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HANDBOOK FOR EDUCATORS

**Thinking in partnership – strengthening cooperation between Roma families and
educators**

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UCCU Foundation

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Who is this handbook for?

This handbook is designed for preschool and early childhood educators who work every day with Roma and non-Roma children and their families. Its aim is to support teachers in building trust, recognizing unconscious biases, and actively involving families. The handbook builds on the 15 years of experience of the UCCU Foundation, as well as on the findings of ethnographic research carried out by CEU researchers within the RAISE project.¹

Why is this topic especially important?

The relationship between teachers and parents often depends on small gestures. If a teacher is open, accepting, and empathetic, this has a direct impact on the child's self-confidence, learning experiences, and future success at school. Genuine attention and respect can lay the foundation for long-term cooperation between preschool teachers and parents.

All parents want their children to grow up in a safe, caring, and respectful environment, and all teachers want to have a supportive and cooperative relationship with parents.

However, there are families - including many Roma families - whose social situation, experiences, or faced prejudices can make this connection difficult. This is why teachers need to approach them consciously and openly. In order to better understand the background of these difficulties and our options, it is important to recognise some fundamental social contexts.

Social background in a nutshell

8–10% of Hungary's population is of Roma origin, but the community is diverse: there are linguistic, cultural, and social differences. The term "**Roma**," often used in everyday language, covers several different groups, such as Romungro, Olah Gypsies, and Beas, each with different customs and traditions.²

¹ Vera Messing – Ágnes Kende: Practices and Narratives of Boundary-making in Everyday Life Institutional Settings Country Report – Hungary (RAISE – WP1). The publication process is ongoing.

² During the mentioned ethnographic research conducted by CEU, the diversity of the Roma community became particularly evident, especially when comparing Roma living in rural and urban areas.

Many Roma families in Hungary today live under disadvantaged conditions, often in segregated neighbourhoods or with poor infrastructure. Housing problems, exclusion from the labour market, and low incomes often affect children's opportunities, from attending kindergarten to school performance.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that the Roma community is not homogeneous: it is extremely diverse in economic, cultural, and social terms, and not all families live under difficult circumstances. Prejudices obscure this diversity, while educators need precisely this sense of divergence.

Prejudices do not only affect disadvantaged Roma families. Discrimination is often not a response to economic circumstances but to ethnicity, regardless of a family's income, education, or living conditions.

This is why teachers need to approach each family individually, with an open mind and based on their actual circumstances, rather than on assumptions or generalisations.

Unfortunately, segregation appears in the education system from an early age. While mixed groups are more common in kindergartens, many children find themselves in segregated educational environments when they start school, whether through conscious or invisible mechanisms. This separation not only limits learning opportunities but also hinders connections between communities.

We often see that the majority society forms its image of the Roma community based on assumptions. Society often expects Roma families to conform to "majority norms" without engaging in genuine dialogue about everyday experiences, values, and customs. This expectation places a one-sided and disproportionate burden on families, while failing to take into account the diversity that is inherent in all communities, including Roma communities.³

³ The ethnographic research also confirmed this assumption, namely that segregation intensifies primarily after the transition to primary school. It also showed that the society expects Roma people to conform to the norms of the majority, regardless of the specific circumstances of their families.

It is important to recognise that the different social and economic situations of families do not mean that they care less about their children or want a different future for them.⁴ Mutual trust, openness, and genuine curiosity are essential for deepening relationships. This allows the community to be built not only on expectations but also on genuine cooperation.

Educators often **have to balance institutional expectations with the real situation of families**, while also being aware of their own prior experiences and community norms. This is a challenge, but also an opportunity to build bridges.

Roma or Gypsy communities – what you need to know

In Hungary, the terms *Roma* and *Gypsy* are often used interchangeably in everyday language. In this handbook, we use the term Roma, which is also widely used in international and professional language. However, it is important to note that many communities and individuals use the term Gypsy to refer to themselves. It is essential that educators communicate sensitively, respecting the term used by the family.

