

SUMMART REPORT – CNAF GRANT, AUGUST 2017

YOUTH ADVENTURE CAMP FOR HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM YOUTH AND PEER MENTORS

This second year of facilitating the Youth Adventure Camp was an honour to be a part of and a great pleasure to bring to the youth and the families we work with in the Child and Youth with Special Needs Program at the Family Resource Association. Similarly to the previous year, the goal was to design a high adventure, two-week camp, in which identified youth with autism could experience group activities to challenge their physical, emotional, and social development. In addition to supporting the youth through these milestones with the assistance of a support team and neuro-typical peer mentors, our other aim was to create a memorable experience to serve as a spring board in raising their confidence and spark their interests in seeking out other opportunities for community engagement.

During the selection process, participants that would comprise a connected group that had the potential for befriending each other as well as challenging each other, were taken into consideration. Youth from the previous year were invited to return as well as a majority of new clients were invited to experience the opportunity.

Substantial consistency with the staff contracted from VIU to deliver the program created a familiar and safe environment, and yet new VIU students and staff offered new energy and a variety of personalities for the youth to connect with and adapt to.

During the initial planning stages, the FRA CYSN staff, VIU staff and students met to develop a strategic itinerary and become familiar with the profiles of the participants. Many of the same activities as the previous year were included, as well as some new adventures were included in the plan; such as outrigger canoeing, sea kayaking, indoor rock climbing, recreational water crafts, stand up paddle boarding, and a trip to an outdoor adventure-themed park in the trees.

New to the process for this year, CYSN staff conducted a youth mentor training session for the purposes of team building, to receive information about the autism spectrum, and to define their role within the summer camp and explore their feelings and expectations.

Just prior to the camp start date, participants met for a meet & greet. This step was also new to the process of delivery this year, and proved to be a valuable strategy in ascertaining friendships among the youth that had already existed and increasing familiarity and comfort levels with those youth who were introduced to others for the first time.

As camp got underway, the pre-existing friendships among the youth seemed to be a significant strength in setting a positive and inclusive tone. Overall, the youth could be observed enjoying what the activities and program had to offer, and at times youth were challenged by their feelings of frustration or uncertainty. The ratio of staff to youth was essentially 1:2, thereby allowing ample support and processing of experiences for individuals and as a group. Youth demonstrated the full experience of the camp through their own personalities, strengths and perceived limitations. They were expressive and articulate as they explored ideas, shared their stories, and seemingly experienced an array of feelings triggered by the range of activities.

All youth were requested to complete post-surveys for feedback and closure at the end of the final camp day. In their responses to questions, all of the youth reported to 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that the service provided was respectful, valuable, and had met their needs. One individual indicated that the service did not allow them to reach their goals. This responses may be due to either an interpretation of the question, a lack of defined goals for the client or an absence of service goals explicitly stated to the youth, or simply reflect a measurement in which the outcome of the service did not meet the client's goals he or she set out for themselves. All youth 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' this is a service they would recommend to a friend. Additional comments included: "Use more single-person kayaks" (as there were two available and most youth went in teams of two), and "This was a great camp! Had an amazing time and the places we went to were fun." Most of the youth's parents also offered 'informal' feedback through comments made in person or by email, which expressed great satisfaction and appreciation. Of particular significance, one parent stated in a written letter "Thank you for all the wonderful work you've done with the youth day camp! (Name) had a great time and is looking forward more to high school because of the connection she made with the kids she made friends with at the camp. For someone who has the social challenges (he/she) has, this is pretty great! Thanks again and I look forward to seeing what other groups (name) could be a part of during the school year."

A debrief and future planning session among VIU and FRA CYSN was conducted where suggestions and recommendations were recorded. Here, a review and evaluation of individual activities was discussed, and other novel activities that would complement the energy flow and group dynamic for the duration of the camp were brainstormed. Staff observations and suggestions for improvement included better defining roles in terms of planning strategic team building games between and possibly during adventure activities, developing clearer goals for the service and creating a vision statement, and pursuing positive press coverage (as consented to by clients allow).

Finally, on behalf of the Family Resource Association Child and Youth with Special Needs Program staff and the youth, and the Vancouver Island University's Outdoor Recreation Department and the Child and Youth Care Department's staff and students, we offer sincere gratitude to the Canadian National Autism Foundation for their recognition of the value of this service, and for their support and contribution to this important and successful initiative.

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