


# A Quick Guide to Working With Children in Institutions

Enable, support, make a difference





*There are many excellent academic guides for working with children with special needs on the internet and the OFP website. There are also many great websites for parents of children with special needs and learning difficulties which offer useful tips. However, there is not much information available regarding working with children with special needs and learning difficulties in institutions. Hopefully, this quick guide will fill in some gaps and explain the issues you may face when working in Government institutions.*

*If anyone has any information which they feel is missing from this document, please send it to me. Many thanks.*

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## Things to bear in mind when you are working with children living in institutions

- The children are usually separated by age, if by any logical system at all. They are not separated by ability. This means that you are likely to find a wide range of abilities within any one group of children. This causes two main problems: this can create dangerous situations for the less able children; and be frustrating for the more able children which can lead to them getting angry or very withdrawn. This obviously leads to some troubling situations. You should be prepared for these situations and try to always know where the nearest member of staff is.
- The children all come from different backgrounds. Some children have lived in orphanages all their lives, others have lived with their biological families or foster families before moving to the orphanage. Others have lived in other orphanages for children who are able or with disabilities. These children will have been moved to their new institution because their other orphanage closed. Many orphanages in towns and cities are being closed due to EU pressures. The children are being moved to 'less visible' places such as Oltania.
- Many of the children who have been in the institutions all their lives are unable to speak and are very withdrawn. They may be reluctant to have any sort of relationship with you. Just try to show them they can trust you.
- The children are not spoken to about sexual development and given no sex education. Some of the older children can be quite overtly sexual. Just try to bear in mind that they don't really understand what impact their actions may have on you and they are never seeking to embarrass you or make you feel uncomfortable. If you say 'enough' ('gata') they will stop what ever they are doing. They never usually do anything more than blow at you, stare at you, etc.
- The staff who work in these institutions are poorly educated and often untrained. It is very easy to get angry and frustrated with their apparent indifference to the children's suffering and lack of compassion. Please just remember that in Romania there is no real welfare system - if you don't work, you don't eat or have anywhere to live. For many of the staff in the institutions, working there is nothing more than a job and they receive poor pay, no encouragement, or guidance. If you respect them, they will respect you. Show them how amazing the children can be and maybe, in time, they will show more of an interest. You may also like to buy them a small present when you leave so they are more accepting of the next team to arrive and care for the children more in the mean time. Through volunteer teams, we may slowly but surely change the attitudes towards caring for children with disabilities in these places.



## A Brief Overview

### Things to do....

- Try new games etc. with the children. You may be surprised what they are really capable of.
- Look at the bigger picture. Even if you find there is one child who is not responding to games or teaching, persevere and remember there will be many more teams after yours. Yours may just be the trip in which he/she starts to recognise what we are trying to do and may be more responsive next time around.
- Talk to your team. You will all be experiencing the same emotions and you need to support each other.
- Take each child on their own merits. These children have all developed in very unique ways. Therefore it is very difficult to make generalisations. Just work slowly and try to see what makes the child respond best.
- Be aware the children can be very unpredictable.
- Try to stick to some sort of routine. Although it is difficult to generalise, many of the children who live in institutions have Autistic tendencies. For this reason, routines are very important.
- Try to stay as calm as possible around the children. The children should see you showing emotion, but it may frighten them if you appear as though you have lost control. Do not be afraid to seek help for yourself or your key child. These are unusual circumstances for you. It is normal not to have all the answers.
- Be creative with your voice. Changing your pitch, tone, rhythm etc. can really help a child with Autistic tendencies work/play with you.
- Maybe you could make cards from the children for the staff. You have a chance to create relationships and make the children seem human to the staff. It is very difficult to ignore or harm a child who has made you a beautiful card.
- Try to create some escapism. The children live very hard lives. If you have any dressing up items, please take them with you. Or make things for them like daisy chains. In the spring you could also try to plant some pot-flowers for them.
- Each morning when the children go to you, why not start the day with a song. The more clapping, shouting, and dancing the better.
- **Leave comprehensive notes and instructions for subsequent teams and make sure you have left notes for the child's communication passport.**



