

socialskilled provides fun opportunities for kids with exceptionalities



As teachers in local special education programs, Ashley Campobasso and Michelle Johnson know all too well that kids with exceptionalities enjoy the same activities as their 'neurotypical' peers but don't often have the chance to do so.

This is a reality the teachers recognize day in and day out, but now they have set out to do something about it.

Johnson and Campobasso recently launched 'socialskilled', an Aurora-based leisure centre designed specifically for children living with autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, anxiety and other exceptionalities.

The space, they say, provides 'creative, recreational and sports programming' that helps kids build their confidence, improve their ability to make friends, and provides them with a sense of belonging.

'Exceptional children sometimes find fitting into traditional recreational activities such as a soccer team or an arts class challenging or impossible,' they say. 'Our program provides safe, inclusive spaces where exceptional children can have fun and make friends while being supported by highly experienced Special Education teachers to meet their individual needs.'

Patrons of the program, they stress, don't need to have a formal diagnosis. Rather, the initiative is open kids who would benefit from smaller teacher-to-child ratios.

'Michelle and I have been teaching for a long time and we have both been teaching in special education services for a majority of that time,' says Ashley. 'Over the course of that time, we have met a lot of kids and a lot of families and there has been that repetitive story that the want is there, the desire is there, to bring their kids to participate in an art class or play soccer, or go to yoga to do any of the things they are hearing other families are doing but for whatever reason, sometimes it is a diagnosis, sometimes it is not necessarily a diagnosis; a child does not have the self-regulation skills or the social skills, really to be able to manage in what we're describing as mainstream extra curriculars.'

Michelle points to a number of programs offered by the Town, including art classes, science programs, and more that are divided by age and tailor-made for specific demographics. But many of these programs are inaccessible to kids with exceptionalities because they are drop-off programs and many kids need supports from skilled individuals.

'Our programs are going to be similar to that,' Michelle continues. 'Fun with Friends is our kick-off staple program where we do a mixture of things like art, science and cooperative games. As well, we have a sensory space where there is more of a free flow, but also space for kids to take breaks and have some exploration as well. We're going to be offering an art class, a science class, and

gym space rented in the fall to do sports.?

The passion to develop socialskilled comes from their background working each day in their school with exceptional youngsters. Opening up the leisure space is something they have balanced with their full-time jobs ? and doing so in a pandemic has been no easy task.

?We're really tired!/? says Michelle with a chuckle. ?We're teaching in a pandemic and starting a business in a pandemic ??

?And raising five children between us in a pandemic!/? Ashley interjects.

?It's something we really care about,? Michelle continues. ?We're invested in the idea, we're invested in these kids and these families, so we make the time because it is important.?

They first dreamed of what is now socialskilled just before the pandemic. The more they talked about the possibilities, the more excited they were. When the pandemic arrived, they questioned whether the timing was right to move forward but decided ?there is no better time because kids right now are missing these opportunities [being out of in-person learning] and there are kids who may have had learning disabilities or anxiety that now haven't been involved in anything for the better part of two years.?

?When you're talking about kids that are five to eight, that's a quarter of their lifespan,? says Michelle of their time out of school. ?Although it is challenging, we're realizing the need is even greater.?

What they hope to achieve, adds Ashley, is to normalize some of the strategies they use within their own programs to make a difference.

?These are not strategies that are rocket science,? she says. ?If you know how to implement them properly, any parent can use them with their children, any child can participate in a fun activity? it's just a matter of giving them that little extra support. Somehow along the line, their understanding is any child who has an exceptionality requires a high level of therapeutic support in order to be successful. For us, we have come to realize that that is not always the case; oftentimes you have kids who need a little bit extra. They need to know what three things are going to happen and in what order. If you give them those three things in that order and pair them with a verbal prompt, then they are okay. They just don't do well with surprises and that is just one example.

?The child doesn't have to have an official diagnosis to register for our programs. It can be any child that may have difficulty fitting into main stream programming ? social, communicative, emotional needs. They just need extra support for whatever the reason. I don't want us to get stuck on the reason; it is not just a school for programs for autism. It is for any child who has these types of needs and I think we're trying to get away from the label and focus on what the needs are, support those needs, and not have to worry about the why.?

For more on socialskilled, visit socialskilled.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter