

Maria's Story

Here is a story that tells how therapy can be adapted to village life.

(1)

Maria lives in a small village on a river. She has cerebral palsy. When she was 4 years old, she was just beginning to walk.

But her knees bumped together when she tried to take steps. So she did not try often. Also, her arms and hands were weak and did not work very well.

Her family took Maria to see a doctor in Nuku'alofa. After a long wait, the doctor examined her. He explained that Maria needed to stretch the muscles on the inner side of her thighs, so her knees would not press together as much.

He recommended that her parents do special exercises with her, and that they buy a special plastic seat to hold her knees wide apart.

He said she also needed exercises to strengthen and increase the control of her hands and arms.

He suggested buying her some special toys, game boards, and aids to practice handling and gripping things.

Maria's family could not afford these costly things. So back in her village her father used whatever he could find to make similar aids at low cost. First he made a special seat of sticks.

Later he made a better seat with pieces of wood, and an old bucket to hold her legs apart.

Then, using a board, corn cobs and rings cut from bamboo, he added a small table so that she could play games to develop hand control.

He also made a hand exerciser out of bamboo.

At first, while they were strange and new, Maria used her special seat and played with her special toys. But soon, she got bored and stopped using

(2)

them. She wanted to do the things that other children did. She wanted to go with her father and brother to the plantation. She wanted to help her mother prepare food and wash the clothes. She wanted to be helpful and grown up.

So she broke her special toys and refused to sit in her special seat. Her parents were furious with her – and she loved it! She would sit for hours with her knees together and her legs bent back. Walking began to get more difficult for her, so she did not walk much.

Her parents then spoke with a community disability worker in a neighbouring village. The disability worker suggested that they look for new ways to help Maria keep her knees apart and improve control of her arms and hands – ways that would be exciting and help her to develop and practice useful skills together with the rest of her family. Here are some of the ideas that Maria and her parents came up with:

When she was good (and sometimes even if she was not) her father would let her help shell corn with him and the other children. Because she had trouble holding the corn and snapping off the grain with her fingers, her father made a special holder and scraper.

The basket between her legs held her knees apart, and the shelling of the corn strengthened her arms, gave her practice gripping, and improved her coordination and control.

It was hard, important work that Maria found she could do. And Maria's mother sometimes invited her to help wash the clothes at the river. Maria would sit at the river's edge with a big 'washing rock' between her legs. She would wash the clothes by squeezing and beating them against the rock – just like her mother

(3)

The rock kept her knees apart and the squeezing and banging strengthened her hands and improved her control. But what mattered was getting the clothes clean. It was hard work. But she found it easy – and fun!

Coming back from the river, Maria just had to walk. It was too far to crawl. And besides, she had to help her mother carry back the washed clothes. This was hard, but she tried hard, and could do it!

Carrying the pails of clothes helped her learn to walk without bending and jerking her arms so much.

To help Maria grip the handle of the pail easier, her father wrapped a long strip of old bicycle inner tube very tightly around the handle. But when Maria's hand sweated, the smooth rubber got slippery. So her father wound a thin rope around the rubber. This way, Maria could hold it better.

At time passed she learned how to carry a bucket of clothes on her head – then a bucket of water. To do this took a lot of practice with balance and control of movement. She just had to keep her legs farther apart to keep her balance.

Her mother was almost afraid to let her try carrying the water. But Maria was stubborn – and did it! Maria also discovered that if she floated a banana leaf on top of the water, it helped keep the water from splashing out.

So, by trying different things, Maria's family, and Maria herself, learned ways to create therapy and aids that were effective, useful, and enjoyable.

Maria did learn to walk better, and to use her hands and arms to do many things. But this took a long time. Sometimes she would try something that was too hard, and almost give up. But when her little brother would say she could not do it, she

(4)

would keep trying until she succeeded.

Even when Maria liked doing something, because she was a child she would get bored and not keep doing it for long. Her parents always had to look for new ways for her to get her therapy. It became a challenge and a game for them, too.

Of course, Maria loved horses. So her father made her a rocking horse out of old logs, branches of trees, and a piece of rope for al tail.

Her father noticed that she was beginning to walk on tiptoe, so he made special stirrups for the rocking horse. With these, when se rocked, her feet stretched up in a more normal position.

The rocking horse kept her knees apart, strengthened her hands, and helped her improve her balance. Maria loved her horse and sometimes rocked for an hour or more. When she got off, it seemed she could walk better.

After Maria had learned to ride the rocking horse, she wanted to ride the real thing. She begged and begged. So one day her father let her ride with him to the plantation on his donkey. He suggested she ride in front of him where he could hold her. But she insisted on riding behind, like other children do.

In the plantation she helped her father and brother clean the weeds out from among the plants. That was good for the young plants – and for her, too! But after several trips to the plantation on the donkey with her father, Maria begged him to let her try by herself.

She could do it – and what confidence it gave her! Soon Maria was preparing lunch for her father and brother and talking it to them in the plantation – all by herself. Now se found se could do many other things she never thought she could. Although she was still awkward, and at times had to look for special ways to do things, she found she could do most anything she wanted or needed to.