## Things not to do....

- Don't judge the staff too harshly. They have hard lives too.
- Try not to think about age as most of the children look much younger than they actually are and do not act their age.
- Don't try to 'teach'. The children have very short attention spans so everything you do needs to be totally interactive so you keep their attention.
- Don't rush the children. Their cognitive development has been significantly set back compared to children who grow up in stimulating environments. If you push them too hard they will get angry or upset, and possibly give up.
- Don't play with things some of the children will try to eat (e.g. Play dough, Plasticine).
- Don't stop the child from producing 'odd' behaviours (e.g. rocking, sucking their hands, etc). These actions are how that particular child affirms his/her existence and consoles him/herself. If you physically stop him/her they are likely to become even more agitated. Try to distract, use imitation, or just leave them to come to you when they have calmed down.
- Try not to draw parallels between the institutions and camps, prisons etc. They're not nice places but the children have to live there. The sooner you can accept their 'home' and find a way to work within it's confines, the better for them.
- Don't make it about you. Yes you will find it hard, yes you may have difficulties, yes it is upsetting. However, for you this is a trip in which you can really help some children in desperate need. For them, this is their life. Please don't let your feelings get in the way of caring for them. Save your thoughts and feelings about the situation for when you get back to the hotel and can discuss your feelings with your team who will be feeling the same. Don't let the children see you upset because they won't understand and may get upset too or scared.



## Activities To Try

- Why not take some colouring items or jigsaws so you have some props in case you feel a bit lost during the first couple of days.
- When you feel a bit more confident, why don't you try to play games the children can do even when you are not there. For example, why don't you go outside with them and collect leaves, rubbish, etc (avoid sticks and twigs or anything sharp). Perhaps save some shiny sweet wrappers. Then, get the children to make collages with them. You can also try to make cue-cards and see if the children can find what is on the card.
- Touching tactile boards encourages children to participate in an activity and engage in social interaction without having to get too involved with care workers. You could try to make a board with the more able children so they are included and get some satisfaction from watching the less able children enjoy 'their' game. Building bridges between the children is the most sustainable way we can help all of them.
- Try to use music and dance as much as possible. If you have a musical instrument which isn't too valuable, why not take it and play to the children? Do you have a CD player and some CDs you could take? Or an iPod with speakers.
- When you can see the children are getting a bit board, play a game like the *hockey-cokey* to liven things up or *sleeping lions* if they get a bit too boisterous.
- Make sure you have a good range of arts and crafts, educational (but fun) activities, creative activities, and physical activities.
- Try to make everything stimulating, interesting, and interactive.



## Learning Self-Regulation Through play


Play is extremely important for children's development. Children build intellectual skills as they problem solve whilst playing, but playing can also help your child learn skills such as focusing attention on a task or sitting still whilst playing. This is called self-regulation and it is an important skill for children to have if they have to live and operate in a small community such as that in the orphanage.

*"Self-regulation is a term that refers to the child's ability to focus their attention and control behavior. Children must understand what is asked of them in a given situation, monitor their own behavior to see if it matches, and maintain or change what he is doing based on his evaluation."*

Developing self-regulation begins at birth. Babies naturally imitate sounds, learn to put themselves to sleep, etc. This is the beginning of self-regulation that will help him/her learn in the future. With most children, when they are babies their parents will play with them. They will hold a toy, a rattle for instance, in front of the baby and the baby learns to reach out and grasp it. He has to focus on the toy and control his arm and hand to connect with it. It takes a lot of work and concentration, but the child's desire to play encourages his effort. However, the children in the orphanages have never had this opportunity to learn this way. This leads to the slow development of many key areas such as fine motor skills, muscle development, and self-regulation amongst others.

The close relationship a mother builds with her child helps him regulate his emotions and his actions. This is called 'early relationship attachment', and it develops because the baby learns to trust the parent to fulfill his needs. He can rely on consistent care and attention, so he learns to quiet and control himself. This of course does not happen in children who grow up in the orphanages as they experience a continuous stream of carers who work on a shift basis. Many children who grow up in institutions can go through their entire lives without ever having a meaningful relationship. Even you are only working in Romania for a relatively short time, you can try to create relationships with the children which will help their social development immensely.

