



BELARUS

“SCHOOL OF PARENTS” TEACHING PARENTS TO BE PARENTS

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Belarus is currently facing a critical shortage of organisations and professionals able to offer qualified psychological and psychiatric assistance to children and parents affected by life crises of various sorts. This view is echoed by parents themselves and professionals in the field. Recently launched EU project “School of Parents”, financed by the Civil Society Facility in the Eastern Partnership is attempting to address this shortfall.

A correspondent of Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress spoke to the project’s staff to learn more about how the “School of Parents” is operating, whom it is helping and

which institutional barriers are envisaged in the future.

The “School of Parents” is teaching parents to be parents”

As parents turn to the school with different problems, help is offered on an individual, case-by-case basis. Some may only require social assistance, while others are looking for legal or psychological help. In particularly difficult situations the school offers integrated support services, including psychiatric and rehabilitation assistance. While some families may only need occasional support, others consult the school on a long-term basis.

The aim of the school is to help parents be parents. *“No matter their parental relationship, whether biological or foster parents, all parents need help and support, in particular during crisis situations”* says Tatiana Burova.

“There have been times when we have helped children and families adapt to divorce or ideally prevent it” adds psychologist Tatiana Shman. Her colleague Tatiana Bakhmat, the coordinator of the project in Mogilev, adds that “the schools have been able to help a large category of people in need to seek support, including those not found earlier”.

According to the feedback of the project’s beneficiaries, prompt and qualified psychological support has been able to prevent families from falling apart and improve the welfare of children affected by challenging family circumstances in their early childhood. The support has targeted biological and foster families alike.

Illuminating the path to success

“Illuminating the path to success for parents and children” is the main aim of the project. In order to resolve an issue, it is necessary to first identify, understand and assemble the required expertise. The families in need are involved in the process, sometimes together with other families facing similar problems.

“In most cases, the School of Parents has been able to restore and improve family relationships, save foster families and convince social services that keeping certain families intact is the best option for the well-being of the children. In cases where children are removed from parental custody, shelter is immediately provided” says Tatiana Shman.

Family crises can be extremely complex. Take the example of foster parents accused of not paying enough attention to their children, who are behaving poorly at school. In many cases, psychologists suggest that the poor behaviour is unrelated to the family context. Instead, it is more likely to be the result of congenital factors or early childhood trauma. It is also often the case that parents, teachers and psychologists lack the necessary training and skills to care for children with special needs.

Each of the interviewed beneficiaries tells us their story from the past and present.

Who has the School of Parents helped?

“I currently have five adopted children along with four of my own - two grown-up daughters who already have their own families, a son who serves in the army and a daughter in third grade. We already took care of eight adopted

children who are now leading successful lives. All of our adopted children have special needs with individual diagnoses.” says Irina Mikhailovna.

Officially Irina is a foster parent, but she and her children prefer not to think of themselves as such, “We feel like a typical family. The kids get offended when we are called foster parents - they call us Mum and Dad.” Irina is ready to talk for hours about each of her children.

“Vitalik now attends a boarding school for children with special needs. He grew up without a father and his mother died of multiple sclerosis when



he was only two years old. We took Vitalik in after he was refused by a previous foster family. Before this, he twice experienced nervous breakdowns and had to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital.”

“Zhenya is now 13 years old and has lived with us since his first birthday. His mother had a dysfunctional lifestyle and was deprived of her parental rights after abandoning him and his sister, who we also adopted. Initially they were cared for by their grandmother before she fell ill and turned to social services for help. Zhenya was a difficult child, but he is now able to attend a mainstream school which also takes children with special needs.

“When he was one year old he was unable to sit down and for weeks I had to carry him in my arms. He was so attached that I couldn’t let go of him. He was scared of everything - water, toys, going outside.”

“We also adopted a brother and sister who are now 13 and 12 years old respectively. Dina was one year and three months old and Volodya around 3 when they joined our family. We took them in after they were refused by an orphanage and other

foster families in the community. Their parents were also deprived of parental rights for leading an “asocial” lifestyle.”

“Vladik, who was the last to join our family, started first grade a year ago. He was brought up by his grandmother until she suffered a stroke. His mother and father were deprived of parental rights when Vladik was just a few months old.”

“The problems of all my adopted children are related to congenital abnormalities linked to their biological parents’ alcohol abuse. Psychologists from the School of Parents provided us

with help to diagnose the children and develop the right course of therapy. In addition, the school offers advice to teachers on how to interact with children who have special needs. The children have started feeling more at ease and we received advice on how to improve our relationship with them.”

“It would be a shame for this project to end. There are many children in Belarus who need special treatment and attention for psychological and birth traumas. I don’t know what would have happened without the support our family received. The number of abused and neglected children would have been far greater.”





“We were going to divorce, but we were able to keep the family together”

“My husband and I were going to divorce” says Anna. “My son and I were very worried. This affected his studying and he began to perform poorly at school. Psychologists from the School of Parents worked with both my son and I on a collective and individual basis. I understood that the aim was to give us respite from the problem, make our perspective more positive and try to change the situation for the better.

“It is difficult to say what exactly the School of Parents was able to do for us, but the results are clear: we were able to save our family. Whether or not we’ll need their help in the future, they are ready to continue supporting us.”

“I would of course like to see the project continue its great work. Without its support, our family may well have fallen apart. On top of this, the services are offered free of charge. Few in Belarus would be able to seek private consultations.”

“Impossible to count all the families we have helped”

The project’s experts find it difficult to give the exact number of people they have helped. “There are those who receive help on a long-term basis and

those who only seek occasional support” says Tatiana Shman. *“The project works with 150 parents and 450 children on a long-term basis, and approximately 250 parents and 700 children on a short-term basis.”*

The project was officially launched in January 2013 and is set to run until December 2016. “If we are able to receive additional funding, we plan to maintain and expand our existing services, as well as launch new ones” says Project Director Tatiana Burova.

As Tatiana Bakhmat points out, far from everyone in Belarus has adequate access to psychotherapy. She estimates that just ten to fifteen per cent of Belarusians have the means to pay for such services privately, and unfortunately not everyone in this bracket recognises its importance. The remainder of society, including those who want to address the issues, are simply not in a position to pay for these services.



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