

## TOOLS AND METHODS

### Big Sister Project

Finland 2023



IFS FOSTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE

## TOOL'S SUMMARY

<b>Tool/method name</b>	<b>Big Sister/Sibling project</b>
<b>Tool/method summary description</b>	The Big Sister Project is an extension of Ahjola Settlement's Gender-Sensitive youth work since 1998. The Big Sibling Program connects children or young people with an adult friend who provides joy and support in their daily lives. Adults who are 18 years or older and interested in volunteering can join as Big Siblings. They commit to being a supportive friend for children and young adults. Both parties agree to participate in the program for at least one year. the focus is on personal growth, friendship, social skills, managing emotions, and fostering a sense of belonging and being heard. And for volunteers, the focus is gaining experience and feeling included.
<b>Country observed</b>	Finland
<b>Year observed</b>	2023
<b>Programme area</b>	Social inclusion, Migrant integration, Active citizenship.
<b>Tool type</b>	Methodology, guide, inclusion icebreaker, Facilitation technique.
<b>Specific topic:</b>	Gender sensitive work, mental well-being, discrimination, bullying, loneliness.
<b>Beneficiaries of tool:</b>	Children and Young adults.
<b>Can this tool be applied to other beneficiaries: yes/no</b>	Yes, this tool can be adapted to all beneficiaries according to the need.
<b>What type of beneficiaries: ALL, or specific ones?</b>	All but in this case it's mainly youth and young adults.
<b>If specific ones, which?</b>	

## Tool full description

The Big Sister Project, an extension of the longstanding Gender Sensitive youth work initiated by Ahjola Settlement in Tampere since 1998. In this project, caring adults volunteer as fellows or 'big siblings' to children enrolled in the program. Engaging activities include:

- **Girls and Boys Cabins:** Safe spaces where kids connect, play, and make friends.
- **Big Sister Activity:** Adults support and befriend children in the program.
- **Girls' Cabin** (founded 2001): A place for Big and Little Siblings to bond during free time.

- **Boys' Cabin** (founded 2018): A similar space for boys and their fellows.

Funding mainly comes from The Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organizations, ensuring all activities are free.

### **Who can join:**

Children who need help with:

- Social and emotional skills
- Mental well-being
- Overcoming loneliness or making friends
- Dealing with bullying or discrimination
- Exploring gender, sexuality, or identities
- Identifying as part of gender or sexual minorities
- Requiring personal guidance from adults

## **Context**

The Boys' and Girls' Cabin project is a part of the youth activities at Ahjola settlement. It started in 1998 and is one of the oldest gender-sensitive programs in Finland. The Girls' Cabin is open twice a week, and the Boys' Cabin is open once a week in the afternoons.

They also organize special events and holiday activities. The main goals are to provide young people a safe place to hang out, meet each other, and take part in activities they enjoy. Girls enjoy crafts, theater, and board games, while boys like video games and board games. They even create their own games and use role-playing to express feelings.

They also have sports and art groups. During snack time, everyone gathers without phones for a group activity where they discuss different topics based on "theme seasons" like identity and social skills. All activities are free. [Read more...](#)

### **Main Goals:**

#### **For children & young adults:**

- Personal growth support
- Making friends and social skills
- Dealing with emotions
- Feeling included and having a say

#### **For volunteers ("big siblings"):**

Gaining experience and feeling included

They talk about gender sensitivity in different ways, sharing information about gender and sexual orientations on their door and creating a safe space to discuss these topics. They welcome all genders and orientations, using preferred names. Everyone gets to define their gender and participate in activities they like.

Finnish Settlements work hard to create comfy spaces for everyone, especially those with special needs. This might seem small but it's crucial in helping people feel good, safe, and

confident. It builds a strong community where people can speak freely and feel accepted, encouraging active citizenship.

### Could it be used in other contexts? If yes, which ones?

Yes, the concept described above could be adapted and used in various other contexts beyond the Bis Sister project. Here are a few examples:

1. **Community Centers:** The idea of creating safe and welcoming spaces where people of different backgrounds, ages, and interests can gather, socialize, and participate in various activities can be applied to community centers. These centers could offer programs for people of all ages, focusing on building connections, fostering personal growth, and providing a platform for open discussions.
2. **Schools and After-School Programs:** Schools and after-school programs could adopt similar principles to enhance social and emotional development among students. By creating designated spaces for various activities, promoting inclusivity, and organizing discussions around important topics, schools can provide students with a supportive environment for personal and educational growth.
3. **Support Groups:** The approach of bringing people together to discuss specific themes during designated periods (like the "theme seasons" mentioned) can be applied to support groups. Whether it's for mental health, specific life challenges, or identity exploration, these groups can provide a structured and safe platform for individuals to share experiences and learn from one another.
4. **Workplace/staff Wellness Programs:** Employers can take inspiration from this concept to create wellness programs for their employees. These programs could include regular gatherings, workshops, and discussions aimed at improving mental health, promoting work-life balance, and building a sense of community within the workplace. It could also be applied as a support for volunteers.
5. **Youth Mentorship Programs:** The concept of "big siblings" and adult volunteers providing support and guidance to young people can be extended to mentorship programs. Such programs can help young individuals develop life skills, set goals, and navigate challenges with the guidance of experienced mentors. This could be a seniors/immigrant women or men's mentorship programs too.
6. **Cultural and Recreational Centers:** Cultural centers or recreational facilities can adopt the idea of offering a variety of activities that cater to diverse interests and age groups. This can help foster a sense of belonging, encourage participation, and create a space where people can explore new hobbies or engage with their passions.
7. **Online Communities and Forums:** While the concept is primarily centered around physical spaces, its principles of inclusivity, open dialogue, and structured discussions

can also be adapted to online communities and forums. Virtual spaces can be designed to facilitate meaningful interactions, provide support, and encourage individuals to share their experiences and insights in any community work programs.

