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Abstract

This article describes an After School Programme which includes children who have disabilities. Parent commitment to the programme has been high and the programme has provided opportunities for children to mix with others who have disabilities and to gradually accept these differences as part of being human.

Keyword: Child Care

PLAY-GROUNDS FOR ACCEPTANCE

MARGARET VALCICH

This author is working in a recreation/care programme which is striving to provide a model which exposes children to others less able than themselves. She believes that this is necessary if we are to create a more integrated society in the future.

I am employed by the Shire of Sherbrooke as a Special Needs Worker at Coonara community house in the Out of School Hours Programmes (OSHP). After School and School Holiday Programmes have been an integral part of the house's activities for a number of years; they provide care and recreational opportunities for primary school-aged children after school hours and for two weeks of each school holiday.

The After School Programme is funded for up to thirty children and currently, between fifteen and twenty children attend between the hours of 3.30pm and 6.00pm. The School Holiday Programme caters for up to forty-five children and although possibly small by metropolitan standards, it is the largest programme run within the Shire of Sherbrooke.

Coonara's programme is the only programme within the Shire to have a permanent, part-time worker employed to integrate children with special needs. The seven children currently attending Coonara's programmes have an intellectual, physical or sensory disability.

Four of the seven OSHP's run within the Shire are based at community houses. Coonara is an ideal setting for a recreational programme of this nature with its large grounds, big old trees and outdoor play equipment surrounded by a high and secure boundary fence. The programme utilises a large multi-purpose room and a smaller room with tables and chairs for 'quieter' activities.

SETTING UP THE PROGRAMME

For many years, one particular School Holiday Programme within the Shire of Sherbrooke has actively encouraged the attendance of children with special needs. When funding became available, Shire officers applied for funding to employ a special needs worker to enable children to be integrated into the out of school hours programmes operating within community houses. The position of this 'supplementary services' worker is funded by the Federal government and administered by the Shire.

The position is funded for sixteen hours each week. Initially, the position was shared

between a number of community houses within the Shire, and the worker spent time in each programme each week. This arrangement proved to be unsatisfactory and the worker resigned after one year; difficulties stemmed from the absence of a formal support structure, the need for the worker to adapt to constant changes in their working environment and the worker's own lack of a sense of 'belonging' to any one project. As a result, and before I was appointed in 1987, community house and Shire representatives decided that the next worker should be based at one community house. Coonara was chosen as being the most accessible. It was also decided that there should be more formal support from the Children's Services Worker at the Shire. Another worker who was employed by Yooralla and also based at the Shire, assumed responsibility for contacting all families with school-aged children with special needs who were receiving specific home-help. Those families who expressed an interest in their children attending the OSHP, were interviewed to ascertain their child's special needs and what they hoped to gain from the programme.

Parents who were interviewed, saw the programme as providing opportunities for the socialisation of their child. Their major concern was that the programme should provide adequate supervision and a safe environment. During the first year, quarterly reviews were conducted with parents to gain feedback on how they and their children felt about the programme.

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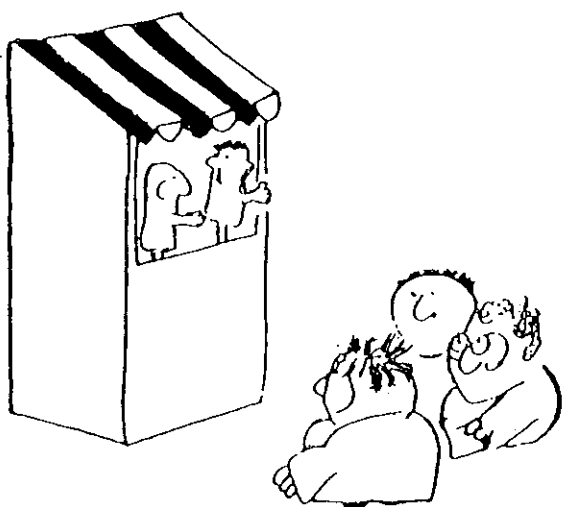
The sixteen funded hours enables me to work four afternoons per week in the After School Programme and part-time during the School Holiday Programmes. The community house has also undertaken to pay additional hours where necessary, to allow children with special needs to attend the full day programme. In some instances, the house has employed an additional worker to ensure adequate supervision on excursion days and/or when more than two special needs children requiring additional supervision are in attendance at the one time.

PARTICIPANTS

Over the past three years eleven children with special needs have attended the programme. Of these, only four had previously attended an integrated out of school hours programme and all attended Special Schools. One of these children is now fully integrated into his local primary school. Of the seven children who currently attend the programme, two are students at their local primary school for one day each week.

Most of the children attending Coonara's programmes have poor verbal skills, many require toileting assistance and a couple have suffered from epilepsy. As is to be expected, behavioural problems are associated with some disabilities.

Half of the participants in the programme



come from sole parent families, and though some of these families regularly use respite care or home-help, the extra support which the programme provides is extremely important to them. Parent commitment is high and in the early days most ferried their children to and from the programme; some children now come by school bus, thus saving their parents an extra trip.

"The primary concern for most parents is that the programme be enjoyable and safe for their child."

Coonara's programme has provided many children with their first opportunity to attend a regular community-based recreation programme. The primary concern for most parents is that the programme be enjoyable and safe for their child. No more than three children requiring additional supervision can attend the programme at any one time; parents have been most co-operative in those instances where enrolments have outnumbered programme vacancies, and it has not been possible to meet all requests. They have also supported my desire to progress cautiously with their children to avoid damaging experiences.

