

**Custody and placement in an SOS Children's Village
– the child, parent, worker and welfare authority perspective**

**The many faces of placement in an
SOS Children's Village**

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Custody Crisis project encourages parents to get together

In spring 1998 the SOS Children's Villages Association launched a three-year Custody Crisis project aiming to establish constructive ways of bringing the parents of children placed in an SOS Children's Village, other relatives and Village workers together. The project is financed by the Finnish Slot Machine Association (RAY).

The SOS Children's Villages are intended for children taken into custody and estimated as being in need of long-term care outside their own families. Placement in a Children's Village is usually preceded by many experiments with various forms of support. The number of involuntary custody cases tends to be exceptionally high in Children's Village placements. There are at the moment 155 children in the Finnish SOS Children's Villages. Of these, 53 per cent were taken into care against their parents' wishes, as against only just over 10 per cent of all the annual custody cases.

Enforced custody often entails such difficult dealings with the children's parents that it is, in the estimate of the welfare authorities, impossible for the foster home to cope with them. One of the reasons for placing a child in an SOS Children's Village is that the Village parents have other members of staff to help and support them and share the responsibility.

The objective of placement in an SOS Children's Village is to give the child a sense of permanence, security and continuity. The children should be given plenty of time to bond with their foster parents, new home and community – without underestimating the importance of the natural parents in the children's lives. Children who have a working relationship with their own parents and “permission” to enter the Children's Village do best in a placement. If, by contrast, the placement is overshadowed by continual arguments and court cases, the child has difficulty settling down in the SOS Children's Village and benefiting from all it has to offer. How well the parents and Children's Villages succeed in working as a team is therefore of vital significance to the child and the placement.

Establishing good relations with the children's parents is a major challenge to which the Children's Villages Association and the Children's Villages are anxious to respond. One constant aim is to establish increasingly constructive working relationships.

Opinion surveys provide basis for developing operations

In order to establish new modes of collaboration, we sought the opinions of the parents of children in care, the staff of our SOS Children's Villages and the children themselves. The survey contained questions about the experiences each had of the process of taking into custody and placement in an SOS Children's Village. We also asked people to state their views on child-parent communications and on factors contributing to a successful relationship.

The survey addressed to municipal social workers contained questions about such things as the therapy and other services provided by the local authorities for parents of children taken into care. It also analysed social workers' expectations and hopes for worker-parent relations when a child is placed in an SOS Children's Village. All the surveys were written and 27 parents or 32 per cent replied. Replies to the staff questionnaire were received from 51 workers, representing 64 per cent of the staff of the Children's Villages. Eighty-seven (81%) of the children and youngsters aged 9—22 living in a Children's Village at the time replied to their questionnaire.

The municipality survey was sent to 44 authorities, i.e. all the authorities that had a child placed in an SOS Children's Village at the time. Replies were received from 26, making a response of 59 per cent.

The parent survey was carried out in summer 1998, the staff survey in autumn 1998, the child survey in spring 1999 and the authority survey in winter 2000.

Parents' attitude to custody and the SOS Children's Village more favourable with time

More than half the parents who answered the questionnaire viewed the custody of their child favourably at the time of the survey and only one third unfavourably, even though the majority of them had been against their child being taken into care at the time.

Only five parents (19%) had been in favour of custody at the time; in other words, they had been aware of their own situation and difficulty of looking after their child(ren).

The parents had, almost without exception, felt utterly crushed by having their child taken into care and found it hard to believe. They had been shocked, angered and stunned:

"I cried for months.

I was furious at having my child taken into care. I felt it was just some old biddy from the welfare throwing her weight about.

I was angry, disappointed and I felt I'd been conned.

It came as a complete shock, because we were having an afternoon nap and the door was locked."

A good half (56%) of the parents had had their child(ren) taken into care more than five years ago; the remainder not more than four years ago.

