

# soskinderdorum

Hermann Gmeiner Academy

Main topic: Metamorphoses



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## Dear Readers

For children to grow into strong adults whose lives are based on healthy optimism, they need to be challenged in a way which helps foster a positive capacity for well-being. Especially "our" children, who have to cope with disruptions and often unwanted changes in their lives, have to develop a high degree of resilience. The message, which is elaborated in this issue of FORUM, can be summarized as follows: children must learn through experience that in spite of difficult conditions they can achieve something themselves. They must get the chance to develop their own problem-solving strategies when challenges arise, and thus acquire the ability to assume responsibility for their own actions. Along the way, they need the support of competent parents or care givers who actively strengthen their children, lead an exemplary life and have sound communicative skills.

Resilience research emphasizes the importance of competent parents and/or care givers to the sound development of children. So in terms of our work, we need to find an answer to the question "How can we promote the potential of our co-workers?" From Bosnia and Herzegovina we have

received an article for FORUM which offers a possible answer: by enabling SOS mothers to meet, to have space and time to exchange their experiences and own approaches as well as their difficulties. Like-minded people, people who have had similar experiences met each other on both the emotional and cognitive level.

On a slightly different note, due to current developments, this issue of FORUM will be my last as editor. This editorial change makes sense in the light of the structural changes taking place within our umbrella association. We have to be ready for - and willing to - change in order to develop, not for its own sake but rather in response to the conditions in the respective environments and to requirements.

An important requirement for SOS Children's Villages is optimum efficiency in its organizational processes. The General Secretariat is responding to this need by developing a new structure. This structure also involves the operational fields of the Hermann Gmeiner Academy: educational quality assurance, personnel development of SOS mothers, village direc-

tors and youth care co-workers as well as research. This also applies to the supporting service providers, public relations and translation.

As a consequence, the responsibility for FORUM will change as well. I hope that the essential issues of SOS work will continue to define the topics of FORUM and engage your interest.

For this issue of FORUM and all those yet to come, I hope you find inspirational reading that also brings rewarding and more reflective moments.

*Christian Honold*

# SOS-Kinderdorf FORUM: Survey

FORUM in its present form has been in existence for ten years. It goes without saying that we keep asking ourselves whether we achieve the goals we have set ourselves: to provide information about an interesting SOS topic from an international perspective and to provide our readers with a forum for the exchange of different opinions and approaches. In order to find out about your opinion we have produced an online questionnaire:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=669423603181>

To save you typing the long address just send an e-mail with the subject "FORUM Survey/English" to [forum@sos-kd.org](mailto:forum@sos-kd.org). You will immediately receive the respective link.

We have compiled some of the opinions, tips and feedback. Of course, our ulterior motive is to arouse your interest and make you want to participate in the survey. We look forward to praise, as it warms our hearts. And we appreciate criticism, as it helps us improve.

Keep up the good work.

Almost all texts, especially the translated ones, lack the individual character of the author. The texts make a very smooth impression and become a bit boring. I think some more pep, also on the language level, would make the texts livelier.

Maybe you could inform all the countries beforehand on the main topics of the issues of the current year, so that interested co-workers would be able to write articles and present them to the editorial team.

I have been receiving and reading FORUM for many years and I find it very interesting. It's not only its layout, which prompts me to dwell on the magazine, to look, to browse and to leaf through and which gives me a first impression of the texts and pictures, but it's also the content that fills me with enthusiasm. The articles are extremely exciting and help me better understand some subjects, which I later on consolidate myself and consider from various angles.

It is a pity that so much money is spent on internal communication on high gloss paper for readers who could easily be reached by other means. Perhaps you should change to the web and a newspaper layout, which would certainly be a more economical approach.

I would like more attention to be paid to the children, youths, SOS mothers and educators who work with the children and youths.

FORUM focuses on topical subjects in terms of our organisation. This is interesting because it enables us to better understand the goals of our efforts.

We would like to read about experiences from other countries from which we have not heard anything so far.

More personal involvement, even anger or annoyance or joy about experiences. Or humour!

FORUM is a very good source of information. I suggest that more national research reports as well as research reports on children that are produced by organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children etc. be published.

# Trust and accountability

Breaches of trust are part of our lives. However, the moment they affect our faith in other people, it is hard to cope with them. For an organization like SOS Children's Villages, the topic of such breaches of trust provides us with a lot to think about. In our work we are faced with many situations requiring our confidence though we cannot always do justice to them.

Kofi, a 12-year-old boy, whose performance in the last examinations had been far below expectations, told his teacher about the difficulties he was going through at home. He suffered particularly as a result of the many quarrels between his parents due to his father's constant drunkenness. The next day his teacher narrated the story to the whole class, mentioning Kofi's name.

Beatrice, a 15-year-old girl, was faced with a lot of advances from her male friends at school. As a teenager she had heard about the dangers of sex and expressed her concerns to Juliet, the youth leader, who had been a good counsellor and friend to her. The following day, the Village Director called and warned her to stay away from the boys or risk losing her youth allowance. She became more confused and wondered how the Village Director got to know what was on her mind.

A few weeks ago Linda handed in her resignation as she could no longer

cope with the incessant amorous advances from her boss. Notwithstanding the numerous challenges she was facing in her 3 year marriage, she could not see herself going out with another man.

You may be tempted to associate someone you know with one or more of the above examples. But wait a minute - do we need to think hard to put ourselves into similar situations? I am sure we all know what a breach of trust is: the contravention of a pledge or faith. Breaches can be minor, fundamental, material or anticipated. What you consider to be a minor disappointment could have serious and lasting effects on someone else and their relationship with you.

I believe it is not by chance that our values as an organization include trust and accountability<sup>1</sup>. We are expected to believe, support and respect one another and to build an environment where we can approach our responsibilities with confidence. When the health records of others become public knowledge or sponsorship information is no longer the preserve of the authorized users, we risk losing the trust placed in us.

I cannot offer any solutions to a breach of trust. However, I would like to recommend the following: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you". Where a breach of trust occurs, whether by master or servant,

old or young, clergy or laity, we are all vulnerable and culpable. In our working lives we have to remember that trust requires security, including the awareness that a breach of faith will be avenged and that we cannot escape the ultimate accountability for it.

We must therefore safeguard the interest of the other party anytime we are faced with a challenge so that we can continue to benefit from the trust we have always enjoyed.

**Kojo Mattah**  
SOS Children's Villages Ghana,  
National Director

<sup>1</sup> "Who we are. Roots, vision, mission and values" of the organization SOS Children's Villages. SOS-Kinderdorf International, 2002

# Love alone is not enough

## A supplement to the last edition of FORUM on "Bonding"

Due to their personal histories, some of the children we take into our SOS Children's Villages have very low self-esteem. Those children who were mistreated by their parents are particularly affected. The lack of self-respect often leads to maladapted or aggressive behaviour that is, quite frankly, hard to bear by those around them. Care givers who are especially benevolent toward these children are often particularly hurt. Frequently, the behaviour of these children is worsened by the fact that they blame themselves for the abuse, thinking along the lines of: "If my parents beat me, I must have deserved it".

In the last edition of FORUM you put forward the correct opinion that the child needs a loving bond to develop, to create a positive self-image, to believe in him- or herself and his or her capabilities. In short, to get involved with the world and to take the first steps into the future. But it is the very same child that will resist, that will not know how to deal with the love of his or her SOS mother, how to deal with the message "I am here to be at your side and to accompany you, because you are valuable as a human being and because I believe in you!" An SOS mother who had grasped this fact once said to me: "I have to be careful not to give them too much right now, they can't deal with it. It scares them and they refuse to accept

it." These children, who have had only negative experiences and have heard only degrading comments about themselves might otherwise risk putting their new home and the relationships with the grown-ups in danger.

The message of attention and benevolence, that expresses itself not just verbally, but in the entire day-to-day behaviour of SOS mothers and the village team, confuses the child at first. It is opposed to the child's self-image, which is why it cannot accept it. This can lead to an inner conflict; many children will resist and reject the message at first.

It is a challenge for the SOS mother and the team to understand that the child cannot accept their good intentions at first. Often, a first phase in which everything is good and beautiful will be followed by a second phase in which there are difficulties. It begins when the relationship grows deeper; it becomes more intense when the children become fearful that the relationship to their SOS mother is tantamount to denying their own parents. These children are stuck right in the middle of a conflict of loyalties.

Many of these children find it difficult to trust their own feelings and, in extreme cases, sometimes end up mistaking love for hate.

The SOS mother has to learn to understand the contradictory behaviour of the child. Her love can confuse the child at first and lead to aggressive behaviour and rejection. This, however, is not a manifestation of failure, but rather a sometimes necessary phase. The aim of the SOS mother and the team must be to gradually dismantle the child's negative self-image without causing too much insecurity. This is a necessary precondition for the reconstruction of the child's self-image; a phase that may be very unstable, during which everyday problems can blur the new self-image and bring the old to the fore again. A young girl once described this feeling by using a very graphic image. She said. "It isn't easy to build your whole life on quicksand that might swallow everything up at any moment!"

