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Camp helps kids with ADHD build social skills

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Life is never easy for children with ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and some behavioral disorders. They face a lot of stress when the time comes for them to be immersed in social settings, such as school, sports or camp.

CampSTAR, a day camp in Highland Park, was designed specifically for children with these special needs in mind. An open house for the camp will be held from 10-11:30 a.m. Jan. 25 at the JCYS Lutz Family Center, 800 Clavey Road, Highland Park.

Many of the activities are the same as at traditional day camps, but with a behavior modification and education components.

On point

A point system is key to behavior modification.

Campers receive points for appropriate behavior, but lose points for inappropriate behavior throughout the day. Daily report cards are distributed, which campers can share with parents.

Amy Shimoni, child and family development specialist with the Jewish Council for Youth Services, said this system, along with teaching sports and activity rules and skills, is intended to build pride and self-esteem.

But campers can also learn from losing points, because they realize what behavior doesn't work in social settings.

"We address something no other camp is going to address for them," she said.

JCYS partners with University of Illinois at Chicago department of psychiatry in running the camp.

Campers are also separated into small groups of same age levels and skill levels.

Counselors are undergraduate and graduate students who are well-versed in the goals of the camp and the point system. Psychologists, a psychiatrist, a doctor for medication assessments and a nurse are on staff.

Model behavior

Dr. Mark Stein, a specialist in ADHD from UIC and director of the Hyperactivity, Attention and Learning Problems Clinic in Northbrook, explains why this works.

"Exposure to models of good sportsmanship and social skills definitely help promote social functioning," he said. "The explicit focus on social skills development, the low ratio of staff to counselors, and the fact that there is a wide range of severity of ADHD and associated problems all serve to optimize opportunities for social functioning."

Brenda Weitzberg, director of North Shore Operations for JCYS, said the UIC department of psychiatry clinicians wanted to open a camp based on a model developed by Dr. William Pelham, professor of psychology, pediatrics and psychiatry at the State University of New York. His Summer Treatment Program for children with ADHD has been recognized by the American Psychological Association and other groups, and has been used in clinical trials by the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

JCYS, which has the experience running camps along with facilities, got on board with the idea and held camp last summer.

"I think camp can be a great experience for most children," Stein said. "However, children with ADHD often have a great deal of difficulty adapting to the less structured camp environment of a typical camp, and their experience is often unsuccessful in terms of their social functioning and self esteem. Often, children are self conscious if they are taking a medication, and typical camps may not be able to help monitor this."

For more information about CampSTAR, visit www.jcys.org/campstar or call (847) 433-6001.



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