

# Family Reunification Support

Project Report



SOS  
BARNBYAR



EUROPEAN UNION  
Asylum, Migration  
and Integration Fund



# Contents

Background: The Family-Strengthening Programme .....	3
Increased coordination helps families get a fresh start .....	5
The key role of mentors when families establish themselves .....	7
Method: Flexible design, clear goals .....	9
The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children in Sweden .....	11
"Right now our son is the adult in the family" .....	12
"It felt like my life began again" .....	14
What did the evaluation show? .....	16
Conclusions and recommendations .....	18
What goals were achieved? .....	20
Who takes responsibility: Civil society or the Swedish state? .....	22
"We're on the side of the children and their families" .....	24
Working long-term and seeing the big picture – that's how we make a difference .....	26
More results .....	27

” We're so happy about all the help my family has received – me, Omid and my daughters. I worry about what it's going to be like when you guys stop.



We promote the opportunities of migration by running a project co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

**Family reunification support**

SOS Children's Villages

Publisher: SOS Children's Villages Sweden, 2022  
SOS Children's Villages Sweden's national programme  
Family reunification support at SOS Children's Villages in Gothenburg  
Project Manager: Andreas Johansson  
Text: David Isaksson/Global Reporting  
Layout: Lisa Jansson/Global Reporting  
Photography: Maja Brand

The project report will be available for download on  
<https://sos-barnbyar.se>





# Background: The Family-Strengthening Programme

SOS Children's Villages Sweden's family reunification project was launched in 2020 and concluded on 31 December 2022. The overall goal was to contribute to a more effective integration of third-country nationals\* into Swedish society.

## Project objective:

Children and adults who come to Sweden based on close family ties to unaccompanied minors have the prerequisites to establish themselves in Swedish society.

## Project goals:

- 1: Families can navigate Swedish society, based on their needs.
- 2: Parents become more employable.
- 3: Parents feel more secure in their parental roles.
- 4: More possibilities for providing coordinated government services to families.

## To achieve these goals, the project works to:

- 1) Support parents in taking primary responsibility for the family's establishment.
- 2) Identify weak links in government support and mobilise actors around recommendations for change.
- 3) Develop a shareable method to support the target audience.

The project is co-financed and implemented with the support of the European Asylum, Migration & Integration Fund (AMIF).



\*Third-country nationals are legally resident in Sweden without Swedish citizenship, and the target group for the project was parents/families who came to Sweden based on close family ties/reunification with unaccompanied young people.

**32** Families in the programme \*

**188** Participants

**5857** Individual interventions

**26** Group activities

**23** Participants (on average) per group activity (Target value 15)

**The participating families** are assigned a mentor who offers complementary support measures according to the purpose of the project, as well as support and guidance in everyday life.

A total of 32 families have been enrolled in the project, including 49 parents and 139 children (a total of 188 people). 26 of the enrolled families have completed the programme, and it is on them that the result measurements are based. Another 6 families left the programme prematurely for various reasons, but took part in some of the activities. The pandemic led to a shift in the inflow of participants due to the entry ban. Moreover, group activities could not be carried out during the period in which stricter measures were in place. Still, overall the same number of activities were carried out as originally planned.

The rights perspective constitutes the basis for SOS Children's Villages' family reunification work. An important part of the organisation's activities is therefore to ensure that the municipalities' administration in these cases is as legally secure as possible. The goal of the project is also to help create more possibilities for providing coordinated government services to families. To achieve these goals, collaboration procedures have been established with other actors. These include collaboration agreements with the City of Gothenburg's Establishment Unit and the Swedish Red Cross.

The main purpose of the project has been to give the participants practical knowledge of how important things in Swedish society work, thereby reducing the gap between societal expectations of newly arrived immigrants and their own abilities.

The project will be concluded with a final report, as well as a conference held in December 2022, at which knowledge and lessons learned will be shared with other actors. Further information is available on the project's website:

<https://sos-barnbyar.se/goteborg/familjestarkande-program/>



\*The figures refer to compilations up to and including Q3 2022.



# Increased coordination helps families get a fresh start

Increased coordination between various Swedish authorities, so that parents can cope with their roles and young people can focus on school. That was the goal when SOS Children's Villages Sweden started its Family-Strengthening Programme in Gothenburg. The programme has since been further developed, but the basic needs remain the same.

**In 2016, SOS Children's Villages Sweden** started its first mentorship programme to provide support to unaccompanied young people so that they could establish themselves in Swedish society. When several of these youths subsequently had the opportunity to reunite with their families, they were overjoyed. At the same time, many of them felt a great deal of pressure, as they needed to support and help their parents with a variety of practical issues; new arrivals must swiftly familiarise themselves with everything from the healthcare system to obtain a BankID.

"At first, the young people were very

happy to get their families here, but then the mentors noticed that many of them had started to miss school, because they had to spend so much time helping their parents. Simply put, these young folks were under enormous pressure, and we youth mentors had to spend a lot of time supporting the whole family and were always two steps behind," says Andreas Johansson, the project manager for the Family-Strengthening Programme at SOS Children's Villages in Gothenburg.

Unlike those who come to Sweden as quota refugees, who receive greater support, here the relatives (that is, the



**” You did exactly what we expected; you did what we needed you to do. Our knowledge of Swedish society was not good, and you helped us understand it better. You’ve meant a lot to us!**



young people), were expected to be the ones who helped the family with everything. For many of them, this creates a strong feeling of stress. Or as Mahdi, one of the young people whose parents recently came here, recounted before the start of the programme: "You have a knot in your stomach on the way home from school, because you wonder what pile of papers will be waiting on the kitchen table today..."

SOS Children's Villages 2019 survey study of young people who had just received their families here showed that the young people had to take on a huge responsibility for the family's establishment; in short, the children had become the adults. At first, the parents did not want to believe that this had happened, but when the programme's mentors asked the families about who handled forms, booked doctor's appointments, and took care of other similar tasks, it turned out that in most cases it was the young people who handled these matters.

