SELF-ADVOCACY TO HEALTHY CHANGES
Empowering Children and Young People With Disabilities to Improve Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect
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This publication is a report on the activities carried out by children and young people from the Club for Healthy Changes within the project “Empowering Children and Young People With Disabilities to Improve Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect”. The project lasted for 20 months – from June 2014 to January 2016. The project is about helping children and young people understand what abuse and neglect is and how they should behave in situations where abuse or neglect happen. The professionals who work with children and young people were also trained in order to provide better protection for children with disabilities when they find themselves in such a situation.

This project has helped children and young people who have participated in it to speak on topics such as child abuse and neglect, as well as on topics that they recognise as important.

During this project, children and young people have learned that their opinions matter, and that there are people who are willing to listen to them. They learned a lot about protection from abuse and neglect, and they shared their knowledge with:

- people of their own age,
• professionals whose job is to look after the needs of children and young people with intellectual disabilities,
• politicians whose job is to see that their rights are achieved,
• lots of other people.
WHO MADE THIS PUBLICATION?

This publication was prepared by the members of the Club for Healthy Changes with the support of the Child Rights Centre, the international children’s charity Lumos and the Centre for Social Preventive Activities GRiG.
WHO WE ARE?

✓ The **Club** for Healthy Changes is for children and young people with disabilities who need additional support and assistance in daily living or in certain situations. This might be assistance in learning, training to be more successful at work, support to demand their own rights and support to participate in various events and public actions.

✓ At the **Club for Healthy Changes**, children and young people can

- socialise,
- learn,
- help and support each other,
- actively participate in life of the local community/city.
Members of our club have many differences! These can be:

- gender,
- age,
- skin tone,
- religion,
- schools attended,
- jobs they want,
- the place where they live

For example, some of us live in institutions for children without parental care, others live on the streets, and some in families.

*We have learned that even though we are all different we have equal rights, we can support each other and that together we are stronger!*
Our club was founded in 2012 and it brings together more than 40 children and young people who actively participate in various activities. Through these activities we have included several hundred of our peers, their parents, teachers and educators. With all of them we have discussed abuse and neglect. In addition to these activities, we also organise outings to the cinema, theatre, various sports activities, and we do everything that our peers do. We celebrate birthdays and holidays together.

At the meetings of the Club we all listen and help each other and we empower ourselves to recognise various forms of abuse and neglect and how to protect ourselves.

We come to the Club:

- “To get knowledge and friends”
- “To learn from each other and share experience”
- “To become independent people”
Empowering Children and Young People With Disabilities to Improve Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect

- “To pick strength in order to become stronger”
- “We fight for more knowledge in our heads”
- “We fight for an advice, justice, rights and for more of us joining the Club”
- “I used to be shy. Now I talk more and spend more time with friends”
- “I like it here, I meet a lot of people at the Club, and now I began to meet people outside the Club”
- “At the Club I make friends, I get support, I have learned how to solve problems”
- “The Club helped me deal with the situation when someone insults me”
- “At the Club I have learned to pay more attention to other people’s feelings”

Beside us, the meetings are attended by the leaders of the Club, who are people we trust. They are the adults who work at the club. We can talk to them about different topics that are important and interesting to us. Leaders accompany us at the actions we participate in. Also, if we don’t want to say something in front of our friends from the Club, we can share it privately with any of the leaders.
Back at the beginning of the Club, when we were still gathering members, we set our own Club rules which we respect and which apply to everyone who comes to visit our Club. This is so we can have better meetings and be certain that we are all equally accepted and respected.

- “It is important for every person, child... for everyone to learn how to respect rules, how to respect each other, not to swear and always to be a harmony.”

In consultation with leaders we occasionally invite guests to our meetings. These are people with interesting life stories or professions. Once we brought the police inspector so we would find out as much information as we could about how to behave when we find ourselves in a situation where someone is suffering abuse or neglect.

At the meetings we talk about various topics and problems:

- About school,
- About the company of people of our own age,

- About our work/how to find a job,

- About our leisure time.
We often talked about abuse and neglect. We shared our thoughts with politicians, police officers, social workers, and other people and professionals. It was important to us that they hear what children and young people think about what abuse and neglect is and how children feel about this topic. We did this by participating in various activities and trainings.

