

A Unique Approach to Social Coaching:

How Camp Amicus Supports Youth with ADHD and Learning Disabilities

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“It is a testament to the growth we see in our campers every day and the impact that growth has on a community”

Research has shown that middle to late childhood is a critical point for developing social and emotional competencies such as negotiating, compromising, resolving conflicts between peers, and disengaging in arguments. Children and youth who do not develop these competencies show poorer outcomes in their social spheres and are generally less accepted by peers. This can then exacerbate social learning difficulties as children who are left out of their peer groups have less opportunity to practice their social skills.

Social-emotional deficits are particularly prominent in neurodiverse communities such as youth diagnosed with ADHD and Learning Disabilities. Difficulties in executive functioning and emotional regulation can make it more challenging for neurodivergent youth to navigate social circles and be proactive when conflict arises. Camp Amicus seeks to support youth diagnosed with ADHD and Learning Disabilities who struggle with social-emotional competencies and connect them with like-minded peers.

How does Camp Amicus actually support the youth it works with? How does it differ from other camps?

Camp Amicus knows that “The child is never the problem, the problem is the problem.”

With this in mind, we know that for every conflict that arises and every social competency that may be lagging, our campers also possess their own strengths and talents that deserve to be celebrated. At Camp Amicus, a child is never assigned a label based on a behaviour that they display or a skill they may not possess yet. Camp works with neurodiverse youth to build a toolkit of social skills while also celebrating their hard work and highlighting their unique strengths. Through social coaching, Camp Amicus sets the framework for success and gives campers the ability to approach difficult conversations with critical thinking and confidence.

Camp Amicus sets the stage for success.

Camp Amicus offers a variety of different Camp and Recreation programs specifically tailored to youth ages 7-18 who have a primary diagnosis of ADHD and/or Learning Disabilities. Camp Amicus has often been described as a “Social skills development program disguised as a summer camp.” Multiple studies have shown that summer camps offer a wonderful opportunity for children and youth to practice their social skills. Unlike school, summer camps are a naturalistic environment with less rigid social expectations than a classroom setting. This offers a unique space where children are able to put their social competencies to the test and form connections with peers based on their shared interests. Camp Amicus is aware that neurodiverse youth can struggle in unfamiliar social situations and helps build up these competencies through explicit social coaching during programs.

In addition to explicit social coaching, a framework for success is also built into the framework of Camp Amicus functions in a 3:1 ratio, meaning for every three campers, there is one staff member. This way, counsellors are more accessible to campers and can intervene easily

if there is a social difficulty between youth. Camp Amicus also functions on a set schedule that varies very little year-to-year. Using schedules helps campers build a consistent daily routine, removing the stress of changing schedules day-to-day, which can greatly reduce anxiety and stress. With less energy spent on uncertainty, campers are more easily able to focus on developing social connections with their peers. Additionally, our staff receive weeks of training before camp even begins. With mature staff who undergo over eighty hours of training and a mandatory SIVA (Supporting Individuals Through Valued Attachments) certification, they are highly equipped to help youth navigate social interactions and foster long-term friendships between campers.

Let's say there is a conflict between two campers. How does Camp Amicus staff address this?

Let's be real: Even the most seasoned adult well practiced in their social skills will still run into conflict. At Camp Amicus, we recognize the importance of building up social skills in these moments so that our campers are better equipped to navigate conflict at camp, school, home, and in their greater lives.

In addition to using SIVA knowledge, Camp Amicus largely coaches youth through a framework called CDP-R. Here's how it works:

- **C: Contain & Co-Regulate.** The C in our acronym stands for Contain and Co-regulate. This involves separating the child involved from the stimulus or social interaction that is distressing them. This is not calling out a child in front of their peers, but rather calmly and privately asking the child if they would like to step away from the situation, or moving the situation away from them. Once the

child has been separated from the stimulus, counsellors work on co-regulating with them. This can look like letting them blow off steam, working through breathing exercises, and grounding techniques, or using the Zones of Regulation to identify feelings. Counsellors take a child-led approach in co-regulation and don't move forward with the social coaching process until a child has sufficiently re-regulated themselves.

- **D: Describe.** Once the camper has regulated and is ready to talk about what happened, counsellors will open up the floor for them to describe the events of the incident in their own words. It is important to note that in this stage, campers are still processing the incident and, in turn, their emotions. At this stage of CDP-R, counsellors are actively listening to the camper and validating their feelings. It is important to note that in this stage, counsellors are not yet in “problem-solving mode,” rather role modelling active listening to the camper and ensuring their concerns feel heard and understood rather than dismissed.
- **P: Plan and Practice.** The plan and practice stage is where the most explicit “social coaching” happens. Once counsellors have heard the camper describe the incident, they will then recount the events back to the camper to clarify before moving into the problem-solving process. The camper and counsellor will then work together to brainstorm multiple different ways to approach similar conflicts in the future. After they have thought of solutions, they will do a role play together so that the camper is easily able to understand the impact of their solutions and whether or not they are effective. This stage is entirely child-led, and counsellors let the youth come up with their own solutions, even if they know

they might not have the desired outcome. Letting campers lead this process is critical to helping them understand the intricacies of social interactions. By going through them with a trusted, non-judgmental adult, it removes the pressure of an interaction with peers and allows them to work through effective solutions that are meaningful to them -ones that they will be more likely to use in future interactions.

- **R: Re-Integrate:** After this process is done, campers will re-integrate back into camp. During this time, counsellors subtly introduce them back into the program and stay with them during the activity. By doing this, it removes shame and stigma that youth might feel about doing something “wrong” and shows them that they are still welcome and valued at camp. During this time, counsellors can also facilitate conversations between campers if there are any further issues that need to be resolved.

Our Commitment

At Amicus, our commitment is to intentionally build social skills while immersing youth in the fun, camaraderie, and friendships that define a meaningful camp experience. Through evidence-based practices, consistent and explicit social coaching, and highly trained staff, we create an environment where neurodiverse youth feel safe to practice, reflect, and grow. The impact of this approach is seen not only in increased confidence and stronger social skills, but in the lasting friendships many campers form- often for the first time- and carry with them for years. To learn more about Camp Amicus, explore our programs, or find out how to get involved, visit <https://www.foothillsacademy.org/community/amicus>.

