

INTRODUCTION

Like many other developing countries, there is a lack of early intervention (EI) services in Fiji for children with disabilities or developmental delays.

Theoretically inclusiveness is one of the five guiding principles in “Na Noda Mataniciva: Kindergarten curriculum guidelines for the Fiji Islands” (Tuivaga, 2010), however, many preschools and day care centres in Fiji lack the capacity to accept children with special needs. Frank Hilton Organization (FHO) has the only early intervention centre (EIC) in Fiji, however it had a waiting list for enrollment.

In 2017 the Speech Pathology team at FHO suggested the idea of playgroups to reduce the wait for EI, especially as the organization was improving early identification of children with hearing impairments and other difficulties.

WHY EARLY INTERVENTION PLAYGROUPS?

- * Shortage of allied health professionals and EI programs.
- * Lessen gap between identification and intervention
- * Support transition to mainstream and special education settings.
- * Provides learning opportunities for parents.
- * Allows access to rehabilitation as soon as possible after assessment/ diagnosis.



GOALS OF THE PLAYGROUPS

- * Provide learning through play-based activities.
- * Increase independence and participation of child in their family and society.
- * Parent education - understanding that education begins at home.
- * Understand child’s abilities and support better engagement.
- * Provide peer support opportunities for parents.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PLAYGROUP PROGRAM

- * Assessments prior to and during 10 week program by multidisciplinary team.
- * Individual goals developed in conjunction with families.
- * Parents receive information, training and support to assist their children.
- * Regular review of goals and progress.
- * Augmentative and alternate communication strategies are used as required.
- * Parent/family member/carers must attend with the child.

THE EARLY INTERVENTION PLAYGROUPS

The children who attend playgroups have a wide range of diagnosed conditions and developmental delays. Target age group is from 0- 8 years old.

- * **Term 3 2017**—Inception of Friday morning playgroups. 8 of 13 children on waiting list for EIC attended.
- * **Term 3 2018**—Inception Friday afternoon group to provide 10 additional spaces.
- * **Term 3 of 2018**—Inception of Wednesday playgroup floor based program for children with Cerebral Palsy
- * **Term 3 2019**—Inception of ‘Listen Up’ group, a 6-week pilot playgroup-based communication rehabilitation for children with hearing loss.



Sample Timetable

9.30am :	Circle time
9.35am :	Visual schedule
9.45am :	Free play and activity stations
10.45am :	Snacks and parent training
11.00am :	Music and Movement
11.15am :	Water break
11.20am :	Circle time, activity and story time
11.25am :	Goodbye song and closing routine

RESULTS

Since the inception in September 2017, 81 children and their families have had access to EI. Children may do more than one term of playgroup depending on their needs and the educational placements available.

Total Children in EI playgroups 2017- 2019	Transitioned to other programs	Children in EI play-groups 2019 Term 3	Moved out of city	Frequent absences - referred to community support officer	Child now in care at home
81	40	33	3	4	1

Transitioned to other programs	Transitioned to FHO EIC	Transitioned to mainstream	Transitioned to special school
40	72.5% (n=29)	17.5% (n=7)	10% (n=4)

Three children have transitioned from the Wednesday floor-based program to the Friday regular intervention playgroup after meeting their goals.

PARENT FEEDBACK

- * “The information provided at playgroup has helped me to understand my son even more - the importance of getting him involved in home activities, the importance of having play sessions at home.”
- * “Be more patient and let him indicate what he wants to do. Also, I talk less now and wait for him to say something.”
- * “We never knew that those activities would help, so now we are planning to take her out most of the times.... There should be more of these around the country.”
- * “Meeting more kids that are similar to X and seeing their capabilities is an eye opener and good experience to share. Also seeing other parents around their kids and how they assist them.”



LESSONS & CHALLENGES

1. **Family engagement:** Frequent change of caregivers/parents who accompany child poses a barrier to parent-child engagement and information sharing.
2. **Goal setting:** Parental involvement in goalsetting facilitates appreciation of progress.
3. **Assessment:** Playgroups provide excellent opportunities to observe children’s abilities and communicate with families during program.
4. **Staffing and time:** Allocation of human resources and continued technical training essential.
5. **Space:** a child-friendly, safe place must be available.
6. **Multiple languages:** there are three official languages in Fiji - English, i Taukei, and Hindi (Tuivaga, 2010). Availability of multilingual communication is essential.
7. **Delivering a culturally and developmentally appropriate program:** Accommodating cultural and developmental differences and ensuring program caters to all is essential. E.g. songs/stories are culturally relevant and activities need to accommodate different level of skill.
8. **Transitioning inclusive ECE placements:** FHO assists in transitioning children into other appropriate education placements. This is a process and relationships are being developed with local mainstream centres.
9. **Data/monitoring and evaluation:** Limited capacity to gather and analyze data. Difficulty in measuring qualitative indicators.

CONCLUSION

The playgroups have offered more children with disabilities the opportunity to receive early Intervention in the Suva area. Parents participating in the program found it beneficial to themselves and their children. The development of capacity building to enable replication of this program would be beneficial to children with disabilities across Fiji, as well as in other low to middle income countries, where there is a lack of early intervention services available.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tuivaga, U. V. (2010). Developing and Implementing an Inclusive Early Childhood Curriculum Guideline. ARNEC Connection - Inclusive Foundations for Early Childhood: Working together to reach the unreachable., 3, 41-42. Retrieved October 1, 2019, from www.iec.mq.edu.au/public/download.jsp?id=165919