The parents' attitude to their child(ren) being in an SOS Children's Village was more favourable than their attitude to their child(ren) being taken into care. At the time, about half of the parents had approved of having their child placed in a Children's Village. At the time of the enquiry, 3/4 of the parents were favourably disposed to the Children's Village. Only four parents were completely opposed to the placement. These parents were dissatisfied with their opportunities for remaining in contact with their child, as with the other contacts with the Children's Village workers.

Judging from the survey, the following were among the reasons why parents had become more favourably disposed to the custody and the placement in a Children's Village:

- the child was happy in the SOS Children's Village
- the child was well and getting on in life
- the Children's Village had a wide range of recreational facilities
- siblings were able to grow up together
- the parents had a good relationship with the Children's Village mother or parents.

"I'm glad for my children. They've made a success of their lives. Right now I'm glad they were taken into care, because I know they've got a good family and they're OK.

It was the only right solution at that time (when the children were taken into care). Just being assigned a counsellor or something like that wouldn't have been any help at all."

More than half the children felt it had been right to take them into care

More than half the children (55%) felt that being taken into care had been right for them. These children had a clear view of why the authorities had acted as they did; their parents had not been capable of looking after them and life at home was not good. In their replies the children reported that their parents drank, were violent and incapable of looking after them:

“My mother and father drank, took drugs and committed crimes. It was difficult for me with my mother and father. They didn’t have the energy to look after me.”

According to 12 children (14%), they had either been wrongly taken into custody or the way in which it was carried out had been wrong. Their parents should, they felt, have had a chance to “really” try, or their parents had been “duped”. The children also felt there was cause for criticism in the way the authorities acted. One child, for example, had been taken to a children’s home without being given a chance to say goodbye to his parents:

“They didn’t tell me where we were going. They just fetched me from school and put me in a taxi. I call that kidnapping. Not until we got there did I hear I was to stay there.”

About one child in three had mixed feelings about being taken into care and could not say whether it had been right or wrong.

A few of the children were vague about the significance of and reason for being taken into care. They reckoned it had been because their parents smoked, the Village Director had ordered it, they got through too many nappies or ate too much at home, or some other such reason. A quarter of the children claimed they had never spoken to a single adult about being taken into custody. The reason was either that they were unwilling to discuss things that distressed them, or that no adult had ever asked their opinion about being taken into care. The majority of the children had, however, discussed the matter with adults, most of them with the Children's Village mother or father. They felt these discussions had been important and a relief.

“It’s not like an institution”

Over 80 per cent of the children felt very or fairly at home in the Children's Village. Only three stated they did not like being there at all. The thing they liked most about life in the Children's Village was the home-like atmosphere and the Children's Village mother as the creator of this atmosphere. They also mentioned security, leading a regular life, friends, the wide range of activities, and the opportunities to see their own parents.

“The fact that it’s not like an institution is due almost solely to one person.

I like living here because it’s just like a home.

Security, a caring, loving mother, doing things together.

Well, it’s home, innit. You don’t come home drunk. You feel safe.

You can do your own thing, you can bring friends home or go round to their place. And you can get help with your homework if you need it.

I can see my parents.”

The children and youngsters criticised the rules of the SOS Children's Village relating to both the individual houses and the village as a whole. As an example they mentioned the time they had to be home in the evening, which they felt was too strict. The rules were criticised by about a third of the respondents. Some complained that they did not see their parents enough, or that they did not receive enough news of them.

The children were also asked where they hoped they would be living in two years' time. About half of those under the age of 15 said they would like to continue living in the Children's Village, with the same Children's Village parents and siblings. About a third hoped to have moved back with their natural parents. The remainder either hoped to move into an apartment of their own or they did not know where they wanted to live. About 90 per cent of the over-15s hoped to be living in an apartment of their own in two years' time.

Insufficient support for parents

More than half (59%) the parents had received outside assistance with difficult questions of custody and placement, the majority of them from friends and relatives and a third from the welfare office. But only two parents had received support from a family guidance clinic or mental health office.

Nearly half the parents had received no support or assistance whatsoever; either they did not want it or they had not received it despite requesting it.

