

# Camp breathes fun, education into kids

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

HOWARD — Accessible by roads covered only with loose pavement and dirt, Camp Rathbun has plenty of fresh air to breathe in.

And it was indeed breathing that was the primary focus of 45 children when they gathered at this Steuben County retreat last Saturday, Sept. 17.

A fun-filled day of education for the whole family marked the third annual "Easy Breathers Asthma Camp," sponsored by St. James Mercy Hospital in nearby Hornell.

With the assistance of adult instructors and volunteers, youths — ranging in age from 4 to 14 — participated in an array of activities that not only shed information about asthma, but also gave several practical tips on how to deal with this breathing disorder.

The agenda featured "Huff and Puff," two puppets who discussed the importance of informing an adult or resting once an asthma attack is detected through signs such as a stuffy nose, shortness of breath or coughing. This skit was followed by a bubble-blowing exercise emphasizing inhaling with one's nose and exhaling through the mouth.

The day also included enlightenment for adults: in a nearby cabin, many of the children's parents attended a series of seminars led by asthma experts.

Betsy Harris-Hughes, who serves as director of respiratory care at St. James Mercy Hospital, noted that this camp has been effective on many levels.

She started the free program in 1992, she said, "to try to reach out to all socio-economic levels of families, so they could receive education to maximize the children's quality of life."

"The medical profession is recognizing that kids with asthma are not easily recognized," she added. "There were many misdiagnosed and under-diagnosed cases coming through (the) emergency department. The camp helps decrease hospital visits, doctors' office visits and days missed at school."

Another key aspect of the camp, Harris-Hughes noted, is its bonding effect. "A lot of times (children) feel singled out. They feel embarrassed and try to hide their feelings," she said. "By coming to camp, they find other kids who have (asthma) and they feel better about themselves when they leave here."

Steve and Vicky Cook, parishioners of St. Mary's Church in Dansville, can attest to the program's effectiveness. The Cooks, as well as four of their six

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Betsy Harris-Hughes



Jennifer Chen (left) and volunteer Pam Lewis laugh at the antics of puppets 'Huff and Puff.'

children, are repeat camp participants.

Vicky noted that none of the couple's children has required a hospital visit since attending the camps, whereas visits averaged one in three months prior to that time.

"For us it was a godsend," Steve remarked.

Andrea Cook, 11, acknowledged that the camp "taught me when to take an asthma treatment and who to talk to." Citing an asthma attack she endured two years ago while playing tag, she said, "If I didn't talk to my parents I would have gone to the hospital, because that's what happened before. I'm a lot more careful now."

Andrea's siblings, on the other hand, focused on the camp's other offerings. When asked about his favorite part of the program, 8-year-old Christopher Cook mentioned the awards ceremony in which restaurant certificates were distributed. Walking by the lake appealed to 11-year-old Adrienne, while 10-year-old Elizabeth revealed her highlight with a one-word response.

"Lunch," she stated.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Four-year-old Geena Huber practices a breathing exercise during an asthma camp sponsored by Hornell's St. James Mercy Hospital on Sept. 17.

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