

Get in the game

Kids of all ability levels can find a place to make friends, build skills and have a ball. By **Jana Banin**



As the mom of a five-year-old with autism, I know firsthand that parents of kids with special needs are constantly reminded that our lives are different. The biggest red flag for me is the hordes of overscheduled children I see being shuffled around from soccer and dance lessons to art and music classes. I can't imagine our being part of a scenario as commonplace as my son swinging a bat at Little League practice while I gab with other parents. Baseball requires the ability to follow instructions and the strength and coordination to hold up a bat—skills my Benjamin doesn't have right now. Even if he could play, I'd be so worried that he might wander off or have a tantrum that I wouldn't be able to relax.

"Conor is better at tae kwon do than some typical kids. He feels like a Power Ranger!"

For many children with special needs, mainstream activities aren't an option. But that doesn't mean your kid shouldn't have the chance to learn, say, karate. In fact, little ones with special needs can benefit from arts or sports programs as much as from traditional therapies. "They get to interact with other children, they strengthen their fine and gross motor skills, and they learn a wide range of new skills," says Cecelia McCarton, M.D., a leading expert in developmental pediatrics and a clinical professor of pediatrics at New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "Plus, they get to have fun! Isn't that what we should offer every child, whether they're typical or have special needs?"

The Tagues of Astoria, Queens, were hoping for all of the above when they enrolled their then six-year-old son, Conor, who has a diagnosis of PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified), an autism spectrum disorder, in a mainstream gymnastics class. They wanted him to have fun doing somersaults and walking the balance beam. But they knew there was a chance he'd have a hard time doing something new and out of his routine. "We explained to the instructor that Conor has special needs, and the guy was like, 'Sure, we get those kinds of kids all the time,'" says Raymond Tague, Conor's dad.

Then the first class rolled around. "A bunch of kids had to wait in line to tumble, and when it was Conor's turn he didn't do it correctly," Tague recalls. "The instructor put his hands

on him to adjust him, and Conor lost his mind." Like many children on the autism spectrum, Conor is sensitive to touch and feels compelled to do things in a specific way. "The fact that he didn't get it right was very upsetting to him. He threw a major tantrum—it was like World War III," says Tague. The teacher seemed freaked out, and Conor refused to go back.

After similar experiences in mainstream soccer and baseball programs, the family finally found a winner. "We Googled 'martial arts and special needs,' and one of the first sites that popped up was East Side Tae Kwon Do," says Tague. Last November, they registered Conor at the East 65th Street studio (see page 34), which caters to kids with special

needs. He took to the lessons right away. "The fact that it's such a structured and disciplined activity works with his temperament," says Tague. The small class size—Conor has never been in a group of more than eight kids—helps, too. "My guy would get lost in a big class," his father says.

Just six months after his first session, Conor was on his fifth belt, and he's still going strong. "He's better at these forms than some of the typical kids because he's so detail-minded," says Tague. "He works at it and he loves it. He feels like a Power Ranger!"

As many parents of kids with special needs know, finding a program where your son or daughter can shine—and where nobody is going to look at your child (or you) funny if he or she rolls around on the ground or makes weird noises for no apparent reason—is a challenge, but there's no doubt about the payoff. Kids have a good time, learn something new and meet other youngsters like them. Their parents get a break—and the peace of mind that comes with knowing their children are in good hands.

The city is home to a surprising number of programs that are supportive of kids with special needs. They can be hard to hunt down—especially for parents who are busy coordinating therapy schedules and dealing with the bureaucracy and logistics of locating an appropriate school. That's why *Time Out Kids* did the research for you. Read on to find dozens of activities, from art to tennis, for infants through teens. >

