SPECIAL ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ACTIVITIES INVOLVING CHILDREN AT RISK AND HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT: The activities of the social worker are directed towards realizing the potential of every person according to his/her natural talents and the opportunities given. Such groups of people in the Bulgarian society are mostly the children at risk and the handicapped people. This article shows the special methods of work with such clients.

KEY WORDS: Social worker, social work, social policy, handicapped people, people at a disadvantage, socially vulnerable groups, policy for children at risk, policy for handicapped people, institutional care, community care, deinstitutionalization

THE aim of the social work is the correct function of individuals, groups and communities, social aid, social self-fulfillment, social development and social change, improving the rehabilitation process of mutually supportive individuals, identifying and eliminating of the social problems concerning the social functioning of physical people within the boundaries of society. It examines the people's need and the problems that arise from the interpersonal and social-economical functions. It prevents the psycho-social dysfunction. It realizes the potential of each individual according to its natural abilities and the given opportunities

THE population groups where the interference of the social workers is needed are different. Usually these individuals and groups are facing sudden and acute crisis situations such as the appearance of a serious disease, unemployment, people living on the verge of poverty etc. People who have suffered serious injuries from their environment. People living in poor neighborhoods, under bad conditions, with no health-care and with great risk for their lives. People facing distress for a short period or permanently because of the absence of a family member, the devaluation of their interpersonal communication or the alteration their personal development. People living under conditions where the stress factors are increased and are often put in difficult situations. Such children in Bulgaria are the children at risk and the people at a disadvantage.

1. Social work with children at risk

ONE of the most important steps that every child has to take on its way to maturity is **to achieve the feeling of identity**, inner confidence and security in its meaningfulness and value,

which will give him/her the chance to escape the ambient where he/she grew up and to live a full and independent life.

DUE to different economic, social, health and cultural reasons, in the process of becoming mature a big part of the children can't see any perspective for their personal growth and self-realization. Often emotionally traumatized, the children at risk, who have been isolated and avoided have insignificantly little chance or none at all to have an equal start in life. When realizing this, these children develop an inferiority complex or aggression towards their environment.

A *child at risk is every child, that is endangered and suffering any form of violence and abuse*; a child, which main necessities are not met – for instance it is not sufficiently fed, poorly dressed, neglected by the people who are supposed to take care of him; a child which does not visit school; which goes begging or wander through the streets with no supervision, which is a victim of exploitation, children which don't have the ability to build an adequate relationship between them and the society; children with emotional and behavioral problems living in institutions.

THE reasons for the presence of children at risk are different, varying from their social surroundings to different health problems. The status of children from socially disadvantaged groups can be examined in the context of a family and non-familiar environment. *Some of the factors known to society and a cause for the emergence of children at risk are*:

- Committed crime or violence against the children;
- Low culturally-educational level of the parents combined with economic problems in the family (social status and financial difficulties);
- Physical and psychical abuse from the parents as well as sexual violation.
- Family conflicts (parents addicted to drugs and/or alcohol) etc.

BECAUSE *of the above-listed factors* **the children at risk can be divided in three main groups**:

FIRST GROUP: The children living and being brought up in a natural family environment, which is the reason for the emergence of behavioral diversions in the child (divorced families, children with one parent, children from ethnical communities)

SECOND GROUP: Children being brought up and educated outside the family environment (orphans, children whose parents have given up their parental rights, or their parental rights have been limited or taken away from them all together)

THIRD GROUP: Disadvantaged children (handicapped children).

THERE is hardly any work that includes such high degree of responsibility and hard work. Still this work is beyond doubt one of the most noble acts of compassion towards the unaided and neglected young population-the children.

