

Special Siblinghood in the Social Space

Shosh Kaminsky, M.S.W., Director of Knowledge Management and Social Change, Beit Issie, and Einat Noah, student of community work (under the guidance of the director of community work in school social work at Beit Issie Shapiro)

2013

Brothers and sisters of children with disabilities come up against society's prevailing stigmas regarding disability, which result from ignorance, lack of information and lack of knowledge. The prejudices and social difficulty in accepting "the other" who is different result in siblings of children with disabilities being subjected to challenges, difficulties, and complex emotional experiences. Special occasions such as birthdays and being in the public-social space become a source of dilemmas and personal family pressure.

There are many ways of coping, including avoidance (siblings avoiding bringing friends home), bold exposure and aggression (attacking people looking at them in the public space), and even joining the aggressor (mocking the sibling together with other children, or ignoring him when with friends). In addition, dilemmas of loyalty or betrayal, identification or estrangement arise.

The ecological theory highlights the fact that we change as a result of changes in the environment. We shape our environment, and at the same time, the environment shapes us. A person's social intelligence develops, among other things, as a result of the patterns of his interaction with his surroundings, and reciprocal relations with significant others have an impact on quality of life. The milestones in the social development of the individual are closely related to the developing connection between us and our environment.

The family and the peer group are systems that are actively and dynamically involved in a person's growth and development from a child into an adult, and to a considerable degree, shape his or her personality and patterns of behavior in the future.

Children are exposed to other children with whom they play or learn. Reciprocal relations among children and their cohort influence their behavior and their social development. On the positive side, the peer group provides children with an arena for learning about themselves, building self-perception, and learning how to develop reciprocal ties with others. On the negative side, the peer group can be a focus of pressure and a cause of emotional distress.

The siblings' relationship with their psycho-social surroundings, and their patterns of interaction with peers, inside and outside of school, play an important role in their emotional and social development. Fruitful relations have a beneficial impact on their development and quality of life, while difficult social relations are liable to delay and interfere with their development.

In the view of various authors, social stigma is the basis that undermines the social significance of disability in the eyes of the typical sibling. A child with disabilities is often the factor that makes the family different from other families. This difference is liable to cause difficulties for the child's siblings, in particular when they come up against reactions or questions from those around them that invoke feelings of shame, guilt, affront, and so on. Part of the price frequently paid by the siblings of a child with disabilities is due to the reaction to disability of people in the community and in society: stigmas, and stereotypes, and "blaming the victim". There is a social cost to the label attached to the family as a whole, and as a consequence of the stigma, siblings may come to respond with introversion, withdrawing from friends, and sometimes there is also an impact on self-esteem.

One of the roles of systems providing services is to provide each individual with the resources required for his or her proper development, including a psycho-social environment enabling optimal growth. Therefore, interventions focusing on changing the relationships between

people and their social environment, individuals or groups, are part of the types of intervention necessary to promote the individual's quality of life.

Also included in this connection are situations in which intervention is necessary to change opinions and stigmas in the social environment.

The values and social norms impact the behavior and attitude of these systems towards the individual. Therefore, intervention in those values and norms of the social systems that shape problematic behaviors towards the individual is essential.

1. Intervention in the social environment of the siblings

Einat Noah – Student of Community Work (under the guidance of the Director of Community Unit at Beit Issie Shapiro)

