

## Building Positive Social Networks Through Environmental Interventions in Integrated Recreation Programs

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this article is to present sociometry, circle of friends, and cooperative learning technologies that therapeutic recreation specialists can use as strategies for including persons with disabilities into integrated community recreation programs. These strategies are examples of external integrative strategies, strategies designed to affect the immediate surroundings of the targeted individual, thus preparing the environment for socialization, learning, and integration. Sociometry is presented as a strategy for restructuring groups to promote the inclusion of isolated individuals. Circle of friends techniques prepare existing groups for the introduction of new members. Cooperative learning methods are used to promote positive interactions between group members. Combined with carefully planned strategies for leisure and social skills instruction and networking with others, sociometry, circle of friends, and cooperative learning techniques can become a part of a comprehensive package to promote the successful integration of recreation programs by including the most distant members of our communities.

**KEY WORDS:** Circle of Friends, Community, Cooperative Learning, Developmental Disabilities, Networking, Social Skills, Sociometry, Therapeutic Recreation

### **Article:**

The appropriate use of free time has become an important aspect of living for people without disabilities. All too often individuals with developmental disabilities have not acquired the skills necessary to use their free time in appropriate, healthful, and social ways. For example, they may participate in an educational or vocational program for a short part of their day and have virtually nothing to do during the largest portion of it.

Constructive and socializing recreational activities can be offered and taught to fill these voids. The development of recreation skills, learned in conjunction with functional social skill instruction, must become a prime objective for therapeutic recreation specialists seeking to serve persons with disabilities. As Moreno (1934) so eloquently stated, "An individual cannot survive without social connections, or thrive without friends." Indeed, individuals who fail to develop the necessary skills to engage in age-appropriate recreation are considered handicapped (Wehman & Schleien, 1981).

When designed carefully, recreation participation will yield collateral benefits across curriculum domains. Improvements in language, cognition, physical fitness, and social behavior are all shown to improve or develop in conjunction with skills learned during recreation participation (Schleien & Wehman, 1986). For example, Bates and Renzaglia (1979) designed a study for a student who was profoundly retarded that included reinforcement for improvements in language, social and leisure skills. The student acquired new verbal and social skills while learning to play a table game. Schleien (1984) promoted the acquisition of cooperative play skills during the implementation of a school-based leisure education program for children who had severe learning disabilities. Similarly, Vandercook (1987) reported that as persons with severe disabilities became more proficient in two recreational activities (i.e., pinball, bowling) their social repertoires became more so-

phisticated.

Alternative models for community recreation integration need to be considered as we attempt to be inclusive in our programs. First, functional social skills instruction should be included as a collateral emphasis during community leisure instruction, as suggested by Schleien and Ray (1988). In this way, the individual with disabilities accesses the community from the outset. Second, we can heed a warning from Sasso and Rude (1987) who stress that basic social skills should be learned prior to community integration in order to maximize success. Following this path, skills that are presumed to be prerequisites for functioning in the community would need to be learned as a condition for community inclusion. A third model, one that closely resembles Taylor's (1988) "new community-based continuum," is one that we recommend. In this model, social and leisure skill needs of the individual are addressed (as in the first model) while, at the same time, carefully preparing the receiving environment so as to smooth community transition. People with developmental disabilities often are more handicapped by the environment than by their disabilities. The most dramatic shift in our way of thinking is the recognition that social and physical environments are often a greater issue than abilities and disabilities (Kappel, Nagel, & Wieck, 1990).

The purpose of this article is to describe the use of three specific interventions to prepare a community recreation environment for integrative programs: sociometry, circle of friends, and cooperative learning. These extrinsic processes impact upon the environment of the individual and are designed to empower program participants, nondisabled and disabled alike, to assist each other in building friendships as they develop leisure and social skills. Each intervention technique is described in the next section, followed by a case study and discussion section on the application of these techniques.

***I. Sociometry.*** Sociometry (Moreno, 1934) is a group restructuring process that identifies qualitative social dimensions within a given group of individuals. The social dimensions include group cohesiveness, the existence of subgroups or cliques, interpersonal attractions and rejections between members, and the social ranking of each group member by his or her peers. Beyond the study of group structure this technique is valuable as a means to assess and promote the inclusion of individuals.

