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INTERVENTION THROUGH SOCIAL SERVICES FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN SITUATIONS AT RISK

INTERVENȚIA PRIN SERVICIILE SOCIALE DESTINATE FAMILIILOR CU COPII ÎN SITUAȚII DE RISC

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Abstract. *Social services designed for families with children in situations of risk serve a fundamental purpose in safeguarding family unity and promoting child welfare. Specific interventions include counseling services, programs for developing children's social skills, and parental support activities, all aimed at strengthening families' ability to provide a stable and secure environment. A fundamental component of these interventions is the assessment of needs and risks through social inquiries, followed by the development of an individualized intervention plan tailored to each family. Intervention for families with children at risk is provided through a coordinated network of services, including the Social Service for Support to Families with Children, Early Intervention Programs, and Day Centers for Children at Risk.*

Keywords: *social services, children at risk, families with children at risk, interventions.*

Rezumat. *Serviciile sociale destinate familiilor cu copii aflați în situații de risc au un rol fundamental în protejarea unității familiei și promovarea bunăstării copilului. Intervențiile specifice includ servicii de consiliere, programe pentru dezvoltarea abilităților sociale ale copiilor și activități de sprijin pentru părinți, toate având scopul de a consolida capacitatea familiilor de a oferi un mediu stabil și sigur. O componentă esențială a acestor intervenții este evaluarea nevoilor și riscurilor prin anchete sociale, urmată de elaborarea unui plan individualizat de intervenție adaptat fiecărei familii. Intervenția destinată familiilor cu copii în situație de risc este asigurată printr-o rețea coordonată de servicii, care include Serviciul Social de Sprijin pentru Familiile cu Copii, Programele de Intervenție Timpurie și Centrele de Zi pentru Copiii aflați în situație de risc.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *servicii sociale, copii în situație de risc, familii cu copii în situație de risc, intervenții.*

Introduction

Social services for families with children at risk play a key role in preventing the separation of children from their families and ensuring their well-being. Specific interventions include counseling services, programs to develop children's social skills, and parental support activities, aimed at strengthening families' capacity to provide a stable and secure environment (Analiza situației..., 2023; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2002).

Intervention through social services for families with children at risk is delivered through the Social Support Service for Families with Children, early intervention programs and services, and Day Centers for Children at Risk, designed to support families in overcoming difficulties (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015).

These interventions are structured to optimally respond to the individual needs of each case, based on a rigorous assessment and implementation process.

Interventions include counseling activities to support parents and children in managing difficulties, as well as educational support to improve access to learning resources. Psychological support is aimed at enhancing emotional stability and family resilience, while material support is used in specific circumstances to address urgent problems (UNICEF, 2022).

The fundamental objective of these measures is to ensure the child's integrity, prevent separation from the family environment, and strengthen the child's well-being in a safe and stimulating environment. At the same time, interventions are implemented according to evidence-based methodologies and best practices, ensuring efficiency and transparency in the family support process (Parteneriate pentru Fiecare Copil, n.d.).

Materials and Methods

According to Government Decision No. 889/2013 for the approval of the Framework Regulation on the organization and functioning of the Social Support Service for Families with Children, family support is defined as a service addressed to families with children to prevent and overcome risk situations (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2013).

The Social Support Service for Families with Children is mainly aimed at preventing risk situations through information and community-based support. To this end, the service provides primary interventions focused on supporting parents in overcoming the difficulties they face. To ensure the upbringing and education of the child in the family environment, the service is provided in two forms: primary family support and secondary family support (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2013).

Primary Family Support

Primary family support plays a key role in supporting families with children, focusing on the prevention of risk situations through various activities and programs at the community level. Interventions in this regard are individualized according to the needs of families and include:



Figure 1. Primary Family Support

Source: Author, based on documentation

- Information and sensitization: organizing awareness sessions on risk topics and situations for diverse groups.

- Strengthening parenting skills: through training and guiding parents to help them navigate and overcome encountered challenges.

- Family support social networks: creating spaces for parents and children to share experiences and receive support.

- Community activities with children: programs promoting emotional and social development and social inclusion of children.

- Community opportunities: facilitating communication and mutual support between families to address daily difficulties.