The parents' replies reflected a marked desire for assistance from the authorities. Some wanted the authorities to listen and console, others "concrete action". *"I wanted a professional to help me because I had been through so much in life already. The children's dad died, no one had time for me though I certainly needed help. I wanted to know what was going to happen to the children, when I would be able to see them, about money, and who was in the family."* One mother answered the question about what consoled parents best when their child was taken into care: *"The thing that helps most of all is having someone to listen to you, someone who doesn't accuse you or pass judgement. It's also important for the natural parents not to get forgotten, to phone and write. I'm so pleased that the Children's Village mother has talked to my children about the many reasons that led to their being taken into care – life just seemed to get on the wrong track."*

The municipalities can offer virtually no special services such as discussion groups or crisis therapy for the parents of children taken into care. Only two of the municipalities that answered the questionnaire mentioned discussion groups for the parents of children taken into care. Two thirds of the municipalities admitted that there was insufficient support for these parents. More than half (54%) the municipalities nevertheless offered parents services already in active use such as those of the family guidance clinic, mental health office and the clinic for alcoholics. Many of the respondents further mentioned that a social worker from the welfare office helps parents by talking to them. More than a third of the municipalities stated that parents are not actively offered any support or assistance when their children are taken into care.

Many of the social workers felt the problem was not only the absence of special services but also that few parents are capable of using the assistance offered. *"Very few are capable of it; often they just cannot cope."* The social workers felt that peer groups and crisis therapy would help parents most of all in the crisis caused by having their children taken into care. More support of this kind is needed. The municipalities also looked to NGOs for help in organising discussion groups for parents.

Own and Children's Village mother the child's most significant adults

All the children had at least one adult who meant a lot to them. Most of the children had several such adults. Both their own and the Children's Village mother were important to about 70 per cent of the children. The biological father and Children's Village father (in Village homes that had a father) were important to about 60 per cent of the children.

Many of the children described their own parents and their significance by simply calling them their "real" parents. The fact that their parents cared for them and remained in contact meant a lot to the children, likewise the parents' attitude to the child living in the SOS Children's Village.

*"They're my parents in my heart, and they're the ones I really care about.
They have a sense of humour and they're dear to me. They approve of my living here.
It's great that they remember my birthday.
That they realise I'm doing fine here and Mum comes to see me.
That my Mum loves me."*

The following are some of the comments reflecting the importance of the Children's Village mother and father:

*"She looks after me and loves me and is a mother!!!
I can tell her anything that's troubling me. And there's someone who loves me and cares for me.
The Children's Village mother is ever so kind and nice and helpful. If ever I have a problem, she helps me and she can be a really loving mother.
That they look after me so well and they comfort me a lot."*

The thing that disturbed the children most in their own parents was their parents' drinking. The children also complained that they did not see their parents enough and that their parents did not keep their promises. Naturally it was difficult for the children to accept that they had been taken into care because their parents were unable to look after them. Other grievances were their parents' divorce, the fact that their parents lived so far away, their parents' negative attitude to the Children's Village and the death of a parent.

*"They don't phone or write to me, and then they complain I don't call them. They could call me if they wanted to.
They didn't look after me as they ought to have done.
They promise to come and then they don't.
They drink and then Dad beats Mum."*

The Children's Village parents were criticised most by the children for being too strict, for losing their temper too easily and for not listening to what the children have to say.

*"There's rules everywhere. We're not allowed to be out for long.
They shout at me if I'm late home. Or if I tread on the hall mat with muddy shoes.
They don't always listen... They sometimes make promises and then don't keep them...
Sometimes they're so stubborn. I feel they're ordering every single thing I do."*

One of the fundamental principles of Children's Village work is to ensure every child at least one close, significant human relationship in the village. For some reason this target had not been achieved for a quarter of the children, who did not mention any adult in the SOS Children's Village as being important to them. There were many adolescent boys in this group. Yet more than half of these children said they liked living in the Children's Village a lot or quite a lot.

