



Caretakers at Rada Vranješević orphanage in Banja Luka display their training certificates

# Fostering Relational Being: Expressive Therapy Training for Caretakers of Orphaned Children in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Brief Project Report

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In the summer of 2015, F-r-e-e (friendship, respect, enrichment, engagement), an NGO working on community building projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina, carried out two train-the-trainer workshops dedicated to working with caretakers of orphaned and traumatized children in two Bosnian cities, Banja Luka and Zenica. The purpose of these sessions was to provide a knowledge base on the psychosocial impact of trauma, and how the principles and practices of expressive therapies can be used as a tool for healing and empowering vulnerable youth.



Children and caretaker work together at Dom i Porodica orphanage in Zenica.

F-r-e-e understands that Bosnia's transition to a functioning, and flourishing, society will likely take time, as the country is still struggling to recover (socially, economically, psychologically, and relationally) from the war of the 1990s, but that small steps must continue to be made toward this eventual goal. This project specifically targeted the socially ostracized groups of orphans and victims of trauma. Many of the children in both of the orphanages our project team partnered with have been placed here, not because of the loss of one or both parents, but due to economic or social situations necessitating their removal from their families. These individuals are thus a very poignant example of the country's precarious social situation, but can also be a powerful key to changing it. Our relationship-based approach considered the importance of providing a safe environment for children to authentically express themselves and collaborate together regardless of ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds.

Two, multi-day workshops were carried out, one at Rada Vranješević orphanage in Banja Luka, and one at Dom i Porodica orphanage in Zenica, each training about 10-15 caretakers, and each involving trainings with the f-r-e-e team in the afternoon, following hands-on implementation in working with children and youth populations in the mornings. Participants at each organization were also provided with an expressive therapy manual, written by the f-r-e-e team, detailing the techniques taught in the workshop and offering many possible directives that could be implemented with the children under these individuals' care.

## SPECIFIC SUCCESS POINTS

F-r-e-e draws on various expressive modalities through all of our work, and in both training workshops we used a balance of direct instruction (including trainings on understanding the neurological effects of trauma and PTSD, as well as vicarious trauma and attachment theory) and hands on activities allowing the participants to themselves experience some of the expressive therapy modalities we were proposing. In addition, through daily workshops with children and youth in each setting, f-r-e-e team members were able to directly apply the expressive therapy methods being discussed, together with staff members participating in the trainings, and thus offer direct examples of these types of approaches in the setting where they will be used.





Yoga session with children and caretakers at Dom i Porodica orphanage in Zenica.

Furthermore, we were able to tailor the trainings to the specific needs of each organization. Both groups of staff requested a greater focus on self-care techniques and an understanding of the ways that they could balance their own well-being with the realities of working with traumatized populations. Jana Nadolski, an art therapist working with the f-r-e-e team, who is also experienced in trauma informed yoga, was able to offer morning yoga sessions each day, above and beyond the planned workshop timing. In addition, we dedicated more time in each of the workshops to discussions of self-care techniques, and allowed space for the staff participants to share experiences with one another and offer support.

Because each day of the training offered a balance between work with staff and work with children in each organization, we were also able to discuss the effects of some of the expressive modalities used on an ongoing basis throughout the workshop. For example, the image to the right, which was drawn by children at Rada Vranješević orphanage in Banja Luka, depicts an artistic response to two adjective prompts: “safety” on the left side, and “fear” on the right. Children worked in groups to create these images and later discussed them with their peers and caretakers. We were able to have an extended conversation with the caretakers participating in the training following this activity about the imagery in this particular drawing, including the idea that safety is portrayed together with a building (resembling the orphanage itself), and fear with an open sky and sunlight. These exchanges were crucial to the implementation of the training and an understanding on how these modalities can be used.

