



## “Students for Children”: A volunteer programme-model for universities for the support of children in foster care

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Article abstract

Foster care institutions are badly understaffed and operate on the lowest expected standards in terms of human resources in Hungary. In many cases, child protection personnel working with children in foster care do not have the necessary qualifications, and even those that do are often so overloaded with tasks that they cannot routinely engage in meaningful social interactions with the children. This paper introduces a unique and easily adaptable model of volunteer „work in university settings that aims to improve the situation of children in foster care. The Students for Children Volunteer Programme was founded in 2010 in the Faculty of Law at the University of Pécs, Hungary, and is now part of the curriculum there both as an elective course and as a cross-faculty programme. From the outset, the primary goal of this initiative has been to improve the situation of children in foster care through student mentoring by empowering them to manage everyday challenges and develop meaningful perspectives on their futures. Other equally important objectives are to enhance students’ social sensitivity and skills and to shape their thinking through this challenging work. Since its inception, the programme has been operating with unbroken success and, over the years, nearly 400 volunteers have completed the programme. The long-term plan is that through this model a country-wide network of similar volunteer programmes can be developed to improve the situation of children in need. Although aspects of the Students for Children programme still need to be refined, our experience with it shows that it has invaluable social, educational, and psychological effects on both the children and the future law professionals.

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## **“STUDENTS FOR CHILDREN”: A VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME-MODEL FOR UNIVERSITIES FOR THE SUPPORT OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

**Gabriella Kulcsár, Judit Zeller, and Beáta Korinek**

**Abstract:** Foster care institutions are badly understaffed and operate on the lowest expected standards in terms of human resources in Hungary. In many cases, child protection personnel working with children in foster care do not have the necessary qualifications, and even those that do are often so overloaded with tasks that they cannot routinely engage in meaningful social interactions with the children. This paper introduces a unique and easily adaptable model of volunteer „work in university settings that aims to improve the situation of children in foster care. The Students for Children Volunteer Programme was founded in 2010 in the Faculty of Law at the University of Pécs, Hungary, and is now part of the curriculum there both as an elective course and as a cross-faculty programme. From the outset, the primary goal of this initiative has been to improve the situation of children in foster care through student mentoring by empowering them to manage everyday challenges and develop meaningful perspectives on their futures. Other equally important objectives are to enhance students’ social sensitivity and skills and to shape their thinking through this challenging work. Since its inception, the programme has been operating with unbroken success and, over the years, nearly 400 volunteers have completed the programme. The long-term plan is that through this model a country-wide network of similar volunteer programmes can be developed to improve the situation of children in need. Although aspects of the Students for Children programme still need to be refined, our experience with it shows that it has invaluable social, educational, and psychological effects on both the children and the future law professionals.

**Keywords:** volunteering, foster care, child protection, care system, sensitization, experiential education, supervision

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The roots of the Students for Children Volunteer Programme (Students for Children) lie in the recognition of two complementary sets of needs: the needs of children in state care for meaningful relationships and activities, and the social and cognitive needs of university students — primarily of the law faculty — to get acquainted with an important target group of their future work. Since its launch in 2010, Students for Children — initiated by Balázs Somfai, then head of the Family and Social Law Group — has been a pioneer model in legal education in Hungary (Somfai, 2011). Despite being a fairly new model, its design makes it easy for any high school or faculty to adopt.

### ***Motivation***

The primary motivation for launching the programme was to improve the living conditions at children's homes in Hungary. The Hungarian child protection system was designed almost 25 years ago. With the “best interest of the child” being its highest priority, the legislation established a system comprising two levels of intervention: the level of prevention and the level of protection (Herczog, 2001). Prevention happens within the birth family with the support of child welfare services. Preventive measures are directed at the child in their own family environment, contributing to the promotion of their physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral development, their welfare and upbringing, and the prevention and elimination of endangerment. Protection and specialised care are provided if the necessary support cannot be realised within the family. On this second level, children are removed from their families, and are placed with foster families, in small foster homes, or — still in many cases — in larger children's homes or care homes.

Despite the well-structured system in place, many problems continue to arise, particularly in children's homes (Hüse, 2016). Despite the legal obligation for children under 12 to be placed with foster families, children's homes look after a significant number of children in that age range. Although children's homes are divided into small units structurally, they virtually function as large residential institutions, and bear the systematic shortcomings of that facility type: the homes are understaffed, caregiver social workers are both underqualified and underpaid, and turnover is high (Herczog, 2001). Caregivers are overburdened with administrative tasks, which limits the amount of individual quality attention the children receive.

