

The Adapted Learning Through Play Calendar

Preamble

Children grow at different rates and have different character traits unique to each of them. Even though development follows a broad pattern, there can be variation in speed, sequence and susceptibility to experiences, in a child's growth and development. In other words, development is differential, with variations in individual characteristics. When some of these are more overt and noticeable than others, and when the difference or deviation goes beyond the normal range, it is considered to be a special need. This special need could arise due to developmental delay in a particular domain, difficulty in fitting into the norm, impairment or deficit in a particular area.

The need for a new perspective

Children develop to their optimum potential when ALL areas of development are considered and addressed holistically. Children with high-risk birth histories, and those with impairments are also best supported when their needs and abilities are viewed within this perspective. Children with disability have an uneven developmental profile, lagging dramatically in some areas of development while doing well in others. It is a matter of great concern that these special children are kept apart, and their development considered differently, with the focus mainly on the disability, and on "normalising" the child. In this approach, the child's strengths and overall potential remain untapped. Often the lowest level of attainment in an area overwhelms the attention of the adult, directs all interaction with the child and guides the intervention plan, while the child's abilities remain dormant or unharnessed, and fade away. As persons with disabilities themselves say, "Just because I cannot walk does not mean I cannot think", or "Just because I cannot speak it does not mean I have nothing to say". The subtler areas of the child's development, especially the emotional well being of the child are all too often least understood and therefore, given scant importance.

Parents of children with special needs are typically stressed and they focus primarily on the disability. Their role is very demanding and sometimes feeling lost, they are totally dependent on professionals for guidance. Even many traditionally trained community workers, who are aware of the support needed, feel unequal to the task of social inclusion. Disability tends to be mystified by the medical model and as a result, children with special needs are marginalised. The early years, birth to six years, are critical developmental periods in a child's life. Much can be done to enhance the child's potential at this stage. The Learning through Play Calendar is an instrument that can address this issue. The move to use the calendar for children with special needs had its genesis in this belief.

The Learning Through Play Calendar

The Hincks-Dellcrest Learning through Play Calendar (LTPC) is an educational resource for parents, helping them to discover enjoyable ways of nurturing and playing with their child at each stage of development. The calendar represents pictorially, with simple, clear, caring messages, a child's important developmental stages and needs from birth to six years. It focuses on all-round development and follows a child as her sense of self, physical skills, relationships, understanding and communication develop.

In 1998, Bala Mandir Research Foundation (BMRF), Chennai, India, undertook to adapt the calendars for use in India. The founding premise was to expand the focus from biological parents to consciously include all key adults and caregivers whose understanding of children's capabilities and development would impact the quality of the child's environment and experiences. The tool has been effectively used with parents and professionals across different environments, including rural areas and urban slums, crèches and institutions, and medical/health care programmes.

It soon became evident that the extraordinary gift of the tool was that it enabled everyone, regardless of their prior knowledge, experience or professional training, to view the child holistically and see how they could engage with the child in simple ways to promote development. The move to apply the tool with families and professionals working with children with special needs was an obvious and exciting next step.

Evolution of the idea to apply the material for special needs

In 2002, BMRF in partnership with Vidya Sagar, a NGO dedicated to working with children and adults with special needs, launched a project to examine the utility of the calendar for adults interacting with children with special needs. This was done in three ways - Parent information and empowerment, training new professionals and professional review. The process was a formative one, with lessons learnt from each meeting or training helping the effectiveness of the next programme.

Parent information and empowerment

100 young children with disabilities were identified and the calendars were used for assessment, programme planning and parent education. The project was headed by a team of 10 professionals from Vidya Sagar, who each worked with 10 children and their parents.

It was expected that the process of finding their child's place in each area of development would help the parents focus on both the abilities as well as the needs of their child. The pictures would allow them to see their own parenting practices that support their child's learning and help them find areas where they could easily enrich the child's experiences. These elements of the calendar would then help parents understand programmes being set for their child and

the importance of the activities and goals selected. Careful documentation of the use of the Calendar with parents and their children provided many insights into the practical benefits and limitations of the tool.

Training new professionals

The efficacy of the material in training two categories of professionals - 26 new community based rehabilitation workers and 26 ancillary staff at a special school - was explored. The main goals of the training were to help them understand development principles, particularly how the children they serve would have uneven developmental profiles, and to increase their awareness of how they could support each child's development and learning through appropriate interactions. It was expected that the tool, in its simplicity and with graphic presentations, would be effective in putting across these ideas that have traditionally been hard to share.