BY enacting child-protection laws in Bulgaria and other countries of the world, a new stage of the child-rights abiding is arising. All institutions, regardless of whether they are state-aided or not, together with their departments, carry out practical measures for child-protection where the main operative officers are the social workers. *The main operative officer-* **the social worker is the direct observer when dealing with children at risk**; *the one who carries out the research and evaluates the environment, for which there are suspicions that the youngsters are not being brought up properly.* The society is probably not aware of the correct number of cases where children fall into these risk groups and maybe we will

never know their number with an absolute certainty. It is therefore a statutory duty for every citizen, who finds out about a child that needs protection, to inform the child-protection authorities, even in cases where the citizen is bounded by an official secret.

THE beginning of the social work with children at risk begins with a research, where the aim is to gather detailed information for the emerging reasons which put the children at risk. This information is being provided by absolutely everybody surrounding the child- the family, the school, the crèche, the kindergarten or the institution, if the child is stationed at such; all close relatives, friends or people from the child's surroundings. The child itself is also been questioned if its physical and health condition are allowing it.

AFTER the child is categorized as child at risk the so called "case" is being opened. In a general aspect the aim of the social worker is to provide the needed personality and social premises and conditions for overcoming the emerging problems and difficulties and to achieve and support a sustainable social functioning and wellbeing for every child using special techniques, methods, forms, means, activities and organization.

BASED on this evaluation and holding up to the main aim, *the social worker works out an **action plan**, which involves long-term purpose and short-term objectives, activities for attaining them and child protection criteria.* The activities of the social worker are always structured in a certain sequence and therefor the action plan should be coordinated with the child's parents, its guardian, trustee or the individual taking care of it, as this should not contradict with the child's interest and should not violate its rights.

THE interaction between the social worker and the child is one of the hardest types of relationship. The reason for this is the children's tender age and their inability to trust a stranger such as the social worker in the first days of his/her contacts with the child. Not all of the children are ready to cooperate with the system, although it is trying to help them. *This is why while helping the child envelope its full potential according to its age and competencies, the positive social experience of both the child and the social worker are being enriched and perfected.* This is why he should:

- Show interest and involvement towards the child;
- To unconditionally accept both its virtues and faults;
- To learn to see the child's point of view;
- To stimulate its talents;
- To display insight, tactfulness and sensibility while interacting with the child;
- To treat the inner thoughts and experiences of the child with understanding and respect;
- To accept the child need for positively orientated interactions with its social surrounding.
- To take into consideration with the methodical regulations for phase-related and consecutive steps of work interaction and the assistance process;
- To adhere the confidentiality regulations.

THE social worker, together with the child-client, searches possibilities for change and development in order to achieve balance, wellbeing and qualitatively higher living standard, to bring a change in personality and social plan. The parents or the individuals taking care of the child, as well as the child itself are encouraged to take an active part in the choice of social services.

THE *social work with children at risk has a number of fundamental directions or tasks by which the work is structured. Those tasks are directed at the following:*

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- Legal and social child protection.
- Providing a system of medico-social care with preventive and prophylactic orientation for the child and the family, where through appropriate work methods the conditions and possibilities for the development of adjustments, motivations and capabilities are created. These aim at a healthy and socially-acceptable way of life; sexual education for the youngsters; medico-social consulting for handicapped children as well as children with severe chronic diseases; preventing and prophylactic for the drug-addicts, for the family and child abuse, unsupervised living, child prostitution and the girl trafficking.
- Realizing psycho-social help for the child and its family.
- Giving help as compensation for the socialization deficits and for the formation of an adequate educational style in the family and in institutions with social-aiding functions.
- Implementation of social rehabilitation, integration and reintegration, responding to the special needs, rights, problems and interests of the children from groups and communities with different risk degrees.

THE social work with children from groups with different risk degrees also has educational aspects. These represent one of the most important and functionally self-determining parts of the social work, its humanistic orientation for the creation of regulations for formation, development and simulation of the many and different qualities of the child. From its philosophical point the social work sees the child as capable of changing and developing and constantly getting to know itself and the world that surrounds it. In order to confirm and protect its main purpose, the social worker has to possess a number of qualities: patience, honest way of acting and most of all unshakable trust in the child's ability to find its way and to cope with the hardships of life; trust in the child's strength, which gives it the possibility to pay attention to its inner voice.

