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Matthew's Summer
With The York Summer Get-Together

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Where was Matthew this summer?

Matthew MacDonald spent the summer of 1986 at the York Summer Get-Together. The Summer Get-Together is a learning enrichment program that emphasizes the formation of a close-knit community of people with a broad range of ages and abilities. It brings together people of diverse experience and interests and allows them to live and work as a community for two months. The core staff consisted of six adults. The two leaders had worked in previous years in successful Get-Together programs. The other staff came from a variety of educational backgrounds. Staff had many skills to share with children, such as dance, art, music, drama, and cooperative games. From time to time guest teachers, including music and dance specialists contributed to the program.

Our fundamental aim was to establish a community to which everybody, staff and children, contributed - a place where everybody felt secure. Within this community educational, social, recreational and cultural programs were planned.

Our director was Dr. Marsha Forest, Visiting Scholar at the Canadian Association for Community Living. The Get-Together concept was originated by Dr. Forest. This unique non-profit concept

is simple; its mandate is to create an enriched learning program that emphasizes the formation of a close-knit community of children with a broad range of ages and abilities. The community itself is created by placing five children who have been labelled physically and/or mentally handicapped into a typical creative day-camp, amongst a group of twenty " non-handicapped " children. All the boys and girls are between five and twelve years old. In this environment the children with challenging needs were able to develop more normally by modeling the behavior of their peers.

Matthew MacDonald was one such child whose behavior improved considerably as a result of his involvement with the Get-Together.

Who is Matthew?

Matthew is a 10 year old boy who spent the summer of 1986 with the York Summer Get-Together. Matthew has light brown hair, a round face and a toothsome grin. Matthew likes swimming, wrestling, hugging, and being with his friends. He also enjoys toying with interesting objects, touching people and eating interesting food. He loves being given a piggyback. Matthew goes crazy with glee on rollercoasters. Surprisingly we found that he really enjoys being around older people. As Matt was picked up at 4:00 while the camp ended at 3:00, he usually ended up in the middle of the staff meetings, listening attentively while sitting at a desk with a big smile on his face. It was for this reason that he was jokingly called the youngest staff member ever.

Dealing with challenging needs

The best way we found to deal with Matthew's challenging needs was to treat him as an individual with varying strengths and needs. A good way to find out these strengths and needs was through home visits. A group of three counselors visited with his family and discussed, in Matthew's presence, the special needs as well as likes and dislikes that he had.

In the camp, we had forums in which all the children discussed their own strengths and needs. The children helped each other to discuss their needs. For example, one child helped a non verbal child say that her strength was swimming. We also had discussions regarding labelling and regarding any questions a child might have had about any other child. A great deal of effort was given to making sure that the children with challenging needs were treated age appropriately.

When planning activities we planned for all children, and then decided how to accommodate the needs of individuals. We didn't plan around the needs of any one person, although not one person was excluded. We tried to make activities co-operative to ensure total participation as well as fun.

Matthew's needs

Matthew needs several supports all of which could be provided by one person. In our camp however these supports, excluding changing of the diaper were provided by the children at the urging of an adult. Matthew needed:

someone to get him initiated into activities

Someone to change his diaper and give him his two pills

Someone to cut large pieces of food

Someone who could empathize with him; figure out if he wants to be alone, outside etc.

Someone to be close to him

Someone he could trust

Someone who was adventurous in introducing him to new activities

A consistent peer group from which to model proper behavior

Matthew needs someone to hug. He should never be underestimated, as he will often unexpectedly accomplish more than one is willing to assume.

Matthew needs to learn how to act in a manner appropriate to his age; namely to not pinch, to be able to keep his concentration fixed to one task and to initiate activity himself. In a grade four class Matthew needs to learn to behave more like a grade four student. He should be able to assert his authority, as well as be conscientious of others,, he should also be able to satiate his own curiosity through interaction with peers and adults. Matthew could certainly gain some of these characteristics by modeling on his peers behavior.

Matthew's pinching

I believe that Matthew pinches for a number of reasons. The first reason was discovered by Jay - a twelve year old camper. Jay bravely volunteered to spend the day with tape over his mouth so that he was unable to speak. During the day he became very frustrated as no one could understand what he wanted to say. He became so frustrated at one point that he hit his sister and was even coming close to pushing other people. At the end of the day when the gag was removed he said that he understood how Matthew might get so frustrated at his inability to communicate that he would pinch people. A good example of this frustration was observed after going on a rollercoaster at Wonderland. Matthew loved the ride but he was so unhappy when it was over that he started pinching me.

Another reason I think Matthew might pinch is as a test of trust. Often he will only pretend to pinch someone to see if they will allow him to touch them. Should they immediately shout at him or pinch him back he seems to become upset and pinch some more. He knows that someone who doesn't immediately withdraw from his touches is a friend and will usually caress that persons arms or face rather than pinch them.

Matthew will sometimes pinch when he is unhappy; when he is hungry, when he wants to have his diaper changed or when he wants to be in a less crowded environment. His claustrophobia can cause him to pinch also. It is hard to explain exactly why and when Matthew pinches. He knows that this behavior is not liked by anyone, but he continues to pinch.

At the camp to get Matthew to stop pinching staff and campers would tell him how upset we were to be pinched; by saying in a strong voice " Matthew don't pinch! ". Matthew would stop pinching, but he became so upset by our momentary disciplining that he began to cry. Luckily he was so happy to be around other kids that his behavior changed considerably. At the outset of the camp he pinched himself and others a lot. He sometimes even hit himself. After the first week he stopped hitting himself. This change in behavior was partly the product of the group deciding that he would be excluded from activities if he hit himself or others. They decided to do this because his behavior was disruptive to them. When Matthew was excluded he became that after that point he behaved much better and was found to be very easy to get along with.

What Matthew needs is a large group of people to encourage him to find an alternative to pinching, such as snapping his fingers or making a sound. This could be easily done in a classroom of kids his age if they could settle on a consistent method of teaching him an alternative to pinching.

Surprises at the York Summer Get-Together

One of the most surprising outcomes of the summer was not so much the improvement in behavior of campers like Matthew, but rather the change in attitudes of the other twenty kids. The following newsletter article was written by Joanne age 10.

The Kids In Our Camp

Some kids in our camp can't speak, but if they could they would probably say that they like this camp and that the counselors and the children are very nice people! For one trip we went to Ontario Place. For example one of our kids " Matthew " went on the air mattress and Matthew loved it, but even though he can't talk we can tell that he's happy through his actions!

By Joanne Dudley

The above article is just one example of how the campers reacted positively to others with challenging needs. What was most surprising was the realization that a ten year old child can

understand someone like Matthew better than an adult. The reason is that all it takes to understand or work with Matthew is the ability to empathize with him, and to act very naturally. An adult can do both, but a child of Mathew's age has the advantage because he/she is the same age! Ergo they can empathize better than an adult. This was became completely obvious because whenever I was unable to understand Mathew I would ask one of his friends what they thought he wanted to say: they had an uncanny ability to know why he was angry, upset, or better yet happy.

The campers left having learned, through play, discussion, experimentation and creation. Most importantly they learned that their peers with challenging needs had the same feelings and sensitivities as themselves. In the future we hope they will be advocates for such peers and thereby create a better community everywhere.