Summer Camp 2009: ATGoes to Camp

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An Interview with Darla Motil, R.N., Community Relations Manager, Achievement Centers for Children, Westlake, OH

When it comes to technological expertise among staff, counselors and campers at camps operated by the Achievement Centers for Children (ACC), youth is not wasted on the young, according to ACC community relations manager Darla Motil.

“Our counselors and junior administrative staffers are college age. They’re digital natives and are a good match for our campers who use assistive technology. Together they have an instinctive and lifelong appreciation and understanding of technology, which certainly makes for a rich camp experience for the children and aids in communication with families,” she says.

The technology expertise of the young counselors marks a sea change in the relationships between youthful counselors and older mentors, she remarks. “We older staffers have always taught the younger ones but now the tables are turned; they are the ones who are teaching us – about technology. In our in-house operations it’s beneficial to have the younger people nudge all of us into the digital age.” She recalls an incident that occurred last Christmas that is emblematic of this change. “My husband gave me a BlackBerry for Christmas. My 26-year-old son asked him, ‘What were you thinking when you bought that for her?’ My husband replied, ‘And you’re going to spend the next six hours teaching her how to use it.’”

The Push-Pull of Generations – and a Stereotype Dispelled

Fortunately, she notes, veteran ACC staffers are surprisingly receptive to the ascendency of the younger digital natives. “The older staffers actually love the technology and want to know why it doesn’t do even more!” From her standpoint, she adds, “It’s interesting to watch the push-pull between the generations. Mostly, the push-pull is positive, but the more senior staffers find themselves having to adapt to the younger people’s technology, enthusiasm and impatience, which can produce occasional minor friction but also a lot of positive creative energy.”
The campers, too, have lived with technology nearly all their lives. Learning about new technology and being receptive to new approaches is as natural to them as it is to their digital native counselors,” she claims.

“Kids with disabilities suffer from a cruel stereotype,” Ms. Motil claims. “When individuals not accustomed to this population regard a child in a wheelchair, they see only a human being with a contorted body or with muscles that are atrophied, a child who does not appear ‘typical.’ But these individuals have not yet been exposed to the brilliance that is often inside these kids’ heads.”

Fortunately, she adds, “we attract administrative staff and counselors whose children, friends or other family members have special needs. Having this experience enables our staff members to provide assistance to campers which is compassionate and appropriate,” she asserts.

According to Ms. Motil, campers with disabilities adapt fast to new AT. “Give them a device and show them how to use it and explain how the device benefits them and campers catch on very quickly.”

She cites the recent college graduation of an ACC camp alumnus who advanced through the organization’s activities while receiving therapy services. The young man was diagnosed with very severe cerebral palsy at birth, she explains, but was able to progress through school thanks to his persistence and his mother’s advocacy skills.

“He attended camp every year since he was old enough and still returns each summer, now as a counselor. He communicates exclusively through an augmentative speech program via his computer. He has a joystick that he moves with his chin. He talks and lectures at our board meetings and annual meetings as well as at our yearly black-tie fundraising gala.”

**Preparing the Way for Campers’ AT**

At ACC’s Camp Cheerful, a large residential overnight camp for kids with disabilities, preparation for a child’s arrival with AT begins in early May. “We conduct a phone interview with a prospective camper’s family, if we do not know the child from previous years. We obtain a snapshot of a child’s needs and specific information on any equipment they have been using.”
Ms. Motil continues, “We have different camping sessions for kids. We do a camping week each year with the Muscular Dystrophy Association. In that camping session we deal with equipment that includes respirators and hospital equipment that has to be brought in to the camp from the outside because it is not our standard equipment and those children have needs that are different from the needs of our usual campers.”

When Camp Cheerful residential or day sessions include children who use communication devices or other AT technology, “we’ll acquire the relevant information about that equipment ahead of time from parents. Depending on the equipment’s level of sophistication “we bring our new counselors in every year for a one- or two-week training program. The intensity of the training is dependent upon the disabilities of the kids participating in each session.”

Information about the equipment to be used by a specific incoming camper is communicated to the group of counselors that will work with that child, Ms. Motil explains. “If a child uses equipment with which we are unfamiliar we ask the child’s parents to bring the child and the child’s device ahead of time to demonstrate to us how they work with the equipment. If that is impossible or does not happen before the child’s arrival at camp then on the child’s first day of the camping session, when child and family arrive, we will have inservice with the family or caregiver.”

Although she admits that “we get some technology curves thrown at us occasionally in terms of equipment we’re unfamiliar with, most of the time we have a good understanding of the equipment.” The ACC camps employ physical, speech and occupational therapists “who are accustomed to all of ACC’s settings, i.e. education, therapy, rehab, mental health, and others.” Those therapists and trained professional staff are a part of the pre-camp orientation in which all of the camping assistants participate, she explains. “During the orientation therapists will demonstrate the use of devices and make sure that the camping staffers are comfortable with the technology.”

