



The Nest - second living room -

A model of services and assistance for children from multi-problem families, for Bosnia and Herzegovina

This paper is intended to facilitate discussion with partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to prepare the implementation of the Nest model, for which external funding is sought.

Introduction

Since the beginning of 2006, Kinderpostzegels (as coordinator within the Cooperating Netherlands Foundations for central and eastern-Europe) has been active as a donor-organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our aim is to improve the social situation of children and young people in disadvantaged circumstances.

Since we began in B&H we have received over 60 project applications designed by local NGOs and have financially supported more than 30. In addition to our projects for children with disabilities, many other projects are aimed at the prevention of trafficking, addiction, criminality and violence. Most of these are undertaken through informative workshops and courses in co-operation with schools. However, the issue that most needs to be addressed is of providing structured and preventative care for children from multi-problem families, who face the greatest risk of becoming victims.

This feeling became more apparent after reading the Save the Children report "Children Speak Out! – What Influences Child Trafficking in Southeast Europe – Bosnia and Herzegovina report". Part of the report provided a profile of potential victims of trafficking. By far the biggest risk group were children from multi-problem families. In such families children have to be very strong and independent, especially if they wish to fulfil all the duties and requirements of the strict B&H school system. Because of this attending additional activities in a strict and formal schedule would probably be too much for them, and as the biggest group at risk it is doubtful if workshops and courses would benefit such children.

In our years of involvement in the Central and East European (CEE) countries we have financed many projects for children from multi-problem families in Poland and Romania. These projects supported after school centres where children can go for activities and services that vary according to the local community needs. In our work with such centres we saw good results, preventing more serious social problems from developing; children in difficult situations were assisted to grow up as healthy adults. In B&H, however, finding comparable after-school centres that could be supported are hard to find. And where they do exist, we found that that the schedule of their activities is not appropriate for children who need support the most and this leads to a risk that they could be excluded.

After observing this discrepancy and problem, we communicated the idea to establish properly structured day care centres to the president of our B&H advisory commission and to our local coordinator. This led to discussion in the full advisory commission, where it was perceived positively for the reason that according to their information no project like this exists in B&H. In the opinion of the commission, establishing day care centres in the many smaller towns or larger villages would be especially beneficial. This was actually the experience in Poland and Romania, where such centres

were mainly found in smaller cities or bigger central villages. Establishing centres in smaller localities in smaller localities, rather than cities is probably also better for the reason that the large number of children in multi-problem families that would be found in bigger cities, could have a negative influence on the small scale and open character of such centres.

Summary of the model

The main purpose of a day care centre is to provide assistance to children from multi-problem families. They should be open centres, not far from the home, where children from multi-problem families can go to after school. They would function as a safe place where such children can find support and care and services.

Goal and objective

The primary objective of the centre is the prevention of trafficking, institutionalisation, addictions, criminal activity, dropping out of school and violence for children at risk, and in order to ensure that all children have access to support, respecting that all children have rights.

Goal:

To provide support by professionals, volunteers and/or peers to children from multi-problem families and to stimulate their development toward competent and positive members of society

Target group

Children in multi-problem families. By the term multi-problem families, we mean children in families where more than one problem exists. For example a family in which the only problem is poverty, is not a multi-problem family, nor is it when the problem might be unemployment and poverty combined, as one is connected to the other. Many children are raised in poor families with unemployed parents, but still grow up as healthy adults. To be defined as a multi-problem family is when one problem, such as poverty is combined with several others, like alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, criminality, prostitution, poor health, mental illness, bad housing or child neglect. Even without unemployment or poverty, the existence of a combination of these problems together can also define a multi-problem family.

What has always to be remembered when considering multi-problem families is that in principle there is nothing wrong with the child. However, when the child has to grow up in an environment that is not very stable, then future problems are the likely result. In a day care centre it is possible to integrate several children with special needs, such as with traumas, behavioural problems or other challenges, so long as their family background is the same and specialised assistance is available. The stability offered by an after-school centre can contribute a lot to the success of external therapy or other treatments.

