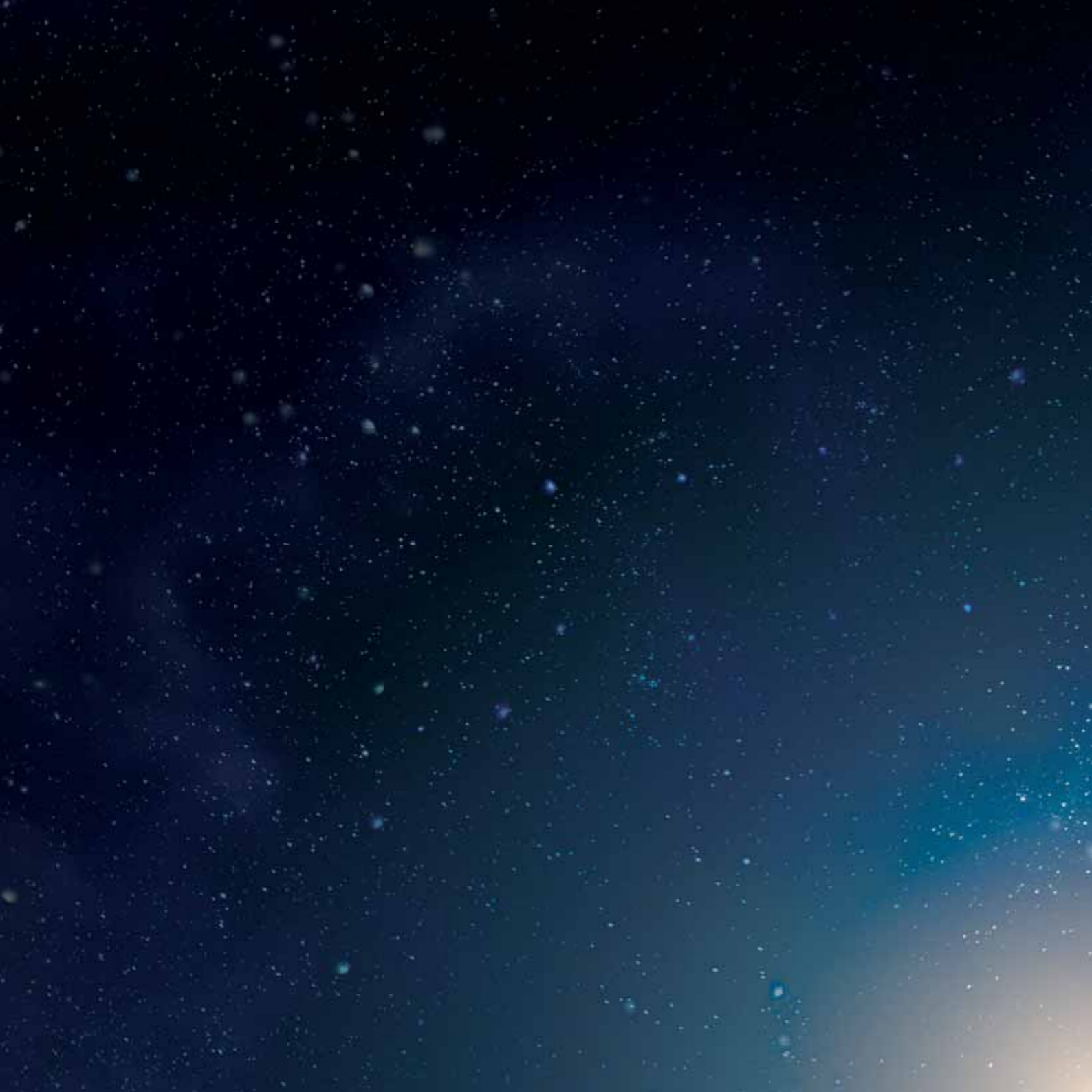


# Annual Report 2021





VOLUNTEER ONCE A WEEK - FRIENDSHIP FOR LIFE

**"I got the feeling that  
I could confide in someone  
and that someone was  
there for me."**

Lívia, 24, Bratislava  
8 years with her  
BUDDY volunteer



# Contents



9

Foreword

10

**I don't give much thought to things that may come. I want to give Andrej everything I have right now.**

(story of a BUDDY pair)

14

**Children appreciate having SOMEONE while volunteers talk about their world being enriched.**

(interview with a coordinator)

18

BUDDY during the pandemic

19

Our current locations

20

**Daniela is going through a difficult time. I hope she sees me as a safe haven.**

(story of a BUDDY pair)

24

**It's not easy for any of us to acknowledge we're not coping and to ask for help.**

(interview with a coordinator)

28

It works. Safe, stable, long-term and reliable

30

**Picking out a dress for the prom and opening a savings account. Who will support young people who do not grow up in a family?**

(story of a BUDDY pair)

36

Together we turn long-term donations into long-term friendships

38

Thanks to the increased trust of donors, the number of pairs and the quality of our work is increasing

40

Our thanks

42

Our plans for 2022

46

Contact



## Dear BUDDY friend,

16 years ago, I never imagined that more than 160 children in Slovakia would have met their BUDDY volunteer.

My mother would often tell me that a droplet erodes a stone not by force, but by persistent falling. Just like our wonderful volunteers in Trnava and Košice: they are there for the child almost every week of the year. Where exactly is "there"? "There" is wherever they and their teen BUDDY decide to go for a walk, grab a coffee or take a bike ride. "There" is simply being: being "there" for the child, being present for him or her, patient, listening, empathetic, and respectful. They are there with their time, which is almost a miracle in the eyes of the BUDDY children. A miracle they didn't think was possible. A marvel that is both art and science.

They are given time, which slowly but surely drives away the gloomy clouds and proves that the sun does indeed always shine after the storm. The sun of friendship, support, security, or smiles, but also of faith in oneself and others. Sun in the form of learning to live independently, improving one's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to find a job or a decent place to live in spite of this. These children have never had the gift of support from their families but, thanks to you, they now have a BUDDY volunteer.

Thanks to you we may work miracles together and help our BUDDY teenagers to dream and live their own free life. I feel that accepting BUDDY children makes our country a little bit more generous, patient, kind, and happy. We believe that will be true for many years and decades to come.

Sincere thanks from the entire BUDDY team,

Laci Kossár, founder

**"I don't give much thought  
to things to that may come.  
I want to give Andrej  
everything I have right now."**

Boris Lacík, 35  
firefighter - rescuer, Bratislava  
1 year in the BUDDY program



## On his mobile phone, Boris has a photo of 12-year-old Andrej wearing a large fireman's helmet on his head. Boris is a professional firefighter and Andrej's BUDDY volunteer.