**The central part** of the programme has therefore always been to support the families in their practical, daily work.

"There is a clear gap between the requirements and expectations of authorities and the knowledge and ability that people have. Being told that you need to register yourself in a housing queue does not necessarily mean that you know how to do it, so for us this 'how-to' aspect has been absolutely central to the work," Andreas Johansson continues.

It is no great surprise that one problem the families have faced is the precarious housing situation and the lack of coordination between different authorities. The consequences of this are that some families have been forced to move several times at short notice.

"Unfortunately, we saw many decisions from authorities that systematically alienated families and meant that their rights, not least the rights of the children, had to be constantly deprioritised. But if we can help improve the coordination of the services these authorities provide to



families, parents can reassert their roles and young people can focus on school. That benefits everyone – not least Swedish society at large," continues Andreas Johansson.

Another insight was that it was also important to support the younger siblings in the family, not least in terms of extracurricular activities and their integration into the community. This led to the hiring of an integration educator, Selma Claesson, who previously worked as a social educator in Swedish schools. She brought along her therapy dog, Bodil:

"For families to cope with the tough transition moving to Sweden entails, fun stuff needs to happen, too. Bodil's has a gift for calming people down. Many children want to read to Bodil, who likes to lie down on their lap. And when something tough is going on, it can make it easier for the children if they can fiddle with Bodil's fur while they talk," says Selma Claesson.

During the project period, the situation has changed for the better. Cooperation with other municipalities and civil society organisations has also been improved. But despite this, the need for broader support remains greater than the public sector has the resources to provide:

"Establishment processes are very complex, and long-term, sustainable integration work demands efforts over a long period of time and from several directions. We must work together to succeed, and civil society organisations like ours play an important role in this, as we can be more flexible and react faster in response to changing needs than, say, a municipality," says Andreas Johansson.





# The key role of mentors when families establish themselves

Trust and cooperation are the basis for successful establishment work. In this process, the mentors who support the families during the establishment process play a key role.

**As a contact person** and bridge to Swedish society, the AMIF programme's mentors play a central role. The mentors also help to relieve some of the burden on the young people who have taken great responsibility for their parents.

The mentors' work covers four key areas: housing, finances, health and parenthood itself.\*

"A lot of it has to do with practical things. We then build up the relationship, based on the first conversation. Often we quickly become close with the family, so we get to know them," says Zeinab El-Sane, who has been one of the programme's mentors.

In many families, young people have taken on a great deal of responsibility. Practically speaking, they have taken on the role of the adult. One goal of the mentors' work is thus to "fill in for" the young people, so that they can focus on school.

"We accompany the parents and family when they go to SFI, visit the social welfare office, and do other things that are challenging for people who have just arrived in Sweden," says mentor Emma Sköld.

Sometimes the young people bring the letters and documents they have received from authorities to the mentors and ask for help with how to answer them.

In supporting the families, the mentors work according to a family development plan based on a self-assessment form that the parents fill out when a family starts the programme. The plan has clear goals, such as that the family themselves should be able to pay their bills and become better at handling their contact with the authorities. At the same time, establishment is a major challenge, not least for those who can neither read nor write:

"For a person who can't even write their



\* SOS Children's Villages' area names are "Network and Context", "Society and Housing", "Health", and "Work".

**” Our way of working with families means that we discover shortcomings in the system that are not evident to everyone, for example to people who work in social authorities.**

own name, it is of course complicated to enter Swedish society. But we have also seen great progress, how the adults try, how they learn more and more words in Swedish and really keep fighting to succeed,” says mentor Daniel Josephson.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for all

newly arrived families is the housing issue:

“If that isn’t working, everything else stops. Children struggle with school and the family can’t grow roots,” Daniel continues.

The work of the mentors also leads to improvements for society at large, something that is also highlighted in the independent evaluation:

“Our way of working with families means that we discover shortcomings in the system that are not evident to everyone, for example to people who work in social authorities. Precisely because we work with particularly vulnerable groups, we see the weaknesses in the system especially clearly,” says Emma Sköld.





# A flexible spider in the web

Flexible design and a focus on how families can achieve their goals, strong personal commitment, and a constant dialogue aimed at establishing collaborations with other actors in society. This sums up the method applied in this project.

**The AMIF project** has acted as a spider in the web around the families and their contact with society at large. It has been fundamental that the participants themselves actively assess and grade their progress. In general, there is ample knowledge about the prevailing problems. The focus of the programme has therefore been on how these problems can be solved and how the target group's knowledge can be improved so that they can gradually cope with more tasks themselves.

To a large extent, the focus has also been on how the participants' abilities can be strengthened in a concrete way that equips them to meet the expectations imposed by society.

Once each participant family was enrolled, the parents completed their own self-assessment. The self-assessments are based on goals and indicators in the project plan and are one of the bases for assessing the results of the programme and the development of the participants.

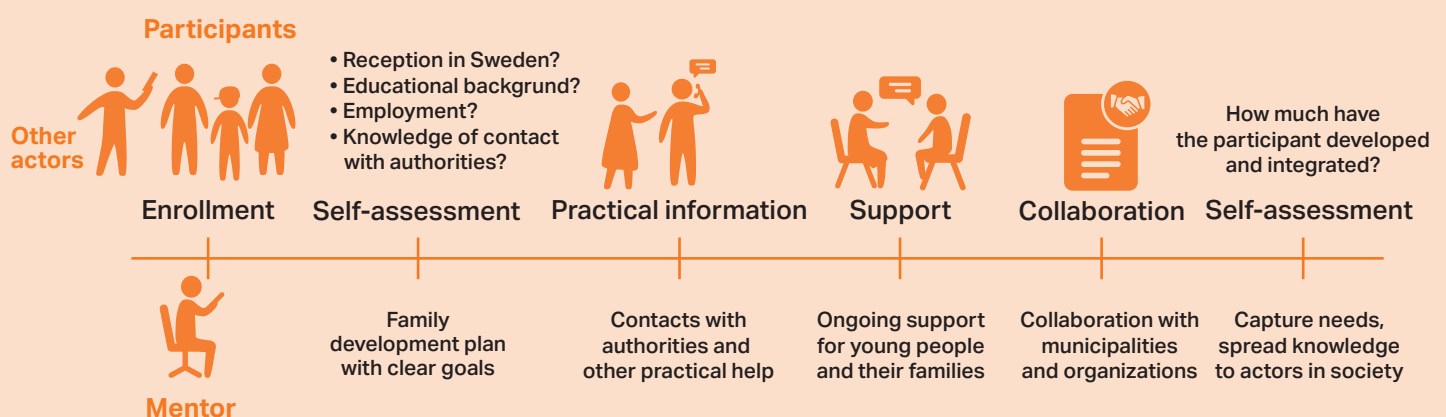
The self-assessment covers the family's reception in Sweden, educational

background and employment, as well as the parents' knowledge with regard to everyday tasks, such as contact with the authorities and the BankID digital identification system. With the help of the assessment and conversations with the parents, a family development plan with clear and specific goals was then developed.

