



Special Needs Camps Serve as Important Complement to Home, School

HONESDALE, Pa., April 2 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The following was written by Chanan Tigay:



(Photo: <http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20100402/DC80925>)

As an eight-year-old, Eric Biskin wasn't -- to put it mildly -- big into sports. "This is a kid who doesn't like to move," says Eric's father, Bruce Biskin. "He could focus on Nintendo for hours. What he doesn't do, to the extreme, is any kind of physical activity."

That's not particularly unusual for a kid like Eric, now 15, who has been diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger's syndrome. What's interesting is what happened next.

In previous summers, Eric's parents had sent him to day camps, but they weren't a good fit -- they were a little too heavy on the athletics for his personality; the pool was a little bit too cold. So one summer the Biskins decided to enroll Eric at Summit Camp in Wayne County, Penn. Summit is a summer sleepaway camp for kids aged 8-17 who have what the camp's director, Gene Bell, calls "attention issues" -- these, he says, include Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD and/or ADHD), Asperger's syndrome, awkward social skills, verbal or non-verbal learning disabilities, and mild emotional concerns.

A few weeks into the session, Biskin and his wife, Barbara Gronsky, visited Eric at camp and saw something they couldn't believe: "For the first time, he jumped into the lake and swam," Biskin recalls. "He couldn't wait to show us. It was like butter melting inside my heart. Back home we couldn't even get him in a pool."

At Summit, Biskin says, "Eric felt a sense of safety, a sense of fun. He got to try out stuff in a very encouraging environment that we could never get him to do at home."

The Biskins' story is affecting but not unique. Indeed, many families with kids who have attention issues or an Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism, Asperger's, Pervasive Developmental Disorder) have had similar experiences at special-needs camps, whose 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week nature sometimes leads to breakthroughs that just aren't possible in school environments. "They do things (at camp) that typically our kids don't do during an academic year," Bell says.

The National Institutes of Health estimates that the number of school-aged children with ADD/ADHD is

between 3-5 percent. A recent study by the Mayo Clinic suggests the number may be as high as 7.5 percent. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the diagnosis of ADHD increased an average of 3 percent annually between 1997 and 2006. Further, as of 2006, 4.5 million children aged 5-17 years had been diagnosed with ADHD.

Further, the CDC estimates that one out of every 110 children in the United States has an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

While homes and schools remain the primary centers for educating these children, experts say summer programs can serve as an important complement.

"ADHD is often misunderstood; subsequently many individuals diagnosed with ADHD are treated as if they are willfully refusing to engage in task completion, or are being 'just lazy,' unmotivated and even uncaring," says Michael Manos, who heads the Center for Pediatric Behavioral Health at Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital. "This is usually not the case, for children with ADHD often are quite energetic and highly focused on restricted interests. This way of finding the defect in the child, that is, calling them 'lazy' often prevents children from truly being served."

He adds: "There are teaching and behavioral strategies that really work for children diagnosed with ADHD. Many times medicine and behavioral interventions are not applied in a systematic way; so many children do not receive optimal treatment and do not have the opportunity to truly change their circumstances."

This may be so, but there is disagreement among some educators and camp professionals over whether kids with attention issues (and other special needs) are better off in special camps or in traditional summer camps that, experts say, are increasingly able to accommodate many of them.

"The debate about mainstreaming is far and wide and very hot in the educational world right now," says Elana Naftalin-Kelman, who runs the Tikvah program at Camp Ramah in Ojai, Calif. As a special-needs camp housed within a mainstream Jewish camp, Tikvah represents a middle ground between the two approaches. And Naftalin-Kelman says even she sees "advantages and disadvantages to the type of program I run."

"The benefit of a special program is that you'll usually get staffing that better understands the needs of the child," says Gary Schulman, who runs New York's Resources for Children with Special Needs, a not-for-profit referral organization that for the last 25 years has run an annual special-needs camp fair. "The curriculum itself might be more tailored to these children's needs. Most children with disabilities, if they're in a special-needs program (in school) have what's called an Individualized Educational Program. Special-needs camps are more willing to look at that plan and are more willing to follow through on it. Consistency is extremely important -- it helps them when they get back to school. "

Still, says Naftalin-Kelman, special camps aren't right for every special-needs child. Tikvah, for example, cannot accept kids who have "severe behavior issues" such as harming themselves or others. But other children, she says, can grow immensely there. "I really believe that it's right for some kids and not right for some kids," she says. "It's based on the needs of each child."

