

THE FIRST CHILDREN'S EMBASSY IN THE WORLD MEGJASHI – REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

SOS Helpline for Children and Youth

02 2465 316, 070 390 632

sos@childrensembassy.org.mk, info@childrensembassy.org.mk,

<https://www.facebook.com/SOSHELPLINEMEGJASHI/>

SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE CHILDREN'S EMBASSY MEGJASHI'S SOS HELPLINE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH (January - June 2021)

Months

January, February, March, April, May, June

Year

2021

Introductory Remarks

One general remark for this reporting period is that the work was carried out under extraordinary conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All calls on the landline SOS number 02 2465 316 were redirected to the mobile SOS number for children and youth – 070 390 632.

The operation of the SOS helpline is firmly grounded in the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasize children's rights to privacy and protection against injury. The purpose of the SOS helpline for children and youth is to provide support to children in need, to provide a forum for sharing information and support, advocacy and lobbying support, promoting the rights of the child and promoting the SOS line as a medium for supporting children.

For the first time in a long time the SOS helpline was active outside the standard working hours, meaning it was available 24 hours thanks to the SOS team (Julija Velkovska – SOS operator, volunteers: Klementina Dobrevska, Marija Gjorgjioska, Mimoza Kostoska and Barlet Bekjiri, as well as Violeta Ilioska – supervisor of the work of the SOS helpline and Jordanka Ch. Trajkovska – SOS helpline coordinator) and the group of volunteers who unselfishly invested and are still investing their time and knowledge. This year the students from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy' Institute of Psychology and members of the Association of Psychology Students Psihesko joined the team of

volunteers for the SOS helpline for children and youth of the Children's Embassy Megjashi. The work of the Children's Embassy Megjashi SOS team, as the previous years, was mentored by Gordana Pirkovska Zmijanac, founder and acting operational director of Megjashi.

A. Operational Information

Region of work: Macedonia

Title of the helpline: SOS telephone for children and youth

Working hours of the SOS helpline: 24/7

Available contacts: sos@childrensembassy.org.mk,

<https://www.facebook.com/SOSHELPLINEMEGJASHI/>

<https://www.facebook.com/detskaambasadamegjashi> <https://www.facebook.com/megjashi/>

E-mail of the SOS helpline: sos@childrensembassy.org.mk

Contact numbers of the SOS helpline: +389 (0)70 390 632 and/or 02 2465 316 24/7 available SOS helpline for children and youth

