

The Banyan Trust



THE SANJEEVANI CENTRE

Our Educational Approach

The Sanjeevani Centre for Child Development is a joint project of The Banyan Trust and SLUM (Society for Lowest Urban Mass) in Vhattara, Dhaka.
The Banyan Trust is a charity registered in the United Kingdom (Charity No. 1071981, Company Limited by Guarantee 3610633).
SLUM (Society for Lowest Urban Mass) is registered with the Bangladesh Government through the NGO Affairs Bureau.

Introduction

Children aged 3 - 21 attend Sanjeevani's daily special education activities, located at the heart of a large Dhaka slum community. The children's disabilities are wide-ranging including autism, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, sensory impairment, speech and language difficulties and learning disabilities. Sanjeevani offers them a stable and nourishing learning environment that is highly individualised and interactive with a view to successful integration. The children are encouraged to develop initiative, assertiveness and the necessary skills to survive in their challenging domestic circumstances. Additional important components of the programme are health monitoring, medical help, nutritional support, outreach, strong parental involvement and extensive family counseling through dedicated community workers employed by the Sanjeevani Centre offering much-needed services within the large slum community.

SANJEEVANI and the Montessori approach

At the Sanjeevani Centre for Child Development we aim to provide a safe, enriching and nurturing learning environment, where the children are encouraged to gain learning experiences through a programme of mainly self-directed activity, coupled with professional observation and guidance. Sanjeevani's approach incorporates the basic principle of the Montessori philosophy, which is "to follow the child and meet his needs".

The children at Sanjeevani come from backgrounds of abject poverty. Living with their families in such extremely difficult circumstances means they are often overlooked and neglected, not only by their own family members but also by the community surrounding them. Most children display moderate to severe dysfunctional social behaviour as result of their deeply engrained insecurity, shyness, depression and often trauma. The harsh realities of these children's lives require the implementation of a modified educational programme, adapted to their specific developmental needs, which are so closely linked to their living environment of deprivation and poverty.

At Sanjeevani our main objectives are to empower the children, boost their living skills and build up their personality. By enhancing their self-confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness these children will learn to make sure that they get what they need in their daily life, whether it is about making sure they get enough food at home, practical support or being a part of social interaction in the world surrounding them. The Sanjeevani children are given the freedom to develop according to their own individual pace. The programme is designed to stimulate their senses and curiosity, motivate them to develop their own initiative, allow them to make mistakes and to correct themselves, make them "co-owners" of the classroom by displaying their art and pictures and engaging them in how to look after the classroom, thus creating responsibility and a sense of home. They are introduced to learning materials and toys that aid them in developing academic skills, concentration, the ability to make their own choices, coordination, a sense of order and independence. The wide ranging educational toys and materials invite self-learning and inspire creative play.

The concept of activities in small groups and the teachers rotating amongst the groups, whilst observing, guiding and teaching the children is based on the Montessori approach.

Sanjeevani is a preparation stage for a particular group of children that would have failed any programme of immediate integration. Whereas we are aware that the next stages of inclusion and further integration of the children are not likely to take place in a Montessori setting, by the time the children will leave the dynamic learning environment at the Sanjeevani Centre, they will be able to function in more traditional education models and be most eager to learn new things through different ways.

The Montessori method is based on the fundamental belief that children learn best by doing. With the Montessori method, learning takes place in an environment where passive acceptance and memorisation of pre-existing knowledge are replaced with active pursuit of experiences. Instead of teacher directed group activities, students learning according to the Montessori method are encouraged to discover activities on their own. They may work alone, with a partner or as part of a group. They can stay with a particular learning activity as long as they desire and move onto the next challenge when they are ready.

The Montessori method utilises a multi-age classroom, where the children in various stages of development learn from each other, with the younger children learning by observing older or more able children. Older children also benefit by instructing younger children. At Sanjeevani there is a "young group" (3-10) and an "older" group (10-18) that attend the centre at different hours. All activities take place in multi-age subgroups.

