

Guidelines for Inclusion of Romani Children and Their Parents in Early Childhood Programs

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Introduction

Guidelines for the Inclusion of Romani Children and Their Parents in Early Childhood Programs were drafted as part of the KHETAUN (Together): With Key Steps to Inclusion of Romani Children into Quality Early Childhood Programs project. The project was partly financed by the European Commission and ran between 2015 and 2017. The leader of the international project, which brought together partners from the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia, was the Slovenian Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step from the Educational Research Institute, with the Preschool Šentvid being the Slovenian project partner.

The project was based on research findings confirming that high-quality early childhood programs that include families make a significant contribution to the developmental potential and the quality of life of children at risk, not only during the preschool period, but also later in life, as well as to the progress of society as a whole (Van der Gaag, 2002; Heckman and James, 2006).

In order to provide accessible and high-quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) programs for Romani children and their parents the project specifically focused on the following areas:

1. Raising awareness of professionals and the general public about the importance of education and ensuring social justice in childcare and education.
2. Carrying out activities for Romani children who are not enrolled in preschools and their parents.
3. Empowering Romani families with regard to childcare and encouraging child development.
4. Building trust and connecting preschools with various actors within the local community.

We have drafted guidelines for future endeavors in each of the listed areas, which are by their nature interconnected. This publication therefore consists of four chapters. Each chapter includes an analysis of the given area, local guidelines for preschools and their respective founding municipalities, and national guidelines for relevant policymakers in childcare and education.

Raising Awareness about the Importance of Education and Ensuring Social Justice in Childcare and Education

CURRENT STATE

The Roma are the most numerous European ethnic minority and are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than other Europeans (The Roma and Poverty..., 2010). Although education is generally acknowledged as a major way out of poverty and social exclusion (Vonta, 2011), the educational achievement of Romani children in Slovenia as well as in other European countries is still lower than that of other children (The situation of the Roma..., 2012). The National Evaluation Study on School Success of Romani Pupils in Slovenian Compulsory Schools (Vonta et al., 2011) states that during the school years of 2005/2006 and 2008/2009 only 60 percent of the Romani pupils included in the study finished primary school.

Many studies show that the key factor for Romani children's performance in education is their participation in preschool programs (Vonta, 2013, in Vonta et al., 2013). Results from a study of 11 European countries show they are facing a high level of non-inclusion regarding Romani children in preschool programs, which is also the case in Slovenia (The situation of the Roma..., 2012). Due to the protection of personal data it is impossible to collect statistical data on the number of Romani children who are enrolled in preschools in Slovenia, but the results of the above-mentioned Evaluation Study (Vonta et al., 2011) show that about a half of first-grade Romani pupils were enrolled in a preschool before starting primary school in the school year 2009/2010. Given the fact that almost a third of head teachers in the study did not have this information and based on our knowledge about the practices, we can conclude that the actual number is far more alarming.

We can certainly claim that a substantial proportion of Romani children first enrol in primary schools with no prior experience of being in organized preschools, which raises the question about the accessibility of early childhood programs

(Vonta, 2013, in Vonta et al., 2013). It is worth pointing out that in Europe children from ethnic minorities and families with lower income increasingly face the problem of access to early childhood programs (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari, 2013, in Jager, 2015). Not all children have the same possibilities when it comes to enrolment in ECEC programs, so ensuring accessible preschool programs for Romani children increases the chance of equal opportunities for support in their development as well as social inclusion; and ensuring quality is not possible without also ensuring equality in preschool processes, and vice versa (Vonta, 2013, in Vonta et al., 2013).

In terms of ensuring equal possibilities for inclusion of Romani children and their parents in high-quality ECEC programs it is vital to ensure social justice in child-care and education, which is a general social and ethical principle that requires an active approach to identifying and eliminating prejudices, stereotypes, and any discriminatory treatment inflicted by individuals or educational institutions (Tankersley et al., 2005).

