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## Counselors' experiences of a virtual summer camp

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Counselors' Experiences of a Virtual Summer Camp

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Health and Human Performance

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## **Introduction**

Youth with developmental disabilities (DD) such as Down syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are at risk for lack of social support and may have limited opportunities for education, employment or community engagement (Ansari et al. 2016). Recent estimates in the United States show that about one in six, or about 17%, of children aged three through seventeen years have one or more developmental disabilities (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). These children and adolescents commonly experience needs that require support in order to participate in activities of daily living known as support needs (Arias et al. 2020). To determine what kind of support youth with DD will need there are five elements that can be observed: intellectual and adaptive behavior skills, environment number and complexity, number and complexity of activities, the presence of exceptional medical needs, and the presences of exceptional behavioral needs. Children with DD are more likely to have comorbid psychological problems such as low self-esteem, behavioral issues, anxiety, and social withdrawal that may include choosing to play alone or not engaging in conversation compared to playing with peers their age and participating in conversation during play (Davis, Saeed, and Antonacci 2008). Confidence in their own abilities to participate in physical activity and engage in social interaction and how they see themselves in relationship to their disability may also impact their interaction with peers (Kapsal et al. 2019). Youth with DD often need adapted environments to participate in activities or events that youth without DD would regularly engage in such as modified chairs for rock climbing or wheel-chair accessible obstacle courses. There is an interdependence between the development of motor and psychosocial skills in children with DD. As motor skills develop,

these individuals are better able to communicate and participate in social interaction (Holloway and Long 2019).

Summer camps are often beneficial to childhood development and experiences for youth with developmental disabilities (Schelbe et al. 2018; Clark and Nwokah 2010; Epstein, Stinson, and Stevens 2005). These camps provide-social interaction with similar age peers (Schelbe et al. 2018), opportunities to engage in fun and developmentally appropriate physical activities (Clark and Nwokah, 2010), and opportunities to develop self-esteem (Rabian and Briery 1999; Aggerholm and Moltke Martiny 2017). Numerous studies have investigated the effects of a camp experience on psychological parameters and health related quality of life of youth with DD, including physical, social, psychological and cognitive aspects (Kapsal et al. 2019; Rabian and Briery 1999; Epstein, Stinson, and Stevens 2005). A meta-analysis on youth with intellectual disabilities found that physical activity has a significant positive effect on both physical and psychosocial health (Kapsal et al. 2019). Attending camp in a setting that provides unique opportunities for physical, cognitive, and social activities adapted to the unique needs of children has been shown to improve opportunities for youth with DD to meet age-appropriate developmental milestones (Clark and Nwokah 2010). However, the global pandemic of 2020 put some limitations on these camp experiences.

The Coronavirus Disease or COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and was the cause of a global pandemic in 2020. The impact of COVID-19 in the United States began to be felt in earnest in March of 2020, which resulted in many businesses, schools, and services considered “non-essential” to be closed, including in the state of Tennessee (Tennessee State Government 2021). This closure removed students from their classrooms, including students with DD (Masonbrink and Hurley 2020). Closures disrupted routines and prevented

participation in many important developmental activities such as team sports or social interaction in the classroom. Students with DD lost access to critical resources such as specialized educators and structured learning environments. Many parents of students with DD lacked adequate resources to continue any online learning activity (Masonbrink and Hurley 2020). Children and young adults with mental health, communication and physical disabilities were at risk for experiencing social isolation, lack of appropriate resources for adapted learning, and miscommunication of factual and updated information regarding the pandemic (Douglas et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced a transition for summer activities that were previously planned for face-to-face to be moved to online delivery options.

