

Kushboo Welfare Society (KWS) Visitation Report

Background: Kushboo Welfare Society (KWS) in Gurgaon, (Haryana State, India) offers Early Intervention services to children-from six months of age to five-year olds-and their families through the 'Sparsh' program. Last October (10/2006), 'Child Vikaas International provided funds (\$ 5000.00) to KWS to support the 'Sparsh' program. The funds were targeted to assist the 'Sparsh' program in offering developmentally appropriate educational opportunities for young children with special needs participating in the program and provide support to their families.

Purpose:

- Conduct a brief program visit to assess the efficacy of the 'Sparsh' program in appropriately meeting the needs of the young children with special needs and their families

The information for this report was gathered from my discussions with the KWS and the 'Sparsh' program staff, and my school visits on 5/15/06, and 5/18/06 in addition to the ongoing communication through e-mail that I have had with the school staff and KWS board members throughout the year. I have also included a brief summary of the recommendations that I presented to the KWS staff to achieve program enhancement.

Program Strengths:

Early Intervention services: The 'Sparsh' program, focusing on Early Intervention services for infants to five year-old children begins with identification of children with special needs. KWS has a mobile unit that goes into the rural areas to conduct the assessment of children. Currently, they serve about 4 villages and according to Sparsh personnel, most of the families accessing the services are poor families. Approximately 35-40 children were assessed this past school year. Children identified with a disability are offered the opportunity to receive therapy services from the 'Sparsh' program, but not all parents take advantage of the program due to a variety of reasons. One of the major hurdles for the family is usually transportation constraints. Cultural attitudes towards disability and family dynamics also play a significant role in whether the families access the services.

KWS has begun charging a nominal fee recently to the families for accessing the services since that will provide an incentive to the families to not miss the therapy sessions. However, if a family is too poor to afford the nominal cost of the program, the fee is waived for the family.

The Therapy services: Once it is determined through assessment that the child has a disability and needs services, the child usually receives one-on-one therapy service-physical, occupational and/or speech therapy services. The 'Sparsh' program provides individual therapy for 30 minutes each weekday with the parent present during the therapy session. KWS requires the parent to be present during the one-on-one session to help learn the therapy techniques to continue with the therapy at home. According to KWS staff, the families also prefer to attend the session, stay with their child, and take the child back home with them. Most of these families live far away from the school and have to depend on public transportation. At the present time, they have about 8-10 children participating in the therapy services, with the number of children fluctuating from time to time

New initiative during the 2006-07: One of the new initiatives that the 'Sparsh' program has launched this year is a group therapy program once a week for 30 minutes where several children and families participate together. Apparently, they are experimenting with encouraging parents to lead the activities for about 5-10 minutes during the session. The objective is to motivate the parents to continue these modeled activities with their child at home.

Creative use of limited resources: Despite very limited access to educational materials, toys, books, and special equipment (no assistive technology equipment), the teaching staff made the most of the resources they had and shared a general enthusiasm for working with the children.

Commitment and caring: Both the KWS educational staff and the board members revealed a very caring attitude towards the children and their families.

Several of the teaching staff at the school (working with not just the 'Sparsh' program but children at all age levels) requested that I provide them with program-specific recommendations based on my observations to improve their services. We met as a small-group, and had a constructive discussion on child-focused strategies, and the use of adaptations and supports to increase motivation and higher levels of involvement and active participation from the children.

Concerns and recommendations:

Program limited to therapy: The thirty minutes of therapy a day and the once-a-week group session for the same amount of time is inadequate to meet the developmental needs of these at-risk young children with delays and disabilities. In addition to the therapy sessions, the children need stimulating group activities to develop their cognitive, communication and social skills.

One of my major recommendations for the 'Sparsh' program was to offer small-group 'Infant-Toddler' sessions and 'Preschool' sessions to the children during the next academic year. I strongly urged them to plan, organize and offer these group sessions for at least a few hours every day to all the children-Infants to preschoolers-to take advantage of the 'windows of opportunity' for learning during these early years.

Although KWS indicated that they are very interested in implementing the idea of Toddler and Preschool sessions, they pointed out that there will be a lot of resistance to the group session from the families. Apparently, families prefer individual therapy. I am skeptical if KWS would pursue Toddler and Preschool group sessions anytime soon due to a number of factors impacting pursuing an instructional-based (instead of therapy-based) early intervention program: inadequate early childhood staff and resources; limited staff knowledge and skills in the area of early childhood education and early childhood special education; the need to increase family awareness of the benefit of such programs; and the general lack of readiness to implement the program.

New Administrator: The school has recently appointed a new administrator and that may cause further delay in implementing any new initiatives and making changes to the existing program.

Limited materials and resources for children: The 'Sparsh' and the entire school had limited toys, books, manipulatives, educational materials, special equipment for the children. The school had no assistive technology devices to enhance communication opportunities and skills for the children who had limited verbal skills.

Limited opportunities for professional development: Most of the staff had limited opportunities for professional development to gain knowledge and skills in the area of special education to address the diverse needs of children.

Based on my recommendation, KWS organized training sessions for the school staff during my visit to the school in 2006 and recently in May this year. I presented several workshops for the school staff including the 'Sparsh' program staff. I also met with some selected staff members to provide individual guidance and suggest strategies in appropriately meeting specific student needs.

As per Dr. Sethuraman's request, I am sharing with the committee some of my other voluntary activities for organizations supported by Child Vikaas International:

Disability Education Conferences in India for KWS and 'Samarthanam':

A two-day Disability Education Conference hosted by KWS was held at Maurya Sheraton in Delhi on May 16th and 17th, 2007. I provided the leadership and guidance to KWS in organizing the conference focusing on the broad theme of 'Disability Education' with major emphasis Early Childhood Education and Intervention in addition to presenting several of the seminars. Several NGOs, training institutes and independent consultants working in the field of early childhood education and special education locally in and around Delhi as well as a few from other places in India participated in the conference. KWS had about 4-5 of their staff members attend and participate in the conference sessions.

Last February (2006), I helped organize a similar conference in Bangalore hosted by 'Samarthanam'. I presented all of the seminars at the conference and the participants were NGOs in and around Bangalore and from the state of Karnataka, as well as families of persons with disabilities.

During each of my visits, in addition to the above educational efforts, I have presented them with professional books as well as children's books, toys, and art materials.

I appreciate this opportunity to share my observations of the 'Sparsh' Program based on my visit in May, 2007 with the Child Vikaas committee members. Along with this report, I am sending Mr. Gupta's accounting statement for the 'Sparsh' program. I would recommend that Child Vikaas should continue to support the program financially for the coming year. If any of the committee members have any further questions concerning the 'Sparsh' program or my visit, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you.

Padmaja P. Sarathy

Date: 8/8/2007