

Children with Autism find Camaraderie in a Cinema

For her 13th birthday, Mary Gwen Baker did what millions of other kids did over the weekend: She went to the movies to watch Miley Cyrus sing and dance as Hannah Montana. The lights were turned up. The volume turned down. And no one complained if audience members walked around, shouted or made repeated bathroom runs.

Arriving with their parents, Peter Rosch and Julia Richards also attended the Saturday morning matinee at AMC Framingham 16, which was screened in ways to suit their special needs.

They all came to see one of the growing numbers of “sensory friendly films” AMC Entertainment is showing so children and adults with autism and other disabilities can enjoy popular movies.

Barbara Baker said her daughter, who is autistic, plays with Hannah Montana dolls, wears Miley Cyrus T-shirts and “loves going to the movies.”

“It’s really a fun thing for her. It doesn’t matter what the movie is,” said the Dover resident. “It’s so nice to go to a theater and feel like a normal person. It makes her feel great.”

The Flutie Pass multiplex is one of 67 AMC theaters in 32 markets now showing “sensory-friendly films” at convenient times and discount prices, said community relations manager Cindy Huffstickler.

AMC has been screening films for autistic viewers since 2007 after a mother complained she’d been asked to leave a Maryland theater run by another chain when her autistic child became disruptive.

Working with specialists from the Autistic Society of America, Kansas-based AMC began showing movies with the lights up and volume down for viewers made uncomfortable by the dark or by loud noises. “Now it’s a national program for us,” said Huffstickler.

Starting late last year, the AMC complex on Flutie Pass has offered Saturday morning screenings at matinee prices at roughly monthly intervals. Since January, they’ve screened “Hotel for Dogs,” “Return to Witch Mountain” and “Monsters vs. Aliens.”

Carin Yavorcik, spokeswoman for the 200,000 member Autism Society of America, described autism as a “complex neurological developmental disability” that dramatically limits the ability to communicate and interact.

“For a lot of families, autism can be very isolating. There’s not a lot of social events they can go do,” she said. “Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects people differently. Many autistic people are non-verbal. In a theater, loud noises or flashing lights can act as a trigger (for anxiety outbursts). An autistic child might have trouble sitting still.”

Yavorcik said “sensory friendly movies” provide a low-stress environment where autistic children “can learn appropriate behaviors” without fear of ostracism.

Parents of autistic children credit AMC for providing convenient and affordable entertainment in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

For Marcy Rosch, movies let her 9-year-old son Peter enjoy himself while learning how to act in a public place.

“Peter is still learning to enjoy the movies. He sits for a while and then gets up to look at the projector,” said the Framingham resident. “A few months ago we saw ‘Hotel for Dogs’ with other autistic children. For some of them, it was their first movie.”

Parents of autistic children often refer to other children as “typical” rather than “normal” which they feel demeans their own children.

Lisa Richards has been taking her 6-year-old daughter Julia, who is a quadriplegic with cerebral palsy, to sensory-friendly movies because bright lights and high volume “that go right through you” frighten her.

“Julia's first movie was ‘Hotel for Dogs.’ She laughed her way through it,” she said.

Parents of older autistic children also agree “sensory friendly films” provide enjoyable opportunities for family fun.

Carol and Joe Kistner said taking their 29-year-old daughter Meghan, who is autistic, to the movies “worked out very nicely.”

“It helps to put Meghan in a social situation in the community where she can be comfortable and we can, too,” said Carol Kistner of Framingham. “We don’t have to worry her outbursts might bother people. Instead we can enjoy a family outing like typical people.”

While Joe Kistner said strangers often react to Meghan’s outbursts by looking away, his wife said they sometimes frown at them as if to say, “Why are you allowing her to act that way?” Richards said strangers sometimes wonder aloud why parents of disruptive autistic children “can’t make their children behave.”

“I want Julia to be able to be herself and not feel somebody’s stepping on her neck. But in the AMC theater, there’s not one person who doesn’t understand what it’s like to have a kid who’s differently-abled,” she said.

For the Saturday showing of “Hannah Montana,” she planned to bring Julia, a kindergarten student at Hemenway School in Framingham, and her 2-year-old twins, Catherine and Patricia. “I want to introduce my little kids to the movies. It’s given me an opportunity to bond with my daughters,” said Richards. “It’s easier to go as a family together than hire a babysitter. It’s not just for kids of different abilities. It’s for kids of all abilities.”