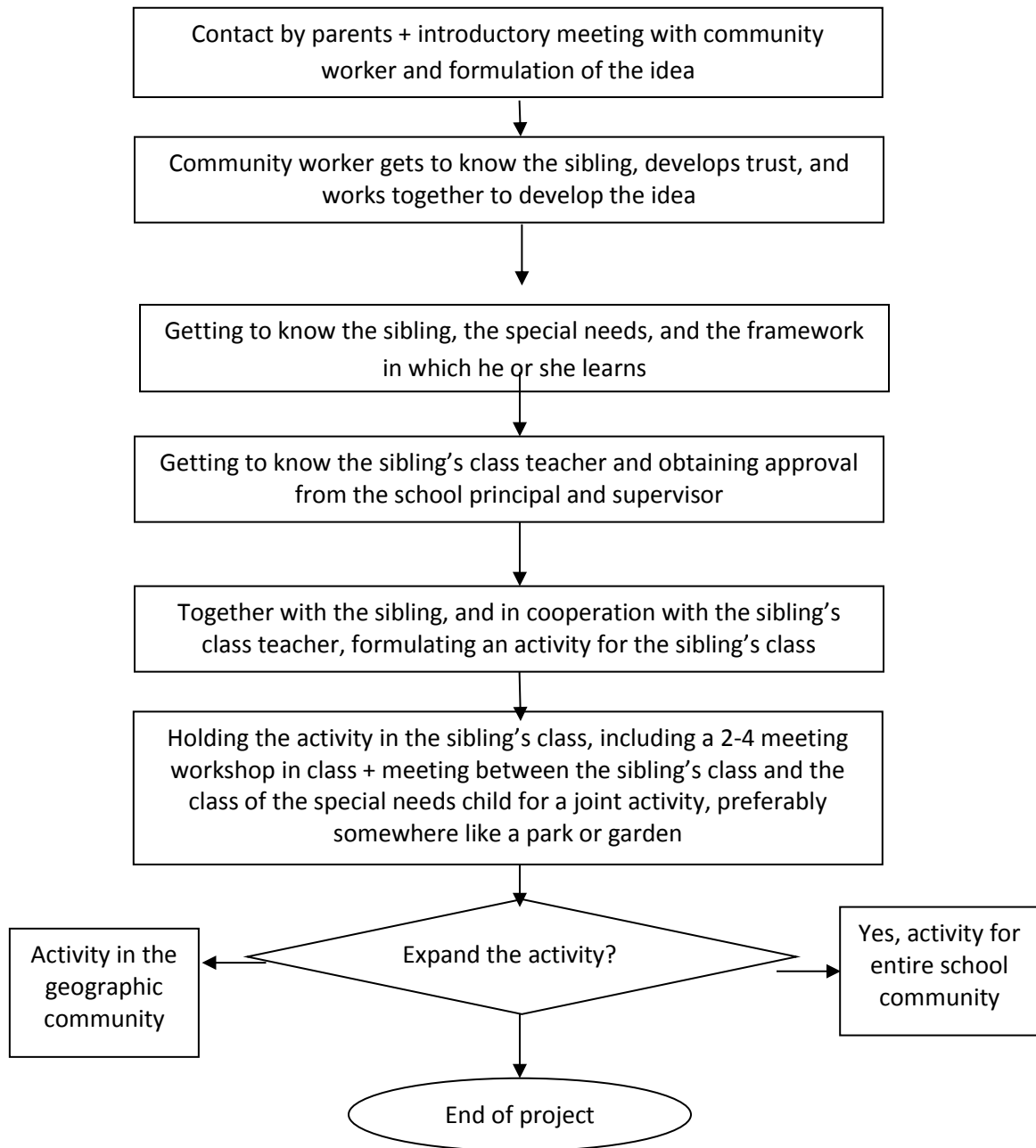
The program for intervention in the social environment of the siblings was developed as a result of:

- Requests from parents asking for help for siblings having difficulty finding their place in social frameworks, and in particular in the education system.
- Recognition of the effect of the attitude of the environment and social stigmas on the quality of life of the sibling, and understanding that the change needs to take place in the social environment itself.

The objectives of the program

- Generating change in attitudes towards people with disabilities among children in the sibling's social and class environment;
- Involving the siblings themselves in the process of change, in order to empower them and strengthen their "voice", and create an opportunity for them to discover their strengths and abilities, and harness them in the action of growth and change;
- Inclusion of parents in the process as an element of strength and support for the sibling, and an opportunity to place the sibling at the focus of attention of the family; an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the sibling and his or her needs, including in the family.

