

A Suitcase for Kukulík

– a project aimed to implement a new tool for reducing the impact of leaving/abandoning a child by their original parent into the socio-legal protection services for children system and into a perceptive inclusion of the public, concerning the topic of abandoned children.

Project duration: 2016 – 2021

Author and implementer of the project: Návrat, o. z. (accredited entity in the area of socio-legal protection services for children in Slovakia), **responsible person:** Mgr. Dana Zilinčíková

About the organization: Since 1993, Návrat has been promoting perceptive family solutions for children at risk in Slovakia. It offers professional support and help to families in high-risk social situations, accompanies abandoned children on their journey to new families and provides foster families with professional assistance. Návrat is active across the whole country and has branches in four Slovak regions (Bratislava, Žilina, Banská Bystrica and Prešov) with more than 30 social workers, psychologists and therapists. The organization also deals with lobbying, the children protection system education and public relations.

1. A basis for implementation of projects:

The project idea innovation:

A child who is born in Slovakia with consent to adoption, in stealth mode or is put inside a baby hatch does not get any information about the people who took care of them during their first days, only some medical records from the hospital. There are still some child friendly tools missing in the socio-legal protection for children system which would help the child understand their difficult social situations and deal with them. Every year there is about 150 children born who experience such situation in Slovakia. **According to our information, before 2016, when the project started, none of such children had any information about this period of their life recorded in a sensitive way and in child friendly language, nor in a language perceptive to their loneliness, although our experience with these children has been showing such need for a long time. Before 2016, the media, the general and competent professional public did not deal with the topic of abandoned children and their stay in hospital (the first 3 – 5 weeks of their life).**

Innovation in the approach to target groups and the project idea innovation:

We are very pleased that we got to transfer personal experience of those who went through such situation in the past and of adults who took care of these children into the methodology of the suitcase content. According to us, it means a **hope for other children (the concerned target group) which will end up in a situation like that. It is also a hope for better understanding by other adults in all the target groups concerned (original parents of the child, new parents of the child and competent professionals).**

The contents of the suitcase (the methodology for the first book about a child) is based on more than 20-year cooperation with children and young adults which went through disadvantageous situations of this sort in their childhood (around 2,000) and our services helped these children deal with them. The methodology includes the results of our 12-year cooperation with parents (around 80) who gave up their children or had them taken away and nearly 25-year cooperation with foster parents (adoptive, foster and professional, around 3,000).

The methodology also includes the results of our 25-year cooperation with the socio-legal protection service for children system and 2-year cooperation with hospitals during the pilot period of our project.

Since the methodology of the suitcase is unique and created with emphasis on

A, a child friendly language

B, a new parents friendly/carers friendly language and way of communication with children

C, roots friendly behaviour (respect to the roots of the child),

we assume that **we contribute to the quality of the processes and contents in the children protection system – the system which was created for children in high-risk situations**. We assume that **by this suitcase, we give the new carers (and through them the child) an understanding of what happened and also the knowing that the child was not alone right after the delivery**. **By this suitcase we send a clear signal to the original parent of the child, that we are trying to preserve respect to their roots and to the new parents we offer ways and words to put it into practice**. **Using the suitcase we strengthen adults' perceptiveness for an abandoned child and for actions beyond their professional responsibilities**.

By creating and talking about the suitcases and the topic of abandoned children we point out a lack of abandoning children prevention, a lack of timely support services for pregnant women and young parents in high-risk social situations. By including general public from the child's community into the creation of the suitcases **we make the public more perceptive** to abandoned children and to the importance of prevention and specific steps and actions in reducing the impact of abandoning the child by their original family. By creating the suitcases together with the general public and by supporting their own creative solutions (it is up to them what they put and write into the suitcase) we support the public interest in this topic and their original solutions: from suitcases to long-term help for children, their original or new parents.