## What is innovative about this method or tool?

The method or tool described in the Big Sister and their other activities brings innovation to the contexts of social inclusion, immigrant integration, and active citizenship in several ways:

1. **Diverse Inclusion:** The project's emphasis on welcoming all genders, sexual orientations, and backgrounds sets an innovative example of inclusivity. This approach sends a clear message that everyone is valued, creating an environment where individuals from different walks of life can feel safe, accepted, and empowered to participate fully.
2. **Holistic Approach to Integration:** For immigrants and newcomers, the project offers more than just language and job skills. By focusing on emotional well-being, providing a supportive community, and addressing themes of identity and belonging, the project promotes a comprehensive form of integration that goes beyond surface-level adaptation.
3. **Engagement and Active Citizenship:** The project encourages young participants to become active citizens. Through discussions on various topics and "theme seasons," participants learn to express their opinions, understand different perspectives, and engage in meaningful dialogue. This experience lays the foundation for them to become informed, participatory members of society.
4. **Empowerment through Activities:** By involving participants in the decision-making process regarding activities, the project fosters a sense of ownership and agency. This empowerment is particularly crucial for marginalized groups like immigrants who may feel disempowered in their new environment.
5. **Overcoming Gender Norms:** The project challenges traditional gender norms by allowing all children to engage in activities that interest them, regardless of whether those activities are stereotypically associated with their gender. This promotes a healthy understanding of gender roles and helps break down harmful stereotypes.
6. **Safe Space for Dialogue:** The project provides a safe space for open discussions about sensitive topics, including gender, sexuality, and emotional well-being. Such discussions are often lacking in traditional integration approaches, and having a platform to openly address these issues contributes to a more inclusive and accepting society.
7. **Building Relationships:** The "big siblings" model not only helps children develop but also fosters intergenerational relationships. This can be particularly beneficial for immigrants, as it provides them with a chance to connect with local adults, learn about the culture, and build a sense of belonging.

8. **Flexible Framework:** The project's adaptable framework can be tailored to suit the needs of various communities, making it a versatile tool for promoting social inclusion and integration.

Overall, the innovative aspects of this method lie in its holistic approach to integration, its focus on empowerment and active citizenship, and its dedication to creating a safe and inclusive environment that fosters dialogue, understanding, and connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

## Detailed Methodology

The project methodology involves creating separate Clubhouses for boys and girls aged 8 to 14, offering a range of activities such as Girls' and Boys' Cabins where kids can socialize and play. The main objectives are to foster individual growth, enhance emotional and social skills, and provide opportunities for participation and influence.

Priority is given to children requiring support with these skills. The space also encourages open discussions about gender, welcoming all gender identities and sexual orientations, as defined by each child. Notably, many children have migrant parents, though most are fluent in Finnish.

Popular activities include handicrafts, theater, board games, and video games. The Boys' and Girls' Cabins are separate due to past experiences where joint spaces led to boys not participating actively.

The 'Big Sibling' activity involves adult volunteers forming pairs with children. Around 70 pairs are created yearly, engaging in various activities including personal counseling, volunteer gatherings, peer support, and recreational events. This setup is particularly beneficial for children with single mothers who may require additional assistance, which the staff coordinates with social workers and participants.

In addition, the criminal record background of each Big Sibling is checked before getting their own Little Sibling.

## Study visits' participants testimonies

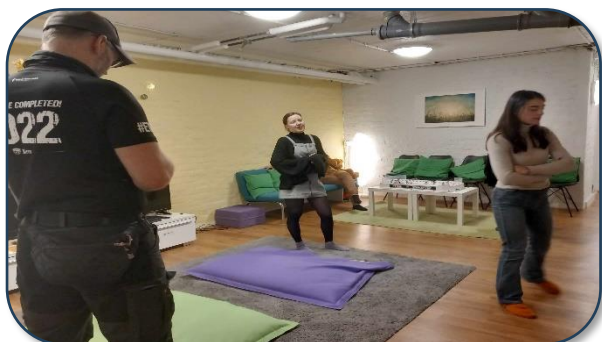
*"In my observation during the study visit, I've noticed that community workers truly prioritize individuals. They place people at the core of their approach, actively listening to them and collaborating on activities that align with their preferences. This process empowers them to express themselves, engage in meaningful conversations, and pursue what holds significance in their lives. These qualities embody the essence of community work." **Anouk C., France.***

*"The concept of gender awareness and non-binary acceptance was prevalent in many of the places we visited. This seemed particularly visible in the projects for younger persons. This might be an interesting insight into meeting younger target groups with specific issues." **Jesper Rønn-Simonsen., Denmark.***

## Specific advice for staff/volunteers/adult educators

Prioritize active listening. Create a space where peoples' voices are heard, interests are valued, and activities are co-designed. This fosters genuine engagement and empowers their growth.

## Big Siblings' spaces in images



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## Webpages

[www.tyttojentupa.fi](http://www.tyttojentupa.fi)

[www.poikatyo.fi](http://www.poikatyo.fi)