

Louise Kerr Report of my trip to Russia

Dates: 31/07/09 - 23/08/09

Agency: Love Russia

Week One:

- Village of Yelatma (Ryazan region of Russia approx 6 hours from Moscow)
- In a home for children with moderate to severe learning difficulties (mental and physical)
- Team of 11 volunteers plus 4 Russian interpreters
 - included 2 physiotherapists, 3 special needs teachers, one GP, one full time special needs carer and 4 others

Aims:

- provide support for ongoing work as indicated by The Promise (a charity which is involved longterm with this home), and by Maria (the orphanage director)
- carry out physiotherapy assessments of several children and provide advice regarding positioning, seating and mobility issues
- provide advice regarding development of communication skills and strategies (e.g.basic Russian sign language, symbols etc)
- carry out some hearing assessments

Summary:

The orphanage has 4 rooms of children. 2 volunteers (plus interpreters) were allocated to each room whilst myself and the other physio (Yvonne) floated between rooms to see various children.

In the rooms, the volunteers spent one-on-one time with each child, using various toys to encourage tactile, visual and aural stimulation. They also encouraged the children to interact with each other in small groups.

Yvonne and I had been given a list of children to re-assess for The Promise to update their records. We also got involved in interactive play with the other children whenever we could. As we weren't allocated to a particular room we were free to do other things, such as put together a wheelchair, measure new beds, and observe the Russian physio who had recently started coming to the orphanage to work with some of the children. He was using methods which we weren't familiar with...and also weren't in agreement with...therefore we unfortunately had limited opportunities to work with those children. As a result of our observations, hopefully The Promise will be able to influence this treatment in future. As we were only there for a week we felt we had no authority to dispute the Russian methods.

We were also asked to visit another of the local orphanages to assess one child who couldn't walk. On our arrival we were shown at least 10 children with developmental delays in terms of mobility. The staff of this home have no training whatsoever in dealing with disabilities. Since my return home I have been in touch with The Promise about this. It is hoped that they will be able to visit this home very soon and provide staff training to help these children realise their potential.

Week Two:

- I travelled alone by train (14 hours!) to another city called Samara to visit friends
- Unfortunately I was feeling ill for this whole week (may or may not have been swine flu!!) so i spent a lot of time sleeping!

Week Three:

- Town of Spassk (Ryazan region approx 4 hours from Moscow)
- Stayed in an orphanage / boarding school
- Team of 21 volunteers

Aims:

- Run a daily programme for the children who live in the orphanage, plus some other local children who came each day
- Continue work on the courtyard playground (started several years ago by Love Russia)
- Provide resources to the orphanage/school and 3 other local schools

Summary:

Approx 50 children attended each day (less than expected as a lot of the orphanage kids were away on another camp). We did the usual holiday-club type stuff such as songs, stories, crafts, games. The orphanage authorities are very strict about what is taught. We were not allowed to use Jesus' name in the stories, sing Christian songs, or pray with the children. A small team also worked on the courtyard to build a tyre swing, a climbing frame and a tyre bench.

Positives:

We all really enjoyed spending time with the children, getting to know them, and helping to put some smiles on their wee faces.

Relationships between Love Russia and the various orphanages were strengthened. Hopefully we have helped to facilitate future work with the immobile children in the other orphanage.

It was brilliant to see the courtyard playground at Spassk being improved and then used by all the children.

Negatives:

I felt that, due to the extensive work already done by Love Russia and The Promise, there was limited need for physios in the special needs home at this time. We could perhaps have been better used elsewhere. (Although this is really a positive thing as the longterm aim is for the Russian staff to be independent working with these special children)

It was difficult to watch the children being upset by the Russian physio and not be able to do much about it.

I didn't feel able to fully throw myself into the activities in week 3 as I was still recovering from being ill.

On the whole, I'm glad I went on this trip. It was a mixed experience which I find difficult to explain, but will never forget.

Thanks again for all your prayers.

Louise Kerr

