

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

A 2024 – 2025 partnership study

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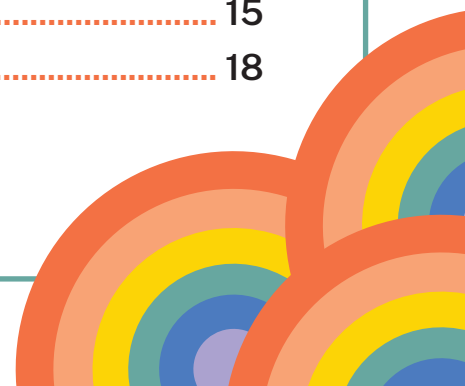


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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
Rationale.....	4
Growing in Partnership	5
Project Partners.....	5
Industry partner.....	5
Funding partner	5
The Research Team.....	5
The Steering Committee	6
Background to Study	7
Queer Youth Experiences.....	7
Third places for queer youth	7
Summer camps act as third places.....	7
Creating cultures of mattering	8
Methods	8
Findings	9
A Haven.....	9
› “The County”	9
› A Haven.....	9
› A magnet	10
The Culture	10
› A culture of learning and growth.....	10
› A culture of activism	11
› A culture of mattering	11
Tensions	11
› Inclusion for all	11
› The experiences of queer and non-queer people are different	12
› New and legacy member visions for camp.....	12
› Church camp and the assumed exclusion of 2SLGBTQAI+ folks.....	13
Conclusions.....	14
Recommendations	15
References	18



Executive Summary

Summer overnight camps have long been central to North American culture, offering nature-based experiences and opportunities for community, growth, and fun. However, many camps still reflect traditionalist gender norms and heteronormative assumptions, creating barriers for queer, gender non-binary, and non-heterosexual identifying youth. This study explored how Camp Menesetung in Ontario, Canada, has intentionally developed practices to foster safety, inclusion, and meaningful experiences for queer campers and staff within a non-queer-exclusive, church-affiliated setting.

Using a Participatory Action Research approach informed by Appreciative Inquiry, the research involved 13 in-depth interviews with diverse camp community stakeholders (i.e., staff, leadership, and board members). Findings highlighted Camp Menesetung as a haven — a space apart from everyday life where queer youth can recharge, affirm their identities, and experience deep belonging. Three themes were constructed through a process of active interpretation: The County (contrasting the camp's inclusive culture with the less-accepting surrounding region), The Haven (providing refuge and renewal), and The Magnet (attracting a majority-queer staff through word-of-mouth).

The camp's intentionally cultivated culture rests on three pillars: learning and growth (education on inclusion and empathy), activism (tangible changes to facilities, policies, and practices), and mattering (ensuring every individual feels valued, celebrated, and able to live “out loud”). Tensions were identified, including differing visions between legacy members and newer staff, the balance between inclusion-for-all and targeted queer inclusion, and reconciling the camp's Christian identity with 2SLGBTQIA+ affirmation.

The study concludes that while navigating these tensions is challenging, the benefits for marginalized youth — and the broader camp community — are profound. Camp Menesetung demonstrates that with intentional leadership, collaboration, and commitment summer camps can evolve into transformative third spaces that centre safety, justice, and belonging.



Introduction

Summer overnight camps in North America are traditionally associated with nature, fun, and youth development. Yet, many camps have historically upheld restrictive ideas about gender and sexuality, creating environments that may exclude or marginalize 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. This research explored the experiences of youth and staff at Camp Menesetung, a 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.

