

# ROOF's INTERNATIONAL SUMMER CAMP 2011



At the Belskoye-Ustye orphanage for children with special needs  
(Porkhov district, Pskov oblast, in north-western Russia)

[www.roofnet.org/camp2011](http://www.roofnet.org/camp2011)



*Since 2000, ROOF's International Summer Camp has been bringing together students and young people from Russia, the UK, the USA, France, Italy and several other countries to Belskoye Ustye, a small village in Pskov oblast (North-West Russia.) Here our visitors spend one month volunteering at the local orphanage for children with special needs. They play games, organise dances and festivals, go hiking with the children, design costumes and do other fun and educational activities, helping to compensate for the lack of attention and individual support in these orphaned children's lives...*

## BACKGROUND TO THE BELSKOYE-USTYE ORPHANAGE: 'unteachable' children

The orphanage in Belskoye Ustye, like other special-needs orphanages, is governed by the local department of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Other orphanages are governed by the Ministry of Education, but the children in orphanages like Belskoye Ustye have been diagnosed as 'unteachable' and therefore have been historically completely **deprived of education or developmental training**. Some of the children really do have some learning difficulties which range from severe problems to those which are slight or even non-existent. Very often these problems appear as a result of years spent without any education, in what have been historically *closed* state institutions for children.

**Sometimes 'unteachability' has nothing to do with a child's ability to learn.** Behavioural problems might be the reason for the transfer from a regular orphanage to a special needs orphanage. Sometimes the transfer is because of a child's slow reactions, caused by psychological trauma and stress experienced in the past. Of course stressful situations and repetitive traumas are common for orphans, 95% of whom come from the dysfunctional families of alcohol and



drug addicts. In 10-15% of cases children are simply diagnosed as 'unteachable' *by mistake*. Some children have been sent to Belskoye Ustye just because of having diabetes, cleft palate, or because housing that should have been provided by law was not available...



**Isolation is another problem in Russian special needs institutions for children.** Very often they are located far away from towns, in rural areas where the children's contact with the outside world is extremely limited. The Belskoye Ustye orphanage is 20 km away from the nearest town, there are approximately 200 people living in that area and 100 of them are children from the orphanage. The only source of information is television; the only possible contacts throughout the year are inside the orphanage. Even contact with local people is limited, because everyone is busy at work or sometimes because of social prejudices. How can these children be expected to learn healthy patterns of social relating if they are not exposed to such patterns enough to weave their own lives right into them?

**Numerous social prejudices exist at all levels against orphans, especially those who live in such special needs institutions as the Belskoye Ustye orphanage.** These have a negative effect on the children's development. Most people never treat orphans as equals and avoid any contact with them; officials consider any additional funding for educational programmes unreasonable since children with learning difficulties are deemed 'unteachable'; even the staff of such institutions often have not made much effort towards the children's development, barely providing the most basic education.

After being sent to Belskoye Ustye, children quickly learn their future. **When they turn 18, they 'graduate' – which means they have to leave for an adult institution** or "another house" as this place is called here, where they have to stay till the end of their lives. Adult institutions combine the functions of old people's homes, lunatic asylums and jails. It is very sad to admit, that this **bleak future is the only option for these youngsters who have been deprived of any education or social-skills developmental training and left alone with their problems with no help.** After a childhood of institutionalisation, at the age of 18 the children are ill-equipped for independent living and therefore further institutionalisation is the result.

**From our experience we know that most children from the Belskoye Ustye orphanage are capable of integrating successfully into society – they just need a helping hand.**



## ROOF's INTERNATIONAL SUMMER CAMP: goals and achievements

The main goal of ROOF's summer camp is to help break the cycle of institutionalisation for the 100 children of the Belskoye Ustye orphanage by contributing to their education, broadening their horizons and integrating them into a pattern of healthy relationships (socialisation).

During the camp volunteers conduct daily classes for the children where they:

- play educational and developmental games, widening the children's horizons and demonstrating (for orphanage staff) interactive ways of teaching;
- organise festivals and competitions, developing children's artistic and creative potential;
- help the children to develop self-esteem and self-confidence.

What is more important, the camp provides the children with an opportunity to interact with young role-models, meet new people from different places and glimpse real life outside the orphanage.

Another feature that distinguishes the Summer Camp from other orphanage programmes is that everyone can take part in activities, regardless of age or ability! **During the Summer Camp every child can participate in competitions, games and other fun activities – everyone receives personal attention and support.**

Our summer camp is located in the beautiful rural location at the orphanage and near its grounds. Since Belskoye Ustye is a special needs orphanage, the children do not have permission to leave for several weeks (as often happens at other orphanages). Therefore we bring Summer Camp to them. Belskoye Ustye is the perfect place to spend the hot month of July, as it is located on a hill above a beach at the delta between two local rivers (the Belka and Shelon).

There is plenty of beautiful-smelling pine forest to be had all around.



**ROOF's first International Summer Camp was held in 2000. Since then there have been many positive changes:**

- local officials', villagers' and orphanage staff's attitude towards the children has improved greatly;
- state funding has been allocated to open a school at the orphanage (the only school of its kind in a psycho-neurological orphanage);
- various extra educational programs work in the orphanage year-round;

- several post-orphanage living and even fostering projects have been developed. These programs keep graduates out of adult institutions;
- because of additional funding, excursions and short trips have become possible for some of the orphans.



**Changing people's attitudes** toward these children is possibly our main achievement. We are very proud of the fact that our long term experience in conducting educational activities and the efforts made by the orphanage administration have convinced local officials to school activities for some of our children. Though at present only 30% of the orphanage population are able to benefit from this advance, we have hope that this number will increase in the future as our work continues.

**Our halfway-house and Abilitation Centre programs** have made it possible to find an alternative to further institutionalisation for some young people when they turn 18. We are able to house a small number of orphanage 'graduates' and ease them into independent living.

Changes in the attitude of the local population have also made it possible to launch fostering programs. This has meant that about 10-15% of the children coming out of Belskoye Ustye are given the chance to join society (rather than go into an adult institution). About 25% are allowed one-day, supervised excursions out of the orphanage on a regular basis.

While we cannot take direct credit for all of these improvements, they nevertheless came about in great part because of ROOF's constant presence at the orphanage, always pushing to show the children *are* capable. **The children can learn. And we can learn from them, too.**

***Help us continue our Summer Camp program this year. There is still much work to be done. The most exciting changes (school and alternative post-orphanage housing) still affect less than half of the orphanage population at Belskoye Ustye. For eleven years ROOF's summer camp has been the exciting annual event that gives vitality to year-round programs for the orphanage. Please be a part of our efforts this year!!***