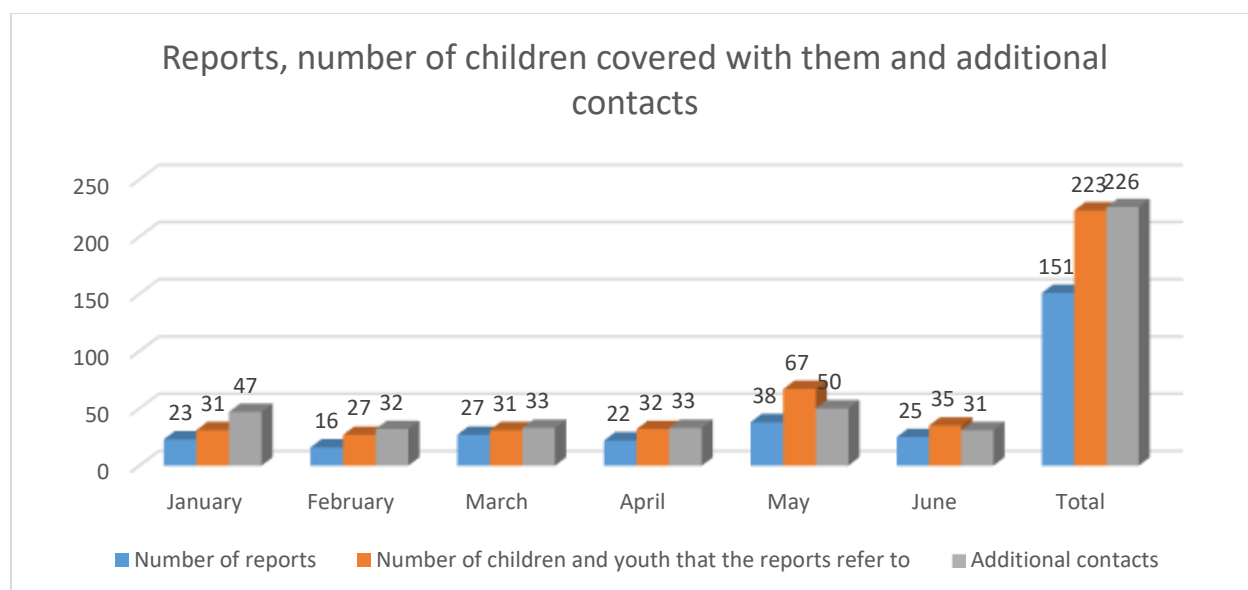
B. Reports

1. Basic Information on the Reports

This part shows general demographic data on the cases (age, gender and ethnicity of the children according to the reports), number of received reports and number of children who were encompassed by these reports. Overview of the manner on which we received the reports – via landline, the Facebook page of the Children's Embassy Megjashi, mail or directly in Megjashi's premises – is also shown in this part.

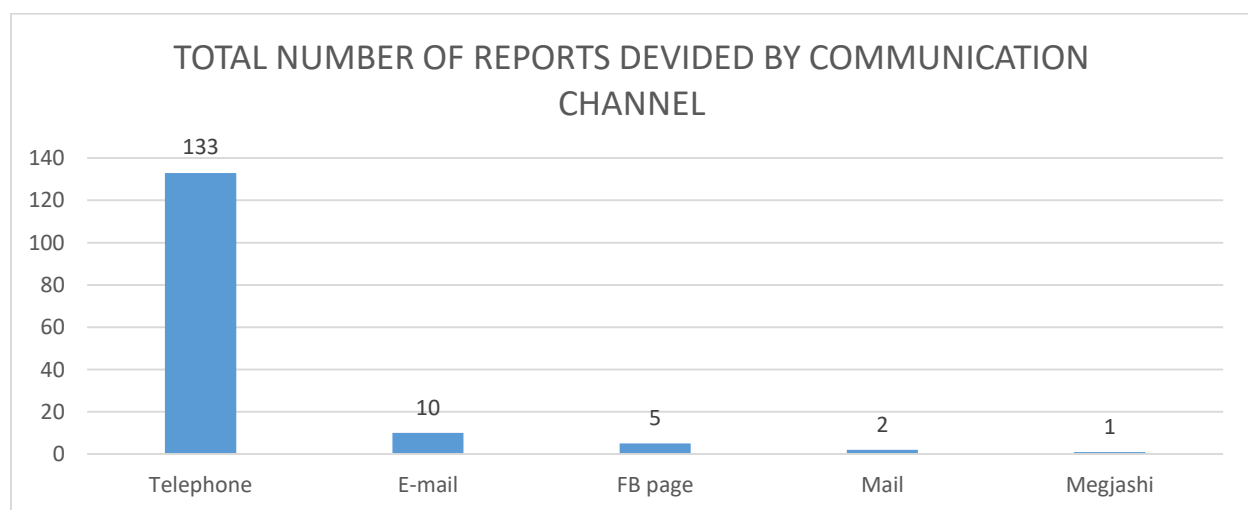
REPORTS

In the period of 6 months, from January 2021 to June 2021, we received total of **151** reports. Total number of children and youth encompassed with the reports is **223**, and **226** additional follow-up conversations were carried out.



COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

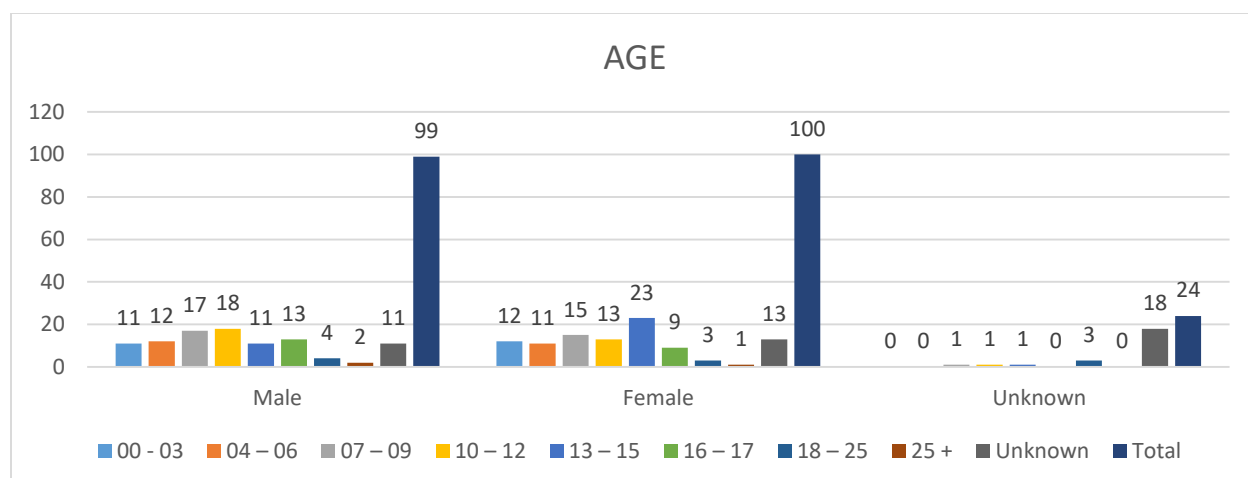
In this 6-month period, the communication with the callers was mostly carried out via the administrative (landline) telephone number of the Children's Embassy Megjashi, or more precisely there were **133** calls via this telephone and **223** additional follow-up conversations. There were **10** reports received via e-mail, **5** on the Facebook page, two via mail and one was personally delivered in Megjashi's premises.



AGE

Total number of children and youth by age and gender

The chart shows overview of the children that the reports were referred to by age and gender.



In terms of gender, there is an equal representation of boys and girls, i.e. 100 girls and 99 boys. In terms of age, the largest number of boys are in the 7-9 years and 10-12 years category, while the largest number of girls are from the age group between 13 and 15.

LIVING ENVIRONMENT

In terms of the living environment of the callers, as may be seen in the **table** below, the largest number or **197** live in urban areas, **20** children live in rural areas, and there are no data on **6** children.

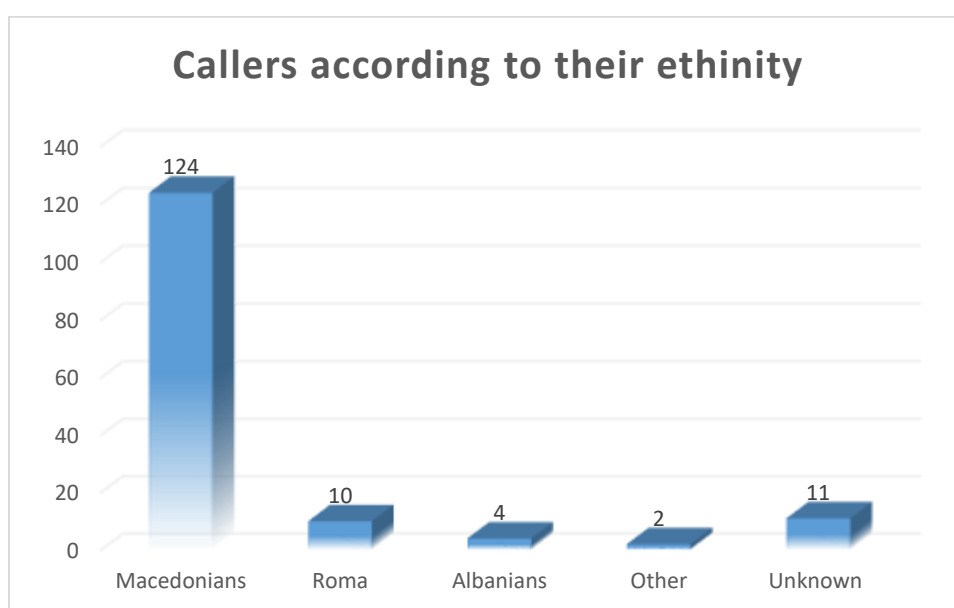
Table 1. Children/youth that the call refers to by living environment – urban and rural – divided by gender for this quarter.

