



Surfers Healing: Kids With Autism and Their Families Find Waves of Joy

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

The satisfying crumble of sand between your toes, the rhythmic swell of cool waves lapping against your legs, the sweet thunder of surf against the shore. As San Diegans, we know we can always find a day of relaxed happiness at the beach. San Diego surfers talk about “that smoothed out feeling” after soaring with the tides.

The World of Autism

But for children with autism, that free and easy feeling is elusive. Now, thanks to the generosity of Surfers Healing, a nonprofit foundation, these children and their families are finding the surprise of simple joy at the beach. And a day in the world of autism is anything but simple.

The diagnosis of autism involves a spectrum of disorders and abilities, with some people functioning at a higher level than others. It’s often difficult for kids with autism to make social connections; many don’t talk, avoid eye contact and seem repelled by physical touch.

They often appear “normal,” which can make their lives even more confusing because people who don’t know them expect them to behave “normally.” When they are scared or confused by something they can react by becoming physically agitated; tantrums are common.

When Ann and Doug Gunderson, of Mission Viejo, brought their son Nicholas to his first Surfers Healing day camp, they had understandable doubts that it would be a positive experience. Doug’s sister had encouraged the Gundersons to try Surfers Healing after hearing about its success with other kids with autism.

“A lot of people are a little bit afraid of Nicholas,” Ann Gunderson says. “He’s six feet three inches tall and weighs 200 pounds. His diagnosis is in the severe range of autism. When you see him upset or agitated there’s a lot of motion going on.”

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They've Never Seen Him Smile Like That

Nicholas has participated in many other activities, including Special Olympic bowling and basketball, Challenger baseball and piano lessons. But his helpers sometimes bear the brunt of his reluctance in the form of hand slapping and hand biting, common autistic behaviors. The Gundersons agreed to try Surfers Healing, but they were convinced Nicholas would be anxious in the ocean.

Two volunteers walked Nicholas to the water's edge, where a surf instructor was waiting. Nicholas calmly followed instructions to lay down on his surfboard, and then paddled out with his instructor. The Gundersons watched, not quite believing what they were seeing, as Nicholas coasted back to shore laying on the board, a look of serenity on his face. After his first ride, he jumped up and flapped his arms in joy as he ran toward his parents.

Nicholas has participated six or seven times and his response has been the same each time. "You can see his connection to the surfer," Gunderson says. "We've never seen him smile like that."

Surfing Brings a Sense of Peace

Surfers Healing was founded in 1999 by Israel and Danielle Paskowitz, whose 14-year-old son, Isaiah, has autism. A former champion longboard surfer, Israel noticed a marked change in Isaiah when he took him out on a tandem surfboard. Surfing seemed to give Isaiah a sense of peace that his parents didn't know he was capable of feeling.

The Paskowitzes had tried many alternative therapies for their son at great financial cost. Many therapies were also stressful for Isaiah. When they realized how therapeutic surfing was for their son, the Paskowitzes knew they wanted to offer the experience to other children with autism. Since families of children with autism already face financial strain due to the cost of therapies, the Paskowitzes felt strongly about offering the day camps free of charge.

"We have a crew of surf instructors from our regular surf camp who help with Surfers Healing," Danielle Paskowitz says. "They're not only great surfers, they also have experience with autism because they're around our son all the time. So they've seen it all."

He Knows Why He's There

Zachary Blitz, of San Clemente, is three-and-a-half and participated in his first Surfers Healing workshop last summer. His father, Robert Blitz, remembers his own amazement on that first day.

"The surfer was helping him stand up on the board," Blitz says. "He came all the way into shore, and then went right back out again. After about three times he took his hands off Zach the last few seconds and he was able to stand up by himself."

Zachary's second experience was even better. Though Zachary doesn't talk, as soon as he arrived at the beach he knew why he was there. "We walked over to the surfer and Zachary was all smiles," Blitz says.

Blitz would someday like to be a good enough surfer to participate as a Surfers Healing volunteer. His wife bought him a surfboard for his birthday.

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Blitz adds that, in some parts of the country, people tend to think of surfers as self-centered. “These surfers put in a very long day and have tremendous patience. These guys deserve a lot of credit for giving their time; they’re top-notch people.”

It’s Freeing

Marianne McCauley, of Orange County, describes the draw of the ocean for her son, Connor, 11. “The ocean is something Connor doesn’t have any control over- he just has to go with it. I think it’s freeing. For someone who has special needs or not, to realize you’re part of a force bigger than you- it’s exhilarating.” Connor was six when he started with Surfers Healing.

The experience of Surfers Healing goes beyond surfing. The day camps often introduce families to the idea that the beach is an option for satisfying, relatively easy family outings with their autistic child. In short, a day of relief.

“It’s okay if your child is throwing a tantrum or throwing sand in the food- we’re all in the same boat,” Paskowitz says. “It doesn’t matter; you can sit down and not worry about it.”

Surfers Healing camps have been life changing for many families. “It’s given us something we can be happy about, something we all enjoy,” Gunderson says. “It’s the one normal activity we can do together all day.” Nicholas’ brother comes along to watch Nicholas surf.

Blitz is relieved that his son is able to experience something so wonderful and so normal. It gives him and his wife hope that Zachary might be able to find other things he enjoys someday.

Nicholas Gunderson now owns his own surfboard. Between Surfers Healing workshops, Nicholas’ father helps push him into the waves. Nicholas is now able to go up on his knees and put his arms out in the “T” position, letting the waves take him to shore.

Though accompanied by his father, Nicholas has learned the skills from Surfers Healing. “There are no surfers in our family,” Douglas Gunderson says. Well, until Nicholas.

For four minutes of joy, watch the QuickTime video on the Surfers Healing web site. Viewers can see Nicholas on his first time out; his grand stature and flapping enthusiasm make him easy to spot. Nicholas is “stoked.” By the end of the video, viewers will be, too.

And It’s Free

Paskowitz cautions families to check credentials of surf camps that charge a fee to families of children with special needs. This summer Surfers Healing is offering several day camps in Southern California. Surfers Healing also travels to hold events in Hawaii, New York, New Jersey and Mexico. All events are free of charge.

The families who meet through Surfers Healing find solace in how much they have in common. They share their experiences, frustrations and successes with their kids. As parents watch from the shore, their children learn that they can ride the tides and find joy, in the ocean and in life.

Families of children with autism can register online at www.surfershealing.com. Participants now have time slots so the kids don’t have to wait as long.

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Volunteers Needed

Volunteers are always needed to help take the kids from the sand to the water. There is also a need for volunteers who can bring buckets and shovels to make it easier for the kids wait for their turn.

Robert Blitz is the chairperson for San Diego's Autism Walk sponsored by Cure Autism Now. For more information visit www.cureautismnow.com and click on Walk Now. The fundraising walk is scheduled for November 2005.

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