



## How to ensure a systematic approach to early childhood care in Slovakia

Conference, 8 November 2022, 9:00-17:30, Hotel Bôrik, Bratislava

### Minutes and conclusions from the Conference

On 8 November 2022, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities organized a conference in Bratislava on the topic of *How to ensure a systematic approach to early childhood care in Slovakia*. In addition to a broader discussion on the importance of an accessible early childhood care, the aim of the conference was to share experience and know-how on the topic of early childhood care among the state authorities from Slovakia and Hungary, professionals and NGOs. Another important aim was to look for ways to implement the work and initiatives of already existing organisations on a systematic level and thus ensure a systematic approach to early care and equal opportunities for healthy development of all children in Slovakia.

The conference was also attended by representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family; the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport; the Ministry of Health; as well as representatives of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Hungary.

The conference started with an opening speech delivered by Ján Hero, the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities who, speaking from his own experience, highlighted the irreplaceable role of early childhood care in children's lives. At the same time, he appreciated the interest of the ministries present at the Conference, the adoption of the [National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Early Care Services](#) and expressed his hope that all responsible ministries will strengthen their cooperation in the search for a systematic solution to the provision of early childhood care in Slovakia. Finally, he stressed that it is crucial to fund these services from the state budget too, as the guests from the neighboring Republic of Hungary had managed to achieve.

During the conference, the representatives from Hungary presented examples of good practice in the provision of early childhood care at a system level. One of the tools that supports healthy development of children and helps compensate for the social disadvantage are the so-called **Sure Start Houses**, usually located directly in settlements or close to them. They provide support for the early development of children aged 0-3 with the active participation of parents. They offer counselling for parents as well (family planning, preparation of pregnant women for the childbirth and their motherhood, and practical services for families such as a shared laundry, kitchen and bathroom facilities).

**László Ulicska**, Head of the [Department of Strategic Planning for Social Inclusion of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Hungary](#), pointed out that the provision of early childhood care at a systematic level has also become part of the [National Strategy](#). **Iván Sörös**, Head of Department of Child Chance and Deputy State Secretary for Social inclusion of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Hungary, added that early childhood care has also been included in strategic documents

such as the [EU Roma Framework Strategy 2030](#) or the [Public Education Strategy 2021-2030](#). He also presented a sustainable model for the Sure Start Houses, illustrating sustainable funding and the gradual transition of the programme to a systematic measure (Figure 1):

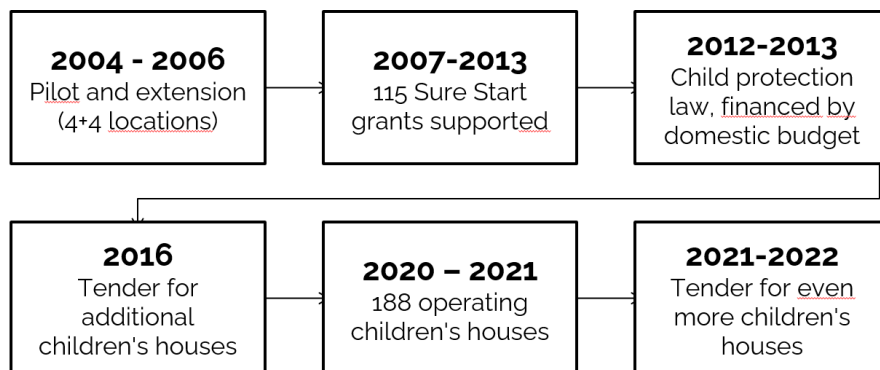


Figure 1: A sustainable model: The Sure Start. Source: Iván Sörös (Presented during the Conference on 8 November 2022)

He stressed that, in order to assess its impact, the operation of the Sure Start Houses is subject to regular monitoring such as data collection or grant implementation reports. The 2016 Impact assessment showed that children attending the Sure Start Houses had improved their social skills, vocabulary, motor skills or behavioral problems in kindergartens. The parents improved their parenting skills and cooperation, established better daily routines and their social isolation decreased.