LOCAL GUIDELINES

- ECEC professionals should be better informed about the situation of the Romani community in Slovenia and around the world, especially in terms of childcare and education.
- In each preschool, special attention should be given to informing ECEC professionals about the situation of the Romani community in their respective local community (housing situation, inclusion in the local community, demographics, inclusion of children in childcare and education and so forth).
- Concerning ECEC professionals, special attention should be given to raising awareness about the importance of high-quality ECEC programs for all children, especially for those who come from socially and economically disadvantaged environments – which is certainly true for the Romani children in Slovenia.
- Concerning ECEC professionals, special attention should be given to creating a common and detailed understanding of the quality of ECEC services, as well as to the understanding of the connection between the professional development of ECEC professionals and the quality of the childcare and educational process.
- Special attention should also be given to raising awareness about the importance of ensuring social justice in childcare and education, as well as identifying and eliminating prejudices, stereotypes and any discriminatory treatment inflicted by individuals or educational institutions.
- Advocacy is crucial for preschools in raising the awareness of non-Romani parents and the larger community regarding the importance of enrolling Romani children in preschool programs and ensuring social justice in childcare and education.

- In terms of the children in each preschool class it is important to plan and carry out activities that encourage learning about differences and positive attitudes toward respecting diversity.
- It is important to select team of professionals in all preschools that would consist of ECEC professionals and representatives of school management, and would hold regular meetings, plan, carry out, and coordinate activities to ensure accessible and high-quality ECEC programs for Romani children and their parents.



NATIONAL GUIDELINES

- It is important to encourage, support, and systematically monitor the proactive activities of ECEC service providers that aim to realize the objectives of already existing documents that support the inclusion of Romani children in preschool programs.
- It is necessary to provide training and other professional support to ECEC professionals so they are better informed about the situation of the Romani community at the national and international level.
- ECEC professionals should be given training and other professional support in order to raise awareness about the importance of high-quality ECEC programs for all children, especially for those who come from socially and economically disadvantaged environments – which is certainly true for the Romani children in Slovenia.
- Special attention should be paid to providing training and other forms of professional support in order to improve the competence of ECEC professionals in terms of understanding high-quality ECEC practice.
- ECEC professionals should be given training and other professional support in order to ensure social justice in childcare and education, as well as to identify and eliminate prejudices, stereotypes, and any discriminatory treatment inflicted by individuals or ECEC institutions.
- Special attention should be given to advocacy, which includes roundtables, conferences, consultations, video materials and other methods of raising the awareness of professional and the general public about the importance of including Romani children in accessible and high-quality ECEC programs.

- Short videos as well as printed and other promotional materials should be made and promotional events should be held in order to present successful and educated members of the Romani community, and therefore set an example of the importance of knowledge and education for success in life, as well as to contribute to eliminating prejudices and stereotypes about the Roma in the eyes of professionals and the general public.
- Efforts to ensure accessible and high-quality ECEC programs for Romani children should also be made in primary schools in environments with Romani communities; otherwise all attempts to ensure the fundamental conditions for a successful progress of Romani children to higher education stages will be in vain.
- Organizations that bring together young and educated members of the Romani community should be supported, as well as taken into consideration when designing strategies at all education levels, which would therefore help other young Romani individuals achieve a higher level of education.

Activities for Romani Children Who Are Not Enrolled in Preschools and Their Parents

CURRENT STATE

The results of a study on the attitudes of head teachers and ECEC professionals toward the provision of ECEC programs for children at risk (Jager, 2015) show that in most cases preschools are not concerned with whether they should also do something for those children that are not enrolled in preschools (Jager, 2016). These findings are particularly alarming since the study also shows that preschools are aware of the fact that children who are not enrolled in preschools come from underprivileged backgrounds (ibid.).

