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YMCA program gives autistic children a chance to swim



Into the pool

Gage Johnson jumps into the swimming pool at the Geary Family YMCA to meet instructor Jim Beeson. After receiving a grant of \$2,000 from The Great Lakes Center for Autism, the YMCA was able to start a swimming instruction program specifically designed for autistic children. Since the program began in June, eight autistic children now receive one-on-one swimming lessons at the YMCA, led by volunteer instructor Beeson. For more information on the program, contact Bonnie Hanson, YMCA senior program director at 419-435-6608 or via e-mail at bhanson@gearyfamilyymca.org. -Photo by Alex Boroff

By Alex Boroff

Focus Reporter

Sometimes, it's the small victories that count.

For Jessica Weisenauer, those small victories came when her 4-year-old son, Logan, learned to follow swimming pool rules at the YMCA.

Logan has autism. For him, just learning to take instruction and allow a teacher to get close enough to work with him was a challenge. Never mind the swimming part.

"We tried regular swim lessons at the Y — it was not working," Weisenauer said.

But, after months of taking swimming lessons specifically designed for autistic children at the Geary Family YMCA in Fostoria, Logan can now swim across the water and feels comfortable in the pool. Better yet, Logan does a better job of listening and following directions when he takes part in open swim with the other children.

The program began when the YMCA received a \$2,000 grant to start a swimming program for autistic children. The grant came from The Great Lakes Center for Autism, which also gave grants to 15 other agencies in northwest Ohio.

Bonnie Hanson, senior program director at the YMCA, applied for the grant because she wanted to give autistic children an opportunity to take learn how to swim, knowing that conventional swim lessons would not work. Typically, autistic children have difficulty forming social relationships, dislike being touched, and have a hard time expressing their needs. All of these characteristics

make conventional group swimming lessons difficult for autistic children.

"[Autistic children] react differently to what we're doing than the kids who don't have any kind of disability," Hanson said.

Thus, swim lessons for autistic children had to teach more than basic swimming skills.

"You're not just working on swimming," Hanson said. "You're working on sensory [skills], you're working on patience and having the kids sit still, learning a routine, ... and safety."

Swim lessons for autistic children are led by volunteer Jim Beeson. Children receive one-on-one instruction for a half-hour each week. Since the program started in June, Beeson now works with eight children on a regular basis.

Beeson, who is the aquatic coordinator and building administrator for The Collingwood Fitness Center in Toledo, has been lead a similar program at Collingwood since 1995, and now oversees swim lessons for 100 special-needs students.

"Basically, we teach to the needs of the student, and take the student on the journey at their own pace," Beeson said. "So we don't force the skill levels that typical swim lessons might."

Though Beeson teaches basic swimming skills such as floating and the ability to climb out of a pool, he also focuses on social skills such as cooperation, following directions, and waiting one's turn.

"Our ultimate goal is one, to promote those social skills, but secondly, to give [autistic children] the ability to enter into a typical lesson," Beeson said.

Since many autistic children have difficulty expressing feelings, Beeson will ask children to make faces into a mirror to represent emotions such as anger, sadness, and happiness, in order to help children become more expressive. The mirror is also helpful for teaching children to make eye contact, which is often difficult for autistic children. All of this is done as the children learn to swim and play in the pool.

Also, Beeson has to work on building trust with his students in order to help them feel comfortable in the water.



Taking lessons

Gage Johnson swims with instructor Jim Beeson at the YMCA. Beeson leads a swimming class for autistic children. Jane Stroman, Gage's grandmother, said she was concerned that her grandson would not be able to focus well enough to make it through a typical group swim lesson. But with Beeson, Gage receives one-on-one instruction tailored to his needs. -Photo by Alex Boroff

“Trust is a huge factor that overcomes fear,” he said. “Once the child does trust that you’re not going to harm them or make them more afraid, then the cooperation starts to build.

“We also have challenges for children who have no fear at all, so we have to basically teach respect of the water, because they will push right away and sink,” Beeson said.

For Weisenauer’s son, Logan, it took several weeks before that trust was built with Beeson.

“The first three or four weeks, he would scream and he would cry when Jim would try to hold him in the water ... and then he just turned a corner with him one day and he just loves him now,” she said.

Weisenauer said she is impressed with Beeson’s ability to work with children.

“He’s extremely patient with the kids,” she said. “He’s very patient with them and understanding.”

But Beeson said that it is the parents who are the real champions.

“The parents are the heroes on this,” he said. “They work with these kids 24-7 — I see them for a half-hour.”

And, as Weisenauer noted, Logan’s swim lessons have helped him in other areas outside the pool, which is one of the main goals of the program.

“If we can teach [autistic children] something that they can carry to family, school and social life, that to us is a success,” Beeson said. “Along the way, they will learn to swim.”

For more information about the program, contact Bonnie Hanson at 419-435-6608 or via e-mail at **bhanson@gearyfamilyymca.org**.

Also, Weisenauer leads a support group for parents of autistic children. The group meets the first Tuesday of each month, 6:30 p.m., at the Early Childhood Intervention Center on Kirk Road in Fostoria. Childcare is provided. For more information on the support group, contact Weisenauer at 419-436-1898 or 419-619-8689.

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