



SUMMERCAMPDIRECTORY

Special Needs Summer Camps: Where All Kids Can Be Kids

BY susan dipietro

Summer is a time for kids to kick back and relax away from the weekly routine of the school year. It's a time for summer camp, making new friends and having some plain old fashioned fun. As parents, we can remember camp fondly, and we want our children to experience it as well. It seems to fit into a summer routine as nicely as flip-flops and watermelon.

For families with a child whose needs can't be met at a traditional camp, however, the experience takes on a whole new meaning. Finding a camp that can meet a child's special needs, whether it is a physical disability, disease, or behavioral issue, can be life changing.

"Finding a population that is all about that child, where the other campers and even the counselors have something in common with them is very empowering for children," says Lucy Norvell, director of the American Camp Association - New England. "If you walk into a camp like that, even a stranger can feel the vibe. Children take that away with them, and they carry it for life."

Camps that are designed, staffed and equipped to meet special needs can offer the same benefits of traditional camps as well as the specific supporting needs of each child. We'll take a look at three camps that give children with challenges a summer experience they won't soon forget.

Barton Center for Diabetes Research Camps

One of the largest independent camping and education programs in the country dedicated to children living with diabetes, The Barton Center operates the Clara Barton residential summer camp in North Oxford for girls and Camp Joslin residential summer camp in Charlton for boys as well as several day camps and adventure programs.

With cabins nestled among the trees and boats tied at the edge of the pond, each campus seems like a place where any kid would be happy to settle in and enjoy their stay. There are lots of things to do including swimming, arts and crafts, boating, fishing and basketball. This is a typical summer camp program in every way except that all of the campers have Type 1 diabetes, and when it's time to check blood sugar levels, something magical happens.

"For a lot of these kids just being in a room where someone else has diabetes is life altering for them," says Jenni Schwab, Clara Barton Day Camp Director. "Diabetes is an isolating disease because typically you are the only one in your class or the only one in your school with diabetes. Getting together in a room where other campers as well as most of the staff are testing their blood sugar is eye opening. Campers will think, 'Oh my gosh, I'm not the only person with diabetes.'"

Schwab says that both she and the director of Camp Joslin have diabetes. They each have children and lead normal, productive lives.

"The kids see that they are not alone. They can lead great lives and diabetes is part of their life but it isn't their entire life," she says.

The camps provide the necessary medical care and keep the staff to camper ratio low. Games include typical camp activities as well as others that teach about diabetes with subjects ranging from insulin, nutrition and how to deal with social situations as they relate to diabetes.

"We look for teachable moments," Schwab says. "Let's say we are playing basketball and a camper's blood sugar becomes low. We stop and take care of the problem, then focus on why it happened, asking questions such as did you eat all of your lunch? Are you feeling stressed? Then we can tie it back to the event so they learn to manage their life and not just the number as it relates to their insulin level," she says. "It's a hard disease because you will have it for the rest of your life. There is no cure right now, and we say until there's a cure there's camp."

The Bridge Center

Located on 20-acres in Bridgewater, the Bridge Center provides camp opportunities for young people ages 4 through 22. A range of programs meets a variety of special needs.

Camp Connect is designed to meet the developmental, social and behavioral needs of children with Asperger's Syndrome, High Functioning Autism and related disorders. Camp Discover is open to all children with special needs regardless of the nature or severity of their disabilities. Camp Summit creates opportunities for success among children who struggle with severe behavioral challenges.

"The programs are geared towards the individual campers," says Program Director Spencer Nichols. "We assess each new camper and determine staffing support based on his or her needs. It's possible that we will have a group of six to eight campers with eight staff members if needed," she says.

The VIP program is designed for teenagers who are interested in developing leadership skills. Participants spend part of the day developing the skills necessary to lead younger campers in daily activities such as sports and cooking. For the remainder of the day, they enjoy recreation activities within their group focusing on teamwork, communication and social skills.

Equine-assisted therapy plays a big role in all of the programs. Therapeutic riding helps to improve posture, balance, communication skills, and sensory processing, according to Spencer. Accommodations are made so that there are no barriers for anyone.

"A lift is available for any student who requires assistance and wants to ride. We also offer carriage driving with a horse and cart which allows children with sensory processing issues to work with the horses outdoors, away from the smell of the barn," she says.

The Bridge Center is now in its 50th year and also offers year-round programs for children, teens and young adults with special needs.

Hole In The Wall Gang Camp

Entering through the archway at the main entrance of the 344-acre campus in Ashford, Conn., a brightly painted sign reads "Welcome! The fun starts here," and with activities including a climbing wall and ropes course, arts and crafts, archery, boating and fishing, horseback riding, mini golf, theater, photography, music, swimming and trail hiking, there is no limit to the fun.

But this is no ordinary camp, and these are no ordinary campers. Celebrating its 25th

anniversary in 2013, the Hole In The Wall Gang Camp provides a place where children throughout the northeast, including Massachusetts, ages 7 to 15 with serious illnesses can go for what is called at the camp "A different kind of healing."

Founded by Paul Newman in 1988, the camp provides eight-week-long sessions for children who would not be able to attend traditional camps because of their extensive medical needs.

Known affectionately as the OK Corral, the on-site medical facility has a full-time staff and provides all treatments campers may need including medications, IV infusions, G/J-tube feedings, chemotherapy, central line care and more. The staff dresses in the standard camp t-shirts and shorts in order to keep the atmosphere as relaxed as possible.

The magic that Paul Newman envisioned lives on in the camp today.

"It provides a safe hideaway for kids, where they can be themselves and not fear that they will be judged by their physical appearance," says Ryan Thompson who is the senior development officer for the camp. "We meet children where they are medically and physically and they participate in every activity here. In school they might be the only kid facing what they are going through, and they face a lot of isolation. Here there are 120 kids just like them. They have a sense of community and belonging. Camp treats their spirit and restores their sense of childhood," he says.

Susan DiPietro is a freelance writer and the mother of two. She can be reached via email at susanjdipietro@gmail.com.

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The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp

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Resources For Parents:

Federation for Children with Special Needs

FCSN.org
The Federation's 2013 Summer Fun Camp Directory includes links to over 200 camp Websites serving children with disabilities.

American Camp Association

Acacamps.org
Online Camp Finder tool includes option for camps that specialize in serving campers with physical/mental challenges.



Baystateparent.com
campguide.baystateparent.com/
specialneedscamps
Bay State Parent online
summer camp fair

6th Annual Summer Camp and Recreation Expo for Children With Special Needs

fsepac.org/events-3/summer-camps
Attend the 6th Annual Summer Camp and Recreation Expo for Children with Special Needs to meet and learn about summer camps and recreational organizations in Massachusetts and the surrounding area.

Event Organizer/Sponsor: Framingham Special Education Parent Advisory Council

When: March 4 from noon-3 p.m.
(Snow Date: March 10)

Where: Framingham High School,
115 A St., Framingham, MA 01701



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