

3 reasons day camp is important for children with special needs By Heather Cherry

Day camp is important for children of all ages and especially for children with special needs. Camp provides a viable opportunity for children of all levels, leaving a lasting impact in their development, whether its social, emotional, or physical. In fact, according to the American Camp Association Youth Outcomes Study, 92 percent of campers said camp made them feel good about themselves.

Here are three reasons why day camp is important for children with special needs:

1. Socialization – Camp provides children the opportunity to interact with like-minded friends. An inclusive camp allows children to socialize with friends who have similar needs, establishing a sense of belonging.

No matter what a child's age or disability, there are opportunities for everyone. "We are not targeted towards one disability," Charlie Deer, The Greater Pittsburgh YMCA Camp Spencer Director said. "We simply want to give campers a chance to adapt and socialize in their safety zone. It's something we believe should be accessible and available to everyone."

Camp provides an opportunity that may not be granted otherwise. "Camp builds communities by bringing together people with similar experiences and stories," said Deer. "Campers can come for a week or weekend and do a variety of activities, giving them an experience they would not get in an ordinary setting."

2. Communication – Every interaction has one thing in common: a need for clear and effective communication. Communication – comprised of body language and listening – is a vital skill that can't always be taught in a typical school setting.

Camp creates a space for campers to learn to communicate in unexpected



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All campers must possess the ability to function within both small and large groups **without** one-on-one assistance or supervision. Independent self-care skills (including toileting, bathing, communication, feeding skills, and more) are required. If your potential camper needs more assistance, please call the EAWCP to ask about our Camp Firefly program. Camp Frog session fees range from \$550-\$750, but Camp Frog scholarships are available during the registration process which can cover up to 100% of the session fees.

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ways. "It is beautiful to see how our campers interact with each other," Deer said. "We let them sit wherever they want in the dining hall and it is interesting to watch how they communicate with peers in an

inclusive environment."

"Children might struggle with communication, underdeveloped language skills, or have inappropriate ways to communicate," said Paulette Colonna, Program Supervisor for Camp A.I.M. "Camp A.I.M. provides a place where true remediation is done because we work on areas where children's needs are."

"We already know a child's primary focus, so we don't have to wait to see how they interact with typical peers," Colonna added. "We can be proactive and speak directly to campers without cognitive issues, allowing them to make better choices by thinking before they react in an inappropriate way."

3. Independence – Children develop a sense of independence when they embark on new adventures. Camp offers children a safe space to explore the world around them, make decisions for themselves, and learn new skills.

"[At Camp Spencer] campers learn on the job training skills and how to work with each other," said Deer. "Our campers are always willing to help others experiencing mobility issues. I love to see them taking the initiative and building friendships."

The Greater Pittsburgh YMCA Camp Spencer is an inclusive special needs camp targeted toward adults, ages 16 to 21 years old, located in Fombell, Pa. Their program is like other programs for campers with (or without) special needs in the Pittsburgh area, offering similar activities and tons of fun!

Camp Achievement, Independence, Motivation (A.I.M.), is operated in conjunction with the Spencer Family YMCA in the South Hills. They are a licensed provider for extended school year services for children who have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). They currently service 17 school districts, including Allegheny County. "Camp A.I.M. is a place for parents who want an environment that focuses on a particular area that needs remediation that is not academic," Colonna said. ■

Heather Cherry is a freelance writer and mom from Renfrew.

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