

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English. I'm June Simms.

More and more American children are playing ice hockey. Parents find the sport helps to keep their children physically active and teaches them the value of teamwork. Kelly Jean Kelly reports about a group of young players with a special story to tell.

Early one Saturday morning, David Blaisdell got up before sunrise. He was preparing for his son Christopher's weekly hockey practice.

Christopher is 14 years old and plays on a team in Rockville, Maryland called Montgomery Cheetahs.

Christopher and his teammates train at the Cabin John Ice Rink. The Cheetahs look no different from other young hockey players across the United States. But their path to the game has been very different.

"My name is Amir Khan. I play for the Montgomery Cheetahs."

"My name is Maurice. I play on the Montgomery Cheetahs."

"Go Cheetahs!"

All the players on the Montgomery Cheetahs have autism, or some developmental disorder that limits social and communication skills.

The team was founded in 2006 with just 10 players and two coaches. But now there are more than 80 Cheetahs and a big group of coaches. David Lucia is head coach.

“Montgomery Cheetahs Special Hockey Team is a therapeutic program for kids, to help them socially, emotionally, behaviorally in and out of the classroom, on and off the ice. It’s life skills that can be taken from the ice and be transferred into daily life.”

David Blaisdell says much of Christopher’s success on the ice is because of the many coaches.

“All the coaches and volunteers are very patient with Christopher.”

The coaches are volunteers. Some, including Coach Lucia, are major donors to the team.

Weiwei Zhang is Christopher’s mother.

“Sometimes you get the sense that the coaches treat your child better than you do.”

When the players hold a meeting, the talk is all about hockey.

“Trying to pass, skate faster, shoot and score, high into the net.”

“Try to when the puck comes to me I try to put it in the goal.”

“Maybe when I skate backward, maybe trying to block a shot. To be honest, it’s a little scary to try to block a shot.”

Weimin Zhou is the father of one player.

“Children with autism don’t mingle very well with other kids. First of all, they are not easily accepted by other kids. Secondly, they may receive special treatment. Neither is good for them to develop social skills. But on the Cheetahs, they feel they are all the same. They feel this is their own team.”

Chris Nagle is the mother of another player.

“The social aspect of it has been a huge help for him because he really enjoys being with his teammates, whereas before he started hockey he did not have that same endurance, he would tire out easily. He would like to sit and read books.”

The social aspect also helps the parents. Parenting a child with special needs can be demanding. The weekly practice gives the parents a chance to calm down and talk with each other.

Marie Jacob is the mother of another Cheetahs player.

“With a special needs child, that you have an opportunity to be with parents that have a similar situation.”

Many parents serve the team as volunteers and advisors. Christopher’s father David is one of them.

“The more progress he makes, the more confident we parents grow, and the more grateful we are to be on the team. I want to do my share and give back to the team.”

The American Special Needs Hockey Association says there are 50 teams like the Cheetahs and more than 1,500 players nationwide.

I'm June Simms. Join us again next week for American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.