2. Project activities:

- **Preparations for the pilot period of the project: March 2016** (visiting hospital in Banská Bystrica in cooperation with the socio-legal protection for children department; a sketch of the cooperating format; a sketch of the methodology based on the results of our experience with young adults who went through such situation, with biological parents of the children and their foster parents)
- **The pilot period of the project: June 2016 – July 2017** (creating first suitcases in Banská Bystrica hospital, starting cooperation with hospital in Brezno, supporting the medical staff in both hospitals, feedback on the first experience, finishing the methodology of suitcases creation, preparation of lobbying materials on implementation of suitcases at national level – cooperation with included hospitals and the socio-legal protection for children departments, creating publicity tools for suitcases – a video, leaflets, posters, signs for hospitals; presenting suitcases on different professional forums: for nurses at neonatal departments, for social workers in different services, for general public etc.; giving away the first suitcases to the socio-legal protection for children system)
- **Lobbying for implementation of suitcases at national level: July 2017 – January 2018** (negotiations with the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and preparation of professional materials for presenting suitcases to the leaders of socio-legal protection for children departments at national level), supporting the internal workers of Návrat organization in all regions, creating more suitcases in Brezno and Banská Bystrica hospitals, first attempts to include communities of citizens in the creation of suitcases and their targeted support: Community centres, Nursery centres, individual people through social media, finding donors to finance this part of the project, preparations of an interactive exhibition about suitcases + lobbying for development of other perceptive interventions for abandoned children in hospitals (the pilot part of the project named *Dominika for Kukulik: Accompanying therapist for a lonely child*)

- **Project follow-up: February 2018 – 2021** (presenting and supporting the leaders of socio-legal protection for children departments to support suitcases in other hospitals, interactive exhibition on this topic, presenting suitcases in other hospitals and supporting staff, including the general public and donors to suitcases creation support)
- **Closing our methodological support of the project: 2021 – 2022** (evaluation of integrating the Suitcase for Kukulík project into the socio-legal protection for children system, recommendations to hospitals and children protection systems) + **individual support for interested hospitals and people from the socio-legal protection for children system, affected groups of children, adults and general public:** from 2021

3. Outcomes of good practice in the pilot period of the project

Together with 2 hospitals we created 10 suitcases for 10 abandoned children in 18 months.

Innovation in the way of implementing: Making a suitcase for Kukulík (for a particular abandoned child) created a space for individual support and more perceptive approach of people taking care of the child. Creation of the suitcase made the present staff evidently more sensitive to the child's needs and educated them in the area of early trauma. It provably mobilized hospital's own staff sources and sources in their area to make them think about the child together and trying to find (and also finding) their own way of support for a child while being in touch with them. Thanks to this, adults and the child got to experience something special; the staff was making more physical contact and being supportive also in different ways – writing personal letters etc. **Adults evaluate such experiences** with a child very positively and they desire to wish the child all the best and believe in them. This way the child and their future carers receive something really special: **a tangible evidence of closeness and support from certain people who got to be the first important people for the child after they went through a highly disadvantageous event in their early childhood.**

These are the professionals that have taken part in this project so far: nurses from neonatal department, doctors from neonatal department, doctors and nurses from intensive care units (premature abandoned infants), social nurses from hospitals, hospital auxiliary workers, social workers from socio-legal protection for children departments, a judge, a psychologist, and therapists from our organization.

Innovation in the public perception: Creating suitcases was met with a great interest in these 2 hospitals and these 2 socio-legal protection for children departments (the pilot period of the project). It also attracted the attention of the general public and the media. One donor (a company) and one natural person were also interested. A pro bono made video about this project came out to be particularly effective in communication with the public, as well as the comprehensible tool: a suitcase and the non-traditional title: Suitcase for Kukulík (in Slovak: Kufřík pre Kukulíka: KUKUKU).

30 volunteers from 3 Community and Nursery Centres in Banská Bystrica and 4 volunteers from Brezno have taken part in creating suitcases. This project is currently under the auspices of a MEP, based on her own interest.