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Importance of social work intervention: Social and economic benefits

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Abstract. Study is focused at an early intervention of social work for risk reduction in families with children and the importance of early intervention. Like an example on which the practical part of the study is based, is one of the early intervention methods – parents’ educational programme “A Child’s Emotional Upbringing” and the importance of this method in reduction of social risks and promotion of social and economic benefits.

Risks characteristic for families with children are many-sided and complex and it means that the state and local-government institutions have to invest essential financial and human resources (professionals’ resources) to solve them.

As long as the emphasis is not put on preventive work in the practical social work activities, professionals will have to work with families with children, where social risks have already made severe effects on the life of the family.

A questionnaire and interviews were used to acquire the data. The data obtained allow us to draw a conclusion, that intervention methods used early can reduce single risks, which, in its turn, promote the development of social and economic benefits both at an individual and family level, as well at the public level.

Still, some risks remain unchanged. The result of the use of such early intervention methods in social work with families with children can be attributed to different aims of the methods. On the other hand, when analyzing the meaning of early social work methods through social-economical prism, one can conclude, that, by using these methods in routine social work, the amount of resources decreases, but, taking into account the fact, that these methods not always have a longstanding effect, the question still remains acute: what are the necessary amount of resources to be invested in order to maintain the achieved result.

Introduction

In order a child would grow up and develop fully, an essential influence is not concerning only heredity, but also the social environment where a child is growing up. At an early age, this environment is created and affected by a child’s primary caregivers, who most commonly are the child’s closest people – parents. If the environment is beneficial, the child develops positive experience, but if there are any risks, they can unfavourably affect the child’s development and physical and mental health.

The United Nations Organization provides the Guidelines on child’s rights and welfare. The Covention on the Rights of the Child (The CRC) (further in the text –CRC) provides care and support in provision of children’s right, as well as emphasizes the importance of the role of the family to

ensure conditions for a child's welfare and upbringing. (The CRC – Children's Rights Convention) LR Convention has been ratified and laws and regulations have been adopted (for example – Law on Protection of Children's Rights, Orphan's Court Act, Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers, which declare the protection of children's rights, which addresses children's rights and welfare, and various programmes have been developed for protection of the child and the family. One of the priorities mentioned is development policy of the country is the child's and family welfare. The LR Ministry of Welfare has worked out the Guidelines on national family policy for 2011–2017 in which the goal of the national family policy is: to promote setting up a family, stability, welfare and contribution into the increase of the birth rate, as well as strengthening the institution of marriage and its value in society. (National Guidelines for Family for 2011–2017) In order to provide support to children and families, the state and local government institutions, as well as public and non-governmental organizations are working on it.

In Latvia, this work is carried out by implementing surveys and supervision of the families in which children upbringing and care is not provided fully and it is done through educational institutions, health care institutions, social services and the police, and, within the competences of each institution, the assistance for the restoration of families functionalities is provided as well.

The social service employs specialists whose professionalism is targeted only at the work with families with children, and whose activities, determined by the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, are to help each person or family to identify, solve or reduce social problems, developing each individual person's resources, and involving them into support systems. (Law on Social Services and Social Assistance). In practice it means, that the necessary social services are attracted either to social risk families, or to parents deprived of care/custody rights or if there only such a threat exists.

According to the data of the Children's Rights Protection Inspectorate, there is a great number of families which do not meet the necessary conditions for the children development and children upbringing. Though, when comparing the statistical data of the last three years, the number of such families in the Republic of Latvia is decreasing (2010–2237, 2011–2061, 2012–2018). But for those who are employed in the field of social work and children and family protection, this question still remains topical. (Children's Rights Protection Inspectorate).

The main, unifying criterion of professional activity for the institutions and specialists, who are engaged in the field of children's rights protection is to prevent social risks, which restrict the possibilities to provide favourable conditions for good development of all family members, as well as provide good and safe environment for children which would be adequate for their specific development age. It means that the duty of social workers is to timely prevent conditions, which may be the basis for a child's separation from his/her family.

The authors of the study, when analyzing the children and families support programmes developed in the country, studied statistical data on the situation of the group studied and the activated preventive programmes and single methods, they paid attention to one specific method – parents' support programme – a child's emotional upbringing, which arised several topical questions: whether the parents' educational programme "A Child's Emotional Upbringing" reduces social risks in the family? What social risks are reduced by parents' educational programme "A Child's Emotional Upbringing" (like an early intervention method)? What are the possible financial differences, investing into early intervention programme and in reduction of consequences of social risks? What are the possible social and economic benefits by introducing an early social work intervention?

In order to look for answers to these questions, the aim was set: to study parents' educational programme's "A Child's Emotional Upbringing" social risk reduction in the family and to analyze the possible social and economic benefits at individual and the family level, as well at the public level.

