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PRESS RELEASE & PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

Camp Sessions: July 21-August 18, 2008

Location: Toby Wells YMCA
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Camp I CAN More Than Just Fun And Games For These Families

SAN DIEGO, CA – Well into the throes of summer, we are inundated with flyers and advertisements of activities for our children, including day and sleep-away camps, family vacations, and even summer school. So it's hard to imagine parents having trouble finding suitable activities for their youngsters. Yet for parents who have children living with autism, that's the sad reality.

“It's not as simple as dropping your child off at one of their friend's houses, or signing them up for tennis camp,” says Shirley Fett, former president of the San Diego Autism Society of America (SDASA) and the mother of two teenage boys with autism. “Unfortunately, your average summer camp is not equipped to handle the unique circumstances that can arise with autistic children.”

Enter *Camp I CAN*, a summer camp that is anything but average. Started in 2002 by the SDASA, *Camp I CAN* (Camp Including Children With Autism Now) provides a safe, enriching, and fun environment for children living with autism. In addition to traditional summer activities like daily swim and field trips, *Camp I CAN* offers sensory activities like foam art, use of therapy balls, bubble machines, blocks, and drawings. The main reason why *Camp I CAN* is so successful is the self-imposed, one-to-one, camper-to-counselor ratio that allows the camp to respond immediately and effectively to emergencies.

“There are very limited choices for children with autism,” says Fett, adding that vacations or hiring a babysitter were not options for her family when her boys were growing up. “That’s why this program is a godsend for kids *and* their parents. They get to do typical, fun, summer things for at least one week out of the summer. My boys talk about it all year, putting it on the calendar and marking off the days. It’s all about *Camp I CAN!*”

Camp I CAN is in its seventh year at the Toby Wells/Mission Valley YMCA offering five weeks of day camp for ages 6 – 17. Because of the low camper-counselor ratio, the camp is able to serve 25 children each week (one week of “high-functioning” children have a three-kids-to-two-counselors ratio). All *Camp I CAN* counselors have experience working with children with special needs, with most working as special education teachers or aids during the year, and others going to school to attain degrees in that field.

The Palomar YMCA in Escondido started the program in 2007, and now offers four sessions of *Camp I CAN* for ages 6 – 14.

Autism is a complex neurological disorder that typically impacts the areas of social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and emotional development. A 2007 report from the Centers for Disease Control shows that the prevalence of autism is growing, finding that 1 in 150 children in America today have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The growth of autism and the need for targeted programming becomes readily apparent after looking at Camp I Can’s registration, which begins the first week in March and usually ends soon thereafter, with every spot for all five sessions filled and an ever-expanding wait list. Because of this high demand and limited number of spaces, parents can only sign-up their children for one week of camp.

“There are so few activities devised especially for children with autism, and this camp is seen by many families as the only summer option,” says Shelly Vanbrabant, a *Camp I CAN* Board Member and parent of an autistic child. “It’s a shame we can’t take everyone who signs up, but that’s why we’re so focused on raising more money – we want to continue to expand the program and still keep the low camper-counselor ratio that parents need.”

With each child having their own camp counselor, the actual cost for a week of camp, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday – Friday is approximately \$800 per child. The cost to parents is \$175/week for Autism Society Members and \$225/week for non-members. The difference in cost is covered by the SDASA fundraising efforts along with donations from Mission Valley YMCA’s Annual Support Campaign.

“There are so many issues that come up with autistic children. This is the one opportunity for all parents to feel like our children are in a safe place where the staff understands and supports them,” explains Vanbrabant. “It’s the one place that you’re not waiting for the phone to ring, asking you to come get your child and never bring them back. As a parent, that feeling is priceless.”

If you would like more information about *Camp I CAN*, or would like to find out how you can support it, contact the San Diego Autism Society at (858) 715-0678 or email info@sd-autism.org. You can also contact the Toby Wells YMCA at (858) 496-9622, or go to www.missionvalley@ymca.org for more information.

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