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The Training Apartment Manual



Happily looking to the future....

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Overview

The Training Apartment program consists of 15 weekly meetings, including overnights. The program was designed for groups of six participants at a time. The main aims of the program are to give the participants and their families a sense of what "out-of-family-home living" is all about and to offer tools to improve the participants' independence.

The participants arrive at the apartment after their morning activity (school or work), once a week, for a series of activities that are typical for sheltered, community based living.

The process that the participants undergo in the apartment facilitates their growth and offers many practical insights about what their future might look like.

This manual had been written on the basis of 20 years' experience in running AKIM- Jerusalem's Training Apartment program.

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AKIM-Jerusalem (<http://www.akim-jerusalem.org.il/en/>)

established in 1951, is a non-profit association providing services to people with intellectual and other disabilities. Today, we care for 160 residents in three hostels and 17 apartments. We also administer a Family Support Centre, which offers various services for a further 200 families who still have a member living at home with special needs.

The purposes of AKIM-Jerusalem are: to help people with special needs fulfill their learning & functional potential, to help their families stay intact and maintain their full working capacity with the help of the supports we can provide and to make the community and its services accessible – socially, physically and economically.

What is the purpose of the Training Apartment?

The future of a person with special needs is full of difficult questions. How will he/she do? With whom will he/she live and much more?

Many professionals in this area of work believe that community based living should be preferred over institutional care. The Training Apartment program rests on the assumption that the graduates will eventually live in community based living arrangements. The program aims at alleviating some of the anxieties that may arise among the participants and their parents.

Who participates in the program?

The age of the participants in the Training apartment range from those completing secondary school up to adults who still live in their family homes.

Generally the groups that participate in the Training apartment program are referred to us by special schools or sheltered workplaces. The advantages of this procedure are that the participants already know one another and their levels of functioning are similar. In addition, a staff member supervises the composition of the group, which helps the group to be more functional. Good interaction between the group members is a key to the success of the program and to achieve its objectives.

Some of the parents are very interested and positive about their son\daughter's participation but there are occasionally those who are very negative. Program's and referent agencies staff do their best to go over the stages of the program with the parents because we are also there to help them through the process of "letting go" from their children. Flexibility can help in some of these cases like offering the possibility of spending some hours during the afternoon with the group without staying overnight, etc. In the end, however, the participation is always completely voluntary. We have never had someone staying in the apartment when he\she didn't wanted to.

Case Study

A., the oldest person to ever take part in the program was 63 years old. Following his parents' deaths he continued to live in an apartment of his own near his sister's home and she cared for A's basic needs (food, laundry, etc.). A's siblings were very concerned about his social isolation because he spent most of the days alone at home, not interacting with anyone.

A. was very opposed to moving away from his apartment. He even suspected his siblings of wanting to "kick him out". Towards the end of his participation in the Training Apartment program, A was asked if he would like to move into a community based living arrangement. He answered: "If the apartment is similar to the Training apartment, then that is exactly what I want!" Shortly after that, his siblings contacted the social worker and asked her to help A. move out of his apartment and into a community based living arrangement. Today, A, lives in his new apartment

with other residents who are of a similar level of functioning and enjoys his new life there. The people that we have accepted to the Training apartment program until now have been people with mild intellectual disabilities without particularly challenging behaviors.

As for adult participants in the program, their guardians are usually their siblings, and so the Training Apartment staff keeps in contact with them.

Three important meetings before the first overnight stay

1. At school or in the workplace: The Training apartment team goes to the place that originally referred the candidates in order to meet with them for the first time. In this meeting, the mutual expectations of the program coordinator and the candidates are clarified and adjusted. During this encounter, the candidates for participation get answers to questions they may have about the program and the apartment. Generally there are more potential participants attending the "get together" than the final group members because some of them will still be hesitant about taking part in the program.

2. In the Training apartment: This meeting is meant for the team members that referred the candidates to the program, the candidates themselves and the program staff. In this meeting, the candidates are told about the house rules which they need to internalize and commit themselves to honor. The rules will be described in greater length below, but the first rule is to honor the Training Apartment's main objective – the participants'

willingness to learn. An additional purpose of this meeting is to familiarize the candidates with the apartment itself. In order to underscore the candidates' independence, they travel to the apartment accompanied by the staff members of the referring agency, and not by their parents.

3. In the Training apartment: In this meeting only the Training apartment staff and the candidates' parents participate. The objectives of this meeting are:

- (a) To reduce the parents anxieties regarding the conditions in the apartment (most parents want to see that the apartment is clean, well equipped, that the staff is qualified, etc.)
- (b) To collect additional information from the parents about the candidates.
- (c) In the course of the meeting, the program staff members become the parents' partners and a communication channel opened. This offers the parents a sense that they have someone to turn to regarding the apartment and their son's/daughter's progress towards independence.

How it all works

We are a democratic apartment: we encourage the participants to express their wishes, take part in decisions related to the program contents: what we should cook or where we want to go and, of course, to share their concerns.

Gradually, the participants' skills develop: self-expression, becoming aware of one's own preferences and, if necessary, giving up on them. As a consequence, the participants' self-confidence builds up (because "I know myself best") and having achieved that, it then becomes easier to establish social relations.

During the daytime, two or three staff members are present in the apartment and this allows for handling individual conversations with the participants. When necessary, the group can also split up into smaller groups and do different activities.

The program includes going out just for fun, reinforcing the social network between the participants and exposing them to a diversity of situations (cinema, cafes, shopping and more).