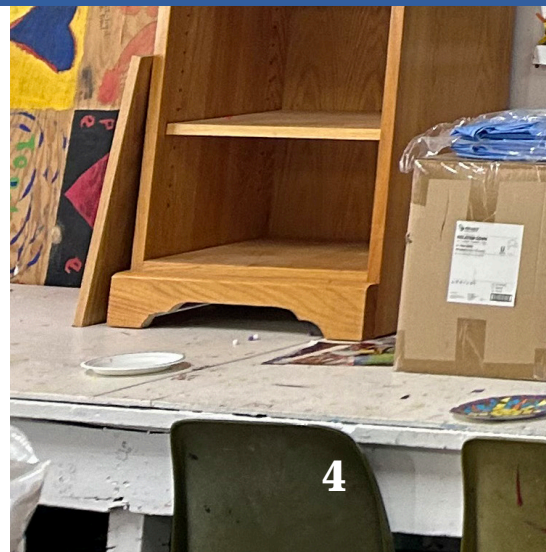


Our Objectives were to:

- 1 Understand the lived experiences of queer youth at an openly inclusive summer camp.
- 2 Explore strategies for fostering safety, inclusion, and community.
- 3 Share insights with camping professionals to support inclusive practices.

Rationale

Camps, which offer unique opportunities of child and youth development, should be places where campers and staff feel safe, included, and valued. This is especially important for those who have been marginalised by camp practices and discourses. Our hope is that the findings from this research will offer meaningful and much-needed insights for others in the North American camp industry who are committed to social justice and inclusionary work in their camps.



Partnerships

This project was a collaborative effort between members of a diverse research team, the Camp Menesetung leadership team, and a project steering committee of stakeholders, as well as the contributions of research participants. We are grateful for the efforts and contributions to the project and to the ongoing of work and legacy of Camp Menesetung.



Industry partner



Camp Menesetung

Camp Menesetung

Goderich, Ontario

Camp Menesetung is an independently incorporated 100 bed overnight facility and day camp on the shores of Lake Huron in Goderich, Ontario. It is affiliated with and supported by the United Church of Canada. In operation since 1935, the camp operates as a non-profit and is guided by a volunteer board, part-time camp director, and executive director. Camp Menesetung welcomes hundreds of campers annually, offering recreational programming, spiritual exploration, and leadership development for children and youth ages 5-16. Each summer, the organization hires approximately 35 high school and post-secondary staff members, many of whom are former campers themselves, to serve as role models and mentors.

Funding partner



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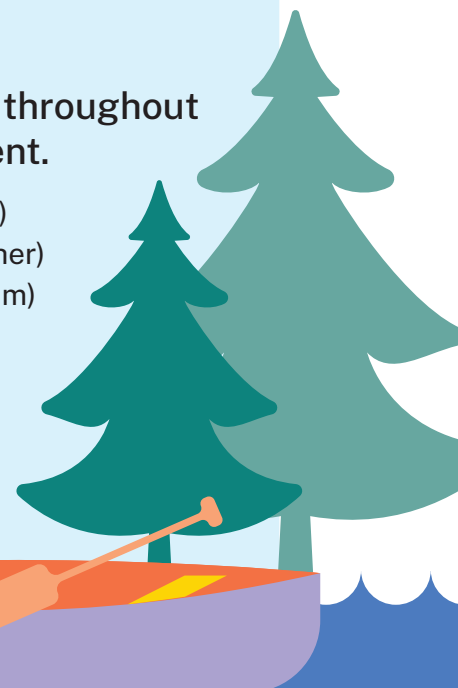
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Many thanks to the members of the Steering Committee throughout the project for their insights, guidance and encouragement.

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Background to Study

The study examined how Camp Menesetung functions as a place, shaped over time, into a broadly inclusive environment. It also explored how the camp has become a safe and affirming setting for queer individuals within church-affiliated summer camp context. While the term queer has been, and in some contexts continues to be, contentious due to its historical and ongoing derogatory use, we adopt it here as part of its activist reclamation and empowerment for those who identify as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and beyond (2SLGBTQIA+).

Queer Youth Experiences

Queer youth seek experiences of belonging and acceptance (Theriault, 2014; Berger et al., 2022). This need is often intensified by the exclusion, discrimination, and oppression that queer individuals face living in heteronormative societies. Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that everyone identifies within a binary framework of male and female, and that individuals are only sexually attracted to the opposite gender. Most industrialized societies are structured around heteronormative assumptions, with systems and infrastructures that often function oppressively for those who fall outside of it. As a result, queer youth actively seek out safe and inclusive spaces (e.g., those with bathroom facilities that accommodate non-binary individuals) and places where meaningful connections and supportive communities can be formed.



