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**SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES FOR SUPPORTING EARLY
CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

ABSTRACT

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The dissertation work “Social work with children and families for supporting early childhood development” was discussed at a meeting of the Social Studies Department of the Faculty of Pedagogy at Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski and is scheduled for defense. The doctor thesis defense will take place on March 31, 2023 at 1 p.m. in the Meeting Hall of the Faculty of Pedagogy, New Building of PU “Paisii Hilendarski”, city of Plovdiv.

The dissertation has a volume of 161 pages and consists of an introduction, three chapters, a summary, conclusions, recommendations for practice work and a list of cited literature (sources) – 105 titles, of which 81 are in Cyrillic and 24 in Latin alphabeth. The dissertation contains 41 figures and one diagram.

The dissertation’s defense papers are available in the New Building of Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski, 236 Bulgaria Blvd., Plovdiv.

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Introduction

1. Actuality

Representing early childhood development as a complex process, there are many opportunities for it to be supported, even if there is no *visible* or *registered* need according professionals. The more complete the acquisition of knowledge and skills in early childhood is, the more qualitative and complete the child's handling of more complex tasks will become when the child is older, which also determines the importance of the need of support for both children and their families. Their development is supported by parents, environment, community and depends on their resources, understanding, capabilities and limitations. It has been proven that the consequences of family upbringing (positive or negative) are long-lasting and reflect in a peculiar way on the effect of the educational process (Krasteva, 2005, 141). In agreement with Madzharov's statement, childhood is "a certain period of life during which adults organize the assimilation of knowledge and behaviour by children" (Madzharov, 2011). It clearly distinguishes the seemingly important role of the family, as a basis for the favorable and beneficial environment for children's development.

In such a *sensitive* period, early childhood providing timely support to parents is extremely important. The support and the encouragement for families to overcome or reduce the negative consequences is a prerequisite for children to develop their potential to the maximum extent. In the focus of the difficulties for our time, the quality of family care stands out as the most rapidly changing dimension, which quite understandably also changes their childhood. When parents and families are informed and supported about the important moments of children's development, when their attention is focused on the child's early years and their importance in determining their future performance, then the minimization of risks to the full development of the child is more certain. Supporting every member of the society is necessary when there are risk conditions for their quality of life, for their development, realization, health status and so on. Support, regardless of its priorities – economic stability and development, social security and protection or educational development, in the context of state policy, is fundamental to limit and minimize adverse consequences affecting the quality of life, security and well-being of citizens, "but in order to provide a child with all the necessary support at an early age; it is not at all necessary to prove that this has a positive economic effect" (UNICEF, 2010). Improving the quality of life for young children is already a priority expressed through research and policy initiatives (Woodhead, 2006). The review of the available literature on the stated problem shows that empirically it is not sufficiently developed and there are no available studies in Bulgaria that directly study the practice in relation to social work in supporting of early childhood development. These prerequisites also determine the need to define a unified understanding of the importance of early support for both children and families, as well as appropriate forms of support for parenting, children's development and prevention of risks to children's health, emotional development, social performance and future development.

The presented view on the importance of social work with children and families in support of early childhood development and parenting concretizes the need of uniting efforts to create an appropriate basis for the development of innovative models to support early childhood development, as an investment in the future of generations.

2. Object, subject, aim and tasks of the research

The *object* of research is theoretical models and current practices of social work in Supporting of early childhood development.

The *subject* of research is methods and approaches that support early childhood development in active social services in Bulgaria (state).

The *aim* of the doctoral work is to examine and evaluate the theoretical foundations and practice of social work with children and families in supporting early childhood development, and to propose approaches, methods and activities for improving the effectiveness of social work in support of early child development.

Tasks

To achieve the goal of the development, the following tasks are set:

1. To clarify the nature and importance of early childhood development support.
2. To study the provision of early childhood development support agreeably with the practice of social work and active social services in the country.
3. To clarify the orientation of the social policy in supporting children in infancy and their families.
4. To identify real deficits in social work supporting early childhood development.
5. To develop a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development to overcome child poverty and social exclusion.
6. To formulate recommendations for the development and application of methods and approaches in social work aimed at supporting integrated early childhood development at national and institutional level.

The study tested the following working hypotheses:

1. If an optimal model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development is created it will improve the quality of care for children and their development in a family environment.
2. The effectiveness of social work in supporting early childhood development will improve if the range of activities, methods, and approaches in social services aimed at children and families at risk is enriched.

3. Structure and content of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The used questionnaire and form for a semi-structured interview are placed in the Appendices.

The content of the dissertation is structured in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The questionnaire used and a form for a semi-structured interview can be found in the Appendices.

The research methods correspond to the objectives of the dissertation and in the course of the work were used:

- **Documentary method for research and analysis of the activity of the pilot project “Center for early childhood development”**, implemented in the city of Asenovgrad, through monitoring of individual processes in the implementation of social work in the provision of services, study of work

documentation related to reporting of the consumption of individual services in the center.

- **Survey method for researching the practice** regarding the support of early childhood development in active social services in the country.
- **Qualitative method** and conduct of the semi-structured interview with managers of social services in the community and of social services of residential type.
- **Statistical methods** for processing primary information, statistical grouping, recoding and analysis.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT – IMPORTANCE AND PROSPECTS FOR SUPPORT

The first chapter is structured in 2 paragraphs and 6 sub-paragraphs. In **paragraph 1. Early children's development** – definition, periods and meaning, a number of definitions for early children's development are considered, the general theory of periodization and its meaning is presented. In **subsection 1.1.** Definitions of early childhood development leading definitions are presented to explain children's development, referring to numerous theories by authors such as Piaget, Freud and Erikson and others. The definitions of leading organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF and the authors Krasteva, Bogdanova, Alexandrova and others are presented. The importance of early childhood development according to foreign authors such as Vandebroek, Lenaerts, Beblavý, Elango, Hojman, García, Heckman, Bruer, Schaffer, Woodhead and organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank, World Health Organization, UNICEF is presented. A definition of early childhood development are derived by the author, which presents it as “A dynamic and important stage of a person's life, filled with both opportunities and limitations for the development of basic life skills. Any influence on a child during this period reflects on his/her individual performance, on his/her life in the community and on society as a whole”.

In **subsection 1.2.** Periods and importance of early childhood development attention is paid to development as a period of essential importance for the individual's performance in the future. Through a study of its characteristics, its significance as a period having a decisive and primary role was determined, according to a number of authors who define the period as a dynamite for the assimilation of a large amount of knowledge (Madzarov, G. 2011), characterized by its intensity (Tatyozov, T. 1999, Peneva, L. 2006), as a specific process with a certain meaning and influence in subsequent age periods as well (Tatyozov, 2006). The understanding of other researchers, who present early childhood as a critical period (Atanasova – Trifonova, L. Peneva, Y. Stoyanova, M. Mutafchieva, I. Yancheva, 2015), as a fundamental and significant stage of a person's life, was also investigated (Peneva 2006), but also the most vulnerable stage of development (Bogdanova, 2009) for children. Emphasis is placed on the supporting of this period, as “a period of life during which adults organize the assimilation of knowledge and behavior for children” (Madzarov, 2011). The relationship of supporting each member of society is presented as necessary when there are risky prerequisites for

their quality of life, for their development, realization, state of health and others. The development of supporting, regardless of its priorities – economic stability and development, social security and protection or educational development, in the context of state policy, is defined as fundamental to limit and minimize adverse consequences affecting the quality of life, security and well-being of our citizens.

