

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SPECIAL SEATING IN SRI LANKA

THE COMMUNITY AS BENEFICIARIES

Working with the profoundly/multiple disabled child/young person has been called the 'ultimate challenge' for professionals, parents, family and the community at large.

What is profound disability? This is a multiple handicap in one individual, a person with severe brain damage, causing non/partial sight, hearing impairment, incontinence, no mobility, no speech severe learning difficulties and understanding of their environment. An individual can have all the above disabilities or a combination of them to be seen as profoundly disabled. Through the phrase 'profoundly disabled', there are classifications from moderate to high through too severe.

Since MENCAFEP's inception, it has operated a section specifically for the profoundly disabled. It is the only day-care facility for the profoundly handicapped child in Sri Lanka (possibly South Asia). To augment this facility MENCAFEP in partnership with Motivation UK is setting up a special seating unit.

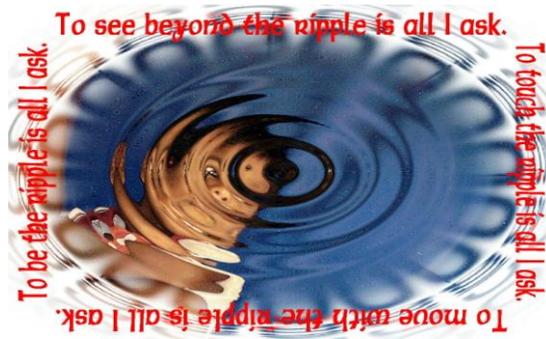
MENCAFEP has a philosophy of working with the severely handicapped child. MENCAFEP believes the purpose of the profoundly disabled is to be joyful. That is what they are there for, to bring joy, to give joy.

In all its work with the handicapped, MENCAFEP practices, that human worth and dignity of the individual, however disabled is the most important aspect of its work.

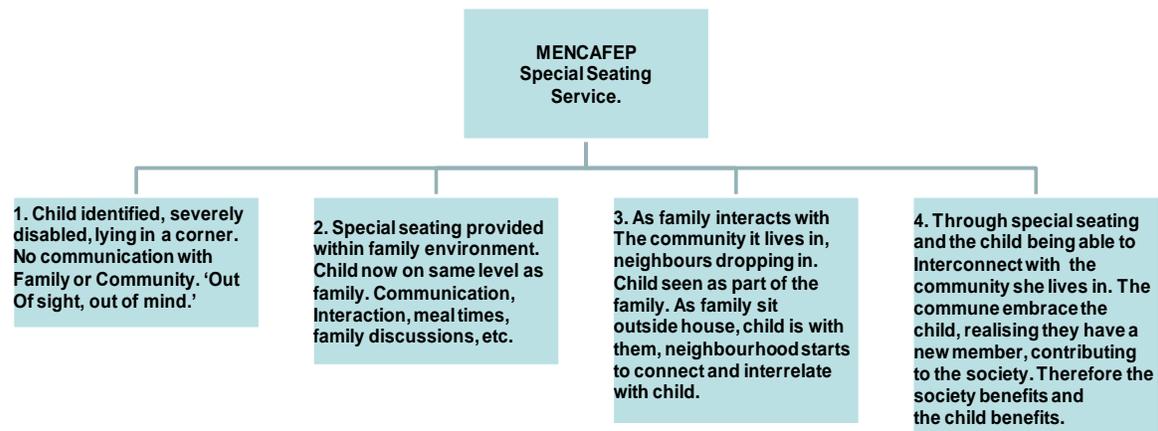
With the profoundly handicapped all forms of stimulation are used to bring out their full potential, which is very important. To bring out this full potential can at times be very exhausting. The worker must be multi-disciplinary and ideally have a one to one relationship with the child, to bring out the best in her/him. Special seating has proved to be an invaluable tool for this purpose, allowing face to face interaction and therefore enhancing the stimulation process.

Along with the standard activities such as muscle stimulation/physiotherapy, speech therapy, soft room play, music, touch and stimulating the senses. MENCAFEP has tried to devise new ways, to bring out that potential and more acceptances within the community. Pet animals, such as rabbits, turkeys, ducks and birds have been introduced into sessions. Walks have taken place; so the children have been able to stimulate their senses with the environment, providing stimulation as well as being seen as part of the community. Other areas explored have been arts and crafts, especially clay and mud work. Again a child/ young person equipped with special seating are able to benefit more from the activities mentioned above.

In MENCAFEP the above is important, but what I would like to look at along side this is how special seating can benefit the community as well as the child/young person that it is provided for.



SOME SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SPECIAL SEATING IN SRI LANKA. THE COMMUNITY AS BENEFICIARIES.



The diagram above shows the steps towards making the community the beneficiary, if special seating is made available in the child's home. So let us look at these steps in more detail:

1. Most children needing special seating usually have multiple disabilities; often in MENCAFEP's experience in Sri Lanka the majority of these children are from poor families. However, as we are all aware disability cuts across all social strata's. On a child being identified for special seating and with the family struggling and not knowing what to do with the child and her/his disability. The child is usually lying in a corner of the family dwelling, with no communication or very little interaction with the family let alone the community. It is the old adage; 'out of sight, out of mind.'

2. After identification, assessment of the child takes place and special seating is provided within family environment. With training and advice, the family learn how to seat the child and how the seat can be used for the benefit of the child. So the child has come from the floor to the seat and is now at the same level as the family. Communication and interaction can now take place between the family and the child; meals together, family discussions and the family at play.

3. As family goes about its usual interactions with the community it lives in, like the neighbours dropping in, the family sitting outside the house (which is very common in the evenings in Sri Lanka), talking with people as they pass by. Through the seating the child is seen as part of the family, the neighbourhood starts to connect and interrelate with child.

4. Through special seating enabling the child to interconnect with the community she/he lives in and the community interacting with the child. The commune embrace the child, realising they have a new member, contributing to there society, therefore the society benefits and the child benefits.

Conclusion:

In MENCAFEP's experience with the MENCAFEP Special Seating Unit. The difference in the quality of life it has made, especially for the profoundly disabled child has been amazing and very measurable. The next step to the above would be to move part of the seating unit into the community. With the child due to the seating, being seen as part of his/her local society; the community could take on the responsibility for the child and her/his chair. The lady down the street with the sewing machine might take on repairing the straps in the chair when needed; the carpenter in the neighbourhood, the metal worker in the house next door helping repair the seat when again needed.

Therefore, not only do we get the four points mentioned above, that through special seating for a disabled child/young person, benefits are brought to the immediate community as well as the child. But if we take it to its logical conclusion, through involving the community at large with the special seat, we have a community of beneficiaries.

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