That's why SOS mothers need professional help to defuse the reactions of those children who meet them with rejection and give them the feeling of having failed. The team's support, trainings, supervision, practise analysis groups and the development of individual educational projects must help the mothers to understand, accept and tolerate this phase. They have to understand that the reactions of these children are the expression of painful conflict; the conflict between the self-image they had in the

past and the forward-looking one corresponding to them, the one towards which we want to guide them.

I hope this contribution has done some justice to those children in need of special attention. As Bruno Bettelheim said, "Love alone is not enough!". We need love, no doubt. But this offering of love scares some of our children and is difficult for them to deal with. Sometimes these children, as well as those taking care of them, have a long and strenuous road ahead of them before they can find the key to unlock the protective armour they are hiding behind.

Rémy MAZIN  
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# Metamorphoses

## Metamorphoses

My sons are interested in everything that has to do with nature. One day, they found a yellow and grey caterpillar on the garden fence. We put it in a jam jar, fed it with nettle leaves, put a few twigs in the jar and waited. Not for long though, because on the very same day, it was hanging from a twig and began its mysterious transformation. Within 24 hours, it had completely pupated - a brown, seemingly lifeless hull, a dead leaf. On the twelfth day, the butterfly burst free of its cocoon. We were disappointed. Instead of the brightly coloured Small Tortoiseshell we were expecting, we found an unsightly little moth drying its wings. Imagine our breathless wonder when the butterfly spread its wings and took off into the midday sun, revealed in all its splendour!

In this edition of FORUM, we would like to present a few examples of metamorphoses within the framework of SOS Children's Villages. We will also tell you about radical changes and new departures, and how we can support these processes as co-workers.

How can we support children so they are able to stand their ground in difficult situations, able to keep up the fight in the face of adversity? **Romana Hinteregger** explains the concept of resilience through a children's book. **Negrin Ameer Khan** supplies us with a series of practical tips on how to support very young children in our work and how to boost their strength and vitality.



The transition from the safe haven of the SOS family to the youth facility is not an easy one. 20-year old **Amela** addresses new arrivals and tells them what they can expect and what to watch out for. Her speech was summarised by **Katerina Ilievska**.

**Gabriela Brugger** has embarked on new vocational horizons. When her seven children no longer needed her as much, she broadened the scope of her training.

Every new beginning is preceded by a separation. How to deal with grief and loss? How can we understand others, especially our children, in their sorrow? **Karl Muller** describes the different stages of grieving.

**Elisabeth Ullmann** enlightens us on the profession of SOS mother, charting its development and recognition and provides two examples of successful legal recognition, in Morocco and France.

**Nermina Becirevic** gives us a report on business not quite as usual, sharing

her experiences from the first meeting of SOS mothers in Bosnia Herzegovina.

**Douglas Reed, Claire Mathisse and Mir Shamsul Alam** will show how urgently needed and important our work in the Family Strengthening Programmes is. Our help benefits the children and contributes towards making our vision come true: "Every child grows up in a family!"

Changes take time. Anyone working with people, especially with children, knows that. Often it takes a lot of patience before changes can be seen in all their splendour. We at FORUM hope that you all have a chance to experience such moments of breathtaking happiness.



Share your ideas and inspiration as well as any criticism relating to FORUM with us on [forum@sos-kd.org](mailto:forum@sos-kd.org)

## Ronia, the robber's daughter and the concept of resilience

*"On the night that Ronia was born, a thunderstorm was raging over the mountains, such a storm that all the goblinfolk in Matt's Forest crept back in terror to their holes and hiding places."*

This is how the story of Ronia, the daughter of the robber chieftain Matt and his wife Lovis begins.

For a long time Ronia, who grows up very sheltered amongst the robbers at Matt's Fort, believes that the great stone hall is the whole world. When the time comes to explore the world outside the fort, she sets forth to watch out for the dangers of the forest, the grey dwarfs, wild harpies, goblins, dark witches and greedy waterfalls.

Even though the father is terribly worried about his daughter, he gives her the following advice before letting her go. "Watch out you don't get lost in the forest," he says, when Ronia wants to go to the forest on her own for the first time. The laconic answer to the question of what she is supposed to do in case she does get lost: "Find the right path". This way, Ronia will become familiar with everything she has to watch out for.<sup>2</sup>

Since the forest has not taught her to be careful of the river, she warily skips over the slippery stones along the riverbank, where the river rushes most fiercely: "Should watching out



be of any use at all, she had to practice it at the rapids and whirlpools and nowhere else".<sup>3</sup> This way Ronia becomes familiar with her fear; at the same time she practices not being frightened.

This part of the story of Ronia, the Robber's Daughter describes how children can develop physical and mental muscles. In a unique way, the author Astrid Lindgren introduces a concept which during the last couple of years has gained great popularity under the term of "resilience".

The concept of resilience in the socio-educational and psychological context generally describes the ability to prevail in a difficult situation and not to go to pieces. This means psychological resistance of children and adults

in the face of biological, psychological and psycho-social developmental risks.

### How do you recognize "resilient" people?

The most important characteristic of resilient people is their healthy degree of optimism. In difficult situations they remember their strengths and search for solutions. They build up friendships and networks, don't believe that they have to be perfect all the time and are able to praise themselves.

"Resilience is not an unchangeable feature we have or don't have, but

rather a capacity we develop in the course of our development in the context of child-environment interaction.<sup>4</sup>

Since we are best able to develop resilience during the first ten years of our lives, it is important to familiarize children with various resilience strategies as early as possible. This enables them to act in anticipated situations of stress and danger, to cope with the situation and to actively participate in organizing their life. However, the point is not only to "overcome" a situation but also to learn from it and to develop skills for the rest of one's life.

The resilience concept is, in fact, not a totally new idea but rather an extended one, combining existing solution- and resource-oriented concepts which were developed in the 1970s, such as that of Salutogenesis (Aaron Antonovsky) and of Empowerment (Heiner Keupp et al).

### The significance of the resilience paradigm for practical educational work

In order to stimulate resilient behaviour and/or an increase in competence, we work on three levels:

- on the child-level,
- on the family-level and
- outside the family.

with the three areas being interwoven and interacting with each other.

Another interesting aspect of the concept is the fact that it does not ignore the current social development but rather emphasizes the responsibility of social policy. Poverty and the risks involved for children and their families are not shuffled off

onto the individual level. It is particularly emphasized that active support can improve the social resources in the environment of childcare.

In the context of training and education, the promotion of resilience starts on the individual and relationship level. On the relationship level, special emphasis is put on parents or care givers. The aim is to strengthen their educational competence, especially in terms of being positive role models, constructive communication between educator and child, the parents' feeling of being competent as well as the conflict-solving strategies of the parents. Such promotion may take place, for instance, through parent training programmes or parent training services by the media.

The promotion of resilience on the individual level means to support children and youths on the following levels: problem-solving skills, personal responsibility, self-effectiveness<sup>5</sup>, social competencies combined with intensifying social relationships, stress coping strategies.

### Fairytales and stories as a way of illustrating resilient behaviour

In the context of daily interaction with children the application of fairytales and stories is particularly recommended. They enable us to illustrate resilient behaviour, to take on various perspectives and to understand problem-solving. They show the children appropriate behaviour models.

Coping with a problem or a difficult situation is the key message of resilience promoted in fairytales and stories. The main characters set out to change this situation, thereby showing self-determined action. They assume responsibility for what hap-

pens in their lives. They believe in their own capabilities to sort out their problems. They build social relationships, enlist support and are not discouraged by setbacks. Thanks to their readiness to help, they also assume responsibility for others and help others discover their resources as well.

### Back to Ronia, the robber's daughter

On her raids through the forest Ronia meets Birk, the son of the robber chieftain Borka. Even the fathers and grandfathers of Ronia and Birk had fallen out with each other. Ronia and Birk, however, feel like kindred spirits and against the will of Matt they decide to venture into the forest. By doing so, Ronia violates a strict rule in this system: she pays more attention to her feelings than to generations of hostility, thus plunging the adults into a difficult crisis.

In Birk, Ronia has found a substitute brother, whom she loves dearly. Yet, time and time again, Ronia longs for her mother and especially for her father. Matt, too, suffers from being separated from Ronia, but nobody is allowed to address his feelings.

When autumn arrives and surviving in the forest becomes increasingly difficult, Lovis, Ronia's mother, succeeds in reconciling father and daughter. Ronia and Birk come back, but many a thing has changed. Ronia knows for sure that in spring she is going to move back to the forest together with Birk. Both children decide not to succeed their fathers as robber chieftains. Matt acknowledges Ronia's decision and ends the conflict with Borka.

Thus the story also describes change and transition processes such as the detachment of the children from

their beloved parents. Detachment processes represent a great challenge for both parents and children. Sometimes children have to be very strong to oppose the will of their parents and find the limits - in this case by going into the forest - to follow their own developmental tasks. This involves a painful separation process, including being anxious about the well-being of the children and mourning - both about the changed status of being a child and of being a parent.

