

Opening Up a Closed World

Autistic children learn, play and make friends at GMU camp.

By **Bonnie Hobbs**

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Mitchell and Elijah didn't know each other before last week. But they became friends when both attended a camp for autistic children at St. George's United Methodist Church in Fairfax.

That, alone, is a big accomplishment, because Elijah is a typical boy and Mitchell has autism. If not for the camp, they might never have met. But because of it, Mitchell not only made a buddy, but learned a wealth of socialization skills.

"It's the first socialization camp in the area," said Karen Emmons, director of Discipleship Ministries at St. George's.

"We've had several, special-needs children in the church, including autistic children, and we saw this camp as a marvelous thing to help happen."

Running from June 29-July 3, from 9 a.m.-4 p.m., the camp was opened to children ages 4-13, with the classes and children organized according to abilities and age.

Autistic children were paired with non-autistic children who acted as their role models for appropriate child behavior.

"Fully one-third of them weren't verbal, but it's amazing what everyone did to help them," said Emmons. "For example, if a child was frustrated because another child had a toy they wanted, they'd be taught how to handle it."

Post-graduates from George Mason University's program for board-certified behavioral analysts (BCBA) worked with the autistic children to teach them socialization skills. Robinson Secondary students acted as teachers' aides in the classrooms.

Shannon McGrail, of Fairfax's Kings Park West community, conceived of the camp, and Ted Hoch, a BCBA on staff at GMU supported the idea. They then e-mailed several United Methodist churches in Fairfax County and St. George's responded, donating its space for free.

The campers were from a nonprofit, autism support group, Parents of Autistic Children of Northern Virginia (POAC-NoVa). McGrail, who has an 8-year-old autistic son, is the director of PVBIA (POAC-NoVa Verbal Behavior Instructor Academy) and ran the camp.

Some 137 children participated, 89 of who were autistic. Activities included emotional charades to help an autistic child determine whether another person is happy or sad. Children also took nature hikes, learned how to share board games and had water-balloon fights, just for fun.

"The autistic children had to bring in their favorite item and learn to share it



Louise Krafft

The campers along with children of church members build little sand castles in the fenced in playground at St. Georges.



Louise Krafft

New friends Elijah and Mitchell walk across the wooden bridge before starting another relay.



Louise Krafft

Students in the psychology club at Robinson participated in the camp as aids to the teachers and companions to the campers.

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with another child, which is difficult for them," said McGrail. "But sharing is an important concept for our kids because, if you can share, you can have a friend."

Many of the autistic children had never been in a mainstream classroom, where they could see how other children behaved. "Typically behaving kids can put a face on autism and see it's not something to be feared and shunned," said McGrail. "Normally, autistic kids don't go to playgrounds, for example, because they are usually ostracized or ignored. They don't act like other kids and don't use appropriate language or body gestures or understand, at first, what the other person said, and it takes them a long time to respond."

She called the non-autistic children at camp "really special, amazing, loving kids willing to put up with or ignore the flapping arms or noise of the autistic kids. They applauded desirable or appropriate behavior, rewarding it with verbal praise, tickles, hugs or edibles. And that makes our [autistic] kids want to make relationships with them, because they're not avoided or walked-away-from by their peers, as they were previously."

The mothers also benefited. "I'd never realized that parents of autistic children weren't naturally part of the community," said Emmons. "So on Monday, we had a coffeehouse in our fellowship hall, and every parent got to meet each other and make new friendships. People shared stories and tips, and they even got a pool of babysitters from the Robinson students."

But the main focus was teaching the children how to socialize with their peers and educating their parents on how to work with their children at home to continue the progress made during the camp. Equally important, said McGrail, was "educating lay people in these skills in hopes of turning them into therapists."

The students teaching the classes are post-masters students at GMU, and McGrail wants them to be trained to teach a variety of levels of learners. She'd also like the Robinson students to become BCBAs or special-ed teachers or therapists, people who work with special-needs students. "If not for this camp, they'd never have access to these types of children," said McGrail.

She added that a critical shortage of professionals trained in verbal behavior to work with autistic children existed. "There are less than 130 BCBAs in the state and less than 1,000 in the country," said McGrail. "Ted Hoch was the first one in Virginia and only the 54th in the world. According to Fairfax County Public Schools, 1 in 125 kids in Fairfax County is autistic, which is higher than the national average of 1 in 150. And the waiting list to get a BCBA is over a year."

McGrail said GMU's BCBA program is the only one of its type in the world, where the students work with autistic children in their homes and are supervised by an instructor. She started the five-semester program last year and, already, she said, "It's changing lives." For more information about the program or about POAC-NoVa, contact McGrail at pvbia@poac-nova.org.

All in all, she was delighted with the success of the camp and is pleased with all the good it did, on many levels. For example, she said, two mothers of autistic children live in the same building in Springfield and didn't even know each other until they came to the camp. Now they and their children are friends and the mothers can be resources for each other.

McGrail was also thrilled with the whole experience at St. George's and with the warm reception the children and teachers received. "We were in every, single room of the church," she said. "It's a beautiful space, and it was so much more than we hoped for. I couldn't have asked for a more supportive

and welcoming environment for our kids, and I'm looking forward to doing this for two weeks, next year." After all, she said, "Any child is a gift, verbal or not. Children are a blessing and people should be grateful to have them."



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