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## **The use of counseling as a part of early intervention as a new service in emerging Family Centers in Slovakia**

### **Social work as a practical profession**

Social work is a practical profession and a scientific discipline. It supports social changes, social cohesion, human rights, and freedom of people. The basis of social work is formed by the rules of social justice, the respect for human rights, the rules of collective responsibility and the respect for all kinds of differences. With the support of theory of social work, social sciences, humanitarian departments and traditional (original) knowledge, the area of social work unites people and structures with the aim to solve problems of life and to strengthen social welfare (Trębski, Młyński, 2022).

Counseling must understand client's problems and phases of human life. At the same time, any understanding offers a space for metanoia, conversion. Any person cannot be healed on emotional level only. His/her life is rooted in psychological growth as well as in spiritual perception of life circumstances. Counselor works with several aspects of one's personality – psychological maturity, social environment, but also with the creation of a space for supernatural dimension of life offered by spirituality. Searching for new methods of help to families represents a great challenge for all helping professions. It means positive orientation towards helping people, families, countries, and the world (Štandardy Rodinných Poradní..., 2023).

In the article, we focus on the possibility of using counseling as a new method of social work in helping families who have a child with a disability. This is the use of counseling as a part of early intervention.

### **Early intervention**

Early intervention as an offered hand represents the way of support provided to those who need it. The metaphor of „offered-hand“ may also be used for the most preferred method within this support – the art of counseling (Cangár, 2016).

Early intervention is an approach that represents the way of finding the solution to the impact and consequences of disability, based on interdisciplinary team collaboration of professionals – social workers, therapeutical pedagogists, physiotherapists, pediatricians, neurologists, psychologists, and other specialists.

In Slovakia, the phenomenon of early intervention is associated with the name of Prof Karol Matulay. This founder of neurology and psychiatry in the Slovak

republic dedicated his effort to the problem of early intervention and diagnostics at the end of his professional career in the area of neurology and psychiatry.

Early intervention covers relatively autonomous area of care for children with various developmental disorders and disabilities during the first years of their life until their admission to pre-school or school institutions, as well as for their families. It is an interdisciplinary care consisting of diagnostics, rehabilitation, counseling, and therapy (Horňáková, 2010).

The term “early intervention” is internationally (*frühförderung, rane intervencije, raná péče*) used to describe the measures and programs of therapeutical, educational and socializing character implemented in relation to the category of children and their families mentioned above. It is typically for early intervention that its clients are all members of the family and it is provided mostly in their natural environment and in collaboration with the healthcare system.

Most EU countries not only acknowledge the need of early intervention, but they have also made the necessary steps to promote its provision by building of the supporting net of services. In some European States, the services associated with the care for children with disabilities and their families are funded from public sources and they are provided in both field and ambulant form by the institutions of early intervention from the moment of the child’s birth. Interdisciplinary teams of these centers usually consist of medics, psychologists, social workers, pedagogists, ensuring a good exchange of information among these specialists.

In Slovakia, there are over fifty thousand children born annually. Those who are born prematurely, require a special approach and procedures provided by doctors, psychologists, social workers, and other experts. Prematurely born children need the support in as early age as possible, because their development is delayed. Some of them need a long-term care. According to statistical data of the healthcare resort, there are up to two thousand children with disabilities born in Slovakia on annual basis. Parents of these children need a long-term counseling as soon as possible after the birth of their child. Families need the service of early intervention.

There is generally acknowledged wider definition of early intervention in early childhood within the European space. According to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, early childhood intervention represents a composite of services and provisions for very young children and their families, provided at their request at a certain time in a child’s life, covering any action undertaken when a child needs special support to:

- ensure and enhance her/his personal development;
- strengthen the family’s own competences;
- promote the social inclusion of the family and the child.

Currently operating centers of early intervention in Slovakia have been created upon the initiative and mostly with the support of non-profit organizations. The complex form of care for families with disabled children is not integrated in the law concerning social services. Such a way of provision of help to a child with disability in his natural environment is provided by the system and functioning of social service and care in Slovakia. Parents could acquire the support through such a service from

the moment of the child's birth (Trębski, 2014), however, the field form of social services for a family with disabled child is only gradually being put into practice, thanks to recent amendment to the law on social services (Šmidová, Trębski, Nemčíková, 2020). Many researchers carried out in the past years have revealed the urgent need to establish such a service for families with disabled children.

Establishment of the centers of early intervention by local municipalities represents one of the ways to help these families (Trębski, 2020). A child with disability needs to spend as much time as possible in harmonic and stimulating domestic environment in early stages of his life. It is not good for a family to spend a lot of time with their disabled child by visiting doctors, waiting in ambulances, and hunting for all kinds of information. For this reason, it is desired that providing of early intervention at home (natural environment of the disabled child) becomes a crucial part of the service and the whole family becomes its client. Counseling in a family circle offers the space for individual approach from which both parents and their child can benefit.