Third places for queer youth

Queer individuals are seeking community with other queer people not only to experience belonging and acceptance but also to expand their understandings of queer culture and explore sexual and gender identities free of discrimination (Berger et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2024). Often safe spaces and community for queer youth can be found in third places. Third places are informal social environments outside of the home (the ‘first place’) and school/work (the ‘second place’) (Oldenburg, 1989). Places like cafés, parks, libraries, and community centers can serve as third places where individuals gather for conversation, leisure, and social interaction. Gender and sexuality alliances create third places where queer youth can let their guard down, access education on queer culture, develop friendships and systems of support, provide creative outlets, and create community in an isolated world (Litwiller, 2020; Theriault, 2014).

Summer camps act as third places

Summer camps function as third places. Third places encourage spontaneous encounters, dialogue, and the formation of social bonds, often across lines of age, class, and other intersecting social identities (Oldenburg, 1989). Camps are particularly effective at generating third places because camp experiences are often temporary and shaped by social dynamics, they can create unique opportunities for young people to explore identity and build strong connections. These in-between moments, sometimes called “liminal spaces,” can lead to powerful feelings of togetherness and belonging (Turner, 1987). Sociologist Émile Durkheim described this kind of shared energy as “collective effervescence,” which can make these experiences especially meaningful and transformative (Olaveson, 2001).. The benefits of this are well established by research (Baker, 2019; Cousineau, Mock, & Glover, 2018; Duerden et al., 2014; DeGraaf & Glover, 2003; Paris, 2008; Povilaitis, Sibthorp, & Warner, 2023; Sibthorp et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2020).

Canadian camps are positioned to have a significant impact on child and youth development. According to the Canadian Camps Association (Scherger & Richard, 2020), 2,050,000 children attended 955 accredited camps with 70,000 young people filling camp staff roles in 2020. This contributed \$2.5 billion to the Canadian economy (Scherger & Richard, 2020). Given the impact of camp experiences, it is vital that camps counter heteronormative practices that exclude queer youth (Gotfredsen & Linander, 2023).





Creating cultures of mattering

Community development and organisational culture building are complex and necessary aspects of offering safe and inclusive third places. Community development involves “citizen participation, community initiative and social change” to benefit individuals or a community (Pedlar, 2013, p.303). Focusing on the idea of “mattering” (Flett, 2017) is a helpful way to support inclusion. Mattering is the feeling of being valued by people who matter to us and believing that we can positively impact others’ lives (Flett, 2017). Mattering recognises the impacts that close

relationships have on mental health, including improvement to self-esteem and self-worth. Not being acknowledged or valued (what Flett (2018) calls “anti-mattering”), can have negative effects on individuals, such as the discrimination, oppression, and violence experienced by queer youth. Mattering, and the cultures where children and youth experience it, provides opportunities for strengthening resilience towards challenges, stabilising mood, and promoting wellbeing (Baker, 2024).

Methods

This study used a Participatory Action Research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). approach, with inspiration from Appreciative Inquiry (Stadler, 2014), to explore effective strategies for fostering inclusion at Camp Menesetung. We conducted 14 in-depth interviews with past and present experiences as campers, camp employees, leaders, board members, and community members. We employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify individuals who could offer varied perspectives and rich narratives (Symon, Cassell, & Dickson, 2000).



Findings:

A Haven

Camp Menesetung functions as a haven, distinct from the everyday realities of its campers and staff. Within this community participants, particularly those who are queer, find physical and emotional safety, but also the freedom to express themselves without fear of judgment or exclusion. This fosters belonging, identity formation, and personal renewal. Camp Menesetung has created a community space where individuals can “be themselves at full volume”.