Playtime is an excellent opportunity to build relationships with a child and help them regulate their behavior. Play is fun for everyone, and when you give your attention to one child and share an enjoyable activity, you strengthen the bond between you. The child has an innate desire to play, so he is motivated to focus his attention and keep up positive behaviors that allow the play to continue.



Here are two ways you can help your key child develop self-regulation when you play together:

**Model language for the child to use.** Try to learn some key words to 'narrate' what the child is doing. For example, if the child starts running say 'fuge'. If a child does not use many words yet, your description of what he is doing helps him connect his actions to words. Soon he will be talking and may use "self-talk" to help control his behavior. Self-talk is private speech in which the child "reminds" himself what to do. As a child's language and emotional development progresses, you will encourage him to use his words to express feelings instead of acting on them. Playtime is a great opportunity to practice using words instead of actions before the situation becomes out of control.

**Be a consultant to the child as he plays.** As children begin to pretend, they have very simple scripts. Picking up a brush and pretending to brush his hair is a toddler's idea of pretending. But if you join in the play, you might show him how to brush a teddy bear/doll. If the child is older, you could elaborate play by suggesting new roles or new uses for play materials. When your child plays a role, he conforms his behavior to it, and that increases his self-regulation skills.

Self-regulation is also promoted when your child follows the rules of a make believe scenario. Young children often make up elaborate scenarios in pretence games. Remember, the child should be in control of the play, and your job is to offer suggestions and follow his lead. (See Dr. Evan Kidd's lecture).

Playing board games or playground games gives you many opportunities to help the child develop self-regulation. In the beginning, keep game rules simple even if you have to modify them to fit the child's self-regulatory abilities. Be patient as you follow the rules your child dictates, and expect him to want to change the rules in his favor!

With you as a play partner, a child can learn the self-control and attention he will need later on. Play with your child daily, and watch his self-regulation grow!

## Motor Development

### First steps to physical fitness

Recent studies show that the older a child gets, the less likely he/she is to get the physical activity necessary for good health. Within the confines of the orphanage and 'Family Type Homes' it can be very difficult to get children who are not in good physical health in the yards. Often the yards are used by the more boisterous 'dangerous' children and are not well cared for. They can be frightening places. As a result you must show that you are completely happy to be there and that going outside is fun. No matter what a child's age, you can start now to encourage his/her love of physical activity.

### What can you do with children who are unable to sit or stand.

As a result of being left in cots when they are babies, some children never learn to walk or stand even if they had the innate ability to learn. What can you do to help them?

When they are awake and playful, place him/her on their stomach on a firm surface such as a blanket on the floor. Stay on their level and talk to them (sound interesting). They will probably work to lift their head off the surface providing exercise to strengthen their back. Can they prop themselves up with their arms and lift their chest off the surface? If so, get above their eye-level so they stretch to look at you. This may lead to the child rolling over if they lose their balance. Reward them with praise and make it into a game. Mastery of these basic movement milestones depends on the chance to move unrestrained. Give incentives through positive social interaction and slowly but surely the child will start to progress. If your baby is in an infant seat, swing, or walker for long stretches of time she does not get the opportunity to develop physical fitness.

### Movers and shakers

When the child is able to balance on their hands and knees, show them how to crawl. Remember that they may never have seen any human move on all fours. Get down on their level and show them how it is done. Have races and goals, e.g. a biscuit about  $\frac{1}{2}$  meter away - who can get their first? How far can they go with different incentives. What happens when someone is waiting for them with open arms a short distance away? Make sure they have space to move. Clear away toys and other objects and make sure they aren't going to get *run over* by other children. When they can walk by holding your hands/finger, get outdoors as much as possible by walking around the block, or kicking a ball in the yard. Children who have not developed physically, are often delayed in many other areas. As such, you may notice some toddler type behaviour such as intense imitation. If they imitate you that is fantastic. Make it more interactive by imitating them also.



## The more boisterous children

A child's self-esteem is enhanced when (s)he can run, jump, and play vigorously. Children at this stage are likely to develop lots of other interests too, and your role includes making sure your child has a good balance of active and quiet activities. Children who are confined to these types of small spaces can become very hyperactive when given lots of attention. When you see they are getting to hyper, just pick them up and give them a cuddle so they still feel secure and cared for but stop moving so much. This should calm them down within a few moments. Then you can continue with the organized chaos.