The sociometric process allows a recreation service provider to assess a group and identify isolated and excluded members. The facilitator can then restructure and integrate these individuals back into the group using an empowerment process. Each group member is empowered to restructure the group through the use of a social criterion. Social criteria are carefully constructed questions that request, in a confidential manner, specific information concerning the individual's social relationships. This information is used to alter grouping arrangements (e.g., seating arrangements, partner arrangements, teammates) to enhance the social dynamics of the group. Furthermore, sociometric measurements are conducted to evaluate the inclusion of the originally isolated and excluded group members. This process should be ongoing throughout the life of the group to ensure the most positive group structure and to continue to empower members to enhance their own social experiences.

Six rules for using the sociometric process were suggested by Moreno (1934) and Hare (1976):

1. The limits of the group in which the test is given should be indicated (describe who can be chosen).
2. There should be unlimited choices of other persons (select as many peers as appropriate).
3. Individuals should be asked to choose and reject other group members with a specific criterion in mind (choose people based on criterion/question offered).
4. The results of the sociometric test should be used to restructure the group (group should be reorganized by placing people together who have chosen each other).

5. Opinions should be given in private.

6. Questions should be phrased in way that all members can understand.

An example of a sociogram is illustrated in Figure 1. This hypothetical sociogram depicts a group of children participating in a scout troop. The recreation leader is undertaking the sociometric process in order to more fully understand the scout troop so that the youth in the troop could select their campsite partners. Specific criteria used included "With whom would you like to set up a campsite?" and "With whom do you not want to set up camp?" Individuals to select from included all of the scouts who registered for the trip. Each scout filled out a 3" X 5" card with his or her answers, which were collected by the leader. The leader then proceeded to construct a sociogram using the initials of each scout and arrows to indicate direction of choices. Where two scouts selected each other, arrowheads were eliminated and a slash was marked across the line. If a scout indicated that he or she did not wish to camp with a particular individual, a dashed line with an arrow recorded the rejection.

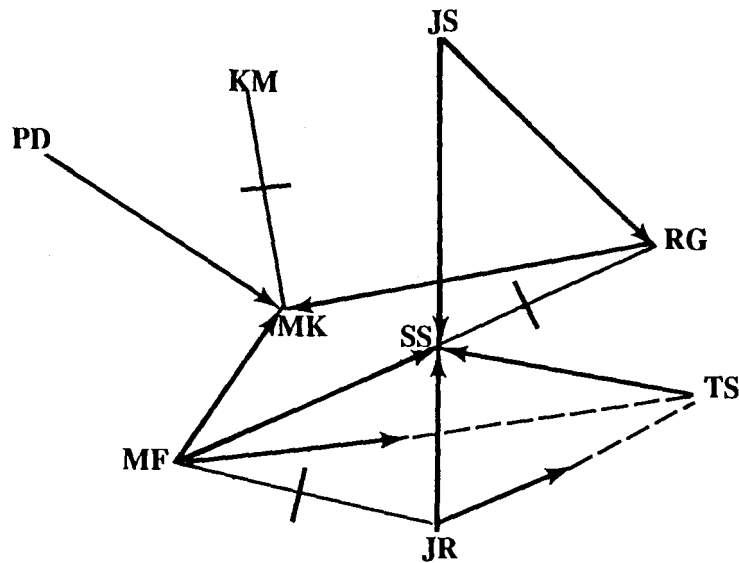


FIGURE 1. ORIGINAL SCOUT TROOP SOCIAL STRUCTURE.

The sociogram in Figure 1 indicates that the scout troop had the following characteristics: (1) Two "stars" existed, SS and MK; they were the most frequently chosen, with 5 and 4 members selecting them, respectively; (2) Three "mutual attractions" existed between KM-MK, SS-RG, and MF-JR; (3) Two "isolates" were present, PD and JS. They were members who had not been selected by the others; (4) One member, TS, was rejected and not chosen.

To restructure this troop, the leader would begin by focusing on the rejected and isolated members TS, PD, and JS. These individuals were the most vulnerable to being left out. These scouts were placed with their first choices and away from those who rejected them. Then, the remaining scouts were placed.

The leader can check on the success of the groupings by conducting informal interviews and by observing interactions between the scouts. Following the camping experience, the leader can evaluate the restructuring through observations, personal interviews, and by conducting another sociometric measurement.

