

Autism in Ethiopia - UNICEF supports country's first ever special school

BY GEORGE MORRIS
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When an Ethiopian beautician first discovered her son was autistic in 1997, her first instinct was to immigrate to America where he could receive proper treatment. Ethiopia had no centers for autistic children, until one day she decided to build her own.

"I knew nothing about autism at first," she says, "It was obvious there was something wrong - he wouldn't fit in anywhere. I took my son to so many schools. They knew nothing about the disability either and accepted him at first. It always ended the same way - after a few months they would ask him to leave. One school demanded extra payment just to let him remain there."

The complexity surrounding the life-long disability known as autism is rarely understood in Ethiopia. After all, there are enough problems in this country of 77million people that are far easier to confront. And so these tragically misunderstood children are left by the wayside. After all, in a nation of grinding poverty and little in the way of child care, what right do these 'naughty' children have to any sort of future?

Autism describes a large spectrum of conditions estimated to occur in one out every 166 children. It is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder that manifests itself in abnormal patterns of social interaction, communication ability, interest and behavior.

Unlike other children at the ages of three, four or five, autistic children rarely involve themselves in play, preferring to sit on their own in a dreamlike state. As they grow older, parents realize their children are incapable of looking after themselves; basic hygiene such as washing needs constant supervision.

Zemi Yanu realized that many other families in the country may be suffering the same fate with no one to help. Instead of leaving Addis Ababa for good she decided to start Ethiopia's first school for autistic children and related disorders.

UNICEF has teamed up with Zemi to try and find over US\$28,000 to keep the school, named the Joy Centre, providing specialist care to special children.

By no means is this an easy task, as Zemi discovered from the start: "In the beginning I was confused, I had no training," said Zemi, "there was none to have in Ethiopia. I felt like quitting. The school had nine children and they were screaming, shouting and out of control. It was overwhelming and one day I stood in the middle of the room and cried.

"But I knew that there was nowhere else for them to go, I couldn't let their parents down so I persevered. "

This year, 60 children will enroll. They will be cared for by 21 full time workers and four volunteers, the only workers of their kind in Ethiopia.

The Joy Centre itself is a bright, colorful place where children receive therapy and take part in rehabilitation sessions. Teachers and assistants and even a psychologist are on hand to give them a chance to grow into capable adults.

There is an interaction centre next to the classrooms. Here, children learn to respond to stimuli with the assistance of specially designed toys or learn to listen with the help of drums and toy trumpets.

For the older children, there are also vocational courses in gardening, cooking and building. By teaching some basic skills the school makes sure they have a chance of being integrated into society by the time they leave.

The Joy Center's founder Zemi Yunus takes pride in her work. "Most mothers say they see tremendous improvements to their children's behavior," she says. "Before they came here they could not eat or hold a cup, they could not even communicate verbally to their parents most of the time."

She makes sure parents are involved in the development of their children. Mothers, fathers and siblings discuss autism and how to cope with the pressures that come with it. Ethiopian families are usually kind to their more unfortunate members. In the case of autism however, Zemi has to confront prejudice and superstition.

Children with mental disabilities are often considered cursed or possessed by demons. There is also little knowledge about how to treat those afflicted. She talks of times when parents, more through despair than wanton cruelty, would tie their children with ropes before leaving the house.

Despite bright interiors and devoted staff, the Joy Centre struggles to make ends meet. Not only is there no school bus (essential for children who can not make sense of traffic and therefore make perilous school journeys on foot) but the school is unable to afford meals. Adequate washrooms have not even been built yet.

Children with autism need small class sizes to ensure each child can be helped individually. The numbers of entrants therefore have to be limited. Over 250 children are on the school's waiting list this year. To increase the number of children, the school needs more space, teachers and equipment.

The Joy Center's work is unique in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, this means flying below the radar of most major donors. Almost all the school's funding comes from Zemi's beautician business. If her income was ever reduced, the school would almost certainly be in jeopardy.

"At the moment, we feel so alone," she says. "It has been hard to make donors understand the importance of our work. That's why we are glad UNICEF is trying to help us, it makes us feel that we have support."

UNICEF Ethiopia is hoping to raise the funds to provide learning aids, health and nutrition supplements, at least 1,000 birr and home care to 10 of the most desperate families along with education and training to caregivers.

The organization also hopes to construct an early identification system for children with autism so special care starts at an early age.

There is no study to indicate how many autistic children there are in Ethiopia. Many will continue to suffer in silence until more people like Zemi can be found with the time and the sacrifice to lead these children to a brighter future.