The family mentors then provided practical support to parents in the form of contact with authorities and organisations, as well as practical help. The family mentors and project managers reflected continuously on the method and kept a journal of their experiences.

At the end of the programme, the participants then filled in the same self-assessment, a so-called "estimation".

**In addition** to practical efforts to support the young people and their families, the project also involved collaboration with municipalities and civil society organisations. A third leg has been to disseminate information and increase knowledge in society at large about the



needs of newly arrived immigrant families.

An important aspect of this work has been to arrange undemanding social activities that build community and strengthen the family's cohesion.

Throughout the project period, those involved have continuously learned from their experiences and developed the work, step by step. This has meant that the content and structure changed along the way. One important insight was that it was crucial to identify the needs of the younger children in the families. To this end, an integration educator was hired whose primary task was to support these children. She brought along her "social services dog" Bodil. The children could play with her and

take their minds off things for a while.

The project has engaged in exchanges with other actors and been presented during Sweden's Children's Rights Days and at the annual Human Rights Days. Part of the knowledge dissemination and learning has occurred in conversations in the reference group and at roundtables. The purpose of the reference groups has mainly been to get input on the project's interventions, as well as to build networks and alliances with others active in the same area. The reference group has had a core of returning participants. The project team has also had exchanges with colleagues in Finland and conducted a roundtable discussion at the EU level.





# The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children in Sweden

All authorities that work with children must comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and take the best interests of the child into account in their assessments. "But many municipalities can get much better at this, not least in terms of considering how their decisions affect children," says Ombudsman for Children Elisabeth Dahlin.

In 2020, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was enshrined in Swedish law. As a result, the authorities must take the best interests of the child into account in all decisions involving children. The authority must also always be able to report on how the child's best interests have been investigated and how this has been taken into account in the decision.

<https://www.barnombudsmannen.se/stod-och-verktyg/genomfora-barnkonventionen/provning-av-barnets-basta/>

The Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as the basis for SOS Children's Villages' family reunification work. At the same time, the programme reveals many shortcomings in the reception process in which municipalities do not fully comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"There have been major changes overall, but when it comes to assessing the best interests of the child and when you look at children's participation in the decision, there's clearly room for improvement by many authorities," says Ombudsman for Children Elisabeth Dahlin.

The evaluation of the programme indicates that young people with families who come to Sweden based on their close family ties to these minors are given too much responsibility for their family's establishment, and that in practice they are forced to take over the adult role from their parents. This, in turn, affects their schooling, in contravention of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"It's insane that the children have to take care of their parents, or that they should have to act as interpreters when the parents have medical appointments. On this point, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is crystal clear, and it applies to everyone under the age of eighteen in Sweden," says Elisabeth Dahlin.

Another of the issues highlighted in the AMIF programme is how the precarious housing situation negatively affects families. This is also an issue that the Ombudsman for Children is actively working to address, and which is highlighted in the agency's latest annual report.



PHOTO: KRISTIAN POHL

"Will it make any difference – or is it pointless for us to bring this up?"

"According to the National Board of Health and Welfare's survey, 24,000 children lack secure housing, but the number is probably much higher. We also see the difficult consequences for children when they are suddenly uprooted and forced to move, just when they've managed to establish themselves someplace," Elisabeth Dahlin continues.

The experiences gained through the programme also show that when the information provided the municipalities falls short, it's often the families who pay the price. Here, the Administrative Procedure Act is clear: the information that children and adults receive should be adapted to the recipient and be easy to understand.

So what can the municipalities do to improve? Above all, they have to set aside time, says Elisabeth Dahlin:

"We often hear from people in social services that they don't have time to make the assessments that the law requires. My advice to any administrator who feels that they don't have enough time to do that is to go to their immediate superior and ask for clear instructions on how their work should be carried out based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child."



## Right now our son is the adult in the family

“No, our son doesn’t get angry when we have to ask about everything! He understands that it takes time for us to learn. So right now, he’s the adult in the family,” says Brhanemeskel. The newly arrived immigrant father can’t help but laugh at his own words.

**In the space of** just a few months, Lebse Grma and Brhanemeskel from Eritrea have been thrown into a new world, one in which they are forced to ask their soon-to-be adult son for help with most things. They themselves know neither Swedish nor English, and here in Sweden the written language is also completely different from what they are used to in Eritrea. Nevertheless, they do not feel stressed and insecure. On the contrary, they are cheerful and expectant:

“I think we’ll probably learn the language after awhile. People are also so helpful; if you say something wrong, there’s always someone who wants to help,” says mother Lebse Grma.

Lebse Grma and Brhanemeskel themselves only attended school for a few years and ran a small farm back in their homeland of Eritrea. They knew almost nothing about Sweden before they came here, but had heard a few key things: It was a good and free country with clear rules, where they could feel safe.

“The most difficult thing is probably understanding how the Swedish language works. Pronouncing words in Swedish is difficult, and then we have to deal with the alphabet, which is completely different from ours. But at least we know a few things, like how to say ‘thank you very much’ and ‘goodbye,’” says Brhanemeskel.

Both he and Lebse Grma seem to take most things in stride, and our conversation is full of laughter. Because even though they have not been here for so long, they have really come to appreciate Sweden, and not least the opportunity for their children to go to school.

