

Research on experience-oriented activities

After a report from Laura Dorland, researcher of the Trimbos-Institute in the Netherlands

Summary by Laura Dorland

INTRODUCTION

It is good to study the effects of new ideas. Especially if there is a potential for a large-scale sequel (continuation), an independent opinion of experts is important to determine the value of the new idea. As part of the program “Heden en Verleden” (Today and Yesterday) – nature activities mainly targeted at elderly people with dementia – Veldwerk Nederland asked the Trimbos Institute for monitoring activities, conclusions and recommendations.

“Heden en Verleden” is inspired by requests from care home staffs to do nature activities for people with dementia, rather similar activities Veldwerk Nederland did at that time for (just) elderly people in residential care centers (program under the name “Natuurcircus”). Within Veldwerk Nederland these activities were mainly based on internal grounds (the main objective of Veldwerk Nederland is to “*connect and enjoy people with nature*”) and not on own expertise working with elderly in care homes. But, by the used resources and methods and a the appeal on senses (smell, touch, seeing, hearing), even if they are limited, workers in care homes immediately recognized that these nature activities also could be suitable and valuable for people with dementia.

However, the demented elderly does not exist. It is not one defined category. In care and nursery homes there is a big scale of differences in dementia. And, besides dementia also many different kinds of discomforts and ailments play a role in how people feel and behave. So, the category dementia has many variations. From groups of demented elderly from which you don’t notice anything on the outside (you can talk to them, ask questions and they respond) to groups or individuals which only barely respond to stimuli (voices/sounds, smell, taste or other senses). In the first group you only recognize dementia if you do frequently activities with them.

The other group seems completely withdrawn in their own world. They are not able to listen to stories or instructions. However, even they too can be involved in activities with a strong appeal on senses. With a more individual approach you can let them touch, smell etcetera and ask them what they feel, smell. Sometimes they only respond with a little smile or some words. This requires not only patience but especially a good orientation on the ‘quality’ of the elderly. Only care home staff can inform you about that.

INVOLVING CHILDREN

As one of the research questions as Trimbos institute we also looked at the role and influence that children from primary schools have on the elderly. Veldwerk Nederland approached primary schools to co-operate with the activities par example to make it possible to go out with a group of elderly. Students of 10-13 years old can help with the activities, to carry resources/tools and help the elderly doing things or



do an activity in front of elderly, to make something for them. If necessary and if it's allowed by the care they (physically) also are able to push wheelchairs!

About the participation of children: if good prepared and tuned with the care participation has a significant added value. Of course you do not enter a quiet living room for 8 elderly with a noisy class of 25 children. Then you divide the class in two and go – with the instruction to be calm – with half the group inside. With the teacher or a trainee the other half can do an activity in the hall or somewhere outside. Halftime you can change groups. But important is that for a 10-13 years old children this kind of activities are special. Even the most busy children at school, act rather well in the care home doing 'something' together with elderly people. Elderly and young children find each other mostly nice and beloved. But even if mutual contact is rather difficult children of this age mention (before and afterwards!) mostly that they are convinced to do 'something good' by helping the elderly or pushing their wheelchair.

For schools especially the social, educational and pedagogical aspects of a such activities are important. They also believe children learn a lot of it. At the other hand teachers also see this kind of activities as "extra", not as part of the curriculum. Maybe this kind of intergenerational activities can be developed in this direction. Then for schools it's more attractive to participate.

Last but not least there is an important effect 'outside'. **During** outdoor activities passersby see that something special is happening (and sometimes they even applaud). **Afterwards** children go home and tell to family and friends enthusiastic about their experiences. From interviewed participating parents we know that they appreciate this kind of activities very much.

GO OUT FOR A WALK; PUSHING WHEELCHAIRS

Not each manager or other workers in the care agree (easily) to go out with the use of 10-13 years old children to walk with the elderly or to push wheelchairs. They understand that after clear instruction groups can go out of course accompanied by more adults including responsible care workers. They also know that children of 10-13 years old are physically able to push wheelchairs. It requires good pumped up tires - as well the little front tires as the big back tires. But suppose something happens

Within the project Heden en Verleden (Now and then) about 30 times groups went out with wheelchairs. The wheelchair instruction has been tested. Care home staff and volunteers, trainees, the teacher and some parents of the children accompanied the 'polonaise' of wheelchairs pushed by children. In fact the adults only have to 'coach' the 'polonaise'. 'Coaching' means to look after all of them driving on the right side of the street or on the footpaths, not too close on each other, to go backwards if they leave the footpath or go down and **always mention** to the elderly if they turn to left or right or turn around if they go backwards. There is always at least one adult ahead as well one behind. In difficult situations the adults can help a little bit pushing. Adults also regulated the traffic by transitions and lights etcetera.