The workers in the program are usually students, who have leadership capacities, know how to run a home and are sensitive to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. They are accustomed to receiving supervision and aspire to experiencing a process of growing together with the program participants. The Training Apartment coordinator is responsible for the relationship with the families, other external agencies, conveying special messages to the participants and for supervising and coaching the team members.

Due to the differences between the participants in the different groups we highly recommend adjusting each work-team to the particular group members. For example, with mixed groups, we advocate making sure that there is a female night staff member. In most cases, there are no more meetings with the group following the 15 meetings that are part of the program. But, every rule has its exceptions. In instances of special requests from the referring agencies, an additional round of meetings can

take place which is then focused on the participants expected moving away from their parental homes and into community based living arrangements in the near future. Alternatively, when some participant does not complete the course with the first group he/she is a member of for any reason, he/she can become part of another group.

The daily schedule in the apartment

- Arrival, warm drink and calling up the parents.
- Allocation of rooms, rest, organizing of personal equipment and making up the bed, free activities: TV, games (social games, creativity, etc.)
- Group talk on the topic of the day: hygiene, behavior, adjusting the expectations of the participants in the group.
- Problems between group members, social tools, general talk, behavior on public transportation, behavior in public places, distribution of house chores, allocation of work shifts in the apartment, money administration, sharing of emotions, developing the menu and preparation of list of things to buy.
- Departure from the apartment: shopping, short excursion, going out for fun, etc.
- Preparations for dinner, showers
- Summarizing the day
- Free activities in the apartment until bedtime

For groups with lower functioning members, the first three talks focus on personal hygiene (including simulation of showering with clothes on), getting to know the other group members and activities to reinforce the group's consolidation.

Following that, endeavors usually focus on improving behavior for activities of daily living in the apartment: preparing hot drinks and organizing personal items. Over the period of time, the participants' are encouraged to gradually take on more and more responsibility for themselves (to make sure to be ready on time in the morning so as not to miss the bus, etc.) and overall to help with the organization of the apartment.

The apartment's impact on the program participants

We cannot know exactly how the program affects each participant individually, but we know that the program constitutes a critical station towards growth, which has a positive – and different impact on most of the program participants:

1. Improved self-confidence,
2. Internalizing social skills,
3. Improved housekeeping skills,
4. Orientation in the use of public transportation,
5. Orientation in public spaces,
6. Improved skills of self-expression.

We do whatever we can to make the participants' experiences in the program as nice as possible and we occasionally "bend the rules" in order to achieve this purpose.

The apartment program's impact on the participants' families

The fact that there are agencies that refer the participants to the program contributes to the parents' readiness to let their children register for participation. Another circumstance that contributes to the parents' agreement is the fact that they know it is a set number of weeks and will not be endlessly extended.

Due to the special needs of their offspring, many parents have great difficulties realizing that their children are growing up. The participants' experiences in the apartment awaken their parents to start thinking about suitable frameworks for their children in the future primarily because the program consists as a model for an "out-of-family-home placement".

The custom of participants calling up their parents from the apartment was created in order for the parents to realize that in spite of the fact that their children are not with them their relationship still remains strong. For the participants, calling their parents reinforces their sense of safety in the apartment.

The objective of consulting with the parents about such things as administering medication, the sorts of food that are prepared and served in the apartment, clarification of values adopted at home etc., from the first meeting with them, are intended to give them a sense that the Training Apartment is an extension of their own homes – a warm and supportive environment. This is a way to avoid unnecessary conflicts. Again, **flexibility** is an important key to the program's success – the program needs to be adapted to every new group – wake- up time, kinds of food, etc. Some

parents have a problem sleeping when their son/daughter is staying overnight at the apartment and many of them relate to us that although overall it is a difficult experience they can cope with it all. For some parents, the Training apartment offers an excellent opportunity to learn how to support their grown-up child, to help him/her in manners that are more suited to his/her age, skills and wishes.

In the program's last meeting, the participants generally invite their parents. Most participants like the "reversal of roles" between them and their parents. They enjoy being the hosts, showing off the apartment and their independence in preparing refreshments for them.

Family visits at any stage of the program are welcomed and such occasions usually offer reasons for a party.

Sometimes, the relationships between the staff members, the participants and their parents continue after the termination of the program in order to discuss and prepare them for the imminent departure from their family homes. AKIM-Jerusalem organizes open lectures for the parents by representative of other agencies to give them information about future possibilities in the fields of housing, work and leisure time activities.

Apartment rules

The apartment rules synthesizes what we discussed with the participants in the first meeting with them and how we intend to work on these subjects during the program; this is the main reason that the participants and their parents must agree to them before the first overnight.

1. I am willing and ready to make an effort to learn new things.
2. Just as I am very careful about own body, I will also respect my friend's and not touch him/her in any private place.
3. There must be no violence. Anyone who hits will be sent home immediately.
4. I am ready to help my peers and will not be ashamed to ask for help if I need it.
5. I will take care of my own belongings and keep them tidy.
6. I will listen to the coordinator's advice and requests with respect.
7. I will thoroughly complete all my duties.

Summary

Fifteen program meetings offer each participant and his/her family an excellent opportunity to consider the possibility of moving to an "out-of-family-home placement". The program facilitates the departure from the family home both for the participants and for their families.

Participation in the Training Apartment program offers the participants an opportunity to experience living in a group as equals, receiving support in learning activities for daily living, something which is not always encouraged in their family homes.

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