

In its most recent estimates, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 11.5% of Texans of all ages, over three million individuals, had a reported disability (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The following tables provide the most recent disability prevalence statistics among children for the United States, Texas, and the KCF counties of interest. Comal County is the only KCF county of interest with a lower prevalence of children with a disability than the state and national percentages:

Prevalence of Disabilities among Adolescents and Children in the United States and Texas

Age Under 18	United States	Texas
Population	73,294,450	7,328,217
With disability	3,084,450	300,576
% disability	4.2%	4.1%

(U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.)

Age Under 18	Bandera	Bexar	Comal	Kendall
Population	3,809	501,624	32,124	10,338
With disability	263	27,459	1,267	474
% disability	6.9%	5.5%	3.9%	4.6%

(U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.)

Many disabled individuals require treatment above and beyond general medical care. For this reason, a wide variety of local and national programs exist to provide physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development therapy for children with disabilities. Different types of programs include athletic programs, artistic programs, and animal assisted therapy programs.

ATHLETIC PROGRAMS

Children suffering from a disability are more likely to have lower levels of fitness and have

higher levels of obesity compared to children without disabilities. A review of data collected by Abilitypath.org, an online site for the special needs community, found that “[e]ighty percent of children with functional limitations on physical activity are either overweight or obese” (Holecko, 2022). In the past, a scarcity of sports and recreation programs for children with disabilities contributed to this issue. In recent years, however, sports and recreation programs for special needs children are more available. Participating in physical activities regularly promotes an emotional boost including elements such as independence, coping abilities, competitiveness, and teamwork among children with disabilities.

SPORTS AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES PROGRAMS

San Antonio offers opportunities for adapted sports activities for children with disabilities predominately through non-profit agencies.

TEAMability

TEAMability is a nonprofit organization located in San Antonio, which focuses on improving the learning of people who have complex disabilities. TEAMability combines evidence-based practices from various disciplines to create a unique model that demonstrates results not achieved through traditional ways of working with disabled children (TEAMability, 2013a). For example, its aquatic therapy program uses unique adapted equipment to improve strength, endurance, flexibility, and range of motion. The children enjoy the

benefits of therapy and the fun of being in the water (TEAMability, 2013b).

Some of the organizations providing adaptive sports and recreational activities in the greater San Antonio area include:

Kinetic Kids

Since its inception in 2001, Kinetic Kids has grown from a single program serving 12 children to hosting 234 sports and recreations programs reaching 5,031 children with disabilities in 2017 (Kinetic Kids, 2022a). Kinetic Kids offers disabled children a variety of sports and recreational programs which typically run once a week for approximately 2-3 hours during a 6–8-week session. Kinetic Kids also offers competitive programs that practice once a week in monthly sessions (Kinetic Kids, 2022c).

Morgan’s Wonderland (Formerly Sports Outdoor and Recreation (SOAR) Park)

SOAR was a non-profit organization developed by the Gordon Hartman Family Foundation in 2007 to raise funds for a recreational park targeting the needs of children with disabilities. Now known as Morgan’s Wonderland, the park opened in April of 2010. The 25-acre park offers a variety of activities accessible to children with disabilities including, but not limited to, wheelchair accessible playgrounds, wheelchair accessible swings, and an events area. Morgan’s Wonderland is considered the World’s First Ultra-Accessible Theme Park (Morgan’s Wonderland, 2022b). Since the inception of the Morgan’s Wonderland theme park, more programs have been created, including competitive sporting, a splash park, and a camp offering a variety of programs. An affiliated program, STRAPS (South Texas Regional Adaptive & Paralympic Sports), provides recreational and competitive sports opportunities to both youth and adults with physical disabilities including soccer; softball; basketball; and goalball (STRAPS, 2022). Additionally, Morgan’s Inspiration Island ultra-accessible splash park officially opened in 2017, offering six attractions with three types of waterproof wheelchairs available for use (Morgan’s Wonderland, 2022a). Morgan’s

Wonderland Camp recently opened and currently offers family camps, partner camps, and corporate retreats. Activities during the family camps include climbing walls, ziplining, archery, horse rides, arts and crafts, swimming, bike riding, and more coming soon (Morgan’s Wonderland Camp, 2022).

Miracle League

The Miracle League of San Antonio is a non-profit organization that provides a four-acre outdoor sporting facility and baseball league to children and adults with special needs. There is a fully lit, specially surfaced cushioned synthetic turf baseball field that allows for wheelchair and walking assistance device access, which helps to prevent injuries. Buddies are assigned to each team member to assist with hitting the ball and running the bases. In addition, there is a three-acre area of smooth asphalt that lets wheelchair bound children and adults play whichever sport they would like (Miracle League, 2016).

