
“PUBLIC LIVING ROOM” - FINAL REPORT BASED ON THE REPORTS FROM ALL THE COUNTRIES

Poland was the first country to start a new partnership project within the European programme “Grundtvig- Lifelong Education” for the years 2013-2015. It was a big challenge for us and, at the same time, a great opportunity to prove our abilities as the association “Mamy Czas”

The topic “Public Living Room” attracted a lot of interest in all the partnership countries. Having received feedback reports from all the countries, we clearly saw that Mother Centers in Europe are perceived by guests and public opinion as places safe for families and centre employees are trustworthy and are fully competent to run their centers and the activities they provide.

Safety is necessary at various levels and for different groups means different things.

By coming to the centre mothers can spend their free time with their children, sometimes whole families come. They can not only sit, talk and drink coffee, but they actively participate in various activities. Besides, centers offer relaxed, safe and friendly atmosphere. There are opportunities for self-development through trainings, support in children’s education and possibilities of socializing. Mothers come to the Mother Center to regain strength, exchange experiences and get to know other cultures. Everybody has the right to express their ideas, worries, hopes and doubts. Parents feel well and safe at the Mother Centre because they can simply be themselves. They meet people who are open to their needs. The Centre is a place where everybody can decide how they want to get involved (nobody expects anything from me- I can decide about my own involvement).

Family Centers are safe places, harbours where you can meet and discuss different topics. In Austria, for example, they try to create tolerant and diversified communities. Centers do not interfere with private opinions or lifestyles as long as they do not affect the principles of tolerance and diversity. Centers in Austria are set up by women with similar outlook on life- there are not too many “hot topics”. Mothers regard themselves as modern, educated women who are able to discuss and have their own opinions. They have no will or intension to say that something is right or wrong (except racism, fascism and violence). There are topics that do not need to be mentioned or discussed, i.e. is it possible to use violence towards children..... Important, but quite trivial can be the issue of centre promotion- how far they can go to get funding for the club, which ways are

Stowarzyszenie „Mamy Czas” Klub Mam i Tatusiów na Bielanach

al. Zjednoczenia 19 Warszawa e-mail: mamybielanskie@gmail.com
tel.: 695 582 415 - Joanna Leszczyńska, tel. 603 705 509 - Agnieszka Kielich
NIP: 1182042713 REGON: 142495201
KRS: 0000360631 Konto bankowe: 83 1140 2017 0000 4102 1191 0611:



appropriate and which are not...Over the years they have noticed in Austria that the issue of children's immunization can be problematic. They talk about the problem, present their opinions, but try to be careful because some doctors have had problems with health authorities.

The question „What do you like most about your Mother Centre?” was given the following answers: hospitality, common exchange at the table, opportunity to talk about own problems, time to talk, laughing together, regular meetings, being open every day, honesty of people, you can come but it is not obligatory, we care about our children together, you can meet nice people, make friends, there come like-minded people.

How to create and keep the atmosphere of openness of the Centre? Let me give you an example from the report from the Stuttgart Mutterforum as I think that it is a very good one, especially for small and young organizations:

“The host of the day is important because they provide:

- A warm greeting and an unconditional “welcome”
- Introduce everybody and integrate everyone
- Create comfortable atmosphere
- Provide necessary information

They should:

- Approach visitors with openness, sensitivity, and kind invitation
- Offer services without imposing themselves
- Offer space and be open to contact with both adults and children
- Have an open heart and sense of humor “

In all the reports from Turkey, Stuttgart, Munich, Austria, Slovakia and Poland there were suggestions about increasing the space of Mother Centers, making it not only inside but also outside in the form of playgrounds, gardens and greenery.

They talked about organizing trainings, workshops, lectures, both for parents and children. They mentioned meetings concerning special issues: education, healthy food, courses for women like sewing and handcraft so that later mothers could earn some money.

Parents have different ideas and thanks to their help many of them can be put into practice.

Parents expect trips, film and discussion evenings, book clubs, childcare, planting trees together, growing herbs and vegetables, second-hand sales, sports activities, etc. Many of them would

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welcome the opportunity to learn foreign languages and have IT classes. They would also like help with homework for older children. An important thing which was mentioned in the reports is a common table and meals. Unfortunately, not everybody can organize that due to the layout of the center or limited space. Everybody has some ideas and they are, if possible, slowly introduced. Very often the person with an idea moves to action and helps to organize meetings. It is really important for the organization because it can develop and move on. Such a person becomes familiar with the world of voluntary work, and often stays for longer and keeps helping. Some men sometimes offer help with repair jobs. The reports rarely mentioned financial support.

Knowledge of people who have been at the Mother Center for many years is very useful. Such people give great support and are a great example to others. They have deep knowledge and know how to put things into practice. They give strength and power to young mothers. Very often these women are grandmothers; they are elderly but young in spirit and full of energy. Unfortunately, in Poland such ladies do not cooperate with organizations. They rather come as grandmothers or carers.