They'd been through a lot together during their meetings, which began more than a year ago, and a trip to the fire station, of course, was not to be missed. "I believe that being a firefighter helped in developing a relationship with Andrej. Our coordinator, Vierka, said that Andrej might want to become a firefighter one day, so we had something to talk about. And I believe he enjoyed it a lot at our station," Boris remarks.

Boris says that Andrej was so passionate about football that he joined a football club. "I've picked him up a few times after training, and I'll be at his game as well. Do we play together? Yes, we do that quite frequently. The only problem is that I'm a clumsy footballer. And he always curb-stomps me badly. He'll set me up as a goalkeeper, hoodwink me, and I'll let in goal after goal," Boris chuckles.



**"It was clear to me that, if I were to make that decision, I must be sure that I wouldn't want to back off in years to come."**

### Long-term commitment

Boris is 35 years old and does not have any children of his own. When he first heard about the BUDDY program, he instantly wondered how he might get involved. "Two factors were critical in my choice. The first thing that came to mind was the enormous sense of responsibility. It was clear to me that if I were to make that decision, I must be fully committed to it. That I wouldn't want to back off in years to come. I knew I wouldn't be able to "pack my things" and go off somewhere like Australia, for example. I realised it was to be regular and long-term contact. I asked myself if I could devote time to that kid on a weekly basis for several years. Although the program usually ends a few years after the child leaves the Centre for Children and Families (CDR), the child and volunteer may remain in contact for the rest of their lives," adds Boris.

The second factor that impacted Boris' choice to become a BUDDY volunteer for a CDR child was his experience from summer camps for children.

"I have helped organise children's summer camps in the past and have participated in them as a supervisor on multiple occasions. We have routinely had children from disadvantaged social or family backgrounds. I've observed how they reacted to us adults, and I'm aware that our interactions with them can shape and even affect them. However, they weren't very long - just ten days. The child then left, and we never saw them again. I believed that if we had the chance to influence such a child for a longer period of time, that contact could be beneficial," Boris explains. "This is what finally encouraged me to apply for the BUDDY program, the fact that the contact with the kid is targeted and long-term. During that time, you develop a relationship with them and may be able to influence them. I considered it to be time extremely well spent," he adds.

### I had the jitters

He described the selection process as being lengthy and difficult. "I remember there were six rounds in total. Five months passed between the application and the meeting with Andrej. During that time, I became more conscious of what attending the program would entail for me, and I was able to mentally prepare myself. They were looking to see if I fulfilled their criteria and, of course, if the kid and I would be a suitable match. I know that they accept people who are already stable in their life into the program. Some people have older children, some have younger children, and some have none at all," Boris says.

When asked if he was nervous before seeing Andrej for the first time, he responds



quickly, "Of course I was nervous. During the admissions process, the coordinators can see through the people in front of them and are familiar with the children who will be enrolled in the program. They seek to match appropriate pairs, and I believe it worked for us. Of course, I was curious how Andrej would respond to my presence. I was curious how the meeting with a complete stranger would go, with also our coordinator Vierka, a lady from CDR, and I presume, the director of the CDR also present. It was a group gathering in the CDR area. But then Andrej and I went for a walk, just the two of us, around the fence maybe thirty times," Boris laughs. That day, he signed the relevant forms and began meeting with Andrej.

### We laugh a lot

Andrej, he says, is very athletic. "He excels in whatever sport he attempts. We used to go hiking as well as cycling. Andrej pedalled, while I jogged beside him," Boris grins. "And we always

chatted while doing so. The fact that a kid immediately confides in you about something serious does not necessarily imply that you have a closer relationship. And vice versa, just because a kid isn't as gregarious about such things doesn't imply they don't trust you," explains Boris.

"I had no idea how things would turn out for us. We were talking frankly from the start, and Andrej told me about his family. He has been in CDR for four years. That's a third of a lifetime for a twelve-year-old, but he also recalls events from when he was still living with his mother. I also told him that my parents were divorced and that my sister is severely disabled. He was intrigued, but we also talked about mundane topics and laughed a lot. It's all good," says Andrej's volunteer cheerfully.

Boris meets with the coordinator of their pair once a month. "We mostly discuss how to react when Andrej brings up a painful topic for him, or how to approach important

**"The fact that a kid immediately confides in you about something serious does not necessarily imply that you have a closer relationship."**

conversations. These frequently come suddenly out of the blue, and it is critical to react appropriately. It's a huge challenge," Boris laughs. "This Sunday, we were talking about things that happened to him. He was sharing his emotions, which he hadn't done before. And he was good at pointing them out," he says.

### I'm here for him

When we ask Boris what the BUDDY program gives him, he mentions time meaningfully spent. "I hope, or at least convince myself, that our encounters will be something Andrej remembers throughout his life and into his adulthood. These children rarely have a dependable adult in their lives for a lengthy period of time. And it's critical that they have one," he explains.

Boris gave Andrej a collage of photographs from their travels together for his birthday. There was a picture of Andrej wearing an oversized fire helmet from the station. Boris says that, whatever they do, he always focuses on Andrej during their time together. Perhaps the best way to describe it is that I am always vigilant. I want to respond appropriately, I ponder the meaning behind his words. One day a crisis might strike in his life and in our relationship, even though I expect a bright future for Andrej. I don't give much thought to things that may come. I want to give Andrej everything I have right now. And I'm here for him."



**"Children appreciate having someone, while volunteers talk about their world being enriched."**

Katarína Šiborová  
psychologist - BUDDY pairs care  
**Member of the BUDDY team for over 3 years**



## Psychologist Katarína Šiborová is in charge of the BUDDY program's volunteers and aids in their recruitment and selection. Entering the program is a long and rigorous process, but the ultimate result is the first meeting with a child and the start of a shared story.

### Who are the volunteers applying to the BUDDY program?

They are a varied group. It's difficult to pinpoint who exactly we're looking for, but we have strict requirements. Although we may reject applicants on occasion, this does not imply that they are not good people. It makes no reflection on them as people or their suitability to be a mother or father to their own children. It also does not preclude them from volunteering with children. It's just that our program with this particular set of kids isn't a suitable fit for them at this time in their lives.

### What requirements must a person meet in order to apply as a BUDDY?

They should have their lives in order. So, not a student, but someone with at least two years of work experience. The youngest volunteers in our program are in their mid-twenties, while the eldest are in their sixties. However, the majority of volunteers are between the ages of 35 and 40. This is a group of people who have already started families and their children are growing up.

### However, such people are often very busy...

They are, but their lives are already, at least partially, stable. They have been working for a longer period of time, have no plans for substantial changes, and the same is true for their personal and family lives. Their children are frequently twelve years old or older and have begun to separate from them, pursuing their own hobbies. However, we do not discriminate against single people who do not have their own children. Often, they are looking for alternative ways to give something to someone.

### What drives people to apply to be volunteers with you, and what are their motivations?

Many of them have got some free time on their hands and would like to do something meaningful with it.

