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Challengers a new social group for adults with special needs

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Melanie Drew wraps her arms around Taylor Billings, a touching embrace between two friends.

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The two women had just finished playing bingo with their friends and enjoyed several other activities, all part of the Cooper City Challengers, a new social group for local adults with special needs.

"I love it!" said Billings, 22, who has cerebral palsy. "I get to see my friend Melanie."

After their children aged out of the programs offered by [Broward County](#) Public Schools, Sheri Billings and Karen Knapp decided to form a group where their children could socialize and have fun.

Thanks to a partnership with Cooper City Parks and Recreation, the group meets bi-weekly at the Pool & Tennis Center to play games, celebrate birthdays and dance.

"We really wanted to get all of our kids out interacting with their peers and in the world," Sheri Billings said.

Starting with eight people in June, the group has reached 25 participants during social nights, which resembles a middle school dance with games like freeze dance and prizes.

Michael Mincev, 33, is the newest member of the group.

"I'm here to socialize and play games," he said.

Knapp, whose son Jimmy attended exceptional student education classes at Cooper City High School with Billings' daughter, said group members look forward to their nights together.

"When my son aged out, my concern for him was socialization because he's autistic," she said. "It's nice to see him sitting with the guys, looking like a typical 20-something. When he's with them, he's happy."

Participation in the group prompted Jimmy to ask to invite his friends to his 23rd birthday party this month — a first for him.

Special Olympics bowler Amanda Blumenthal, 25, is looking forward to the group using the city's new interactive video game system to play sports.

"It gets me out of the house and helps me make friends," she said of the group.

Cooper City Challengers has no age limit, and people of all abilities are welcome to attend.

"We have various exceptionalities, from autism to ADHD to Down syndrome to cerebral palsy," Billings said. "It's pretty much all the spectrums."

The only rule is they must be accompanied by a parent or other chaperon.

"We want the parents to show up and interact with us," Knapp said.

The group meets from 7-9 p.m. the first and third Fridays of every month at the Pool & Tennis Center, 11600 Stonebridge Parkway. The next event is a pirate-themed dance on Sept. 19.

For more information, visit Coopercitychallengers.com.

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