



# BUSTA GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS, THERAPY ORGANIZATIONS, AND FOR DISABILITY ASSOCIATIONS



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## ABOUT BUSTA



BUSTA project “BUilding skills in Schools through Training therapy Animals” project No. 2021-1-LT01-KA220-SCH-000034363 involves three countries: Lithuania, Belgium and Bulgaria.

The idea about this project came from the thinking that there is a need to adapt educational processes to the challenges of the 21st century, schools need to rely on innovative and practical methods, involving students in challenging activities and combining new educational needs with existing educational curricula aimed at creating active, inclusive and responsible citizens. This project was targeted at democratic skills building with the involvement of animals - dolphins, dogs and horses. In total seven organizations joined this initiative - therapy organizations of animals and schools.

In order to put this approach forward, transversal skills need to be fostered in the school ecosystem to allow a more transdisciplinary, learner-centred and challenge-based approach. Therefore, teachers and school personnel need to reinforce the development of key competence. Also, clear guidelines need to be traced in order to allow more and more schools to use innovative education approaches to prepare students to participate fully in society and enter successfully in the labour market. Given these premises, through the BUSTA project, student's actions have real life impact that reach beyond the boundaries of the school, on the lives of people with disabilities. It's general objective is to promote innovative framework possibilities for students, with real world impact through the integration of service animal training. They also get the opportunity to contrast and exchange their research and actions with partnering countries, to foster a stronger European citizenship by developing cross-curricular projects that enhance learners' global competence. With the close guidance from the partnering therapy animal associations, we will set up 3 parallel collaborations: - QUEST's democratic school project in Brussels BOS (Belgium) with a therapy dog association (Dyadis), - The Maria Montessori school in Klaipeda (Lithuania) with a Dolphin Assisted Therapy Center (Lithuanian Sea Museum) - And Community for Democratic Education school in Sofia (Bulgaria) with a therapy horse foundation (PQHF).

BUSTA project lasted for 24 months, partners participated in general meetings and the most important experience - they met in Learning, Teaching, Training activities and shared their experiences, developed democratic skills in the international context.

## DEMOCRATIC SKILLS AND KEY COMPETENCIES

In today's world, developing democratic skills is a vital aspect of modern education from a very young age. It goes beyond traditional teaching methods and involves treating students and children as equal members of the community. By empowering them to become responsible young people, educators can help cultivate competences and character qualities that are recognized as important for 21st-century skills for lifelong learning.

The concept of a school parliament has been implemented in more and more countries across the globe in different school settings. This unique approach allows children to participate as equals in discussions related to their daily lives and interests. The purpose of this initiative is to provide children with a platform to voice their opinions and concerns, which are often overlooked in traditional decision-making processes.[1]

Creating a safe environment where students' rights and opinions are respected is crucial for their personal growth. When students feel heard and valued, they are more likely to engage in meaningful discussions and take ownership of their learning. This, in turn, helps them develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills that are essential for success in the real world.

Involving children in decisions that concern them is vital. This includes decisions about classroom rules, school programs, and excursions. By involving children in these decisions, educators can help them develop a sense of ownership and responsibility. Encouraging children to voice their opinions and ideas can help them develop their communication and negotiation skills.

The role of the teacher in this process is to be a facilitator. The teacher should help students to express their thoughts in a respectful manner and support those who are shy but have an opinion on a topic. Teachers can also guide students towards constructive conversations and encourage them to listen actively to others' opinions.

To ensure that the decision making organ runs smoothly, it is essential to set strict rules from the very beginning. These rules should include raising a hand if someone wants to speak, expressing suggestions and thoughts in a respectful manner, and deciding together the way decisions are going to be made - sociocratic with 100% agreement or democratic model with 70% or 51% agreement. It is also good for the children to experience different models of decision making.

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[1] The Hannam Report - <https://alternativestotoschool.com/pdfs/The%20Hannam%20Report.pdf>

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In democratic schools, there is a strong emphasis on the development of soft skills, working on formative assessment and formative feedback, such as:

- **Communication:** Democratic education encourages open dialogue, active listening, and effective communication skills. Students learn to express their thoughts and ideas clearly and respectfully, while also learning to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives.
- **Collaboration:** Through collaborative projects and group discussions, democratic education promotes teamwork and cooperation. Students learn to work together, share responsibilities, and value the contributions of others.
- **Critical thinking:** Democratic education emphasizes critical thinking skills, encouraging students to analyse information, evaluate evidence, and make informed decisions. They learn to question assumptions, think independently, and develop logical reasoning abilities.
- **Problem-solving:** Democratic education encourages students to identify and solve problems in real-life contexts. They learn to approach challenges creatively, think outside the box, and develop innovative solutions.
- **Empathy and respect:** Democratic education fosters empathy and respect for others. Students learn to understand and appreciate different perspectives, develop tolerance, and practice inclusivity.
- **Leadership:** Democratic education provides opportunities for students to develop leadership skills. They learn to take initiative, make decisions, and inspire others through their actions and ideas.
- **Learning to learn:** Democratic education aims to empower students to become self-directed learners. They are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process, set goals, and develop effective study habits. Students learn how to identify their learning styles, utilize various resources, and adapt their learning strategies to different situations. This skill enables them to become lifelong learners and adapt to new challenges and opportunities.
- **Inclusion** is a fundamental aspect of democratic education. It promotes the idea that every individual, regardless of their background, abilities, or characteristics, should have equal access to education and be included in the learning community.



- **Citizenship skills:** Democratic education places importance on preparing students to be active and responsible citizens in their communities and society. Students learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, as well as the importance of civic engagement. They develop skills such as critical thinking, effective communication, and problem-solving, which are essential for participating in democratic processes and contributing positively to society. Additionally, they learn about social justice, equality, and ethical decision-making, fostering a sense of social responsibility.

Therefore democratic schools often look into cross-sectorial experiences, such as opportunities like the BUSTA project in order to promote soft skill development. These environments can serve as living laboratories for paving the way for all other schools to integrate innovative skill development activities into their curriculum.

Undertakings such as BUSTA present an excellent chance for educational institutions, as well as informal associations of youth and professionals from diverse sectors, to hone their democratic decision-making skills. This is largely due to the adaptable program and activities that can be formulated within the group. By participating in such initiatives, individuals can learn to work together effectively, respect each other's opinions, and make decisions through consensus-building. This fosters a culture of inclusivity and collaboration, which are essential qualities for success in any field.

## IMPORTANCE OF RAISING AWARENESS TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

The importance of raising awareness towards people with individual needs is a historical question. Modern societies demonstrate much more inclusive attitudes towards differentially. It is proved that integrated and supportive strategies from early development have better social outcomes in many countries. However, the biggest issue for inclusive society still remains negative representations of the society towards people with individual needs, especially having psychiatric and behavioural disorders. The statistics show that diagnosis of psychiatric and behavioural disorders is at the highest prevalence worldwide for children as the first diagnosis. The most meaningful changes happen in early years.

For example, psychomotor development and building up the independence of children with disabilities basically predetermine better conditions for the child's integration into the community, the reduction of stress and dependence on family members, and better harmony in the family. The child's psychomotor development covers major areas of child development: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, cognition, perception of language, verbal expression, self-regulation, and social and emotional development. But in terms of mental and behavioural disorders, the formation of skills proceeds in a more complex way. This disorder often manifests itself together with sensory problems: too high/low response, high stress felt, anxiety, and detachment from specific activities/measures, which may result in the delayed formation of independence skills. The development of the independence of a child with a disability is very important when individually selecting a suitable environment and factors that increase the motivation to learn, seek and interiorise newly acquired skills. These skills predetermine the possibilities for a person with a disability to feel independent in their daily activities in the future. Engagement in social interaction is an inevitable and important element of a high-quality daily life. Children with a disability face increased difficulties in their daily routines. Children with poorer social skills undergo social exclusion and experience more difficulties in perceiving the feelings of other people, recognising, and expressing emotions, complying with regulations and norms, and respecting themselves and others[1].

Therefore, this BUSTA project invites for inclusive strategy of all individual needs in school setting with the involvement of animals. We believe that we all have individual needs and animals could become a bridge for cooperative practices in schools, for supporting vulnerable groups and destigmatizing school practices.

Raising awareness towards people with individual needs especially to children is of paramount importance for several reasons:

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[2] Brigita Kreiviniene, Vaida Vaišvilaitė, Vida Miškinė, Aurelija Kasparavičienė, VAIKŲ, TURINČIŲ NEGALIŲ, SAVARANKIŠKUMO FORMAVIMAS DELFINŲ TERAPIJOS CENTRE: DIDESNIŲ GALIMYBIŲ LINK, Tiltai 86(2022), no. 1, 101-120, DOI 10.15181/tbb.v86i1.2262.

First of all, it promotes inclusivity. Raising awareness helps create a more inclusive society where everyone, regardless of their individual needs or differences, feels valued, accepted, and respected. This fosters a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation among individuals with diverse requirements.

At the second, it fosters empathy and understanding. Awareness initiatives encourage people to learn about the challenges faced by individuals with individual needs. This increased understanding leads to empathy, compassion, and a willingness to offer support and assistance. As a perfect example could be mentioned a festival held in Klaipėda each year 'I am indifferent, what about you?' where Lithuanian Sea Museum together with Klaipėda University invites schoolchildren to get to know disability and individual needs via practice. The same festival was held in 2022 in the framework of BUSTA project and in 2023 during the festival, all three BUSTA projects results were disseminated. Children participated in the discussions about the disability, are invited to solve tasks, face disability in practical lessons trying different simulations. This led towards understanding that disability is not an obstacle to friendship. The growth of this festival is fascinating, if 10 years ago the organizers of this festival started with 30 children, in 2022 there were over 1500 schoolchildren who took part in this social festival of destigmatization.

The third reason is combating stigma and discrimination. Many individuals with specific needs face stigma and discrimination due to lack of awareness and misconceptions. By educating the public about these conditions and their impact on individuals' lives, we can challenge harmful stereotypes and attitudes. Especially these practices are important in early years, starting from the educational settings.

The fourth reason is empowering self-advocacy. When people are aware of different needs and conditions, individuals with those needs may find it easier to speak up for themselves and assert their rights. This empowerment leads to increased self-confidence and autonomy. This is very important for educational institution to be reflective, flexible and empathetic. As far in early age a lot of stigma aspects, enrolments, support and empowerment in class group depend on teacher. Such supportive initiative can be named as fifth reason as -

Enhancing professional practices. Professionals working in various fields, such as healthcare, education, and customer service, need to be aware of individual needs to provide appropriate and sensitive care and support. The scientific research shows that successful integrative school practices are very much important not only for children with disabilities and individual needs but also for other children in the setting, they tend to learn about the diversity, learn different communication strategies, collaboration, and support to each other. Therefore, the core of need to raise awareness lies in the empathetic understanding of individual needs.