Camp Ability, established in 2006, is a summer camp program sponsored by Special Kids Therapy and Nursing Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (Special Kids Therapy and Nursing Center, n.d.). It provides a summer camp experience for approximately seventy children and young adults, ages five to twenty-five, with DD each summer. Camp Ability's mission statement is, 'To provide hope, fun, and support to anyone with special needs and their families.' In a typical summer, this camp is organized into groups primarily by age, and there are approximately seven groups made up of about ten campers with three counselors in each group. Camp hours are 8:30 AM- 3:30 PM, Monday through Friday, and this camp experience incorporates physical, social and life skills categories into the camp for seven weeks during the months of June and July. The physical aspects are implemented by different physical activities such as free play in a gymnasium or active field trips like rock climbing or swimming. Camp Ability addresses the social aspects of development by creating an opportunity for youth with DD to spend time with peers of similar age and ability. They are also provided activities of life skills lessons (e.g., kitchen skills, laundry skills, dressing, and other activities of daily living such as grooming) to

help encourage independence and age-appropriate behaviors. Many regular attendees of Camp Ability not only exhibit developmental delays but also suffer from severe health issues such as extreme allergies, seizures, behavior disorders, and compromised immune systems, making an in-person camp impractical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In adherence with Tennessee state guidelines at the time, and for best efforts to protect the health and safety of campers, Camp Ability became a virtual experience for 2020. This transition removed most of the in-person contact and allowed campers and camp staff to connect via the Zoom platform (Zoom Video Communication Inc. 2016). Zoom is a virtual platform that allows multiple people to interact via video chatting online and includes beneficial instructional tools like screen sharing and recording of interactions. Camp Ability 2020 hosted thirty-seven campers and nine staff members (six counselors and three administrative staff) and facilitated a 4-week virtual program. Many of the traditional camp activities, games, arts and crafts, and field trips were modified and adjusted to fit the virtual environment. Virtual sessions were hosted twice daily for approximately an hour to an hour and a half, Tuesday through Friday. On Mondays, campers and their families attended a “car parade” in the morning and an afternoon virtual session. The car parades were designed to give parents and campers the opportunity to visit with their counselor face-to-face while socially-distancing and following other COVID-19 guidelines. Counselors prepared supply bags that were distributed to the families at the car parade and supply bags were hand-delivered to the homes of families who could not attend the parade. The supply bags contained a variety of supplies that the campers would use to participate in the upcoming week’s activities such as cooking, arts and crafts and puppet shows. The daily morning sessions started with ‘Big Group Welcome’, Camp Ability’s morning activity to bring

all the groups together by participating in roll call activities and sharing the planned activities for the day, and then separated into smaller group sessions.

The thirty-seven campers were divided into six groups based on age and ability with each group having their own dedicated counselors. During virtual sessions, groups were paired up (youngest two groups together, etc.) to allow the two counselors from the respective groups to co-facilitate activities. During these small group sessions, counselors led two activities assigned for that day (eg: field trip and cooking). The parents/caregivers of campers received daily emails indicating which activities would be done for that day and identified which supplies would be needed for participation. There was a total of eight pre-planned activities that were covered in morning sessions throughout the week: bible study, life skills, field trips, movement, games, crafts, puppet show, and cooking. Examples of cooking included preparing fun easily preservable snacks like fruit loop rainbows with marshmallows. Afternoon virtual sessions Monday through Thursday alternated between karaoke sessions and story readings with Friday afternoons reserved for dance parties.

All virtual sessions were recorded and posted to group-specific Google Classrooms that were shared between counselors and their campers. By posting recordings of the camp sessions, any camper who was unable to attend a scheduled session could then complete and participate in camp activities. The facilitation of these activities was organized by lesson plans that were pre-developed by counselors and other camp staff. Each counselor was responsible for developing four weeks of lesson plans for their assigned activity (e.g., cooking) and a pre-recorded story reading. These materials were then distributed to the rest of the counselors via a camp staff Google Classroom for session use and implementation. This resulted in each counselor

facilitating one activity-they had planned, and seven activities based on lesson plans created and shared by the other counselors and/or administrative staff each week.

The purpose of this study was to gather feedback from camp counselors using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews about the implementation of the virtual summer camp. Topics of discussion included successes, failures, and future plans for the next camp experience. The study also aimed to broaden our scope of understanding of how an online platform could deliver a virtual summer camp experience for children with DD that may be used by others.

