

Prevention of Drug Abuse in Petržalka

By Jana Štúrová, PhD

The fall of communism in Slovakia brought the country's residents a wealth of information, technology and art long inaccessible to them. However, the free flow across the borders also carried with it easy access to illegal drugs.

Concerned about the rising pressures on young people as Slovakia undergoes transition, a group of psychologists, teachers and activists in the community formed the Aid to Children at Risk Foundation in December 1994 to promote healthy lifestyles and minimize the threat of drug abuse among youth in the Petržalka. In partnership with Truman Medical Center in Kansas City, MO, we plan to develop community-based intervention strategies to improve the health status of Petržalka's population, with an emphasis on children and adolescents.

Petržalka, a district of Bratislava, is the most densely populated region of Slovakia, with more than 140,000 inhabitants concentrated in a small geographic area. The population has a large proportion of families with small children, and the socioeconomic level of most of the inhabitants is relatively low. In fact, nearly half of the children of Bratislava live in Petržalka. The majority of Petržalka's residents live in high-rise public housing developments without trees, playgrounds or sport centers. There is a perception that living in this district is undesirable; people don't have a feeling that this is really their home. While the suburbs have grown enormously in recent years, the number of shopping centers, hospitals, public health and transportation facilities, community centers, theaters, churches and schools being built has not kept pace with the population increase.

Bratislava--especially Petržalka--is known as a melting pot because people from all over Slovakia come here seeking job opportunities. Since 1989, however, unemployment among 15- to 20-year-olds has risen sharply, along with crime and juvenile delinquency. Truancy, depression and behavioral disorders are common among children and adolescents. Children as young as 12 are exposed to a variety of drugs, including marijuana, cocaine and heroin. Unlike in the United States, heroin is cheaper than cocaine in Slovakia and has quickly become the drug of choice among young people.

Because they have not been educated to deal with such problems, parents and teachers often feel a sense of helplessness when confronted with these issues. Upon learning that their children have become involved with drugs, many parents respond with panic and bewilderment.

Until the Foundation was created, Petržalka had no therapeutic or educational institutions dealing with the problem of adolescent drug abuse. During the 1993-94 school year, psychologists and other professionals from the Pedagogic and Psychological Counseling Center No. 5 (PPCC) in Bratislava recognized the magnitude of the social problems faced by youth and began to sponsor regular seminars for teachers and advisers. For students in grades seven to nine, they organized workshops that include training in social skills and group interaction. Students learned how to recognize early symptoms of drug abuse, where to obtain accurate information about drugs and how to resist drugs.

These PPCC-sponsored activities led to the creation of the Aid to Children at Risk Foundation, which brings together parents, teachers and other citizens who are interested in helping to solve drug abuse problems. The Foundation uses many of the same techniques and activities developed at the PPCC. We have been working with more than 40 school classes in Petržalka.

Initially, the most difficult part of our work has been with teachers. Many are rigid and used to the old ways. Many teachers thought that drug dependent children should be locked up in jail.

By training teachers in the field of psychology, they can be equipped to help prevent drug addiction rather than ignore or punish children who are addicted to drugs.

The Foundation has established a network of teachers who volunteered to help educate youth about the dangers of drug abuse. Under an agreement with the Bratislava District School Office, these teachers receive regular training at seminars organized by the Foundation.

The real benefit the Foundation brings is helping people mobilize the wealth of resources inside themselves. Some residents of Petržalka have become victims of apathy, they've lost hope. But I believe that by teaching children that they possess the strength to overcome the hopelessness they feel that their lives can become better.

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Aid to Children at Risk Foundation

In addition to drug abuse prevention programs, the Foundation also sponsors the following projects:

- *Sex education and AIDS prevention.* This program provides children and adults with basic information on healthy sexual behavior and attitudes. The Foundation sponsors workshops and discussions for 12- to 15-year-old children, including a special group for mentally retarded children.
- *Project "Help Line."* The Foundation plans to establish a telephone help line for children and youth to prevent crisis situations (suicide, domestic violence, rape, running away from home, etc.), and to provide basic information on drugs and AIDS to parents and other concerned citizens.
- *"Center of Social Prevention."* The center's goal is to support the healthy development of children with pathological behaviors and to foster a healthy family and school environment. Children will participate in three-week sessions comprised of individual, group and family therapy.
- *Dissemination of educational materials.* The Foundation will develop and distribute posters, brochures and handouts to teachers, parents and children.

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