Favourable contacts support children's development

Almost all the children saw at least one of their parents. Only four stated that they saw neither. 84 per cent (73) saw their mother, 67 per cent (58) their father and 59 per cent (49) both parents. Almost all the children saw other relatives, the majority their grandparents, in addition to their parents.

Just under half the children said they saw their mother sufficiently and approximately as many too seldom. One third said they saw their father sufficiently often and a good one third too seldom. Just on one third never saw their father.

The children were fairly satisfied with the way their opinions were sought in arranging meetings with relatives. 78 per cent (68) felt they had had a good or fairly good chance of influencing these meetings; 16 respondents felt their opinions had been heard poorly or not at all.

Slightly more than half the children's parents (15) were either extremely or fairly satisfied with the contact arrangements, just under half dissatisfied. The main criticisms of those who were dissatisfied were that the meetings were too few and far between and too short. The parents also complained that they could not phone their children whenever they felt like it or that the children spent Christmas, for example, in the SOS Children's Village. Even some of the satisfied parents wished the SOS Children's Village would be more active in contacting them *"instead of always waiting for us to take the initiative"*.

Most of the Children's Village workers considered that contact with relatives supported the children's growth and development. The favourable effect of contacts was particularly noticeable when the parents approved of the placement and gave the child "permission" to live in the Children's Village. It is then easy to discuss things with the parents, to agree on an upbringing policy and to plan the child's education and future together.

The staff felt that contacts support the child's growth and development because

- they help the child to build a basis for his/her life, to make him/her aware of his/her own roots and to realise his/her situation
- the child learns at meetings about his/her parents, how they are faring and their situation, and this has a pacifying effect.

A quarter of the staff felt that contacts could also hinder the growth and development of the child. Meetings *"bring out unpleasant things that prevent the child from leading a normal childhood"*, as one respondent put it.

Contact may hinder the growth and development of the child if

- the parents prevent the child from settling in the Children's Village because they cannot accept the custody and placement, or
- the parents give the child promises about coming home that cannot be kept.

It is extremely difficult for the child if the parents do not want him/her to settle in the Children's Village and bond with the Children's Village parents. The children wish adults could discuss things calmly among themselves without arguing. One child said in his reply that *"the relationship between my own and my Children's Village parents does not need to be particularly warm, so long as the adults can work together as a team"*.

More than 70 per cent (64) of the children reckoned their own and the Children's Village parents got on at least fairly well together. Only 15 per cent (13) rated the relationship as poor

or reckoned the adults could not get along together at all. Children have many ways of assessing the relationships between their “two sets of parents”. They “sense the atmosphere”, observe people’s expressions and gestures and catch the tone of conversations.

“My Children's Village mother is always cheerful when she’s talking to them. I can tell; the looks and behaviour after their visit. It’s easy to see from the way they behave to one another.”

Meetings on the children’s terms

The views of the various parties concerned on successful meetings and contacts did not differ very much. The child-parent meetings are most successful when they have been arranged beforehand and take place in a calm atmosphere, the adults respect one another, there are no arguments and the child can be the focus of attention. The children enjoy a successful meeting. *“They gain approval for being in the Children's Village, and life seems normal,”* is how one Children's Village mother described a successful meeting. When there is no conflict, the mood of the meeting is relaxed and the adults can discuss both issues connected with the child and general matters.

The children value a relaxed meeting without any “scenes”. In their own words:

“Meetings are nice when they’re sober and can talk sensibly. No arguing, you can talk, be alone together. Meetings without a lot of arguing and my parents listen to what I have to say. Fun, because it’s great to see my parents.”

For some children it seemed to be enough just to see their parents and chat to them: *“Just seeing them and sitting on their knee”* or *“Just seeing Mum and Dad.”* Some of the children would like to do more with their parents, not just *“sit and chat”*.

In problem situations both the child and the parents may feel tense, distressed and even afraid. This puts the child in a situation where he or she tries to act as mediator between two sets of significant adults. He or she tries to please both sets of parents and expresses his/her feelings lightly for fear of offending either party.