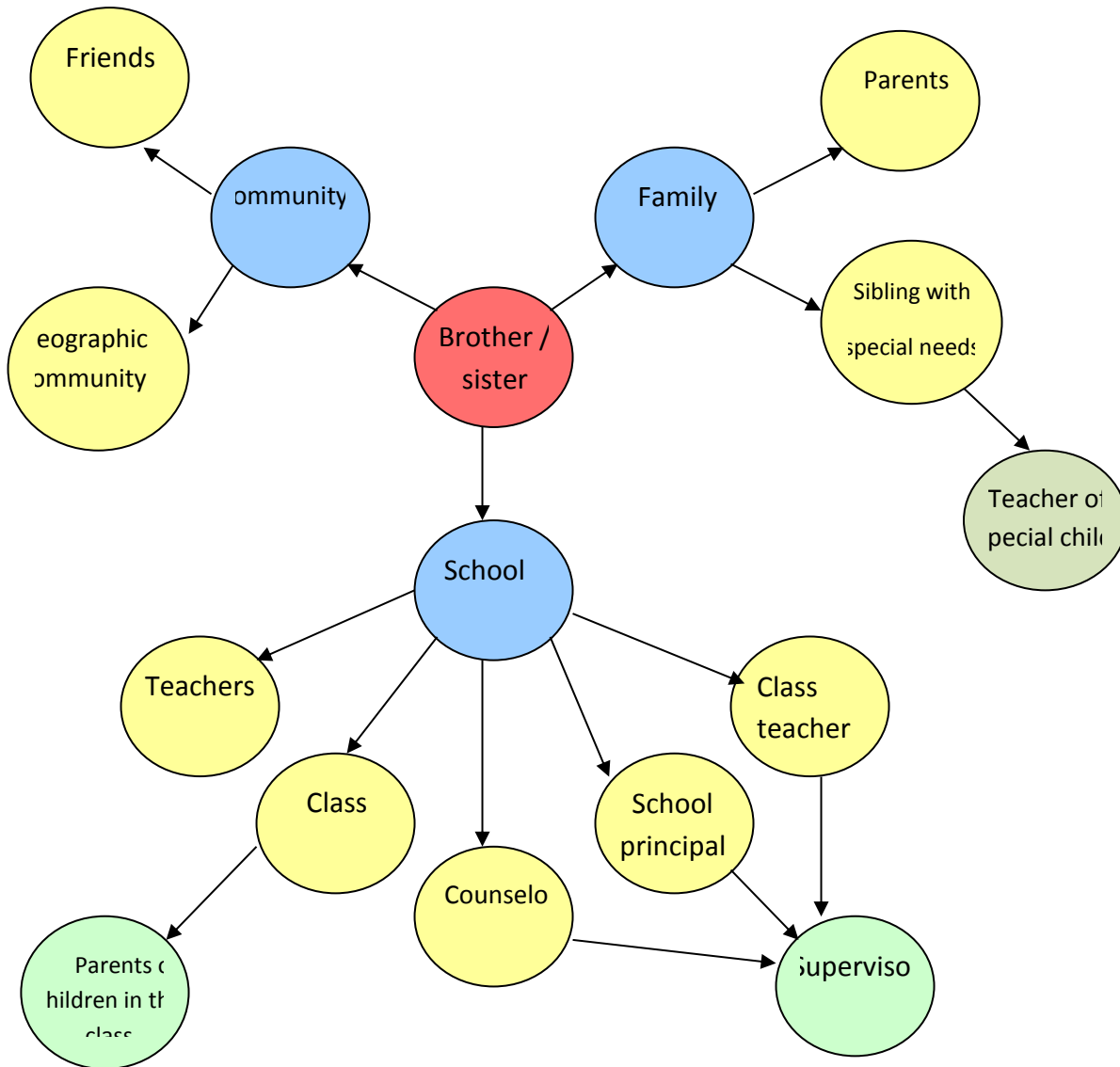
The stages of work



The working model of intervention in the sibling's social environment

The working model

Intervention in the environment of the sibling of a child with special needs is an inclusive and comprehensive intervention. The diagram below presents the systems involved in the intervention process.



As described in the stages of work, the intervention starts with the sibling him- or herself, and continues through the family, the community, and the school attended by the sibling. With regard to each of the entities, an appropriate intervention goal is set: changing attitudes towards people with special needs in the school, and inclusion in the community. In an intervention of this kind, the aim is to reach the greatest possible number of circles and entities that are connected with the child's environment, and come in contact with him or her.

Expansion of the circles has a number of objectives:

- Developing and expanding the program in order to impact as many circles as possible
- Achieving perspective and learning about the process from new viewpoints
- Each element involved in the activity brings its own knowledge, contributing to the success of the program

An intervention program aimed at empowering the sibling eventually develops into a process of empowerment of all the parties involved. This statement draws on the ecological approach – seeing the different living environments of the individual: family, educational framework, peer group, society and the community. The ecological approach emphasizes the reciprocal relations between an individual and the different environments, their impact on his or her development, functioning, independence and quality of life.

This intervention model can be altered according to the place and other external factors in which the intervention is held.