Five years ago, twins Caylee and Brianna Mackey, now eight years old, attended a summer camp program at Hattie Larlham. While they don’t have disabilities themselves, they attended the integrated camp with children who do. Their lives were forever changed. Their siblings Johnny Rose, age seven, and Logan, five, have since attended the same camp at the Mantua, Ohio-based center. They have all found deep connections with the other kids there, a strong compassion and intuitive ability to oblige a variety of unique needs. They’ve forged potential lifelong friendships. But most of all, they just love to play with their new friends. It’s as simple as that.

Play is fundamental in a child’s life. Through play children develop cognitive, problem-solving, and social skills. Play also breaks down barriers and lays the foundation for adult relationships.

Thirteen-year-old Austin Warner has autism and knows all about the benefits of play. His parents chose to home-school him to protect him from possible social difficulties a public school education could present. As a result, other than speech therapy and swimming lessons, Austin didn’t have much interaction with larger groups of kids. “Because of his needs, he can be isolated,” says his father Daniel Warner. “Other kids don’t actively engage him,” he adds. Warner works at Hattie Larlham. The kids camp at his workplace afforded Austin the chance to really socialize with other children and have fun. “For him, it has really opened up some new doors. He has something to look forward to, and it breaks the routine of schoolwork,” voices Warner. “It’s marked down in his calendar and he counts down the days. He knows everybody there, and he talks about the different projects and activities they do.” Warner emphasizes that without the camp and other recreational activities, such as playing baseball and taking swimming lessons, Austin’s life would be very different. “It has a huge impact on his life, bringing some normalcy to it.”

The Therapy Director at Hattie Larlham is Ingrid Kanics who maintains that play is vital for both children and adults alike. "Play is so core to who we are as human beings. It’s not just something about childhood... it’s where we discover the world and expand our way of thinking about things. The further away we are from it, the more miserable we are," she assures.

Three years ago Noah Battey, who has autism, wouldn’t make eye contact with others, and didn’t understand the concept of personal space. “For the first three years of his life, he didn’t want to interact with anyone,” discloses his mother Lynn Battey. “He just lived in his own little world.”
Fred Rogers was an enormous advocate of play. “Every activity helps him in some positive impact on son Austin's school performance,” she explains, “which makes it different than when (United States), agrees. “An organized sport for example, is still an outcome to learn so many important things about being human.”

Rogers, children’s educational TV personality and pioneer, writes: “We never know that, in the past, kids played about going to the moon before that was ever a reality. Let’s play now, or we might just do it differently. With play, they have that opportunity to really interact with their peers. If the facility is designed properly, the disability disappears in a second.”

Hattie Larlham. “Her mission was to provide comfort, joy, and achievement for people with disabilities, and inspire people working in this field,” she says, "and parents should cultivate that in their children. Play should be viewed as a basic in life and parents need to stimulate that urge to play in children.”

With parents’ encouragement, and facilities like Hattie Larlham, children will continue to create memories, reap the many benefits that play can provide, and cultivate the friendships that will stay with them for many years to come.

Editor’s Note: Fred Rogers was an enormous advocate of play. Look for more on the life’s work of Mr. Rogers, and his legacy, in the next issue of Play to Podium.

Hattie Larlham • A Legacy to a Life’s Work

Located in Mantua, Ohio, Hattie Larlham provides on-site and community services to approximately 1,500 people with disabilities from long-term residential care, to summer day camps, the facility is dedicated to serving the needs of children and adults with disabilities. It was founded in 1961 by Hattie Larlham, a nurse, who saw her neighbour’s family struggling to take care of their daughter who had hydrocephalus. Hattie and her husband took the child into their home and took care of her. “She started with one child, and now we’re providing services to 1,500 people,” says Bill Wahl, Communications Coordinator at Hattie Larlham’s Therapy Center. “Her mission was to provide comfort, joy, and achievement for people with disabilities, and we continue to strive to achieve that."

In January 2009, the centre unveiled a 7,000-square-foot State-of-the-Art Play Center as part of a larger renovation project called the Hope at Work Project. The Play Center is a wonderful indoor space. There are toys and activities for children of all ages and abilities, including pool, slide, and gym equipment to draw on, a music area, art room, and a multi-sensory room. "It’s a wonderful, welcoming, safe place for children of all abilities to play and interact with each other," says Carolyn Lehman, Director of the Hattie Larlham Center for Children with Disabilities.

The Play Center was carefully designed to meet the needs of all levels of disabilities. "Kids with disabilities have the same, innate drive as other kids, but they might just do it differently. With play, they have that opportunity to really interact with their peers. If the facility is designed properly, the disability disappears in the mix."

To learn more Hattie Larlham’s life’s work and her legacy visit www.hattielarlham.org