

## Big Brothers, Big Sisters gains ground in Russia

By Eric Batsie and Ekaterina Dodonova

For over a century, Big Brothers Big Sisters programs have helped children reach their potential through professionally-supported one-on-one mentoring relationships. Established in New York City in 1902, BBBS now operates in every US state and 35 countries.

BBBS matches caring adults with children in need of meaningful mentoring relationships. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Russia (BBBSR) has been successfully serving at-risk youth, mostly from orphanages, for 15 years. The children in the BBBSR program range from 5 to 18 years old and come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are orphans, while others live in single-parent homes and simply need a role model. A Big Brother or Big Sister is someone to talk to, confide in and, above all, a friend and mentor who can help a child find answers to some of the big questions about life.

BBBSR began in 1995 with a regional program in Perm with the local government providing key support for office space and staff positions. Trainers educated local social workers and psychologists regarding the international standards and programs of Big Brothers Big Sisters International. From Perm, the program quickly expanded into the regions of Tyumen, Yoshkar-Ola, Ryazan, Yaroslavl, Kirov and Tambov. BBBSR has matched hundreds of disadvantaged youth with Big Brothers and Big Sisters and has created opportunities for friendships that provide hope, support and care for children who might otherwise have none. In 2006, BBBSR began its Moscow Flagship program.

BBBSR's long-standing mentoring program has shown that by spending a few hours a month with a child in need, an adult can make a world of difference to the child's future. Children in BBBS programs perform better academically, exhibit improvements in self-esteem and confidence and become more involved in sports and other hobbies. They also are less likely to



drink alcohol, smoke, do drugs or become involved in fighting or other unhealthy activities.

Katya, a Big Sister in Yaroslavl, shares the following about her relationship with her Little Sister...

"My Katya plays the Fox... and it has been 365 days now. Things were starting off exactly as in the book, *The Little Prince*. I came in and sat on the edge of her orphanage bed, and Katya was looking at me out of the corner of her eye. We didn't know how to start but have become closer since that time. I came to visit her every Monday, at 4 p.m., sometimes I was late, sometimes ahead of time. Yet it was always Monday. Who made the first step toward friendship? Who was the first to believe in it and trust the other, the Fox or the Little Prince? And which of us is which? I don't know. But I do know myself, and by now, hopefully, I know Katya, too... She dreams to become a dress designer, and I'm studying to be a journalist. At the same time we both are actresses at an amateur theater. We even share the same name - Katya, Katenka, Katyuna, Katyusha, Katyushka or Kat'ka or Ekaterina. All this is just a small fraction of our simple discoveries about each other. We extended our contract for 365 more days, to become even closer. Remember how *The Little Prince* said that tears follow taming, tears for parting with Fox. Katya and I will rewrite the end of the story and will remain friends. Because Katya and I come from one planet, which means between us there is not such an obstacle between us similar to the one between Fox and Little Prince from the asteroid B-612.



*"You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me-- like that-- in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day..."*

*The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint Exupéry*

**Correction from BBBS International:** BBBSI Affiliates currently operate in 12 countries not 35 as stated in this article. (M.Barbano-Maxwell, Assoc. Dir. of Affiliate Development)