In sub-paragraph 1.3. Children`s Development – Needs and Responsibilities – views of individual authors (Pringle, Erikson, Piaget, Kinney, Haapala & Booth) who are leaders in defining children's needs are presented. Erik Erikson, an emotional development psychologist, points out the relationship of children's development, their needs with experience and the change of people's abilities. The author defines the stages of children`s development (eight main stages) with the changes affecting the types of experiences children acquire in interacting with people. Different needs and abilities are important for children at different ages. Erikson points out the relationship between abilities and the changes that occur as children age. It is important how their abilities change, how their particular needs of other people change, how their social environment changes, what are the events and problems that dominate their thinking and their development. Each stage of child development is characterized by certain changes explored by authors such as Piaget and Erikson, all related to parental presence and interaction. Helping and supporting children and families is a prerequisite for their full development, taking into account the early periods of development, as the most important not only from the point of view of the preparation for life of the children and the family but also from the point of view of the quality of life. The presentation of social work with children and families as a tool for developing the possibilities of parents to adequately meet the needs of children is advocated in the analysis and summarization of the information. The importance of increasing the skills and resources among families to enable them to function better after the intervention has also been noted (Kinney, Haapala & Booth, 1991). As an object of impact of social work, the social conditions are also presented, which are an important prerequisite for the development of the children, given the fact that they are linked with the living conditions, well-being, materialistic opportunities and community in which children and family live.

In sub-paragraph 1.4. Early years and environment dependence, the importance of early experiences and the environment, as well as the children's interaction with adults, which determines the whole life and development of speaking mother tongue, cognitive abilities, social and emotional skills is presented (Yang, 2014). Emphasis is placed on the understanding that “Functions of the family to enable children to fulfill the tasks of their development” (Bogdanova, 2009), which confirms both the role of the child in this process, with its individual characteristics, and the important role of the family as a stimulator or limiter of opportunities for positive experiences, learning, gaining experience, development and so on. The understanding that “children`s development is the result of both the genetically fixed features and the possibilities for their manifestation, as well as the features of the environment in which the individual's life takes place” (Madzharov, 2011) has been confirmed. It is a prerequisite for the presence of a number of challenges , not only to the family but also to the systems supporting it. The challenges for the children are defined as challenges for the families as well, and informing and preparing the parents for their role as active in the child's development process is defined as the responsibility of the individual

spheres of support for the children's development – the health sphere, the social sphere, the educational sphere. The effectiveness of support is defined as dependent on the pooling of all resources to support the child's interaction with the environment and his full passage through the stages of childhood.

In the second paragraph, 2. Impact and support of early childhood development, two sub-paragraphs are defined, concerning the family and parenting and the support of children's development. **In sub-paragraph 2.1.** Family as the main influencing factor, the importance of the family and the family system is explored, presenting aspects of the children's life, its functioning and understanding of the family, as a significant factor in the “process of forming human personality, acquiring necessary knowledge for life, their adaptation to public life, etc. These processes require a complex complex of activities, having both family and social significance” (Keremidchieva, 1998, 17). A number of modern studies indicate that the children's early relationships with adults, especially with mother, are very important for his/her further successful development and health. According to K. Tagareva, the lack of communication with adults leads to delays and deviations in the subsequent development of the child (Tagareva, 2017). Ecological theory presented by Kaplan & Girard is introduced, which informs family-focused practice in that it “shifts the focus from the individual to the family, the subsystems within the family, and the family's interaction with the community” (Kaplan & Girard, 1994, 4). From the perspective of the children's needs and his interaction with the family system, the family provides – basic, caring for the child, continuous daily contact with these adults, gradually changing relationships with a small number of individuals throughout their life, safety and security, stimulation and encouragement of growth, support and a number of others. **In sub-paragraph 2.2.** Responsible parenting and support of child development, understandings about the life and development of children and the role of parental authority are explored. In the field of helping professions, there is much research related to theories of the family. This topic does not lose its relevance in the modern world, where the traditional family is only a part of diverse possibilities. Family itself is a social structure that welcomes the child, regardless of its acceptance or not of the understandings and beliefs in its potential. Family – parents, beyond their love for children, has a certain function. The impact of the family on children's development is undeniable, as well as its influence, according to Bornstein's research, on the functioning and socialization of the child – the family profile, formal and informal institutions, public, professional, social, educational, legal, medical and governmental sectors, the economic environment, ecology and culture, as well as the children themselves. (Bornstein, 2005). In the theoretical analysis of the essence of parenting, presented by various authors, its individual characteristics stand out, most often indicating parenting as the responsibility of the family. The study of the different views and opinions of a number of authors gives reason to propose the following definition of responsible parenting for the purposes of the dissertation: “Parenting, which we define as responsible, needs to emphasize and note the importance of the quality of communication with the child, which includes understanding his/her needs, feelings, grievances, unhappiness, sadness, dreams and desires. Parenting that also considers the importance of play and stimulation, positive relationships, emotional care and education for children.

In conclusion, several important conclusions and prerequisites for placing the topic of early childhood development as a focus are noted.

- *Early childhood development is of key importance for human development, which is of interest to the whole society.*
- *Children, unlike adults, need more time and in some cases more support to develop their potential to build security and resilience in their communication and realization.*
- *Early support for children should affect not only their resilience in the future, but also the ability of parents to support the development of their basic skills which will contribute to steady performance at school, for studying, to their professional development and to their safe future.*
- *Accepting parents as a major factor in early childhood influencing children's abilities in adulthood. We can define their role as protecting children from some risky consequences or adverse conditions but supporting their skills and potential to cope with separate challenges as well.*
- *Safe and full development of the children and the family implies and requires mutual efforts and engagement, such as the system of social work, social support and social activities. This system, through its resources (social services) and interventions (methods and approaches of social work), contributes to the development of the children, to the development of the family and the community in which it projects its goals and tasks.*
- *The development of separate mechanisms to support children in early childhood and their families should provide an opportunity for groups and individuals to show their potential, to develop their skills or improve their quality of life.*

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The second chapter is structured in 6 paragraphs and 4 sub-paragraphs. **In paragraph 1.** Contemporary understandings of social work with children and families, the importance of social work in Bulgaria is presented, reflected and studied by a number of local authors, such as Radev, Vekova, Nunev, Petrova, Kusev, Todorova, Mehandziyska, Strateva and others, contributing to the formulation of its objectives, content, fields of action, subjects and interventions. From the point of view of the nature of social work, the authors define the scope, function and role of social workers as assisting the individual, family, group and community. It is social work with its methods and approaches that mediates, activates, develops the interaction of individuals and the resources important to the family system in order to overcome and/or influence the risks, difficulties and relationships that have arisen. The topic of social work is still relevant today, especially in the context of child development, family well-being, parenting and support, given the fact that in Bulgaria it is on the threshold of major changes, challenges, new solutions and determination of social priorities, namely in supporting children and families. Regarding the development of social work and forms of support

for children and families, several main historical moments can be noted, which are part of the state social policy:

- Adoption of the UN Convention of Children Rights in 1989, specifying social and legal principles relating to the protection and well-being of children;
- The adoption of the Child Protection Act in 2000, which puts children and family in focus, defines protection measures, assistance, support and services in a family environment as a form of support for the most vulnerable members of society – children, as stated in Article 4, Paragraph 1 of the Child Protection Act;
- The national strategy “Vision for deinstitutionalization of children in the Republic of Bulgaria”, adopted with Protocol No. 42.22 of the meeting of the Council of Ministers on November 24, 2010 and others.