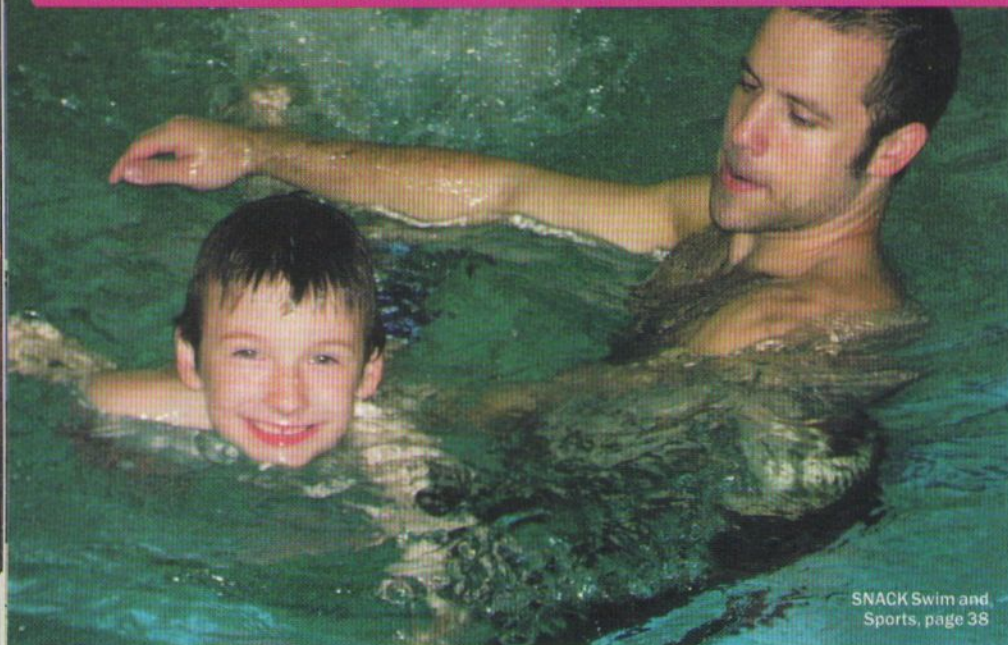
Alternative therapy

New York is full of places that are special-needs-friendly by chance. City parents share their kids' faves.

● One day it occurred to Debbie Stevenson that her son Taylor, 12, who doesn't get much physical activity, might benefit from working out with a personal trainer. So she asked the folks at David Barton Gym, where she's been a member for years, if they take kids. "I explained that he has fragile X syndrome, and they told me that they have some really great, patient instructors," says the Upper East Sider. Taylor enjoys the exercises, particularly getting stretched. "I've never paid for a trainer for myself because it seems so expensive," says his mom, "but it's practically half the price of his traditional therapy!"

● Vanessa Brennan of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, takes Flynn, her four-year-old who has a diagnosis of PDD-NOS, to Virgin Records in Union Square. "It's noisy in there, but we go straight to the sample stations," she says. "He loves the earphones. We each put them on, then face each other and dance."

● Our reporter, Jana Banin, and her son, Benjamin, make visits to Barnes & Noble: "Because all of the stores look somewhat alike, he doesn't get the anxiety he generally experiences in new places."



SNACK Swim and Sports, page 38

Specialties listed

- **Aut:** Autism spectrum disorders
- **Blind:** All visual impairments
- **Deaf:** All hearing impairments
- **Dev:** Developmental and emotional disorders and Down syndrome
- **Phys:** Physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and paraplegia
- **All:** No child is turned away.

collages. Group and individual projects focus on process over the final product. Many other special-needs classes are also available. *Members \$280, nonmembers \$330 for a 12-week session. 5625 Arlington Ave near W 256th St, Bronx (718-548-8200, ext 230; riverdaley.org)*

Arts in Action at Little Shop of Crafts, Upper West Side

Dev/Phys; ages 5 to 12

Kids learn to communicate through drawing, painting and sculpting in this mainstream fine-arts program that happens to be very special-needs-friendly. Instructors are especially adept at catering to children with post-traumatic stress disorder and ADD/ADHD. The curriculum helps students work on skills like critical and analytical thinking, sequencing and fine motor control—although they'll be having too much fun to notice. *\$865 per semester; scholarships available. 711 Amsterdam Ave at 94th St (212-864-4883, artsinactionvap.org)*

Art

Riverdale Y, Bronx
Aut/Blind/Dev/Phys; ages 4 to 8

Led by a certified art therapist, these Sunday classes build self-esteem, memory and language skills, while also stimulating tactile senses (at home you probably call this part "making a mess"). Youngsters enjoy painting, drawing and making fridge-worthy

Baseball

Challenger Baseball with Downtown Little League, Financial District
Aut/Dev/Phys; ages 5 to 13