According to the workers, meetings are harmful to children if

- there is an element of accusation at the meeting – by either the workers or the parents
- they arouse conflicting loyalties
- the parents make promises they cannot keep
- feelings get out of hand
- the meetings are only chance ones
- the parents do not give the child “permission” to be in the Children's Village.

Most of the parents said they had had no experience of harmful meetings. Some did, however, point out that the adults could, by their own behaviour, make a meeting fail. *“If I were drunk, I’m sure, or if I failed to keep my word.”* Some parents felt the Children's Village staff should not be present at meetings. *“It’s not a good idea for the Children's Village mother to be present at these times off, because it means the children can’t be themselves.”*

Two thirds of the children felt meeting their parents was never a bore. The remainder said the meetings were sometimes a bore. It was worst when the parents began arguing with each other: *“Sometimes when they’re quarrelling they’re so, so stupid,”* or if the parents turn up drunk or fail to turn up at all as promised.

Children like most of all to meet in their parents' home

Most of all the children said they liked meeting their parents in their own home, and they would usually choose this as the place to meet both their mother and their father. They particularly wanted to meet their mother in her own home; 40 per cent (35) of the children gave no alternative choice of place to meet their mother. The corresponding figures for fathers were 28 per cent and 24 children.

The next most popular place was the Children's Village house, chosen by about a quarter of the children. Yet only 6 per cent (5) of the children gave this as the only alternative for meeting their mother and 15 per cent (13) their father. A fifth of the children said the place did not matter. *"The main thing is simply seeing Mum and Dad."*

Security and a home-like atmosphere seemed to be among the main criteria in choosing the place for the meeting, regardless of where this meeting took place.

*"Because you feel so safe at home.
I would prefer to meet my mother in the Children's Village house or the Village centre,
because I feel most safe there."*

The children who gave their parents' home as the place where they would most like to meet their parents also argued that it was nice being alone together at home without the presence of other adults.

*"There are no Children's Village adults milling around, and anyway it's nice being back home again.
It's my home, too. That's where I feel at home.
Somehow it seems most natural to meet there, or at least I can behave naturally there."*

Most of the parents likewise preferred to meet their children at home or at relatives'. They could then be alone with their children, without the presence of any outsiders.

Children's reactions to meetings

Half the Children's Village parents mentioned that one or some of the children in their care always or usually reacted with mental symptoms or behavioural disturbances to contacts with their parents. According to a quarter of them, reactions are rare. Three Children's Village parents stated that the children never display mental symptoms after contacts with their parents.

Examples of reactions mentioned by the Children's Village parents included:

- bad temper
- restlessness and difficulty concentrating
- dejection
- sleeping problems
- bed-wetting or messing
- distress and fear.

The symptoms and disturbed behaviour brought on by the visit usually last from a few days to weeks and even months. The reasons for the mental disorders and disturbed behaviour are, in the opinion of the Children's Village parents, that

- they bring old grievances and feelings of chaos to the surface again in the child
- the child feels insecure/disappointed
- the child grieves his/her situation
- the child misses and is worried about his/her parents
- the parents do not give their “permission” for the placement and manifest this to the child either directly or indirectly.

The parents describe their children as cheerful, willing and enthusiastic about their meetings. Parting may be difficult, but on the other hand the children *“have got used to the fact that Mum goes away and comes back to see them again”*. Some parents suspect that the Children's Village has taught the child *“to behave in a certain way”* at their meetings. The writers do not, however, explain precisely what they mean by this.

Parent-worker relations for the most part business-like and natural

Fifty-nine per cent of the parents stated that the staff have a business-like attitude to them. Approximately the same percentage also described the relationship as natural. Just under a third of the parents (8) felt that the staff had avoided them or been hostile. One parent reckoned the Children's Village staff were afraid of him and two felt the staff were secretive and lacked directness.

