

Accessibility, Disability and Risky Play in the Outdoors

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SPEAKERS

Cherlene, Amanda

- A** Amanda 00:01
So I think risk, especially when you're working to make an environment more accessible that can be hard to be accessible, is think of risk as choice.
- C** Cherlene 00:20
Hi everyone, you're listening to the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada Podcast. I'm one of your hosts Cherlene Eloria, and I'm the Communications Coordinator for CNAC. If you'd like to learn more about what we do, please check out our website at www.childnature.ca. I'm joined today by Amanda St. Dennis. Amanda is a mixed-race Metis/European. She's 30 years old and currently lives on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe near Ottawa, Ontario. She grew up in a military family, which means she moved around a fair amount during her childhood. This experience taught her to embrace new environments and peoples. Amanda lives with mild to moderate spastic right side cerebral palsy, as well as ADD combined type, nonverbal learning disorder and anxiety. In 2011, she graduated from Algonquin College with Honors in the Developmental Services Worker Program. In 2020. She graduated with High Distinction from Carleton University with a BA in child studies and a minor in disability studies. She was one of two undergraduate representatives to help create Carleton's Integrated Accessibility Plan. Amanda also completed one year of a two-year Intervenor for Deaf-Blind Individuals

program at George Brown College. In 2016, Amanda was one of 250 youth selected to participate in a National Youth Forum regarding accessibility. The feedback she and other youth provided assisted the Federal Government of Canada in creating the Accessible Canada Act. Amanda worked for 10 years at Easter Seals Ontario Camp Merrywood, an outdoor summer camp for children and youth with disabilities. In addition to her work at Easter Seals Ontario, she has worked as a personal support worker through Carleton University's attendant program, in which she provided support and activities of daily living for Carleton University or Algonquin College students with physical disabilities. In her final year of university, she worked as a receptionist with the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities. These, as well as other experiences, have made Amanda extremely passionate about accessibility, disability advocacy, as well as disability rights and inclusion. In her leisure time, Amanda enjoys horseback riding, as well as continuing her learning in the field of disability studies. On today's episode, Amanda and I will be talking about disability, accessibility and the outdoors. Hi there, Amanda. Thank you so much for joining our show today. How are you doing?

A

Amanda 02:58

I'm good. Thanks. And thanks for having me.

C

Cherlene 03:00

Yeah, thank you so much for being here. I know this is a topic that is really important. And I'm so glad to have you here with all of your experience to be able to speak on this.

A

Amanda 03:10

I'm happy to be here. I'm happy to have this conversation.

C

Cherlene 03:13

So I want to start off with: What are some of your most favorite memories spent outside in nature?

A

Amanda 03:21

So I worked 10 summers at an Easter Seals Ontario camp called Camp Merrywood, which is just outside of Perth, Ontario. It's a fully accessible camp for children and youth with physical disabilities from the ages of six to 26. So wide gambit! But part of summer camp whether you're able-bodied, sorry non-disabled or disabled are that it brings you to

nature. So for me, some of my favorite memories are being able to take some of these campers canoeing and having it be the first time they're able to put their hands in the water and just trail along the water. It might be the first time that they've felt a pussy willow or others it might be the first time they've seen a frog - or held a frog! We have a few that love to catch frogs and snakes even. But it's also like being able to go to the beach. A wheelchair is not really accessible at a beach and in the sand. So we go via canoe and we lift them in and out of the canoes are we help support them to walk and just being able to be at the beach like any other one of their friends and being able to kind of say, "I went to the beach this summer", for me that's the outdoor memories that I think stick with me. And yeah, I was older, but as a kid, outdoors was the same like I grew up kayaking. I grew up canoeing. So being able to share that love of being able to be free on water for me is nature, because water is freeing to me.

C

Cherlene 05:06

That's a really wonderful way to put that. Yeah, I want to ask you like, when you were a kid, what was like, what was so different about being outside versus, you know, staying at home?

A

Amanda 05:17

Outside took a lot more planning for everybody. We did a lot as a family, but um, Hiking has never been really accessible to me. But like kayaking, in order to go out by ourselves, the first thing that my dad taught us was how to, how to get out, how to self rescue, how to drain a boat. And it was something I was able to do because in the water, my disability doesn't really matter. So being on a boat just enhances being able to be out in nature. I love to swim, I love, I love swimming in lakes and rivers and such. Like I would prefer doing that over swimming in a pool any day. So to me, being out in nature looks really different than just playing in our backyard. But me and my brother did that as well. I remember building snow forts and having snowball fights, and just being a kid running through the sprinkler. But for me, a lot of my more positive memories of being outside and the more prominent memories are the ones which involve water and being out on the water. Because to me, it's freeing. I love that just feeling of not having to be in control but yet in control.

C

Cherlene 06:41

It's almost like you're flying, I want to say.

A

Amanda 06:44

Yeah, it feels freeing, cuz there's nothing holding me back, which there's a lot of barriers on land that often can hold me back whereas in the water it doesn't really exist.

C

Cherlene 06:58

Thank you, thank you so much for sharing that. And kind of speaking on that point, maybe you can speak to some of the ways in which the outdoors in general can be inaccessible to people with disabilities, children or adults. Like even just in the city, in like a city park.