- “The Club is a safe place where we share things that are good and bad. My friends and I have learned many things. I know that it is wrong when somebody hits you, it is a physical abuse and I don’t have to put up with it. No one has to tolerate it.”
- “I wish as many young people to learn that they can report violence, that they have right to do so”.

SELF-ADVOCACY

There are situations in which rights of the children with disabilities are violated. When this happens, often other people make decisions without including us. This is especially important when we talk about the right to be protected from abuse and neglect. People who are abused or neglected often don’t recognise these situations, keeping silent and often thinking that they are to blame for what happens to them. Therefore a self-advocacy is very important to us and we learn it in the Club for Healthy Changes. This means that we learn and practice to represent ourselves, to say what we need and seek our rights, to say what we think and decide about issues related to our lives.

- “It was cool when we went to visit Ombudsman, I never thought we could go visit politicians and tell them what we need. I would like us to talk more with politicians because if we speak more to them they might do something for us.”

- “When we self-advocate we fight for ourselves.”

- “We are able to talk to someone about our problems.”

Since the Club was started, we were taught to recognise abuse and neglect, and how to react and protect ourselves in these situations. We do this through the Club meetings where we talk about what kinds of abuse exist, to whom and where it can happen and to whom we can turn for help. We exchange experiences, and encourage and support one another.

- For example, a member of the club has experienced harassment on the street. She was approached by boys who said things that frightened her.
They also called her names, and then stole her phone. As our member knew that their behavior was wrong, with the support of friends from the Club she went to the police and gave a statement (filed a complaint) about what happened.

As we have learned to recognise abuse and neglect and how to react, we try to convey our knowledge to our peers through workshops, performances and activities that we organise.

- We made a play about abuse of a girl with intellectual disabilities on the bus. It is the story of a member of our Club. The show was performed in front of young people from the Home for children without parental care “Drinka Pavlovic,” who have intellectual disabilities. In the show we demonstrated how we should behave towards people who need our support.
We are especially proud of the book that we have made “NOBODY IS ALLOWED TO HARM YOU” which is intended for children and young people in order to help them understand what abuse and neglect is, and to learn how to react if they find themselves in such situations. In this we received help from the Child Rights Centre, the international children’s charity Lumos and the Centre for Social Preventive Activities GRiG. The book is translated in Braille so that blind people can read it.
In order for more children to know about this book, we have organised a promotion to which we have invited many participants. We have been preparing for this for a long time.

- “It was important to us that the promotion went well, that we don’t get nervous or embarrassed”.
At the promotion there were a lot of children and young people who liked our book. During the promotion together we painted canvases with messages dedicated to our peers, politicians and other community members, that showed how we feel when we see or suffer violence and how much it matters. We also introduced these
Public actions that we have organised and participated in

We have organised and participated in 18 public actions where in different ways we presented why it is important for young people with disabilities to speak for themselves about protection from abuse and neglect.

Here we will mention only some of them.

We marked the 20th November, the day that the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Together with other groups of children and young people from across Serbia we reminded decision makers of the key findings from the Report on the implementation of child rights in our country, which was prepared by the children and young people. There were also talks about the children/young people who live on the streets. This was particularly important because some of us fear that we could end up on the street if we don’t now fight for our rights.
In June 2015, together with our friends from the Children’s Information Cultural Service DX (a group of primary and secondary school children who are active at the Child Rights Centre), we participated in the action “What the children and young people of Belgrade need.” We collected opinions of our peers from primary and secondary schools in Belgrade about what they think that the most important needs of our generation are, particularly at the local community level. We collected opinions related to children’s rights and delivered them to the City of Belgrade Council for Child Rights, which is led by the Mayor. These suggestions should contribute to the creation of the future policy of the City of Belgrade towards children.

To mark the 10th December – Day of Human Rights – we have participated in a conference organised by the Youth Panel of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF in Serbia. The conference was related to child participation and there we
presented the work of our Club and activities in relation to the topic of the protection of children from abuse and neglect.