Social work is an activity that takes place at different levels and levels, related to people's relationships, their functioning in the environment and the study of individual human development is considered **in paragraph 2**. Level of impact of social work on objects – children and families. Emphasizing the methods of social work, we can also note their importance in supporting each object – children, families, groups and communities. Three main levels at which the impact of social work occurs are presented – at the level of the individual, at the level of the family group and at the level of the community. The use of different methods of social work is complex, related to the overflow of separate approaches and forms, where helping the individual affects the development and stability of the family, and from there, the community in which it is presented. The activity and role of parents is indisputable, but with the cooperation of social work specialists and choosing an appropriate method of family support, the full potential of the system that functions around the child – which influences, supports, develops or limits the individual – is unfolded. **In paragraph 3**. Social work as a supporting system for children and families, the representation of the person as a “systemic whole, not so much from the point of view of his internal “device”, biological or mental, but above all from the point of view of that he needs many and varied connections with the outside world for his full life activity” (Stoyanov, 2011, 78). Social work has its responsibilities in supporting the functioning of the family system and the growth of the child. “Every child has the need and the right to grow up in a family. Children need to be with their family wherever possible. Only in this way will they be able to develop as full-fledged people. That's the ultimate goal. To achieve it, we must plan our work step by step. And that cannot be done overnight” (Nightingale, 2005, 122). **In paragraph 4**. Risk groups and protection in the field of social work with children and families, the practice of social work related to the emergence and development of the protection of the elderly, children, the poor, assistance and care for them is examined. Importance is placed on social work with children and families, covering these risk target groups that need protection, help and support. Risk is the result of a combination of factors (individual, family, community/social) plus different coping mechanisms and strategies that are present at each of these levels (Davis, 2008). Risks for children and families are various – social, health, educational and others. The risks encountered for children and the family determine the methods, approaches and knowledge necessary for impact and protection. Services and activities aimed at overcoming risks are at the core of social work with children and families. The presented role of the strategic document, indicating the importance and place of children protection in the system of public

relations is linked with the first special law for children in Bulgaria – Child Protection Act (CPA). The law was adopted in 2000 and entered into force on 01.01.2001. The law provides a vision for the ways in which the children protection policy should be implemented, defining the sub-normative documents to guarantee the mechanisms for the implementation of the laws. The Social Security Act refers to obligations both in relation to persons professionally engaged in children's problems and to civil society in general. The vision of SSA defends for the first time in Bulgaria the thesis that children have the right for better life that meets his or her needs according to the abilities and financial capabilities of those responsible for them. The SSA considers it inefficient to concentrate resources in specialized institutions in order to ensure a higher standard of living for the children. On the contrary, it is necessary to help families and communities to raise their standard of living according to the state of the country in order to provide the best possible care for their children. Support from the country is determined in separate strategic documents indicating the direction of social activities and social work with children and families at the national level: National Strategy for the Children 2008-2018, National Strategy “The Vision for the Deinstitutionalization of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria, National Program for children protection, Municipal programs for children protection and others. These documents follow the process of supporting children and families, define new moments in children's care and present new forms of prevention of risks for the family system. A focus is placed on the children, their safety, well-being and development being paramount. Parents, families, society, the government, institutions, organizations and helping professionals. It is important to accept the right and the need of every child to grow up in a family environment, protected them from the many risks and it should be determined and the importance of prevention of the risks to the child as the better option, more effective in terms of outcomes that are proven to be more sustainable over time for the development of children and families. **In paragraph 5.** Social services and practice in support of children and families and **sub-paragraph 5.1.** Social work as a professional activity in social services for children and families examines the professional field of social work, determines the activities to improve the development and status of persons in need – families, groups and the environment in which they live. The relationship between social work and social services is traced, which is distinguished by the understanding that professional activities in the social sphere are defined as a complex of supporting activities aimed at achieving a better quality of life, dignity and responsibility in people based on individual their abilities, interpersonal relationships, and community resources. Professional activities in the social sphere, which mainly support the development, stability, well-being of the risk groups of communities, are implemented by the system of social services, determined to support individual target groups, which include children and families. Regarding the theoretical basis that represents the focus of social work practice on families and each individual member, it is also indicated by the authors Weiss and Jacobs, who studied

the ecological theory that underlies the family focus movement (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Weiss and Jacobs describe family support and education programs and the challenges and opportunities they present to families and practitioners in a family-centered approach. The presented cases from practice and the tools used to measure the quality of services provide an opportunity to enrich the practice of specialists.

In subsection 5.2. An effective system for supporting child development is examined, the practice that realizes social work and the activities whose focus of

supporting is the child, represented mainly through the developed services – Centers for children with disabilities, Day care centers, Centers for family-type accommodation, Centers for social rehabilitation and integration. Interaction with parents is presented as a secondary goal and support still developing, according to practice data. High-quality care in families, child-care services and preschools in the earliest years needs to be followed by high-quality education and services in adolescence to take advantage of the interdependencies between investments made in successive stages of the life cycle. To promote, protect and support children's development, intervention is needed as early as possible. Interaction, as a support mechanism implemented by social activities and services, is available, but in terms of violence prevention and deinstitutionalization policies, as stated in the Child Protection Act. Considering that “prevention at different levels is necessary” (Bogdanova, 2012, 682) in order to implement the effective support of the children and the families, a mechanism for impact, coordination and interaction in support of early childhood development is not yet available. This fact supports the free choice of tools, approaches, programs and activities by each provider and poses risks for the effectiveness of the family support provided. **Sub-paragraph 5.3** Development of a system of social services for children and families analyzes actions for the development of social services for children and families, as well as the complex approach in implementing one or another practice. The growing need for flexible and diverse social services and the need for new investments determines the introduction of innovative forms and models for support and care of children and families. Social services provided in the community and residential type, which are an alternative to institutional care for children, have an essential role in supporting children and families, as well as in realizing the deinstitutionalization process. The presented overview of the development of the system of social services in support of children and families directly corresponds to the main goal of the dissertation – to examine and evaluate the theoretical foundations and practice of social work with children and families in support of early childhood development, and are proposed approaches, methods and activities to improve the effectiveness of social work in support of early childhood development. Research on the topic supports the claims of the overall reform of the system of social services, and authors such as Vekova, Kolarova note that “in recent years, the variety of social services in the community has increased in response to the needs of different groups of disadvantaged persons” (Kolarova, 2011, 29). Regarding the variety of options for supporting children and families in practice in the country, as the most recognizable social services, according to their role of supporting families and children and early childhood development, the Public Support Centers /PSP/ and the innovative form stand out of a social service known as Early Childhood Development Centers. During a review of the methodology for the conditions and the way of providing social services in the Community Center, prepared by the Agency for social assistance, the direction of the services and their comparison according to age characteristics is not precisely defined, i.e. age sub-groups are not fixed and appropriate for the respective groups of services are not defined. The services are presented as a set of activities to achieve certain goals related to prevention of abandonment, prevention of violence, dropping out of school, deinstitutionalization and reintegration of children, training for independent living and social integration of children from residential care. With the entry into force of the Law on Social Services (LSS, No. 24 of 22.03.2019, in force from 1.07.2020 – amended, No. 101 of 27.12.2019; amended . with Decision No. 9 of the Constitutional Court of the

Republic of Belarus from 14.07.2020 – No. 65 from 21.07.2020), the integrated provision of support is also regulated, not only through social services, but also through services from different systems. Integrated services are also regulated, and integrated health and social services are extremely important in the process of deinstitutionalization of care for children, the elderly and people with disabilities. **Sub-section 5.4.** Social services as preventive activities to support children and families presents the relationship of preventive social work with the focus and its influence on the risks for child development and the ways to deal with them. Depending on the function of social services, they are defined as “preventive, supportive and restorative”, which is stated in Art. 13, paragraph 1. from the Social Services Act. (SSA, 2019). With the review of the Social Services Act and the regulation of the preventive role of social services, we can once again confirm the importance of these forms of support and encouragement of families to quality care for the development of children. Speaking about the system of social services, it is necessary to present several important points specified in the Law on Social Services (LSS) and related to their role, function, rights that they realize for individuals and their purpose.