In special situations, such as a child from a Roma family, their participation in a centre will depend on the housing situation. But where they are living in an integrated way the children should be included. However, when they are living in special Roma settlements, establishing and organising a centre that is only for Roma children will depend on local sources, like staff, a building and volunteers that can function as role-models. While this is so, specialised centres in Roma settlements do exist in Romania.

As for children that live in really dangerous situations, they do not belong to the target group of the day care centres. Their needs require a different and specific category of care and should be under the direct mandate of child protection (Centres for Social Work - CSW). Nevertheless, where child protection institutions do not or cannot fulfil their responsibilities, they may try to transfer most difficult cases to a day care centre. In such cases a centre should have the right, formally and informally, to refuse them. Such a decision should not have no consequences for their future or their funding.

Traditionally, many children in B&H are cared for by grandparents or other family members. This system is functioning well and should not be replaced by a more formal approach with centres. Priority should be given to those children that do not have support from other members of the extended family.

Nevertheless, the informal care system by the extended family can be overburdened or not completely adequate and in such situations of care the centre could function as an additional support.

In principle, the participation of children from multi-problem families at after-school centres, should be suggested by professionals (CSW) or schools, and admission decided by the centres staff, following an acceptance interview.

Once a child has begun to attend, centres should always exercise openness. It has to be normal for a child to sometimes bring his/her school friend along. At the same time a centre should not be a place for everybody. There should be a difference between access and participation. While every child and adult can visit the centre, not every child can participate. It is not so different from a family home. Being a visitor or living there is what makes the difference.

The number of children cannot be too big, not even when they are organised in smaller groups. Most existing centres have between 30 and 60 daily participants. It is preferable to establish more-smaller centres, in the area where the child lives, than to have big centres. When a hot meal service is included in the programme that demands a kitchen and dining room (and will require respecting a lot of legal regulations), co-operation with other centres or other facilities is a good solution. For example consideration could be given to combining the dinner service for the children with dinner for elderly people at the local home for the elderly, which could even stimulate intergenerational contacts.

Whether parents belong to the target group of the centre, may vary and will depend on the possibilities and principles of the NGO. To work with parents demands other skills, working methods and knowledge and not every NGO that works with children has such knowledge. Sometimes the work with parents is done by another organisation/governmental institute, but in a co-ordinated way. When centres work with parents, they mostly do individual counselling. Group counselling is rarely done, as parents in smaller cities do not like to speak openly about their problems. Certain centres will explicitly not work with parents in the same building (to do so can portray the centre as not being a safe place anymore for the children, in case of domestic violence being one of the problems); other centres, however, are of the opinion that in order to solve the problems of the child one has to work with the parents.

In CEE countries a centre is primarily meant for children attending primary school, which usually means from 7 till 15 years old. There are examples for younger children from 4 years onwards, but then the maximum age is about 10 years and many more staff are needed, as possibilities for mutual support are limited. Above the age of 15, children can often continue to be involved as volunteers.

The centres bear the risk of stimulating the stigmatisation of children from multi-problem families, because they work with a selected group. However, such stigmatisation risk can be reduced by the openness of the centre where visitors are welcome, the organisation of bigger activities for (children of) the community and by being very careful in external communication.

Problem analysis

The number of children, growing up in multi-problem families, increased enormously in CEE, due to the transition problems. The deterioration of the social economic situation increased the number of multi-problem families. Old and traditional ways of social care disappeared. In B&H the war has contributed additionally to the number of such families, because of the social economic situation and from war trauma's that developed into Post Trauma Stress Disorder that – if not treated – can result in alcoholism and violent behaviour.

The traditional state system is not able to cope with the large number and the complexities of the problems. The staff do not work on the principle of case management and have a more administrative approach to social work and to clients. A systematic approach to social problems is lacking. Often their activities are limited to one-off financial assistance but, due to limited financial resources especially in smaller municipalities, even that support is rare. The traditional child protection system is often limited to institutionalised care, which is not in the best interest of the child. The institutionalised system is also a financial burden for a country when numbers of clients increase what is the existing situation in B&H, caused by many public discussions initiated by NGOs.

