

Executive Summary
Evaluation of the
Children-Friendly Kindergarten Program

to Promote Children's Learning & Behavioral Competence
in Haifa, Netanya and Rishon Lezion

Based on the
Neuro-Developmental-Functional Approach

Implemented by
Learning Competence – the Center for the
Advancement of Functional Capacities

Funded by the
Bernard Van Leer Foundation

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Introduction

The program for the advancement of learning and behavioral skills offered by the Center for the Advancement of Functional Capacities Ltd. under the directorship of Mr. Rami Katz has for some 20 years been operating in kindergartens and schools in numerous cities and regional councils in Israel. The program is based on the Neuro-Developmental-Functional Approach (NDFA) which aims to prevent functional development delays, to treat such delays if they exist as well as to help children advance in a very broad functional spectrum in the cognitive, motor, social and emotional areas and more.

In the year 2005, the Van Leer Foundation awarded a grant to implement the Learning Competence Program in the kindergartens of three cities – Haifa, Netanya and Rishon Lezion. The grant was awarded for a three year period. The program was called the Children-Friendly Kindergarten Program.

From March to July 2008, the program was evaluated by "*Muvanim* – Evaluation Team". Information for the evaluation was gathered from the program operators, the staff of the kindergartens where the program operated, local authority representatives and parents of children participating in the program. The evaluation used interviews, focus groups, a kindergarten staff questionnaire, and text analysis. The results of the staff questionnaire are presented here as percentages¹.

¹ For reasons of convenience, some numbers have been rounded out.

Main findings

The project funded by the Van Leer Foundation operates in a total of 84 kindergartens – 32 kindergartens in Haifa, 25 in Netanya, and 27 in Rishon Lezion.

1. Program goals - The different parties involved are all in consensus, mainly positive, about the goals of the program. Greater effort has to be made to give parents a full grasp of the program and its implications.

2. General satisfaction - According to the kindergarten staff questionnaire, the general satisfaction rating for the program is very high. 93.5% of the respondents expressed a high level or very high level of satisfaction.

3. Effect of the program on the children - Findings indicate that the program has a positive effect on many children. It helps to provide a response to the special needs of individual children, removes the "not normal" label from children who are different, gives a feeling of satisfaction, focus and success, conveys a feeling of understanding, containment and acceptance, helps to develop individual abilities, learning competencies and preparation for school, helps in adapting the school environment to the children, develops social skills, and helps to meet the needs of a troubled sector of the population. The majority of the kindergarten staff (90%) expressed a high level of satisfaction about the effect of the program on the children. The following table shows the percentage of respondents that expressed high levels of agreement with statements about the effect of the program on the children:

Statement	High/very high
The program enables the children to experience satisfaction and success.	94%
The program helps children to develop personal abilities and learning competencies.	93%
The program helps to provide a response to the special needs of children.	91%
The program contributes to the integration of special needs children.	86%
The program helps the children to accept each other.	83%

4. Effect of the program on the kindergarten staff – The majority of the kindergarten's staff (89%) expressed high levels of satisfaction from the effect of the program on the kindergarten staff.

The findings indicate that the kindergarten staff has been strengthened by the program which promotes cooperation among the staff by including the assistant kindergarten teachers in the program. (86%) and improving the kindergarten staff's sense of professionalism and competence in their own eyes and in the eyes of those around them (parents, supervisors and the municipality).

The following table shows the percentage of respondents that expressed high levels of agreement with statements regarding the contribution that the program makes to improving their professionalism.

Statement	High/very high
The program provides tools to identify children's difficulties.	92%
The program adds to my knowledge about child development.	91%
The program helps to accept and contain children.	91%
The program helps to improve professional language.	90%
The program provides tools to deal with children's difficulties.	86%
The program gives you an opportunity to express your creative side.	85%

5. Effect of the program on the atmosphere in the Kindergarten – The majority of the kindergarten's staff (88%) expressed high levels of satisfaction from the effect of the program on the climate in the kindergarten.

Findings indicates that the program contributes towards making a positive change in the atmosphere of the kindergarten by decreasing violent incidents and increasing positive interactions between the children. Children are busily involved in positive and independent activity, and children who need to be constantly on the move can legitimately express this need in designated corners. This helps to reduce friction and aggression, and creates a sense of order in the kindergarten

The following table shows the percentage of respondents that expressed high levels of agreement with statements relating to the effect of the program on the atmosphere in the kindergarten

Statement	High/very high
The program encourages activities and participation.	94%
The program creates an effective attentive environment for the child.	85%
The program helps to reduce in the number of violent incidents.	78%
The program helps to reduce disciplinary events.	77%
The program helps to reduce disquiet and constant mobility.	76%

6. Diversity and load - The majority of the kindergarten's staff (93%) reported that the program provides a variety of teaching methods and encourages the teachers' creativity in terms of using different accessories as well as responding to difficulties.

In addition, the staff reports that running the program constitutes a heavy load for them mainly because of the need to invent new activities, the need to set up a large number of stations, and the need to invest time in becoming familiar with and mediating each activity center.

It seems that the heavy load is replacing a different load that the staff had to contend with previously which was dealing with discipline and behavior problems.

