

FIFTEEN YEARS OF THE “STUDENTS FOR CHILDREN” PROGRAM: TRAUMA-INFORMED VOLUNTEERISM AND INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION IN CHILD PROTECTION

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Abstract: The *Students for Children* program has been running for more than 15 years in Hungary, offering university students an opportunity to engage in child protection work through a trauma-informed, interdisciplinary approach. The program serves a dual purpose: supporting children in specialized care while equipping students with practical experience in working with vulnerable populations. Through structured classroom training, supervised volunteer work, and collaborative partnerships with child protection institutions, the program fosters professional preparedness, ethical engagement, and social responsibility. This paper explores the program’s development, key guidelines, and bridging function of linking disciplines, institutions, and international networks to strengthen child welfare efforts. Insights from student testimonials and micro-research findings illustrate the program’s impact, highlighting its role in promoting trauma-informed care, emotional safety, and sustainable professional engagement.

Keywords: child protection, volunteer program, trauma-informed care, interdisciplinary education, university student engagement, foster care support

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In 2020, in connection with the 34th FICE Congress, we first reported on the *Students for Children Volunteer Program* (hereinafter: Students for Children), which has been operating in Hungary for over 15 years. As we mentioned in our first article (Kulcsár et al., 2020), the two primary aims of Students for Children are to support and assist children in specialized child protection care, and to provide university students with an opportunity to become familiar with a potential target group of their future professional work. In addition, by functioning as both a theoretical and a practical course that is open to students from every academic field across the university, it also prepares future professionals for high-quality client engagement, equipping them with skills for collaboration and coordinated task-sharing. Each semester, Students for Children runs as a seminar with two main components: university-based classroom sessions and practical volunteer work in child protection institutions. Training is led by two lawyer-psychologists and one lawyer-coordinator. To date, nearly 450 students have participated in the volunteer initiative.

The program's development is supported by external training sessions provided by professional organizations that covering topics such as communication skills development and abuse prevention; and micro-research projects that assessed the impact of the program on the student volunteer community. Finally, volunteers provide weekly feedback on their work, which is collectively processed during classroom-based group supervision sessions, conducted in adherence to group confidentiality principles.

The present study aims to outline the key guidelines based on the principles introduced in our previous paper (Kulcsár et al., 2020), with a particular focus on integrating a trauma-informed approach into the program. It expands on prior findings by incorporating students' experiences, gathered through a micro-research study and student-authored experience summaries. We discuss the program's bridging function, which not only connects students across disciplines but also seeks to facilitate local collaboration among institutions and professionals involved in child protection.

Volunteering Ethics and Experiential Learning

Child-focused volunteer programs, particularly those involving travelling volunteers in developing countries, have faced numerous criticisms (Richter & Norman, 2010). As Richter and Norman (2010) pointed out, these programs are often short-term and primarily centered on the volunteers themselves. Volunteers may not receive adequate preparation for working with children or for understanding their situations, nor are they consistently provided with ongoing support, supervision, and professional guidance. Such "voluntourism" results in only brief engagements with children, which can increase their emotional vulnerability. Projects in which volunteers work with children are the most popular form of voluntourism; however, preparing and implementing such projects require special caution, the lack of which can easily lead to harm to the physical and mental well-being of the children involved (van Doore et al., 2023). One particularly important basic rule is that the longer the volunteers stay, and the better their experiences match the needs of the organization, the more meaningfully can the projects be designed (Czarnecki et al., 2015).

The ethics of volunteering to work with children — particularly those in disadvantaged contexts — are therefore the subject of ongoing debate, largely because well-intentioned volunteers can unknowingly reinforce oppressive structures (Amigo et al., 2022). In addition to concerns about inadequate skills, scholars highlight issues such as mismatched expectations, an overreliance on volunteer enthusiasm, the reinforcement of stereotypes, the creation of dependency, and the marginalization of host communities' needs (Hechenberger, 2019). Although volunteer mobility may entail adverse consequences, it also holds the potential to generate sustainable benefits for all parties involved, provided it is implemented responsibly and ethically. However, this presupposes adequate preparation, as well as continuous monitoring and feedback throughout the period of volunteering. Hammersley (2016), in referring to Dewey (1966), stated that learning through volunteering is a process that begins well before, and extends well beyond, the engagement experience itself. The potential benefits of the experience for volunteers can, therefore, be better supported if they are well prepared for the interaction.

