

# Family-Oriented Approach

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL WELFARE PRACTICES APPLIED IN GDYNIA



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# Table of Contents

- 1 ▶ **Introduction** | MICHAŁ GUĆ, Vice-President of the City of Gdynia
- 2 ▶ **The Family First** | FRANCISZEK BRONK, Deputy Director of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre
- 4 ▶ **Gdynia: an Exceptionally Family-Friendly City** | BEATA SZADZIUL, Plenipotentiary of the President of Gdynia in Charge of Family Affairs
- 8 ▶ **Tailor-Made Social Welfare – On Three Levels** | JAROSŁAW JÓZEFczyk, Deputy Director of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre
- 13 ▶ **Trust Me, I'm a Family Assistant** | MAGDALENA GAJEWSKA, Deputy Manager of the Social Welfare Development Team, MARTA KONDRACIUK, Family Assistant, and MONIKA KSIĘŻOPOLSKA, Family Division Coordinator at the Neighbourhood Social Welfare Centre No. 2
- 16 ▶ **Pregnancy and Alcohol Do Not Go Hand in Hand** | MIROSŁAWA JEZIOR, Director of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre
- 18 ▶ **Together Against Violence** | HANNA ŻÓŁKOŚ-MARGOŃSKA, Chair of the Interdisciplinary Team in Gdynia, Manager of the Domestic Violence Prevention Team
- 20 ▶ **Children in the Support Network** | PRZEMYSŁAW LEBIEDZIŃSKI, Director of the K. Lisiecki "Dziadek" Specialist Facility Team
- 22 ▶ **Raise Children in Homes, Not Institutions** | ZUZANNA ŁACZYŃSKA-STEC, Manager of the Family Foster Care Team
- 24 ▶ **Children Feel That This is Their Home** | BEATA I DARIUSZ PODLASEK, Foster Home Operators in Gdynia
- 26 ▶ **They Know That Well-Being is Contagious When Shared** | BEATA BLOCK, RDL Hydraulics, AGNIESZKA DOBRZYŃSKA, Misys, ANDRZEJ BOCZEK, AB Investor, ANDRZEJ BRZEZIŃSKI, Dohle Marine Services Europe, MAREK CISZEWSKI, The Riviera Centre
- 28 ▶ **Important Addresses**







**The strategic, long-term goal of social welfare should be its self-elimination.** Gdynia is one of the places that has managed to achieve this goal: our City was one of the first in Poland to close down large orphanages. At present, children in foster care are placed in foster families, in foster homes or in small institutional care facilities. It is the best way to provide support to youth deprived of the chance to grow up in their natural family, identify problems faced by them, guide them through the difficult period of puberty and give them a chance of a normal life when they enter adulthood.

The prevention system in Gdynia is based on a similar philosophy. It allows the system to react effectively when a family exhibits signs of crisis. The intensive assistance provided to families by a family assistant or social worker often prevents major problems from occurring or, when they have occurred, enables families to overcome these problems in most cases. Our specialists support the process of restoring bonds and assist families in the effective management of their resources. We also provide support to children, where necessary. They receive counselling, psychological care or therapy.

Of course, social workers are not left to their own devices. Gdynia has built a broad coalition of institutions supporting families within their own environments. The coalition comprises municipal institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of local, socially responsible businesses.

Today, after several years of pursuing activities in this domain, we can see how effectively this system operates. With each passing year, the number of children placed in foster care centres in Gdynia is consistently declining. It should be noted that this is a trend opposite to that observed on a national scale, where this number is growing. The basic concepts that guided us have found their confirmation in practice. In the light of these experiences, the role played by family assistants is gaining importance, not unlike prevention and interdisciplinary work. The experiences observed in Gdynia are eagerly being adopted by other local governments across the entire country and the City reaps rewards for its developed support system. Therefore, it is even more worthwhile to pause and look at this compilation from a distance and get an outside review. A welcome opportunity to do so is through the seminar organised under the name “Family-Oriented Approach – Effective Social Welfare Practices Applied in Gdynia”. It is not only sailors who know that one degree adjustment of the sails can get you to your destination faster.

**MICHAŁ GUĆ**

Vice-President of the City of Gdynia



# ► The Family First



THE REPORT ENTITLED “SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS”, EDITED BY JANUSZ CZAPIŃSKI AND TOMASZ PANEK, COMPILED IN 2015, STATES THAT 87.2% OF THE RESIDENTS OF GDYNIA ARE SATISFIED WITH THE CITY IN WHICH THEY RESIDE. NO OTHER CITY IN POLAND CAN BOAST SUCH RESULT. THE RESIDENTS OF GDYNIA HAVE DECLARED A SIMILARLY HIGH DEGREE OF SATISFACTION IN 2011 (83%) AND IN 2013 (85%). ONE OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCH HIGH NUMBERS IS THE SOCIAL POLICY PURSUED BY THE CITY AUTHORITIES.

Family welfare is defined as providing support to families in all aspects of family life, regardless of their financial standing, resources or problems faced, has been adopted by Gdynia as one of its priorities. The City has been introducing changes to the child and family support system for years.

These changes have a cross-sectorial impact. They aim to prevent negative phenomena and minimise the effects they may have on the life of families residing in Gdynia.

The shift towards comprehensive forms of support provided to families within their environments or, where such support cannot be provided, towards improving family-based foster care while also reducing the number of children placed in institutional care has been persistent in Gdynia for years.

Systemic actions undertaken in our city are focused on three areas:

- Prevention understood as the early recognition of problems, actions aimed to increase awareness, education and formation of appropriate attitudes
- Reintegration defined as the provision of support to families emerging from a crisis and becoming increasingly autonomous
- Intervention utilising the existing resources and instruments when a family's welfare is directly at risk.

There is a system in place to identify families that require comprehensive support. We reach out to these families via social curators, guardians appointed by the Family Court and, more and more, school counsellors. The very few cases where children are placed in some form of foster care happens after all possible family support actions have been exhausted – these cases are monitored on an ongoing basis.

The support system comprises a network of day support centres for children and young people, located





**SUPPORT IN NUMBERS**

**In 2015, Gdynia Social Welfare Centre provided support to 4,608 families, including 989 families with children.** According to the data, 11.6% of families struggle with educational and childcare-related problems that constitute the main reason for provided support. For several years now, the number of children placed in institutional care has been declining (2014: 170, 2013: 87, 2015: 18). Per year, approximately 250 families with approximately 750 children are provided with comprehensive support consisting of social welfare and family assistance. In over 90% of families receiving support, the most important goal of maintaining the integrity of the family and making it safe for children has been achieved. All families requiring individualised forms of support are provided with such support without delay.

all across the city, providing support to approximately 500 children and their families. The area of family-based foster care and their dedicated professional support services are under development. All diagnosed needs for highly specialised therapeutic support are satisfied on an ongoing basis.

**We have the first Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) detection centre in the country where it is possible to receive support in diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of FASD.**

The City's organisational units, including the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre and NGOs, are engaged in providing support to children and families in their environment. This interdisciplinary approach and work in coalitions has been adopted in many areas, including providing support to children in their environment, preventing domestic violence and family assistance.

**All specialists agree that only a broad family approach, multi-dimensional diagnosis of problems faced**

**by families and the close cooperation of those responsible for resolving specific problems can make families regain their independence and mend frayed bonds between their members.**

We present before you is an attempt to demonstrate family support practices adopted in Gdynia.

We also hope that it will prove helpful in your day-to-day work.

**FRANCISZEK BRONK**

Deputy Director of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre in Charge of Child and Family Support





# ► Gdynia

## – An Exceptionally Family-Friendly City



### INTERVIEW

**BEATA SZADZIUL**, PLENIPOTENTIARY OF THE PRESIDENT OF GDYNIA IN CHARGE OF FAMILY AFFAIRS, “FAMILY-FRIENDLY GDYNIA” PROGRAMME COORDINATOR AND DEPUTY CHAIR OF THE CITY COUNCIL, **TALKS ABOUT HOW THE TERM “FAMILY” IS UNDERSTOOD IN GDYNIA**, HOW THE FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMME CAME INTO BEING AND ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY LIFE.

▼ **“Family-Friendly Gdynia” is more than just the name of a programme that has been implemented by the City for nearly four years now. It’s a standalone philosophy.** That is correct. In Gdynia, we care about the entire family. There have always been many interesting, pro-family initiatives in Gdynia, but they lacked coordination, from someone who would cast a fresh eye over the whole and identify areas worth developing further. It was necessary to view the city from the perspective of the family. It can be assumed that all of us live in a family; therefore, all actions undertaken by the City are directed at families. We have to remember that families have their own, particular needs and that they are characterised by different family relationships. We also have to remember that families are more than just the mother, father and child. There are also multi-generational and modern families that live slightly different lives. It would also be a very good thing for the City to notice these differences.

Therefore, three female members of the City Council got down to business and presented three different points of view: Ms Beata Łęgowska, a grandmother, Maja Wagner, a mother-to-be, and myself, a mother of 10-year-old children. We compiled a document presenting our different perspectives on what family-oriented actions should be undertaken by the City. I believe that this is the reason why this programme is so interesting and unconventional. It doesn’t assess the situation or present projections. In a sense, it’s an intuitive approach to how the city can think about family and to think like a family.

▼ **All three of you had a look – and what did you see? What, in your opinion, was worthwhile to focus on and what had to be done?**

First of all, we looked at spending free time together as it’s an important aspect of family life. The city also plays a very important role in equalising opportunities. These opportunities are a concern not only for less affluent families but also for families with a disabled member and for families that require challenges to stimulate their activity. It’s also important to view public urban space and remember that a range of residents uses it; children require different elements than their mothers or grandparents.

▼ **In the context of the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme, the family is more than the “mother, father, child” model. It’s also the pairs of seniors living alone without children or grandchildren.**

Exactly right. One of the elements of the programme is the Sibling Day that will be celebrated this year for the first time. It’s an example of looking at family from a completely different perspective and a reminder that a brother or sister is also part of the family. And that it doesn’t have to be a biological sister. Its purpose is to point out the fact that cordiality differs depending on the level of family relationship. The relationship with a grandmother or grandfather is different than with a mother or a father who are also seniors.



▼ **I believe I am not exaggerating when I say that a community has developed around this programme for these past three years...**

You can definitely say so. Today, I can already see a group of residents awaiting events organised under the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme, residents who gave us their trust. This did not happen by itself. It involved many years of promoting certain events and disseminating information about them. By ensuring their credibility with our brand, people began to eagerly participate in these events. One of the main roles of the programme is to find events happening in the city and identify aspects that could interest the majority of families.