“School is important for our children. Here they have freedom, they can educate themselves and have their own opinions. Our problem is that we can’t help them, because we lack the necessary skills. That’s why it’s so great that they can get homework help,” continues Lebse Grma, who had never used the internet before she came to Sweden.





” School is important for our children. Here they have freedom, they can educate themselves and have their own opinions. Our problem is that we can’t help them, because we lack the necessary skills.

Now she must everything that is required to make one’s way in Swedish society, and all in a short space of time.

“Yes, there are many forms that are difficult to fill in, and I don’t understand anything yet, so I need help with the translation. Fortunately, our eldest son can help. But in the last few months, he has had to say no to us a lot, because he has to keep up with his schoolwork. And then it’s lucky that we have the help of our mentor,” continues Lebse Grma.

***But how does it feel to have to ask your son for help with so many things?***

“Well, it still feels good. He respects us, and we understand when he is busy with school and doesn’t have time. But it’s true what you say, that he’s the adult and it’s we parents who are the children, because he’s the one who knows the language and the society. But he’s aware of that – and so are we!” says Brhanemeskel.

“And no, he’s nice, he doesn’t get angry because we don’t know things!” Lebse Grma continues, laughing.

Despite so much being new, Lebse Grma and Brhanemeskel exude a sense of fearlessness – and curiosity. They are genuinely eager to integrate into Swedish society.

“Now we’re starting to learn how to find our way to the hospital in Angered and other places. If I don’t know how, I ask. People are helpful and usually try to point me in the right direction,” says Lebse Grma.

They have also begun to explore Swedish society. Among other things, they have been to the theatre. The youngest children have started swimming lessons, and the summer is guaranteed to bring excursions to the seashore.

“In a year’s time, we’ll be able to cope on our own!” They both say. And then they laugh again.

A young boy with dark hair is holding a large, bright orange balloon over his face, partially obscuring it. He is smiling and looking up at the balloon. He is wearing a green and white long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor space.

## ” It felt like my life began again

“The feeling when I met my family at Landvetter after so many years was just indescribable. It felt like my life began again!

**Early summer winds** are gusting through Gothenburg as Omid walks along the waterfront. He is 19 and in his final year of high school. As a thirteen-year-old, Omid came to Sweden alone after the Taliban killed his uncle and threatened to kill him and his father. In Sweden, Omid lived in a foster home and had an appointed guardian who helped him with many practical things.

“But it was still difficult. For several years, I had no way to contact my family and didn’t know if they were alive or dead. I was worried about my dad; what had the Taliban done to him?”

In the end, Omid found his family. With the support of his guardian, he began the family reunification process. It would be more than two years before they could meet. But then, one day, the family was standing there at Landvetter Airport. Thus began a new phase in Omid’s life.

“That feeling can’t be described. Only someone who’s been through something similar can understand how it felt. It was like I was back in real life, like I could breathe again. My life began again! What happened then was probably the best thing you could ever experience,” says Omid.



By the time his family finally arrived, Omid hadn't seen his sisters since they were small children. Now they were thirteen and fourteen years old, respectively. Starting over was exciting, but it also meant that Omid had to take on a great deal of responsibility. After all, only he knew how things worked in Sweden.

"I care a ton about my sisters and my mother. They shouldn't feel anxious or insecure. The most important thing is for my sisters to focus on school. I'll take care of everything else, I thought."

**The early days** involved a great deal of contact with the Swedish Tax Agency, among other authorities. Omid had to help his family with things all the time, and it was hard to find time to study. So, a few months after the family arrived in Sweden, the Establishment Unit put him in touch with the SOS Children's Villages project. With the support of his mentor Emma Sköld at SOS Children's Villages, Omid was able to get help with many of the practical matters, such as accompanying his mother and siblings to the hospital. As a result, he was not forced to take as much time off from school.

Then integration educator Selma Claesson got involved. She had time to support his sisters and come up with fun things for them to do, like going out to the cinema with a bunch of girls who had all recently arrived in Sweden.

"Yeah, that was really a relief for me," Omid says.

For him, it is important to help his mother to gradually integrate into Swedish society. He has a joint bank account with his mother, and the idea is that she will learn how things work, step by step.

"The language was the worst thing for my mom. She can't read or write, so she can't even answer the phone when someone calls. So I'm the one who has to help with everything.

It's super tough to not even be able to go grocery shopping by yourself! She doesn't know how bank cards work. She's never had something like that before and doesn't know anything about pin codes. For me, it's normal, but for folks who've had a different life, everything here is new," continues Omid,



” When I got help from Emma at SOS Children's Villages Sweden, it was a huge relief for me.

who by now has become an expert in how to fill out various forms and reports:

"My mom's very grateful for all the help she gets. In Afghanistan, there was no tax office, no BankID and all those other things that are required here and that are so difficult for her to understand."

Sweden is very dear to Omid. This is his country, and it is here that he wants to live and develop:

"I like Sweden a lot and I'm grateful that I've had the chance to live here. I feel like a real person here, I can study here and don't have to work 24/7. There are so many people in the world who don't have that opportunity. Sweden's got good stuff!"

Now Omid has his sights set on the future. He has gotten a summer job in the healthcare service, and this coming autumn he will supplement some of his grades through the KOMVUX adult education programme before applying to become an assistant nurse.

"Then I want to continue and become a nurse – those are my plans!"



# What did the evaluation show?

SOS Children's Villages Sweden's efforts to support family reunification by relieving young people of some of their responsibilities are necessary work, as no other actor addresses this need. This is the conclusion of the independent evaluators who have followed the work throughout the project.

*"The evaluation clearly shows that the target group has a great need for support to facilitate the establishment process, thereby reducing personal suffering for individual families, facilitating the education of the young people, and saving money for society. ... The evaluators believe that there are several reasons to continue to develop and disseminate the method. Without this project, it is also likely that the target group would not have received this support."*

(from the evaluators' final report)

The evaluators have followed the project throughout the project period, both to support the project's learning and to provide unbiased documentation to its funding body, the AMIF. Their evaluation has consisted of various parts, including a theory of change, an interim report, a memo focusing on participants, and a final evaluation report. The final evaluation has been guided by the following questions:

- › What has been implemented in the project?
- › Have the project's efforts led to the achievement of the results and impact goals of the theory of change?
- › Are the project's results sustainable in the long term?