With regard to preventive measures to support families and children, the LSS is clearly stated in Article 2, Item 5 “Prevention of Institutionalization” as the principle by which they are organized and provided. When reviewing Article 3, paragraph 1, describing support activities, they are services for “prevention and/or overcoming social exclusion, realization of rights, improvement of quality of life”. Social services are defined according to Art. 7, paragraph 1, as “the right of every person who needs support to prevent and/or overcome social exclusion, realize rights or improve his quality of life, regardless of his age, health status, education, income, social and property status”.

As examples of the implementation of a support network for families and children, fully compliant with the regulations in the LSS, the development of social work to support early childhood can be indicated as a prerequisite for future investment, which is appropriate and possible to implement through the system of social services.

Paragraph 6. Priorities for the development of social services for early childhood development presents the importance, need and role of early childhood development support through the prism of the unity of forms for its support. Countries in Europe, individual responsible governments and all stakeholders are identifying the importance and need to develop community services to meet the broad needs of vulnerable groups of people. The voluntary European Framework for the Quality of Social Services in the EU offers a definition of social services in two main categories:

1. mandatory and additional social security schemes covering the main risks in life related to health, ageing, occupational accidents, unemployment, retirement and disability;
2. other basic services provided directly to the person. These services, which play a preventive role and help social cohesion, are expressed in the provision of personalized assistance in support of social inclusion and the protection of fundamental rights.

The services presented as basic, according to the description, include several fields of impact:

- assistance for persons experiencing personal difficulties or crises (such as indebtedness, unemployment, drug addiction or family breakdown).

- activities through which the affected persons are given the opportunity to fully reintegrate into society (rehabilitation, language training for immigrants) and, in particular, into the labor market (vocational training and reintegration).
- a complementary and auxiliary function in particular to the role of families in their care of the youngest and oldest members of society.
- activities for the integration of persons with long-term health problems or disabilities.
- social housing, by providing housing for disadvantaged citizens or groups of persons in a less favorable social situation.

The presented description of the author, regarding the roles of social services – preventive, protective, mediating, reintegrating, integrating, complementary, auxiliary and others, determines its specificity. One of the specified roles – universal and preventive – is actually one of the main priorities of social services. The practice in the country gives priority to the implementation of preventive activities by the social services. The practice in the “Child Protection” Departments is different, because they mainly support children and families in the form of tertiary prevention, i.e. when there is a risk to the child's life and/or health. The occurrence of a situation where the intervention of the state is necessary is mainly associated with a risk and a need for the protection of a child. The presented roles of social services show a comprehensive priority in supporting individual target groups, given the fact that the needs of children and families create prerequisites for the implementation of one or another form of support, therefore the form of support should be universal. Creating an appropriate form does not always mean meeting complex consumer needs, as exemplified by supporting only health needs met by general practitioners, only educational needs met by educators, or social needs met by social workers, according to popular understanding . The complex focus, in this case, we associate with help that unites the professional competences of many specialists in a single framework and the possibility of early identification of the relevant needs. Choosing an appropriate form of support for early childhood development is important, accepting the understanding that “for the first time in the family, a person receives his earliest life lessons – how to love, how to communicate, to be responsible for one's actions and how to empathize with the problems of the rest of the family and the wider social community” (Tasevska, 2008, 11). The role of early childhood development services should be defined as an opportunity – an investment in the potential and development of the family and the child, but also a way to prevent individual risks for the functioning of the family system, which is also defined as a priority of social policy in the country relation to the overall support of children and families. The author's opinion on the leading factors for the development of a policy in support of early childhood development is figuratively presented. The figure depicts their importance and the interrelationship of theory, knowledge and research in the field of child development, and the need to consider the impact of the role of family, communities and societies with their child and family support resources.

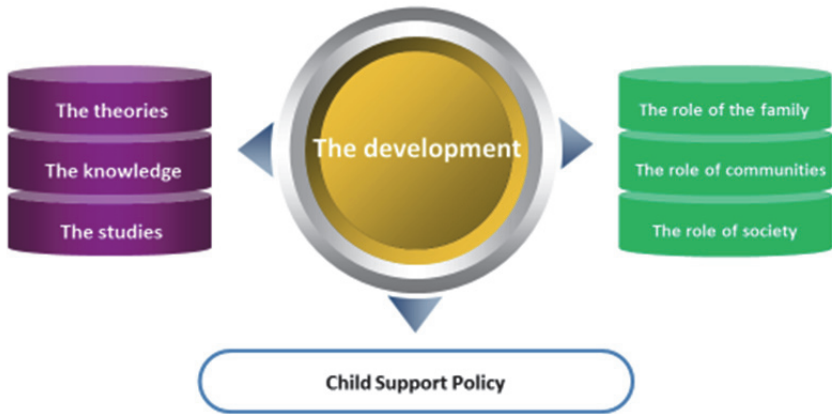


Figure 6. Factors for child support policy development

After reviewing the main topics in the second chapter of the work, several important conclusions should be presented regarding the effectiveness of social work and social services in support of early childhood development.

- Mainly, the mission of social services is related to the support of people in need, as well as their access to quality, affordable and universal services. But in relation to social services for early childhood development, the above is a new area of research and development. Regardless of this fact, early childhood development services should maintain their focus on children's well-being and to the right to a dignified life, education, health care and full development.
- The determination of early childhood development as a significant period of life and its wide influence on the performance of the children in the future shows the need for the unification of the specified sectors whose objects are children and families, regardless of the presence of risk for their development. As the main sectors influencing children's development, in the analysis of practice and theory, education, health care and social activities, through the protection of the children in the vulnerable periods of their development are determined.
- As communities differ, they face different challenges, create different constraints or preconditions for risks, which also determines different approaches when choosing interventions, both for children's and families support.
- The implementation of separate methods, approaches and interventions to support early childhood development requires sharing common goals, common planning and responsibility in order to bring the decisions to the desired impact – quality of life at an early age, development and building of children's potential, which in turn affects their future realization. Following the development of the existing social services, the need for synchronizing and binding the separate support systems – social, health, educational and others – is clearly taken into account;
- In order to respond to the complex needs of children and families, it is necessary to develop services at different levels, one of which is early

childhood development services, to guarantee the possibility of reducing the consequences of traumatic events in children's lives, such as living in an adverse environment of deprivation, violence or abandonment that we can define as a critical risk to the well-being of the children and families.