THE social work with children from different risk degree groups, as already stated, also has an educational function which cultivates and stimulates the qualities in the child such as:

- Belief in its own capabilities and powers to overcome the emerged difficulties and problems. Persistency to achieve equality in the social status within the society.
- Responsibility when making a decision, ability to accept the mistakes and the failures and purposefulness when attempting to make a step towards achieving a real change.
- Positive attitude towards the advancing changes and the expansion of the social surrounding which aims at finding effective ways for overcoming any possible problematic situations and difficulties.
- In order to stimulate the positive child's attitude towards the problem, it has to be unconditionally accepted with the adequate amount of warmth, concern and genuine interest for the child's problems and life. The manifestation of warmth, concern, love and interest towards the child and accepting it the way it is are all factors which ensures the introduction of atmosphere and relationship where the child feels meaningful, has the possibility to express itself openly and to familiarize itself with its own capabilities, thoughts and feeling.
- Development of self-respect, feeling for own dignity and philanthropy and the acceptance of own feelings and thoughts and their unconditional acceptance.

- The whole social engagement and strive for personal development should be correspondent to the age. Their development when solving the problem should go in positive directions regardless of the time which both sides has to put into this.

ONE of the most important questions that need solving when working with children at risk is the problem of feeling unsecure and uncertain in life and to cope relatively independently with their fears and oppressing experiences. The ability to see the child in the same way it sees itself, so that its view of the social workers' place in its life can be assessed, is one of the social worker's main qualities. In this way the aspiration and the desire of the child to share its thoughts and experiences and to confide in and to partner with the social worker are stimulated, which fills up the sense and the idea of the social assistance. A tendency has been noticed that in most cases when the social worker meets the child for the first time, it has certain expectations for the communication with the person standing in front of him. In most cases the children have a negative adjustment and are even have a hostile disposition towards the social workers attempt to establish contact with them.

IN *the cases where there is a risk of suicidal act, violence and other critical situations, the children have to be protected in an adequate manner both from themselves and from other people and institutions.* In such extreme cases the social worker has to inform the parents and help them or the other interested parties and the institutions so that the security and the child's safety are secured. In the cases where the danger comes from another individual, the social worker has to inform the corresponding authorities and demand protection for the child.

THE general examination of the work relationship between the child as a client and the social worker is connected with the necessity to find the leading aspects of the social work with children. The efforts are directed toward the presentation of human orientated style of interaction between the child-client and the social worker, in the fundament of which are the self-regulation, child activeness and the natural strive towards change and development.

2. SOCIAL WORK WITH HANDICAPPED PEOPLE.

THE variations between the members of the same type of people are *called individual differences*. Despite the fact that these differences are something natural some people are different to such a degree that this influences their normal development and their adaptation in society. People with such differences are sometimes called unnormal, unsuitable, difficult, problematic, people with character disturbance. These characteristics have been removed and replaced with others, more appropriate, resulting from social sensibility for those individuals. Respectively, there are people with flawed senses (sight, hearing), people with physical handicaps, people suffering from chronicle diseases, people suffering from psychical diseases, people with poor psychical development, etc. The last well-founded term for those people is "handicapped people".

THE attitude of the society toward the handicapped people was altered by history but also by the public debate in society. Ancient Sparta is an example for the violence with which the societies have treated the children which didn't correspond to their view of a healthy Spartan. In the pre-Christian period the "defective" people have been neglected, chased and even slaughtered. With the appearance of the Christianity and the sermons about love and compassion, these individuals started to get care and protection. In the beginning of the new era, mental homes have been created for these individuals, but far away from the rest of the

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people, where they would stay for the rest of their lives. The main purpose of these homes was to diminish their physical pain and risk of starvation.

