

# Students play at Critter Camp

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SAN BERNARDINO - When he's wearing his blue jacket, Abe is all business.

He sits quietly, so still he looks like he's asleep. No sniffing, no whining, no tail-wagging.

But take off his jacket - more like a cape, really - and Abe lets loose, licking faces, wagging his entire body and climbing over and between the children who have gathered for a chance to pet him.

"He changed, like he was happy to be playing with all of us," said 7-year-old Quiana Joe, one of about 25 children gathered Monday at the Humane Society of San Bernardino Valley for the society's week-long Critter Camp program for third-graders.

Abe, a chocolate labrador who is training to become a guide dog, was the highlight of the first day.

"When his jacket is on, he's working," said Abe's trainer, Linda Vieira, a volunteer "puppy raiser" for Guide Dogs of the Desert. "When his jacket is off, he knows it's time to play."

Vieira told campers about raising and training guide dogs. She said she takes Abe with her everywhere she goes, including Disneyland, where Abe rode the "Pirates of the Caribbean" with her.

"We're training them to be in crowds and not get distracted," Vieira said. She also gave campers an idea of what it might be like to need a guide dog.

She had campers blindfold themselves, then try to walk through a gauntlet of folding chairs. They navigated the chairs again with the help of a non-blindfolded friend.

The goal of the exercise was not only to illustrate the importance of guide dogs for the blind but also to get campers to think about kindness and about helping others, said Lynn Hildebrand, a Humane Society educator who runs the Critter Camp program.

"It's building empathy understanding, compassion and sensitivity," Hildebrand said. "We have one rule here - to be kind. That's kind to one another and kind to animals."