Growing up in a multi-problem family strongly contributes to the risk of becoming a victim of trafficking and violence, or of becoming addicted. The risk of dropping out from school increases, which limits the chance of finding a proper job. Growing up in a multi-problem family certainly endangers the social-emotional development of a child. Self-confidence is often low; feelings of depression are not uncommon, being less able to share their thoughts, feelings and intentions with others, a child often does not feel belonging to a community. All of these factors make integration into society more difficult.

Security is a basic requirement in being able to raise children properly. Security that the child takes from his/her notion, that the adult is wise and strong and has the best intention for the child. And security that the adult gets from the knowledge that he or she is able to raise a child properly.

More and more is known nowadays about the intergenerational transition of problematic behaviour. Today's children are tomorrow's parents. In the process of observing how adults interact with others, children learn patterns of family behaviour that they tend to repeat when they form their own families. And such a pattern continues often over many generations. However, this cycle of repeating across generations can be interrupted by educating children in more positive patterns of behaviour. Without such efforts and unless measures are taken the number of multi-problem families in CEE will increase with every generation.

Parents, through their personal history and lost hope, are no longer able to give love. In more academic terms: because of insecure experiences with emotional attachments in their youth, adults can develop insecure representations of emotional attachment that when in contact with their child, they will then transmit to their child. A lot has been spoken about the cycle of violence.

What is important is that research has indicated certain factors that can help children in extremely difficult situations to grow up healthy. Protective factors are: a supporting relationship with another adult in their youth, therapy and counselling in order to help children gain self-confidence and hope, communication skills and to believe in themselves and a supportive partner relationship as an adult. Preventing cycles of violence can be achieved by:

- promoting positive parenting to families with children under five years of age,
- support to children with behavioural problems such as low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation and antisocial behaviour,
- school inclusion and support for children who are failing academically, have behavioural difficulties or who are missing school or isolated from their peers,
- incentives to complete schooling,
- positive interventions for adolescents involved in alcohol and drug misuse, anti-social acts or self-harming behaviour, either singularly or peer groups,
- appropriate criminal justice interventions for delinquent teenagers and
- education for all teenagers regarding positive relationships, reproductive and sexual health, pregnancy and parenthood.

More theoretical information in a summary format can be found in "The cycle of violence: The relationship between child maltreatment and the risk of later becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Key facts", by the World Health organisation, Regional Office for Europe, 2007.

Schools are being confronted with a growing number of problems, which include school results, school drop out, behavioural problems and peer violence. Schools often do not know how to react to these problems, other than by disciplinary punishments. This makes the situation only more complex and does not provide an answer. Children, who clearly have problems, are punished and their possibilities for changing the situation are then reduced, whereas they are actually in dire need of assistance and encouragement.

A quality support system for children from multi-problem families is lacking.

Activities

Depending on the number of shifts or schedules that exist in the local schools, the centre should be open before and after school hours. If there is one shift, the centre usually is open from 15.00 to 19.00 hours, and during weekends and school holidays.

Basic activities are:

1. A living room where children can relax and socialise. Facilities like television, video/dvd, music, use of computer, drinks as well as a couch to hang on with friends, are available. There is no organised programme in the living room, but there are some regulations for the use of facilities.
2. A place to make homework. A quiet room with proper furniture.
3. Assistance in making homework, when requested.
4. Individual psychological counselling by a professional for children.
5. Free time activities, to be organised by children themselves or volunteers.
6. Health promotion and preventive information.
7. Basic medical care by nurse. Not fulltime. Usually once a week.

