

# Rock the Boat: Navigating the Bronx River to Change Participation for Children with Developmental Disabilities and Their Families

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## INTRODUCTION

The nearly 1.5 million Bronx residents are unaware of outdoor nature activities in their New York City community and have not considered the Bronx River for recreation including canoeing.

Limiting access even more, children with developmental disabilities in urban environments and with less financial resources participate less in physical, sporting and community activities compared to their non-disabled peers and report less enjoyment.

To increase access for all, RFK CERC occupational and physical therapy created this innovative program for the children at our center. We collaborated with the Bronx River Alliance to develop a canoeing excursion down the Bronx River for children with disabilities and their families.

The Alliance mission to protect and restore the Bronx River corridor as ecological, recreational, educational and economic resources for the community tied in perfectly with our purpose for the excursion:

- 1) Promoting active participation for children with developmental disabilities;
- 2) Connecting families to the river as a natural outdoor recreation resource;
- 3) Experiencing this as a family so they could later participate together; and
- 4) Ensuring success with the support of occupational and physical therapists they trusted, and with expert river guides, thus improving the child's participation in physical activities, and possibly building a lifelong interest.

## PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

**Objective 1:** Participants will develop an awareness of accessing community natural resources to promote participation for children with disabilities and families.

**Objective 2:** Participants will acknowledge that expanding the participation for the entire family increases opportunity for children with disabilities.

**Objective 3:** Participants will understand that the presence of skilled therapeutic intervention opens doors to adventurous new experiences making participation possible in any environment.

## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Participants learned to paddle with a parent and a therapist in the boat. River guides paddled in separate canoes to provide instruction and assistance as needed. Participants had the opportunity to paddle up and down the river on the edge of the Bronx Zoo at their own pace for up to 1.5 hours. Each child was required to assist with paddling, even if it were to simply place their oar in the water and create some movement, thereby allowing all levels of participation.

## Canoeing On The Bronx River

### Learning The Ropes



### Boarding For The Adventure



### Off Into The Bronx Wilderness



**Participation  
In The  
Community**



**Engagement  
With Natural  
Resources**

## PARTICIPANTS

- 7 children (mean age 9.6 years, range 6.5-11 years)
- Varied diagnoses
  - Congenital UE limb deficiency
  - CP/ hemiplegia
  - ASD
  - DCD
  - s/p childhood cancer
  - Birth Brachial Plexus Injury
- 8 caregivers
- Therapists, trainees and professional guides: orient children and families to safety, river and canoe use, and paddling.
- This was the first canoe experience for all participants and families.

## RESULTS

Families thought it was great for everyone. They loved being together with therapists and family in a fun, beautiful environment. Most of the children liked rowing, although many were scared at first, but once they mastered the ability to move the canoe in the direction they wanted to go they were empowered. Therapists learned to never underestimate the child's ability. Family interactions were individualized: some pushed for their child to do more and others felt they had to do it for them. This was a great lesson on meeting families where they are in the moment and helping to expand options and opportunities to increase participation.

The results of the excursion were:

- Bonding of families and therapists, learning about the natural environment in one's immediate community which can be accessed at anytime
- Development of a new skill as participants used their bodies to paddle up and down the river
- Each participant learned they were capable, could overcome fears, and had the ability to experience this again on their own as a family.

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