Most children begin by attending half-day sessions. As they become more familiar with the programme, this sessional time is extended.

MY ROLE

My ongoing presence at the house has enabled me to establish good and close relationships with all of the participants. This, I believe, is essential to the overall success of the integration process as I find that able-bodied children model their behaviour on my own. Integration also breaks down other barriers. It provides opportunities for children to mix with others who are 'different' and to gradually accept these differences as part of being human.

I see my role in terms of guiding the group to an understanding of children with special needs. In accepting these children, I share my values with other staff members and children and hopefully promote an understanding which leads to co-operative and beneficial relationships for all involved.

A child's disability or frustration with their disability sometimes causes them to act in inappropriate ways. Such behaviour often sets the child apart from his/her peer group and so where possible, it is discouraged. However some behaviours need to be accepted for what they are - an integral part of the child's individual make-up.

WORKER SUPPORT

I initially maintained weekly contact with the Shire's Children's Services worker, who proved to be an excellent resource person. Though she is currently on maternity leave. Sherbrooke Council continues to provide support on a regular basis. The worker from Yooralla was also very supportive in acting as a resource person until funding for her position was withdrawn over a year ago.

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Working in the programme has also brought me into contact with the local OSHP's Network which holds monthly meetings. The meetings have provided me with an excellent opportunity to present positive images of integration to other community-based childcare workers, many of whom lack experience of children with special needs. Regular, regional inservice training opportunities also provide valuable information and cover topics such as: managing children's behaviour; integration of special needs children; assertiveness skills; communication and teamwork; child development; indicators of child abuse;

disability awareness; understanding children's behaviour; art and craft activities and 'Life Be In It' games.

Excellent co-operation on the part of the OSHP co-ordinator at Coonara, and her willingness to try new ideas, have made my relationship with her a very positive one. For example, the co-ordinator recognises the importance of providing a mix of programme activities which will allow special needs children to successfully participate. A programme which only offered craft activities for instance, would not be suitable for many of our special needs children, as many have difficulty in coping with attention to detail.

During the summer months, outings to the local pool and park prove to be popular with all children in the programmes. Cinema excursions on the other hand, are less appropriate for children with poor concentration skills. A child, with severe physical disability, can enjoy a games session or a puppet or

drama show, while a child with severe sensory disability could also gain enjoyment from a games session and would be able to participate in a cooking or cubby-making session. It needs to be remembered that a number of intellectually disabled children are operating at a pre-school level in many areas of their development and are unable or disinterested in constructively participating in activities such as craft or team games.

ENROLMENT PROCEDURES

Tentative enrolments for special needs children in the school holiday programme are taken in advance, pending availability of a place. Although this could be seen as discriminatory, it ensures that adequate supervision is maintained, and that staff are not over-extended in this area. Preference is given to families living within the Shire, but as the house is on the Knox-Sherbrooke boundary, children are also accepted from the City of



Knox. The Programme Co-ordinator and the Special Needs worker meet to discuss enrolment applications and how they can best be met. Issues taken into consideration include: family needs; the capabilities and needs of the child; the suitability of particular activities for the child; the ratio of children with special needs to their able-bodied peers, and the programme to provide adequate supervision for that child. If socialisation is seen as the main reason for a child's attendance, parents and staff endeavour to select the most suitable activity session for the child. On the other hand, if respite or work commitments are factors prompting enrolment, we try to meet requests as fully as possible.

"Good supervision protects the child's wellbeing and allows for minimum disruption for all children attending..."

Staff also need to consider each child's energy levels and whether they would enjoy a full day of activity without becoming overtired. The programme is unable to accept a child whose needs cannot be adequately catered for.

SUPERVISION

Good supervision is an essential part of Coonara's programme. It not only provides children with a safe environment, but also facilitates their participation and hence integration into programme activities.

Depending on the child and the activity supervision can involve close physical contact, or it can simply mean that the worker remains in the same room or activity area as the child. Good supervision protects the child's wellbeing and allows for minimum disruption for all children attending the programme. Where appropriate, children with special needs are encouraged to participate in organised activities.

Decisions regarding staffing are based on the knowledge of particular children who wish to attend, and the planned activity for

that session. When a number of children require additional supervision at one time, a second worker has sometimes been employed. As staff become more familiar with children who regularly attend, supervision has become more relaxed, although it still remains a top priority.

EVALUATION

Our initial formal quarterly reviews have been scaled down, so that staff now maintain regular informal contact with parents. I am currently in the process of meeting with individual families to evaluate their child's progress and participation in the programme.

The acceptance of 'special' children by their able-bodied peers who regularly attend our programmes has a broader value. Children who are new to the programme, are able to observe interaction between regular attenders and staff and children with special needs, and on occasions are reassured about 'odd' behaviour by children who know the special needs child concerned.

Credit for the ongoing success of Coonara's programmes must go to all workers involved, for it is their teamwork and acceptance of our 'special' children which allows them to be integrated into the Out of School Hours programmes.

Having grown up with a profoundly deaf cousin, Margaret Valcich went on to train as a primary school teacher with a year in special needs education. She has worked in a variety of jobs involving people with disabilities, and with the terminally ill. For six years she was a family aide for families with socio-economic problems. Margaret has been employed as integration worker at Coonara for the past three years.