

## INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING CHILDREN FROM SOCIALLY AT-RISK FAMILIES

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### Abstract

The connection between a socially dysfunctional family and a child's failure at school is a frequent phenomenon well-known by teachers. The objective of the three-year long research (2014-2016) was to identify the level of similarities as well as differences in the field of assessment of at risk families based on theoretical concepts of chosen systemic models of family functionality and the usual practices in family situation assessment by those working in social and legal children's protection. This article presents only a part of the research, which emphasizes the role played by school, a child's behavior at school and school employees in assessing family functionality. The essential research question is "What are the significant for assessing a family's social risk rate by children's social and legal protection workers? Grounded Theory was chosen as the qualitative research design. To achieve a high level of objectiveness, the researcher cooperated with representatives of various sectors: State (offices of labor, social affairs and families), town and village municipalities as well as NGOs which provided altogether 58 participants. The premise of this study is that once social workers are informed about problems in a child's family, they can immediately contact a school headmaster and a class teacher. In the phase of assessing the risk level of children and their family, the school is in the optimal position to prevent many crises or even fatal situations that may befall the child as the school can inform the social workers of the symptoms (e.g. truancy, violent behavior, improper/inadequately sized seasonal clothes, missing school tools and study materials, disinterested parents) In the social intervention phase, professional school employees can cooperate with social workers to reduce the negative effects of family dysfunctionality on children.

*Keywords:* Children, school behavior, dysfunctional family, schools employees

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## **1. Introduction**

Twenty six years have passed, since socialism was overthrown in former Czechoslovakia. The government's paternalistic approach to social care changed overnight- in November 1989 - into a complete loss of interest in citizens. In Slovakia, we have been trying to find the optimal solution between these two approaches – from closed paternalistic care to total neglect of citizens' needs. In every social system, a family still represents the basic social unit upon which all other social structures are built. The more stable the family, the more stable the whole society. In Slovakia, the work with families is carried out by both the public as well as the private sector. As for the work with dysfunctional families, two main support systems have been formed: psychological and social. The psychological system intervenes through the network of state counselling agencies and private clinical psychologists. Qualified psychotherapists focus on work with an individual or with a couple, but very rarely with the whole family. The focus of psychotherapy is still an individual. It is well-known that the living standards and living conditions of each individual may deteriorate or improve according to his/her family circumstances. The social system mainly works thanks to the state network of offices of labor, social affairs and families. Thanks to the proclaimed "child's best interest" labor office employees also deal with children's families. The system of private NGOs usually specializes in specific problems in families and these work as a complement of the state system. The history of social work shows that the family has always been an object of the social work intervention, which can be seen in the works of Jane Addams (1886), Zilpha Drew Smith (1914), Mary Richmond (1917) and Marie Krakešová (1946) (as cited in Levická, 2002a, 2002b, Levická, et al., 2012). The objective of social work with a family is to help to improve the life quality of individual family members as well as family adaptation abilities with regard to their social environment. The main objective of family therapy is to teach a family to respond adequately to their members with a mental disorder as well as to cope with the consequences. In this article, the researcher would like to present partial research outcomes of a scientific project affiliation with the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. This article aspires to highlight effects of social family dysfunction on children's behavior at school. The objective of the research is to influence teachers', psychologists', special and therapeutic educators' views on school failures of children from socially dysfunctional families.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The three-year long research (2014-2016) mentioned above was aimed at identifying the level of similarities as well as differences in the field of assessment of risk rate of families premised in the theoretical concepts of the selected systemic models of family functionality as

found in Olson`s circumplex model of family system (2011; 2000; 1993; 1991; 1986) Connolly and Beaver (2015); McMaster`s (2017) model of family functioning (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 1998; Fiese, 2002; Ryan & Epstein, 2005), Beavers`s systemic model of family functioning (Beavers, 1997, 1985, 1989; Beavers & Hampson, 1990, 1993). These were supplemented with the usual practices used in family assessment by workers working in the field of social and legal children`s protection. The social and psychological models of work with families was analyzed and compared, in order to identify the departure points and theoretical models and concepts used by Slovak professionals working with families.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

This paper will present the partial research outcomes dealing with the assessment phase of children and family`s social diagnostics by social workers. The purpose of this is to highlight the role played by schools, the child`s behavior at school and school employees when assessing family functionality by social workers. One of the research objectives of the long term study was to identify key indicators of the social risk rate of a family from the perspective of workers working in social and legal children`s protection.

