

*“We wake up knowing that the sun will shine and we can swim in the Caribbean Sea after work”*

**S**t Lucia is a travellers’ paradise. It is only 27 miles long and 14 miles wide, with the Atlantic Ocean on its eastern shore and beautiful beaches and the Caribbean Sea on its west coast. My colleague Catherine Ward and I work here as volunteers at the Child Development and Guidance Centre (CDGC).

Established in 1998 by German paediatrician Dr Brigitte Schuling, the CDGC is a registered non profit organisation and is unique in St Lucia in providing multidisciplinary developmental assessments and therapy. The centre currently comprises a local paediatrician and office manager, Catherine and myself, and a voluntary occupational therapist, also from the UK. There are no local trained paediatric therapists.

The CDGC sees children aged 0 to 16 with developmental difficulties, including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autistic spectrum and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders, and general speech and language delay/disorder. It receives no government funding. The major financial support comes from Förderverein Villa Kunterbunt, a German fundraising organisation, and local fundraising is ongoing.

The most obvious difference between working in the UK and the Caribbean is the weather. We wake up knowing the sun will shine and we can swim in the Caribbean Sea after work. It is a privilege to work with a team of such dedicated professionals, although it can feel like working in Piccadilly Circus in a heat wave.

The centre has two small light and bright rooms overlooking Castries, the capital of the island and its harbour. Sessions can include up to three professionals, two children and their carers. This necessitates joint therapy sessions, which are daunting at first but are of significant benefit to therapists, children and their families.



**From left Jane McManus; Beatrice Anyalagbu (OT); Catherine Ward (SLT); Kim Gardner (paediatrician)**

Resources are limited and therapists need to be creative and imaginative in their work. Fortunately, the joy of bubbles and balloons is universal. However, the whole approach is relaxed and comfortable and paperwork is certainly more manageable than in the UK.

English is the main language and yet there are striking differences in grammatical structure and vocabulary. Catherine and I now ‘open the tap’, ‘send the ball’ and ‘shake the shak shak’ (maracas). UK standardised assessments are clearly not appropriate but even using them for qualitative information can be problematic. For example, children don’t recognise some of the pictures in the RAPT (there are no red postboxes on the island) and the ‘pushchair’ in the STAP is a ‘stroller’. Often adult grammatical structure is telegraphic (eg, ‘look it’, ‘what she have’, ‘I coming’) and therefore grammatical targets, such as work on verb phrases, is often inappropriate.

Despite St Lucia having a cruise ship image, there is a lot of poverty and a high level of illiteracy. Some families struggle

to afford the bus fare and it is not always appropriate to give written advice.

However, the families are committed and keen. At the end of each session, carers are asked if they are able to make a small donation towards therapy. Coming from the UK this takes some getting used to, as does removing your shoes before entering the building and working in bare feet.

Flexibility is the key. You might think you know who to expect and when but an appointment system is an unfamiliar concept in St Lucia. Children may arrive two hours early or a day late and still expect to be seen. Despite the steep learning curve, it’s been a truly wonderful experience that we would definitely recommend... so what are you waiting for – therapist wanted. ■

**For more information visit: [www.cdgc.info](http://www.cdgc.info)  
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