What don't you like about your Center? - was answered unanimously: too little space, not enough information about classes, the décor should be updated; it should be open for longer.

In the countries where there is a well functioning network, Mother Centers try to support one another and share knowledge. However, it is not simple and easy. Under communism, it was common to keep knowledge to oneself or to sell it. That is why organizations have been trying to change this cultural attitude. In Austria they do not have a problem with knowledge sharing. They have prepared a manual containing a lot of information essential to set up and run a Mother Center there. Each new member gets it for free and it is updated regularly. Non-members can buy it for 150 euro. They say:

“When we help the Mother Center in the founding process, we try to support them with our knowledge the best way we can – but if we have the feeling, that they do not want to be the member of the network or will be a MC of the church or a political party or even a business institute, we are not so open.....

We try to have a good communication with them, we hold regular meetings with all of the MCs in Austria which are interested (most of the time – not always! the DV or a DV MC are the initiators and hosts of these meetings), we sit on various boards together with other MC representatives. Competition is mostly in the field of money – does every organisation get the equal share of the money from the state – that's the question and the struggle.....”

Austria was the only country to give a detailed report of what helps Mother Center/ Network employees (paid and volunteers) to feel safe. I believe that this is an exceptionally important issue which should be further reported:

“A clear “mission statement” – found in a common process, reviewed and remodelled regularly

- The mission statement is visible in the MC (example of MC Kind&Kegel: postcards with the mission statement used as a permanent folder)
- Values and Structure:
 - who is in charge of what
 - is the structure up to date
 - what are the values that are not in question (generally agreed)
- Important to have structures to talk about “hot” topics and how these are handled within the MC – documentation (minutes of the meetings) is open for all people concerned – but also having the proof, that discussions may stay in a group if this is necessary.
- Networks: there are other (“professional”) institutions where we can seek help in case it is necessary (e.g. if anybody needs professional help; how to handle suspicion of sexual or violent abuse)
- An MC is a safe place when the organisational group can trust the active MC people that they act according the MC values and do not promote their own business or ideology
- Insurance and liability – trying to cover all important eventualities (fire, water, broken glass, theft, burglary, accident, legal protection insurance) – knowledge of and information on liabilities for all persons concerned (board, staff, active MC people, visitors)
- Knowing the resources (financial and personal)
- Knowledge about the organisational and conceptual work in MC (in case a person steps out and can't work in the successor) - information on financial resources, what is important to apply for public funding, who are important persons in the magistrate/region/state
- Transparency in Finance:
 - the organisational staff has proof of the financial situation, there are people who audit finances on a regular basis, best done by people who are independent of the MC and have professional background but know about the special spirit of an MC – in Austria it is necessary to have financial auditors if MC is a non-profit association. It is important, that all staff and the board can look into the books regularly
 - it is stated clear, who has the “key” to the money and what rules there are (who has to be asked and informed when an expenditure is done).
 - Doing the bookkeeping “inhouse” has more advantages (gives information who spent what money for what) than disadvantages (possibilities to fiddle expenses), because it gives a good feeling on the resources

Active people in Mother Centres (voluntary or paid) – what helps feeling safe in the MC?

- trust and empathy – enough time to talk and get to know the fellow MC people
- clear description of possibilities and duties

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- what is paid,
 - what is voluntary work,
 - what general ideas frame the work and doings in the MC,
 - ways of decision making (who and how) - what is democratic in the MC and where are the limits of democracy
 - clear “mission statement”
 - active MC people need to know all the MC procedures, the overall values and the structures, so they can take part actively in a shaping process
- MC as a group of people who give personal support if necessary
 - Responsible exposure to/handling of personal resources – open atmosphere to speak about personal situation and how this connects to the work in the MC
 - There are known ways to direct people to other institutions if professional help is needed
 - Information on the everyday MC life (minutes from the meetings , formal and informal talk with the organisation group)
 - The ”mission statement“ was done by all active people and there is agreement on it. It is reviewed and remodelled from time to time in a common process.
 - Structures to have support and supervision (not necessarily professional) – it is important to have a platform where the everyday life in MC is a topic – tools of Leadership Support Method help with this, this ensures that the people can bring in their personal situation in combination with the MC work.
 - Emergency plans (fire extinguisher, emergency phone numbers, meeting point and evacuating procedure in case of emergency ...) – in Austria some of the official authorities have regulations – e.g. every MC staff has to sign a paper where all the important information for emergency is written down ..”

The discussion gave us the sense that we are needed as women, mothers, families and organizations. We reach out to a great number of families who have a very positive opinion about us. Thanks to that Mother Centres keep thinking about further development and getting better knowledge.

Report prepared by: Joanna Leszczyńska- Association „ Mamy Czas“

Translation: Donata Wojtyńska