

Israeli Disability Nonprofit Beit Issie Shapiro Inaugurates New 'Inclusive' Campus

By Judith Sudilovsky, June 27, 2025

The center will house a daycare for 40 children with and 40 children without disabilities, along with a joint play area, under the belief that this benefits both

In 1980, Beit Issie Shapiro launched a groundbreaking initiative in Israel by opening a small, community-based special education center in Ra'anana for 16 children with complex cognitive disabilities. Inspired by the vision of Issie Shapiro, a recent immigrant from South Africa, the project was led by his children following his death during a fundraising trip to the United States.

Now, 45 years later, the center marked a new milestone in disability inclusion for young children with the opening of its new Beit Raz campus.

In September, the campus will welcome 80 children — 40 with and 40 without disabilities — from infants to age 3 to its new inclusive mainstream daycare program at its new Early Intervention Center.

"This is a new model for the country that will foster emotional resilience, social connection and mutual respect among all children," said Naomi Stuchiner, Beit Issie Shapiro's founder.

Though the number of children in the mainstream daycare may seem small, the impact is significant, according to Sasha Weiss, a Beit Issie board chair and Issie Shapiro's great niece. She noted that its operating model combines its therapy programs with research and global professional training to maximize its reach. The center's advocacy and innovation has also helped establish 180 early intervention centers across Israel since its founding, Weiss said.

In addition, she said, Beit Issie worked to craft Israel's Law of Early Intervention, which was passed in 2000 and grants all toddlers with disabilities in Israel access to Early Intervention Daycares.



With campuses in Ra'anana and Qalansawe, an Arab city in central Israel, and a focus on global knowledge sharing, the organization affects over 500,000 people worldwide each year, Weiss said.

"That is how we make a huge impact...We really want to create a society in which children feel comfortable with each other and, additionally, where parents feel comfortable. A lot of times, parents are the ones who are giving the message to their kids of who to include and who to exclude," she told eJewishPhilanthropy. "Yes, it is a small number [of children to begin with]...but the model really is to say: Let's create something new and let's then research it to make sure it works. And then let's share it. Let's train as many professionals as we possibly can across Israel and across the world. Let's share it all over. That is how we make a huge impact."

The new building will house an Early Intervention Center for toddlers with complex disabilities, the mainstream daycare program, the Aaron De Lowe Wing and indoor and outdoor inclusive play facilities for joint play time. The campus also includes the Wohl Therapy Center and Israel's new National Center for Emotional and Mental Health for individuals with disabilities and their families.

It is named after Raz Fisher, a former Beit Issie child who died when he was 4. His parents, Tamar and venture capitalist Adam Fisher donated an undisclosed amount to bring their vision to honor their son to Beit Issie as a way of supporting other families who have a child with a disability.

“You sit in front of five people, doctors, nurses, a social worker, and basically they say that your child’s brain is very, very sick and they can’t tell you what his future will be. And from that moment on, you realize that the world has fallen apart and needs to be reassembled,” Tamar said at the campus inauguration, recalling the days just after Raz was born when they learned he was born with a very rare neurological syndrome causing him to be severely disabled. “Luckily for us, we found the amazing place that is here. When I came through these gates I felt that there was a kind of magic screen here, that when I enter here with Raz [the staff saw] the child first and not the disability. We came to this project as parents because we felt we had a responsibility to give these new parents a place of hope.”

This inclusive approach for the youngest children is based on “extensive research, learning and development” and is a “paradigm shift” in early childhood inclusion, said Ahmir Lerner, Beit Issie Shapiro’s CEO. The organization hopes that it will serve as a model for inclusive education around the world.

“Beit Issie is always working on the micro level, on the personal and also on the macro on the societal level. So on the personal level, we’re bringing a new model of inclusion to Ra’anana and to children with or without disabilities, with emphasis on how we create a win-win situation,” Lerner said.

He noted that in a recently completed pilot program, Beit Issie Shapiro found that integrating children with and without disabilities in an inclusive daycare framework yields far greater benefits for all children, their families and the community.

In another first, Lerner said they put out a call for research proposals to all educational institutions in Israel for projects studying the center’s system of social emotional learning. Ten researchers applied, he said and they are now sifting through the proposals.

“One of the main criteria we are considering is how the research can help us to change policy in the end. Because you need data to change policy. We want the research to supply the right data. So then we can stop using philanthropic funding, bring the government to do this and fund it not only here, but in the 180 centers,” he said.

Beit Issie’s overall budget is supported by a mix of funding sources: 40% comes from philanthropy, 30% from government support and the remaining 30% is self-generated through sales of services, he said.

As war with Iran broke out earlier this month, and the physical facilities had to be closed, Beit Issie opened a hotline for disabilities professionals to offer them support and guidance, while Beit Issie teachers and therapists remained in personal telephone contact with the Beit Issie parents and children, said Lerner, creating personalized videos, messages and giving personal responses to families. On Friday, the special education school held a communal kabbalat Shabbat on Zoom, and it has been offering emotional therapy sessions on Zoom as well, he said.

While early childhood is a critical period for child development, children with disabilities in Israel typically attend separate Early Intervention Centers, while their peers without disabilities go to standard daycare programs, noted Hanna Yamin-Cherki, vice president of professional services at Beit Issie Shapiro. This gap in inclusion reduces opportunities for interaction between children in early childhood and underscores the urgent need for a new approach that fosters mutual understanding, empathy, and belonging from the earliest years, setting the foundation for an inclusive society, she said. “These early experiences shape who they become — children who grow into adults with open hearts, who embrace difference naturally and help build a kinder, more inclusive world,” said Yamin-Cherki.