

Karin Dom -
Center for Rehabilitation and Social Integration of Children with
Special Needs and Their Families

The Center provides services for approximately 150 children per year with physical disabilities, mental disorders, learning difficulties, autism, hyperactivity disorders, multiple disabilities. The work aims at early intervention and integration of the children with special needs.

Karin Dom was the first NGI in Bulgaria which started a new method of working with children with disabilities and initiated a struggle against their classification as «uneducable» and also against the old system which sends them in institutions, hidden from the eyes of the society.

We work with each child as per an individual program. A multidiscipline team is working with the children and families - special pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, a kinesitherapist, rehabilitators, social workers, a pediatrician, assistants. The program for parents includes consultation, training and groups of mutual assistance and support.

In Karin Dom the practical work is combined with the vindication in order to be enhanced the consciousness of the society. Thus we support the social inclusion in the society. One of the main objectives is children with special needs to live in their natural family environment.

Being a Learning and resource center, we **conduct seminars and workshops** for specialists, staff from social institutions, teachers from mass educational institutions, parents, students, non-government organizations.

As a partner under a pilot project of Municipality of Varna, Karin Dom teached and trained 64 unemployed persons as social assitants of children with SEN in mass schools and kindergartens.

Karin Dom was established on the British model of child centers and special schools.

Activities:

Bobath: Karin Dom chose the Bobath concept to work with children with cerebral palsy and multiple disabilities.

This is an approach perceiving the child as a whole and covering all aspects of their sensory-motor, cognitive, perception, social and emotional development.

The Bobath concept is open, flexible and adaptable. It is a successful management of the cerebral palsy status.

The therapeutic goals are as follows:

- To analyze the functional abilities of each child in particular situations of everyday life.
- To provide a more normal sensory-motor experience through appropriate techniques

The cooperation with parents is of great significance for the improvement of the children's quality of life and reaching their full potential. Parents take part in the therapeutic sessions, where they master the specific ways of behaviour, carrying, positioning of their child and learn how to apply them during games, nutrition, toilet and the rest of the routine activities at home. This leads to reassertion of more normal functional skills and conversion of the everyday life into therapy.

Montessori:

The Bobath concept combines well with the Montessori system of education. The significance of this method is to stimulate the child on self-education, self-training and self-development. The child's request towards the teacher "HELP ME TO DO THIS ON MY OWN" appears to be the symbol of its entire pedagogics.

In the environment specially organized in a Montessori room, the children learn to love and to be orderly in the work, to be profound and careful, independent and initiative, spontaneously self-educative, free, which is expressed in independent decisions and actions.

The environment prepared in the rooms **consists of five areas of development: exercises for real life, sensory development area, mathematical development area, language area and the area of the surrounding world and environment.** Here the child chooses himself/herself the material for his/her activity and makes out of it whatever "his/her inner creative spirit enjoins him/her". The teacher in

the room helps the child, he/she is always by the child and directs the child in the environment.

Social integration: In the socialization group, children learn skills on independent and free life. We also work under the Montessori system on setting up elementary mathematical ideas and concepts, training on reading and writing, developing graphic skills. The children acquire social skills which give them the opportunity of a more successful social integration in the mass education institutions. The group is attended also by children of primary school age who have learning difficulties. Different activities are organized: fests and entertainments, meetings with coevals from mass kindergartens and schools, visiting exhibitions, concerts, theatre, shopping.

Work with children with autism: There are groups formed in Karin Dom for work with children with autism and autistic spectrum disorders. In the communication group, children learn how to work together by observing group rules, waiting for their turn, following instructions, carrying out eye contact, pronouncing words, getting to know the subject and working with it.

Work under "PECS" system: "PECS" is a system in which the conversation by children with communicative disorders is eased through exchange of pictures.

We work out special dictionaries with which the children communicate in and out of Karin Dom.

Sensory stimulation: – The therapy is based on the theory of sensory integration. Therapeutic sessions are provided and addressed towards the child through activities and equipment which is specially selected to meet the individual needs of the child. In Karin Dom we are working for overcoming the sensory problems - in case of inadequate responding to sound, light, pain, touch. The stimulation is grading step-by-step for each child.

Eco education: The children and the team from Karin take care of the flora and cleanness of the Center's park, grow fruits, vegetables

and flowers and always take part in Eco events of the town. The very garden is adjusted to the needs of the children. The equipment of a sensory garden is in store at the moment.

Partnership with parents:

There is a parents' room in Karin Dom, where they meet and share their problems and hopes. Various problems, experience and information exchange are discussed in the parents' groups created for training and self-assistance. Parents are one of the best partners in the therapeutic process. They participate actively in the life of the foundation.

Karin Dom Center for education and resource center: The team of Karin Dom is trained by specialists from Great Britain, France, the Netherlands. Learning modules with foreign and Bulgarian lecturers are conducted.

The specialists conduct seminars and practical studies both in Karin Dom and other settlements. The education programs are on practical lines and are in conformity with the needs of the participants.

Since the opening, up to present, 152 children from Karin Dom have been integrated in mass kindergartens and schools. The process of integration training is complex and long. A team from Karin Dom gives its support to parents and teachers on site in the schools and kindergartens and through therapy in Karin Dom.

Karin Dom disposes of a multidisciplinary team of high quality specialists, trained and applying good practices from other countries. This team passes on its experience to teachers, specialists, parents, students, volunteers.

Weak points in the process of incorporation in the education:

- lack of solid legislation on incorporating education of children with SEN;
- a great number of children/students in groups at kindergartens and in classes at mass schools;

- the mass teachers does not acquire training in special education;
- lack of experience of the mass teachers in working with children with SEN;
- lack of data basis (in Municipality of Varna) regarding the number of children with disabilities, besides the number of those with TELK;
- not enough special groups and classes for children with SEN at mass kindergartens or mass schools;
- presence of architecture and infrastructure barriers - loading platforms, WCs, lifts, equipment;
- unsuitable school materials for children with intellectual difficulties;
- lack of an adequate system of criteria for evaluation of the school achievements of the children with SEN.

Suggestions for a change:

- integration should not be considered absolute - the mass school with resource support is not suitable for all children with SEN. It is necessary to be established a special school, securing an adequate environment and meeting the individual and specific needs of each child.
- the society should be more widely informed - time on television on the problems of the integrated education, and on the other hand - National forum on manifestation of the talents of children with SEN;
- the children with SEN should be able to attend the kindergarten/school which is located in their region, i.e. more special groups/classes at the mass kindergartens and schools should be opened;
- methods, school schedules and textbooks updated for children with intellectual difficulties;
- motivation for the mass teacher, in whose class there is a child with SEN (extra remuneration);
- a decreased number of children in a group/class where there is a child with SEN;
- equal opportunities for participation in the out-of-school forms for the children with SEN;

- a preliminary introduction of the children with SEN to their future classmates through organization of summer centers for work with children - exhibitions, concerts, joint studies and summer camps;
- conformity with the opinion of the parents while taking a decision for direction by the Team for complex pedagogic evaluation at the Ministry of Education and Science.

Conclusion:

Normal children are a positive model of conversation and social skills for the children with SEN.

„We, the children, are not an expense but an investment. We are a source of problems and not resources. We are not only small people, but also citizens of this world. **You call us "future", but we are "presence" as well.** We want a worthy world for ourselves which will be the same for every other person."

This is the mighty message by approximately 400 children from 100 nationalities who took part in the special session of children at the United Nations General Assembly, held on May 8-10, 2002 in New York.

Vision:

The school of 21st century - a school for everybody. Hospitable, accessible, securing effective education and social inclusion and development of children with SEN.