Volunteering, nevertheless, can bring many benefits as well. From the perspective of the host community, volunteering can increase understanding of both the volunteer and the hosts, increase civic engagement, and offer material support to the disadvantaged (Hechenberger, 2019). From the perspective of the volunteers, it can result in experiential learning. John Dewey, an expert on experiential learning identified this type of learning as a developmental process through which purposeful action is generated through the interaction of impulses, observations, knowledge and reflection, and even an “organic connection between education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1955, p. 12, cited by Amigo et al., 2022, p. 185). Amigo and colleagues (2022) even made the proposal that the student can act as a catalyst for this emancipatory perspective, and that critical reflection is necessary to achieve this outcome.

In our program, we consciously pay careful attention to these aspects as we must never lose sight of the child's best interest, one of the core principles of child protection. Guided by this principle, the training places special emphasis on a trauma-informed approach, collaboration, the development of mentalization skills, and equity.

The Systemic Framework of the Volunteer Program

Our volunteer program operates against the background of the Hungarian child protection system and, indirectly, against the families from which children are placed into state care. In most cases, these families are, in most cases, so-called “multi-problem families”, as defined by Herczog (2021):

Multi-problem families are those in which family members struggle with chronic, prolonged, or permanent, as well as multigenerational and inherited, complex social, economic, and psychosocial difficulties. They rarely request or accept help and may even reject it; for this reason, they are sometimes referred to as “hard to reach”.

In order for the participants of our program to keep the child's best interests in mind, they must understand what it means to be socialized in a multi-problem family; the program considers it essential that the volunteers understand these families' circumstances and the complexities underlying the children's behaviors.

In 2020, we outlined the most pressing challenges of the Hungarian child protection services (Kulcsár et al., 2020), here we would only like to refer back to the issues of labor shortages, inadequately trained professionals, high turnover, and the excessive workload of caretakers, all of which deprive children of receiving individual quality attention.

Guiding Principles

A key value and the objective of our program is to attract volunteers from multiple fields of study, to ensure that students discuss and share various professional perspectives, paradigms, approaches, and solutions. Given the diversity of the challenges involved, our program cannot function without clearly defined principles and behavioral guidelines. In a previous article (Kulcsár et al., 2020), we introduced the program's fundamental principles: causing no harm; building trust through reliability, honesty, and transparency; developing a healthy mentor–mentee relationship through interactive engagement; empowering children by fostering hope for their future with positive yet realistic perspectives; respecting boundaries; reporting concerns in cases of danger; and providing emotional support to volunteers. In the present article, we aim to summarize the specific behavioral guidelines that give practical meaning to these principles and help prepare our volunteers for their work. In our previous summary, we focused on the fundamental operational principles of the program without elaborating on the actual guidelines. Over the past years, our guidelines have undergone significant development, primarily through the introduction of a trauma-informed approach, which we discuss here in detail.

Principles for Students Working With Children

Respect for Human Dignity

Children in foster care usually come from neglectful or abusive family backgrounds, as this is one of the primary reasons for their placement in care. Many of them have had limited opportunities for basic socialization and may lack fundamental manners or practical skills. As a result of past negative and often traumatic experiences, their behavior may sometimes be aggressive or provoke strong reactions in others.

Despite these challenges, it is essential to respect the dignity of every child. Volunteers must never treat children in a humiliating or demeaning manner, nor should they engage in verbal or physical aggression or intimidation. This does not mean, however, that setting boundaries and establishing clear rules and expectations for the children is unimportant.

Equal Treatment

Equal treatment within the program can be understood in both legal and psychological terms. Legally, it is strictly prohibited to discriminate against children based on protected characteristics as defined by international and national anti-discrimination laws. These include gender, race, ethnicity, social origin, genetic traits, language, religion or belief, political or other opinions, national minority status, financial situation, birth, disability, age, and sexual orientation. On a practical level, equal treatment also means ensuring that no child feels excluded or neglected in the presence of a volunteer. Volunteers should strive to include all children in activities and group interactions.

