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Go Beyond the Highs and Lows Camp Conrad-Chinnock lets kids with diabetes be kids by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

When campers first gather in the amphitheater at Camp Conrad-Chinnock, in the San Bernardino Mountains, Rocky Wilson, the executive director, shouts, “How many here have diabetes?”

Everyone’s hands go up, including the counselors’, and campers know the question is tongue-in-cheek. They also feel something distinctly unfamiliar – they’re just one of the crowd.

Camp Conrad-Chinnock is specifically designed for insulin-dependent children with diabetes, ages 7 to 16. There is a camp leadership program for teens ages 16 to 18.

The Flow of Camp Life

Daily pauses and nightly wake-ups for blood tests, insulin shots and snacks to control blood sugar are all part of the flow of camp life. Of course, the complexity of a daily medical routine is familiar for children with diabetes. But the aim here is just as important: to help campers feel like normal kids.

Barbara Haworth of La Jolla explains that many insulin-dependent children have never been away from their parents before attending Camp Conrad-Chinnock. Haworth’s 18-year-old son, Graham, has been attending the camp for ten years.

“It’s unusual for other parents to want to undertake the care of a child with diabetes for a sleepover,” Haworth says. “So going to camp is an even bigger experience than it would be for other children.”

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Freedom and Independence

With a pediatric endocrinologist, a team of physicians-in-training, nurses and dieticians on site, Camp Conrad-Chinnock offers a level of care beyond even the home environment. This reassuring safety factor allows campers and parents to experience a freedom they've never known before during their week apart.

While the kids are busy canoeing, doing archery, making arts and crafts, playing volleyball or singing around the campfire, they are also learning from each other. They see their fellow campers managing their self-care and coping with blood sugar lows and highs. And then jumping right back into the pool.

The camp's message is clear: "Yes, we have challenges with diabetes but there's no reason to miss out on the fun."

Campers are often motivated to improve their self-management skills, making their lives easier and safer when they return home. With encouragement and training from the medical staff, kids often find the courage to learn to administer their own insulin injections for the first time while at camp.

A deeper commitment to self-care has a powerful impact on a child's self-confidence and feeling of independence. With these skills, a child feels more comfortable on extended outings away from his parents.

As Graham Haworth prepares for college he is grateful for the camp's educational workshops on leaving home. Topics include helpful tips on informing roommates about diabetes and managing blood sugar while driving. Haworth is currently completing his counselor-in-training program.

"I've gone to day camps before and I didn't connect with people the way I did at this camp," Haworth says. "We could joke about diabetes; we do skits about having low blood sugar. It's a good release."

Family Camp

Camp Conrad-Chinnock also offers family camp sessions. These week-long sessions allow families the chance to reconnect in a beautiful, relaxed setting, with many recreational and educational opportunities. It's a wonderful camp experience for a child who is not quite ready to separate from family. Family camp often gives parents the confidence to allow a child to attend camp on their own the following summer.

Letting Go

Haworth mentioned the camp to Dianne and Ure Kretowicz of La Jolla, who also have a son with diabetes, Ravean. Now 15, Ravean began attending Camp Conrad-Chinnock when he was seven.

When Dianne Kretowicz first heard about the camp she was reluctant to even think about letting her son spend a week away from home. Kretowicz says, "But as time went on, I thought, 'I have to cut the strings – I have to let him go, especially if this is a safe place.'"

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Kretowicz was heartened by the camp's medical protocol, especially the fact that doctors make rounds during the night. When Ravean was younger, Kretowicz tested his blood once or twice a night. Because of the hormonal changes that come with adolescence, she now tests him four times a night.

Thinking back to her son's first journey to camp, Kretowicz says, "We were all smiling when he left on the bus, pretending to be fine. Just his little eyes were peeking out the window; he held his hand out to touch goodbye and then he bravely rode away. I was in tears."

Kretowicz had packed ten pieces of stationery with self-addressed stamps so Ravean could write home. She sent him a letter every day but heard nothing from him the whole week. "So we went to pick him up and I didn't know what to expect," Kretowicz says. "Ravean got off the bus and he was dirty from head to toe. He had muddy shoes with one sock on. He was so hoarse from singing and talking and laughing he could barely speak. He said he'd never had a better time in his life."

The Joy of Empty Pockets

Kretowicz explained that one of the simple joys for the campers is the feel of empty pockets. The camp provides all the test strips, the monitors and "pokers" (to draw blood for testing), which the kids usually carry around everywhere. The counselors keep them on hand so the kids are unburdened for the week.

"I Forget I Have Diabetes"

Talking about camp recently, Ravean told his mom and dad, "Here you are at a camp where everyone has diabetes and it's the only place I forget I have diabetes. We're like brothers and sisters; we understand what we all go through."

Camp Conrad-Chinnock is owned and operated by the Diabetic Youth Services, Inc. The camp is supported by donations and volunteers. For more information, visit www.diabetescamp.com.

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