Events in Gdynia are organised by museums, the Experiment Science Centre, the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre, NGOs, private companies, and other establishments that organise family events as part of their day-to-day operations. Our partners are very receptive to new ideas. At times, we advise them to “think about it – it’s worth doing.” We have no personal interest in these events. It’s all done to inform residents of programming that’s fun and informative.

I remember when, at the very outset of the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme, we organised a meeting with several private entities and NGOs operating in the city. They were afraid. They said that they would lose customers, as new opportunities will open before others, that they would lose developed contacts. They were afraid that people will forget about them due to the large number of events and will stop visiting. Exactly one year later, at a similar meeting, they said that the number of visitors had increased; they established great partnerships and benefited from knowledge exchange, contacts and skills. This proves that there is still demand for family events in Gdynia. Moreover, appetite comes with eating. Families themselves begin to seek and initiate events, creating bottom-up social campaigns. As the environment grows rapidly, their network is comprised of more and more members. All of this allows me to say, without exaggerating, that family has become fashionable in Gdynia. There is an entire group of people who are devoted fans of such an approach to the city. We began with a single campaign. Now, we initiate a new campaign basically every week. We promote breastfeeding, carrying babies in a shawl, closeness, natural childbirth and doulas, which are natural childbirth attendants. There are an infinite number of initiatives and each of them has its supporter.

▼ **One of your successes is also that more and more establishments feature a “children’s corner” where children can draw, play and read.**

Everyone understood that if you invite a family and that family has a great time, others would follow. The others may be friends of the parents or their children,

**“FAMILY-FRIENDLY GDYNIA” CARD**

The purpose of introducing a discount card for families residing in Gdynia is to increase access to cultural events, sports events and recreational activities. This access is achieved by creating and developing a catalogue of family discounts on services offered by both municipal institutions and private partners.

**A family in Gdynia may use the card if they meet the following criteria:**

- ▶ **Have at least one child below the age of 18**, including families with single parents, carers and foster families. Parents who do not live in the same household may collect the card individually for the same child. A single family has the right to specify no more than two carers on the card;
- ▶ **Registered for permanent or temporary residence** for a period longer than three months;
- ▶ **Residing in Gdynia** and paying taxes to the local Revenue Office for competent persons residing in Gdynia.

The Card is valid for two years from its issue date.

For more information, please visit:

[www.gdyniarodzinna.pl](http://www.gdyniarodzinna.pl)

their grandfathers or grandmothers. This is beneficial for the establishment owners and engages all residents to a certain extent.

▼ **The programme was officially inaugurated in 2012. Several months later, you became the Plenipotentiary of the President of Gdynia in Charge of Family Affairs.**

I was appointed in order to coordinate this programme, to see how it operates, to see whether it is effective, and to encourage cooperation.

▼ **Now you will represent Gdynia in the newly established Family Affairs Council convened by the Marshal of the Pomorskie Voivodeship.**

The City was invited to participate in this body. Of course, we accepted this invitation. It’s important to me that the best practices adopted in Gdynia are passed on to others. I believe that we have reached a moment when we can present proven measures and communicate the key to this success to others.

▼ **It’s even more interesting when we take into consideration that the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme operates without an office or full-time employees.**

I perform my role on a community service basis, but I’ve been assigned a project coordinator at the Mayor’s Office. I’m talking about Ms Justyna Śliwicka, who does a great job in supporting me and all the other partners in our tasks.





From the beginning, it was our intention not to establish any structure but to work in the field and encourage individual entities to operate together in promoting the concept of the family. Now, it's happening all on its own.

▼ **A perfect example of this desire to participate is found in the carnival balls recently organised in the Gdynia Arena.**

This is a great phenomenon. The balls are organised by all our partners who have been with us throughout the year. As a thank you, we invited them to help organise a ball where they have an opportunity to talk about themselves and invite families to participate in prepared activities. Most importantly, it's an opportunity to celebrate our City's birthday in a family setting. And who doesn't like birthdays?

▼ **Parents' clubs are also a big success.**

For me, that is our biggest achievement. What has happened in Gdynia with regard to parents' clubs in the last two years is absolutely extraordinary. I plan to go even further with this idea, to expand it nationwide. Two years ago, we had a single, unofficial parents' club in Gdynia, whose members met here and there. As soon as the "Family-Friendly Gdynia" programme was established, they turned to us with a desire to expand and promote their activity. We invited the club to cooperate. We prepared and financed a three-month long training carried out by club members for the potential leadership of new clubs. With this training, clubs began to spring up everywhere. Today, there are 15 active clubs in Gdynia, providing a meeting space for parents in all city districts. The biggest challenge was to find a location for meetings as meetings in coffee houses or restaurants created costs. Therefore, we made various public locations available



**Each family calling Gdynia home and wishing to stay up-to-date on all information regarding events in Gdynia appealing to the youngest residents, their parents and grandparents, should add the [www.gdyniarodzinna.pl](http://www.gdyniarodzinna.pl) website to their favourites.**

The website features an event calendar updated on an ongoing basis and many other suggestions on how to spend time with your family, including a variety of hiking trails, games, playground map, and quick navigation of family-friendly locations. The website also features a rich database of addresses of museums, cinemas, galleries, libraries, sports clubs, primary health centres, parents' clubs and foundations operating for the benefit of families. In addition, the site offers health advice and practical information for citizens of all ages. All this information is presented in an accessible and transparent format.

for their use: libraries, schools, and socio-therapeutic community centres. We also prepared small grants. Clubs have the opportunity to apply for 2,000 Polish zlotys to finance their ideas, to invite an interesting guest or to purchase cups, plates or small toys. As we have seen, this system operates very effectively. The club is an irreplaceable support group for parents. All those who were once young parents know that there's a moment when we need to have contact and converse with someone who's going through a similar experience.

▼ **The first parents' club was run by the "Mamy z Morza" Foundation, a recipient of many awards.**

Yes, and it was the women from the "Mamy z Morza" Foundation who conducted the training I mentioned earlier. Later, they received a grant of 160,000 Polish zlotys from the Civil Initiatives Fund. The City made its own contribution to the project by providing access to the municipal library. For a year and a half, they organised very interesting classes within the framework of the Family Activity Incubator. It's the first of many examples of activities that we support. Someone has an idea, submits an application, requires funds to finance their own contribution and we're happy to support an initiative that will benefit all residents of Gdynia.

▼ **All this success has led to the "Family-Friendly Gdynia" programme receiving awards and commendations.**

In 2014, we submitted entries to the "Good Climate for Family" competition organised by the President of the Republic of Poland, in all three categories. We were invited to Warsaw, though we weren't sure which project would receive an award. One of the entries promoted the positive image of families with multiple children. The exhibit, entitled "Mamy więcej", presented mothers from families with three or more children as women who, despite having a large family and a host of responsibilities, remain beautiful and passionate. During the competition finale, the First Lady Anna Komorowska opened an exhibition at the Royal Łazienki Museum, presenting photographs taken during the "Mamy więcej" campaign. By the way, those mothers were inspired by us to create a foundation and, to this day, implement new projects, such as "The Faculty of Arts", a university where priority is given to students from families with multiple children and are at risk of exclusion. It's a cycle of art workshops and lectures for 60 children.

But, returning to Warsaw, our attention was focused on one of our projects that was nominated for an award and, for a moment, we thought that would be the end. I'm talking about the project implemented by the "Creative" Social Change Foundation under the Resident Activity Centre located at Zamenhofa Street in Chylonia.

In the end, it turned out that the jury of the competition decided that our projects in Gdynia were so



interesting that they deserved a special award. It was a huge success, as this was only the second full year of the programme. It was a sign that it was worthwhile to share the family philosophy of Gdynia.

▼ **The “Family-Friendly Gdynia” card is also a unique solution, unlike any other in Poland.**

We decided that we become a family when we’re expecting the first child. We didn’t want to indicate that only families with multiple children deserve special attention in Gdynia, as for many people the decision to have their first child involves sacrifices, challenges and change. We wish to celebrate each child and each family that decides to have a child. Therefore, we decided to introduce the “Family-Friendly Gdynia 1+” card. So far, we’ve issued over 3,800 cards.

We have many private partners who have gladly joined the programme and support it by offering discounts to families in Gdynia. It’s also a way of building local patriotism: the citizens of Gdynia help each other because we play in the same team. The benefits arising from the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” card include more than simply discounts. We organise city events exclusively for cardholders or with priority access for cardholders. As the “Family-Friendly” project is implemented entirely from the City of Gdynia’s budget, it is very important to us that those who contribute to this budget have the opportunity to participate in specific events. During the holidays, for example, as a gift we reserved two performances at the Gdynia Główna Theatre where entry was reserved for cardholders only.

In the rush of everyday life, people must find time to be with each other and we’re intent on creating opportunities for them to do so. Open-air activities organised on the Children’s Day or St Nicholas’ Day are events that are attended by crowds of people representing all age groups.

▼ **Another component of the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme is its website.**

We gain new users with each passing week. We try to inform, invite, and entertain while also raising important topics. Recently, we published an article on how fathers can imprint themselves on their daughters and raise them to be fine women. Over seven thousand users read this article. I’m glad that we’re becoming a place that prompts people to think, to change. The residents of Gdynia have already grown accustomed to and like our website. They know that they are sure to learn something interesting by visiting it.

▼ **Any plans for the future?**

We want to focus on playgrounds and encourage citizens to visit them more often. We want them to know the locations of playgrounds all across Gdynia and what they have to offer. A special app will be developed to

direct them to these locations. We’re also preparing a project, as part of which our parents’ clubs, will host fun and unique events at playgrounds. We will invite residents to spontaneous happenings to go where we’ve never gone before. It’s worth mentioning that the City offers a very large number of playgrounds adapted to the needs of all citizens.

We publish the *Książeczki Gdynieczki* series. Every year, we publish a book about Gdynia. The books are written and illustrated by the residents of Gdynia. They are distributed during events taking place in the city. We’ve already published books entitled *Gdynia* and *Legenda o gdyńskich rybkach*. We’re currently working on another book, a special edition for the City’s 90th anniversary. The book will be published in October. It will focus on the residents of Gdynia that helped build it, but are not given due credit. For the time being, I won’t divulge about whom I’m talking. Among the authors of three stories is Ms Małgorzata Warda, a laureate of the “Book of the Year 2015” award in the books for young people category for *5 sekund do Io*, published by the Media Rodzina publishing house. *Legenda o gdyńskich rybkach* will be adapted into a theatrical play and the premiere will be organised by the Cultural Centre. Right now, the story of fish from the boulevard is considered to be make-believe, but perhaps in a few years, we’ll regard it as true.