2021	male	female	Unspecified	Unknown	Total by environment
January	16	8	0	3	27
February	9	10	0	0	19
March	14	14	0	3	31
April	15	12	0	2	29
May	19	35	0	6	60
June	17	13	0	1	31
Urban	90	92	0	15	197
January	1	2	0	0	3
February	2	2	0	4	8
March	0	0	0	0	0
April	2	0	0	0	2
May	0	0	0	5	5
June	1	1	0	0	2
Rural	6	5	0	9	20
January	1	0	0	0	1
February	0	0	0	0	0
March	0	0	0	0	0

April	0	1	0	0	1
May	2	0	0	0	2
June	0	2	0	0	2
Unknown	3	3	0	0	6
Total by gender	99	100	0	24	223

CALLERS ACCORDING TO THEIR ETHNICITY

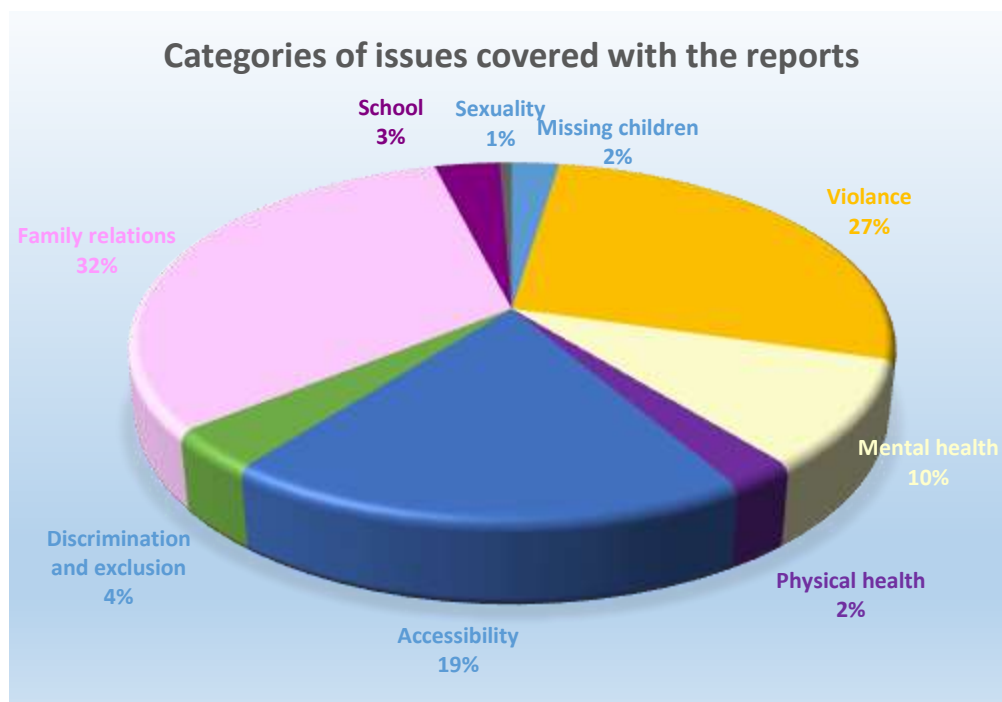
In terms of the ethnicity of the callers, as may be seen from the chart, **124** of the total number are Macedonians, **10** callers are Roma, and **4** callers are Albanians. Only **2** of the reports were from callers from other ethnical groups and there were **11** people with unknown ethnicity.



2. Overview of the Data on Violating the Rights of Children by Category of Issues

CATEGORIES OF ISSUES

Every report is recorded as an individual case regardless if it is an information request or a more serious issue; the reason is categorized in a standard form according to Child Helpline International (CHI) which is a global network of SOS telephone line for children that works on the protection of children's rights. Megjashi's SOS telephone number for children and youth is a member of this network since 2004. There are 11 categories of issues within the frame, i.e. violations of children's rights and each and every of the 151 reports is counted in several categories of issues depending on the complexity of the issue.



The four most common categories of issues from the received reports are as follows:

- **FAMILY RELATIONS – 32%**

As in the previous four years, this category of issues is on the top of the reasons why we receive the reports. The recurrence of violation of the child's right to see both parents continuously in the past few years and its persistence on the top of the problems reported to the SOS helpline is one of the reasons why the Children's Embassy Megjashi together with the Ombudsman used to provide and continues to provide support to the Initiative for Joint and Shared Parenting and their activities. Most of the children, 98 of them, are covered with the reports which refer to violation of the child's right in divorce proceedings and failure to respect the decisions of the Centres for Social Work, on the grounds of the child to see the other parent who is not a guardian.