A

Amanda 07:15

So some of the big ones that right off the bat you would think of would be like uneven ground and weather. Electric chairs are really hard to maneuver in the rain because you don't want to get the battery pack damaged. At camp we kind of helped with this by putting a plastic bag over the joystick but some of the kids kind of don't like that feeling under their hands. So it makes navigating if we have to go from a building to another building in the rain, it can be harder. So even just being outside in that, that environment like you have to worry about equipment failing. Transportation's a big one. I'm lucky in that I live in Ottawa, and there are a few more outdoor places that are accessible by bus. But a lot of them, you have to be able to drive or you need to know someone that drives and I don't drive and transit doesn't go places. And then if you take into account, if you use a wheelchair, or a walker, or some sort of mobility device, does the vehicle that you're traveling in have room for that? Can you get there? So like those to me- and like weather, same thing. Is it rainy, is it muddy? Is it super sunny? Some people on some medications are less tolerant of heat, or the sun than others and it's part of their disability. It can be part of medication side effects. But other things that a lot of people don't think of are: clothing, access to adaptive equipment. So do you have a wheelchair that can go over the bumps and the roots and everything? Or is a kid going to be able to walk? Do they have the stamina to walk on a nature trail? But also the clothing. So for me a lot of those non-cotton clothing that outdoor companies sell, I'm a little bit on the larger side and that's partly because of my disability. And I don't have the access to that type of equipment and that type of clothing. So it's, it's really hard to be like, oh, okay, I know all the right steps, I know the layer, I know to do this, but I have to get really creative and how I layer. Or do I spend the time figuring out what to wear just to go out for 20 minutes in the cold or the wet or etc. And that kind of ties into the one that I think a lot of people wouldn't think of and that's time. Because outdoors is everywhere. You can step out into a backyard, you can walk down a block to a park. But when you've got school in the case of a kid to school and extra physio, occupational therapy appointments, medical appointments, maybe surgeries, and then maybe you've got other siblings in the house,

who also need attention. Maybe a parent's working full time outside the house, inside the house, trying to find that time to then go out as a family, it can be really difficult because the last thing you want is to have to think creatively on how to maneuver in an environment that might may or may not be unknown. So maybe going into your local park, it's maybe a little bit easier. Maybe you have a sled you can pull in, in the winter, maybe your stroller goes over the grass. But then you show up to the playground, is the playground accessible? Are they able to participate? So it's that extra time to have to figure out. Can I access a place? Can I get there? So sometimes time equals energy, and that's I think a barrier that a lot of people wouldn't think is an inaccessible barrier. Just because until you have to kind of make those decisions and have to go through that process, you don't always think of how inaccessible just going outside for 10 minutes might be. Now for others, it could be an excuse. But for some, it's very valid that it takes a lot of time.

C

Cherlene 11:46

Yeah, and that kind of brings into when you you're talking about all this planning. Planning for the unknowns, and the emotional and financial investment it might take to even you know, think about a 10 minute walk outside. And then you have that amplified, if you're thinking about a bigger trip, let's say camping or even hiking. I know I love to camp and that that's a huge planning and financial investment. So it really goes to show that the outdoors, although it's not- although it is everywhere, and technically free to be outside, there's so many hidden barriers that some people wouldn't even think of.

A

Amanda 12:27

And I can attest to the time involved in even camping. So I haven't really camped, but part of the summer camp program at Merrywood is that we take every session, the out trippers, which are three people trained to specifically be able to take out to a local Provincial Park that's nearby Crotch Lake, um, four to five campers, each session. And most of these campers might have a little bit more mobility in that they can walk or they're easy to lift and maneuver. But the planning involved just because I've helped some of the trip- trippers as we call them to plan, they've got emergency plans, they've got they're trained by the nurses. If any of the kids have medications that they have to take, they are trained. Just extra that they have to do it, in addition to what you would expect if you were taking a non-disabled group of kids out. So on top of having first aid and having all the food and the water it's: Do they have the straws? Do they have a plate that's not going like if it's needed isn't going to fall off someone's lap? Is the kid comfortable? Can we get the kid to comfortable easily in the canoe? If it's not someone who can sit on one of the bench seats of a canoe. So it's a lot more extra thinking that you wouldn't always

have to put it in. So that it was it's kind of interesting that you mentioned that planning aspect because I've seen it I've seen the extra planning that has to go in to enjoy the outdoors even in a structured, yeah.

C

Cherlene 14:14

Yeah, and in the outdoors, like you were talking about like the joy and the wonder that comes out of being out there like it's so, would you say it's so worth it to go through all of this like as a camp- as a camp counselor, as someone who's worked at Easter Seals?

A

Amanda 14:29

It can be. As someone who also has a disability, I can also see how it might not be worth it. If it's a lot of unknown, if it's a lot of risk that's being taken, if it's uncertainty, sometimes taking that extra time and energy might not feel like it's worth it. Sometimes you have to kind of, I hate to use the word bribe, but sometimes it's the best way to kind of get the point. Like you have to kind of sell, sell the experience and bribe, I'm gonna say child because that's the work I do. But like, you have to kind of make it fun. You have to make it sound funner than it is. Because you've got to work through that barrier of using extra energy and extra time.

