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# The Windmill Programme: Thinking outside the square

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Research has shown that children with disabilities struggle to find a place in mainstream social and recreational programmes (Families Commission, 2007). They may, for example, feel inhibited (Shannon & Young, 2004).

The Windmill Programme is a specialised care programme that provides educational and recreational after school and holiday programmes for children and adolescents aged 5 to 18 (participants) who are on the autistic spectrum or who have an intellectual or physical disability. It can be difficult for this group to access out-of-school care programmes. This can be a cause of stress, not only for the parents but also for the child.

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*A central aim of the programme is to encourage participants to interact with their peers.*

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The Windmill Programme is a division of Dunedin Home Support Services (DHSS), a privately owned organisation that provides social and health care solutions to the local community. This article describes the establishment of the Windmill Programme and the nature of the programmes it provides.

From 2006 onwards, the DHSS Specialised Care Coordinator and the Chief Executive were aware of a constant flow of Needs Assessment Service Co-ordination (NASC) referrals, which stressed a need for children to be able to interact with peers and have opportunities to access activities in the community. At the time these needs were met through a buddying system, where a staff member helped a child plan activities and accompanied them when they then took part

in the activities. Ongoing meetings with NASC staff reinforced the fact that there was indeed a need for services like this. However providing such services would stretch the staffing resources of DHSS. The logistics of meeting the needs of children with disabilities and their families meant that we had to think outside the square.

## **Identifying the need**

To find out more about what might work, we instigated the following process. Meetings were organised with the Otago branch of Autism New Zealand. These meetings were attended by parents, families and other involved agencies. Attendees made it absolutely clear that specialised holiday programmes were desperately needed. Further discussions with parents and staff involved with our specialised care clients confirmed that there was a lack of specialised holiday programmes, and that there was also an urgent need for respite care and a day centre. After this period of consultation we took our first step towards developing a specialised holiday programme.

Within the next five months we reached the point of understanding what would be required to run a specialised holiday programme, and we had worked out how to fund it. However, it was still going to take a great deal of energy, effort and resources to get the programmes up and running. In July 2009 a social work student from Otago University started her placement with DHSS. Part of her role was helping the Specialised Care Coordinator establish a holiday programme that would be up and running by the September 2009 school holidays.

### First steps

The pilot programme took a further two months of preparation. This included the recruitment of additional staff as well as selecting existing staff from within the current DHSS team. A key part of the preparation phase was the development of a core programme of learning and activities. There were logistical challenges to be dealt with – the location of a suitable venue and the coordination of activities, enrolments and transportation. Policies and procedures for the Windmill Programme were adapted from those of DHSS, which was already accredited to the Health and Community Sector Standards (NZS 8158:2003).

In September 2009, the two-week Pilot Windmill Holiday Programme was launched at Bayfield High School in South Dunedin. The programme catered for 8 to 12 participants, some of whom required one-on-one supervision.

Most of the participants displayed behavioural and emotional issues while attending the programme. A feature of the early days of the pilot programme was the number of children who became very upset or whose behaviour became very hard to manage. This was a regular occurrence for some participants and the staff quickly learned to recognise the triggers. They began to adapt the programme to reduce the stress on the participants in order to avert this kind of situation, which could be distressing for the child, other participants and staff. Several siblings of the children with disabilities attended the programme. This seemed to have the effect of helping to normalise their situation: “I am not the only one with a brother or sister with special needs”.

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*The participation of siblings brought about some stability and contributed to the structure within each programme.*

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### Programme design

It is important to note that in any programme, whether it is a holiday programme or after school programme, the staff and the organisation must acknowledge and respond sensitively to the

anxiety of the child and parent. Parents told us that when they had tried using mainstream programmes in the past, they often found that the programmes were simply unsuitable and that using them was actually stressful. Because mainstream programmes did not have the capacity to tailor the programme to a child’s needs, children attending such programmes were often very anxious, bullied, and became withdrawn and isolated. Furthermore, staff did not always have the necessary information and knowledge to help the children manage their behaviour and protect them from engaging in any potentially harmful behaviour. Parents would often become very anxious for their children’s safety and concerned that their children’s needs were not being met. Because staff ratios on mainstream programmes are relatively low, and because no specialised routines were being established for their children, the parents found themselves on edge, waiting for the dreaded telephone call to ask for their child to be picked up because they could not be managed and it was no longer appropriate for them to remain on the programme. This increased stress levels about using any care programme and led to a sense of failure for parents. We had to do our utmost to reassure parents that their child’s needs were understood and would be attended to.

A key factor in the success of the Windmill programme pilot was that the Specialised Care Co-ordinator or the social work student visited the family at home to assess the individual needs of the prospective participant. We felt the need to gather as much information as possible regarding the participants in order to provide the most appropriate and rewarding care.