The evaluators have based their work on a theory of change in which they have focussed on finding the common thread between activities and expected results. The evaluation is based on supporting information developed using various methods, such as participatory observation, focus groups, individual interviews and ongoing conversations with the project management team. The project's own self-assessment is another key component. According to the evaluators themselves, this broad range of information has helped to provide a comprehensive and credible picture of the results.

In our evaluation, efforts to support



family reunification by relieving young people of some of their responsibilities are repeatedly shown to be necessary work, as no other actor addresses this need. As an employee of one of the project collaborators interviewed for the evaluation puts it, this need tends to “fall through the cracks”. The Family-Strengthening Programme thus fills a clear need for the families who come to Sweden to be reunited with an unaccompanied minor.

**According to interviewees**, the Family-Strengthening Programme also fills a need for which the public sector does not take responsibility and for which there are no guidelines. In several municipalities, there is no actor tasked with providing concrete support to reunified families, and it thus falls to their younger members to handle practical matters, such as contact with authorities. The project’s ambition has also been for the interventions to contribute to changes that create long-term sustainability. However, it is too early to see any structural changes within the relevant authorities.

One important reason – despite a great need for this kind of support and a family-strengthening method that works well – is that this type of effort currently falls beyond the scope of the administrators’ statutory work. At the same time, there are currently no resources for the work, the evaluators note.

The project has provided authorities with more knowledge about the target group and created better conditions for coordination that benefits the target group. However, when it comes to contributing to the long-term sustainability of the method, other and more structural measures will be needed. For example, sustainability is greatly affected by the possibility of obtaining the funding that will make it possible to continue working with the programme.

The evaluation points to clear shortcomings in the reception of the reunited families. One of these is the housing issue. There is great frustration among the project staff about housing matters. New arrivals often end up in messy situations when they move to other municipalities – for example, perhaps the new municipality refuses to cover the full cost of their rent. This can have

major consequences for their lives.

At the same time, the evaluation shows that upon discharge from the programme, the number of young people who handle certain tasks for their families has decreased very little. One interpretation may be that during the project period, the mentors took care of these tasks for the family, but the young people must now take over if their parents are not yet ready to handle them. Another possible interpretation could be that the parent and child do the tasks together, as suggested by some interviewees.

Differences between women and men have not been discernible in the self-assessment results. However, women often have a lower level of education and fewer experiences from gainful employment. This was one reason why families were registered in the system under the woman’s name, as the woman’s needs were often greater than those of the man in the family.

Among other things, the evaluators make the following conclusions:

- › SOS Children’s Villages’ efforts to support family reunification by relieving young people of some of their responsibilities are necessary work, as no other actor addresses this need.
- › There is often a lack of a holistic view of the parents, their situation and needs, and there is a lack of coordination between different efforts.
- › Parents usually make progress in the right direction. Still, some of them have a long way to go. This makes it difficult to assess exactly to what extent the support helps them in the long term.
- › The project has a child rights perspective and is based on a clear need among members of the target group. It is thus highly relevant. Many aspects of the project work well, and many lessons have been learned that can be put to good use in the future.

*The evaluation was made by Roger Orwén/ Orwén Konsulting and Eva Sennemark/ Contextio Ethnographic. The evaluation report will be available on SOS Children’s Villages’ website <https://sos-barnbyar.se>.*

# Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the experiences gained during the programme and through the independent evaluation, a number of conclusions have been made, along with recommendations for the authorities and others working with the target group.

## Conclusions from the work

### Great interest in learning more and improving the activities

Representatives of municipalities, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, and others have participated in discussions and roundtable discussions during the project. Among those who have participated, there is a great interest in helping to find solutions to the identified problems. This is positive, as it provides an important basis for solving the problems identified by the project.

### Families have been strengthened – mentors are beneficial

Despite the problems and challenges it has encountered, the project has clearly shown that it has contributed to strengthening families in their establishment in society. This shows that the model that has emerged, in which families have received support from family mentors, has been truly beneficial.

### The Convention on the Rights of the Child is often disregarded

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is enshrined in Swedish law. This means that the best interests of the child must be taken into account when making decisions. Despite this, we often see that the Convention on the Rights of the Child has not been followed, or

that the child rights perspective has not been taken into account, when municipalities and other authorities have made their decisions.

### A major lack of coordination between authorities

There is often no holistic view of the parents, their situation and needs, and there is a great lack of coordination between various intervention efforts. This silo approach means that unnecessary time is spent on the wrong things and that new problems arise when authorities have failed to coordinate their activities. The family mentors help parents with these issues and with other aspects, thus reducing obstacles to receiving financial support and accessing social services.

### Establishment is a long-term effort

Family reunification after years spent apart is often a complicated process. The problems and gaps identified by the AMIF project demand long-term solutions in which families receive support to gradually grow roots in Swedish society.

### Practical issues are often the most difficult

The issue of alienation and the problems faced by many new arrivals to Swedish society is a perennial “hot topic”. At the same time, the great challenge for families is how to solve these problems in their everyday lives. It is therefore important to focus on practical matters that can truly facilitate the establishment process. This has also been the main focus of the AMIF project.

### Lack of housing – many fall between the cracks

Perhaps the greatest challenge for all newly arrived families is the housing issue. There are also numerous examples of how families have been bounced between various municipalities and have been the ones to pay

” The language, and that everything is new. I couldn’t read or write and didn’t understand where I would go to school. We’ve been staying in hostels for a long time, so things haven’t been good.





the price when coordination failed, or when different municipalities and administrators provided conflicting information about contracts and rent levels. This has proven to have severe consequences for the opportunities of already vulnerable families.

### **The digital divide makes it more difficult**

Sweden is a digitalised society in which most services require access to computers, the BankID digital identification system, and smartphones. For those who have lived in a completely different type of society and who may not even be able to read and write in their own language, the digital divide becomes an abyss.

