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Program reaches out to autistic children, families

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Wednesday, February 7, 2007

By LISA GRZYBOSKI
Courier-Post Staff
CHERRY HILL

Judgmental stares, whispered comments and uncomfortable body language have dogged Catherine Medovich and her autistic teenage son for years.

When Nicholas had severe tantrums as a boy, people glared. When he gets stuck on a topic of conversation and starts repeating information, some snicker and roll their eyes or simply walk away.

"I don't think he knows," Medovich said, when asked if Nicholas gets upset by some people's response to his behavior. "But I think for any parent, it makes you want to disappear in your shoes."

And find a place to feel welcomed.

Which is what the Garden State Discovery Museum has become on certain nights for autistic children and their families.

One night every season, the hands-on children's museum opens its doors for free to autistic kids and their parents, and it lets them explore the center for two hours in an accepting environment without large crowds.



Photo provided
Garden State Discovery Museum has a shaving cream room where kids get to participate in a sensory activity.

IF YOU GO
Garden State Discovery Museum, 2040 Springdale Road, Cherry Hill, plans its next play night for autistic children from 6 to 8 p.m. Feb. 18. A session for parents with autistic children is slated for 6 p.m. March 21, with a guest speaker. Admission to both events is free, but registration is requested. Call (856) 424-1233, ext. 314, or e-mail onthego@discoverymuseum.com.

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It started the Open Arms program in 2005 after an employee with autism and her family encouraged the museum to reach out to the often underserved autistic community, said Coniqua Abdul-Malik, the museum's special-projects coordinator.

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"Right now, we're one of the only places that's doing something like this," said Abdul-Malik, noting that people come from Philadelphia, its suburbs and from North and Central Jersey to attend the program.

Besides its normal interactive exhibits, which invite kids to touch, explore and create, the museum also opens rooms that meet autistic children's special needs.

For example, there's a "cool down" area for kids who are overstimulated and a room where children can play on shaving cream-covered tables, Abdul-Malik said.

During its Open Arms sessions, the museum focuses on play activities that stimulate the senses, because people with autism have to be constantly encouraged to interact with the people and the world around them. That's because the brain disorder of ten makes it difficult for them to communicate, respond to surroundings and form relationships with others.

Medovich said her son, who is 15 years old and attends the Young Adolescent Learning Experience School in Cherry Hill, looks forward to the museum's special nights. They're among the only times he can play like a kid and not be judged for it, she said.

"There is so much ability for these kids to be creative, to be social. It's fabulous," Medovich said of the program. "Here, no one has to worry -- Is their child too loud? Is their child having a meltdown?"

Psychologists who work with special-needs children and have visited the museum during its Open Arms nights agree with what Medovich and other parents say about the event.

"It's a great concept. People who have kids on the autism spectrum would love for this to happen in every community around the country," said Cindy N. Ariel, a psychologist who works at Alternative Choices, a medical practice in Philadelphia.

"There's a real desperate need for families to have places to go as a family and just be themselves."

The number of program participants grows with each passing event -- to the point where the museum is considering expanding beyond four nights a year to prevent large crowds, Abdul-Malik said.

It will also add speaker sessions for parents with autistic children so they can learn more about the disorder, and it may run regular workshops to teach siblings how to cope with their loved one's disorder, she said.

All this takes money.

The museum recently received a \$12,450 grant from the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism Inc., a Massachusetts-based group founded by former NFL quarterback Doug Flutie and his wife in honor of their son, Doug Jr., who's autistic.

It's also partnered with U Care Now, the charitable division of Mount Laurel-based Magellan Hill Technologies. People

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sign up for the company's phone service, and 5 percent of their bill goes to the charity of their choice. The museum hopes some will earmark funds for the Open Arms program, Abdul-Malik said.

"I would be really disappointed if this program ended," Medovich said. "I have to thank the museum for doing this because it's not an easy population group to work with. There are many, many behavioral challenges associated with autism."

Reach Lisa Grzyboski at (856) 486-2931 or lgrzyboski@courierpostonline.com

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