

Imagine waiting by the phone, waiting for it to ring, waiting for the other shoe to drop. You decided to try sending your child to summer camp again. They said they were equipped to provide a safe, fun environment for children with autism. You were clear about your child's needs; you did everything you could to give them a good summer. But you know it's not going to work out, it never does.

Lisa McCarty, an Ames mother to three boys with autism, explained the anxiety of parents in the summertime. Lisa and her husband Mike tried for several summers to find engaging summer programs that would work for their kids. When they couldn't find a good fit, they decided to start their own summer camp. Each year, they have expanded their programs to meet the needs of families with autism in their community.

While taking a break from school can be exciting for neurotypical children, children with autism can struggle with the transition. According to the Sarah Dooley Center for Autism, summer disrupts the schedule and structure that school provides, and this can be a challenge when many children with autism thrive on consistent routines.

The McCartys experienced these challenges first hand each summer, so they tried to find programs that would help them create a summer schedule for their sons. Even though they found summer camps designed for children with special needs, it didn't work for all of their sons. Lisa recalled a specific situation in which she was very clear with the summer camp about one of her son's behavioral challenges, but they were sure they were well-prepared to have him at camp. Yet again, she received that dreaded phone call to pick her son up early.

In 2016, the McCartys founded All Aboard for Kids. They created a small summer program for nine children, including their three sons. The focus of the program was STEM-based activities, inspired by their sons' love for technology. It quickly became clear how much Ames and Central Iowa needed a program like this. They've since grown to host over 30 kids at a time with a large, qualified staff and different program options.

It was important to the McCartys that their camp had a place for every child. Their morning program has an elementary-aged group, a middle through high school group and an option for children who need more space and individual attention. They also recently added an afternoon adult-readiness workshop for the older students.

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, identifying community supports is an important first step in helping students with autism make the challenging transition to life after school. The earlier students can start learning about the transition, the more prepared they will be. Through the All Aboard for Kids workshop, students have practiced social skills like conflict resolution, used community resources like CyRide and learned about meal planning with HyVee.

Lisa McCarty said that their goal for camp is that each child would find success in their own way. Most children will not have a perfect day loving every activity they try. That's why All Aboard for Kids provides them with many different activities that promote learning, social skills and physical activity. Success may mean finding something each day that a child enjoys engaging with alongside their peers.

For parents, success looks like never getting that phone call. It looks like picking their child up from summer camp excited about something they did. It looks like taking a break knowing that their kid is having fun. And it looks like having their kid wake up excited about today's catapult contest at summer camp.

Resources

1. <https://www.sarahdooleycenter.org/news/help-children-with-autism-transition-into-summer/>
2. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/deepening-supports-for-teens-with-autism>
3. <https://allaboardforkids.com/about/>

Key Points

I would pull the following quotes: “It quickly became clear how much Ames and Central Iowa needed a program like this,” and “For parents, success looks like never getting that phone call.” These quotes would be a much larger size and colored (to match the color scheme of that page or the magazine). They could be the same font as the title to make them stand out without using more than two fonts. They would be placed more to the side of the page but slightly embedded, like a “wrap text.”

- The first quote is a key point because the article focuses on the different needs of autistic children that the McCartys are meeting through their camp, and it localizes the whole story to make it more relevant to the audience.
- The second quote is key because it is a part of the “phone call” story that I weaved throughout the article. It moves the article along through the different parts, so the final quote should resonate as a feeling of lifting tension that parents can identify with. It’s important to the lasting impact of the story.