

Safe, Inclusive and Meaningful Camp Experiences for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth

A 2025 partnership study



Study Focus

This research explored the experiences of queer-identifying youth and staff at **Camp Menesetung**, an United Church-affiliated overnight camp in Ontario, Canada. The camp serves as a model for balancing **faith-based traditions** with **inclusive values**, offering a safe and affirming space for queer individuals.

Background

Summer overnight camps in North America are traditionally associated with nature, fun, and youth development. Yet, many camps have historically followed restrictive ideas about gender and sexuality, creating environments that have excluded and marginalized 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

Objectives

- 1 Understand the lived experiences of queer youth at an open and queer-inclusive summer camp.
- 2 Explore the strategies used by the camp to foster experiences of safety, mattering and community.
- 3 Share insights with camping professionals to support inclusive practices.

Methods

Using **Participatory Action Research** and **Appreciative Inquiry** approaches 13 interviews were conducted with campers, staff, leaders, and community members. Thematic analysis guided the co-creation of findings.



Key Findings

A Haven

Camp Menesetung provided a space for identity affirmation and renewal. In contrast to the conservatism of surrounding areas, the camp provides a refuge from discrimination where queer youth felt they could safely explore and celebrate their identity. The majority-queer staff are drawn to work at Camp Menesetung due to their experiences of acceptance and community, amplifying queer representation through word-of-mouth recruitment.

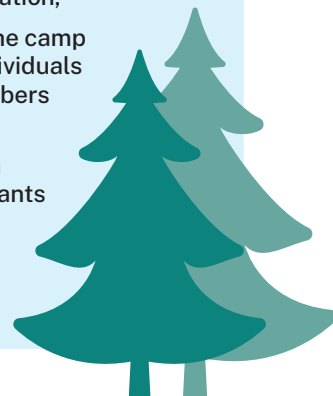
Meaningful Community

The camp fosters a culture of learning, activism, and mattering. Staff are presented with and facilitate opportunities for learning about queer identity. The camp implements inclusive practices (e.g., pronoun use, accommodating sleeping arrangements, non-gendered bathrooms) and encourages a community where individuals feel seen and valued.

Tensions

Tensions surfaced in the culture maintenance and strategic visioning of Camp Menesetung. The study identified tensions surrounding:

- Queer and non-queer folks deriving different meanings from their camp experiences,
- Well-intended “inclusion-for-all” philosophies rather than focusing on one minoritised population,
- Differing desires/visions/purposes of the camp according to the length and history individuals have with it (i.e., long-term legacy members and new arrivals), and
- Identifying as a community of Christian faith without dissuading queer participants due to historical exclusion and harm by Christian institutions.





Recommendations to Support Inclusion at Camps

Leadership & Culture

- Define and communicate values around queer-inclusion.
- Hire queer-identifying staff, especially in leadership.
- Integrate focused inclusion strategies into all staff related activities (recruitment, training & evaluation), organisational policies and daily practices (language & behaviours).
- Provide emotional support, personal development and reflection for all staff.
- Support staff in understanding operational realities to foster buy-in and adaptability.

Site Design

- Offer gender-neutral and gender-specific facilities.
- Use flexible accommodation arrangements.
- Display queer-inclusive signage and remove outdated artifacts.

Governance

- Educate boards and stakeholders.
- Partner with local groups and seek funding for justice work.

Family & Staff Engagement

- Set clear expectations about queer-inclusion for all stakeholders (campers, families and staff).
- Use social contracts to educate and reinforce community values of inclusion.
- Provide ongoing training focused on compassion.

Conclusion

Camp Menesetung's inclusive culture is the result of intentional, collaborative efforts rooted in justice and care. While the work is complex, the benefits for youth, staff, and community are profound.

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by Drs Mandi Baker, Luc Cousineau and Teresa Hill



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“Menesetung was kind of like my saving grace ... I was really struggling with my identity and I was bullied a lot... But every summer I knew that I could go and feel a little normal ... there were people there specifically to listen to me talk if I needed to talk. And these were people who didn't know me in day-to-day life. So, I could really let them in. ... And it was like, a totally separate world. Like how negative of a culture school really was and how different it was from camp culture and to that [connect] in nature and connect to the world and feel like a real human being ...”

(Cicada)