Sociometric criteria can be designed to assist the leader to fulfill the goals of the activity or program. If the program provides opportunities to make friends, a criterion such as, "Who would you choose as a friend?" could be used. Or, if the program attempts to promote leadership and teamwork, criteria such as "Who would you choose as a leader?" or "With whom would you like to canoe?" could be used. Adaptations can be made, such as using pictures of fellow classmates, to assist participants with developmental disabilities or those with poor expressive language (Hart, 1976).

**II. Circle of Friends.** Sometimes an individual has great difficulty gaining access to a group, possibly because

of the presence of a severe disability. In such a case, it may be useful to use the circle of friends intervention technique. This technique or process prepares a small group or circle of friends to assist the individual or focus person. The circle of friends is comprised of volunteer group members, friends and significant people in the focus person's life (e.g., parents, siblings). These new and old friends are empowered through intimate knowledge of the focus person. For example, a group leader can prepare a group of nondisabled peers for inclusion of a person with a disability by orchestrating a group discussion of the new member's dreams, nightmares, likes, strengths/gifts/abilities, and needs.

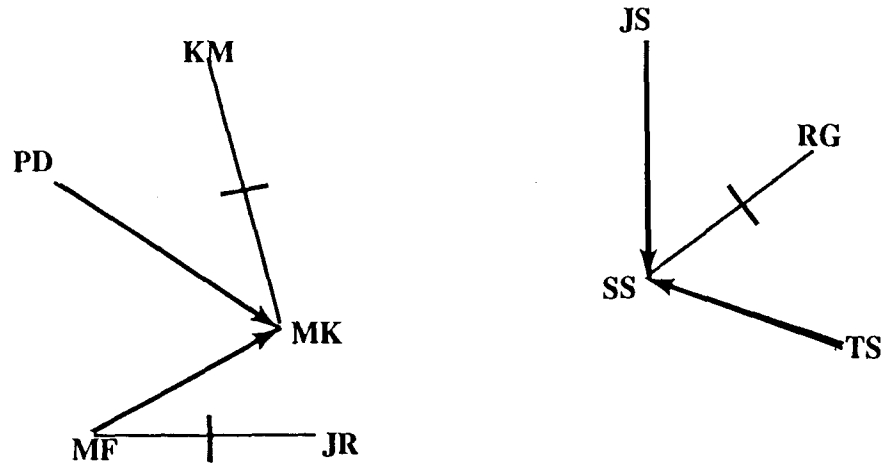


FIGURE 2. SCOUT TROOP RESTRUCTURED INTO TWO CAMPSITE GROUPS.

By carefully directing the discussion, the leader can guide the group through the perceived barriers to inclusion, assisting the group to create solutions that could promote acceptance of the focus person into the group. The circle of friends, the focus person, and the group leader work together to create successful participation for all. Recreation specialists will find this adaptable and dynamic process useful in assisting many individuals to develop their own circles of friends in recreational programs and communities.

**III. Cooperative Learning.** The primary focus of the sociometric and circle of friends approaches is to encourage nondisabled participants to think creatively about how they can improve opportunities for a peer who is disabled and then to empower them to implement their plans and act upon their ideas. These are essential approaches in the process of sound integrated programming and ones that can be enhanced with a cooperative learning approach. Cooperative learning is, in part, also a planning vehicle, but its emphasis is upon actively promoting child-to-child interactions through three interrelated processes: (1) preparation of non-disabled participants to interact as friends of a participant with a disability, (2) structuring of group directions and dynamics to promote cooperative outcomes, and (3) preparation of adult leaders to promote and sustain positive child-to-child interactions (Rynders & Schleien, 1988).

Preparation of nondisabled participants to interact as friends with a participant who has a disability includes sharpening their existing friendship skills (e.g., pointing out the importance of taking turns, staying close when playing together, communicating effectively). It also involves giving tips on how to interact when a partner with a disability is having difficulty with a task (e.g., how to use a prompting instructional hierarchy).

Structuring of group dynamics to promote cooperative learning outcomes involves the techniques of cooperative goal structuring (Johnson & Johnson, 1987) in which group goals emphasize interrelated contributions of all members of the group. For example, a waterfront director, preparing a group of five persons with varying abilities to paddle a canoe cooperatively would instruct them in how to encourage one another and stroke together. Nondisabled participants would be taught how to provide modeling and physical guidance at the proper time, and would learn how to be supportive—but not to dominate—in their participation. The central intent would be to encourage interdependence so that a successful group outcome is attained. Cooperative learning by its very nature creates camaraderie and positive interactions.

