**Current findings on the project *The risk levels for behavioral problems of children of early developmental age and professional interventions***

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Abstract

The aims of this paper were to represent theoretical frame, some current obtained data and further plans of the project *The risk levels for behavioral problems of children of early developmental age and professional interventions*. The project in Rijeka, Croatia aims at preventing undesirable social and personal development outcomes. The prevention concept relies on the theory of risk and protection used in evidence-based early intervention model. The results have shown several risk and protective elements that possibly could be relevant for modeling prevention and early intervention program. Further research should be conducted.

Key words: early intervention, prevention, protective factors, preschool institution, risk factors

1. Introduction

The main purpose of the project is to contribute to prevention of undesirable development outcomes like unsuccessful adaptation to school, bullying and being bullied, juvenile delinquency, the diseases of addiction and disruption of mental health. Thereby, it is assumed that qualitative and effective prevention: (i) relies on numerous studies which confirmed that early detection and professional support, i.e. early intervention for children with special needs, foster optimized maturity, socialization and development of children’s full potential, (ii) should be regarded as interdisciplinary, complex, dynamic and organized system as well as a process that is carefully planned and systematically evaluated, and (iii) should be comprehensive and applied from the earliest age. The project consists of three phases: i) assessing risk levels and protective elements for the development of behavioral problems in preschool children in Rijeka, (ii) creating network of an early intervention model for children and their families in moderate and high risk levels, and (iii) continuous evaluation of the early intervention model through evidence-based approach and the sustainability of the project. Currently, the core team is working on the first phase of the project, i.e. identifying risk and protective factors of children’s development by means of a mix method. Quantitative research has been conducted since 2013 as part of a longitudinal research which follows one generation of children at their toddler age in preschool institutions in Rijeka named Kindergarten Rijeka (N=236; 30% of population). The aim of the quantitative study is to identify risk and protective factors of development of observed children, parents and preschool teachers in preschool institution regarded as a socio-ecological system of child upbringing. The general objective, achieved by qualitative approach, was to test, describe and interpret preschool teachers’ and preschool counselors’ beliefs on children’s behavioral problems from phenomenological, etiological and intervention aspect. The aims of this paper were to present project’s theoretical frame, some current obtained data and further plans. The proposed goals will be realized by review of relevant literature and selected research findings from the first stage of the Project.

2. Theoretical frame of the Project

The theory of risk and protective factors for behavioral disorders and substance abuse (Garmezy, 1996; Pollard and Hawkins, 1999) showed it was highly important to recognize risk and protective factors in human's socio-ecological system. Reducing risk factors as well as investing in protective factors prevents the development of negative psychosocial and health outcomes. According to the same authors, risk factors are defined as all circumstances and conditions in life, as well as individual characteristics which contribute to or might contribute to the occurrence of adverse psychosocial and health outcomes in the individual. Most frequently, risks can be regarded as risks within the individual (such as a difficult character, cognitive difficulties, lack in emotional and social skills) and risks in the child's environment (family, preschool institutions/schools, community) (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill & Abbott 2005; Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, & Noam, 2011; Murray & Farrington, 2010; Youngblade et al, 2007).

By implementing prevention, it is of crucial importance to identify and minimize risk factors. Research has shown that prevention efforts need to be implemented especially in children who have manifested persistent internalized (emotional) problems and externalized (behavioral) problems in an early or preschool age (Mann & Reydols, 2006). These children need to be involved in inclusive programs where they would be provided with the help of preschool teachers and preschool counselors. Internalized and externalized problems (emotional problems and behavioral problems) are considered to be at-risk behavior while socially competent behavior is considered to be protective behavior.

Protective factors mediate or lessen the effects of exposure to risk factors and reduce the incidence of behavioral problems (Pollard & Hawkins, 1999). Investing in development of protective mechanisms in the early and preschool age is considered to be one of the protective factors. In other words, it positively affects psychosocial development and health. Protective mechanisms are grouped into (i) genetic and biological (e.g. gender), (ii) individual peer (e.g. social skills), (iii) academic, (iv) family (e.g. relationship with parents), and (v) protective mechanisms associated with the community (support system). Furthermore, fostering and encouraging the development of social competence in preschool age is also a protective element that predicts desired psychosocial development and health in adolescence (Farrington, 1994; Hawkins et al., 1992; Hawkins et al., 1995; Smokowsky et al., 2004; all according to Bašić, 2009).

One of the supporting systems of protective factors in Croatian preschool system is National Curriculum for Preschool Education (2014) which promotes improvement of inclusive efforts in education (2014, p. 20). The development of children’s social competence is one of the goals of the before mentioned document. It is highly relevant to risk factor prevention because social competence is in moderate to strong negative correlation to internalized (emotional) problems and externalized (behavioral) problems in the early and preschool age children (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Vlah et al., 2012). Thus, children with internalized (emotional) problems and externalized (behavioral) problems should be involved in inclusive preschool as a form of protective environment.

Preschoolers’ environment, which can be regarded as the protective element in the community that could improve children’s social skills, reduces the impacts of early internalized (emotional) and externalized (behavioral) problems and ensures better social adaptation in future. Therefore, it is advisable to review literature according to which early intervention efforts in preschool should focus on reducing known risk factors and, if possible, increasing protective factors (Webster-Straton & Reid, 2007). Preschool teachers are caring professionals who shape children’s psychosocial environment on a daily basis. They are, along with parents, important and significant elders who provide protection to children. The question is what is their opinion of risk factors? Do they have enough knowledge to decide whether and how they should react? How do they define and identify internalized (emotional) problems and externalized (behavioral) problems in an early developing age? Do they see the prospect for interventions to protect children? Hopefully, the results of the Project’s first phase would give answers to those and similar questions.

