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# ASAP CASE STUDIES MODEL PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE IN BULGARIA

**IN THE CONTEXT OF THE**

Against School Aggression Partnership



We are grateful for the support of Partners Bulgaria Team who devoted time and energy to make schools a peaceful and happier place for children: Daniela Kolarova, PhD, Elmira Nesheva, Aneta Kalcheva, Rumen Minkovski, Rumen Mihailov, Svilen Kolarov, Lora Lalova, Kristina Petkova. Special thanks to Mrs. Yanka Karadjova, school principal, Mrs. Grozdanka Stamova, school psychologist, Mrs Ivka Koceva, teacher and the whole teaching and non-teaching team of 130 school “St.Karadja”, Sofia.

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## Introduction

Conflicts are part of human interactions. However, the way we deal with them is key. The topic of violence and aggression in the school environment has been highly debated in recent years and has become a serious problem faced by many schools around the world. Aggression and bullying happen at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary, and throughout the years it has become a pervasive problem. School aggression and bullying cause significant deleterious effects on the physical, mental, and social well-being of youth, which place many children at risk of becoming juvenile offenders and subsequently end up in juvenile detention centres. Aggressive behaviour and bullying accompany the daily life of a large percentage of school children, leaving lasting consequences on their future development and social life.

Challenging social situations are learning opportunities and if they are treated with a restorative instead of punitive approach, they reinforce relationships within a community and can prevent the escalation towards aggression. Safe and positive environment is where learning can occur, enhancing social and emotional skills, preventing and treating aggression is key in schools.

ASAP - Against School Aggression Partnership is a project implemented and led by Partners Hungary Foundation, between October 2015 and August 2018, in collaboration with SOS Malta, Partners Bulgaria Foundation and Szolnoki Szolgáltatási Szakképzési Centrum (Szolnok Centre of Counselling Training) and funded by the Erasmus Programme of the European Union.

In Bulgaria the project was implemented in 130 school “St.Karadja”, Sofia.

ASAP aims to create a safe, caring, responsible school environment in order to reduce school aggression and bullying, while establishing and strengthening the cooperation between different institutions that deal with the student community. A model program has been developed based on existing and approved methods, taking the form of a whole school approach. The program offers an accessible and easy to adopt tool, for the reduction of school violence and bullying, which was tested and further developed in 9 secondary schools, one from each participant country: Hungary, Bulgaria and Malta.

The project **promotes and provides alternative conflict resolution, management procedures and restorative methods** tailored for the school environment.

These practices help, on one hand, prevent conflicts and minimise the occurrence of aggression, bullying and other behaviours, as risk factors in terms of a potential criminal career, and on the other hand come as a support tool for teachers and students when it comes to tackling such cases. One of the reasons why the restorative approach is more successful on the long run is because all stakeholders participate in the processes that affect them – we can

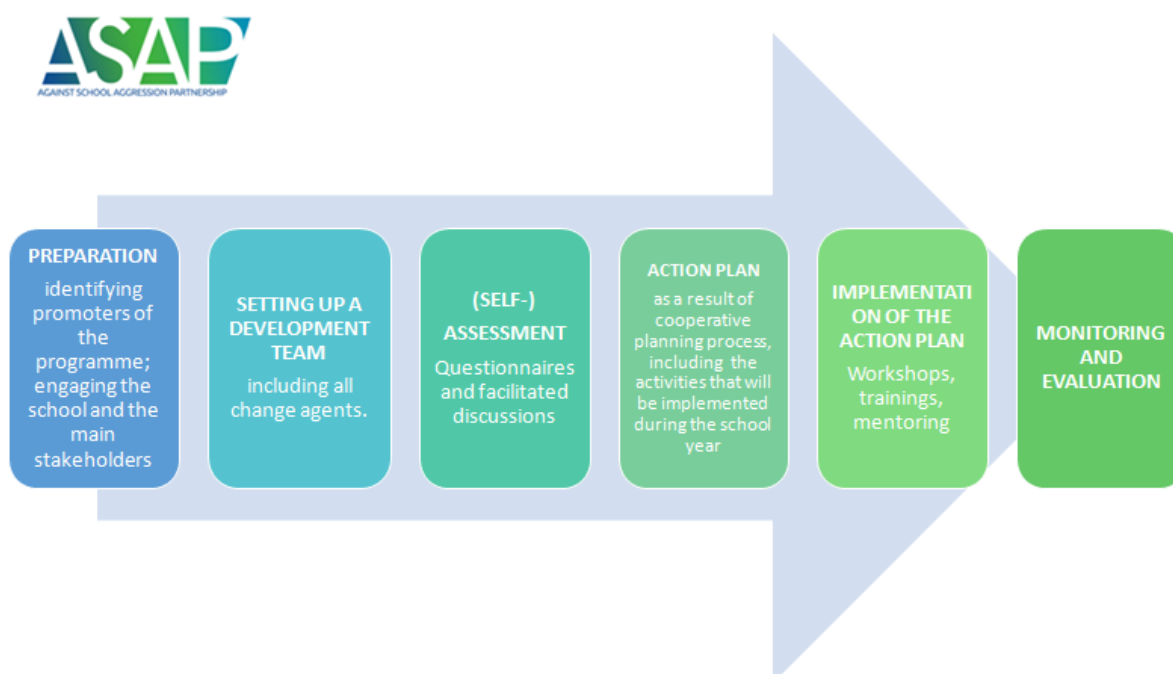
only make the school environment better if we share the responsibility, plan the activities together and carry them through consequently.