During this time the parents also need other people to talk to about their feelings, friends and partnerships that strengthen them and give them confidence that this crisis is the basis for something good and new.

And sometimes, adults too need stories like that of Ronia, the Robber's Daughter.

Romana Hinteregger

Head of the Socio-educational Institute, Educational Department, SOS Children's Villages Austria

<sup>1</sup> Astrid Lindgren, "Ronja, the robber's daughter", Puffin Books, 1985

<sup>2</sup> *ib.*, p. 11

<sup>3</sup> *ib.*, p. 17

<sup>4</sup> Corina Wustmann 2006, Das Konzept der Resilienz und seine Bedeutung für das pädagogische Handeln; in: Irina Bohn (Hrsg); Dokumentation der Fachtagung "Resilienz - was Kinder aus armen Familien stark macht", ISS-Aktuell, 2/2006, p. 7.

(The concept of resilience and its significance for educational action; in: Irina Bohn (ed.); Documentation of the Conference "Resilience - what makes children from poor families strong".)

<sup>5</sup> Self-effectiveness is the expectation that people are able to successfully carry out desired actions on the basis of their own competences.



# Don't feel sorry, promote strength

## How to support young children in our practical work and how to promote their resilience



chance to look for his strengths and those of his environment in order to build upon them. Why do some people thrive against all odds? We can learn lessons from these experiences and should share them to improve our work.

Resilience is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened or even transformed by the adversities of life. Along with food and shelter, children need love and trust, hope and autonomy. They need safe relationships that foster friendships and commitment. They need loving support and self-confidence, faith in themselves and their world. All of this builds resilience. Resilience is actually overcoming difficult situations with courage, skill and faith.

Though resilience plays an important role at every age, I would like to discuss the importance of this phenomenon for children in our care. Resilience helps when changes or disruptions occur, but it has to be built up.

When children are learning new things they are very open to new impressions. They are involved in all type of activities and ignorant of what the future holds for them. They are sensi-

tive and emotional: an insignificant incident can bring tears to their eyes and a small gift brings laughter. This is the age when we have to be really careful and understand them and their needs.

### What we, as care providers, should do to promote the resilience of small children is

Give **unconditional love** to the child, express this love verbally, calm down a child by holding, rocking and using a soothing voice. Support the child in learning to **recognize and label his or her own feelings as well as those of others**. Help the child become increasingly aware of his or her own temperament (for example, how shy or outgoing, cautious or thrill-seeking he or she is) as well as of that of the adults playing an important role in his life. Encourage the child to demonstrate empathy and caring, to be pleasant and do nice things for others.

**Listen** to the children, comfort them in stressful situations and encourage them to take independent action -

even without adult help. Encourage the children to use communication and problem-solving skills to resolve inter-personal problems or to seek help with them. **Communicate** with the children on the day's events, ideas, observations and feelings.

Offer **explanations and reconciliation** along with rules and discipline in a consistent way. Enforce forms of discipline that set limits to behaviour and are linked with certain consequences without crushing the child's spirit. Praise the children for accomplishments (for instance for helping their mother, for listening and really putting toys away when asked to do so or for not throwing a tantrum). However, accept errors and failures as well, while providing guidance toward improvement.

**Be a model of courage, confidence, optimism, self-esteem and resilience.** Demonstrate appropriate behaviour when facing challenges such as inter-personal problems or conflict and difficult situations. Gradually expose the

children to adversities and look for helpful coping strategies together. Help the children accept responsibility for their own behaviour and understand that their actions have consequences.

Working for orphans and abandoned children makes us more sensitive to their needs. We need to train our SOS mothers, co-workers and everyone working with us in such a manner that they help children become stronger and more determined. For us, even the gate keeper of the village or youth home is a care provider. The thing to remember is that we have to build the resilience of our children in order for them to face the future with open arms and open minds.

Nergis Ameerr Khan  
SOS Children's Villages, Pakistan



Everyone faces adversities, no-one is exempt. However, with resilience children can triumph over their trauma. Without it, it is their trauma that triumphs. Children can overcome the crises they face both within their families and in their communities, even if they are young and vulnerable.

What happens to a child when he or she is thrown into society without

any explanation? Or when he becomes orphaned? In both cases the child is at a loss and does not know how to react. Children facing such situations often feel lonely, scared and vulnerable.

The life of such a child at that time should not be perceived as a disadvantage or as a problem to be solved or compensated for. Rather, this is a

# Time for change

## From the SOS family to an SOS Youth Facility

Taking the first step towards independence is not always easy. When children move from an SOS Children's Village to an SOS Youth Facility they experience changes and challenges. In Sarajevo the children facing these changes received a first-hand 'tutorial' from one of their peers. Katerina Ilievska has summarized the speech of 20-year-old Amela.



Amela has been living in an SOS youth facility for five years now. This year she graduated from high-school and will soon be making her next big step to independence - living on her own. Her educator is very proud of her: "Amela has been through thick and thin," he explains. "She came a long way from the confused angry girl she once was to the responsible young lady she is today. When we asked her to be the main speaker at this presentation she thought at first that she'd have nothing to say. We spoke for a while about her growth and development and once she realized that she in fact has a great deal to say, she agreed to speak."

### Amela's advice for the new arrivals

First I would like to say how I wish I'd had another youngster tell me what I am telling you now. So, please try to understand that I'm not trying to lecture you, but to offer you friendly advice from a peer.

#### It is our home

I'll start with practical things. Everything in the house, furniture and appliances, should be looked after and maintained as if it were our own. People shared money from their family's budgets for us to have and use these things for their true purpose, not to break them because of our little whims!

Picture this: angry that your boyfriend or girlfriend left you, you break a window in your own flat on purpose. No one will come to repair it just because you felt like breaking it. You'll have to save money to afford a replacement. Appreciate what is given to you here and preserve it for the next generation.

Although we know that we are not a real family, we act like one. We have to accept each other the way we are because we can change only ourselves, never the others. This is an important step you all need to take in



order to have a better, nicer and more comfortable life here.

But, it is also normal that such a large family cannot function without rules which the members must follow. Sometimes these rules seem difficult or unfair. You might even hate them. I know I did. I fought and rebelled against the rules I disliked. I was punished, of course. I didn't understand then and I didn't care about the rules or the punishment. Now, when I look at my 15-year-old self, I know I acted foolishly and I completely understand and approve of the punishment.

#### Punishment fits the rule broken

The rules of the house are created in agreement between the youngsters and the educators. This is a democratic and changing process, but there are unchangeable ones which are based on the law. So, don't blame the

educators that you can't stay out after midnight. It's the law!

For each broken rule there is a certain punishment, which has also been agreed between the youngsters and the educators. We've been through all kinds of punishments in these five years and we have all agreed that the most effective one is money. We have a scale of different amounts for different acts of mischief.

Please remember, rules exist in every family and having a system of rules is the only way for a house or a family to function properly and to have some order in it! It took me some time to understand this. Don't make the same mistake.

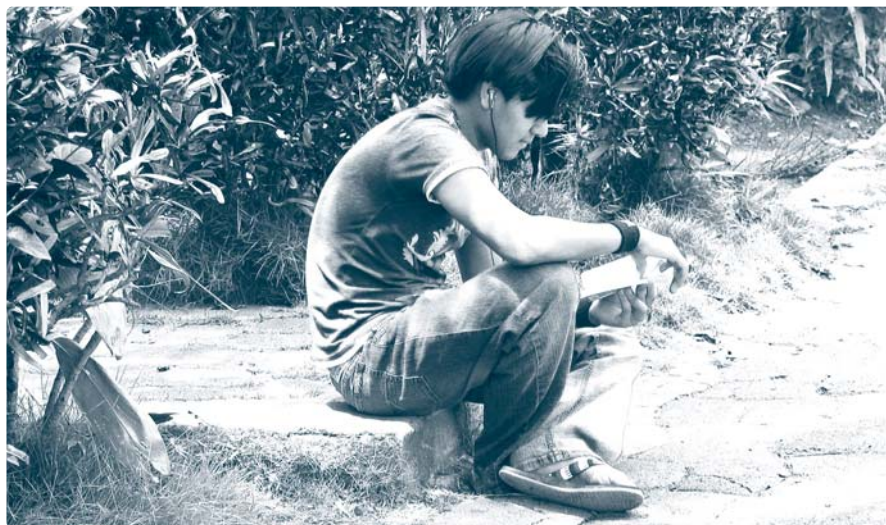
#### Relationship with the educators

The educators are here to support us, to counsel us, to reprimand us, to talk

to us and, in a way, to control us, with respect to school, social contacts, responsibilities, etc.

To begin with, some of you might think that they're against you. I thought so. As time went on, I realized they're on my side. They don't advise you to break up a new friendship because they hate you. They can recognize bad influences and they're here to tell us about them. They were trained for this and they have at least twice your life experience. Be smart and take advantage of their experience. There isn't any better school.