Special Olympics Texas

In addition to its well-known sports training and athletic competition programs for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics Texas (SOTX) provides FUNDamental Sports, a program for young people who “are unable to participate in official Special Olympics sport competitions because of their skill and/or functional abilities” (SOTX, 2022a). In its most recent report, there were a total of 9,330 athletes in the San Antonio area participating in the various Special Olympic programs (SOTX, 2016).

ARTISTIC PROGRAMS

Artistic experiences provide opportunities for creativity, problem solving, and critical thinking. VSA: The International Organization on Arts and Disability reports that, “Students with disabilities who participate in the arts are given opportunities to convey sophisticated ideas, experience validation in their work, and enhance their academic pursuits. Inherent in arts education are means of diverse and variable expressions, responses, and outcomes, allowing students opportunities to diverge from the rote learning often required in other subjects. Thus, students with disabilities can

exercise cognitive processes, find and develop their unique voices, and experience overall success” (The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, the fields of dance, art, and music offer professionally developed therapy programs that can be beneficial to children with disabilities.

Kinetic Kids

In San Antonio, the Kinetic Kids program offers a wide variety of programs for children with special needs, both physical and cognitive. They offer three music programs that explore music and movement using instruments and music techniques. The first program allows parents and their 18-month to 5-year-old children to explore music and learn basic music technique. The second and third programs are for ages 5-18, with one providing sensory breaks and 1:1 assistance, and the other focusing on individual skills for a final performance (Kinetic Kids, 2022d). Various art programs are offered which allow children to display their creativity through day classes or work on projects during the holiday seasons. There are three *Dance* programs available for children. One program provides sensory breaks between structured tasks and 1:1 assistance. The second and third programs involve more group participation, with the third focusing on a higher level of competition (Kinetic Kids, 2022b). Similar to the music programs, children learn a variety of dances which they perform at a recital near the end of the session. There is also a *Musical Theatre* program offered that combines the aspects of music, theatre, and dance. There are two groups for this program, both aged 5 to 18 years and based on abilities/needs (Kinetic Kids, 2022e).

ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY PROGRAMS

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is a form of therapy that incorporates animals as an integral part of the treatment process, aimed at improving physical, social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. A trained health professional delivers AAT, and a wide variety of disciplines may incorporate this therapeutic intervention (Pet Partners, 2022).

On the other hand, animal-assisted activities (AAA) do not focus on the treatment of a specific condition, but rather, “provide[s] opportunities for motivational, educational, and/or recreational benefits to enhance quality of life” (Pet Partners, 2022). AAA do not require a health professional and no treatment goals are developed. A professional, paraprofessional, or simply a volunteer who is familiar with the animal and human population with which they interact may deliver AAA.

The American Humane Association provides services in other settings in which the animal interaction provides comfort to children with cancer, teaches children in special education and mainstream classrooms important life skills, and helps children learn how to read (American Humane Association, 2018).

Equine Therapy

Two types of programs using horses appear to be most beneficial for children with disabilities. The first, Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), teaches recreational riding skills for children with disabilities. Children can participate in group or individual lessons, which are supervised by therapeutic riding instructors. Therapeutic horseback riding fosters a relationship between the child and the horse aiming to increase confidence and self-esteem. This program typically targets children with social, emotional, and learning challenges. In addition, using horses as a “biofeedback machine” can help therapists to better understand the emotional state of the client due to the horse’s sensitive nature and body language (PATH International, 2021).

The second program, hippotherapy, is a type of physical, occupational, and speech-language therapy used as an integrated treatment plan. Hippotherapy engages sensory, neuromotor and cognitive systems (American Hippotherapy Association, Inc. 2020).

Examples of medical conditions and impairments afflicting children and adults who seek hippotherapy or EFP are listed below:

Medical Conditions

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Developmental Delay or Disability
- Attention Deficit Disorder
- Learning Disabilities
- Cerebral Palsy
- Down Syndrome
- Speech-Language Disorders
- Traumatic Brain Injury/Stroke
(PATH International, 2011; American Hippotherapy Association, Inc., 2018).

Impairments

- Impaired muscle tone
- Impaired cognitive function
- Impaired coordination
- Impaired communication
- Impaired sensorimotor function
- Impaired range of motion
- Postural asymmetry
- Poor postural control
- Decreased mobility
(American Hippotherapy Association, Inc., 2018).