C

Cherlene 15:16

Yeah, that's a really good perspective that you've brought, because I, you know, as someone who is not disabled, would think that, you know, kids love being outside and it's not really an issue. But I really, really appreciate you bringing up that that perspective that for some, like the risks, and the unknown are too great.

A

Amanda 15:34

Yeah, or feels to great.

C

Cherlene 15:38

You spoke about your work with children. And I thought we could kind of pivot our conversation now to talking about forest schools and outdoor programs, which is what the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada's work is really about. It's getting more kids outside. So let's talk about access to the outdoors for children with disabilities specifically, like what are some challenges you could think of for them, like you talked about a beach or in the forest?

A

Amanda 16:10

So I've mentioned some of them. So it would be like physical access to the environment. Can a wheelchair, can a walker get through sand? Can it get through muddy trails? But other ones is the environment calm enough or active enough depending on the child? So some children might have a really hard time if it's a lot of sensory input, especially if it's a lot of new sensory input. So you might have a child who might appear defiant or might appear like they're not paying attention, or they aren't listening. But it's more that maybe they're taking absolutely everything in, even things that maybe you don't notice, or you don't hear or you don't see. And they're overwhelmed, they don't know where to start. Others it might not be enough sense sensory input, they might not know how to use the space around them to run and play because that may be new. And that might be what they need. They need that heavy work on their muscles to run around and like jump off of things. I remember as a kid, before they removed them, because I got injured on them. When we lived in Winnipeg, our school had this set, this path of like logs, and it made this like really cool, like they were different heights. And they were- You could jump along them and skip over them. And for me, at the time, that was a great way- It was a great way to jump and get energy out because I didn't have to interact with other kids in order to play. I like I didn't need to pretend, I didn't need to interact, I could just be in the same spaces as other kids or I can be there by myself if there was nobody there. So it's it's sometimes it could be as easy as that: Of navigating those relationship issues that can be barriers to the outside and enjoying structured or semi-structured play. Kids want to do it their way and it's child-led, but when you add numerous kids in or some with disability, some not, sometimes that that child-led to be really confusing for some kids. And that's a barrier. That's a barrier in itself. Not all kids are at a stage where they know how to navigate those relationships. Be it, they're non-disabled or disabled, like kids in general don't always know how to navigate. But it's an extra layer if your disability is directly impacting those relationship interactions. Be it because you don't know how to do it, you don't do it in the typical way that society thinks we should do it. Or you just- everything's too much and you shut down or you would rather be by yourself and you don't want to be forced to do everything all at once. Someone might want to explore an environment first. See what they've got, see the space they're in before engaging with others. Because that might be too much. So there's there can be a lot of barriers.

C

Cherlene 19:31

And you touched on this quite, quite well actually when we were talking about the forest school approach and that how play and learning is child-led but for some children with disabilities, this child-led approach can present some challenges. So, what would you say for like, like, you talked about maybe letting the child see the space on their own at first. Are there any other ways you can think of to kind of get a child who's new to forest school

more comfortable?

A

Amanda 20:02

I would say supported facilitation and scaffolding. And what I mean by that is, you may have to facilitate more of the activity at first to help a child get comfortable in the space. You may have to prompt ideas of how to use materials, or maybe how to navigate using materials with another child. And as they get more comfortable or gain the skills depending on how it looks through the day, through the hours, or it might take months. Like it might take numerous visits for you to then slowly be able to back out of the engagement and have them more direct the play. And there's, there's nothing wrong with that. It's still child-led. Because you're meeting them where they are. So it's being- it's a different type of facilitating. It's not like you're dictating how they can use it, or what they can do. Or, like case in point, I'm going to use just a random example kind of based on camp. There's a program often that is make a shelter out of random objects. Some of them nature-inspired, so sticks, and logs and leaves and some of them like tarps and rope, and milk crates. And some kids jump right in. They have an idea, they they understand, intellectually and emotionally what the task is. And then there's others who it might be because of physical limitations of, but I can't reach the objects or this is new, or it might be a limitation of this is really new to me, I don't understand, who might need someone going, "Okay, so you've got rope and you've got a tarp, how could we put those two together?" So you've instantly instead of them having all of the objects in front of them, they've now only got two. So you're facilitating it in a way of kind of watching where their interest is, what they're gazing at, what they're looking at what they're reaching out for, and kind of using that and making it less overwhelming. Because I fully fully believe in the child-led philosophy of Forest School, and as a child, child studies scholar like this is, that's something so important to me. Because it gives children the ability to show that they're competent, and to believe that they're competent. And for children with disabilities, that can be really hard to do. Often, with no malice or anything, teachers and family members can often be sometimes overbearing or protective. So a child may never have had the opportunity to take a risk, or to say, "I don't want to do that" or "I'm not comfortable in this situation." And that's so- Even respecting those words of "I'm not okay with this" or that body language of "No, not for me," and maybe helping them direct what else they can do instead. Like, I was at that program once with a kid who just not feeling the level of excitement that was going on. And they were a little bit younger than some of the other campers engaging. And so I was like, "Okay, what about your stuffed animal that you sleep with every night? Could we build a smaller shelter for them? Or how about we draw it? Can we draw what that shelter would look like using the materials that we have here?" So they're still doing a similar activity and they're still with their peers. And they're still- But they're using what they know, to kind of scaffold into what they don't know. By the

