

Camps for all: Summer activities for special-needs kids more common

By Raina Hanna

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Summer camp opportunities for children with disabilities have come a long way in the six years since Dr. Sheila Williamson, a clinical psychologist, and Kristen Holloway, a third-grade teacher at Desoto Central Elementary School, came up with the idea for Camp BOLD.

The two began the camp in 2006 to serve those with autism spectrum disorders and other low incident disabilities.

In its first year, the camp had only 12 participants. This year, there are about 100.

But even more noteworthy are the kids who are now attending mainstream camps because of their Camp BOLD experiences and the number of camps around DeSoto County now accepting those with special needs.

"We're always happy when kids go on to mainstream camps or outgrow our camp and are able to come back as counselors," Williamson said. "That's our goal."

At Camp BOLD, each special-needs camper is paired with an assistant -- a peer close to their age. The assistants range from third grade to high school age and help the campers through their day while blending into the social environment.

Activities are typical camp fare: moon bounce/water slide day, tie-dying, art activities, relay races, karate demonstrations, music activities, big-screen movie day, and other games, some with the goal of encouraging socialization.

"One of the things we do is a scavenger hunt, but in ours you have to find, for example, the person who likes snakes. This gets them talking to other kids and asking them questions," Williamson said.

The ratio between adults to children is also a lot smaller than typical summer camps, usually around one to six.

Williamson said the biggest barrier to children with special needs attending other camps is not the children's abilities but the lack of information other camp directors have about how to include them.

"I spend a lot of time consulting with schools and camps and giving talks about how easy it is to include these children as long as they have the support," she said.

Longview Heights Baptist Church, which donates its facilities for Camp BOLD, is one program Williamson considers a success story. That program now welcomes children with special needs into its "Trekking" Christ-based Summer Care and after school programs.

Another is John Wade Karate, whose facility served at one time as home for Camp BOLD before the camp moved to Longview Heights several years ago. Wade continued working with the special-needs children even after the move to the church.

The Kudzu Playhouse's Kidzu Summer Camp welcomes special-needs children into their drama summer camp. Williamson said several kids who have attended Camp BOLD, mostly girls, have moved on to enjoy participation in area drama camps.

Horn Lake Fire Department's Fire Academy offers special sessions for children and adults with special needs as well as including some special-needs kids in regular sessions. These programs teach children fire safety, general safety and minor first aid.

These camps are just a few of those in DeSoto County open to those with special needs. Most camp directors are happy to meet with families to see if their camp can accommodate children on their individual need basis.

Williamson thinks the opportunities for children with special needs to attend a summer camp, either like Camp BOLD or a mainstream camp, will only increase.

Camp BOLD is part of the BOLD Initiative, a nonprofit organization funded through the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, individual donations and fundraising.

Because of these donations, there is no charge to families for children to attend. This year, there will be three week-long sessions, four hours each day, July 5 to July 22. The weeks are divided by age: 3- to 6-year-olds the first week, 6- to 10-year-olds the second week and 11-year-olds and up the third week.

Other camps are individually priced and families should contact them directly for details.



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