### **Rampant noncompliance with the Administrative Procedure Act**

The Administrative Procedure Act clearly describes how contact between individuals and authorities should take place and states that people should receive the help necessary to preserve their interests. The insights gained from the project show that this frequently does not happen, often due to a lack of time or as a result of political decisions, not least in the so-called "Trelleborg Model" in which part of the decision-making process has become automated. When case management is automated, many people cannot cope with the technicalities.

### **It has to be fun, too!**

It is easy to focus solely on problems and how they should be solved. But to gain a foothold in Swedish society, people also need to have fun. People must laugh together, children must get the chance to participate in leisure activities, and families must get to discover Swedish culture through everything from bowling to museum visits. Research shows that this increases the ability of families to cope with the difficult life situations they often face.

## **Recommendations**

The following are some of the recommendations that have emerged through the work. They are primarily aimed at Swedish authorities.

- > The Convention on the Rights of the Child must be taken into account in all cases where children are affected.
- > The work to support the families striving to establish themselves must be long-term. Above all, it must focus on helping the family handle practical issues tied to their establishment.
- > Authorities need to improve the working methods they use to ensure that an interpreter is provided in cases where it is required, as this is a right.
- > There is a need for better coordination and joint responsibility between municipalities, so that families do not risk being "dumped" when one municipality makes decisions about, e.g., housing for which another municipality subsequently does not want to take responsibility.
- > When planning residential areas, more attention should be paid to the target group.
- > Swedish society needs to become better at using available coordination resources to better coordinate their support efforts.
- > Municipalities must become better at complying with the Administrative Procedure Act: In all communication with people who have a lack of knowledge of Swedish, communication should take place both in writing (via letter or text message) and orally, to minimise the risk of misunderstandings. The automation of case management must also be adapted to the individual.
- > When conveying decisions of great consequence, the municipality's administrators must ensure that the information is understandable and that officials are available for questions and follow-up. From a rights perspective, this is a "must".
- > There must be proportionality between minor mistakes (such as a missed meeting) and their financial and social consequences.

# What goals were achieved?

The overall objective of the project has been a more effective integration of third-country nationals\* into Swedish society.

**The achievement** of this objective was measured, among other things, by examining how many young people in the participating families state that they take less responsibility for the family's needs, compared to the base measurement. Here, practical matters are paramount and include ensuring that parents are able to pay bills and contact a bank, can take public transport, and know how to apply for a job.

The evaluations conducted show that the parents have made progress in a number of areas, improving the families' conditions for establishing themselves. The focus has always been on practical and concrete aspects of everyday life, such as how to obtain and use a BankID.

The results also show that young people have been relieved of a great deal of responsibility during the project period. Upon discharge from the programme, however, there is still a relatively small percentage of parents who pay bills, apply for housing, and handle other similar tasks themselves. A possible interpretation could be that the parent and child do the tasks together, as suggested by some interviewees.

It is also unclear to what extent cultural patterns or family culture govern the distribution of tasks within the family, and this probably differs between families. Therefore, it is important to also apply an intersectional perspective when analysing the results.

Another important project goal has been

to help families to navigate Swedish society. This means being able to pay bills, contact the bank, take public transport, and look for work, as well as knowing how to contact authorities about various matters. Perhaps most importantly, it means being able to apply for housing.

At the time of discharge, almost all families were registered with the Boplat housing agency in Gothenburg, listed at a health centre, and have had dental appointments (for adults and children) and the like. Upon discharge from the programme, 62 percent also state that they are familiar with 1177.

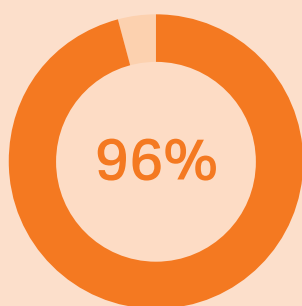
**In some areas**, such as their ability to find their way around the city via public transport and contact the healthcare service, parents have taken great strides. By the time they were discharged from the project, around two-thirds of parents said that they could cope with these tasks themselves. At the same time, the table indicates a persistent lack of knowledge and that the majority of parents cannot cope with certain everyday activities (such as paying bills, contact with the authorities, etc.) on their own.

One of the project goals has been to increase parents' chances of getting a job (employability). An indicator of how far the parents have come in this regard has been whether they have increased knowledge of what a CV is and how it can be written, what the Swedish Public Employment Service is and what services it offers, how to apply for a

**Tabel 1: Do you know what you (parent) should do to...**

Indicator	Proportion YES at enrollment	Proportion YES at discharge	Movement at group level
Pay bills?	8%	27%	19%
Manage banking matters? (obtain and use a BankID, account etc)	8%	23%	15%
Apply for financial support?	4%	23%	19%
Find your way via public transport?	26%	67%	41%
Have contact with authorities?	4%	19%	15%
Have contact with healthcare?	4%	62%	58%

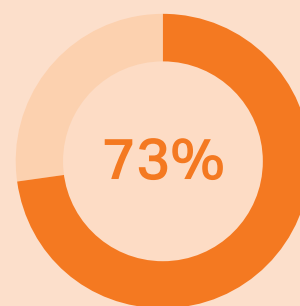




96% of parents respond that they feel more secure in their parental role upon completing the programme.



Through SOS Children's Villages, 100% of parents have gotten in touch with another actor who offers measures and services.



Upon completing the programme, 73% of parents have a finished CV or greater knowledge of how a CV can be used.

job, and whether they are participating in an establishment program.

Since most participants cannot read or write and often lack experience of working outside the home, the road to employability is a long one. But although many parents do not have experience with paid work, they have a wealth of informal knowledge and experience, for example of running a farm or sewing to order. The project staff has therefore been on several work-related study visits to learn more about work-related internships. They have received training in the Supported Employment method and plan to implement SE in future family-strengthening activities.

Another important project goal has been for parents to become more secure in their roles and strengthen their self-esteem, e.g., by expanding their networks through participation in the project's group activities. 96 percent of parents also respond that after completing the programme, they feel more secure in their parental role and are now better able to handle, e.g., banking or contact with the authorities.

Of the parents interviewed, the interviews show some progress in knowledge of how to handle aspects of everyday life, which can improve their self-esteem and sense of security. However, many parents remain highly dependent on the young person with whom they have been reunited and/or their other children.