“THE COUNTY”

Participants pointed to both personal experiences and broader perceptions of exclusion, harassment, discrimination, and isolation in the geographical and socio-cultural context where Menesetung is located. The area is rural and tends to be politically conservative with ties to farming communities and industry. The visible or openly queer population in the region appears to be low, which participants interpreted either as an actual demographic trend or as a reflection of individuals feeling unsafe to live “out” queer lives.

Participants consistently described the need to suppress or manage their identities in The County.

“I come from a very rural town and they’re not accepting. Like, there’s a lot of stigma against being queer, especially in these small towns. And it’s a very, like, conservative viewpoint.” (Trish)

Camp Menesetung was described as symbolically separate from The County, and as a haven where queer expression was not only allowed but celebrated.



A REFUGE

Camp Menesetung was perceived as a haven and/or a refuge. Participants described the camp as being a space separate from their daily lives that gave them a break from environments often rife with discrimination, bigotry, and/or social exclusion. Participants also described the camp as a place for recharging. Importantly, the data suggest that this need for refuge and renewal was not limited to queer individuals. Yet, for queer participants, being immersed in a supportive and affirming community meant that they gained renewed confidence in their identities, which helped them re-enter their everyday lives with greater resilience, self-worth, and a sense of mattering.

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“Menesetung was kind of like my saving grace when I was in high school ... 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 ... And 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.” (Cicada)

A MAGNET

The majority of Camp Menesetung staff are queer. This stands in contrast to Statistics Canada (2023) numbers where only 4.4% of Canadians identified as 2SLGBTQAI+ in 2023. Participants described being drawn to work for the camp due to their own or other queer friends' experiences of being accepted, valued, safe to expressive

themselves, and building community with others who share similar identities.

Camp Menesetung is a “magnet” for queer individuals seeking both summer employment and personal connection that is perpetuated through strong word-of-mouth recruitment of staff.

“

“Even within the context of being a United Church camp and meeting a lot of older people who are queer, I think is definitely a factor in allowing people to explore their identity from the area. And then they're going to be the people who are coming back year after year because they might not get that space at other camps within the area.” (Jasper)

Findings:

The Culture

“The Culture” refers to the intentionally created environment shaped and maintained by staff for themselves and campers. The Camp Menesetung culture is rooted in ideals of close-knit, caring, and inclusive Christian community. The time-limited setting of camp creates unique opportunities for Camp Menesetung to build a culture that emphasizes learning, activism, and mattering.

A CULTURE OF LEARNING AND GROWTH

Camp Menesetung prioritises individual learning and growth toward inclusion and social justice. This approach is grounded in the belief that campers, staff, families, and camp leaders are doing their best to be inclusive, but they may lack the information and/or understanding needed for interacting respectfully with queer individuals. In response, staff are trained to engage with a “maybe you didn’t know” and “how can I help you understand” mentality, aiming to guide people toward deeper awareness and empathy. The goal is to foster meaningful, relational, and experiential learning that leads to increased knowledge, compassion, and inclusivity.

“

“I would make jokes at the expense of other people. And then I learned from that... I know that some of the things I said weren’t okay and I can acknowledge that. I became better from that because I learned from people who are focused on equity, diversity and inclusion... It is a place where everyone can learn.” (McQueen)



A CULTURE OF ACTIVISM

The underlying philosophy behind queering space at Camp Menesetung is grounded in a desire to create positive change and compassionate impact. This approach is not abstract or symbolic, rather, it was based on tangible action. Examples of this activism included making the main hygiene building gender neutral, providing diverse sleeping arrangements (i.e., gender segregated, mixed gender and gender neutral), and participation in annual Pride festivities in the local area. At the core of these efforts was a strong understanding of what it means to belong to a marginalized group. This included recognizing how differences in privilege, access, and opportunity can shape people's experiences, and how meaningful change can be made by addressing these inequalities.