end of that activity, by the way, I had the kid completely engaged in actually building things. They just needed to be like, yeah, they just needed to be kind of coaxed into it and like, take more steps to get there. And I think that's something that really needs to be thought of when you're thinking child-led. Child-led doesn't need to be right off the bat. It can be scaffolded, it can look very different. You might have to plan a little bit more. Like to give actual instructions than just: "Here's things, here's what you can do!" Like you might have to give them "hey, we're going to do this right now." And we'll do free play to kind of give them a chance to settle. So it's things like that. It's it's, it's saying it's okay to take risks, it's saying it's okay to be weary or unsure.

C

Cherlene 25:05

Yeah, you really brought up something that I feel like we- I didn't think of when we were planning this conversation. But you're talking about like the role of the facilitator and the educator. And in that description of the activity you had with, with the child who at first was kind of weary, he didn't really want to do it, and then at the end was still engaged. So that's a really good point that sometimes, facilitators and educators at forest and nature schools might have to step in a little bit more than they're used to with a- with another group, right. Um, so yeah, thank you for bringing that up. Because as much as forest school teachers might feel okay, with stepping back and just letting the play emerge, for some children with disabilities, you might need that extra planning that extra prompting.

A

Amanda 25:54

I think if any message can get across to facilitators is: It's not less, you're not doing your job less, you're not doing the philosophy less. In fact, to me, you're doing more. You're making sure that every child is included. Because that can also be a problem of a child-led environment is that you're going to instinctually have children that are just left out. And for some it- That might be an okay thing, they're, they're fine with that, they're fine to play on their own, they're fine to engage on their own. But for others, that might be something that they've had to deal with their entire lives. And they don't want to have to deal with that at forest school. And so it can be a great teaching opportunity for both disabled and non-disabled peers. Because unfortunately, statistically, disabled children are more often to be bullied just because they're different. Because the statistics are at the bullies tend to go for those that are different. Well, automatically, as soon as you have a disability you're deemed different. So forest school might be the first time that if a facilitator and educator is on the ball or aware of what's going on, it might be the first time that you could get all the kids playing together. In a loose, sort of structured but not fully structured way, it might be the first time ever, which might end up then kind of translating to other environments. Because you've already pushed everybody outside of

their comfort zone. And so if they can do it at forest school, they might be able to do it back in school or back in the classroom or in the neighborhood. So you've just opened the world for a ton of kids. So maybe facilitating is not a bad thing. And I think if you go into it thinking that way, then you're- you're not going to set kids up to fail or to be disappointed in their experience.

C

Cherlene 28:06

Yeah, great point. So I'm wondering if we can kind of pivot to like staying on the topic of forest school, I know that there's an emphasis at forest schools on risky play. So, whether it's climbing trees or, you know, climb across a log that goes over some water. That- that's a big part of Forest School, but for some children, all play can be risky, for some children with disabilities. Do you have any examples of this?

A

Amanda 28:36

There's some kids who can't even walk across a log, they might be in physical therapy working on taking steps on flat ground, they are nowhere near able to go across a log. Or a risk for them is just coming out and then trying to engage in play. Others might be running risk, so they might- it's an elopement risk. If things get to be too much, or they might run. So even having them out in the forest with an EA or an aid to help keep is a risk on its own of, "Oh my god, let's not lose a child." We have to keep an extra eye on them or- and that's a risk too. And I think risk can look different. Maybe a risk for a kid is having- putting their hands in snow for the first time. Or in mud for the first time. Because they don't usually like that sensory feeling of squishy or cold in the case of snow. So maybe their risk is them putting their hands, or their feet, or their boots in that environment. Others it might be that they literally touch bark, they've touched a tree. Or they're trying to hang off of a branch. Risk looks different. Like, some kids might be able to hang from a tree with support. Give them that opportunity! If a kid can get up out of the wheelchair, outside the walker, but needs spotting from an adult, then get them up and out, if it's safe to do so. Just because they're in a wheelchair, just because they're using a walker, or stroller, or are blind and using a white cane, doesn't mean that they can't do the same thing. They might just need more adult support than another peer. So I wouldn't say like, let them climb a tree if they're not able to, because that's just kind of opening everybody up for more problems. But I'm not saying like- We had a really low branch on one of the trees at camp. And oftentimes for evening programs, programmers would climb into the tree and sit there as a character to engage with the campers because it was a different position for them to look. They weren't looking at the ground, they weren't looking in front of them, they actually had to look up and they had to engage. And so, sometimes maybe that's their risk. It's not them in the tree, maybe put a stuffed animal in a tree. Send them

