

Private school pushes kids to communicate

SOUTH DAYTONA — The nine boys sat in silence at the picnic tables, munching on snacks and cooling down after running around the playground at Reed Canal Park.

Their lack of conversation, said Chase Academy executive director Mimi Lundell, is typical of children with Autism who often have problems with communication and social interaction.

Chase Academy is a private, nonprofit school for high-performing autistic children in kindergarten through eighth grade that opened in August at the Community of Christ Church, 700 Reed Canal Road. It's named for Lundell's autistic son, Chase, who was the inspiration for the school and attends classes there.



Mimi Lundell, Executive Director of the Chase Academy in South Daytona, teaches 10-year-old AJ Brewer about angles during a math lesson this week. N-J | David Massey

Lundell is a former public-school teacher who spent three years getting the private school off the ground. During that time, she earned her state certification in Exceptional-student Education and an Autism endorsement.

"I went from an educator who was a concerned mom to being completely educated about teaching these children," said Lundell, who teaches full time at Chase Academy as well as overseeing administrative details.

She and other Chase Academy parents were looking for a school that would serve their children's special needs.

For Lee Anderson of DeLand, that meant finding a school where his nonverbal, autistic son, Caleb, could learn to communicate better and become as independent as possible.

"He's made phenomenal progress" at Chase Academy, Anderson said.

Most Chase Academy students attend the school with the help of state-financed McKay Scholarships for children with disabilities. Tuition runs \$12,000 a year, and the school is sponsoring a family expo from 1 to 6 p.m. April 24 at Family Church, 920 Beville Road, Daytona Beach, to raise additional scholarship money.

Lundell said the school's staff has been trained to understand the behavioral problems that some autistic children exhibit.

"Our No. 1 rule is behavior is communication," Lundell said.

"We don't assume a child is bad; we assume they're trying to tell us something," she said. "All we have to do is give them the tools for the right behavior."

The program also includes weekly group field trips that expose the Chase students to unfamiliar social situations that allow them to learn coping skills. The trips have included museum visits, a river cruise and lunch at a pizza restaurant. The students also visit Reed Canal Park on a regular basis.

"We do a lot of stuff so the community sees us and knows us," Lundell said.

-- Linda Trimble