

After a couple of amazing Romania trips, this summer I decided I'd have a go at a different trip and chose to work at the Karin Dom centre in Varna, Bulgaria. As Maggie showed us round the centre I was struck by how well it was run; there were many different specialists to attend to the needs of each child; SLTs, Physiotherapists, Doctors and a well trained team of care staff. The staffs were incredibly friendly and offered me the opportunity to learn a variety of new skills through working with them; I learnt about the child-led Montessori approach, worked in the socialisation room, and got to spend a lot of time with the fantastic physiotherapists. I sat in on several sessions, watching the physios in action and being able to talk to them and the children they work with about how different techniques have worked. Particularly astounding was the story of one Harry Potter fanatic, who (apart from giving me a ridiculously hard pop quiz on Harry Potter that I completely failed at) told me about how she's been coming to the centre since she was a baby, and had progressed from being unable to move most of her limbs to being almost completely able, walking around only with the support of crutches, and is currently working hard to get rid of them too. Chatting to her and another teen, seeing that their conditions had been improved so much that their disabilities had very much taken a back seat to shopping and talking about boys, really made me realise the extent to which a well-equipped and well-staffed centre can impact upon the lives of children as they grow up.

That's not to say that all the work is done in Varna, far from it. The Karin Dom Centre is in constant need of help to further improve and expand its services to help more people. And there is also the orphanage where we worked in the afternoons, which are in desperate need of help. I spent a lot of time at the boys' orphanage with the group of incredibly sweet, friendly and caring kids. Some were a bit shy but most were lively and animated, chatting away as much as their English and my Bulgarian would allow, getting stuck into some arts and crafts, and gleefully kicking my ass at basketball then taking the mick! You could almost be fooled into thinking they are getting on ok in the orphanage, but a chat with an interpreter confirmed that the opposite is true; she said they are always sad when there are no volunteers in, and are failing at school because they have no drive to succeed. Some of them are able to visit their parents for a few weeks a year, but some of them no longer have parents and remain rattling around the big, concrete orphanage, unable to be fostered or adopted due to restrictive Bulgarian law. It was clear from my talk with the interpreter that she believed having volunteers come in and spend time with the boys really does have an effect on their emotional well-being; we can help by providing intellectual and creative stimulation, care and affection, by paying attention to their needs and making them feel valued. Raising self-esteem is an important part of our work as it may in turn help the children become more motivated to work hard to get a good education.

Lastly, even though it's in no way related to the excellent care work that goes on in Varna, it would just be rude not to mention that there's a lovely beach just down the hill from the volunteer flat. After a day of working hard on the projects, a couple of hours sunbathing, a nice big ice-cream and a dip did go down a treat

Claire Brown, Varna Summer Trip 2008