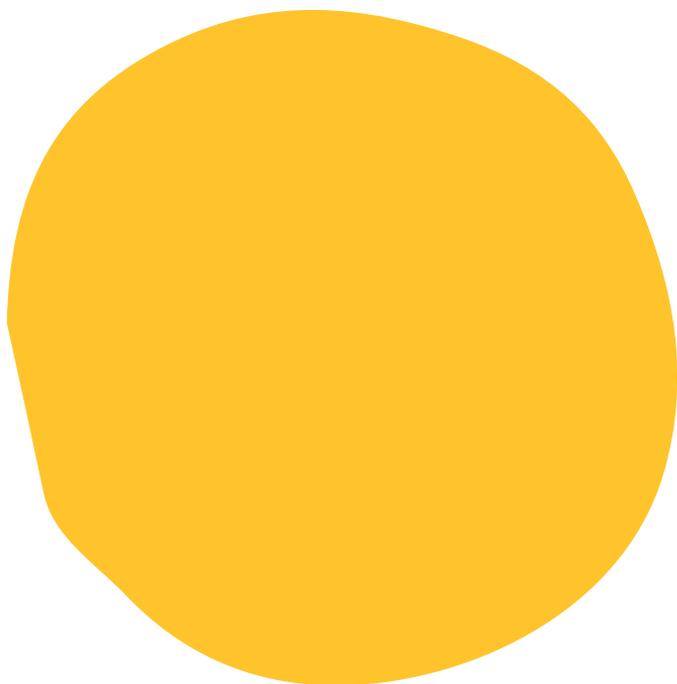
As the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) also states, efforts should be made to try to include all children in early childhood programs (Jager, 2016). The United Nations specifically drew attention to this particular matter in its document *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood* (2006) in which they highlight the importance of ensuring accessible ECEC services, especially to the most vulnerable children (who live in poverty, or come from minorities or migrant families) (United Nations, 2006, p. 11, ibid.).

Preschools as ECEC service providers cannot ensure solely by providing various programs that Romani parents will enrol children in their programs since the mere provision of service does not ensure accessibility (Vonta, 2013, in Vonta et al., 2013). Preschools, which are the center of preschool education in local communities and in environments with Romani communities, should be more active in the process of encouraging Romani parents to include their preschool children in such ECEC programs (ibid.).

Outreach activities in preschools – the institutions' goal being the provision of outreach services in order to approach the target group, which usually does not have access to such services, in their primary environment (Buck, 2009, in Buck et al., 2009) – constitute the first step toward building the trust of marginalized communities toward preschools/ECEC service providers (Jager, 2016). The trust

that Romani parents have in the institution or ECEC professionals is one of the most important preconditions for their decision to include their child in a program – this fact is supported by numerous international documents, studies, and other sources (such as Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2013; Save the Children, 2001, Building Futures: Developing Trust, 2009; etc.).

In Slovenia the importance of building trust of Romani parents toward preschools is stressed in the Appendix to the Curriculum in Preschools for Working with Romani Children (2005) and the Strategy of Childcare and Education of the Roma in the Republic of Slovenia (2004), the latter of which highlights the importance of activities at preschools even before children enrol in preschools, as they contribute to establishing the trust of Romani parents in the institution. Home visits by ECEC professionals and establishing personal contact with parents play an important role in this regard (ibid.).



LOCAL GUIDELINES

- To facilitate the planning of the activities for the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs it is key that preschools acquire information on the number of Romani preschool children in a given area, as well as to connect with key local stakeholders who will enable the preschool to gain such information.
- Outreach activities should be planned and continuously carried out in preschools, since they are the first step toward building the trust of the Romani community in preschools; such activities may be carried out in the home as informal gatherings, games, creative workshops, sports events, and so forth.
- ECEC professionals should pay special attention to making a personal approach in terms of campaigns; they should notify families of their activities, as well as take Romani parents and their children into consideration when planning, carrying out, and evaluating such activities.
- In order to carry out such activities, suitable conditions should be met in Romani settlements, as appropriate (covered space or at least a canopy with tables and chairs, and so forth).
- It is also important to plan and carry out step-by-step introduction activities to familiarize Romani children and their parents with preschools, ECEC professionals, and other children, enrolled in the preschool, as well as their parents.
- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide transportation for children if Romani parents cannot access the preschool due to financial or any other reasons; this includes not only transporting children and their parents to step-by-step introduction activities, but also their transportation later on when the child is already enrolled.