Occasionally, however, children bring very sophisticated assistive devices to camp. Usually, she says, these devices are designed to enhance communication or mobility. We do our best to work with whatever the child utilizes.”
ACC Campers: a Wide Range of Disabilities

ACC campers have a wide range of disabilities, Ms. Motil says. “We run the entire gamut. We have specific programs aimed at kids with physical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, chromosomal abnormalities, Down syndrome, nearly every type of physical impairment. We also possess expertise with kids’ psychological, social and developmental issues.” ACC operates programs for children on the autism spectrum, from Asperger’s to lower functioning conditions, and pervasive developmental delays.

“We try to arrange our programming around specific conditions,” she notes. “When it comes to kids with autism, with emotional/psychological issues, we design programming specifically for that population because these children require a lot of organization, structure and a cooperative relationship with the child from a mental and emotional standpoint.”

In terms of disabilities, she says, “in any one camping session week there is a good mix of campers. They help each other so much. The children really get to have fun. Our summer residential program is not goal-oriented, or therapy-oriented. We are not giving the children exercises to do or working on any specific goals to be achieved in that week.”

However, she adds, “Our other locations and centers that provide year-round programming are very goal-specific and focused.” For example, she points out, “in our autism classrooms we have very specific goals for each child. The children have an individualized educational plan (IEP) that we follow in conjunction with a child’s school district. In therapy the children are goal-oriented as well. Our therapists are constantly working toward specific goals.”

Residential camp, however, “is one week a year in which these children get to be kids. They do make a lot of progress, though, in that week because they are able to learn about other children with similar issues or with different issues that impact them in ways that are similar - and the kids help each other. It’s a rewarding experience.”
Early Intervention Is a Strong Suit

Camp Cheerful accepts children from age five. “If the camp serves children younger than age five then the camp needs day care and childcare licensing, which we have for our other ACC programs.” Early intervention, she declares, “is one of our traditional strong suits. We take kids all the way through adulthood and have dedicated sessions and numerous weekend sessions throughout the year in which individuals who were graduates of our camp in their youth return as adults and become reacquainted. These sessions are very well-attended.”

The ACC rule of thumb, she explains, “is that we work with any disability that occurred in childhood and is a lifelong issue. For example, we won’t rehab a 55-year-old stroke victim but a child who came through our program with whom we have worked through the years can come back to us as an adult for specific help in certain areas. This is not a big part of what we do but we do occasionally work with kids who are now adults.”

Children come to Camp Cheerful from several Ohio feeder agencies, including Help Me Grow (HMG), a statewide program designed to target children birth-age three who are deemed to be at-risk. HMG staff are housed in two of our three locations, including camp. “These early intervention specialists work with families in the community to help identify children early and get them the services they need. They then refer kids and families to appropriate agencies. We accept referrals from HMG when the children referred are appropriate for our services. There are many other agencies networked into this program. It has been an effective program.”

Technology Is Never an Insurmountable Issue: “We Have to be Adaptable”

Ms. Motil is unable to recall any issue associated with camper technology that has been insurmountable by camp counselors and staff. “We often have to be adaptable. It could be that the specific technology a child uses is too costly to replicate in our specific setting and is not portable. If that’s the case we consult with the family and try to figure out a way around it. I can recall only one instance where we could not adapt. A child was using a communication device that he was unable
to bring to us and we could not replicate. Nevertheless, we were able to have him adapt to other types of systems that we did have available.”

In a technology dilemma that is not easily resolvable, she explains, use of a computer often provides a solution. She cites the child who could not bring a unique communication device to camp. “The child told us that he was unable to communicate by phone with his parents while he was at camp. Ahead of time we agreed to have the child send an email to his parents -- this was a few years ago before we were able to provide him with instant messaging. We agreed on a time. The parents were at the computer. The child would send his good-night messages and the parents would reply. That approach seemed to satisfy everyone. We try to accommodate as much as possible.”

**Transferring AT to Camp: How Parents Can Help**

Parents of children who bring AT to camp can help the AT transfer process by teaching camp staff about devices with which the staffers might be unfamiliar, Ms. Motil advises. Parents should also be available to answer questions about issues associated with the device their child uses. “We always have a high level of cooperation with our families.

Parents, she continues, should be open-minded as they and their child enter a camp situation. “That is especially apt in a case where we might not be able to exactly replicate in a camp environment what the child and his/her parents are accustomed to at home. However, we can devise ways to adapt.”

