

The American Friends of the Association for the Advancement of Community Centers in Israel

Programs for Children and Youth with Special Needs

Breaking a Wall of Silence

Some ten percent of Israel's six million citizens suffer from physical, cognitive or emotional disabilities. Of the country's children and youth with disabilities, over 43,000 are enrolled in the special education system. In addition, some 160,000 children with disabilities study in mainstream frameworks but still need special equipment, attention or physical accommodation. In addition to the challenges posed by their disabilities, these children are faced with formidable barriers to their ability to enjoy the services and resources available to the general public. Compared to other Western-oriented countries, Israel has invested relatively little in integrating people with special needs into national and community life; for example, an incredible 95 percent of the country's public buildings are not accessible to people in wheelchairs. Israel's present security and economic crisis has only worsened this shocking state of affairs, as significantly fewer public resources are now available for improving quality of life for people with disabilities.

Moreover, until recently Israeli children with disabilities were isolated and, in effect, invisible – few outside their immediate family circles and schools were aware of their special needs or of the importance of enabling them to live their lives as fully as possible, together with the other members of their communities. While the Special Education Law (which has been only partially implemented, because the Ministry of Finance has not allocated sufficient resources) has mandated since 1995 that children with disabilities receive an education appropriate to their needs, after school children and youth with special needs would “disappear” from community life, unseen, unspoken of, and unable to take part in the after-school activities enjoyed by their peers without disabilities.

The Israel Association of Community Centers (IACC) has begun to break this wall of silence, and to empower the country's children and youth with special needs to fully participate in community life. Since 1992, the IACC has conducted a growing number of programs that serve to children and youth with special needs. This year alone, some 20,000 of children with special needs have participated in these programs. As the word has spread to other young people and their parents, demand for these activities has been growing quickly, and has already far outstripped available resources. The IACC would like to invite the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation to join it in expanding the choices available to tens of thousands more of these children.

A Revolution in the Making

Over the past ten years, the IACC has revolutionized the relationship between communities and their members with special needs. IACC programs are profoundly changing special children's image in the eyes of others, and their own self-image as well. Other institutions and organizations that serve children with disabilities – such as schools and government agencies – tend to be overprotective, often maintaining too

limited a view of what they are capable of accomplishing. The IACC, however, approaches children with special needs with the belief that, with appropriate support, they can achieve a great deal of what others their age do. By imparting this belief to the children themselves, and by creating the conditions for them to succeed, program staff dramatically raise their self-esteem and thus their willingness to try even more kinds of activities. Many special children in communities with participating IACC community centers now eagerly enroll in after-school activities year after year – it has become the normal way of spending leisure time, just as it is for other children.

IACC community centers have taken the lead in making their resources and activities accessible to all residents, whether they suffer from disabilities or not, and bringing them together for common activities. For children and youth with special needs, the centers offer a wealth of innovative and holistic programs that aim to empower these young people and enable them – often for the first time – to choose to spend their after-school hours in the same kind of activities in which other children engage. Accessible activities include social and computer clubs, artistic and cultural activities, and sports. Often, children with special needs participate in these activities together with their peers who do not suffer from disabilities. For these other participants, the programs offer an opportunity – also often for the first time – to meet and get to know youngsters in their age group whose disabilities had previously segregated them.

Goals

- To enable children and youth with special needs to access the full range of community resources and activities.
- To empower these young people by expanding the options among which they may choose for spending their leisure time.
- To provide, to the extent possible, integrated programs for children and youth with special needs and their peers who do not suffer from disabilities.

The IACC – Decades of Experience Serving the Community

Established in 1969, the IACC's mission is to empower Israel's diverse communities and improve their quality of life. Its unique democratic, holistic and flexible approach encompasses a comprehensive range of programs specially tailored to the needs of each community in which it operates. These programs are available to all Israelis, regardless of ethnic background, religion, age, gender, economic status, or location. The IACC is proud to offer the same range and level of services to Israel's peripheral areas as to the center, and to place special emphasis on serving disadvantaged populations in all sectors of the country. Its network includes over 180 community centers, with 816 branches, and more than 400 community schools throughout Israel.

The IACC's staff of 400 dedicated employees supports over 20,000 community center workers by providing seed money for new programs, professional training, guidance, and strategic and financial planning. It also assists the institutions under its umbrella in with fundraising and with program planning and implementation.

In addition to its programs for young people with special needs, the IACC and its community centers offer a wide variety of programs for people with disabilities; please see the Appendix for details.