But, in order to acquire the data, such methods as statistical data and other analysis data, case analysis, interviews and questionnaires were used.

Study of material

According to U. Bronfenbrenner's formulated bio ecological human development model, a human development is described as an interactive process of dynamic biological and environmental factors which occur within the framework of five interrelated systems: in microsystem – in the nearest environment in which a human development is going on (family and school interaction); mesosystem which is a formed interaction of microsystems (family and school interaction); ecosystem or a wider environment (wider family, family friends, parents' place of work) which indirectly affects the development; macrosystem which is formed by culture norms, traditions and values, and chronosystem which is formed by the above identified mutual interactions and in the process of the development. (Bronfenbrenner, 2000).

Biological and environmental factors in the child's development make an impact on the child's development and, with the conditions being unfavourable, they can become the risk factors.

Regarding the risk factors due to children's behavioural problems, we can divide the risk factors into four groups: 1) factors related to children development; 2) interrelation of parents – children; 3) parents' experience and current functioning; 4) social demographic and social factors. (Landy, 2002).

In case the risk factors are not timely reduced or prevented, the family may face various problems, for instance, violence, problems of family relationship, low self-esteem of family members, aggravation of social-economical situation, etc. On the other hand, if timely support for the family is provided, family members' chances for a long-term involvement in social and economic life are encouraged. And, undeniably, such a support should begin with the investment into children.

In social routine work, when estimating the parents' abilities of provision for the children's needs in respect to their age, doing the risk assessment in the family, the risk factors directed at provision of basic needs, either safety, or emotional stability in the family, and emotional attachment are taken into account. (see Table 1).

Source: LR Regulations of Cabinet of Ministers 03.06.2003, Nr. 291 "Requirements to social service givers" (amendments made 08.03.2011).

But, in order to timely identify and prevent social risks in the family, it is necessary to introduce the early intervention which is one of the instruments of social work, and it includes various methods and programs. It is a complex of services for families with children at early age and covers all activities which are necessary for the family. But, in order to effectively recognize the need for early intervention, it is necessary to consider all its elements: accessibility (support to families should be provided as early as possible), *proximity* to services (services reach all representatives of target groups, and social workers have to have a clear understanding about the needs of the family, and their consideration is at the centre of each activity), financial accessibility (services offered to the family are free of charge, because services are provided by social assistance or educational service providers, or public organizations, using the state of local government financing, or with a minimum family co-payments), intersectional work (specialists, who are engaged in service provision to children and families; there exist various branches, and they have different professional experience in respect to the institution where they are working), variety of services. This feature is closely related to branches which get involved in the early intervention process. (Early intervention – Progress and development tendencies, 2005–2010).

Studying social work practice in Latvia, the authors can assert that the early intervention methods are being gradually acquired and included into practice. In the World and European context, different programmes and separate methods have been used quite long and have been accepted at the macro level. The programme "Steady basis" ("Drošais pamats") worked out in the Great Britain is the state policy instrument in the field of children's rights protection. It means that at the national level the early intervention is paid a significant role in work with families at risk. Quite successful activities have been made in Poland, where parents' educational programme is implemented on the upbringing not applying spanking – step by step "Without a spank. How with love and respect to set borders

Table 1. Assessment of risk criteria.

Nr.	Child's affecting risk factors	Parents' affecting risk factors
1.	Child's age	A parent's mental, physical and emotional behavior
2.	Physical, mental development and social skills	Use of addictive substances
3.	Behaviour	Drug co-dependance
4.	Education	Parents' skills and knowledge in children upbringing
5.	Use of addictive substances	Mutual relationship of parents and children
6.	Drug co-dependence	Parents' reaction to a child's behavioral disorders
7.	Adequate medical care	Child's protection from a violent person or threatening situations
8.	Provision of basic needs	Violence in the family which is not directly aimed at the child
9.	Physical threat	Experience of violence or insufficient attention acquired by a parent in childhood
10.	Self-defense	Provision of a parent's basic needs
11.	Fear from a parent (other persons) or home environment	A parent's employment
12.	Supervision/control	A parent's stress
13.	Parents' (other persons) physical violence to the child	Social support to a parent Social support to a parent
14.	Degree of physical injuries and damage	Recognition of the problem
15.	Degree of emotional vulnerability	Collaboration with state, local government and other institutions
16.	Sexual abuse and exploitation	Earlier experience in child care
17.	Use of child's resources for getting one's own benefit	
18.	Period of time when violence was induced or insufficient control, or a child being outside the family care	