We are particularly concerned about the alienated child syndrome that occurs in children of divorced parents, as it has serious consequences for the development of these children and their personality. Closely related to this problem is the problem of child abduction by one of the divorced parents, a problem that for the first in a long time was reported several times on the SOS helpline in the first half of 2021. The Children's Embassy Megjashi has long lobbied and advocated for the implementation of the Hague Convention on the Civil Legal Aspects of International Child Abduction, which Macedonia signed in 1991. Therefore, in cases of abduction of children by one parent, the authorities are obliged to act in accordance with the Convention and thus contribute to the respect of the best interests of the child.

This is not just an alarming number but it also remains a dominant reason for calling the SOS helpline for 5 years which refers to the fact that additional measures and education of the parents should be provided during their divorce. More attention should be paid to the damage which results from their conflict communication by not taking into account the need of the child to love both parents equally and that the child needs the love and care of both parents unless otherwise evaluated. By preventing one parent to see the child, this leads to alienated child syndrome.

With our many years of experience in cooperating with the centres for social work, we had the opportunity to see that the huge number of cases and insufficient number of human resources that should be involved in actively managing and monitoring a case is the key issue in untimely treatment and protection of children. An additional problem is the lack of appropriate training of employees in dealing with children and what are the measures that the centre has in its competence. We are always open for cooperation, guidance and support by which we could support improve the situation.

- **VIOLENCE – 27 %**

The violence related reports cover 90 children and they refer to several types of violence:

- Harmful and dangerous work, 1 child;
- Peer violence, 1 violence;
- Economic exploitation, abuse of child labour, 2 children;
- Mental/emotional violence covers 21 children;
- Negligence, 10 children;
- Physical violence – 33 children are covered with the reports which refer to this type of violence, which is the largest number of children from all violence reports;
- Sexual violence – 8 children are covered from the violence related reports;
- Unspecified/other – 14 children.

- **ACCESSIBILITY – 19%**

Total of 63 children are covered in the category of issues related to accessibility to different services and institutions and refer to problems related to:

- Access to education, 15 children.

This category encompasses children who had limited access to education as a result of not having a birth certificate, vaccination chart, decrease of working capacities of kindergartens due to the COVID-19 pandemic, technical device for following online schooling etc.

- Essential needs – basic needs which are not available to 23 children.

This category encompasses children who did not have the most basic needs such as food, home, clothes etc. Most often these are vulnerable categories of families who live on the verge of poverty.

- Problem with access to healthcare protection, inability to receive the necessary medical help, necessary health protection; 12 children with this problem are reported.
- Reports related to problem with access to legal services – advices, need for legal representation cover 5 children.
- Mental health services refer to 2 children.
- Contacts related to problems with access to different social or economic services and help; number of children cover with these reports is 4.
- Unspecified, other 2 children (the children were not admitted to kindergarten because they did not have vaccination chart).

- **MENTAL HEALTH – 10%**

Although the percentage of children categorized in this category of problems seems small (15 children), the importance of mental health of developing children is still very high and can affect the entire life of the child. In the cases reported was noted that anger, frustration, emotions that lead to aggressive behaviour, prevail in children, and the most often cause of this psychological state in children is the behaviour of the parents that arises from the divorce. Parental disagreement about seeing, making contacts and meetings of one of the parents with the child or children after the divorce and after granting custody to one of the parents.

- **OTHER PROBLEMS – 12%**

Problem categories with low number of children included in the reports are the following: discrimination and exclusion, school, missing children, physical health, sexuality and gender identity.

In the category of Discrimination and exclusion we have registered 12 cases and in most cases it was about excluding the child from different groups due to their health condition, but also discrimination on ethnic grounds, misunderstandings between adults and etc.

The category of school includes issues related to handling school tasks and academic performance, problems, problematic relationship or interaction with a teacher or school authorities, which may have a negative impact on the child or the young person, on their psychosocial well-being. There are 11 children registered in this category.

The categories of Missing children and Physical health participate with 2% in the total number. The category of Missing children includes cases of a minor who escaped or voluntarily left the home or the institution they were accommodated in and abduction of a child by one parent, i.e. family abduction. We have 8 cases in this category in the first half of this year. Although the number is small compared to other categories of problems, it is still significant for two reasons. The first is that this type of reports appear for the first time in a long period of time, and the second reason is that most of the reports are about child abduction by a parent (divorced parents). In the category of Physical health, problems of 8 cases were entered, and they refer to HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and medical problems.

Category of Sexuality and Gender identity - reports concerning issues related to sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Two children are registered in this category.

