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Behavioral health summer camp keeps children on track

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For most people the term “summer camp” conjures up many images from a multitude of outdoor activities, to arts and crafts, to fun with new friends. The children who attended the Evans Army Community Hospital Behavioral Health Summer Camps July 11 to 22 they not only got to experience all that, but also had the opportunity to work on the skills they had learned during the previous school year.

“The summer camp helps us stay in touch with the children that we work with during the school year,” said U.S. Public Health Service Capt. Dale Thompson, a clinical social worker and the director of Evans’ School Behavioral Health Program. “Over the summer, just like children can experience a loss of ability in their math or reading skills when school starts again, the same is true with behavioral health concerns. If the kids are practicing poor coping skills over the summer with siblings and parents, then when they get back to school we are not actually beginning the year where we left off the previous year, but having to back up and bring them back to where they should be.”

To keep the children on track with their coping and self-management skills the summer camp was started five years ago. Fort Carson’s elementary and middle school students who are in the School Behavioral Health Program were eligible to attend one of the week-long camps.

“More families attended this year than we have had any other year, we had 25-30 kids each day,” said Thompson.

The theme for this year’s camp was “I’m the boss of my own body, mind and spirit.” To help enforce that they were the boss, the first activity of the week was everyone agreeing on a “social contract” for the camp.

“The perception or feeling we want for the kids is that they are getting to participate, they are getting to make decisions about what camp looks like,

so we set up a social contract," Thompson said. "Because they are kids that have some behavioral health issues, whether that is anxieties or discomfort with social issues, maybe some depression from bullying, they generally have a push button that triggers these feelings. So they might suggest that no one should push during the camp or someone telling someone else no all the time."

To help show the children that it is ok to have different feelings they watched the Pixar- Walt Disney Pictures movie "Inside Out" about 11-year-old Riley who was uprooted from her Midwest life when her father started a new job in San Francisco.

"All these kids come from military families so they can really relate to moving and the change of friends and environment and home," Thompson said. "From the movie we did a lot of processing, it is very intense with lots of emotions, a lot of experiences for this young lady. We talked about how these changes make them feel and what they do to take care of themselves so they aren't blue all the time, not sad all the time."

Just as the movie showed the children that there is a lot more going on inside every one that can't be seen, they also learned that is true for other things.

Another activity of the week was testing water samples. The children found out that although the water looked the same the samples contained different chemicals in them that they couldn't see, such as alkaline and chlorine.

"We used this activity to talk about how on the inside things are sometimes different from what we might think," said Thompson. "And people are just the same and just by looking at them you can't tell if they are having a good day or a sad day."

Other activities of the School Behavior Health Summer camp were rock climbing, activities that focused on group problem solving and working as a team, yoga to teach the children about self-control and calming the mind and a presentation by a group of chiropractors who talked about how to control the body and what the body is capable of.

But the camp wasn't just for the children, this year it included a parent day where Army Community Services talked to the parents about programs that ACS offers.

"Having ACS there was great, I was able to get more in depth details about ADHD and the programs they have at ACS to help us communicate better as a family," said Isabel, who has two children who have been in the School Behavioral Health Program since they moved to Fort Carson in 2014.

"The camp has been great, they enjoy it a lot," she said. "It and the school program have helped both of them to be able to express themselves, instead of just holding it all in."

Isabel's children were thrilled with the accomplishments that they were able to achieve on the climbing wall.

For one sixth grader, this was her first time at the summer camp and although she liked the painting class her favorite part of the week was those she got to meet.

"You get to interact with a lot of other kids that you don't know, because usually they just say 'it is so hot outside, I want to be stay inside and play my video games'," she said. "So it actually gives you a chance to interact with others instead of being trapped inside."

Although the summer camps are over, the children won't have to wait a year to get help from Thompson and his co-workers. When school begins this month, they will be there to greet them on the first day of school, because their offices are not in the hospital, but at each of Fort Carson's elementary and middle schools.

"The great thing about being in the school is that is where the issues are often experienced," Thompson said. "So we are at the point where the acting out or break down occurs. If there is a kid that has social anxieties and doesn't want to come in the building we have a provider right at the building that can meet the kiddo out front and coach them into class and keep them plugged in."

Being at the school not only helps the children with their behavior health concerns, but also academically because they don't have to miss a couple hours or an afternoon of class room instruction for an appointment.

"The kids get to see us on a daily basis, in the hallways, in the cafeteria as we have lunch with them, or at PE," said Thompson. "They just see us

playing with them, but we are able to observe them in their environment, not a sterile hospital office.”

Thompson said another benefit is that with the parent’s consent they can meet regularly with the child’s teachers to not only find out what is happening in the classroom, but also to discuss with the teacher how to properly handle outbreaks and how to intervene.

“This is a real world program where we are part of the team at the school,” said Thompson. “The kids are receiving services at the point where many of the problems are happening – at the school, with their peers – they are getting good quality of care, which keeps mom and dad healthy, which in turns causes less stress at home and helps to maintain the family.”



During the Behavioral Health Summer Camp, children paint a peacock.
(Photo by Jeff Troth)