for a child". ("Bez pēriena. Kā ar mīlestību un cieņu noteikt bērnam robežas.") In Latvia, the early intervention programmes and methods are actively implemented by the Foundation "Centre Dardedze" ("Centrs Dardedze."). In cooperation with "Nobodys Children Foundation", Bulgarian Social activities and practice centre and Lithuanian Children's support centre, the Foundation "Centre Dardedze" is in process of implementing a project "A house without violence for each child". The aim of this project is to promote small children's parents' understanding of negative consequences of physical punishment or the use of any other cruel treatment to small children, as well as to improve parents' knowledge about positive children's discipline methods. In the project "Childhood without violence – the best children's rights protection system in East European countries", besides the above mentioned organizations, also National center for violence prevention to a child of Moldova and the Ukrainian Children Welfare Fund take part. The aim of the project is to develop the children's protection system in Latvia, to improve competences of professionals who work in this field and to promote public knowledge and participation in prevention of violence (Foundation "Centrs Dardedze," 2012).

When acquiring the international experience in early prevention activities, training programs for young parents are provided, social workers also provide a family assistant's services which provide support to the family/a person as well as training in social skills, care of a child and upbringing, household management in accordance to the individually made social rehabilitation plan, etc. (RD binding regulations Nr. 184, 2012).

Early intervention in social risk prevention positively influences the family environment, consequently – the child's social and emotional health. But, if children grow up in poverty and in unfavorable conditions, if they don't receive adequate health care and education, or, if they

encounter other social and economic risks, it may promote children's further exclusion and even discrimination.

The European Commission Communication for the European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee and Regional Committee urges Member States to turn greater attention to such political fields as childcare, education, support in housing, rehabilitation and health care services, etc. In this communication, it is indicated, that by doing social investments, one should focus on the final results both at an individual, and public level, and it is admitted that a greater support is provided by social services, rather than cash benefits. (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, European Economic and Social Committee and Regional Committee: Social Investments into Development and Cohesion, as well as for the implementation of European Social Fund for 2014–2020, 2013.)

One of the social work service instruments which is used for early intervention of families at risk, is the support group for parents "A Child's Emotional Upbringing" (further – CEU). CEU aim is to help parents to be able to bring up emotionally fit and talented children.

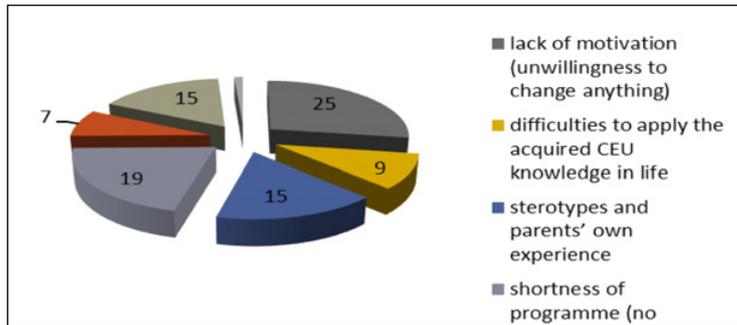
When executing the first part of the study – to investigate the meaning of parents' educational program CEU regarding the risk reduction in the family, 25 and interviewed 7 social workers, who in their practice use CEU as an early intervention method in work with a client were questioned, additionally, 2 Orphan's Court staff and 2 CEU group monitors were interviewed and 7 social cases were analyzed. To do the analysis, special social cases considering certain criteria were selected: there is a child (children) in the family up to the the age of 7; obligatory status of a client; as the most significant code of the problem- a lack of skills of a child's upbringing and a lack of skills in a child's care; Orphans' Court involved in case solution; a client transferred to and undertaken the parents' educational programme CEU. But, when analyzing these cases, the initial social functioning evaluation and risk assessment of parents before and after attending CEU which were based on the Regulations of LR Cabinet of Ministers 03.06.2003., Nr. 291 "Requirement to social service providers" (amendments made 08.03.2011) appendix Nr. 1 was used.

Study results

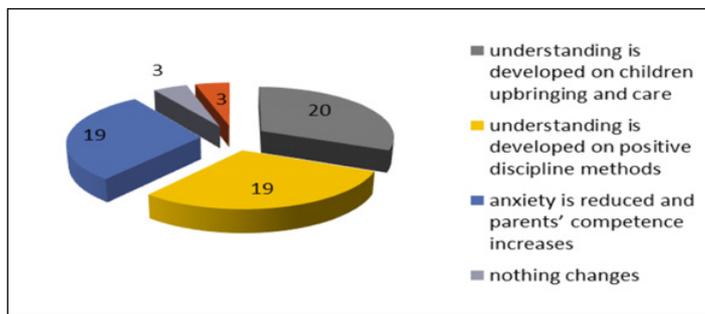
Doing analysis of the data obtained from the study, we can conclude, that as the main pitfall for achieving BEA aims, the respondents have mentioned the lack of clients' motivation/disinclination to change something. Nineteen respondents have pointed to the temporariness (lack of continuity) of BEA programme, it is regarded as an obstacle for achieving CEA aims, while fifteen respondents have marked, that the obstacles are parents' stereotypes and their own individual experience, as well as lack of support to parents after CEA programmes. In nine answers it was pointed out that obstacles in achieving CEA aims are connected with difficulties to apply theoretical knowledge acquired during life. Seven respondents have mentioned that obstacles might be connected with the lack of further supervision (control). One respondent has indicated the answer "other", pointing, that, for parents, it is sometimes too complicated to perceive the information given (see Picture 1).