## **Methods**

Participants in the current study included five counselors at Camp Ability during Summer 2020. The final (sixth) counselor was one of the authors of the study and so was not included to reduce the risk of bias. Counselors were not required to participate in the study, but engagement was expected to be high as counselors were historically invested in the process and success of the camp. Recruitment was conducted via emails sent to counselors requesting their participation in the interviews. Participants were asked to complete an approximately sixty-minute, semi-structured interview (Appendix A) with the researcher (CB) via Zoom to capture their experiences, feedback and opinions about the virtual camp offered in the summer of 2020 in light of the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the interview, participants were provided with a brief overview of the survey aims and procedures and verbal consent was obtained (Appendix A). Zoom interviews were recorded and serve as a record of consent. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

## Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, manually transcribed and corrected by the interviewer using the audio-video recordings as the reference. Interviewees reviewed the corrected transcripts for clarifications. Transcriptions underwent 3 coding cycles: independent open coding by two investigators to determine possible coding themes; pattern coding to compare and consolidate themes for use as coding nodes or subcodes; and coding within NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2018) for further analysis. After the initial NVivo node and subcode labels and definitions were agreed upon, one interview was synchronously coded to enhance consistency. All remaining interviews were separately coded by the interviewers, after which they reviewed the other's coding for completeness. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed among the coders to reach consensus. The data then underwent focused analysis for development of thematic commonalities.

## Results

Interviews resulted in three themes: (a) camp planning and processes, (b) experiences during camps, and (c) lessons learned for the future. Table 1 presents the three themes and nine subthemes. Five interviews yielded nine coding themes merged into three major themes supporting thematic saturation.

Table 1.

Theme	Nodes
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## Camp Processes/Planning

Initial Concerns  
 Planning  
 Communication

## Experiences

Successes  
 Challenges Resolved  
 Observed Family  
 Parent Feedback

## Lessons Learned

Future  
 Technology

***Theme One: Camp Planning and Processes.***

Most counselors expressed that their primary concern prior to camp starting was that camper participation would be low compared to live camp sessions. Given the particular needs of campers, including a usual reliance on hand-over-hand instruction, counselors worried that campers would not be able to interact and engage to the same level that they would in a face-to-face camp. Interestingly, four of the five counselors stated that participation was not an actual problem once camp started.

*'I was just worried because we have students with such high needs, that we wouldn't be able to find something virtual that they could participate in ... I did also feel bad because our kids need so much support and hand over hand.'* – Counselor 4

*'No, participation was great.'* - Counselor 3

Counselors also discussed the impact of the camp planning process and the ways staff communication influenced their work. Several of them found that counselor communication was lacking in this setting, including little feedback from other counselors about how lesson plans were implemented in various groups. However, many of the counselors agreed that pre-planning activities with lesson plans was beneficial.

*'I felt like everyone did really well with the lesson plans... laying it out step by step. So it's pretty simple to figure it out... It was laid out well by everyone.'* - Counselor 2

*'I didn't get any feedback. I'm sure there are things I could have done better, but I didn't get any.'* - Counselor 5

*'I feel like in general, the lesson plans went well and like we kind of ask questions if we needed to, so...if someone had a question..., it's like, 'oh, I didn't even think to put that in', I was able to put it in the next weeks. So, it's kind of like a trial and error every week with the lesson plans.'* - Counselor 4

### ***Theme Two: Experiences During Camp.***

Camp Ability's mission states, 'To provide help, fun and support to anyone with special needs and their families.' All five counselors noted that Camp Ability's mission was successfully achieved despite the irregular circumstances. These circumstances included the adjustment to all activities being held virtually, and the limitations that prevented Camp Ability from serving its typical and larger population. Most of the campers were unable to attend school

or other social gatherings due to COVID-19 closures, and counselors described camp activities as something for campers to look forward to or as a change of routine.

