

# Water Planet Children's Programs

an article by DeAnna Bay, M.Ed., CCLS, CTRS

The programs provided by Water Planet for Special Needs Children are an extremely distinct therapeutic endeavor. The approach that is taken by the Water Planet team is one that provides each child and family in our programs with plans and goals that are individualized to their unique needs. There is not one child that is alike, and therefore, each child and family ultimately joins our program with different intentions and outcomes in mind. We strive to support an environment where each child and family is able to apply their given abilities and make improvements on whichever areas of need are decided upon. We also realize that the programs are specifically designed to support the child with special needs, but we also aspire to create an experience that is beneficial for the entire family or unit that accompanies the child.

Therefore, the **general goals** for our program are as follows:

- 1) To increase opportunities for physical activity through dolphin swims, pool sessions and recreational activities throughout the course of the program.
- 2) To increase opportunities for emotional expression and self-confidence through verbalization, expressive art, music, and other various outlets throughout the course of the program.
- 3) To increase appropriate socialization with other participants, family, and staff through ongoing communication during all activities.
- 4) To increase knowledge of marine life, marine mammal behavior, people-animal interactions, and other information related to the Gulf environment throughout the course of the program.
- 5) To increase knowledge of possible leisure pursuits presented during the program such as: boating, swimming, music, art, etc that can be continued after the cessation of the program.

The programs that we offer are divided into two sessions: The Harmony Program and The Serenity Program. Both of the programs allow the children to participate in wild dolphin swims for part of the day, and workshops for the other part of the day. Each program focuses on meeting needs directly related to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains of a person's well-being. Although children with similar diagnoses and conditions have had successes in both programs, each are more directed to different domains.

**The Harmony Program** offers more focus on the areas of the social and emotional

domains. Children that have completed the Harmony Program often have had diagnoses such as: ADD, ADHD, Autism Spectrum disorder, Down Syndrome, Depression, Tourette's Syndrome, Chronic and Life Threatening Illness, and others. We use various methods of enhancing social and emotional skills through the use of: Craniosacral therapy, expressive arts media, sensory integration techniques, social skills games, cooperative play activities, relaxation techniques, expression through music, pool sessions, and recreation participation.

**The Serenity Program** offers more focus on the cognitive and physical domains. The greatest difference in this program from the Harmony Program is that more mechanical interventions are applied which means we have a Physical Therapist and sometimes an Occupational Therapist on staff for the Serenity Programs. The typical diagnosis from participants of the Serenity Programs include: Cerebral Palsy, Head and Spinal Cord Injury, Mitochondrial Disorders, Spina Bifida, Muscular Dystrophy, Angelman's Syndrome, Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and others. The techniques used during workshops in the Serenity Program include: Physical therapy (sometimes Occupational therapy), Watsu therapy, Acupressure, Cranio-sacral therapy, creative arts, musical expression, pool sessions, and functional intervention of leisure activities.

**Individual goals** that have been created and established during our programs include, but are not limited to:

- Increased feelings of confidence in self
- Increased range of expression of emotions
- Increase of regulated and predictable sleep patterns
- Increased ability to initiate socialization among peers and adults
- Improvement of appropriate social interactions
- Improvement of physical abilities such as range of motion and climbing skills
- Increased knowledge of marine mammals and marine life
- Increased knowledge of how to appropriately interact with wild animals
- Improved swimming abilities such as holding breath, kicking, and stroke formation.
- Increased opportunities to improve fine and gross motor skills

There are many similarities between the types of programs offered and the diagnosis of the participants in our two programs, but the main difference is what type of goal the participant is looking to achieve through participation in our programs. Additionally, the most important aspect of both of our programs and our main objective is to create lasting and memorable experiences for the participant and their family (or group) with the motivation of wild dolphin interactions that they will be able to cherish and carry with them throughout their lives.

DeAnna Bay, DeAnna Bay, M.Ed., CCLS, CTRS  
Therapeutic Programs and Intern Coordinator  
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