### How to read this book?

**This handbook is a practical account of how the program was implemented in Bulgaria.**

This is not a ready-made recipe but the processes give guidance on the possible usage of the elements. The elements can be used separately but they work best as part of the process.

Our handbook is designed for those who want to implement a similar program in their schools: principals, teachers and other school-related professionals. In order to get familiar with our conceptual framework and the process-oriented, holistic approach, we recommend that you read our Model Program first. Below is described the process of implementation of the Model program.



**The process of „Against School Aggression Partnership” Model program**

The questions that will be covered in each of the 6 chapters are the following:

- What was the starting point?
- What was the method used?
- What were our expectations?
- What were the challenges we faced? How did we address them? Effects of challenges and reanalysis of methods and expectations. Alternatives should be suggested
- How far did we get? What was the outcome?
- Recommendations, lessons learned

## Chapter I. Preparation

This section describes the steps needed to identify and involve all stakeholders related to the target group of students: school leadership, resource teachers, psychologists and pedagogical staff involved in the prevention of school bullying and aggression. This process supports measures taken by schools to implement the Mechanism for Combating Bullying among Children and Students in Bulgarian Schools.

### Starting point

When implementing the program at 130 Sofia University "St. Karadzha" in Sofia, this initial phase included several activities. A study of national best practices for prevention and addressing bullying and aggression in school was conducted. National policies and mechanisms, services, projects and resources were synthesized in a national report for the benefit of the general public.

### Methods

At this stage of the program, intensive consultations were conducted to gather information about how the schools deal with aggression and violence. Information was gathered on the school's experience of coping with bullying and aggression, as well as the measures that the school administration applies within the official Mechanism for Combating Bullying among Children and Students in Bulgarian Schools.

An exchange of good practices was a key element of the preparatory phase of the project. Local and foreign partners presented effective methods for identifying and addressing cases of bullying and aggression while discussing the limitations and challenges of introducing such practices.

The project was presented to colleagues from non-governmental organizations working on school-based programs and introducing methods and tools stimulating development of social and emotional intelligence of students. Useful ideas were discussed and included in the development of the Model Program.

In order to work together on the situation analysis and development of action plan, a **co-operative planning process** has been put in place. It reflects people's ability to work with others to develop an effective program that introduces changes. This is a joint problem-solving process involving participants with different interests. This process involves mutually beneficial relationships between two or more parties that work to achieve common goals, sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for delivering results.

Joint planning offers many benefits. Implementing this process improves the flow of information, reduces surprises and resistance to change, builds trust, makes better decisions, exerts greater commitment to the implementation of the jointly developed plan, and facilitates faster implementation of the action plan. The process was implemented in the first months of

the project implementation, when the project team of the Partners Bulgaria Foundation worked with the administration and key figures from the pilot school.

**Applying the cooperative planning process to a school** anti-violence and bullying program is beneficial when people deal with complex issues involving many stakeholders and none of them has the full power and ability to solve the problem. This means that the process involves representatives of all major stakeholders involved in designing the process and developing context-friendly solutions. Participants in the process adopt a common definition of the problem and objectives. There is clear, committed, and facilitating leadership. It is important to maintain respectful relationships and have specific implementation responsibilities. The process involves analyzing the problem; process design; running the program and implementing the solutions.

