

MENCAFEP
s r i l a n k a

Mentally Handicapped Children & Families Educational Project

A Programme for Children / Young People with Learning Disabilities

[Areas of Work](#) | [Our History](#) | [Disability in Sri Lanka](#) | [MENCAFEP Training](#) | [How MENCAFEP is Run](#)



MENCAFEP



[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

MENCAFEP are very aware of the need for ,experienced, well trained staff, which starts with the learning by giving and doing philosophy. This leads into the belief that Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) is the way forward for disabled children in Sri Lanka, as well as the rest of the world.

MENCAFEP has always been committed to employing people from Nuwara Eliya. So in January 1988 when MENCAFEP was founded, the project looked no further than an unemployed womens group that Ranji and Chris Stubbs (Co-Founders of MENCAFEP) had formed in a village just outside Nuwara Eliya Town. Of the 15 to 20 young women who regularly attended group meetings, three clearly stood out. Shyamalie, Miranda and Sunetha have been working at MENCAFEP ever since. As the programme has grown in size from 6 children in 1988 to over a 100 children in 2002, these women have grown just as much in experience. Has as been proven, Chris and Ranji thought there was something special about them at the time. They seemed motivated and interested in helping their community.

When they first started with MENCAFEP they were very much afraid. Two out the three had never held a job before. More significantly they had never seen a disabled child. Their ideas about disabled children were representative of the prevailing view in Sri Lanka, a predominantly Buddhist and Hindu country where most people still believe that handicaps are a punishment for misdeeds in a former life.

Sunetha, for example, was frightened to touch a handicapped child before coming to MENCAFEP. She thought it might bring her bad luck. To see her interact with the children today, she is all smiles and hugs - it's obvious that her thinking has changed. "Now if someone talks about bad luck, by touching, being with and working with a disabled child, I tell them that it is all lies," says Sunetha.

Shyamalie was eight months pregnant when an elderly neighbour gave her some unwelcome advice. "She told me to leave MENCAFEP because it was not a 'normal' school," Shyamalie says, "she said it was not good for my unborn baby." A majority of Sri Lankans still consider mental and physical disabilities contagious. Pregnant women are supposed to be especially at risk. "It was as though something would rub off on my unborn baby, from the children I was working with - crazy," says Shyamalie. It was not that crazy at the time, but true, Shyamalie and since then other members of the MENCAFEP family, that have been pregnant, have been under immense pressure from their families to stay away from MENCAFEP while pregnant! Imagine, if you can, the stress of working with disabled children when you or your partner is pregnant. The community that you are in, are convinced that something twill happen to your unborn baby, if you continue to be around disabled children. It takes a very special human being to carry on working until it is time to give birth - MENCAFEP has those special human beings.

One of the first things many visitors notice about MENCAFEP, perhaps the thing that leaves the most lasting impression, is the inhibited genuine love the staff show for the children in their care.

[<< Previous](#) | [Next >>](#)

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