"Although we may reject applicants on occasion, this does not imply that they are not good people."

They are drawn to children because they believe they can influence them in some way. They want to make the lives of those children better and easier, and they want to do their part to help make that happen.

### Does it matter if it's a man or a woman?

We always have same-sex couples, pairing girls with women and boys with men. It is important for children to have a female or male role model. Someone they may want to be like when they grow up.

### What kind of children enter the program?

These are children who live in centres for children and families. The basic rule is that we only enrol children from the age of 12. This is because these children can already distinguish between the roles of BUDDY volunteers and other adults in their lives. They already understand that they are not going to be a surrogate mother or father, but rather someone who plays a specific role in their lives, and they can accept that. This is the age when children begin to separate from their parents. They already fully comprehend that a volunteer is someone who comes and goes, who does not take them in permanently, but will be with them and are someone they can turn to if they have a need. Another rule is that we only enrol children who will be able to live independently in the future and do not have mental or other serious disabilities. So these are children who, when they reach the age of 18, will find themselves in the adult world, often without a family. Otherwise, they are very varied, with a range of different personalities and coming from different backgrounds.

### However, these children do know their biological families, many are aware of their origins and who their parents are.

Yes, and even if they don't live together, some of them have a good relationship with them. However, most of the time, the reasons why a child does not grow up in a biological family remain. When the child grows up, he or she usually does not return to his or her original environment since the parents are still unable to provide a home for the child and frequently have major problems in their own lives.

### The first meeting between a volunteer and a child is preceded by thorough preparation. What does it look like?

Preparations for becoming a volunteer begins with the volunteer's enrollment into the selection process. It takes several months and includes up to eight steps. If we accept a volunteer, he or she is usually allocated a coordinator based on where he or she lives. Volunteers can come from anywhere in Slovakia. Throughout the selection process, participants learn more about the program. Not only do we choose them, but they choose us too.

### Can they change their minds and withdraw?

It happens very rarely. We are the ones who are strict, and we frequently reject a candidate if we are unsure. Once the volunteer has been chosen, the allocated coordinator will meet him or her before they meet the child to go over the volunteer contract. The volunteer also learns more about the child, and we also reflect on the selection process. We discuss the aspects that stand out and want to define our forthcoming partnership. We inform the volunteers about what to expect and how the meeting with the child will take place.



### And how do you prepare the child?

The local centre chooses the children. They have psychologists who are familiar with them and work with them. If we believe we have a qualified volunteer in that location for a specific child, the coordinator visits them and introduces them to the program. However, the BUDDY program has been running for a long time in many centres, so many children are familiar with it. Regardless, they consult with the coordinator.

### Do the children want to join this program?

Generally, yes. Sometimes their primary motivation is to get out of the centre and have someone visit them. At first, it's primarily a pleasant distraction for them. The coordinator informs them that the volunteer is doing it for free since he or she is interested in spending time together, and how frequently they will meet.

### Do BUDDY volunteers get nervous before their first meeting?

Generally, yes. Some are visibly worried. However, in my experience, the nerves soon fade. The first meeting is always a bit artificial, after all, we are introducing two strangers, telling them that they might eventually like one another and form a relationship. During the first short 30-minute meeting, which takes place in the centre, the coordinator is generally present who has previously met the child and introduces him or her to the volunteer. The coordinator does, however, try to gently fade away and leave them alone for at least a few minutes so they have a bit of privacy. The meeting is usually concluded with an agreement about their next meeting.

### How does this process continue?

The volunteer is a junior for the first two years and meets with his or her coordinator at least once a month. If there is an emergency that needs to be addressed, they meet right away; otherwise, they meet

"The first meeting is always a bit inauthentic; after all, we are introducing two strangers, telling them that they might eventually like one another and form a relationship."

once every four weeks. They talk about what's going well in their relationship with the child, where there are any issues, and what's going on between them.

### What do the volunteer and the child do together in the subsequent meetings?

It varies. For boys, it generally revolves around various activities, such as sports. With girls, the pairs usually quickly find shared interests and speak when wandering around town or in cafes. It is important for them to spend 1:1 time and do activities that help them get to know one another.

### How long does the whole program take?

When we talk about volunteer commitment, we mean a minimum of three years. However, the ideal is for it to last a lifetime. Of course, we will not see a volunteer once a month for the rest of their lives. After two years, the volunteer advances to a senior role, becomes independent, meets with the coordinator once every three months, and the program's duration is determined by the child's age. The majority of pairs stay in the program until the child is 22 years old, with a maximum age of 26. We check in with pairs who are nearing the end of the program twice a year to see how they are doing.

### Can the child end the relationship?

It is possible, although it is unusual. And, when it does happen, it usually happens in the first year. Children usually only need a dependable adult to accompany them. Some children's trust in adults has been so undermined and they have been let down so many times that they react coldly to a BUDDY volunteer. The child wishes to interact but is unable to do so.

### Can a BUDDY, for example, assist a child with schoolwork?

They can, but the children aren't keen on it. However, the majority of our volunteers have an overview of the kid's performance and attitude towards school. Interestingly, despite the fact that many children do not seek help with schoolwork, they report in our annual questionnaires that volunteers have helped them with school - either to improve their grades or to get them accepted to a school.

### Will the children also get to know the people around the BUDDY volunteer?

They will, in time. Children eventually enter their social circles, and meet their friends and family. We prefer that this does not happen in the early phases of a relationship, but it is not an issue later on and occurs frequently. This way they also witness how other adults live and how different relationships in families work.

### Have you also had pairs that have lasted until the child became an adult?

We have several such pairs, some of which have lasted for 6-7 years – the duration of the BUDDY program in its current form.

### What do the children think about the program in hindsight after a few years? What are they happy about?

We conduct annual questionnaires with the children. They often mention having SOMEONE they can turn to, someone they can approach, someone who accepts them for who they are, despite their issues. They have someone who gives them reassurance and is always there for them.

### What do the volunteers have to say about the program in their questionnaires? How does it benefit them?

They appreciate the fact that children have enriched and expanded their world. They come from very different backgrounds. Most important, though, is the relationship with the children. They write that they love them, care about them, and want the best for them. Their interaction changes over time, although they typically remain friends.

Text: Marcela Fuknová  
Photos: Kristína Močková

# BUDDY during the pandemic

BUDDY volunteers are still in high demand.

