



Camp for Kids With Autism Offers Extreme Therapy

Colorado Getaway Features Rafting, Rock Climbing, Skiing, Rope Courses and More

By JOHN DONVAN
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- 1 Consider what it does to the senses when you're in a kayak on the Colorado River and you hit white water. You can't hear anything but the water. There's spray in your face. Violent drops. Wicked turns. And fear -- moments when the river seems to be in control, not you. In short, it's total sensory overload, a total adrenaline rush.
- 2 But if you have autism -- like most kids at the Extreme Sports Camp near Aspen, Colo. -- it's overload times 20, or times 100. And that's the point: to take kids to their limits, and beyond.
- 3 "It's got to be visceral," said Doug Gilstrap, 47, who has run the camp since it launched in 2001. "It's stimulating, it's super-intense. And, actually, the more intense it is, the better they are on the other end."
- 4 It's about taking kids to the extreme, the kids who have difficulties with extremes in everyday life, he said.
- 5 "Many times our kids, campers have a lot of behavior issues or a lot of sensory issues that they just can't handle," Gilstrap said. "It's too cold, it's too hot, it's too bright. All those sorts of things can cause a lot of problems."
- 6 The kids here, ages 5 and up, represent the many different ways autism can take shape. Quinn, like several kids at the week-long camp, barely speaks, while Johnny talks and talks. The girls are more physically timid than most of the boys, while a few kids, like Josh, are athletically gifted.
- 7 One of Josh's challenges was to take on a steep rock wall.
- 8 "So, with any person, a new thing can bring about some fear and some apprehension," Gilstrap said. "It's even heightened with autism. A situation that forces focus, like here, knowing where to put your feet, figuring out what piece of rock to grab onto -- you can see Josh working it through, 50 feet up, and then the rappel back down.
- 9 "We've built the camp around, sort of, not to use the word 'extreme,' like 'extreme games,'" Gilstrap said. "It's extreme in the sense that all the activities are visceral."

- 10 Back on the ground, Josh was asked if it was a hard ascent.
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- 12 "It was hard, yes," he said, adding that he found all the cracks he needed.
- 13 "The greater the adrenaline shock that I can put to the system -- the brain, the body and the endorphin rush that comes in post-adrenaline rush -- is what gets them the most relaxation and calm," Gilstrap said. "When they are back in a normal situation, they have better capacity to be in control."
- 14 Internal struggle is visible on many of the campers' faces, as they move over ropes high above the ground.
- 15 The Extreme Sports Camp features ropes that go over a river and back again, and then run up to tree level. While every kid is in a safety harness -- they can't fall to the ground -- the kids can still slip off the line as they try to cross it, and do.
- 16 "Some kids need a little more pushing and some need a little less," Gilstrap said. "If the kid doesn't need pushing, I don't come and push -- I just let them do their own thing."
- 17 Gilstrap tried to coax a camper named Johnny to try the ropes.
- 18 "You go first," Johnny said.
- 19 "Are you scared?" Gilstrap said. "That's the way you learn from it."
- 20 Johnny moved tentatively along a rope.
- 21 "You're doing great -- I'm proud of you, Johnny," Gilstrap said. "Turn your feet upriver. I'm very proud of you -- stand up, Johnny. Did your legs stop working?"
- 22 "I have lousy legs," the camper said.
- 23 "No, you don't have lousy legs," came Gilstrap's reply.

Autism Camp: A Taste of the Extreme

- 24 Gilstrap said he wants the campers to struggle, but only so much. If the campers get too scared or excited, he said, they can't move forward.
- 25 "With that heightened apprehension, if we make it over that hump and on to the other side," he said, "then we get what we're looking for."
- 26 They make it as fun as they can. At the end of the treetop rope course is a wonderful zip-line glide back down to Earth.
- 27 Gilstrap has also built a special device to help the campers go waterskiing. He

described how he learned to work with kids with autism.

- 28 "I just studied it and watched how they did things," he said, "and I picked up on a way of interacting with them on whatever they were focused on. It's just a way of touch. Touch can be a very calming thing. Like, again for Josh, I can just reach over and touch him and he'll go [exhales slowly]. Just with the touch. I don't say a single word to him."
- 29 Each child is assigned his or her own counselor for the full week. It's what makes it possible in the first place for a kid to step on that wire or hang onto that wall, or just to get through the bus rides between events.
- 30 But the real signal that the camp works: Most of the campers come back, year after year -- for another taste of the extreme.