

## **Helping child victims of crime at the Nobody's Children Foundation's "Mazowiecka" Child Advocacy Center**

---

"Mazowiecka" Child Advocacy Center was established as a result of the Nobody's Children Foundation's twelve years' experience. Our experience with abused children, their families and caregivers, as well as our cooperation with a wide range of aid institutions and organizations made us realize that it was necessary to create a place, where child victims of crime would receive professional help adjusted to their needs.

Among our child clients there were cases that required legal intervention. Such decisions were made when the child was a victim of sexual abuse or physical and emotional maltreatment, or had witnessed dangerous acts of domestic violence and other crimes threatening his or her health or life.

More and more often such cases were reported to us by institutions such as the police, prosecutor's offices and courts, who requested us to provide assistance for abused children and their families. On the other hand, we tried to engage these institutions in our interventions, depending on the nature of the cases we dealt with.

The types of child victims' problems created challenges that we – as psychologists and pedagogues – had rarely faced in our previous practices. While accompanying children during interviews, protecting them against secondary victimization, learning the basic legal procedures, and trying to skillfully use the law to protect children, we realized that it was necessary to undertake systemic actions in order to effectively protect child victims of crime. The analysis of our experience in accompanying children throughout legal procedures, as well as multiple meetings with prosecutors, judges, police officers and psychologists – court experts, reinforced our belief that it was necessary to protect child victims, and helped us outline an institution that would perform such a role. During numerous discussions preceding the decision to launch such an institution, several important questions emerged.

The answer to the first one – Is such a place really necessary? – seemed obvious. Yes, it is, because there are child victims of crime, because legal regulations do not create special conditions for protecting children in legal procedures, because the regulations do not preclude creating such conditions, because we help children whose experience of testifying and appearing in court has negatively affected their emotional state and aggravated their trauma.

Another important question concerned the range of services. What do we wish and are able to offer to our prospective clients and who are going to be our future clients? The client definition obviously includes child victims of offences against life, health, and family, as well as sexual offenses. The institution's services are also addressed to such children's families and caregivers. Another client category includes police officers, judges, and psychologists for whom we perform a service role, offering them our facilities, equipment, and professional psychological knowledge. The third group of clients are all those, who seek advice, consultation or supervision in cases of children involved in legal procedures.

While trying to define, what we wish and can offer to our potential clients, we generated a few ideas. First, we wanted to create a place, where child witnesses would feel comfortable: a friendly place meeting children's needs and reducing their distress associated with the role of a court witness or a participant in court proceedings.

In order to create such a place we needed to arrange the space, select proper equipment, choose colors, and – more generally – give the facility the "right spirit". We were assisted by many

individuals and institutions, who offered money, equipment, their own ideas, and professional know-how. The devastated office space (270 m<sup>2</sup>) was gradually changing into a modern “child’s world”.

The very process of creating this “world” abounded with stressful moments. The first rooms completed were an interview room and a court trial room. With the assistance of the TVN Foundation, a TV show *Rozmowy w toku*, and the sponsors of another TV program, *Kto was tak urządził*, cozy and functional rooms were conjured in what appeared to be just a few moments, furnished with audio and video equipment, colorful furniture, curtains, and toys.

The ready-to-use rooms were being recorded by TV cameras when just a couple of meters away workers began general renovation of the walls and the floors. They were pulling out the old windows and doors, while electricians were laying down new cables. The camera operators were soon covered with dust from the walls that were being pulled down at the back of the building. There were moments when the renovation work appeared to be all chaotic and “upside down”, but the enthusiasm of both the “visionaries”, and the executors of the idea let us observe the progressing work with optimism.

## INTERVIEW ROOM

This room must meet both the psychophysical needs of children, and the formal requirements associated with legal interviews. The technical equipment includes a big one-way mirror, providing good visibility, a camera transmitting the image to the other room and recording the interview, as well as microphones registering sounds. Opposite to popular beliefs, we have not hidden the camera and the microphones. After all we do not make hidden-camera reportages and we never lie to the child that he or she is not going to be recorded, especially that the child’s recorded testimony is a major part of the evidence. Most children quickly get accustomed to the recording situation and soon forget about the camera.

The equipment in the interview room must be carefully selected. It is not a play room, so it needs to remain quite ascetic. Obviously it should be cozy, nice, and a bit “childish”. Nevertheless the selection of furniture, decorations, and toys has to be thoroughly considered and purposeful. It is indispensable to furnish such a room with two small tables: a lower one for younger children and a higher one for older ones. It is important that the child’s feet reach the floor, when he or she sits at the table. This will reduce the tension and discomfort experienced by the child. There may be soft toys in the room, but the diagnostic toys should rather be hidden. We should definitely provide paper, crayons, and markers. Our experience shows that it is also recommendable to provide soft drinks and paper tissues.

