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An Adventure Learning The Ropes

Featured Photo: Interaction through playing, such as the outdoor obstacle is an essential part of growth for children, according to Blackwater Outdoor Experiences director Matthew Waneta.

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Blackwater Outdoor Experiences Teaches Lessons Through Play

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A rope is made up of many individual strands. Alone, each strand offers little support, but joined together they form a strength that leads beyond their individual ability. Through use of that analogy, Midlothian-based Blackwater Outdoor Experiences has been using rope to lead children with special needs into a better future.

In their Experiential Social Skills Development Group, Blackwater took six 9- to 13-year-olds, with developmental difficulties and learning disabilities such as ADHD, autism and Aspergers, and created meaningful, relevant experiences in a social context. Each Tuesday, from September to October, the group meets at a Rockwood Park shelter to experience adventures in the outdoors. The culmination of the classes - a recent weekend camping trip to Westview on the James in Goochland.

Matthew Waneta, director of Blackwater, said he and his fellow therapists use adventure-based counseling, as well as play therapy, and apply it to children with special needs. For Waneta, interaction through playing is an essential part of growth. "If you look at most normal, happy, well-adjusted adults, where did we really develop?" he said. "It was playing in the neighborhood; experimenting in the woods behind the house." Waneta said the kids with special needs never get to experience such social interaction because they don't get invited to play in neighborhood games or to attend parties. "They've had difficulties because they're seen as odd or different," Waneta said. "We bring that group together, in a safe environment, where they're not odd, they're not different, and we're able to meet their individual needs."

Sara Alguire serves as the Clinical Director at Blackwater and said the context of wilderness learning is adapted for the children where normal learning patterns do not work. "Learning has become being in this box," she said. "These kids that we work with, especially, are not good at staying inside that box. They're certainly not going to learn real-world lessons inside that box very well."

Waneta said Blackwater's form of teaching works as "rope" knowledge where one thing leads to another. According to Waneta, if a child's particular rope knowledge is that he finds value in telling jokes then the experiences he has telling jokes creates a neural pathway between that piece of rope knowledge and all pieces. "The more neural pathways you create between any piece of rope knowledge and experience, the more solidified it becomes and the more prevalent it becomes. The easier the recall is for it."

It is the experience that teaches rather than the words. "It's really the difference between somebody saying, 'Hey, chocolate tastes really good' and someone giving you a chocolate bar," he said. "It's much more meaningful when you taste it."



photo courtesy Blackwater

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During their camping trip, the Blackwater group used activities on low-rope courses to help solidify social skills for the children. A network of ropes was tied across a pathway as an obstacle course with the children on one side and their goal on the other. "We told them a giant man-eating spider is after them and the only way to get away from the man-eating spider is to get through the web," Alguire said. "As they're going through and holding on to each other, they can't let go of hands. They also can't have any part of them touch the web as they go."

Alguire said it took numerous trial-and-error attempts before the group maneuvered the obstacle perfectly. However, when they finally reached their goal, they were overjoyed. The Blackwater staff then had the children analyze how they succeeded and how that knowledge could be applied. "Every single one of those kids was able to draw a line from that to come up with something in their real life," she said. "We were talking about giving up and 'How did you finally accomplish the spider web?' They were all able to apply that to some other place in their life where, if they used those same skills, the not giving up, the trying other things, the listening to other people, the working as a team, they were able to come up with examples of other places in their life if they used those same things the outcome for them would be something they were happier with."

Waneta said that all of the learning simply boils down to enjoyment. "For the kids this is play," he said. "We don't use the word therapy. We don't use the word client. It's time to come play and it's silly and it's fun."

Likewise, the children don't look upon the adults as teachers, but playmates. "As far as they're concerned, we're just big, idiot, dummies," Waneta said. "We're just there to play and are part of that experience for them. They don't see us as therapists."

Blackwater Outdoor Experiences is connected with special needs classes throughout Chesterfield and they have programs that involve a wide range of age groups and situations. Some programs involve the entire family to teach them how to better function as a unit, while others deal with adolescent girls, and young adults.

For more information on Blackwater Outdoor Experiences, go to www.blackwateroutdoor.com

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