*'I think we fulfilled mission in a different way, like we definitely provided support and gave them activities to do during the day and giving them some kind of structure or something to look forward to, and I think they had fun, I had fun...' - Counselor 3*

*'I felt like it definitely, for the circumstance that it was, ... reached the families that could join us by just giving them a break for that short amount of time and also providing them kind of a schedule. And I think even like the phone calls that we made home, kind of made a difference, showing them that we're here for like parents too... So I felt like we were pretty good about showing that we're there for support even in these weird times.' - Counselor 2*

Counselors also experienced daily or weekly challenges that required adjustments to improve the facilitation of and participation in activities. Some of these challenges included modifying movement activities to include campers with wheelchairs or making a virtual field trip more engaging for younger groups. A majority of the counselors found that it was difficult to virtually assist campers during the virtual activities, and many of the campers had to rely on parents or caregivers. One of the key components of face-to-face camp is the ability to assist campers hand-over-hand, and it was repeatedly noted that one of virtual camp's biggest challenges was the inability of counselors to assist campers in this way. Many parents or caregivers were responsible for logging their camper onto the Zoom session or took on the typical role of the counselor and assisted hand-over-hand activities like arts and crafts. By filling

this gap, campers were able to successfully participate in camp activities, and counselors were able to successfully complete the activities for each lesson plan.

*'Some of the movement plans. I had to adapt them to what kids we were working with. And we had lots of kids in wheelchairs, so we had to adapt a little bit.'* - Counselor 5

*'I think relying on the parents to be able to help the students or the kids who could not do it was my biggest struggle because at camp, you know, we can lead an activity and still help those kids in the wheelchairs and also wrangling somebody else and like you were only in charge of yourself in this thing. So that was kind of difficult.'* - Counselor 3

*'... it's so difficult not to be able to assist them because in normal activities like I'm able to run over to someone who can't do it by themselves... so, I didn't realize how much we did as counselors until, like, we couldn't do it at all...it was hard for me not to be as involved as possible. But, you know, I think we did the best we could.'* - Counselor 4

In addition to working with the campers, virtual camp allowed the counselors to connect and communicate with campers' family members and caregivers more frequently than during a typical camp season. The counselors were able to observe the campers in their home environments while interacting with their families and they also received feedback from some parents. This feedback was not only encouraging for the counselors to see the positive impact of the camp experience, but also allowed the counselors to view the campers in a setting that a traditional camp does not allow. Despite the difficult circumstances counselors had during the

camp experience, they were able to appreciate the work and effort of the parents/caregivers to make camp happen for their participant.

*'I mean, whether it be getting them to the parade or making sure that they have a way to log on or a device to log on, even though they're not going to be home or helping them with whatever craft we're doing. I mean, they were the ones, the parents, that were a constant. Changed the dynamic of how things happened.'* - Counselor 1

*'I thought it was good... I felt like it showed the families that we really cared and we're here to be there for them. So I enjoyed it. And it was kind of fun to see some of the kids at home and how they interact with their home life, I guess. So that was kind of fun.'* - Counselor 2

*'Camper 1's mom said like every morning he would wake up and be telling her, like, we have to get on Camp Ability and Camper 2 participated in everything. He was always the first one at the parade and his dad really was praising all of us, just the fact that, like, we took the time out of our summer to still make camp happen. And Camper 3's mom just appreciated that because we feel like if we didn't have activities that were adaptable, we tried to make it that way... I just think they really enjoyed it and the parents really enjoyed it, too.'* (Camper names redacted) - Counselor 4

### ***Theme Three: Lessons Learned for the Future.***

In the final theme that emerged, counselors discussed ideas that could be implemented in the future, should Camp Ability facilitate another virtual camp session. Some of these ideas included the continued use of Google Classroom to post resources for campers to use at home if

they were unable to attend in-person. One specific feature that counselors mentioned was using this resource for Camp Ability Plus. Camp Ability Plus is a day-long camp event that occurs one Saturday of each month during the Fall and Winter. It serves as an opportunity to visit with familiar camp faces during the off-season. Counselors also discussed the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic may continue to impact Camp Ability and its participants. They also reflected on activities they thought would be the most successful and what areas needed improvement. Counselors shared positive experiences about the movement and life skills activities, but also recommended improvement for activities like the virtual field trips and cooking.