### **4. Research Questions**

The basic research question is “What are most significant indicators that workers working in social and legal children`s protection can use to identify a family`s social risk rate?”

### **5. Research Methods**

Grounded Theory was chosen as the qualitative research design for the entire research. However, only the relevant explanations pertaining to the research procedure for the portion reported in this paper will be given. Participants were selected based on their experience and competencies in identifying and assessing risk rate of families.

To achieve a high level of objectiveness, the researcher cooperated with representatives of various sectors: State (offices of labor, social affairs and families), town and village municipalities as well as NGOs which provided altogether 58 participants for this study.

The data collection and processing were carried out from December 2015 to August 2016. The information was gained through semi-structured interviews that were recorded, literally transcribed and processed via Atlas.ti software. Besides semi-structured interviews with workers working in social and legal children`s protection, content analysis of documents was also carried out. The analyzed documents were records on chosen families documented by social and legal children`s protection offices as well as the internal norms titled “Social

Work Planning in social and legal children's protection and social guardianship" published by the headquarters of the Office of Labor, Social Affairs and Families. This content analysis revealed that "the life situation of a child and his/her family", is aimed at "...identifying a child's and his/her family's needs, finding out how his/her family functioned in the past, what problems they are facing now and how they are able to change them.

## **6. Research Findings**

This paper will present a part of the results obtained from a long-term research on the practice of assessing social risk rate in families in terms of how these are inextricably linked with the school environment of a child living in a dysfunctional family. The interview responses were coded which resulted in basic categories and subcategories as well as the emergence of individual indicators within them.

The results were divided into three parts according in accordance with the research focus: (1) What indicators do workers in the field of social and legal children's protection identify as a social risk in the family assessment process? (2) How do they handle this? (3) What does this mean for school employees? The coding of the interviews identified 2574 indicators of probable causes of social dysfunctionality in families. These indicators were grouped into 6 basic categories: 1) saturation of family members' basic needs involving subcategories: housing, food, clothing, hygiene, health; 2) general family functioning and their mutual communication containing subcategories: family potential, parents, parents' and children's relationship, siblings' relationship, relationship to the living environment; 3) emotionality and family relations; 4) pathology in family; 5) financial family situation containing subcategories: income and expenses, employment and work, social and demographic situation; 6) school and education.

For the purpose of this paper, the presentation of results focuses on the last category of indicators of social risk in families with regard to the category of school and education.

The research results show that workers in social and legal children's protection consider the child's behavior at school to be an important factor signaling potential for the development of risky family functionality. That this information is well-known, is acknowledged by the researchers and this paper highlights those signals arising from such children's school behavior that could indicate to teachers and the other professional school employees that a child is becoming a victim of his/her family's failure.

The research results show that about one-third of the total number of defined indicators are linked with the school. This fact is not surprising as a school represents a natural environment, where a child spends a third of his/her day. A very clear signal to indicate that

something is not quite right in a child's family is truancy. This phenomenon only appears in connection with two basic areas. Truancy as a natural part of family's lifestyle or it is a reflection of the child's crisis situation, most frequently the consequence of parents' divorce or abuse. Truancy is a very transparent and seemingly objective indicator as it is quantifiable (number of missed unexcused lessons).

Children from socially dysfunctional families struggle for years with undiagnosed learning disorders. Their parents often do not have sufficient mental abilities to notice disorders. School employees consider children's slow learning (compared to their peers) to be caused by an unstimulating social environment. This too can be an indicator of at-risk family circumstances that can be identified with school behavior.

Non-adaptive school behavior (demonstrated for example through small thefts, fighting with peers, intimidating and bullying of others) is typical for children, who miss the feeling of safety in their families. Feeling safe is significantly absent not only in children from low-income families, but also in children with the children abused and neglected (CAN) syndrome. It is quite common for at risk families, which tend to be in low income groups to move from a certain social housing to another. This results in cutting off children's social links and these children face enormous pressure and expectations to adapt constantly to a new environment, new teachers, new classmates and a new community. Escaping from an abusive spouse or partner, from bankruptcy execution, frequent changing of partners by one of parents can exert enormous pressure on a child, which results in a child's resignation and accepting his/her label as problematic. In this way, the vicious cycle grinds on as the unfortunate child joins other family members who are already labelled this way.