The secondary motivation of the programme was to provide professionals — primarily future lawyers — with the specific knowledge, skills, and sensitivity to deal with the legal issues of children in the child protection system. Lawyers working at guardianship authorities and in the courts rarely see the complete picture in child abuse and custody cases; consequently, they seldom appreciate the child's perspective on being brought up in an abusive family or without parents. In fact, general legal education is not focused on children's rights, yet many students become legal officers designated to deal with children's issues at court, at the guardianship authority, and in various other settings. Also, while prospective lawyers are required to pass practice or training courses to earn an advanced academic degree, the compulsory period of practical training in law

school is only 6 weeks. This means, unfortunately, that higher education does not currently provide sufficient insight into the unique, rather closed setting of the child protection system.

Students for Children provides support and encouragement for children living in these disadvantaged circumstances, by organising university student volunteers from various academic fields. Students visit children in the children's home on a weekly basis and engage in various social activities. In terms of volunteering motivations, Students for Children fulfils a twofold objective. On the individual level, it opens the path for students to obtain practical skills and specialised knowledge. On the altruistic level, students' goals are strongly associated with the intention to help children.

### ***Programme Set-up and Frames of Operation***

Students for Children operates as an elective course in the curriculum of the Faculty of Law at the University of Pécs. The programme leaders — the authors of this paper — are lecturers from different fields (family law, constitutional law, and criminology) and their role enables them to give students a broader perspective on the legal and psychological aspects of children's lives in foster care. In the beginning, membership in the programme was offered only to law students but, by the year 2018, Students for Children had developed into a cross-faculty programme. Owing to this development, children in foster care now get to meet future representatives of not only one profession but of several, and can profit from their knowledge and expertise.

Students signing up for the programme are asked to commit to volunteering for a minimum of one semester, but are encouraged to stay longer in the programme in order to build more substantial relationships with the children in foster care. All students are protected and bound by a volunteer contract, according to which they spend at least 2 hours a week volunteering; this consists of leading mentoring activities, mainly tutoring and recreation. In addition, the volunteers are required to join a weekly complementary class, designed by the programme leaders, in order to deepen the volunteers' knowledge of the programme's principles and guidelines, as well as of the psychological and legal dimensions of their task. Furthermore, the programme leaders — two of whom are trained psychologists — also offer the professional support the volunteers need to cope with the burden of the practical and psychological difficulties they face in this line of work. In addition, the programme leaders also help them discover the unique skills and abilities that will help make volunteering an enriching experience both for them and the children. Group confidentiality in the weekly class creates an atmosphere where students feel safe enough to open up about their feelings and struggles.

### ***Principles of the Programme***

Principles and corresponding guidelines for the volunteers were developed in accordance with the goals of the programme. The most important principles include the following:

**1. Causing no harm:** As the programme aims to help highly vulnerable children in foster care, it is important that the students use a trauma-informed approach to avoid causing any further harm.

In order to follow this principle, students learn what traumas the children may have experienced and how these might have impacted the way they feel, think, and behave.

**2. Building trust with reliability, trustworthiness, and transparency:** The second step is to earn the children's trust by being reliable and trustworthy, which entails being good and empathetic listeners but also requires practical contributions such as volunteering consistently every week for at least one semester. Students are expected to communicate honestly with the children and let them know in advance if they cannot keep an appointment. It is vital that students appreciate the importance of these rules and expectations because children in foster care are in particular need of positive experiences with the adult world, especially as their trust in people may have been betrayed many times before. In conjunction with these principles, it is highly recommended that students commit to the volunteer work for longer than just one semester because children in foster care need to develop a strengthened sense of stability in many fields of their lives. It is of great value to a child if a person they have grown to trust stays in their life for at least one or two years.

**3. Empowerment through instilling hope in the children's future by helping them develop positive, but realistic, perspectives:** Being a good mentor also means being a good role model. In fact, volunteer students serve as inspiration for the children in foster care in how to live a meaningful life, self-empower, and define one's goals and aspirations in a realistic way. In the best case, students succeed in supporting children in developing and maintaining skills and competencies and in giving them the hope that they too have the ability to live meaningful lives.

**4. Social inclusion through a non-judgemental and respectful approach:** An essential element in interacting with the children is to approach them with respect and sensitivity. The volunteers must never judge them for how they behave, speak, or look. Accepting the children as they are helps them accept themselves and gives them the feeling of social inclusion.

