



An open letter to the Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, Helsinki, Finland

## "Prime Minister and Children in Alcohol Families"

*Dear Prime Minister*

I know that the new cabinet has many important matters to deal with. One of them is the reduction of alcohol-related harms and especially the problem that affects one in ten people directly and the rest of us in an indirect way: the families with parental alcohol or drug problems.

In January we, the Ombudsman for Children and voluntary organisations of this field, presented a proposal to Minister Liisa Hyssälä on improving the situation of children in alcohol families. The Minister, the State Secretary and the civil servants listened to us sympathetically and promised to advance the issue, also with an eye on the upcoming government negotiations. We took these promises seriously, because it really is time to do something about this national disgrace. I trust that you already discussed this matter in the government negotiations.

According to a recent international UNICEF comparison, Finnish children have a safe and healthy living environment, but the study did not look at for instance violence against children. Quite a typical way of turning a blind eye, since we at the same time know that also in Finland parental alcohol problems are the most common and the most underestimated forms of domestic violence and child neglect. Excessive drinking is in many cities the most common reason for taking children into custody. Half a million Finns suffer from this social and public health problem.

It is important to understand that even though alcohol has become the national disease of our time, the problems are not only caused by the visible excessive consumption, but in an even larger scale by the inconsiderate drinking of parents. Also moderate consumption can be harmful if we do not take the children into consideration when drinking.

Mr Prime Minister, is it not true that if there were an epidemic of disease causing harms to an equally large group of children, the nation would have been mobilised a long time ago?

The good thing is, of course, that this is in a way an easy issue, because in principle we all are on the children's side. Often it is a question of opening our eyes, of understanding that alcohol is a different kind of issue for children than it is for us adults. Usually the harms are not irrevocable, with the exception of FAS. Children also have their innate resources. Many children of alcohol families survive, as long as they have an understanding adult to support them or contacts with others in the same situation. And, in severe cases, there is therapy and other expert help quickly available.

There are effective yet cheap means to help children in alcohol and drug families. What is needed is the support from all adults as well as the mobilisation of professionals. Both relatives and authorities are needed.

But this issue is too large to be tackled by voluntary organisations alone. That is why we proposed to the Minister of Social Affairs and Health that the state include the issue of supporting alcohol families into its strategies and make it a focus of practical measures. We suggested both changes in the alcohol policy in general as well as special measures of support on many levels.

Dear Prime Minister, the government is offered an excellent opportunity to help all Finnish children live truly well by providing also the children of alcohol families a safe environment to grow up in. The state has passed laws giving citizens a subjective right to get help in many other situations that are as far-reaching and serious as this one. Should not a similar right be given to children in families with parental alcohol or drug problems?

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### *Update:*

To the great satisfaction of the author, the Ombudsman for Children, and others who signed the proposal mentioned above, the Programme of the new government of Mr. Vanhanen, published on 19 April 2007, states as its aims: "To decrease with a purposeful alcohol and drug policy the alcohol use of parents and harms caused by that to children. To safeguard children's rights by securing treatment of pregnant women who have alcohol problems. To secure sufficient support services for children of alcoholic parents."