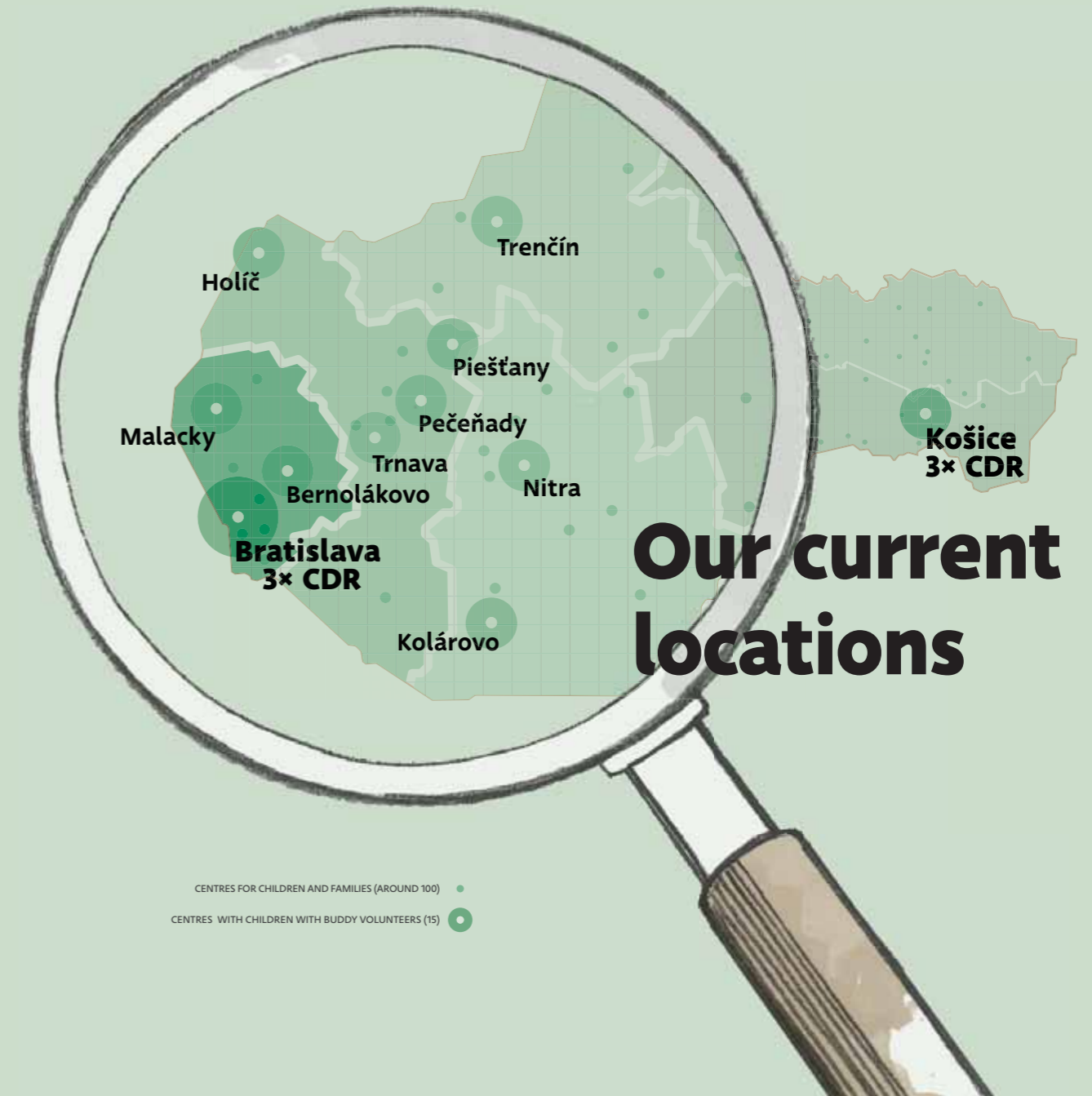
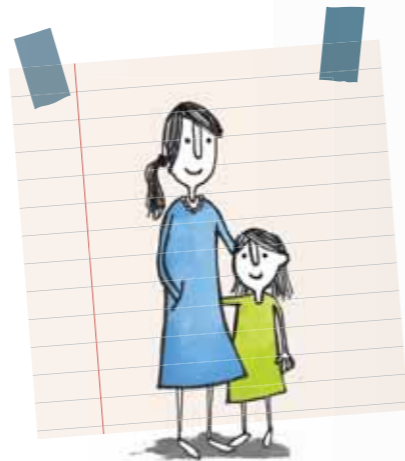
## 101

children actively meeting up with their BUDDY volunteers



## 23

new children met their BUDDY volunteer



**"Daniela is going through a difficult time. I hope she sees me as a safe haven."**

Lucia Remišová,  
teacher of economics at grammar school, Trnava  
2 years in the BUDDY program



## In addition to their nearly two-year relationship, BUDDY volunteer Lucia (39) and Daniela (14) share an important date.



"When we first met, we discovered that our birthdays are on the same day. To be honest, we hadn't celebrated it together yet. First because of the coronavirus and this year because I was on vacation with my family. But Daniela surprised me by calling me first. I was pleased when she told me that her new foster family, where she is on a trial over the summer vacation, is kind to her and pays attention to her. And we're both looking forward to seeing each other again," Lucia says.

Despite the fact that their relationship is in its second year, they have only had a handful of personal interactions in the last six months. They had been communicating more on the phone up until that point. Not because they were unwilling to meet in person. "You could say I met Daniela during a turbulent period in her life. We hit it off right away because she's a very kind and wise girl. However, the circumstances were stacked against her. She had been separated from her biological family six months prior to our first meeting. A few days later, she was told she was going to live

with a foster family in a town fifty kilometres away. She returned to the centre for children and families after nine months and, just a few days ago, she went to another foster family fifty kilometres away in the opposite direction," Lucia says.

"Daniela has switched schools four times in the last two years. If she stays with this family, she will have attended her fifth school in three years. She's had to change friends several times, adjusting each time. She was an honours student in her previous foster family, but her grades temporarily plummeted. However, I'm not sure who would get decent grades in such conditions. Many adults would struggle to deal with so many significant life changes in such a short period of time," Daniela's BUDDY volunteer says.

"I also met Daniela's biological mother, who told me that she was happy to have Daniela with me..."

## I'm not going anywhere

Their chats, according to Lucia, frequently focused on these challenging conditions. "We discussed the fact that things are the way they are and that we must find a way of coping with them. I wanted to motivate and encourage her. To let her know that, even though everything is changing, I'm not leaving and will be there for her as well," says the mother of two sons.

They spent a lot of time going for walks when they were able to see each other more frequently once the pandemic situation stabilised and Daniela returned from her first foster family. "We would sometimes just sit on a blanket and do puzzles or go for coffee. We also visited the museum and discussed the exhibits, for example. Daniela is really clever and makes remarkable observations. She is a pleasure to converse with," Lucia says. Daniela has also visited her house on multiple occasions.

"I hope that Daniela and I will stay in touch when she grows older."

"She has already made friends with my sons, who are a little younger than her. They watch something, or we cook and bake together. I believe she feels our house is a safe haven for her. She said that our home is really peaceful. I also met Daniela's biological mother, who told me that she was happy that Daniela has me in her life..." Lucia says.