Building stronger communities. By recognizing and supporting individuals with specific needs, we foster a sense of community that celebrates diversity and offers assistance when needed. This helps build stronger social bonds and resilience within society. This by no means drives policy changes in all spheres and creates better quality of life to everyone. Raising awareness can spur policymakers and legislators to take action to address the needs of diverse populations. This can lead to the development of more inclusive policies and laws that protect the rights and well-being of individuals with specific needs.

In summary, raising awareness towards people with individual needs is not just a matter of social responsibility; it is essential for building a more inclusive, empathetic, and supportive society that benefits everyone. By embracing diversity and acknowledging the unique requirements of individuals, we move towards a more equitable and compassionate world.

## INTEGRATED INNOVATION AND NEED FOR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

### In Lithuania

Since June 2020 the Lithuanian Government adopted amendments to the Law on Education, which create legal preconditions gradually increase the inclusion of children with special educational needs in education system until the 1st of September 2024. The students with special needs have equal opportunities and access to education. In Lithuania the education system is composed of early childhood education, primary, lower secondary education, upper secondary education and post-secondary non-tertiary level.

**Pre-school and pre-primary education.** In Lithuania, early childhood education and care is composed of pre-school and pre-primary education and is attributed to the type of non-formal education. Attendance is compulsory for pre-primary education when a child turns 6 years of age in the calendar year.

**Primary and lower secondary education.** Children must start attending primary schools when they turn 7 years of age during the calendar year. Primary education lasts for 4 years and its purpose is to provide children with the fundamentals of learning, literature and social and cultural skills. Primary and lower secondary education is free of charge in public educational institutions. Lower secondary education lasts for 6 years and is also compulsory. Children usually enter lower secondary education when they are 10 to 11 years of age. Education is compulsory until 16 years of age. By that time the learner will have usually finished the course of lower secondary education (10 grades).

### The situation of integrated education in Lithuania

Lithuania has reformed its educational legislation to better serve the goal of inclusive education. In 1998, the Law on Special Education of Republic of Lithuania laid the legal foundation for the model of integrated education to transition from a strictly segregated system to an educational system open to all learners equally. Then the term concerning the learners with various developmental disorders were changed to learners with special educational needs (SEN). The goal was to merge general and special education into a common educational space. According to Vilnius university article information (2019) there are two forms of education for learners with special educational needs in general education schools: education in a general class providing necessary student support, and education in a special class, usually for learners with intellectual disorders.[3]

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[3]Retrieved from: [Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level. This education is not compulsory. Pupils may choose to attend gymnasium \(2 years\) or school with vocational education and training \(1 or 2 years\).](#)[1].

Inclusive education is not only an approach, teaching, but also a different organisation of education. The example of Lithuania shows that it is not easy to create such a system and it takes a lot of effort, competence, cooperation, and political will to fully implement accessible education for all.[1]

Nowadays in Lithuania integrated education has been applied to general schools. Based on Lithuanian governmental information there are 90% of pupils with special educational needs who are studying together in general schools with their peers.

Regardless of the opportunity to let children with special needs to study together, parents are still looking for the schools that best suit their child's needs. The Government is ready to give them a choice. In many cases, the number of specialists will ensure that the special school remains a place where some children can receive better education and better support. As a result, the work of education departments and pedagogical psychological services becomes very important to help parents find the best conditions and the best schools for their children.

**Support for schools.** The Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, together with disabled people's organisations and social partners, has prepared an Inclusive Education Plan, the goal of which is to create the best learning conditions for every child in all schools. Measures are foreseen to strengthen the readiness of schools to receive children with various needs, to improve educational support, to strengthen the competences of pedagogues and educational support specialists, to change the attitudes of the school community towards the education of children with special needs.[5]

If there are one or more children with special needs in the class, the teacher must be assisted by other specialists as well as students' assistants. This is a help for both of them: teachers and students. Child is supported and guided by an assistant through daily activities.[4]

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[4] Retrieved from: [Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level. This education is not compulsory. Pupils may choose to attend gymnasium \(2 years\) or school with vocational education and training \(1 or 2 years\).](#)[1].

[5] Retrieved from: [Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary level. This education is not compulsory. Pupils may choose to attend gymnasium \(2 years\) or school with vocational education and training \(1 or 2 years\).](#)[1].

**Educational content.** The educational content of students with special educational needs is formed in accordance with the primary education program (adapting it) and taking into account the special educational needs of each child, the recommendations of the pedagogical psychological service and the expectations of parents. For children with special educational needs education is provided with conditions according to his abilities and powers. Child's teacher with other teachers and educational support specialists, parents, relatives provides the necessary assistance, strengthening the child's motivation to learn, improve, develop competences, reduce, overcome or compensate for difficulties arising in the educational process. [6]

**School environment and educational material.** Schools still need very concrete methodological help for knowing how to teach children with special needs. The Lithuanian government is preparing educational guidelines for which are going to include learning process, physical and communicative, informative environment and will allow communities of schools to find new ways to respond to the needs of children.

The government is planning to create inclusive education organisation models, i.e. practical guidelines on how to form a class or group so that all children can be educated equally: how to find a balance between individual and teamwork during activities in the class, what kind of specialist team should work in the classroom during a day together with kid(s) who has special educational needs. These models are designed taking into account the fact that some activities for kids with special educational needs are performed in the classroom during lessons with other children, or separately, being apart from the rest of the class. A special model would help schools to find the optimal option to educate as many children with special needs as possible together with other classmates, but at the same time, would create conditions to organise part of education separately.

Methodical publications have been prepared for parents raising children with autism spectrum disorder, for teachers as well, and a publication for students introducing the behaviour and specifics of a child with autism, explaining how to communicate, make friends with him and play together.

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[6]Retrieved from: <https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimas-pradinis-ugdymas/mokiniu-turinciu-specialiuju-ugdymosi-poreikiu-ugdymas-2?lang=lt>

It is also planned to prepare more methodological tools that will help to understand and educate children with special educational needs. Besides, in the digitization project EdTech it is planned to make 69 digital resources. Some part of the project will be dedicated to children with special educational needs, and to gifted children as well.[7]

**Support all the time.** Support for schools is not a one-time event. A continuous support system is being created so that school professionals can always consult and receive help when needed. At the beginning of 2023 Inclusive educational centre of Lithuania was established. The centre is responsible for the preparation of material, implementation of inclusive education innovations, consultations for schools. Its staff are able to provide targeted assistance to children with significant special educational needs.

The government is planning to establish regional mobile counselling centres on the basis of special schools that have experiences of good inclusive education. Specialists from the regional centres also would come to the school to give advice and would help to deal with specific situations. In this case we would have a system of three levels. School being at the first level in case of need could apply for help to the regional centre and later to the national one.[8]

Belgium's approach to education for students with learning difficulties, also known as special needs education, is centered around the principles of inclusion and equality. The country is committed to providing every child with the right to an education that maximizes their potential.[9] Belgium has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, further emphasizing its dedication to ensuring equal educational opportunities.

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[7] Retrieved from: [1] Retrieved from: <https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimas-pradinis-ugdymas/mokiniu-turinciu-specialiuju-ugdymosi-poreikiu-ugdymas-2?lang=lt>.

[8] Retrieved from: [1] Retrieved from: <https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimas-pradinis-ugdymas/mokiniu-turinciu-specialiuju-ugdymosi-poreikiu-ugdymas-2?lang=lt>

[9] Special Needs Education - Belgium - Angloinfo (<https://www.angloinfo.com/howto/belgium/family/schooling-education/special-needs-education> )



Education in Belgium is governed by a federal system, with responsibilities for implementing educational policies falling under the language communities and their respective Ministries of Education. The Flemish Speaking Community, the French Speaking Community, and the German Speaking Community each have their own policies on inclusive education and support for children with disabilities. Schools in Belgium have the freedom to develop their own curricula, assessments, and self-evaluations.

Enrolment in a special school in Belgium is based on the request of the family, and a multidisciplinary examination is conducted to determine the most appropriate school for the child. Children may transition between mainstream and specialist schools based on their needs. The school day and term in special schools align closely with those of mainstream schools.

Transportation to the nearest appropriate school is typically provided free of charge, either through school buses with accompanying staff or specially adapted private vehicles if necessary.[10]

- **In the Flemish Speaking Community**, inclusive education has been supported through various legislative acts. The Parliament Act of 28th June 2002 granted students with special educational needs the right to enroll in a school of their choice. Subsequent integrations in 2008 and 2011 further promoted equal opportunities and equal treatment in education. In 2014, the M-Decree strengthened the legislation for inclusive education by reinforcing the right of students with special educational needs to be enrolled in mainstream education.

The M-Decree introduced several measures, including updated categories for students with special educational needs, such as a category for children with autism. Mainstream schools are obligated to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate students with special needs. Additionally, parents have the right to appeal to a Student Rights Commission if they disagree with a school's refusal to enrol their child.

While Flanders has made progress towards inclusive education, there is still work to be done to fully meet the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In terms of funding, both mainstream and special schools receive financial support, with special schools receiving differentiated funding based on the type of special education they offer.

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[10] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 1. [https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk\\_research\\_Belgium\\_en.pdf](https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk_research_Belgium_en.pdf)

Mainstream schools that enrol disadvantaged learners may receive additional support under the equal educational opportunities policy.

Enrolment in the Flemish Community requires a statement from the Pupil Guidance Centre (CLB), which includes documentation of the learner's need for special education. However, the CLB's role is advisory, and parents cannot be forced to enrol their child in a special school. Both special schools and inclusive education require a certificate, with inclusive education also involving an "inclusion plan" developed through consultation among all parties involved.[11]

- The French-speaking community has taken steps to promote inclusive education and the rights of learners with disabilities. They have established eight types of special education, categorized based on the specific disability of the child. These include mild intellectual disabilities, moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, severe behavioural and personality problems, physical impairments, illness or convalescence, visual impairments, auditory impairments, and instrumental impairments.