on a scavenger hunt, maybe they have to find certain things, right, that are in different locations. If they're not able to get across. Maybe it's that they give directions to their peers on how to get across a stream. There's a really cool trust exercise that a lot of people do that you split into teams, and you blindfold one person. And then, either the whole rest of the team or just one person has to walk them through a maze that you've made set up to get to a goal. But it all relies on the person who can see giving really straightforward instructions. Like stop, or like you're going too far, you're- slow down, you need to step over the log. So maybe it's giving instructions to your peers in a fun way. That's their risk. They're risking participation, they're risking, maybe not communicating it correctly. They're risking engaging. So I think I think we can still promote risk, I think we can, and we should still promote risk. But you need to remember who's taking the risk. It's not. It's not you as a facilitator taking the risk. It's not you as the parent taking the risk. It's not you as the teacher taking the risk, or the aid, it's the child. So if a child's not ready for that risk, don't push it. Respect those feelings, because that's a risk too. They're being open to you that they're not comfortable in a situation, that they need things slow down, they need it thought differently. So I think risk, especially when you're working to make an environment more accessible, that can be hard to be accessible, is think of risk as choice. As like not as like, take a risk, it's your choice, like it's, it's like your choice: be it, be it an open ended choice, or maybe it's, "you want to try this or this?" So giving them two options, which and by the way, if you're going to do that, try to give options that you know are attainable. You don't want to set kids up to fail, at least in my book. Like failing and making a mistake are two different things. You want some sort of success in whatever they do. And when a child with a disability is being given new tasks and new environments or new challenges, you want something that they can succeed in. Because if you're just gonna have it look like this person is having mistake after mistake after mistake. That's no longer a mistake, at least in my brain, that's now a failure. And it's a failure on the environment or it's a failure on the task given. Whereas if you give two choices that you see a possibility of success of some sort. Do you then the child is taking a risk just by choosing cetera? I like to think of taking risks of taking choices and make choices and making decisions that are right for you and your body and your mind.

C

Cherlene 34:55

So Amanda, in previous conversations, I remember you saying something that I had to write down because it was so interesting to me. And I thought, I thought I would get you to talk about it a bit more. So you said before that "exploring nature doesn't have to be in nature". Do you mind like telling me and the folks at home like what what did you mean by this exploring nature doesn't have to be in nature?

A

Amanda 35:20

So as I've mentioned, nature is often really inaccessible for different reasons. But what I mean by that is: Bring nature in. So bring snow in on a cookie sheet and have kids explore it with like food coloring droplets, or like being able to take drips of watercolor paint, food dye and be able to like color the snow in different colors. By bringing it inside, if you need to set it up at a different level than on the ground so that it's on a table. It's slanted. It's against a certain color background for visual needs, you're able to make those adaptations, but still have them engaged in nature. It could be bringing leaves different types of leaves in for a child to explore, it could be- A lot of kindergarten and preschool classes do sensory bins of rice, or- but you could use acorns, you could use leaves, you could use twigs, and rocks. Art activities even that involve nature. So nature doesn't have to be a nature walk outside or building a fort with the materials that are outside. It could be doing leaf prints, and putting that those leaves in paint and putting them on paper. They're still learning to engage with nature. Obviously teach them not to pull the leaves off trees, because we don't want to kill the trees. But by bringing it to their level, you're able to do different things. So someone who might be visually impaired might need more sensory. So it's bringing those smells of pine and cedar inside. Also, by bringing it inside, you can have a little more control on the environment. So you're not suddenly sending a kid out into what to them might feel unknown and scary. At Merrywood, we have an environment- environment program, and part of it is yes, taking them on our semi-accessible nature trail. But and throughout camp and pushing them around and like having them explore outside. But some of its making bird feeders. So rolling it in peanut butter, that's not peanut butter. It's soy based peanut allergy. Rolling, rolling things in- taking pine cones and rolling it in that and making bird feeders to then go hang up. Be it that could be your program, that could be what you do, it could be part of your program, so you're not spending. So say you're, you've got a class at forest school for a- four-hour time period, just give or take. Instead of spending all four hours outside, that might be too much. For some kids, that might be too much. But then having a kid be able to have an art activity that's inspired by what's going on outside to be pressing flowers, like wild flowers, it could be pressing leaves, it could be leaf prints, it could be making a bird feeder, so it's winter, and you're trying to teach how birds forage for food. They're often more willing to engage in an activity. And they're also- Which then allows them to work with their abilities and their strengths and their limitations. They might not have to work on holding themselves upright in a wheelchair over the bumps. Instead, they get to focus on smells, the tactile feeling of material.

C

Cherlene 39:21

I know through your summers working at Camp Merrywood that you've had to come up with some pretty creative ways - sometimes on the spot - to provide accommodations for

campers in the outdoor space. I know you're you as a person, you're very quick and can do it in a matter of seconds. And I know you've had to do that at your job. So with that experience in mind, what are some ways that practitioners at Forest School can accommodate children with disabilities at forest school? Maybe you're not inside but you're outside. How can they do it outside?

