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*Chairman of the Society Úsmev ako dar*

Úsmev ako dar has been searching for practical ways how to help children and families at risk or in need for more than 30 years. I perceive three levels of help: Firstly, we help children in children homes, families at risk and foster families to improve their prospects and preparedness for an independent or shared family life. The second level is help for those who themselves provide help. This means, we make an effort for volunteers and professionals to carry out their work for the benefit of the children as best they can. And then there is systemic help aimed at improving the system of social care itself. We must not forget that Úsmev ako dar is made up of particular people who do their best to make sure that children in need and their families can have a better life.



## OUR PHILOSOPHY:

In order to develop harmoniously, we are convinced that a child needs to grow up in an environment with a father and a mother. Only in this way can their needs be met and can experience the secure bonding which is the basis of a healthy and mature personal and social life. If a child cannot live in their own functional family, the most suitable solution is growing up with their relatives. If not possible, the original family can be substituted by a foster family in the form of adoption or foster care. If neither of these possibilities can be fulfilled, it is necessary to ensure that an institution that provides them with the environment most like that of their biological family.

**Society of Friends of children from children's homes**  
**Smile as a Gift - Úsmev ako dar**

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**Úsmev ako dar**  
... so that every child has a family

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## WHO WE ARE:

The Society of friends of children from children's homes **Úsmev ako dar** has existed for more than 30 years. We are the oldest and largest non-governmental organisation in Slovakia aimed at children at risk and their families. Never for a moment have we lost sight of our vision ... "so that every child has a family". At the same time we realise that for many children reality is not so kind. Therefore we have made various programmes and projects with the aim to help children regain their lost family background, security and stable relationships with loved ones. We believe that these qualities are essential for what we call **prosperous**.

## WHAT WE DO:

- **We work with families in distress** who face challenging life situations, who are at risk having their child removed from them and with families whose children have already been taken away. We consider it is crucial to maintain integrity and continuity in the life of the child. We therefore support the vulnerable family in the process of the stabilisation to avoid out of home placement of children from their family environment, and we do our best to return children from institutional care into their families as soon as possible.

- **We provide development programmes for children and youth in children's homes, foster families and those in kinship care.** We help develop their personalities and motivate them to take part in meaningful activities – studies, art and sport. We organise educational activities and development stays. Through our programmes we offer relationships and longterm ties for children without family attachments. We bring together siblings who have grown up apart within the system of institutional care. (*Angel Programme, Pippi Longstocking Fund, The Sweetest Concert of the Year, sports championships etc.*)

- **We prepare and support foster families.** We lead them to understand the needs, experiences and feelings of children who have lost their original background. We develop their parental skills and encourage them towards unconditional acceptance, as well as esteem and respect towards the child's biological family. (*PRIDE Programme, foster family clubs, diferent support activities*)

We do all this according to the Declaration of Human Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Charter of the Rights of the Family.

... SO THAT EVERY CHILD HAS A FAMILY



- **We educate parents, family members, foster parents and professionals** who take part in the care of children at risk. On average, we provide trainings, educational activities, conferences and seminars for about 4,000 participants a year.

- **We educate and supervise volunteers working with children.** We see that all children from children's homes crucially need the support of a close person. As their inner world is marked by the trauma of separation and early negative experience, we pay close attention that our volunteers are informed and prepared for their mission well. (*Angel Academy Programme*)

- **We run crisis centres and low-threshold clubs.** In cooperation with the DeDo Foundation we are developing a national network of social facilities where families with children and young adults can find a temporary home and professional assistance. (*Dorka Crisis Centres for Restoration of the Family in Košice, Zvolen, Prešov, Dunajská Lužná Children's Home Education Centre, Klub Fortuna in Bratislava, Mak Centre in Trnava, a.o.*)



### PROGRAMME PRIDE

is an experiential learning programme for foster parents which provides them with necessary information and the perspective of the abandoned child's life situation, and equips them with appropriate skills. The programme is unique since it allows the parents to understand the experiences of their child at a logical and emotional level and perceive it as a part of the child's personal story – a story which is being led in a new direction. The Programme PRIDE is suitable for all people who work with children separated from their families.



### FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES

is an innovative conference model of work with families at risk which aims to mobilise the natural support network of the child. Relatives and close people around the family involved in the child's life make their own solution plan for the child and take responsibility for them. The family often needs external help only in the re-establishment of broken family ties in order to manage the problem themselves.



### ÚSMEV AKO DAR CHRISTMAS CHARITY CONCERT

is the oldest charity event for children in institutional care in Central Europe. Its history goes back to 1982 and since then has brought children joy and the message that they are not alone. The more than thirty-year-old tradition of this concert has been indelibly marked into the public's awareness, helping to improve openness and tolerance in society towards children from children's homes.



### DORKA CRISIS CENTRES FOR RESTORATION OF THE FAMILY

combine various facilities which provide professional services for different groups of clients. The unique feature of these centres is the fact that they can accept the family as a whole, something which is not usual in other social facilities. Here the family remains together, as we are convinced that the preservation of family bonds is fundamental and the most important security for a child. In such an environment the parents can then develop their skills and learn how to manage the challenging task of parenting. In cooperation with the DeDo Foundation it is our endeavour to have these Centres for Restoration of the Family in various regions and towns in Slovakia.

- **We offer help and support to young adults** after leaving institutional care. We support them in the difficult process of becoming independent and integrating into society. (*SOS programme, Young to young-Domováci domovákom / Past to present children from children's homes*)

- **We network experts.** We create scope for expert discussions and the exchange of information from various scientific and competent fields, which deepens knowledge of the problem. Focus is to create well working system of support and empowerment of the families. (*Bridges to the Family, Bridges in Social and Legal Protection, Meeting of judges, The Prenatal Child etc.*)

- **We develop concepts** which encourage changes to the legislative framework leading to a direct impact on the social environment. We also try to improve child and family care by modifying laws and regulations.

- **Public education.** We communicate with the public openly about the issue of institutional care, enlighten and open social debates. We try to eradicate deep-rooted prejudices and show the situation of abandoned children in its true light.