Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Life Skills Camp Report

Student: J.
Dates: June 13-17, 2010
Teacher:
Dorm Managers:
Residential Instructors:

General Description of the Life Skills Camp
This five-day life skills camp is designed for students who are approximately 5-22 years of age, developmentally delayed, and functioning significantly below grade level. The camp provided a special occasion for students to be away from home for a brief period of time so that these children with high needs, may have increased opportunities to share experiences with caregivers other than parents. While at camp, students were involved in a wide range of experiences in a safe and supportive environment, with small adult-student ratios. The focus of this camp was recreational and centered on real experiences, which included activities both on and off campus. Students participated in a variety of fun, small group activities on campus such as art, music, water play, simple food preparation, games and other meaningful activities. In addition, there were numerous off campus outings in the community such as pizza and games at Austin Park and Pizza, a Town Lake boat trip, the Austin Zoo, swimming at a local YMCA pool and at Northwest Pool, a jumping gym and lunch at several local restaurants. Because of the short duration of the program, the emphasis was not on acquiring new skills but enrichment and experience.

Individual Student Comments
J was an inquisitive, sweet, active young man and staff thoroughly enjoyed having him in this program. Wherever he went, he was curious about how something felt or sounded when he tapped on it. He explored everything with his hands and mouth and enjoyed tapping his water bottle on different surfaces. He would put his head down close to feel the vibrations and/or listen.

J loved playing in water and when we went swimming, he splashed water up on the tile surfaces, and then explored with his fingertips, hands, face, etc. He also enjoyed playing with water in the sink. He would tap his water bottle and fill it up with water and tap it again to get a different sound. J. was fearless and tireless! He participated in every activity and really seemed to enjoy going to new places every day. The challenge with J. was to just keep up with him, as he was on the move all the time looking for items of interest.

Staff communicated with J. by speaking and using basic sign language. J. used one sign accurately and consistently and that was “eat.” He also would tap his head and we understood that was his sign for “mom.”

J needed support with dressing. Staff would hold up his items of clothing and J. would raise his hands for his shirt and put his feet into his pants legs. He was able to pull up his pants but would wait for staff to help him with fasteners. He could use the restroom with some support from staff. He could pull down his pants and underwear and aim for the toilet. After he was finished, he would pull up his pants on his own. Staff would zip
Information: How We Teach Children with Multiple Disabilities

This section provides teachers and parents with a brief overview on our approach to teaching children with severe disabilities. We include it each year, because it is a good reminder of a quality approach to teaching. The Life Skills Camp programs are based on the principle of teaching skills within positive, interesting activities of daily living. Children can learn skills in any activity, if it is properly designed to provide them with learning opportunities.

At TSBVI, we often think of activities falling within three major categories: (1) activities related to domestic life; (2) activities related to recreation and leisure both at home and in the community; and (3) activities related to the world of work (which even young children start to learn as they help with chores assigned them around the house and classroom). We look for aspects of these activities that will be the most interesting and thus motivating to each child, and then develop them in a way that the child can best participate.

Children with multiple disabilities usually learn best through activities with considerable structure and repetition in order to participate successfully. It is natural to perform many of these activities repetitively because we really do them every day (e.g., brush our teeth, fix a snack, wash the dishes). Once we decide on the activities we want to use, we design them with three considerations in mind:

1. Activities should be positive experiences that allow for happy interactions between the child and others. Children are just like us in preferring to participate in activities that are pleasant. And, like us, they avoid and perform poorly when bored or under stress.

2. The activities should be very routine. This means that we do it the same way every time. The more difficult it is for a child to learn, the more routine the activity needs to be. We start and end the activity in the same way every time we do it, using the same materials, and doing it in the same place each time. As the child becomes good at doing a routine, we can gradually expand or vary it to other times, places or people.

3. We need to decide if the focus of the activity is the activity itself (as described in most of the examples above) or if the focus is primarily on social interaction and communication. If the purpose is social interaction and communication, we need to design the activity so that it has many opportunities for the child to practice communication skills such as: making requests, making choices, taking verbal and physical turns with adults and peers, rejecting non-desired objects or activities, and initiating and maintaining interactions. We set up the interaction so the child has many opportunities to practice the skill. And we keep the activity simple so the child can focus more on the interaction.

Positive interactions with children must be the foundation of all activities. Children are at their best when they feel secure, happy and trusting. On days when we’re feeling frustrated and impatient (as we all feel at times), we might need to back off or try to get some help from someone else. We need to give children choices (opportunities to express themselves) and avoid power struggles. Easy to say, not always easy to do! Hopefully some of the ideas presented here for successful teaching activities and interactions will be of help to you as we proceed through this journey.