**5. Respecting boundaries:** Students also learn that it is of utmost importance to set clear boundaries in the interests of both the children and themselves. Having physical, emotional, and professional boundaries is fundamental to building and maintaining healthy mentor–mentee relationships. This means that as much as we encourage students to interact with the children and build connections with them, we also emphasise that the students are not therapists or child protection professionals, and therefore their responsibilities are limited. They have to protect themselves from the emotional burden of not being able to do more for the children than their mentoring roles allow, and to understand that it is not their task to solve the difficult problems the children face. Students also have to be careful if the children trust them with sensitive information or if the children ask them to do small favours, such as forwarding messages or physical items to someone else. There is a thin line between being a confidant and an accomplice, and students have to be very careful not to get unintentionally involved in unethical activities.

**6. Signalling in cases of danger:** In conjunction with setting boundaries, it is also important to discuss with volunteers when, how, and to whom they have to report potential or actual dangers.

We define the situation as dangerous or potentially dangerous when students receive information that children are engaging in substance abuse, prostitution, self-harm, suicide attempts, bullying, and other forms of high-risk behaviour. In cases of immediate danger, students are advised to alert any personnel who are on hand and the programme leaders, and to call 112 for emergency assistance if needed. In less urgent or unclear situations, students are advised to refer the case to the institution's psychologist. In addition, they are asked to report such situations for discussion in the complementary class.

**7. Importance of emotional support for volunteers:** As mentioned earlier, the programme aims not only to guide the volunteers, but to provide them the emotional and professional support they need throughout their volunteer work, and to make this experience meaningful and positive for them. Working with traumatised children in settings of child protection institutions can be extremely challenging. Even if the volunteers' work is limited to mentoring activities only, they might face difficult situations or hear about emotionally disturbing life stories that they need to process. Fortunately, the hundreds of students who have completed the programme have given highly positive feedback about their work with children in foster care: in some cases, these enriching experiences have even influenced their career choices.

## **Results of the Programme**

### ***Benefits for the Children in Care***

Students for Children is a somewhat unusual volunteer programme, since volunteering more typically takes place at community, non-profit, and civil organisations in support of common causes. Volunteering means giving one's time and ability, with no expectation of financial return, to the community or to one of a wide range of organisations that support civic interests and the vulnerable (Salamon, 2012, as cited in Washington, 2018, p. 3). Students for Children, however, operates at a university that is maintained by the state and that directly supports the delivery of state public services. Nevertheless, children's homes are "not simply providers of services, but spaces of living, living together, growing up, and socialisation" (Schmid & Herczeg, 2018, p. 138). Aiming at fostering change in people, children's homes "are predominantly based on interactional relationships. Thus, the quality of face-to-face relationships and of interactions is a strong determinant of the success of any intervention, including sociopedagogical ones (Fretschner, 2011, p. 77)" (Schmid & Herczeg, 2018, p. 140). Therefore, whom the children meet and when determines whether they have the opportunities to observe adult role models, build personal contacts, and relate to others.

In order to understand the role of the students in the lives of the children, and be able to place the volunteer programme in the public service framework, we have to consider the general situation of the child care system and the specific institutional context. Recent surveys show that child care institutions in Hungary are badly understaffed and, in terms of human resources, operate at the lowest standard allowed by law, or lower (Hungarian Office of the Commissioner for

Fundamental Rights, 2019, p. 17). In fact, in many cases, professionals working with children do not possess the required qualifications for their work (Rácz, 2012, p. 15). Also, staff members are generally preoccupied with and overloaded by household chores and administrative duties, and consequently are not always able to engage in meaningful social interactions with the children beyond general oversight of their behaviour and actions. The volunteer students may fill this void by being present in the children's home without any official duties. Their main focus is to build interactions with the children themselves. The methods students use to improve the situation of the children include:

**1. Providing one-on-one contact and time:** Residential institutions have a general tendency to weaken one-on-one relationships. Current Hungarian law allows a maximum of 12 children per house group in a residential institution. The group is usually cared for by only one adult in every shift throughout the day and night. It is not difficult to realise that in this setting the children's legitimate demand for attention is likely to exceed the capacity of the caregivers. However, students are in a position to devote time and capacity to meet the children's need for personal contact and attention.

**2. Being a person of trust:** An almost necessary consequence of establishing substantial relationships is that students are often present in the children's home as persons of trust but not as authority figures. Students are closer to the children in age, and are not perceived as supervisors or controllers; the informal nature of the relationship facilitates the building of trust. It is therefore the volunteers that the children often contact first to discuss personal, even intimate, problems; to receive help with heartfelt private issues; and to ask for support or further advice in moments of crisis. In crisis situations, the students are expected to identify and report the perceived danger and encourage the children to share their problems with the professionals — caregivers or psychologists — of the care home as soon as possible.