The primary family support service also applies in cases of reintegration of children, where the family is supported and encouraged to overcome difficulties to care for the returned child and provide a favorable growth environment (Oceretnîi & Bătrînescu, 2024).

Secondary Family Support

Secondary family support involves a complex set of activities, including, where necessary, the provision of financial support to families with children at risk. The main aim is to reduce factors affecting the child's health and development, prevent separation from the family, or prepare for reintegration (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016).

Interventions are implemented based on child protection case management practices (Ministerul Muncii şi Protecţiei Sociale, 2023), which involve opening an individualized file for each child.

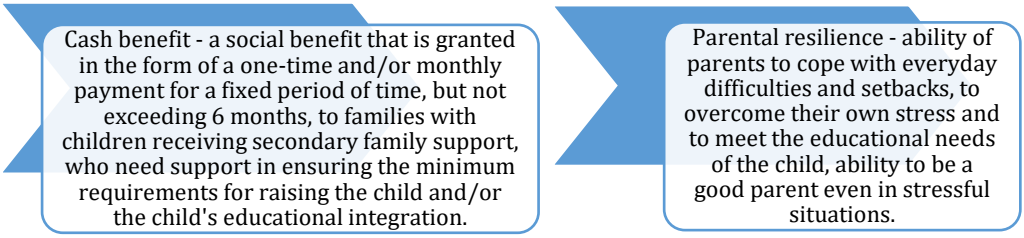


Figure 2. Secondary Family Support

Source: Author, based on documentation

The activity of the Service is based on the following essential principles:

1) respect for the rights and best interests of the child;
2) respect for human dignity;
3) non-discrimination;
4) comprehensive and individualized approach to the child;
5) early intervention at the community level, limited in time;
6) protection of the child from abuse, neglect, and exploitation;
7) respect for the views of the child;
8) ensuring access to appropriate forms of support;
9) confidentiality of information;
10) social solidarity;
11) partnership;
12) transparency in decision-making.

The Social Support Service for Families with Children is oriented towards empowering families and supporting the harmonious development of children, strengthening parenting skills and family resilience, using a child-centered approach.

A fundamental component of these interventions is the assessment of needs and risks through social surveys, followed by the development of an individualized intervention plan tailored to each family. Parental support and psychosocial counseling are essential to improving intra-family relationships and preventing situations of neglect or abuse. Facilitating access to educational and health services also contributes to the harmonious development of the child and reduces social inequalities.

An effective approach requires intersectoral collaboration between public institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the community, ensuring coordinated support for families in need. Through these mechanisms, the risk of abandonment and social exclusion is reduced, promoting the inclusion and balanced development of children in the family environment.

Actual practice and recent studies in the field argue that, for the effective implementation of the social support service for families with children, it is necessary to revise the normative framework, to clearly regulate the planning and evaluation procedures, to hire specialists in child rights protection, to establish a monitoring mechanism, to ensure continuous training of multidisciplinary teams, to empower community actors, to organize information campaigns, to diversify community activities, and to make use of community infrastructure (such as cultural centers, libraries, sports grounds, etc.). These interventions ensure a unified approach by all community actors to the tasks assigned to them in activities aimed at strengthening families with children (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2013).

Early intervention for children in the Republic of Moldova refers to services and support programs designed to promote the healthy development and well-being of young children with developmental disorders or at risk of developing them. Early intervention usually focuses on the first years of a child's life (0–3 years), as this period is critical for rapid brain development and the formation of the foundations for learning and behavior.

Early intervention services for children are based on a social model that links assistance from different sectors in a coherent way, fostering seamless integration of services and promoting transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary engagement. These services and activities are defined within each institution providing early intervention, in order to contribute to the implementation of national policies aligned with international principles and standards (Analiza situației..., 2023).

Early intervention is family-centered, designed to provide comprehensive support to families with young children from birth to three years of age, and sometimes up to six years old.

Research Findings

In Moldova, early intervention for children refers to "medical, social, and psycho-pedagogical services provided to children for physical development, including stimulation of vision and hearing, cognitive, communicative, social, psycho-emotional, and adaptive development". The Government Decision No. 816/2016 for the approval of the "Framework Regulation on the organization and functioning of early intervention services and minimum quality standards for early intervention services" initially mentioned the group of beneficiaries — children aged 0–3 years.