The most viewed performance at the Municipal Theatre is the fables; the theatre is always packed to capacity. This means that families wish to participate in city life. As they have the time, families wish to go outside the confines of their house and spend that time together.

▼ **You’re the only remaining member of the original three-person team that initiated the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme.**

Beata Łęgowska is no longer on the City Council, whereas Maja Wagner became the Duly Authorised Representative of the President of Gdynia in Charge of Culture. We still consult each other on many topics, support and help each other, and exchange ideas. I created the “Family in Gdynia” Facebook group where I sometimes post topics for discussion to gather the opinion of others. It is particularly important to me that all actions within the framework of the “Family-Friendly Gdynia” programme be implemented by the local community so that we feel it’s ours.



# ► Tailor-Made Social Welfare – On Three Levels

**JAROSŁAW JÓZEFczyk**, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE GDYNIA SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRE IN CHARGE OF SUPPORTING THE HOMELESS, THE JOB MARKET AND STRATEGIC PLANNING, TALKS ABOUT THE SOCIAL WELFARE PRACTICES ADOPTED IN GDYNIA, IMPLEMENTED ON THREE DIRECTLY ADJACENT LEVELS.

Some time ago, at the turn of 2008, we wondered how to gain a fresh perspective on social welfare. Our aim was to return it to its strong roots, to what we associate with the mission, with a good grasp on the community, with a people-oriented, open and professional approach to supporting individuals with specific problems. We began to pay closer attention to the relations most often established between the people coming to us for assistance and the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre employees. Quite often, conversations presented a rather unilateral image. The most common occurrence was that a social worker presented an offer consisting of, in most cases, benefits and the client accepted this offer. If there was any feedback, it usually pertained to a claim. The more we looked, the less we found this situation to be agreeable. Social work has many different colours. Just like people coming to us for assistance: they have different expectations with regard to the form of support they wish to receive.

In light of the above, an idea for a work system based, to a large extent, on coaching and assistance was born.

We learned about different cities in Poland attempting to introduce assistance services. We liked this approach as it offered very intensive relations with the client. More importantly, these relations are bilateral. Both the client and social worker must be engaged in the process.



It was also interesting to note that supporting families requires that the number of families under the worker's care be smaller. We often heard this view, especially considering that at some point our social



workers managed between 70 and 100 clients each. Even if only half of them required maintaining intensive contact, establishing a close relationship, building trust or planning joint activities, monitoring the progress at a later date could be difficult.

Therefore, we decided to introduce

## assistance services.

These services were focused primarily on children and families. The problem was that, in crisis situations, courts ruled to place children in childcare institutions that didn't have sufficient vacancies. We couldn't agree to put underprivileged children on any waiting lists. How can you wait for someone to provide a feeling of security to a child or to remove them from a home in which they may be mistreated?

It was around that time when an opportunity to acquire European Union (EU) funds earmarked for the implementation of a systemic project arose. We were aware that it was a big challenge, but we also considered it a big opportunity. Therefore, to apply for a project where assistance would be understood as intensive social family assistance, carried out on an ongoing basis at neighbourhood social welfare centres. We named the project "Family Closer Together".

When the project was created, we were faced with a very specific challenge of defining what assistance means to us. We defined it as a type of intensive social work. In Poland, there are voices saying that a social worker should not be an assistant because they represent local government authorities and that keeps them from being independent, etc. However, we started from a premise that if a social worker is a professional, they will not let their ideological or political views dictate their actions. A social worker simply wants to help people and to carry out their mission; these are the roots to which we wished to return.

At the very beginning of creating the profile of assistance services offered in Gdynia, that is intensive social work services, we made the decision that an assistant will handle no more than 10 families at a time and

that we have to specify a group of clients with minimum resources necessary to change. We must not fool ourselves: there are families without motivation to change and without minimum resources necessary to induce such change. We said to ourselves that our role is to knock on doors and monitor environmental data so that nothing bad occurs. The intensive actions were to be directed at families at the brink of breakdown, with the minimum resources and motivation necessary to induce change.

We created a dyad but saw that there was still something missing. On the one hand, there were families in a serious, long-term crisis, while on the other hand, there were families who required social assistance services for the first time, as they had fairly good resources, but ran into bad luck at some point in their life.

The group of recipients of assistance services offered by the Centre also included persons who overcame a crisis and still strive to regain full functional capacity in the community. We noticed a significant gap between the social worker's everyday activity and the very intensive assistance services, so we decided to fill this gap. That's how we came up with the idea for the third type of social work services: in-depth social work services.

This tripartite division is illustrated by the

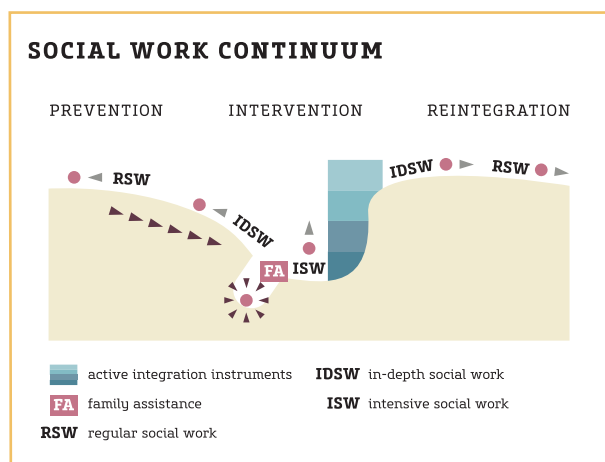
## lift story that I often mention.

There's a person going through life. At some point difficulties appear – debt, addiction – that brings this person down, causing additional problems. What type of social work should be provided to this person? If it's at the very outset of the crisis, regular social work, i.e. preventive measures, should be applied. We prevent the situation from deteriorating and act intensively so that nothing pulls this person down any further.

If someone still experiences problems but has not become entrenched by isolating themselves and telling others to "leave them alone", it is then time to undertake intensive social work. Often persons who've been 'down' for quite some time don't know the way up. It's necessary to help them find their way. Our lift consists of offering them active integration instruments. These were tailor-made support services: school for families, budget management training, psychological care, social events, etc. When our clients have reached a certain level of autonomy, self-awareness, and responsibility for their own lives, we engage them in in-depth social work. This stage of overcoming difficulties deals with reintegration. The purpose of reintegration is to fully reintegrate the affected person into society. The intensive social work are applied as a form of intervention, understood as saving the family.

However, there are individuals or families that cannot be helped even by undertaking intensive social





work services. There are entrenched so deeply within their problems that they reject any offer of assistance. We wanted to have a solution we could offer them as well – the answer was family assistance. Sometimes social work was not enough, as we weren't able to complete the entire assistance process when someone said, "I don't want to". Nonetheless, we need to keep an eye on this person, observe whether the situation is deteriorating, and, when their situation changes for the better even in the slightest, undertake intensive social work services, connect our "lift" and take our client up to a level where they can enjoy a good social existence.

Who could say, "What's it all for?" These three types of social work and this lift... This narration was needed to create a clear image of how work can be organized at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre. It also brought us closer to finding the answer to the question: what type of predispositions and competencies must our employees have when considering the various needs of our clients? Work with families that, despite being in need of assistance, simply wish to live in peace, even if less well organised, requires completely different predispositions and competencies. The experiences of family assistants showed that miracles should not be expected in such situations. It's necessary to expect the situation to end either in an application to take the children away or in leading this family by the hand and initiating intensive social work. We provided social workers who begin working in such environments with very strong supervisory and psychological support.

Social workers very quickly accepted the story of the tripartite division of social work. The staff working on the "Family Closer Together" project included the highly competent personnel of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre. Due to the circumstances surrounding the project and the need to account for EU funds, the process of implementing our ideal model of assistance had to involve employees with the most experience and

motivation. We sought them out from amongst the social workers who were employed in neighbourhood social welfare centres at the time. Vacancies were created and this made the situation difficult for our managers. However, as time passed, we employed new personnel and the situation returned to normal.

I can safely say that the "Family Closer Together" project was an

## all-encompassing project.

Its implementation involved the entire staff of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre. Each of us had to change our way of thinking and the way we operated. We tried to outline everyone's duties and we demonstrated what the new concept should look like.

At the time, I strongly believed that since we were engaging people in the project, they were taking a risk, as entering into a new project is always like entering into the unknown. To be honest, we were not a hundred percent sure what exactly they were going to be doing and how they were to operate. We had to work out the rhythm and courses of action on our own. My personal ambition was not to lose people with experience in implementing projects, those who gave us their trust. You can say that they dove head first into the pool without even knowing whether there was water in it. We succeeded in the sense that two years prior to the completion of the project, we had developed an exit strategy, showing city authorities that with well-planned financial engineering, you can purchase this project in installments. Finally, we managed to gradually reduce project expenditures from the optimal amount to the minimum subsistence level.

Indeed, our project allowed us a budgetary luxury that we wouldn't have been able to afford in a different situation. We had sufficient funds to ensure that the project could operate at an optimal level and therefore; we could act faster and more efficiently. For example, we could quickly purchase a service that was particularly necessary at the time, etc. The level of minimum subsistence expenditures allowed us to pay wages and ensure working conditions that maintained project results. The most important result is the fact that less, rather than more, children were being placed in the round-the-clock care system.

The municipality purchased the minimum subsistence level in instalments over the period of three years. In the end, by way of a decision issued by the City Council, the last remaining amounts were guaranteed to the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre's budget, allowing the project to live on within the Centre's structure without EU funding. Due to this decision at the end of the EU funded project we did not have to fire a single employee.





What I'm talking about is, on one hand, a story about how we discovered

## different shades of social work

together, while on the other hand, a story about how to prepare, in management and organisational terms, the main tasks given to those who are going to do the work. In this way we can all understand our duties, know the possibilities offered by the institution and what we have agreed to.

For example, the Intensive Social Family Assistance Team employees know very well that this is not a 7 am to 9 pm job, but rather a task-based one. Employees are on stand-by until 10 pm and longer when necessary. They are aware that the diagnosis of the situation must be much more in-depth, the planning much more precise, and the monitoring should be carried out according to specific methods and using specific tools.

Systemic projects financed from EU funds rightfully focus on financing direct actions that benefit clients. In short, the largest amount possible of these funds should go to the people in need of support. We were slightly annoyed by the fact that our employees face new challenges and operate in pioneer conditions, there is no allowance to fund training or to strengthen the staff directly. Following negotiations, we paved the way to establish a mechanism to award bonuses for good work performance with results in in-depth social work. We were awarding additional remuneration for entering into the contract and bonuses for contract performance. This mechanism also proved effective. Whether the objectives were accomplished wasn't decided by an employee, but rather by teams working at the neighbourhood social welfare centres.

