

CHILDREN FROM EL SALVADOR, KOREA, ENGLAND, JAPAN AND MEXICO PARTICIPATE IN THE HELP GROUP'S VILLAGE GLEN SUMMER DAY CAMP FOR SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Children with high functioning autism and Asperger's Disorder from around the world have traveled to the United States to attend The Help Group's Village Glen Summer Day Camp. This camp serves children ages 5 through 16 and is designed to promote overall social skills development through fun, hands-on activities. Families from El Salvador, Korea, England, Japan and Mexico have made the journey to the United States so that their children may participate in this unique and innovative camp. These families have made this commitment, since programs designed for children with HFA and Asperger's children are not available.

Claudia Gonzalez's brought her son Luis to the camp from El Salvador. She said, "I want to give Luis wings, so he can overcome his shyness and be independent."

Dr. Laurie Stephens, Director of the Autism Spectrum Disorders Programs at The Help Group, oversees the camp that began five years ago. It is staffed by teacher specialists, therapists and assistant teachers from The Help Group's Autism Spectrum Disorders programs. Camp activities encourage effective communication, theory of mind, team-building, non-verbal communication, anger management, frustration tolerance, friendship-making, organization, emotional development, creativity and problem solving.

According to Dr. Stephens, "The camp is designed to be an intensive social skills workshop. We wanted to offer a camp that would be exciting and motivating for the campers, while teaching necessary social skills in a format that didn't seem like a classroom or wasn't too overwhelming. When we started, we realized that many children with HFA/Asperger's did not have a place to go to camp where they felt like they belonged. Many of the children had been asked to leave other camps because they "didn't fit in." Our goal is to provide an atmosphere where all children feel safe, feel that they are surrounded by those who are like them and where learning social skills is fun and easy."

The fostering of self esteem and teamwork are cornerstones of the program. In this camp, children learn essential social skills while taking field trips to the science museum, the movies, arcades and having a "water day" once a week. In these games, maintaining a positive attitude makes you a winner. Activities range from inventing their own country together, making a commercial to sell a friend, to building a tower with marshmallows and toothpicks.

Mireille, a camper from Mexico, said what she liked most about the camp was "being able to work as a team and learning that things work out better when you work with other people." Andrew summed it all up by saying, "Besides water day, the best thing is I've made a best friend here!"

The camp is in session for five weeks; two weeks in June and three weeks in August. Children attend any or all weeks.

