

LINK...

AUTISM - EUROPE

After "Working Time"

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Organisation of leisure times for the person with autism .

Life in a residence [supported accommodation group home – CRU] must be as similar as possible to ordinary life with time to work - even if it is not the same in terms of rent ability and wages - time to learn, daily life occupation as well as leisure time.

It is the organization of the evenings and weekends that, in general raises specific problems in the residences for adults. This difficulty comes from the lack of framework, sometimes insufficient for daily tasks -meals, shower, sleeping - and for leisure activities and on the other hand problems with autism itself. Difficulty in:

- Finding his own occupation,
- Taking initiatives
- Dealing with unpredictability and unexpected situations
- Expressing his own preferences
- Involving himself in an activity leaving his stereotypes behind.

These real difficulties must not interfere with daily home and leisure activities. "Spare" time usually represents a source of anxiety to an autistic person who is not able to initiate an activity and it may contribute to his social isolation and behaviour problems. If in our society people claims for more spare time to improve their quality of life, persons with mental handicap, especially persons with autism, generally have too much spare time to deal with and they hardly support this situation.

Structuring evening and weekend activities:-

It is indispensable to organize different and adjusted activities to reduce those spare times empty of sense and to avoid vague and non structured activities that can be the cause of so many troubles in persons with autism.

The spontaneous refusal of participation from the person with autism doesn't mean indifference. It often means fear of the unknown or lack of understanding of the activity or the signs identifying the activity or the organisation of the task.

According to the specific characteristics of the disability we need certain conditions to

implement those activities:-

- The activities must take place in a defined space-time.
- Life groups must be coherent.
- Professionals must have more training in Autism.

Like the workshops or other different activities, the evening or weekend activities must be predictable and announced in a clear form. According to the individual level of symbolization and comprehension, different supports are used to announce what is going to happen in the evening or the weekend or the different sequences of an activity or a task:

- agenda, if there is acquisition of language, bloc notes, support that can be consulted at any moment, with references of the activities or events in every page.
- Mural schema with images, pictograms or photos,
- A shelf with significative objects.

This predictability is a preventive way of behaviour problems and an essential factor to dominate the environment to let more easily invest in a more constructive activity.

It is not enough to speak even if it is necessary and indispensable as a communication tool. However it doesn't last and it is not verifiable

Whenever possible, we should introduce choice to respect at the most the motivation and personal interests. The persons who still didn't have integrated this concept must also learn to express their preferences so they can fully participate at their private life organisation.

We must encourage every way of active participation. However the teacher must look after to prevent those repeated choices to reinforce obsessions and rituals creating difficult situations to correct.

Some activities for the evenings and the week ends

The activities to propose for the evening and during week-ends are developed mainly in three areas :

1. Development of personal autonomy

Washing, dressing, putting on the shoes, brush the teeth, take a shower...all these competencies need often a visual cues system showing the order of gestures in order to acquire full autonomy. These visual cues - for instance, a dummy with separate body parts or a sequence of images to show how to take a shower- will be not used permanently; once the routines are acquired, we can sometimes simplify or even eliminate this cues and use a transitory phase of verbal and non verbal indications.

2. Participation on social life

There are valuable situations in daily life. They permit to generalise acquired competences in the workshops. Every resident must participate in domestic tasks, according to their own programme: to set things in order, to put the dishes on the table, to do the dishes, to sweep, to fold the

clothes, to water the flowers, to go shopping at the supermarket...

All these tasks, even the easiest, need previous learning, the setting of adapted visual cues and individual teaching.

3. Relaxation and leisure activities

Play games - individual or collective - gives the occasion to their favourite occupation; some like society games, demand an important capacity of abstraction, symbolisation and socialisation, other like puzzles, threading strings to make necklaces...are more accessible.

Sports occupy a privileged place. It is important to maintain the figure and the body, to develop motor control. In addition the integration in sports clubs give the opportunity to increase social relationships outside residences.