Preparation of the adult leader(s) as interaction "coache(s)" involves instructing the adult leaders in how to prompt cooperative interactions when they are not occurring and how to reinforce positive interactions when they do occur. Also emphasized is the importance of reorienting participants when interactions lose their "spark" and to trouble-shoot to avoid problems that threaten good participation altogether. Moreover, adult leaders are encouraged to diminish the frequency and duration of intervention when the tempo of the cooperative activity is sufficient, to avoid unnecessary adult intrusiveness (a problem brought to professionals' attention by Meyer et al., 1987). Finally, adult leaders learn how to adapt activities to maximize cooperative participation. For example, an adult leader might give each individual a pizza ingredient that is essential to creating a good whole pizza rather than just setting all of the ingredients in the center of the table.

### A Case Study Illustrating the Use of the Three Techniques

Jamie was 11-years-old when he attended a self-contained, segregated classroom for children with severe and multiple disabilities. His mother was engaged in preparations to integrate Jamie into his local neighborhood middle school. His mother's greatest fear was that her son did not know any of the other children who attended the local school and that this was his greatest need. She believed that a potential path to success in his integration at school was to help him build relationships, hopefully friendships, before the fall term. To assess Jamie's current relationships and friendships, his mother and the CTRS constructed a circle of friends diagram that is illustrated in Figure 3.

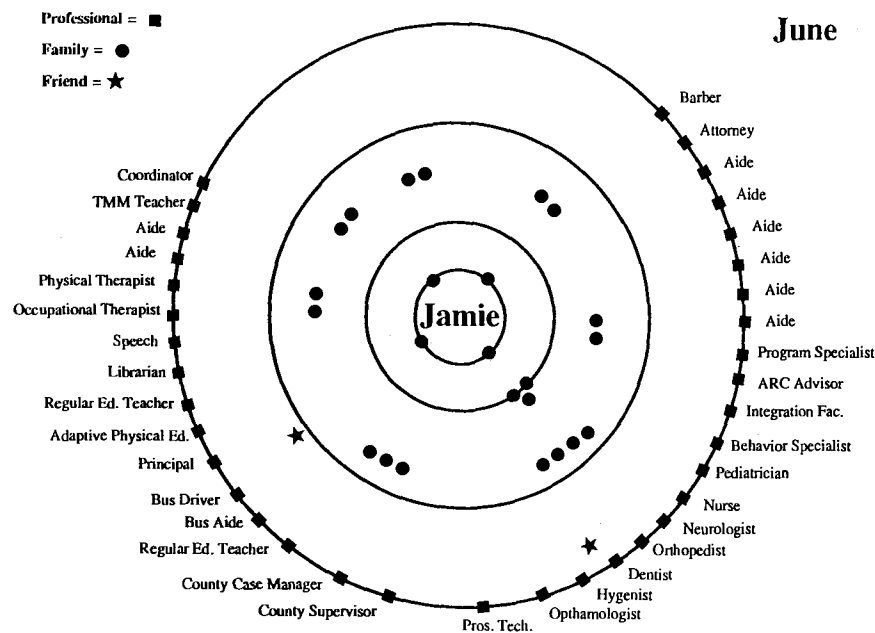


FIGURE 3. JAMIE'S CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, JUNE, 1988.

In this figure each circle represents a different type of relationship. The first circle around Jamie represents his very best friends (i.e., the people closest to him who he loves and relies on, as well as with whom he spends the most time). The second circle represents his best friends (i.e., the people who he really likes and with whom he spends a significant amount of time, but not as much as those in his inner-most circle). The third circle represents Jamie's recreational friends and extended family (i.e., the people with whom he does things periodically). Finally, the outer circle represents professionals who are paid to be in Jamie's life, such as doctors, teachers, and others who have a defined role to perform on behalf of Jamie (O'Brien, Forest, Snow, & Hasbury, 1989).

