

Out of Home Placed Children in Slovakia

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Abstract:

One of the saddest features of the 20th and 21st centuries is characterized by the title “The century of abandoned children, the century of living parents orphan children“. Based on the UNICEF estimates, 5 years ago these children amounted to 150 million, according to the latest report their number is inestimable. The primary reason for this situation is the worldwide pandemic of the family disintegration. Slovakia as the post-communist country has been changing its care system from the boarding institutions to today’s centers for child and family.

For forty years, a socialist model of boarding institutional care along the lines of the mission – „to bring up future communist-like young people without being influenced by their bad parents“ was applied in Slovakia. The first open criticisms were heard in 1968; in 1972 the first family-like children’s home was originated in Nove Mesto nad Vahom; in 1976 the Children’s Town in Zlatovce was established. At a turning period in 1989, almost 95% still lived within the boarding system. The average capacity of children’s homes was 204 children...

If we want to assess the system briefly and eloquently, we might say the system of the boarding institutional care organization, characterized particularly by collectivism, strictly organized daily routine and „waiting in a queue“ restricted, or even disabled child’s personality’s healthy development. It disallowed to identify the actual condition of the child’s personality and meet his/her individual formative needs. This system did not provide adequate quality and quantity of stimuli for a child to obtain what is needed for both the present and future.

Children in these institutions have grown up with a small prospect to prove successful in their lives. They were insufficiently prepared for life, they were used to live for today, not to plan anything and just wait passively for the other’s help. As many as 70% of young adults felt problems upon leaving their children’s home, since there was no effective social care system, especially when looking for housing conditions and a job after completion of their institutional care. Due to this fact, most of the fosterlings of substitute care boarding facilities remained dependent on the state’s assistance even after leaving the institution.

Transformation – the change process of the entire post-socialist substitute care system, particularly the system of work in institutional care facilities – has taken place in Slovakia on the initiative of the *Society of Friends of Children from Children’s Homes* (Smile As A Gift) since 2000. This largest NGO focusing on the children at risk in Slovakia has performed systematic activities in Slovakia for almost 35 years in order to protect the family. Their vision „...so that every child has a family“ aims to fulfill the basic needs of every child. The main objective is the support of the family and protection of children’s rights by or-

ganizing to advocate and enforce this objective through educational activities, legislative changes, transformation of alternative care system and public care of children and families in crisis, by direct support and assistance to the marginalized groups, to families in crisis or young care leavers. Actively proposing legislation changes, educating professionals working with children and their families, this networking organization is very active in field work and providing practical aid to biological families which are at risk of separation of their children or from which the children have already been separated. In doing so, their work is based on the long-term research which has been performed since 2003.

The primary idea of the transformation of the child care system in Slovakia focuses on a child who, through no fault of his/her own, has lost a possibility and right to grow up in their own family, could be able to return to their family after some time. If the return is not possible, even after making all efforts by the involved team, the priority is to provide living with relatives. If the broader family is dysfunctional or not interested in providing the care, the aim is to find a substitute family for the child. If there is no possible solution in the primary, broader or substitute family, and the child has to be temporarily placed in the institution, the effort is made to enable him/her to live in an environment as much as close to the setting of their biological family. Only in such an environment, a child can have met their needs and exercised their rights. In other words, the transformation is principally aimed at the change of children’s homes from „the last resort to the change resort“.

As mentioned above, the transformation has involved the complex shift of the entire substitute care system. The changes have been made in four principal areas that are interconnected and mutually influencable:

1. Forming an effective and complex prevention system.
2. Development and improvement of field social work with a child and family with the aim to decrease the number of threatened and disintegrated families and reduce the number of children separated from their original families.
3. Development of all forms of substitute family care aimed at increasing the number of children placed in substitute families

4. Transformation of the institutional care system aimed at decreasing the number of children with the ordered institutional and protective care and completion of the consistent transformation of boarding children's homes into the children's homes with autonomous groups.

The transformation of children's homes into the family-like forms of care was completed regarding the fundamental goals in 2006. Since that time we regularly do research of the Family at Risk in Slovakia in cooperation with the St. Elisabeth University showing that on average there are more than 15,000 children growing up out of their families, thereof almost 5,000 in children's homes. The most frequent reason for the children's placement into institutional care is that their parents are not able to address their issues. Only 2% of children are double orphans. Despite this fact, children's homes in Slovakia are filled up to 95% of their capacity. Yet, more than a half (54.7%) of the placed children could come back to their parents, if the family were given appropriate help and support. However, such a scenario is rare, only about 6% of children come back to their parents from a children's home (Mikloskova, 2017). We worked out deep analysis of the situation of children in institutional care in Slovakia to research development of the situation of children at risk in Slovakia in 2006 – 2016. Outcome of this research provided deep insight into the issue of children at risk due to the separation from their families based on socio-economic difficulties in the family and an inadequately established social system insufficiently reflecting the alarming situation of the families at risk in our country. In 40% of all out-of-home placement, the socio-economic situation of the child's family is what matters. In fact, only 5%-6% of children return to their native families. Others remain longtime or permanently separated from their family members and taken out of their natural environment. An alarmingly high proportion is formed by children who, despite emotional ties and parents' interest in caring for their children, cannot grow up in their families due to housing or economic security issues. More than 60% of the taken out children do not have regular contacts with their family, 30% of children have no contact with the family at all. After institutionalized care, in particular aged 18, most of these children (around 80%) return after leaving insti-