Roma communities represent different languages, traditions, lifestyles, and social statuses. Some live in cities and have university degrees, while others live in villages and follow traditional customs. Some families are more economically stable, while others struggle - just like in any other community.

It is important to recognise that cultural diversity is a value, not a burden. If educators are open to learning about different cultural practices, holidays, and perspectives, they not only strengthen relationships but also support children's sense of identity.

At the same time, stereotypes - even if they are hidden - can very easily build walls. For example, if we treat someone as “disadvantaged” based solely on their ethnic background, without really getting to know them, we are approaching them with prejudice.

⁴ During the ethnographic research almost all Roma interviewees explained that their most important goal in life was to provide a better life and more opportunities for their children, than their own.

The most important thing is not to generalise. Every child and every family is unique and deserves personal, caring attention.

How does this handbook help?

It uses practical examples to show how situations can be interpreted in different ways. It offers communication tools for kindergarten teachers to engage with parents. It supports the initiation of inner work through self-reflection exercises.

It presents good practices from Hungary and recommendations from the literature.

Message to kindergarten teachers:

Just paying attention itself makes a difference. Your openness and empathy are the greatest help to children.

Chapter 2 – The basic principles of relationship building

Trust does not develop overnight. This is especially true when teachers and parents come from different social or cultural backgrounds. First encounters, everyday gestures, and communication styles can all contribute to turning a formal relationship into genuine cooperation.

This chapter will help you ensure that your relationships are based not only on politeness but also on respect, curiosity, and genuine understanding. Every little gesture counts, and you are already doing a lot by paying attention.⁵

1. Empathy and trust building

At the beginning of a relationship, the **smallest, most human gestures** have the greatest power: calling someone by name, a simple smile, an honest question, a thank you.

Consistency provides security: if parents know what to expect from you, they will open up more easily. Don't make promises you can't keep; predictability is essential.

Attentive listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give. Don't interrupt the parent, don't look for a solution right away - just be present and listen with understanding.

Example - everyday empathy:

Parent:

"Sometimes we're late because I have to take the older ones to school."

Teacher (empathetic response):

"I completely understand. It must be difficult to organise everything in the morning. Thank you for bringing your child to the kindergarten anyway."

This sentence is not only supportive, but it also reinforces the parent's efforts and lays the foundation for further cooperation.

⁵ The aforementioned ethnographic research also revealed that a trusting relationship between the parties has a positive impact on the effectiveness of their collaboration.

2. Involving parents

A **personal invitation** is worth much more than an official letter. An invitation saying "we would be delighted if you could come" says more than a poster on the door.

Give them a **choice**: when, how and in what way they can participate. They may not be able to come in the afternoon, but they may be happy to bring something or help in another way.

Every contribution is valuable, whether it is attendance, comments, or assistance. Reinforce with **praise and recognition**: "We were very happy to have you here," "It was very helpful that you brought an extra pair of shoes."

Important:

Do not assume that the family does not want to participate, as they may not know how to do so. Many families have no experience with what is "customary" in kindergarten. This is, of course, a real difficulty for all families with Roma and non-Roma children who are new to kindergarten. What is certain is that involvement always begins with an invitation.

3. Communication style

Start with **compliments**, then move on to the difficulties.

This is not flattery; it is confidence-building. If parents feel that the teacher also sees the positives, they are more receptive to feedbacks about problems and more open to discussing them. Use **simple, easy-to-understand language** and avoid jargon. Don't say, "He has sensory integration difficulties" when you can say more simply, "He sometimes has trouble with loud noises."

Don't give orders – instead, make requests and suggestions. "Please be mindful that..." is much more cooperative than "You can't do that." Seeking a joint solution is not a sign of weakness, but of partnership.

Example – supportive tone: "Let's see together how we can make it easier next time."

Reinforcement for the teacher:

Trust is not a given, but a bridge built together. Your attention, patience, questions, and openness are all building blocks in this foundation. If you consistently treat parents with respect, families will sense this and become long-term partners in raising their children.