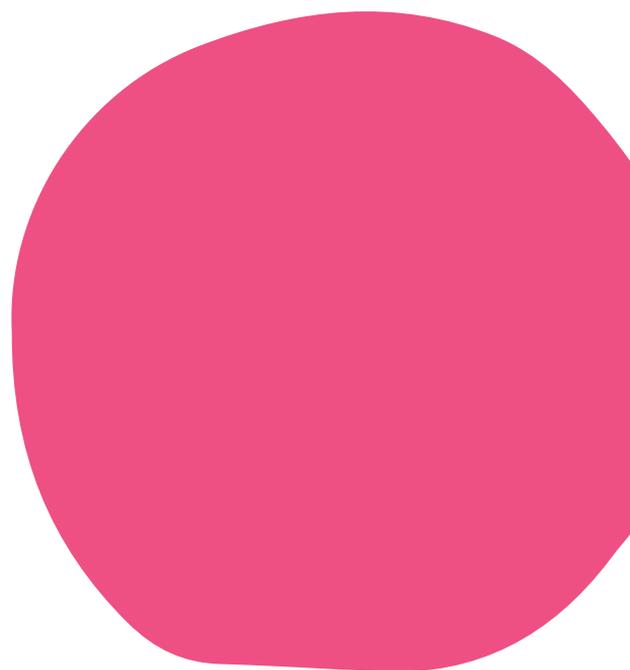
- Regarding the inclusion of Romani children in preschools it is vital that children are included in heterogeneous groups, not in homogeneous groups of only Romani children.
- Various reasons why parents do not enrol their children in early childhood programs should be taken into consideration, as well as the fact that due to high rate of unemployment in Romani communities the need for day care is relatively small. If parents are unable to cover preschool costs – for children at the highest risk – alternative sources for covering enrolment fees should be provided or parents should be permitted to enrol their children free of charge. Additional dedicated financial means should be considered in order to allow parents to ensure their children are transported to preschools, to buy them clothes, and so forth.
- Last but not least, the inclusion or employment of the members of Romani community at preschools should be encouraged and enabled; as such cooperation plays an important part in building trust and overcoming language barriers.

NATIONAL GUIDELINES

- The Personal Data Protection Act should be put into effect in a way that would allow preschools to have access to the necessary information for planning the inclusion of Romani children in early childhood programs.
- It is important to establish appropriate measures and support for preschools that would make them aware of their responsibility not only to support development of children who are already enrolled in their programs, but also in fulfilling the rights of children who are not.
- A binding measure should be implemented to obligate the preschools in environments with Romani communities to prioritize activities with which they could approach Romani children and their parents or encourage the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs.
- In addition to the funds that Slovenia has already earmarked for preschool services for Romani children under the Pre-School Institutions Act, other financial means should be provided for activities with which preschools could approach Romani preschool children who are not enrolled in preschools and their parents (for staff and other related costs).
- A systematic approach to ensuring the prioritized inclusion of Romani children in preschools even during the school year should be considered if parents decide to enrol their child in a preschool during outreach activities or step-by-step introduction activities.
- If parents are not able to cover preschool costs, appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide alternative sources for covering enrolment fees for Romani

children at the highest risk, which would allow their parents to enrol them free of charge.

- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established in order to provide transportation for children if Romani parents cannot access the preschool due to financial or any other reasons; this includes not only the transportation of children and their parents to step-by-step introduction activities, but also their transportation later on when the child is already enrolled.
- Appropriate measures and support for preschools should be established to help them include or employ members of the Romani community at preschools.



Empowering Romani Parents with Regard to Inclusion in Childcare and Education of Their Children

CURRENT STATE

Researches show that the inclusion of parents in their child(ren)'s education process has an effect on all children (Mapp, 2004), especially those who come from socially and economically disadvantaged environments (Quiyun, 2003) – which is certainly true for Romani children in Slovenia. The effects of including Romani parents have also been proven by the aforementioned National Evaluation Study (Vonta et al., 2011). The more Romani parents were included in different kinds of cooperation with schools, the higher the average grade achieved by Romani pupils (ibid.).

Parental inclusion in their child(ren)'s ECEC process therefore plays an important part, especially for children from socially and economically disadvantaged environments. Yet some studies (Graves Smith, 2006; OECD, 2012) show that it is the parents of such children – Romani parents included – that are less likely to participate in such ECEC processes. Reasons for their low inclusion are surely connected to several factors, such as language barriers, embarrassment due to low education level, and so forth (Cotton and Reed Wikelund, 2001).

