

## Executive Director's Column

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# Summer Options: ESY, Camp, Intensive Therapy, or Just Hanging Out?

Parents frequently ask me to make recommendations about summer programming for their children with special needs. They are torn between using the season for intensifying therapy programs or giving the child a break from routine. Let's explore some options. Only you can decide what is right for your child.

### Extended School Year

Any child who has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is eligible for an Extended School Year (ESY) program. First, the IEP identifies "critical life skills." Next, a committee of educators and a child's parents determines that, without ESY services, the identified critical life skills: 1) will regress, and not recover in a reasonable amount of time; 2) are emerging, and at a breakthrough point; or 3) are impeded by stereotypic, ritualistic, or self-injurious behaviors.

If an interruption in programming is likely to prevent a student from receiving some benefit from the educational program during the regular school year, the school system must provide ESY services. IEP goals for ESY are carried over from annual goals; no new goals are added.

My experience is that ESY services often sound better than they are. The services tend not be intensive or remedial, and are often just fulfilling an obligation. Even though free, better ways for children with developmental delays to pass the summer months exist.

### Sensory Camps

Occupational therapists across the country, who realize that being outdoors and practicing sensory skills are a perfect marriage, have developed sensory intensive camps. Each day, children are involved in activities that stimulate and normalize touch, movement, listening, and visual skills. Swimming lessons help children gain confidence and provide the opportunity for movement without the demands of resisting gravity. Students studying occupational therapy and special education often work as counselors and aides.

Some kids with special needs develop lifelong friendships, and are deliriously happy with the nutritious sensory diet they get through heavy work, the martial and fine arts. Some camps include typical siblings of children with autism, attention deficits, and emotional problems, making this a summer with inclusion possibilities, as well.

Research studies show that children in programs such as these showed remarkable gains in language, social-emotional, and academic areas, although these areas are rarely addressed directly. The children also do better in post-testing on a screening of neurological risk factors.

If a child meets ESY criteria, on occasion, school systems might fund a private camp in the same way that it funds private school. Receiving this service could require going to due process, however.

### Inclusion with Typical Peers

For children in self-contained classes, the summer can be an opportunity to try some inclusion with typical peers in a general day camp. Integrating children with special needs with non-disabled peers benefits both groups. Sometimes a "shadow" from a local graduate school in education, psychology, or occupational therapy may be necessary for success. Typical children learn about autism, attention deficits, and retardation, while those with delays have a chance to practice social interactions, language, and physical skills.

### Intensive Therapy

Summer can be a great time to schedule therapy that is hard to fit in during the school year. I would especially recommend this for older children. Consider intensifying auditory or vision therapy to several times a week. If you need to travel to a practitioner in a distant city, combine the trip with a visit to a theme park or camping out. Do home therapy exercises outside. Enroll a child in FastForWord, Earobics or a Lindamood-Bell program. Find a tutor who understands sensory processing and incorporates movement into her sessions.

### Family Vacations

Trips to theme and national parks are opportunities for families to be together, bond, and enjoy nature. Fortunately, many parks have tried to make it easier by issuing special passes to avoid long lines and other perks. Use the park's web site or call before you go.

A new opportunity this summer is in Warner Springs, California [www.warnersprings.com](http://www.warnersprings.com) in August...yes, it will be HOT!!! Dana Gorman, founder of [www.DefeatAutismYesterday.org](http://www.DefeatAutismYesterday.org) is in the process of creating a full complement of practitioners, therapies, and seminars to take advantage of while you camp or lodge in this unique area of clean air, water, and low electromagnetic fields (EMF). In addition to being the almost perfect environment for special needs children to heal, Warner Springs is surrounded by healthy activities: hot springs (chlorine-free), pony rides, petting zoos, golf for Dad, and much more! This is an evolving project that will be unfolding with updates available at [www.GeckoRanch.org](http://www.GeckoRanch.org).

While vacations with children with special needs can be trying, the unpredictable does happen. Some children hop right onto a roller coaster and love it. One child I know of spoke his first words after that intense vestibular stimulation.

### A Summer to Remember

Make this summer a memorable one by keeping up a child's routines as well as providing sensory and nutritional diets that you know your child thrives on. Just "hanging out" can be hard on everyone. Help relatives understand the importance of being flexible within set limits. Those not familiar with your child may think of behaviors as "bad," when they truly are not.

Most importantly — have fun!