Others might see the educators as close friends. Maybe because by age they are closer to us than our SOS mothers, or maybe because we feel grown up. But, they have to be the parental figure in our lives. You have to respect them and acknowledge



their authority. We joke and have fun with them all the time, but don't think this buys us a get-out-of-jail card when we screw up.

It will be very hard to accept the fact that you are no longer the centre of the universe. We are many youngsters and the responsibilities are even more. The educators don't have time to focus all their attention on you. They have lives and families of their own. They too need time and space just like we do.

We argue with the educators too. This is normal human behaviour and one more characteristic of a real family. We quarrel over minor things just as we do with our SOS mums.

#### **Difference between the village and the Youth Facility**

There are several major differences

between life in the village and the youth facility, some of which you'll like and some you'll totally dislike.

The first difference is that we have greater independence. But independence also means responsibility. Be smart and don't make hasty decisions. Take your time to think things through and better yet, talk it over with your educator.

The second difference is that in the youth facility we have more problems. Sometimes you can't explain to yourself why you feel angry. Puberty reaches its peak at the time we move here, so expect... well, difficult times... Seek help. Talk to the educators. Don't shut down.

The third difference is that your mum is no longer here to remind you to do your homework, brush your teeth or

shower. All this you have to remember and if, let's say you forget to shower, you better believe it, other youngsters will remind you! I assure you, such reminders never sound good.

The fourth difference is that we are all age-peers here, more or less. No more little ones to bug you or to delegate your chores to. You can't feel special for being the oldest or youngest as you do in the village. At the same time, this works the opposite way. An age span of four or five years doesn't seem much, but in reality it is. I'm not trying to sound pretentious when I say that I know more now than five years ago. I still have lots to learn, but I definitely understand better now than at 15.

The fifth difference is that we're all in secondary school here. We all have more subjects, tougher lessons and

more obligations. Your lesson in Latin is no more important than mine in home economics. Respect mine and I'll respect yours.

The sixth difference is that the punishments are stricter than at home and there are more rules. We all learned how to trick our way out of a punishment with our (SOS) mothers. It won't work here!

The seventh difference is that there are more people in the house. Tolerance is the key word here. Learn to accept that you can't always have things your way.

And remember, our rules here are not written in stone. There's room for changes. We hold group meetings every month. There we openly state our opinions about ourselves and the others, present our proposals or ideas, discuss current issues and find solutions.

#### **A few more bits of advice to round off**

It is normal for children of our age to come into conflict with each other. But we must make sure that we're not allowing the conflicts to grow into serious problems or physical fights. To avoid this we must:

- accept each other the way we are,
- understand that we can't all always be in a joking mood, and
- stop looking at what the others are doing and focus on what you are doing.

It is important to have as many joint activities as possible. By joint I mean including both youngsters and educators. Have picnics, barbecues in the garden, lunches, or just sit together for coffee on weekend mornings. This

brings us together and keeps us close, like a real family.

Last, but not least: stay in touch with your SOS families! You all know that the SOS mother I grew up with left the village. I moved here just before Jasminka, the present SOS mother in my SOS family, came, so I never really lived with her. But I never stopped visiting my SOS siblings and by doing so I managed to establish an excellent relationship with Jasminka. We talk and she advises me. I consider her my real parent.

That's all I have to tell you for now. When you move here I will be living elsewhere, but be sure I'll be visiting. And I'm here for you; whenever you need help, advice or just someone to hear you out.

#### **Amelas's next step**

I am just as scared of living alone as when I moved to the Youth Facility, maybe even more. Hey, all the bills will be mine. But the life here made me more responsible and able to face Bosnian reality. Looking back tells me I'll make it. I'll just have to remember what I told you right now.

**Katerina Ilevska**  
Regional Editor / Regional Office II,  
Skopje



# Off to new horizons

Gabriela Brugger used to work as an SOS Children's Village mother and is currently an educational co-worker of SOS Children's Village Austria. We asked her to tell us about her professional beginnings as well as the sudden changes in her career. It is her aim "to give every child the feeling: I am happy to be alive in this world!"

## 1988

It all just felt so right to me. I was 26, had a three-year-old daughter, and my marriage, unfortunately, was over. Being with my daughter, I discovered that working with children made me happy and that I wanted this happiness with children to be a part of my career.

Looking through the range of professions dealing with children, I came across the SOS Children's Village organisation. Without hesitating, I decided there and then to become an SOS Children's Village mother. For 18 years, my dedication to the job was absolute. My own daughter, four full siblings and two more children all became my children.

Looking back, time went by very quickly: the baby and the toddlers I took in all those years ago have grown into independent and beautiful adults I adore and of whom I am very proud.

I am also very proud of the way I have grown as an individual during these years of sharing our lives; and grateful

for the help and supervision that accompanied my work throughout the years. I also learned a lot about myself, learning to realise which were my blind spots and inhibitions, how to work on them and thus to tap into my own vital force much more than I had before.

A few years before my children started spending more and more time away from home due to school and professional training, I started a course in experiential pedagogics with the focus on personal development, resource and goal orientation as well as dialogue training.

## 2005

My older kids had to go through yet another process of gaining their independence when I started working as an educational co-worker in the SOS Children's Village. As is the case with most children, they didn't think of a mum who takes care of her kids and the household as having a job. But they quickly realised and understood that they would have to do their own laundry, get the groceries, clean or

cook more often than they were used to doing.

As an educational co-worker for SOS Children's Villages for the last two years, I have been in charge of working in groups or individually with young people, as well as providing educational and organisational support in our SOS Children's Village.

To me, the village is my extended family and I am glad to be making my contribution within this wider framework. The feeling that I was doing something meaningful was so tangible in my work; I could never have done without it in any new employment! My job satisfaction is directly related to the importance of the work I am doing.

I can feel the meaning of what I do when my contribution to the community leads to more joy and happiness, to a feeling of togetherness among and with the children, when the quality, constant development and professionalism of what we do is being fostered. To achieve these goals, I have discovered two guidelines for

myself, along which I try to align all my work.

These are, firstly, trying to understand each other instead of judging and accusing, and secondly, attempting to render an unemotional account of events and openly admit our feelings instead of sulking. The concept of "non-violent communication" as described by Marshall Rosenberg shows us a way to communicate our point of view and our basic needs without fear and without hurting the other person. Discussions with young people in particular have often been a source of deep satisfaction for me. They start out being defensive and angry, but after I empathize with them and show understanding for their underlying need, they stop trying to resist. All of a sudden, they start working on the problem themselves and find ideas and solutions to what is bothering them. Those are moments of intense personal happiness for me.

Another thing that matters a lot to me is the definition of and the alignment with certain goals: What is it we want to achieve? Why? What will it be like to have achieved those goals? The answers to these questions reinforce our motivation and enthusiasm. To achieve a certain goal it is worth becoming personally committed and taking the necessary steps. Once I have envisioned those goals - my own as well as those of the community - that is where participation really begins. I experience happiness and satisfaction with



every step I take toward these goals. I start to play an active part in my life, instead of passively playing along. I start to take responsibility for what I want, for what is important to me and am glad to be contributing towards achieving it.

People with a vision are capable of getting others emotionally involved; they have made the world a happier place and have thus achieved happiness for themselves. My vision is to

strengthen the language of mutual understanding and the enthusiasm for achieving common goals, as well as the experience of happiness they produce. This is why I want to be in close contact with my co-workers, the youngsters and the children; for in this way I can help make the SOS Children's Village the paradise it can be one day.

**Gabriela Brugger**  
SOS Children's Village of Dornbirn,  
Austria

# The experience of grief

## How to deal with loss

In the course of our life and as a part of our development we are all faced with loss, change, parting or, in other words, with "ruptures" in our relationships. Ruptures are not only an unavoidable phenomenon in educational work but also in the development of an organization. There are two aspects to every rupture:

- The end of something the way it used to be, a breaking off
- The possibility of starting something new, to set off

In the realm of human experience there are situations and events that lead to this phenomenon: the death of a loved one, loss of employment, the death or loss of a pet, loss of status, a faltering sense of security, loss of friendship, loss of possessions etc. The experience of the loss of someone or something of value is a traumatic and life-altering one. It implies that a person has to accept this loss, accept the end of

something. He has to reconstruct his experiential reality to include this loss in a meaningful manner. This then leads to the possibility of starting something new.

The emotion experienced when dealing with a loss that we define as significant to us is called grief. Grief is a multidimensional and complex response to loss. Although it is perceived to be primarily an emotional response, it also has physical (the pain of loss), cognitive (thoughts about loss), behavioral (appropriate behaviour for a grieving person), social (relationships during and after loss), and philosophical (the meaning of life and our view of life after loss) dimensions.

Our response to a loss and experience of grief is moderated and shaped by such diverse influences as our culture, religion - or rather our faith in and interaction with prevailing religious beliefs - our family and our personality.