Since the willingness, ability, and accessibility for inclusion vary from parent to parent, the ECEC institution should ensure a range of possibilities for parental inclusion in the ECEC process (Tankersley et al., 2013). The aforementioned National Evaluation Study (Vonta et al., 2001) shows that the schools that participated in the study mainly cooperate with Romani parents in traditional ways. Such inflexible ways of cooperation, which disregards parent's different needs, interests, and abilities, may be one of the reasons why parents do not participate in those activities (Vonta, 2013, in Vonta et al., 2013).

In this respect it is key that ECEC institutions prioritize parental inclusion in the

ECEC programs of their children and provide appropriate support for all parents, especially those who are less included or are not included at all. After all, it should be stressed that study results (Sylva et al. 2004) show that early parent inclusion in their child(ren)'s ECEC process proves to be highly effective, and preschools play a very important part in this regard.



LOCAL GUIDELINES

- It is vital to raise the awareness of ECEC professionals at preschools about early parent inclusion in their child(ren)'s ECEC programs, especially with respect to Romani children and other children from underprivileged backgrounds.
- It is important to provide different options for the inclusion of Romani parents in such ECEC programs, as well as to ensure continuity in terms of parental inclusion and to provide parents with appropriate support.
- Such efforts should be based on the assumption that the institution considers parental cooperation important and necessary, as well as that the institution creates possibilities for collaboration – the institution should get in touch with individuals as opposed to expecting individuals to do so themselves; whereas with regard to Romani parents establishing a contact with the target group outside the institution in a less formal manner is especially important.
- Potential reasons that hinder the inclusion process of Romani parents in their children's childcare and education should be carefully analyzed (i.e. language barriers, low level of trust in their own ability to actively participate, and so forth) and accordingly taken into account when planning parental inclusion.
- Establishing and building mutual trust between Romani parents and ECEC professionals is the fundamental requirement to achieving parents' willingness to cooperate. We can gain their trust through consistent acquisition and consideration of parents' opinions, ideas, needs, and expectations in terms of their children's childcare and education.

- Special consideration should be given to the establishment of a mechanism to help increase the amount of fathers participating in these activities, such as designing more interesting topics for them, increasing the number of male ECEC professionals, preferably Romani employees, and so forth.
- With regard to planning various approaches, designing diverse topics, and including parents in different ways – while strengthening parental competencies – it is important for ECEC institutions to connect with the representatives of key institutions in the local area and gain their support in this matter.

NATIONAL GUIDELINES

- Special attention should be given to advocacy activities, which include roundtables, conferences, consultations, video materials, and other methods of raising the awareness of professionals and the general public about the importance of the early inclusion of parents in their children's ECEC programs, especially for Romani children and other children from underprivileged backgrounds.
- Training and other forms of professional support should be given in order to strengthen ECEC professionals' competencies in terms of various possibilities for including Romani parents in the ECEC programs of their children.
- Along with programs offered by a particular preschool, supplementary programs by other institutions within the local community should also be provided in order to strengthen parental competencies and empower Romani parents with regard to literacy and other topics that they find important and that would contribute to parents' inclusion in their children's ECEC programs.
- The several methods for parental inclusion in such ECEC programs and the implementation of programs for strengthening parental competencies in this regard should be systemically monitored and evaluated.

Building Trust and Connecting Preschools with Various Actors within the Local Community

CURRENT STATE

The problems that parents from disadvantaged environments, and consequently their children, face are very complex because they experience poverty, increasing inequality, uncertainty regarding employment, migrations, rapid economic and political changes, and so forth. In order to successfully deal with such issues, which are always interdependent, they should be handled as a whole. The integration of services or the system of integrated services from various sectors is a unique opportunity for solving complex issues (OECD, 2015).

At the European level more and more attention is being paid to a systemic and integrated approach to ECEC services, which encompasses all the relevant stakeholders from different sectors (education, culture, social affairs, employment, health, and justice) and different levels of administration (local, regional, and national level), as well as ensures a close cross-sectoral cooperation (European Commission, 2013; Official Journal of the European Union 2011/C 175/03, in Jager, 2016). In terms of the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in early childhood programs, it is important that preschools collaborate with the representatives of different sectors responsible for education, social affairs, health, and so forth, in order to successfully handle any related complex challenges.