Additional activities depending on the local needs and/or possibilities are:

1. Hot meal service. Such service can only be given when a structural financial source for food and a cook is available.
2. Showers.
3. Laundry.
4. Open air playground.
5. Additional courses like foreign languages, creative workshops, computer skills, sports, non-violent communication, Rights of the Child.
6. Group therapy for children.
7. Individual counselling/social work for parents.
8. Courses for parents in parenting skills.
9. Holidays.
10. Larger scale activities for all children from the community. Incidental.
11. Internet café.
12. Library.
13. Renting service of school books.
14. Volunteer actions in the community.

Specific working methods:

The basic idea is to stimulate mutual support between children. The active participation of children is needed and they themselves are responsible for making their own programme. As participants they are responsible for organising free time activities and for housekeeping. However, the staff should put borders if needed and should educate children on how to use their independence. In the larger centres children are organised in groups of about 10 - in order to facilitate mutual assistance, in vertical groups, this means a mixture of ages. Sometimes the children can compose the groups themselves and the composition may change every three months.

Aside from their family from which these children cannot expect much, the peer group is one of the most important frames of reference for shaping their experiences of social integration and for expressing their needs and interests. The influence of the peer group is strong. In these centres a positive peer group is created. On the other hand, the prevention of peer violence within the centre is extremely important.

The children themselves make their weekly programme, the youngest ones with the help of older group members or volunteers. Basically they are free to choose, but their personal aims formulated in the admission interview have to be kept in mind and staff should discuss the programme when these are not respected. Children are stimulated to organise activities themselves, together with others from their group or from the same age. Housekeeping duties are arranged within the groups, keeping in mind responsibilities and age. Once having made their own weekly programme, children are obliged to follow it.

Every day each group has an experienced volunteer to assist the members in that group. The number of volunteers for a group cannot be too high. Volunteers should be able to be present at least two days a week. They will often come from the group of former participants and therefore will know the background of the children from their own experience. Volunteers can also be students of social work, but if they do not have the personal experience of growing up in a multi-problem family, then in certain centres they are not working as a group assistant, but helping with home work, assist in counselling, organise group activities like courses and sports or bigger activities. The need for a specific type of volunteer as group assistant, with personal experience, can be a problem at the start of the centre. All volunteers should be trained and well guided. Volunteers can receive a reward in the form of facilities like access to Internet.

As volunteers and staff function as role-models to the children, it is important to also involve male volunteers. Practise in CEE is that it is mainly women who are working in and interested in social work. But while this may be so participating boys must be able to find a role-model in the centre. For sports activities, it is necessary to find male volunteers. Involving male volunteers and, if possible, male staff is very important as there are indicators that males are at greater risk.

A combination of personal experience from having grown up in a multi-problem family and a professional education is preferred for staff members. Former participants and volunteers are actively encouraged to follow professional education in the social field. At the start of a centre it is not easy to find proper staff members with such a background. Staff should be very engaged, willing to work on weekends and holidays and should be stable personalities. The number of staff members depends on the exact activities, but not all professionals have to be fulltime and directly connected to the centre. A nurse once a week coming from a hospital is sufficient. A psychologist once a week from the CSW is also enough. The essential staff are an experienced coordinator and a coordinator/trainer of the volunteers. The number of staff can be limited, as volunteers and participants will do the bulk of the daily work. However, the centres are open during a large number of hours a week and as such will demand enough staff. For more than 30 participants, a minimum of 3 full-time staff and 10 volunteers will be needed.

Regulations within the centre are made by the children themselves. It is rare that regulations are complete from day one, but they develop with time. Some centres have an elected council of children, which is the discussion partner for the coordinator of the centre, and involved in developing, deciding and evaluating activities. Sometimes such a council also decides about the punishment of children that do not respect the regulations - they usually are more creative in finding punishments than adults are!

Operational measures

NGOs are the most equipped to establish such centres as they are flexible, non bureaucratic, more engaged and used to work with volunteers. In Poland 90% of the centres are managed by NGOs; in Romania about 80%. No matter from which ethnical or political group the NGO founders come, a centre should be open for all children in the target group, regardless of ethnic background.

An equipped building is most important. Often former school buildings or kindergartens are used. An outdoor playground or sports field will help, but is no condition.