It turns the traditional concept of a classroom on its head by seeking ways to adapt learning approaches to each child, rather than sitting children into a rigid setting. The method is founded on the belief that exposing children to knowledge through a variety of sensory experiences promotes learning better than simply listening to a lesson. The hands-on techniques of the Montessori teaching approach employ all the senses in the learning process.

Montessori Method and Learning Disabilities

The fact that children with special needs often excel in a learning environment based on the Montessori method has generated a great deal of interest. Although the Montessori method is used with children who have a wide range of learning abilities, the developer of the method, Dr. Maria Montessori, initially worked with several groups of children with learning disabilities.

Perhaps one reason that the Montessori method has proven so successful among children with special needs is the pacing. Children are encouraged to move ahead at their own pace. They take up a new activity only when they are comfortable that they have learned enough from the previous activity. Another technique highly supportive for children with learning disabilities is the degree of personal attention that students receive. Montessori teachers are not installed at the front room by a podium or imposing desk. Rather, they move throughout the room observing, guiding and assessing each individual child.

At the Sanjeevani Centre the children work at their own pace, finding attractive activities which meet their abilities and are appropriate for their different stages of development.

A Different Learning Style

Children with special needs find that the multi sensory, interactive environment created by the Montessori method is the perfect setting for learning. There is a high degree of stimulation and children are highly involved with their learning. This is precisely the outcome that many individual education plans seek to achieve. Many children with learning disabilities also derive great benefit from observing other children acting in normal and appropriate ways. At Sanjeevani we aim to move these children beyond the passive observation stage and gently coach them towards active participation in the classroom activities, thus preparing them for the next stage of integration, which in most cases will be an inclusive education environment.

The Montessori method embraces uniqueness. Differences in learning style and pace are handled with ease. For this reason, the Montessori method is equally successful with many types of children, including children with special educational needs. And because the pace of learning is decided by the child, children stay motivated and build positive self-esteem.

Therefore at the Sanjeevani Centre for Child Development we apply the following learning principles:

1. The Approach

The Sanjeevani programme aims to help children reach their full potential. Our special educators assist, guide, help and allow the child to experience the joy of learning, the time to enjoy the process, and ensure the development of self-esteem.

2. Materials

The classroom is equipped with things/materials/toys that our children enjoy and return to repeatedly. This includes multi-sensory, sequential and self-correcting materials/toys/games to facilitate learning.

3. Positive attitude towards school

The learning activities are individualised, even when done in groups, so that a child engages in a learning task that appeals to his/her abilities and builds a positive attitude toward learning.

4. Developing self-confidence

Tasks are designed in accordance to the abilities of different children. This removes the negative experience of frequent failure, contributing to the children's healthy emotional development.

5. A habit of concentration

The ability to listen attentively to what is said or demonstrated presupposes effective learning. Through series of absorbing experiences, the children form habits of extended attention, increasing his/her ability to concentrate.

6. An abiding curiosity

Opportunities are offered for our children to discover qualities, dimensions and relationships amidst a variety of stimulating learning situations thereby developing curiosity, an essential element in creative learning.

7. Initiative and persistence

Our children are surrounded with materials, toys and activities geared to his/her inner needs so that he/she becomes accustomed to engaging in activities on his/her own, resulting in a habit of initiative.

Dr. Montessori stressed the importance of respecting each child as an individual, having a thorough knowledge of child development and being both a sensitive observer of the child as well as a facilitator. She believed that these teacher attributes allowed one to "follow the child" in facilitating and creating opportunities for experiences and learning which are carefully matched to the child's needs, interests, and developmental levels. She also stressed the importance of preparing an environment for a child which allowed the child to be a highly engaged and active participant. She noted that a child's play is the child's work, and the multiple activities, toys and materials available in Montessori classrooms are referred to as "work."