Nonetheless, the majority of parents seem to handle the contact with their children's school/preschool themselves. This can be interpreted as an indication that they feel more secure in their parental roles.

The project has clearly revealed the shortcomings in the coordination of the authorities' support for families. Here, efforts have therefore focused on how the coordination of authorities' services/ interventions aimed at parents can be

improved, among other things by increasing knowledge of where the shortcomings exist and by conducting meetings with external actors. Here, the project has served as a bridge between authorities, with each mentors acting as the spider in the family's web and thus also coordinating the information passing between different authorities. Another important project goal has been to increase the knowledge of SOS Children's Villages and Swedish authorities about possible differences in needs between women and men.

The evaluation points to clear shortcomings in the reception of the reunited families. Among these are housing issues. There is great frustration among the project staff about housing matters. New arrivals often end up in messy situations when they move to other municipalities – for example, perhaps the new municipality refuses to cover the full cost of their rent. This can have major consequences for their lives.

Another shortcoming is that newly arrived immigrants, including reunited families, rarely use existing public services. For example, they do not visit the Information Office at the City of Gothenburg's Integration Centre or the Citizens' Office. The interviews indicate that few of them are aware that they can get help paying bills, translating letters, etc. Another reason is that they don't know how to get to the offices or where the services are available.

The lack of interpreters at hospital visits who help explain an illness and ensure that parents receive the right care is another of the shortcomings that have been highlighted. When new arrivals are deprived of an interpreter, it is difficult to describe what the problem is. Everyone in Sweden has the right to receive information in a language and in a way that the recipient can understand. Conveying information without ensuring that the recipient has understood it is a violation of that person's rights.



## Who takes responsibility: Civil society or the Swedish state?

The Family-Strengthening Programme has revealed major shortcomings and gaps between different authorities. But is it really the job of civil society to “step in” where the state fails?

And what happens if an organisation becomes too dependent on a municipality? Will the organisation still dare to sound the alarm about problems and inaccuracies?

**It is often said** that civil society has two roles: to influence society and to conduct activities. Often these two roles are combined, for example, in the sports movement. There are also examples of when civil society provides services that would otherwise have been a societal responsibility, for example by running shelters for women or the unhoused. The AMIF project, on the other hand, is not financed by municipalities or by the Swedish state, but by project money from the EU.

Perhaps civil society could also be seen

as a natural player in the social field, where its services are “purchased” in the same way as is currently done from private actors? Such an arrangement would bypass the discussion about profits in welfare, since the activities of civil society are not-for-profit.

**Erik Sjöstrand** is Operations Manager at the umbrella organisation Ideell Arena. He highlights the differences between how civil society and the Swedish state organise their activities:

“Civil society often has a more holistic



”Civil society often has a more holistic view of the individual than authorities do, and many times we encounter a very siloed mindset among authorities.

view of the individual than authorities do, and many times we encounter a very siloed mindset among authorities,” he says.

**In civil society**, people often talk about two types of organisations. Those that “get things done” (the implementers) and those that focus on advocacy (the influencers). When an organisation takes on the role of an implementer, it risks being forced to adapt to the municipal activities in general. The organisation may also no longer feel that it can influence public opinion and drive change, as it has become part of the public sector.

“As an organisation, you must always be prepared to handle the demands that funding body may make and whether they’re compatible with the ideals of the organisation. In some contracts, problems can arise if, for example, there are straight-up bans on conducting advocacy on an issue that organisation has a mission to address,” Erik Sjöstrand continues.

Ola Segnestam Larsson is a professor at Marie Cederschiöld University and has conducted extensive research on the role of civil society. He believes that need not be a

contradiction between being an influencer and a implementer:

“Civil society can be a vanguard that takes the lead and shows the public sector how something can be implemented better than it is today. A good example of this is when RFSU shows how you can run clinics differently. Civil society can thus be an important voice for those who aren’t part of the vast majority in our society.”

**Historically speaking**, SOS Children’s Villages has not conducted activities in Sweden. For the organisation, the family reunification work here has raised serious questions about what role SOS Children’s Villages should play in the future:

“Our sister organisations in Finland, for example, have been working with extensive service activities for a long time, whereas here in Sweden we are just starting to do this. At the same time, I see no risk for us to become dependent. We’re stable financially and have strong, private funding,” says Petra Nyberg, Director of Programme Development at SOS Children’s Villages in Sweden.



## "We're on the side of the children"

**With the experiences gained through the Family-Strengthening Programme, SOS Children's Villages Sweden will develop its work to reach more children and families who need help.**

**As the evaluation** has shown, SOS Children's Villages Sweden's family-strengthening efforts in the AMIF project fill an important gap in Swedish society's support for new arrivals. All the partners interviewed express a desire to continue their collaboration with SOS Children's Villages.

"The most important conclusion is that we really fill a need – we're needed! At the same time, we've learned an incredible amount through the project and are now taking that knowledge with us as we continue to develop SOS Children's Villages' work here in Sweden," says Lady-France Mulumba, Operations Manager for

the Family-Strengthening Programme in Gothenburg.

Unlike municipal activities, which are politically controlled, SOS Children's Villages can act independently in its support for families and their children. Here, the mentors who worked with the families in the AMIF project have played an important role:

"Being a mentor is completely different from being a social worker. Helping the families is the mentors' mission, and we aren't constricted by playing the role of an authority. We are a rights organisation and have knowledge and experience of working with children's rights. As part of civil society,

” Being a mentor is completely different from being a social worker. Helping the families is the mentors’ mission, and we aren’t constricted by playing the role of an authority.

we can highlight what we see as errors and shortcomings – we’re simply on the side of the children and their families!” continues Lady-France Mulumba.

**SOS Children’s Villages** has now submitted an application to continue developing this work within the framework of a new, AMIF-funded project. Among other things, the focus is on building upon the method that has already been developed and adapting the new project based on the lessons learned through its predecessor. The target group will also be broader, with a focus on reunited families, quota refugees and refugees from Ukraine.

In parallel with this, the overall family-strengthening work is also being further developed within the framework of SOS Children’s Villages’ regular programme activities in Sweden.

