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CHILDREN'S CLUB PROGRAM



Initially, we carried out club activities in cooperation with two emergency housing shelters in Pilsen. We were allowed to organize activities in the shelter's communal area for the children who lived in the building. We ran a couple of regular activities, and later added some one-off events. But in order to be really regular

and organized, we desperately needed our own space. Things changed for the better when we found suitable premises in one of the Pilsen schools. Our children all lived nearby and they could attend our activities at any time without having to commute across the city.

During all our activities we try to pass on principles and information to children – and eventually to the adults – that can help them lead a better life. We try to do this in a way that is not forceful, but as natural as possible. We started running various hobby clubs even before the organization was founded in 2008. At first, we cooperated with the shelters, because we had no premises of our own for the first few years. At the same time, families in the shelters were typically our target group. Organizing activities in the shelter's communal area had many advantages. We could easily go door-to-door around the building to pick children up. There were two shelters for mothers with children we cooperated with: the “St. Zdislava” shelter

and the “Hope” shelter. We worked with both older children (in the afternoons) and younger, pre-school children (in the mornings). At the same time, we also began cooperating with the Pathfinder Club, which is a Scout-like, spiritual-recreational-activity program designed for children. Petr and Meggy were two volunteers who helped us run the separate “Scout Group” for Roma children. They visited the shelter every week and organized sports games, crafting activities or fun educational activities. They also took the kids on trips to nature, or to the Zoo. In 2010, we took over and continued with the activities. Two groups, one group of 10 children and one group of 15 children, kept meeting at the shelter.



Over time, some of the families we were in touch with moved out of the shelters into rented apartments in the centre of Pilsen city. And we wanted to continue meeting them. When we acquired our own premises in 2014, it was a big relief. We also needed storage spaces for our summer camp equipment. We managed to establish cooperation with a Waldorf school, whose management was very supportive. We were able to get not only storage spaces but also two rooms for our activities. Thanks to the support of the Youth in Action (“Mládež v akci”) project, we painted, furnished and slightly renovated the rooms on our own. The room was located

in a very strategic place on John Hus Square in Pilsen city. The surrounding houses were mostly a part of socially excluded localities. The children who attended our hobby clubs and tutoring sessions lived mostly on the square or in the adjacent streets. Once we had our own place, we were able to expand the range of our provided activities. Before our extra-curricular activities, we met with the children for tutoring sessions to help them with homework or to practice reading, math and other skills needed for their school classes. Our extra-curricular activities included board games, music sessions and crafting sessions. One of our activities aimed



at developing key skills and knowledge. We named it "Letters and Colours" and it has kept running until today. The Waldorf school also allowed us to use their gym for various sports activities. We ran a regular sports class in the gym, and a few larger sports events for the whole families (Christmas party, Easter party, St. Nicholas party, etc).

In 2017 we moved within the same building from the first floor to the ground floor. We had a smaller room available, because the school needed to use our original space. We expanded our activities to include board

games and an English language class. Playing board games teaches children to follow the rules and develops a variety of skills such as logical thinking, strategic thinking, fine motor skills and more. The English language class helped the children learn basic English vocabulary, and understand why it is important to learn foreign languages. In 2018, we expanded our activities for preschoolers. Children between 2 and 4 years old attended two morning activities per week, and joined some of the activities for other age groups. We also started meeting with the parents. We shared information with each other,

and worked together on preparation of various crafting activities.

In 2018, we had to move again. The Waldorf school expanded and needed to use all its rooms and premises on John Hus Square. We moved to a new address, Palova 19 in Pilsen. This address was further away from where our children lived, which was a disadvantage. For us, it meant that we had to pick children up in their homes and bring them to our activities and clubs using public transport. On the other hand, the premises had a kitchen available, so we could open a cooking class. At our new address, we also started lectures for adults as part of the "I already know WHY"

project. This project allowed us to expand our range of activities for adults. We organized lectures on topics such as financial literacy, parenting, pregnancy, internet safety, smoking, etc and invited experts in the fields to speak about those topics. Since 2020, we have organized project days on various topics, both indoors and outdoors. On each of the project days, an expert is invited to speak to children and introduce a given topic in a fun way. the topics included navigation in a city, or how to keep our teeth healthy.

Just before the end of 2019, we moved into our current premises in the "Komenda"



building. It is located in a former law faculty at sady Pětatřicátníků 27, Pilsen. The building is owned by the city of Pilsen. The city council decided to renovate the spaces and rent it to non-profit organizations. We were very lucky to have been selected as one of the four organizations! Before we moved in, there was an extensive renovation of the space, and we had the opportunity to share with the city council how we imagine the space to look like. We now have a spacious large room where dance, ping pong, music classes, and various community events can take place. We also have an additional room available for hobby classes, for mothers with children, or for workshops and tutoring sessions.