### Lifelong habits for good physical fitness begin early.

- Be a role model. Participate in and enjoy physical activity yourself.
- Play active games with the children. Your participation encourages others to engage in physical activity.
- Plan time for unstructured play. Young children need blocks of time to invent play, including physical activity.
- Provide space, including outdoor space, for active play.
- Invite other children to play. The children are likely to be rather unsociable towards each other as they are often encouraged by the carers not to have friends. (Divide and rule if you like). You therefore need to act as the medium through which they can come together and be friends. Invite other children to play but try to have one volunteer per child so you avoid jealousy between the children.

## Developing Fine Motor Skills

Fine motor skills can be defined as small muscle movements: those that occur in the finger, in coordination with the eyes. Teaching fine motor skills is similar to teaching other skills because the instructor must always try to be patient and understanding. Fine motor skills won't develop over-night, but with time and practice. Here are some suggestions for developing fine motor skills, and some activities to use to practice them:

### A. Cutting (only with the most able children when none of the others are around)

Use a thick black line to guide cutting the following:

- A fringe from a piece of paper
- Cut off corners of a piece of paper
- Cut along curved lines
- Cut lines with a variety of angles
- Cut figures with curves and angles
- Cut clay with blunt scissors

### B. Placing and Pasting

Place a variety of forms (eg. blocks, felt, paper, string, cotton, cereal, cotton) on outlines  
Match shapes, color, or pictures to a page and paste them within the outlines

### C. Tracing and Coloring

Use a thick black line if needed

Trace and then color shapes, increasing the size and complexity gradually

### D. Self-Care Skills (not listed in order of difficulty)

- Buttoning
- Lacing
- Tying
- Fastening Snaps
- Zipping
- Carrying
- Using a screwdriver
- Locking and unlocking a door
- Winding a clock
- Opening and closing jars
- Vacuuming a rug
- Rolling out dough or other simple cooking activities
- Washing plastic dishes
- Sweeping the floor
- Dressing
- Bathing

### E. Finger Tracing

- Many times when a child is unable to do a worksheet, it helps to trace the pattern with his finger before he tries it with a pencil.
- Have the child trace a pattern in sand, cornmeal, finger paint, etc. The textures give the child kinesthetic feedback.

### F. Pre-Writing

- Dot-to-dot drawings of pictures, objects, shapes, numbers, letters, etc.
- Typing exercises
- Tile and mosaic work
- Folding activities
- Fine coloring
- Have the child do repetitious strokes (with an increasingly smaller writing tool) similar to those found in manuscript or cursive letters. Emphasize accuracy, spacing and flow or rhythm. Sometimes doing it to music helps.

### G. Writing

- Have the child write in the air and in front of his eyes (arm outstretched) with his finger.
- To increase his tactile awareness, have him trace over letters on textured surfaces. Have him manipulate 3-dimensional letters when blindfolded.
- When a writing tool is introduced, letters which involve similar strokes should be taught first (moving simple to complex). Next, combinations of letters in short words, sentences and finally spontaneous writing. (Remember to use words which are within the child's reading vocabulary).

### Things to remember:

Upright working surfaces promote fine motor skills. Examples of these are: vertical chalkboards; flannel boards; magnet boards; windows and mirrors; white boards, etc. Kids can also make sticker pictures; do rubber ink-stamping; use stickers to make pictures; complete puzzles with thick knobs; use magna-doodle and etch-a-sketch as well. The benefits for these include: having the child's wrist positioned to develop good thumb movements; they help develop good fine motor muscles; the child is using the arm and shoulder muscles.

In general, it is more fun to learn while you play. Keep that in mind when teaching fine motor skills. Try to incorporate activities like dress-up to teach zipping and buttons; card creations to practice writing or tracing skills; cutting and pasting to make a creation other than just a plain piece of paper, etc. Be creative and have fun!



## What is developmental screening? You can do one for the children in your care

The following explains the components of these types of screenings.