The Hungarian representatives mentioned also the challenges that the Sure Start Houses still face, such as a high employee turnover, funding continuity, irregular involvement of parents and the need to switch the focus of mentoring from administrative assistance for employees towards the staff training and development.

**Márton Medgyesi** from the Centre for Social Sciences and the [Child Opportunities Research Group](#) presented the results of the survey on Sure Start Houses. The survey showed that Sure Start Houses are generally run by the municipality (75%), NGOs (12%) and the Church/Order of Malta (13%). They are funded by EU projects (46%), government funding (46%) or partly from other projects and their own resources. In terms of location, 71% of the Houses are located in the center of the village, 15% in a segregated area, 9% in other poor area and 5% in other non-poor area. M. Medgyesi stressed the importance of the location selection, which affects the attendance of children from the most vulnerable communities (Figure 2). However, he added that placing a Sure Start House in a segregated area tends to isolate the Sure Start House from other services that tend to be located in the center of the village. He underlined the need to find the best balance possible for given localities.

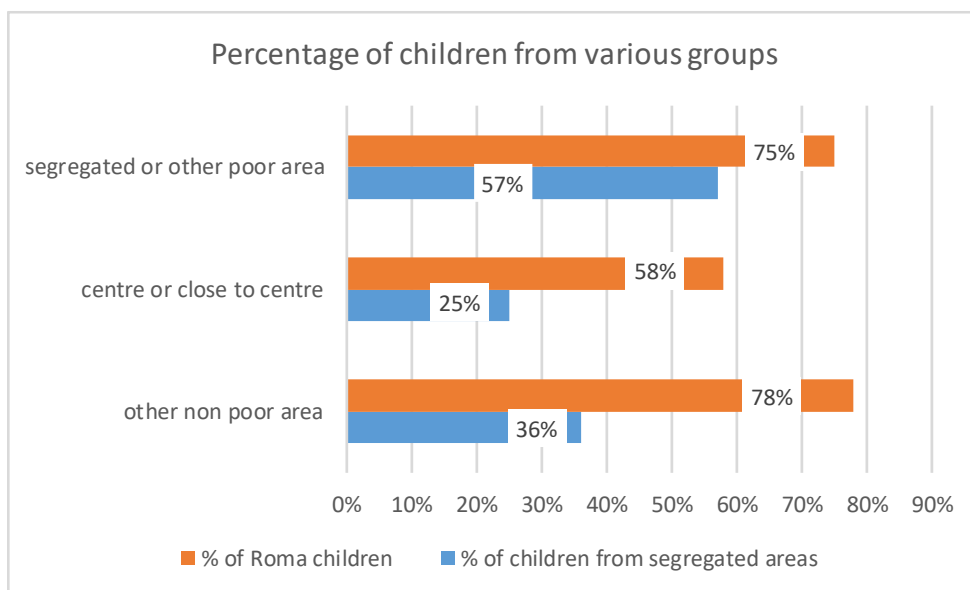


Figure 2: Attendance of children from various groups regarding the location of the Sure Start House. Source: Márton Medgyesi (Presented during the Conference on 8 November 2022)

