

FIRST STEPS AT THE AGE OF 11

or how the impossible becomes possible

For most people February 17th, 2012 was just like any other day but for **Ventsa from the Pink House** (the family-type home managed by EQ) it was her eleventh birthday.

But not just a birthday, this was the day when - ably supported by a senior nurse, took her first steps defying all predictions that she would never been able to walk. It was even suspected that her contractures will get worse because of the missed opportunity of corrective surgery in her earlier childhood when she lived in the Mogilino institution.

“As she was playing on the mattress, Ventsa sat up, stood with almost completely stretched legs and holding my hand, she hugged me. I hugged her too and she turned around and went back to her place again with almost completely stretched position of the body and continued to play.”

Here are the events leading up to 17th February.

We start with the closure of the St Petka home for mentally retarded children and young adults in Mogilino. The first 7 children were transferred to the family-type home commonly known as the Pink House during the autumn of 2008. One of those children was seven-year old Ventsa who is diagnosed with cerebral palsy. At the time of her transfer, Ventsa seemed like a rag-doll lacking good muscle tone, passive and withdrawn and she played rarely. Usually she lay on her back and was able to sit up unassisted but not to stand. She moved herself in a sitting position shuffling on her bottom or crawling and she could kneel, using her arms for support. She was fed by one of the staff and all her food was liquidized and she needed help to drink from a cup. She could not chew and just swallowed the food.

Now everything is very different. Ventsa is not only one of the most active children in the Pink House, but she has also made big advances in feeding holding the spoon and chewing her food. She can drink from a cup, holding it herself. When the leg's posture is not convenient for her, she grabs them with her hands and moves them one by one, in order to feel better. She is able to move the wheels of her wheelchair with her hands and despite her limited vision, she moves herself with great speed to the desired location negotiating narrow doors and a labyrinth of corridors.

With the help of intensive physiotherapy she has learned the classical posture and method for crawling and this has had a major impact on her interaction with staff members and the other children. Ventsa manipulates objects without assistance and plays with them, preferring things that produce sounds - balls with bells, musical toys and paper that can be scrunched. Her activity is independent and .sustained revealing an exploratory impulse and true learning capacity. She loves to play ball with an adult and gives hand for “hello” to a friend. She likes music and even tries to dance and her laughter is utterly contagious.



The significant improvement comes from applying a structured, systematic approach to e childcare and also as a result of the family-type environment that she now lives in. The possibility for individual contact during feeding, play sessions and bathing stimulates the all round development of the child.

It is extremely important for Ventsa to have physiotherapy and this only started when she came to the Pink House. But this is not simple (medical) therapy, it stimulates communication between the child and the physiotherapist. The process is pleasurable for Ventsa. The whole process resembles a particular type of communication, where all of the parts of the human body are involved, particularly the function of the voice, which the child follows.

The significant progress in Ventsa's motor development first became apparent early in 2011 when Elina Todorova started to work with her. Elina is a young and dedicated specialist from the team of Tsvetomir Tsankov - director of "Hygiya - KT" Ruse. Ventsa began to become more mobile and active, thanks to the regular sessions with the physiotherapist, as well as to her individual training and the daily communication with the team members.

Her work with the support teacher from Petar Beron School together with two other children from the house helped her develop skills for interaction with children of her age - while at the beginning she usually ignored them (unless they made physical contact with her), she now moves herself to them looking for hugs.

Since moving to the Pink House, the children have enjoyed annual holidays near the mountains in Tryavna. During 2011 they were taken to the seaside for the first time in their lives. They have become friends with the horses in the local riding club run by BTB - Ruse and have had 8 sessions of remedial riding (hippotherapy) which often yields particularly good results with children with cerebral palsy. A biofeedback expert also works with them - the psychologist Emily Damyanova. The Pink House is visited regularly by students of occupational therapy from the Universities of Ruse and York (in the UK).

Whether Ventsislava will try to repeat her spontaneous attempt at walking, we do not know. But we do know that when a child feels that he/she is accepted for who she is and is loved, that there is somebody to take notice and to help celebrate all her small successes, soon the child will take steps towards personal success.

This is the way that impossible things become possible.

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