Taking her nine-year-old typical son, Sam, to baseball games was starting to wear on Heather Damon: She wound up spending the whole time trying to drag Eric, her six-year-old who has a PDD-NOS diagnosis, off the field. "He wanted so badly to participate but he didn't know how." The Park Slope mom was thrilled to find out about this program, which takes over Downtown Little League's field at Warren and West Streets every Saturday from 10am to noon. Each child is paired with a college-student volunteer, who helps teach the youngsters how to bat and run the bases. *Free. E-mail PlayNewYork@gmail.com for information on the spring 2009 season.*

Dance

Dancing Dreams, Queens
Blind/Deaf/Phys; ages 3 and up

Many of the students here attend mainstream schools and are dying for a chance to do what their classmates (and their sisters and friends) are doing in their after-school dance classes. Joann Ferrara, a physical therapist who has a background in dance, brings in high-schooler volunteers so that little ones who need it can get one-on-one attention. The major highlight for kids like nine-year-old Veronica Siaba, who has cerebral palsy and can't walk and can't stand up without support, is the annual spring recital. "She gets so excited about the glitter and the tiara and the tutu," says her mom, Maria Siaba of College Point, Queens. "She has

me xerox the flyers, and she hands them to everyone she knows—her principal, the kids in her class, her therapists." Veronica's fellow-dancers must have similar PR strategies: Last year's performance drew more than 500 people. *No established fee; families pay what they wish. Call Joann Ferrara for new location in Bayside (718-428-2600, dancingdreams.org).*

Gymnastics

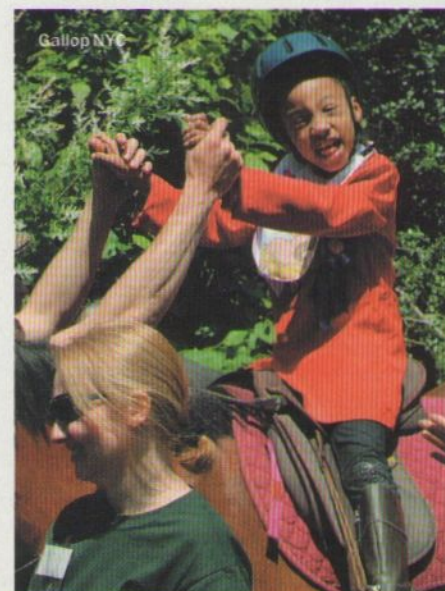
Power Play, Brooklyn
Aut/Dev; ages 9 mos. and up

My son loves running around like a maniac and scaling the monkey bars at the playground, so you'd think gym class would suit him just right. The thing is, he also needs a lot of structure and an environment that's not too distracting. Power Play is a great fit for him. Two instructors accustom their charges (no more than five at a time) to tumbling in a midsized, mat-filled room and gradually bring them into the main gym, where they can go nuts jumping on the trampoline or hiding under a parachute. *\$560 for a 14-week semester. 432 Third Ave between 7th and 8th Sts, Park Slope (718-369-9880)*

Horseback riding

Gallop NYC, Brooklyn
Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; ages 2 and up

This program serves a wide range of children, including those with cerebral palsy and amputees. "For kids with physical issues, riding is therapeutic because it replicates walking, building core strength and balance, and easing and strengthening limbs," says



Alicia Kershaw, who runs Gallop NYC. In addition to the lessons, Gallop provides hippotherapy—physical therapy on a horse. People with tense limbs see noticeable relaxation; directing a horse to go, turn and stop develops coordination and a sequencing of actions, which is helpful for people with processing disorders. *\$800 for a ten-week session; subsidies and discounts available. Kensington Stables, 51 Caton Pl at E 8th St (southwest corner of Prospect Park) (646-413-0469, gallopnyc.org)*

New York Therapeutic Riding Center, Midtown West
Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; ages 5 and up

At this Saturday program, the instructor teaches three kids at a time, with up to three volunteers per child (one leads the horse, and the others monitor either side). The owners of the center also keep Shetland ponies and a goat, which are popular among little guys. *\$450 for nine weeks; scholarships and discounts available. Chateau Stables, 608 W 48th St between Eleventh and Twelfth Aves (212-535-3917)*