Confidentiality

Through their volunteer work, students may gain access to sensitive personal information about the children. Conversations with the children or their caregivers may reveal details about their background, biological family, physical or mental health, and other private matters. Not only are such details considered legally sensitive and not to be shared, but violating confidentiality can also undermine the trust-based relationship between volunteers and children. There is, however, one exception to confidentiality: if a volunteer learns of a situation where a child's physical, moral, or emotional development is at risk, they must act as part of the child protection system. In such cases, the volunteer must report their concerns to their supervisor or other responsible adult.

Trauma-Informed Approach for Children

Our newest guideline, the trauma-informed approach, has become essential in working with children in child protection services. This principle encompasses multiple key elements. Therefore, we will examine this specific principle in more detail here.

Children who enter the child protection system have often experienced significant trauma, such as physical and emotional neglect or abuse within their families. Additionally, being removed from their families constitutes another traumatic event: they lose familiar relationships and environments, leading to instability and uncertainty in their lives. Traumatized children frequently develop survival strategies that, in the long term, hinder attachment, emotional regulation, and social integration. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial to effectively supporting affected children. If the system fails to provide adequate support, the impact of trauma may intensify and significantly impede their development over time (Bányai, 2013).

Therefore, it is therefore essential that professionals and volunteers working with these children, including students in the Students for Children program, adopt a trauma-informed approach in their volunteer work. The principles of trauma-informed care ensure that individuals receiving support feel both physically and emotionally safe. Within the child protection system, these principles include the following: physical and emotional safety, collaboration and mutuality, trust and transparency, a focus on strengths and resilience, community support, and sensitivity to

the needs of minority groups (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014)

Ensuring physical and emotional safety: The primary goal of this principle is to create an environment where traumatized children feel safe and do not have to live in a state of constant vigilance and anxiety. Communication should be friendly, supportive, and clear. Institutions must maintain trust, and actions should align with spoken commitments. A trauma-informed environment must be free from violence, shaming, or any harmful behaviors. Confidentiality must be respected, and communication should be accessible, avoiding technical jargon.

Collaboration and mutuality: In a trauma-informed institution, children are not passive recipients of care. Instead, efforts should be made to strengthen their decision-making abilities and autonomy. By regaining control over certain aspects of their lives, children can experience a sense of empowerment, which supports their healing process. Therefore, institutions should strive to treat children as partners whenever it is appropriate to do so.

Trust and transparency: Trust between children and their caregivers is crucial for effective support. This requires clear and consistent rules, as well as transparent institutional operations. Respecting boundaries is key to creating a safe environment. Institutions should use clear and transparent communication to ensure that children understand their rights, the resources available to them, and the processes affecting them.

Focusing on strengths and resilience: Instead of emphasizing problems and deficiencies, trauma-informed institutions focus on children's strengths and resilience. The goal is to help them recognize the coping strategies they have used in the past and adapt or refine them for a healthier response in a new environment. This approach does not reinforce a victim identity but fosters active personal growth and independence. Strengthening these abilities supports children's later social roles and stabilizes their identity.

Providing community support: Trauma-informed organizations place great emphasis on ensuring that children belong to a supportive community in which they feel safe. Relationships with individuals who have had similar experiences can facilitate healing by providing hope and fostering self-confidence, as long as these connections remain safe. Such social networks providing community support enhance integration and contribute to successful societal adaptation.

Sensitivity to the needs of minority groups: Trauma-informed institutions acknowledge the specific needs of cultural, gender, and other minority groups. They reject outdated, exclusionary practices and create environments that respect individual and cultural differences. Special attention is given to addressing intergenerational trauma and its long-term effects.

The goal of the Students for Children program is to ensure that participating students understand and apply these principles in their work with children, even if these principles are not fully implemented within the child protection system itself. For this reason, it is crucial for volunteers to represent stability in these children's lives. This commitment is ensured in two ways:

1. Volunteers are expected to commit to the program for at least two academic semesters.
2. Volunteers should interact with children in a predictable manner, visiting at the same time each week. If a volunteer is unable to attend a scheduled session, they must inform the caregivers and children in advance.