**3. Providing disciplined knowledge and skills:** Although students are not expected (and not allowed without professional supervision) to exercise their future profession (e.g., as teachers, nurses, or lawyers), they already have sufficient professional back-up to help the children acquire new knowledge and new skills. Mentoring children means introducing activities ranging from doing homework with them and baking together for Christmas to rehearsing a play and practising how to apply make-up. Sometimes mentoring means just sitting around together or playing football in the courtyard. The variations are limitless.

### ***Benefits for the Students***

The direct involvement of volunteers with the residents of the children's home has been a feature of the programme's design since its inception. This means that the students are in immediate contact with the children instead of being put to use in administrative or other background capacities in the children's home. The programme does not concern itself with directly arranging a space for exercising professional skills; it is, however, strongly concerned with the future tasks and responsibilities of the students in various ways. The strongest feature of the

programme is that students are constantly engaged with a community to which they had not been exposed previously but which they are likely to meet in their future professional practice in various official proceedings. As removing children from their birth families and placing them in residential institutions is a decision to be made by legal officers of the guardianship authority, our volunteer programme becomes all the more important: volunteering in the children's home offers the students insight into numerous relevant areas, of which we would like to highlight the following:

**1. Gaining tangible experience and understanding what it means for a child to be removed from the birth family:** Children living in institutional care often bear a double burden. First, these children have a difficult family background, for being placed in an institution always means that the birth family was either dysfunctional or absent: by the time these children are placed in institutions, many have already been victims of child abuse or severe neglect. Second, children in residential care suffer from the negative emotional effects of losing their birth family background. According to extensive research, more than 25% of children in institutional care consider self-harm, and a much higher percentage of them than of children living in families (even foster families) engage in risk-taking behaviours, including use and abuse of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes; and unsafe sexual activities (Elekes & Paksi, 2005; Kökönyei et al., 2003; Szótsné et al., 2007, as cited in Rácz, 2012). The same research also indicates that children living in institutions experience anxiety more often and have more difficulties with emotional intelligence, more struggles with their negative emotions, and a less efficient problem-solving capacity than do children living in their birth families. Authors emphasise that children often react to removal from the birth family with panic, and that their self-concept is based on the experience that they do not belong anywhere (Rácz, 2012, p. 20). Consequently, children in the care home are highly vulnerable and, because of their volatility, not easy to interact with. Students who develop a meaningful relationship with the children not only receive first-hand information about the problems of this vulnerable group, but they also gain insights into the psychodynamics of being placed and living in an institution as a child. This experience adds to their knowledge of children who are victims of deprivation, disadvantage, and maltreatment. The new insights significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of what is at stake when placing a child into residential care.

**2. Getting acquainted with the functioning of a child care facility:** Being present regularly in the facility gives the volunteers insight into the operation of the children's home as a system. This helps them identify the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of staff members and contributes to their recognition of probable dysfunctions and anomalies that hinder the effective, child-centred functioning of the institution.

**3. Gaining professional experience and context for the future profession:** Unlike legal clinics or mandatory university-prescribed practicums for teachers or law students, Students for Children expects participants not to have to rely on their future profession throughout the volunteer work. Although the Students for Children agenda does not aim to provide field training for future professionals, nor does it reject the use of professional knowledge and skills. During their volunteer work, future teachers are welcome to use the pedagogical approaches they have learnt,



and psychology students can also apply their discipline knowledge in giving emotional support for children. Similarly, law students can identify problems of legal relevance in the child care setting. Once again, we emphasise that respecting boundaries is an important principle of our programme: proper psychological support and legal aid may only be provided by professionals. However, students are encouraged to recognise problems and direct them to the experts for professional and binding resolutions.

**4. Gaining multidisciplinary experiences with peers:** Students for Children is organised as a cross-faculty volunteering opportunity that also offers rich learning experiences because of the multidisciplinary environment in which it is embedded. During fieldwork in the children's home, the students support and complement each other with their specific knowledge and skills. Students usually visit the home in pairs, which facilitates making contact with the children through games and other activities. During supervised sessions in the classroom, the future professionals often introduce standpoints and opinions that contribute to a multidimensional evaluation of issues in connection with the volunteer work. While at first glance the differences in approaches might seem to discourage mutual understanding between professionals, in our experience, multidisciplinary discussions facilitate the development of a much-needed comprehensive awareness of the links between the elements of the child care system — children, staff, facility, and state. Such discussions also help break down barriers between professions. Furthermore, the collaboration between faculties aids the development of professional connections that are likely to be amplified into long-term professional networks outside the university. It may be possible to optimise this outcome through a more strategic pairing of students on visits to homes. At the moment, students select their own partners. Organising them into interdisciplinary pairs (lawyer with social worker, psychologist with teacher, etc.) is one of the possible directions for development of the programme.