✔ Together with our peers from the Children’s Information Cultural Service DX we marked 19th November – World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse. We organised a panel discussion where we presented some different ways to recognise abuse and neglect and how young people should react if they are in a situation where abuse or neglect happens. During the panel discussion we presented results of the survey on how children and young people see their role in the protection of children from abuse and what they think the state, local community and school could do on the matter.
In addition to everything mentioned above we also:

✓ Participated of the first humanitarian sports bazaar where we joined other associations people who were collecting money to help the school “Radivoj Popovic” in Zemun, which is for children with disabilities. Young people who go to this school are mostly those with hearing impairments and autistic children. We met many celebrities and we talked with them.
Participated in an event organised by the Union of the Blind People of Serbia, on the occasion marking the 15th October – the International Day of the Blind. Then we presented our book “Nobody is Allowed to Harm You” and shared copies translated into Braille.

Participated in Children’s Week which is held every October, by having our own stand where we presented our materials and discussed our activities with all interested visitors.
Hosted a group “Respect our Rights”, along with our friends from the DX, which brings together children and young people in Pristina and Pec. The members of DX presented their activities and results, and we presented to the guests the project “Empowering children and young people with disabilities to improve responses to child abuse and neglect” and shared experiences and the challenges we are facing and how we overcome them. Young people from the group “Respect our Rights” introduced us with the results of their work.
Organised a socialising event through play and music with the youngest children in the House for infants, children and young people in Belgrade.

- “I have played with children. I took a little one by his hand and walked with him. Those children were happy because somebody played with them, I would love to play with them again.”
WE ARE CO-TRAINERS IN TRAININGS FOR PROFESSIONALS

We have participated as co-trainers in 10 trainings. The trainings were held across Serbia and they were intended for professionals (police officers, doctors, prosecutors, teachers, social workers, people from civil society organisations) who should provide protection and support to children and youth when abuse or neglect happen.
In order to become good co-trainers we first had to learn how to do it. We were helped in this by Shaun Webster and Catherine Carter at a training session held for us on 8 October 2014. Shaun and Catherine come from the organisation CHANGE from Great Britain, which promotes the participation of people with disabilities in training professionals. All Club members have undergone this training, because it is important that they all participate equally in the activities of our Club.
We conducted trainings together with adult trainers. At the beginning we set ground rules, talked about our experiences and needs, said how we think professionals should talk with us and discussed what bothers us and what helps. Our role at the training was to help professionals to better understand our side of the story. In addition, we talked about how we hang out at the Club, and how we made a book “Nobody is Allowed to Harm You”, which they especially liked.
• “At the trainings we have learned that there are people willing to listen to us when we feel low.”

• “For me it was interesting because I have met new people and I was a pair with my friend. It was a new experience and I had a stage fright, but it went away quickly.”

• “Being a co-trainer in Kragujevac was a new experience to me. Then I have learned to present the Club and myself. It was great meeting doctors, police officers, social workers, psychologists...”
"This is the first time I’ve spoken in public. I was a little nervous because I thought I would make a mistake, I even was a bit scared because you never know how the people sitting in the audience are. I was afraid that people do not understand me, that they would get me wrong. However, when I came out in front of people, I introduced myself, and it was easier than I thought. People who were present supported me. They applauded when I did something, respected the rules Stefan and I have set together with them. It was wonderful with Stefan, we worked together as a team, we respected each other. It was great, a working group invited me to sit with them and share some of my personal experiences that are related to the topic. I told them that I went through everything that was said in training. I met some new friends from Nis and they are very good, obedient, hardworking. I went to their association. When I arrived they welcomed us nicely, they showed us what they have, what they do, how they hang out. And they also have rules. We have presented our Club for Healthy Changes and invited them to visit us. That day I had a really good time and I felt like it was the best time ever and I would like to once again participate in such trainings. I would also add that it is not easy to be a trainer, it’s something that needs to be practiced.” (Emina)