Respecting Competence Boundaries and Safety Guidelines

Although volunteers are university students, they are not yet certified professionals. Therefore, they must not take on tasks that require specialized expertise. This does not mean that they cannot contribute meaningfully, but they should remain aware of the limits of their role. Safety is a priority, as volunteering may sometimes involve potentially risky situations. Volunteers must avoid placing themselves or the children in unsafe circumstances. They should be aware of when to seek help and whom to turn to in case of an emergency. If a volunteer notices a child is at risk, they must report it to their supervisor so that appropriate action can be taken in accordance with child protection laws.

Principles of Working With the Students and Operating the Program

Trauma-Informed Approach for Students

In order to ensure the mental well-being of the students, the program's accompanying seminar aims to provide them with firsthand experiences of the trauma-informed principles discussed above. Emotional safety is reinforced through debriefing discussions with supervisors; collaboration is encouraged by allowing students to implement their own ideas; trust and transparency are upheld through open communication; and empowerment is fostered by strengthening students' ability to engage in volunteer work. Community support is built through shared experiences with fellow volunteers, and sensitivity to minority groups is maintained through conscious and inclusive practices. By equipping students with a trauma-informed foundation, we aim to protect them from the harmful effects of secondary trauma while ensuring that they can effectively apply these principles in their work with children. However, these principles only gain true significance when students understand the behaviors and emotions of traumatized children within a trauma-informed framework. Therefore, in addition to promoting these principles, education is also a fundamental objective of the Students for Children program.

“Bottom-Up” Method and Partnership

From its inception, the course has followed a “bottom-up” approach, which — beyond providing a solid professional and theoretical foundation — actively involves university students in both the program's daily operations and its ongoing development, fostering an environment in

which students and instructors engage as equal partners. This engagement not only instils a sense of responsibility but also promotes students' creative and professional autonomy.

Building Bridges

In our program, we naturally recognize that promoting child protection and the enforcement of children's rights requires the involvement of numerous stakeholders. In our work, we strive to identify and connect with as many of these stakeholders as possible. Our program's bridge-building role focuses on fostering connections by expanding from our student community to broader societal groups. Beyond ensuring effective internal collaboration, we engage with regional child protection organizations, interdisciplinary networks, and international partners. Over the past 15 years, we have built professional relationships with numerous organizations, including SOS Children's Village and FICE.

University students outside the programme: Our primary goal is, of course, to create a genuine professional community among students from diverse fields and provide them with the opportunity to apply their varied expertise in child protection volunteer work. The primary venue for this knowledge transfer is weekly classroom sessions. Additionally, we encourage young people to spread this mindset and the knowledge they acquire within their own circles.

Institutions: In our volunteer program, there has been a consistent number of students enrolled every university semester, allowing us to maintain a reliable presence in the daily operations of the institutions visited by our students. This enables us to provide quick assistance in addressing issues — whether material or relational — that arise within the organizations by connecting the visited child protection institutions with experts, outside organizations, or other third parties. This may include legal support, assisting in the procurement of tools for the institution and children through grant applications, or ensuring participation in and organizing cultural programs.

Child protection roundtable: At the local level, we strive to participate regularly in professional communities dedicated to improving child protection, sharing our knowledge and experience to facilitate positive change. Accordingly, we are active members — and at times hosts — of the child protection roundtable, a dedicated group of child protection professionals in our city who meet once a month to discuss current issues in the field.

International connections: Our international relationships, particularly with the FICE organization, are of great importance. Although Hungary's current ties to FICE are limited, we were pleased to represent our country at the most recent conference in Split in the fall of 2024, where we presented the Students for Children child protection program.

Insights from Student Volunteers: What Do They Gain from the Program?

In our program, we place great importance on the opinions and feedback of our volunteers. In 2024, we sought to assess their evaluations through a micro-research study (Korinek, 2024) in which 38 former volunteers completed a brief questionnaire. They unanimously reported that the training they received in our program was highly beneficial. Nearly half of these volunteers have remained involved in child protection in their current profession or through ongoing volunteer work, and all stated that the program encourages social responsibility. Many also expressed a desire to motivate people in their own circles in order to promote similar volunteer activities.

Additionally, we provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences and insights with the academic community. We therefore asked two dedicated law students — who have been volunteers in our program for several years and co-led our workshop at the 35th FICE 35 conference in Split — to share, in their own words, why this program is important to them and what it offers. We summarize here the key themes emerging from their testimony, highlighting how the program fosters trauma-informed awareness, ethical volunteerism, and social responsibility.