1. Developmental screenings are simply a look at how a child is gaining skills and learning in comparison to other children their age in the following areas

Social/Emotional - how well a child interacts with others, can take care of her own needs, regulates her emotions and behavior

Language - how well a child listens or responds to language, uses vocabulary and grammar, and shows interest in books, print, music and her surroundings

Fine motor/adaptive - a child's ability to use small muscles, coordinate eye/hand movements and problem solve

Gross motor - a child's ability to use her large muscles (rolling over, sitting, jumping)

### 2. Hearing and vision screenings

- Can the child clearly hear you when they can't see you?
- Can the child hear different pitches?
- Can they hear a range of sounds?
- What sounds does the child respond to most frequently?

### 3. Health screenings

- Does the child look their age
- Does the child weight roughly what they could
- Is the child's gender immediately obvious
- Has the child reached puberty? If so, when did they?
- Does the child get ill often?
- What is their skin like? Do they have bed sores or signs of malnutrition?

#### ■ You can support developmental screening by

- sharing information about the child's development with other volunteers and health care professionals
- asking about any concerns you have regarding the child
- create a communication passport or update an existing one
- recommending additional evaluations

#### ■ You can help the child by

- providing them with a communication passport they can use (mainly consisting of pictures and objects).
- providing opportunities for the child to be physically active
- providing daily routines that include time for rest
- planning time together to read, sing, talk and play to support your child's developing brain

## Adaptive Programming

### Adaptations are made according to:

- If the child does not want to play a specific game, no amount of adaptations will create interest
- You must think about the abilities of the child. Simplify the game or give the children different roles.
- Apparent age of the child - gear activities towards age(s) of participants
- Access to the necessary material and equipment - consider what resources are available, less expensive adaptations can always be found, plan ahead - they won't wait for you

### Keep in mind when adapting activities:

- Does the adaptation change the activity so much that it is no longer recognizable as the same activity?
- Does the adaptation match skill levels?
- Will individual children be able to participate with others or does modification restrict choice of partners?

### To the program:

#### Program

- Focus on activities that do not require specialized skills.
- Promote cooperation instead of competition.
- Promote participation instead of elimination.
- Plan activities that are within range of abilities but still provide a challenge.

#### Skill Level:

- Keep activity challenging for all participants.
- You may change the space required, number of participants, skill, methods and rules, etc.
- Substitute sitting down, kneeling or lying down for standing.
- Reduce size of playing field or courts.
- Substitute lighter and more easily controlled equipment ie: balloons for balls.
- Other players may run for another person.
- Reduce number of points needed.
- **Provide more frequent rest periods.**



## Equipment & Material

It may be necessary to re-design or use other equipment to allow individuals to participate.

*Games:* Use easily controlled equipment.

## Arts & Crafts

- Use sponge paint or finger paint instead of brushes.
- Use thicker pencils, crayon, markers, etc. for better control.
- Wrap plasticine around the handles of brushes, pens, etc..
- Tear rather than cut paper.

## Music:

Sing action songs so the person is able to participate even if he/she is not able to sing. Use instruments.

## Instruction & Leadership Style:

- This will vary depending on the age and skill level of all participants.
- It must be appropriate for the group skill level.
- Remember to break down tasks into simple step by step instruction.
- Use examples when explaining.
- Provide positive reinforcement.
- Get all participants involved.



## Adapting Games for Specific Disabilities

For these games use the following suggestions to change the game to fit the player(s) needs that you are adapting for.

### Developmental Disabilities:

1. Break down tasks into sequence
2. Use positive reinforcement
3. Show/Guide the child through the activity
4. May require some physical adaptations

### Physical Disabilities:

1. Adaptations of material and equipment
2. Break down tasks
3. Use positive reinforcements

### Visual Impairments:

1. Use descriptive/illustrative instructions
2. Guide the person through the action
3. Use positive reinforcement
4. Adaptations of equipment and materials

### Hard of Hearing:

1. Use sign language/non-invasive gestures
2. Face the person when you are talking
3. Use positive reinforcement
4. Possible physical adaptations for difficulties with balance

### Behaviour:

1. Keep the participant in a small group
2. Use positive reinforcement
3. Arrange for activities that are short in length
4. Plan for easy-to-succeed activities so that the person does not become frustrated