**5. Revitalising unused skills and developing new ones:** Our 10-year experience shows that every volunteer student possesses a unique combination of skills within a wide variety of fields. These skills are rarely — or not at all — used in the educational setting. The Students for Children programme offers the opportunity to revitalise one's rarely used talents and creativity.

**6. Taking responsibility and initiative:** According to McFadden and Smeaton (2017),

A recent call in higher education has been for universities to create ... students who possess more than discipline knowledge and who are also 'active and engaged citizens' (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 11) ... who can identify and rectify power imbalances in society ... and [are] invested in the creation of an equitable society (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016). (p. 2)

As the *Students for Children* programme has no special focus on providing learning support or free-time activities, the students themselves are involved in the conceptualisation of the specific programmes introduced in the children's home. This creates space for innovation and opportunities for the students to be active and engaged during their volunteer work. Taking part in defining the

concept, however, means assuming responsibility for the outcome as well. In fact, students must consider and discuss the details of bigger plans such as a Christmas charity baking project, or theatre classes conducted in the home by future theatre teachers. They must also take into account project-related costs and benefits. We certainly hope that positive experiences with personal responsibility, together with receiving positive feedback on the initiatives, will not only have a favourable long-term impact on the students, but will also give rise to further engagements with volunteering in their professional and private lives.

### ***Possibilities for Further Improvement of the Programme and Challenges of Dissemination***

At its launch 10 years ago, Students for Children started as a vision without a detailed methodology or structure. Today, we aim in our day-to-day efforts to solve some of the major inherent psychological, educational, and organisational challenges to this work. Addressing psychological challenges, such as maintaining the motivation of students to do volunteer work, applying the “cause no harm” rule, and managing the emotional toll involved in working with traumatised children, is the reason for the complementary class; it serves as a necessary support for students. From an educational and organisational perspective, the main challenge in implementing the programme was scheduling: the programme had to be integrated into the already existing curricula of the different faculties without conflicts in order to enable learners to attend. Another challenge was engaging and building stable relationships with child protection facilities in the area.

As programme builders, at the launch of the programme in 2010 we focused on learning and improving through routine experiences. However, after 10 years it has become obvious that in order to maximise the social, educational, and psychological benefits for both the students and the children, we need a more scientific approach. To upgrade the programme to an evidence-based educational experience it is now essential to conduct overall impact assessments with special focus on the empowerment of the children and students who are in the programme, as well as alumni students. Research on the impacts is also crucial for the dissemination of the programme. Furthermore, the programme objectives will need a more defined outline with empowerment as the focus. The experiences of a decade’s work will also need to be included in the process of building a more stable and — in terms of dissemination — reproducible structure and methodology.

Additional future plans include broadening the spectrum of services we offer to child protection services in order to further improve the benefits connected to the programme. Another route for development is to build productive relationships with other organisations doing volunteer work in this field, and not only to learn from each other’s experiences but also to coordinate and perhaps combine our efforts to maximise the positive impact of the volunteering activities.

## Conclusion

While the Students for Children programme has been active in the past 10 years in various facilities for children, its main target has always been the work with children in residential care in the Pécs Children's Home. Throughout the years, the programme has evolved from a small group of law students in one faculty at the University of Pécs into a larger-scale university-wide volunteer programme with the participation of future psychologists, doctors, health care professionals, and teachers.

Students for Children meets very important needs for both the volunteers and the children, and thus fulfils a double task: it serves social purposes through supporting the interests of the children, and it also helps the volunteer students pursue their individual goals in gaining professional experience and expertise. In addition, as children's homes often lack the required personnel, and material conditions may be inadequate, volunteering helps to improve the much-needed public services provided to children.

Systematically assessing the outcomes of the Students for Children programme requires ongoing in-depth analyses and detailed descriptions. Therefore, one possible course of development, and an important future goal of the programme, is to develop evidence-based information on the specific experiences of the students and the impact of the volunteer work on the children and the care homes. This goal is to be reached by empirical research such as quantitative surveys and interviews among the students, the children, and the staff members in the children's home.

Our other developmental goal is to present our model programme to other universities and give rise to a country-wide volunteer programme in Hungary. Students for Children fits the requirements for a mandatory practicum as it complements professional experience requirements with insight into the social differences and power imbalances in society. Students for Children amplifies the outcomes of university education and has a long-term impact on the mindset and the work of future professionals.

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