They also deal with strictly female issues together. "Daniela has lovely curly hair. But, because she frequently uses a straightening iron on it. I never know what she will look like the next time we meet," Lucia chuckles. "She was concerned about getting it wet the last time we went rafting together on BUDDY Day 2022. Eventually, that's exactly what happened and she ended up swimming. I believe we both felt comfortable there, curly hair or not," she laughs.

## The selection process? Difficult.

More than half a year has passed since my decision to enrol in the BUDDY program and my first meeting with Daniela. "At first, I wanted to help babies in the maternity ward whose mothers couldn't be there with them. However, there was no such opportunity in my area. While looking on the internet, I came across the BUDDY program. I applied and attended the first meeting. The selection process was challenging. We went through different psychological tests and sessions with psychologists over a long period of time. We were thoroughly checked. At the same time, we had time to think about what we expected from the program and whether we were willing and able to make the necessary commitments. My husband accompanied me to the first meeting. He thought it was an excellent idea and continues to support me," Lucia says.

When we ask Lucia what she appreciates the most about her friendship with Daniela, she responds: "Probably the notion that I might

be able to help her just by being there. That I can be there for her. And that I can spend some quality time with her. I'm lucky to have Daniela. At first, I thought, if I am to have any impact on this child, seeing her once a week is not enough. After all, one influences one's own children 24 hours a day, and the results are not always as expected," jokes Lucia.

She continues: "However, it does make a difference. I hope that Daniela and I will stay in touch when she grows older. She aspires to be an economist and to learn to play the guitar. And I hope that, when she looks back on this period, she will remember it as more than just a time when she was moving from place to place. I hope she remembers our conversations and our shared experiences. The fact that we were both together and that I was there for her."

Text: Marcela Fuknová  
Photos: Kristína Močková





**"It's not easy for any  
of us to acknowledge  
we're not coping  
and ask for help."**

Viera Vatrťová  
psychologist - BUDDY pairs care  
**Member of the BUDDY team  
for 2 years**

## Psychologist Viera VatrtoVá has accompanied several pairs of children and BUDDY volunteers for a long time. What is her role if their relationship has a problem or if there is a sudden change in one of their lives?

**Once a volunteer has passed the selection process, joins the BUDDY program and starts meeting the child, what kind of things do you discuss every month? Could there be an issue early on in their relationship?**

I've been working in the BUDDY program for two years and during this time the pairs in my care have not experienced any major issues at the start of their relationships. However, it is possible. I recall a boy who was quite reclusive and was viewed as such even at the centre where he lived. At the time, we were just building our relationship with the centre and the volunteer. We shared information such as what to focus on during meetings with the boy and how and whether to ask specific questions. I believe it was very beneficial and aided in the development of their relationship.

**As the child slowly opens up in the relationship with the volunteer, he or she is likely to start talking about sensitive topics. Perhaps about events that occurred with his biological family, or about painful memories from the past. Do the volunteers ask you how they should react in that situation? What advice do you give them?**

They often ask this question when they don't even know the child yet. We hold our first meeting together once the volunteers have passed the selection procedure, and they sign a contract. We discuss the results of the psychological evaluation as well as what they can

"We have volunteers who have become mothers and are trying to deepen their relationship with their BUDDY child. They are great."

expect when they first meet the child. One of their first concerns is, "What should I ask and what should I not ask? Should I ask further questions when the child says something, or should I let it pass for the time being?" These questions usually arise even in the early stages of their relationship, particularly in the first year. Volunteers, in my opinion, are people who are willing to be there for the child. On the other hand, they have never been in a situation like this before, and they need my reassurance. I tell them that all they need to do is be there for the child and ask questions if they are interested in something but in a sensitive manner. To be open, but not to put pressure on the child. It's a challenge for them, and we frequently discuss it throughout the first few months.

**Is there ever a perilous period in the BUDDY volunteer-child relationship? When are difficulties or even crises more likely to occur?**

In my experience, it's the period when the child leaves the centre and begins to live independently. These young people frequently choose to leave after reaching adulthood, even if they have not completed their secondary education yet. It is quite challenging because they must be able to find accommodation, a part-time job for steady income, and attend school. It is a moment when their life abruptly changes, and this is when problems can arise.

**Such as?**

The child might reduce contact, for example. I've met with a boy who moved from the centre to subsidized housing. He had his own money, but he ran out of it quickly. He also began to miss school and struggle. It was difficult for him to communicate with the volunteer at that moment since it was also tough for him to face up to what was happening to him. At the same time, it had been a smooth relationship that had worked until that point, and they had met week after week.

**And isn't this the moment when BUDDY should be there to help the child? Isn't now the moment to benefit from everything they've invested in their relationship over the years?**

That is the best-case scenario, and it frequently occurs. It is difficult for children to admit that they cannot handle something. Volunteers offer assistance, of course, and we often have to keep them in check so that they won't try and solve the child's problems by being too prescriptive. It may appear simple to them because they have experienced similar situations numerous times. Volunteers are eager to assist, but they must first provide space for the child to seek out assistance. It is difficult for any of us to be vulnerable and reach out for help.

**What is the most common problem encountered by volunteers? What about major life changes such as having a baby, someone's death or a change of job?**

There are also such instances. We have volunteers who have become mothers and are trying to deepen their relationship with their BUDDY child. They are great. At the same time, it's a difficult moment for them since they want to stay in touch with the child while also taking care of their newborn first and foremost.

**Is it a concern if the volunteer and child's meetings become temporarily less frequent?**

It may or may not always be an issue, depending on their relationship. We also speak to volunteers who are expecting a baby about how difficult it might be. We explain that the child may also need to be invited into the baby's life. Girls frequently want to see pictures of the baby, they prefer to take a walk with them in the stroller, and it's typically not a problem. However, if the volunteer's life changes at the same time as the child is having a difficult time and would like to have the volunteer around more, it may not be ideal.

**What happens if a volunteer's life does not change for the better and instead something awful or tragic occurs?**

I recall a case where this happened to a volunteer, and she chose not to discuss her loss with her BUDDY child, because the child's life had been difficult previously and continued to be difficult due to external factors. It was a challenging relationship altogether, and the child only learned about the volunteer's loss in retrospect. In contrast, we had a case where a child who had already lost a parent was paired with a volunteer who had unexpectedly lost a loved one. They assisted one another at that time and it was a moment when they

"We had a case where a child who had lost a parent was paired with a volunteer who had lost a loved one and they helped one another."

realised they understood each other, and their friendship grew even deeper. So it does not always have to be bad. In any case, we attempt to ensure that the child is as well prepared and accompanied as possible for a major change with a volunteer, in order to minimize the risk of harm to the child.

