NEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION
**** MY SATURDAY SIDEKICKS “PHILOSOPHY” ****
Please read BEFORE the first session !!

Saturday Sidekicks has been going for 19 years now! Below I describe my ideas about what we do and why so that you will know where I’m coming from. I welcome your input and feedback, so please let me know your thoughts and responses at any point in the semester.

First, about the structure of the classes (for the 9 & 10 am sessions – see below for teens):

- The first 15 min of each class consists of free play with their Sidekicks. The structure here is loose – designed to serve as transition time. (This is critical for many children, as you know, so please look at it as part of the class, and try to arrive on the hour)– familiar equipment and activities are put out for them to interact with.

- The opening circle is a chance to follow a group structure like that which most children have experienced or will experience at school or camp or other programs (with the demands and limitations that implies). The name song is designed to welcome each child and to acknowledge them as a part of the group. Following the song, we have a dance or exploration-type activity that we all do together, to reinforce our sense of “groupness” and to get everyone moving.

- The stations are the “meat” of the class – an opportunity for connections to develop between each child and her/his Sidekick, as well as a chance for “individualization.” That is, during this time, the children have some choices, and the Sidekicks can modify activities according to each child’s needs. The idea behind the stations is “mastery learning” – i.e., each child can work on an activity as much or as little as necessary to achieve success, or move on to another activity if they choose. I ask the Sidekicks to encourage children to move through the stations, but I also tell them that some children may want to stay at only one or two stations, and that may be just what some children need. The primary goal is to build a relationship, which I believe helps to facilitate more learning. Also available during this time are the “touch corner” and the “art station” – places where the children can play quietly with some fine motor materials or just take a break. We change the “theme” of the stations each week, but many activities are repeated over the course of the 8 weeks. Your input is welcome for suggestions about themes or activities. If you have a particular activity that you would like your child to work on, this would be the time when that’s possible – just let us know.

- The closing activity and circle are a second opportunity to come together. They are designed to mark the end of the class and to transition to leaving, as well as to acknowledge us as a group again. Usually we’ll do a group activity or game or dance, but sometimes we only have time to sing our “good-bye” song!

The “TEEN CLUB” (for older children) is structured differently. The focus in this group is on developing and refining social interaction and teamwork skills. Thus, we ask the participants to communicate and cooperate with one another and with the group, using a variety of games and other activities. We include games that involve varying
levels of physical activity – some sessions may be more physical than others, but we always include physical activity in each session. The participants work in small groups and pairs, as well as in one large group. We encourage them to talk to one another and get together outside of our sessions, and we need and appreciate your assistance in this goal. Toward this end, we sometimes plan an “off site” activity just for the teens.

About the assignment and the role of the Sidekicks and YOUR role:

First, let me tell you some things I have learned in the past 19 years about the SSU students who volunteer as Sidekicks:

- Nearly all of them have open hearts and minds and lots of energy and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, at first they may be a bit cautious or resistant to this experience because of one or both of the following:

  o Some are scared to death! Some have never met - not to mention interacted with - children with special needs. They may be afraid that they will not know what to do or how to act, or that they risk “hurting” a child (especially if he or she has a physical disability). This barrier usually resolves fairly quickly, and you can help with this process by giving them guidance and support.

  o Some would rather be sleeping on Saturday mornings! (This may not change, but at least most of them eventually value the positive aspects of the experience despite the drawback of having to get up early on Saturdays.)

- They also typically want most of all to be liked themselves, and so being firm and setting limits with the children may be difficult for them. You can help here, too, by letting them know it’s OK to set limits and redirect behavior and by showing them how to do that best with your child.

The student assistants and I will do our best to assign a Sidekick to your child that we think will “connect” with him or her. However, this is not in any way foolproof, and sometimes the match does not work out well for one or both of the pair. I tell the assistants and the Sidekicks to let me know if there’s a problem, and I want you to let me know as well! We can usually make an adjustment.

More importantly, feel free to give the Sidekicks suggestions and pointers early on about how to best work with your child – or let me know and I will ask them to talk to you – remember, they are learning, and they need our guidance and support. Sometimes with just a little help, difficulties can be smoothed out, and they will learn something new as well!

Finally, as I’m often rushing around on Saturdays, I don’t get to tell you how much I value you and your children. You are what keep me energized and excited about my work, and I am so grateful to know you and have the opportunity to interact with you and your children.

Elaine