A Northeast Minneapolis day camp, 10-year-old kids with autism navigate an unusual obstacle course.

They walk a balance beam, hang on monkey bars, and alligator-crawl across mats. These exercises aren’t just for fun—all of them are designed to stimulate the type of brain activity needed in academics.

The nonprofit A Chance To Grow (actg.org) was founded in 1982, and it’s starting to reach out to the community.

"[We want] the community to come out to see the program, see the kids, talk to the parents, and realize that this is in their backyard," says Amy Deden, event and workshop coordinator. "People don’t know that we’re here."

Many of the clients have Down Syndrome, autism, or attention deficit disorder, although the center serves any child. In addition to exercise, the clinic offers therapies that hook kids up to video games and teaches them to focus their brain activity. Other therapies help kids who see double images or have trouble hearing certain pitches.

The staff has spent the past year reaching out in new ways. They recently partnered with a Northeast yoga teacher to teach classes at the camp. They’re also partnering with clubs like the Lions and Exchange Club to host neighborhood picnics and develop scholarships. And they’re dreaming up ideas for after-school programs as well as trips that would teach adolescents how to use local grocery stores.

“We have such great community people here,” says occupational therapist Julie Neumann. “People love Northeast. They believe in it and they fight for it, and they fight for their programs.”

**Making time for moving**

A Chance To Grow is more than a health clinic. It runs a daycare center, and it provides teacher workshops across...
the country. The agency has gained national recognition for its “S.M.A.R.T.” (Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training) program, which encourages teachers to take breaks for exercise in the classroom. Movement is vital for kids to focus—it “gets the wiggles out,” Neumann says.

After 80 hours of exercises like those mentioned above, children on average make a six-month reading gain, according to the agency. Today, 300 schools across the country use the S.M.A.R.T. strategy, and this past summer, staff conducted teacher workshops in Delaware, Tennessee, and Michigan.

Shari, grandmother to 16-year-old Luke, says that in younger grades, Luke would spend his classroom hours in a daze—he would love nothing more than to simply sit in his room and be quiet, she says. But all of the camp’s emphasis on movement has made a change. Now, Luke wants to go to the gym and play basketball.

“He’s grounded; he’s aware,” she says. “New, wonderful, expansive things keep happening to Luke.”

For kids with developmental disabilities, a simple exercise like walking on a balance beam helps them develop balance and spatial awareness, which are skills they need to simply sit still in a classroom or read from left to right. Other exercises, like crossing the monkey bars, force a child’s eyes to work together and fuse each eyeball’s image into one. That’s an important skill for reading.

“We get to the root level—the basics of movement—and build up from there,” Neumann says.

The summer day camp “Boost Up Plus” spends three intensive weeks on fun exercises and neurotechnology therapies. The program is filled to capacity, and it draws people from across the metro and even attracted a family from Canada last year.

“I spent many, many hours researching places all over the world, so it just seemed like the best of everything,” says Cheryl, a visitor from Canada whose 11-year-old daughter Danielle has severe speech delays. “Anything I have researched, this combines it all.”

Another mother, Kelly, says she appreciates the one-stop-shop for her son, Joe, who is eight years old and has Down Syndrome.

“You do so much driving to therapies and doctors; it’s so scattered,” Kelly says. She tried the Boost Up Plus camp last summer to help Joe’s speech delays and reflexes.

“I saw huge differences from before and after,” she says. “His speech has come further in the last nine months than I’ve seen it come in eight years.”

Kelly also takes advantage of the neurotechnology available. She uses Audio Visual Entrainment (AVE) sunglasses to help Joe relax and go to sleep at night.

“He usually sucks right out.”

The sunglasses flash lights that mimic the sensation of sitting by a campfire and are hugely popular at A Chance To Grow. Staff has trained 46 Minnesota schools on how to use them, and they have sold 600 machines to patients since 2001.

“For centuries, people have looked at how flickering lights affect the body,” says Becky Aish, director of neurotechnology services. “Scientists found that watching a candle flame could calm hysteria for some people.”
The pulsing lights match brainwave patterns that can help someone relax (similar to the light a television emits), or stimulate neurons for academic success. At the same time, a pair of headphones plays music with heartbeats and pulses that help brainwaves get into a certain groove. Olympic athletes and even football teams have used the technology to gear up for sports events.

"I used one to get through my master's program," Neumann says. "And for migraines."

**Fight-or-flight**

Children also try a therapy called EEG Neurofeedback. Electrodes placed on their heads measure brain activity while they watch a dolphin jump in the water, or a plane flying in the sky. If they become distracted, anxious or tired, their brainwaves trigger the game to stop moving. Aish says the goal here is to help children relax and unconsciously teach their brains to rid itself of foggy, unfocused brain activity. Games like this can target the brain state needed for yoga or meditation.

"So many of our kids are in fight-or-flight mode all the time," Aish says. "We want them to relax and de-stress their bodies. ...We're teaching the brain how to appropriately work."

Another service at the clinic tests for auditory processing delays. Some children have trouble with left-ear dominance, a condition where sounds can take longer for the brain to process. Other kids are obsessed with low-frequency noises like running fans or background voices—they tend to blur higher frequencies, like a female teacher's voice. The clinic creates individualized CDs for children to listen to for 10 minutes a day. The CDs might help them become right-ear dominant, or tune into higher frequencies like birds chirping.

All of the neurotechnology services are available at the summer day camps. Kelly says it's an inexpensive way to take advantage of the costly therapies. This past summer, Kelly even enrolled her six-year-old Jessica, who is a typically-developing child—she thought it might help her daughter's carsickness.

"It's great for any kid," Kelly says. "And she's loving it."