A centre should be started separately from the school system. To function in school buildings (where separate spaces are available) and to have good co-operation with the schools is logical. However, in CEE there are no positive experiences in the functioning of such centres under the authority of a school. As far as we know, there are no centres that have realised all basic activities within the school system. As described in the introduction, many extra curriculum activities are provided in schools, but often without a participative approach and not in a structural way.

Reasons for separating centres from the school system are:

- schools are state organisations and usually bureaucratic obstacles exist toward involving volunteers and different opening hours,
- teachers are educated to be the authority in a class and being the expert, which is often contradictory to stimulating mutual support between children, self-responsibility of children and their participation in decision-making. Only few teachers are able to make the change in attitude that is needed,

- teachers have little knowledge of and attention for social-emotional development, whereas this is the main field of work of the centres. The centres have only limited and additional activities aiming at cognitive development,
- schools often react with disciplinary punishments to the behaviour of these children, which is counter-productive as it only excludes them further.

A centre can only be realised when the local authorities assist. A hot meal service is only possible when local authorities are prepared to finance it. A building has to be made available by the local authorities. In the long-term such centres depend on subsidies from local authorities, as they can never be self-sustainable. From the experience in Poland some financial information is available about the costs of a child in different forms of child care and protection. A child in residential care is ten times more expensive than a child in a day-care centre. Moreover, it should be noted that all costs that are connected to addiction, criminality etc. are considerably reduced when the number of victims can be decreased.

To run such a centre on a temporary basis is not possible. The starting-up period is quite long, as it takes time and education to establish a functional system for mutual support. To close a centre after a few years, would be extremely hard and will have a negative effect on the children as they will feel left without support from the society and probably will turn their back on society. Therefore, much attention should be given to the realisation of financial sustainability with local sources of income. An activity plan should be developed in order to realise financial sustainability. Visibility in the community and local media, co-operation with other stakeholders, co-operation with other NGOs, as well as contacts with relevant authorities are important.

Examples from other countries

In the mid 90s in Poland, the King Baudouin Foundation from Belgium and their local partner, the Foundation for Poland, started a national programme for street children. Children from multi-problem families that spent a lot of time on the street, belong to this group and, in practise, this has been the biggest group. Within the national programme local NGOs have been stimulated and assisted to develop their own local programmes. In addition to that, exchange of experience through visits and trainings has been an important part. The CNF and Kinderpostzegels financed the start of about 20 centres, not all of them participating in the national programme, but its existence has played a big part in stimulating their development.

Many of these centres in Poland have something with “nest” in their name. “Nest” in the meaning of a safe and caring place where children can find support. They all are different, following the local needs. What they have in common are the “living room”, homework possibility and assistance, often a hot meal, free time activities, a lot of volunteers and psychological assistance for children. Most of the centres can be found in smaller cities and in former collective farm villages. Few of them are in big cities.

At the end of the 90s in Romania, the need to develop activities in order to prevent the institutionalisation of children became an issue. After having initiated many changes in the child protection system, a preventive system was needed in order to limit the number of children in the protection system. One of the preventive measures was the realisation of a financial support system to families. But in addition many NGOs also developed preventive projects. Finally, the government made the legal provisions necessary for the so-called day centres. CNF and Kinderpostzegels financed the start of about 15 such centres.

It is difficult to characterise the centres in Romania as there is more difference between them than between those in Poland, probably due to the less co-ordinated development. Home work assistance, shower possibility, laundry service, access to computers and counselling for parents is more present in Romania. A hot meal service is only realised when the authorities want to finance it, as Romanian NGOs do not have the resources to finance such a service themselves.

How many centres one can find nowadays in Poland and Romania is unclear, but in total there must be more than 100. All different and taking the local needs and situation into consideration.

One should also keep in mind that it will be difficult to find exactly a centre as described above. What has been described above are the best practises of many projects. One centre can have a strongly developed model of mutual support, while others have developed a policy with regard to staff and volunteers. Not one is according to this description and not one is the same.