

Fresh Air Fund

Helping kids to think before they act

Simple program teaches how to stay out of trouble

Summer camp staff respect their troubled charges

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FEATURE WRITER

You really couldn't blame the staff at Camp Wimodausic if they started throwing tantrums.

They've lost their playground equipment because of a change in safety codes. Space is tight and money tighter, so they never do a fraction of what they'd like to do. And, because they're the only game in town, they're snowed under with requests.

But instead of snapping back, they simply... SNAP.

It's the camp motto — Stop Now and Plan — and central to what Wimodausic offers kids with behavioural and violence problems. Don't act on impulse; take a deep breath, think things through and decide what's best rather than what might temporarily relieve your feelings. And get you in trouble.

"SNAP originated right here," says camp director Karen Sewell proudly. "And other places have picked up on the concept. It's even gone international, overseas. I love that."

Sewell and her camp counsellors would say, without any maudlin intent, that love has a lot to do with how Wimodausic functions. A love of kids, a love of seeing a child in turmoil turned onto a more productive path.

"We have some... challenging kids; we're not going to lie to you," says deputy director Tony Medeiros. "But we never throw up our hands."

"None of this is their choice," adds counsellor Daniel Ster-

mac-Stein. "Their life and environment sometimes have never given them the chance to be regular kids. It's not like they want to be in trouble."

Wimodausic, established in 1982, is part of the Child Development Institute, on a quiet street in Toronto's west end. The Fresh Air Fund sponsors kids at the camp, which is one of a total of 99, catering to about 25,000 children, the fund supports with donations from *Star* readers.

It's a day-camp, the only one catering to kids with behavioural issues — anything from hyperactivity to disobedience; impulsiveness to aggressiveness.

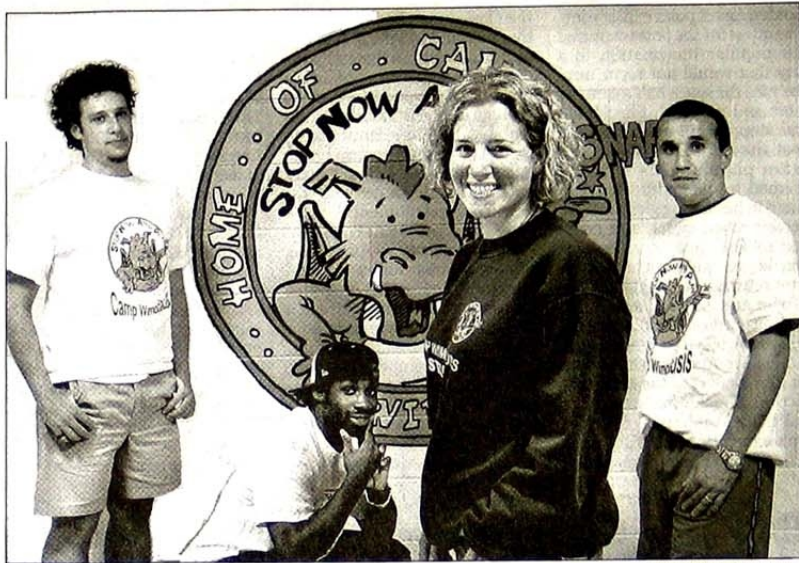
These are the kids who get thrown out of regular day-camps. So there's a constant plea for places at Wimodausic from parents and social workers all over the city. But it can only take a total of 48 children, aged 6 to 11, in two four-week sessions over the summer.

SNAP. It takes a lot of planning to get the most bang for the least bucks. The playground equipment has been taken down and, Medeiros says, would cost \$50,000 to replace. So now it's hide-and-seek and relay races around the building.

"I guess we're not always the best neighbours," he says with a grin.

Outings have to be planned with an ingenious eye on the purse strings. A trip to the zoo is beyond the fiscal bounds right now but just might happen one of these days. Canada's Wonderland is beyond anyone's wildest dreams. But one of the big hits last year was a visit to the National Film Board, which may strike you as the last place to take kids whose strong suit is not a long attention span.

"We were using our imagination, though," says Medeiros. "And the kids got to use theirs. The NFB gave them a clayma-



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR

Camp Wimodausic director Karen Sewell — backed by (left to right) counsellor Daniel Stermac-Stein, counsellor Johnathan Tamar and deputy director Tony Medeiros — delivers fun and help for troubled kids.

tion workshop. They got to make their little figures and make them move. And they got to see the outcome... 'Hey, we did this and it's on video.'

"We took them on a factory tour, too. The kids really liked it. But it's a problem coming up with outings that fit our budget."

One daily priority is to get the kids a nutritious snack, something they may not have had at home. Activities include anger-management and problem-solving, with role-playing games looking at situations where they've let themselves get mad, leading them into trouble.

"With boys, it's more likely to be physical aggression," says Sewell. "With girls, it's social aggression. So you handle it differently. Girls will sit down and have longer discussions."

There's a daily session of sports. And sportsmanship. This is a special interest of counsellor Johnathan Tamar, 17.

"A lot of these kids have difficulty making friends; social skills don't come naturally to them," he says. "They want to have fun but they don't know how. Once they learn to participate in team stuff, they're better able to join in playground games in school."

Throughout each day runs a thread of positive reinforcement. A kid who does something good is singled out for credit in front of the group. And every kid winds up doing something good. "They love that," says Sewell. "It's not the kind of attention they're used to."

With three assistant directors and 12 counsellors, there's a

high staff-camper ratio. Counsellors call the kids before camp gets under way to introduce themselves; they also have their photographs.

"That way, when they arrive on the first day, you're never saying, 'And what's your name?'" says Stermac-Stein, 19. "You know their name and that makes them feel like they matter."

Some children will return the following year. But Sewell and her cohorts like best to hear that a Wimodausic alumnus has been accepted into a regular camp.

If you want to make a SNAP judgement on whether the program works, consider this: several counsellors first came to Wimodausic as troubled kids. They were part of the problem, now they're part of the solution.



Wanted: your camp letters

This year the Toronto Star celebrates the kids of the Fresh Air Fund in their own words. If you have memories of a Star-sponsored camp or a letter a child wrote from a fund-supported camp, please share them with us.

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