Like therapeutic horseback riding, hippotherapy also facilitates improved self-esteem and emotional self-awareness by developing a relationship between the child and the horse. Additionally, hippotherapy is used to facilitate coordination and timing, grading of responses, “confidence, empowerment, and a sense of self-worth” (RISE, 2021b).

Horses Helping the Handicapped, Inc. (HHH)
Also known as Triple H Equitherapy Center, HHH is a nonprofit, nationally accredited, equine-assisted activities and therapy center servicing both children and adults in Bandera, Bexar, Comal, Kendall, Kerr, and Medina counties (HHH, 2020a). Its programs include (in part): Hooves, Hearts & Heroes – school-based program using therapeutic horseback riding and horse facilitated experiential learning; From Fear to Responsibility – mental health assistance for at-risk children/youth; and Riding to Independence – therapeutic riding for individuals with various physical, emotional, and cognitive challenges (HHH, 2020b).

Saddle Light Center (SLC)

The SLC provides “professional equestrian therapy for children, teenagers and adults with neurological, orthopedic, learning, emotional or other disabilities” (SLC, 2022). The SLC offers both therapeutic horseback riding and hippotherapy for riders of all ages. This program serves individuals in the greater San Antonio area and offers programs ranging from 8 to 15 weeks throughout the year (SLC, 2021).

RISE Therapeutic Equestrian Center

RISE Rehab works to provide equine and hippotherapy to those with intellectual or physical disabilities. The organization’s goal is to improve individuals physically as well as mentally by providing therapy that exercises bodies as well as minds. In order to maximize both benefit and safety, there are established weight guidelines for the riders relative to the horses and volunteers available (RISE, 2021a).

CAMPS

There are numerous camps for children with disabilities located throughout the country. These camps facilitate interactions between children who face similar challenges. There are a variety of camps with both broad and specific disability focus. For instance, there are camps designated for children with various disabling conditions and others with specific focus on areas such as diabetes, amputation, autism, and cerebral palsy. Disability camps allow children of all ages to encounter new experiences and learn cooperation and communication skills while building self-confidence and a sense of independence. Camps are a great place for children to establish new friendships while learning valuable life-skills (Disabled World, 2020).

Several camps throughout the region offer programs to children with disabilities. The American Camp Association (ACA) website can help locate a variety of camps suited for specific needs across the nation (ACA, 2022). Camp CAMP (Children’s Association for Maximum Potential) is a disability camp located in Kerr County. The association serves children who are not eligible to participate in other

camps due to the severity of their disabilities as well as their non-disabled siblings (CAMP, n.d.).

Many organizations provide day camps during school breaks. A number of them can be found on the Navigate Life Texas website, which lists a host of resources available for children with disabilities living in Texas, including:

- Camp Summit offers spring break, summer, and fall weeklong camps
- Texas Lions Camp offers “TLC-4-Families” which provides a camping experience for families who have a child with disabilities (Navigate Life Texas, 2022).

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The pandemic has had a substantial impact on all aspects of social interaction, especially for disabled children. A survey conducted by the Lakeshore Foundation and the NCHPAD (National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability) showed that more than half of their 1,400 respondents, or 58%, said they could not meet daily needs in recreation or other health-related activities as a result of the pandemic. About 24% of 1138 reported reaching out for help from organizations, and of that, only 12% reported that all of their needs were met (NCHPAD, 2020).

Organizations responded to the lack of in-person activities by implementing a variety of alternate programs, guidelines, and resources. Kinetic Kids introduced *Stay Strong*, which provides virtual resources to help motivate, educate, and encourage movement (Kinetic Kids, 2022f). Similarly, Kinetic Kids has been adjusting its COVID policies. Staff and volunteers are required to wear a mask while indoors and outdoors (when physical distancing is not possible). Parents, guardians, and children must pass health screening tests, and disinfectant and sanitizer are used while in class (Kinetic Kids, 2022g). Morgan’s Wonderland provided a list of guidelines for their reopening in 2021 under the hashtag #GiveJoyNotGerms to allow for safe outdoor activities, including mask recommendations for guests, required masks for employees, disinfecting high-touch surfaces, and providing hand-sanitizing stations for

guests (Morgan’s Wonderland, 2022c). Special Olympics Texas also has return-to-activities requirements, which includes signing a mandatory waiver and an optional safety video for athletes (SOTX, 2022b).

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