

# Including special needs families in the community

By JENNIFER COLTON

Yelling, stares and the panic that follows a public meltdown can tempt special needs parents to build private walls, but working through it has long-term benefits.

"I think the parents know that it's good for them to get out and interact, but on the other hand, sometimes the reactions the community has to the meltdowns at the end drive the parents back into the house," says Winnie Burnett. "It's very difficult to be the parent of a special needs child."

As such a parent, Burnett says being around a community that understands can make the difference. In Eastern Oregon, programs for special needs children range from specialized sports opportunities – including the Little League Challenger Division and US Youth Soccer TOPSoccer – to the iCan Bike summer day camp that teaches how to ride a bicycle. For a half-decade, Burnett has run the special needs open gym times at the Pendleton Recreation Center. She says the physical activity helps children focus and handle reactions better in the long-term.

"The social interactions, the more they meet with people and interact with people, the better it is," she remarks. "The social part is huge for them, getting out and meeting people and being able to observe. They learn so much by observing."

The special needs open gym runs from October through May each year, and The Arc of Umatilla County offers multiple camps during the summer, focused on both those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and neuro-typical children, especially siblings.

The Summer Recreation and Inclusion Program for 2018 includes two camps: a Stay and Play Camp at The Arc Building in Hermiston and a Trip and Travel Camp that starts in Hermiston but includes activities at the SAGE Center in Boardman, a cooking class, and a trip to the Tri-Cities. For more information on either of The Arc camps, contact Camp Director Jessica Brown at 541-720-7951.

Other organizations host events that can be modified to meet the needs of children with disabilities. The Public Library Summer Reading Program includes fun – and free – events, and the Hermiston Public Library offers a weekly "Adventure Time Story Time" geared directly for developmentally disabled children and adults. Community organizations, including the Pendleton Arts Center and the SAGE Center in Boardman, will work with children to help them get the most out of a lesson, and Special Olympics has a strong program that includes seasonal sports like track and field, bocce, and golf.

Kristi Smalley is a parent of a special needs child actively involved with The Arc of Umatilla County, Special Olympics and more. She says parents of special needs children have to create opportunities for the child.

"Parents of special needs children have to create their own opportunities for their children to learn language, social skills and

how to function with neuro-typical peers," she says. "Find out who your child 'clicks' with in their class and take the initiative to invite that child

to play at the park, feed the ducks or whatever."

Some of those outings can evolve into more. Smalley says she reached out to friends with neuro-typical children and developed a playtime cooperative, allowing all the children

to participate in an activity once a week. That type of cooperative also gives parents a break when it isn't their turn to host the activity, because keeping a child involved – with or without a disability – can be stressful for parents.

"Resist the temptation to keep your child at home and isolated from the public," Smalley says. "Take small steps and reward your child for complying with your simple directions. As they build language and social skills, your child will have more opportunities to interact with both disabled and neuro-typical peers."

Socialization is a benefit for the child, for the family, and for the community. Interaction with the community helps a child observe, but it also helps community members observe the child. Burnett points out many of the "meltdowns" happen when the child has to leave, and when community members are aware of what is happening, they are often more understanding.



## Strategies

"These aren't bratty kids. They're just kids that at this moment are unable to handle all the stress coming their way. It's about education: letting people know that they have meltdowns because they're overstimulated, because they're having fun, because they don't want it to end," Burnett explains.

Taking care of special needs children and adults also includes sensory events, which are designed not to overstimulate children. Both Destiny Theaters in Hermiston and the Children's Museum of Eastern Oregon in Pendleton offer monthly sensory experiences. During the summer, spray parks can be an opportunity for those with special needs to enjoy water – even on days when an aquatic center or pool can be too overwhelming. Multiple parent support groups, such as the Eastern Oregon Down Syndrome Support Group that meets in Hermiston, also exist to help parents remember they aren't alone.

"If you want to get your child involved, we can try to make something work for people. That's huge – having a community that's willing to meet them where they're at," Burnett says. "It's really hard on the parents, but it's really good for them to know that it will benefit their kids long term."

*Jennifer Colton is news director of KOHU and KQFM, and mother of three, based in Pendleton.*