Indeed, many forms of mental illness have an aetiology influenced by complicated grieving processes.

Psychology is moving away from the classic stage theory of grief as described, for instance, by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, to a process theory of grief based on the theory of John Bowlby.

The Kübler-Ross model of grief posits various stages that a person has to work through:

- **Denial:** a person cannot believe or accept the loss
- **Anger:** a person feels anger at the loss
- **Bargaining:** attempting to bargain with God or powers that be to reverse or change the loss
- **Depression:** after the stage of denial and anger a person experiences feelings of grief
- **Acceptance:** a person comes to terms with the loss

The stages are not necessarily sequential and a person does not have to work through them in the order stated above, nor are all stages experienced by all individuals. However, Kübler-Ross did believe that a person will experience at least 2 of these stages.

J. Bowlby posited certain variable grieving processes that occur during our response to loss. These processes include:

- **Shock and denial:** a person experiences the loss as unreal, may withdraw from the situation and has difficulty coming to terms with the loss.
- **Volatile reactions:** emotions such as terror, resentment, jealousy, fear, anger etc. may be experienced as the person has to deal with a

change in his identity and social order due to the loss.

- **Disorganisation and despair:** the pain and mourning processes we normally associate with a loss.
- **Reorganisation:** the person assimilates the loss as part of his reality and redefines his life meaningfully in the face of the loss.

### When children grieve

SOS Children's Villages builds families for children who are facing or have faced a significant loss in their lives. Whether SOS Children's Villages interacts with children within a Family Strengthening Programme or within a Children's Village, it's the children who have to deal with the loss or the potential loss of caregivers, grandparents, parents and other significant persons.

Loss in children is often complicated by the fact that they may not have the maturity or ability to express their mourning the way adults do. For example, younger children may see death as a changeable state, which can be reversed by applying an appropriate remedy. Although children may not express their grief verbally, the intensity of the experience remains. This often leads to children "acting out" their grief through destructive behaviour or reverting to previous behaviour such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting or clinging to a specific toy or item. It is thus very important that SOS mothers and staff in Family Strengthening Programmes understand that the child's grief can complicate their work.



### Time for a new beginning

It takes time for us to say goodbye to those we love. The length of the grieving period will be influenced by the depth and intensity of the relationship we had with the other person. However, grief is a difficult emotion for human beings and can be difficult to end. Psychology defines complicated or chronic grief as grief lasting 2 years or more and/or showing signs of worsening.

Grief is a normal and necessary emotional response to loss. Without it we

do not have the capacity to restructure and make meaning of our lives after a loss. Its pain is a natural reaction and in some way adds to our humanity. Grief is part of the price humans being pay for the gift of self-awareness. Without it our other gifts such as determination, joy and finding a meaning in life become hollow shells.

**Karl Muller**

Research psychologist,

until August 2007 co-worker of

SOS Children's Villages South-Africa

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# Families "under siege" in Africa

## Family on the brink of breaking down

In sub-Saharan Africa the family is "under siege"! During the last few decades HIV and AIDS have spread throughout the continent more and more every year, attacking the social and economic fabric of countries and communities wherever they have been able to take root. Children are not being spared from the suffering brought about by AIDS and are often left alone to deal with its consequences. While the role of communities is emphasised and governments are called to action, it is ultimately the families that have to bear the brunt of the pandemic.

As the impact of HIV and AIDS has grown, so has the burden having to provide care for orphans and vulnerable children. Under this strain, the family safety net that has traditionally played such a critical role in addressing the situation of orphans and vulnerable children is being stretched to the point of breaking. Without appropriate support, many families are simply unable to provide adequate care and protection for their children and are in danger of breaking apart.

### Our vision: every child grows up in a family!

As an organisation that is founded on the principle that families are the very core of society, we are compelled to act and to prevent such a breakdown of the family support system. With this in mind, Family Strengthening Programmes (FSPs) have been established. Our response - as outlined in the article - is intended to prevent this breach so that families can stay intact and care for their children.

Given the scale of the problem, we have seen a rapid growth of this preventative work. In the last five years, more than 95 programmes have been established in communities in which we are working all over Africa and the Middle East. These programmes are supporting more than 13,600 families to care for almost 38,500 children. 53% of these families are caring for children who have lost both of their parents, while 34% are headed by a chronically ill or widowed parent.



We would like to express our sincere thanks to Karl Muller for his farewell gift in the form of this article! Quite coincidentally we asked him to write an article on this very topic at a time he was saying goodbye himself. We wish Karl all the best and thank him for his open and valuable cooperation!

## Breaking away made me strong

I felt lost for the first time in my life. What will happen if I get sick? Who will look after me?

My mum used to make such nice food - will I get the same here?

These were the questions going through my mind again and again when my mother left me in the care of SOS Children's Villages Pakistan, since my father had died and she had to remarry. My stepfather was not prepared to keep me so she brought me to SOS Children's Villages Pakistan.

Breaking away was very painful for me; it tore me apart. But I had no idea that some day I would be able to stand on my own two feet and look back with pride at what I have become. Today, I am a successful, happily married man with my own children. The process has been long but now I realize that the struggle, the pain and breaking away made me stronger and more successful.

I know that life is tough but I know that the more challenging is it, the more reward we get.

Source: SOS Children's Village Rawalpindi

Written by Nergis Ameer Khan  
SOS Children's Villages Pakistan

## The example of Yama

One such family is that of Yama in the Gambia. Yama has been married twice, but has suffered the loss of both of her husbands. Her second husband passed away in 2001 and left her with three children to care for. Struggling for her family's survival, Yama started begging on the street. Some days it worked, but most days the children went hungry and were turned away from school for not paying their fees in time.

A co-worker who felt concerned about the situation of the children drew the FSP coordinator's attention to the family. Their situation was investigated and assessed. By that time Yama had managed to start a tiny homemade couscous selling business. Yet she did not generate enough income to provide for her children's basic needs. Furthermore, she would sell it in a good, but very far-off market place. She came home after midnight every day since she had to walk 20km along a not only long but also dangerous road.

The children were affected by the loss of their father, but of far greater concern was the lack of food and the inability to go to school. What the family needed was a helping hand: some food supplement, a little home improvement and money for school. At the same time, Yama needed support in establishing a safer and closer business.

## A silver lining

"Since SOS started helping us, we have been sleeping on good beds with mosquito nets to prevent us from getting malaria", says 15-year-old Malik. "Before, we used to sleep on the floor, on cartons and mats covered with bed sheets. Now we are well rested to go

to school". The children need to be well rested since school is about an hour's walk away from home. To Malik this is no burden because "school is important. If you are well educated you will become somebody in the future".

Meanwhile Yama sells cooking ingredients, which she partly receives from SOS, on the nearby market place. "When mother is on the market, I cook lunch" says Malik. "When I have time, I also help her on the market to carry onions and tomatoes". His 12-year-old brother Mbye helps his mother by taking care of his younger sister and supervising her homework.

With the help of the FSP coordinator Kumba N'dure, Yama will soon open a savings account with a local micro-finance institution. "It's something very new for her, as it is for many other women", explains Kumba, "and I will probably have to assist her in the beginning to get her more acquainted with the procedures and comfortable with the process. But soon, this family will no longer need the support of the programme. In such a short period of time, they managed to really change their situation".

Yama regained her self-confidence. She is now concentrating all her efforts on developing her business and works towards making her dream come true: a small house for her children. The land was already given to her family by the village chief ten years ago.

## Development plans for families

This story is similar to that of many families being reached through the Family Strengthening Programmes. As in the case of Yama, such families are supported to develop the knowl-

edge, skills, confidence and other resources to be able to adequately protect and care for their children. The goal is for each family to become self-reliant in caring for their children, so that they are effectively able to face the challenges of life and provide a healthy environment for their children to grow up in.

As soon as a family is accepted into the programme, a "family development plan" is drawn up with them, to map the way forward to self-reliance. Together with the family, gaps are identified and targets set for each of the "key areas" of self-reliance. These are:

- Access to essential services for their children (including nutrition, health, living conditions, day care and education, psycho-social support, identity)
- Ability of the care giver to provide child care (knowledge and skills in the field of child care, needs in terms of the care giver's health, long-term planning for child care)
- Sufficient family resources (stable source of income, ability to manage resources, maintenance, inheritance and property rights)

Then, the contribution of the family and the contribution of the programme towards these targets are agreed, and time frames are set for how long support is to be given and when self-reliance is to be achieved.

The progress of the family is monitored on an ongoing basis and their plan reviewed and updated as their situation changes. The family is expected to have achieved self-reliance and be able to graduate from the programme within a period of three to

five years. Yama and her children are well on their way to achieving this goal!

## Supporting communities to support families

We are concerned with sustaining the support given to the vulnerable children and their families well into the future and extending this support to as many communities as possible. Therefore, each Family Strengthening Programme is to be "rooted" in the community it serves, as an integral part of that community's response to the situation of its orphaned and vulnerable children.