Chapter 3 – Recognising and dealing with prejudices

We all bring with us experiences, ingrained habits, and things we have heard, which is completely natural. These may come from our childhood or our environment. These patterns can consciously or unconsciously influence how we see children and parents and how we interpret their behaviour. This is especially true when someone deviates from the norm, from the “majority pattern.”

This chapter helps us to look at our own prejudices courageously and honestly - **not with guilt, but with openness** and a willingness to learn. Self-reflection is not meant to be critical, but rather an opportunity for growth. Once we recognise how these automatic thoughts work within us, we have already taken a step toward more conscious and accepting pedagogical work.

What is prejudice?

Prejudice is when we form a **preliminary opinion** about someone or a situation without having accurate knowledge of the actual circumstances. Prejudice can be negative, but it can also be overly positive (e.g., Roma children have a good sense of rhythm and are good dancers) - this is also a stereotype, as it does not look at the individual, but projects an expectation assigned to a group onto them.

Prejudices often operate **unconsciously** within us. We often do not even notice that behind a thought, feeling, or reaction, there is not a personal experience but a previous ingrained habit. That is why it is not shameful to recognise this - **it is the beginning of awareness.**

Common examples of prejudiced attitudes related to Roma:

- “Gypsy children are always noisy.”
- “She's late because she's not interested in kindergarten.”
- “You can't count on them anyway.”
- “They never bring anything when we ask them to.”
- “These parents never show up for meetings.”
- “They probably can't read, that's why they don't sign the papers.”

These statements are all **generalisations** and do not allow us to understand individual situations. If we believe them and treat a child or family accordingly, it can **hinder relationship building** and obstruct the child's development.

How can I recognise this in myself?

Useful questions that help us examine our own thoughts:

- 1. Are my thoughts based on facts, or am I just making assumptions?**

For example: Is she not interested in what happened at the nursery, or is she just tired and unable to pay attention right now?

- 2. Would I think the same thing if the parent/child were not Roma?**

For example: If not, then it is likely that I am being prejudiced.

- 3. Is there another acceptable explanation for what I am seeing?**

For example: The paper may not be signed because they don't have a printer, they may not have a pen at home, or they may not fully understand what to do.

4. How might this thought affect my relationship with the child or parent?

Prejudices are not only about us, they also **affect the attitude of Roma parents.**

Don't say this – Say this

Situation	Prejudiced statement	Empathetic, conscious statement
The child is late	Roma people are never on time.	It must be difficult to get several children ready at the same time in the morning.
The child is noisy	They are always too loud.	He is full of energy – let's give him a task where this can be a strength.
Parent is absent	She/He doesn't care about her/his child.	Maybe she/he had to work – let's arrange another time.
The child is muddy	They come to the kindergarten dirty.	She/He got muddy because of the road conditions – we can offer them a pair of indoor shoes.

Recognising prejudice in yourself is not a sign of weakness, but courage. The first step toward trust is being honest with ourselves. If you are reading this handbook, you are already on that path.

Chapter 4 – Practical methods

Building relationships is not just a matter of good intentions, but also of mindful methods. A warm smile or a kind word is not always enough on its own; often, conscious attention, patience, and well-chosen steps are needed.

This chapter presents specific examples and techniques that can help make cooperation not just an intention, but a real experience. Trust is a feeling that can be built, strengthened, and regained.

Reinterpreting situations

Often, it is not the event itself that is most important, but **how we interpret it**. The way we interpret it determines whether we grow closer or further apart.

The same situation can be viewed in many ways, and the choice is in the hands of the educator. Changing our interpretation is often the first step toward understanding.

Parent is late:

It's not “carelessness,” but rather that they also have to take the older sibling, or need to change buses several times, or simply that mornings can be hard to manage. This happens in every family.

What can we do in such a situation?

- A compassionate sentence can help: “*I know mornings can get overwhelming*” - this already eases the tension.

Parent refuses a program:

It's not necessarily a rejection of the community; it may be that they feel uncertain, don't have the right clothes, are afraid they won't fit in, or had a bad experience before.

