

Summer camp helps kids deal with problems

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Sitting in the cool shade of a gazebo at the private Horizons School, Barbara Walton spoke of her relief at having found a new summer camp for her son, who sometimes can be a handful.

Daelin, she said, is intelligent, but has problems with hyperactivity and controlling his emotions.



Joey Ivansco/AJC

Tracie S. and Gina L. (right) paint a banner at Camp CHRIS in Atlanta.

This particular morning, the 10-year-old wasn't into cooperating and shouted angry, defiant denials when a camp counselor approached holding him by the arm to report his behavior.

"I don't like people touching me like that," Daelin complained as he paced around the gazebo.

Welcome to Camp CHRIS.

The nine-week program, which wraps up Thursday, is in its 11th year of providing a summer camp for at-risk children with behavior and emotional challenges.



Joey Ivansco/AJC

Jackie L. (front center) and Tiffany M. do morning exercises at Camp CHRIS summer camp at the Horizons School in Atlanta.

The niche camp boasts a mix of traditional and therapeutic activities designed to help campers work on their emotional and behavior issues. Its staff is trained in handling their special needs.

Camp CHRIS is a program of CHRIS Kids, the 26-year-old nonprofit organization that offers a variety of services to children and families in crisis. CHRIS is an acronym for the organization's core values of creativity, honor, respect, integrity and safety.

CEO Kathy Colbenson created the camp to provide parents of children with emotional and behavior challenges a safe, welcoming and well-supervised care option during summer break.

Such parents, Colbenson found, sometimes had to stop working during this time of year if their troubled children were having problems or were ejected from other camp programs.

Families pay the \$3,600 cost on a sliding scale based their income. Services also include meals and transportation.



Joey Ivansco/AJC

Racquel K. writes in her journal why she enjoys the camp, which helps at-risk children deal with their behavior and emotional issues.

Camp CHRIS is designed to give the special children an environment where they can be successful.

"Our philosophy has been this is a camp you can't get kicked out of," said Traci Waites, Camp CHRIS director.

THERAPEUTIC SUMMER CAMP

- Camp CHRIS, an acronym for the organization's core values of creativity, honor, respect, integrity and safety.
- Founded in 1995 by Kathy Colbenson to provide parents of children with emotional and behavior difficulties a care option for summer break.
- Who: Ages 7-16
- Cost: \$3,600 charged on a sliding scale based on family income. Includes meals and door-to-door transportation for the weekday camp.
- Officials say more than 450 children have participated in the camp, including 55 this summer.

So far, more than 450 children ages 7 to 16 have participated in the weekday summer camp, including 55 this summer. Participants are primarily from DeKalb and Fulton counties, but the program serves children and families of varying incomes from throughout metro Atlanta.

Referrals come from the DeKalb Department of Family and Children Services, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, the DeKalb Community Service Board, nonprofit organizations and other sources.

Many have suffered abuse or neglect and act out their pain in ways — anger, aggression, moodiness and attachment issues — that more traditional summer camp programs typically are ill-equipped to handle, said Kevin Lynch, a CHRIS Kids spokesman.

Walton found that to be true with Daelin's previous camp experiences, which she said offered limited activities and rigid schedules that failed to provide the level of stimulation and challenge he needs.

"When they meet kids with a challenge, they don't understand or even care," Walton said. "Here is a therapeutic camp. Along with the fun and games they still take care of important issues."

Each day at Camp CHRIS begins with breakfast and an hour of exercise. Offerings include arts and crafts, field trips and other recreational activities. Campers also tour local colleges, get opportunities to showcase their talents and participate in special projects.

Teens learn strategies for dealing with life issues and staying out of trouble through the Path Project.

The Tiger Woods Start Something Project lets participants of all ages do community service work, such as the flowers and vegetable gardens they planted this summer at the Horizons School or the quilts they made last year for the homeless.

The camp's schedule also includes journaling or art therapy to let campers explore their feelings, learn about empathy and handling their emotions and relationships.

"I use to love to fight," said Keyani Wynter, 15. "But ever since I've been at camp, I've learned to manage my emotions. It's helped my communication skills and how I get along with my parents."

A ratio of at least one counselor for every three campers provides a higher level of supervision and more one-on-one attention from staffers trained not to panic or penalize campers when they act out.

"We look at it from an understanding perspective," Waites said. "We try to communicate our way through it."

Some teen participants serve as peer counselors. Helping others sometimes is its own therapy as India Graves, 17, has found.

"You notice more about yourself," the teen said. "You can talk to them, especially if you've been through it."

Key'Ondra Darnell initially didn't want to attend but now loves it.

"I think the camp is really good. The camp staff will work with you and they're very patient," said Darnell, another peer counselor. "I think they have been through some of the things [we have] and can actually relate. It's cool."