The decision to let children push wheelchairs however is the responsibility of the care home staff. If something happens, they are and feel responsible. **If that feeling**



says “no” (and sometimes there is even a home-rule that not allows children to push wheelchairs!) **we have to respect that.** That decision is not in question!

APPROACH OF THE RESEARCH

One of the objectives of the research by Trimbos Institute of course was to get a good idea how the elderly with dementia experienced the activity.

To develop an activity for people with dementia requires to determine very well what people with dementia really need. If you are good informed about the needs and the perception of elderly with dementia, you can organize and offer appropriate activities. Partly you can set up these activities based on own empathizes. For the other part you have to listen very careful to the information of the care home staff and own experiences you learned from previous experiences and/or evaluations. Experienced-based activities in the care means that you approach the elderly and communicate with them on a manner that considers very well their feelings, needs and limitations.

This means that you must try to look as good as possible **through the eyes of the person with dementia** and not (only) from your own limited, most theoretical reference. Only then the person with dementia experiences support, feel safe and keep a feeling of self-esteem.

An experience-oriented approach (like nature activities) requires a warm, open, empathic and personal attitude to others.

For all workers with (demented) elderly there are a number of points to pay attention to:

- work/act with a warm, open attitude
- empathize as good as possible into their experiences/perceptions
- give (also) personal attention
- consider as much as possible their positive and negative feelings
- inform in advance the care home staff how to deal with negative behavior (of individuals)
- help them (if necessary) at the activities, considering as much as possible their limitations.

RESULTS FOR THE CARE

Altogether the care home staffs concluded that Heden en Verleden is a very nice and amusing activity for demented elderly. The residents had many pleasure and they were interested and sometimes also surprised in most of the activities. The activities bring liven in the daily routine and it the combination with (school-) children has a special value. The children (10-12 years old) go and work very well and quite pleasant with the elderly. And they also can help them by their limitations doing activities. For the care home staff Heden en Verleden gave a number of new ideas to do something with nature (environment, plants, animals) in own activities. Sometimes the activities of Heden en Verleden are busy and (rather) chaotic because of the number of children participating or too much resources (stuffed animals, pictures,



tools) or activities at one time. With 15 elderly and 25 children it's not easy and even possible to give individual attention.

But care home staff afterwards can make own selections in number and time of activities, how to let 25 children participate the best (e.g. in smaller groups in different rooms) etcetera. After each activity it's good to discuss and evaluate together how to improve activities next time. It is the specific expertise and responsibility of care home staff to tune the activities the next time as good as possible on their own elderly. They have to inform before the (extern) nature-specialist about the qualities/limitations of their group and should not hesitate to assist or correct him/her during the activity.

Although all kind of activities can and maybe must be improved, the overall conclusion of Heden en Verleden is that (all) different kinds of nature stories and -activities are also very useful - or to make suitable - for elderly with dementia. Looking to the way how Heden en Verleden is performed, it is an activity the elderly really can enjoy. Thereby the participating of children has an extra value.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the main conclusion it appeared that nature activities – with or without the assistance of children - certainly can be valuable for the care. Many aspects of nature (flowers, animals), environment, recycling, the kitchen garden, (old) tools etcetera reminds them at earlier days. Because it is a relative new activity, there are a number of things that can be improved. Preferably care home staff, nature-expert and teacher (school) discuss activities together as **common responsibility**. In this research we noticed that as well care home staff as teachers sometimes only participated and looked – however mostly very amused – how nicely the nature-expert did his or her best. For the nature-expert, Veldwerk Nederland, elderly in general, and demented elderly in particular, are rather new target groups. And, **not one group of elderly is the same**. The best way to work with a specific group of elderly in the first place is the specialty of the care home staff. So listen very carefully to them is an important step.

From this investigation we give a number of recommendations for improvements and the development of new activities:

- Learn, with and of each other, what the characteristics of experience-based activities and the needs of elderly with dementia are. Use this experiences to improve own activities and during training/study for new care home staffs.
- If participating elderly don't like (a part of) the activity, it is important to consider this. It is not good to argue this or to ignore such feelings. *If one or some elderly really don't like the activity or the presence of a lot of children, care home staff (in the first place) or the nature-expert has to do something.*
- It is important to confront the elderly not or as little as possible with their limitations, for instance with their memory problems; the limitations are okay, a fact.
- Most elderly with dementia don't talk much by themselves. It's good to ask sometimes also about some specific memories but don't expect and wait for immediate answers but go on in a quiet way on with questioning others and ask (later) something different. After it you will find out that then the response is probably much higher.

