

CAMP PUZZLE PEACE:

A Sanctuary in the Adirondacks

BY CAROLYN SPERRY



Camp Puzzle Peace offers all the traditional fun of summer camp—swimming and canoeing, crafts, games, camp songs, and s'mores—with specialized assistance for families who need it

For families with children on the autism spectrum, taking a summer vacation can come with challenges. Some children are thrown off by a change in routine, made anxious by staying in new surroundings, or have difficulties at mealtime if their familiar, preferred foods are not available. Many people on the autism spectrum thrive on routine and struggle when they do not know what to expect next in their day. Some children present with behavior challenges that can make even a car trip tough or have meltdowns that can provoke staring and judgement from passers-by. Additionally, some children on the spectrum may not have the same sense of danger as typically developing children and may wander away from adults, creating safety concerns. For many families, a peaceful, restful vacation has been simply out of reach.

Enter Jen Hackett, a high-energy special education teacher in Webster and an outdoor enthusiast who has made a second home of the Adirondacks. About eight years ago she realized that some of her students' families were finding it

difficult or impossible to go on vacation, and the idea for Camp Puzzle Peace was born. She wanted families to be able get away together and enjoy the outdoors in a fun, supportive environment in her beloved Adirondack mountains. Hackett and some fellow teachers and therapists hosted the first family camp at Beaver Camp in Lowville in 2013 with five families. Since then, programs have been fine-tuned, additional staff has come onboard, and bonds between families have grown. There are two sessions of camp this summer, and “quite a few families have signed up for both,” Hackett says. One of the most rewarding things about running the camp is watching all the families come together again. “Parents always say they feel comfortable around other families who ‘get it,’ she says. The camp is a place where families find compassion. “Nobody judges a meltdown.” Meltdowns happen, the camper’s needs are met, and there’s plenty of time and space for people to be themselves. Unsurprisingly, many parents and kids have formed treasured friendships after meeting at camp.

Beaver Camp—three hours from Rochester and a world away—sits on a pristine Adirondack lake. Camp Puzzle Peace offers all the traditional fun of summer camp—swimming and canoeing, crafts, games, camp songs, and s’mores—with specialized assistance for families who need it. The camp provides around-the-clock behavioral support as needed, a binder for each camper with visuals to help transition through their day and see what comes next, as well as communication tools such as social stories. The program can accommodate specific dietary needs and preferences to keep campers within their comfort zones for meals. Staff also provides respite opportunities for families—parents can take a moment to relax knowing that their children are in the care of trained staff. The most popular activities among campers are the waterfront and the large water trampoline. Campers also enjoy arts and crafts, sensory activities, hikes, lawn games, music, and scavenger hunts. “Everyone loves the parachute games,” Hackett says. This wide range of activities and the flexible staff help ensure time for each camper’s individual preferences and interests. Most campers are school age, but campers have ranged in age from toddlers to young adults.

Things have, of course, been different since the beginning of the pandemic. The camp was closed entirely last year, and this year the staff is excited to re-open with some modifications. The camp will be run at fifty percent capacity and social distancing will be observed during activities, extra cleaning and sanitizing will take place, and meals may be grab-and-go instead of communal in the dining hall this year. “We’re just adapting,” Hackett says. “We’re taking social distancing seriously.” Since so much of camp takes place outside, it will be a welcome change of pace for families who haven’t had many places to go for over a year.

In addition to Beaver Camp, Camp Puzzle Peace also offers activities locally in the Rochester area. This summer the camp will offer its Community Connections program in Rochester, a summer program for children with social cognition delays. Hackett will also be providing the programming for the new Autism Nature Trail (ANT) at Letchworth Park, a mile-long attraction that is currently under construction and that will feature sensory stations and offer the opportunity for hikers to explore the outdoors at their own pace. [Kids](#)

For more information, visit familyautismcenter.com or autismnaturetrail.com.



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