

Autism Family Care: The Experience of an Italian Association

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Once upon a time, there was a little pig whose name was Oliviero.

It lived, happily, with other animals, in a pretty farm in the middle of the wonderful Italian land.

No! That's not the beginning of a fairy-tale; it is just the beginning of a fabulous day our children spent, together with their families, in a special place: a trip to an Educational Farm, a very special farm, special as all our children with autism.

Isaia, Alessandro, Adriano, Irene, Silvia, Jonata, Diana, Alessandra, Giovanni, Matteo, Zenò... These are the names of some of our special children, lead actors of a sunny day.

A particular care was given, by the Italian association for autism care and research "Cancellautismo", to the choice of the location.

The farm selected for that day is part of a Social Cooperative founded on initiative of some parents of boys and girls with psychotic and psychiatric problems. Their common aim was to give their children the possibility to emerge and get dignity and self-respect through socialization, educational programs and inclusion in the world of work.

The Cooperative consists of

-and Educational Organic Farm;

-an "Open Home" where young people with disabilities can live and have a job: they take care of the farm garden;

-An Avant-gard Pedagogical Centre for early childhood. The pedagogical idea of the project is to give children the possibility to live important moments of openness in an educational community which is sensitive to different social and cultural identities.

The farm has been for our children a good opportunity to "learn by doing", through direct experience. They observed carefully all the animals of the farm and listened with great interest to the young lady who was introducing them to the wonderful world of animals.

What a nice experience to meet, caress and feed those animals: "Oliviero", the pig of the farm and goats, chickens, donkeys, rabbits, birds ...

But taking care of animals was not enough to be true farmers.

And so...they experimented the joy to knead the dough. What fun for them to dirty their hands and their faces with flour and what satisfaction to take home noodles made by their own hands!

But to complete their training to become certified farmers, there was a last thing to learn: how to make a scarecrow. During the organization of the excursion, all the children were invited to look, at home, for old garments which would be used to dress their scarecrow: old trousers, an old shirt or a funny hat. At the farm, their contribute led to the birth of a wonderful scarecrow.

Once again they had to use their hands and all their senses. Take (and sniff) hay to fill its body, draw all together its face and finally set everything up to get their fantastic creature.

What is autism?

Let's try to explain it through some behaviours.

Autism is a child with important sensory problems, a child who can not tolerate sounds, noises, lights, a child who has a very falsified tactile sense.

So, it happens that he doesn't want to get touched or doesn't want to touch things, it happens that he can not tolerate certain clothes because labels or sewing are perceived like pins on his skin.

Often, what people see are final behaviours: a child who cries with no apparent reason, a child who screams and escape from his mother at a Shopping Center, a child who gets undressed innumerable times during the day.

Often all these behaviours are considered by people who don't live autism, as manners due to a bad education. And not less important than sensory problems, it's the difficulty to accept changes to their rigide routine and their inability to play with other children.

This last difficulty is, for many parents, really a strong thing to be accepted.

Childhood is synonymous of play and looking at a child who doesn't socialize and is not able to play like all other children is very very sad. It's such a denied childhood.

What happened during that day at the farm?

They had the possibility to use all their senses. With no stress, and in complete freedom, they lived all emotions given by the contact with animals and by the experience at the laboratories of creativity. They took with their hands food for animals, they touched animals' hairs to caress them, they manipulated flour mixed with eggs and water.

They cooperated and played all together to build their scarecrow. This is socialization!

There was no aggressive rupture to their rigide routine. Taking from home the necessary to make the scarecrow gave them the time to understand and accept what they were going to do at the farm. Taking home and eat the day after the noodles made at the farm, created a sort of positive continuity between the experience they lived the day before, far from home, and their habitual place of life. Really a day of freedom for kids and a special day for their parents. When autism bursts in one family, it kidnaps the child and very often, it deprives the family of its social life. Parents feel alone, they often prefer not to share with others their life.

Spending one day with other families that live same experience, gave parents, who took part to this excursion, a breath of life. They could

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talk with no fear, sure to be understood. They shared their experiences about cures, rehabilitation, school and opened the door to the birth of new friend relationships. Often children are the mirror of their parents.

If parents are strong and have energy to fight autism with hope and positivity, in the same way children will face everyday the difficulties of their life.

“Thanks for this day of freedom. Freedom from judgements and compassionate looks. Our children felt good and if they feel good we feel good too!”

“It’s nice to meet other families! Our children socialize and we can confront each other about all what concerns autism.”

“ A wonderful day in a total freedom of emotions!”

The above sentences are just few comments left from some families at the end of the day...

Their words and the expressive eyes of their children gave our Association the energy and the desire to continue working for them (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Picture of the day.