A Flexible Approach to Programming

There are presently more than 300 IACC national and local programs for young people with disabilities. National programs are developed by IACC professional staff and open to youth with disabilities throughout the country. Local initiatives are developed by community center staff and presented to the IACC's district office for approval. Once it has approved a local program, the IACC supports it both financially and professionally. At present, the main limitation on the number of programs the IACC approves is financial: often, only a fraction of the programs proposed by a particular community center can be approved for support, even though many more programs meet the IACC's high professional standards.

Each IACC district has a special needs supervisor who serves as the contact person for all the community centers in the district. Each community center also designates one staff member (often the center's director) to maintain contact with the young people and their parents. The district supervisor, who knows each young person with special needs who is served by the IACC in the district, trains, guides and supervises community center staff in their work with the children. Each time a young person with a disability that the staff had not previously encountered seeks to participate in a program at the center, the district supervisor provides additional, specialized training and guidance.

One feature that distinguishes IACC programs for special needs children is their holistic nature. The IACC sees each young person not only as an individual, but also in the context of his or her family and community. Young people with disabilities are often dependent on their parents for so much that the parents become reluctant – or don't know how – to give them even a small degree of independence. Their fear that their child will not be capable of engaging in “normal” activities is transferred as a fear of failure to the child as well, taking a heavy toll on her or his self-confidence. Therefore, community center staff works closely with parents to help them “let go” to the extent possible – and to help their children achieve all they are capable of achieving on their own. In addition, while their children are at the community center, parents enjoy free time – a precious commodity for parents of children with special needs. This, in turn, shows parents that when their children do what they can on their own, the entire family benefits.

Most parents of children with special needs spend so much on medical, cognitive and/or emotional therapies for them that there are few financial resources left for leisure activities for their children, even if these activities are accessible. Therefore, the IACC heavily subsidizes the special children's participation in community center activities.

In keeping with the IACC's flexible approach to programming, it has developed three separate but related models for serving children and youth with special needs. On the local level, each model is implemented in a way that is tailored to the needs of the particular young people served by a particular community center.

“Everyone Together” – Integrating Young People With and Without Special Needs
Everyone Together aims to enable young people with disabilities to participate in programs open to all young people in the general community. When a young person with special needs expresses interest in a certain activity, the IACC counselor who

runs the activity is taught how to integrate an individual with that particular disability into the group. The community center provides the young participant with all the support she or he needs to engage in the activity together with the other members of the group. Sometimes it is the group's counselor who offers the required assistance, sometimes another community center staff member – and often the other young participants are taught how to help their peer to join them in the activity.

This programming model offers several advantages. It empowers children with special needs by enabling them to choose among several possible leisure activities. It also shatters the social segregation that the young person with special needs had heretofore experienced. Consequently, the young participant begins to see him/herself as “one of the gang.” The opportunity to engage in activities that express his or her personal talents and strengths further bolsters the young person's self-image; sometimes he or she even leads the others in the group (for example, a “computer maven” in a wheelchair may teach the other, walking participants how to use a new program). The children's families and teachers see what they are capable of – and begin to treat them less as helpless, dependent individuals and more as autonomous entities. And the other young people in the community get to broaden their own experience by meeting their special peers, learning about them and forming relationships with them.

“Seeing with the Heart” is one example of a community center program bringing young people with and without disabilities together for joint activities. For several years, the “Ross House” community center in Jerusalem has run several programs that aim to integrate seeing and blind residents together in community life. For example, blind and seeing residents together built a playground at the community center with equipments suitable for blind children. Another example is a community theater group in which both blind and seeing young women take part and perform regularly for the general community. In several other communities, youth with and without special needs work together on productions that are shown on their community television stations.

In the 2003-2004 year, approximately 800 young people with special needs regularly participated in community center activities in the framework of *Everyone Together*. There are, however, thousands more young people who would love the opportunity to take part in community center activities together with other youngsters from their neighborhood. Due to lack of sufficient resources, however, the IACC has been able to meet only a small proportion of the demand for the program.

Special Groups for Special Children

While integration between children with and without disabilities is a high priority for the IACC, not all activities lend themselves to integration and not all children can join groups that are open to the general public. Therefore, the IACC and its community centers offer scores of separate programs for young people with a certain disability or with similar disabilities. For these groups, the IACC provides any special equipment as well as the professional staff needed to enable children with special needs to take part. This is sometimes done in partnership with the commercial sector; for example, the IACC and Microsoft are now cooperating to create a computer interface that will be accessible to children with all disabilities, whether physical, emotional or cognitive.