## Work results

were determined by observing the number of children placed in institutional care. A positive change brought about by the project was that the number of children placed in the system dropped from 140 in 2007 to 87 in 2013. Today, this number is below 50. Of course, no one proved that the direct reason for that reduction is a different approach to social work, but what else could cause this change?

The story of the tripartite division of social work is supported by a simple narrative.

I once came upon a book summarising the effects of a project implemented in southern Poland with the involvement of poviats employment agencies. The project consisted of putting the Kurcman matrix into effect. According to the matrix, when working with people it's worth knowing their motivation level to undertake

employment and their professional competencies. If someone doesn't want to work, we won't accomplish anything. If they don't have sufficient competencies but are motivated, it's possible to work with that person, although the road to success may be long. I came to a similar conclusion with social assistance, except instead of the motivation to undertake employment, we take into consideration their motivation to change and improve their situation.

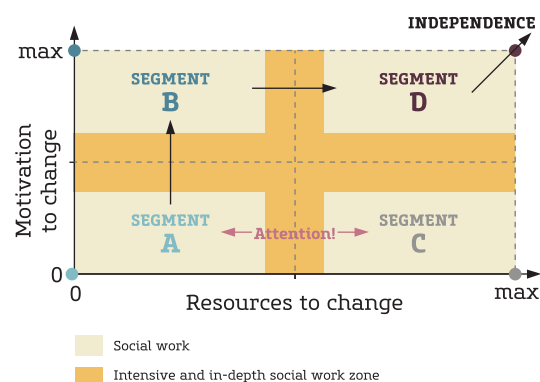
I remember that I was strongly scolded at a meeting for talking about how we adapted the Kurcman matrix to the present conditions in Gdynia. But these are our observations: some people give the impression that they don't want anything to change or that they are not ready for change.

There are people with zero motivation to change and nearly zero resources to effect this change. There are motivated people who lack resources to bring about change. There are people coming to us with resources to change, but without motivation. And, lastly, there are those who are every social worker's dream: people with both resources and motivation. This made us think. When a client has not "accumulated" resources or forgotten about them and, on top of it all, suffers from an addiction, social work is very difficult, often nearly impossible. You cannot expect a social worker to make this person into an independent individual in half a year, for example.

On the other hand, the group exhibiting motivation requires intensive measures to be undertaken, with social work focused on increasing their resources.

In regards to the next group, the biggest priority is placed on psychological care, so as to increase the motivation to change. Increasing resources without working on motivation is a rather destructive path. These are the classic cases of dependence on assistance. We provide food, a small allowance for essen-

**SEGMENTATION OF SUPPORT RECIPIENT**  
based on Kurcman's die



tials, a small apartment subsidy and then the person is stuck in the system for years, growing increasingly dependent on it.

Therefore, we've developed a strategy that will allow us to increase motivation and only then develop resources, so as to foster our client's desire to become autonomous, independent or to better function in life. We've noticed that, in many cases, a client that is in a very favourable situation and has good resources to effect change loses motivation and begins to squander these resources due to a psychological fear of success.

Regular social work proves most effective when there are motivation and resources to change. In such situations, you don't require high calibre offers; all you need is a professional approach to the environment.

After the "Family Closer Together" project ended, our structure featured a new unit:

## Intensive Social Family Assistance Team

In fact, intensive social work is how we define assistance: the work method and professional attitude consisting of being right behind the client heading for change. Assistance is not a change management model, it's not showing the direction in which to go or handling matters for the client. It's very patiently standing next to the person and supporting them in finding the path that is most important for them. This might sound pompous, but it's extremely important to realise that we're not there to meet someone and plan his or her entire life. A real change occurs when the client comes to the conclusion that "I couldn't see that my daughter wanted me to hug her" or "I couldn't see that kids are making fun of her because she has an old backpack" on their own. The difficulty of assistance lies in creating situations where a person learns new things about themselves in the course of changing. Our social workers had the time to visit their clients even four times a week, spend much more than 30 minutes with them, play with their children, and see their family in various contexts.

When we were providing intensive work and assistance services as part of the systemic project, we had the time to go away with these families for two to three days and see how they behaved in completely different circumstances. These were very precious social outings. I know that some elements of that work have been preserved.

Intensive social work is a combination of smart accompaniment and paving the way forward together. The person undergoing change paves the way forward. It's important to have a group of social workers that are properly motivated and have a sense of mission to work to the highest possible standard. I always told our team members that I admire their patience and readiness to

face both the worst and the best moments that this job has to offer, as it's something you cannot avoid.

When social workers provide intensive social work services, it often happens that they see more, go deeper, and have to confront very difficult issues. For example, it turns out that a child suddenly displays signs of abuse. Yet, we also witness many satisfying situations, such as a family that has been under the social welfare centre care for many years gets back on its feet and says, "Thank you, but we can do this on our own."

Sometimes they return to the system, but generally intensive social work produces positive results. It's performed together with family assistance. If the family's motivation increases and we can see something good is beginning to happen, the family is transferred under the care of social services. First, the family assistant raises the family's motivation, and then a social worker steps in and assumes leadership over the situation. But this pair remains in touch during the entire time and continues to work together with the family.

Intensive social work allows us to get a more in-depth diagnosis and provides specific tools to make this diagnosis. Each family signs a social contract and the situation is monitored, often by a team. Work is supervised psychologically and we have a system for classifying families to specific levels of social work services. It's also very beneficial to hold regular meetings within teams, where a social worker can present a family and propose an appropriate level of intervention. I often participate in such discussions, if only to gain a wider perspective on the possible ways to support these families. There are situations where it's not feasible to see all of the City's resources available to get a family back on its feet from the Neighbourhood Social Welfare Centre level.

Today, we know that success requires a lot of teamwork, conscious forethought on what we have to offer and on what a family actually needs.





# ▶ Trust Me, I'm a Family Assistant

**THE BEGINNING WASN'T EASY.** WHEN THE FIRST FAMILY ASSISTANT BEGAN WORKING AT THE GDYNIA SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRE, ALMOST NO ONE KNEW HOW TO FIT THEIR WORK INTO THE EXISTING SUPPORT SYSTEM. TODAY, THERE'S NO TRACE OF THIS UNCERTAINTY. ON THE CONTRARY, THERE'S A DEEP BELIEF THAT YOU CANNOT PROVIDE EFFECTIVE SUPPORT WITHOUT THE HELP OF AN ASSISTANT.

The employment of assistants responsible for working with families struggling with serious educational and care-related problems was possible thanks to the Family Support and Foster Care Act. The Gdynia Social Welfare Centre employed its first family assistant in 2012, which is the year after the Act came into force. Another six assistants were hired a year later, thus ensuring the possibility of extending family assistance services to all neighbourhood social welfare centres.

"Assistants provided support to families diagnosed by social workers as lacking the motivation to cooperate and helpless in educational and care-related matters," recalls **Magdalena Gajewska**, Deputy Manager of the Social Welfare Development Team at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre and Family Assistance Coordinator at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre.

**Monika Książopolska**, Family Division Coordinator at the Neighbourhood Social Welfare Centre No. 2: "Many challenges were awaiting for the newly hired assistants. They were developing a new method of work. They worked responsibly and consistently and with great determination. The situation at the Neighbourhood Social Welfare Centres was changing; a social worker received support. Of course, cooperation was close from the very beginning. As a rule, family assistants made the first visits together with a social worker who "introduced them to the family."

A family assistant may have completed tertiary education in a field related to social work, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, or family sciences. Assistants working in Gdynia meet this criterion. The Act also does not exclude tertiary education in other fields or secondary education but, in such cases, it is necessary to complete a family assistance course and an internship.

The Act stipulates that an assistant may work with no more than 15 families at the same time. In Gdynia,



**MARTA KONDRACIUK**

we adopted a limit of a maximum of 12 families. This rule stems from the awareness of how many difficult situations an assistant must deal with at the same time. It's a significant burden. The principle is simple: the greater the number of families, the lower the chance of genuine family assistance and the greater the risk of occupational burnout.

The family assistance training courses and regular supervision have been the elements supporting assistants at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre since 2013. It is important that assistants have an opportunity to discuss difficult situations and to meet both with each other and with a specialist.

**Marta Kondraciuk** notes, "I've been working as a family assistant at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre for two years. At present, I'm providing assistance to nine families, three of whom require a lot of attention. If I had to provide assistance to more of such environments, I could devote less time to them. In my experience and based on conversations I had with other assistants, ten families is the number that allows us to devote a sufficient amount of time to each family. On average, we meet





**MAGDALENA GAJEWSKA**

once a week. There are families with whom I used to meet every two days at a certain period in our relationship, others become self-sufficient enough that they require contact once every three weeks. These meetings act as a way to monitor their progress and lead to ending the cooperation with those families.”

During these two years, **Ms Kondraciuk** ended the cooperation with five families. This was not due in all cases to the fact that the family became self-sufficient, as some families moved abroad or to a different city. For over a year, she successfully worked with a mother whose goal was to regain custody of a child placed in a foster family.

The decision whether to send an assistant to a family is made by a social worker upon analysing its situation. In such a situation, the social worker applies to the social welfare centre manager for a family assistant to be assigned to this family.

Each family signs the consent to cooperate. After talks about mutual expectations, a work plan for the next several months is prepared. The work plan specifies the goals that the family sets for itself and wishes to achieve with the help of the assistant. After the stipulated period of time, the assistant discusses with the family which goals have been achieved and which still require work. As a result, we either modify the assumptions made in the work plan or decide to end the cooperation.

An important aspect of the Family Support and Foster Care System Act is assistance provided to a natural family whose children have been placed in foster care centres or in a foster family by a court decision. It's necessary to mention the teamwork of all involved parties acting in the best interest of the family. Regular meetings, information exchange and being on the lookout for new solutions have become permanent parts of family assistance. The assistant is a link between all involved parties: carer, family foster care coordinator, psychologist and other specialists engaged in the family assistance process.

“This constant cooperation between the involved parties is very important for two reasons. The first reason is that we learn about our competencies and their limits, and the second is that we're all focused on family assistance.

**We act on an interdisciplinary basis. We think about the client in a very broad context,”** emphasised

**Monika Księżopolska.** “The presence of the assistant and social worker in this group is very beneficial for both parties, especially when there's a matter that requires urgent action.”

The importance of the coalition of all involved parties for the assistant's work is strongly emphasised by **Ms Kondraciuk.** “In the initial period of my employment – I was hired after assistance services were introduced to Gdynia – the parties involved in the family support process had a different understanding of the role of family assistant. There were expectations that I could not meet. This period of setting limits and adapting to the new role was not easy. Today, this cooperation is carried out in a completely different way.”