What can we ask in this situation?

- How could we organise it in a way that works for you, as well? This results in the door being already half-open.

Parent does not attend the parent-teacher meeting:

Our first thought in this situation might be that they don't care about their child. This assumption, especially when it involves a Roma parent, is often based on a prejudiced interpretation. However, there may be other explanations:

- They couldn't come because they had to work or didn't get leave.
- There was no one to look after the younger children.
- Due to past negative experiences, they feel anxious that they don't belong there.
- They didn't fully understand when and where the meeting would take place.

If the same happens with a non-Roma family, we tend to react more like this:

- *They must be very busy now, surely they'll come next time.*
- *Maybe they didn't feel comfortable last time, so we should ask how we could help.*

What can we ask to truly understand why the Roma parent couldn't attend?

- *We're sorry you couldn't come. Is everything all right at home?*
(This is empathetic; it doesn't blame but shows concern.)
- *We thought maybe the timing wasn't convenient - would there be a time that works better for you?*
(This doesn't assume unwillingness but acknowledges availability issues.)
- *It's important for us to know how we could organise the program so that you also feel comfortable. Do you have any suggestions?*
(This recognises the parent's perspective and involves them.)
- *Was there perhaps something about last time that made you feel uncomfortable?*
(This encourages honesty - but only worth asking if there's already some level of trust.)
- *How could we arrange things so that it would be more convenient for you?*
(This is not an expectation but an opportunity, sending the message: what you think matters.)

The lesson:

The same behaviour can be interpreted differently depending on the preconceptions we have about the parent.

The goal is to become aware of these reflexes in ourselves and to try to understand each situation in its own context—without prejudice.

Home Visits – A Compass for Building Connections

A home visit is an opportunity, not an inspection. It works well when we don't enter the family's home with presuppositions but with **respect, curiosity, and openness**.

Key points:

- **Consciously pay attention to the positives.** A beautiful drawing on the wall, a tidy corner, a sibling's care - these are all anchors for building relationships.
- **Do not judge the circumstances.** The question is not how they live but what the child, the kindergarten, and the community mean to them.
- **Accept hospitality.** A coffee, pastry, or soda is often the first sign of trust. Accepting them is not mandatory, but reciprocating kindness is essential.
- **Be a partner, not an inspector.** You might say: *I came so we can get to know each other better and talk about how your child feels in kindergarten.*

A short story from everyday life

A kindergarten teacher visited a family where cooperation had been minimal before. During the visit, she **praised the child's drawings**, which the parents had put on the wall. At first, the parents were withdrawn: they said few words, sitting tensely. However, **a week later, they volunteered** to help decorate the kindergarten room for a holiday.

A sincere compliment, a genuine interest can break through invisible walls. For the teacher, it may have been just a moment - for the family, it was an important turning point.

Encouragement for the kindergarten teacher

Your openness is not only a **professional tool** but also a **human value**. You set an example - for children, colleagues, and parents. The way you pay attention, the way you address someone, affects the quality of relationships.

When you cross walls, others will also take the first step more confidently. Maybe not immediately - but that's how change begins. **You are the first link in a new relationship.**

Chapter 5: Closing Words

This handbook is based on the Hungarian country **report made by the Central European University (CEU) within the RAISE project** (Messing-Kende, 2023). The research revealed how Roma families experience invisible barriers, prejudice, and social segregation in education - especially during the transition from kindergarten to school.

Roma youth, parents, and teachers were also asked during the research. Their accounts clearly show that **discrimination often does not appear in an overt form, but rather in hidden ways, through subtle distinctions**: differently phrased messages, separate expectations, or simply the absence of trust.

Key findings of the report:

- Roma children typically participate in **mixed communities in kindergarten**, but when entering school, they often find themselves in **segregated or homogeneous environments**. This does not only limit learning opportunities but also restricts social networking.
- Roma parents often report that even at the first encounters, **they feel distance, suspicion**, or that they are not considered full-value partners in educational institutions.
- **Teachers are often left alone in these situations**, lacking appropriate methodological tools or support to handle the challenges arising from diversity.