*'I mean, I think it kind of it depends on what happens with life if it doesn't get any better. I think we should continue doing it like for Camp Ability Plus. But I also think, you know, if/when corona(virus) ends that we could use it as a resource for people who get waitlisted or kids that can't come to camp a certain week or because I know there's some that can only come three weeks, but they want to come all the time. So, something to where they can still do stuff at home even though they can't be at camp. I think we should do it.'* - Counselor 5

*'I love the life skills and the movement, and I think I would change a virtual field trip just in the way that like... I think we need to pick things that are more like the campers' interests and stuff. But I thought they were great... given the circumstances. I thought cooking was really cool. That is definitely hard to do over a virtual, but I think it went well and I think if we do like more snack-based things, it would be good... it's easier over virtual and everyone can participate easier.'* - Counselor 3

Experiencing technological barriers not only impacted campers, but also effected counselors. After completing their lesson plans, counselors sent them to an administrative staff member for uploading to the Google Classroom platform. This staff member asked that all lesson plans be completed by a certain deadline. This created a barrier for one counselor who sought to complete their lesson plans on their own timeline, and upload plans at their own pace. This counselor suggested that it may have been more beneficial to have all counselors comfortable with the Google Classroom platform to reduce this barrier.

*'I think it would have been more beneficial and to the group, had everybody known, how to upload stuff instead of having to send it to one person, have one person upload it.'* – Counselor 1

Counselors also mentioned the afternoon camp sessions as a potential opportunity for improvement. Multiple counselors believed that the camp schedule should be revisited in the future to better satisfy the needs of both campers' daily routines and counselors' schedules. Since Camp Ability had been adjusted for the summer, some counselors sought additional employment options to make up for the lack of full-time employment that camp typically provides. The split schedule created some difficulty for counselors to be able to work other jobs. The schedule was also difficult for the campers. Many of them are acclimated to specific routines involving personal interests or family care and a daily split schedule for four weeks was a disruption to this routine.

*'The afternoon sessions were harder for some of them because they did the morning and now, they've gotten into doing whatever they wanted to do, so we'll try to get them away*

*from what they were doing to come back to the computer was tough, from what I hear.' -*

*Counselor 1*

*'The biggest change I would do... the afternoon sessions... from a counselor's perspective, the afternoon sessions were hard for me because of just my schedule, but I think the kids really liked it' - Counselor 5*

Technology was in some ways perceived as a barrier, and a few counselors found it to be a hindrance to participation. To some counselors, the barrier was campers' ability to independently manage the technology, necessitating a need for help at home. There was some inability to log on or off independently, but it was also the physical distance barrier that prevented counselors from assisting campers. The technology barrier also prevented some campers from being able to participate altogether which in turn affected the counselors. Counselors in Groups 1 and 2 (youngest groups) specifically found technology to be a hindrance to participation as they saw the fewest regular participants each week. Counselor 2 saw that the campers heavily relied on the parents/caregivers for participation, and if the parents were not available to assist with the technology then the camper could not participate.

*'I think the ones that had the most challenges are the ones that didn't have a legitimate, like routine. It was someone different all the time logging them on or not knowing when they were getting on or right.'* - Counselor 1

*'I contacted the parents, but they were just like, you know, 'I'm working all day and they're with grandparents. They don't know how to do it.' So, it wasn't really anything I felt like I could do... I*

*will say we did try to change a little bit with the recordings. So, I think that was really good to have outside of the live sessions because those kids could go at a different time if mom was there or dad. So, I feel like we did try, but I still didn't have anyone show up for the live sessions.'* -

*Counselor 2*

## **Discussion**

Counselors shared their perceptions and experiences regarding initial concerns, planning, and communication. Camper participation was a major concern mentioned by almost all participating counselors, however, most found that this concern was not an issue during the implementation of camp activities. The level of participation may have been influenced by the campers' ability to engage independently in the activities or level of parent/caregiver interaction and support. A study observing student engagement in an online school setting found that students with diverse socioemotional and academic learning environments were better participants in online activities than students without. Authors also concluded that parent and family interaction with other parents and families in the program boosted participation (Domina et al. 2021). Based on these findings, some provision of parent-to-parent interaction might be helpful for future virtual offerings.

