provide encouragement and direction to families of children with special needs dreading the long summer months and instead provide a valuable opportunity for the social development of children with special needs. It is hoped that program descriptions such as this one can serve as models for the successful inclusion of children with special needs in a variety of community settings.—YVONNE E. M. BRUINSMA

# Facilitating Social Interactions in a Community Summer Camp Setting for Children with Autism



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**Abstract:** This article describes a program developed to support the participation of children with autism in a full-inclusion summer day camp program with their typically developing peers. The goal of the program was to support the children in inclusive summer recreational settings and specifically target their social development with typically developing peers. The program contained the following elements: recruiting appropriate aides, providing the aides with ongoing training and support, creating individualized social and behavioral goals for the campers, developing interventions that were contextually appropriate to the camp settings, and communicating with the families during their participation in the program. This article discusses the relevant child, family, agency, and community issues relevant to the implementation of this program.

This article describes a comprehensive program driven by many critical features of positive behavior support (PBS; Carr et al., 2002; Horner, 2000; L. K. Koegel, Koegel, & Dunlap, 1996). The goal of the program was to target social skills in children with autism through an inclusive community summer camp program by using applied behavior analysis and PBS strategies. As Carr et al. (2002) suggested, inclusion of people with disabilities must move beyond the educational arena and into other community settings that provide opportunities for participation and social interaction with people without disabilities.

The summer camp program was implemented based on the needs identified by parents from our center and other parents from the community. It was supported by the local branch of the state agency that provides funding for individuals with developmental disabilities. Specifically, parents identified a need for continuation of inclusive programming during the summer months. The research supports the idea that children with autism can benefit from participation in inclusive settings with typically developing peers (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Guralnick, Gottman, & Hammond, 1996; Halvorson & Sailor, 1990).

The purpose of the summer camp program was to facilitate the maintenance of children's current functioning (in order to prevent backsliding) and, perhaps even more important, to promote the acquisition of new skills. The primary mechanisms for implementing these social goals were the coordination of paraprofessional aide services and the provision of ongoing training and support to both specialized and general summer camp staff. Our approach to facilitating social interactions between children with autism and their typically developing peers included peer-mediated strategies, adult-facilitated strategies, and strategies designed to increase initiating and autonomy in a child with autism (Haring & Breen, 1992; Kamps, Kravits, & Gonzalez-Lopez, 1998; Kennedy, 2001; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1998; Weiss & Harris, 2001). Strategies appropriate to the goals of each child were implemented on an ongoing basis throughout the day while the child attended camp.

## Description of Camp Program

### CAMPERS

The eight children with autism who participated in the inclusion summer camp program were from the local community. Their ages ranged from 4 to 10 years, and they represented a large range of functioning and communication levels. Children attended camp for 1 to 3 weeks.

### AIDES

Full-time paraprofessional aides supported the campers on an ongoing basis throughout their day. One aide was assigned to every one or two children, with most children requiring one-on-one assistance at the beginning of the program. These aides were an addition to the regular summer camp staff, who were not associated with our center but were employed through the summer camp. Aides were selected from undergraduate students who had been working in the autism clinic during the school year for course credit and had previous supervised experience working with children with autism in home and community settings. Graduate students, supervised by faculty, trained undergraduates in the procedures of pivotal response training (PRT) and the principles of behavior modification and positive behavior support. Consistent with the literature, the undergraduate students were able to provide the support the children needed with a relatively small amount of time and effort (L. K. Koegel et al., 2002).

### SETTING

The inclusion program took place in a community summer camp on the campus of a large university. This camp was for boys and girls ages 5 to 14. Campers were divided into four age groups: 5 to 6, 7 to 8, 9 to 11, and 12 to 14.

Approximately 200 campers attended camp each week throughout the summer. The camp was open from 7:15 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., although some of the campers with autism participated for half days. Activities (e.g., swimming, dance, rock climbing, gymnastics, art) were divided into 45-minute blocks. The campers with autism were assigned to groups based on their age, with approximately 15 campers per group. The majority of the campers with autism were assigned to groups in which they were the only camper with a disability.

### INDIVIDUALIZED GOALS

Individualized social and behavioral goals were set for each child at the beginning of the camp week. These goals were developed based on systematic observations of the child and functional assessment data (Frea, Koegel, & Koegel, 1994). Each child had approximately three goals that the aides targeted during the child's participation at camp. Examples of such goals included (a) increasing the number of appropriate social initiations (verbal or nonverbal) made by the child with autism toward his or her peers, (b) increasing appropriate participation in camp routines and activities, and (c) increasing the number of appropriate on-topic responses and questions to peers during social conversations.

### INTERVENTIONS

#### *Priming*

Many of the camp activities (e.g., freeze tag, karate, archery) were new to the campers with autism. In order to increase their participation during these activities, priming was incorporated into the intervention activities. Priming is an intervention method that provides a child with a preview of information or activities to be presented (Wilde, Koegel, & Koegel, 1992). This preview takes place under low-demand conditions. In this case, the purpose of the priming was to introduce the campers with autism to new activities in a concrete and systematic manner to increase their familiarity with future demands and expectations. Likewise, priming was used to facilitate transitions throughout the camp day.