There are three risk levels according to which children’s positive development can be delayed or even prevented. The risk levels can be minimal, moderate or high. With regard to the estimated level, different forms of support should be defined and implemented (from preventive interventions to specific forms of treatment). According to the contemporary theory of prevention, all children are, at least, in the minimum risk of the adverse psychosocial development (Bašić, Mihić & Novak, 2010). Prevention interventions are undertaken on a universal level to ensure the wellbeing of all children in preschool institution (National Curriculum for Preschool Education, 2014). But, those children who are at increased risk (moderate and/or high risk level) should be involved in some sort of intervention program that implies programming intervention goals and its assessment. The Project aims at systematic collection and data analysis regarding parents’, preschool teachers’ and representatives’ of professional services views on risk behaviors, current intervention system for children at moderate and high risk. Moreover, according to Bühler’s pedagogical concept (1969; in Vlah, 2013), predicting risk level ensures providing children with professional help more often. That help is provided by the person who teaches children on an everyday basis within an educational group or by the professional or a team of professionals who use their specialized expertise to give additional help to the child in need. If the child’s risk level is moderate, preschool teacher is able to solve his/her problematic behavior or emotional state by using individual approach that presupposes more engagement. High risk, on the other hand, requires the expertise of institution’s preschool counselor or an external professional who will engage in the process of problem solving posed by particular behavior.

4. Some current derived results of the project

4.1. Results derived from quantitative longitudinal study

Nursery children between 1.5 and 3 years of age were initially tested in the longitudinal study. The follow up measurement commenced when the children reached early preschool age (between 3 and 4.5 years old). As far as final measurements are concerned, they are planned to occur when the children reach preschool age (between 5.5 and 7 years old) in 2018. According to educators’ opinion, 9% of nursery children between 1.5 and 3 years of age require educators’ additional help mostly due to children’s problems with regulation, elimination, sleep, stereotyped actions and/or unusual behavior (Vlah & Ferić, 2017, in press). The follow up measurement test results indicate that 20% of children require extra work due to their internalized and/or externalized problems (Vlah, Smojver-Ažić & Dorčić Martinac, 2017, in press). Educators rate their proffesional self-efficacy extremely high (Vlah, 2017, in press). The higher the level of educators’ self-efficacy in instruction giving and group guidance, the lesser the frequency of externalized and internalized problems. Moreover, the level of children’s social competence increases. The results indicated that early preschool educators usually get the additional help if required whereas nursery educators tend to disagree. According to Martinac Dorčić, Smojver-Ažić & Vlah (2015), parents of children between 1.5 and 3 years who express concern about at least one aspect of their child’s development and behavior, perceive their parenting competence lower than parents who do not worry. Parents stated to react appropriately to their child’s negative emotions, meaning they help their child feel better and encourage problem solving. On the other hand, those children whose parents punish them by depriving them from another activity or making them feel guilty whenever they display fear or anxiety of a kind, are more anxious and reserved. Furthermore, children can become equally anxious if their parents show agitation or underestimate the importance of their feelings. Moreover, children whose parents get upset or punish them when expressing negative emotions display aggressive behavior more often. Besides parent reactions, behavior issues are connected to child’s temper, i.e. reaction patterns. Children who get upset easily when they encounter new situations, exhibit more problematic behavior. Meaning, they express negative emotions and have minimized reaction control abilities (Martinac Dorčić et al., 2015). Sleeping problems have been proved to be relevant early recognized predictor of externalized and internalized behavioral problems (Martinac Dorčić, Smojver-Ažić & Vlah, 2016).

4.2. Results derived from qualitative study

So far, results regarding preschool teachers’ perspective have been evaluated (Vlah, Katić i Mirosavljević, 2018 in press) and organized in five focus groups sorted by internal criterion (experience with children diagnosed with behavioral problems) and external criterion (territorial distribution i.e. proximity to certain kindergarten). The research was conducted according to the Principles of Ethical Research. Thematic analysis yielded six topics. The first topic *Emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) experience* is comprised of all important aspects, elements and evaluation tasks related to emotional and behavioral problems. The second one is *Communication and cooperation – key elements of competent dealing with EBD* which highlights the importance of cooperation between parents, preschool teachers and preschool counselors, together with early detection, evaluation and planning interventions for children diagnosed with EBD. The third topic *Factors which hinder efficient treatment of EBD* refers to the factors that lessen the possibility of qualitative work and integration of children diagnosed with EBD in regular preschool institutions. The forth topic is entitled *Competent preschool teacher – the key figure and the holder of preventive activities in kindergarten.* Preschool teachers’ key role in EBD preventive activities has significant theoretical and practical background. The fifth topic *Preschool teacher – dissatisfied with the job* relates to negative aspects of preschool teachers’ job which contribute to their general dissatisfaction. Moreover, they can experience early burnout*.* This issue can also be regarded as a loophole in preschool education system despite, primarily preschool teachers’ and preschool counselors’ numerous efforts. The sixth topic *Recommendations for advancement in EBD treatment in kindergarten* specifies participants’ recommendations with intent to improve the system and its procedures to overcome challenges and difficulties they encounter on a daily basis.

5. Instead of the conclusion – what's next?

We intend to finish the first phase of the project and proceed to the next one. As preliminary results have showed, preschool institution is a place where risk and protective factors could be recognized as elements which could enable modeling prevention and early intervention program.

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