These programs may take the form of activities specially tailored in accordance with participants' special needs, such as dance groups for the hearing-impaired, or social clubs for the youth with learning disabilities. In contrast to separate activities available to children and youth with disabilities in other frameworks, the participants in community center programs decide for themselves what form their group will take and what activities they will pursue.

Although the groups formed in the framework of this model are homogeneous, composed exclusively of young people with special needs, where possible the IACC arranges for them to participate in regional or national events in their field of interest. In this way, even those who cannot join their peers in regular community center activities have the opportunity of meeting other young people with similar interests.

An excellent example of a separate program offered on the national level is the "Olympic hothouses" that the IACC has established in cooperation with the Israeli Sports Association for the Disabled. These "hothouses" train young people with disabilities to engage in competitive sport, with a view toward eventually participating in the International Special Olympics. The groups sometimes participate in nationwide events such as national sports days or competitions together with groups of young sportspeople without disabilities. While the young people with and without disabilities usually compete separately, sometimes (where appropriate) the competition is integrated. Recently, for example, a blind youth who had learned judo at his local community center won the gold medal in a country-wide judo competition with his seeing peers!

Today, approximately 250 young people are enrolled in Olympic hothouses throughout the country, all of whom participate in the Special Olympics. The IACC estimates that this figure represents less than ten percent of the number of children and youth who are capable of participating and would do so if they were offered the opportunity. Again, the limiting factor is financial – the program, like other national and local programs for youth with special needs, simply has far too few resources to meet the demand.

Active Vacations

The Special Education Law mandates that the school year for children and youth enrolled in the special education system be extended to include most of the regular system's vacation days. These pupils learn for all of July as well as for most of the shorter school holidays. Eight years ago, the Ministry of Education, approached the IACC and proposed that a large proportion of the pupils' activities during vacations be conducted by and at their local community centers. At present, some 100 community centers are serving some 1,600 children from approximately 650 special education frameworks throughout the country, including preschools, schools and rehabilitative hospitals. These institutions work together with the community centers to plan the activities, which are based on the activities offered to children without disabilities and modified to take the specific disabilities into account. Programming includes appropriate touring, artistic and creative activities, and sports. Some of the continuity programs are separate, and in others the participants take part in activities together with other children and youth from the community.

In order to provide continuity for participating children and youth between vacations, the IACC and the Education Ministry have jointly planned a program through which community centers provide similar activities for children in the extended school year program throughout the year and not only during school holidays. The program is implemented by local community center staff in close cooperation with the children's educational frameworks. It aims to integrate the participants, to the extent possible, with the community's other children, and to work closely with their families as allies in the struggle for empowering their children. Due to budget cuts, however, the number of hours of activity the community centers can provide has been severely limited.

Appendix

Examples of Other IACC and Community Center Programming for Populations with Special Needs

Leisure Activities

Individual and group leisure activities in the community centers, including:

Art

- *Kesharim* – art activities for heterogeneous groups
- *Painting the Community* – Consciousness-raising and expression in the community through art
- *Color in the Heart* – creative activities in all the arts

Theater

- Story-telling workshops for the deaf
- Community theater for the mentally ill
- Theater group for people with disabilities

Clubs

- Clubs for the deaf
- *Re'im* – clubs for youth with communication problems
- Clubs for the blind

Sports

- *Special Olympics* – competitive sports for people with disabilities
- Navigation
- Swimming groups
- Tandem bicycle riding for the blind
- Sports competitions and league (in cooperation with the Sports Association for the Disabled)

Tourism

- Tours in cooperation with "Eretz Moreshet"
- Tourism center – initiates, consults on, coordinates, publicizes and guides tours for people with disabilities

Education

- Braille computer training
- Courses in sign language
- Computerized enrichments centers

Communication and PR

- Community media

- Public campaigns (e.g. against using parking places reserved for people with disabilities)

“Accessible Community”

- Making buildings and public services accessible to people with disabilities
- Integration and “normalization” of people with disabilities in the community through mutual assistance and leadership
- Support systems for people with disabilities and their families
- Partnerships among community organizations working in the field
- Empowerment of people with disabilities and their families, including personal empowerment through various courses and empowerment of parents of children with special needs

“Amitim” – Integration of the Mentally Ill into the Community

- Integration into existing leisure activities in the community centers and the community in general, in cooperation with the Health Ministry
- Preparation and support for the participants