tution to their natural environment. Disturbed emotional attachments and disruption of the life continuum of these families, however, have far-reaching consequences (Mikloskova, 2017).

For this reason, since 2007 we have built DORKA Crisis Centers for family restoration in the cooperation of the DeDo Foundation. Our experience with their functioning could get as many as 80% of such families back on their feet. At present, we run 10 crisis centers.

The research outcomes along with the DORKA Centers have initiated the idea of the amendment of the Act No. 305/2005 on Child protection and social guardianship which has introduced an extensive reform of the facilities and their transformation into centers for child and family since 1 January 2019. These centers with the help of re-introduced field social work and in-house care systematically work with families focusing on keeping the child in their biological family in order not to be placed in the institutional care.

In prevention of the family disintegration and children's placement into the substitute care system, systematic field social work plays a significant role. The effective work with families at risk is supported by a system of work with threatened families introduced by Smile As A Gift which intensively applies a very effective model of empowering the natural supportive family and community network – Family Group Conferences. It is a system of networking and mobilizing the broader family and the community around the child at risk which autonomously make a plan, accept decisions and take responsibility for problem solving, while the whole process initiating the motivation and potential of the family network is facilitated by qualified coordinators. This way, almost 90% of families have their issues addressed in the circle of the broader family and other persons close to the child. This model has proven that the most effective form of support and help to the threatened families is the mobilization of their own paralyzed potential and initiation of their inner motivation through searching and empowering their strengths and meeting their actual needs.

From time to time, all families have to face challenges, some of them need external help when addressing them. In a traditional family, usually a family member gets some help and support from

the broader family which enables him/her to address the traditional role when providing the care and protection of a child within the family. Over time, a lot of the traditional family roles have been taken over by the society and its social system. When the role of the child protection was taken by the authorities, many of the family members either decided to give up their traditional role in favor of the authority or they found themselves having been excluded from the process, regardless of their concern. Distorting the balance and breaking a family system has had a long-term negative consequences for future generations as well (Miklosko, Bezakova, Herak, 2017).

This phenomenon is apparent in our biggest marginalized population group – the Romani minority. In order to change their situation, two approaches have to be used completely different from those having been applied in Slovakia for the last decades. In the substitute care institutions there are 60% children with Romani ethnicity (Analysis of the situation of children in institutional care in Slovakia, 2017, Children at Risk, 2006-2016) which is, in contradiction with their traditional mentality regarding the separation of the child, unthinkable. The social policy peculiar to the period of communism, which convinced Romani families of the benefits of having the child on the „stay” in the institution, has had enormous consequences. Romani families believed that for their child it was better to grow up in an institution rather than in the family. They gave up their traditional role and today there has grown up the third generation of „institutional fosterlings“ who are uprooted without a clear identity; with all the accompanying phenomena which life with no roots and identity; as well as without relations and family bonds brings. The intensive field social work connected with evangelistic and pastoral activities is very needed and provably efficient in this target group. In this respect, the results of the Greek Catholic Romani Mission are undoubtable.

The execution of the amendment of the Act on Child Protection and Social Guardianship of 2018 and the formation of regionally-available centers for child and family which include in-house, field and residential service for help and support of families in challenging life situations have brought Slovakia to the fore of the EU member countries as to the help of the families at risk.

Finally, we would like to express the belief that a child needs an environment of a complete family including mother and father for their healthy psychosocial development. This is the fundamental condition for meeting their needs and experiencing a safe attachment which is the basis of their future relationships and communication. The stable and favorable family setting can adequately develop the child's personality, enhance their potential and prepare them for future functioning in the broader social context.

Growing up in their own functional family with mother and father is the primary goal we have in our minds. If a child does not have such a possibility, the most appropriate option for him/her is to grow up with their relatives. If even this option is not real for them, the original family can be substituted by surrogate care in the form of adoption or foster care. If neither of these alternatives is possible to accomplish, it is necessary to provide the care of a facility which creates a background resembling their family setting as much as possible.

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