AFTER the Second World War a lively desire and inexhaustible interest for the full acceptance of the "different" people and the insurance of the systematic assistance for their reception by the society.

IN the last few years constant efforts for the education and the development of these people's capacity aiming at their social rehabilitation can be noticed. In this way this long, dark period when the best way to deal with handicapped people was the institutional care has given in to a period of optimism where with the appropriate education and training made the economic and social independence of these people more and more possible. Thus, *a new era in the attitude toward handicapped people emerged, which is connected with the systematic help for them, so that they can live within the society surrounded with their relatives, as far as their handicap allows them.*

THIS new tendency for social acceptance of the "different" people is due to many factors. ***The enforcement of democratic ideas** leads to the recognition of equal rights for all citizens, especially the education and the social care, regardless of their capabilities and/or handicaps*. The parents and the guardians of the handicapped individuals in all countries around the world are pressuring the society and the state officials for special measures such as the creation of special schools, the functioning of specialized educating centers, training special teachers, providing employment, etc.

THE development of the psychometric and psychology of the individual differences help better understand the characteristics of the handicapped people and their ability for development and social correction. Beside this the economic and the practical reasons require the social inclusion of the handicapped people, as it is more profitable for a country to educate these people and to help them live with dignity within the society than to force them draw from the social care all their lives. Within the frame of this logic, many EU-financed programs take care of the education and the rehabilitation of these individuals, who can be trained for different professions and treated as capable labor power.

ACCEPT from the restrictions caused by their handicap, the people with disabilities have to cope with many more difficulties, connected with their adaptation and their acceptance in social context as well as with the acceptance of their own appearance and disability. It is obvious that the reality and their condition is frightful for them and the acceptance of one-self as a "disabled" is a long and painful process. The narcissistic trauma of this acceptance might lead to self- isolation or to organizing their daily routine only around their disability. As a result they might show dependency, passiveness, low self-esteem and loss of interest.

THE handicapped people have the right to use the measures guaranteeing their independence, professional integration and participation in the public, economic and political life of the country they live in. The actions and the interventions for strengthening and protecting the people with disabilities should be specialized in the following areas: preparation, education, encouraging the employment.

THE *main areas of the activities supporting handicapped people within the framework of the social work are:*

- Social support for the individual, the family and his/her wider social surrounding.

- Social and educational care.
- Giving consultation for social integration and reintegration.
- Financial support for all kinds of problems including housing.
- Granting transportation help to places for education, training, doing an internship and/or working.
- Correct ergonomic adjustment of the training sites aiming at providing employment.
- Creating of solidarity and mutual aid networks. Stabilizing the deinstitutionalization.
- Increasing the handicapped people's possibilities for independent live, self-preservation, adhering to the hygiene standards and studying the main rules for social behavior.
- Forming representative organizations for handicapped people.
- Informing the society and the employers and fighting the social disregard and overcoming the stigma and prejudices.
- Finding companies and organizations, which encourage internships and opportunities for permanent employment.
- Creating of networks to exchange information and experience on national and international level.
- Creation of local and national registries for individuals with disabilities.

DESPITE all the efforts to improve the standard of live of the handicapped people, their complete integration in the social and cultural context in reality is much more different. The legal changes and the educational opportunities, granted to those people are still not able to change the comprehension of the regular people, who often due to lack of information and/or stimuli to make people more knowledgeable on the subject have a very different perception of those people. The result is marginalization, stigmatization and the feeling that the individuals with disabilities don't have the ability to play a significant role in the modern life. This might be the most important aspect of the handicapped people's problems, as the change in mentality will lead to wider changes in practical aspects of daily live. It is therefore apparent, that one such change is not only a state duty but also an obligation of the social workers, as professionals standing in the middle of the social activities realization. This is a change, which will contribute not only to the improvement of the handicapped people's quality of life, but will also encourage the development of the society.

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