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## Campers Get Special Attention



by sue lovejoy



Summer camps and programs provide children with wonderful opportunities for fun and learning.

However, choosing the right one for a child with a special need can be a complex undertaking.

Inclusive programs bring children together with typically developing peer models, while specialized programs service a select group of children. For parents, knowing that their child is finding enjoyment in a secure, safe, and understanding environment is a great relief.

Throughout New England, resident (overnight) and day camps are available for children with various special needs.

While researching camp offerings, parents should consider many factors, none more important than the unique needs of their child.

"Talk to your child" to make sure he or she is prepared and ready for the camp experience, said Lara Abramson, the year round program coordinator for the Clara Barton Camp for Girls with Diabetes in North Oxford.

She also said that families visit camps prior to making a commitment, and stresses, "there is power in knowledge."

Would you prefer a program that focuses on recreational activities? Specific skill development? Specialized services, such as Speech Therapy?

Eve Weber, a speech and language pathologist and behavior analyst said parents should first define specific camp goals for their child.

Parents must do their homework and seek information about a camp's staff qualifications, accessibility of medical care, and camper to staff ratio. Recommendations from others whose children have attended a specific camp can be most valuable in a family's decision-making process.

As Director of Confidence Connection in Wellesley, Weber has designed a therapeutic academic program for children ages 4 to 12 with Autism, Pervasive Development Disorder, and other developmental delays. Confidence Connection's primary focus is on strengthening social skills.

Weber strives to be on the "cutting edge of service" by providing low student to staff ratio of 2:1, (1:1 when necessary), highly qualified and educated staff, accessible hours, reverse inclusion opportunities and individualized communication between program staff and parents.

Parent Stephanie Woerner praised Weber's program.

"The groups were small and the director worked at getting kids together who shared similar interests. My son enjoyed the activities and he liked the kids in his group," she said.

Some areas in which Woerner noticed marked improvement in her son's communication skills included "making eye contact, participating in a conversation and taking turns... It was a successful summer experience for my son," she said.

Month-long daily summer sessions at Confidence Connection met their family's needs, as no other summer program had to date.

"Lessons were learned in one day and could be...built upon the next day," Woerner said. "There was more time for reinforcement and less probability that my son would have to be re-taught a lesson or skill, given the short time span between classes." The two-hour schedule worked well, allowing time for activities, transitions and skill practice, she said.

Using theatrical games and techniques, The Spotlight Program in Danvers teaches social pragmatic skills to adolescents' ages 9-20 with Asperger's Syndrome, Autism, ADHD, and other nonverbal learning challenges. Spotlight helps participants become better aware of how they present themselves during social interactions.

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According to Director Matthew Lerner, one reason for developing Spotlight was in response to the needs of families whose children had participated in traditional programs, but not found success for a variety of reasons.

Spotlight's diverse, qualified staff includes special education teachers, general educators, and actors, all of whom demonstrate a genuine rapport with students. Staff members "understand and appreciate the kids" in a way that is not just "clinical or academic," Lerner said.

Peabody parent Linda Stanley said, "This (Spotlight) is the first summer program that my daughter has wanted to return to. Her feeling of truly being with her peers made me cry. It's hard to express the words that would describe her sense of 'fitting in' and 'belonging.' I'm thankful for this program and hope it continues throughout her educational years."

In addition to the summer sessions, a variety of year-round opportunities are available at Spotlight.

A specialized camp is a venue for children to share the challenges of their disabilities or illnesses with others who face similar obstacles. Many of these programs allow campers an experience where they are no longer in the minority. North Oxford's Clara Barton Center offers residential, day, and family camps, as well as other year round activities to girls with Type 1 Diabetes.

Children arrive at Clara Barton's residential camp and feel "immediately empowered ... everybody else is just like them," said Abramson. She added that 75% of the support staff also has diabetes.

"At camp, kids with diabetes are surrounded by people just like them - both kids and adults who share their day to day challenges and triumphs ... Camp gives kids the opportunity to meet and learn from adult counselors with diabetes..." (American Diabetes Association)

Cost is yet another important consideration when choosing a camp.

Many private and specialized camps and programs for children with special needs can be pricey. School personnel and Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members may be able to aid parents in locating appropriate programs and/or funding. Community sponsorships, payment plans and scholarships are an available, frequently untapped, resource.

Abramson encouraged parents to seek funding alternatives. Clara Barton campers have accessed sponsorships through road races and local organizations and/or businesses. Families also take advantage of "Camperships" and "Work Day" programs through the camp itself to help offset costs.

Parents are the key components when choosing a quality summer program for children. With their own high standards and a child's individual needs in mind, parents help to ensure that the camp experience is a healthy and fulfilling one.

**Sources:** [www.mass.gov/portal/site/massgoveportal](http://www.mass.gov/portal/site/massgoveportal); Federation for Children with Special Needs ([www.fcsn.org/camps](http://www.fcsn.org/camps)); American Camp Association, New England ([www.acane-camps.org/camp](http://www.acane-camps.org/camp)) and Atlanta Alliance on Developmental Disabilities (AADD) ([www.aadd.org](http://www.aadd.org))

*Sue Lovejoy is a freelance writer from Holden.*

#### Parent Resources

□ Federation for Children with Special Needs: [www.fcsn.org/camps](http://www.fcsn.org/camps) □ American Camp Association: [www.americancampassociation.org](http://www.americancampassociation.org) □ American Camp Association, New England: [www.acane-camps.org/camp/](http://www.acane-camps.org/camp/) □ [www.Mysummercamps.com](http://www.Mysummercamps.com) □ Local Board of Health offices licensing information

#### Questions To Ask When Deciding on A Camp

□ Availability of healthcare? □ Educational and/or recreational goals? □ Staff : Camper ratio? □ Staff education and qualifications (expertise with Special Need)? □ Inclusion vs. special needs only? □ Staff/parent communication policy? □ Accreditations and licenses? □ References from other families?



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