## **Expectations**

A mapping of all stakeholders has led to identification of project target groups. The main partners were identified both by the pilot school and the wider environment, such as Ministry of Education and Science, the Regional Educational Inspectorate, experts from the Education Department and Children's Pedagogical Room in the respective municipality as well as other key figures from the professional groups of teachers, school psychologists and other specialists.

This preparatory work included meetings with international project partners. Local partners were engaged in focus groups and discussions to identify the needs of the school and the expectations of the school staff. These meetings helped to identify possible difficulties such as time constraints for training and work at school, employment imitations of teachers, cultural diversity and differences in school, etc.

## **Challenges**

When being an external organization aiming to work at school, there are systemic and formal difficulties requiring compliance with school interests and the needs of all stakeholders. The limited time for extracurricular activities of school staff was a challenge, but once the program offered a significant benefit to improving school policy on preventing violence among students, the staff made it possible to include project activities at a convenient time without breaking their usual tasks.

It was not easy to set and coordinate dates for online or offline international meetings to align with the three work programs due to the fact that the project was implemented simultaneously in three different countries.

At this stage of the project, it was important to raise awareness among the school staff and the professionals about the importance of systematic processes of change. The mission of the project was to focus attention to proven effective methods that help address bullying behavior. For example, the team presented the whole school approach which promotes systematic, consistent efforts to change the school into a positive and friendly learning environment for children.

Methods, such as restorative practices, that introduced preventive measures to deal with both victims and perpetrators of violence, were presented. Through these first presentations, these methods were identified as useful and appropriate. The way they proved beneficial in other countries motivated partners to establish strategy for implementation in target schools as well.

Another important element of this initial phase was, on the one hand, to avoid repeating of school measures that are already in place and, on the other hand, to avoid initiatives that contradict the existing services.

The leadership of 130 St. Karadzha School and the team of the Partners Bulgaria Foundation took part in practical introductory training on restorative practices conducted by the International Institute for Restorative Practice in Hungary in 2016. This training helped lay the foundation for the **whole school approach** as a basis for the Model Program.

### Useful tips

Creating a relationship of trust with all stakeholders involved in the program is a key to the success of the project. The project facilitators create a safe and comfortable environment in which everyone can share their visions and needs without fear or worry. It is important to emphasize that the responsibility for introducing changes to make the school environment more positive and student-friendly is shared among all stakeholders: teacher and non-teaching staff in the school, professionals, parents, state and non-governmental organizations. A strong leadership that unites and motivates people is an important factor for the success of the program.

## Chapter II. Setting up a development team

### Starting point

Development of a school implementation team is initiated by the school principal in cooperation with the project staff. The team created in the school is run by the school psychologist, who became the key figure in this program against school aggression. Ensuring synergy between new models and existing policies and mechanisms is crucial in order to create synergies and provide appropriate training that is consistent with national strategy and policy.

School representatives from Bulgaria were included in workshops and trainings in Malta and in Hungary, where experts shared knowledge, good practices and ideas. This eventually created an opportunity to develop a better plan to work at school.

### Expectations

There was a great expectation for utilization of the rich experience of international partners and the good practices of local organizations. An effort was put in identifying most



appropriate practices that can be easily adapted and implemented in a national and local context. It required detailed analysis, testing, and careful application of the new models. This was done with the participation of key stakeholders – teachers, administrators and experts in a classroom and out-of-class environment. In this way, control over the process of change was ensured by teachers directly working with children. For example, the application of Friends cards, as a method of developing good relationships and solving conflicts between students, was tested by one primary school teacher and later the method was cascaded among other teachers.

## **Challenges**

The main challenges in setting up development team were related to how to persuade school staff, teachers and the management team about the importance of the whole school approach as a basis for tackling bullying and aggression at school. The lack of time and resources was also an important obstacle.

Access to school staff, especially teacher engagement, is difficult, but it is even harder to reach parents throughout the program. Parents are approached through teachers and children and asked to provide opinions and permissions for child participation, or engage in school activities such as public events and celebrations.

Taking a road to promote change at school is difficult, but making a change in three different national contexts is even more challenging. The structural differences between the three countries that exist with regard to available school services have created misbalance in the implementation of the program. For example, while the schools in Malta have already introduced certain services dealing with school violence, such as School Anti-bullying Service that offers teams of psychologists available to schools, the resources and staff available in Hungary and Bulgaria are much more limited.