Professional Review

The main goal of the professional review was to obtain a critical evaluation of the use of the calendar for special needs. Apart from the 10 professionals who participated in the parent information & empowerment programme, groups of professionals were brought together at different times in the process. A group of 50 special educators and therapists from Vidya Sagar, and a group of 13 experienced community based rehabilitation workers were introduced to the calendar. Each group was asked to use the calendar, and comment on its effectiveness in guiding parents and in supporting their traditional tools in assessment and planning a programme for children.

The experience gained in the training programmes and the feedback obtained underscores the value of the calendar in reaching out to families and professionals new to developmental issues and the ways of dealing with children with special needs. The calendar retains its value as a handy reference guide for the adult to understand the child's current achievements and needs, to think of ways to support the child and to monitor the child's progress through the early years. Its simplicity allows people with little experience and knowledge in the area of impairments to appreciate the child's needs with a little guidance. Such understanding empowers those in the child's environment to participate meaningfully in planning and caring for the child with special needs.

Adapting the calendars for special needs

Initial trials in using the calendars with parents and professionals led to the decision to adapt the calendar format to reflect the special considerations involved when working with children with special needs and their families. The calendars were reformatted into two sets each covering 14 stages from birth to 6 years.

Calendar 1 with 14 stages has an age reference. Each page illustrates the normative development at that stage with salient features and messages of how learning occurs through play in that age. The pages are colour-coded to match the corresponding stages in Calendar 2.

Calendar 2, again with 14 stages, has a stage reference instead of age, in order that parents viewing it do not get unduly discouraged at their child's low level of performance. The stages are colour-coded to match corresponding stages in calendar 1.

Each of the 14 stages contains in 5 columns, messages and pictures illustrating the development of the child's sense of self, physical development, relationships, understanding, and communication at that stage. In the adapted version, the five columns are segmented so as to be independent of each other across the 14 stages.

This reformatting allows for multi-segmentation of the developmental profile and allows for an individual holistic profile to emerge, where a child can be simultaneously at different developmental levels in the different domains. The profile obtained enables attention to be focused appropriately on the five segments individually, from which to work further. Some of the visuals have been modified to depict disabilities in children to make it user friendly and inclusive.

Development of support material

In dealing with children with special needs, the importance of the child's family history, birth history and other demographic data were recognised, leading to the development of appropriate support material. A Quadrant to record the family and birth history and other demographic details, and an Oval to record the child's activities in the different domains were thus developed. This led to a complete, ready package for use by professionals, consisting of a Quadrant, an Oval and the two Calendars. Both the Quadrant and Oval have checklists for ready reference.

The Quadrant helps the special educator to fill up the child's particular history regarding the family, birth and development all on one page so that there are no interruptions while the parent is talking. The natural, free flowing conversation enables the parent to share details & concerns that a more structured interview format does not allow.

The Oval helps the interviewer chart out the child's activities and abilities in a graphic manner, so that at one glance one can see the child's level in the various domains and can plan for activities that will enhance each domain. It would also serve as a ready reference to follow the progress of the child's development. It empowers the parent to question the professional in planning activities. These

two tools have been developed through experience in the field and through training new professionals.

Benefits of the adapted Learning Through Play Calendars

The ease with which the calendar is able to put across complex principles of development and explain the interaction between learning and the environment available to the child makes it the ideal bridge for professionals to reach families and other adults who regularly interact with the child. Several features of the calendar make it particularly effective in putting across to the user a more holistic way of looking at children with special needs.

Holistic perspective

The calendar focuses equally on all areas of development including the vital and least understood sense of self. The segmentation of each area allows a profile of the child to emerge, helping the user to keep the child's abilities in view while noting areas of need. The individual profiles serve as an interaction guide by telling the adult what cognitive level to pitch an activity at (U), how best to interact with the child (R and S), what physical challenge and postures would be appropriate for the child (P), and what language to use and response to expect (C).

For many parents, seeing their child's abilities highlighted so clearly is a new experience and they feel more positive and less worried about their child's potential. For experienced as well as new professionals, typically trained to look for areas of delay and impairment, it enables a shift in their perspective from a focus on disability to an appreciation of the children in the context of their abilities.