A

Amanda 39:55

So one that's kind of been floating around the internet through parents and caregivers and aids etc. The idea of snow and accessibility in snow, especially if you're a wheelchair user. So having one of those plastic sleds - great thing, can be really helpful. So even just having one of those cheap ones that you can get at a hardware store, really, really helpful. But for some kids that might not create enough support. So for some of the smaller kids, I'm thinking preschool, kindergarten, maybe grade one: Using a laundry basket, actually attaching a rope to it could actually really help. It's still going to be difficult, you're still probably going to need two people because uneven ground. But you've suddenly now have this kid out of your wheelchair onto into an object that is a little flatter. Wagons, big one could be really helpful. And I'm not meaning those little red wagons. I'm meaning those garden wagons that obviously put something down and make it a little softer on the butt. But like, if it's got walls, it's got some way to keep a kid in. And I'm saying keep in because by keeping in, you're supporting the child to sit properly. But there's all the wagons that are tried and true, you could probably get used, that have a little more support, the wheels are a little bit more rugged. So you've you've now got a kid who can access more. Um, it's putting collected objects on varying levels. So have some up high have some on the grounds have some on maybe a pre made table that you can pull a wheelchair up to. It's having a place of quiet. Like, "Okay, if you come in this circle of logs that have been purposely placed, it needs to be calm and quiet." Maybe have a tarp up on one side too, so that like it's quieter. So that kid can take a break. They can, they're still outside, they're still engaging. But there's some sort of just unwritten rule eventually that it's like, Okay, if you're in this space, tone of voice comes down. The volume level comes down. It's quiet, it's calm. So having a place to escape to. Use of beanbags. You can get those pretty cheap, some of them. We have a whole bunch of camp. And we use the most- The two places we use them the most are in the boats. So some kids get lifted out of their wheelchairs into beanbags in the boats and so it's more comfortable to them. Others, we had our maintenance guy, awesome, took a piece of wood and you know those lawn- the plastic white or green lawn chairs that you can get? He took off the legs, and he attached them to the wood and the wood has a channel in them so that it goes over the support beam in the canoe. And we sit the kids in that. We also have ones that are attached to the kayak. So it's thinking creatively of how to get kids- and you don't need a lot. It can be pool noodles to support someone leaning against something. It can

be beanbags, because the other place we use them is to get them out during campfire at night. An adult might need to sit behind the beanbag, but they're now at the level of their peers. They're down on the ground. People power think of that. It's having volunteers. If you guys as a school, as a forest school practitioner, reach out to the community. And ask is there anybody with skills in working with kids with special needs, with disabilities that can volunteer their time when we know we've got kids come in that have extra disabilities, so it's not completely on their staff? Like obviously have the volunteers police checked and everything, all of safety things, but sometimes having someone who's not their normal EA, or their normal teacher might make it so that a kid will engage more.

C

Cherlene 44:29

And so I'm kind of thinking about how, for some folks this might, this way of thinking of adaptations on the fly might not come naturally to them. It might be something that their brain has never really had to do and, and it's difficult. But what would you say like, what is your advice for maybe some of the folks listening at home who are working in this field but really don't know how to get started on increasing the accessibility of their forest school program.

A

Amanda 44:57

So first and foremost, try. You're going to see effort and concentrated effort as a start. Don't, don't, don't end there. But start. You can't fix anything, if you don't try to fix it. You can't adapt anything, if you don't try to adapt it. I'd also say, get a consultant and talk to children with disabilities, talk to adults with disabilities. Ask them some of your common barriers to common problems that come up. Ask what can be done! Start having a document that you can train off of. You can have a list of simple accommodations. I did that for camp, each program area- My second, my second last year, my ninth year, every single program area- Sorry my 10th year. Every single program area had common adaptations that you wouldn't just think of naturally, and it was a starting point. And a lot of them said, just by looking at that document meant, you might have not given me the solution for that exact child, but you've made it so that I could think. You calmed my brain down and you made it so I could think of something. Because I no longer was going off nothing, I was going off something. So it's talking to the public, it's talking to the teachers, it's talking to the aides, it's talking to the parents. Ask for suggestions. It's, it's employing facilitators with disabilities. They might not all be able to facilitate full time, but they could maybe in a tandem team do it really well. Because by having people with disabilities working with you, you've now got someone who's likely had to adapt their entire life in some way or another. So they're, they might naturally come to adapting activities for others much more easily than someone who's not disabled.

C

Cherlene 47:03

That's a really, really great tip to even just have that running list, like you said, and, you know, sit down and think. Just think about how in how you can start to provide those accommodations, like if you know, there are some barriers that are common already in your program, get the staff together, and just think through ways- and they don't have to be expensive, like you said. Think through ways that a child with disabilities will be able to engage in this activity in their own way. Um, so I know you touched on this a bit, but I just kind of want to tease it out a little bit more. So as someone with disabilities like yourself, um, what message does it send to you when when organizations, whether it's a forest school, or what have you, try to provide those accommodations? What does it mean to you?

