

A PLACE WHERE KIDS CONNECT

Campers learn new ways to express themselves

By Joe Moszczynski
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

For 51 weeks a year, Lorraine O'Leary worries about her son, Brandon, who has autism and verbal apraxia and is unable to speak without the help of a voice-synthesizing computer.

But this week, 11-year-old Brandon is attending Camp Chatterbox, and that means his mom can relax.

Sponsored by the Children's Specialized Hospital, Camp Chatterbox brings together nonspeaking and severely speech-impaired children and helps them do all the things campers do: swim, boat, watch movies and play sports. More importantly, the camp allows the kids to interact with other children using voice-synthesizing systems known as augmentative and alternative communication devices.

"When he's here, he feels like everybody else," said O'Leary, wear-

ing a black T-shirt emblazoned with the camp's name and theme for this year's program "Outtalk, Outlook and Outsmart."

In its 19th year, Camp Chatterbox is held at the Fair Lake Camp & Conference Center in Stillwater, Sussex County, a 600-acre campground in northwestern New Jersey near the Delaware Water Gap

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National Recreation Area.

This year, 15 campers from eight states are attending the program, which also provides training for parents. The kids, ages 5 to 15, are assisted by 57 staff members, most of whom are speech therapists and special education teachers.

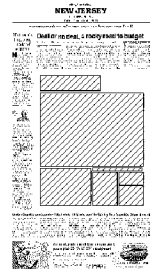
"It gives them a chance to see other kids with similar disabilities. It's motivating for them and it allows them to

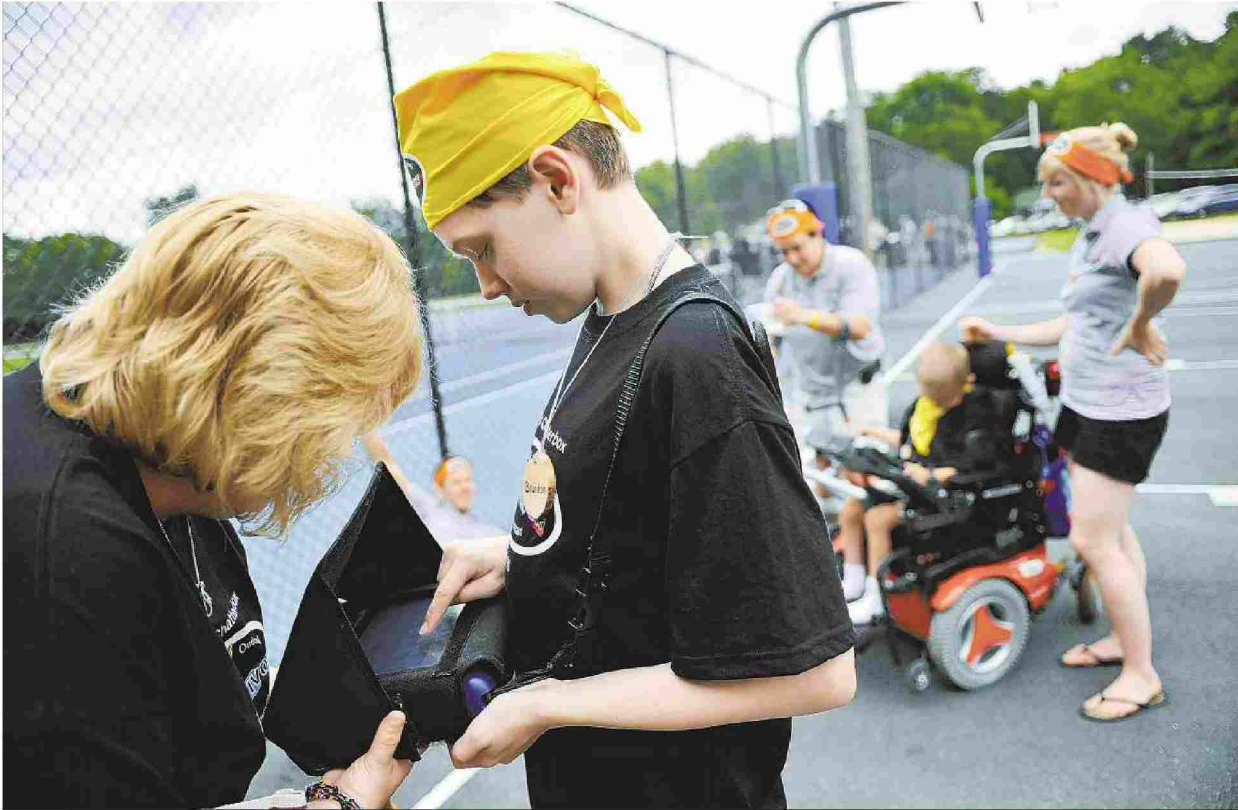
make friends," said camp director and founder Joan Bruno, of Children's Specialized Hospital.

An AAC device, which costs between \$7,000 and \$10,000, allows Brandon to "speak" to others by using a touch-pad on the computer that weighs four pounds and hangs around his neck.

When asked his name, Brandon touches the appropriate space on the screen. A young male voice replies, "I'm Brandon," and the boy smiles.

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PHOTOS BY MATT RAINY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Lorraine O'Leary helps her son Brandon, 11, with his computerized communications device yesterday during a safety lesson at Camp Chatterbox in Stillwater. Children's Specialized Hospital sponsors the camp for nonspeaking and severely speech-impaired children.



Ben Hosterman of Coopersville, Mich., uses his computerized communications device during an arts and crafts session at the camp.