Seaside Therapeutic Riding at Jamaica Bay, Brooklyn
All; all ages

Leery of popping your unpredictable kid on a 1,000-pound animal? You've never met Babalouie. "He's the most bomb-proof horse in the world," says Daniel Cutler, Seaside's director, of the program's senior horse. "Nothing will scare, excite or aggravate him." The other three horses are equally special-needs-friendly. Not only can the animals deal with tantrums and seizures, but they're also fine around crutches and wheelchairs. In the two years since she started riding, Sophia Morris, a four-year-old with Down syndrome, has learned to trot and steer. "She rides around the ring waving to everybody," says Sophia's Brooklyn Heights mom, Debbie. "It's done great things for her strength and stability—it's really complemented all of her other therapies." *No set charge, but donations are welcome. 7000 Shore Pkwy, Mill Basin (718-531-8949, seasideriding.com)*

Martial arts

East Side Tae Kwon Do, Upper East Side
Aut/Dev; ages 3 and up

This place doesn't simply serve kids with special needs: Up to half the participants have some type of diagnosis, most often cognitive impairments such as autism and ADHD. You won't find mirrors in the studio—they're too distracting for those with ADD and ADHD—but you will see clearly-designated spot markers, a must for kids with boundary issues. If your child isn't quite ready for the group



Super Soccer Stars, page 36; below, SNACKivities, page 38



thing, she can start out with private or semiprivate lessons. *Registration fee \$100; group lessons: ages 3–4 \$775 for four months; 5 and up \$1,194 for six months. 325 E 65th St between First and Second Aves (212-755-5982, eastsidetaekwondo.com)*

FirefliesNY, Brooklyn
Aut; ages 3 to 15

Lisa Chin, who runs this studio on one floor of her duplex apartment, isn't just a martial arts expert—she's also a special educator who works with autistic kids. Besides gaining balance, flexibility, muscle tone and focus, her students are exposed to some pretty amazing peer models: the typically developing middle-schoolers who volunteer to help little ones master their side and roundhouse kicks. *Intake evaluation \$100; \$80 per session, or \$695 for ten weeks. Call or e-mail for location in Windsor Terrace (718-355-9480, Lisa@FirefliesNY.com, firefliesny.com)*

Karate at the JCC, Upper West Side
Aut/Dev; ages 6 to 13

Children build strength and self-confidence in this special-needs class staffed with extra assistants. Some kids may be integrated into mainstream sessions. *\$460 for members; \$610 for nonmembers for 17 Friday sessions; financial aid available. 334 Amsterdam Ave at 76th St (646-505-4444, jccmanhattan.org)*

Say what?

Parents of children with special needs are often confronted by sympathetic friends and curious strangers who have a knack for saying the wrong thing. Here, parents vent about the most common offenses.

● "My least favorite remark is when people who meet a child with a special need that's not instantly apparent say, 'Are you sure? He looks fine to me.'"

—Sarah Birnbaum, Upper West Side

● "It bothers me when people say, 'You should just accept what she has.' As if to say, 'You don't need to worry or try to make it better.'"

—Marie Wright, Upper West Side

● "I do not need any more e-mails about brilliant new breakthrough cures for autism! I even have to remind my mother. I read *Scientific American*—I know what's out there."

—John Ordovery, Bay Ridge, Brooklyn

● "The looks bothered me more than anything else. Often, when I had a hard time redirecting my son or getting him off the floor, people stood there with their chins hitting the ground. It's like they wanted to say, 'Why can't you control your child?'"

—Margot Weinstock, Upper East Side



Music therapy at Nordoff-Robbins; inset: Brooklyn-Queens Conservatory



Music

Brooklyn-Queens Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn

Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; ages 18 mos. and up

Think your kid might have a knack for piano, voice or guitar? Children of all ages and disabilities come here for therapeutic lessons and music therapy, which is offered individually and in groups. Charlotte Burke, a 14-year-old from Park Slope who has expressive language and mental coordination disorders, has been coming to the conservatory for four years. "Last year was her first time participating in the annual talent show, but she was too nervous to go up," says Melinda Burke, Charlotte's mom. "This year, Kate, her therapist from the conservatory, worked with her on it, and she actually got up and sang a solo!" *\$415 for a 15-week group session; \$665–\$1,395 for a 17-week duo or one-on-one session; limited financial aid available. 58 Seventh Ave between Lincoln and St. Johns Pls, Park Slope (718-622-3300, bqcm.org)*

