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McAVOY, SMITH, RYNDERS, & JACOBS

A MODIFIED OUTDOOR ADVENTURE PROGRAM SERVING INDIVIDUALS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES WHO PRESENT SERIOUS ACCOMODATION CHALLENGES

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Background

When inclusive programming is to be offered in an outdoor adventure context, and attempts are made to welcome individuals who present disability issues that make accommodation unusually challenging, the obstacles to program success can begin to look insurmountable. Research indicates there are a number of benefits realized through participation in inclusive outdoor adventure programs (McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien, & Lais, 1989; Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligman, 1997; McAvoy, 2001). There has been a paucity of research focused on persons with cognitive disabilities in outdoor programs that typically go on camping excursions into wilderness or wilderness-like natural areas rather than staying in a developed camp facility. The limited research available does show that benefits can be realized through outdoor adventure programs that include persons with cognitive disabilities (Newman, 2004). Recognizing the need for further study in this area, the primary purpose of this research was to assess participant growth in social/socialization and leisure skill functioning of persons with cognitive disabilities relative to participation in a modified inclusive outdoor adventure program. The study used the Peterson and Stumbo (2000) Leisure Ability Model as a conceptual foundation for assessing programmatic outcomes.

Methods

The study focused on 3-5 day wilderness trips offered by Wilderness Inquiry, a non-profit outdoor adventure organization located in Minneapolis, MN. These specific trips are designed to provide an outdoor adventure opportunity for persons with cognitive disabilities who present serious accommodation challenges due to behaviors that can be disruptive to an outdoor program group. This study included 23 adult individuals with cognitive disabilities, most of whom were group home residents. Participant growth in leisure skill functioning was assessed prior to and after their adventure trips through questionnaires that were completed by participants with assistance from research staff. Support persons from participants' group homes and other living sites provided additional evaluations of participant skills and satisfaction levels. Qualitative data on social skill growth were gathered through semi-structured interviews 7-14 days following the trip, including both participants with disabilities and those who went on a trip as a support person to a participant with disabilities. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and accepted qualitative data analysis methods.

Results and Discussion

Analysis indicates that the 23 participants, as a group, on a pre-post basis, rated themselves as having increased their skill levels in nine out of ten outdoor camping and canoeing skills. Similarly, the 23 support staff partners reported, as a group, that they saw participants having

greater skills in nine of the ten areas post-trip as opposed to pre-trip. Levels of satisfaction were highly positive. The post-trip interviews with both participants and support staff demonstrated a number of strong themes. Both participants and support staff indicated participants learned skills both in the areas of camping and canoeing (as most often mentioned by the participants themselves), and in the area of using appropriate social skills and working as the member of a team (as most often noted by support staff). Both participants and support staff reported on the group culture that developed during the trips, a culture that encouraged group rather than individual challenges. The findings reveal that both social/socialization abilities and outdoor adventure skills generally grew across the length of these trips. Furthermore, both participants who present serious accommodation challenges and their support personnel partners indicated high levels of satisfaction with the trip components and the culture generated on the trip experience.

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