



Camper with and without disabilities work together at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta summer camps.

Camps Rise to the Occasion with Inclusive Summer Programs

by Adrienne Murchison

Lifelong memories are created at summer camp. The mix of self-discovery and recreational experiences bring the kind of joy to children’s faces that every parent wants to see. For Leanne and Anthony Abraham, it was delight in seeing their son Amiri ride a horse at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta (JCC) summer camp in 2014.

Just before then eight-year-old Amiri started camp, the couple was asked by the director, what was the one thing they wanted him to be exposed to? They wanted him to be comfortable atop a horse.

Amiri, now 12, is diagnosed with Down syndrome and riding horses is among the many things he has enjoyed during the summer getaway where campers with and without disabilities participate together in activities such as swimming, boating, sports and arts and crafts.

“He loves it,” Leanne said. “It’s a very warm feeling as a parent. He’s made friends that he plays with outside of camp. We thought that because he has inclusion at school, summer camp should be too.”

Inclusive summer programs are proving how children with disabilities can thrive when they are included. Registration at most camps close soon, however they do provide waiting lists to fill inevitable cancellations. While all camps are not equipped to accommodate children with disabilities, parents have a variety of inclusive

options to choose from where camp administrators and staff are deliberate in facilitating safe, as well as adventurous daily experiences accessible to all children.

With the Abrahams, Jennifer Lieb, director of the Blonder Family Department for Special Needs at JCC, visited Amiri in his school setting to see if he would be a good fit for their summer camp and what specific assistance he would need.

The JCC has about 100 different types of summer programs with nearly 600 attendees per week. Camp runs from Memorial Day to the first week of August. JCC camps are not faith-based and children of all faiths are welcomed.

“Traditional is the most popular for campers with disabilities,” said Lieb, referring to Pre-K through middle school programs. “It’s an overnight camp experience in a day camp setting. We have an inclusive team to support the child and can make basic modifications.”

JCC’s summer program boasts a nearly 100% retention rate. Lieb

said lines blur between campers as they are eager to partner on teams and celebrate each other’s birthdays.

“The exposure is amazing,” she said. “It’s truly inclusive.”

The JCC and other programs such as Peacebuilders Camp in South Georgia allow for facilitators to be with children throughout the day for one-on-one support.

Located on a 250-acre farm, Peacebuilders overnight summer camp teaches middle-schoolers about the importance of human rights and how to have a positive, meaningful impact on the world. Through games they learn about past and present activists, including teenage trailblazers. Camp counselors blend in service projects and discuss thought-provoking topics related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To explore the right of everyone to have access to adequate food, Peacebuilders brought in staff from Carver Neighborhood Market in South Atlanta last year to introduce the concept of food deserts. They set up a game for campers to learn how a person’s circumstances can hinder their ability to shop at markets



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located a significant distance away from their neighborhood.

For many people, including those with disabilities, this is a reality. The point of the game was for all of the campers to develop empathy for others and know that everyone has a right to have access to food.

Peacebuilders hosts three one-week camp sessions in July. Each session has only 20 campers. “Within that, we know them really well,” said McDonald. “We work to make sure no one is turned away and approach them on a case-by-case basis.”

While the camp may not be able to accommodate everyone currently, it is working on increasing its reach and capability.

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The camp organization is funded in part through the Real Communities Partnerships initiative of the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCCD). A main objective is to inspire campers with and without disabilities to be social justice advocates and realize goals that they set for themselves.

“We follow up with campers to record stories of what they have accomplished,” McDonald said.

In the past, Peacebuilders’ counselors have designed curriculum and activities to meet the individual physical needs and learning abilities of campers who would benefit.

Last summer, a camp counselor stayed alongside a camper with muscular dystrophy to provide specific physical movements designed to keep him engaged in activities, McDonald said.

In preparation for its 2018 summer camp, Peacebuilders has collaborated with the Atlanta Area School for the Deaf (AASD) on ideas to create the best possible experience for students attending camp for the first time this year. Campers will have sign language interpreters.