“I must say that I liked everything. Both preparation for training and travelling to Novi Sad. I traveled to Novi Sad for the first time and the training was great. It was a beautiful day. First we joked on the bus, then we arrived there, we took a taxi to the hotel. We knew how to tell a taxi driver where to drive us. When we arrived at the hotel, everything was very nice, we drank coffee and we were greeted by Veronika and Dara. They were good to us. I had the small jitters when I saw that there were there people with cameras, but they quickly left. There was a lot of people and the stage fright made my hands shake, and only when we finished it stopped a little. I was afraid people would laugh at us because I do not speak very well. I was surprised when they gave us a big applause. While we were co-trainers it was nice, Marija and I, we got along fine. When I forgot to say something Marija continued and I helped her when she stopped. It was difficult to present all well in front of so many people. But I think we did a good job because we got a big round of applause. We handed out flyers and I wore a T-shirt with the image of our Club that I drew. I would like to be co-trainer again, because it would be easier now, I am now better prepared.” (Borislav)
“It was great, nice, fine in Palic. Because of training sessions primarily because you can learn a lot from these people, these experts. I like what is being done about halting violence against children. Although there are stories in the media about this, the violence does not stop. I’m glad they gave me the chance to show the experience gained. The first time I had a bit of stage fright, I hope to have a chance some other time because I think I would be better next time telling my experience. You must have patience mentally and physically in order to be a trainer. You should know what you’re doing. When I got there, and when I traveled I only thought about how to introduce myself and the Club as well as the rules. There was a stage fright because I’m doing this the first time, and everyone has it – both an actor and a singer. Of course, I was glad because I did not see any reaction from them that would make me feel bad. They listened to me, they had the patience to see two young people who came to this training and to hear their experiences. I wanted to say a lot, but I did not... and I wanted to raise my hand several times because my friends were in everything what is being talked about, including me when my dad was an alcoholic.” (Tebor)

“The trip to Vranje was a little tiring, long. But besides that it was interesting. From conductor on the bus we get really funny nicknames (boss and guys). The leader of the Club and I drank medication for vomiting and we were not sick. The training was better than the first time. Because I have already participated and prepared with the leader of the Club a few days before the training, I didn’t have a big stage fright. Just a little, I guess you all have it. As a partner Ivan was good, both during the trip and in the training. It was nice to work again with Veronika and Dara. During the training we handed out our flyers and brochures, people have asked us whether we have more of them. They loved it. I am happy. I thought I can not stand the journey, but I did it, I didn’t get sick and I was good at the training” (Djulja)
“I have to admit that in the first raining I was a little nervous at first, but it was little frightening which made my palms sweaty, which passed when we finished our part. Gorica helped me a lot, and when I was confused, she finished my words.

At my second training I wasn’t nervous. We were well prepared by our leader of the Club. Djulja was perfect, everything she said is what I would’ve said. I think we are a good team. We shared our flyers and brochures. Veronika and Dara were really great, I liked how they teach and talk nicely. All in all I thought it was very nice, great.” (Ivan)

“It was very nice in Palic. It was my first time there. We talked about people, how they should be helped and protected. It was difficult for me to speak up about what bothers me and about my life in the Home, in front of all these unknown people... I wanted to say that I was having a hard time but, I don’t know, I didn’t want them to ask me questions about it. I always have stage fright and it is difficult for me to talk in front of many unknown people. Although I wanted to say it, I forgot it in a moment. That’s why it meant a lot that Tebor was with me, he helped me a lot...” (Zoka)

“When I stepped out to introduce myself, I had a small stage fright, but then it passed. I felt confused in the beginning of the training, but later I felt much better. Ivan and I are a good team. At the time I was a little confused, he helped me, and then I continued by myself. All in all, it is great to be a co-trainer and mingle with the Dara and Veronika who are totally “cool”. At the training I liked it that there were plenty of people.” (Gorica)
“That was my first experience in a role of a co-trainer. I am glad that I was a member of such a project because in the future I would like to deal with these work. This is not the end but only the beginning. I felt fantastic in this role. I had a small positive stage fright, which did not affected the outcome much. The ambiance was fantastic. In the role of co-trainer was as I had expected. I expected to succeed in this, I was a little scared when I heard that I should participate and did not know whether I’ll be able to pull it off. But at the rehearsals the leaders of the Club trusted me and gave me hope that I can do it. I learned that people with disabilities need help and that I am ready to help them. I learned how to conduct workshops, so that one day I might be in Dara’s and Veronika’s place. As I was talking about my experience, I cried a little because it was not easy to tell my experience. I’m glad I met new people at this seminar and I learned a very important lesson – how to be human. It is not easy to be a co-trainer because you have to pass education, but maybe one day I can be a trainer. This is a new experience. I have felt empowered and it was not hard to be co-trainer. I would recommend everyone to try it. I learned how to set and follow the rules that you bring by yourself. I learned that rules should be made in agreement with the group. It is not easy to be a co-trainer if you do not have someone else that can help you to remember. This can help me because I learned to have a better communication and presentation to other people and associations. I have a better culture of expression and I learned to present myself in the best possible light.” (Samir)
NATIONAL WORKING GROUP

✓ Members of our Club participated in the National Working Group which produced a document that will help professionals to provide better protection to children and young people with disabilities when they find themselves in a situation of abuse or neglect.