**Magdalena Gajewska:** “During the past three years, the recognition and identification of assistants in the child and family support system have undergone a change. Previously, the name “family assistant” was used when referring to social workers who intensively worked with a family struggling with educational and care-related problems as part of the “Family Closer Together” project. Today, they operate under the Act that differentiates their work from that of social workers. They became a permanent part of working teams operating within the Neighbourhood Social Welfare Centres and the Family Foster Care Team, where the family's situation is discussed and conclusions regarding future actions to be undertaken are made. The cooperation between the assistant and social worker has grown increasingly closer.”

**The number of families that receive the assistant's support by the court's decision has significantly increased as well. In 2014, only one family received such sup-**



port, but today this number has grown to seven.

“In the court’s eyes, the assistant is a new, additional resource, whereas in my opinion **the social worker and family assistant act in tandem, although the social worker is the mainstay of the process,**”

emphasised **Monika Księżopolska**. “By closely cooperating with the assistant, creating a support plan, and cooperating with all parties involved in the support process, we give the family a chance to find a way out of a difficult situation.”

However, the first month or two are difficult. It’s a time of building the relationship, mutual trust, and convincing the client that the assistant’s job is to help them, rather than to control or impose their will on them. It’s a time when you have to fight reluctance and knock on closed doors time and time again.

“I don’t enter into a contract with a family on “do this, so that can happen” terms. I simply work on the goal set by the family itself,” explained **Marta Kondraciuk**.

**“I don’t work in such a way that imposes anything on the family, I even try not to suggest solutions. It’s the**

**family that must find its own way out of a particular situation.** However, when I see a threat,

most of all, to the children’s well-being, I direct the matter to the court after discussing the family’s situation with the social worker and all other involved parties.

When the assistant’s work is complete, the family remains under the care of the social worker. There are cases where the relationship cannot be severed overnight – the client grows so attached to the assistant that they request the opportunity to call them from time to time. That is the best proof that our work matters.”

**Monika Księżopolska:** “When the cooperation is heading in the right direction, our clients mature to certain decisions, their perception changes and they begin to view the assistant as someone who is there to help, who improves their life. At that point, actually ending the cooperation may be difficult.”

**Marta Kondraciuk:**

“Most of our clients are single parents who don’t receive support from their families or partners. For them, the family assistant is the person with whom they can discuss their situation and certain matters.

I’ve seen how much this support means to the clients, so when everything is going well, it’s difficult for them to accept the fact that the assistant will no longer be there for them. There are two families that I’ve been working with for two years. I thought about ending the cooperation several times, but I heard them openly say that they still needed assistance. I discussed the situation with my manager and the coordinator and we decided that it’s advisable to continue working with these families while slowly pulling away. I don’t meet with them once a week as I did previously, but rather once a month. We also talk on the phone. There must be signals that I’m slowly pulling away, but that I’m there for them as needed and that they have not been left on their own.

“Family assistance services are an important supplement to the support system and another link that proved to be beneficial, that’s why I can’t imagine the system without them,” says **Monika Księżopolska**. “When I see a social worker appreciating this cooperation, when I hear them say “I’ll ask the assistant” or “It’s a task for the assistant,” I know that the family assistant has become part of our community. It’s a valuable resource of the family support system.”



MONIKA KSIĘŻOPOLSKA



# ► Pregnancy and Alcohol

## Do Not Go Hand in Hand



**EVEN ONE GLASS OF WINE CONSUMED BY A PREGNANT WOMAN CAN LEAD TO FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME (FAS). MIROSŁAWA JEZIOR, DIRECTOR OF THE GDYNIA SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRE, TALKS ABOUT FAS PREVENTION MEASURES THAT HAVE BEEN APPLIED IN GDYNIA OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS AND THE SUPPORT PROVIDED TO CHILDREN DIAGNOSED WITH FAS.**

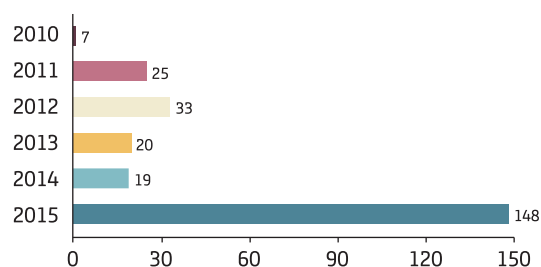
The instigator of all that work currently being done in Gdynia with regard to FAS is Ms Grażyna Rymaszewska, MD. On October 16, 2008, by her initiative, the Franciscan Church in Gdynia held a conference regarding excessive alcohol consumption issues. I had the pleasure of attending this conference, as did a large number of social workers. There were many parents present, mostly foster parents. They had observed the discussed behaviours in children under their care and wished to become more informed on the subject.

For me, the urge to begin thinking about FAS in broader terms was the film titled *Wieczne dzieci (Eternal Children)*. I realised that the characters in this film were persons I've had contact with for many years. Professionally, I am a special education teacher and I have worked with people with intellectual disabilities. I was curious as to how many of the children with whom I had contact suffered from illnesses because their mother consumed alcohol at some point in their pregnancy. In those times, we hadn't been taught about FAS at university. This made it a subject which we had very limited knowledge about. I had considered this before, but it wouldn't have developed in this way if not for the persistence and stubbornness of Grażyna Rymaszewska, MD. I don't know if it's because she saw the curiosity in my eyes, but she decided to persuade me to do something about it. We only had 5,000 Polish zlotys at our disposal. At some point, we came up with an idea to develop a special programme, on the condition that it would be continued. From experience, we know that help provided in this way is much more effective. The fundamental issue with regard to FAS is the psychological and medical diagnosis. A person diagnosed with FAS cannot be left with just the diagnosis, even if the statement indicates the directions to follow.

In July 2009, the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre, with subject matter support provided by Grażyna Rymaszewska, MD, developed the Municipal FAS Education and Therapy Programme. The programme was implemented in three stages.

The first stage was implemented between 2009 and 2010; – it included general training introducing to this subject matter. We invited foster parents, foster care centre workers, family assistants, teachers, social workers, school counsellors, psychologists, physicians, nurses, and court-appointed guardians. There were also supplementary workshops during the training for people chosen on the basis of questionnaires (asking whether they had previously dealt with such children, whether they know how to handle them, whether they wish to learn more due to the nature of their work). We also began training people who would be in charge of diagnosing FAS professionally. The lectures were attended by

### DIAGNOSES MADE BY THE FAS COUNSELLING AND TESTING CENTRE IN GDYNIA



**201 children** were accepted for consultation in the years 2010–2015





273 people, the supplementary workshops by 141 people, and the in-depth knowledge workshop by 110 people.

We planned to open a testing centre for children in the third year of the programme's operation (2011). This was supposed to be the beginning of professional therapy. We already had exact funds needed to implement these two steps: 27,500 Polish zloty. Gdynia was probably the only city in Poland in which such programme was developed and which allocated specific funds for its implementation from its budget.

The FAS Testing and Therapy Centre in Gdynia was opened on October 9, 2009. It was established within the Specialist Care Centre Complex located at Wejherowska Street. The complex provided diagnostic services and employed a psychologist, a child and youth psychiatrist, an educational psychiatrist and a psychotherapist. We were proud of it but still believed it to be not enough.

Around the same time, we carried out a social campaign titled "Out of Concern for the Child", as we decided that information about FAS had to be shared with the public.

Posters warning that even the smallest amount of alcohol consumed by a woman during pregnancy may be harmful to the baby appeared in primary health centres and on public transportation. We also requested parishes to inform their parishioners about the campaign and the problem at a minimum during announcements. Altar servers were also distributing leaflets after masses.

The Centre located at Wejherowska Street was responsible for implementing the campaign. When the programme ended, the centre and its employees were tasked with spreading knowledge regarding FAS. They conducted training for young people and school counsellors. We tested all children placed in the foster care system for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Specialists estimate that three to four out of every 100 children born has FAS.

FAS may also occur in children born by women who are not heavy drinkers, as there is no safe dose of alcohol that may be consumed during pregnancy. And I don't refer only to pathological mothers. We attach a great deal of importance to raising the parents' awareness, as educating parents that the child's poor health condition may be a result of alcohol consumed by the mother proves to be a major problem. Even if a teacher or counsellor suspects that the child's behaviour may be the result of fetal damage caused by alcohol, they still don't know how to communicate this to the mother. It's much easier to talk about hyperactivity, as it's a "safe" subject. Using this approach, the mother bears responsibility for the child's behaviour, but does not feel internally responsible for causing harm to her child by consuming alcohol during pregnancy.

In 2015, two children were taken away from a mother. The first child was taken away when she took her son for a walk together with the child's inebriated

#### THE SYMPTOMS OF SEVERE FAS INCLUDE:

- ▶ Brain damage
- ▶ Facial malformations
- ▶ Stunted growth and weight gain
- ▶ Reduced head circumference

#### THESE SYMPTOMS ARE OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY:

- ▶ Heart and other internal organ defects
- ▶ Sensory organ defects
- ▶ Limb anomalies

father and they were buying alcohol. The second child was taken away after childbirth, during which she had a blood alcohol level of 2%. Today, the girl is seven months old, whereas the boy is one year and seven months old. The likelihood that they both have FAS is high. The boy is developing well thanks to intensive work at the family-based foster care centre. Children with FAS who receive specialist help do not have to be reliant on care or placed in care centres for people with disabilities. They often learn in regular schools, sometimes in integrated classes. It's an extremely labour-intensive process. To work with such children is difficult, but not hopeless.

Good role models in this regard are Krzysztof Liszcz, MD, our guardian angel, and his wife Katarzyna Kałamańska-Liszcz. The first two children adopted by this couple had FAS. Today, they are adults. Their son completed his Bachelor's degree studies, whereas their daughter has finished secondary school and manages the couple's administrative office. Nowadays, Mr and Mrs Liszcz raise another two children with FAS in their foster family.

At the beginning of 2016, five years after the FAS Centre began its operation, we opened the Gdynia Testing and Therapy Centre located at Wejherowska Street. The new Centre houses the offices of a psychiatrist, a psychologist and a psychotherapist. We also cooperate with a neurologist and a physiotherapist. We've started training volunteers to help families work with FAS children. We're also training school counsellors and support teachers in small groups.

We want to provide therapeutic support. It's especially difficult for biological families to face the reality that their child has FAS.

I'm extremely glad that the actions undertaken in Gdynia with regard to FAS are developing well, as it's like my child. I'm glad that we're able to help children and their parents.

All that we do with regard to FAS results from the implementation of the Municipal Programme for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems. The Programme was adopted unanimously by Gdynia City councillors, which best proves that we all want to act together.

