

First of all I would like to say that the trip was absolutely amazing, and I can't wait to go back. I went out as part of a team of nine, most of whom, like me, had not worked with CAST before. In the mornings we each visited two flats ('Family Type Homes'), each of which had about five children, who were all non-verbal and had some type of developmental disorder. In the afternoons we went to the adult institutions in Cezieni and Caracal, where there was a wider range of ability.

As soon as we arrived the culture difference was immediately clear. Even in Bucharest, on a motorway, there was a horse and cart. On the first day of working with the children, we were really thrown in at the deep end. The first Family Type Home (FTH) I visited had four children in, one of whom could be quite violent on occasion. They were all strong teenagers, but I discovered later that on this first day most of the children had been sedated which is allowed for safety reasons. One of the girls liked throwing Lego bricks at the other children, but was not willing to play with me. My aim was to get her to interact with me, and to achieve this I had to get her trust. I was tempted to tell her to stop throwing the Lego, but I had to be open-minded to realise that she might not know that she was behaving badly. Another girl was lying on the floor and scribbling on the Lego blocks with a blunt pencil. I brought paper and pens for her the next day, but I was surprised to see that she was jumping around and dancing. Since the children were not sedated later in the week, there was much more hair pulling and hitting; they also liked to take glasses, jewellery and watches off. It was surprising how strong many of the children were, considering their small size; it was important to remember that they meant no harm.

In the second flat I visited in the morning there were three children. One of the boys wanted to jump out of the windows. As soon as we came in, he grabbed my hand and dragged me into every room of the flat. Like many of the children, he loved repetitive actions such as clapping, as well as being picked up and swung around. One of the girls liked putting things in her mouth and rocking backwards and forwards; if she trusted someone, she liked to sit on them and be stroked. A 14-year-old girl loved drawing, painting nails and having her hair brushed. She liked us drawing faces, which she then copied. At the end of the first week we brought her some pencils and a colouring book, and it was so satisfying to see how excited she became. While she was busy with her pencils, the song "Mad World" started playing on the TV; I was extremely surprised when she started singing along, perfectly in tune!

On another morning, I went to another flat and played with a little 7-year-old. She had lived in the orphanage since birth, but several years ago had been taken into foster care. She returned to the orphanage after a few months, but was so traumatised that she stopped speaking. She was very shy and disinterested, and when I brought out the bubbles she played with them alone for twenty minutes, completely ignoring my attempts to play with her. My aim was to get her to interact with me, which I finally managed by picking her up, which she absolutely loved. For the next hour, she kept pulling me up to swing her around. She was very capable of communicating what she wanted, despite not speaking. I tried to get her to interact with me more, by pretending I did not understand what she wanted. I found it greatly rewarding when she started laughing towards the end because she enjoyed it so much. I felt that simply making noises was a significant improvement in her interaction with me.

In the afternoons, we went to the adult institutions at Cezieni and Caracal. In many ways, I found this more challenging, since these people were so much older than me, but behaved in such a childlike way. For example, many loved bubbles and painting nails. Almost all of the adults had come from the old orphanages in Slatina and Balş, while the rest were institutionalised either because they had suffered brain damage, or were infected with HIV. I found it quite shocking to see how the institutionalisation had affected them, since they were all born with the potential to be completely normal. I was surprised by the range and severity of the psychological, social and emotional problems these people faced as a result of the deprivation they experienced during childhood. On the other hand, it was so exciting to see the subtle improvements in their ability to interact over the course of just ten days. Simply by playing with them I was able to create a stimulating atmosphere that allowed their development to resume to some extent.

I think it would have helped me to learn some more Romanian words and phrases, as many of the people in the adult institutions were able to talk. It would have been easier to tailor activities to their abilities if I had known even simple words such as 'flower', 'house', 'tree', etc. By far the most useful, however, were 'Buna' (hello), 'Pa' (bye), 'Da' (yes), 'Nu' (no) and 'Gata' (stop/enough/finished).