Ease of understanding

The illustrations and simple comments make it accessible to people from a variety of educational, socio-economic and experience backgrounds. The calendar can even be used with siblings to help them understand why their brother or sister behaves in certain ways and what they can do to help. The illustrations suggest activities appropriate for the child at a given stage and show parents what they can do and why it is important. This capacity for self-learning that the calendar provides is an unexpected and powerful benefit, as it demystifies intervention for children with special needs into simple, typical child-rearing activities and it places information in the hands of the parent and workers with less formal training, whose interactions have a substantial impact on child learning.

Attention on the environment; not on the impairment

In each picture, the voice of the child tells the adults how their actions can support the child's learning and development. The message, that much can be achieved by fixing the environment rather than the typical intervention focus on

the child's impairment is a positive way to approach supporting atypical development. The illustrations capture everyday activities in the home and imaginatively include adults and siblings, to highlight the importance of the social and physical environment. The activity ideas that emerge are easily incorporated within the child's natural routines and environments, a basic requirement of an effective programme for young children with disabilities.

Endorsing the adaptation

A group of 16 professionals considered experts in different areas of child development and disability was asked to use the package and provide a critical appraisal. They were given six months in which to field test the material and report back.

This not only helped give credibility to the package, but also served as a means of outreach and expansion into other institutions and disciplines.

Peer review

It is interesting to note that the peer review of the material reaffirmed and endorsed the opinions of the other groups. While the professionals expressed their concerns about the limitations of the calendar in detailed assessment and programme planning, they did appreciate the calendar's role as a handy quick-reference for both, and its compatibility with further checklists and assessment tools. They noted that the calendar also helps as a reminder for them to ensure that their assessment and planning processes took into consideration the strengths and areas of need of the child in all developmental areas and the interconnectedness of developmental domains that is of crucial importance in assessment and programme planning. It is clear that the adapted calendars are not meant as 'stand alone' tools for assessment or programme planning.

There are several cautions and limitations in using the calendar for programme planning and assessment, pointing to the need for judicious use perhaps only by professionals experienced in their respective areas of expertise. Many areas of developmental concern for different areas of impairment are not covered by the calendar in great detail. Most obvious among these is the lack of mention of reflexes, lack of detailing of development of self care skills, the simplification of the cognitive area and the grouping together of areas such as receptive and expressive language and fine and gross motor skills.

For children with profound impairments, the very small areas of ability and skills are important to document and cannot be done with the calendar. Further, atypical developmental sequences occur normally with certain kinds of impairment, which are not captured by the calendar. Many children have splinter skills, which are then hard to document or represent on the calendar. In severe disability, it is not good practice to follow a strict developmental sequence in programme planning.

Effective use of the calendar for these purposes involves comparing the findings from the specialised tools of their discipline with the calendar - something that requires good knowledge and experience. There was much concern that inexperienced workers or parents may select inappropriate programme goals for the children. In general, there were many reasons to use the calendar for either programme planning or assessment only with adequate training and guidance.

However, those who used it along with their specialised assessment and planning tools highlighted several positive benefits.

It serves as a handy reference for both assessment and planning. The pictures and messages at each stage serve as quick tips on what to assess or expect - particularly useful as many specialists found they were uncomfortable with other areas of development. During field testing, different recurring SPRUC profiles for different conditions were noticed and could guide differential diagnosis.

The messages can be framed into questions for easy, initial assessments. The calendar quickly identifies areas and gaps in learning where more detailed inputs are required. The messages suggest teaching methodology, useful for programme planning and parent training while the 8 pictures at each stage suggest at least 8 simple, everyday activities. The individual profile reminds the adult to work simultaneously on the strengths and disabilities. Thus, assessment and programme planning become friendlier, more functional and less threatening.

Conclusion

In one simple move of segmenting the columns of the calendar, a new vista has opened, enabling a child's unique profile to appear. It moves from having to squeeze a child into an ill-fitting mould of "normalcy", to allowing him to form his own mould. The package enables the professionals to use their expertise and yet demystify disability while conveying information and skills to the parent. The pictures and the messages speak the "thousand words" that empower the parent with the knowledge that her child can be different - and equal. It enables a parent to be a proactive partner in the planning and execution of her child's programme. The attractive and simple package makes it user friendly even for the unlettered, and is sure to offer a better deal for ALL children.