



Teaching Trades to Kids With Autism

Danny and Claire Combs' son Dylan was about three years old when they started to notice some differences in his development. Dylan's speech was delayed, and he walked on his toes. The Combs family began speech and occupational therapy to help their son, but there seemed to be something else going on. Eventually, Dylan was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

"When we first found out, we had a lot of different experiences with therapists who would work with Dylan on his gross and fine motor skills, speech, and social skills. They were wonderful, but we were looking for a different approach," Danny Combs says.

The search for a different approach led Danny and Claire to found Teaching the Autism Community Trades (TACT) in 2016. TACT's first class was a ukulele-building class, in partnership with the Stapleton Music Lab. Now, they teach a variety of skill-building classes to kids with autism, including auto mechanics, carpentry, electronics, and coding/robotics.

"When you learn a trade, you get fine motor, gross motor, and social skills while you work in a more natural environment," says Combs,

a music teacher, as well as a fourth-generation woodworker and mechanical tinkerer.

Studies show that adults with autism have the highest unemployment rate in the country, at about 80 to 90 percent. TACT hopes to change that through its career path classes. New this fall, high school students with autism can receive school credit in auto mechanics, carpentry, and computer science through TACT. Later this year, Combs plans to launch two companies—one construction and one auto mechanic—in which some students would be able to work, as they get older.

TACT offers a mobile program, too. It partners with local organizations to bring small group classes to locations in which the children are already comfortable. Classes are tailored to the needs of the group, and serve verbal and nonverbal children.

"People sometimes assume that because children are nonverbal, they are not good at anything, but they haven't been given the chance. There are so many untapped skills," says Becky Mershon, TACT's director of student services. "You don't need to be verbal to be successful."

Summer 2017 was TACT's first season offering a full lineup of camps, all with a maximum of six students per class.

TACT Kids, Inc.

720-460-0897

tactkids.org



TOP: Children with autism can learn trade skills from TACT's mobile classes, offered in partnership with a variety of organizations and groups. **ABOVE:** TACT offers skill-building classes for a wide range of children with autism spectrum disorder, at their workshop in the River North (RiNo) District.

HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP

- Donate lumber, tools, car parts, computers, fiber arts, and other materials to be used in TACT's classes
- Perform maintenance tasks as needed at TACT's office and workshop
- Help with administrative tasks
- Volunteer to assist with classes for which you have expertise (adult volunteers)

"One really amazing thing (with summer camp) was when one of our students walked away with an electric guitar that he built himself," says Mershon. "Working here has reaffirmed how bright and talented these students are, and that they can do amazing things."

—Lydia Rueger

SUBMISSIONS

Do you have local parenting news, a story idea, or shout out? Share it with us at edit@coloradoparent.com.

Summertime Tea in the Gardens Aug. 5 and 26, 10-11:30am. Attend a morning of tea tasting and education by Denver Botanic Gardens and Denver Tea Room in the serene Woodland Mosaic Gardens in the brand new glass enclosed Solarium. \$42 nonmember, \$38 member. *Denver Botanic Gardens. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

Miniature Garden Family Workshop: Summertime Fairies 10am-noon and 2-4pm. Create a container garden to take home. Discover the beauty, diversity, and importance of plants. Classes are designed for families with children ages 5-10. \$10-\$17. *Denver Botanic Gardens. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

Tree Climbing Adventure 10am-1pm. Safely climb trees while discovering their importance in nature. Tree climbing locations vary. Register online. Ages 8-12. Class is limited to 12 spaces. \$15. *Standley Lake Regional Park, 9785 Eagle View Loop, Westminster. 303-425-1097. prl-web.ci.westminster.co.us*

FREE Majestic View Nature Center 15th Birthday Bash 10am-2pm. Celebrate with a Slackline performance and live music from kids' musicians, Jeff and Paige. *Majestic View Nature Center. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

Wild West Kids 10am-2pm. Saddle up for games, stories, and a horse-drawn wagon ride. \$5 nonmembers ages 3 and up, free for members. *Four Mile Historic Park. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