Indeed, says child-adolescent psychiatrist Larry Silver, the decision about whether or not to send a child to a special-needs camp should be based on the specific child. "If they have ADHD and medication helps them control it, they could probably go to any camp that has the capacity to monitor medication," says Silver, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the Georgetown University Medical Center and author of *The Misunderstood Child*. "If they have ADHD and they're not taking medication" or they have problems with time management or social skills, then they might benefit more from special camps.

Many ADHD kids have been "excluded so much from social interactions at school that they don't really know how to be accepted," Silver says. Further, he adds, many of them have motor problems. "Typical camp is a lot of baseball, basketball, soccer," he says, "and they don't do very well with that."

Special camps, he says, might offer alternatives, such as swimming and hiking, and might also help campers begin building social skills. That's the case at Summit Camp, where Eric Biskin learned to swim. Among the camp's offerings is a travel program for kids aged 15-19. This summer, participants will travel from Vancouver to Halifax by plane and train. Later, the camp will offer a bus tour of Colonial America. Finally, there will be an ecology and nature tour of Costa Rica.

"Each camper is unique and has his or her own challenges that we work to overcome in order to meet the basic needs for acceptance, recognition and respect," says Bell, who has been involved full-time in Special Education since 1972 and with Summit Camp since 1999. "But throughout all of the various sessions and activities, certain goals are constant -- we look to establish and reinforce feelings of success, confidence, enthusiasm and self-worth in all of our campers. These are the traits that they may not attain in the normal social environments, and we can fill those voids."

Establishing those traits is done through traditional camping activities -- sports, arts and crafts, hiking, and other camp programs. Yet, each program is geared towards developing the social interaction skills of the camper and allowing them to identify their special interests. Summit Camp has 250 staff to supervise and nurture the maximum 300 campers it hosts at any given time. Bell says at an average age of 22, counselors are more mature than those at a typical camp. There is a group of staff members who act as guidance counselors. The admissions director is a clinical social worker. And while most mainstream camps have counselor-to-camper ratios ranging from 1:6 to 1:10, Summit camp and others like it boast a ratio of 1:2.

"Our camp is a therapeutic milieu," he says. "We have a caring and nurturing staff who are able to identify the challenges that our children have and are able to work with their abilities as opposed to their disabilities."

Many special-needs camps boast similar benefits for their campers, but the focus can shift from camp to camp. Some put the emphasis on improving academic performance; others, such as Camp Northwood in Remsen, NY, highlight social skills. The Talisman Programs in Zirconia, NC, promotes self-regulation and self-direction among its campers. Quest Camp in Alamo, Calif. offers a therapeutic intervention program. Whatever the focus, educators warn that quality can vary. They encourage parents to do their research before choosing a camp for their child.

"Like every other program, there's quality and there are some that are not so good," says Schulman, of Resources for Children with Special Needs. "It's up to the parent really to visit the program, maybe the

summer before. Ask for a video. Call professionals like myself. Ask to speak to other parents."

Parents also can do a significant amount of research online. The Web site www.4-adhd.com lists summer camps for kids with ADHD, as does the American Camp Associations site, <http://www.acacamps.org/>, and www.MySummerCamps.com. Further information can be obtained from CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), www.chadd.org; the ADDA (Attention Deficit Disorder Association), www.add.org; the National Resource Center on AD/HD, www.help4adhd.org; and ADDitude Magazine, <http://www.additudemag.com>.

"Because your child has a label like ADHD or ADD doesn't mean your child must go to a special camp," Schulman says. He points out that under the Americans with Disabilities Act, special-needs children are entitled to be given reasonable accommodations in regular programs. Still, he says, special-needs camps are beneficial for "children with more severe behavioral problems who need a much higher staff-to-children ratio."

"If there's a behavioral crisis that takes place, they're less likely to just send the child home," he says.

After seven years at Summit Camp, Eric Biskin's parents think it's time for him to learn that "Summit is not the only place in the world." This summer, as last, he'll be spending half of his time in a more mainstream camp -- a situation his dad says was made possible by his years at camp.

"He's more confident in his social skills now," Biskin says. "He realizes that he can do things that he's afraid to do. Getting him over the fear so that he actually does them is still an issue -- but now when you tell him that if you give yourself the chance to learn something or do something then you can do it, he believes you. And he didn't believe that before."

SOURCE Summit Camp

Find this article at:

<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/special-needs-camps-serve-as-important-complement-to-home-school-89800832.html>