What does boundary making mean?

One of the key concepts of the research is **boundary making** - the social process through which invisible walls are drawn between Roma and non-Roma communities.

These boundaries do not always take the form of explicit rules or physical separation. They often manifest in:

- space (e.g., separate kindergarten groups, school classes),
- expectations (e.g., different reactions to the same behaviour),
- language use, tone,
- or in how and when communication takes place between teacher and parent.

These boundaries are not inevitable, and they are not everlasting. The teacher plays a key role in starting to break them down.

Conclusion – the teacher as a bridge-builder

Boundary making is not a spectacular process. We often sense it only through small signs: who sits where, who talks to whom, who dares to ask questions and who does not. These invisible walls run not only between children, but also between families and the institution. But just as walls are built, they can also be dismantled. In this process, the teacher is not a passive observer, but a shaping force. An empathetic question, genuine curiosity, and a reliable presence can dissolve distance and create a new pattern. What is needed is an environment where the child feels safe, the parent can relate as a partner, and the teacher is not left alone but can educate in genuine cooperation. This is not always an easy task, but it is possible. Every change begins with a small step.

Message to the teacher:

Change does not happen suddenly, but it can begin with a morning smile, an open question, or by listening to someone without judgment. You are the first step, and every step counts.

Closing Thoughts

A teacher cannot solve social inequalities alone. Nor is it their task. But with **every small, empathetic gesture they can build bridges towards children and parents.**

A compliment, an open question, a respectful, sincere address - these everyday tools can spark meaningful change. Trust is often not born in grand moments, but in quiet attention, in an unspoken absence of criticism, in an understanding smile.

Roma children can grow, develop, and thrive only if they are raised in an environment where **they feel important, valued, and worthy - just as they are, like any other child.**

Encouragement for the teacher:

Change begins within you. That thoughtful sentence you say to a parent today may **leave a mark in a child's heart years from now**, and perhaps help them as an adult to face fewer walls to tear down.

Thank you for taking part in this work. Everything you give truly matters.

Attachments: Practical Notes for Teachers

1. Self-reflection questions

Recommended for the beginning of trainings or staff meetings.

- Why is it important for me to have a relationship with families?
- What experiences have I had with Roma children and families?
- Do I notice signs of prejudice in myself? If so, in which situations?

Notes:

2. Reinterpreting an example

Describe a situation that was difficult for you in connection with a parent or a child. Then try to rethink it from another perspective.

Original interpretation:

Alternative perspective:

What can I do differently next time?

3. Family relationship-building plan

For a specific family.

- Family name (for your own reminder only):
- What have been my experiences with them so far?
- What has worked until now?
- What would I like to achieve in the next two months?
- What step will I take this week?

4. Resource list

I have already tried:

- Illustrated invitation for the parent meeting
- Morning compliments to the parent (e.g., *I'm glad you could come today*)
- Suggesting a one-on-one conversation instead of a regular consultation hour
- Asking for support from a civil organisation

What I would still like to try:

5. Inspirational sentence

Write at the end of the day:

- *“Today I was glad that...”*
- *“The challenge I’m treating as learning today is...”*
- *“For tomorrow I will take with me a...”*

Final message to the teacher:

You don't have to walk this path alone. If you feel a situation is beyond your capacity, you can ask for support and involve experts. It is not weakness but professional wisdom to recognise when the knowledge of others can add value. These organisations are partners, not outsiders. Together with them you can create new patterns - ones that help children, support families, and strengthen your sense that you are on the right path.