Only two same-age peers appear on Jamie's initial diagram. One peer, on his third circle, is a girl who lives about three blocks away and visits him periodically. Jamie does not see her outside of these visits. The second peer represents the rotating "special friends" children who help and teach in the special education classroom. These peers have been placed on the fourth circle because of their transient and defined roles within Jamie's life. This diagramming procedure documented Jamie's need to build friendships with other children. This became the

focus of Jamie's therapeutic recreation program during the summer months. To offer Jamie and his neighborhood peers an opportunity to get to know one another, several long-term social recreational programs were selected for Jamie's integrative participation. The programs included a supervised 8-week playground program at a neighborhood park and a 2-week day camp program.

Careful planning, communication, and support building were undertaken by Jamie's parents, the CTRS/integration facilitator, aides, park and recreation supervisors, and site personnel. Formal and informal environmental assessments, leisure interest assessments, and leisure skill inventories (Schleien & Ray, 1988) were completed and staff training was performed based on the information received. A peer training program with a cooperative learning approach was implemented and the second phase of the circle of friends process was initiated.

The second phase of the circle of friends process was to involve the playground participants in the process of integrating Jamie into the program. Jamie was introduced by the CTRS as an 11-year-old boy who lived in a near-by neighborhood, would be attending fifth grade at the local middle school in the fall, and who wished to participate. A photo album was shared to give the children without disabilities an opportunity to see the activities that Jamie and his family enjoy.

The CTRS and the park and recreation staff were apprehensive that the summer program might not be a success for everyone. The nondisabled participants were asked why they thought that the adults were uneasy about Jamie joining the program. The children responded with, "We may tease or ignore Jamie." Then, they were asked, "What are the things we want you to do to make this program a success?" and they responded with "We can say hello, invite Jamie to play, talk with him, and show him how we play the games." The CTRS followed this introduction with the five questions and discussion areas (i.e., Jamie's dreams, nightmares, likes, strengths, needs) that the circle of friends process addresses. The answers that Jamie's parents and siblings provided previously were shared at this time. This discussion empowered the participants to contribute to the program's success.

The next step was to structure interactions for cooperative learning. Playground staff were identified as being responsible for structuring the activities, learning how to promote interdependence (cooperation), learning when and how to cue and reinforce positive interactions, developing an understanding of how and when to redirect the activities of participants when off-task, and understanding that rapid intervention (e.g., removal, passive restraint) would be in order if a situation became unsafe. The aide that assisted Jamie was identified as being responsible for his personal needs (i.e., toileting, feeding, mobility) and for attempting to facilitate interactions between Jamie and his peers. Peers without disabilities had their general friendship skills sharpened (e.g., "friends take turns, smile at each other, stay close when playing together"), and also learned how to be a special friend when that was appropriate. For example, they learned when and how to model and/ or physically guide a response when Jamie indicated that he didn't know what to do. They also learned basic manual communication signs that people with disabilities often use (e.g., toilet, friend).

Throughout the summer program leaders empowered the children to make suggestions and adaptations and to create games or ways that everyone could participate. By the end of the summer it was the consensus of staff and Jamie's aide that the children had invented more creative ways to include Jamie and make it fun for everyone than did the adults. To evaluate Jamie's goal, another circle of friends diagram was constructed by playground staff, Jamie's aide, and the other children. This second diagram appears in Figure 4. The summer was a success for everyone.

Stories of inclusion continued for Jamie. In the fall he was welcomed by his playground friends at his neighborhood school where a circle of friends was continued to assist in his integration. During the following summer he was joined daily by a friend who lived down the street. Jamie was often invited to her home for snacks and play. When the CTRS introduced him at a day camp program the following summer, 10 of the 18 campers listed Jamie on their circle of friends diagrams before the program commenced.



## Discussion and Implications

Sociometry, circle of friends, and cooperative learning are examples of environmental strategies. The intent of these techniques is to affect the targeted individual's environment in order to make that environment more accessible and conducive to learning, socialization, and friendship development. In Jamie's case, his peers were prepared to meet him, and the program was structured to promote maximum positive interaction between Jamie and his peers. However, there are other questions that need to be addressed when formulating a plan for inclusion of individuals of varying abilities. Other concerns include how leisure and social skills will be taught and the identification of key players who will help make integration and neighborhood connectedness a reality. Finally, the adult leader must consider how to combine these strategies to accommodate all of the participants with and without disabilities.

