

@Virtual Voices Camp 2001 Report



New friends, fun and communication were the themes of @Virtual Voices 2001, a summer program for BC students with augmentative communication needs. Twenty-three campers, who all use "voice output" technologies, came from across the province to spend five days at Camp Squamish. They enjoyed camp activities, such as swimming, games, and drama, with extra support to help them communicate with their friends and camp staff.

The Lions Society of BC's Easter Seal Camping Program and Special Education Technology-British Columbia co-sponsored @Virtual Voices 2001. The Lions Society hosted this program at Camp Squamish, a fully accessible facility set in park-like surroundings. The camp staff provided a full program of recreational activities, as well as 24-hour care and supervision at no cost for all the children who participated.



@Virtual Voices had a unique focus on building communication and technology skills in a camp atmosphere. To support these goals, SET-BC coordinated a team of speech language pathologists and technical specialists who planned and facilitated communication throughout the 5 days. This team worked in partnership with camp staff to ensure that the children could participate and communicate in all activities.

"We're extremely pleased to bring this camp experience to young students in BC," said Stephen Miller, Executive Director of the Lions Society of BC. "@Virtual Voices ensures that they too get to enjoy traditional camp activities such as arts and crafts, aquatics, sing-alongs and even an overnight campout and evening campfire. Perhaps most important of all, it gives these children the ability and confidence to express themselves, in a setting that makes for a truly unforgettable time."



Camp Activities

The camp provided a great environment for campers to make new friends, take part in recreational activities and improve their communication skills. Camp Squamish programmers and counselors organized the campers into "buddy groups" for each day's events. Campers could choose whether they wanted to join in arts and crafts, outdoor pursuits, aquatics in the indoor pool, waterfront, or recreation and games.



The theme of camp this year was Hollywood North and activities revolved around the film and fashion industry. Even the boys got into the swing of things! Campers participated in the all-camp activity, which was created by the camp programmers and staff. "Flashy Star", the famous talk show host, was kidnapped on the first day and the mystery of her disappearance had to be solved! To everyone's delight and relief, the kidnapper was discovered, Flashy was released unharmed and re-appeared on the last day.

The camp setting was a motivating environment for building communication strategies, as the campers were eager to take part in the fun and excitement. The communication team supported and facilitated the campers' communication in all camp activities.

It was day three and staff and campers, except for those eating blended food, were eating make-your-own burritos. Tyson was quite content to eat his own dinner until he saw the others with burritos. Although he was still hungry, he stopped eating and said "adult food num!" on his communication device. After many unsuccessful attempts to get his message across, he said, "I want to show you something". He looked in the kitchen, naming all of the kitchen utensils stored in his DeltaTalker until Lois asked

"Were you looking for a blender?" Tyson practically jumped out of his chair in glee! He went through the line, picked his fixin's, and half an hour later, was happily finishing his blended burrito. Talk about persistence!!! The next day, we added "blender" into Tyson's DeltaTalker.



Support for Communication

During the five days, each Buddy Group wrote and practiced a skit, which they performed on the last day. They used their personal communication devices, plus a number of simple digital recording devices, to say their lines. It was fun and exciting to watch each group's performance and very enlightening for the speech language pathologists who coordinated the process. A major focus of this year's camp was encouraging the campers to communicate with each other.



With 23 campers using 10 different types of communication technologies, there was a lot of interest in comparing devices and sharing opinions on technology options. For most of the campers, and especially for those from small communities, camp provided a unique opportunity for them to talk to other students who use voice output technologies to communicate.

Aizlyn used her computer (with Speaking Dynamically Pro) constantly, sharing her ideas and thoughts without prompting. She loved being a witch in the play and had fun teasing her roommates and others with her witch's laugh.

Bree-Anna is a big fan of the Back Street Boys and used her SynergyMaac to play her favourite songs for the other teenage girls. And she did a great job as the narrator of the "Princess in Peril" on skit night.

Rachel started initiating greetings with some counselors and then requested her favourite song. It was great to see her so motivated to use her DynaMyte spontaneously.

Beata used up 50% of her Liberator's battery power. That's never happened before. She talked more today than ever before.

Maggie took her DynaVox to the campfire and chatted all through dinner with her friends, at one time saying "You are my special friend".

Marcel pointed to another camper using a Delta Talker, indicating with gestures that he had one too. When asked, "Where is it?", he went inside to get it and proceeded to use during a great conversation. It was all initiated because of the modeling of another camper.

It was great to see Christopher working so hard today. We were trying to create our skit. Each of the boys was going to do a commercial to go with our TV game show. Christopher put a great deal of time and effort into creating his trailer for a television show called "Cooking with Christopher and his Mom". He worked with Karen, Mike and Sean, as well as his buddies TJ, Marcel and Nick, to make sure that all of his ideas were included!



Camp Sponsors

The host for the camp, the British Columbia Lions Society for Children with Disabilities, has raised over 150 million dollars in support of children with disabilities in BC since it was established in 1947. Other programs and initiatives funded by the society include the Lions Easter Seal House, Child Development Centres, Valley Therapeutic Equestrian Centre, and the Lions Helipad at Vancouver Hospital.



SET-BC is a Ministry of Education provincial resource program that supports school districts in educating students with disabilities through the use of special technologies. Working in partnership with school districts, SET-BC provides support, training, and the loan of assistive technology to students whose access to the curriculum is restricted by physical disabilities, visual impairments or autism.

Community Involvement

Organizing and presenting @Virtual Voices 2001 was a true team effort, involving partners from a wide range of community agencies, educational programs and businesses. With a common goal of creating an exciting and supportive environment for the campers, each group or individual taking part played an important role in making @Virtual Voices a success.

The families of the campers were very enthusiastic about @Virtual Voices and were eager for their children to take part. Some of the families arranged their summer vacation around the camp dates and traveled long distances to get to the camp. Personal care workers came from the home communities of ten of the campers and supported them throughout the program.



The communication team for @Virtual Voices included speech language pathologists from a range of education, community and health agencies, as well as technology specialists from Aroga Technologies of Vancouver, DynaVox Systems of Pittsburgh PA and Sunrise Medical of Concord ON. The Hamber Foundation provided a grant for the purchase of special communication materials and resources for the campers.

The partnership between the Lions Society and SET-BC, plus the contribution of all the other supporters of @Virtual Voices 2001, created a positive atmosphere for communication and fun for everyone. The campers responded with enthusiasm, participating and sharing their own ideas and expertise in all activities. They took advantage of unique setting of @Virtual Voices and demonstrated the value of independent communication for each other.

