

GLOBAL VOICES

On speaking terms with children with no language

Social Educator Katarzyna Sadowska works in a special kindergarten in Gdansk in Poland and has specialised in Augmentative and Alternative Communication with children with a mental deficiency who have no language

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Social Educator Katarzyna Sadowska has a goal. She would like to make life easier for children who, due to a physical or a mental handicap, are unable to communicate with people around them. Therefore, she has specialised in communication with people who has no language.

The method is called Augmentative and Alternative Communication, and Katarzyna Sadowska is certain that alternative communication is possible in many ways. She practises these methods every day in the kindergarten, Gdansk

Przedszkole 77, for children with a mental deficiency.

– It is all about teaching the children to express what they want and for them to understand what other people say to them. Some of them prefer to point at pictures, others use special computers. Some point at letters, make signs or do something completely different. The most important thing is that the children learn to express basic things. What is easiest for them varies, and it is our job to help them find out, says Katarzyna Sadowska and points at the picture boards and piles of pictures lying on the table in the room in the kindergarten specially designed for language exercises.

There are large and small picture boards, a computer with large keys, and a touch screen. Katarzyna enjoys working here. Her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm and the commitment in her voice clearly indicates that she likes her work.

– You can see the result of your work and how the children make progress all the time which is very gratifying, she says.

Good conditions

Katarzyna Sadowska's workplace consists of well appointed

rooms with modern appliances. It is located in a part of a house and allocated for 36 children with physical or mental handicaps at the age from four to ten. The children live at home with their parents and go to kindergarten while their parents are at work.

– This is one of the four special kindergartens in Gdansk and we have children with spastic paralysis and children with brain damage. Our special competence is children with no language, says Katarzyna Sadowska.

In the kindergarten the children participate in the daily activities supervised by the preschool teachers in addition to physical training which the attached physiotherapists attend to. Teachers with special competences are responsible for language stimulation.

Katarzyna Sadowska is one of the teachers responsible for the children's language stimulation, and this means daily exercises where picture boards, computers and sign methods are used.

– We work with the children in rooms especially designed for this purpose and in the common rooms, says Katarzyna, as we approach one of the common rooms where a boy with

spastic paralysis in a wheelchair immediately points at the word 'hello', which is one of the ten words cut out in paper and glued to a small table on the wheelchair.

– Hello Lukasz, says Katarzyna and smiles at the boy.

– Lukasz has spastic paralysis and cannot speak. He has made significant progress lately and has learned 'to speak' by pointing at words. But we also make other exercises, says Katarzyna Sadowska.

Parent cooperation

Katarzyna Sadowska does not spend all her time on the children. Their parents need to know how to stimulate their children at home and cooperation with the parents is therefore very important.

– After all, the parents spend the most time with their children and have the best opportunities to influence their development. It is important that the parents continue stimulation of the children at home and that they know which exercises to do with the children, says Katarzyna Sadowska.

Katarzyna has had several courses in Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Combined with her daily work

at the institution this means that she has obtained a lot of knowledge in this field to the benefit of both children with mental deficiencies as well as other social educators in Poland.

– We organise courses in Augmentative and Alternative Communication for other social educators and make trial projects on communication for children who are unable to speak, she says.

Currently, Katarzyna Sadowska and Przedszkole 77 are involved in a project on language stimulation of very young children with a mental deficiency. The idea behind the project is to find new ways of alternative communication and obtain more knowledge in the field. Funds have been granted by the Polish state which makes it possible for children with mental deficiencies and their parents to go to Przedszkole 77 for special instructions in language stimulation.

– We have for example a 10-month old child who comes to the school with his parents and receives therapy in terms of language stimulation for two hours twice a week, says Katarzyna.

Katarzyna Sadowska is convinced that a very early effort



will improve children's communication skills significantly and make their lives easier.

No coincidence

Katarzyna is 44 years old and graduated as a social educator from the University of Gdansk. She has worked at Przedszkole 77 since she completed her education 20 years ago and her choice of education at the time was no coincidence.

– When I was young, I was an assistant at a summer camp for

children with mental deficiencies. It was a wonderful experience to be able to help and to make life easier for the children. Therefore, when I had to decide what I wanted to study, I had no doubt in my mind that it had to be social education, says Katarzyna Sadowska.

When Katarzyna Sadowska decided to study social education and started her studies, conditions for the disabled were very different from the way they are in Poland today.

– Before the political revolution, children with mental deficiencies or handicaps were generally not seen publicly. Disabled children were kept at home and their parents took care of them. Today, parents are entitled to have their children cared for at special institutions where they receive the required therapy and training, so a lot has happened, she says.