All stakeholders involved in cross-sectoral cooperation should have a clear and common understanding of their respective roles and a shared responsibility in collaborative activities, and should also keep in mind that cooperation is expected from them. Policy makers should provide sources for long-term investments in the development of integrated services, as well as for raising awareness and activities for approaching vulnerable groups. They should also conduct appropriate evaluations for a comprehensive understanding of the value of integrated services (OECD, 2015).

LOCAL GUIDELINES

- In terms of preschools all key actors who have contact with Romani families and may contribute to the more successful inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs (municipality, centers for social work, healthcare centers, NGOs and other organizations who work with Romani families, the Romani community, the local community, and so forth) should be identified.
- It is critical that ECEC professionals and other relevant stakeholders within the local community are aware of the significance of a comprehensive approach in preschool education, and should also pay attention to the inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs.
- Local action teams should be formed consisting of the representatives of all key local stakeholders who have contact with Romani families and may contribute to a more successful inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs.
- It is vital that the representatives of the Romani community are identified and included in their respective local action teams.
- In this respect it is key to strengthen the cooperation between the preschool and its founding municipality, with the latter being responsible for providing ECEC programs that can fulfil the specific needs of program participants, including Romani families.
- Last but not least, it is essential that local action teams regularly (once a month or more often, if needed) meet to determine key challenges that arise with regard to the inclusion of Romani children in early childhood programs, plan campaigns, and evaluate the implementation of their objectives.

NATIONAL GUIDELINES

- It is necessary to establish a system of cross-sectoral collaboration that brings together preschools and other local institutions (municipalities, centers for social work, healthcare centers, and so forth), as well as to include them in work and problem-solving activities regarding the inclusion of Romani children in early childhood programs (healthcare centers should provide medical examinations for Romani children before they enrol in preschools, municipalities should provide additional sources for transporting children from Romani settlements to preschools, if needed, and centers for social work should handle appropriate subventions for covering enrolment fees, and so forth).
- It is necessary to provide training and other activities to raise the awareness of professionals and the general public regarding the importance and strategies for connecting preschools with various actors within local communities, as well as including Romani children and their parents in preschool programs.
- It is key to carry out advocacy activities about the importance of connecting preschools with various actors within local communities who have contact with Romani families and may contribute to the more successful inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs (municipalities, centers for social work, healthcare centers, NGOs and other organizations who work with Romani families, the Romani community, and so forth).
- Connecting preschools with various actors within local communities who have contact with Romani families and may contribute to a more successful inclusion of Romani children and their parents in ECEC programs should be prioritized in every preschool in areas with Romani communities.

- With regard to efforts for the inclusion of the members of the Romani community in local action teams, suitable support should be provided in connection with empowering the members of the Romani community to ensure their active participation in local action teams.
- Systemic monitoring and evaluation of local action teams that work in areas with Romani communities should be ensured.
- The establishment and work of local action teams should be included in national documents that govern the childcare and education of Romani children, and effort should be made to incorporate this initiative in the strategic documents of municipalities with Romani communities.

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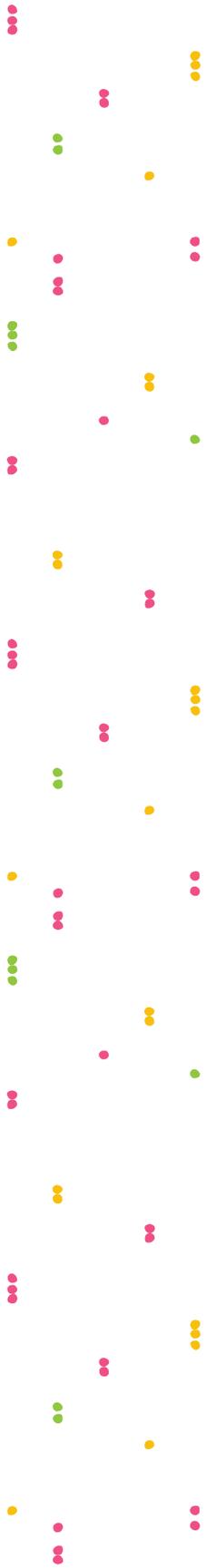
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