**What if the volunteer does not totally agree with the way the teenager or young adult lives? When they leave the centre and learn to stand on their own feet, for example? Or if he or she forms a relationship that the volunteer regards as damaging or toxic?**

Our volunteers are encouraged to be accepting and respectful. They are, in fact. That makes things easier for them and us. At the same time, in some instances, they get extremely frustrated and enraged. It's frequently my role to create space for them to express their emotions at this point. We are all upset with our loved ones at times, and sometimes we yell at them. When a volunteer in a meeting with me can vent their negative emotions, they can calm down, perhaps look at things in a different light, and become more tolerant of their child's relationship.

**Is it an issue if a child has been through something very traumatic and they can't communicate about it in their relationship with the volunteer, they can't 'let it go'? Does it happen that the child will not open up even if the relationship with the volunteer is positive? What happens next?**

I recall a child who is really open with a volunteer, despite coming from a difficult background and having been through some pretty complicated experiences. They are able to talk about it, despite the fact that any adult would be appalled and upset that such things could ever happen to a child. They both have open personalities, so it may be easier for them than for other pairs. However, the child may not feel the need to discuss it, may not perceive it that way, and may not want to. The volunteers understand that it is okay, and that the child will begin talking when they are ready and when they need it. And perhaps they never will. It may have no effect on their relationship.

**Has there ever been a situation when a volunteer wanted to end a relationship with an adolescent child because they felt they couldn't provide them with what they needed?**

We had a difficult relationship in which the girl was having depressive episodes and would not call the volunteer for prolonged periods of time. The volunteer was unsure whether their relationship was making a difference in her life at the time. In fact, the girl declined all activities and did not react to contact requests. We inquired at the centre, and we spoke to a psychologist with whom the girl had been in contact for many years. However, it is vital to realise that these children have often encountered many disappointments or traumas in their early lives, and some of them have lost close family members. The difficult situation in the case of this pair led them to be more open with each other.

**Can it happen that the volunteer inadvertently disappoints a child? How do children cope with this?**

It happened to us that the volunteer got sick right before the first anniversary of their relationship. It was difficult for the child to accept her absence because she was looking forward to celebrating with her. The carer at the centre proved very helpful. He spoke with her and said that the volunteer had really wanted to

come but couldn't because of COVID. And he drew her attention to the idea that they should work together to make the volunteer happy. They made her something, she left it in her yard, and the volunteer came later to pick it up. They waved from a distance and, despite the initial disappointment, they made it work together.

**What happens when a BUDDY relationship runs into difficulty?**

I started working with a pair when they were going through a difficult time. The child left the centre because he was wasting money on useless stuff, and the volunteer was unhappy with him. They were continually distancing and warming up to one another. The child also happened to oversleep and did not attend an interview with an employer. I started to work with the pair when he realised he needed to work to pay for accommodation. His volunteer was present during the job search. They sent out résumés and made phone calls together. They even had a chart showing what he was spending his money on and where he could save it. He chose to accept the volunteer's assistance, and they are now close. They are no longer a BUDDY and a child. He's a twenty-year-old young man talking about his friend. There's no doubt that they've been through a lot in their relationship. The boy is quite grateful for this, and he still speaks highly about the volunteer.

Text: Marcela Fuknová  
Photos: Kristína Močková



# It works. Safe, stable, long-term and effective



child safety record,  
with no reports of any  
child safety violations

100%

95%

of children said that they can  
always **count on their volunteer**

of pairs remain in the program  
for **more than 3 years**

>90%

86%

of children said a volunteer helps  
them **stay out of trouble**

of pairs remain **in contact** even  
after the child **has left the centre**

>75%

>90%

of young adults have a job (or are  
on maternity leave/at school)  
several months to years **after  
leaving their centre**

of centres would  
**recommend us** to other centres

100%

100%

we have had no reports of  
any young adults who have  
already left their centre being  
**without accommodation**

**Picking out a dress for  
the prom and opening  
a savings account.**

**Who will support young  
people who do not grow  
up in a family?**



Magdalena Zahoranová, 40  
head of the Regional Development Department, Nové Zámky

**5 years in the BUDDY program**





**"I approached this young thirteen-year-old girl and told her that I was here to be an aunt to her, to help her and lead her through life." She listened to me for almost 30 minutes. When I asked her afterwards if she wanted something like that, she simply responded, "No."**

### Can I be your convenience aunt?

Magdaléna Zahoranová is recalling her first encounter with Vanda. It took place at the centre for children and families, formerly also known as the children's home. "I understood. From her perspective, I was a stranger. Someone who arrives out of nowhere and unexpectedly offers her friendship. Despite her refusal, we agreed to exchange phone numbers, and Vanda let that sink in."

**"Despite her refusal, we agreed to exchange phone numbers, and Vanda let that sink in."**

Since the first meeting, more than five years have passed. Vanda, who is at home in Magdalena's living room and in her life, is preparing for her high school graduation, planning for college, and coping with the many things that a young woman's life entails. Choosing a prom dress, for example.

"Apart from the carers, I didn't really meet anyone from my family when I was in the children's home, and I had no one to talk to about important things. So I found something similar to a surrogate aunt in Magda," Vanda explains. Magdalena was looking for a long-term volunteer opportunity that would allow her to apply not only her knowledge but also her maternal instincts. "We didn't want to have another kid, but I still wanted to love

**"After all these years, our relationship is so stable that even the pandemic, during which we were together online rather than in person, didn't disrupt it."**

someone else. Because it involved my husband and children, I discussed it extensively with them. Being a convenience aunt was what we termed it."

### The pair might not get along

When children cannot turn to their family, another person who is present in their lives and who they can call and see on a daily basis is an important pillar. "Children build ties with carers and social workers at the centres, but these can change over time, and the child may not have such a close relationship with their replacements. Our goal is for children to acquire long-term, ideally lifelong, friendships and support from volunteers. Someone who can advise, encourage, and lift them up when they are in need," explains Jana Bevilaqua, a psychologist and volunteer coordinator for the BUDDY program. Even so, it is not guaranteed that a pair will click at first sight. "Vanda is very introverted, which made the beginning of our relationship particularly difficult. Her answers were initially one-worded, we largely communicated in writing, and we only saw each other once a week," Magdaléna explains. They got to know each other gradually, and Vanda had to adjust to Magdaléna as well as her family.

"After all these years, our relationship is so stable that even the pandemic, during which we were together online rather than in person, didn't disrupt it," she adds.

### They assist them in making difficult decisions

Vanda was in her second year of primary school when they met, and she was about to make her first substantial decision about her future. She had little faith in her abilities at the time and aspired to become a pastry chef after finishing primary school. "I didn't want to discredit the profession or her decision, but I saw her amazing potential and knew she could manage a more challenging high school. She needed some motivation and reassurance," Magdaléna explains. According to the psychologist, children who do not grow up in families tend to have lower aspirations.