Recommended literature for teachers

(on educating Roma/Gypsy children, dealing with prejudice, shaping attitudes)

1. Who is a Gypsy? Problems of definition: issues of naming. The externally defined society, key elements of self-identification, the we–they relation

Ladányi János – Szelényi Iván: *Who is a Gypsy?*

http://www.adatbank.transindex.ro/html/cim_pdf443.pdf

Havas Gábor – Kemény István – Kertesi Gábor: *The relative Gypsy in the battlefield of classification.* https://bokoz.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A_relativ_cigany_a_klasszifikacios_kuzdo-3.pdf

2. The linguistic and territorial distribution of the Roma in Hungary, their social strata, groups, and traditional culture

Kállai Ernő 2015: *Gypsy Groups in Europe and Hungary.* pp. 1–23

Szuhay Péter: *The culture of Roma in Hungary: ethnic culture or the culture of poverty.* Chapter in *The Ethnography of Roma.*

https://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/magyarorszagi_nemzetisegek/romak/a_magyarorszagi_ciganyok_kulturaja_etnikus_kultura/index.htm

3. Directions and main results of historical research on the Roma

Kotics József 2020: *Patterns of Roma–Hungarian Coexistence.* Budapest: National University of Public Service. ISBN 978-963-498-070-4 pp. 5–14.

<https://nkerepo.uni-nke.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/15948/A%20cigany%20magyar%20egyutteles%20mintazatai.pdf?sequence=1>

Binder Mátyás: “*Imagined Culture*” – A possible interpretation and misinterpretations of Roma/Gypsy culture.

http://epa.oszk.hu/01700/01739/00071/pdf/EPA01739_eszmelet_86_2010_172-195.pdf

4. Roma in Medieval and Early Modern Hungary (15th–18th centuries)

Nagy Pál: *The Early History of Roma in Hungary.*

https://kisebbsegkutato.tk.hu/uploads/files/olvasoszoba/romaszovegtar/A_farao_nepe.pdf pp. 1–

Kotics József 2020: *Patterns of Roma–Hungarian Coexistence*. pp. 14–19
Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. Budapest:
Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. ISBN 978-
963-8302-53-3 pp. 27–43

5. Maria Theresa's Gypsy policy

Gulyás Klára: *Maria Theresa's Gypsy Policy: Unified Concept, Divergent Implementation*. In:
Gábor Biczó (ed.) *This Is How We Do Research: Selected Romological Studies of the Lippai
Balázs Roma College for Advanced Studies*. Debrecen: Didakt (2019), pp. 11–28
Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 44–53

6. Roma in the 19th century

Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 68–81
Kotics József 2020: *Patterns of Roma–Hungarian Coexistence*. pp. 23–29

7. Roma between the two World Wars

Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 82–112

8. The Roma Holocaust

Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 112–120
Dupcsik Csaba: “...Here is the Opportunity for Their Execution”: *On the Roma Holocaust*.
<https://ormanyasag.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Dupcsik-Csaba-ITT-AZ-ALKALOM-A-KIVEGZESUKRE.pdf>

9. The Socialist Era

Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 121–149,
150–196

Kotics József 2020: *Patterns of Roma–Hungarian Coexistence*. pp. 29–34

10. Roma self-organization and nationality aspirations in Hungary, the birth of contemporary Roma culture

Sorsunk 4 – Roma Self-organization in Hungary from the 1989 Regime Change to the Present

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avMhg2u07ns>

Binder Mátyás 2008: *Roma Nation-building – In Historical and Cultural Anthropological Cross-section*. https://www.eszmelet.hu/binder_matyas-a-roma-nemzetepites-torteneti-es-kulturalis/

11. Roma in the Post-Transition Period

Dupcsik Csaba 2018: *Roma in Hungary in Everyday and Scientific Discourses*. pp. 228–260

Kotics József 2020: *Patterns of Roma–Hungarian Coexistence*. pp. 34–42

Communication, mediation, inclusion

- **Partners Hungary**

Practical guides for teachers on conflict management and dialogue building.

- **UCCU Foundation** – awareness-raising toolkits

URL: <https://www.uccualapitvany.hu/letoltheto-szakmai-anyagok/>

Useful links / available digital resources

- **Romani Design – Culture and visuality of Roma identity**

www.romani.hu

- **OSZK Digitális Gyűjtemény – Romology**

<https://epa.oszk.hu>