This social involvement is as important as the funds granted to us by the City.



# ▶ Together Against Violence



**HANNA ŻÓŁKOŚ-MARGOŃSKA, CHAIR OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM IN GDYNIA ESTABLISHED ON AUGUST 25, 2010, TALKS ABOUT THE TEAM'S WORK AFTER THE AMENDMENT TO THE ACT ON THE PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ENTERED INTO FORCE.**

The name “interdisciplinary” itself is meant to emphasise the fact that the team is composed of people from various institutions. The prevention of violence, which is a multi-dimensional problem in and of itself, requires the cooperation of many people. The initial composition of the team was specified on November 16, 2010, by way of a resolution issued by the President of the City of Gdynia. At that time, the team was composed of 111 members.

The guiding principle of the interdisciplinary team is to build relations between the representatives of institutions involved in such a way that they impact others who are not directly part of the team. Our members include, among others, managers, directors of municipal institutions, Police and Municipal Guard commissioners, but also police community support officers, social workers, guardians and beat officers. The purpose of this team is to inform the management and employees of the relevant institutions about the consequences of actions aimed to provide support to families suffering from domestic violence. By being aware of what is required by the Blue Card procedure, consisting of providing direct support in individual cases, they enable their employees to undertake these actions.

The team's composition last changed on March 1, 2016. Today, the team comprises 124 people, including representatives of social services, police, the Municipal Guard, the Municipal Office, specialist care centres, the Municipal Committee for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems, emergency rescue services and guardians. The team also includes a physician, two representatives from the education system, two prosecutors, the Plenipotentiary of the President of Gdynia in charge of City Security and the chair of the Local Self-Government Committee at the Gdynia City Council. As the law changed slightly in 2015, a Military Police officer also joined the team. Despite the fact that military police

were given the right to intervene in the families of active soldiers, it doesn't have the right to initiate the Blue Card procedure.

I chaired the team from the very beginning and now I'm nearing the end of my second term of office. I admit that this job is very demanding, but people I work with make it manageable.

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The decision whether to provide assistance to someone is left to the person concerned. We act in a more direct manner when there's a threat to life or health – especially where children are involved. We also intervene in the event of negligence, when despite our efforts put into motivating people to undertake action, we don't see them doing anything for their own good or for the good of their children. We apply to the family court to get insight into the family's situation and submit notices of suspected criminal offence to the prosecutor's office. These are situations in which someone gets hurt “here and now” and we're there to witness it happen.

**We intervene against any form of violence: physical, psychological, economic, sexual, and in the event of negligence.** It's a form of

violence that gets little attention, but it is as important as all others.

The Blue Card procedure is initiated as a result of a suspicion. Our task is to confirm or disprove the suspicion, not penalising people or drawing conclusions.





Each piece of information we receive is verified; a social worker, police community support officer, police patrol or a police officer from the Juvenile Unit is dispatched to a specific location. Our assessment of the situation is taken into consideration increasingly more often; in some cases, team members act as witnesses in court. We try to formulate letters and applications in such way that judges, prosecutors and police officers are presented with the facts. We're not there to assess or make assumptions; we're there to provide an objective perspective on the situation.

In 80 percent of the cases, we enter into people's lives as a result of a police intervention or suspected criminal offence reported by immediate family. There are situations when someone visits the precinct but doesn't want to report a crime. However, just completing the "Blue Card – A" form gives us a signal that they refuse to be treated in a certain way by a member of their immediate family. That's enough for us to take action.

Procedures are also initiated as a result of observations made by a social worker in the field and information they received directly from affected persons. We're contacted by school counsellors or class teachers who have the greatest opportunity to observe children and the relationship with their parents. Sometimes, the procedure is initiated by healthcare services or the Municipal Committee for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems. In 60 to 70 percent of the cases, domestic violence is accompanied by excessive alcohol consumption.

Whoever initiates the procedure submits the original copy of the form to the chair of the interdisciplinary team. It is at this moment that the domestic violence prevention team (separated from the organisational structure of the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre on September 1, 2013) steps in. This team is composed of Blue Card procedure coordinators. Social workers comprising the team coordinate all procedures within the entire territory of Gdynia. In our work, we divide the city according to precincts. This division makes it easier to create working groups whose members work in different systems and, sometimes, different hours. The group must create a single front: its members must complement each other, share information, determine actions to be undertaken and provide information to the coordinator. While harmonising the actions taken by all members of the working group, coordinators must monitor the family in the field.

Our role ends when the procedure is closed. The previous year ended with the procedure initiated 338

**338** times in 2015 in Gdynia the Blue Card procedure was initiated.

times, while in the period from January to March 23, 2016, this number amounted to 78. The number is comparable to that recorded in 2015. At present, two-thirds of all procedures are initiated with respect to persons who aren't recipients of social assistance; therefore, they're unknown to us and entered the system in response to the procedure. In Gdynia, the procedure lasts, on average, seven months. It ends when all members of a relevant working group issue an opinion and an assessment of the family's situation. In some cases, the court imposes the penalty of imprisonment against the perpetrator of violence and issues a restraining order in favour of the victim while the procedure is pending.

**124** members comprises of The Interdisciplinary Team in Gdynia.

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One of the tools at the disposal of prosecutors and judges is the room for perpetrators of domestic violence. Since October 2011, they may use this room to isolate the perpetrators of violence from their victims. Previously, it was much more difficult to temporarily prohibit such an individual from occupying their own apartment, as they had nowhere else to go.

The room is specifically located at 24 Janka Wiśniewskiego Street. The Gdynia Social Welfare Centre provided furniture and equipment for this space and finances its operation. It is such an effective tool that, after the decision is made, many people don't want to be identified as a violent perpetrator. They move into hotels or with more distant relatives. In 2015, out of 14 prosecution proceedings that required the perpetrator to be isolated, only one person used the perpetrator room.

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Gdynia has initiated the second edition of the "Municipal Programme for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence for the Years 2014–2020". In 2015, we were still creating tools referenced in the programme. I'm talking about the algorithm of procedures for families suffering from domestic violence to be applied following the end of the Blue Card procedure: what happens "after" is crucial to ensure that they never come back. It was also important to develop a scale to estimate the risk of renewed violence.

Simultaneously, a psychological support system for families suffering from domestic violence was being developed. The system would specify how to provide such families with adequate assistance, how to translate psychology into action and to normal, day-to-day life. This knowledge is priceless.

# ► Children in the Support Network

## INTERVIEW



**THE MISSION OF THE SPECIALIST CARE CENTRE COMPLEX IS TO HELP CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES CARRY OUT BASIC FAMILY FUNCTIONS BY UNDERTAKING ACTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL, DIAGNOSTIC AND THERAPEUTIC NATURE AS WELL AS TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AND SUPPORT FAMILIES AT RISK OF DYSFUNCTION AND IN A DIFFICULT – OFTEN CRISIS – SITUATION.**

**PRZEMYSŁAW LEBIEDZIŃSKI, DIRECTOR OF THE K. LISIECKI “DZIADEK” SPECIALIST CARE CENTRE COMPLEX IN GDYNIA TALKS ABOUT HOW THEY APPROACH THAT WORK.**

▼ **The word “network” probably best describes the social child support system operating in Gdynia.**

In the past, when community centres, such as socio-therapeutic community centres, were under the control of the Health Department at the Municipal Office and we were responsible for managing day support centres located at Wejherowska Street in the Chylonia District, we felt that we had to be a team. We played on the same team but had little interaction with each other. The goal wasn't only to operate under single management, but to complement each other and not to let our work overlap. By way of a tender and pursuant to the Family Support and Foster Care System Act, all community centres were transformed into day support centres. They retained their identity and independence, but each centre had to “get the hang” of working with a child through the lens of the family as there is no child without a family. The second task was to integrate

with the community in which the centre operates, so that it wouldn't be perceived as a place for children from pathological families, but rather as a space for activities for local residents. The third task was to establish cooperation. Centres must create a cohesive network collecting information on clients and inviting increasingly more allies.

▼ **Do you estimate the time required to help the child or do you allow matters to progress at their own pace?**

We prepare a plan and set a goal based on an interview, observations and, in some cases, a multi-stage diagnosis. The goal may be for the child to start going to school, to stop having difficulties when in contact with other children, to learn assertiveness, for the family to better handle difficulties between its members. We know in advance that the child doesn't have to be with us until the age of majority. We assume that the standard time required to implement the plan is one academic year.

Monitoring and recruitment teams meet twice a year. All interested parties verify which aspects of the prepared plan have and have not been effective. First meetings show that we're heading in the right direction, but still have a long way to go.

▼ **As I understand, when you consider a goal to have been achieved, you continue to monitor the situation?**

We assume that when centres “release” someone back into their home environment, they continue to monitor

### DAY SUPPORT CENTRE DIVISION

- ▶ **Socio-therapeutic, re-education and re-integration classes**
- ▶ **Organising leisure activities**
- ▶ **Supporting** persons striving to become independent and adoptive families
- ▶ **Training and on-the-job training** for school counsellors and special education teachers
- ▶ A total of **17-day support centres in Gdynia** (including 14 with the cooperation of NGOs)



both that person and their family. During team meetings, we determine who is the main animator of actions. We want for these families to learn that, despite the fact that this assistance is provided without a cost, it's not entirely free – they have to contribute.

One of the reasons we wanted to work with families as well, was the fact that most families came to us complaining about difficulties with children, without seeing any fault on their part. We wish to fix or at least help fix the entire family.

▼ **Is family assistance carried out on a voluntary basis or does it require enforcement, since some cases also involve court-appointed guardians?**

If a guardian is assigned to the case, it can be construed as enforced and creates difficulties, especially in relations with young people. Our task as educators is to establish such relations with a child where, despite feeling that something is forced upon them, they realise it's for their own good. This requires more than a month or two. In some cases, you need a year or longer. The child begins to understand why they were placed in the centre, parents appear and start to notice the problem, and then we start working together. Parents attend, for example, parent school classes where they learn to rebuild a relationship with their child or establish such relationship anew. We don't assume that the situation will improve one hundred percent as we're human and we can be wrong in our diagnosis, however, we do assume that families will gain access to the resources that they had previously but squandered for various reasons.

▼ **You say "children," but am I correct in assuming that you're also referring to young people under the age of 18?**

Day support centres provide support to children aged 6 to 18, beginning with children starting primary school. In certain cases, we provide support up to the age of 21, as we also assist them in becoming independent. There are also cases when a family has a child younger than six who also visits the day support centre, as we don't want to separate siblings.