- Early childhood development services should be defined as universal and generally available, without the need to examine the risk prerequisites for the need for their use and as a tool to prevent individual risks for the functioning of the children's and the families system.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Chapter three presents in 3 separate paragraphs describing the conducted research of dissertation work. **Paragraph 1.** Organization and methodology of the study presents data on the methods used in people at work. **In paragraph 2.** Analysis and summarization of the results of the conducted research, sub-paragraph 2.1 Research of a pilot project – Center for early childhood development – town of Asenovgrad presents the example of one of the 60 municipalities that started a reform in support of early childhood development and investing in the creation and development of services with this focus, through the implementation of the *Center for Early Childhood Development Project*. The results of the conducted research are related to the results of the implemented support, according to the scope of the services. The information shows the gradual achievement of the individual capacity for each of the services, which takes place over 5 years (2016 – 2020). When presenting the data that shows the capacity and the change in the number of users of individual services, their interrelationship with the effectiveness of the practice is leading. Figure 16 shows the development of the *Center for early childhood development – Asenovgrad* service, through the use of two indicators – the planned capacity for each activity and the real capacity at the end of the researched period, which also determines the share of consumption of the service.

The data show the dynamic development of each of the services implemented in the *Center for Early Childhood Development* project. The analysis used reporting data for the specified period, but also tracked the development of the service from the point of view of public importance. The presented analysis confirms the need for a complex scope of social services and in response to an identified “deficiency of state policy”, namely “the lack of emphasis on the development of a complex policy aimed at supporting families and stimulating responsible parenthood” (Vekova, 2017, 203), it can be assumed that the project realizes important goals that are of public importance and are a priority in supporting early childhood development.

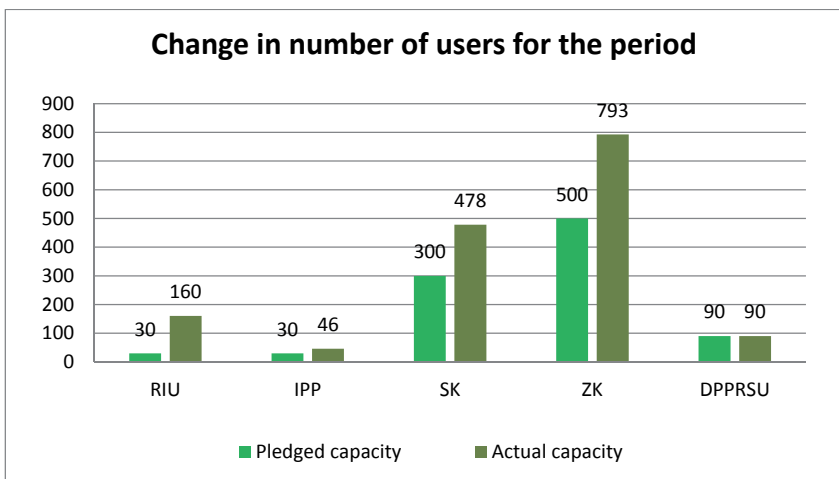


Figure 16. Service development
“Center for early childhood development” – Asenovgrad

Paragraph 2.2. Study of social work practices in supporting of early childhood development in active social services on the territory of the country presents data and summaries of the results, when surveying specialists working in social services on the territory of the country. The scope of the study includes active social services related to early childhood development support. The results bring out and summarize data about the need to create a new model of social work for early childhood development – integrating social, educational and health support.

The analysis of the results of the conducted survey is based on the information collected through questionnaires from a total of 104 respondents, representatives of social services in the community, residential services and non-governmental sector. The representatives are from 19 municipalities and settlements, as follows: Asenovgrad – 25 investigated persons; Pazardzhik – 7 examined persons; Sofia – 1 examined person; Sofia – city – 2 examined persons; Medium – 3 subjects; Varna – 3 examined persons; Pleven – 1 examined person;

Plovdiv – 24 examined persons; Vidin – 2 examined persons; Kardzhali – 1 examined person; Ardino – 2 examined persons; Bratsigovo – 4 examined persons; Smolyan – 7 research subjects; Compound – 3 subjects; Sadovo – 5 examined persons; Rakovski – 1 examined person; Krichim – 4 investigated persons; Hisarya – 5 examined persons; Burgas – 4 examined persons.

The purpose of surveying the participants is to explore approaches, methods and activities of social work in support of early childhood development. Data are presented graphically with corresponding figures and percentage of responses. The questions are analyzed by presenting brief information about the essence of the question and about the results after the participation of the respondents.

The instrument of the study is a questionnaire with 27 questions – two of which are formulated as open-ended (23 and 24) to explore the opinion of the participants. The rest

of the questions are of the closed type with answer options according to the understanding of the respondents. The study started with a study of the factors that most often lead to the use of services provided in the different settlements by the participants in the study, presents data on the direction of users to social services, and the results show a high share of 72% of “Directorates are social assistance” as leading in terms of consumer referrals, followed by a 34.6% share of self-reported clients. Figure 19 presents information on the share of social services users.

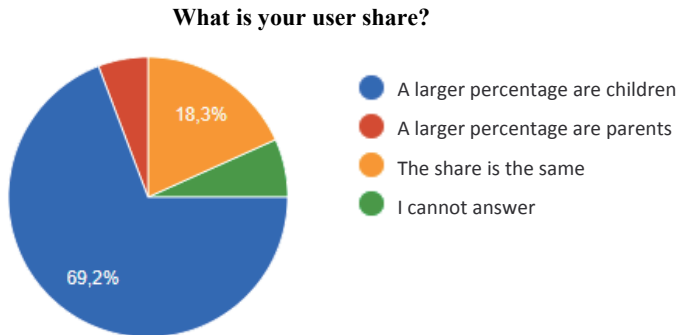


Figure 19. Share of users

The results of the survey, presented in **Figure 19**, show that according to 69.2% of the respondents, children are the greater users percentage, compared to 5.8% who define the share of parents as higher. The data shows that 18.3% of the participants believe that the share of users is the same.

Figure 20 reports the age range of the cases with which the respondents work, based on the total range.

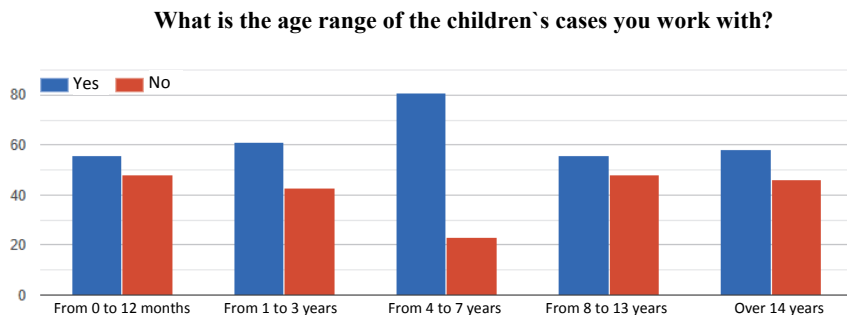


Figure 20. Age range of child cases

Regarding the age range of the cases with which the respondents work, the results of the research show that the largest percentage is in favor of the share of children from 4 up to 7 years old, which is 77.9%, respectively indicated by 81 of the participants,

followed by the group of children aged 1 to 3 with 58.7%. The results for the following ages are close, with a small percentage difference, namely 55.8%, respectively indicated by 58 of the respondents for the share of children over 14 years old. The remaining groups according to the age range of children from 0 to 12 months old and from 8 to 13 years old have the same result – 56 of the participants chose to indicate the ages in question in their range.

The research groups questions related to the provision of supporting in relation to separate target groups – expectant parents, newborn children and their families, as well as examines the forms of their support, through the implementation of preventive support, information campaigns, mobile work with the community and other.

