

LOOKING FOR A FAMILY

Living in a children's home, or a real home?



Children who don't have parents to look after them are placed into 'institutional care,' also known as orphanages or children's care homes. The Czech Republic has been criticized by the United Nations for its large number of children living in this type of care.

The Czech parliament has just passed an amendment (= added changes) to the law to deal with this issue. The following story is an example of how life might have been different for a boy called Tom if there had been alternative (= other) **options**¹ for him when his parents found themselves in crisis.

Little Tom's story

Both of Tom's parents grew up in children's care homes, so they

did not have much experience of family life and how to **bring up**² a child. They loved him a lot, but it was difficult. When Tom was three months old, his mum left him, and his dad **struggled on his own**³ for another three months, trying to take care of his son.

He turned to a social worker for help and he was advised to put his child into a children's care home. He wasn't offered any other alternatives. So from

the age of six months Tom ended up in a *kojenecký ústav* institution where there was only one nurse for every nine children to look after.

Tom lived there for two and a half years and during this period his father visited him regularly as he was very fond of his child (= liked him a lot).

One day a man and woman came to "look at" Tom when he had a high fever. Sometime later he was told by the staff (= employees) that he was going on a trip. The man and woman returned and he had to get dressed in clothes they had brought. In fact, it wasn't a trip – he was being transferred (= moved) to a **foster family**⁴!

Tom with foster parents

Tom is a regular kid. He enjoys cycling, climbing trees, and all the other things that children like doing. However, every day his foster parents deal with the problems he has because of a lack of (= not enough) early personal care and love. "When he came to live with us, he used to hit the pillows at night, because he **was wet**⁵. Even as a three-year-old he did not respond to his own name. He didn't know how to **cuddle**⁶ with us," say his foster parents.

Living in a family

When you are a foster parent, you provide a safe home within your family for a child who for some

According to statistics, 50% of young children or babies are in care only because of social reasons, like debts or housing issues.

On the other hand, when you adopt a child, you have all the parental rights⁸ and you are legally responsible as if it was your own child.

A bit of history

Before communism, it was much more common to foster children. This changed in the 1950s, when foster care was banned⁹ and children were put into

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big "collective" institutions. One of the first psychologists that criticised this was Zdeněk Matějček in the 1960s. Very young children especially need one on one* care in a family setting (= environment).

Even though now fostering is legal, there are still over 5,000 children today in children's care homes. That's the same number of children in care as when the institutions were created.

Changing the law to help kids

The amendment to the Child Social Protection Act¹⁰ will change the current law to ensure that children have to stay in their families. (If a crisis occurs, social workers should help.) If it is not possible, a foster family environment should be offered. And only if none of these are available, then a child can be put into an institution.

It will also make sure that any child under three years old stays

with a foster family and not in a children's care home.

Fostering will be regarded as a regular (= normal) job. Foster parents will be paid and so it is expected that they prepare for it as a profession. They will have to work with accredited (= government checked) organizations to get advice from psychologists, etc. Foster parent Karel Švejda agrees that in this way they will not be left alone to deal with problems that kids might have.

The director of the Karlovy Vary children's home, Petr Zmuda, actually welcomes a change in the law. He says that despite the excellent work in his care home, it can never replace the emotional support that children need: **day to day**¹¹ contact between parents and siblings (= brothers and sisters). He also says it is an unnatural environment to bring up children in.

Respect for biological parents

One of the more demanding aspects of fostering, unlike adoption, is the relationship with biological parents.

Tom's foster parents recall (= remember) quite a funny moment when they overheard Tom talking to their kids. The kids were all playing together and Tom said: "My dad is stronger than our dad!" Tom didn't say *your* dad. He naturally thinks that he has two fathers.

A different scenario for Tom

If someone had visited Tom's father in his home and given him practical advice and support, there is a strong chance Tom would not have ended up in a care home. Another option may have also been foster care in a family environment in his early years. Hopefully these changes in the Czech law regarding



AMALTHEA

An organization that helps foster families and adoptive families with bringing up children. It also tries to find possible foster parents. You can support them by donating money: 107-362280257/0100. www.amalthea.pardubice.cz

DISCUSS

What are day-to-day situations that children experience at home which children in institutions cannot?

SAMPLE ANSWERS

In a family setting, children can experience what it's like to have family arguments and then how to solve them, how to share things and how to follow rules in the family. They may have to wash windows, mow the lawn and generally be part of a team helping out with extra chores. They also learn how to share life with an extended family (aunts, grandfathers, etc.).

reason cannot live with their birth parents (= biological parents). You do it until it's either safe for the child to go back home or a relative can take them, or until they are adopted into another family. Children might live in a foster home anywhere between a few days and several years – sometimes until adulthood. Foster parents are given **foster care benefits**⁷ for this.

childcare will provide a better life for children like Tom in the future.

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VOCABULARY

- ¹ **option** ['ɒpʃ(ə)n] – možnost
- ² **to bring up** – vychovat
- ³ **struggled on his own** – usilovně se snažil, pokoušel se sám
- ⁴ **foster family** ['fɒstə] – pěstounská rodina, pěstouni
- ⁵ **was wet** – byl mokrý, počůral se

⁶ **to cuddle** ['kʌd(ə)] – obejmout, přitulit se, mazlit se

⁷ **foster care benefits** – výživné

⁸ **right** – právo

⁹ **to ban** [bæn] – zakázat

¹⁰ **Child Social Protection Act** ['səʊʃ(ə)l prə'tekʃ(ə)n ækt] – zákon o sociálně-právní ochraně dětí

¹¹ **day to day** – každodenní

GLOSSARY*

one on one – a situation or relationship which involves only two people; the child gets much more direct attention in this scenario

LANGUAGE POINT

care home, children's home – in the UK babies don't go to children's homes, they are fostered. There are usually only older children in care homes, so there isn't a special word for *kojenecký ústav*.