In 2009, a decree was introduced to integrate students with special needs into mainstream education. This requires a partnership between a special school and a mainstream school, with support from various parties. Enrolment into a special school in the French-speaking community is based on a report that assesses the student's needs and specifies the appropriate level and type of education. Many children with special needs are accommodated in mainstream schools, with additional support provided by special needs experts and funding for additional staff, equipment, and teaching materials.[12]

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[11] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 3. [1] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 1. [https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk\\_research\\_Belgium\\_en.pdf](https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk_research_Belgium_en.pdf)

[12] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 4. [1] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 1. [https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk\\_research\\_Belgium\\_en.pdf](https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk_research_Belgium_en.pdf)

- **In the German-speaking community**, special education needs services are provided by a separate institution, not directly connected to the education system. Decrees have been adopted to ensure collaboration among multiple institutions and to improve education for children with special needs. A Center for Education of Children with Special Needs was established in 2009, and in 2016, a department was created to focus on self-determined life and support for children with special education needs. This department is responsible for creating awareness, conducting research, and providing guidance and support for the development, education, and social integration of children with special needs.[13]

In recent years, the Belgian education system has made significant strides in the **deinstitutionalization** of students with disabilities. The focus has shifted from segregating these students in specialized institutions to promoting inclusive education within mainstream schools. This shift is driven by the belief that all students, regardless of their abilities, should have equal access to quality education and the opportunity to learn and grow alongside their peers. As a result, efforts have been made to provide necessary support and accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in the regular classroom environment.

The deinstitutionalization process in the Belgian education system has been accompanied by various measures and initiatives. These include the provision of individualized support plans, the training of teachers in inclusive practices, and the establishment of support networks involving parents, educators, and specialists. Additionally, efforts have been made to adapt physical infrastructure and resources within schools to create an inclusive learning environment. By embracing the principles of deinstitutionalization, the Belgian education system aims to foster a more inclusive society where students with disabilities can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. However, the current situation is still unsatisfactory.

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[13] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 5. [1] Cortex, Cognitive Resources for Toddlers Teens and Experts (Ed.). (n.d.). Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium. pag 1. [https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk\\_research\\_Belgium\\_en.pdf](https://cortex.eu/images/pdfs/desk_research_Belgium_en.pdf)

The majority of children in Belgium who lack parental care find themselves placed in institutional settings. Among these vulnerable children, those with disabilities face particularly pronounced discrimination, as there is a noticeable absence of a comprehensive plan for individuals with disabilities, as highlighted in the 2014 UNCRPD concluding observations. Regrettably, there is no well-defined deinstitutionalization (DI) strategy aimed at the children residing in these institutions.

Deinstitutionalization in Belgium is primarily perceived as a cost-cutting measure, with the government prioritizing the job security of professionals employed in these institutions. The recent surge in unaccompanied migrant and refugee children has resulted in the establishment or expansion of additional institutional facilities. Complicating matters, Belgium's structure as a nation divided into three distinct communities has hindered the centralized collection of data concerning institutional care. Consequently, such information is frequently either unavailable or difficult to access. Moreover, the support provided to children with disabilities varies significantly across different regions of Belgium.[14]

In the French-speaking community, there are currently 5,583 children residing in institutional care, of which approximately 2,031 have disabilities. Within this group, 372 children fall in the age range of 0 to 3 years, though it's important to note that this figure excludes 300 babies and children living in hospitals. In Flanders, there are 7,917 children in institutional care, with a substantial 7,286 of them having disabilities, and an additional 466 children being under the age of five.

One of the most significant obstacles to implementing DI reforms in Belgium is the persistent association of institutionalization with cost-effective alternatives. Given the substantial workforce engaged in residential care in Belgium, the sector is regarded as a priority for the government, both in terms of employment stability and budget considerations. Consequently, DI is often seen as an austerity measure within this context.[15]

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[14] Inclusive Education: The way forward Country Report Belgium. (n.d.). EASPD.

[https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Projects/1.5.1\\_IE\\_Country\\_Report\\_Belgium.pdf](https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects/1.5.1_IE_Country_Report_Belgium.pdf)

[15] Inclusive Education: The way forward Country Report Belgium. (n.d.). EASPD. [https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Projects](https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects)

1.5.1 IE Country Report Belgium.pdf

## In Bulgaria

In the last decade, a number of measures have been taken in Bulgaria to ensure equal access to quality education for every child, student, and pupil. A comprehensive inclusion policy has been developed aimed at creating conditions to support the individuality of each child and student by removing obstacles to learning and creating opportunities for children and students to participate in all aspects of life.

A supportive, secure and safe educational environment is provided to conduct an effective educational process, to protect and enhance the health of children and students, and to promote their full personal development. The educational system seeks sustainable and effective solutions for successful integration and permanent inclusion of every child and student, regardless of regional peculiarities, socio-economic status of the family, and mother tongue.

In implementing these policies, entirely new strategies and regulatory acts have been adopted in the field of pre-school, school, and higher education. Measures to build a supportive environment are related to providing architectural, information, and communication access in schools and universities, as well as developing special curricula and educational programs, printing adapted textbooks and teaching aids, training teachers, and more.[16]

The policy of inclusive education is further developed through measures to support all children who have difficulties in learning the curriculum, for career guidance aimed at preparing for the transition to the next educational level, for motivation to continue education and for participation in the labour market.

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[16] Educational support and guidance  
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/bg/national-education-systems/bulgaria/bulgaria-bgobrazovatelna-podkrepa-i-orientirane>

From the academic year 2016/2017 to the academic year 2020-2021, the number of supported children and students with special educational needs has increased by over 4,770, with support provided to over 19,800 children and students in the academic year 2020/2021. Support is provided by specialists appointed in kindergartens and schools or in regional centres for support of the inclusive education process. Special schools for training and support of students with sensory impairments - hearing impairment or visual impairment - have also been reformed and modernised.

However, societal attitudes towards persons with physical and intellectual disabilities are changing at a slower pace. A recent survey conducted by UNICEF revealed that 80% of respondents agree or almost agree that negative attitudes towards people with special needs cause them to suffer. Additionally, only half of the participants agreed that they contribute to diversity in society. These findings highlight the need for intentional efforts to change attitudes towards individuals with special needs, not only in the education system but also in the labour market. Failure to understand their needs and potential for inclusion can lead to compassion, but to disbelief that they can be fully integrated into society.

*“Parents of children with special needs share that they encounter inappropriate comments and behaviour towards their children on a daily basis. “They spit in each other's bosom; they knock on a tree - no one gets pleasure from looking at you.” Parents say that it is an unpleasant practice for people to make comments to children, however well-intentioned, about their condition, especially when the child is now grown up and aware of his difficulty, as well as to use the expression “such children” which often even specialists use. Parents talk about situations in which other parents do not allow their children to play with theirs, as they are worried about imitation and negative influence on development to their own children. They share about a different, negative attitude they receive from teachers in kindergartens, from doctors, from neighbours, from circle of friends.” Study of attitudes towards children with disabilities in Bulgaria, (UNICEF).[17]*

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[17] UNICEF - [Study of attitudes towards children with disabilities in Bulgaria](#)

According to a part of the same survey among young people aged 10-14, sometimes children mock and insult a child with developmental difficulties. Most teenagers shared that they do not have children with disabilities in their immediate environment and, accordingly, do not have experience in communication with them or attitudes built on the basis of real impressions. Mainly in cases where the interviewees share about contact with children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, it is a result of that there is a similar case in the class or in the school. Another observation is that there is a trend that the older the students are, the more likely they are to reproduce the common talk about children with special needs and developmental difficulties.

In order for attitudes towards individuals with special needs to change, it is crucial that innovative strategies and approaches are developed not only in the education of individuals with, but also among those without special needs. Simply speaking learned phrases about acceptance and equality is not enough to truly effect change on an emotional level where the real understanding and empathy come out. It is important to point out not only the needs of individuals with special needs, but also their possibilities and that could happen with the young people in different types of activities.

Moreover, the development of soft skills has become increasingly important in the 21st century, yet they are still not given adequate attention in regular curricula. Instead, the emphasis continues to be on academic knowledge, which has been shown to not necessarily benefit individuals in their daily lives. It is imperative that we recognize the importance of soft skills and incorporate them into educational programs to better prepare individuals for success in all aspects of life.

Incorporating informal education activities outside of the classroom can significantly enhance the soft skills of students of all ages. These activities provide hands-on experience and foster skills like communication, teamwork, empathy, and leadership. By involving individuals with special needs in common activities, students can gain a real perspective on the challenges faced by these individuals and reduce any discomfort or fear they may have when interacting with them.

To effectively integrate students with special needs into the classroom, it is crucial to educate their classmates about their condition and the support they require. By providing open and respectful explanations about the condition, we can change attitudes and reduce stigma towards students with special needs. Fear and avoidance are natural reactions to the unknown, but by educating students about their peers with special needs, we can foster a culture of acceptance and inclusivity.[18]

The experience of Community of Democratic Education with students with special needs proves that a simple and respectful explanation to other students about the development helps a lot in acceptance and reduces the stigma and conflicts between the children.

As a part of BUSTA activities the students had to take part in therapy sessions of a child with special needs. The therapist took a long time to get to know the students with the condition of the child, what was specific in his development, the difficulties he faces and the progress he made thanks to horse therapy.

This introduction of the case prepared the students and made them to be more alert on the specifics of the child, furthermore they approached him with patience, friendly attitude and understanding of his possibilities. On other hand it empowered them and involved them as equals of the therapy process.

## MEANINGFULNESS OF DOLPHIN TRAINING FOR SKILL-BUILDING

### WHY ARE DOLPHINS SO UNIQUE?

There are many myths about the dolphins, as they were in the constant interest of human beings for many years. As far back as Ancient Greece, a dolphin fresco painted in the bathhouse building at the Palace of Knossos shows people's admiration for dolphins and the need to perpetuate it.

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[18] Dr. Bruce Perry - The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog /book/.





Chris Johnson photography [19]

However, this importance never faded, as far recent years so many dolphinariums, thematic parks, other institutions are talking about these amazing and sensitive animals. Having dolphins under human care is not only a joy, this is a huge responsibility as well to enhance and stimulate their natural behaviour, constant work on the environmental enrichment programs, etc. Taking back to the BUSTA project and democratic skills it is important to know - why dolphins are such unique animals?

Anyone interested in the life of dolphins can certainly find a lot of information about the fact that dolphins are unique and intelligent animals. At the first, physiological uniqueness alone makes us smile when we take a look at the dolphin, because we associate a dolphin's open mouth with its smile. At the second, these animals are endlessly curious, you can see that just by visiting the dolphin therapy center.

*The member of the Dolphin assisted therapy team was telling: 'I remember how a family that came with a baby, accidentally left his bottle of tea by the window, immediately a whole group of interested dolphins arrived, who tried to "inspect" what this thing was.*

*Another member was saying that 'working professionals know that a slipper or work card left by the pool can easily become a toy for these animals, and if they catch such a "toy" they will not run anywhere but will obviously throw it a short distance away laughing at us'*

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[19] Retrieved from: [1] [Dr. Bruce Perry - The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog /book/](#) .