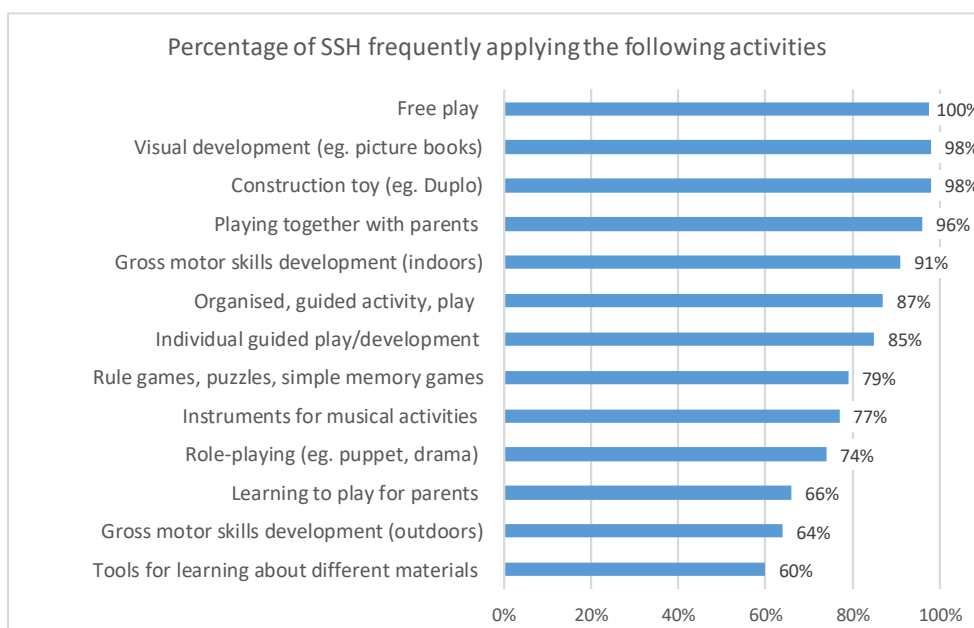


Figure 3: Percentage of Sure Start Houses frequently applying certain types of activities. Source: Márton Medgyesi (Presented during the Conference on 8 November 2022)

Several measures and activities mentioned above are already operated by various organisations or projects in Slovakia. The topic of health in early childhood was addressed at the conference by [Healthy Regions](#) organization and [ACEC](#) association. The latter presented the [Mission 1000 project](#), which focuses on the first crucial 1000 days since the conception of the child. They provide a postnatal care directly in hospitals through the so-called [Midwives \(Babice\)](#), who help to overcome the language barrier, help improving parenting skills and increase the health literacy of parents. Experiences directly from the field were shared by the Midwives themselves, who highlighted the gratitude of Roma mothers and their will to change their lives for the better.

Healthy Regions are active both in hospitals and in the field. Their [Health Support Assistants](#) working in the context of early childhood care educate parents about mandatory preventive check-ups and try to improve the existing cooperation with pediatricians. One of the serious problems that they notice is a low number of checkups and screenings carried out on one-year-old children, or the lack of involvement of people with basic education and parents from excluded communities in the topic of early care.

A professional point of view on the topic of health was provided by Dr. **Olga Matúšková** from the Therapeutic Education Department, National Institute of Children's Diseases and the Committee for Early Childhood Prevention of the Government Council for Mental Health. She provided a scientific perspective on the acquired behavior forms of children who cope with a challenging environment this way and, as a consequence of the toxic stress, they do not manage to reach their developmental potential. She emphasized that the best help for these children are empowered and informed families. They need to "get the right type and the right form of care provided in the right place, at the right time, and by the right person." At the end of her speech she provided recommendations that should be followed when transitioning early childhood care to a systematic measure.

Pavel Hrica from the organization [Way Out \(Cesta von\)](#) shared his experience with the [Omama](#) project which, like the Sure Start Houses, provides a targeted early childhood development care, tailored to the age of the child, with the presence of parents in the home environment. Mr. Hrica also expressed the urgent need to implement these types of projects into a systematic level while proposing recommendations for the state. The state should not carry out the interventions itself, but it should **set the stage** (goals, rules, minimum standards), **ensure a quality selection of employees, cover the costs, and check the results and impacts.**

Gabriela Hanisek Salová, director of the kindergarten in the village of Raslavice, shared her experience with the national project [PRIM II](#), which is aimed at children aged 3-6 and serves to cover the period before they start school. She highlighted the importance of the PRIM II project that helps creating an inclusive environment for children, employs primarily Roma men and women from the community and provides school assistants who are indispensable in the educational process.