## Body Awareness

Learning of all types will be late until a child has developed a realistic concept of body image. Many children who have cognitive delays have incomplete or weak body image systems and require extensive training to develop body awareness through vision, touch and muscle sense. Children in institutions often have a very poor sense of their identity as their individual needs are not met, they rarely see themselves in mirrors, their physical appearance is rarely commented on, and their gender is not defined. Here are some activities to improve body image and body awareness:

- Have the child look into a mirror and see where his/her head is. See if the child can observe the position of eyes, ears, nose, mouth, eyebrows, cheeks, forehead, chin, etc. Have the child touch his body parts as he names them.
- Have the child put "face puzzles" together. Later make a puzzle of the whole person and have the child put it together, naming and feeling the parts. Have clothing made to fit a paper doll. Have the child trace on the paper and cut up and put together or dress the original doll, naming parts.
- Use worksheets containing drawings of people with missing features. Have the child tell you which parts are missing, then complete the drawing.
- In front of a mirror, have the child stand tall (arms above head), stand small (crouch down), stand wide (arms at sides), stand narrow (arms hugging himself), stand happy, sad, angry, excited, tired, etc.
- Exercises increase body awareness and thus improve body image. Use balance boards, balance beams, chinning bars, ropes, swinging, hopping, rolling, skipping, jumping-jacks, etc.
- Make activities creative and don't be afraid to be "silly" with movements. Be sure to incorporate verbal skills along with pointing and touching. Have a mirror handy so that the child has plenty of opportunity to see himself performing different activities, or just to look at himself. Have him draw self portraits and portraits of others.



# Some ideas for activities:

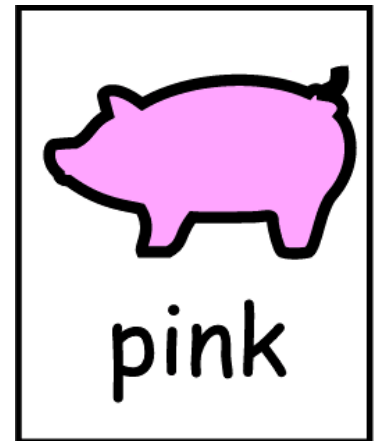
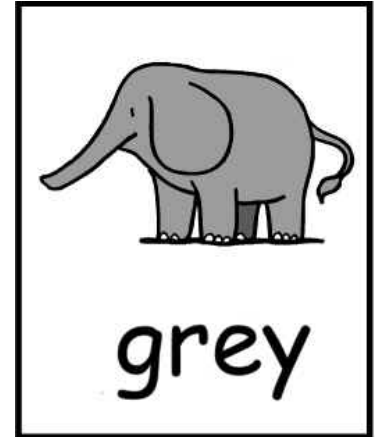
- Why not have a theme? Under the sea, Easter, seasons....
- Make your own mazes, information cards, wall displays etc. with the children
- Give what they make or do extra value with positive praise, give it to a member of staff as a present with them, put it on display, etc.
- Make what they do personal to them
- Don't let the other children interrupt a game or damage what they have done
- Make sure they realise there is always a purpose to an activity
- Bring the outdoors indoors by showing them seasons in action. Dry leaves or flowers and create books with them.
- Help the more able children help the less able children. Try to establish relationships so they look after each other once you're gone

# Activities

You can make prompt cards with the more able children for the less able children. Or, just as a group activity. The more able children can write and draw the pictures, and the less able children can colour in and pass you or the other child items.

These can have several uses:

- A way for you to communicate with children who can not speak
- Why not write the words in English and Romanian? Use these to communicate with all the children and teach them some English
- Categorise them so the children learn what go together. E.g. farm animals, foreign animals, and underwater animals.
- You can make weather ones and ask the children to change them each day.
- You can make ones representing different emotions to see how the child feels that day.



Making templates based on the children's body parts is not only fun, but it is personal. It also increases their sense of self.

- Build full size versions of the child with different body parts.
- Ask the more able children to name them and help the child write what they are called. This will help build both childrens' self-esteem
- Show them how you get bigger as you get older.
- Try to get the children to draw pictures of themselves facing a mirror. Can they draw pictures of each other? This task should help their social development.