

Camp Connecting Brothers, Sisters in Foster Care

By Lisa Flower
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ANDOVER -- Alex, age 10, sat in the dining room of the "Channel 3 Kids Camp- Siblings Connections" with his three brothers who are all in foster care. When asked what this sibling camp experience meant to him, he said, "We get to be with each other and spend time together." His 8-year-old brother, Neo, chimed in: "We got to hug each other and laugh." Other brothers Manny and Angel happily agreed.



Angel, Manny, Alex and Neo were removed from their mother in February 2007. They have been in foster care since. They are placed in three separate foster homes, with Alex and Angel remaining together. While about eight out of ten siblings are placed together, the other 20 percent may not be able to be together due to complex medical needs, large sibling groups, or children with serious behavioral challenges. In the boys' case, all four are placed in therapeutic foster homes to get specialized care to meet their individualized needs. Currently the boys visit with Mom on a weekly basis as part of the case plan for reunification.

Sibling connections is a weeklong summer camp experience designed to strengthen and enhance the bond shared between foster siblings. Children in foster care are sometimes separated from their siblings due to individual needs or other circumstances and face unique challenges in maintaining connections when separated from their brothers and sisters.

The Department of Children and Families (DCF), Channel 3 Kids Camp and Wheeler Clinic established *Sibling Connections* to provide a camp experience to strengthen and enhance the bond shared between siblings. "*Sibling Connections* is a great opportunity for children in foster care to reunite with their brothers and sisters and spend quality time together" said Denise Hornbecker, Executive Director of Channel 3 Kids Camp.

Mike Russo, Wheeler Clinic's Director, said, "This has been a terrific collaborative opportunity to create an environment where foster children can enjoy a great camp experience, spend quality time with their brothers and sisters and receive the emotional support they need to make it safe and fun." Wheeler also provides clinical support to the youth at the camp when needed.

DCF Commissioner Susan Hamilton said, "We are very excited to work with Channel 3 Kids Camp and Wheeler Clinic in the creation of this unique opportunity for children in need. DCF recognizes the vital importance of preserving sibling relationships, which are critical to a child's sense of permanency and emotional well being. And this camp is a very positive way to preserve these deeply personal attachments."

The four brothers have all been at the camp for four days and were all smiling and listening attentively to what their siblings had to say during the interview. One of the final thoughts that Alex and Angel chose to share was that if they had a wish it would be "to stay one more week with their brothers at camp." Additional *Sibling Connections* events involving the brothers and the other sibling groups in the program will occur in the Fall and again in the Spring. Further, planning is underway for next year's *Sibling Connections*' summer session.