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Social Village: Where Kids Feel Unjudged

The world is not an easy place for people who are uncomfortable in social settings. For kids, especially, the pressure to fit in, socialize, and interact with groups can be overwhelming. And often, those kids who have the most trouble traversing the social jungle of school turn out to be reclusive adults who avoid others as often as they can and convince themselves that they just can't interact with other people.

Often enough, however, those same kids just need to feel unjudged. Or to learn the unwritten rules of social behavior; the silent cues and intonations of voice that most people learn as they communicate with others. For some it is the brain's basic wiring that is in need of a little TLC. For others it helps immensely to be in a safe environment to practice the social skills they need to help them navigate life among social beings.

Social Village is that safe place. Opening in September, Social Village is an offshoot of the Princeton Speech-Language Learning Center, where adults and children with speech, language, learning, social, and communication difficulties learn to overcome their issues in a non-judgmental, nurturing environment. Social skills groups are also offered at PSLLC. These skills can then be practiced in a naturalistic environment at the Social Village.

Social Village will cater to children and young adults from 8 to 23 years of age who are high-functioning but aware that they are "quirky" compared to most people they know. The Village welcomes those with ADHD, non-verbal learning disabilities, Asperger's, or high-functioning autism, as well as those just struggling with social anxiety or who "just can't find their niche," says executive director Terri Rossman, who has operated PSLLC for 25 years.

Social Village does not get hung up on diagnoses, but rather seeks to find the strengths and interests of its visitors. And there is much to pique the interest. Kids get to take part in art and woodworking, robotics, game clubs, cooking, science groups, Star Wars and Star Trek clubs (because the distinction is definitely important), book clubs, debate teams, and more. Kids also get to just hang with other kids like themselves and practice their social interaction skills without pressure and without judgment.

Social Village also is for the parents. Often, parents build their social lives around their children's activities. But when a child has difficulty interacting with others, otherwise social parents (or non-social parents) can get isolated in a hurry. Giving a place where their kids can feel comfortable goes a long way toward helping parents make new friends.

Social Village is not therapy, but rather more like a social club that happens to have therapeutic side effects, at very low and reasonable fees. "We encourage people to come to our social skills groups," says Rossman. "Not instead of therapy, but in addition to therapy, for some."

PSLLC will host an open house for Social Village on Sunday, September 21, from 1 to 5 p.m. All are welcome. Especially those who might be a little nervous.

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