

The therapeutic value of LEGO®

Text by Carien Borst

Images by Joop Flamman

Emergis is an institution for mental healthcare in the Netherland, and it treats about 10.000 people every year in the province of Zeeland. The long-term care and living is one of the seven sectors of Emergis and it has five apprenticeship companies that are used by about 400 people. Apprenticeship companies are companies for people who for psychiatrically and/or psychological reasons have fallen outside of the regular labour market. By means of work rehabilitation these people work on social recovery and re-integration. In July 2011 the LEGO® project was started.

Why LEGO?

Why use LEGO in psychiatry? The LEGO project provides a variety of activities, from low threshold to complex, that fit the interests and qualities of the employees. Second hand LEGO has been bought and gathered on a large scale. The LEGO elements that were acquired are washed, sorted and put together. The participants in this project look for building instructions on the internet and take care of administration and computer tasks. Complete sets are sold in the shop and on the internet. Anyone with a demand and goal related to work rehabilitation and occupation is welcome in the LEGO project.

LEGO connects psychiatry and society

The LEGO project makes a link between psychiatry and society. Customers coming to the apprenticeship company are people who would not normally have contact with people in mental healthcare. Because LEGO is popular, young and old, everyone knows it and wants to visit our shop. Collectors are looking for rare sets from the '50s and '60s. With a LEGO catalogue under one arm and assisted by the employees, they look for that one LEGO piece in the boxes with parts. Children are awed and can hardly choose what set to buy with their pocket money or ask for their birthday.

LEGO and autism

"The LEGO project passes over the difficulties someone with autism can experience. It uses qualities people with autism possess and people are valued for their expertise" says Corné Verhoeven, who is specialized in treating people with autism.

The characteristics of LEGO can be seen as a metaphor for people with autism. For them the world often consists of loose elements; the LEGO bricks. There is no connection or consistency between them. However, following building instructions you automatically arrive at the desired end result. That gives support and structure. Working with LEGO is clear, predictable, logical and target oriented. This logic and approach fits very well with autistic people.

LEGO the elderly

Another group of people who use LEGO are the elderly who stay in the psychiatric department for observation and diagnosis. They may suffer from dementia combined with psychiatric problems. Especially the men like to work with LEGO and they usually build buildings or vehicles.

Esther van de Kimmenade, occupational therapist: "what stands out is that they can easily spend hours looking for bricks, sorting and building. Focus and concentration are usually much shorter with other activities. LEGO provides enough impulses to spend more time on an activity and requires the use of imagination. We also notices that communication improves. We can easily make contact by joining in the building process and conversation are started about what is being built and old memories come up.."

LEGO helps building structure and health

LEGO has unique characteristics and a worldwide recognition which gives a new dimension to work rehabilitation for many employees of the apprenticeship company. LEGO is not the objective, but means that has so far allowed 43 people to find their way to the apprenticeship company and this number is increasing.

LEGO contributes to the health of people whose limitation would otherwise keep them at home, which usually increases problems and care consumption due to worsening depressions, addiction and feelings of worthlessness. Emergis's apprenticeship companies take a stand for a group





of people for whom a normal work environment is not (yet) within reach. The apprenticeship company and the LEGO® project make a world of difference.

The “Social Return on Investment”^[1] investigation that was recently carried out shows that the apprenticeship companies do not represent a large cost for a society in which government funding disappears endlessly. The apprenticeship companies return a social benefit. Each Euro that is invested in the company yields 2.25 Euro for the society. People are less prone to develop a psychosis or depression thanks to day and night rhythm, they experience newfound structure in their lives and have a reason to get out of bed. In addition, they discover that despite their problems they are capable of doing something. This decreases visits to psychiatrists and people need to be interned less frequently.

Finally

An employee of the apprenticeship company tells her story

“I had a paid job but eventually I ended up being at home. I couldn’t hold on to the job because there was too much pressure. If I have no daytime activities it feels like the wall are closing in on me and thoughts keep milling through my mind. I find it hard to create structure in my life and as a result I am mostly



active during the night time. Consequently I have no reason to get up. The danger is that I get trapped in a negative spiral which results in depression and an even bigger distance from work. I am happy I had the courage to start over in this company.” Agnes^[2]

[1] Reseach report Social Return on Investment – Werkcentrum Gered Gereedschap (2011)

[2] Werkcentrum Gered Gereedschap maakt het verschil (2010)

#