Key- elements of the Sanjeevani Special Education Curriculum

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Cooperating with each other
- Problem solving
- Describing feelings
- Sharing ideas
- Expressing feelings
- Caring for precious things
- Sharing responsibility
- Developing awareness of personal hygiene
- Caring for toys

Language, Literacy and Communication

- Asking questions
- Positional language
- Story telling
- Interpreting pictures
- Using picture symbols

- Discussion
- Recognizing names
- Describing toys

Mathematical

- Describing shape
- Ordering
- Describing pattern
- Counting
- Shape recognition
- Sharing
- Mathematical language

Knowledge and understanding of the world

- Exploring movement
- Naming body parts
- Experimenting with materials
- Building, selecting and using materials
- Cutting and joining
- Discussing features of the world around us

Physical development

- Developing fine and gross motor skills
- Balancing skills
- Moving with increased control
- Moving confidently
- Moving with awareness of others
- Using small and large apparatus/tools

Creative development

- Sensory exploration
- Use of imagination
- Responding to music
- Enjoying song, dance and games
- Using materials
- Working in three dimensions

Extra notes on the educational approach at Sanjeevani

The development of independence and the ability to make choices.

Research has shown that children with the most severe disabilities make few meaningful choices in their daily lives. In fact, the relationship between disability level and choice making is an inverse one. The more severe a child's disability is, the fewer opportunities to make meaningful choices he/she experiences

Montessori classrooms help children with disabilities to make choices and become independent learners in many ways. At the Sanjeevani Centre, like in any Montessori classroom, our children may choose any material/activity/game/toy for which they have had a lesson or guidance given by the teachers. The children's activities, therefore, are not only predetermined by the teachers' lesson plans, but they are given the freedom of choice regarding their own activities. Our children with disabilities thus are afforded the same opportunities to choose materials each day, just like their typically developing peers. At Sanjeevani they learn to make meaningful choices many times each day. This fosters independence, because as early as a child's second day, he/she is encouraged to choose from any of the materials and toys presented the day before. With his/her first choice, the child is taking a step toward becoming an independent learner. Independence is also facilitated by offering children a long uninterrupted block of "work" or play time daily, freeing them to truly experience this independent learning style.

The emphasis on and value of repetition within the Montessori environment.

Children with special needs typically require lots of practice and may make progress in small increments. Montessori philosophy recognises that the amount of repetition needed varies from child to child and skill to skill. Therefore, flexibility in the amount of practice needed for each child and each skill occurs daily for all children.

The use of concrete materials.

For children with disabilities, the use of concrete materials such as educational toys is critical to promoting real learning. Montessori classrooms offer a wide range of such concrete materials children can learn from as a regular part of the curriculum. At the Sanjeevani Centre all educational materials are stored and displayed on open shelves, so the children have easy access to them. The children themselves are responsible to organise the shelves and keep them tidy. Sanjeevani tries to ensure that the materials provided meet the needs and interests of the children. The open shelves and clearly visible learning resources in this particular learning environment are an excellent way for these children with thought processing and imagination difficulties to learn to make choices and to develop independence. The Sanjeevani Centre wants the children to feel that the classroom belongs to them rather than the teachers.

The use of sensorial materials

Sanjeevani aims to offer its children a wide variety of materials that guide them through different processes of development. In the case of most sensorial materials the teachers assist them in exploring their senses.

Children explore the world through their senses. Sensorial materials assist children in gaining the tools and knowledge to understand their sensory impressions of the world. Each of the sensorial materials isolates one defining quality such as colour, shape, weight, texture, size, sound, smell, and so forth. Children learn by distinguishing, categorizing, and classifying their senses and perceptions. These skills provide a foundation for the later development of more advanced skills in language, math, music, etc. Sensorial materials help children internalize concepts and relate new information to what they already know.

The “Fuel for Learning” Nutritional Component

The healthy and nutritious meals at the Sanjeevani Centre form an essential component in the programme. As nutritional standards and intellectual performance are closely linked, the Sanjeevani Centre offers its children a daily balanced diet, which is high in proteins accompanied by a variety of vegetables.

The Sanjeevani children learn to make choices and develop initiative by being allowed to serve themselves at meal times. This way the children gain a necessary degree of assertiveness when food is distributed in order to make sure they are no longer overlooked within their domestic settings.

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