



Apex Summer Camp – A Camp for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Related Disorders

by Kate Forster

For most people, the idea of summer camp conjures memories of scavenger hunts, outdoor activities, and field trips. But for the youngsters at Apex Summer Camp, a day camp for children and youth who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other related disorders, the experience is something more: a break from being different. The University of Washington Autism Center, which is part of the CHDD University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), has been offering the five-week summer camp, now in its fifth year, for children with ASD ages 6 to 12 years. The Autism Center has extended the camp to include children with related disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). The program served 91 kids during this past summer, with a staff of nearly 50. The curriculum for Apex Summer Camp is designed to build children's social skills and self-esteem within the context of structured learning and recreational activities. The goals of this approach include improved peer interactions, increased self-efficacy and confidence, and enhanced self-regulation of emotions and behavior.



Kids build social skills and self-esteem while playing games at Apex Summer Camp.

An interdisciplinary team of consultants from the UW Autism Center supports the program. This includes Ben Aaronson, Ph.D., director of the camp; Kelly Johnson, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist; Ashley Penney, Ph.D., a board-certified behavior analyst; and Amy Rodda, Ph.D., a speech language pathologist. Graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Washington and around the country staff the camp as part of a clinical internship program provided by the Autism Center. In addition to gaining hands-on experience, the students receive two weeks of intensive training by a team of interdisciplinary experts from the CHDD and around the region; key topics include how to identify and handle challenging behaviors, the genetics of developmental disabilities, and principles of autism intervention. The camp also employs professional therapists and teachers on staff.

Camp structure

Campers are organized into groups of about twelve who are roughly the same age, with four to five counselors per group. While the camp is therapeutic, it is designed to give the campers the experience of a real summer camp. Before each activity, the counselors lead a discussion on behaviors that are acceptable and those that are not, and they make sure that the campers understand what is expected of them. "When a child exhibits challenging behavior during an activity, like if they tease someone, counselors provide feedback neutrally. The child is not punished. When a child behaves well, counselors recognize and praise this. Here, a child can have a meltdown and not be branded as a troublemaker or as having behavior issues. Also, positive behaviors that will help them be successful in other environments are recognized and reinforced," said Aaronson. For example, during a kickball game last summer,

counselors regularly asked the campers questions that tested how well they were paying attention, such as “What’s the score?” and “How many outs are there?” The counselors also praised the youngsters’ good behavior. “All of this may look natural, but the counselors’ approach is very deliberate and based on proven behavior intervention strategies,” said Aaronson. One counselor in each group carries an iPad and logs behavior data on each camper so that both challenges and progress are recorded.

Part of the Apex curriculum involves focusing on a different social skill to work on each week, such as communication or cooperation, and the majority of the activities for that week support learning and practicing different aspects of that skill. During Validation Week, for example, a group of campers participated in an activity where they practiced paying each other compliments.

Involving parents

Parents receive daily reports detailing their child’s progress on behavior skills as well as any challenges they may be having. Once a week, parents are invited to attend education and training sessions on how to coach and reinforce the new skills their children learned, with the goal of encouraging their children to practice those skills in different environments.

School-year booster program

During the school year, the Autism Center offers a weekly booster program for families who participated in the camp. The children receive consistent reinforcement of skills they learned and the chance to practice those skills in a neutral and safe setting. The booster program also offers participants the opportunity to continue friendships they made at the camp, and play dates are often arranged between the families. “Many of these children have had negative experiences in school and with their peers. These are children who have difficulty making friends at school, and it’s easier for them to make friends in the relaxed and supportive environment of Apex. They get a sense of belonging here and of just being a kid. At Apex, we really want to set these children up for success,” said Aaronson.



Ben Aaronson is the director of Apex Summer Camp.

Results: Campers show more positive interactions

“The program has strong evidence that it affects behavior. We were really interested in whether it is improving social interactions as well, the primary referral concern for the families we serve,” Aaronson said. Statistical analysis of data the counselors collected showed that campers increased their positive peer interactions, such as helping, sharing, or ignoring a negative stimulus. “It is a really exciting finding to show that our environment is not only behaviorally beneficial, but really is benefiting kids socially and increasing the quantity and quality of their social interactions. That’s one of our overarching goals,” Aaronson said. In addition to Aaronson, Annette Estes, Ph.D., director of the UW Autism Center at CHDD, and Mark Stein, Ph.D., CHDD research affiliates, were involved in evaluating the program’s effectiveness.

Parents have also reported improvements in their children’s behavior and positive changes in their overall demeanor as a result of their participation in the camp. “Many parents told us that they have seen progress, and this progress carries over into the school year and into the children’s lives,” said Aaronson.

CHDD is an interdisciplinary center dedicated to the prevention and amelioration of developmental disabilities through research, training, clinical service, and community outreach. CHDD includes the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center.

CHDD Outlook

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