*Fact: Sometimes, not having an object to play with dolphins are able to create their own toys, for example, they release an air bubble and hold it under water with their echolocation (sounds emitted) system, then divide it into small bubbles and "eat" them or form an air-ring and swim through it. Due to this unique property, it can emit extremely high-frequency sounds that the human ear cannot capture.[20]*

Dolphins also are unique with their manner of sleep. Well, it could be stated that they sleep for a short period of time, about ten minutes a day. However, this is not the usual rest that we are used to seeing - dolphins do not have beds or bearings, they just lay on the surface of the water, closing one eye for about 10-20 seconds. In this way, he rests one hemisphere of his brain, and later, after more active swimming, the dolphin rests the other hemisphere again, having already closed the other eye. One of the most unique features of these animals, which few people know about, is that they can "send" a picture to another dolphin with their voice, i.e. transmit what they see with sound. For a person, it would be like sending a holographic image to another person with their thoughts.

The species of dolphins kept in the dolphinarium of the Lithuanian Sea Museum are called Black Sea bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus ponticus* - Latin). The name itself says that these are Black Sea mammals, although sometimes you must hear what a big fish it is. So, being a mammal, the little dolphin feeds on its mother's milk. Another important thing is that, like real mammals and not fish, they breathe air, so they always rise above the surface of the water to inhale it, they could stay under water for about 10 minutes without breathing. One dolphin can weigh up to 350 kg and eats about 12-23 kg of fish per day, depending on its age.

## THE CONCEPT OF THERAPY WITH DOLPHINS

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[20] Marten, K., Shariff, K. Psarakos, S., et al. (1996). Ring Bubbles of Dolphins. Scientific American, Inc. 82-87.

The main concept of therapeutic impact for children with disabilities lies in three key factors:

1. Therapeutic environment and using materials. This involves being in the water of participant, wearing a wetsuit and using floating platforms, playing objects.
2. Dolphins. This mostly involves the possibilities which are open while communicating with a dolphin in the water and communicational aspects, the longest playful attention of all mammals.
3. Methodology behind the therapy. This involves neurosensorymotor methodology of human being and neuroplasticity.[21]

Recently, many scientific research works have been performed on the benefits of dolphin assisted therapy for people with disabilities. In general, an animal plays a key role for child's motivation, emotional development, especially child's self-value, autonomy, sense of empathy towards others.[22] In the scientific literature, we can find works speaking about positive evaluations of dolphin assisted therapy for children with mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders.[23] The dolphin assisted therapy can have a statistically significant positive impact on children with mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders: reduced stereotypical behaviour and better social communication[24], fine motor development, cognitive performance and verbal development.[25] Also, it is proposed that an emitted biosonar signal of the dolphin pulsed at low frequencies results in inactivation of piezoelectric collagen molecules within the body and generates a whole-body entertainment of the receptive nervous system. Such a mechanism could result in entertainment of the brain to produce specific low frequency components in conjunction with the previous mechanisms, as well as changes which result from increased endorphin production.[26] Dolphin Assisted Therapy center of the Lithuanian Sea Museum provides therapy for children and adults with various disabilities. It was established in 2015, however, the dolphin assisted therapy programs took part in Dolphinarium from 2003.

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[21] Kreivinienė, B, & Mockevičienė, D. (2020). Dolphin assisted therapy: evaluation of the impact in neuro- sensory-motor functions of children with mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 29 (4), 292–307. <https://doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.8>

[22] K. Wilks, "When Dogs Are Man's Best Friend –the Health Benefits of Companion Animals in the Modern Society". In: Urban Animal Management (UAM) Conference Proceedings Gold Coast, 1999.

Kreiviniene, B, & Mockevičienė, D. (2020). Dolphin assisted therapy: evaluation of the impact in neuro- sensory-motor functions of children with mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 29 (4), 292–307. <https://doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.8>

[23] M. Shaifudin, B. Md Yusof; N. Kok Hwee Chia. Dolphin Encounter for Special Children (DESC) Program: Effectiveness of Dolphin-Assisted Therapy for Children with Autism. *International Journal of Special Education*, vol. 27 (3), 2012.

E. Salgueiro, L.A. Nunes, A. E. Barros, J. Marôco, A. I. Salgueiro, & M.E. Santos. Effects of a Dolphin Interaction Program on Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, an Exploratory Research. *BMC Research Notes*, vol. 5, 2011.

S. Birch, "Dolphin Sonar Pulse Intervals and Human Resonance Characteristics", 2nd International Conference on Bioelectromagnetism, Australia, Melbourne: February, 1998.

[24] M. Shaifudin, B. Md Yusof; N. Kok Hwee Chia. Dolphin Encounter for Special Children (DESC) Program: Effectiveness of Dolphin-Assisted Therapy for Children with Autism. *International Journal of Special Education*, vol. 27 (3), 2012.

[25] E. Salgueiro, L.A. Nunes, A. E. Barros, J. Marôco, A. I. Salgueiro, & M.E. Santos. Effects of a Dolphin Interaction Program on Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, an Exploratory Research. *BMC Research Notes*, vol. 5, 2011.

Kreiviniene, B, & Mockevičienė, D. (2020). Dolphin assisted therapy: evaluation of the impact in neuro- sensory-motor functions of children with mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 29 (4), 292–307. <https://doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.8>

[26] S. Birch, "Dolphin Sonar Pulse Intervals and Human Resonance Characteristics", 2nd International Conference on Bioelectromagnetism, Australia, Melbourne: February, 1998.

The very first therapeutic activities were targeted towards interactions between dolphin and child with autism and later this communication was expanded registering very positive results for people with Down syndrome, those suffering from oncology, cerebral palsy, and other diseases. Therefore, at the moment there is a wide spectrum of issues with which therapy can be helpful and people may apply for this kind of therapeutic activities.

Dolphin Assisted Therapy center works only with people having issues. Mental and behavioural disorders in children and adults are often accompanied by symptoms of sensory disorders and dysfunctions.[27] One of the most observed dysfunctions is locomotor or vestibular and proprioceptive systems. Volitional movement and poor body position control caused by motor dysfunction, when the brain cannot coordinate the performance of ideation and motor planning tasks, are expressed in children with psychiatric and behavioural disorders.[28] The majority of studies with qualitative and quantitative research confirmed that most often we can see that dolphin assisted therapy can have positive changes in motor skills, ideation and actual behaviour in the situation: the child is no longer afraid to go by car, prefers to ride an elevator / lift, began to perform tasks with two hands; they mention hand-foot coordination changes, e.g., learned cycling, swimming in the pool; involvement in new activities has improved, there is less refusals, resistance to novelties, developed social skills etc.

## THE PROCESS OF SKILL-BUILDING FOR A CHILD IN A COMMUNICATION PROCESS WITH A DOLPHIN

Dolphin Assisted Therapy Center organizes individual or group communicational sessions of interaction with dolphins for people having physical, mental or situational issues as well as for people suffering from neurological diseases and/or having experienced psycho-emotional traumas.

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[27] Kreivinienė, B and Vaitkienė, R. (2021). Sensorinė judesio metodika pažeidžiamai suaugusių grupei. Klaipėda: Klaipėdos universiteto leidykla.

[28] Kreivinienė, B., Kleiva, Ž, Lupeikaitė, L, Mockevičienė, D, & Alijošienė, E. (2021). Both sided effect of complex dolphin assisted therapy for children with psychiatric and behavioural disorders and situational welfare of dolphins. Turkish Journal of Field Crops, 26(2), 503–519. <https://doi.org/10.17557/tjfc.834596>.

It helps to improve their neurosensorymotor status, well-being and develops their cognitive and socialization skills. Activities of interaction with dolphins are organized according to the HN 133: 2013 of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania. Therapy sessions usually involve the entire team of professionals: a dolphin trainer, a psychologist, a physiotherapist, a behavioural specialist and a social worker. In 2013, the Dolphin Assisted Therapy Programme was validated by the order of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Lithuania as a health promotion service. It is a European precedent whereby dolphin therapy is regulated by the Ministry of Health documents.

While working in a therapy centre, dolphins choose who they want to interact with – interestingly, in this area of activity, they do not get encouraged with fish and constantly amaze with their ability to find a common ground with a wide variety of people. Dolphins are sensitive to the emotional state of their visitors and can adapt to it. As a result, one of the first effects of therapy visitors can notice is a massive influx of positive emotions. Another important factor is that dolphins themselves are a great motivator for child or adult with disability, they also have possibility to communicate in very simple way understandable for everyone.

Founder of the dolphin assisted therapy David E. Nathanson, a neuro-psychologist and behaviour investigator, investigated that children with disability react more positively to the interaction with dolphins rather than other animals. During the therapy sessions, dolphins interact with children and adults using toying elements, allowing them to relax better. Due to this, information is easier grasped and memorized, attention is better focussed, psycho-social behaviour and communication elements are developed, and children's psycho-emotional condition is improved. Dolphins are very curious animals. The essence of the therapy lies in dolphins' capability to develop and maintain toying behaviour longer than any other mammal. Such fact proves their high level of emotional behaviour. David E. Nathanson systematized practical information and developed a concept of dolphin assisted therapy that enhances positive factors of humans. In cases of grave communication disturbances, the very encounter with a dolphin performs the function of an 'icebreaker', which stimulates positive changes in psycho-social and psycho-emotional contacts and leads to further therapeutic activities.

Moreover, it is explained by applying Malan's [29] concept of 'transmission triangle' that the effect obtained in dolphin assisted therapy programmes can also be grounded on the interaction of child, dolphin and therapist, that creates a triangle in which the communication and skill-development is targeted towards the child. Also, the dolphin assisted therapy involves: educational, environmental, safety, learning, interaction and many other factors determining a successful learning programme with 'just the right challenge'.

The dolphin assisted therapy in the water is performed with active movements in an ever-changing context. Such water-based activities can be fun and highly motivating. As Champion (1991, p. 12) notes, water interventions are 'widening experience – physically, developmentally, cognitively, and psychologically.' [30] The psychomotor change and skill-building is increased because of children with psychiatric and behavioural disorders nervous system's capacity to change in response to experience or neuroplasticity. [31]

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[29] Kreiviniene B., Mockevičienė D., Alijošienė E. (2021) Psychosocial and Neuro-Sensory Effect of Complex Dolphin Assisted Therapy for Children with Psychiatric and Behavioral Disorders. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica* 2021, Vol. XXX, N. 1, 174-191.