In other at-risk circumstances, children coming from socially isolated communities experience rather difficult circumstances to attend school regularly. They often have to walk on foot for several miles - in every kind of weather, in order to attend school. In such cases, the child's school attendance depends a lot on his/her parents and their attitude to education. If the parents' value system does not consider education as important, they will not support their children's educational efforts. Usually this is also linked with employment. If a parent works - legally or illegally - he/she tends to provide conducive conditions for his/her children's education. Such parents would attend parents' gatherings at school, and ask teachers about his/her child's results and behavior in school. For a child's educational success, the parents' relationship to education and employment appears to be far more important than the family's material circumstances. There are parents, who walk side by side with their children, even though it is for several miles, just to make sure that their child gets to school. Parents who support their children in education would also attempt to bring up the children (more or less

successfully). On the other hand, with at-risk families, children's behavior at school would be unacceptable and they would be labelled as ill-mannered. Such children would behave badly in the canteen or in common social contacts. They would be clothed neglectfully, in clothes either disproportionate for their age (too small or too big) or unsuitable for the current weather. Their hygiene would be insufficient, often with parasites, and they are often hungry at school. Such symptoms are caused by their family's dysfunction, including material circumstances as well as parents' incapability to provide adequately for their children. Such children also often do not have basic school necessities (school bag, pencil case etc.) for which they are punished at school and labelled as neglectful and unconsciencious. The children in this situation, passively accepts such criticism if they can still hide the social dysfunctionality of their family. Only a visit to the child's household will uncover that housing and living conditions are unacceptable. It would be discovered that such children would not have any space of their own not only for studying, but even sleeping, causing them to fall asleep at lessons, or unable to concentrate due to lack of rest or nutrition. They may even have to do their homework while there is daylight as their family does not have electricity.

All these symptoms occurring at the school level are clear indicators that the child is or going to be at risk. The mislabeling of children's unacceptable behavior at school by inconsiderate and/or insensitive school employees is both neglectful and disrespectful of the innocent child's pathetic circumstances, resulting from family dysfunctionality. The (bright) future of such children is jeopardized due to the insensitivity and incompetence of school employees to notice and highlight such symptoms to social workers. This underscores the importance of the need for social workers to work closely with the school to identify and solve the issues arising from family dysfunctionality with regard to the effects on the children.

## **7. Conclusions and Implications**

Social workers' cooperation with schools can take several forms according to the phase of work with a child and his family. Once social workers are informed about problems in a child's family, they immediately contact a school headmaster and a class teacher. Many social workers consider a school to work as a "litmus-paper" and they fully trust in school employees' opinions. In the phase of assessing the risk level for a child and his/her family, the school is in the optimal position to prevent many crises or even fatal situations that may befall the child by quickly informing the social workers of the symptoms. At times, the identification may occur based on a teacher's instinct that something is wrong with a child, while at other times, there are clear symptoms. In the social intervention phase, professional school employees can cooperate with social workers to reduce the effects of family dysfunctionality on children.

This collaboration can be organized as a cooperating intervention team usually comprising a social worker, a psychologist, a teacher, a pediatrician, a policeman, a city council officer.

In European societies, education systems have been established on the assumption that children are adequately provided with positive mental as well as material conditions which would secure their educational efforts. In reality however, a great number of children suffer quietly though poverty and hardship in their families, which many teachers or other school employees have no clue about. This situation mostly occurs when the family dysfunction starts to develop. At this stage, children in such a situation naturally feel embarrassed to admit it to themselves as well as to others that their family is facing problems. It is at this juncture that the school employees' actions are paramount in saving the child concerned. A school employee trained to identify such symptoms will realise that something is wrong through the child's appearance and behavior. This information can be relayed to a social worker who can then take the appropriate steps to mitigate the damage to the child resulting from the family's dysfunctionality. Both of them can cooperate to provide for such children the opportunity to feel accepted and prevent them from feeling like and becoming neglected.

The significance of this research lies in the vital need for those working with children to establish a relationship between children's failure at school and the dysfunction level of his/her family. Although this is a great challenge for the agencies concerned, it is nonetheless crucial that efforts in this direction are undertaken for the sake of the "child's best interest" as it is the children who will suffer the most in such situations. As mentioned earlier, school is the place where a child spends one third of his/her day. Hence, much good can be achieved by ensuring that all school employees, not just the teachers, are aware of and responsive to the indicators that signal a child's distress due to family dysfunctionality. This action aligns to the research focus mentioned earlier which are "How do they handle this?" and "What does this mean for school employees?"

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that indicators of children's physical, psychological, and mental well-being are inextricably linked with the school. Hence, it is crucial that the school's association with and responsibility for children's well-being be a strong focus of research. Much more needs to be done in this area and for researchers and practitioners, this is a fertile ground for further investigation and action in this area.

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