▼ **If one wanted to mark the network of your centres on the map of Gdynia, what would it look like?**

Our centres are located all over the city. In addition, there are also neighbourhood social welfare centres. In total, we can accommodate nearly 500 children or approximately 400 families. Those are all the spaces we have available and they are usually all taken. At present, we're implementing a system where each team has partners working to help children and their families. We're changing the nomenclature as in the past, we used a child-oriented approach. The child was taught to be assertive and that led to disputes at home because

### ROUND-THE-CLOCK INTERVENTION DIVISION

- ▶ **Crisis intervention** – for people suffering from a psychological crisis
- ▶ **Support groups**
- ▶ **Psychotherapy** in contracted private offices
  - for persons suffering from violence
- ▶ **Corrective and educational programme**
  - for people causing domestic violence
- ▶ **Blue Room** – a place where child victims can be safely interviewed
- ▶ **Blue Patrol** – psychologist's intervention with police assistance
- ▶ **External and on-the-job training for psychologists**
- ▶ **Training for employees of institutions** having contact with people suffering from violence

they wouldn't watch over younger siblings. Parents laid the blame on us. Therefore, we decided that we would not accept parents without their child or a child without their parents. We also decided that we had to invite the local community to take action. Finally, we conducted studies and learned that despite the multitude of care centres operating within the city, they're not aware of actions undertaken by other centres.

We act as a network and in synergy so that we can see, be aware of, understand, and support each other.

▼ **What is the biggest benefit of this work method?**

We're able to define the needs of families placed in the system in a more precise manner. When centres were under different management, there were cases where families received support in several centres, but without any visible effect. Today, we know exactly where a family member receives assistance and what results can be expected. It's the success of these first meetings: we see that we make a difference within the system.

▼ **Any plans for the future?**

Currently, we're in the process of implementing what we had already planned. In two or three years, we will repeat the studies where the original results led us to make certain decisions. We'll pose some questions once again and see what changed. It's possible that certain aspects will prove no longer necessary, but if something doesn't work, we'll learn from our mistakes.



# ► To Raise Children in Homes, Not Institutions



## INTERVIEW

ON THE ONE HAND, CONTINUOUS SUPPORT IS PROVIDED TO FOSTER FAMILIES INTO WHICH CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE HAVE BEEN PLACED. ON THE OTHER HAND, CONSTANT EFFORTS ARE MADE TO FIND OTHERS INTERESTED IN GIVING A HOME TO CHILDREN THAT CANNOT REMAIN IN THEIR FOSTER HOMES. ZUZANNA ŁACZYŃSKA-STEC, MANAGER OF THE FAMILY-BASED FOSTER CARE TEAM, TALKS ABOUT HOW HER TEAM OPERATES.

### ▼ Let's start with some statistics.

In 2015, a total of 255 families and 403 children were registered in the family-based foster care system. In addition, six family-based foster care centres house up to eight children, nine if there are siblings. There are also social service centres. The number of children in the foster care system must be increased by approximately 130 when including those in institutional care.

### ▼ Is the number of places available in the foster care system sufficient?

We work hard to make it so. We're constantly growing and looking for new candidates to become foster parents. We must have well-developed capacities in regard to forms of family-based care since as of January 2016 we can't place children under the age of 10 in social service centres.

### ▼ You're conducting campaigns promoting the system of foster families in places that aren't associated with serious topics: buses, shopping centres, and employment agencies.

It's important to conduct these campaigns everywhere where there are people. Most of us have children. Maybe someone can take a child without a home into their own. Announcements at the "Town Hall" or spots played in trams produce results. We carried out promotional campaigns in Catholic churches, now we want to do the same in other churches. We're also thinking about campaigns in schools.

A professional foster family is a form of occupation that requires passion, appropriate predispositions and motivation. The "Occupation: Foster Parent" campaign intended to show that being unemployed doesn't mean that someone can't be a foster parent. Perhaps they have appropriate predispositions and motivation to turn being a foster parent into an occupation. However, financial reasons cannot be the only motivation.

### ▼ It's probably easier to verify predispositions than motivation. Candidates for foster parents must pass a qualification process.

Those who wish to become a professional foster family must have experience in that capacity. It's also necessary to complete a training course consisting of 93 teaching hours as well as practical training. The family undergoes practical training for a certain period of time and only when they verify whether it can handle the new role are they given a chance to become a professional foster family.

### ▼ How do you convince someone to take a foster child into his or her care? In some cases, can a child have disabilities?

It's a difficult question and a difficult task. In most cases, it's the candidates that demonstrate the willingness to take a child into their care. They come to us saying they would like to do something good for another person. They've already raised their children and have achieved success in this area. We have to show them what it





takes to become a foster parent. Children in our care have often been through very traumatic experiences. They require specialist care that differs from the way in which the family cared for their biological children. If a foster parent candidate accepts all of these conditions, understands and listens to what we say about the needs of children placed in foster care, they have a chance to succeed in becoming a foster parent.

▼ **The City allocated substantial funds to creating a support system for foster families.**

When our team was created in 2012, there were eight coordinators. Today, there are fifteen. In principle, each foster family is under the care of a coordinator. The coordinator's task isn't to "fix" the child, but to support the family and instruct them as to where they may find assistance. The mutual relationship between them is very important, as the coordinator visits the family on many occasions. It's important for the coordinator to celebrate success with the family and to provide support in difficult moments.

We have five psychologists who diagnose children the moment that they are placed in our care. If we determine that the child requires therapy, we may conduct this therapy internally within our team. The FAS Centre is also located nearby. In May, we plan to organise training for related foster families at the FAS Centre.

## 18 months

*After this time, if the reason for which the child was placed in foster care has not ceased, the organiser of family-based foster care applies to the court to clarify the child's legal status*

▼ **How is the Family-Based Foster Care Team organised?**

We currently have 24 full-time employees: 15 family-based foster care coordinators, three educators, five psychologists. I'm also included as manager for the entire team.

Apart from that, we also cooperate, on the basis of commission contracts, with socio-therapists and a psychologist specialising in diagnosing abused children, especially children who suffered sexual abuse. We're also visited by legal counsel who offers foster families free legal advice regarding matters mostly related to clarifying the child's legal status or alimony. We also employ a psychologist who leads the support group for foster parents: for related and non-professional foster

families. Once a month, our employees and I hold a clinical supervision meeting.

▼ **One of the elements of the system is the family support and foster care development programme adopted in Gdynia.**

It's a comprehensive programme scheduled to be implemented in the years 2014 to 2016 that focuses on providing family support as early as the moment a family starts to experience a crisis. Its purpose is to allow the family assistant referred to in the Family Support and Foster Care System Act to work on the resources. All this work is to ensure that the child isn't placed in foster care. Very intensive work with a biological family produces results. It's also important to have a well-developed network of day support centres. As a result, the number of children placed in institutional care has been dropping from year to year.

Thanks to the support provided by the local government, it's possible to rent houses and use them to operate family-based children's homes. The equipment, furniture and supplies are provided by the City. The City also provides the families with discretionary assistance, depending on individual needs.

▼ **If you had to specify a distinctive aspect of your team's work, what would it be?**

As with most teams at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre, we operate on the basis of an annual plan. This plan is developed regardless of our statutory obligations. We set out other goals we want to achieve and specify additional ideas. These actions are aimed to make foster families see us not only as social workers that visit and fill out forms but rather as someone with whom you can spend time in a fun way.

▼ **I believe it's working since no one can imagine May without the picnic to celebrate Foster Parents' Day. And I know that's not all.**

The Foster Parents' Day is an occasion for all foster families to meet. However, we also organise smaller events, such as the carnival ball, which you have to attend in costume. On December 6, coordinators and psychologists deliver presents to children as part of the "When Santa Claus Comes Knocking" campaign. We took young people to the Addiction Therapy Centre in Wandzin and to the Juvenile Detention Facility in Barczew. We also organised workshops regarding tolerance towards people suffering from AIDS and infected with the HIV virus, suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction, and workshops regarding life choices.

Young people regularly organise a film discussion club. We also organise art and music classes. Before the holidays, we make holiday ornaments.

I'm open to new ideas and we're never strapped for them when the team consists of 24 members.



# ► Children Feel That This is Their Home



**A TERRACED HOUSE STANDS IN ONE OF THE RESIDENTIAL AREAS IN GDYNIA.** GROUND FLOOR AND TWO STOREYS, EACH OF THEM VIBRANT WITH THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF FAMILY LIFE. TO BE MORE PRECISE: THE LIFE OF A FOSTER HOME CREATED BY **BEATA PODLASKA AND DARIUSZ PODLASKI** FOR SIX CHILDREN IN THEIR CARE. ANIA IS 15 YEARS OLD, WERONIKA IS 13 YEARS OLD, KUBA IS 10 YEARS OLD, AGNIESZKA IS FOUR AND A HALF YEARS OLD, NIKOLA IS FIVE AND A HALF YEARS OLD AND ANDŻELIKA IS EIGHT YEARS OLD.

BEATA AND DARIUSZ HAVE BEEN A FOSTER FAMILY FOR OVER SIX YEARS.

“This decision resulted from my extensive reflection on the matter,” said Mrs Podlaska. “I volunteered at the socio-therapeutic community centre for over a year. The idea of creating a foster family was on my mind for quite some time and I wanted to find out how I fared with children. When I met the nine-year-old Ania, it became clear that since I stumbled upon a place with a child looking for a home, this must be the child.

Beata and Dariusz adopted the girl in October 2014.

Agnieszka joined the family on February 6, 2013. She was born with the Down syndrome, oesophageal atresia and a heart defect.

Kuba has been with the family for two years now, Weronika for a year and a half, Nikola for nine months, and Andżelika for a month. After Nikola joined the family, they received the status of a foster home. It was necessary to move to a bigger apartment. The girl is disabled and requires space for rehabilitation.

Nikola was born in July 2010 in the ambulance of emergency services in Gdynia. The woman who gave birth to her was homeless and an addict. On that day, she had a blood alcohol level of 4‰.

The baby girl she gave birth to weighed 950 grams. She had to be revived twice. When they tested the newborn baby’s blood, it showed a blood alcohol concentration of 4.27‰.

Nikola was placed in the “Child Haven” children’s home in Gdynia. The mother was sentenced and imprisoned. Her parental rights were taken away.

In 2012, the baby girl was in need of comprehensive specialist care and so was placed in the Janusz Korczak Memorial Specialist Mother and Child Healthcare Centre in Gdańsk.

Once there she was noticed by Mrs Podlaska. “I’ve been visiting Agnieszka, who was to become a part of our family, and when Agnieszka was already with us and everyone had adapted to the new situation, I felt that Nikola was constantly somewhere on my mind. I thought to myself: we have a place for one more child. I’m referring more to the place in my heart, as that’s the most important thing.”