[30] R. Griffioen, & M. J. Enders-Slegers. The Effect of Dolphin-Assisted Therapy on the Cognitive and Social Development of Children with Down Syndrome. *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals*, vol. 27, 2014.

Kreiviniene B., Mockevičienė D., Alijošienė E. (2021) Psychosocial and Neuro-Sensory Effect of Complex Dolphin Assisted Therapy for Children with Psychiatric and Behavioral Disorders. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica* 2021, Vol. XXX, N. 1, 174-191.

[31] Dix, M. R., and Hallpike, C. S. (1952). The Pathology, Symptomatology and Diagnosis of Certain Common Disorders of the Vestibular System. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 45 (341), 341-354.

Gjesing G. (2002) "Water-Based Intervention". In: A. C. Bundy, S. J. Lane, & E. A. Murray, (Eds.), *Sensory Integration: Theory and Practice*. Philadelphia: FA Davis Company.

Ayres A.J., Robbins, J., "Sensory Integration and the Child". (2005). *Understanding Hidden Sensory Challenges*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Los Angeles CA: Western Psychological Services.

Therefore, in skill-building process can be stated that interaction with dolphins ensures positive emotions; water environment allows professionals to use physical rehabilitation or neurosensorymotor aspects. It is stated that sessions of interaction with dolphins are suitable for everyone experiencing difficult situations in life. Dolphins have incredible abilities to feel emotions and understand gestures. They ask for attention by addressing people, playfully throwing a ball or splashing water. Studies of dolphin assisted therapy center shows that when parents watch their child interacting with dolphins get to know him/her better, thus a new stronger and closer mutual relation is formed.

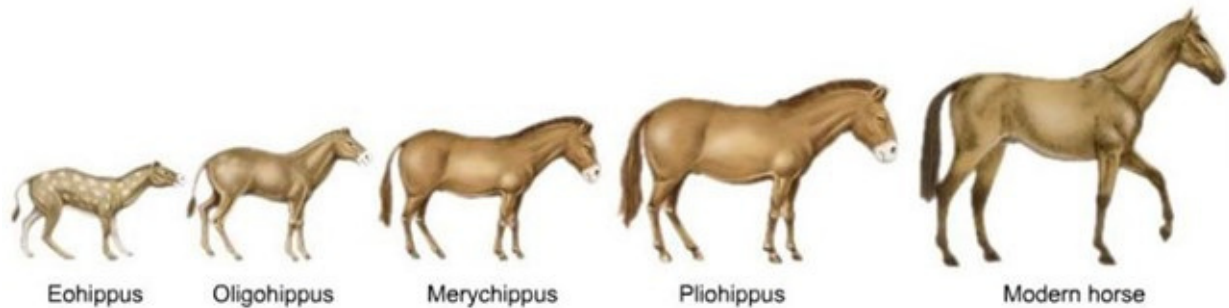
Generally, the dolphin assisted therapy is applied all over the world for patients with autism, Down syndrome, haemophilia, cancer, fibrosis, congenital heart diseases, cerebral palsy, arthritis, diabetes, depression, AIDS, drug addiction or alcoholism. Though, irrespective of global practice, it is necessary to assess the possible negative effect for the participant (due to animal behaviour, cold water, salinity or possible allergic reactions) in every individual case. Almost in all countries the dolphin assisted therapy is not applied at all and/or applied using extra safety measures (e.g. without getting into the water) for patients with epilepsy, fragile bone system, stoma(s), open wounds or Down syndrome.

## MEANINGFULNESS OF HORSE TRAINING FOR SKILL-BUILDING

### WHY ARE HORSES SO UNIQUE?

The horse is a vital part of human history in helping people move, as a prey, conquer lands, as a means of transportation, and at all times a companionship. The first species was the Eohippus (Hyracotherium) or the "dawn horse" which developed for 56 million years to become the animal we know today.





Horses are herd animals that enjoy grazing through open pastures. By nature they are curious and kind, approaching humans cautiously but befriending those who open up for them. Latest anthropological research shows that the modern horse or the *Equus caballus* was first domesticated about 6000 years ago[32]. As early as 460-377 B.C.

Hippocrates noted the healing power of the horse for the human. Fortunately, over the years the role of the horse as a therapy animal became more and more renowned, evolving into equine-assisted therapy.

The training of therapy horses is a complex and many times long process. It requires the knowledge and efforts of multiple staff members depending on the set up of the therapy organization. Often the organization both raises and cares for the horses and at the same time trains them to become therapy animals. That requires a person who cares for the horses on a daily basis and maintains their environment. Professional training programs are executed by the trainers.

## THE CONCEPT OF THERAPY WITH HORSES

Today there are many studies showing the positive effects of equine-assisted therapy on humans with different psychic and motor pathologies. It is especially beneficial for children and young people with disabilities. Examples of equine-assisted therapy results are improvement of sleep and quality of rest; improved fine and gross motor function, as well as the parameters related to the cognitive, emotional and social areas; a positive influence on the quality of life of patients' families.[33]

[32] Drager, M. (2015, November 20). Silver Charm. Encyclopedia Britannica, Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silver-Charm>

[33] María Dolores Ayala, Andrea Carrillo, Pilar Iniesta, and Pedro Ferrer (2021), Animals (Basel). ; 11(12): 3527  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8698107/>

But how is equine-assisted therapy done in practice?

There are three main interactions with the horse during equine-assisted therapy for improvement of the physical and mental state of the human.[34]

1. The first one is from the ground. That includes being around the horse; spending time with it or the entire herd; touch it with hands; brush the mane, tail, and body; feed it food and/or treats; do ground work exercises and training.
2. The second type is being on the back of the horse. That includes riding and doing particular exercises and movements while being on the horse's back.
3. The third type is driving the horse, usually through a carriage. This type gives the opportunity for interacting with the horse to beneficiaries with little mobility or other problems.

Depending on the age and the condition of a person, equine specialists choose the most appropriate type(s) of interaction. Suitable for all ages and many conditions the benefits of equine-assisted therapy can be social, emotional, cognitive, physical, self-esteem. The conditions are similar to those that can be influenced by dolphin therapy and dog therapy. The professional community usually divides the equine-assisted therapy in equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine-assisted learning, therapeutic riding, and hippotherapy. Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation Bulgaria was established to develop and provide equine-assisted therapy and natural means of horse training with dedication to two horse breeds – Paint Horse and Quarter Horse. The breeds whose ancestors are the wild mustangs of North America were chosen by the founders because of their easy-going nature and fondness of humans. The horses in the organization are raised in a farm located in the lower mountains close to the Bulgarian capital. They graze in large pastures with access to a small river and 'all you can eat' hay. That environment ensures they don't feel in captivity and develop their full potential. The horses are trained with a method called 'natural horsemanship'.

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[34] Raduncheva, M. Guidelines in Youth in Equine-Assisted Therapy (2023), Retrieved \_\_\_\_\_ from [https://www.pqfbulgaria.org/\\_files/ugd/5c651c\\_b3aa0641449146a5859b14add6e83b74.pdf](https://www.pqfbulgaria.org/_files/ugd/5c651c_b3aa0641449146a5859b14add6e83b74.pdf)

The method relies on building a relationship with the animal and maintaining respect for the horse's dignity. The horse is not forced to move or behave through ropes, chains, and bits (the metal tool put in the horse's mouth to control it). Instead, time is invested in establishing contact and building trust, allowing the horse to follow the human under its own will.

## THE PROCESS OF SKILL-BUILDING FOR A CHILD IN A COMMUNICATION PROCESS WITH A HORSE

Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation is the first and only organization in Bulgaria certified by the Agency for Child Protection to offer equine-assisted therapy to children. In general equine-assisted therapy has very few regulations in the country and even non-professionals can offer it. That can pose a risk to the beneficiaries if the providers are not experienced enough. The therapists of Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation follow the directions of the International Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship.

With the help of the horses the organization offers a program for free therapeutic riding to children and young people with disabilities. The patients of the program of the organization aged 6 to 13 struggles with different conditions such as autistic spectrum disorder, epilepsy, Down syndrome, hyperactivity, Attention Deficit Disorder. These conditions are considered to be greatly influenced by equine-assisted therapy.

One of the therapists in Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation Bulgaria shared her story with a young boy with autistic spectrum disorder and hyperactivity that just started his therapeutic riding sessions in an attempt to improve his condition.

*'The boy was 6 years old when he came to us. Due to his conditions, there were things suitable for his age that he didn't do, such as drawing. We couldn't tell if he truly liked his horse friend. But only after four sessions did he go home and draw a horse. That was a major breakthrough for our little patient. It illustrated the emotional bond the boy formed with the horse. The bond's severity remained unrecognised until the inspiration he received from the horse triggered his development.'*

It is a real relaxing and joyful moment to touch and brush the horse's furry warm coat. The horse has a slightly higher than human body temperature of 38C. Even only standing by the horse can be comforting listening to his breath that is only 8 to 16 breaths per minute. On the other hand, being on the back of the horse is beneficial for the entire human body, mostly the spine and its muscles. When the human is in close contact with the horse the animal is capable of seeing the person for his or her true nature overlooking the prejudice of society such as age, gender, health condition, social status, achievements, etc. Under the guidance of a professional that brings the human to a state of self awareness and epiphany about one's being and emotions.

A young horse weighs about 350 kilograms the same as a grown dolphin. The mature horse of certain breeds can grow up to 1000 kilograms. It is hard to imagine that such a big animal can be afraid of small harmless objects as colourful balls. The reason for that is the "fight or flight" response triggered in the horse that in the nature is a prey and must always be on the lookout for danger. Living among humans the horse needs to evaluate every aspect of the environment to be certain of its safety. Making sure that the horse is familiar with different things and reacts calmly is one of the tasks during its preparation to become a therapy animal. In such training were involved the children from the Democratic School in Sofia during the BUSTA project. Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation followed a setting up a skill-building program with the Community for Democratic Education school. The students of CDE began their skill-building in the farm of Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation Bulgaria with introduction to the place and the horses, as well as different types of disabilities. For five visits they observed and participated in a therapy session in the Program "Free Therapeutic Riding for Children with Disabilities"; brainstormed and tested new games that could be played during therapy sessions; observed the herds of horses in the farm; brought horses from the pasture for training; did exercises with a trained horse and a horse in desensitizing training stage. All activities involved preparation by the students, discussions and follow up reflections. To begin the process of skill-building in the partnership between the therapy association and the school should be formed by appointing the persons responsible for organizing the participation of the students.