Table 2. The total number of children affected by problem categories for the period from January to June 2021

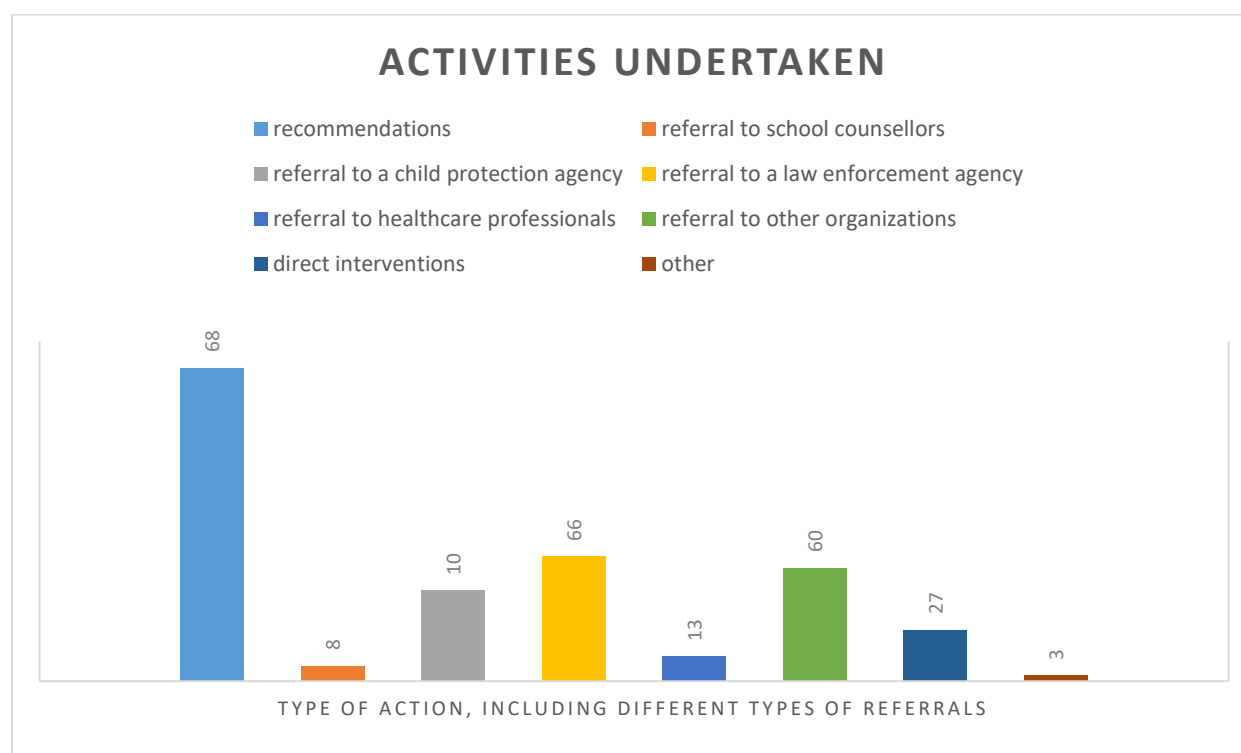
Category of Problem	January	February	March	April	May	June	Total
Missing children	0	0	1	0	3	4	8
Violence	6	9	12	13	33	17	90
Mental health	1	10	5	1	13	2	32
Physical health	0	0	0	1	0	7	8
Accessibility	14	3	2	20	11	13	63
Discrimination and exclusion	1	0	2	9	0	0	12
Family relations	24	15	14	13	25	15	106
School	0	0	1	2	6	2	11
Sexuality	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Total	46	37	39	59	91	60	332

3. ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN

Activities undertaken in this 6-month period in relation to finding a solution to the problems expressed in the reports are mainly the following: Recommendations – to **68** children, referrals to law enforcement bodies – **66** children, referrals to other institutions in the country or abroad – **60**

children or young people and referrals to school counsellors – 8 children. 27 children have received direct interventions.

During the undertaking of activities for solving the problems, contacts and cooperation were established with other organizations, services and institutions and for the most part the cooperation was successful and a solution was found.



During acting upon and providing support, the SOS helpline team often cooperated with the centres for social work, especially with the Intervention Team at the Skopje Centre, as well as the centres from other cities, the Sector of Interior Affairs, schools, the Association of Young Lawyers, the Coalition for Fair Trial, First Family Centre as well as other stakeholders and organizations to provide better and more effective support to callers.

