

Program “A missing wheel”

As part of the SISAAP project (Sport as a tool in the socialization and development of skills of people with autism) in which are, alongside CUAA, organizations Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, Asociacion Autismo Sevilla, Fundacion Escuela Andaluza de Economia Social, Associazione di promozione sociale e sportivo-dilettantistica NuoveRotte taking part, our idea is to present quality and prominent practices of using sports as a tool in working with people with autism. We don't have to look much further than an hour drive from our office in Zagreb to Nedelišće, where our member association for autism “Pogled” is located. Association “Pogled” has been implementing a program named “A missing wheel” for many years. It is a program well recognized not only in Croatia, but outside its borders, as innovative in terms of including vulnerable groups, using sports, involving the local community and encouraging volunteerism, which can lead to exceptional results in the development of children with autism.

One of the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups in our communities are children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The reason for this is the specificity of this behavioral disorder.

Most activities and behaviors that children with typical development master automatically and without difficulties, children with autism have to learn step by step, over a long period of time through individual work and support. This makes it very difficult for children with autism to be successfully involved in any type of activity, simply because they must acquire skills to do so. Very few available and organized activities respect their way and pace of learning. Due to that, there is a growing need for programs that are tailored exclusively to the needs of children with autism and through which they are prepared for inclusion through strengthening their independence, self-confidence and satisfaction with what they have achieved.

The program “A missing wheel” is innovative because it is tailored to the needs of children with ASD and combines the knowledge and experience of parents of children with ASD as well as experts in speech therapy, educational rehabilitators, occupational therapists, kinesiologists and health professionals. It is individualized according to abilities of each child, and each child is accompanied by one volunteer who provides support during the activity. Without volunteers, as representatives Association for autism “Pogled” have stressed many times, the program would not be possible. The emphasis is on enthusiasm, a positive and stimulating attitude to encourage children to interact and reach their maximum potential.

Through socialization and recreational activities of this program, children are able to sustain their attention for longer periods of time, improve fine and gross motor skills, coordination, awareness of their own body and movement, as well as work in groups. These activities help children to adapt and cope with different auditory, visual and sensory stimuli in the environment.

Through tailored and adapted recreational activities (swimming, gymnastics, therapeutic riding), children strengthen their physical abilities and motor skills, acquire basic communication and socialization skills and learn to respect sports and other rules of conduct. These activities are carried out daily in the gymnastics center and in pools. 70 children aged 4 to 18 participate through groups formed according to their age, individual specifics and current abilities.

People who work with children with disabilities are certified AutismFitness trainers. Volunteers who join the program undergo basic training on working with children with ASD. This program is a supplement to basic therapies and early intervention, and through it the progress and improvement of the quality of life of children with autism is much faster and more successful.

The program has been successfully implemented for more than 5 years and during that time exceptionally good results have been achieved. The number of children involved in regular kindergartens and schools, sports and other activities with their peers with typical development has increased. Association "Pogled" has a very good support from the local community, both local government through support and funding, and citizens through the response to volunteering and a growing understanding of the needs of children with disabilities as well as acceptance of diversity. The quality of the program is also recognized at the national level, where the financing of the program was achieved through project calls of national ministries.

The most important impact of this program is improving the quality of life of children with ASD and their families. Children are becoming more successful in coping with challenges of the environment and are getting more involved in interacting with their peers. The conditions for their further inclusion in regular education systems are being achieved, and in this way the preconditions are being created for their independent living later in their life. This program is one of the ways to achieve long-term well-being of children with ASD that is vital to their future and the basis for determining how they can be included and accepted in their community.