Ms. Hanisek Salová also shared her positive experience with the [Aflatot](#) social and financial literacy methodology, which was further explained by Jana Dravecká from the [Open Society Foundation](#). She also shared the alarming results of the REYN network research study, according to which up to 90% of children from the research sample did not have access to quality early childhood services. She also introduced the [First Years First Priority](#) campaign, which aims to raise awareness of children's rights and ensure that early childhood development is at the forefront of policy priorities. She concluded her speech by inviting the organisations to join the campaign and form a broader coalition of organisations advocating for equal access to early childhood care.

Vladislav Matej from the [SOCIA](#) foundation defined clear requirements and expectations from the **early childhood care assistants** (qualification requirements, staff training, supervision and mentoring) and shared concrete ideas of proposals that could be implemented in the Act on Social Services. Finally, he discussed whether the early childhood care should be provided as a mainstream



service or as a service targeted at a clearly defined group.

As the theme of the conference was a **systematic approach to early childhood care in Slovakia**, the inputs from the representatives of the present ministries were indispensable too. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Slovak Republic reported on existing and planned investments, tools and services necessary to help families in need. State Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family **Soňa Gaborčáková** highlighted the introduction of the [Children's Groups](#) service to support a work-life balance of families, or the adoption of the [National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Early Care Services for 2022-2030](#). Its vision and goals were subsequently presented by **Alexandra Bublášová** from the Ministry of Labour.

State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport **Slavomír Partila** said that in addition to financial support, a cooperation with families and political consensus also play a key role in the provision of early childhood care. He agreed that the current state of early childhood care appears to be non-ideal, unevenly distributed in the regions and not funded enough. However, he highlighted the importance of the above-mentioned [National Strategy](#) and stated the achievements of the Ministry of Education, such as the introduction of [compulsory pre-primary education](#), the [transformation of the counselling system in education](#) starting from 1 January 2023 and the [grant scheme](#) to support the provision of early childhood care to children aged 0-6 years, particularly from MRC and generational poverty backgrounds (following the [Component 6 of the Recovery and Resilience Plan](#)).

**Kálmán Petőcz**, Director General of the National and Lifelong Learning Section at the Ministry of Education, stressed the need for a complex approach towards early childhood care, strategic thinking, and EU involvement. He highlighted the importance of the [Call for Support of Early Childhood Education and Care Programmes](#) for MRC children aged 0-3 as an important step towards their legal right to education in the future.

All representatives from the ministries agreed that providing a quality early childhood care today will help reduce our current problems in the future. They also expressed a willingness to strengthen their collaboration and a hope that the discussion on early childhood care will not fade out after this conference ends. As the guests from neighboring Hungary said, implementing the early childhood care into legislation and making it a stable part of the system will take some time, but achieving the desired result is not impossible. However, it will have to be preceded by experience gathering, negotiations and, last but not least, political will.

In his final speech, the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities Ján Hero expressed his gratitude to the ministerial representatives for their interest in the topic. He encouraged the participants to maintain the cooperation and stressed the importance of preserving the already existing "know-how" of the organizations and the need to create a common platform that would contribute to a systematic approach to early childhood care in Slovakia. As he concluded, "Today we are at the beginning of building a bridge that we may cross in 20 years, but our effort will result in a strong generation of capable and independent individuals."



## Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusions and recommendations for the systematic approach to early childhood care that emerged from the conference were:

- to ensure a sustainable form of funding (a combination of state budget and EU resources);
- to ensure a stable and long-term funding of early childhood care policies;
- to invest into awareness about early prevention among families;
- to prioritize long-term social and financial benefits over the short-term savings;
- to put together an overview of early childhood care providers, their activities and availability in the regions;
- to create a networking platform to share experiences and ensure a continuous communication between the stakeholders in the topic;
- to adopt a complex approach to early childhood care provision, related more to the level of risk than to ethnicity;
- to involve relevant parties in the development of Action plans for the [National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Early Care Services](#), and to implement activities with a direct positive impact on the target group and with reasonable financial allocations;
- strategic and long-term thinking in the context of the conception of policies and interventions;
- in the light of current the scientific knowledge on the negative impacts of the absence of appropriate early care, to raise awareness and commitment of state institutions in this area.