Successful participation depended on campers' ability to access and navigate the Zoom platform. The ability to follow virtual instructions given by the camp counselors or be guided hand-over-hand by those present with campers also impacted level of participation. Similarly, Curtis and Werth found that the transparency and availability of tools and resources provided by the online learning organization contributed to the success of participation in online learning

programs. This was true for both the parents and students participating in an online learning environment (Curtis and Werth 2015).

Based on camper registration from 2019, slightly over half of Camp Ability's returning campers and families chose either to not register or withdrew from camp after the first week due to lack of interest from the camper or the virtual setting not meeting the needs of the family. One counselor observed that lack of participation progressed over the course of the summer. This group consisted of younger campers ages 5-7 and was largely dependent on parents/caregivers for technical assistance and aid in participating in camp activities. Without specifically interviewing the parents, it was not possible to determine the direct cause of limited participation for this group.

Counselors agreed that the organization and planning approach to virtual camp was beneficial. The pre-written lesson plans were useful for counselors to implement camp activities without requiring them to plan each activity for their own group. However, some counselors noted that activities needed to be adapted on short notice or during implementation to meet the needs of the campers in their groups. For example, some campers were physically disabled or wheelchair-bound, so counselors would have to adapt movement or game activities to meet their unique needs. They did this by adjusting specific body movements to similar wheelchair movements or changing the setting of a game from multiple rooms in a camper's house to the immediate space. With these challenges in mind, some summer camps are designed to allow campers to participate in recreational activities. The activities are adapted to meet these needs so the campers can participate similarly to their non-disabled peers (McCarthy 2015). Since counselors were responsible for planning only one specific activity, such as cooking or crafting, for each of the four weeks, communication to discuss questions or provide feedback between

was expected. Surprisingly, counselors communicated little amongst each other to discuss these lesson implementations. Most camp communication, based on the interviews, was only between counselors whose groups were paired together. Communication or feedback from the remaining four counselors did not occur often, if at all. This is an important area to improve upon for the future. Research shows that one of the best ways to improve employee engagement during tough times, such as a pandemic, is to solicit employee feedback by asking employees to freely share both their frustrations and ideas for developments. (Chanana and Sangeeta 2020). This applies to the counselors in the camp setting.

While participation seemed to be successful and many counselors did not have issues with participation, it should be noted that camper participation could have been limited due to accessibility issues. These issues included sight and hearing impairments, as well as limited functional ability. For future virtual camp settings, it is important to address the accessibility of online platforms for developmentally disabled populations. As for planning and communication, the pre-planning approach was successful for four weeks of virtual activities. Few corrections or adjustments to the lesson plans were mentioned by the counselors, but for future studies, it may be valuable to ask more detailed questions about the lesson plans in order for adjustments to be more successful. Communication was sufficient between administrative staff and counselors but lacking among and between counselors. Providing feedback about lesson plans, sharing success stories, or even implementing new ideas for lesson plans could provide a better camp environment for campers and help improve the detail and modification of lesson plans.

Many of the counselors felt that camp fulfilled its mission statement and provided a positive and fun setting for its campers. Despite the nature of the virtual circumstances, counselors felt that Camp Ability attempted to provide some normalcy. The daily and weekly

challenges recorded included adapting pre-planned activities to meet the needs of the campers or being unavailable to assist the campers in a hands-on fashion. Similarly, Hanline et al. found that teachers implementing online learning programs for students with severe disabilities had to make several modifications of instruction in order to promote a positive engagement and learning environment. These modifications included adjusting environmental factors to allow for smooth transition and interaction. The teachers also used disability specific resources and assistive technology, resources not available or implemented in Camp Ability 2020. (Hanline, Hatoum, and Riggie 2012).