"The county held its first Pride in 2023, and it was during our staff training week. And so we went! We had a table [displaying the camp] at Pride and I let the staff go loose for a couple hours in the afternoon. I was like, "Go have fun. Go have Pride." I think maybe this is also part of why, culturally, what... it was the first Pride in the county. For a lot of my queer staff, this was the first time that their identities were being acknowledged. So I was like, "it doesn't matter what training I have to do this afternoon and evening, we are going to Pride because you need to be in this space." (Corinna)



A CULTURE OF MATTERING

The data revealed a culture where individuals felt genuinely seen, valued, and affirmed at Camp Menesetung. Participants described a sense of mattering using words of being celebrated, welcomed, affirmed (drawing from United Church language), at ease, safe, included, and belonging. The term mattering captures the essence of what Camp Menesetung strives to cultivate.

"...it felt like we were making what was happening around us and got to have all of our voices heard like how we did all of our check-ins" (Maci)



Findings:

Tensions

There are challenges to providing queer-inclusive, youth-focused cultures, programs and/or places. Participants surfaced tensions about how Camp Menesetung staff and stakeholders navigated and continue to navigate differences about inclusion, tradition, and community. The following tensions sub-themes explore the challenges Camp Menesetung faced and faces in being a queer inclusive environment.

INCLUSION FOR ALL

The concept of inclusion is interpreted in varied and sometimes conflicting ways. The data from this study revealed important nuances and contradictions in how inclusion is understood and operationalized at Camp Menesetung. Two distinct approaches emerged: inclusion-for-all and inclusion-for-queer-folks.

The inclusion-for-all perspective promoted the idea that all individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, should be equally welcomed and accommodated. For example, some participants equated the need for queer inclusion with the need for mobility accessibility, suggesting that similar efforts of inclusion would put disparate groups on equal footing. While this perspective is well-intentioned, both literature and practicality caution that

striving for full inclusion for “all” can be unrealistic and/or problematic to achieve. When such broad promises cannot be delivered, there is a risk of causing further harm or feelings of exclusion.

In contrast, the data also revealed a more targeted and tangible focus on inclusion-for-queer-folks, both ideologically and in practice. This specific form of inclusion appears to be more actively prioritized among younger staff and some leadership. However, this created tension, particularly between the perspectives of board members and legacy families, and the camp’s youth employees. A tension arose between differing stakeholders about what inclusion means, who it should be centred in inclusion efforts, and how these should be implemented.



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“There are still some board members that are like, “we are not rainbow camp. I don’t understand why we’re doing this so out there.” ...They see it [camp] as pigeonholed as one thing, and it’s like no, it is complete inclusion. It just so happens that right now that is the inclusion that’s needed.” (Kristy)



THE EXPERIENCES OF QUEER AND NON-QUEER PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT

Queer and non-queer individuals experienced camp differently and attached different meanings to their experiences. The data reveals that lived experiences at and of Camp Menesetung are layered, complex, and shaped by identity, belonging, and pre-crafted expectations by participants.

For queer participants, Camp Menesetung represented a space of safety, affirmation, and chosen community that is not present in other areas of their lives. This was also true for non-queer people but was not described in the same sense of being protected or having respite from discrimination. For non-queer people, camp held meanings tied to legacy, nostalgia, and individual growth. These diverse expectations and interpretations are not in conflict but generated some tensions, especially when the values, needs, or expectations diverged regarding camp practices or programming.

NEW AND LEGACY MEMBER VISIONS FOR CAMP

Camp Menesetung holds deep meaning for many individuals and families, including those with long-standing or multi-generational connections, as well as those who had attended, volunteered, or supported the camp financially over the years. For “legacy” members of Camp Menesetung (families with long and/or generational ties to the camp), the camp represented tradition, community, and personal and/or family history. There was also a large contingent of young people (children, youth, and young adults) who were deeply invested in the unique haven and culture of Camp Menesetung. This newer/younger cohort tended to have different expectations for the camp, including a greater emphasis on inclusivity, particularly around queer identities and experiences.

