

Kids Konnect

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Abstract

iC2 PrepHouse was established in 2012 to provide specialist services to meet the needs of parents and their children with vision impairment to achieve independence through empowerment and social competence. Initial registrations in 2012 were five. As of June 2016, there are eighty registered students with iC2 PrepHouse. Programmes and services provided are customised for individual learning needs.

While working with the students between the ages of five and ten years old, teachers noted that many were lacking in social competence and daily living skills. In 2014, the age range of five and ten year olds made up thirty-four percent (nineteen) of the fifty-six students enrolled in iC2 PrepHouse. Due to the significant number of students in this age group with common needs, iC2 PrepHouse teachers initiated the Kids Konnect programme for them.

The group programme was designed to address the lack of social skills and limited opportunities in experiential learning. The first Kids Konnect was held in 2014 with five children attending the programme. In 2015, three Kids Konnect programme were conducted, with the highest number attending being eleven children. Each session lasted for three to four hours and addressed various components of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). The ratio of adult to child was one to one, to maximise learning opportunities for the students.

Introduction

iC2 PrepHouse, a charity organisation in Singapore, was founded in 2012 to focus on children and youth with vision impairment. The charity provides vision-related services to enable independence for those with vision impairment, in a sighted community. iC2 PrepHouse also believes in imparting requisite skills and knowledge that will empower and enrich the lives of the visually impaired and their families (iC2 PrepHouse, 2012).

Kids Konnect is a group programme started in 2014 for children, aged five to ten years old, to develop their social, motor and independence skills. The four hour programme was conducted during the school holidays. School holidays are ideal for our students as parents were able to bring them for the programme. This is an opportunity for our students to interact with others.

Need for Kids Konnect Program

During IEP planning, teachers shared similar observations of their students' needs. Students displayed lack of skills in social competencies, fine and gross motor movement and independent living. Vision teachers at iC2 PrepHouse believed there was a need for a programme to address the skill development in these areas.

There were several reasons that could have contributed to the under-developed social, motor and independent skills. One factor may be the low societal expectation of children with special needs in Singapore. Singapore's compulsory education act that states all children must attend primary school exempts students with special needs. Attending preschools is also not compulsory for students. Hence, children with vision impairment are not expected to go to school. This means that they may

not have the opportunities to integrate into the mainstream education system. The Singapore government has recently formed SG Enable, which is an agency dedicated to supporting persons with disabilities. They have collaborated with some preschools to support children with special needs which include vision impairment and other disabilities. However, these preschools have limited places and there is only one special needs teacher to support all the children with special needs in each school. This special needs teacher may have some training in special education but may not be trained to support students with vision impairment. Hence, even if children with vision impairment attend these selected preschools they may not receive the appropriate intervention.

These societal expectations may relate to low parental expectation. This could also be attributed to the general lack of awareness regarding the impact of vision impairment on a child's learning. Parents may not know how to engage their children in experiential and exploratory learning.

Another significant factor could be the overemphasis on academic results. Teng and Yang (2016) wrote in a Straits Times review that Singapore's education system has gained a reputation for being highly competitive and overly focused on grades. Sapp & Hatlen (2010) argued that success in school goes beyond ensuring that students are able to pass their courses and graduate from school on time. Hatlen (1997) highlighted that the skills under the ECC go beyond the core components of math, reading, writing and science, and Singapore currently has less focus on the ECC.

Kids Konnect Programme

The objectives of the programme are targeted towards the development in the areas of social, motor and independence skills. The social skills we aimed to develop initially were: simple greetings, listening and responding to others. Introduction activities included greetings, roll call, circle time games, and most importantly sharing information about themselves. Vision teachers modelled and encouraged interactions between students, volunteers and themselves. Students were given opportunities to speak to adults and peers whom they were less familiar with.

Initially, students showed difficulty in holding conversations with one another and did not display appropriate social behaviours such as looking at the person they were talking to. Vision teachers modelled desired social behaviours and prompted students to ask questions and elaborate answers. Through sharing, students began to cultivate self-awareness and the ability to express themselves. They learnt to listen to their peers and were encouraged to remember and use the names of those present.

Social skills such as turn taking, sharing and cooperation were encouraged through games and play. Vision teachers scaffolded the activities as our students did not take turns or interact and engaged only in parallel play. Following instructions and problem-solving were key components in the programme. Vision teachers observed the students and prompted when they were facing difficulties or asked for help.

Students with vision impairment have limited exposure and experiences in understanding visual cues, interpretation of social settings, and appropriate behaviours due to their poor or lack of vision (Palmer, 1998). Other studies have shown that it is essential for young children with vision impairment to experience

different types of hands-on learning activities to develop their social skills (cited in Sacks and Wolffe, 2006).