## **Results**

As a result of this phase, a team, motivated to invest time and energy to achieve a positive change at school, was created. A part of teachers and administrative staff has been involved in mediation and restorative practice training.

The training in restorative practices represented an important part of school staff preparation to accept the proposed Model program by introducing them to alternative methods to combat aggression and improving the school environment. Trainer from the International institute of restorative practice has been engaged to train the international group of professionals from Hungary, Bulgaria and Malta.



*Training in restorative practice, Budapest, October 2016.*

### Useful tips

Defining roles in the team, creating a realistic plan and meeting deadlines are important elements for people's motivation. It is good for the team to be large enough to have a proportional distribution of tasks. This is useful if during the implementation phase the participants change or decide not to participate in the project anymore.

## Chapter III. Assessment

### Starting point

The evaluation starts with identifying and discussing available resources, existing practices and challenges in schools. These discussions are facilitated by teachers and administrative staff at school who are appointed to implementing the national Mechanism for Combating Bullying among Students at School. The Mechanism has a case registration and referral system that has been in operation for several years.

**A self-assessment tool** was provided to school administration to review existing resources and capabilities and identify needs, including the need for capacity building and changes in school policy and practice.

The second important instrument administered to collect data and analyze the situation was a research questionnaire developed by the project team to measure students, parents and teachers' opinion and attitudes. The questionnaire was developed in three versions by the Partners Bulgaria team and consulted with partners from Malta and Hungary as well as with a team of teachers from the pilot schools of the three countries. The finalized versions of questionnaires were distributed among teachers and administrative staff, parents and students.

## **Expectations**

The assessment of the situation at school aimed at identifying the specific needs of each school. The information gathered included the scope of school aggression and bullying, the level of knowledge, capacity and relationship between stakeholders. The data gathered through the questionnaire was analyzed and presented in the form of an analytical research report. The report contained specific recommendations what types of activities and strategies should be adopted to prevent and overcome bullying between students. The questionnaire was filled in anonymously.

## **Challenges**

The main challenges associated with this phase are related to the inclusion of sufficient school staff, students and parents in the sample of respondents who complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed on paper, making the evaluation phase longer than expected but providing a larger number of respondents. The lowest return was obtained among parents. Only about a quarter of the questionnaires were returned filled in by parents.

## **Result**

The information gathered during the evaluation phase helped to plan the next stages of project implementation. The recommendations received, were taken into account when developing the strategy for activities, the lesson plans, the trainings and the seminars that were developed in a later phase of the project.

Many students mention that they do not always feel safe at school, and do not feel respected by other students. Various types of bullying are reported, most often speaking about verbal, physical and social bullying. Proposals were given how to improve relations and school climate, to create friendships, to cooperate and to work together. Informal confidence-building, awareness-raising and cooperative activities are recommended as a way to stop and prevent bullying among students.

As far as the teaching staff was concerned, some of the conclusions drawn from their replies were:

- A strong need for training to raise awareness of what constitutes bullying behavior - causes, consequences, preventative measures;
- Not all school staff was aware of the school bullying policy;
- Pedagogical staff expected greater professional support in addressing children with challenging behavior, difficult children, children with special cognitive needs, and others. Some members of the school staff prefer to report incidents and not to engage in person but to monitor the development of the case;
- Teaching and non-teaching staff signaled the need for more specialized training on how to deal with aggression and bullying among students.

### **Useful tips**

Dissemination of an online questionnaire is a more appropriate alternative if the school aims for an independent evaluation without an external expert. This would save a lot of time and labor for processing the questionnaires.

Ensuring anonymity is an important factor for honesty in filling in the questionnaire.

It is important to use a parental consent form for children to participate in the survey. It is possible, instead of using a classic consent form that could take a long time to be returned, to use a disagreement form. Parents are asked to sign the form only in case they do not want their children and them personally to participate in the survey.

## **Chapter IV. Action Plan**

The Action Plan is based on the assessment data which informs the nature and content of the activities to be carried out during the school year. In the process of cooperative planning, the creation of this plan is essential, because it reflects the direction in which stakeholders are planning to intervene to induce school change. It is important that the plan is widely consulted so that all stakeholders support it.

