

The Impact of Ramah Programs for Children, Teens, and Young Adults with Disabilities

A Survey of Special Needs Education Professionals, Ramah Special Needs Staff, Staff Alumni, and Parents

National Ramah Commission, Inc., and Research Success Technologies, Inc.

Summary – October 2013

Since the establishment of the first Tikvah program in 1970, Ramah camps have pioneered the development of immersive, educational Jewish camp experiences for children, teens, and young adults with disabilities. **The National Ramah Commission carried out this research project in order to document the impact of its special needs programs.**

Three groups received an email invitation with follow-up reminders to take an online survey in September 2013:

- **Professionals:** National Ramah assembled a contact list of 142 people, leading professionals in the field of Jewish special needs education. Of these, 53 (37%) responded and 37 (26%) completed the entire survey.
- **Parents:** 576 parents of children who have attended Ramah special needs programs received a survey invitation. Of these, 170 (30%) responded and 147 (26%) completed the entire survey.
- **Staff and staff alumni:** 749 staff and staff alumni of Ramah special needs programs received the survey invitation. Of these, 228 (30%) responded and 152 (20%) completed the entire survey.

Key findings are summarized below.

I. REPUTATION

Ramah special needs programs enjoy a stellar reputation among the professionals, parents, staff, and staff alumni who responded to the strategic planning survey.

- Over 90% of all three groups would strongly recommend the program when asked about sending a child to a Ramah special needs program.
- 90% of parents who are familiar with other camps regard Ramah as providing better programming in comparison to other camp programs.
- Three-quarters of professionals regard Ramah as a pioneer in the field and as continuing to set industry standards.

Parents hold Ramah staff in high esteem. Three-quarters of parents cite Ramah staff expertise as the reason they send their child to Ramah. They report that Ramah special needs program staff are:

- 97% – Hardworking
- 95% – Nurturing
- 83% – Selfless
- 79% – Well-trained

"I believe that the way the program involves children with special needs with the rest of the camp is absolutely incredible and life-changing for everyone. I think Ramah sets an amazing standard for the necessity of integration. Additionally, the amount of programming and thought that goes into every program makes it an educational experience as well as a social fun one for the kids."

II. ACCESS TO JEWISH EDUCATION

A large majority of parents report that **finding Jewish educational opportunities for their children with disabilities is a struggle**, and that **Ramah's programs provide access to Jewish education that they would not otherwise attain**.

- 79% believe that it is difficult gaining access to a meaningful Jewish experience due to their children's disabilities; 83% feel their children gained meaningful exposure to Jewish community at Ramah; 58% feel their children gained meaningful exposure to Jewish ritual
- 32% report that their children have been turned away from another Jewish program or institution due to their disabilities
- 22% note financial assistance was a condition for them to send their children to a Jewish camp

III. IMPACT ON STAFF AND OTHER CAMPERS

The **impact of camp extends to special needs program staff and to campers who interact with campers with disabilities**, influencing the choices they make in life:

- 55% – Philanthropy
- 53% – Volunteer work
- 41% – Professional work and career choice
- 32% – College or graduate school coursework

This includes a **wide range of personal and professional benefits**:

- 95% – gained awareness of issues having to do with inclusion of individuals with disabilities
- 87% – gained a sense of responsibility for others
- 84% – became more patient with others

"Thanks to my experience working in a special needs program, my ability to recognize other people for their strengths and not just for their weaknesses is much more developed. When you're working with a camper with special needs, not only does your patience have to increase, but your stress and intolerance for their supposed 'weakness' initially rise as well. However, as the summer goes on, you begin to realize that beyond the visible cues and often difficult moments in working with someone with special needs, there is a deep and elaborate human being with skills and desires far beyond what you expect."

IV. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The majority of respondents believe that the **ongoing development of social integration represents the area of greatest strategic importance** for future programming. **Parents are particularly concerned about social inclusion**, with 68% stating that it served as a strong initial motivation to send their children to Ramah. A **second area of priority is building campers' skills and confidence**. Most parents, professionals, and staff alumni felt satisfied with the educational environment and Jewish experiences at camp and, as a result, did not feel there was need for this to be a priority area for future development.