There were a wide range of activities in the programme to encourage the development of gross and fine motor skills. Many of our students had poor body awareness and body control. Music for movement was included as it promotes quality in movement. Music does not only encourage creativity, but also develops auditory skills. Activities such as art and craft and food preparation focused on the development of fine motor skills.

Halleman (2016) wrote that vision impairment impacts the motor development in children as vision is an important factor in posture and motor development. Opportunities to develop motor skills were pertinent as the majority of our students were not engaging in much physical activities at home or school.

Not only did the programme address social and motor skill development, the manner in which they were conducted had a strong focus on independence and self-advocacy skills.

Impact of Kids Konnect Programme

The Kids Konnect programme has been a great platform for the children to develop their social skills. They have learnt to interact with familiar people like teachers, and new people like peers and volunteers. The children have learned to share information about their eye condition which has allowed others to understand what they can and cannot see or do. This helps them to advocate for their needs as required. Willings (n.d.) says it is important for students with vision impairment to be able to understand and communicate to others about their disability and unique needs.

Through games and free play, the students had the opportunity to interact with peers and volunteers. This encouraged cooperative and more interactions rather than parallel play. Development of social interaction skills have been observed though some prompting may be necessary. The students have enjoyed these interactions and eagerly look forward to the next Kids Konnect programme.

Our students also showed the lack of body and spatial awareness. They were unable to position themselves as instructed, for example, "lie on your back or put two feet and one hand on the ground". It seemed that lack of body awareness was more of an issue than following instructions. Improvement in body control and awareness has been demonstrated through quicker manipulation of their bodies into specific positions. Problem-solving games have added another level to body awareness and cooperation. The students were initially unable to demonstrate fundamental locomotion patterns such as crawling, hopping, galloping and skipping, these are now developing.

The students were initially tentative when using gym equipment such as the beam, tunnel and ladder forming a bridge between two large blocks. Students are now more confident to attempt all activities on a variety of equipment. Music has been incorporated into the movement programme to enhance body control and spatial awareness, as music stimulates a better quality of movement.

Our students have had limited exposure to art and craft activities and simple food preparation, both of which could promote creativity, independence, and choice and decision making. Providing such activities has helped to develop fine motor skills in regards to manipulation of tools and materials. It also highlighted students with tactile defensive issues. For example, during the clay and play dough activities, some

students were reluctant to play. After prompts and encouragement, most began experimenting. This was less observed during food preparation.

Challenges for the Kids Konnect programme

The Kids Konnect programmes are held during the school holiday periods. In Singapore, the school term breaks falls on March, June and September and December. Hence, we conduct our Kids Konnect programme four times a year. However, to reinforce the social, motor and independence skills addressed during the Kids Konnect programme, and to develop these further, it would be preferable to have these programmes more frequently.

Often both parents are working so they need to leave their children at the student - care or child-care centres and are unable to bring their children for the Kids Konnect programme. Hence, although Kids Konnect sessions are held during school holidays some students are still unable to attend as they are at the student care or child care centres.

Where to from here

With the increase in the numbers of students attending Kids Konnect and the increased age range, the decision was made to have two separate sessions. The students were grouped based on developmental age rather than chronological age. Group One was for seven to nine year olds and Group Two was for four to six year olds.

Due to the importance of reinforcing the motor, social and independence skills, the decision was made to increase the frequency of the Kids Konnect-like sessions. Saturday sessions were initiated weekly; these were a similar set up to the Kids

Konnect but only run for an hour. These sessions include a selection of circle time, story time, games, songs, crafts, music and movement.

In addition, iC2 PrepHouse also established the Infant Konnect for zero to three years old and a Teens Konnect. The Infant Konnect group is a platform for parents to share about the challenges they face and their coping strategies. This has allowed parents to make contact and ultimately may lead to an active parent support group.

The Teens Konnect is less frequent due to the high academic demands, however events have been planned to develop their daily living, social and career skills. These have included a cooking session, a visit to an art gallery, a dining experience, and a job related hotel visit.

Conclusion

Kids Konnect programme has been effective in allowing our children with vision impairment to develop social, motor and independence skills. Vision teachers, at iC2 PrepHouse, hope that increasing the frequency of the Kids Konnect sessions, particularly on Saturday would allow the skills to be reinforced. Additional sessions for other age group are also being explored. Vision teachers at iC2 PrepHouse hope to continue to have a positive impact on the learning of the students, in collaboration with the parents.

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