Despite some achievements, the reality is that the existing minimum quality standards for early intervention services for children are outdated, and there is no set of indicators to ensure effective planning and delivery of these services (Analiza situației..., 2023). Strengthening early intervention services for children requires strategic and well-planned measures to ensure sustainable impact. A key recommendation is the development of a five-year national program that sets out clear directions for development, implementation costs, and promotes internationally recognized evidence-based methods.

This program should be aligned with the legislative framework of the Republic of Moldova, integrating key dimensions such as maternal and child health, early child development, and inclusive education. Improving the regulatory framework is vital to ensure the effective development and implementation of early intervention services. At the same time, a coordinated system involving governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community partners is essential to promote collaboration in the delivery of these services. Strengthened funding mechanisms, through adequate allocation of public resources to support service sustainability and equitable access for all families, regardless of socio-economic conditions, are a priority. Well-defined standards remain fundamental to continuous quality improvement. Coherent development and national implementation of early intervention for children can be achieved through a well-functioning system of data collection, management, and use, which will help inform decision-making and intervention planning. This will ensure optimal adaptation of services to the needs of each child and family in Moldova.

The studies conducted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022) and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2002) identify a set of core principles of effective and high-quality early intervention services for children. These include: 1) services based on the social model of disability, promoting integration and inclusion; 2) family-centered services for children aged 0–3 years and their families that are:

- delivered early and on an ongoing basis;
- individualized and based on the needs of families and children;
- intensive and driven by child and family needs;
- evidence-based and outcome-driven;
- accessible and available;
- interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, integrated, and team-based.

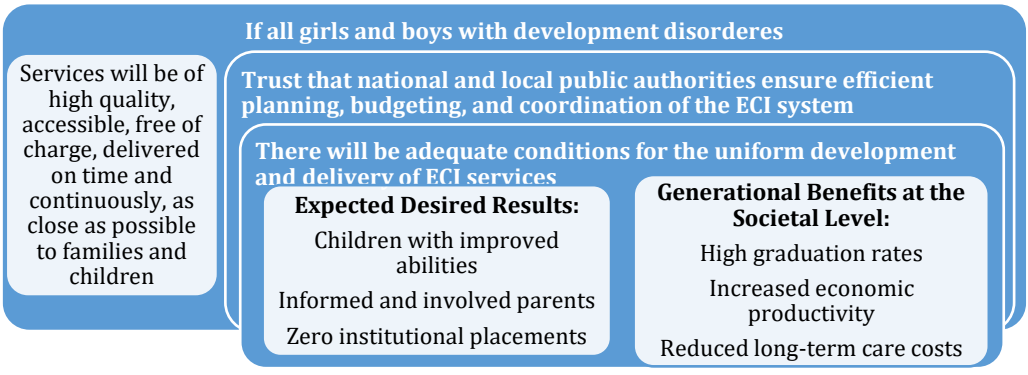


Figure 3. Theory of Change in the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Field

Source: adapted from UNICEF, 2022

The core concepts and benefits of early intervention programs and services for children are also outlined in the Theory of Change model.

The national system of early intervention for children includes structural and institutional mechanisms specific to the national context that enable children with developmental disorders to access specialized services for their optimal development. The *Framework Regulation on the organization and functioning of early intervention*

services and minimum quality standards for early intervention services in the Republic of Moldova stipulates that the providers of these services include health-care institutions and organizations specialized in early intervention. These can have various forms of ownership and legal organization, provided they are accredited and operate according to the legislative provisions in force (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016).

The provision of services is linked to accreditation, whereby the services provided must meet specific standards, allowing the provider to access funding from the Compulsory Health Care Insurance Fund. Intervention through early intervention services for children in Moldova refers to "medical-social services provided to children for physical development, including vision and hearing, cognitive development, communication development, social development, psycho-emotional and adaptive development" (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2016).

Another model of intervention through social services for families with children at risk is achieved through the services provided by the *Day Social Service for Children at Risk*, regulated by Government Decision No. 441/2015 for the approval of the *Framework Regulation on the organization and functioning of the Day Social Service for Children at Risk and minimum quality standards* (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015). The *Day Care Centre for Children at Risk* provides specialized day assistance to children in order to ensure their social and family (re)integration, as well as to prevent their separation from the family environment.