#### *Self-Management*

When appropriate for individual camper goals, self-management procedures (L. K. Koegel, Harrower, & Koegel, 1999; L. K. Koegel, Koegel, & Parks, 1992; R. L. Koegel, Frea, & Surratt, 1994) were employed to teach children to monitor their own behaviors, thus reducing the amount of prompting required of the aides. Self-management was used in the camp setting as a method to decrease disruptive behaviors and increase appropriate behaviors. This was especially appropriate for the older children because their peers were more likely to notice the aides intervening during camp activities. Furthermore, for

many of these children, an increase in their autonomy and a decrease in adult vigilance was an appropriate and important extension of their individual goals.

### *Peer Involvement*

A variety of different strategies were used to encourage social interactions between the campers with autism and their typically developing peers. All strategies were implemented with the goal of making the social interaction mutually reinforcing to both the camper with autism and his or her peer. Examples of peer-involvement strategies included

1. facilitating sharing exchanges;
2. encouraging children with and without autism to seek assistance from each other;
3. facilitating social conversations between campers with autism who were verbal and their typically developing peers;
4. facilitating interactions at snack and lunch, during transitions, and during many other daily activities; and
5. facilitating social engagement in all camp activities.

### **AIDE TRAINING**

Four graduate students, supervised by faculty, provided in-vivo training and on-call supervision (as needed) to the aides throughout the day using a variety of training and supervision techniques. A graduate student or faculty supervisor was present during the majority of the hours that camp was in session. This intensity of training and supervision may be a particularly critical component of this program, given the short period of time each child was at camp. Likewise, a variety of easily implemented and efficient strategies were used in training the aides. These strategies are described below.

#### *Feedback*

Graduate students provided in-vivo feedback and instructions to the aides throughout camp activities so they could immediately implement suggestions. At the beginning of the aides' first week of camp, graduate students observed and videotaped the aides for 1 to 2 hours when they were working with their camper. This allowed the faculty supervisors to evaluate both training goals for the aide and intervention goals for the camper via videotape supervision. Supervisors provided specific instructions and feedback to the aides on the procedures to facilitate social interactions based on the child's functioning level.

#### *Modeling*

In addition to the feedback provided to the aides, graduate students also modeled effective methods of facilitating social interactions between the campers with and without autism. This was especially important in the early stages of

training for each aide because modeling gave them examples of the intervention procedures that had been previously introduced.

#### *Supervision*

In addition to the in-vivo feedback and modeling that the graduate students provided to the aides, camp activities were videotaped so that the clinic directors from our center could provide supervision.

#### *Safety*

In addition to the standard safety procedures employed by the camp, a number of safety precautions were taken by the graduate students to increase the safety of the campers with autism. For example, aides notified graduate students of any change in staffing, remained in very close proximity to campers during pool time, and notified on-duty lifeguards as to which camper with special needs was in the pool.

### **Systems Issues**

Research has suggested that coordination between professionals and families, system responsiveness, and "buy-in" from professionals within the system are important features of community-based programs (Hieneman & Dunlap, 2001). We identified a number of important issues related to the system responsiveness and fit within the camp environment and routines. First, we found that establishing good rapport with the camp director prior to the program and communicating with him frequently throughout the summer were important to the success of the program. That is, given this collaborative relationship, the director was willing to be flexible to meet the needs of the campers with autism. Second, we attempted to have the inclusion aides "blend in" with the general camp counselors and staff (e.g., by wearing the same staff T-shirts as the regular camp counselors, meeting the campers with autism at the same drop-off location as the other counselors and campers, and interchanging roles with the other counselors). Last, educating the general camp staff in issues related to including children with autism was an important component. For example, the graduate students, faculty supervisors, and aides taught regular counselors procedures to reduce problem behaviors, include children with autism in all camp activities, and facilitate social interactions among all children.

### **Addressing Parental Concerns**

For many of the parents of the children with autism, this summer camp was the first time their child attended a recreational or extracurricular activity. Although parents of any child may feel nervous when their child first attends camp, parents of children with autism may experience more apprehension, given their child's possible history of disruptive behaviors and difficulty with social interactions

in community settings. In order to address parental concerns, the graduate student and the autism clinic directors discussed the program structure in detail with the parents in the weeks preceding camp. Likewise, our staff maintained close communication with parents throughout their child's time at camp.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the camp program described in this article was to address the concerns raised by families in our community about the lack of inclusive activities for children with autism over the summer months. Based on our conversations with parents, we found that they often experience significant stress during the summer due to this lack of services and disruption to routines. In the camp program, children with autism were fully included into a community summer camp with the support of aides recruited and trained by the staff from our clinic. The aides were trained to facilitate social interactions between the campers with autism and their typically developing peers throughout all camp activities. We found that the children with autism, who had varying levels of functioning, were able to successfully participate in the camp activities with the support of their aides. Likewise, the typically developing campers and the camp staff members also benefited from the implementation of this inclusion program. This model was found to be efficient and easy to implement for children with a broad range of functioning levels.

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