Twenty respondents, however, have expressed their opinion, saying, that after the visit to CEU, they have developed the understanding of the children upbringing. Nineteen times, respondents have marked that parents are getting an understanding about the positive disciplinary methods, as well as they are having less anxiety and it raises parents' sense of competence. Some respondents have marked, that it may be, that "nothing changes in the family after CEA visit", that "everything before-mentioned can change, but it depends on the client's motivation", "unfortunately, nothing changes in most of the families", and still "it depends on the situation in the family as a whole" (see Picture 2).

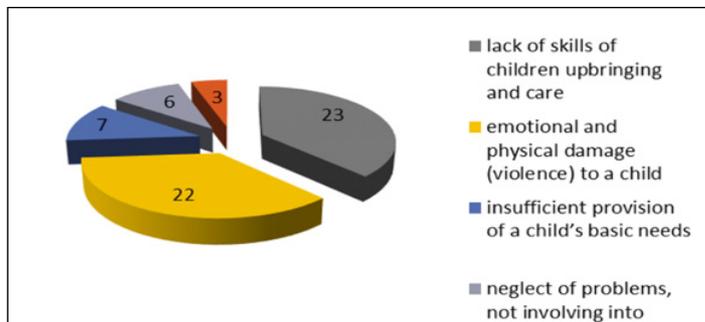
When risks which decrease in the family after the attendance of CEA were analyzed, respondents have marked, that, after the attendance of CEA, reduced are mostly those risks are which are connected with children upbringing and lack of care skills, and also the risks which are connected with emotional



Picture 1. Pitfalls for achieving CEU aims. Source: Bolsteina, 2012.



Picture 2. Changes in the family after the attendance of CEU lessons. Source: Bolsteina, 2012.



Picture 3. Risks which are reduced after CEU. Source: Bolsteina, 2012.

and physical harm done to a child. Decrease also the risks which deal with insufficient provision of basic needs to the child, and the risks which are connected with denial of problems, disengagement in problem solution. Some respondents have emphasized, that “risk reduction depends on the family, parental specificities, or a situation”, and “it changes, if a client is motivated, though the risks usually change little” (see Picture 3).

Results of case studies:

- Risks dealing with the use of addictive substances (in 3 cases the risk had decreased; parents got involved into the therapy program).

- Risks dealing with parents' skills and knowledge about the children upbringing (in 5 cases these risks have been prevented, parents provided the environment which is necessary for growth and development of children in accordance to their needs; 1 – moderate risks, 1 – high).
- Risks dealing with a parent and a child's mutual relationship (in 5 cases they had been prevented and the child-parent's relationship is stable, 1 – moderate risks, 1-impossible to prevent such risks because the child in this period was taken out of the family).
- Risks dealing, with violence in the family (in 5 cases they were prevented and parents are solving conflicts without violent methods, 2 – low risks are preserved).
- Risks dealing with the parents' ability to recognize the problems and to undertake the responsibility (in 5 cases the risks have been reduced, in 1 case – moderate risk exist, in 1 case, there is still high risk).

Conclusions

Certainly, in social practice, using early intervention methods, in order to reduce or prevent risk factors, it is important to evaluate the efficiency of these methods, sustainability, usefulness and coherence. But, in general, the study data point to single benefit both at individual and the family, or public levels. Among most of the important benefits, we can mention: knowledge how to help a child grow up/how to bring up a child emotionally and physically healthy, and consequently – how to change the child-rearing model; the understanding of the family related problems and the ways for their solutions; reduced or prevented social dysfunctions due to the consequences; the opportunities for continuation of objective and timely professional intervention; reduced costs due to prevention of delayed and deeper consequences. And, in case the early intervention is viewed through long-term prism, we can assume that along with the reduction of risk factors, the human capital of family members (children including) increases, and with it also the future perspectives widen.

- Social risks which deal with CEU aims are reduced;
- CEU influence is short,, it is necessary to continue to strengthen CEU acquired knowledge and skills in order to stabilize CEU acquired results.
- The preventive program costs are lower rather than working with the consequences.

The work at reduction or prevention of consequences because of social risks is connected with direct or indirect expenses from the state and local government budgets.

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