

**Media Contacts:**Lauren McMillin
American Camp Association
pr@acacamps.org

Helen McDermott
SeriousFun Children’s Network
hmcdermott@seriousfun.org

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Global Collaboration Creates Playbook to Support Character and Leadership Development in Youth with Disabilities and Illnesses at Medical Specialty Camps**

 **Martinsville, Indiana (June 20, 2025) –** The American Camp Association (ACA), in partnership with Abt Global and SeriousFun Children’s Network, proudly announces the culmination of a three-year initiative: *Promoting Character Through Counselors-in-Training Programs at Medical Specialty Camps*. Supported by the John Templeton Foundation, this groundbreaking project has advanced the field of youth development by exploring how character strengths can be cultivated in adolescents and young adults living with disabilities and illnesses.

For more than 100 years, character development has been a cornerstone of the camp experience. This project recognizes the extraordinary resilience demonstrated by youth in medical specialty camps — spaces where overcoming adversity is part of everyday life — and examines how these settings uniquely nurture leadership and growth through counselor-in-training (CIT) programs.

ACA Senior Director of Innovation and Learning Laurie Pearson shares, “Medical specialty camps provide a transformative environment where young people not only heal and thrive but also grow into community leaders. This initiative deepens our understanding of how character is built in these powerful, adaptive spaces.”

The initiative joined 12 medical specialty camps from around the globe — including programs in the United States, Ireland, India, and Haiti — in a vibrant community of practice. These camps included:

* Double H Ranch (New York)
* Camp Rainbow Bangalore (India)
* Barretstown (Ireland)
* Kan Etwal (Haiti)
* Flying Horse Farms (Ohio)
* The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (Connecticut)
* Camp Ho Mita Koda (Ohio/Michigan)
* Camp High Hopes (Iowa)
* PA Lions Beacon Lodge (Pennsylvania)
* Camp Aldersgate (Arkansas)
* Melwood (Maryland)
* Camp TLC (Texas)

Together, they codeveloped a *Character Development Framework* and an accompanying *Playbook of Character in C.I.T. Programs at Medical Specialty Camps* to guide camp practitioners in fostering character strengths tailored to their campers’ unique experiences and challenges. These tools empower youth with disabilities and illnesses to “give back” by becoming role models and leaders within their camp communities.

As a result of the project, a suite of practical and accessible deliverables was produced and is now available to the general public free of charge. These resources include a series of educational activity videos designed to promote character strengths while incorporating medical accessibility accommodations, facilitator guides to support program implementation, and a comprehensive *Playbook of Character in C.I.T. Programs at Medical Specialty Camps*. Together, these tools provide adaptable, research-informed strategies for cultivating character in camp settings worldwide.

“This project is a significant contribution not only to the study of summer camps but also to the broader youth development ecosystem,” said Ann Gillard, PhD, director of research and evaluation at SeriousFun Children’s Network. “By understanding how character is cultivated in resilient populations, we open doors for more inclusive, impactful programming across the world.”

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**About American Camp Association**
The American Camp Association® (ACA) is a national organization serving the more than 20,000 year-round and summer camps in the United States that annually serve 26 million campers. ACA is committed to collaborating with those who believe in quality camp and outdoor experiences for children, youth, and adults. ACA provides advocacy, evidence-based education, and professional development, and is the only independent national accrediting body for the organized camp experience. ACA accreditation provides public evidence of a camp's voluntary commitment to the health, safety, risk management, and overall well-being of campers and staff. For more information, visit [ACAcamps.org](https://www.acacamps.org/).

**About SeriousFun Children’s Network**SeriousFun Children's Network is the leading network of medical specialty camps in the world, comprised of 30 camps and programs serving children with serious illnesses and their families, always free of charge. Following the founding of The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp by Paul Newman in 1988, he and other like-hearted individuals opened similar camps around the world, ultimately joining together to form SeriousFun Children's Network. Thanks to a shared vision and collective contributions, the Network has evolved to become the leader in medical specialty camps, delivering over 1.9 million life-changing experiences to children and families from over 50 countries. Each member camp is an independent, not-for-profit organization dependent upon private funding to serve all children at no cost to their families. To learn more about SeriousFun, visit [www.seriousfun.org](https://c212.net/c/link/?t=0&l=en&o=4201589-1&h=17392576&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.seriousfun.org%2F&a=www.seriousfun.org).