

Joy to the places where kids belong

Monday, July 10, 2006, Page: A11
Christian Cotroneo

The sun sends scores of children - one mighty splash after another - into the massive swimming pool at **Camp Kirk**.

That's where children chirp along the water's edge, lounge on floating rubber mats and climb the backs of older, burlier swimmers, like mountaineers.

Nicholas Dunk drops straight to the bottom of the pool to retrieve a plastic stake. "Awww!" The 12-year-old surfaces and doubles up in mock pain. "A water jet just got me in the wrong spot."

For camp director Henri Audet, it's a postcard of childhood. Except, Audet hastens to add, these children don't always see themselves in the picture.

"Their self-esteem has been totally undermined," he says. "They can think of themselves as losers, misfits, stupid or whatever."

Many of the children who arrive for 10-day sojourns here near Kirkfield, Ont., have learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), "and just about every 'D' in the book."

"What we try to do here is swing the pendulum the other way - and really focus on the positive," Audet adds. "They're here and they know they can be who they are - and feel good about who they are."

At 13, Daniel has Asperger syndrome, ADHD and "another little thing that most people wouldn't know." But the Mississauga boy is taking the day one ray at a time, lingering at the edge of the pool.

"It's not much of a big deal," he says. "At least here."

Camp Kirk is one of 98 summer camps funded by The Toronto Star Fresh Air Fund. In its 106th year, the charity aims to raise \$575,000 to send some 25,000 children to camp.

The frolic in **Camp Kirk's** pool fades when a whistle shrieks. It's time to take medications and for today's kitchen crew to get busy. A boy intently counts plastic cups, "Four ... five ... six ..." Audet takes to the microphone. And everything changes. "Jeremiah was a bullfrog!" he croons, strumming his guitar. "He was a good friend of mine." And the kitchen patrol claps as one, joining the refrain - "Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea ..."

Even the boy once so focused on counting cups betrays a bop. And then falls into a full-body boogie.