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SOCIETY

This clinical psychologist is empowering people with autism & developmental disorders; 40,000 benefitted so far

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As a child growing up in Nashik, Maharashtra, Rishikesh Shindikar struggled through school. Unable to cope with the syllabus, he had to put up with cruel jibes from other children and admonition from his parents for neglecting his studies. Little did they realise that Rishikesh had a developmental disorder that hampered his learning ability.

It was when Rishikesh was in class 5 that his teacher suggested his parents consult a psychiatrist. “It was shocking for us to learn that he has Mild Intellectual Disorder. That is when we got to know why he was a slow learner and struggled in school. He always seemed more interested in playing. Moreover, he was not able to express himself,” says Praful Shindikar, Rishikesh’s father.

Though teachers suggested to Rishikesh’s father to send him to a school for special children, his father could not afford it. Rishikesh went to a regular school till class 8 which he cleared with difficulty.

“I run a stationery shop and earn Rs20,000 to 25,000 a month. It was difficult for me to afford any private and specialised education for him. Thankfully, when he was 19, we came across V-Excel Educational Trust through a magazine article that my sister had read. That changed things for us,” says Praful.

Rishikesh, now 24, received training and counselling at V-Excel Educational Trust, a non-profit organisation. Through various intervention programmes and vocational training, Rishikesh was able to manage daily activities and also learnt new skills.

Rishikesh now travels independently and is interning at the paper cup manufacturing centre of V-Excel Educational Trust in Nashik. Pic: V-Excel Educational Trust



In January 2020, he got placed in a private company for an assembly line operation. However, he lost his job during the lockdown after working for a few months. He was then recruited by the V-Excel Educational Trust at its paper cups manufacturing centre in Nashik.

“He is undergoing training right now and receives a monthly stipend of Rs6000. He has been assured of a raise after the training,” says Praful.

He adds that Rishikesh is now more confident and wants to learn new things. “He now travels independently in public transport for commuting to and from the manufacturing centre. He works and performs day to day activities without any support. He also plans to learn English.”

Empowering specially-abled people

V-Excel Educational Trust was founded by clinical psychologist Vasudha Prakash in 2001 to help people with developmental disorders acquire learning and skills.

Developmental disorders comprise various psychiatric conditions that originate in childhood such as autism, ADHD, intellectual disability, learning disability, cerebral palsy and others.

In the last two decades, V-Excel has reached over 40,000 beneficiaries of which 50 people are placed in various companies and in the hospitality industry.

It has carried out teacher training programmes in over 100 schools to teach inclusive education.



At the baking centre of V-Excel Educational Trust.

Pic: V-Excel Educational Trust

Vasudha was born and brought up in Mumbai but shifted to Saudi Arabia and then to the US after marriage where she worked as a professor. She also pursued a doctorate in Special Education from Rutgers University, New Jersey.

She says she always wanted to do something in India in the education sector. After returning in 2001, she was once part of a TV show on education for specially-abled people.

“After the TV show many people suggested I do something in this sector and that’s how the journey started,” says Vasudha

In 2001, Vasudha who settled in Chennai launched V-Excel Educational Trust.

“I started with 11 people with autism and intellectual disabilities and eight staff members,” says the 59-year-old.

V-Excel now has centres in several cities including Chennai, Tirunelveli, Pollachi, Solapur, Srirangam, Erode, Mylapore and Nashik. They conduct early intervention programmes, counsellings, vocational training and much more. Activities like cooking, washing and gardening are part of the training to help the beneficiaries lead a normal life. They also have music and art activities.



V-Excel Educational Trust has CSR partners who are regular customers of the products made by people there. Pic: V-Excel Educational Trust

The non-profit has a six-acre organic farm near Chennai where the children spend two days a week with all the freedom to do what they want. “In the farm, they don’t have to pretend to be anyone else. They are connected with nature and that helps improve their mental health,” says Vasudha.

Training and placement

“Once the beneficiaries can perform day to day activities independently, they are shifted to get vocational training,” she says.

After training, they are placed in jobs where they can earn a living and lead an independent life. The non-profit has tied up with various companies and hotels for placements.

“Moreover, we also manufacture various products such as paper cups, jute products, bags, showpieces, coasters, stationery holders and more. So many beneficiaries are placed in our centres where they manufacture products, package them, do data entry and other jobs, earning money,” says Vasudha.

The products manufactured at the centres are sold online as well as offline and have found a market in the United States, Australia and Singapore apart from India.

The organisation has CSR partners who are regular customers of the products. They also have stalls at Hexaware, Grundfos, TCS, Cognizant, Tech Mahindra and many other companies to sell the products.

Harish, from Chennai, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder when he was very young. His mother says he struggled with his education though he managed to complete graduation. But finding a job proved a stiff challenge.



Skating training underway at a centre. Pic: V-Excel Educational Trust

“He completed graduation in sociology by memorizing everything, not understanding. He somehow secured 55 percent in graduation but faced a lot of problems in finding a job,” says Harish’s mother Neela.

A friend told Harish about V-Excel Educational Trust in 2018 and he enrolled for training there. He has now

been working with a private company for a year.

“I know MS Word and other computer skills. I work as a customer relationship executive and earn Rs12,000 a month. I am doing well now and want to lead a dignified and independent life,” says Harish, 36, who also receives PF from his company.

Parents of children with developmental disorders go through a lot of stress and face social stigma. Rishikesh’s father recalls, “Children would laugh at him use many demeaning words. We faced a lot of social challenges along with our personal struggle to take care of our son.”



Dr. Vasudha Prakash addressing the staff at V-Excel Trust. Pic: V-Excel Trust

Vasudha agrees. “Children with developmental disorders are slow learners and have expression and IQ issues. They are seen as different and laughed at. But slowly things are changing as awareness is increasing,” she says.

Parents and guardians of those with developmental disorders should be patient and open to explaining to people as it can reduce the social stigma associated with it,” she adds.

“Often parents would cry and say their children can’t have a normal life. However, after counselling and awareness, the attitude of the parents and guardians change.”

The NGO charges money from the patient's parents depending on how much they can afford.

"We run the organisation to help the people, not for profit. However, we need money to run it and we charge according to the situation of the parents."

Many parents don't pay. "However, we don't compromise on anything from early intervention to counselling and making the children skilled enough to lead a better life," she says.

V-Excel has over 50 staff members across all the centres including trainers, therapists, psychologists, support staff and administration staff. "We have at least eight people working on one child. This shows how different it is from regular education. Moreover, the staff members for such people are highly qualified so they need better pay too," says Vasudha.



Products made at the non-profit are also exported to the US and Singapore. Pic: V-Excel Trust

She says the operational expenses required to run the centres is Rs5 lakh per month. "My husband helped me a lot initially to set up the centre. People help us through donations as well," she says.

Despite her fulfilling journey so far, Vasudha has larger plans. "We want to have at least one centre in every tier 2 city. We want to work on creating large-scale awareness so that schools become places for inclusive learning," says Vasudha.

(Bilal Khan is a Mumbai-based independent journalist. He covers grassroot issues, LGBTQ community and loves to write positive and inspiring stories.)

2 THOUGHTS ON "THIS CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST IS EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM & DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS; 40,000 BENEFITTED SO FAR"



Charumathi Sriram says:

Hi Bilal

Beautiful article and well covered. Thank you so much

FEBRUARY 4, 2022 AT 1:17 PM

REPLY



Vasudha Prakash says:

Thank you Bilal Khan for this coverage!

FEBRUARY 5, 2022 AT 9:25 PM

REPLY