“Often, our students here are home for two months during the summer and feel isolated [as they] don’t have a lot of people to communicate with,” said Adam Garfinkel, high school transition coordinator. “And we want them to have shared experiences and to have a wonderful summer experience.”

The existence of inclusive summer camps helps build awareness of basic needs that self-advocates and families have to fight for, that others move through easily, said John Serrano, AASD school superintendent. “Unfortunately, it’s not a given,” he added.

Peacebuilders seeks to counter the notion of a child feeling like an outsider. “It’s about creating programs that are fully inclusive and having campers feel included,” McDonald said. “That’s the bottom line that we are trying to achieve.”

Susanna Miller-Raines’ works with the Center for Leadership in Disability at Georgia State University helping to inform the larger community by translating research on the best practices in developmental disabilities into programs that ultimately support and benefit people with disabilities.



Campers with and without disabilities mix ingredients in a cooking class at SciKidz summer camp.

That includes children with disabilities and their families.

“Inclusion is important in general because it gives everyone an opportunity to learn from each other,” Miller-Raines said.

There are varying dynamics for children with disabilities and their families. “There are situations where you have a camper with a disability who might not be as included in the rest of their life,” she said. “And camp gives them an opportunity to learn skills through observations of other peers. Also, students in school are more and more included all of the time, so it’s been more natural to be included, which is beautiful.”

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parents have an essential role in how their child’s summer unfolds into a successful camp experience. It benefits them to make inquiries on applications and ask how equipped counselors are to meet children’s individual needs as they arise.

For example, Athens-Clarke County programs provide a range of support for children with disabilities, with the exception of personal care needs. Its camps include sports, arts, a nature center and more.

“We have children with various disabilities in our programs and will work to see what’s needed for additional support” said Leslie Trier, a certified therapeutic education specialist. “But we do sometimes get



SciKidz campers find a sense of belonging, camaraderie and friendship.



Adult volunteers and campers work together on a project for a hospitality house at Peacebuilders Camp.



Campers with and without disabilities work on projects at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta summer camps.

requests for things I cannot change. For example, if a gym echoes and a child cannot handle a lot of noise, camp may not be the best place.”

The ratio of counselors to campers is good to know as well. Athens-Clarke County’s inclusive programs have about one counselor per 10 kids.

Camp directors also stress the importance of families providing complete information on children including medical, medicinal and dietary needs. Bob Hagan, co-owner of Club SciKidz, said there have been occasions when parents omitted crucial information on forms and camp counselors were at a disadvantage as a result.

“We’ve had kids [who are diagnosed with autism or] have emotional issues and there is nothing on the forms,” Hagan explained. “And we are scratching our heads and wondering what is wrong.”

SciKidz offers science-based summer day camps to students from Pre-K to ninth grade at churches and schools around the Atlanta metro area in June and July. Campers’ interests are piqued by topics such as crime scene investigations, 3D printing, advanced robotics and space engineering.

During Veterinary Science Camp students learn first aid techniques

for pets, such as how to clean a dog’s ears. During microscopy, they analyze bacteria and blood samples provided by local veterinarians.

SciKidz site directors must hold current classroom teaching positions in Georgia. Counselors are trained in education and inclusivity.

The camp has had many participants with various needs. “Some have had a feeding tube, sometimes kids have a disability with just one arm or hand and might need some assistance,” said Hagan.

Some parents hire private facilitators who are beside a camper all day.

Additionally, at SciKidz, a counselor of the same gender can assist somewhat physically independent children that adapt well without aid, but perhaps need help standing or toileting, Hagan added.

Counselors and directors are a great help, said Fionnuala Burdett, the mother of 11-year-old twin boys who are on the autism spectrum and attend the JCC summer camp.

“This will be their fifth year,” said Burdett. “They would not be able to attend this camp if they did not have help during the day. Counselors ask for my advice and Jennifer has been my lifeline. Brendan is nonverbal and Aidan socially finds it hard to interact.”