Besides developing physical capacities, certain sports develop specific competences like imitation (gymnastics), motor control (horseback riding), personal contacts (judo), efforts (climbing mountains), balance (bicycle)...

Going out to public places: libraries, cinema, theatre, exhibitions, restaurants, local parties, are pleasant experiences. Besides that they mean inclusion in the community and an occasion to improve social behaviour. Taking a drink, or going to a movie, rest in a swimming pool, pick up myrtles, to organise a dancing party...all of them are good ideas to fill the evenings.

During week-ends, the residents may go out for an afternoon, a full journey or two days: swimming parties, theatres, picnics, bicycle tours, skiing...every possibility the country can offer is explored so the activities can be different and be chosen according to the interests or competences of the group.

However, it is necessary to structure the activities, to have a determined space-time for them, to prepare individual aids (mostly visual) for each person, to teach and to transfer the acquisitions to the real places. This is the only way the persons with autism can fully profit from these occupations.

These learning situations and the generalisation of the acquisitions mean a great effort

and demand a regular sequence, a strict organisation and coordination of intervention. Only a team trained in autism and knowing well the individual characteristics of every person is able to engage in this process.

Group projects

To obtain a coherent life in group and to raise common interests, the composition of the groups can not be left to chance and certain criteria must be followed to facilitate life in community:

1 Concerning the place to live

- houses with several levels or one single level
- rooms medium size or separate
- closed kitchen or open kitchenette
- individual or collective bathrooms

2 Concerning the profile of the residents

- level of autonomy
- physical condition
- behaviour problems
- peculiar behaviours (obsessions, rituals...)
- social behaviour
- personal likes and dislikes
- sensorial peculiarities
- interests

Besides the educational individual programme, this team work about residential settings, permits to elaborate a real group project to each residence and the organisation of leisure activities adjusted to the capacities and motivation of the residents.

The group project defines, among other things:

- The objectives of autonomy to attain
- The organisation and the distribution of the daily tasks
- The equipment and the management of the places, The types of leisure activities appropriate to this group

I n d i v i d u a l i z e d A c t i v i t i e s

To give a better response to the personal interests and motivations, each resident must profit from a previous evaluation and intentional learning to acquire real competences (to take a shower, to dress himself, to cut the meat, to ride a bicycle, to cook, to communicate...) and also to behave in a social adapted way (to wait, to understand "waiting for his turn", to accept the changing, to ask for help, to share, to respect others...).

Learning is fundamental because spontaneous acquisitions are rare and the person with autism in general doesn't know how to do what she has previously learnt. This kind of work will permit the individualisation of the activities and their adaptation to the performances and difficulties of each person and of each group.

The systematic development of personal autonomy and social competences is indispensable; on one hand the new competencies increase the independency, a better social insertion and a personal value; on another hand they free the trainer from certain everyday tasks (shower, for instance) and leave more free time for rest and leisure activities.

Aware of the difficulty to encourage evenings and week-ends and with the objective to reduce behaviour problems that usually take place in these not structured times, l'Abri Montagnard got involved in 1994 and 1995 in two research projects of the Toulouse University, Department of Prof. Bernadette Roge (Development of leisure capacities in the adult with autism, Choice of leisure activities). This research contributed to a better understanding of the specific difficulties of persons with autism during leisure times, to the identification of their special needs and above all adapt, structure and individualise better these activities.

Conclusion

In order that the evenings and weekends will not become "dead" times but on the contrary become rich moments, in order that everyone could participate in everyday life and find interest in leisure and relaxation, it is necessary to structure the environment with visual spatial temporal cues and assure a daily guidance adapted to the way of thinking and living of persons with autism.

Only a structured environment permits to open a way to communication and learning. The interiorisation of schema, rules and the clarification of contexts are fundamental conditions to access to participation and action.

Thanks to this structured frame, we can help these adults to live the most harmoniously possible every moment of the day:

- Fostering their participation
- Fostering their autonomy and their sociability
- Facilitating the access to a greater diversity of human relationship

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