8. Diagnostic tool – The program provides a diagnostic tool for the younger children, and later also provides tools to deal with the results of the diagnosis.

9. Kindergarten structure - One of the key changes implemented as a result of the program was the reorganization of the education environment. Kindergartens housed in a small building found it difficult to keep a large number of activity areas open at the same time. In addition, many of the kindergarten teachers reported that they lack storage space for the equipment required for the program (54%).

10. Parental Involvement - The parents' direct contact with program occurs primarily at three levels:

- **Parent's activities**: The majority of the kindergarten's staff (91.8%) expressed high levels of satisfaction from the parent's activities, as did the parents. Not all of the kindergartens managed to meet the quota of three activities per year.
- **Morning circuit**: For most of the parents, this is their main encounter with the program. Most of them see it in a positive light. The majority of kindergarten's staff (81.9%) indicates that the morning circuit helps the parents relate to the program.
- **Personal contact** - Some of the parents of children with difficulties are in personal contact with the kindergarten teacher or the local coordinator. These parents know the program well.

Based on conversations with the parents, and contrary to the kindergarten staff's view, it is clear that many of the parents are unaware of the program's existence, or alternatively, they know that the program exists but they only have partial information about the program, its goals, principles and implementation. In addition, only a minority of parents implement in the home the activities they learned in the kindergarten.

11. Integration of Theoretical and Practical Aspects - The program offers an important and crucial combination of theoretical and practical aspects. The training course is perceived as providing theoretical information which is sometimes complex and of a high level, while the facilitation in the field allows participants to translate this knowledge into activities that are related to day-to-day matters in the kindergarten.

12. Training course - The training course facilitated by Rami Katz was rated very high in terms of its importance (97%), interest (95%) and more.

13. Local Coordinator - More than 50% of the respondents meet the local coordinator once every two weeks.

It is reported from the field that the role of the local coordinator is significant on three fronts: Support in dealing with difficulties encountered when implementing the program. Translation of the theory into action adapted to each kindergarten, as well as to certain children and Networking function ensuring that information is shared between the different kindergartens.

The contribution of the local coordinator to the kindergarten staff was rated very high in the questionnaire; for example: satisfaction (99.3%), help in translating the program into practice (98%) and availability (97.4%).

14. Documentation and Writing - A predominant characteristic of the program is the small amount of organized printed material that is accessible to the program participants. This applies to the theoretical material from the training courses, as well as to the practical material and proposed activities. Numerous times it was mentioned in the field that the lack of this type of material makes it difficult for the kindergarten staff to run activities.

15. Formative Evaluation - The supervisory body raises the need for continuous evaluation of the program that will help mold the program during its operation

16. Sectors - The findings indicate that there is a difference between the sectors. Although all the values are high, the values in the State sector and the Arab sector are higher than those in the religious State sector. There is no significant difference between the State sector and the Arab sector.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Strength of the Findings - In most cases, the findings of the qualitative study were congruent with the findings from the questionnaire. This congruency provides cross validation for the findings and reinforces them.

2. Program Evaluation by Participants - The stakeholders (the kindergarten staff, supervisory body, and the municipality) value this program, believing it to be important and of top quality.

3. Achieving Project Goals - The program is achieving a large proportion of its goals. The results clearly show that the program helps to reinforce the kindergarten staff, to promote cooperation between the kindergarten teachers and their assistants, to diversify teaching methods and to improve the atmosphere in the kindergarten. Furthermore, the program helps by providing a response to the individual needs of different children, by legitimizing their differentness and by helping them to develop their learning competencies. It should be noted that this study did not address the effects of the program on specific children. Linking the parents to the principles of the program was only partially achieved (see the following section).

4. Linking the parents to the principles of the program - The findings indicate that this goal was only partially achieved. It is an important goal and if achieved, it can extend the positive effect of the program on the children who are participating in it. **It is therefore recommended that the parents' familiarity with the program and its principles be increased by intensifying the current means of contact and adding more points of contact.** Eight suggestions for implementation of this recommendation are detailed in the evaluation report.

5. Written material - Very little written material about the program, either theoretical or practical, is available. This presents difficulties for the kindergarten staff and is liable to affect the program's long-term survivability. **It is therefore recommended that the range of written material, both theoretical and practical, about the program be expanded.** Eight suggestions for implementation of this recommendation are detailed in the evaluation report.

6. Kindergarten Structure / Equipment Maintenance - From the field, it is unclear who is responsible for maintaining equipment that becomes worn or damaged. **It is recommended that the matter of responsibility for equipment maintenance be clarified for the stakeholders.** Furthermore, it appears that some of the kindergartens lack adequate storage space for the equipment. **It is recommended to examine the possibility of supplying the kindergartens with a portable storeroom in addition to the equipment**

7. Points for Future Research - among other questions, long-term studies may be conducted on the following:

- What effect does exposure to the learning competencies program have on the readiness for 1st grade of children who participated in the program?
- Do the findings that indicate that the stage at which the kindergarten staff join the three-year training course makes a difference regarding various aspects of the evaluation, represent a significant trend or is it a marginal side effect?
- Is the difference between the sectors, as indicated in the findings, a significant trend or is it a marginal side effect?