- “It wasn’t difficult for us to participate in this meeting, no one had to remind us. We remembered when we should go by ourselves. It is nice when they invite us and ask for our opinion.” – Djulja and Samir
THEY SAID ABOUT THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE...

- “Club for Healthy Changes help young people in the process of getting independent, contributing youth to become more sure of themselves and their abilities.” (Maja Ostojic, Educator in the Institution for children without parental care)

- “I have often had occasion to play guitar for others, but the way I play and how much creativity will enter into playing, depends on the energy that the audience bring. I will not describe how I felt at the Club while I was playing to the young people, but I’ll just say that I was very creative.” (Mirko Djukic, Music workshop facilitator)

- “Young people need to socialise and to have someone affirming them, but they do not find a valid support in the environment. Therefore, the existence of the youth club is of paramount importance, primarily for persons who are developing, but also for the wider community. To be seen, accepted by the peers, to share personal experience and integrate it, without labeling or judging, that is my impression of the club for young people and represents an important link in the development of every young man.” (Ana Zimonjic, Psychologist in the school “Vozd”)

- “It was inspiring to watch the children and young people openly and willingly speak for themselves, and the name of all children and young people about the rights and issues which are not sufficiently spoken of. I believe that this brochure will be a useful guide for all professionals in the process of better understanding of the difficulties and challenges that children and young people face.” (Dragana Kalinic, Deputy Principal of the elementary school “Aleksa Santic”)

- “Listening to them, so full of positive energy and strength, talk about their problems and difficulties encountered, helped me to never lose hope and the will, even in the most difficult moments! Thank you for that important lesson!” (Todor Cvetkovic, High School Sophomore Year Pupil, Fifth Belgrade Gymnasium)

- “It was a real challenge to respond to very serious questions by these young people. Among them there is no faking.” (Mila Vukovic Jovanovic, Head in the Centre for Protection of Infants, Children and Youth)
ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS THAT HELPED US...

The Child Rights Centre
(www.cpd.org.rs) is an organisation that works to help all children in the Republic of Serbia enjoy their rights. This is achieved by: training professionals, organising professional meetings and conferences, conducting research, monitoring and reporting on the rights of the child, direct work with children and youth in order to empower them to participate in community life. To achieve its goals the Centre cooperates with numerous international and national organisations, government agencies, institutions, departments, as well as with children and young people. What is very important to this organisation is informing the general public about how children today and whether their rights are respected.

The international children’s charity Lumos
(www.wearelumos.org) works to provide assistance to eight million children worldwide who are separated from their parents and living in institutions. Lumos cooperates with the United Nations, the European Union, state governments, institutions, staff, children and families. Lumos tries to ensure that all children are allowed to grow up in their families and to engage in community life.

The Centre for Social Preventive Activities (GRiG)
(www.cspa-grig.org) is an association of professionals who particularly care for children and young people living in homes for children without parental care and in foster homes. GRiG supports young people, strives to meet their needs, advocate for their interests and supports them in the process of becoming independent. GRiG organises and runs several clubs for them, and one of these is the Club for Healthy Changes, which it leads together with the Child Rights Centre.
Words you might not know

**Institution** is a very large home. It can be for children or for adults. People are placed in institutions and cared for by carers. People in institutions are often separated from their families, friends and communities.

**Self-advocate** – someone who fights for their own rights – “Fighting to get my voice heard!” For people with intellectual disabilities, self-advocacy means that they can speak for themselves and make decisions relevant to their lives, either directly or with support.

**Professionals/Experts** – someone who knows a lot about certain subject.
**Equal rights** – everyone has the same rights. Children and young people with intellectual disabilities have the equal right to be included like everyone else.

**Project** – when people work together to improve something.

**Braille** – letters for blind people. This ‘alphabet’ is read by finger tips touching bumps on the paper.
Abuse – this is when somebody does or says something to someone which can hurt, trouble or frighten them.

Verbal violence – this is when someone hurts or intimidates you by something they say.
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