The room on the other side of the one-way mirror is designed for adult participants in the legal procedure. It has to be properly lit and furnished with a table and chairs. It is also equipped with the audio-video set, the microphone, and loud speakers necessary to stay in contact with the interviewer.

While designing the Center, we have not managed to avoid slight imperfections. It turned out, for example, that the room for adult participants is a bit too small, so we had to forgo some furniture, choosing comfort and functionality over the previously defined esthetics.

Furnishing the interview room was an extremely important yet merely the initial step towards changing the procedures of interviewing child victims of crime. The next step – and a much more difficult one – was to make the room really useful. We had to persuade judges, prosecutors, police officers, and expert psychologists that conducting interviews and court trials outside official buildings (i.e., their natural work places) was possible and beneficial for collecting evidence, simultaneously protecting child victims from secondary trauma.

The “Mazowiecka” Child Advocacy Center has developed a special offer addressed to judges, prosecutors, police officers, and expert psychologists, promoting interdisciplinary meetings of these professional groups’ representatives. Such meetings are aimed at improving the professionals’ com-



petences and enhancing their sensitivity to children's special role in legal procedures. Joint training sessions provide an opportunity to exchange experiences and develop rational standards of helping child victims of crime. Our biggest allies in promoting and implementing the idea of special treatment of children by law-enforcement institutions are judges, prosecutors, and police officers who have already used our services. Having the experience of interviewing children in the settings we have created, they tend to come back to handle further cases with child participants at our Center.

Nice interiors, the interview room, a small kitchen where we prepare snacks and drinks, and colorful mattresses ideal for jumping, are not everything we offer to children and their families.

The experience of being a victim or a witness of domestic violence or a victim of sexual abuse is by no means over at the interview stage. Nearly all children and their caregivers need psychological, legal, and (in many cases) medical assistance. The "Mazowiecka" Center offers such services. It provides individual therapy for children and their non-abusive caregivers. Many children suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and require long-term psychotherapy and psychiatric treatment.

The psychiatrists employed at the Center do not limit their work to filling prescriptions. They also conduct therapy and plan joint interventions with psychologists and lawyers.

***Kamila:** a 12-year-old girl living in a single-parent family. Since her mother's death four years ago she has been sexually abused by her father. A year ago, after an attempted suicide, the girl revealed the reasons of her desperate behavior to the hospital staff. Kamila has found herself in a dramatic situation: after losing her mother she has now lost her father, who has been arrested. The girl is currently residing in a public care institution. She shows a strong sense of guilt (blaming herself for her father's confinement), suffers from anorexia, hates herself, and has lost confidence in adults.*

*The girl is given antidepressant drugs, participates in psychotherapy, and is regularly visited by a volunteer who helps her with her schoolwork. Her premature sexual initiation has resulted in pathological changes in Kamila's reproductive organs, so the girl is also treated by a gynecologist. A caretaker from the public care institution systematically contacts the Center's lawyers to sort out the girl's complex legal issues.*

Lawyers play a significant role in the range of our services. Without them it would be impossible to provide full support for our clients. The generally low legal awareness, feelings of confusion and helplessness, inability to cope with the tangle of regulations, and mistrust towards law enforcement institutions make our clients unable to exercise their rights in the legal proceedings. The Center's lawyers patiently explain, instruct, "translate" the complicated legal language, write trial documents, and, most importantly, make sure that the rights of child victims and witnesses are observed in legal procedures.

When we talk about helping child victims of crime, we often emphasize that we take care not only of the child but also of his or her caregivers. Revealing the fact that the child has been victimized is usually a strong traumatic experience for the caregivers. Such parents need psychological support and advice or even psychotherapy. After all they have to provide support for their children; without parental support the child victim's recovery is extremely difficult.

The need for psychological assistance has turned out to be the most acute among mothers of child victims of incest and sexual abuse.