Management plans were established for each participant so that these could be implemented during the holiday programme. These management plans mirror the plans that were currently in place for children at home and at school. This built a framework for communication and continuity and meant that there would always be a similar response to a particular situation. The information was drawn together in a “Getting to Know Me” book

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which contained information as to likes, dislikes, behaviour triggers and management plans. Both the parents and our staff have found these books to be of great value. Comprehensive information, and the resulting ability to provide care that is consistent with the care that the child normally receives, has given us the best chance of a positive outcome for the participant and their parents.

Home visits are now established as a first step in the process of settling the child at the programme. During home visits, participants are given a booklet titled “What am I doing this week”. This highly visual booklet contains information and photographs of each day’s excursions, along with photographs of the staff who may be working at the programme. Any other housekeeping documentation is also completed at this time.

#### **A typical Windmill day**

To increase accessibility and reduce stress on parents and caregivers, we collect most of the children from their homes and deliver them home afterwards. We aim to provide continuity of staff and establish a solid structure for all activities. Each participant is allocated a carer at a ratio of 1:3, with some participants requiring 1:1 supervision. Where possible, participants are allocated the same carer at each session. A typical day at the programme is constructed around morning activities (9 am – 1 pm, including morning tea and lunch) and an afternoon excursion (1pm – 5pm, including afternoon tea). Morning activities include arts and crafts projects, table games, sporting activities, computer use, videos and quiet times if required. Because staff work collaboratively and share a collective sense of responsibility, these activities can occur either in a communal setting, where children can interact with others, or on an individual basis.

The daily afternoon excursions include all participants. The group travels to various venues and attractions around Dunedin. Excursions have included trips to Moana Pool, the Aquarium, the SPCA, ice-skating, ten-pin bowling, Otago

Museum, the Police station, and the beach. As not all possible venues and attractions can meet the particular needs of children with a disability, a prior assessment is made as to the suitability of each venue.

We have been fortunate that the staff at Moana Pool in Dunedin have been extremely considerate of the needs of our participants. This excursion is one of the most popular activities and also one of the most exhausting. Activities such as swimming are often out of the reach of children with special needs, because of various logistical and social barriers.

#### **Developments**

Since September 2009 we have further developed and extended our programmes. In a comparatively short period of time we have become accredited by Child, Youth and Family and DHSS has also become an OSCAR Foundation member and been recertified to the Home and Community Sector Standards (NZS 8158:2003).

The specialised care coordinator and management decided that there was a need for the establishment of a permanent specialised centre from which to run future holiday and after school programmes. Some time was spent locating a suitable venue due to issues relating to the accessibility and safety of the building, resource consent and affordability. Eventually a property was located. It was named the Windmill Centre.

The number of participants has increased with each programme. During December 2009 and January 2010 the Windmill Programme<sup>1</sup> catered for an average of 17–19 participants a day. Average enrolments now stand at around 30 participants.

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*After the 2010 Easter school holidays, the After School Programme was launched. This ensured that participants had the benefit of an ongoing service where there was a familiar recognisable structure on a daily basis. The After School Programme*

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<sup>1</sup> This programme was also held at Bayfield High School.

*is in its infancy, and will be further developed over the next few months.*

### Evaluation

At the conclusion of each School Holiday Programme, questionnaires are distributed among parents and staff to evaluate the effectiveness and relevancy of the programme. This constant monitoring, assessing and evaluating, combined with parents' input and carers' insights, assist in the ongoing review of management plans for each participant and thus enhance the professional care provided.

Evaluation reports completed by parents and staff indicate that outcomes of a structured specialised care programme include the following benefits for participants:

- ⋮ increased confidence, tolerance and independence.
- ⋮ development of social skills, such as communication abilities (including verbal communication and more subtle interaction with peers and others).
- ⋮ experiences of co-operation and learning to integrate into a community.
- ⋮ increased sense of belonging, involving give and take.
- ⋮ noticeable behavioural progress (a result of implementing existing management plans).
- ⋮ reduction of severe stress levels around school holiday times within the participants' home environment

A sample of parental responses from the evaluation questionnaires indicates the benefits of Windmill programmes for children and their parents and caregivers:

*"The holidays are so much more relaxed for everyone."* (Mother of 8-year-old boy)

*"I feel happy leaving 'P' in your care (that is not something that I feel often). Your programme is one of the only places I leave him."* (Mother of 6-year-old boy)

*"It was great for 'C' to have such experiences, expanding her horizons in so many ways –*

*social confidence, speech and independence all improving"*. (Grandmother of 11-year-old girl)

*"The holiday programme was an absolute breakthrough for 'R'. We have trouble getting him out of bed in the mornings and the days of the programme he was up at 6am waiting to be picked up."* (Foster mother of a 17-year-old boy)

A community service programme such as the Windmill Programme is an important component of service delivery for the specialised care sector. A key outcome is that participants develop a sense of connection to their peers and carers. The benefits for participants are in marked contrast to their experience with mainstream programmes.

The Windmill Programme has been rewarding and fulfilling for everyone involved and proved to be constructive, cheerful and filled with inspirational moments. ■

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