### **Starting point**

After the assessment stage, a preliminary plan of activities was set up during several meetings with the school management. The activities are based not only on the questionnaire information, but also on the experience of the school and out-of-school team. There was room for changes and flexibility of certain elements of the plan.

### **Expectations**

The school staff was expected to actively provide input in the decision-making process related to planning of school activities, especially in relation to the needed capacity building



program by external experts. Thus, a program of work closest to the needs of the school was created.

## Challenges

The most difficult part of developing an Action plan was to set appropriate time for different training and counseling sessions for students and teachers. The formal school program leaves little time for additional activities, so timely and careful planning is important.

The purpose of the Model Program is to bring together different actors in the education process. This is also a challenge because of the difficulties in coordinating different schedules and the limited possibilities of professionals to participate.

## Result

The extensive Action plan includes training sessions on different methods and tools for solving school conflicts, tackling bullying at school, supporting children with challenging behavior and developing children's social skills.

The team of the Partners Bulgaria Foundation has conducted teachers training on how to identify and tackle bullying at school. Two groups of teachers were trained in mediation skills. Another group of teachers have been introduced to a program in supporting children with challenging behavior at school. All teachers were trained in prevention of bullying in the classroom.



*Training of teaching and administrative staff of 130 school, Sofia, April 2017*



Special peer mediation training was conducted with high school students. The first cases, in which students participated as school mediators, were presented and discussed at supervision sessions.



*Training of school mediators at the Partners Bulgaria office, June 2016.*

*Students have learned about the main principles of mediation, the steps in mediation process, main characteristics of conflict behavior and types of conflicts. Through interactive methods, exercises and role plays students acquired skills to lead mediation process.*

Ten students went through the training and four of them took part in an international summer camp in school mediation held in Hungary.



The international training by the Lake Balaton was focused on the peer mediation methodology which has been chosen as one of the main methods to solve and prevent conflicts that might later lead to aggression and bullying behaviour. This methodology is part of the model programme developed for the ASAP project. The curriculum for teachers and students was mainly identical, except for the cases of the role-play exercises: students deal more with peer conflicts, whereby teachers deal with conflicts between student-student, teacher-student and teacher-parent. The role of peer mediators is mainly to notice the conflicts at an early stage and to prevent their escalation; the more complex and serious cases are to be mediated along with a trainer teacher-mediator. The summer camp took place in the camping area owned by the Szolnok institute which is one of the partners in the ASAP project.



*Students, who participated in the international training in school mediation in Hungary, August 2017, receive their certificates from the Director of Partners Hungary, Mrs. Eva Deak during her visit in Sofia, October 2017.*

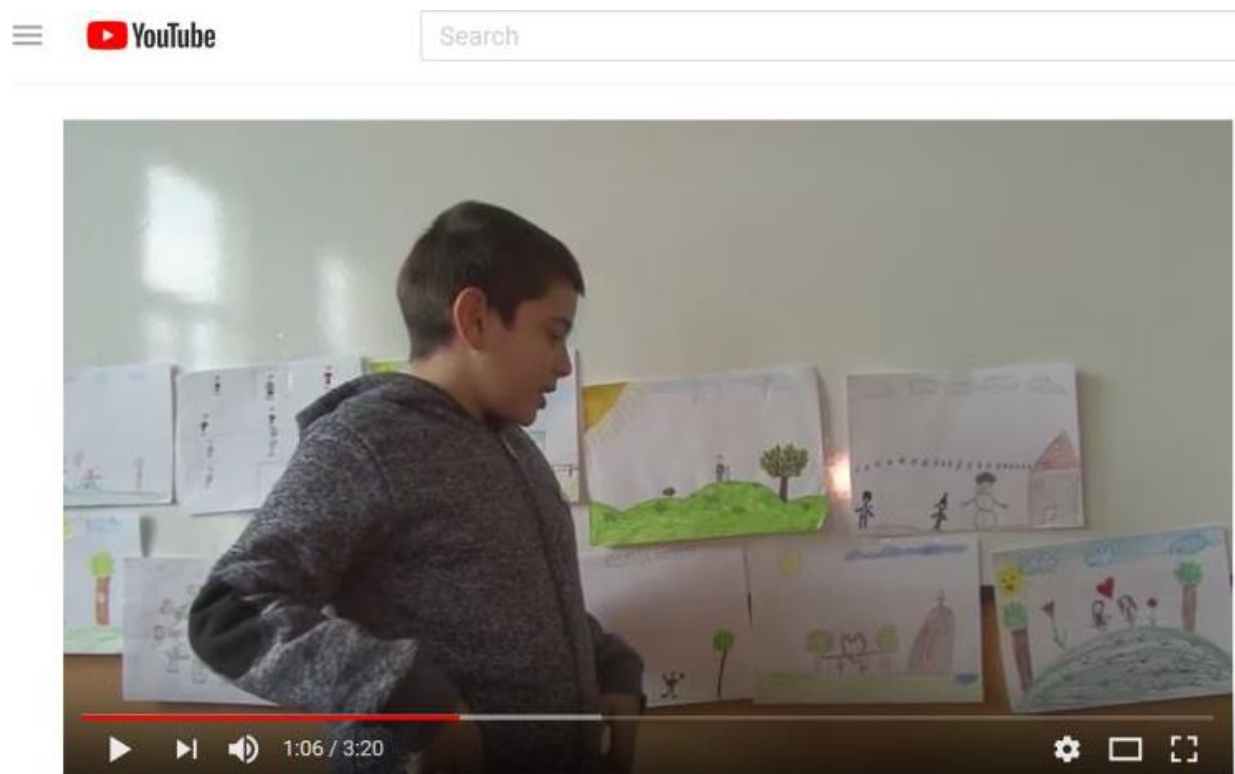
In order to disseminate the school mediation process, a mediation training film was prepared. Trained school mediators from the school upper grades took part in preparation of the film. The film of school mediation was disseminated through national networks of professionals working at school.





