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Inclusion:

A Balancing Act of Opportunity and Careful Planning

BY BRIA BOLTON MOORE

Wherever Cammy goes — the grocery store, a Tulsa Driller's game or a simple shopping trip through Wal-Mart — she runs into familiar faces who are always quick to greet her.

"I like when people talk to me and are nice," said Cammy Bergman, a 20-year-old senior at Jenks High School who is developmentally delayed.

Since Cammy was a kindergartener in Jenks Public Schools, her education, as well as her life, has been a balancing act of environments. Sometimes she is with peers who have special needs, but a lot of the time, she's not.

Often considered an educational practice as well as an educational philosophy, the practice of inclusion may depend less on a definition and more on the individual child. Although the word inclusion isn't found in Federal statutes and therefore isn't defined by the Department of Education, many call it a commitment to include a child with special needs in classes or activities he or she would otherwise attend, to the maximum extent appropriate. Inclusion in public schools is based on the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which requires that children with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment appro-

priate" to meet their "unique needs."

"In my mind, inclusion is including a student as much as possible in an environment where they can feel successful and be included in activities with whatever supports are necessary," said Kim Harper, a state-certified school psychologist and educational diagnostician who also serves as the kindergarten through fifth-grade counselor at Riverfield Country Day School in Tulsa. "Inclusion, to me, is not necessarily inclusion in everything without careful thought and planning, because you don't want to create an unsuccessful situation for any of the students. It can be very successful, but it's very personal, very individualized," Harper said.

Cammy spent her first few years of school in regular classrooms with other children her age, but "after awhile, the gulf between her and the rest of the class got too wide," said Cammy's mom, Kim Dallow.

"[Now], Cammy needs to be in a special ed classroom most of the day, because that's where she's going to function and learn," Dallow said. "Having her sit through algebra and draw smiley faces on a piece of paper isn't productive. But, being able to participate in regular PE, regular lunch, assemblies and things like that are important to her. She wants to be a part of the process. She wants to go to homecoming and those sorts of things. Being allowed to do those are really important to her."



JENKS SENIOR CAMMY BERGMAN.

Photo Credit: OH Snap! Photography

Harper explained that a vital part of inclusion is providing supports to children with special needs. Those supports may be environmental like how the classroom is set

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up or who the student is paired with, or they may be instructional in terms of what directions the teacher provides or how the activities are structured. For example, Cammy has a peer tutor who joins her in PE class.

"Inclusion isn't just putting a child in the group and letting them navigate it independently," Harper said.

Proponents of inclusion believe that when children with and without special needs are together, there's opportunity for children with special needs to learn by example.

"Inclusion needs to be personalized, but it does need to happen, especially when you talk about kids on the autism spectrum like Cammy," Dallow said. "They need their toe in the water a little bit. They need to be around normal people where normal behavior is displayed."

A 2014 study published in *Psychological Science* examined the language skills of 670 preschoolers in Ohio. Researchers found that after one year of preschool, children with disabilities who were in classrooms with their typically-developing peers had language skills comparable to their peers. The average language skills of classmates in the fall significantly predicted a child's language skills in the spring.

While it's important for children with special needs to be stretched and challenged by "normal" environments, Harper said it's also essential for them to interact with others who have special needs.

"There's comfort that comes in knowing, 'I'm not the only one. I'm not the only person that struggles with this. I'm not the only person that has these challenges,' but also having peers that model what you could do differently, things that don't come naturally," she said. "It's very much a balance for each child."

Many people believe inclusion is just as important outside the classroom — on soccer fields, in art lessons, and even at summer camp. For the third year this summer, Camp Fire Green Country partnered with The National Inclusion Project, an organization that works to bridge the gap between young people with disabilities and the world around them.

Susan Bencke, Camp & Outdoor Services director for Camp Fire Green Country, explained that The National Inclusion Project is a foundation created by Clay Aiken to provide a support system for recreational and educational programs around the country to "open doors to children with disability that had thus remained closed."

Since its inception in 2003, the project has provided inclusive opportunities for over 50,000 children in the United States.

"Camp Fire's three-year partnership with the National Inclusion Project has created a cultural shift not only at summer camp, but also throughout our council," Bencke said. "Little by little, in each of our programs, we're evolving from an initial, internal reaction of 'How much extra work will it take to serve this child?' to a response of 'The culture of Camp Fire is to learn how to best serve every child — how can we best serve yours?' Camp Fire has access to so many resources within our organization, as well as in the Tulsa community, to learn how to best serve any child that wants to participate in Camp Fire. At Camp Fire, ALL youth and families are welcome."

Camp Fire includes children with dis-



(L TO R) CAMP FIRE CAMPER CALEB KETTMALLEN ROASTS MARSHMALLOWS WITH BUDDY COUNSELOR JONATHON CLARK.

abilities and special needs in regular summer camp experiences by pairing each child with a buddy counselor.

"I'm an inclusion counselor, which means I'm placed as a buddy with someone who is either mentally or physically handicapped to make sure they feel much more included in camp," said Jonathan Clark or "Bug" as he's known at Camp Fire Green Country's Camp Waluhili. "We make sure

they're able to go to camp and have that outdoor experience, which typically wouldn't be readily available if we didn't have someone to do that specifically."

Jonathan has had buddies with Down syndrome and those on the autism spectrum. He helps navigate social situations and facilitate understanding. But most of all, Jonathan makes sure his campers have fun.

"Youth in Camp Fire are learning to interact socially, work with, and at camp, live with, those different from them," Bencke said, "better preparing them for life. They are learning that though another child may look different or act different, they can find commonalities in hobbies and other interests."

Harper said the benefits of inclusion in school extend to all students and bring awareness that everybody has strengths, and everybody has some weaknesses. Harper and Dallow agree that inclusion is a balancing act. It takes teamwork and communication between parents, students, counselors and teachers. It takes attention to detail to know what's best for the individual child. It takes patience and flexibility and open-mindedness.

Dallow said she thinks our society has made significant strides in the way those with special needs are treated.

"When I was a kid, you didn't see regular students embracing special needs students like they do now," she said. "They were in a corner and nobody included them, and that's certainly changed. Until I had Cammy, I was sort of afraid of people with special needs. I didn't know how to talk to them; I didn't know how to act. Now that we are including them, we're growing up with these kids, and we're not so afraid of them."

Dallow said a lot of people want to be helpful and understand, but they simply don't know how.

"As inclusion grows, the general public is going to be more understanding of those with special needs, because they'll be around them."

At its core, inclusion is about people welcoming people — regardless of their appearance, IQ or abilities. And, if there's one thing Cammy likes, it's people.

She enjoys eating lunch with her friend Kaylee and seeing people hang pictures she creates. On any given day, you can find Cammy stringing beads to create friendship bracelets she often gives as gifts. And if you're lucky, you just might be a recipient of one of these bracelets, and, therefore, her inclusion and friendship.