Trust-Building and Emotional Engagement

The law students emphasized the deep emotional connections formed with children in state care, many of whom have experienced multiple traumas and attachment difficulties. Gaining the trust of these children is a gradual and fragile process, one built on consistency, honesty, and emotional availability:

During our regular weekly visits, we never make promises that we cannot keep. These meetings and opportunities help not only them but also us, in building a trusting relationship between us.

This principle of reliability directly supports trauma-informed care by creating predictable, safe relationships.

Attention and Reciprocity

A recurring theme in the student narratives is the significance of undivided attention. During weekly visits, volunteers focus entirely on the children — listening, playing, advising, and simply being present. Students reported that this attention is often reciprocated, with children expressing concern for their volunteer's well-being:

They repay our attention with theirs, and at such times, they inquire about us. [...] Their attention means a lot to us; it serves as feedback on the usefulness of our work.

This mutual care reflects a key trauma-informed value: restoring emotional reciprocity in relationships.

Shared Experiences and Co-Development

Engaging in activities such as crafts, theater visits, or skating outings helped build shared memories. The students described these moments as “unforgettable”, underscoring the reciprocal development that occurs between children and volunteers:

Thanks to the time spent with the children, it can be stated that we too develop and evolve alongside them. They teach us to view our lives differently, to tackle our fellow human beings in a new way, to be grateful, and to appreciate what we have.

Such moments reinforce the healing potential of joyful shared experiences.

Raising Awareness and Community Engagement

The law students’ testimony also highlighted how the program inspires civic engagement. A student-led charity initiative organized across three faculties successfully mobilized university peers for a common cause:

Through this event, we collected donations for children in specialized care and those at risk. The initiative reached many people, and we are proud to say that it concluded successfully.

The event illustrated the bridge-building function of the program — extending awareness beyond the volunteer group.

Professional Supervision and Peer Support

Weekly debriefings were frequently cited as crucial spaces for emotional processing, ethical reflection, and collective learning. These supervision sessions served to integrate student experiences within a trauma-informed framework:

During these meetings, we have the opportunity to discuss challenging life situations. Here, we not only receive appropriate professional support from our instructors, but we also provide each other with advice.

Structured peer–professional reflection strengthens both competence and confidence.

Long-Lasting Impact

Finally, the law students expressed a profound emotional attachment to the children they worked with, underscoring the depth and significance of the experience:

We get a lot and learn through the program, but the most important are the children we get to know. [...] Perhaps, on behalf of our fellow students, we can say that we will never forget these children and the moments we shared together.

These reflections affirm the dual benefit of the program: sustained impact for both the children and the student volunteers.

Conclusions

Based on a decade and a half of experience, it may now be stated that the Students for Children program constitutes a complex, trauma-informed, interdisciplinary, university initiative that helps to create bridges to various stakeholders within the child protection system and that may exert long-term positive effects on both children in care and participating university students.

For children living in out-of-home care, the program is designed to offer safe, regular, and predictable interactions — conditions that are widely acknowledged as fundamental to post-trauma recovery (Bányai, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014). The consistent presence of student volunteers is aimed at fostering emotional security, facilitating the partial restoration of attachment, and supporting the development of social skills.

For student volunteers, the program offers valuable hands-on experience with one of the most vulnerable client groups: children raised without parental care. According to the findings of a recent micro-research study (Korinek, 2024), this experience may influence students' career choices, shape their professional attitudes, and contribute to their personal growth.

A key innovation of the program is the application of trauma-informed principles not only as a curricular component but also as an operational framework. This dual-level integration may enable students to remain attentive to both the needs of the children and their own emotional capacity, supported by structured supervision.

Testimony from student participants suggested that weekly presence, keeping promises, offering unconditional attention, and forming authentic connections represent core values that may contribute to the gradual rebuilding of trust among traumatized children. The emotional significance of shared experiences — whether during structured activities or informal play — may remain deeply impactful for both children and students alike.

The program's bridge-building role — linking students, institutions, research, and professional fields — may serve as a model for how universities can actively fulfil a social responsibility by contributing in tangible ways to the development of national child protection systems.

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