The following results of the research presented in figure 31, show how appropriate, according to the respondents are services from various sectors – social, educational and health. They should be integrated, i.e. united in another center.

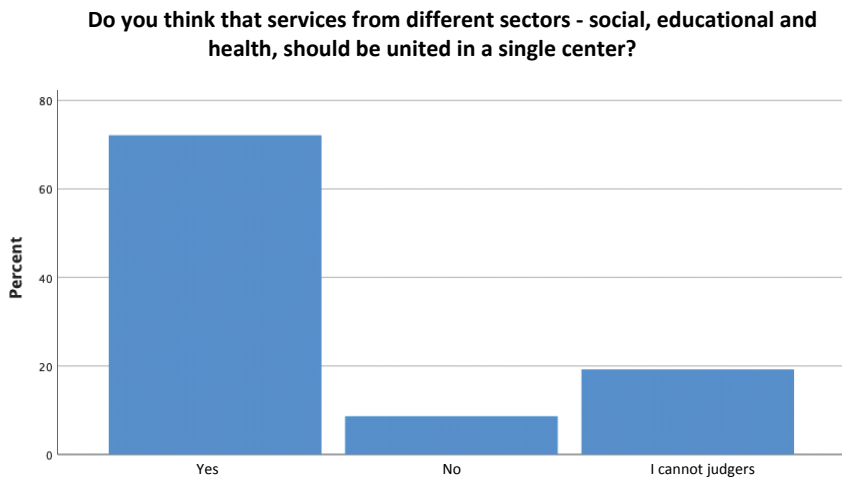


Figure. 31. *Unification of the sectors in a single center*

Respondents indicated that services from different sectors – social, educational and health, should be integrated, i.e. united in a single center (73.1%) or 76 of the total number of participants. The group of respondents who noted a reluctance to unite the sectors is relatively small (7.7%), as well as the group of persons indicating the answer “I cannot judge” (figure 31). The analysis of the results shows that a much higher than average number of respondents consider the pooling and integration of services to be acceptable, which could also mean that the potential of these structures should have an impact on the effective support for children in the period of early childhood development and their families. The recognition of social services as a sector of the integrated support of children and families is a key point of the research and the respondents' understanding of the importance of a complex and integrated approach to the needs of children. The next question reflects the opinion of the participants in the survey about the need for the

development of new services to support children’s development to meet needs of children and families in the respective municipality.

Do you think that the development of new services to support child development will meet the needs of children and families in your municipality?

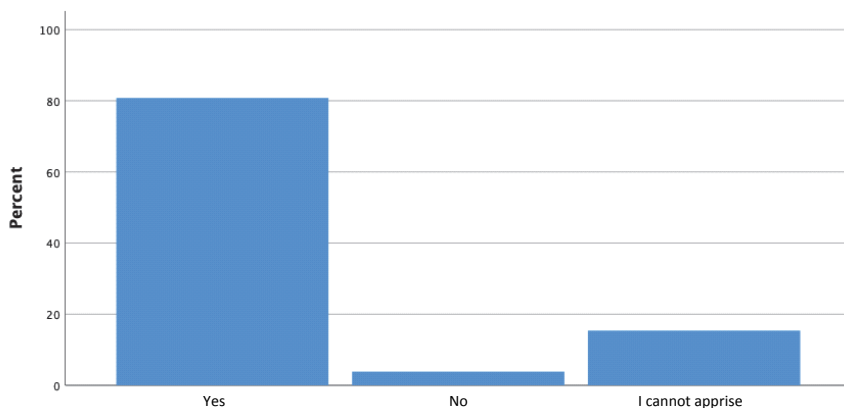


Figure. 32. Development of new support services

The data in **figure 32** show a high result, which was indicated by respondents who noted the need for the development of new services to support child development, which will meet the needs of children and families in the respective municipality (80.8%). Only four of the respondents are of the opinion that there is no such need (3.8%). 16 of the survey participants or 15.4% gave the answer “I cannot apprise”. The positive answers about the need for the developing new services gives reason to consider that there are still uncovered risks in individual municipalities concerning children and families and more specifically the new direction of children development support.

Figure 39 presents the responses of all participants, indicating the participant's affiliation to the specific institution, their profile and the respective municipality they represent. The respondents are representatives of 10 various institutions (figure 39). The largest number of representatives are from the Center for Public Support – CPS (35), followed by the Center for Early Childhood Development – CESD (22), Complex for Social Services (16), Day Center (8), Center for Social Rehabilitation and Integration – CSRI (6), Center for family-type accommodation – CFTA (4), Foster care (2) and the column “Other”, participants – part of a non-governmental organization (4) and two participants from Preventive – information center. The data show the different spectrum of profiled support for early childhood development.

The data show the different spectrum of profiled support for early childhood development.

Surveying and summarizing the results presented so far has provided an opportunity to identify real deficits in social work supporting early childhood development. The research reports individual moments as positive practices, but also various challenges for professionals, both in terms of the lack of support for individual target groups, and in terms of preparation for the implementation of activities in the context of early childhood development. The positive result indicates knowledge of the specifics of early childhood development support services – target groups, methods, scope of the services, taking into account the lack of information about the structure of the services – is indicative. From the general analysis of the data and the results of the survey conducted among social service specialists in the country, according to their profile of support – social, educational or health, the following general conclusions should be drawn:

- When examining the main focus placed on supporting children and families, respondents indicated relation of the development to parenting skills, which emphasizes family support in terms of the quality of parental care and commitment. Factors such as poverty and risk of abandonment remain in the following positions but the focus of support on social integration, which is listed as the second most important factor related to social service support, is impressive.
- The results show that children are the main users of social services, followed by parents, which also determines the direction of support – mainly focused on children, regardless of the fact that the factor of parenting skills is also determined as the main one in targeting families.
- Mainly support is provided and services are used accordingly by the group of children from 4 to 7 years old, and it is indicative that the share of children from the age group from 0 to 3 years old who use social services is the smallest one. This group, mainly associated with early support, early intervention and prevention, is not in the current scope of the researched services. These data also show the need to change the priority scope of services to support early childhood development.
- In tracking the presence/absence of support to expectant parents, in terms of their preparation for parenting, developing skills and generating knowledge about childhood development, the research shows this target group takes support to a certain extent, and this determines the need of developing new methods and approaches focused on early childhood development. Prenatal support services have a preventive, informative and educational element, a kind of opportunity to influence series of risks for children's development caused by the lack of information about its meaning, periodization, characteristics and others. With regard to one of the priority groups for support – prenatal period future parents, it is necessary to develop their orientation and inclusion in the field of support through social services. When tracking the type of support to this target group, a need for change was found, again – related to the development of additional mechanisms for community and preventive support. It is based on the data that individual counseling is the most common support preceding *mobile* and *community* work. Group approaches, work with communities and early intervention, which develop the potential of future parents in support of early childhood development are not sufficiently advocated in practice.