<https://youtu.be/3WJwlIHseLo>

Art activities on the subject of friendship were also held at school as part of the Action plan. At the primary school level, the children took part in the "Draw me a Friend" competition. Their drawings and short stories on friendship were recorded as a short video film. The students spoke important messages about friendship, respect for each other and how to communicate with each other when issues appear.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyvPt9KsLLs>

## Useful tips

Sufficient time is needed at this stage of the implementation, as the development of a comprehensive plan requires consultations and input from different actors in the educational process. For example, student mediation training was accompanied by teachers and a psychologist whose time and availability had to be coordinated.

In any case, the involvement of students in drafting the Action plan for prevention and tackling school bullying is important for implementation of a child rights approach.

## Chapter V. Implementation of the Action Plan

### Starting point

The implementation of the Action Plan has two dimensions, one focusing on teaching and administrative staff and another focusing on students. There are also activities targeting parents to engage in school celebrations and public events.

Following the approval of implementation plans, the team conducted training sessions in mediation and supporting children with challenging behavior. Experts were invited to present effective approaches to work with difficult students and to support victims of violence.

An important part of Action Plan was a review of existing school policy to combat bullying at school followed by adoption of changes to improve it.

### Expectations

The school staff responded to the expectations of active involvement in the decision-making process related to Action Plan, which provided the necessary support for the program.

### Challenges

Participation was voluntary and the presence of almost the entire teaching staff in the training was particularly valuable.

It was difficult to find suitable hours and dates for participation of all stakeholders. Applying a whole school approach requires all participants in the school process to be aware of the objectives and activities of the program.

### Result

**Training in restorative practices** was carried out by the International Institute for Restorative Practices in Budapest, Hungary. The participation of school leadership and the project team made it possible to explore the essence of the whole school approach and restorative practices. In the restorative justice system all participants in one situation meet and discuss the effect of the act committed by the perpetrator and the necessary responsibility he should take in order to restore justice, compensate the affected person. The process gives a chance to the perpetrator to correct his act. Recovery procedures - like mediation - restore the relationship between those affected. Restorative practices aim to create a supportive community and strengthen relationships. If a member of the community does something wrong the rest of the community takes actions to restore the relationship and achieve justice. When there is such a community, with common norms and a space for trust talk and openness, then the participants have opportunity to focus on the recovery of damage and relationships in case of trouble.

An exchange of practices from experts from the three participating countries allowed to get acquainted with specific programs to combat school violence. An example of such a practice was the presentation of the **Friendship cards** by the Friendship is Forever Foundation, Malta. Working with these cards offers a way to explore the relationships, feelings and attitudes of children when they find themselves in a conflict situation with another student. By analyzing conflict situations, they are trained to recognize "bad reactions" as opposed to "good reactions" that help maintain relationships and lead to solutions of conflict situations.