"This is primarily due to their traumas, fear of rejection, and failure, which is exacerbated by the fact that they have no one to support them. Of course, their personality also matters, but many children opt to take fewer risks, enrolling in schools that are below their skill level, often to compensate for low self-esteem."

**"According to the psychologist, children who do not grow up in families tend to have lower aspirations."**

Vanda, the introverted student, ultimately decided to attend the business academy thanks to the support of her BUDDY volunteer. "I told myself in eighth grade that I needed to fix my grades because they weren't the best. I went from Ds to Bs and As, and I was able to achieve this largely because I began studying consistently," Vanda admits. "I suppose a few chats helped here as well," Magdaléna recalls. "But I have to say that she is a really clever girl and one of those children who takes well-meaning advice to heart."

Vanda plans to continue her studies at university after secondary school, and she is already preparing for interviews with Magdalena. "She will undoubtedly attend the university's preparatory courses, but we are also trying to find tutors to assist her with one-on-one tutoring. We know it will be a tough period, but I have great faith in her."


### Handling money is a challenge

Aside from important life decisions, the beginning of independent life, with its economic and financial duties, is more difficult for children who are not raised in a family. While most children learn the cycle of income and expenditure primarily through observation of their parents, pocket money, and part-time jobs, children in institutional care face a more challenging scenario. They learn about money management at a later age before becoming a young adult, like Vanda. She already lives in an apartment managed by the centre for children and families in Kolárovo as an adult. She manages her own household, cooks, shops, and is in charge of spending wisely her state allowance of 280 EUR. She must use this money to cover her food, hygiene, and other minor expenses. "Vanda was concerned about the change, and I must admit that I was as well. She needed some help with budgeting, but after the first month of her independence, it was evident that she would be able to handle it without issue," Magdaléna explains. Not many young adults growing up in institutions find the process simple. Leaving institutions, together with poor financial literacy, is a risk factor for homelessness or other socially detrimental phenomena such as crime or prostitution. "It's a major issue and, in this case, having a combination of a tutor and a volunteer helps tremendously," Bevilaqua says.

The question of financial literacy starts to be addressed about two years before they leave the centre. Children are given a little pocket money at the time, which they use



to cover some of their expenses. "However, this is not always sufficient to reinforce practical abilities, and it is still not personalised. A volunteer may have more time and opportunities to teach the child about money management," explains the psychologist.

  
"Sometimes simply changing the communication style or reducing the number of meetings is enough to ensure that the relationship is not burdensome for the child but is maintained and the child may contact the volunteer when needed."

## It took only time and attention

The BUDDY program tries to select children and volunteers in a way that the chances for a long-term, preferably life-long relationship are maximised. Coordinators and staff at the centres ensure that the pair has as much in common as possible in order for the relationship to establish itself as soon as possible. Volunteers are subjected to higher demands. Although the relationship is consensual, volunteers must be aware that it is a commitment and that terminating the relationship may be perceived as a significant blow by a child who is not growing up in a family.

There are crises and difficult times in any friendship. "We've only had one quarrel and I don't even know why," Vanda explains, admitting that it could have been related to her rebellious nature throughout her adolescence. Magdalena's experience with her own children, who are approximately Vanda's age, has been beneficial in this aspect. "Puberty is unquestionably one of the most difficult times in a person's life, when relationships might shift. When a child's interests and preferences change, the volunteer and his or her presence may become less enticing. It is therefore the responsibility of the centre's staff coordinator to seek methods to deepen the relationship," Bevilaqua remarks.

Sometimes simply changing the communication style or reducing the number of meetings is enough to ensure that the relationship is not burdensome for the child but is maintained and the child may contact the volunteer when needed.

Another crisis phase is the period of young adulthood, when a young person stands on his or her own two feet, gets a job, and enters into their first serious relationships. "Volunteers are sometimes astonished when a child goes silent for half a year. However, it is critical that we emphasise that this is a relationship to which the child can return at any time, even after reaching adulthood, and will receive support," the psychologist adds. Magdaléna also acknowledges that Vanda is connecting with her children more and more, and they have become as much a part of her life as she is. "I believe it has brought only good into all of our lives."

15

centres for children and families

Together we turn  
long-term donations into  
long-term friendships

202  
101 children  
and 101 volunteers



275



financial supporters  
individuals, companies and foundations

20  
BUDDY  
team members

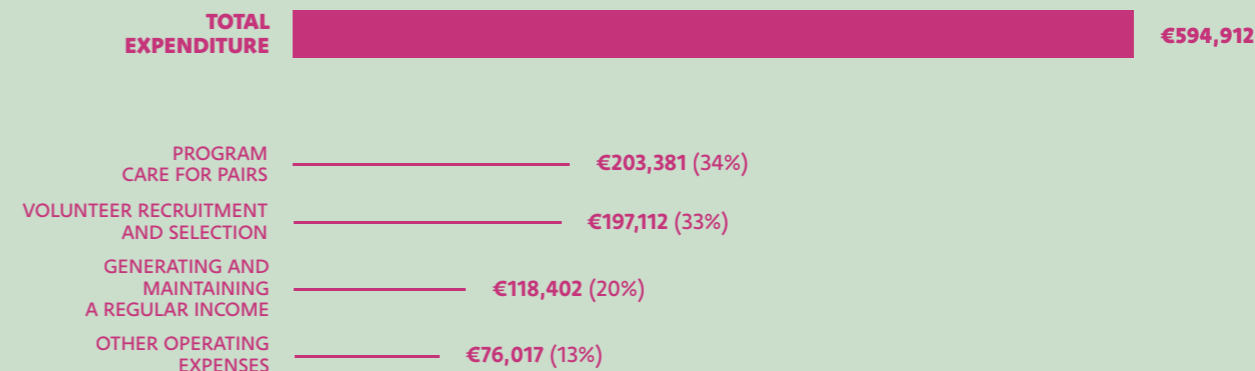
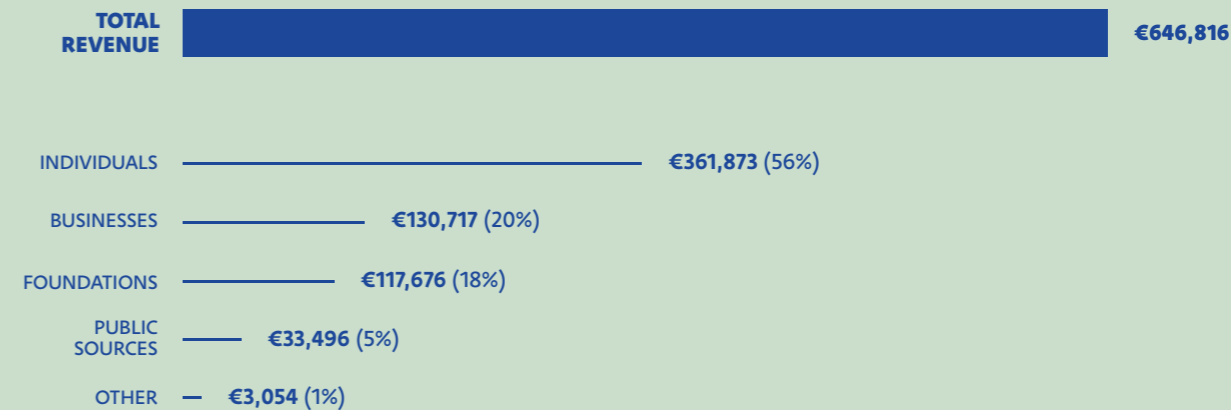