Tensions emerged between these groups. Legacy members reported feeling distanced and/or ostracized as the camp culture shifted toward promoting newer camp priorities and values. Conversely, newer camp employees, many of whom had attended or worked at camp for only two or three summers, were not aware of the importance or substantial contributions of support (financial, volunteering, repairs, donations) by legacy members. The need for ongoing support while positioning the camp as a leader in queer inclusion revealed the tensions of differing perspectives as well as a lack of understanding and/or sensitivity between and toward groups.

“I support this [explicit queer inclusion focus] 100%, but it’s being able to retain some of the families that historically have always come to camp. ...we have had some generational families from the camp that no longer attend because they don’t think that this is where the camp should be going ... They see it [camp] as pigeonholed as one thing, and it’s like no, it is complete inclusion. It just so happens that right now that is the inclusion that’s needed.” (Kristy)



CHURCH CAMP AND THE ASSUMED EXCLUSION OF 2SLGBTQAI+ FOLKS

The study revealed a powerful assumption that, because many Christian institutions have historically excluded 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, symbols, language, and practices connected to Christianity at camp might make queer participants feel unwelcome. The camp's leadership, staff, and broader community were navigating the tensions of honoring its faith-based roots and ensuring it remained a safe and "affirming" space for all (United Church, 2011). This evolving relationship between faith, tradition, and progressive values intensified the tension between legacy members and newer staff members, especially around questions of who belonged, whose voices were prioritized, and what the camp's mission should be. Efforts were underway to bridge divides, drawing on the United Church's call to be more inclusive, not less, but this remained an ongoing and complex challenge.

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“I know that we have [had bad experiences] when the camp has set up a booth at Pride ...there’s been a couple of individuals who will come up to the people at the booth who say “if you are a United Church camp, you can’t stand for this thing”, which obviously is backwards to what the United Church actually stands for. But say, “you can’t be promoting queerness. You can’t be. You’re not actually a community of faith if this is the direction you’ve decided to take...”” (Freya)

Conclusions

Camp Menesetung, and the unique culture of mattering that it provides, is an outcome of intentional efforts of far-reaching and diverse camp community members. Over many years camp leaders, staff, campers, families, board and community members have committed their time, care, convictions and compassion to develop a culture and physical space that is welcoming and just. These values, often associated and drawn from the ideals of Christian community, have inspired and made it possible for Camp Menesetung to serve as a haven and refuge for many individuals, allowing them to recharge, develop and strengthen their identities, and be connected to meaningful and supportive community. Our data revealed that this is particularly true and vital to the queer youth who have been campers and/or employees of the camp.

No community development, creation of a third place, or social justice work is without challenges. These challenges are especially present when people with different backgrounds, values, and visions come together to create a place that offers safety and belonging for everyone, with particular attention to those who are marginalized in their daily lives. Inevitably, there will be tensions. This study revealed, however, that the challenging, or “woolly”, work of navigating those tensions are worthwhile for the deep and rich benefits reported by participants.

While appreciative inquiry inspired this study (Stadler, 2014), we were open to and reflected critically on the stories shared with us in the interviews. We have endeavoured to conduct this project with an “open mind” but not an “empty head” (Dey, 1999, p.25) . Our goal was to reflect the complex and layered process of creating and sustaining a culture rooted in justice, welcoming, and mattering for others. We are grateful for the research participants sharing their stories with us and for the commitment and contribution of the study’s community-based steering committee. We feel very privileged to have conducted a study about community with, in, and for community.



Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to camp leaders at all levels who are engaging in the work of queer inclusion and justice within their camps and/or youth programs. As noted, camps are complex social and physical environments. While our study primarily focused on the social dynamics, cultural constructions, and the creation of safe and inclusive third places, we recognize that physical and structural elements also play a significant role in shaping camp participants' experiences of belonging and mattering. Camp Menesetung generously shared many of these insights with us, and in this section, we pass them along to you.