The premises also include an office and storage space. We can use a part of the garden too. We have worked hard to furnish all the indoor and outdoor spaces and create a cozy environment.

We have provided new tables and chairs. We purchased a new sofa in the red colour – the colour of our organization. We also provided new toys and educational tools for the children. We purchased two folding ping pong tables and a foosball table for the large room. For our sports activities, we bought big gymnastic balls which we keep suspended in nets on the wall. We equipped the large room with a set of speakers



and a projector. We worked round the clock to adjust the outdoor spaces, too. We levelled the ground using soil and sand. We bought a wooden sandbox, two raised beds, two compost bins, a wooden fence and a children's climbing frame with a slide. We also paved a part of the outdoor space, built a garden gazebo with a shed. We provided a trampoline and an outdoor grill. We planted fruit bushes, trees, herbs, strawberries and a few flowers in the garden.

Our activities in the first two years after moving to the new premises were limited due to the Covid pandemic, but we are excited

about the new spaces! In July 2020, we organized a Summer School project. The purpose of this project was to help children catch up on the knowledge they missed due to many schools being shut down during the pandemic. We also provided a space for music rehearsals for the Roma group Le Chhavendar. In 2022, our premises also hosted the project "Effective Health Promotion for People at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion" organized by the Czech National Institute of Health. From 2023 onwards, we have hosted a follow-up project called "Promoting Health in Families".





We also regularly use our large room to distribute clothing and household items to needy families. Before Christmas, we fill the room with gifts to give away to children as part of the “Christmas Shoebox Project”. Four to five afternoons a week, we run after-school hobby clubs and tutoring sessions – our core activities. Children can use the opportunity to complete their homework with us, prepare for tests or entrance exams, practice their math skills, read books

and encyclopedias from our library. We use the children's study materials provided by schools as well as supplementary printed worksheets and available online materials. We also play a variety of board games to promote logical and strategic thinking as well as fine motor skills. We also host diverse workshops, project days, sleepovers, and community events for families (Advent wreath crafting, St. Nicholas Day, Health Day in the Garden, and more).



Support Options for the Education of Roma Pupils and Students

Education support is a cornerstone of our work in promoting inclusion. Our team includes two professionally trained educators and three graduates of a leisure-time pedagogy course. This topic was also the focus of our colleague Johanka Bělohoubková's thesis during her studies in Primary Education at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen: *The Issue of Socially Disadvantaged Children in Education with a focus on the Pilsen City region.*¹

In all our activities, we emphasize comprehensive education for both children and adults, fostering talent, overall development, and positive learning experiences. We aim to create opportunities for success,

especially for children who struggle with learning. For many, this is a new experience that motivates them to continue learning. Since 2014, we've been running a regular tutoring program, currently helping 80 children. Tutoring, along with interest-based clubs, is an integral part of our program. Children work on their homework with us, practice math, and read books, atlases, and encyclopedias from our library. We also play board games designed to enhance logical thinking, strategic planning, and fine motor skills. Education isn't limited to club activities, it's also a part of our one-off events. We intentionally design these events to be fun and engaging for children and their families while offering opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge. Examples include learning about animals at the zoo, practicing swimming at the local swimming pool, and exploring physics and chemistry at Techmania Science Center. By trying new activities and learning together, both individuals and the community as a whole gain confidence and a sense of empowerment.



In August 2024, an online questionnaire about the education of Roma students was sent to the principals of all 272 primary and secondary schools in the Pilsen Region. A total of 64 respondents completed the survey, with the majority (81%) of respondents being school principals. The remaining responses came from deputy principals, teachers, school counselors, or school prevention specialists. The aim of the survey was to map the issues related to the education of Roma pupils and students, explore possibilities for effective support, and assess schools' interest in implementing awareness-raising activities by the organization Close Neighbour (such as discussions with pupils and seminars with teachers). Detailed survey results, including graphical visualizations, are published on the organization's website.²



Key Findings

The survey confirmed that Roma students tend to achieve average or below-average academic results, highlighting the need for support measures to achieve equal academic representation. Collaboration with nonprofit organizations for parent communication was positively viewed by 36% of respondents, making it the second most highly rated support measure. This aligns with our experience: both families and schools value this collaboration. Many principals, who have no previous experience with this option, value this opportunity as beneficial. This is very encouraging for us.

Available online in Czech language

- <https://blizkysoused.cz/kvalifikacni-prace/>
- <https://blizkysoused.cz/dokumenty/>



Bits and pieces of life

"What are we going to make today? I love crafting!" Ester is Pata's favourite leader because she runs crafts and art workshops, and Pata loves those. The children enjoy crafting activities immensely, and we are happy that they develop their fine motor skills, creativity and boost self-confidence. There aren't many places where our children hear that they are smart, that their artwork is beautiful, and so on...