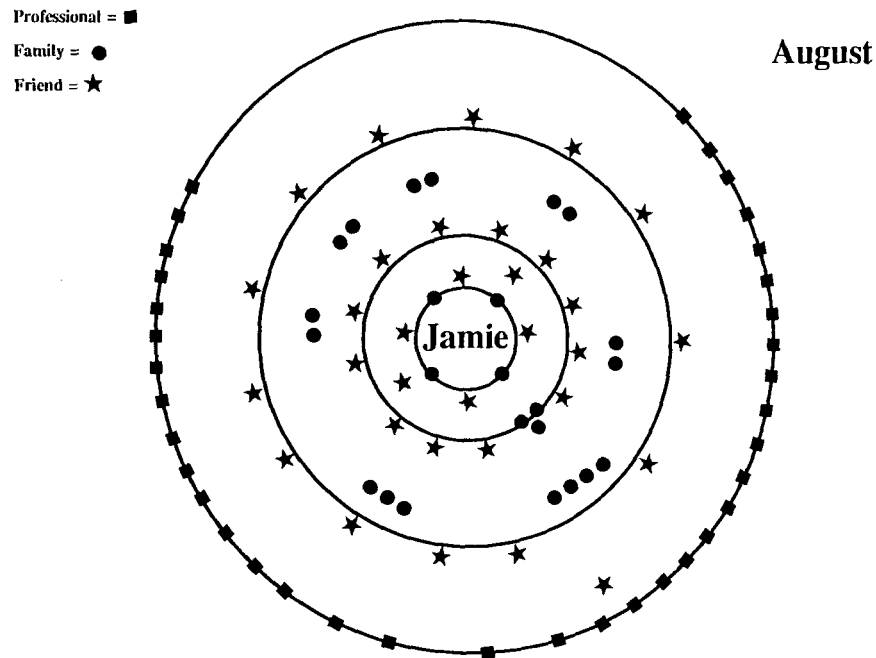


FIGURE 4. JAMIE'S CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, AUGUST, 1988.

We contend that well planned, repeated, frequent, systematic, small group instruction in community leisure environments must be implemented to the maximum extent possible if we are to be successful in teaching community leisure, social, and friendship skills. But, given limited personnel and resources of most public schools, group homes, and rehabilitation facilities, how does one organize such systematic instruction? One way is to jointly plan community instruction with therapeutic recreation personnel (e.g., CTRS consultants) who may be employed by the recreation agency targeted for instruction. Such an alliance could provide a powerful source of help to special educators and parents/careproviders. Since most therapeutic recreation specialists provide recreation instruction after school and work hours and on weekends, such instruction could easily supplement community training provided in schools and at work sites.

Individuals with severe disabilities, like Jamie, will probably need daily or weekly instruction in community settings to acquire normalized recreation skills and friends. In addition, once the skills are mastered, a variety of interested family members and friends must be located and encouraged to commit a minimal amount of time to provide an opportunity for the individual to practice and enjoy the activity. How are these problems to be addressed? Locating only two people interested in spending one afternoon per month can result in a substantial change in the recreation and social options available to a person with a disability. In addition, costs of community instruction can be reduced by simple maneuvers such as having school buses drop students with disabilities off at a particular recreation agency on the way to school (with the instructor there to meet them of course), or by teaching them to use public transportation.

While it is expected that the community recreation professional has the requisite skills and knowledge to plan and implement appropriate recreation programs and services for the neighborhood constituency, seldom does he

or she operate alone in this process. Networking is required. Networking involves making connections with professionals from various disciplines, with community members, and with parents and consumers—all of whom share common interests in improving the quality of life for an individual with a disability. Networking is a process. As such, it involves the establishment of ongoing and productive working relationships between the CTRS and others who are striving to meet similar ends. Through the use of sociometric and circle of friends technologies, the astute recreation professional and parent/careprovider will determine the strengths of these social networks or contacts and solicit the assistance of the community in promoting social interactions and friendship skills through cooperative learning techniques.

As Jamie's parents can verify, the facilitation of social networks and friendships can become the most significant role of the CTRS. The traditional goals of the therapeutic recreation specialist (e.g., teaching leisure skills) cannot compare with the experience of facilitating a close friendship. The combination of elements, such as learning appropriate leisure and social skills, and preparing nondisabled participants for integrated activities, made it possible for Jamie and his nondisabled peers to share leisure experiences in a mutually gratifying way. The time has come to adapt a new way of thinking, founded on the premise that the community belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to the community. Integrated recreation can be an ideal vehicle for promoting this attitude.

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