The beneficiaries of the service are children aged 7 to 18 years who are registered with the guardianship authority as children at risk and, where necessary, children with moderate or severe disabilities, as well as their family members. The service aims to prevent family separation, marginalization, social exclusion, and institutionalization of the child, and to facilitate their (re)integration into the family and community.

Intervention through the *Day Center for Children at Risk* is based on the implementation of an *Individualized Service Plan* — a set of tailored interventions developed following a detailed assessment of the child's assistance and development needs. The purpose of the plan is to support the child's autonomy and inclusion. The plan is created and updated throughout the service use period and forms part of the *Individual Assistance Plan*, ensuring a comprehensive and personalized approach (Ministerul Muncii și Protecției Sociale, 2023).

Children admitted to the center are those identified as being in risk situations and officially registered by the guardianship authority. When a child is referred by the authority, the referral must include:

- the initial and comprehensive assessment of the child's situation,
- the individual assistance plan, and
- the decision to register the child as being at risk (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015).

In cases where parents or another legal representative directly approach the service, the provider must request the guardianship authority to register the child within three working days. Admission is based on an application submitted by the parents or legal representative, accompanied by identity documents (birth certificate, identity document, or family composition certificate).

The service provider reviews the request, makes an admission decision, registers the child, and signs a *Collaboration Agreement* with the parents. A case manager is assigned, who assesses the child's needs and develops the *Individualized Service Plan* together with the multidisciplinary team and family. The child's situation is regularly reviewed, and the case manager prepares periodic reports for the guardianship authority (Ministerul Muncii și Protecției Sociale, 2023). The child's exit from the service occurs upon achievement of objectives, at family request, or in special circumstances, and is officially recorded.

The Day Center for Children at Risk offers a broad range of interventions, aiming to support the holistic development of beneficiaries, including:

- nutritional support,
- development of life skills,
- enhancement of cognitive, communication, and behavioral abilities,
- support for school integration and educational achievement.

Additionally, the service facilitates:

- career orientation programs,
- counseling and psychosocial rehabilitation,
- organization of recreational and cultural activities,
- access to community services in education, health, and culture sectors.

Strong emphasis is placed on strengthening parenting skills, recognized as essential for the upbringing and education of children. Depending on individual needs, beneficiaries may also access other specialized services, ensuring a holistic and integrated approach for social inclusion and balanced development.

Conclusions

This paper highlights the critical role of social interventions aimed at families with children at risk, interventions carried out through various structures and services, each with a specific and complementary role. The system is based on a well-coordinated network composed of diverse services, operating within a clear and integrated framework (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2013; Ministerul Muncii și Protecției Sociale, 2023).

The *Social Support Service for Families with Children* focuses primarily on preventing risk situations through information, parental support, and promoting the upbringing and development of children within the family environment. This service plays a key role in strengthening family resilience and fostering a safe and nurturing context for children's growth (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2013).

Early intervention programs and services address the integrated development of children with developmental disorders or at risk of such disorders, applying an interdisciplinary approach and interventions based on the social model of disability. These interventions are family-centered, evidence-based, accessible, and adapted to the individual needs of children and their families (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2002; UNICEF, 2022). Through interdisciplinary engagement, early intervention programs offer support not only for the child's optimal development but also for empowering the family to manage difficulties and create sustainable developmental opportunities (Analiza situației privind intervenția timpurie la copii, 2023).

Day Centers for Children at Risk provide psychosocial rehabilitation, skill development, educational support, and access to community resources. They contribute to children's (re)integration into their families and communities by promoting emotional well-being, social inclusion, and the strengthening of family ties (Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 2015). The implementation of these interventions relies on interdisciplinary collaboration, quality standards, individualized service plans, and evidence-based methodologies to ensure efficiency, transparency, and sustainable impact (Ministerul Muncii și Protecției Sociale, 2023).

In conclusion, the complex mechanisms of social intervention for children at risk contribute significantly to the protection, development, and social inclusion of children, promoting their harmonious growth in secure family and community environments.

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