Deaf Youth and Summer Programs: The How

Introduction

Summer programs can offer a variety of enrichment activities that encourage students to grow and thrive through meaningful participation. Deaf students who get involved in summer programs can achieve the same benefits as their hearing peers when activities are inclusive and meet the unique needs of deaf students. Summer programs also have significant potential to strengthen student outcomes.[1] Successfully including deaf youth in summer programs requires strategic planning and a focus on the following key considerations in the development or improvement of summer programs.

> "Positive youth development outcomes do not occur just because children are at camp. Rather, growth and development occur because of the way that camps are operated in terms of policies, structures, leadership, and activities."[2]
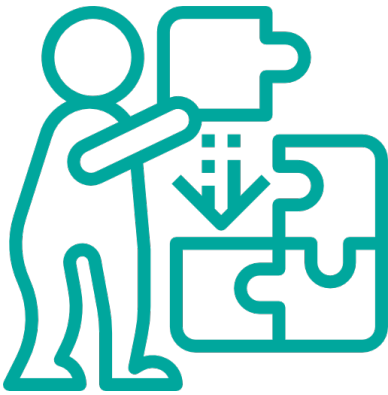
Key Considerations

RECRUITING

Recruiting and enrolling deaf students in summer programs can be challenging. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act protects the privacy of student information and can make it difficult for summer camps to locate deaf students to provide them with information. In addition, students may not feel like they would "fit in" at a deaf camp. To recruit students, consider these strategies:

- Use inclusive language in marketing and outreach.
- Use multiple outreach paths, including presentations at conferences, social media, targeted outreach at schools, and marketing at deaf community events.
- Create promotional videos that show students a snapshot of the program experience.

STRUCTURE

To build new programming, or strengthen existing programming, research suggests that program duration, learning approach, and focus are key factors. Consider these research-based recommendations:

- Offer longer camps with an overnight component, which have greater benefits than shorter camps.[4]

- Encourage students to attend camp more than once, over several years.[4]

- Focus on active, hands-on learning in real-world situations.[5, 6]

- Design activities to address specific skill development [7, 8, 9]
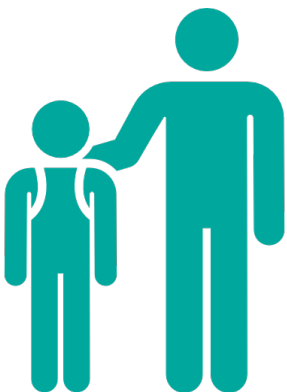
ACCESS

Deaf students' language needs and communication preferences vary widely and change over time. Quality access in summer programs is critical and challenging. Consider these strategies when planning:

- Collect information about language needs and communication preferences for each student in advance.

- Hire Certified Deaf Interpreters/Deaf Interpreters (CDI/DI) to work with deaf students who have emerging language skills.

- Hire language facilitators who can sign and speak, integrate them within the programming, and make them available to support students' social interactions.

- Caption all media used in instructional settings.

STAFFING

An experienced staff is an important component of a successful program.[6] Staff members often act as role models to students.[5] Deaf role models have been found to increase young deaf individuals' self-identity and beliefs about their capabilities.[10] In summer programming for deaf youth, staff members who are deaf can model how to navigate professional and educational environments, have successful careers, engage in positive relationships, and advocate for themselves. The following are important staffing considerations:

- Maintain a low student-to-staff ratio.[5]

- Hire staff members with diverse cultural backgrounds.

- Think creatively about how to recruit staff members who are deaf.

PARTNERSHIPS

Identifying and establishing partnerships across agencies or institutions is key to successful deaf youth programming. Many deaf youth programs have an overnight component, which often requires a relationship with an organization that has residential capacity. Depending on goals and focus, creating a high-quality and sustainable summer program may involve forming relationships with the following:

- Educational institutions
- Local businesses
- Disability organizations
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Other community partners

MEASUREMENT

Data and measurement are critical to the success of any educational program. Identifying clear goals for data collection allows programs to recognize needed improvements and maximize youth outcomes. Consider these steps for data and measurement planning:

- Identify what you are measuring (e.g., outcomes, behaviors, relationships).
- Use or tailor existing summer program measures (e.g., American Camping Association[11]).
- Decide how to collect data (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups).
- Consider data-collection approaches that would be most accessible for deaf youth and take the least amount of time.

FUNDING

Finding ways to fund deaf youth activities is a major challenge. Vocational rehabilitation is a source of funding for deaf youth programs in many states, but additional funding sources are often required to ensure sustainable programs. Consider these funding strategies:

- Use Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds.
- Partner with other state agencies that have funding.
- Apply for grants.
- Seek private foundation funding.

References

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