- Pay (also) attention at each individual. In a way that person counts. Some of them don't like or dare to talk by themselves in a group. You can help them. In a short conversation with this individual it might happen that he/she really has an interesting story to share with the whole group. Be aware of such signals and help them with what they want to tell. In that way you also do not overlook the more quiet elderly.
- Match the number of topics on the available time and the participants. For the elderly it shouldn't be too much/too busy and – at the other side – for the children not to be too boring.
- Note the tempo. If the tempo is too high, elderly can lose the overview of the activity.
- Repeat information by telling it in **different** ways. Then most elderly gets the chance to understand it. The same if you show things or do something, do it in a few directions. Repeat also activities with the same or other groups/care homes. It's useful to build up experiences with the activity, resources needed, time schedule etcetera. Which possibilities/variations there are on different locations, with different groups? In this way you improve yourself, step by step.
- In advance make as nature-expert with care home staff and school/teacher clear appointments about 'role and responsibility'. So everybody knows what the expectations are. Most important is that everything is focused on the main goal that **the elderly can enjoy the activity as much as possible.**
- Be aware of – within all agreements – of a certain space for improvisation to be able to respond to changes or (unexpected) input by comments or questions from the elderly. This also depends – at least partly - on what the care home staff judges as the best way of working with their residents. Some don't like unexpected, messy changes, for others it's no problem at all, even refreshing.
- Take care of a certain balance or rest in the activity. Do not hasten to achieve everything you planned before. Then you better skip one or two of the planned topics. At the other side it's good to have some activities, questions or stories in reserve if there is some time left.
- Discuss with the school the role of the children and prepare them, so they know **before** who gives the instruction and with whom they are going to do the activity.
- If you go out: give clear instruction and demonstration how to drive (forward and backwards) with wheelchairs, how and when to use the breaks etcetera. Important part of the instruction concerns the contact with the elderly on the road e.g. if they leave the foot path, turn around to go backwards or to left or right. For the elderly this info is important so they know what is going to happen and they feel safe. Sudden movements can scare them. **The instruction is for all children and adults!**
- By crossings, lights, thresholds, speed bumps, by leaving the footpath etcetera adults have supervision. Only if necessary let adults help pushing (a lot of children don't appreciate it if they get 'unwished' help! Because it's their job!).
- Keep into account the numbers of old and young. Outside a ratio from 1 : 1 is possible, 1 : 2 is better, but also 1 : 3 is not a big problem if all children have tasks. Inside 1 : 2 is the maximum, 1 : 1 is better. In the case of too much children on a group of elderly you better divide the group in two halves. One group is going to talk, play or work with the elderly, the other one is doing an own activity. Halfway groups can change positions.



- Going out with wheelchairs 2 children at 1 wheelchair is maximum. All children like to push all time/a while. With 2 they can change half way. One pushes the wheelchair, the other guides it and carries resources for activities outside.
- At the start, on the road, during the activities or breaks, elderly and children often talk (a lot) with each other. It's good to stimulate this spontaneous communication. You can also organize communication. At school you or the teacher can prepare with the children some questions they can ask. In most cases elderly and children come from the same place/town or they are born elsewhere, they went to a primary school, played (as child) same or different games, love sports (or not), had life stock or pets at home etcetera. Around such questions you can start the activity with a "10-minute talk".
- Don't arrange program and resources (equipment, tools, subjects) in the very last moments. Not only demented people forget things.
- If wished, children can also help to invite and convince elderly to go out (by offering their help or presence).
- Most elderly like to sing, especially songs from their childhood. Use from time to time this repertoire. Maybe children can sing a song from school. Elderly like that.
- Be aware of your position and the position or number of resources you use. Make sure everyone can see you and the resources very well. Pass the used resources so that elderly which can not see very good have time enough to see or touch the subjects.
- Think in advance about the best way to introduce an activity. Elderly with all kind of inconveniences may become very confused if something happens or changes at once. An 'invasion' of 24 children or the announcement: "we all go out in 10 minutes" can completely disturb their balance. Something like that can give too much incentives in one time. Care home staff and/or nature guide can inform/prepare them quietly – maybe in two or three steps - about what is going to happen.
- Even elderly with serious dementia and other limitations can participate! On their way! In nature activities there is a rather big appeal on sensory perception. In relations to senses, the touch stays till the very last moments of someone's life. Demented elderly also enjoy to look at activities from/with others without active participation. But, involve them as much as possible.

Finally: To implement this kind of activities it's important that (also) the management of care homes become motivated. Only if the responsible manager or director is convinced of the values of this kind of activities, he/she will support them. So, always inform and/or invite the manager/director to visit the activities.