For building (queer) inclusive cultures:

- › Set and articulate your vision, mission, and values with regards to (queer) inclusion
- › Translate these values into observable behaviours for campers, staff, and leadership
- › Centre inclusive behaviours and values in all Human Resource related activities and practices (i.e., staff recruitment advertising and practices, position descriptions, performance review criteria, and performance management activities)
- › Develop a policy document (that can be and is revised regularly)
- › Hire queer people in all employment levels/roles, where possible
- › Hire queer people to leadership /decision making positions. Look for individuals who have experience with queer advocacy, community and culture development, and who displays reflexivity and maturity. These people will, intentionally or not, set a tone and be living role models.
- › Provide opportunities for debriefing, education, rest, and emotional regulation so that staff are able to respond compassionately to the circumstances they encounter
- › Set and reinforce expectations for language (i.e., pronoun usage, unacceptable slang, etc.)

For sites and structures:

- Maintain both gender-neutral toileting and shower facilities (with adequate privacy for individual use) as well as gender binary options (and label all the types)
- Offer flexible sleeping arrangements and accommodation including, but not limited to, gender segregated, gender mixed, and gender non-binary.
- Consider how employment roles are often filled according to heteronormatively assumed gendered role (i.e., cooks and kitchen staff by women and/or femininely identifying individuals or adventure and sport activity leaders by men and/or masculinely identifying individuals) and balance this out. This also includes holding all individuals accountable for their work duties regardless of gender assumptions or socialisation biases (i.e., men counsellors being excused for not performing caring, nurturing, or domestic cabin duties with campers)
- Use signage, materials, and camp artifacts to demonstrate inclusion and welcome to all who come on site (i.e. flags, symbols, signage, affirmational text and/or images, etc.), which includes divesting the camp from harmful practices, rituals, and artifacts

For camp boards and Executive Directors/ decision makers:

- › Physical Safety considerations such as codifying language on websites and other public-facing materials to protect from unwanted behaviours (discrimination, violence, etc.) coming on site
- › Get everybody on the board ON-BOARD
- › Educate your board and educate your camp community with your plans for change and inclusion
- › Make social and/or changes in stages and gain support from the wider community as you go along
- › Cultivate community partnerships that foster mutually beneficial relationships
- › Grow partnerships that can offer both financial and in-kind support, including skilled volunteers.
- › Identify where queer campers might congregate (other third places in the geography) already and recruit from there. AND, support that third place or affiliation to stay connected with campers and staff outside of the camp season
- › Work with partners to educate local communities about queer culture and inclusion of minoritized peoples
- › Apply for and work with partners to subsidise and fund social justice work in, through, and for the camp and its community
- › Listen to feedback, reflect, discuss, ask for help, make a (new) plan(s) AND follow-through. Engaging a cycle of dreaming, researching options, planning, implementation, and evaluation will serve you in longevity of efforts and positive improvements.

Summer camp directors:

- › Articulate expectations to parents/ guardians/purchasers about inclusivity at camp
- › Have camp purchasers (usually parents/ guardians) AND campers sign a behaviour expectations “contract”
- › Build staff trainings for inclusion that are based on your camp’s values, keeping in mind that ethics, compassion, and reflection can be taught, improved, and serve young people even when they don’t have all the correct information or terms.
- › Grow-as-you-go approaches to staff implementation and understandings of inclusion as well as strength-based approaches were serve you best
- › Take the time to help camp staff understand the business imperatives of camps so they can appreciate why certain things are done the way they are, and in the timeline that they do.

For camp staff:

- › Remember change can take time – your patience, compassion, and persistence are what gets it done
- › Keep learning about what helps campers and fellow staff members feel included, welcome, safe, respected, and like they matter. Do the things that promote this in your behaviours and in the community that you generate with others.
- › Social justice work AND camp employment are emotionally, intellectually and physically exhausting – take care of yourself so that you are rested enough to remain emotionally regulated and you can respond in ways that are confident, calm and foster connection.

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