A visit of the students to the place where the therapy horses are raised and trained should be organized. That will give a chance for everyone to get to know each other, for the students to see how comfortable they are around horses and in their space. A demonstration of the daily activities and trainings will help the students and the trainers get an idea of how the students can get involved. Often that depends on the number of horses in training and the level they have reached. Next it is advisable to involve the students and the trainers in creating the program and its features – types of activities students can and wish to undertake, the regularity of the visits, rights and responsibilities of everyone involved. That will give both the school and the therapy animal association a sense of structure with the respective expectation for both parties' inputs in the process. In the course of the activities regular follow-ups should be done for evaluation of the students' feedback and the progress made.

Students also can be involved in the daily care of the horses. Under the guidance of a professional that can include: feeding the horses; maintaining their stables and pastures; brushing the horses and spending time with them. Involving the students in the training of the therapy horses can vary depending on the specific programs of the therapy animal association. A few examples include desensitizing training programs, training programs for baby horses during their first months, development of horse-assisted activities for people with special needs. The collaboration in BUSTA project also was meaningful for Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation:

- The trainer received valuable feedback on the games played during therapy sessions with the children with special needs. As the students from the CDE are the children's peers it was useful to have that insight of what is the most and the least entraining and enjoyable parts.
- The trainer expanded the desensitizing program for one of the therapy horses in training. For the horse it was an important experience to be in contact with a large group of children and feel comfortable around them.
- The therapy of one of the children in the Program 'Free Therapeutic Riding for Children with Disabilities' was expanded with socialization, building communication skills, asserting confidence in the child's abilities and knowledge among peers, raising a sense of acceptance and inclusion.
- The organization spread its cause among the community of CDE and built long lasting relationships with its members.

- The organization gained experience in organizing activities with large group of students of different ages.

Children of CDE school had the opportunity to understand the worry of an untrained horse and work together with it to ensure the animal understands the colourful balls are not posing a threat. In this case the horse in training was partnering with a more experienced horse to give it even more confidence. Colourful balls were spread around the horses. The horse in training was first worried by the balls. The students and the trainers approached the horse, tried to communicate with it that the balls are of no danger. The students had to remain calm themselves and try to transmit their messages in a non-verbal way by the position of their bodies, their movements, and their energy. That two-way communication process is at the core not only of the training process but during therapy, too. As the students during the BUSTA project realised, the horse cannot speak, so the humans need to become aware of all the other ways of communicating. This set of skills is then easily applicable to all areas of one's everyday life. For beneficiaries with certain conditions it is a way of expression of emotions and thoughts in a way that is understandable for others. That is only one important part of the skill-building processes that happens during equine-assisted therapy. Similar to other animal assisted therapies, equine-assisted therapy has its limitations and have to be avoided in some cases, such as brain cysts, traumas of the spine, allergies, etc. Overall, it is a wonderful way to connect with an animal, bring one physical and mental improvement, as well as enjoy oneself.

## MEANINGFULNESS OF DOG TRAINING FOR SKILL-BUILDING

### WHY ARE DOGS SO UNIQUE?

I assume we all know the saying 'A dog is a man's best friend'. In a society with a diverse spread population of domesticated animals, dogs seem to have a strongly embedded spot in many families. Where before dogs were often seen as a partner and had specific roles and tasks for helping his human family. At present times many dog breeds have changed from specific goals, for example hunting, guarding, scent work etcetera, to dogs who will mostly enjoy their lives in a household without specific tasks. This change made it more appealing to many people to acquire a dog.

Since dogs are very interactive and live closely with us humans, people experience a strong willingness to bond and even work along with dogs. Dogs have historically been humans' companions, and their bond can be traced to prehistoric times[1]. Dogs have played diverse roles in human societies, from hunting and herding to guarding and companionship, they have been essential to human survival and progress. Ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, revered and valued dogs for their loyalty and skills. Through history they have evolved into social animals whether it to be to hunt or to protect one another etc. This innate sense coupled with their deferent behaviour enables them to readily integrate within a human family whether it be bonding, housetraining or being well-mannered, to achieve symbiotic goals for example agility, truffle hunting, etc to even fulfil a familial need which we humans require.



Artemis & Dog. Roman copy of the 1st cent. CE after a Greek original, 4th cent. BCE. Rome, Vatican Museums.

The process of domestication led to the development of emotional bonds between humans and dogs. As dogs adapted to living in human environments, they became attuned to human emotions and learned to respond to human cues. Studies have shown that the dog-human interaction is mutually beneficial, as it leads to an increase in oxytocin hormone production - favouring social-bonds and contributing to the general wellbeing - while simultaneously lowering cortisol, the stress hormone. [35]

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[35] Marshall-Pescini, S., Schaebs, F. S., Gaugg, A., Meinert, A. A., Deschner, T., & Range, F. (2019). The role of oxytocin in the Dog-Owner relationship. *Animals*, 9(10), 792. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9100792>

We could ask ourselves the question, “Why so many households have dogs”? The reasons really are too innumerable to list. However empathic concern is definitely one of the reasons for which we connect so closely with these sentient companions. Dogs are highly attuned on are moods and instinctively will offer ‘support’ whatever our state of mind: happiness, sadness, anger, impatient, etc. Said empathic concern extends even to persons with disabilities, whether physical/psychological or both.

A pet can provide, in boundless measure, love and unqualified approval. Many people have discovered that pets satisfy vital emotional needs. They find that they can hold on to the world of reality, of cares, of human toil and sacrifice, and of intense emotional relationships by caring for an animal. Their concepts of themselves as worthwhile persons can be resorted, even enhanced, by the assurance that the pets they care for love them in return. The bond between human and pets depends on their commonality as animals and their mutual need for attachment. Today the dog’s unique qualities make them particularly well-suited for therapeutic intervention. Dogs possess a remarkable ability to sense and respond to human emotions, and can detect subtle cues in body languages and tone of voice, fostering empathy and emotional understanding.[36] Moreover, thanks to their characteristics, they are suitable to provide assistance and therapy also in indoors environments, and can accompany people in their daily tasks, providing assistance and company.

### THE CONCEPT OF THERAPY WITH DOGS

The interaction between humans and dogs is proven beneficial from different perspectives. In particular, in a therapeutic setting involving people with a mental or physical disability, the dogs’ characteristics and qualities are particularly indicated to create safe environments, attend needs, and promote holistic well-being.

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[36] Barber, A. L. A., Randi, D., Müller, C. A., & Huber, L. (2016). The processing of human emotional faces by pet and lab dogs: evidence for lateralization and experience effects. PLOS ONE, 11(4), e0152393. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0152393>



Dog training presents significant opportunities for skill-building for students. Whether it's overcoming the fear of dogs, developing leadership skills, or fostering patience, this activity offers a versatile and transformative learning experience. Moreover, the adaptability and meaningfulness of dog training distinguish it from other animal-assisted activities, like dolphin or horse therapy.

### *Overcoming Fear of Dogs*

For students who fear dogs, dog training can be a therapeutic avenue. By learning to understand and work with these animals, students can gradually overcome their fear, building their confidence and emotional resilience.

### *Flexibility of Skill Building*

Unlike dolphins and horses, dogs can be part of a student's everyday life. They can be in homes, schools, and city contexts. This constant presence provides an ongoing opportunity for skill development, ensuring that the lessons learned are readily applicable.

### *Leadership Skills and Boundaries*

Training a dog requires strong leadership and an understanding of boundaries. Students learn how to assert themselves confidently and set clear limits for the dog. This translates into essential leadership skills that can be applied in various aspects of life.

### *Developing Patience*

Training a dog is a lesson in patience. Dogs don't learn instantly, and students must persevere through the process. This skill-building activity instills a deep sense of patience and persistence.

### *Shifting Attitudes towards Dogs*

Training dogs for individuals with disabilities shifts our attitude towards our relationship with these animals. It moves away from owning dogs for self-gratification and promotes a cooperative partnership with animals, recognizing the profound impact dogs can have on enhancing the quality of life for people with disabilities.

### *Alone Time and Improved Habits*

Spending time alone with a dog allows students to reflect on their own behaviours and habits. Dogs are incredibly perceptive and can mirror their owner's emotional state. This unique bond encourages students to be more self-aware and make positive changes in their behaviour at home, and in some instances, in situations where no other educators outside the direct family have access.

### *Socialization through Incremental Training*

The incremental nature of dog training encourages students to socialize, both with the dog and other people from their neighbourhood. This not only enhances their interpersonal skills but also fosters a sense of community and support within the training environment.

### *Affective Companion and Emotional Development*

Dogs are affectionate companions that can help students develop important soft skills, such as empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence. This holistic approach to skill-building goes beyond the cognitive domain and nurtures the emotional side of learning.

### *Tailored training*

An incentive for students to become curious and to learn about disabilities in order to become active and effective contributors to the enhancement of the life of a person with special needs. Training dogs for individuals with disabilities requires a deep understanding of the specific needs of the future beneficiary. Students must customize their training approach to meet the unique requirements of the person with a disability, fostering problem-solving and adaptability. Developing curiosity in students to the subject of disabilities is the key to start developing successful inclusive classrooms and communities.

### *Creative Thinking Opportunities*

Designing new training games and methods offers numerous opportunities for creative thinking. Students can explore innovative ways to teach and engage the dogs, pushing the boundaries of their problem-solving abilities.

Dog training is a multifaceted skill-building activity that goes beyond teaching tricks or obedience. It offers students a chance to overcome their fears, develop crucial life skills, build a profound, cooperative relationship with animals, bridge the gap between students and persons with disabilities, and to build self-esteem for having contributed positively to a fellow human in need. The flexibility, socialization, and emotional connection make it a meaningful and transformative experience that can enrich the lives of the students, the dogs they work with and with persons with special needs.

Dogs can be trained to execute commands and simple orders, as well as to maintain a calm behaviour and respond to human emotions. Dog-assisted therapy intervention can be tailored to individual needs and treatment goals. Therefore, dog-trainings are specific and focus on obedience, socialization, and the ability to work in various situations.

### *Types of Therapy Dog*

- **Outdoors Assistance Dog:** intended to help people with reduced mobility or those suffering from an illness, mainly in open/public spaces. Future owners must be able to communicate orders to the dog, as well as have a sufficient active lifestyle to meet and care for the dogs needs.
- **Institutional Dog:** undergoes special training to provide assistance in an institution such as a school, a youth centre, elderly centre, etc.
- **In-House Assistance Dog:** is able to assist at home people with reduced mobility or suffering from other illness.