Counselors commented on their observations from the families and also shared parent feedback. One of the components of the camp schedule was to call the families once a week and provide them with an ear to listen. Some parents/caregivers used this time to share their reflections on camp, their praises and successes, and challenges about camp, family, and schedules. Other families chose to let the campers spend one-on-one time talking to their counselors, something that rarely happens in a typical camp setting. For those that chose to use the counselor calls to share their experiences, counselors received a significant amount of encouraging and positive feedback. Thurber et al. conducted research on the effectiveness of summer camp on child development, ages eight-fourteen, and found that 70% of parents noted that their children were more confident and had greater self-esteem, and some parents also reported better social skills. (Thurber et al. 2007). While this research did not observe children with special needs or chronic disabilities, not surprisingly, this comparison demonstrated that other parents/caregivers also reported positive outcomes for their youth that participated in summer camps.

Despite the overwhelming response by counselors that Camp Ability achieved its mission, it needs to be considered that the camp served only half the number of campers compared to a typical summer. As a result, the other half of campers and families were unable to reap the benefits that Camp Ability usually provides. The challenges experienced by the counselors and campers are also important to consider when planning a future virtual aspect for Camp Ability. For future studies, it would be beneficial to include interviews with the campers and/or their parents/caregivers about their camp experiences. These responses could be compared with counselor feedback to determine and better plan future virtual implementation for Camp Ability.

Lastly, counselors discussed lessons learned and future improvements for virtual camp. This is important for moving forward with planning future virtual sessions for Camp Ability, and also provides considerations for other virtual programs. Counselors believed that, even if things return to “normal,” the virtual platform could still be used for campers that cannot or may not attend the full seven weeks of camp. Counselors also thought that using recordings might be a unique way to continue camp activities at home or after camp hours. Similar changes that embrace the possibility of remote engagement were discussed in the realm of education. The notion that learning must only be done in the classroom is now being challenged by the successful completion of schoolwork online and schools are reconsidering the traditional learning environments (Zhao 2020). This supports the possibility of furthering virtual accessibility for Camp Ability and its activities.

Counselors reflected on which activities were most successful with his/her group such as movement and games, and counselors discussed difficulties with the virtual field trips and cooking activities. The largest setback with cooking was handing out materials at the beginning

of the week during the in-person car parades. Some food items had to be stored or prepared a certain way which was not accessible for everyone. For example, one lesson plan included using a toaster oven, and it should not be assumed that not everyone had a toaster oven. Moving forward, it was suggested that the cooking activities be limited to snacks with foods that are easily prepared, self-stable, or surveying campers to determine what supplies they have to successfully participate in the food activity. Field trips were difficult for the younger groups, as their counselors mentioned that the field trips were not places of interest for them and campers became easily distracted. The usual field trip activity of “in-person” camp was hard to replicate in the virtual setting. The campers could not physically attend many of the places they had looked forward to visiting, for example, a nearby college recreation center or bowling alley. Moving forward, allowing the counselors to have more time to plan and develop ideas for these virtual activities could result in better activities that are more suited to implement virtually, or more tailored activities to meet the functional ability levels for each group of campers. These may include trips to a favorite place by the camper or a new location the camper might be interested in trying.

Other challenges included the structure of the camp schedule that planned for morning and afternoon sessions. Some campers and families enjoyed this aspect as they were able to join one session or the other depending on their schedule, while others found it to be difficult to redirect their campers to another camp activity after acquiring interest in something else at home. Both counselors and parents/caregivers (as relayed by counselors) mentioned that they struggled with the morning and afternoon camp routine. Some of this disruption stemmed from camper attention span and ability to redirect after finding interest in a new activity, while some of the lack of participation came from unavailability of a parent or a caregiver to assist with the camp

activity. Counselors also found this schedule to be difficult as it required them to leave most of their day open for camp activities and restricted the time available for other commitments . Rutherford County Schools, the local county school system that educates most of Camp Ability’s participants, facilitates a distance learning option on virtual platforms, similar to Camp Ability. Their distance learning schedule was similar to a regular school schedule, but the teachers organized when they met virtually with students and provided them with other engaging and educational activities for when they were not interacting virtually. (Rutherford County Schools 2020). In this example, teachers were only required to meet with students once a day and chose their meeting time. In contrast, Camp Ability required its counselors to meet twice a day and scheduled these meetings for them. The pros and cons of the twice daily schedule should be revisited, because while it aims to benefit campers and their schedules, alternative ways could be explored. Subjects such as budgets for materials, improvements, and suggested changes about camp overall were also addressed with unique feedback from each counselor. Some suggestions included better supplies for activities while others suggested and finding a more efficient way to deliver supplies to campers that could not attend the parade. Overall, the recording feature of the virtual platform was a favorite for counselors as they felt it helped campers feel included when they were unable to participate during the originally scheduled time.