From the outset, programmes are co-developed with community-based organisations. In Gambia such partnerships have been formed with existing community-based organisations (e.g. Neekinaka women's group), and, where they do not exist, the establishment of local child welfare committees is supported. Such part-

ners are assisted until they have developed the capacity to take full responsibility for running the programme in the long term. As the community-based partner does more and SOS does less, we are able to re-allocate our resources to reach other vulnerable families in more communities.

## Together we are strong

Furthermore, we support the development of community networks, bringing together various people, organizations and institutions involved in the care and support of orphans and vulnerable children. Through such networks, awareness is raised about the situation of orphans and vulnerable children, and, as partners, we can collectively advocate change where the well-being and rights of children are being undermined; engaging with relevant government authorities and supporting them to strengthen their own capacities.

In these ways, together with our partners in every community where we work, we are reaching many more vulnerable children. Their families are being supported to stay intact, so that these children can receive the quality care they deserve.

Douglas Reed  
Continental FSP advisor,  
Africa & Middle East

Claire Mathisse  
Regional FSP advisor,  
Northwest Africa



# Helping those whose needs are greatest

## The Family Strengthening Programmes in Bangladesh

In spite of being a participating country of the International Programme on Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), Bangladesh can hardly do anything to prevent children from being abandoned and engaged in child labour. The most powerful force driving children into arduous and hazardous tasks is the exploitation of poverty.

Society in the northern region of Bangladesh is characterized by poverty and inequity. Cases of child labour are likely to increase. In most poor families, the contribution of a child's income is essential. Either that or their assistance at home provides the opportunity for the parents to go to work themselves. When the number of children in a family is regarded as a burden, they are cast out.

SOS Children's Villages has so far tried its utmost to alleviate the suffering of those distressed children in this part by providing them with shelter and food along with security and the love and affection of mothers. Besides, it has also been struggling against poverty by creating awareness of the importance of education, developing interest in technical edu-

cation and so on with the Family Strengthening Programme (FSP).

Women are offered special training programmes and are encouraged to train others in their skills. These efforts have worked like magic and a sort of change towards betterment has already taken place. Destitute people have now been inspired to dream again. Since the inauguration of the FSPs in September 2006, SOS

Children's Villages has covered some 500 children along with its primary care givers and has trained the primary care givers through its training branch.

A baseline survey has made the importance of such programmes clear. For the countless children who are abandoned and desperate, the Family Strengthening Programme is a burning need.



Eight years ago, Merina Khatun was dropped into an ocean of uncertainty when her husband died. At that time her only son Mehedi Hasan was only three years old. She tried her utmost to fight the hard times, earning her own income with a hand-run spinning wheel, but it was virtually impossible for her as social barriers were hindering her every step of the way and finally she gave in. Her relatives convinced her to remarry.

For Merina Khatun, misfortune did not come alone but with company. She got a shelter ultimately but her only son Mehedi Hasan was subjected to neglect by his stepfather who did not allow him to continue his education. Instead he preferred Mehedi

Hasan to do some laborious jobs to improve the family income. In spite of being only 11, poor Mehedi Hasan was forced to earn his own living. He helped his mother to make clothes and sold them with his stepfather all day long. Even then he was secretly going to school on an irregular basis.

SOS Social Centre Rajshahi selected Merina Khatun through a survey for the Family Strengthening Programme (FSP). She has been receiving food, medical and educational items as part of the whole process of FSP for the last few months. Her husband was also motivated through counselling. Now he lets Mehedi Hasan go to school on the condition that SOS Social Centre Rajshahi will bear the

cost of Mehedi Hasan's education. "Now that his stepfather does not slap him for going to school, Mehedi Hasan also attends the Study Centre run by SOS Social Centre Rajshahi" says Merina Khatun. She added that if SOS provided a sewing machine it would be very helpful, for she could make clothes and sell them from door to door.

[Mir Shamsul Alam](#)  
Youth Educator,  
[SOS Children's Village of Rajshahi](#)



# Profession:

## SOS mother

The prejudice claiming that through professionalization, SOS mothers are in danger of becoming "skilled technicians" at the expense of the love and affection for the children entrusted to their care may still exist amongst the general public and even in some parts of the organisation. Hermann Gmeiner did not see this danger: on the contrary, right from the beginning he demanded, "We must make the profession of an SOS mother attractive in the intellectual as well as spiritual sense. Hereby we must create a new, modern women's profession like the professions of nurse or social worker."

He laid out a first framework for the development of the SOS mother's profession in 1978: The SOS mother statutes included first international standards on selection, training, support services and salary of the SOS mothers.

Over the last 10 years, the philosophy and content of the SOS mother statutes was incorporated into our manuals, developed further and implemented.

Today, the SOS mother's profession includes all the features that are defined for a profession in the field of "life space work" (see box).

### What do SOS mothers say?

During the first phase of our strategy

development for 2009-16, 27 SOS mother groups from all continents contributed their experience and suggestions, clearly showing they would like their profession to be developed further. Their great interest is mirrored in their recommendation to the SOS Children's Village organisation to "invest in the personal growth and professional knowledge" of the SOS mothers and in their concern "Take care of the carer".

All groups express their appreciation for the training they have received and they ask for more, particularly in the area of child development.

In addition to that, SOS mothers suggest creating more career growth opportunities for them and underline the importance of "having the trust of the organisation in our daily work". They also ask for more support in the educational and psycho-

## Characteristics of a profession

The term "life space work" summarizes the various types of out-of-home care, where we find "the peculiar profession of the life space worker, the worker who helps people by sharing their daily life".<sup>1</sup> The authors refer to a list of generally accepted characteristics of this profession, which at the same time can be seen as steps towards more professionalism:

- 1 A specific task or cluster of related tasks.
- 2 These tasks are performed by certain persons more than incidentally, for a considerable part of their time over a period, generally in return for some payment.
- 3 The performance of this task presupposes a specific competence, a combination of practical skills and theoretical insights.
- 4 A structured, more or less formalised route is followed to acquire this competence, in the shape of either a pre-practise school or an in-service education.
- 5 Recognition of the competence by society, perhaps in a formal qualification conveying the right to exercise this function.
- 6 The existence of a (never complete) body of skills and insights, which is the basis of on-going training and practice.
- 7 A more or less professional organisation, which assumes responsibility for the further development of the profession and for the quality of services provided. Sometimes this is formulated in professional standards and a system of professional supervision.

logical field as well as for more "hands-on" support in the SOS family through family assistants.

Courage, dignity and respect are necessary attitudes and values on which they build their work with children and which they also demand from other co-workers.

SOS mothers consider their task a profession. They want the professional knowledge, tools and conditions necessary to enable them to live up to the challenges of their responsibility and give the children what is in their best interest.

### Internal further development and external recognition

The external recognition of the SOS mother's profession is part and parcel of its overall development. Efforts towards external recognition can stimulate and speed up internal processes: profiles need to be sharpened, curricula lifted to external standards and the quality of training delivery accounted for.

A higher qualification and belonging to a legally defined professional group in the field of out-of-home child care could imply the need to upgrade conditions of service such as fewer working hours or a higher salary, which in turn may bear some risks for the organisation. Each association is thus challenged to find its own balanced, appropriate way.

A team of experts from all continents has been set up to further promote the development of the SOS mother's profession and has agreed on using the following framework:



### Ongoing development

In the context of internal further training and external recognition, the team works on updating the current SOS mother job description, defines the core competences and develops further the core curriculum. These tools are to support both recruitment and selection processes as well as to provide adequate basic and further training.

Fair conditions of service, continuous growth opportunities, adequate support services, inclusion in decision-making processes and sensitive

phasing-out and end of service practices are further framework conditions for which the organisation is responsible.

The development of a "code of ethics" - in many professions a cornerstone for its self-image - is seen as an identity-promoting building block which the SOS mothers could develop themselves by defining their common values and childcare practises as an ethical basis for action.

Finally, the SOS mothers should have the possibility of developing and pro-



# Profession:

## SOS mother



moting themselves as well as their profession through formal and informal exchange. Group identity, which grows from the feeling of belonging to the same profession where one finds support and opportunities for professional exchange, has already been formulated as a goal in the SOS mother statutes.

### Professionalism needs recognition

The legal recognition of the SOS mother's profession has been defined as one of the strategic goals of our organisation. According to the national trend analysis 2006-08, 70 out of 105 national associations are striving for legal recognition of the SOS mother's profession. At present, SOS mothers in 25% of the countries are included as "child care professionals" in the respective national laws, with the categories ranging from "foster parent", "social mother/parent/educator", "family educator", "social worker" to "child care professional".

The road towards legal recognition of the SOS mother's profession is usually a long and complex one. There is variety of measures depending on the respective national labour laws, child welfare legislation, other child

### The example of France

Since 1990 the SOS mothers and family assistants of the French association have benefited from a statute which defines their working conditions and payment. This statute was agreed by the Ministry of Social Services and consequently recognized by all social child welfare services which entrust children to our care.

