



Tailoring Programs for Those with Special Needs

For the last five years Teri Rogoway of Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority has been partnering with the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy at the Rotary Play Garden to put on HPHP programs tailored for individuals with disabilities. This partnership originated when the Guadalupe River Park Conservancy received a Yahoo Education Grant, and contacted Teri to train their staff and volunteers on working with individuals who have special needs—in addition to adapting and implementing two of their exit programs specifically for this population as well.

When planning programs designed for individuals with disabilities, Teri’s process is intricate and multifaceted. She explains how:

“You [first] figure out how to adapt the activities for people with physical limitations because that is the easiest to adapt for –it also happens to be what most people think of when they imagine people with disabilities. I do a lot of sensitivity practice. I will sit in a chair and try to do the activity, and then try it without sight or hearing. I utilize a lot of the techniques I do in my trainings to determine if something will work. At the end of this process I make sure that I have props and materials that will be the most fun for the most people”.

But the true challenge in creating these tailored programs occurs when adapting for disabilities that are not visible and or obvious to staff members. Rogoway recalls one incident when a staff member grew frustrated with a child stating that:

“I had a staff person get upset with a child who was excited and started knocking down other participants, particularly one with Down Syndrome. That staff member didn't understand that he was also disabled, but with Autism and ADHD—and was not aware of those he was potentially hurting. You can't get upset with someone who is unintentionally hurting others”.

When creating programs Teri is careful to make sure that both the program location and the program itself are not too over stimulating for participants. She accomplishes this through having program leaders communicate clear and simple rules, making sure that everyone is behaving in a safe manner, and setting her programs in the Rotary Play Garden – a venue that is fenced in and has only one entrance and exit. For those leading programs, Teri is quick to note that some of the most important skills to have are flexibility and quick thinking. Teri elaborates that:

“You need to be able to adapt yourself on the fly, in the moment, to meet the needs of each person you are playing with. It helps to remember this is play and not a formal program. It helps keep the mood light;

and when dealing with bubbles, EVERY child will knock them over or spill the bucket at least once if not many times in their lives. No need to get upset, we are making good memories for everyone”.

But despite the challenges that come with tailoring and leading programs such as this, the end result is not only rewarding, but inspiring as well. For the participants of her programs, they are left with feelings of acceptance, and “knowing [that] there are places you can go, where people will understand and no one will judge you. People seem very grateful for the chance to be welcome someplace, regardless of ability. It is so hard for parents and caregivers of people with disabilities to feel truly welcome and included”.

When asked about what advice she would give to a program leader who is running a program for those with special needs Rogoway shares that it is alright to make mistakes and to be a little nervous. “You may make mistakes in the beginning as you are figuring out what works” she exclaims, “but I find this population to be very forgiving, patient, and very much grateful for your efforts. It is also one of the most rewarding things you can experience; when you let children lose themselves in being a kid and they forget about all their limitations. The expressions on their parents’ faces are well worth any uncertainty you may have at the beginning”.

For Teri, creating and taking part in programming tailored for those with special needs has had a substantial impact on her work as a park professional. She mentions how:

“These programs are an excellent reminder that educators and interpreters work well together because we are focused on giving people good experiences outside. I enjoy working with other park professionals. I feel like we have a stronger alliance. In times like these, when things can happen, like government shut downs, it is great to know that you have made friends you can help and who can help you in return. And the collaboration of ideas is always awesome. If you want a partnership, all you need to do is ask. Show what you can bring to the table, what you have to offer and tell them what you need in return to meet your own goals and make your boss and board happy. Most people's bosses want the same thing. There will be agencies that have had bad experiences in the past. So you be the good experience. Be patient and start slow, with just a few things and once the trust is established, you can really ramp up together”.

For more information on Teri’s programs please visit the program calendar.