



Publication Details:

San Diego Family Magazine
 May 2006
 pp. 115-116, 118-119
 Approximately 1,100 words

Yes They Can!

Camp I CAN invites children with autism to summer camp

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

“We’re sorry- we can’t accommodate your child. We just don’t have the resources.”

“We need you to come and pick up your child; he’s not behaving appropriately.”

These statements are all too familiar to San Diego parents of children with autism in search of summer camp. The rite of passage of summer camp is a milestone usually left unturned for these children, through no fault of their own.

Lost in Translation

The new faces and get-to-know-you chatter of social situations translate to an intensely frightening, ambiguous scene for children with autism. Faced with an experience of ear-splitting noise and unwelcome physical touch, many autistic children engage in self-protective behaviors. They might become physically aggressive or create their own world of comfort away from the group with repetitive, self-soothing actions.

If they don’t seem to enjoy group situations with other children, they’re not missing anything, right? Well, not exactly. In a structured, safe environment with knowledgeable supervision and the right mix of activities, children with autism are capable of experiencing wonder, fun and happiness.

Quest for a Camp

Shirley Fett of Clairemont, President of the San Diego County Chapter of the Autism Society of America (SDASA), remembers her sadness when a typical summer camp experience seemed out of the question for her sons Brock, 15, and Derek, 13, both autistic. When they were eight and six, Fett began a countywide quest for a summer camp that would meet her sons’ needs. Her search ended in rejection and disappointment.

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“I found in talking to other parents that we were all going through the same process,” Fett says. “It’s hard for parents of kids with autism as it is; then, to be turned away or to get that phone call mid-week from camp saying it’s too difficult to meet their child’s needs – that’s really tough.”

Can-Do-It Attitude

Rather than giving up, Fett saw the spark of possibility. She was a board member of the SDASA at the time and knew that large numbers of parents longed for a summer camp for their children.

“I thought, ‘If there isn’t a camp, let’s make one,’” Fett says. “I pitched it to the board of the SDASA and they said, ‘Great idea- run with it.’”

Camp I CAN- “Including Children with Autism Now”- made its debut in the summer of 2002 after a full year of working out the details. With a growing network of supporters and a waiting list, the camp has been gratefully received.

One-on-One Aides

Based on reverse-mainstream principles, Camp I CAN caters to the specific needs of children with autism. In order to do that the camp provides one-on-one aides for all campers. “We wanted the camp to be available to kids that can’t go to any other camp,” Fett says. “So parents with children with more challenges or who are afraid- they’ve never sent their child to camp- are reassured that every one of these kids has one adult to facilitate and keep an eye on them through the day.”

Community Partnership with YMCA

Camp I CAN is held at the Toby Wells Mission Valley YMCA, which has formed a true community partnership with the camp. Under the guidance of Shirley Fett and the Camp I CAN committee, the YMCA staff has been integral in developing a satisfying experience for these special campers. Many kids return each year.

The day camp is comprised of daily field trips and time for swimming each afternoon. Field trips have included Knott’s Soak City in Chula Vista, Boomers arcade in El Cajon, San Diego Ice Arena in Mira Mesa, and the Reuben H. Fleet IMAX Theater in Balboa Park. Campers are told each day what the plan is for the following day, and look forward to relaxing in the pool when they return from the outing.

Jenna Loves Camp

Julie McNutt’s daughter Jenna, 14, has been attending Camp I CAN since it began four years ago. McNutt, of Clairemont, appreciates the care the aides take in getting to know the campers. Parents fill out a biographical form, describing their child’s likes, dislikes, behaviors and personality.

“Jenna’s aide calls us a few days before camp to go over her form and ask any questions,” McNutt says. “So when I meet her I feel like she already knows Jenna. It’s obvious they want to be there with the kids. The moment we get there, everyone is so friendly and positive; they make Jenna feel so welcome.”

Jenna loves riding in the bus. Her favorite field trip is the water park and she is delighted to swim every day. Swimming is often a calming activity for people with autism.

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McNutt has seen a change in Jenna's reaction to the camp over the years. "I think she remembers camp now because the first couple years she'd scream a bit when we'd get there," McNutt says. "Now she gets out of the car and off she goes. They're so organized and the kids know what to expect from one hour to the next. Routine is so important with these children."

While McNutt relaxes and gets a few things done, she knows Jenna is having a good time and being well taken care of. The camp's socialization and community exploration is helpful in building skills and confidence. But mainly it's a chance to have some plain old summer fun, something everyone deserves.

At the end of the week the camp hosts a party with awards for the kids. Each aide stands up and shares compliments about the child they assisted.

Hats Off to Shirley – and Sea World

"Shirley Fett started the camp from the grassroots," McNutt says. "If it wasn't for her this program wouldn't exist. My hat's off to her."

The SDASA holds fundraisers throughout the year to support the camp. In April, Sea World sponsors "All Out for Autism," a day on which 100 percent of the park's proceeds are donated to Camp I CAN. Grants and donations help make possible the one-on-one aides and field trips.

More Information

Camp I CAN will be held in July and August, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. For registration forms, contact the Mission Valley YMCA at 619-298-3576. Cost for one week: SDASA members, \$150; non-SDASA members, \$200. Financial assistance is available to qualifying families through the YMCA. Each child may enroll in only one week of camp due to the high demand. Camp I CAN is unable to offer camp to individuals who live outside of San Diego County.

For exact dates and more detailed information visit the web site at www.sd-autism.org; click on "News and Events" and scroll down to Camp I CAN.

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