Special needs camps put fun back in summer

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Summertime is supposed to be fun; but for kids with medical, learning or mental health problems clouding their days, the same issues they fight during the school year – low self esteem, problems connecting with adults or interacting with peers – can easily spill into vacations.

Specialized summer camps like ones geared toward sports and the arts have existed for generations. In New England, some camps also cater to kids with special needs of all kinds. Three in particular – Adventurelore in N.H. and Maine, Camp Starfish in Massachusetts, and Camp Daybreak in Vermont – help this population experience summertime more like a “typical” child despite what makes them special.

Using the Great Outdoors: Adventurelore

Camp directors agree that a good camp is one with a “safety first” attitude, but a close second is creating an environment that helps kids break the barriers that bind them. The key ingredient? Fun.

“We have three rules at Adventurelore: Safety, respect for others, and an environment of fun,” says Jason Holder, Ph.D., executive director of the program for 31 years. “Fun is such a key element for these kids...because a lot of kids come from counseling situations that aren’t positive. We try to treat them in an environment that’s not conducive to whom they are. But when you get them shooting hoops or out on a climbing wall, all of a sudden, kids’ eyes will light up. That’s when you know you’ve made a connection.”

Adventurelore has two sites – Bar Harbor, Maine, and amid the White Mountains of Woodstock, N.H. Both are rustic and use outdoor activities to connect with campers whose impairments can range from allergies, diabetes and missing limbs to bipolar disorder, depression, social phobias and anxiety. Some campers are “typical,” as well. Most staff are at least master’s degree-level clinicians (one is a licensed psychologist). With a staff-to-camper ratio of 1:3, Holder says campers are welcome as long as they are non-violent and physically capable of participating in camp activities.

“We are a really hands-on program,” he says. “We do a lot of hugging and wrestling and physical play because we want kids to learn what appropriate physical play is.” But what Holder emphasizes most to his counselors is that connecting with campers is necessary to help bring them out from their shells.

“In my [experience] counseling, some kids tell their whole life story in the first session where others take eight, nine or 10 just to build a relationship,” says Holder. “Sometimes, staff wants to rush to get to the real issue....If anything, the most important thing counselors must do is make a connection and don’t rush it. Learn where a child is coming from.”

Ratios Make A Difference: Camp Starfish

Staff-to-camper ratio is a big consideration for parents of kids with any special need. Most camps offer one that’s 1:6. Camp Starfish provides a 1:1 ratio at all times and is one of only a few camps in the country that do so for kids with emotional, behavioral and social learning challenges. However, Executive Director Emily Golinsky says that though Starfish is a “therapeutic environment,” it doesn’t provide treatment or therapy at camp.

“Starfish was initially designed as a place where campers – many of whom receive multiple professional therapies both in and out of school – could get a break from formalized interventions,” says Golinsky, who has been at the camp since 2006. “Although there is no scheduled ‘social group’ or therapy sessions, the nurturing support of the one-to-one ratio along with a team of experienced supervisors enables children to participate in group programming with individualized planning as needed.”

In the absence of structured therapy, Starfish campers still work daily on coping skills. Golinsky says every day comprises a “Tool of the Day” that is woven into activities and group time and includes daily affirmations like “I use my words to express my needs and feelings,” or “I ask for help when I need it.” A “Key of the Day” helps campers focus on essential social skills like “apologizing,” “looking others in the eye and introducing yourself by name,” or “giving and accepting compliments.”
Campers are as young as age five and attend anywhere between one and eight weeks. Testimonials from parents and kids alike reflect the monumental difference Starfish has made in their lives, likely because of an important Starfish viewpoint, says Golinsky: “Our staff has a desire to help children be their best self rather than to ‘fix’ kids, since they’re not broken.”

**Camp With Association Benefits: Camp Daybreak**

Overt differences like programming and structure separate these camps from more typical ones, but the differences can be more subtle...like having a mental health organization be your governing entity. Camp Daybreak is a 52-year program that since 1961 has operated under the umbrella of the Vermont Association of Mental Health and Addiction Recovery. Its model pairs 30 residential campers ages eight to 11 with a teen- or college-age volunteer “big brother” or “big sister.” Campers are placed in one of three “families” that is run by someone in the education or mental health field for one week of what Executive Director Dan Osman calls “structured fun.”

“These are young kids and they are struggling,” says Osman, who volunteered in his youth and 16 years later leads the camp. “Our focus is to see the kid not as someone [with a disability] but to build their relationship skills and help them achieve mental health. Most of our work at Daybreak deals with relationships and social skills.”

The camp isn’t considered a mental health setting; however Osman credits Vermont’s Gov. Peter Shumlin and the state at large for being the foreground of conversations about improving the state’s overall mental health...starting with its youngest Vermonters at Daybreak.

“Kids with mental health conditions are not defined by our conditions,” says Osman. “They’re trying to achieve mental health, but are doing it in different ways.”

*By Jennifer E Chase*