- With regard to the support of newborn children and their parents – it is implemented to a relatively large extent which confirms the understanding of the importance of preparation for the newborn child care, which has a preventive nature in terms of risks for the children, an informative and educational nature related to with the first care for the newborn – nutrition, breastfeeding, hygiene, health care, as well as information on children’s development. It is clear from the data that some respondents provide such support, which is a positive example and factor in minimizing risks to their development, but the broad scope that is key to this activity is not developed and advocated as an element of support activities of early childhood development.
- It was found that, in relation to preventive and informative activities aimed at the “wider” community, the studied social services, at least for the most part, carry out information campaigns in supporting early childhood development with various intensities and changes should be recommended in this direction, to include these activities in the recommended and prioritized when activating the early support of the children and the families. It is noteworthy that in relation to the topics with which the information campaigns are linked, mainly the provision of services is commented on at the expense of the topics of early childhood development. Informing and promoting activities about the essence of services should not be the only focus of this type of activities, but should be primarily aimed at developing knowledge about the importance, periodization and investment in early childhood development, as well as topics about family planning and dropout prevention.
- When examining the main activities involving early support of children and families, the informative ones are indicated again and insufficient focus is found on activities for training parents, preventive ones, prenatal support and mobile work.
- When researching the availability of support for early childhood development in the form of services, the results show that complex services predominate, and a small percentage are services for early childhood intervention. Lastly is the presence of integrated services. These results show an uneven distribution of existing services across locations (where they are present), and focus on integrated support and comprehensively meeting the needs of children and families. The information gathered from the research is positive about the availability of complex services which implies a better scope in relation to the needs of children and families.
- The results show that the development of social, educational and health services to support children and families in the respective municipalities is relatively appropriate, which on the other hand raises the question of the need for a coordination system for the available services and their networking, as a new research topic as in relation to their distribution in the respective municipalities, as well as regarding the integrated approach in the work of the individual representatives of the services.
- When examining the relationship between individual child development support systems, the most recognizable are complex services, which defines them as a partnership with appropriate resources and the potential to continue the unification of other sectors working with children and families. The recognition of other key partners such as parents, kindergartens, schools, Social Assistance Directorates, social services and health facilities is an important prerequisite for the successful coordination of actions, which on the other hand puts social work and the role of

the social worker in focus as unifying and moderating the individual levels of communication. The integration, coordination and interaction between the key partners from the individual sectors – social, educational and health is unreliable, and in some places it is missing, according to the respondents.

- There is an understanding among some of specialists to create a model that unites the individual sectors for supporting early childhood development and their role in a single center for supporting children's development. The lack of individual resources, such as financial, training, supporting practice, supervision, etc., are identified as a factor in the organization of comprehensive activities, services and effective support for children and families.
- Regarding the specialists's preparation for the activities development to support early childhood development, the results show knowledge of the specifics of the target groups, knowledge of the activities and work methodology. The data analysis shows a high knowledge of the main parameters of early childhood development services which is a positive point and should support the sure response of specialists regarding the implementation of new activities and services for early childhood development.
- Human resources, experience and qualifications of specialists also related to the topic of early childhood development are considered as an important component in the development of activities. Mainly, the need for change indicated by the participants is related to the needs of individual groups of children and families, the needs of the community and the partner network which is a prerequisite for a deeper discussion of the topic.
- The study of preventive programs and activities in the relevant municipalities reports a lack of support for one of the most important groups of service users in the scope of early support – future parents and newborn children. Preventive work is not a main one and advocated in supporting children and families.

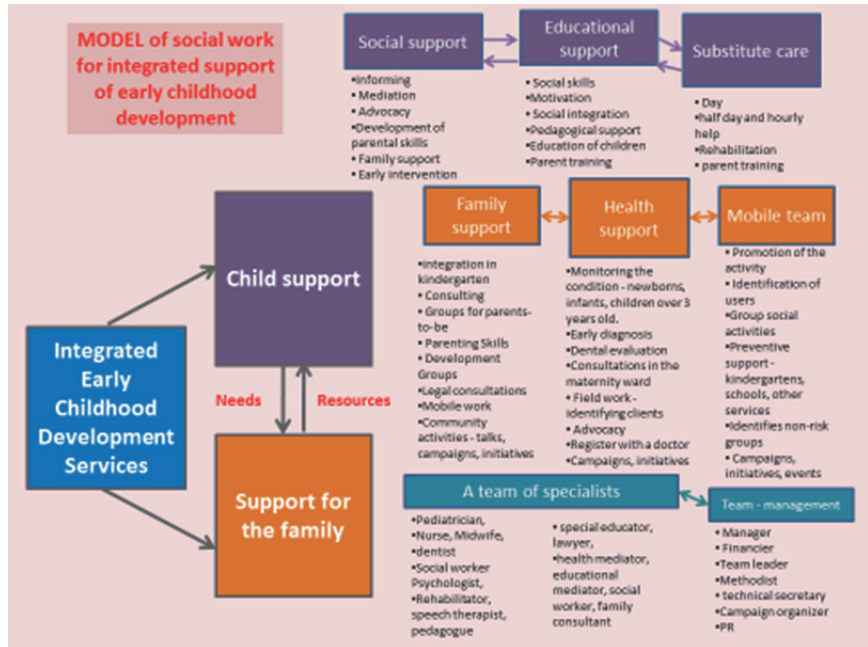
Researching the need of developing new models (integrated services) to support children and families in early childhood is a major point of the work. The obtained results demonstrably report as a deficit the implementation of integrated support of early childhood development, which is also the basis for the development and presentation of a social work model for integrated support of early childhood development, presented in subsection 2.3. Social work model for integrated early childhood development support scheme 1.

The aim of the doctoral work is to examine and evaluate the theoretical foundations and practice of social work with children and families in support of early childhood development, and to propose approaches, methods and activities to improve the effectiveness of social work for support of early childhood development.

The conclusions of the conducted research give reason to present the process of preparing a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development. It includes integrated, multidisciplinary and connecting support for children and families. When presenting the model, the importance of elements such as the structure of the model is also taken into account and it is presented in four components – description of the purpose of the model, description of the target group, description of the structure and main activities within its scope. When developing a vision of a social work model for integrated support of early childhood development, the significant elements of its

management were defined, such as the definition of a support provider, a financing system, a system of control and accountability, coordination with other services and institutions, performance and outcomes.

Scheme. 1. Model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development



Main goals of the social work model for integrated supporting of early childhood development

The model presents a new view, a new structure and organization for integrated support, which in practice is interconnected from the point of view of meeting the complex needs of children – health, education and social.

The presented model for integrated support of early childhood development also takes into account the influence of the environment on children, their preparation for the important events in life, passing through the individual stages of their development – from birth to reaching the age of 7, and the importance of parenting. Integrated support at each stage of children’s development has its own important priorities, emphasizing different needs – development of attachment, satisfaction of the need for security and affection, development and quality of parental commitment and dynamics of family relationships, development of family system resources, positive communication, encouragement, learning, social and emotional dialogue, social adaptation, comprehensive care and health, nutrition, hygiene, etc.

The presented priorities regarding the full support of early childhood development define the following goals as the main ones in the scope of the model:

- Prevention of abandonment and institutionalization of children at risk;
- Provision of a package of integrated social services for early childhood development, various activities to develop effective care for children from vulnerable groups as well as for children with disabilities and their families;
- Development of a wide range of activities – integrated – both in terms of the mutual work of various specialists with the target groups, and in terms of the very nature of the support – social, health, educational and pre-school preparation, informative and educational and related to early childhood development.
- Reaching support to all young children and their families, as well as the “wider” community, identified through mobile team and support groups;
- Trained teams of specialists for social work and integrated support of early childhood development as well as for conducting mobile work in communities and substitute care;
- Increasing public awareness, sensitivity and engagement on the topic of early childhood development and the problems of children and families in early childhood.