She notes that the most successful experiences often occur “when a family not only is willing to let us make adaptations but also participates in that process. We have found that when adapting equipment to a camp environment families often have the best ideas.” Flexibility on the families’ part and the camp’s, she emphasizes, is key to achieving a successful equipment adaptation.

**Consumer Technology at Camp**

Ms. Motil and ACC camp staffers utilize consumer-type technologies such as PDAs and web-based tools as part of the ACC summer camp program. “We use this equipment so we can be more efficient and productive.” Older campers, too, also often come equipped with their own consumer-type devices, she notes.
“We offer computer and internet access for the campers so that they can continue to participate in their social networks, which are very important to them.” However, she admits, campers’ computer time is limited because their days are so full of activities. “They swim, ride horses, fish, canoe and climb the high ropes. In fact, we have a 50-foot tower high ropes course that is 100% accessible. It doesn’t matter what a camper’s disability is, one way or another, even if it means that we harness the camper in and we use an elevator to get the camper to the top, if the camper desires he/she can make it to the top of the tower. There is a zip line that takes campers back down and actually lowers them into their wheelchairs.”

After a day of intense physical activity, she says, there is little time or energy for recreational “techno time.” This posture, however, does not mean that children are discouraged from communicating with their families and friends. Staff members establish a communication schedule that parents and children are happy with, she explains, that accommodates families’ need for respite and the children’s need for contact.

AT for Education, Even at Camp
While Camp Cheerful’s residential and overnight activities are devoted primarily to recreation, some of the ACC summer day programs are partially funded by school districts to provide extended school year services that are education based. “These campers have their own educational plan that we follow and into which we have input prior to the school year. In these programs, as in our year-round autism classrooms, we use Smartboard or whiteboard technology.”

Day campers also make use of consumer technology, she says. “We access web-based learning tools for kids with a wide variety of special needs. We have separate computers set up just for the campers to use and interact with these programs and educational tools. We’ve also purchased (computer-based) programs, or the programs have been purchased on our behalf, such as PECS picture exchange systems. We are finding that web-based programming and interactive whiteboard technology allow us to go much further than the typical picture exchange.” When day campers are exposed to a device or program with which they are unfamiliar “we provide the family with all the necessary information about [them] so that the family can follow up at home.” Campers are then taught to use the new AT.
“If the technology is very unusual, detailed or involved, we enlist one of our resident experts from another program who may not be on staff at the camp but who will visit our facility to provide consultation on that issue.”

**Universal Accessibility: No Camper Is Left Out**

Universal accessibility, Ms. Motil says, is a hallmark of ACC camps. “High ropes, fishing and horseback riding are activities that are inaccessible to many campers outside of camp. Our goal is to familiarize them with these activities. We never have an activity in which a child or a group of children won’t be able to participate due to inaccessibility.”

Providing universal accessibility requires imagination and a spirit of adaptability on the part of camp staff and counselors, she insists. “We make use of the diverse expertise of our staff. We work very collaboratively. For example, our camp director will collaborate with our speech and language expert or with our social work/family support staff to determine the best way to achieve universal accessibility in every single activity.”

This approach, she says, “requires foresight and planning on our part and making sure that universal accessibility is embedded in the training we provide for camp counselors. We are all about inclusion. A big part of their job, if the counselors are participating in an activity or working with a group, is to be aware of when a camper is off to the side and uninvolved. Counselors need to determine how to engage that child and what the obstacle is to the camper’s involvement in the activity. Sometimes it is as simple as a child not enjoying the activity or that he/she is intimidated by some aspect of the activity. If that is the case it is the counselor’s job to find an activity that the camper would enjoy and then develop a group to participate in that activity with that camper.”

**Maintaining Service in an Era of Scarce Resources**

Maintaining a high quality camp experience, Ms. Motil says, is the ACC challenge of the era as it is for most camps and other non-profit organizations nationwide. “Trying to provide our usual high level of service to the numbers of kids for whom we want to provide it without putting ourselves out of existence because we run out of funding is a daunting challenge,” she declares.
In her opinion, an organization’s success in a time of scarce resources depends on the skill of the executive director and the inspiration with which she/he infuses the organization. “For us, success emanates from our own executive director, Pat Nobili, who is without a doubt the most determined and energetic woman I’ve ever met. She won’t accept ‘no’ as an answer when it is something that our kids and families need. We may not always get what we want and need the first time in that regard, or the 10th time, but we will eventually get what’s needed. That’s not an empty boast. We have the kind of dedicated team that can make that boast a reality far more often than not, even in an environment as difficult and uncertain as the current one.”

Money is important, she readily concedes. “We all need it. All organizations need it.” But money is not what gets you out of bed in the morning. What gets you up and out is the desire to make a difference. If an organization is fortunate enough to attract a team of professionals that is inspired by that notion almost any objective can eventually be achieved.”