Lighthouse International Music School, Midtown East

Blind; ages 5 to 17

Visually impaired children who are enrolled in this Saturday program spend the day in music classes like chorus and percussion. In the cool technology course, students use a computer to do sequencing, composition and arrangements. Those learning to play a particular instrument get private lessons from professional musicians. "The Lighthouse is a real music school where kids truly learn music," says Anthony Riala of Staten Island. His ten-year-old daughter, Julianna, who was born blind, is

learning to play the piano, among other things. "Julianna is actually learning to play on the same level a typical kid would," he adds, "as opposed to being in a music therapy class." *\$314 for 16 weeks of one-on-one lessons. 111 E 59th St between Lexington and Park Aves (212-821-9200, lighthouse.org)*

Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy, Greenwich Village

Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; all ages

Couldn't get your tune-loving tot to sit through a Music Together class? Music therapy might be a better option. The one-on-one and group sessions here are mostly improvisational. Youngsters jam on an array of instruments, many of which require little training (think maracas and bongos). *\$80 for an individual session; \$50 for a group session; discounts available. New York University, 82 Washington Sq East at Washington Pl (212-998-5151, steinhardt.nyu.edu/music/nordoff)*

Soccer

Super Soccer Stars, various locations

Aut/Dev; ages 2 to 14

This program matches every two kids with an instructor, who assists the little ones in shaping up their soccer skills. "Before Super Soccer Stars, Taylor never really had an opportunity to learn what to do with a ball," says Debbie Stevenson of her 12-year-old son, who has fragile X syndrome. "In other programs, with typical kids—who have a tendency to kick the ball too hard—it's just too intimidating." *Prices vary by location.*

Locations include SSS headquarters (606 Columbus Ave at 89th St); the JCC (334 Amsterdam Ave at 76th St) and the Riverdale Y (5625 Arlington Ave near 256th St, Bronx). (212-877-7171, supersoccerstars.com)

Swimming

Asphalt Green, Upper East Side

Aut/Dev/Phys; ages 4 to 12

Children of all ability levels can learn to swim here in group lessons or one-on-one. The 50-meter pool is equipped with two hydraulic-lift chairs, and the warm-water pool has an adjustable floor that makes it easy to lower kids with paraplegia or cerebral palsy into the water. John Ordover of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, was amazed by what his six-year-old, who has autism, learned. "We go up to a lake on weekends, and now Arren actually swims. We pop one of those inner tubes around his waist and he takes off!" says Ordover. "At first the notion of floating free terrified him, but the instructors got him over that. They're used to dealing with kids who are scared." *\$406 for 14 beginner group sessions; one-on-one lessons \$60 each. 555 E 90th St between York and East End Aves (212-369-8890, asphaltgreen.org)*

JCC, Upper West Side

Aut/Dev; ages 5 to 12

This Monday drop-off class takes children with various cognitive impairments. (At the JCC, children with physical disabilities tend to be integrated into mainstream classes.) Tykes are divided into small groups with swimmers of similar ability. "The low ratio of kids to teachers meant that my daughter was getting very close supervision. The instructor was able to really get to know her, and her strengths and weaknesses," says Sarah Birnbaum, whose daughter has a PDD-NOS diagnosis. *\$380 for members, \$550 for nonmembers for a 10-week session. 334 Amsterdam Ave at 76th St (646-505-4444, jccmanhattan.org)*

Rainbow Fish at Camp Olympia, Brooklyn

Aut; ages 5 to 12

Adults dive in, too, at this program for kids with autism or autism-like symptoms. "The grown-up facilitates the learning process. That way, the next time you're on vacation, you'll know what to do in the water with your child," says Tracey Jindyeh, a special educator and aquatics enthusiast who helped create the program. *\$110 for an eight-week session. John Jay High School, 237 Seventh Ave at 5th St, Park Slope (718-748-7084, campolympian.com)*



Lisa Chin with a student at FirefliesNY, page 34; right: the Nesher Program at the 92nd St

specialists help the little players use big paddles to hit balloons hanging from the ceiling or lob balls over the net with rackets (kids are grouped according to ability). "The therapists are essential," says Michelle Muller, a Kensington mom whose son Harrison, 9, has severe low muscle tone that makes it difficult for him to use his hands. "Having people who are experts in the area of movement and muscle tone really helps facilitate participation. They're

and "sibfun" classes, where brothers and sisters of children with disabilities meet other kids whose siblings have similar needs. "When I found out Zachary had special needs, my life descended into a social abyss," says Margot Weinstock, an Upper East Side mom. "Going to the JCC meant I was able to develop a network of friends with special-needs kids." *Prices vary per class. 334 Amsterdam Ave at 76th St (646-505-4444, jccmanhattan.org)*

