

No camper left behind

At Camp Kaleidoscope, the city's only summer day camp for children and young adults with autism, **PAULINE TAM** finds a positive attitude that ensures no one is left on the sidelines.

It's a beautiful morning for boating on Dow's Lake. As the day-campers wait to be helped into canoes and paddle boats, their excitement, tinged with anxiety, is palpable.

One young man mumbles to himself as he paces in circles. Another is monitored by three camp counsellors as he rattles a chain-link rope by the dock. Amid the flurry of activity, Alex Mitchell stands quietly with his blue eyes fixed to the ground.

"When was the last time you went canoeing, Alex?" his counsellor asks. "Back in 2005," Mitchell answers without looking up at her.

Mitchell, a gentle 21-year-old with red hair and a trim moustache, has autism, a developmental disorder that causes extreme introversion and can make his participation in any sport or social activity a challenge.

But at Camp Kaleidoscope, the city's only summer day camp for children and young adults with autism, counsellors have a can-do attitude that ensures no one is left on the sidelines. Even campers who are considered low-functioning or difficult to motivate are coaxed to participate — or at least try.

On this day, Mitchell is among 12 campers, out of 14, who manage to get into boats and enjoy their excursion on the water. Proud counsellors record the moment, snapping photos that go home with the campers.

The camp was started last year by Children at Risk, an Ottawa-based autism charity. In an expanded version this summer, it is being funded by The King's Daughter's and Sons (Ottawa City Union), Unity For Autism Foundation, Community Foundation of Ottawa and the Ottawa Catholic School Board.

The camp was conceived as much as a social outlet for youth with autism as a respite program for their parents, allowing them to take a break from the stresses of raising high-needs children.

Often, many parents are so consumed with struggles to find speech therapists, behavioural intervention services, special education classes and a way to pay for them that the last thing on their minds is a recreation program.

"A lot of parents can't handle going on trips with these children if they don't have the support," says Hazel Smith, one of the camp organizers. "We're trying to give these children experiences they wouldn't otherwise have."

The camp's focus on physical activity is backed by mounting research that suggests the value of sports for children with autism is overlooked. Studies dating back to the 1980s have found that brisk physical activity increases attention span and reduces some of the repetitive behaviours that characterize autism.

Mitchell falls roughly in the middle of autism's spectrum of social impairments. He has difficulty making eye contact and staying on topic during conversations. When he's anxious or overstimulated, he will flap his arms. His sharp memory, quirky sense of humour and mild manner endear him to the camp counsellors.

Mitchell's mother, Beth, said until two years ago, when her son caught a mysterious illness, he was learning at the Grade 12 level and on track to graduate from high school. However, with the sudden onset of brain seizures, Mitchell lost all his speech and mobility.

"One day, he was talking and the next day he couldn't even open his birthday gift," Beth recalls. "He just crashed and lost every skill he ever had."

By March 2011, with intensive coaching from his mother, Mitchell was just starting to walk again. When Beth heard about Camp Kaleidoscope, she decided a rigorous program of exercise and life-skills training was just what her son needed.

"He needed to get out and socialize. And I was taking him out, but that wasn't enough. He needed stimulation, lots and lots of stimulation," Beth said.

She credits the camp with speeding her son's recovery, allowing him to finish high school earlier this year. "They kept him busy all the time and I just saw how quickly he came back to us."

The severity of the autistic symptoms varies among the campers, who range in age from four to 21.



JANA CHYILOVA/OTTAWA CITIZEN

Alex Mitchell enjoys a chicken burger he helped to prepare at Camp Kaleidoscope, a day camp for children and young adults with autism.

Some are withdrawn, others engage with unabashed outbursts. Some are mute, others speak fluently. Many depend on rigid routines for a sense of security. A small number are physically aggressive, especially when their senses are overloaded.

Left to their own devices, people with autism, whose unusual behaviours are believed to stem from variations in early brain development, will retreat into their own worlds. Many are prescribed antipsychotics and other drugs that can produce fatigue and swift weight gain, making physical activity that much more important.

'When she's at this camp, there's never a thought that Holly won't be accepted. The attitude is, 'Let's just make it the best experience possible.'

MARK LALONDE
Parent

However, because they need extra attention, many young people with autism have trouble finding acceptance at other summer camps, where the activities are not necessarily tailored to their rhythm and they don't have the benefit of close supervision.

While other camps may have one counsellor for every five campers, each Kaleidoscope camper is assigned a counsellor, sometimes even two, allowing close bonds to be formed.

The emphasis is on adapting the camp's program to each camper rather than the other way around.

"We don't want to send anybody home unless we know we've tried all the strategies to keep the kids at camp," camp director Debbie Lacroix said.

And, unlike other summer camps, Kaleidoscope is staffed entirely by counsellors who either have a family member with autism or are professionally trained to work with people with the condition.

Lacroix, for example, has an 18-year-old son with autism. In bringing her unique insights, experience and empathy as a parent to her job as a counsellor, Lacroix works hard to foster a warm and nurturing environment within the camp.

And because children with autism often do better with routines, the itinerary is highly structured. Campers are provided with a daily schedule at the morning "icebreaker" sessions, where the day's activities are discussed in detail.

"We like the fact that there's a lot of expertise at the camp for children with autism," says Mark Lalonde, whose 13-year-old daughter, Holly, is one of the campers.

A curious and energetic teen, Holly is considered high functioning. Nevertheless, she has had trouble in the past fitting into summer camps for "neurotypical" children.

"She can sometimes be fine and seem almost neurotypical herself — with a few quirks," says her father.

"But then something can set her off and then she can really go off the rails. That's a real challenge for some of the camps that she has been to."

"When she's at this camp, there's never a thought that Holly won't be accepted. The attitude is, 'Let's just make it the best experience possible.'"