The majority (over 80%) of the staff consider they have a business-like relationship with the natural parents. Most of them also described their relationship as natural. Only one worker admitted to being angry for a moment, but even she said that *“what you feel and what you do are two different things in this job”*. According to the workers, their attitude to the parents are affected by

- their own concept of people and their basic attitude to the parents
- the parents' attitude to the Children's Village and its workers.

The estimates of the parents and the workers on the parents' attitude to the staff were very similar. 70 per cent of the parents (19) said they had a business-like relationship with the staff, and 78 per cent of the staff (40) were of the same opinion. Just under half the parents also described their relationship as natural, and 56 per cent of the staff felt the parents treated them naturally.

More than half (56%) the children's parents felt the partnership with the SOS Children's Village was either good or extremely good and a quarter moderately good. Only four parents rated the partnership as poor. About one third of the SOS Children's Village staff reported that they had no problems with parents. The majority of the workers had problems with some parents, but none with others. The dealings with the children's parents were, in the opinion of the staff, for the most part *“easy but challenging”*.

A third of the staff felt that their dealings with parents were difficult, taxing, and that they called forth conflicting emotions. Such situations arise, they said, when

- the parents have a negative basic attitude to the Children's Village
- the parents are still grieving about their child being taken into care and the placement.

According to the workers, the parents find it difficult to place themselves in their children's shoes because of their own problems. The parents do not see that their behaviour affects the child because their own needs and demands are foremost in their minds. Some parents may direct their anger at the Children's Village workers, whom they sometimes regard as responsible for their child being taken into care. The lives of many of the children in the

Children's Villages are overshadowed by their parents' behaviour: their angry outbursts, rows, accusations and court cases. These prevent the children from settling down in the Children's Village and benefiting from all it has to offer. Sometimes the parents may "vanish" from their child's life for weeks or even months on end. As a result, the child is worried about where they are or what has happened to them.

Parents satisfied with children's growth and development

The majority of the parents (85%) were either extremely or fairly satisfied with the growth and development of their children in the SOS Children's Village. They praised the Children's Village parents for the good care they provided. Their replies also reflected joy and even pride in the way their children had turned out in the SOS Children's Village.

"The Children's Village mother has brought my boys up to be really good people. I'm really pleased that the children have calmed down and are stable and respect their foster parents. The children have all sorts of hobbies and the foster parents teach them sport and send them to music school. So long as the kids are doing fine, that's enough for me, even though the staff sometimes doubt I'll keep off the bottle."

The parents were satisfied with the support for their children's school attendance and the recreational facilities offered by the SOS Children's Village. Many parents also felt their children had become more stable at the SOS Children's Village.

Three of the parents who answered the questionnaire said they were not at all pleased with the way their children had developed in the SOS Children's Village. Among other things, they expressed their fear that the youngsters would not be allowed to become independent and that they would be *"tied to the Children's Village by blackmailing or bribing them"*, or they felt that all in all their child was not at ease in the Children's Village.

Proposals for improving the partnership

Since the parents felt that any problems in parent-staff relations were most due to the children and parents not being able to meet sufficiently often, more opportunities to meet would, in their opinion, mean a *"better partnership"*. Some parents felt the SOS Children's Village had not been sufficiently *"open and honest"*. Attention to these considerations would, they felt, generate greater trust and desire to cooperate.

The parents also said they wished their opinions were heeded more than they are at present. Some also called for better care plan meetings, since they felt their voice was not sufficiently heard at these. According to them, child-parent meetings were agreed beforehand by the welfare authorities and the Children's Village staff. The parents thus had little real chance to influence the decisions.

The workers in turn called for new procedures and a change of attitude to cooperation with parents. What was needed, they felt, was a bold attitude, an ability to take risks and a genuine desire to get the parents involved.

In order to improve the parent-worker relations the workers called for

- attitude and other training for workers in dealing with natural parents
- collaboration with parents from the very start of the placement
- support persons for parents
- meetings at a place other than the Children's Village house

- courage to experiment
- joint events for children/parents/workers
- more human resources.

