

REPORT: PRABHAT SUMMER FUN CLUB 2009

Why summer workshops for special children?

The enthusiastic response to Prabhat's summer workshops over past two years has shown us how important these programmes can be for special children. They are excluded from the summer opportunities that 'normal' children take for granted, and that are advertised all over Ahmedabad every year. Things are beginning to change. This year we have been happy to notice a few summer programmes for special children. That is a very encouraging sign. It helped us to strengthen our summer services, not just to special children but to their siblings and communities as well.

Planning with a difference

In April, the Prabhat team met to plan a Summer Fun Club 2009. The difference this year was that we decided to bring special children together with their siblings and with other children from their neighbourhoods and from the Maninagar area. We wanted a truly mixed group that would provide several important experiences. Special children would have the experience and confidence of learning and playing with others. Their siblings and community children would experience how 'normal' special children can be, and this could lead on to better integration in homes as well as in neighbourhoods and communities. Barriers of stigma and ignorance could be lowered and hopefully, the summer experience would lead on to a happier situation outside of a protective Prabhat environment.

We formed five activity teams under the direction of an educator with one of these special interests: art and craft, dance and music, sports and games, yoga/meditation/aerobic exercises, gardening/cooking and picnics. Leaflets and banners were prepared and distributed to take the news of Summer Fun Club 2009 into homes, communities, schools and neighbourhoods. We contacted other NGOs, potential volunteers, parents and other resource persons. Our message was to support Prabhat in its effort to give special children opportunities which should be theirs by right, and to help them relate with others in a 'normal' way.

Space was a challenge that demanded early attention. Prabhat's Maninagar Centre has just enough space to conduct its regular activities, and we have very little outdoor area. This time, we needed space not only for larger numbers but also for a variety of indoor and outdoor activity. In addition, we wanted to have an environment that would give special children an experience of the so-called 'normal' surroundings of a regular school. Near our campus is the AMC School no. 6 and the Durga Primary School. Both were contacted, and both were willing to cooperate. That was very encouraging. The May elections meant the AMC school no. 6 could not make its rooms and spaces available to us until 5 May, and the Fun Club began on that day.

Why siblings and other children?

Three years ago when Prabhat started its efforts in Maninagar, the attitude of most families with special children was one of helplessness and hopelessness. Encouraging them to bring their children to Prabhat was a very difficult challenge. Things began to change very gradually, as their children began to learn and acquire basic life-skills and confidence. With that came greater involvement of parents and a gradual change in their attitudes. With hope came new demands on Prabhat on behalf of their children. This has been encouraging. Yet a corresponding changes in the neighbourhoods and communities is taking much longer. Even within families, isolation from siblings in activities and play can be very hard on special children. We therefore have felt the urgent need to reach out more effectively to these

sections, which are the society within which our special children need the most support and the most acceptance. They need acceptance as children with great potential who deserve respect and understanding, away from being labeled as 'mad'. Summer Fun Club 2009 was a step toward this kind of integration and acceptance.

Through our contacts with parents, mohalla leaders, auto-rickshaw drivers and others, we began to publicise the Summer Fun Club within local communities. The reaction was positive. Many children wanted to join when they heard of the activities and events that were planned. Yet when they heard that Prabhat works with special children --- 'mad' children in many eyes --- some of the enthusiasm for the Fun Club disappeared. We decided to press ahead with whatever numbers we could put together, and hoped that soon word of mouth would spread and others would come to join the fun. That strategy worked. Soon we had siblings and other children come along to the Fun Club with their 'special' contacts. Often these were those who had earlier rejected participation. Equally encouraging was the spread of participants from different socio-economic groups. Our AMC location attracted curious visitors, and this too helped spread the word. Apart from our Psychology student interns, we attracted parents and other volunteers. The ratio of teacher to child was 1:3. Our interns were able to do detailed observations on learning and behaviour patterns.

Some significant experiences

Salman is a special child from a mohalla which pays little attention to him. At the Fun Club, Salman's status was that of a leader. It was because of him that other so called normal children from his mohalla had joined, and these children would identify themselves as 'Salman mohallawala'. Another neighbourhood child, Megha, announced that she is from "Khushi's society". Khushi is a special child, and she too had a new status now as giving chances to others. A special child who used to be locked up at home and is still afraid of darkness, hit a 'normal' child who tried to put him in a dark corner. The child complained to the teacher that he had been hit, and this led to a dialogue on why the special child had reacted so strongly. Hostility was replaced with understanding. Tabassum, a 'normal' child, had Surabhi, a special child, as her dance partner. Tabassum learned the steps quickly and then patiently helped Surabhi to master them. When Surabhi fell sick, Tabassum was very disappointed, but a friendship had been made. Khushi announced to her friends that now that she had introduced them to Prabhat and the Fun Club, they should now invite her to their events! This special child decided to make demands for equal treatment!

A celebration

The Summer Fun Club 2009 concluded on May 28 with a grand celebration at the AMC School location. There was an exhibition of art and craft, screening of videos of summer activities and outings, dance and music performances, sports and competitions of many kinds. All children and families, special and 'normal', were equal participants, helping each other and joining the fun. There was lots of music and shouts of encouragement. Parents were very active as guides and helpers, and cheering and encouraging their children at every event. There were representatives of NGOs, service clubs, local and city authorities, school and college educators, neighbours and others from the local community. A groom who was to get married next door came with his wedding party to join the fun and enquire what was going on. Altogether, it was an event that helped demonstrate our purpose of integration and acceptance.

After the exhibition and sports events, participants gathered under a large shamiana to enjoy a cultural programme by the children that was so well integrated that many said they could not identify who was 'special' or 'handicapped' and who was not! The Prabhat team had an opportunity to present our work as an organization and to invite participation and support. Some guests later came to the mike to speak and shared their admiration for what one described as a 'mind-blowing' revelation. Everyone wanted more of these opportunities. The enjoyment continued over lunch that brought everyone together again, and no one complained about the heat! Prabhat parents were overjoyed. This year their pride was not just about what their children could do, but also about how well they could be accepted.

What have we learned?

We have learned that, as we expected, special children do best when integrated with others. This points to the need for greater efforts at integration in all future Prabhat efforts. We have learned that 'normal' children enjoy these opportunities, and indeed they have asked us to ensure more chances to play and learn with their special friends. We have learned how little prejudice children have about each other, and how much of discrimination comes from the way elders behave. In the mohallas, we find greater acceptance as news has spread from those who enjoyed the Fun Club. Although the summer experience would be much more difficult to re-create in a mohalla environment, as distinct from a school setting, we now need to innovate community-based approaches that can take this experience further. Prabhat is building on its summer experience with designing a **Community Based Programme** during 2009-10 that can extend Prabhat's services beyond its Centres, into the communities and environments to which our special children belong and in which they must find acceptance and support for future lives as productive and happy citizens.

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