

2nd Summer Program

From the August 13, 2003 issue of the Tisdale Recorder

Written by Peggy Todd

With the advent of a new school year just around the corner, several students have made an early return to the hallways at the Tisdale Elementary School to participate in a unique summer program.

For the second consecutive year, Saskatchewan Families for Effective Autism Treatment Inc. (SASKFEAT) is hosting a summer program in which four children from Tisdale and one child from White Fox are participating. Made possible through the funding assistance of the Tisdale Kinsmen, Tisdale Lion's, Tisdale Lion L's, the Royal Canadian Legion Branch #50, a Kelsey Trail Health Region Wellness Grant, a Sasklotteries Regional Intersectorial Community Grant, the John Barron Community Trust, Lacroix Drugs, and the support of both TES and Tisdale School Division. The three-week program is being instructed by Carnie Williams, the TES Learning Support Centre Teacher.

The program began on Monday, July 28th and runs from Monday through Friday from 9:30 AM to 3 PM daily. Throughout each day, the students follow the same program with slight variations on activities that are designed to meet each child's individual needs. "Most of these children have autistic tendencies or autism. Socially, school can be difficult for them. This gives them the opportunity to maintain the skills they got over the previous school year and utilize them." Williams told the Recorder.

Based on ideas and activities that were implemented during the 2002 summer program held in Nipawin, the program also strives to refresh and reinforce the skill level each student has reached during the previous school year. "With children with disabilities, it's sometimes difficult to understand what they've truly mastered and what's routine. This helps keep their skills fresh. When they come back in September, they'll be close to where they were when they left," Williams stated.

The students, who range in age from preschool to nine-years old, begin their day with opening exercises followed by a game of "Simon Says" and "Show & Tell". They move on to participate in rotational centers designed to stimulate each in a variety of ways. The shaving center, for example, is a sensory-related activity. Other centers include blocks, dolls, barn and animals, bean and puzzles.

A cooking segment, in which each student is an active participant in the preparation of his or her own snack, is rewarded with the consumption of their own creation. Recess allows each child the opportunity to utilize the outdoor play equipment before returning to the classroom for reading and math.

Though each child is involved in the same subject, the focus may be different. Williams used nursery rhymes, as an example, while one child may be focused on developing reading skills, another may be working on their memory skills or simply learning to pay attention.

One of the most important aspects of the daily program is PECS – Picture Exchange Communication. Through PEC's the students utilize picture symbols as a form of communication, using the symbols to assist in telling or asking for something. "It facilitates with oral communications if they don't have their oral skills yet. Through PEC's, they can develop them," Williams explained. While PEC's can be effective for

children with any type of communication disorder, it is particularly popular with children with autism. All of the students attending the summer program have previous knowledge and experience with PEC's. During the summer program, they are involved in PEC's stimulation twice daily.

Each afternoon the students venture out into the community for a field trip. This year, field trips have taken the children mini golfing, swimming, bowling, and exploring Tisdale's parks. An afternoon recess featuring games like "London Bridges", "Farmer in the Dell", and hopscotch is followed by a craft activity that concludes each day. Each child takes a comment book home at the end of the day.

An opportunity for Williams to report on each child's progress on a daily basis, the comment book provides parents with insight into their child's development and is also a tool parents can utilize to keep Williams and her team of teacher assistants aware of the effect the program may or may not have on each child outside the school environment. "We know where each student is at and how they're responding," she commented.

While Williams would ideally prefer to include some typical children in the summer camp program for the purpose of providing peer role models, she is pleased with the progress the students have made. She is particularly happy with the work her support staff has done with the children. "It's a great staff. The kids really like the teacher assistants that are working with them," she said. "They get the maximum benefit from the activity when someone is there guiding their learning."

When the program concludes on Friday, Williams is confident the students will all be well prepared to head back to school with their classmates when the new year begins on Wednesday, August 27th.

"They are developing into a routine," she concluded. "They still have their ups and downs but their compliance becomes more consistent, their use of language becomes more consistent. For the most part, I'm very pleased."