



## ELIYA - association for blind and visually impaired children

### Adapting to COVID-19

ELIYA is Israel's leading organization for the care and advancement of blind and visually impaired children, as well as for children with additional developmental challenges. Founded in 1982, ELIYA now serves populations in centers throughout the country, from its first and central location in Petach Tikvah, to Jerusalem, Rehovot, Beer Sheva in the south, and Haifa in the north.

ELIYA's focus is on children from birth to age six, in the belief that professional and intensive intervention during these formative years is critical for the development of skills that will help them to successfully integrate into mainstream education and the community at large.

Upon the outbreak of the Coronavirus in March 2020 and following the changes in the operation of **ELIYA's** Day Care Centers as a result of the Ministry of Health guidelines, we were forced to adjust our working method with the children in our Day Care Centers. In this paper we will present the adaptations made during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the immediate adjustments to COVID-19 was a significant reduction in group activities which meant that we had to increase the amount of toys, games, arts and crafts material in all **ELIYA's** Day Care Centers tremendously – especially the equipment that had to be purchased for the group of very young infants who tend to use the toys and all materials with their mouth. This was mandated by the fact that the requirements imposed by the pandemic increased individual isolated care. In order to allow all children equal opportunity to use the toys without endangering them or causing them any medical harm we had to double and triple the amount of toys, games, and creative materials purchased.

Upon our return to the new routine, we started to work with a computerized system (CRM) that enables work while maintaining distance between staff members, the sending of health certificates - for staff and families- and the monitoring of activities in all **ELIYA** Day Care Centers simultaneously. The need to embrace digital record keeping and filing had been present for quite some time, but the pandemic has accelerated the process much sooner than we expected.

The hours of programming and implementation of the system is a complex long-term and expensive project. The implementation involves significant staff retraining to maximize the benefits of the system. In the long run, many man-hours of working time will be saved by no longer having to review and scan individual hard copy records, communication between our Day Care Centers will be vastly improved as will communication between supervisors and staff as well as staff and parents.

Other Adaptation measures include:

- Adapting the sensory aspect of the toys to the visual impairment of the children
- Preparing creative material and home kits to be used by the children during periods of lockdown and quarantine
- Increased staff training on adapting our center-based methods performed by professionals to a home-based method performed by parents

- Increased staff communication with the parents to properly instruct and follow the home care protocol
- The fact that all communication with parents is now by ZOOM or telephone, without personal hands-on meetings has also required of us much improved communication skills.
- Increased emphasis on emotional support for the children, their parents and the staff in order to cope with the emotional burdens that COVID-19 added to the "normal" burdens of the visually impaired
- In accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of Health, we were obliged to provide the staff on a regular basis with full protective equipment such as: gloves, masks, protective robes, alcogel and more.
- The beginning of the school year in the middle of a pandemic has also caused changes as the parents cannot accompany their children into the classroom during the first acclimation period as they had in previous years and contact with parents remains more limited
- With the exception of the first month and a half "lock-down" we have continued to function as a rehabilitative facility and have received children in the regular classroom settings. While at the beginning, regulations and fear limited attendance, it has now returned to normal.

It is important to stress that throughout this challenging time, changes have been made, staff has adapted and we have continued to provide the high level of rehabilitative care that has characterized **Eliya** during its entire history.

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