DYADIS has been training and allocating assistance dogs for over 25 years in Belgium. The association has chosen to work mainly with Golden and Labrador Retrievers as this breed has been proven calm and sociable, particularly suited for remembering orders and specialized in retrieving objects. Throughout these years it was possible to observe first hand the social, emotional, cognitive and physical benefits that an assistance dog can bring to a person with special needs, impacting their autonomy and independence and improving their overall wellbeing.

### *How to train an assistance dog?*

1. Selection of dogs: puppies are selected from the age of 2 months according to their physical characteristics (robust constitution, no hereditary diseases) and their behaviour (flexible, balanced character, etc.) Dyadis selects six new puppies every 6 months.
2. Socialization in a host family: between the ages of 2 and 18 months, puppies are socialized within a foster family that is in charge with familiarizing them with the outside world (noises, walking pace, routine, etc). Host families undertake two training courses per month with a Dyadis trainer.
3. Intensive training at the training centre: between 18 months and 2 years, dogs receive intensive training at Dyadis training centre. Trainers work on a daily basis with each dog to complete their training and become assistance dogs.
4. Find a new family: the search takes place in two phases, initially the possible candidates are invited to socialize with the different dogs within Dyadis structure, and after a week the candidate can begin its individual trail with the dog to test how they interact with each other.
5. Monitoring dogs and owners: after the assistance dog is assigned, Dyadis follows-up with the new owner and intervenes where necessary with additional training sessions.

## THE PROCESS OF SKILL-BUILDING FOR CHILDREN IN A COMMUNICATION PROCESS WITH A DOG

Training an assistance dog requires consistent and specific interactions that enable it to acquire a set of skills essential to fulfil its duty. During this process, the trainer-dog relationship starts by shaping a routine that meets the dogs needs and ensure its wellbeing. In a second moment, accompanied by its trainer, the dogs begins to familiarize with indoors and outdoors environments, socializing with other humans and dogs. In order to accomplish this learning process, dogs need to learn how to recognize and execute a series of specific commands.

Within the BUSTA project, Aika (one of Dyadis dogs) was invited in the BOS school and has crossed its learning path with that of the students. Moreover, one student volunteered to host Aika in her house in order to finalize its training. The group of students, aged between 8 and 12 years have voluntarily chosen how and if to interact with the dog within the class, learning how to assert their boundaries and respect the dogs space. Similarly, also the democratic school l'Arbre des Possible hosted a puppy under training and the students went under the same process of discovery, space negotiation and skills building.

Therapy dog training introduces myriad opportunities for interdisciplinary learning: it encourages the exploration of multiple subjects, fostering cross-curricular connections that enrich students' educational experiences. By favouring the interaction between children and dog-in-training it is possible to observe the mutual benefit that they bring to each other's learning process. The impact does not rely on the exact reproduction of the activities, but rather on setting achievable learning goals, and individualized creative strategies to achieve them.

Dog training is a multifaceted skill-building activity that goes beyond teaching tricks or obedience. Student's interaction with the dogs provides them with an opportunity to understand and eventually overcome their fears, learning how to assert and respect boundaries, and fostering curiosity and comprehension on the theme of inclusion and disabilities. The flexibility of the training, as well as the entailed socialization process between students-dog and the surrounding community, allows building authentic connections, contributing to fostering meaningful and transformative learning experiences. Students must customize their training approach to meet the needs of the future beneficiary, exploring innovative ways to teach and engage the dog and pushing the boundaries of their problem-solving abilities.

The process of interaction between students and dogs has also a positive impact in building their self-esteem and confidence, as they will learn how to assert themselves confidently and set clear limits for the dog. This translates into essential leadership skills that can be applied in various aspects of life.

For instance, for students who fear dogs, dog training can be a therapeutic avenue. By learning to understand and work with these animals, students can gradually overcome their fear, building their confidence and emotional resilience. Moreover, training dogs that will benefit people with special needs, instigates reflections on our relationship with these animals, and the impact they can have in our lives. Students might reflect and discuss also on the role of animal and their rights, prompting discussions that shift the perspective of owning a dog only for self-gratification, towards a more cooperative partnership.

Finally, the process of integrating an assistance dog within a learning environment such as a school can incentivize students curiosity to learn about disabilities and how to become active and effective contributors to improving the life of a person with special needs. This in turn has a positive impact on creating inclusive classrooms and communities.

## THE GUIDELINES FOR INTEGRATING SKILL-BUILDING IN SCHOOLS THROUGH ANIMAL TRAINING FOR SCHOOLS

Integrating skills building activities in schools through initiatives that involve training therapy animals is an innovative idea that provides a unique platform for the students' holistic development.

Engaging in the training of an animal that will benefit a person with special needs can provide an opportunity for skills building through cross-curricular learning, and practical activities.

Students will benefit from an educational experience that stimulates their interests and curiosity, as well as problem-solving skills and critical thinking. Understanding the dynamics related to disability, special needs and exclusion, students can become active agents of inclusion, boosting their self-esteem and confidence. Setting in place an initiative that puts in contact students with therapy animal centre can require the put in place of certain measures in order to ensure the full benefits of this experience.

Active student participation is central to the success of these activities. Students must be actively engaged, through their own will, in every aspect of the training process, from planning and execution to reflecting on their experiences.

This hands-on approach fosters a profound connection between students and the animals. Student participation cannot however be forced or experienced as an obligation, so those students who would rather not engage the activities need to be given the freedom not to participate directly, but have the opportunity to be observers. Not all children have the same learning style or the same desire for responsibility or direct contact.

Finally, it is equally important to evaluate the impact of animal training on students' skill development. Encouraging students to reflect on their experiences and articulate their learning is a critical aspect of the learning process, promoting critical thinking and self-awareness.

Integrating skill-building through animal training in schools has the potential to be a potent and transformative experience for students. By adhering to these guidelines, educators can ensure that these programs are not only effective but also enriching, promoting personal growth and valuable life skills. As students learn to work with animals, they also learn to work with themselves and others, fostering emotional intelligence, empathy, and a sense of responsibility that will serve them well in the future.

## THE MEANINGFULNESS OF SKILL-BUILDING

Integrating skills-building activities in schools is fundamental to foster a true holistic development of the students' competences and capacities, as it equips students with essential abilities and knowledge for personal growth and future success. By developing skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration, students become better prepared to navigate challenges, pursue their interests, and contribute to society.

One of the key advantages of incorporating skill-building activities into the curriculum lies in their real-world applicability. Through projects involving hands-on experiences, students gain insights into how their education extends beyond the classroom, acquiring knowledge and skills with direct relevance to practical, everyday scenarios. This connection between theoretical learning and practical application also serves to foster a sense of purpose and self-confidence, empowering students to pursue their goals and make a positive impact in their lives and communities.

Enriching students' learning experiences with activities that stimulate their interest and link theoretical concepts with concreteness provides them with the opportunity to develop fundamental competences, is key to creating an enjoyable and interactive educational setting. Skill-building activities are a strategic approach that prepares students for the challenges of the future, nurtures their overall development, and provides an education that extends beyond mere academic knowledge, creating well-rounded individuals equipped for success in an ever-evolving world.

### DEMOCRATIC SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

Incorporating students into the decision-making process is a practice that should be implemented early on in primary school but also could be done on later stages. By trusting in the wisdom of young individuals, a fresh and innovative approach can be adopted when addressing various topics. This process not only fosters empathy and patience but also broadens students' world-view. While safety and financial distribution typically remain under the purview of the school board, matters such as food, personal belongings, school trips, and class schedules are examples of topics in which students of any age would be eager to contribute their insights. Establishing rules that guarantee listening to everyone and honest decision-making is a step towards creating an environment that supports individual development and cultivation of group dynamics. Activities such as the BUSTA project provide an opportunity for school groups to apply and train common decision making in small groups such as a class. It is not an easy process, but involving students in decision making can lead to positive outcomes for both the students and the school community as a whole.

*The benefits for the students on training therapy animals through all age groups:*

- Emotional Well-being: Interacting with therapy animals has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and improve overall emotional well-being. Students who engage with these animals can learn how to manage their emotions effectively and develop self-care strategies.



- *Empathy and Compassion:* Working with therapy animals cultivates empathy and compassion in students. They learn to understand the needs and feelings of the animals and people with special needs the animals are trained to serve on, which can then extend to their interactions and approaches.
- *Responsibility and Care:* Caring for therapy animals requires responsibility and commitment. Students learn to follow specific rules, routines, provide proper care, and respect the well-being of the animals. This fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability.
- *Communication and Social Skills:* Interacting with therapy animals can improve communication and social skills. Students may need to communicate with trainers or handlers to understand the animals' needs or participate in group activities involving the animals, promoting effective communication and teamwork.
- *Patience and Resilience:* Training therapy animals requires patience and resilience as progress may take time. Students learn to persevere through challenges, setbacks, and develop patience in achieving desired outcomes.
- *Focus and Concentration:* Engaging with therapy animals can help improve students' focus and concentration. Animals provide a calming presence that can enhance attention spans and help students stay present at the moment.
- *Sensory Integration:* Therapy animals can assist in sensory integration activities for students with sensory processing difficulties. Interacting with the animals through touch, movement, or grooming can help regulate sensory responses.

## SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND SKILL BUILDING

Partnering schools with training therapy animals centres provides an important opportunity to promote social participation and integrate skills building activities in the educational curriculum. Interacting with these animals fosters a positive and inclusive atmosphere, breaking down social barriers and cultivating connections among students.

Engaging in the training process provides students with opportunities to develop valuable skills such as patience, empathy, and effective communication. The therapeutic benefits of interacting with animals are well-documented. Schools incorporating therapy animals often observe positive changes in students' emotional well-being, including reduced stress levels and improved emotional regulation. Engaging in the activity of training an animal that will benefit a person with a disability or special needs, allows the students to gain in depth understanding of disabilities, and take active action to overcome possible barriers, becoming agent of inclusion. This experiential learning extends beyond traditional academic subjects, contributing to the development of well-rounded individuals with a broader perspective on life.

In conclusion, the integration of therapy animals into schools provides dual benefit by enhancing social participation and serving as a powerful tool for skill-building. This innovative approach to education creates a unique and enriching learning environment, preparing students holistically for the challenges they may encounter in the future.

Following a list of skills developed within the BUSTA project:

- *Communication Skills:* Engaging in social activities allows students to interact with their peers, teachers, and other individuals, such as the therapists that took part in the BUSTA project on topics that are beyond their usual interests. This helps them develop effective communication skills, including active listening, expressing ideas clearly, and understanding different perspectives. Students also build confidence and self-esteem.
- *Collaboration and Teamwork:* encouraging students' voluntary participation fosters a cooperative environment. Students learn how to cooperate with each other in order to reach a common goal. Students learn how to cross their interests and skills, delegate tasks, and achieve common goals.
- *Empathy and Understanding:* Interacting with diverse groups of people promotes empathy and understanding. Students learn to appreciate and value diversity, fostering tolerance and acceptance, within the school and beyond.

