

Bulgaria

Big Brothers Big Sisters Foundation

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The Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Foundation was started in 1904 and is the oldest and largest mentoring programme in the world. There are many country-specific programmes operating within BBBS. All have a common theme – that of recruiting, training and supervising volunteers to operate in one-to-one mentoring relationships with children who are at risk of failing to reach their full potential because of family or environmental constraints. The BBBS model has been evaluated and the results suggest that an ongoing friendship relationship with a young person has a significant impact; enriching and strengthening their characters and leading to more positive and constructive behaviour in their education, peer and family environment. Children involved with BBBS also appear less likely to get involved in drug or alcohol abuse or to demonstrate violent behaviour.

In 2001, the BBBS Foundation in Plovdiv (Bulgaria's second-largest city) instigated a project aimed at preventing violent behaviour among children living in institutions. The project is funded by the Oak Foundation of Switzerland. The institutions involved include an orphanage, a street shelter for ethnic minority (Roma) youth, a school for deaf children and a school for children with mental disabilities. The project builds on BBBS activities, recruiting volunteers who befriend the children and serve as consultants and role models for positive behaviour. However, the application of the mentoring relationships and the specific organization of activities are different. In standard BBBS programmes, the children are not institutionalised. Most of them live with their families and the little and big 'brothers and sisters' communicate solely with their own matched partner with few joint activities. In this project, group activities and specialised workshops were needed to foster

interaction between the children and the volunteers (mostly high-school pupils or university students).

Group activities

Group activities take place once or twice a month. Volunteers conduct pre-planned activities that aim to reduce levels of aggression and violence. These include role-plays, art, drama, visits to the cinema or puppet theatre and structured conversations. The children particularly enjoy and benefit from applied and theatrical art activities.

Work in pairs

The purpose of communication between a child and an adult volunteer is to overcome trauma caused by violence, expand the social skills of the child and improve the child's ability for social integration. Throughout the activities in pairs, the children talk with the volunteers, go on visits outside the institutions, attend various cultural and educational events and, most important of all, share their problems, troubles and joys. The programme's consultants monitor the activities and progress at least once a week and ask for feedback from both child and volunteer.

Summer camps

Camps have an intensive programme of activities aimed at strengthening the pair relationships and acquiring environmental/natural resources knowledge. When children need to be prepared for 'closing' of the pairs, which normally occurs after around 12 or 16 months, this takes place in the summer camp.

Information and awareness

The programme also raises awareness of the need to prevent child abuse by publishing information aimed at children, parents and teachers, and organizing distribution among the local community.



The Big Brothers Big Sisters camps have intensive programmes of activities aimed at strengthening pair relationships.

Mihail's story

Mihail is 11 years old. His father has taken little interest in him and his mother moved abroad five years ago. Since then, his great-grandmother has taken care of him. However, she tended to resort to verbal and physical abuse as a method of education. At school (Plovdiv School for Deaf Children) he had few friends and only seemed able to communicate with his great-grandmother. He was very aggressive towards his peers and solved any issue of conflict by fighting.

The BBBS programme has matched Mihail with a hearing volunteer, and this has brought about a drastic change in his behaviour in school and with his family. He is more open and has begun to search for contact with other children, including those with normal hearing. His teachers and relatives have

noticed that he is more willing to participate actively in school lessons and appears more composed. He has also participated in new activities, developing his social and group interaction skills. Mihail waits for the meetings with his 'big brothers' with great enthusiasm and has been trying to prepare himself in the best possible way. The programme has also positively affected Mihail's family. His great-grandmother has started to talk with him more often and to use more effective education methods. The school counsellor has noticed that the father has taken more interest in the boy and started to meet him more often. As a result, Mihail's whole environment has changed in a positive way.