

Inclusive Community Aquatics Programming for Children with Developmental Challenges: A Community Participatory Action Research

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What Is the Purpose of this Study/Review?

- The purpose of this participatory action research study was to explore facilitators and barriers to inclusive community aquatics programs for children with developmental/mental health challenges and their families.
- We sought to produce a framework that delineates barriers and facilitators to inclusive community programs for children with developmental/mental health challenges and their families.

What Is the Problem?

- Studies in education have repeatedly shown that inclusive education improves childhood experience and life trajectory; however, little is known about inclusion in community programs.
- Parents with children with mental health/developmental challenges as well as a local nonprofit partnered with an academic institution to investigate factors that prevent or enhance inclusion for community aquatics programs.

What Are the Findings?

- Inclusion is a concept that does not share a universal meaning.
- Major facilitators to inclusion in community settings include adequate resources, flexibility around accommodations, and motivated staff.
- Major barriers to inclusion in community settings include social stigma, financial limitations, and lack of communication between caregivers and service providers.

Who Should Care Most?

- People with developmental/mental health challenges.
- Community program leaders.
- Parents.
- Health care professionals.
- Public Health professionals.
- Nonprofit organizations working with people with developmental/mental health challenges

Recommendations for Action

- Participants felt strongly about the need to improve inclusion practices within aquatic and other community-based programs.
- Having an open communication channel among families, community programmers, and helping professionals can set expectations early and improve outcomes for neurodiverse children and their families.
- Devoting resources to ensure more staff have adequate training to work with neurodiverse children will improve inclusion in community settings.
- Public health efforts to promote inclusion in community programs and destigmatize mental illness and developmental disabilities in community settings can improve understanding and awareness of different abilities for the general public and community program participants.