**Mediation training** for teachers, administrative staff and students was conducted in various modules and formats. One representative of the school passed a comprehensive licensed program for certified mediators approved by the Ministry of Justice and received a document of a professional mediator.

Mediation training consists of a 6-step process in which an impartial and neutral mediator helps conflicting parties to start talking and reach a mutually beneficial agreement. In this process, parties express their feelings, opinions, interests and actively listen to the other side. The parties are involved in a structured process encouraging them to commit to finding a solution that works for both sides. Conflict is presented as an opportunity to renew and restore the overturned balance. During the mediation procedure, the parties to the dispute try to discuss and resolve the conflict with the help of a neutral mediator.

The team of the foundation prepared a school mediation toolkit, which was distributed to trained students and teachers.

Longer training in mediation among peers was received by four students from "St.Karadja" High School in Sofia. The training was held at international youth camp in Hungary.

Students trained in mediation have participated in popularizing the method among their peers at school. They made presentations among teachers and students. Due to earlier training, teachers were familiar with the procedure. They assisted and supported the



students - mediators. The Partners Bulgaria Foundation helped create a special room in which students could gather and conduct mediations.

Concrete school conflicts were resolved with the assistance of peer mediators. With the support of teachers and the school psychologist, trained peer mediators have been able to help solve various peer disputes.

Another important part of the program to combat bullying at school was related to training in **methodology to support children with a challenging behavior**. Partners Bulgaria experts trained all primary school teachers. The methodology has helped them to better understand the functions of the challenging behavior and the needs of children who challenge. Consideration has been given to how to work with children with challenging behavior, the creation of a support plan, and indicators of progress towards behaviors that are socially acceptable.

All school staff was introduced to a program designed to prevent bullying among students. A tool with an interactive methodology was prepared for use by teachers. The curriculum was presented through interactive methodology while the training program looked at both content items and methodological issues of working with children.

### **Useful tips**

For this phase of the program, sufficient time must be spent, as the development of a comprehensive plan requires the input of different actors in the education process.

It is necessary to consult interested parties on the implementation of each method or approach. For example, the implementation of the mediation process at school requires that the staff and the administration are familiarized with the procedure. Presentations and information materials provided information to students about this opportunity to resolve disputes through peer mediation. Thus, the participation of students, teachers and administrators in the introduction of the new model is crucial for its acceptance by the whole community.

## **Chapter VI. Monitoring and Evaluation**

### **Starting point**

The Action Plan was successfully implemented and the end of the program was marked by a public forum and the presentation of the results to colleagues and partners.

The final assessment of the program was conducted through questionnaires which were delivered to students and teachers. The aim was to understand the program's effectiveness and what could be further improved. The paper copies of questionnaires were filled in by students, as well as by teachers and parents in the last months of the project. Although the

sample included fewer respondents than the initial baseline study, the information received was sufficient to track the changes in the school.

### **Expectations**

The main expectation was related to increased understanding of bullying phenomenon and greater demands for improving the school climate by all participants in the school process. We expected active support for introducing alternative approaches to dispute resolution and adopting cooperative practices instead of administrative punitive approach.

### **Challenges**

Work in school is always about finding the right timetable for the final evaluation. The cooperation of the teachers and the school management was invaluable for this task to be accomplished.

### **Result**

In the final evaluation, 135 students, 12 teachers and 12 parents completed the questionnaire. Teachers showed greater sensitivity to the need to move to cooperative approaches at school, and students showed increased knowledge of bullying phenomenon. Although the main trends in school aggression do not change, the school administration, teachers, parents and students agree that the events and trainings of the program are useful to them. Most teachers state that the program has provided valuable tools for coping with challenging children; they became aware of instruments to assess situations of bullying and to apply effective methods of coping with bullying and aggression of children.

### **Useful tips**

The implementation of the program requires the participation and support of all, as well as material and financial resources. Seeking resources from national and European programs can help raise the school staff capacity for new cooperative approaches.

It is important to manage expectations and set realistic goals, looking for small but sustainable and consistent improvements. Change is a difficult and time-consuming process, but the hard work and well-designed plan bring success: good school communities where all stakeholders - teachers, students, parents - can feel safe and with a sense of well-being, comfortable in their relationship with others and satisfied with their work.