“Family-strengthening efforts are also needed in Sweden, and we intend to work together with the municipalities in Västra Götaland County and Stockholm County. Here, we can contribute our expertise in working to protect the best interests of the children and supporting families at risk of breaking up. We intend to develop this work based on the lessons we learned from the AMIF project, our international engagement, and the experiences we have gleaned from other programmes around the world,” says Lady-France Mulumba.

SOS Children’s Villages conducts family-strengthening program activities all over the world and is one of the world’s largest children’s rights organisations. Therefore, it is also an obvious step to develop the

family-strengthening work in Sweden. The goal is to be able to offer family-strengthening efforts in 50 municipalities by 2030. Moving forward, family-strengthening efforts may also be regarded in a larger context, wherein civil society is given an increasingly important role as the municipalities’ finances deteriorate.

“The model we have developed is also well-suited for working with other groups, such as families with substance abuse problems or where children are at risk of suffering from mental illness or ending up in a life of crime. Many families need support in everyday life. As an organisation, we can work together with the families to prevent children from being harmed. Research shows that it is generally good for children to grow up with their biological parents, but that not all parents may have the capacity to fulfil their parental role, in which case society needs to take responsibility. But as long as we can avoid family fragmentation, our organisation wants to be involved in equipping the families who need support,” Lady-France Mulumba continues.





# Working long-term and seeing the big picture – that's how we make a difference

The AMIF project has clearly shown that it is crucial for newly arrived families that we adopt a more long-term mentality and look at the big picture. Through the Family-Strengthening Programme, we can support the families while helping municipalities and others to become better at giving children and adults the support to which they are entitled," writes Anna Ernestam, Secretary General of SOS Children's Villages Sweden.

Since 1949, SOS Children's Villages has worked to support children and young people in over 130 countries around the world. Here in Sweden, we have been around since 1972, and our family-strengthening efforts are a central part of SOS Children's Villages' global work.

The AMIF project started when we discovered that young people had to take on a great deal of responsibility for families that had come to Sweden to be reunited with them, while at the same time they had to cope with their studies. It also became clear that information from Swedish society is often provided digitally and that understanding how our authorities work isn't easy when you don't know the language or understand the structures. The families who are need to establish themselves in Sweden also lack the networks that those of us who grew up here have. They don't know how to seek out information and often need help with contact with the authorities.

**The project has** been an important learning process for us, one in which we, together with the young people and their families, have identified the problems and shortcomings in our society's support system. At the same time, we have seen what opportunities there are to make a difference.

One conclusion we have drawn is that we need to take a long-term approach to the support required for families to be able to establish themselves and for young people to be able to focus on their studies. We also see how important it is to apply a holistic perspective with regard to needs

and solutions – this enables us to best support the families we help. At the same time, we are not supposed to take over the responsibilities of the authorities. Still, through the experiences we have gained, we can serve as a method support for municipalities and other authorities.

Powered by our experiences, we hope to exercise influence, draw attention to the problems, and push for change. We can do this through reports, posts and podcasts that we share on social media, while simultaneously collaborating with researchers and other actors in civil society.

Our family-strengthening efforts have been rewarding for our organisation, as we have felt that our activities have been concrete, meaningful, and appreciated by the families we have served. We take great pride in that. We are now bringing our experiences from the AMIF programme along with us as we continue to develop SOS Children's Villages' operations in Sweden. Above all, we must continue to work constructively with municipalities and other authorities so that we can all become better at supporting the families who are in the process of

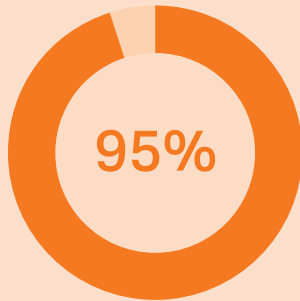
establishing themselves in Sweden.

That's how we can make a difference.

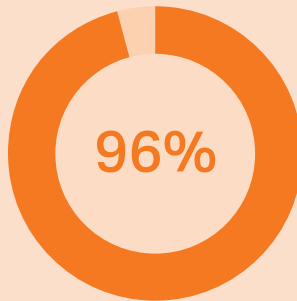


Anna Ernestam  
Secretary General  
SOS Children's  
Villages Sweden

# More results



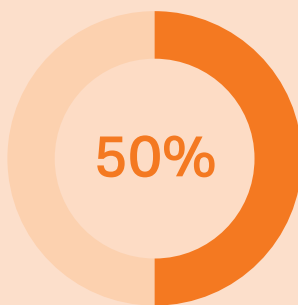
95% of all set goals in the individual family development plans have been achieved.



96% of parents respond that they feel more established in Swedish society upon completing the programme.



100% of parents answer "Yes, absolutely" or "Yes, I largely agree" when asked if they feel that their family mentor has been a support.



50% more families are in the housing queue by the time they are discharged from the programme, compared to when they enrolled.

## **Can you (parent) manage your everyday life better now than you could a year ago?**

23 out of 26 answer "Yes, absolutely" or "Yes, I largely agree". The other two answer "No, not so much", and one declined to answer because they felt they had not spend enough time in the programme to respond.

## **Know that there are special rights for children in Sweden (parent):**

A progression (increase) of 31% has occurred from enrolment to completion.

## **Know about 1177 (parent):**

A progression (increase) of 62% has occurred from enrolment to completion.

## **Know how to (parent) find your way around the city when you need to take public transport:**

A progression (increase) of 41% has occurred from enrolment to completion.

” Since I enrolled in SFI courses and started at SOS Children's Villages, I've learned the language and so much about the society. I feel that I cope much better now and am starting to adapt to Swedish society.

” I can't compare it to anything else, the help I've received from you! No one else has helped me as much as you have!

” I wanted to live in a nice and free country.  
The kids would go to school and so would  
I. We wanted to be together as a family  
and have a normal and quiet life.



**SOS  
BARNBYAR**



**EUROPEAN UNION**  
Asylum, Migration  
and Integration Fund

We promote the opportunities of migration by running a project co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

**Family reunification  
support**

SOS Children's Villages