It was important for Mrs Podlaska that the other children got to know Nikola, so they visited the Healthcare Centre together. For a year, Nikola grew more and more accustomed to Mrs Podlaska’s touch and smell. The girl suffers from profound intellectual and physical disabilities. She is hypersensitive to touch, but slowly allowed Mrs Podlaska to touch her. When she was leaving the Healthcare Centre, she was making her first steps with the help of others, but no one knew whether she would ever be able to walk on her own. Today, she runs around the house, walks up and down the stairs with Mr Podlaski and hugs Mrs Podlaska so tightly that you wouldn’t be able to squeeze a pin between them. Despite the physician’s claims that the girl’s hearing and vision are significantly impaired, she reacts to their voices and can find her way exactly to where she wants to go. She is fed parenterally, but there is hope that in time, she will





be able to eat like other, healthy children. Classes at the Eating School run by the “żyć z POMPA” (“Living with the TUBE”) foundation from Gdynia are intended to help her achieve that goal. Nikola is also undergoing rehabilitation at the Early Intervention Centre. The contact with other children that she has at home cannot be overestimated.

Older children go to the same school while Agnieszka and Nikola go to a nursery school for children with special needs. The children are growing increasingly closer to each other; they sometimes even refer to each other as “my sister” or “my brother.” “This happens on their own initiative and shows what the relationship between them looks like,” Mrs Podlaska noticed. “They feel that it’s their home. We, adults, think that taking in a child will be all fun. That it will be all sunshine and rainbows from the beginning, as if with a flick of a magic wand. It’s not. And it may not be so for a long time. You need to look at the situation from the child’s perspective. They’re suddenly placed in a home that is foreign to them. They no doubt have been waiting for a home, but it’s a very difficult experience for them nonetheless. I believe that the best anyone can do in this situation, although it’s still not entirely possible, is to try to enable the child to become familiar with the new environment, and to make certain that it’s stable and predictable. It’s very important in the case of foster children, as in their experience, they often don’t have influence over anything.”

Mrs Podlaska’s way of running a foster family includes not pretending that they’re a biological family. “Because we’re not,” she replied briefly. “Some of the children call me “Mom”, some call me “Aunt.” To me, it’s important that they have a single person, unlike all other aunts. I’m open to what the children want, but I know that you have only one mother. Children find it difficult to reconcile the idea of having a biological and foster mother. It’s difficult for them to spread their roots. I often hear people speaking very negatively about women who don’t raise their children, but I’m not so quick to jump to conclusions. I try to think about what must have happened in that woman’s life that she was unable to take care of her own child.

In families like the one created by Mrs Podlaska and Mr Podlaski, the most important thing is proper organisation and planning. There is no place for chaos, especially in the morning. It’s important because Agnieszka and Nikola require different treatments.

They often go out with the whole family. However, it can be problematic as not every establishment accepts people with disabilities. “There is a stereotype that a disabled child is poorly dressed and their mother is grey, sad and ruined by life,” Mrs Podlaska observed. “When we go out, I dress Agnieszka and Nikola in pretty, colourful clothes because they’re entitled to have a great life. Because they’re great.”

The doubt whether a sense of “I can handle this” is always present. According to her that’s good because if she ever noticed that she had become fearless, she would start to worry.

Childcare, especially where children with disabilities are concerned, is a huge responsibility. This fear allows Mrs Podlaska to think about areas that prove more difficult for her and in which she requires assistance. However, she runs the foster home with her husband, without any additional childminders.

“When I said that we’d be accepting a sixth child, only two people said “Congratulations!” Most said “Oh God!” she recalled. “I also heard some people say “I feel sorry for you.” People react differently when they hear about what we’re doing, but to feel sorry for us? I chose this of my own free will, nothing bad is happening to us. Despite the difficulties that come with taking care of Agnieszka and Nikola, the positive aspects and joy of being together outweigh all negative aspects. Of course, my husband had to agree to the idea of creating a foster family. We talked about it for a long time, but we had to be ready to make this decision. A single person may also act as a foster family, but it’s better when there are both parents in the household. It’s important to show children what a normal family looks like. I know that none of this would’ve worked without my husband. He has a different perspective, so he cuts me down to size. Many men leave their families not because they can’t stand taking care of a disabled child, but because they can’t handle the fear. My husband is an example that it doesn’t have to be this way. His relationship with Agnieszka is exceptional.”

Mrs Podlaska believes that her family’s example might serve as a signpost on the road to attaining the internal maturity to adopt a foster child. Or, as a way to dot the i’s and cross the t’s. However, she emphasised that it must be a strongly rooted decision: “Not everyone is ready to, or for that matter capable of, adopting a child forever but you can also help by spending an hour or two a week with them. Children placed in institutional care are all our children. Everyone may support them as best they can.”

Soon, thanks to the support provided by the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre, a guidebook for foster parents written by Mrs Podlaska will be published. “After comparing my experiences with those of others, I came to the conclusion that foster children experience certain difficulties more often than children from biological families. When I first started, I wasn’t quite sure where to turn to for help in a specific situation, at times I didn’t even know what I needed,” she admitted. “I thought that it would be beneficial to collect answers to all these questions, the most important contact information and some literature in a single place. I hope that this publication will make the process easier for someone.”



# ▶ They Know That Well-Being is Contagious When Shared

**HARDWORKING, BUSY, DOWN TO EARTH BUT WITH A BIG HEART.** THEY CAN PERSUADE COWORKERS AND CLIENTS TO HAVE FUN TOGETHER AND SOMETIMES TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN PLACED IN THE CARE OF THE GDYNIA SOCIAL WELFARE CENTRE. THANKS TO THOSE WHO DEMONSTRATE EACH DAY WHAT CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY MEANS IN PRACTICE, CHILDREN GO TO SUMMER AND WINTER CAMPS, FULFIL THEIR DREAMS AND DEVELOP THEIR TALENTS.

**WE PRESENT YOU THE MAGNIFICENT FIVE – AND BOW OUR HEADS WITH GRATITUDE FOR ALL THAT THEY’VE DONE.**



**BEATA BLOCK**  
RDL Hydraulics

I always wanted to help someone who couldn't help themselves. I asked Michał Guć, Vice-President of Gdynia, with whom I was in contact, to help me decide to whom to give my support. He directed me to Mr Franciszek Bronk and Mrs Zuzanna Stec.

My support gives foster children an opportunity to do something they perhaps wouldn't be able to do otherwise. They participate in language lessons, art classes, go to the swimming pool, learn horse riding. The little ones who need therapy receive specialist care. We provide financial support throughout the entire academic year and longer if we also subsidise therapeutic summer camp trips. There are cases when the available classes do not meet someone's expectations or cannot be continued due to health reasons.

Whatever the case may be, I hope that the children and young people will be able to utilise the opportunity given to them in the best possible way.

I became involved in charity work at my previous place of employment, Thomson Reuters. In 2007, I proposed collecting money for Christmas gifts for children; I was already in contact with Mrs Zuzanna Stec. Thomson Reuters employs many foreigners. In November, they organise the International Cuisine Day; employees buy products, prepare traditional dishes of their home country and sell them at the fair for symbolic amounts. As many as 30 people prepared dishes and around 300 people bought them. At MISYS, where I currently work, there are a large number of people doing charity work. At the end of 2015, we collected money for Christmas gifts for children. The people working at the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre prepared many of them each year. They deliver them to children's homes while dressed as Santa Claus. I liked their commitment and the fact that they always deliver the gifts in their free time on St. Nicholas Day, even when it falls on the weekend.



**AGNIESZKA DOBRZYŃSKA**  
Misys





I know that I can't make the entire world happy, but since children were always the closest to my heart, I decided to focus on supporting them. I made a commitment to support children under the care of the Gdynia Education and Care Centre located in Witomin-Chwarzno Districts by donating a total amount of 100,000 Polish zlotys over three years. The specific purpose to which the funds will be allocated will be determined together with the children and their carers: e.g. survival-style holidays, football camp combined with horse riding lessons. I also financed a skate park at the Sue Ryder Park where children learn how to skateboard and ride BMX. Together, we visit the refuge for animals. I also donate money to finance its operations. Before Christmas, children write letters to me as Santa Claus. I try to make their requests a reality. Once a month, I take the children, either on my own or with my wife, to the cinema, theatre or playground. I think this experience allowed me to establish a personal relationship with them. Children can also count on me when they reach adulthood, as they became my own children, so to speak.



**ANDRZEJ BOCZEK**  
AB Investor



**ANDRZEJ BRZEZIŃSKI**  
Dohle Marine Services  
Europe

My professional life was and still remains connected to the sea. After “coming ashore,” I wished to share my internal belief in humanity and nature with those whose lives were coming to an end or who were wronged by fate.

I decided to work as a volunteer at a hospice. From there, I went to family-based foster homes. I shared my experiences with my coworkers and the management at the company recruiting crewmembers for ships of foreign shipowners, Dohle Marine Services Europe. The president gave me the green light to initiate cooperation with the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre and he became involved himself.

We obtain funds from sailors who generously put money into the money box placed at the company's reception desk.

The “Work and Sail with Us” Foundation gives us access to sailboats that we take on the Raduńskie Lake from the Apostleship of the Sea Centre in Przewóz near Chmielno, with children from family-based foster homes, their carers and educators on board.

More than 50 children from family-based foster homes and many volunteers attended the Christmas dinner.

The most important thing is that we're close to children not only at celebrations and events but, above all, on normal days, when they need our affection, interest and presence; we need to become true aunts and uncles and friends!

The cooperation of the present Riviera Centre with the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre began in January 2013, several months before the official opening of the building that, at the time, operated under the name “Wzgórze Shopping Centre.” As explained by the representatives of the investor, Mayland Real Estate, corporate social responsibility is of greater importance to the company than charitable activity, as the company wants to establish good relations with the local community and invest in its future. Helping children and young people seemed like the obvious idea.

During the winter break, Wzgórze Shopping Centre organised a ski camp for 20 children placed in family-based foster care. The Centre also organised a series of workshops related to journalism. The workshops were attended by 15 children from families supported by the Gdynia Social Welfare Centre. Wzgórze Shopping Centre provided funds to purchase laptops, digital cameras and yearlong access to the internet.

One of the last jointly organised actions was called “Christmas Wish Tree”.

“We hung mock-ups of Christmas tree ornaments at the Christmas tree set up in our Centre. Each ornament featured the child's name and a description of their dream gift,” said Marek Ciszewski, Director of the Riviera Centre. “We also encouraged our clients to make those wishes come true. It worked! Over 40 children received Christmas gifts.”



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