11 members of the program team  
(selection, care, quality and impact, expert program oversight)  
and 9 other team members  
(marketing, donors, operations)

# Thanks to the increased trust of donors, the number of pairs and the quality of our work is increasing

In comparison to 2020, we managed to boost total revenue by more than EUR 70,000 and regular revenue by more than EUR 140,000. At the same time, recurring revenue has increased to cover 85% of total expenditure.

The majority of our supporters' contributions went to the program team and its associated activities. We have also invested extensively in recruitment campaigns in order to expand the program to Eastern Slovakia.



# OUR THANKS TO

- more than a hundred volunteers
- our internal BUDDY team and other associates
- 15 cooperating centres
- more than 200 financial supporters
- all our friends and advocates of the BUDDY program



## Supporting foundations in 2021

Férová  
Nadácia O<sub>2</sub>



Mercedes-Benz  
Financial Services

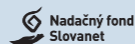
KRÜGER



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Nadačný fond  
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VGP  
FOUNDATION

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FOUNDATION

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Foundation



Thanks to this support we can continue to bring BUDDY volunteers into the lives of children throughout Slovakia.

**THANK YOU for being with us!**

# Our plans for 2022

**MATCH**

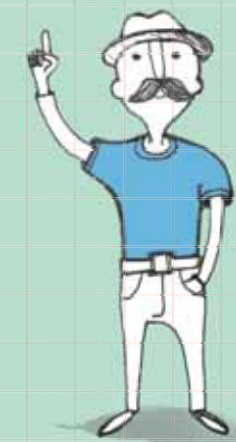
25 new children


**GROW**

throughout Slovakia

**BOOST**

long-term donations





**"You can't support me any better but, for the other kids, I'd like you to be as dedicated to them as you were to me, and to recruit more volunteers so that every child has a volunteer."**

Nina, 24, Bernolákovo  
7 years with her  
BUDDY volunteer

# „Per Aspera Ad Astra“

Through adversity to the stars

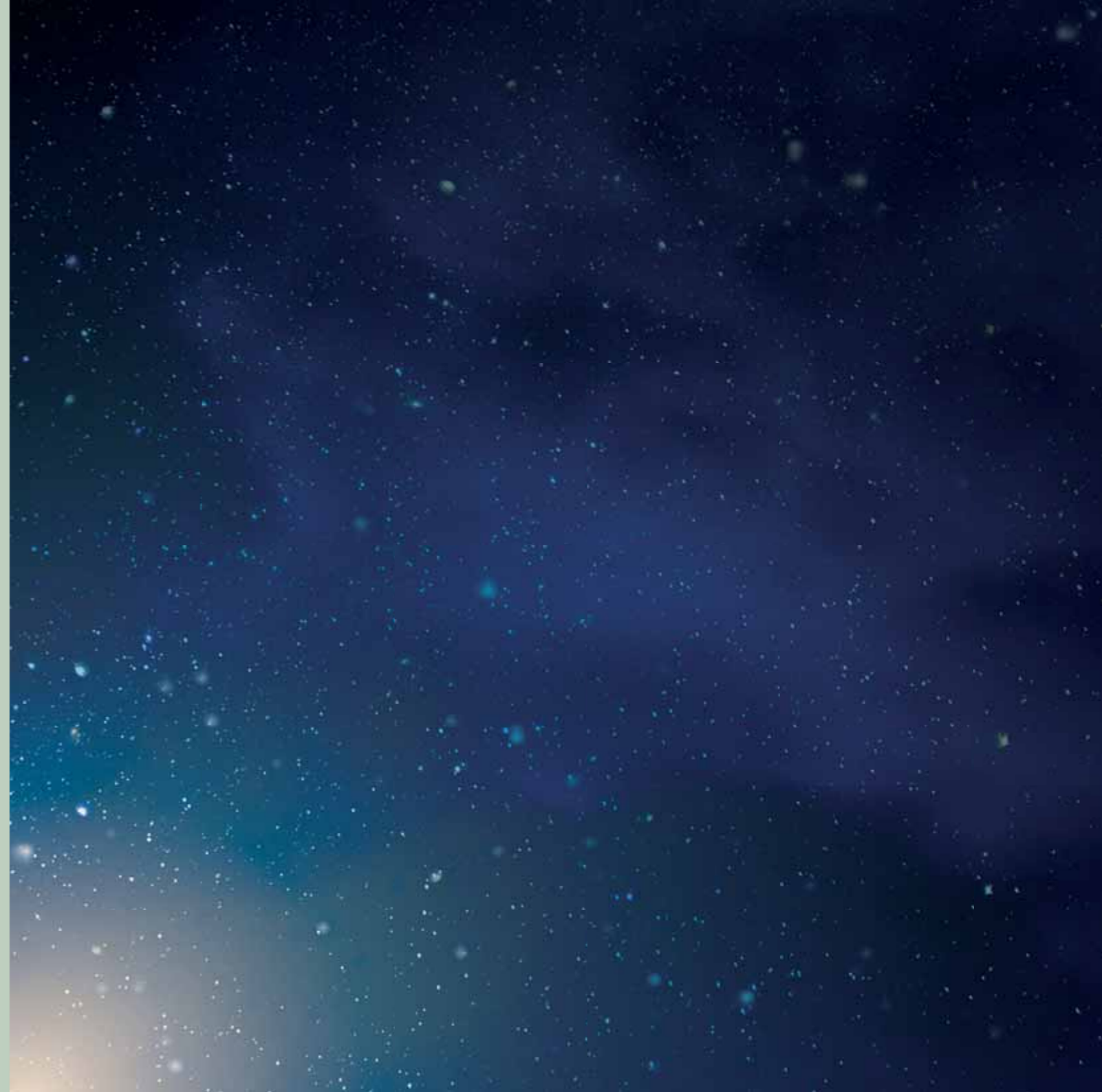
The names of the children in the annual report  
have been changed to maintain their privacy.

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Strážna 11, 83101 Bratislava

Company ID No.: 379 27051  
IBAN: SK90 1100 0000 0026 2383 9960

[www.tvojbuddy.sk](http://www.tvojbuddy.sk)







**everybody  
needs  
someBUDDY**