The findings of this study are limited to only five counselors and only one specific camp and may not be generalizable to other settings. For future studies, feedback may be collected from administrative staff, parents/caregivers, or campers. This will allow for comparison and better all-around evaluation of the virtual camp. However, these findings are still valid ideas moving forward and could be considered for future implementation of virtual activities in camps for youth with disabilities. Specifically, Camp Ability can use this feedback and interview data to

implement another virtual camp, improve a typical summer camp, and broaden its reach during other camp sessions, like Camp Ability Plus. These results may also be helpful for other virtual programs that may be trying to determine structure, timing, communication needs and interactions necessary for successful implementation of activities for a similar population.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

**Introduction:** Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed about your experiences conducting a virtual camp versus a live camp for children with disabilities. This interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes and is about your experiences with the activities you planned this summer, your experiences administering activities planned by other counselors, your perception of family and camper experiences with virtual camp, and your general impressions of virtual camp.

This Zoom session will be recorded to help the research team review your responses, but please know that your comments will be kept confidential. If selected responses are used in any publications or presentations, neither you nor your institution will be identified. Your name/ Zoom user ID number will be captured in the Zoom recording but will not be included in any transcripts of the interview or any reporting of the data. Please refrain from using campers' full names. If referencing a camper, please use first names only.

If at any time you do not wish to answer a question you have the choice to refrain and move on, or if at any time you wish not to continue the interview you have the right to withdraw. If you choose to withdraw, any previously answered questions will not be recorded for project use.

Are you willing to participate in the survey? If so, answer yes.

Thank you!

#### Background/Baseline Questions

1. How long have you been a counselor at camp ability?
2. What ages/group were you responsible for this summer?  
Is this a group you have worked with before?
3. (a)What were your initial concerns at the beginning of the summer about running a virtual camp? (b)Were any of those concerns later issues? (c)If yes, how were they solved?

#### Questions about Counselor-Planned Activities

4. What camp activity were you in charge of planning and providing?
5. (a)What were some successes you encountered with this activity for your group? (b)What about issues? (c)How did you solve them?
6. If any, what feedback did you receive from other counselors about implementing your activity in other groups?
7. From this feedback, how would you compare or contrast the success or participation of this activity for the other groups?

#### Questions about Facilitating Your Group

8. (a)When implementing activities created by other staff what did you find successful or helpful? (b)What did you find to be an issue?
9. (a)Describe your group's participation. (b)Did they require lots of redirection by parents or caregivers? (c)Were they mostly independent?
10. In comparison to previous years of camp, In what ways did camp ability achieve its mission? Mission Statement- To provide hope, fun and support to anyone with special needs and their families

11. Explain any difficulties you encountered in adjusting these normal camp activities to the online platform.

#### Questions about Family/Camper Experiences of Virtual Camp

12. Because virtual camp lacks the in person contact and communication that a typical camp provides, tell me what it was like to call individual families and campers.

13. (a)What seemed to be some things they were struggling with in the transition to virtual camp? (b)What about positive experiences or successes?

14. How would you describe the campers that seemed to get the most out of the camp and those that had the most challenges?

Prompts:

(a) How did communication skills impact participation?

(b) How did the family impact participation?

© How did the camper diagnosis impact participation?

(d) Is technology a barrier?

#### Questions about Counselor Experiences of Virtual Camp

15. If we were to use the virtual camp structure again, what areas /activities would you keep the same and what would you change?

16. What improvements (in an ideal world, where \$\$ is no object) would allow a virtual program to work best for our population?

17. Do you feel using the virtual platform could be used throughout the year during off camp season (Camp Plus)? If so, in what capacity?

18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a camp counselor?