The municipalities felt that the SOS Children's Villages nowadays pay greater attention to the parents than they used to; this was, they felt, a significant improvement. All the municipalities but one regarded it as important to their work for the Children's Villages Association to have one social worker responsible for supporting parents. Many of the respondents pointed out that having their child taken into custody is painful for the parents. The social workers who have taken the child into custody are not therefore necessarily the right people to support the parents. The parents may look upon the Children's Villages Association social worker as an outsider with whom they can go over the reasons for the custody and placement in a more neutral manner.

According to the social workers, it was important for the parents to be supplied in advance with information that was as accurate as possible on the SOS Children's Village and the placement ground rules. Parents find it easier to accept a placement decision if they can visit their child's future growth environment, new home and carers in advance. They should therefore visit the Children's Village before the child moves in.

The municipalities expressed the wish that the Children's Villages would motivate parents to keep in touch with their children even during long-term placements. Parents need support and encouragement for the parenthood that is, despite the fact that their children have been taken into custody, still possible. The social workers believe that work with parents also helps the children by making life easier for the children in the village. The municipalities also wished that the SOS Children's Villages would keep both the parents and the municipality regularly informed about the children, their progress, etc.

More constructive procedures

The survey also sought information on the views of the parents, children, Children's Village staff and municipalities on taking into care, placement, living in an SOS Children's Village, child-parent communications and relationships.

As a result of the feedback, one of the items for development in Children's Village work has become the placement process in the Children's Village and ways of making greater allowance for the parents in this process.

During the project the placement process has been developed so as to enhance the role of the parents in the decision-making process. Efforts are being made to get the parents involved in making the decisions and approving the SOS Children's Village as a suitable placement for their child. A project (social) worker meets the parents before the placement decision is made, seeks their opinions and wishes on the placement and informs them about the SOS Children's Villages and the principles on which they operate. The aim here is for the parents to have sufficient information on which to base their decision. Naturally the Welfare Board may decide to place a child in an SOS Children's Village contrary to the parents' wishes. In this case the Children's Villages Association nevertheless has to evaluate the significance to the child and the success of the placement of the parents' opposition.

In their own replies the parents said they felt there had been no one to help them when the child was taken into care and placed. They would have liked more support and assistance, especially from the welfare office and the Children's Villages Association. One of the objectives of the meeting between the project worker and the parents is in fact to give the parents a chance to express the painful emotions aroused by the custody and placement – both before and after the placement. Since the project worker has not been involved in the

custody process, he or she is in a better position than the municipal social worker to establish trusting relations with the parents. Admittedly there is still a danger of conflict arising even then, especially if the child has already been placed in an SOS Children's Village.

The parents said they would like to meet other parents in the same situation. The Punkaharju and Tapiola SOS Children's Villages have responded to this by arranging open days for natural parents. These have been informal meetings at which parents have had a chance to discuss their experiences with others. The feedback has been positive. The parents and staff were likewise enthusiastic about the first Christmas party held jointly for the villagers and the children's relatives at the Tapiola SOS Children's Village in 1999.

Concrete modes of interaction will continue to be developed. One item for development is, for example, keeping the parents supplied with news on the child's schooling and health, and little everyday issues. A "visiting book" for use when the child goes home for a visit might further the flow of information in both directions. This could serve as a medium for both the Children's Village parents and the natural parents to send messages to one another. Information gets passed on naturally when there are regular, smooth contacts between the child and his/her parents. Not all parents are, however, capable of regular communication, but even so they want to hear about their child. Summaries of all the questionnaire replies were sent to the parents.

The child-parent meetings could in some cases be more systematic than they are at present. Getting parents involved in planning the content and objectives of meetings is a challenge to be taken up; it is, however, important to the child's development and the aims of the placement. What is needed now is new ways of getting parents motivated for this.

During the year 2000 a social worker will be assigned to each of the SOS Children's Villages. This will naturally mean more resources for collaboration with the children's relatives and the municipalities as well.