

These youths energize camp

By DEBRA ALEXANDER

Hiking, swimming and craft-making. Sound like a traditional summer day camp?

It is, except for an innovative concept the Campfire Inc., North Oakland Council is trying out this summer: mainstreaming.

Campfire, a national youth organization, is trying to mainstream learning-disabled children into regular summer day camp activities in Clarkston.

Many of the youngsters participating in the summer program, both non-disabled and disabled, are from the Rochester area.

Campfire, a division of the United Way Agency, has traditionally been one of the oldest year-round girls' organizations in the country.

It is operated through the school districts and involves children in educational and recreational activities. Three years ago boys, ages 8-9, were added to the program.



Rochester's Michael Fredericks flies a homemade kite at the camp grounds. (Staff photo by Mindy Saunders)

The four-week, innovative summer program, if successful, may be viewed as a possible model for other Campfire camps across the country.

"Mainstreaming" is the integration of both the physically and mentally handicapped into everyday activities. Until the Campfire attempt, Michigan had used the "mainstreaming" concept primarily in classroom situations, said Sharon Kniffen, Campfire's financial development director.

According to Campfire's Director of Special Services, Sally Mocerri, handicapped children involved in the program have "middle-of-the-road" learning disabilities.

"These children have a highly functional level of retardation. The handicaps are usually not visually noticeable," she said. The disabilities usually involve some sort of emotional or learning impairment, or hearing and speech difficulties, she added.

The "mainstreaming" program was made possible through a special

\$15,000 United Way grant from the federal government.

Cooperation from school district special education directors and other special education organizations helped some children become involved with the day camp program.

ALL CHILDREN INVOLVED in the day camp participate in activities like swimming, archery, hiking, and arts and crafts.

"Our program is successful because it allows for flexibility. If a child does not want to participate in a certain activity, there are alternatives for him to choose," said Mrs. Mocerri.

When the concept was first suggested to the board of directors and camp leaders, there was a natural suspicion. The leaders felt they would not be able to maintain successful integration of the children, said Campfire Board of Directors' President Jean Benson.

All leaders for the day camp are volunteers. To prepare for the "mainstreaming" program, all group leaders went through a training process to eliminate these fears.

"We demonstrated how certain disabilities are accommodated and how to handle certain situations," explained Mrs. Mocerri.

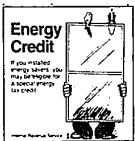
My main concern was what to tell my campers," said camp volunteer Jan Gyde.

Mrs. Mocerri related how non-handicapped campers are shown, for example, what a hearing device is.

"For a visual device, we will talk to the children. We tell them what a hearing aid is, how it is used, and what it looks like. Afterwards, the device is accepted as a perfectly normal thing," she added.

In addition to individual group leaders, seven accredited teachers, working toward special education certification from Oakland University, help in the adjustment.

One teacher is assigned to each group. Within a group of 10, two children generally have some sort of disability.

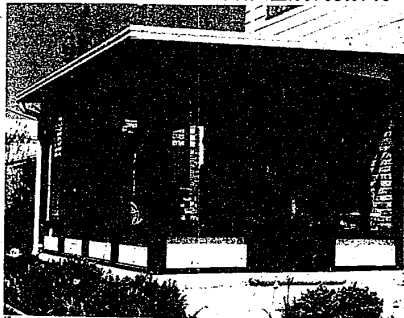


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