- *Critical Thinking*: engaging in the training of a therapy animal provides an opportunity for students to think critically and analyse situations from various angles. They learn to evaluate different opinions, make informed decisions, and solve problems creatively.

Based on the project's positive experience of students, it is recommended to make continuity for further education and to integrate skill-building in schools through animal therapy. These are main guidelines steps for schools or other educational institutions that could be modified anytime according to opportunities of schools and governmental support:

- to do a search of partners and centres for animal training. Institutions can search a centre in its own or different region of the country;
- to include animal therapy into the educational system. For example, during a school year, students can visit an animal training centre once in two or three months;
- to do a search for financial support like projects, sponsors etc. In that case, all pupils from the same classroom would be able to participate in animal therapy activities free of charge. It would decrease the social exclusion of students;
- to arrange with centre skill-building activities for students without animals. It would include developing various skills: communication, collaboration, empathy, compassion, responsibility and care, critical thinking of the students;
- to organise participation of the students in therapy with animals. Students would be guided and participating in activities with professional animal trainers;
- to document the feedback of activities. It can include observations, reflections, individual interviews and discussions of the students. Teachers could document it by writing a reflection and sharing their experience by doing presentations for other teachers, schools or institutions.

## THE GUIDELINES FOR INTEGRATING SKILL-BUILDING IN SCHOOLS THROUGH ANIMAL TRAINING FOR THERAPY ANIMAL ASSOCIATIONS

Therapy animal associations and all organizations that are involved with preparing and providing therapy animals can engage with schools and educational institutions to promote skills-building initiatives through activities with training therapy animals. By entering in contact with children and young people, centers of therapy animals can raise awareness on social barriers and inclusion, strengthening the bonds of social solidarity and fostering empathy and understanding.

Beyond individual skill development, involving schools in therapy animal training promotes a sense of community and engagement. Students participate in activities that extend beyond the confines of the classroom, creating a connection between the school and the broader community. This sense of engagement fosters a positive school culture and encourages students to see the relevance of their education in real-world contexts.

Providing the perspective of a training centre for animals can enrich the learning experience of students, that in turn can broaden their knowledge on animal behaviours, and actively engage in training an animal that will benefit a person with a disability or special needs.

It is important for therapy animal centres to cooperate with schools and design a plan that gradually introduces interested students to animal training, structuring the training activities in partnership with the students and allowing space for reflection, discussion and feedback.

The benefits for therapy animal associations in the process are on both institutional and internal levels. In the process as an institution the therapy animal association will broaden their reach-out to the communities; expand their possibilities of collaboration with private and public bodies; raise awareness of their causes; aid their fundraising efforts. Internally therapy animal associations can expand their programs and projects; develop new approaches in the training of their animals; challenge their staff members to advance their practice in working with children and young people; provide new expertise for their trainers; expand their animal training programs; enrich the training process of the animals they work with.

List of benefits that collaborating with schools could offer:

1. **Promoting Inclusive Societies:** Students not only learn about disabilities but also develop curiosity and an open-minded perspective that drives them to explore and contribute to societal needs beyond the classroom. This contributes to a new activity of the organisation in the effort to inform the general population and spread awareness about the benefits of therapy animals for persons with special needs.
2. **Reducing Human Resource Costs:** Organizations can benefit from the assistance of students, mitigating one of the largest costs incurred by therapy animal organizations: human resources and time.
3. **Increasing Awareness and Volunteer Engagement:** Greater visibility in schools can lead to increased awareness, indirect exposure, advertising, advocacy, and potential donations.
4. **Enhancing Organizational Reputation:** By promoting a more inclusive society and becoming agents of change, organizations can garner more support from foundations, public donations, or financial backing.
5. **Socialization:** Therapy animals benefit from exposure to students and/or school environment.
6. **Inspiring New Training Ideas:** Students may propose innovative training games and activities that can enrich the training process.
7. **Fostering Connections:** Students may develop a long-lasting healthy connection with the therapy animals prompting them to continue supporting such therapy animal organizations in the future.
8. **Harnessing Collective Intelligence:** Schools can provide a platform for creative problem-solving, allowing students to collaborate on training games that fulfil specific needs of beneficiaries, if the organisation has a specific training challenge to solve, relating to a specific need of a future beneficiary.

## GUIDELINES FOR INTEGRATING SKILL-BUILDING IN SCHOOLS

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 15% of the world's population, or over 1 billion people, live with some form of disability. Disabilities can be physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health-related, and their prevalence varies across regions and demographics.

Pinpointing the exact number of disability organizations globally is challenging due to the diverse nature of these organizations and varying definitions of disability. However, there are thousands of disability-specific NGOs, advocacy groups, and international organizations working to address the needs and rights of people with disabilities. These organizations focus on areas such as accessibility, inclusion, education, employment, and healthcare. Social integration begins when people with special needs begin to be seen not as different, but as similar. The quality of life of children with special needs depends on the society's attitude towards the disabled and the characteristics of the applied care model.

Collaboration of schools and associations for disabilities can help to deal with different challenges facing people with disabilities:

- **Dealing with Discrimination and Stigma:** People with disabilities often face societal discrimination and stigma, hindering their full integration into various aspects of life, including education and employment. For example, children with disabilities are increasingly included in general education. In order to introduce a child with a disability to other students, it is important that schools cooperate with various associations of the disabled people.
- **Inadequate Accessibility:** Many environments, including public spaces and digital platforms, lack proper accessibility features, limiting the participation of individuals with disabilities.
- **Limited Economic Opportunities:** People with disabilities often encounter barriers to employment, facing higher unemployment rates and lower wages compared to the general population.
- **Healthcare Disparities:** Access to healthcare services, including rehabilitation and assistive technologies, can be limited for people with disabilities, exacerbating health disparities.
- **Educational Challenges:** Inclusive education remains a challenge, with barriers to access and support services for students with disabilities.
- **Legal and Policy Gaps:** Inconsistencies in disability-related legislation and insufficient implementation of inclusive policies contribute to ongoing challenges for individuals with disabilities.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from governments, communities, and organizations to promote inclusivity, eliminate discrimination, and create opportunities for the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

Recommendation for future cooperation and activities:

- Schools can prepare various meetings with people having individual needs, for example, a meeting with a person having vision disability. This person could tell about this specific disability, how he lives, how he adapts to the environment. Also, there could be specific activities for children in schools, like presenting Braille, gesture language, etc. Such similar activities could be organized for raising awareness about different disabilities.
- Different campaigns could be organized in collaboration with disability organizations for children to overcome stigmatized views and develop integrative approaches. For example, during the campaign for World Down's Syndrome Day students can wear socks of different colors and patterns, to do different handicrafts: to draw, to color, to cut or even to knit different socks.
- Students can participate in activities of centers for people with disabilities. Children can show their own concert like singing, dancing, acting, reading poetry and etc.
- Children can be enrolled in different emancipating activities of people with disabilities. For example, visit integrated theater where people with different individual needs are acting. Amateur actors take part of performance where they can reveal themselves as individuals, feel significant and included in society.
- It is recommended to organize different awareness campaigns and festivals, other events which reminds of respect, tolerance, equity and individual need. For example, students can participate in every year organized Klaipeda University and Lithuanian Sea Museum (Lithuania) festival 'I am indifferent, what about you?'. This is a good example of awareness raising, when children are invited to get to know individual needs in specially for this festival installed temporary labs where they get to know about vision disability, hearing disability, feeling, sensory integration, functional limitations and etc.

- It is recommended to involve students in different volunteering activities at farms, museums, disability organizations for therapy animals, such as horses, dolphins, dogs, helping with the everyday care. Also it is recommended to suggest for students to join volunteering groups, such as social-skills training groups for children with autism. In this case, children can gain valuable experience, suggest their help and support of communication and expand own abilities.
- Today it is already understood that is necessary to create the most favorable conditions for a child with a disability and special needs to grow and develop. It is necessary to raise and educate him. Then child will be able to socialize successfully in society and integrate into it. Social integration is today's aspiration and goal.[37]

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[37] Valančiutė L. (2010). Vaikų su negalia integracija bendrojo lavinimo mokykloje. Magistro baigiamasis darbas. Mykolo Riomerio universitetas. Retrieved from: <https://vb.mruni.eu/object/elaba:1994188/1994188.pdf>



## CONCLUSIONS

- BUSTA project was orientated towards democratic skills development and schoolchildren involvement into training therapy animals. In this project we haven't got any idea to separate children of typical development from children having special needs. Therefore, democratic insights and the openness was very meaningful. The project itself enrolled all children with respect and equity to individual needs of each participant. Project reached it's designated goals for expanding, laying and developing democratic skills of children involved in the project activities.
- Many scientific studies proved that animals are highly significant for children and their development of different social and psychological aspects. It is also documented that practices involving animals in school life has a lot of benefits, the same as therapy effect is gained during the different therapeutic activities for children with disabilities.
- Animals let the children feel unconditional love and helps to improve their confidence. Often animals are found to give comfort, they communicate in a low but safe level of social cognition, therefore, are easily understood by any age or developmental individualities of children.
- Project involved different animal kinds – dolphins, horses, and dogs. Therefore, participating children had possibility to face different communication and training models, deal with different challenges, try varied activities. The majority of children who took part into this project reflected that all animals simply give love to them and affections, they think that animals may feel their moods, and with animals children may “talk”, or do different elements, that animals are smart and are possible to get their communicational features. Also they all reflected that animals are alive partners which are very important and must be treated with empathy and trustworthy attitudes. They noticed that animals are good for communicating without words, but seems to be recognizing if children were speaking, open to suggested non-verbal interaction, like cuddling, hug, grooming and etc.

- Suggested educational activities in this project with animals and other activities based on understanding people with individual needs impacted real-life experiences of children on critical thinking, problem-solving skills and social skill, this article underscores the imperative for educators to consider experiential learning. The gatherings of narratives from teachers, therapy organizations, and children revealed that suggested activities based on training therapy animals and other educational activities provided by open school basing on democratic philosophy for children developed their personal, social and learning to learn competencies, citizenship, cultural awareness, expression and multilingual competences. By observing and taking care of animals children got understanding and developed appreciation for the world around them. They got a lot of experiences in different animal recognition, lifecycles, training methods, eating habits, sensitivity what lead to an interest in the natural world and an appreciation for all forms of life on earth.