A

Amanda 47:54

That I'm valuable that I matter, that me being here matters. That this isn't a place that limits. This isn't a place that judges based off of appearance or ability or race or sexuality, etc. It's one that accepts people where they are, it's one that accepts that there are limitations, there are societal barriers, there are physical barriers, there are medical barriers. But that doesn't mean that we're not contributing members to society. People with disabilities, in this case, like aren't to be sent away and hidden away, which historically is what has happened. So by having an organization having a program that right off the bat says: Okay, so we've never encountered that. But what can we do? What do you think is going to be the limitations? Or what do you advise that we do? Or we're not sure! You know, what, we're going to reach out to our consultants that we have, and we're gonna brainstorm how to make this a success. Right? It's okay to reach out for help. It's okay to ask people with disabilities to help you. We are the experts on disability. People with disabilities, be it children, be it adults. Yes, there's medical professionals. Yes, there's educational professionals who have degrees and Bac Ed and all these credentials, but they're not the experts. They haven't lived this life. So this idea of just being able to use your resources and not be afraid to ask for help in terms of consulting. Like many people with disabilities would prefer you pay us some format, because historically, a lot of our labor has been for free, unfortunately, because of how society deems disabled people yeah. But financially doesn't always need to be monetary, it could be a gift card, it could be food, it could be- There's varying degrees, depending on, it could be the opportunity to volunteer with your program, it could be a reference reference on for a resume. So it's, so don't be afraid to reach out to the community, the broader community for help. Because by even doing that, and the reason I bring it up under this topic of what it means is that by someone making a visible effort to ask people in that community with that identity for assistance, you're saying that you're enough, even if you don't know if it's going to work. So by utilizing us, by listening to adults and children with disabilities, and by engaging

with us, we feel valued, we feel important.

C

Cherlene 51:23

So as we know, issues of accessibility are not just found in the outdoors in the outdoor space, they're found everywhere. Such as you know, how information is presented on websites, etc. Websites, social media. Can you talk a little bit about how, let's say a for school, can make their website a bit more accessible to folks with disabilities?

A

Amanda 51:47

So first and foremost, having image descriptions for your images, and there's numerous places you can Google to do it. And I do understand that it doesn't come naturally to everybody, even just basic explanation of what's in an image, what colors are there. It can help, it can help someone who's visually impaired using a screen reader be able to read what's in the picture because screen readers don't read. So alt text, which is often in the background of your pictures, is great. But I also use ID descriptions underneath in the caption, sometimes, this is especially true on social media, so Facebook or Instagram, because not everybody uses screen capture. Sorry, screen readers. So by having it in the caption, you're you're making it available to more people who just need it for processing or you know, for further understanding what they're seeing. A website that can work on mobile, or on tablets, in addition to laptops. Not everybody has a laptop, not everybody is able to access a laptop. Some people access the internet better on on phones or on tablet with touchscreens. So making sure that you're you either can toggle between settings on a website, so between mobile version, a laptop version. Or able to toggle between touchscreen, like touchscreen ability to non touchscreen, a mouse. How busy are webpages? And this is something that a lot of people won't think of. But something with tons of bright colors that don't make sense. Tons of different changing color text, or lots of just images or videos that don't have like headings or subheadings, or captions or anything can be really hard to navigate for some people. But also representation. Does your pictures include people with disabilities? And acknowledging that disability isn't always visible. There's a lot of people with invisible disabilities: learning disabilities, ADHD. But there's also visibility, so wheelchair walkers, crutches, autism is another invisible. But is that representation there? It's just as important as different races and ethnicities, including that that visual representation or verbal representation. Are you showing equipment? So if you've taken a picture of kids in play, are you hiding their wheelchair? Why? Like ask yourself, why are you hiding adaptive equipment? There's nothing wrong with adaptive equipment. Why are you hiding their speech communication device? That's part of who they are. That's part of representation and there's nothing wrong with that. But some bigger corporations are going much more in depth in access. So being able to toggle what

the text looks like, what the colors look like. Is it a black screen, white screen? So making sure that you don't have to go that in depth because that can be confusing and can be very difficult, time consuming and expensive. But being open to providing- So say your sign up, say you have to register, for example, for something, and it's an online forms. Not all online forms are accessible. So being open to "If this isn't accessible, please call us or email us or text us even." Because acknowledge phone calls aren't accessible to everybody if you need a different format. So maybe I need a hardcopy maybe? Could we- Could you help register me over the phone? So if someone can speak how they need it filled out, and then you fill it out on your end, that's valid, too, that's accessible. So be open to different ways of doing things. And being clear that if something's not accessible, if we aren't understandable. Putting your words in plain language. Making it so people whose language isn't- first language isn't English, or French can understand. So that's helpful to newcomers to Canada, but it's also really good for people with learning disabilities or intellectual or cognitive disabilities. How you break up text... and there's tons of things you can look on Google. Like, I'm not telling you guys change it websites with no, with no assistance. There are tons of resources out there. There is tons of just people you can reach out to. People who will do this for a small fee. Some people who will audit. I will give advice like someone like myself, I'm more willing to give advice than to audit the full thing. But there's all sorts of things you can do. I think I've given some of the top ones, but it's thinking outside the box. And one that I haven't mentioned is transcripts from videos and podcasts. Very important, be it because you can't hear the podcast or you need to use it to process. And the reason I added this for last is as I know, we've discussed it, but we will be ensuring that a transcript for this podcast will be available. Correct?

C

Cherlene 57:24

I was just about to mention that, that you issued us at CNAC a challenge to make our podcast accessible for all. And one of the ways we thought to do that is to provide a written transcript. And yes, we will, we will be definitely providing that for this episode. And then retroactively for all the episodes we have up on our website, slowly and surely. But we will have those podcasts up for this one in probably a couple weeks after. When we start editing this episode, but it will be available.