However, on the level of the association this statute imposed restrictions since it was not included in French industrial law. In 2002 four family assistants brought their case against the association to the industrial court. Consequently, the association started to search for a legal statute which would better meet its demands. The Ministry of Social Services suggested that a legal text be elaborated, providing SOS mothers and family assistants with a special statute included in industrial law. In 2004, after various meetings of the Ministry of Social Services and the Ministry of Employment, the agreements made in the framework of "Social Cohesion Law" were submitted to the representatives and adopted.

Moreover, the French SOS Children's Village Association began negotiations with the respective trade

unions to reach an internal agreement, which was then submitted to a national commission and adopted at a national level at the beginning of 2006.

By adopting the law and the trade union agreement, the following regulations, apart from numerous others, were made:

- The salaries of the SOS mothers, which are paid by the authorities, were raised. The child welfare authorities supported the project, although this led to an increase in costs.
- The maximum number of working days per year (258) mentioned in the text refers to the present number of working days of the SOS mothers.
- In France, the possibility of collecting working hours is a tool which enables co-workers to accumulate holidays, for instance to retire earlier or to go on holiday for a longer period.
- The law talks about "family educators" and "family helpers", whereas the SOS Children's Village association sticks to the term "SOS mothers".

### The example of Morocco

"To all people in the field of social work in Morocco, the year 2006 will remain memorable because of the official recognition of the professional status of SOS mothers as foster mothers". Béatrice Beloubad, national director of Morocco, is convinced of this, since this official status is really unique in the Maghreb countries. It includes the same rights and duties as that of French foster mothers, particularly in the area of compulsory, ongoing further training.

For twenty-two years the association has been communicating the SOS family childcare model. This was not always easy and required a lot of staying power and patience in this country of strong traditions which pays only little attention to the problems of abandoned children.

"It is thanks to our SOS childcare model and the SOS mothers who took this path of trial and tribulation that we were able to win recognition. We ventured to pursue this road under conditions which were not always easy. But with much good will and improvisation we succeeded at last," says Amina, SOS mother in the first Moroccan SOS Children's Village.

The association started to invest in the professionalisation of the SOS mothers.

Selection and training were improved, and tools such as coaching and mentoring by experienced SOS mothers introduced. "24 months of practice and theory, alternately, on topics such as children's rights, child protection, child psychology, etc.", adds Fatéma El Berhoumi, in charge of vocational training, "have turned our dedicated mothers into professional and committed SOS mothers".

Meanwhile, this professionalisation has borne some remarkable fruits: the diploma of vocational training, awarded by the "Entraide Nationale", and the official status as foster mothers. This status allows SOS mothers a better consideration of their profession and more prestige. Finally, Fatéma El Berhoumi believes that "this recognition makes the profession more attractive and hiring future SOS mothers becomes easier."

Rémy Mazin  
Deputy General Director SOS France

Gérard Lanux  
SOS Children's Villages Morocco

care professions etc. The following paths towards recognition have so far proven worthwhile:

- the official recognition of the SOS mother's profession and the SOS family child care model in government agreements, which serves as a foundation for further steps;
- the inclusion of the SOS mother's profession in national profession classifiers;
- handling working hours and other labour law related issues in a collective treaty like in Austria;
- the full, legal recognition of the profession in a way that also solves the working hours' dilemma, for instance in France ("family educator") and in some Eastern European countries ("foster parents").

An important step towards the recognition of the profession is the external recognition of SOS mother training. It is a great challenge to develop the curriculum in accordance with external standards on the one hand, while maintaining SOS specific features on the other.

Some of our training centres like those in the Gambia, Colombia, Venezuela or Austria have already been successful in the accreditation of their training programmes. South Africa has obtained provisional accreditation for its programmes, and Bolivia and Kenya are well on their way.

SOS mothers can also enrol in externally approved training programmes. This may be a state foster care programme as in some CEE/CIS/Baltics countries or a state-recognised educator training as in Germany.

At present, the recognition of SOS mother training by the government

or educational institutes amounts to 28% worldwide.

SOS Children's Villages works towards the professionalisation of the SOS mother's profession on an ongoing basis. Good training opportunities, fair working conditions and the development of a professional identity are the basis on which the SOS mothers can grow and guide our children in the best possible way.

[Elisabeth Ullmann](#)  
[Hermann Gmeiner Academy](#)

<sup>1</sup> Lies Gualtherie van Weezel and Kees Waaldijk: Life space work, child & youth care work, (semi-) residential work - is this a Profession?  
<http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0600-profession.html> (1.10.2007)

# Knowledge is the only thing that is multiplied by sharing it

**Fostering the professionalism of SOS Children's Village mothers by sharing practical experiences. A report from a conference of Bosnian-Herzegovinian SOS Children's Village mothers in the summer of 2007.**

This first good practice conference for SOS Children's Village mothers from Bosnia and Herzegovina gave two SOS Children's Village teams the chance to celebrate successes, open their hearts, meet, shed tears together and listen to each other about issues that are almost overlooked in the chaos of day-to-day life.

This meeting, which brought together the SOS Children's Village mothers from two SOS Children's Villages, the village leaders and the educational co-workers, took place in a small village on the Croatian coast, just a few hours from home.

## **Finding (free) time**

Managing the daily schedule of both SOS Children's Villages in a way that would not interfere with the children's normal routine and dynamics was no small challenge! The village leaders had to rely heavily on the help of all SOS Children's Village aunts and family assistants, while the SOS mothers looked forward anxiously to their "public" appearance. Most were

nervous about possible criticism and evaluation from their colleagues, but they also looked forward to the adventure and the new challenges these three days outside the Children's Village meant. These women, who had decided to share their experiences and tell their stories to other Children's Village mothers, know what this job and this life is really all about.

It felt good to feel the group's strength: a group of 26 women who dedicate their lives to working with children without parental support. The conference, held with the aim of facilitating the exchange of examples for good practice, has improved the concept we developed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It gave us the opportunity to give the highest priority to the exchange of ideas concerning the overall objective, that is, the development of the profession of SOS Children's Village mother.

The participants were asked to think about positive processes and results, including the measures they had been using in their work with their families and children, the methods that helped them obtain good results. Every presentation had a special meaning, its special touch.

## **Experience and exchange**

The national director opened the conference with words of thanks for the motivation and dedication shown by the SOS Children's Village mothers in taking care of their children. He presented the current overall organizational process and the derived strategies for the future, before giving the floor to the mothers' speakers.

On the first day of the conference, we discussed our expectations and ideas, introduced ourselves to each other and started the group process. There were four or five presentations every





## A current research project

day, divided into common subjects: life with children with special needs, crisis situations and the responses of the mothers and the team to these situations, strategies for dealing with separations and life's other difficult moments, etc.

After the presentations, we discussed feedback, aimed mainly at lessons learned and motivating experiences. We decided which methods were practicable and which obstacles might be encountered.

During these three days, the groups shared a lot with each other: questions, for instance, such as: where do we find the energy, the strength and dedication needed to solve problems? How does the children's move to a youth facility change the relationship between mother and child, and how do we deal with this ourselves?

After lunch, the SOS Children's Village mothers and the other team members had the chance to socialize and get to know each other in less formal surroundings, having coffee, going for a swim or just enjoying the magnificent coastal countryside.

### You-me-us

For me, as a mother coordinator, it is very easy to share the content, goals and structures of our conference with FORUM readers. The emotions, the incredible energy, the countless tears, the mutual understanding, the support and sympathy we felt during these three days are much harder to communicate. You should have been there! Sharing all these experiences, the happy ones and the painful ones, with people who had gone through the same situations brought about a feeling of relief that brought the group together - our fears vanished and we truly accepted each other.

All the participants (see photo) agreed that every aspect of the conference had been helpful: the exchange of experiences, the numerous guidelines for future work, strong messages concerning methods and practices for SOS Children's Village family work, the optimism, getting to know like-minded people who really understand you, the feeling of connecting with others, friendship, fresh energy, and strengthened motivation.

### Drawing the line

Professionalism, personal dedication, emotional involvement... the question of where to draw the line between these aspects of life in the framework of SOS Children's Villages and the education of children in need is a question that will always preoccupy us in our work for SOS Children's Villages. Another issue that will always give us food for thought is the task of trying to understand the needs of children at different ages and from different backgrounds, the effort of trying to give them the best possible care and support and of making them feel loved and appreciated, on top of all the countless challenges they face and the performance that is expected from them, not to mention the performance they expect from themselves.

**Nermina Becirevic**  
Mother coordinator, Bosnia

Each child in an SOS Children's Village is offered individual development opportunities tailored to his/her needs and potential. With the help of other co-workers, the SOS mother guides the development of the children in her SOS family.

Child development planning (CDP) as an instrument of quality assurance was created to support this aim. The child receives support in the holistic planning of his/her future and the development of his/her potential and is directly involved in processes and decision-making that affect him/her. Together with the child concerned, the short-term and long-term development objectives to be reached are agreed, regularly checked and adapted to his/her situation.