"Are we going to church?" Our Roma children ask us, no matter when or where we meet. We are happy that they do not find church service boring, but we are also proud we offer a wide range of activities beyond church.

"Will there be a hobby club at Christmas?" Our children ask us eagerly and they are very disappointed when there isn't. Holidays might be great, but if there is nothing interesting to do, they are not so attractive anymore. We keep track of our children's attendance and we are often surprised how many of them come to our events every year, how many attend regularly, and how much they remember. The attendance can be found in our annual reports, and we also know that children who attend tutoring sessions tend to achieve better results at school.

"Does he love me or not?" Romani girls have the same problems like all the other girls. They want to have a happy family, kind husband and healthy children. We really hope they will have all they wish for one day! But hoping is not enough, which is why we often talk to girls about relationships, birth control or the importance of choosing the right partner for life. We are often the only source of information on certain topics for them and we believe it makes a difference.

"Inclusion means equal opportunity?" If one child has a broken leg and the others are healthy, then letting them participate in the same race is hardly an equal opportunity. Equal opportunity in this case is proper diagnosis of their injury, follow-up treatment, rehabilitation, recovery, training, and then running the same race with others. Our children are socially disadvantaged, and more often than not, they had nobody to consistently develop their cognitive abilities in the early years. Nobody was reading bedtime stories to these children, nobody taught them the names of colours, or counting, names of trees, road signs, and many other things. Children are not used to hearing information, remembering it and then being praised for remembering it. In short, they are not used to learning new things, or wanting to learn new things. As a result, they may appear "slow" and undisciplined at school because they are simply not able to keep up with children who have come to school already knowing a lot. What we are trying to do is help them catch up with what they have missed, at least a little bit. Our "Letters and Colours" club is the flagship of this effort. If socially disadvantaged children have nobody to help them catch up with their peers, placing them in a mainstream classroom is a punishment for all parties involved. They would ideally need a year or two in a smaller class, with an assistant, before being put in a regular class along with everyone else. For many years, we have been patiently sending our suggestions relating to the shortcomings of our school system to our ministers...

"Will Koli be there?" The boys often want to know if our men will be present at an event - it really matters to them. Positive male role models are generally hard to find in our society, and as far as education or extracurricular activities are concerned, they are even more scarce. This is mainly because the wages of social workers, education assistants and similar professions are too low to attract male employees. This why we are infinitely grateful to Koli for his selfless dedication and the support he provides to the boys during our sports classes. It is thanks to him that the boys learn much more than just chasing a ball. They train their discipline, learn to follow rules, and they find out that if they want something, they need to work hard for it, and often break sweat.

Bits and pieces of life

"Is that a cow?" Seven-year-old Verunka inquired. In our Letters and Colours club, we teach preschool and early elementary school children a little bit of everything. We try to provide basic knowledge in various areas and we do not assume that the children already know things. After visiting the local Zoo, we review how tall a giraffe is, we sing songs about animals, play with animal toys... Our children are not stupid, but nobody is born with basic knowledge. Our Roma children have nobody to teach them. When teaching Petr, he thought that "horse" is about 3 cm tall, because that's how big a horse was on a picture he saw. When we explained to him that an actual horse is taller than that, he looked surprised. This is what our Letters and Colours club is about, we try to fill in the gaps.

"I love Gawwd!" Roman has a tough life. He's 8 years old and he's taught things at home that he is not supposed to be taught at all. Sometimes, he steals, he lies, but he says that he will not beat his wife and that he loves God. Roman still has a lot of struggles and moral dilemmas ahead of him and spelling words correctly is the least of his problems. We want to support him when he is faced with those struggles and has to make important decisions!

"I'll have two candies left!" When my oldest daughter was 5 years old, she was great at adding numbers up, but subtracting them was a struggle. So, I asked her how many candies she will have left if she has 5, but her siblings eat 3 of them. She knew the answer right away. When we teach children, we try to use examples from daily life as well. Our children are amazing and we are proud of them! David knows how to write his name, Lucy can recognize a giraffe, Kuba is great at singing, René can count, they all already know the rules of several board games.

"Lida and Zuzka have been attending a regular school since September and are doing just fine!" Children can bring their homework to our after-school clubs. Many have improved their results at school. This year, two 13-year-old girls have been transferred from a special school to a regular school. In 2015, Lida attended 23 of our activities and events, and Zuzka even attended 31. and it brings fruit! Both of them also participated in our summer camp. We believe that their success is not only a result of tutoring sessions, but also the result of being part of a stable environment, with stable values, that gives them a feeling of security.