A

Amanda 57:54

Which is exactly- and that's that right there. And there's a reason I put you on the spot. And I framed it that way, is that I wanted you to show what effort means. But just a little bit of effort means. Like I put a challenge out, you didn't have to take it. But you want to do better, you want to try to do better, you want to try to be accessible. So, and the reason I threw that out there is even if all you do on your website at first is make sure it's

not super busy. Or make sure that there's image descriptions for every image. Some people might fuss and say everything needs to change at the same time. I have the philosophy of the slow turtle can win the win the race. So I'd rather you do small things and deal with them well, and build upon fully accessible website space, etc. than do everything at once. And you drop the ball somewhere. So that is why I point what put the challenge out verbally. Do with it what you will.

C

Cherlene 59:13

Yeah. I mean, as someone who, as someone whose job is the, is coordinating our communications at CNAC. I'm actually going through and re-drafting some of our web pages. And at first it can be really overwhelming. But going one at a time is my approach. And I'm really excited to be launching a couple new web pages that are less busy, that have image description and alt texts and all of that all that stuff. So yeah, definitely the effort is here. Just got to keep working at it.

A

Amanda 59:47

Just take things one step at a time. If I can tell anybody anything: It's take it one step at a time.

C

Cherlene 59:53

Yeah, that's really all you can do to save yourself from burnout and feeling overwhelmed. Um, so I know, Amanda, you are passionate about accessibility and disability advocacy, especially in the natural spaces, given your experience at camp and your love of the outdoors. So where, I guess I want to ask: Where did you want to- Where do you hope to take your work?

A

Amanda 1:00:22

So, I graduated university with an undergrad in child studies and a minor in disability studies. And I graduated in June of 2020. So right in the middle of a pandemic. This has left me without a job. Without any kind of support to find a job. So I've actually been contemplating maybe turning this into a part-time business. Being able to act as a disability consultant, and accessibility consultant to organizations such as CNAC. Organizations such as individual forest schools. But also businesses such as horseback riding stables. I'm planning right now to try to do some education around disability and equestrian at the barn I ride at. They don't know about that yet. Well, they do now if they listen to this. Oh, that's okay. Um, so, I am starting to think maybe I can turn this into a

business. Because I want the world to be a better place for all the adults: be it children, be it disabled, not disabled. I want the world to be better. And I've always lived by the quote from the blessed mother, Saint Mother Teresa. And that's: Do small things with great love. I have a passion for accessibility, I have a passion for disability awareness and disability rights. And I can make a small difference by just talking to an audience that wants to hear. So I don't know where it's gonna take me. But I'm doing small steps to try to move it towards something.

C

Cherlene 1:02:27

I definitely believe that, that you can make a really great business out of this. Your advice, even in the short time that I've known you, has really caused me to think about the little ways that we at CNAC could be better in our accessibility. So thank you. And so finally, previously, you told the CNAC team, in one of our meetings we had that you would like us to think about accessibility as Access for All. And I thought that would be a great way to kind of end our conversation today: To think about accessibility as access for all. And I invite you to kind of explore this idea and elaborate on what you meant by that.

A

Amanda 1:03:11

So thinking of access for all- accessibility as access for all is thinking about by making one small improvement, how many other people you can impact. I'm going to use the example that I used in a school assignment of a ramp, or a curb cut on the side of a sidewalk. So ramps and curb cuts make it so that people in wheelchairs can access a store or access to be able to cross the road. But guess who else that helps? That helps people with walking walkers, that helps people pushing strollers, it helps people- Young kids who curbs are really difficult for, steps are really difficult for. It helps people who don't walk the normative way. So right then and there, you've now made a space available for more than just someone in a wheelchair. You've made it available to everybody by having a different way to access a building or curb. So by changing how you think, and how you act and, how you produce you're making it so every single person has a voice at the table and has the ability to get to that table. And table in this this case is very metaphorical in that, I'm meaning more the space that a child is in, but an adult is impacting. So don't think of accessibility as something that you're just doing for disability. Because trust me that attitude will probably get you feeling like you can't accomplish anything, that you can't make a difference. That it's too much work, it's too much of a burden. It's too much. But if you think about accessibilities for all, you're thinking of your broader population that you're serving, that you're working with. So it no longer is just a one time thing. It's no longer just for one person, two people, it's now for 50. It's now for 60 people. It's now for more than just one, which makes it so much easier to implement, to respect, to abide by

to, to acknowledge, because you've now made it even more important. And you've created a ripple effect. So I think that's, I think that's the easiest way to sum it up is it's a ripple effect. Accessibility is for disability, but accessibility is also for everybody.



Cherlene 1:05:58

Wow, that was an amazing episode. I learned a whole lot and I'm sure you did, too. Thank you so much to Amanda for joining us and for our listeners tuning in at home. If you like what you heard, be sure to subscribe because we've got more great guests coming your way. And if you have any topics you'd like us to cover, feel free to reach out to us on social media. This is Cherlene Eloria for the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada Podcast, signing off.