To find out whether child development planning has achieved what it set out to achieve back when it was introduced a few years ago, the Hermann Gmeiner Academy is currently conducting an effect study on the subject.

The aim of this study was to obtain a general outline of the current status of CDP in SOS Children's Villages by conducting a status-quo survey in one in five SOS Children's Villages worldwide. These were the results obtained:

- **Implementation of child development planning in the SOS Children's Villages:** All SOS mothers and 9 out of 10 children attend the CDP meetings that take place once or twice per year. To provide written documentation, a form is usually used.

- **Impact of CDP:** Three quarters of those questioned thought CDP had a considerable effect on the village director and the child development co-workers. Only half of those questioned thought CDP had a considerable effect on children, youths and SOS mothers.

- **Experiences and suggestions for improvement:** To support the development of a child based on his/her individual needs and skills is generally seen as a positive experience associated with CDP. The bureaucratic aspect, the time it takes and the lack of support for SOS mothers are perceived as negative experiences. Also, the CDP form needs to be revised and/or standardised. Training programs and workshops are also high up on the list of suggested improvements.

- **Suggestions and questions regarding the effect study currently being developed:** The exchange of experiences with CDP, the development and participation of the children as well as

the motivation of those involved are suggested as issues of interest for the study.

To achieve practice-oriented research, the design of the effect study is being developed based on these survey results.

The results of this study will be available for SOS co-workers towards the end of 2008 to help them improve the quality of child care in the SOS Children's Villages as well as to scientifically document the efforts of their work with the children and youths.

**Mai Ngan Nguyen-Feichtner**  
Hermann Gmeiner Academy



# ACADEMY NEWS



SOS Children's Villages can be proud of its adolescents! In order to acknowledge the performances of these young people, every two years the **Hermann Gmeiner Award** is presented to a person who has grown up in an SOS Children's Village and/or has been able to take advantage of the chances provided to him/her.

This might be a person who has successfully served his/her apprenticeship in spite of unfavourable conditions or a person who has completed his/her university studies with outstanding success. The award may be given either to an individual or to a group of people.

**Nominations** may be put forward by the heads of educational facilities and national directors in accordance with the respective regional director (in countries in which there is no regional director, the nominations have to be approved by the Secretary-General), by the Secretary-General and the President of SOS-Kinderdorf International.

The **deadline for application** for this year's Hermann Gmeiner Award is 15 March 2008. Full application forms are available from Evelyne Brändle (Evelyne.Braendle@sos-kd.org)

Organisers of the conference "**Researching Children**" that took place in Innsbruck from the 10-12 December 2007, were proud to announce that

Peter Egg of the organisation "Verein Mitbestimmung" (Association for Participation) and Ross Frost of the University of Cambridge had agreed to speak at the conference. The level of feedback and registrations bears witness to the considerable interest in this topic of child participation. Please go to [www.researchingchildren.org](http://www.researchingchildren.org) for further information on the conference as well as on the subject of "Researching Children" in general.

Together with an external partner, SOS Children's Villages has developed a research tool called "**Compare the Model**" which helps compare the work model of SOS Children's Villages with those of other organisations. The pilot phase of the project Compare the Model was successfully concluded in autumn of 2007. The tool will be suggested for systematic comparison at a local level. Aside from SOS Children's Villages, seven more institutions participated in the project for the development of a benchmark tool. Within the framework of a trial survey conducted in India and South Africa, the questions proved relevant for the evaluation of the institutions. There are already indications of an interesting spin-off effect: often, there are information gaps between institutions and decision-makers that such surveys could help to identify and remedy.

Together with a team of people with first-hand experience from all over the world, Barbara Schratz-Hadwich and Claudia Mödlagl have been working on the completion of the SOS Children's Village **guidelines for Formal Education Policy**.

The third meeting of the global **Child Protection Team** took place in September. The pilot phase is nearing completion in 28 countries; the experiences from this first period of implementation are being collected and handed on in the form of recommendations. The re-edited version of the document on Child Protection Guidelines will be presented during the next meeting of upper management and approved at the 2008 General Assembly of SOS-Kinderdorf International.

To determine whether the **Child Protection Measures** have an impact on the lives of the SOS children and adolescents, an appropriate tool is being devised (Impact Evaluation Tool).

Another module has been added to the **Self-evaluation Tool**. It enables us to take an even more differentiated view of **youth work**. To get young people involved, this survey is being organized as a youth meeting. The results of both processes are being used to draft the annual work plan of an SOS Children's Village. After a pilot



1980



1996



Reconstruction 2007

phase that was conducted in 15 countries (Africa, Asia, CEE/CIS/Baltic states), the module was adapted accordingly and prepared for implementation.

The **Quality4Children Standards**, developed by SOS Children's Villages, IFCO and FICE International, were completed in June. To facilitate their application in European countries, they have been translated into several languages. In close cooperation with our Liaison & Advocacy Office and our Q4C Coordination Team, **action plans for the implementation** of these standards and their use for **advocacy activities** are being developed and put into action.

Within SOS Children's Villages, the European associations have been

urged to **integrate the standards** into their own work to further improve the situation of children in out-of-home care in their own country.

The German publisher Schneider Verlag has recently presented the book "**Fremd und doch zu Hause. Qualitätsentwicklung in der Fremdunterbringung**" (**At Home away from Home. Quality development in Out-of-home Child Care**), edited by Werner Hilweg and Christian Posch. Though so far there is only a German version, a number of well-known authors such as Klaus Wolf, Helmut and Ursula Johnson, and Yvonne Kachel share their insights on the topics of Children's Rights and the development and implementation of quality standards, based on the question of what a child in out-of-home childcare needs.

This book, as well as those mentioned below, is available in bookstores and from the Hermann Gmeiner Academy ([hgak@sos-kd.org](mailto:hgak@sos-kd.org))

The English edition of "**When Knowledge Sparks a Flame**" has been published by the Peter Lang-Verlagsgruppe, and the Spanish edition "**Cuando el saber enciende**" by the Bolivian publisher Sigla Editores.

## Theory U:

### Leading from the Future as It Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing.

C. Otto Scharmer. SOL (The Society for Organizational Learning). Cambridge/MA.

ISBN 10: 0974239054; ISBN 13: 9780974239057

Today's organizations face complex challenges in fast and global environments. What we learned about organizations, systems, management and processes and what worked for us up till now does not necessarily give answers to the diverse problems of today, never mind those of tomorrow. Although managers and leaders worldwide try to face these challenges, they still draw on the (known) past - for an unknown future.

Letting go of the past and the patterns in which one is thinking and acting and creating the future from how it emerges is the maxim of Theory U. Leaders, argues organization research guru C. Otto Scharmer, are like artists in front of a blank canvas - they must sense the painting long before the brush touches the varnish. They must feel and see it emerge, long before it is put on the fabric. Only then can it transform from a mere drawing into a piece of art. Good leaders are creative artists who know, see and sense what is emerging. They can sense the present holistically, draw on knowledge from the past and learn from the emerging future.

To Scharmer "the most important leadership tool is your self. One self is the person or community we have become as a result of a journey that took place in the past. The other self is the person or community we can become as we journey into the future. It is our highest future possibility."<sup>1</sup>

To activate this vital potential as a leader, three preconditions are necessary: an open mind, an open heart, and an open will. The Open Mind is our willingness to embrace change. Open Will ultimately means to "let go" of the patterns of the past. It needs "seeing with fresh eyes" and "sensing from the field" what is and what could be. Theory U as a change theory builds exactly on this "art of letting go". "What am I here for, what is my self, what is my purpose?" are decisive questions both on the individual as well as on the organizational level. They are the key for creating a new vision, co-creating and performing in an emerging future.

Scharmer describes these three stages of openness as new intelligences

which every leader has to nurture and cultivate like precision instruments. This eventually leads to a "shift from sensing exterior causation to sensing something collective that is emerging from within"<sup>2</sup>.

Reading Theory U is a challenge. It challenges one's traditional beliefs about the way a book on organizational theory should be written. It takes the reader on a journey of personal and therapeutic learning about his understanding of the world and organizations. It shows forms of learning on both the individual and the systems level as an inter-linked and necessary dialogue.

Barbara Schratz-Hadwich  
Hermann Gmeiner Academy

<sup>1</sup> Theory U, p. 41  
<sup>2</sup> Theory U, p. 373

#### IMPRINT

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The editors look forward to receiving your comments and feedback that will certainly help us improve. We do, however, reserve the right to edit for clarity or space. The opinions and statements appearing in the articles contained in the magazine are those of the contributor(s) concerned and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the publisher or the editors.

## www.power4youth.eu

Exchange experiences, make friends, discuss questions – that's what youth can do on the new website [www.power4youth.eu](http://www.power4youth.eu)!

The network has been set up by youths for youths who have lived or are still living in out-of-home care.

# soskinderdorum

Hermann Gmeiner Academy

Main topic: Metamorphoses