***Barbara:** the mother of an 8-year-old Szymon, who has been sexually abused by his father. Barbara got divorced to her husband six years ago. The court allowed Szymon's father to see his son outside Barbara's home. Szymon is a child with significant intellectual deficits and suffers from a serious speech defect. Barbara has two younger children with her current partner. The woman blames herself for not observing her oldest son carefully enough. She feels guilty because she used to encourage Szymon to visit his father and was quite pleased when her ex-husband eased her of taking care of three little children. Barbara has lost self-confidence as a mother, cannot cope with child-rearing problems concerning Szymon, feels stigmatized by her environment, and does not find any support in her family.*

For mothers such as Barbara a therapeutic group has been formed at the „Mazowiecka” Center. Children’s participation in the legal procedures, however, is not confined to legal interviews. Frequently courts and prosecutor’s offices request elaborate forensic psychological examinations. In such cases the Center’s psychologists are called in to perform the role of experts. Most cases requiring such examinations concern child sexual abuse; these are usually multi-faceted, complex cases. Our expert opinions appear to have gained trust among courts and prosecutor’s offices, as they submit cases not only from Warsaw, but also from other Polish towns and cities, such as Toruń, Siedlce, Białystok or Lublin.

Our frequent partners in resolving our clients’ complicated life issues are court guardians. They observe the child in his or her natural environment, and cooperate with schools and social services. The idea of interdisciplinary help may be quite difficult to implement at the Center. We take care of children from the entire Mazowsze province, and sometimes from distant places in Poland, so in many cases we do not know local partners or local help services. In such cases court guardians perform the role of a liaison between the Center and the local community. As such, they assume responsibility for activating interdisciplinary help for the children and their families in the local community.

Wishing to encourage court guardians to cooperation, establish closer contacts, and create a platform for joint actions, we have started the Court Guardians’ Club (in cooperation with the court). We meet regularly, once a month, to improve professional competences, exchange experiences, and provide supervision of most difficult cases of our – so often shared – clients.

For obvious reasons the Club’s sessions at the “Mazowiecka” Center are available only for court guardians from Warsaw and its surroundings. Our new initiative is to launch an Internet Court Guardians’ Club on the Foundation’s website, [www.fdn.pl](http://www.fdn.pl). The Internet will allow us to reach court guardians from all over Poland, creating a platform for sharing information, scientific reports, research findings, and help services.

We hope that, similarly to court guardians, psychologists – court experts treat the “Mazowiecka” Center as a friendly, helpful place. For a few months psychologists working as court experts have met regularly on Mondays, at their own club sessions. The formula of these meetings is open: the participants may use supervision, listen to lectures, or share their experiences over a cup of tea or coffee. Expert psychologists know each other mainly from corridors of court buildings and police stations. Due to the specific nature of their work they do not have a place for regular meetings. Hopefully they may find such a place at the “Mazowiecka” Center.

We hope to develop standards of child interviews in cooperation with psychologists acting as court experts. We also encourage them to participate in child interviews conducted in our rooms and to promote the Center among judges, court guardians, and police officers they cooperate with.

Analyzing our clients’ needs, we have noticed a major gap in our range of services. Quite clearly many of them require financial support. Many caregivers cannot afford bus tickets to participate regularly in therapeutic sessions and some of the children come to the Center hungry or cold, as they are not properly dressed. We try to address every such problem, however dedicated funds are needed for developing systemic solutions.

Another imperfection is the insufficient number of staff, as compared to the number of children needing help. As an NGO we have to raise funds for financing our activity on our own, which obviously limits our employment potential.

Recently another “therapist” or rather “ornitotherapist” joined our small team. It is a kakadu named Zuzia, which has been presented to us as a gift. Zuzia has given the Center a special spirit, changing it into a slightly unusual place, where children may talk to a parrot, which is a gifted listener able to keep even the deepest secrets.

The Center’s 28-month activity has shown that our services are needed and find their recipients. Child victims of crime are not an exceptional, marginal social problem. Unfortunately, many children fall victim to various types of offences, and a complex, systemic help offer is practically non-existent.

Summarizing the “Mazowiecka” Center’s experience, we have to emphasize that this is just the beginning of the process of developing a system for protecting child victims. The treatment of children still depends more on individual professionals’ good will, awareness, and resourcefulness, than on obligatory standards.

Hopefully the fact that the Center is now operating under the patronage of the Ministry of Justice, as well as our cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration and the General Police Headquarters will contribute to promoting and perfecting these standards. We are also glad that the training program we have conducted since 2002 to promote child-friendly interview rooms – *Child under the Umbrella of Law* – has resulted in a higher awareness of child witnesses' special needs among judges, prosecutors and police officers working in many Polish law enforcement institutions. This program has inspired local authorities and aid organizations to launch new institutions, which perform a role similar to the Foundation's "Mazowiecka" Center. We believe that in the future a network of such specialized institutions, adhering to shared standards, and acting in cooperation with courts and prosecutor's offices will provide protection and support for child witnesses all over Poland.