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Bulgaria

"LIFE AS IT IS" SHOWCASING ALTERNATIVE FAMILY CARE

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, as a part of the UNICEF agenda to stop children under 3 years of age from being placed in institutions and to close the infant homes for institutional care, UNICEF in Bulgaria launched a documentary reality TV series “*Life as it is – foster families*”.

A camera followed the real life stories of 11 foster families for more than seven months, showing the positive outcomes for the children living in foster care as well as the challenges foster families face to take care of a child who is coming from an institution.

The TV series aimed to

1. Raise public awareness about the harmful effects of institutional care on child development;
2. Educate the audience of the importance and benefits for children to live within families,
3. Promote foster care and foster parents as a better alternative to institutional care,
4. Continue the fundraising efforts from the telethon *Magnificent Six*, organized by UNICEF and bTV.

12 episodes were broadcasted during a 3 months period, one episode per week, on the largest Bulgarian national television channel, bTV. A hot line for people interested in becoming foster parents received twice as many calls after the series aired.

BACKGROUND

Every 5 hours a baby is abandoned in Bulgaria

In 2010 statistics showed that 7,276 children live in 142 institutions across the country. More than 2,000 of these children were under 3 years of age, many abandoned by their parents soon after they were born due to reasons related to poverty. Most of these children will spend their entire childhood in an institution. Studies¹ have shown that for every three months a child stays in an institution their development is delayed by one month.

On the other hand, there are many people who are willing and able to offer to take care of the abandoned children to prevent them from living in an institution. Foster care provides one of the best alternatives to institutional care by affording children a chance to grow in a family environment and fully develop their potential. Simultaneously, preventative mechanisms must be strengthened to support families of children at risk of abandonment.

STRATEGY & IMPLEMENTATION

The traditional media in Bulgaria still plays a significant role when it comes to social mobilization and to changing attitudes of the public. *Life as it is – foster families* TV series was part of a larger UNICEF-led awareness and fundraising campaign dedicated to a child’s right to live in a family.

The TV series informed the public of the necessity to close all institutions for children in Bulgaria exposing how harmful residential care is for children and alternatively showing the many benefits for children that live within a family as part of foster care in addition to highlighting the need for family support to prevent abandonment of children.

During the airing of the series it was supported by cross promotion in other media. Opinion leaders, government partners and experts spoke out in other media channels to discuss the topics that were raised during the show. The additional component of strong fundraising appeals to the public was also a key part of the campaign.

¹ [The Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care](#) by Save the Children Fund, 2009

PROGRESS & RESULTS

Approximately 250 foster families with 220 children in foster care existed at the end of 2008. As a result of the popularity and resonance of the TV series, as proven by the high television ratings, more than 270 foster families were approved during the airing of the TV series *Life as it is – foster families* and more than 330 children have been placed for a short or long period of time.

This positive impact led to the introduction in 2011 of a new season of *Life as it is – to be a parent*.

CHALLENGES IN TERMS OF COMMUNICATION:

The shooting of interviews including children deprived from parental care, required preliminary preparation and permission by the Agency for Social Protection. But overall, the campaign proved very effectual in dispelling many pre-conceived notions the public had regarding institutions for children, namely that it was exclusive for the Roma community who face stigmatization within Bulgaria. The TV series was also able to communicate the harmful effects of institutions on the development of children while also explaining the difference between foster care and adoption. There was insufficient knowledge about the life of children in institutions and how harmful it is to his or her development.

LESSONS LEARNED

The success of both the TV series and the larger communication campaign reinforces that the traditional media outlets are still the best channel for raising awareness on topics which requires changing attitudes of the public as well as fundraising, however, it is important to note that the TV series would not have been as successful if there was not a larger communicational/advocacy campaign.

INNOVATION

From a partnership perspectives *Life as it is – foster families* is a best example of cooperation between UNICEF, bTV and a private sector company. In this partnership the media broadcasted and promoted the series (including the cross promotion of the additional topics) and the private sector partner sponsored the TV program.

Life as it is – foster families series was also the first example of integration between advocacy, communication for development and fundraising in Bulgaria.

NEXT STEPS

In 2011, a new season of *Life as it is – to be a parent* was launched. And the *Life as it is – Workshop for Parents* is under development.

RELATED LINKS*

[Episode 1](#), *Life as it is – foster families* Episode 1

[Episode 2](#), *Life as it is – foster families*

[Episode 3](#), *Life as it is – foster families*

[Episode 4](#), *Life as it is – foster families*

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[Episode 9](#), *Life as it is – foster families*

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[Episode 11](#), *Life as it is – foster families*

**All titles are hyperlinked to their respective web-based files.*

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