When it comes to organizational case management, our primary goal is the best interests of the child, i.e. the actions should be vital in making decisions and implementing activities that apply to each child individually, but also to a specific group of children. The principle of best interests of the child is a general principle that in the broadest sense of the word leads to the well-being of the child. The SOS team is composed of different profiles of people: psychologists, lawyer, criminologist, pedagogue, social worker and from recently a volunteer - special educator. This team diversity gives us the opportunity to consider each case individually from several aspects and to find the best solution to solve it.

ONLINE SURVEY ON HABITS AND MANNERS OF COMMUNICATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN SEEKING ADVICE

Directed to continuously improve the work of the SOS helpline for children and youth and to get closer to this target group, the Children's Embassy Megjashi occasionally conducts surveys about the attitudes and opinions of young people about its work. During April and May 2021, an online survey of a sample of children and young people aged 11 to 18 was conducted about the habits and preferred manners of communication when seeking advice, the areas in which that need advice and support, as well as topics from their interest.

The questionnaire was answered by 431 students, 114 of which were Albanians and 317 Macedonians (female 247, male 177), 287 parents, 214 of which were female and 69 male, 195 Macedonians and 92 Albanians and 113 teachers, 45 of which were Albanians and 68 Macedonians. Most of them were females (91).

Students

More than half of the students were informed about the existence of the SOS helpline for children and youth, and almost no one was in acquaintance with someone who called on the helpline. And the willingness of students to call the same helpline is really low because they think they have no need, and they feel uncomfortable talking to a stranger.

Online teaching is the most common problem for students at the moment, but they are not unfamiliar with sleep problems, feelings of sadness and anxiety.

If students need to ask for help for a problem and call the SOS helpline for children and youth, it would be the easiest for them to write a message on FB and Instagram, as well as a text message.

To call the SOS helpline, students need to be aware of the following: to know that it is safe, to know that they will talk to experts, to have their personal data protected, as well as to know that they are calling someone who can really help them.

Parents

Most of the surveyed parents are aware of the existence of the SOS helpline for children and youth, they are that their child never called it, just as they themselves never did. Nearly two-thirds would encourage their child to call the SOS helpline if needed, but there is still a significant percentage of parents who said they would not encourage it. As the most common obstacle that parents think children/young people would have in asking for help and using such an SOS helpline for children and youth, is fear (of possible consequences) and embarrassment (of the environment, of friends), lack of information and ignorance of existence on such a line, self-doubt and lack of courage, mentality and prejudices, as well as the pressures from the environment and the distrust they have towards adults in general.

Teachers

Most of the teachers from the Macedonian schools are aware that there is an SOS helpline; the teachers from the Albanian schools are almost divided in terms of their awareness of the existence of the helpline. Only one teacher knows a student who called for help on the SOS helpline, and more than $\frac{3}{4}$ teachers are willing to direct students to call the helpline. The most common reasons given by teachers why students would not call the SOS helpline are the following: lack of information, fear, embarrassment, mistrust, prejudice, lack of courage. None of the teachers asked for help from the SOS helpline in cases when they have noticed a problem with any of the students. However, a larger number (60%) expressed readiness to call if they notice a problem that they would be unable to solve.

Teachers' recommendations for the SOS helpline:

"The SOS helpline should be publicly available on all social networks and in prominent places in cities, schools, cafes, etc. A mobile application can also be developed for greater and faster availability."

"I think it would be good to have more frequent questionnaires for teachers, students, parents on certain topics."

"I think an SOS helpline is a good idea and would work well in the future to support young people."

"Open an SOS information website as soon as possible to help children as soon as possible."

This survey is part of the project "Let's take the rights into our own hands", in partnership with Save the Children Kosovo, which is financially supported by the Government of Sweden.

The survey was conducted by Prof. Eleonora Serafimovska PhD and Prof. Mariana Markovic PhD, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, ISPPi, Psychological Laboratory.

Report prepared by:

Violeta Ilioska, SOS helpline Supervisor

Julija Velkovska, SOS helpline Operator

Marija Gjorgjioska, Volunteer on the SOS helpline

Jordanka Cherepnalkova-Trajkoska, Coordinator of the SOS helpline

Editor: Dragi Zmijanac, founder and chairperson of FCEW Megjashi