Mainly the user group, in the context of early childhood development support includes children from 0 to 7 years and their families, including children with disabilities and their families, with the definition of subgroups of children at risk (0-7 years) and parent groups. When determining the target groups, taking into account the results of the conducted research, separate practical difficulties can be formulated:

- The need for support that is aimed at all risk groups of children, families and communities is considered as a challenge, great and current, as at the time of structuring the model.
- The current practice regarding the determination of the target groups of children and families, in the practice of social work to support the early childhood development of individual social services is mainly associated with the presence of risk, at the expense of preventive and community support. The context presented in the previous part of the analysis determines the need to introduce a new model of the scope of integrated support which covers the broad needs of communities, not only related to risky behavior, risky care or lack thereof in relation to children.
- Determining the age group of children from 0 to 7 years is a priority but in order to foresee the expansion of the boundaries in terms of a risk for the children who are the target of support, the model provides that the target group includes “wider” community, without the presence of a risk being a necessary condition.
- Involving a large group of people – parents, future parents, students, foster families, adoptive families and reaching support to local communities should lead to a reduction in the prerequisites for creating risky situations – family, community, educational or health, as well for both children and families.

One of the main conclusions from the conducted study of social work practice in support of early childhood development shows that the interaction of institutions with regard to children in the period of their early childhood is insufficient and its effectiveness is controversial. It does not support the limitation of negative effects on children's development. The conclusions show that the creation of an interdisciplinary network of specialists – social, educational and health, integrated as a model, should actively support children in their early years of development and their parents too. For the effectiveness of the model in terms of the prevention a number of risks, it is necessary to note the following recommendations:

- The self-declaration of families is an important moment for the effective support of the community in the implementation of the model. It proceeds as an integrated support to everyone involved in a child's life. The family system, therefore, and the development of a wide range of activities is imperative to fulfill its preventive role;
- Working in partnership with the family and specialists (kindergartens, schools, social services, institutions) is defined as crucial in "creating" an effective form of support for the community, families and children, especially at an early age. This important role of the model – to connect the resources of individual institutions offers new challenges and tools should be used for its effectiveness. The presented mobile support to the community is a key, given the fact that increasing public awareness, sensitivity and engagement of communities on the topic of early childhood development will positively affect the minimization of risks, difficulties and problems of children and families in early childhood.
- The application of preventive methods and approaches to influence early childhood development and parenting directly corresponds to the need to introduce alternative forms of support for their development, both in terms of building safe and beneficial parenting and in terms of social integration of children at risk. The preparation, information, training of parents-to-be, current parents and the organization of forms for realizing an informed choice on the part of the risk groups of communities also contributes to limiting risky behavior in relation to children's development.

Conclusion

The research gives reason to list the following conclusions and conclusions:

- The development of successful early childhood development intervention models and cross-sectoral programs is still identified as a huge challenge that could be overcome by establishing a sharp policy framework for the provision of preventive services and practices in early childhood.
- Responsibilities and priorities regarding child care, protection and well-being should be defined as the focus of the work of individual stakeholders – institutions, professionals and parents with their abilities, skills, understanding, capacity and moral values.
- Social services remittances research shows that there has no unified approach on the part of social services and activities focusing on early childhood development as a priority and a significant investment yet.
- The topic of early childhood development, early education, care and protection, requires a certain activity – legislative and centralized, structural and methodical, practical and decentralized. In recent years, it is gradually present but the results for children and family well-being, to improve children's quality of life, to destroy the cycle of unequal and uncertain futures for children and families, are still not satisfactory.
- The share of children and families at risk of poverty, social exclusion, health risk and others remains high. It confirms insufficient development of resources for change – social services, forms of early intervention and prevention.
- Following good practices and introducing new ones, strategic planning and the use of effective approaches to family support that bring together the social, educational and health spheres, in partnership with the multitude of stakeholders in children's development should support secure and sustainable development of individuals.

The presentation of a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development is a serious proof of the commitment to the subject and the aspiration for a complete change of approaches, change of direction and support measures for children and families. One of the most important expectations from the presentation of the model is to create an opportunity for child abandonment prevention, to improve training and performance of the children in the educational environment, to ensure access and integration in school for vulnerable children from low-income families and for children with disabilities, to influence the improvement of efforts, to provide good care and services that support children's development. The results of the future implementation and practical application of the model can be determined as foundational, and its implementation as quality support for the government's efforts to develop and implement integrated policy for early childhood development.

The dissertation defined a number of statements and conclusions in the context of early childhood development, of the effective forms of support for this period as essential for the future development of the individual, as well as the orientation of social tools and

policies to support the minimization of risks for children`s development, which allows the confirmation of certain hypotheses.

The described model for integrated support emphasizes networking and can be defined as effective for mobilizing and developing the resources of both children and the families is innovative. It provides an opportunity for activity not only to those in need of support but also to the vast community of citizens, future parents, to specialists of different profiles and competencies, to institutions with own standards and activities, and even to the society with an invitation to accept and participation in building a safe and secure community that effectively supports early childhood development.

In conclusion, the hypothesis can be confirmed that if an optimal model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development is created, it will improve the quality of care for children and their development in a family environment.

The introduction of a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development to overcome child poverty and social exclusion should lead to the enrichment of individual methods and approaches for supporting children and families. Therefore it makes it possible to confirm the other work hypothesis that the effectiveness of social work in supporting early childhood development will improve if the range of activities, methods and approaches in existing social services targeting at-risk children and families is enriched.

The confirmation of the hypotheses in the present work suggests new opportunities and challenges for the social services system, as a future priority will be the need for a pointed, systematic focus on early childhood development support from the perspective of development, capacity and benefits.

Contributions

The conducted research on the topic of social work with children and families in supporting early childhood development contains the following contributions of a scientific and scientific-applied nature:

1. A number of definitions from the conceptual apparatus of the dissertation have been systematized regarding: early childhood development, social work with children and families, activities to support early childhood development, deficits in social services to support early childhood development, integrated support for the children and families with their own understanding and definitions also proposed.
2. Substantiated by analysis of the obtained results are specific patterns and activities that support improvement the effectiveness of social work for supporting early childhood development.
3. Formulated on the basis of empirical data analysis gives reason to implement specific activities for promoting development of integrated health, educational and social practices in supporting early childhood development which should be part of the social policy on national level.
4. A model of social work has been developed for integrated support of early childhood development to overcome children's poverty and social exclusion.
5. The results of the theoretical analysis and the conducted research can be viewed as basis for distinguishing in the curricula of various disciplines and in extra-academic forms of education, a special course on the integrated support of early childhood development.

Publications

List of publications of the doctoral student Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova in connection with the topic of the dissertation “Social work with children and families in support of early childhood development”:

1. Uzhikanova, E. (2021). Policy challenges and priorities in support of early childhood development. Collection of reports from the Second Scientific and Practical Conference “Education and Arts: Traditions and Perspectives” SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”. (74-83). ISSN 2738-8999.
2. Uzhikanova, E. (2021). Development and perspectives of the social service model – Center for early childhood development. Proceedings Fourth scientific-practical conference with international participation: Social work, management and development – contemporary challenges, perspectives and innovative practices. University Publishing House Technical University – Varna. (176-185) ISBN 978-964-20-0834-7.
3. Uzhikanova, E. (2022). The role of social services for the future development of children and families. Proceedings of the international scientific-practical conference “Social work – past, present, future”. Southwest University “Neofit Rilski” Blagoevgrad. ISBN (978-954-00-0309-2).
4. Uzhikanova, E. (2021). Social policy in support of early childhood development. Proceedings of an interdisciplinary scientific conference. University Publishing House “Paisiy Hilendarski” Plovdiv. ISBN (2738-8859).

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