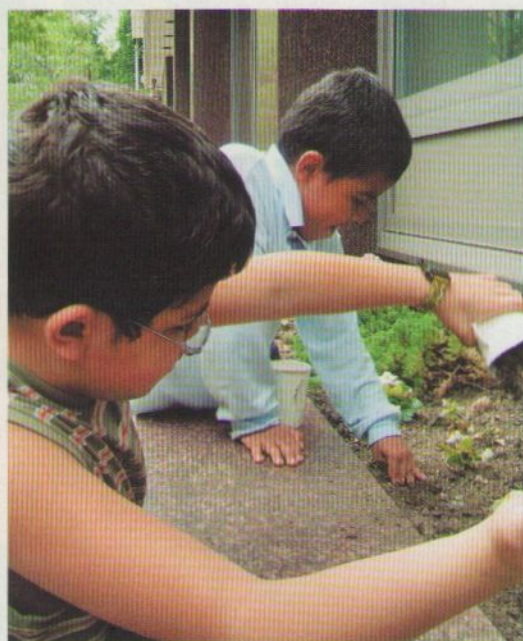
Nesher Program at the 92nd Street Y, Upper East Side
Dev; ages 4 to 21

For the past 20 years, this after-school and Saturday program has been a haven for developmentally disabled people. Participants spend one to five days a week

here engaging in fun stuff like music, dance, art, board games, sports, cooking and swimming. Pick-up time is usually 5pm, but children can stay until 5:45 by prior arrangement. *Sliding-scale fee. 1395 Lexington Ave at 92nd St (212-415-5626 or e-mail mmandel@92Y.org; 92y.org)*

Rhineland Saturday Program, Upper East Side
Deaf; ages 5 to 12

This twice-monthly program for the deaf and hearing impaired offers art, dance and cooking classes; field trips to places like a bowling alley; sign-interpreted theatrical performances; and more. The entire staff is proficient in American Sign Language and many are also fluent in Spanish. *Free. 350 E 88th St between First and Second Aves (212-876-0500, rhinelandcenter.org)*



able to anticipate potential problems." Coming soon: a wheelchair-specific class. *\$72 for six classes. Prospect Park Tennis Center, 50 Parkside Ave between Parade and St. Paul Pls, Park Slope (718-436-2500)*

After-school/ weekend programs

Kulam at the JCC, Upper West Side
Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; ages 2 to 16

This program, which runs Sundays from 10am to 2pm, offers a ton of different classes: music therapy, social skills, sports, puppetry and more. The real draw, though, is that there's something here for everyone—parent workshops and seminars; family sessions;

SNACKivities, Upper East Side
All; ages 3 to 15

When she couldn't find appropriate activities for her seven-year-old son, who is on the autism spectrum, New York mom Jackie Ceonzo created her own program, the Special Needs Activity Center for Kids. Eight years later, SNACK is going strong, helping and entertaining youngsters (most of whom have autism, although the center is open to everyone). During SNACKivities, on Thursday and Friday afternoons and weekends, participants spend two hours choosing between music, yoga and movement, drama, games, art and snacks (the food kind). The sessions are drop-off, although parents are welcome to stay. Nervous about leaving your kid? The two-to-one student-teacher ratio might help put you at ease. *\$100 per two-hour class. Classes held at Go Fish, 220 E 86th St between Second and Third Aves (212-439-9996, snacknyc.com)* ■

SNACK Swim and Sports, Midtown East
All; ages 3 to 13

Children taking one-on-one swimming lessons through SNACK—the Special Needs Activity Center for Kids—get the run of the entire heated pool at St. Bart's Church every Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon and Sunday morning. (Parents and siblings can take a dip, too, on Sundays during family swim.) Tots with all disabilities are welcome; most of the children who attend are on the autistic spectrum. "We have kids who don't want to put their feet in the water, and by the end they're swimming," says Mary Jane Pulzello, director of operations at SNACK. *\$55 for a 30-minute private swim lesson, \$35 for the 45-minute family swim. St. Bartholomew's Church, 109 E 50th St between Park and Lexington Aves (212-439-9996, snacknyc.com)*

Tennis

Special Aces Tennis, Brooklyn
Aut/Blind/Deaf/Dev/Phys; ages 6 to 16

Many of the volunteers here aren't just your run-of-the-mill do-gooders—they're physical and occupational therapists. These