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Camp integrates autistic children with typically developing peers

By Sara Michael  
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Pre-schoolers are read a story at the new Power Play with Peers Camp at the Kennedy Krieger Center for Autism and Related Disorders in Baltimore Kristine Buls/Examiner Sitting in small green plastic chairs, eight 3- and 4-year-olds point to cut-out whales posted around the room, at times jumping up to fetch the animals that correspond with the part of story being read aloud.

The scene looks like any other preschool classroom with children pointing and interacting with the story.

But what's different here is five of the children are autistic.

"We're taking the same intensity [of autism therapy programs], but putting it in the more natural environment," said Katherine Holman, director of autism early intervention at Kennedy Krieger Institute.

In a new camp at Kennedy Krieger called Power Play with Peers, autistic and typically developing children play together for several hours a week in a highly structured environment. The activities mirror those in a typical preschool, but more attention is paid to the interactions and the exercises are based on autism research, said Holman, the camp's supervisor.

"You can't just put kids with autism in with their peers," she said. "You have to support that integration."

The concept of integrated play is still new, and the camp grew out of a need for autistic children to interact with their typically developing peers. After two camp sessions, Holman said she wants to expand the program.

Here the autistic children are challenged to learn social skills, such as pointing to an object or using language to communicate, Holman said.

At Friday's camp, one teaching instructor noticed an autistic child initiate an activity - jumping - and immediately encouraged the others to follow suit. This teaches the children imitation, a skill not easily grasped by autistic children.

Anna Jain has seen those skills grow in her 3-year-old autistic son Kanha Vardhan. Before the camp, he might have cried and pushed his mother if she was sitting in the seat he wanted. Now, he uses words, saying, "Move back, Mom," Jain recalled.

"Typical peers bring out a lot you wouldn't see in a class room of autistic kids," said Jain, of Elkridge.

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The camp also offers a few hours of fun for her son, who spends 30 hours a week in intensive therapy.

Supporters contend the typically developing children also benefit, learning lessons of inclusion and patience.

“We wanted to get him on a path to understanding the world is full of different kinds of people,” said Jennifer Mendelsohn, whose 4-year-old son Ethan Abel is typically developing.

Mendelsohn said she had no reservations about Ethan’s own development in the group. She knew it was meticulously organized and has watched Ethan embrace the role of being a teacher to his peers.

“He’s advancing - just in a different part,” Mendelsohn said.

Holman said she wants to start a longer program in January, and may include criteria for selecting the participants. Autistic children with more advanced language skills may benefit more, and some children may need additional one-on-one therapy before integrated play.

Christine Accardo, program director for the Shafer Center for Early Intervention, which is located in Reisterstown and provides programs for young autistic children, agreed, saying the kids must be advanced enough to really interact.

“That’s a good model if the kids are ready for it,” she said.

“The goal is always to really get the child to be as functional as possible.”