According to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, there are several common features typical for the services of early intervention like availability to the families in need not only in cities and towns but also in rural areas, proximity in a sense of provision of the services within certain community or directly in domestic environment, as well as in a sense of clear understanding of and respect for the family's needs. Affordability of services is also supported by the fact that in most countries this activity is provided through public funds of healthcare, social or educational authorities, or by insurance companies and nonprofit associations. Professionals in charge of the direct support to families belong to different professions and interdisciplinary work facilitates the exchange of information among the team members. Diversity of services emerges from the involvement of three areas: health, social services, and education.

The analysis of the study – elaborated on the base of collected information from several European countries – results in the following recommendations:

1. Regarding availability of services, is recommended to create a systemic conception of early intervention on local, regional and national level supported by political measures to guarantee the availability of information and to clearly define the target groups. The common goal of early intervention is to make it available to all children and their families who need support as early as possible. It is a joint priority for all countries with the aim to balance regional differences concerning availability of resources and to ensure that children and their families asking for help will have the access to the services of equal quality.

2. To secure the proximity of services, it is necessary to obtain the information about living and social conditions of a family directly in its natural environment and with the respect for the needs of the family and the child. It is crucial in this area to ensure that help reaches all members of the target population. Help is available as close to the family as possible at both local and community level. This aspect is also associated with the concept of provision of family-oriented services. The aim of the whole process is to clearly understand and respect the needs of the family with disabled child.

3. Financial affordability regardless of social-economical background of a family must be ensured, which means that all the services of early intervention should be funded from public resources. They are provided free of charge or at minimum expenses. Services are funded from public resources through the authorities in charge of healthcare, social affairs education, or through NGOs. These services can be provided independently or in the complementary manner.

4. Cooperation of professionals with families as the main partners must be ensured and the experts should be the ones to initiate it. Professionals must be capable of working in team, transmission of information must be functional and fluent. It is necessary to organize common advanced trainings or education in practice. Professionals in charge of the direct support to young children and their families belong to various disciplines with diverse background depending on the profession they are related to. Interdisciplinary work facilitates the exchange of information among the team members. This feature is closely associated with the diversity of disciplines involved in the process of early intervention. The involvement of three services – healthcare, social services, and education – is similar for many countries, however, it also constitutes one of the main differences at the same time.

5. Stability of the team members is necessary to ensure quality of provided services. Diversity in sectors providing early intervention should not exclude a certain portion of responsibility of the healthcare resort, the system of social services and education (Šmidová, Trębski, Nemčíková, 2019).

6. When parents obtain the information about possibility of using the service of early intervention, counselor will be assigned by the center of early intervention to accompany the family and mediate the contact with other professionals.

## **Family Center**

In Slovakia, this mission is currently being fulfilled by the newly established Family Centers. Family counseling centers were created within the framework of the National project Family centers – counseling and psychological services for individuals, couples, and families with the aim of expanding and increasing the availability of free professional help in the field of family counseling (in the form of counseling for individuals, couples and families) as one of the preventive tools to support mental and social health of Slovak families and their members.

Family counseling services are provided at the level of universal, selective, and indicated prevention in the form of counseling of several types, while with each type of counseling it is necessary to respect its professional and ethical principles in order to maintain the high quality of the service. Advisors are obliged to respect the latest scientific knowledge and general legislative principles.

## Counseling

Counseling is a new profession that is establishing itself in Slovakia and that can help improve the quality of support for families in various stressful situations (Trębski, 2016).

Counseling is a new developing method of social work. It is a method that helps face difficult situations that influence one's personal, social and spiritual level. This method is implemented in all areas of human life, regarding problems associated with work and unemployment, spousal and family conflicts, problems concerning sexual and emotional life, disability to make decisions, educational problems, losses and sadness, loneliness, inappropriate interpersonal relations, illnesses, existential emptiness, lack of faith and problems of spiritual character (Šmidová, 2016).

The ambition of family centers is to become a safe place for everyone who is in an unfavorable or difficult life situations, for instance "unintelligible", loses a sense of security and support in the home environment, unclarity of family relationships and structures, life changes or challenges which one cannot deal with on his own, when he/her needs psycho-social help. Family counseling centers are a place where an individual, a couple or a family with children can find professional help from a psychologist, social worker, lawyer, or other specialist, always free of charge. If the problem does not fall within the scope of Family centers, the client will receive basic information about the possibilities of solving his problems, as well as the information about other experts and institutions in the region that can help him/her solve the problem.

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### **Abstract**

The national project implemented in Slovakia creates space for conceptual support for families. The main goal of family counseling is to help effectively families and their members with problems related to the family and its relationships. Support of healthy family cohesion and mobilization of internal resources aimed at joint solutions to problems and difficult situations, so that its members are able to provide for their mutual support. Strengthening family relationships is in the attention of family counseling centers also with the aim of preventing the emergence of problems and the recurrence of pathological phenomena. In parallel with this process, a new counseling profession is being established in Slovakia, which is currently at the level of specialization in social work and is a suitable addition to the services provided by family counseling centers to help families in early intervention.

**Keywords:** family support, family center, counseling, early intervention.

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