FREE Denver International Festival 10am-8pm. Celebrate Coloradans from different cultures and countries at this family-friendly event. There will be music, food, art, and kids' activities. *Civic Center Park, 101 W. 14th Ave., Denver. internationalfest.org*

FREE Denver Urban Spectrum's Family Reunion 10am-8pm. Celebrate the organization's work with a festival dedicated to family fun. Ten multi-generational families making an impact in the community

will be recognized. Activities include live music and a classic car show. *Great Lawn Park in Lowry, 101 Yosemite St., Denver. familyreunionfestival.com*

CelebrARTE and Cuentos del Arte at Free First Saturday 11:30am and 1pm. Celebrate creativity and cultura with bilingual activities for toda la familia. Listen to cuentistas tell the tales of artworks during a storytelling program, Cuentos del Arte. *Denver Art Museum. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

Hairspray Jr. Noon and 4pm. Attend a family-friendly musical adapted from the Broadway production that won eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical. Age 7 and up. \$15 adults, \$12 children. *Su Teatro Cultural Arts Center, 721 Santa Fe Dr., Denver. 303-245-8150. theaterforkids.net/boulder_summer_camp*

Asleep at the Wheel and Dale Watson 7:30pm. Listen to the Grammy award winning country music band. \$29 and \$49. *Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, 6901 Wadsworth Blvd., Arvada. 720-898-7200. arvadacenter.org*

6 SUNDAY Stumpy's Stampede 5K/10K Trail Run 9:30am-1pm. Support the JCC Ranch Camp Camper Fund and participate in a 5K or 10K trail run. The race includes the Mac-A-Dash Kids obstacle course and fun run, post-race snacks, and entertainment. \$5-\$35. *JCC Ranch Camp, 21441 N. Elbert Rd., Elbert. 303-316-2660. jccdenver.org/event/stumpys-stampede*

Mallets for Melanoma by Mike Ward Maserati 10am-1pm. Enjoy a day of polo and live entertainment to benefit the Colorado Melanoma Foundation. \$30, free age 12 and under. *The Denver Polo Club, 6354 Airport Rd., Sedalia. comelanoma.org/tickets*

Special Families

FREE ASL Storytime 6:30-7pm. First Wed of each month. Visit the Children's Area for an American Sign Language (ASL) storytime designed for all ages. Age 4 and under must have adult present. *Belmar Public Library, 555 S. Allison Pkwy., Lakewood. 303-403-5362. jeffcolibrary.org*

Autism Pizza Night First Tue of every month at Arvada location, 5:30-7:30pm. Join the Autism Society of Colorado and Beau Jo's pizza for a monthly Autism Pizza Night. Kids eat free, and participants receive 10 percent off their meal. *720-214-0794 ext. 15. autismcolorado.org*

Low Sensory Morning at the DAM Aug. 19, 8:30-10am. Visit the museum with a less sensory-stimulating environment. Loud gallery sounds are turned down and attendance is limited. There are tours of the museums, numerous hands-on activities, and artmaking projects for individuals and families to enjoy. Included in general admission, but space is limited. Reservations will open a month before the event. Contact access@denverartmuseum.org or 720-913-0074 with any questions or for ticketing assistance. *Denver Art Museum. See Where the Kids Are, page 56.*

Sensory Friendly Films Aug. 8: *The Emoji Movie*. Watch films in a comfortable environment suitable for children with disabilities. Theater lights will be brought up and sound turned down, families may bring in their own snacks and move around during the film. \$4-\$6. *Select AMC locations. amctheatres.com/programs/sensory-friendly-films*

FREE Sensory Friendly Storytime Sun, 2:30-3:30pm. Join specially-designed storytimes tailored to meet the needs of youth on the autism spectrum, those with sensory integration challenges, or children who have difficulty sitting. Location rotates by week. *Various Boulder Public Library locations. 303-441-3100. boulderlibrary.org*

TACT Workshops Monthly. Attend classes that teach a variety of trade skills to individuals on the autism spectrum. Visit the website for upcoming classes. tactkids.org



Children with autism can learn trade skills through TACT's monthly workshops.