



## Social Village: Where Kids Feel Unjudged

**K**ids play with other kids. Adults get together for all kinds of reasons — socially and at work — every day. Communication and interaction with others is such a natural part of life that no one gives it a thought. For some individuals, both children and adults, such normal interaction is a struggle. On many levels, it those with certain learning differences and disabilities, including autism, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), dyslexia, and social anxiety.

For these people, "social thinking" must be learned and practiced. Fortunately, in the Princeton area, a number of schools and organizations offer programs to help children and adults learn ways to function in and be comfortable in social situations.

Social Village, which will open in September, is a offshoot of Princeton Speech-Language & Learning Center, located on Wall Street in Princeton. "Social Village is a unique and exciting environment, a place for kids to meet and engage in clubs and activities," explains owner and director Terri Rossman.

### Therapeutic Side Effects

"Social Thinking, and executive function skills are reinforced while members are having fun. Social Village is an offshoot of the Princeton Speech-Language & Learning Center, where social thinking groups are offered. Social Village is not therapy, but rather more like a social club that happens to have therapeutic side effects."

Social Village offers programs for children to young adults, from ages eight to 23, with specific programs for different age groups, adds Ms. Rossman such as Teen/tween activity night and Saturday Teen Night.

"There will be some clubs for younger kids ages eight to 12, and other clubs/activities offered for 'tweens or teens. Social Village welcomes those with ADHD, non-verbal learning disabilities, Asperger's, or high functioning autism, as well as those who just struggle with social anxiety and just can't find their niche."

Social Village is a year-round program, with a few specific summer programs, such as a teen and young adult social/executive function group. Next year, there will be a summer camp program.

Speech-language pathologists, teachers, special educators, and college/graduate school students will be in charge of the programs, reports Ms. Rossman. Pokemon club, Minecraft club, Lego club, Fantasy book club, Recess Bootcamp, and Games Cubed are among the most popular programs.

Having a place where they can get out of the house and learn social skills is a safe haven for many children. Understanding how to play and interact with a group (large or

small), play games, try a new activity without pressure, have a trained social coach guide their interactions and offer suggestions, and feel a sense of belonging in the Social Village community are all enormous advantages for children who have never felt at home in social situations. Now they have an opportunity to be comfortable and to learn skills which will benefit them throughout their lives.

### Social Interaction

Social Village will have an open house on September 21.

Area schools also offer programs for students with learning differences and social interaction challenges.

The Lewis School in Princeton (pre-K to postgraduate) addresses the needs of students with dyslexia, as well as those with Central Auditory Processing Data Disorder (CAPD) and ADHD. The Lewis School has created a proven model in the U.S. where a diagnostic and research clinic are integral parts of the same educational entity.

In addition to the academic regimen, a variety of other programs are available at The Lewis School. Sports programs include soccer, swimming and diving, as well as a special middle school Walk/Run program in partnership with the Princeton University men's lacrosse team. Students can run or walk one mile to the Community Park Woods.

The school places importance on the link between physical fitness and academic performance, noting that studies suggest that aerobic conditioning enhances brain functioning, builds problem solving skills, and improves overall academic performance.

The Lewis School is also planning to expand its play area beyond the existing swing set, balance beam, and monkey bars. A fundraising program is underway to provide a safe and appropriate place for more recreational activity.

### School-Wide

In addition to sports, The Lewis School offers a variety of clubs, including chess. This club had an opportunity to meet a U.S. Grand Master chess champion who performed a memory demonstration for the chess team. It targeted task attention, recall-focus skills, and active working memory strategies.

The Lewis School's Girl's Club organized a school-wide canned food drive to benefit the Mercer Street Friend's Food Bank last Thanksgiving. The club's mission is to perform service projects to benefit local community organizations while simultaneously fostering friendships.

This summer, the school offered SAIL (Summer Adventures In Learning), a full-day program for students in the lower school. A hands-on, active learning experience, it promoted multi-sensory learning in a relaxed camp

environment. It is a collaborative effort of the physical fitness, art, and speech and language services departments, as well as support staff and teachers.

The purpose of SAIL is to integrate physical exercise, theme-based educational activities, and functional communication skills by engaging in multi-sensory, multi-modal it y learning experiences in a variety of settings and social contexts. Campers participated in many hands-on arts and crafts, science demonstrations, and cooking experiences.

Lewis School graduates have attended many of the finest colleges and universities, and have gone on to successful careers in a full range of professions.

The Laurel School of Princeton is part of The Newgrange School of Princeton Inc., an organization devoted to educational services for children with learning differences. The Laurel School is dedicated to helping students in grades one through eight who face the learning challenges brought on by dyslexia.

### Small Group Instruction

The school emphasizes small group instruction with special subjects to encourage the students' unique gifts and talents. In addition to a regular curriculum, design thinking, technology, art, music, and physical education all play important parts in the students' education and interaction.

State of the art assistance and creative technology are important features, and ancillary services, such as speech and language, and occupational therapy, are available.

Many students with dyslexia are gifted artistically, and the Laurel School is committed to allowing them to explore their talents to the fullest. In the visual arts program, students learn about various materials and media, investigating the connection between these and various cultures and subject areas. They learn about artists and art history, and are encouraged to create their own artistic works.

A special summer enrichment program Planet Protectors was held this past July for grades one through eight. Students studied the planet and explored ways to protect it for future generations.

Through hands-on, inquiry-based science lessons, the young Planet Protectors explored the resources of earth, climate change, waste management, and recycling, while increasing their reading and writing skills. They engaged in small group reading, writing, and math instruction.

This special summer program was an opportunity for the students to interact, while working together in creative and constructive activities.

—Jean Stratton