The facilitators are adept at keeping children focused, she said. “Aidan knows every type of tsunami, hurricane and storm. The facilitator will say, ‘Let’s not talk about the weather right now. Let’s talk about what you did on your vacation.’”

To ensure parents and children are equally excited and comfortable with attending camp, SciKidz and JCC allow families to tour and learn about the experience and surroundings before opening day.

The JCC will hold an open house for families interested in their day camp on May 24 at the Zaban Park location in Dunwoody. Parents and children can walk the grounds and sample activities that will take place when camp begins.

“I highly encourage a camp tour,” Lieb said. “Parents are our best allies. We try to work closely with them to know the child. We encourage them to share things with us so we can frame their child’s experience positively.”

GAINING INDEPENDENCE

Last year, an excited Amiri brought home flyers on Camp Barney every week and pleaded with his parents to let him go. So, the Abrahams are considering their son attending a week away for the first time ever.

INCLUSIVE SUMMER CAMP PROGRAMS

Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services

706.613.3800

<https://www.accgov.com/148/Leisure-Services>

Atlanta Area School for the Deaf

404-296-7110, aasdweb.com

Camp Best Friends

City of Atlanta Office of Recreation

Email: CampBestFriends@atlantaga.gov

Website: <http://bit.ly/2InvESG>

Club SciKidz

678.493.5651, clubscikidz.com

Summer Camp starts on June 4, 2018!

Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta

678.812.4000, atlantajcc.org

OPEN HOUSE - May 24, 2018

Peacebuilders Camp - Koinonia Farm

404.373.8036, peacebuilderscamp.org

Spruill Arts Summer Art Camps

770.394.3447

<http://www.spruillarts.org/>

youthclassesandcamps

RESOURCES FOR SUMMER CAMPS

Atlanta Parent Magazine

<https://www.atlantaparent.com/summer-day-camps-listings-atlanta-georgia/>

American Camp Association

<http://find.acacamps.org/>



Children at the Peacebuilders Camp wait for fireworks to begin on July 4, 2017.

Anthony Abraham finally agreed, but Leanne contemplates Amiri's dietary restrictions and wellbeing.

Leanne said, "Every year, he becomes more self-sufficient. He had a facilitator when he first started camp and last year he shared one. I guess we are over-protective."

Understandably, all parents are protective when their son or daughter is attending camp for the first time, but their children's excitement is always reassuring.

Burdett recalls her unexpected tears of joy after Brendan and Aidan's first day of summer camp.

"They were sweaty and had dirty hair," she said. "It was just like what you would consider a typical summer camp to be for kids." The Burdett boys have become more independent and are eager to go back to school as a result of camp.

"Brendan has more eye contact now," Burdett added. "Aidan, getting him out of his shell is very much a big deal."

For parents who have children with disabilities, the separation is naturally easier to bear with day camps than sleep-away programs. Those can prove especially difficult as some have strict rules that limit communication with family to establish a sense of independence.

"I do think campers need to have that separated experience, but staff could be more willing to communicate with families," Miller-Raines said.

In 2010, she was camp director at Talisman Summer Camp in North Carolina, which served young people on the autism spectrum or diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).



Twins Brendan and Aidan Burdett have flourished at JCC's summer program, which they have attended for five years.

"The camp I worked at, there were weekly phone calls," she said. "A lot of camps don't do that." Instead, most camp administrators update families on children's progress.

Amiri's increased independence is likely linked to the amount of time he spends at camp, which has extended each year, his mother said. In 2017, he went for six weeks.

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Leib said campers benefit greatly by attending for at least a month. "We recommend at least three consecutive weeks," she said. "Week one they're figuring it out. Week two they're getting comfortable, and by three, they've got it."

Indeed, by that third week, campers have a found a sense of independence, belonging and camaraderie.

Inclusive summer camps demonstrate children with and without disabilities not only want to feel included in every type of activity, but they thrive in the experiences resulting in new-found confidence and security within themselves.