

DOI 10.51558/2490-3647.2025.10.1.843

UDK 364:373.2

Primljeno: 03. 03. 2025.

Pregledni rad

Review paper

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## **SOCIAL WORK IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS**

Social work in preschool institutions plays a crucial role in supporting the holistic development of young children, fostering a nurturing environment, and promoting family engagement. Early childhood education is a pivotal phase in a child's life, where emotional, social, and cognitive development lays the foundation for future learning and well-being. Social workers within preschool settings focus on addressing the diverse needs of children and families, ensuring that each child receives the support required to thrive. Social workers in preschool institutions work closely with educators, parents, and communities to identify and respond to challenges such as emotional difficulties, behavioral issues, neglect, abuse, and socio-economic disparities. They provide counseling services, facilitate family interventions, and advocate for resources to ensure that children grow up in environments that foster their emotional and developmental needs. Additionally, social workers offer support to teachers by guiding classroom management and promoting positive social interactions among children. In this context, social work is not just about addressing problems but also about building resilience, enhancing social skills, and ensuring access to educational resources. By promoting a supportive and inclusive environment, social workers contribute to reducing barriers to learning and creating a positive foundation for lifelong success. This paper explores the roles and responsibilities of social workers in preschool settings, the challenges they face, and strategies for effective intervention.

**Keywords:** social work; child development; support; preschool; system

## INTRODUCTION

Social work in preschool institutions is defined differently, but authors agree on its designation as a special area of social work. Constable (2009: 8) emphasizes that social work in preschool institutions is „a special area of practice within social work, which requires a wide range of skills, including interactive teamwork, especially with teachers, students and their families”.

Social work in preschool education has developed in line with the growing awareness of the need to support children and families, especially those in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions. In the early 20th century, in many countries in Europe and the USA, social workers were introduced into preschool institutions to address problems such as poverty and neglect (Kahn 2014).

Social work in preschool institutions plays a key role in supporting children, families and professional staff. The preschool period is a time of intensive development of the child, when the basic foundations for emotional, social and cognitive development are formed. In this context, social work provides significant assistance in identifying and solving problems that may affect the child’s well-being and his ability to fully utilize the potential of preschool education (Greenberg et al. 2013).

The role of a social worker in these institutions is not only solving social problems, but also prevention, education and connecting with the local community. Their task is to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment for every child, including those from vulnerable groups, such as children from socio-economically disadvantaged families, children with special needs and migrant children (Azzi-Lessing 2010; Milosavljević 2009).

This paper provides a basis for understanding the importance of social work in preschool institutions, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach that includes teamwork with educators, professional associates and families. Social work in this setting contributes to the creation of a community that supports children in developing their potential and promotes social justice from an early age.

## 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORK IN PRESCHOOLS

The development of social work in preschools has a rich history and has evolved through various phases, from the initial steps in recognizing the need for support for children and their families, to modern forms of social work in educational institutions. Here is how it developed:

1. Early phases (until the mid-20th century): Initially, social work in preschools was very informal and sporadic. Pedagogues and kindergarten teachers were often the ones who also dealt with the social aspects of children's lives, but without specific strategies or education in the field of social work.
2. The emergence of social workers in schools (mid-20th century): After World War II, especially in developed countries, there was a growing interest in social assistance in educational institutions. Social workers slowly entered the education system, recognizing that children, especially from disadvantaged social backgrounds, could benefit from additional support.
3. Development of specific programs for preschools (1960-1990): In the second half of the 20th century, the development of social work in preschools became increasingly specific. Social workers began to play a key role in identifying children's social problems, such as neglect, abuse, family difficulties, and also in providing support to parents through various advice and courses. Also, kindergartens began to introduce programs that included parent education, which further integrated social work into the education system.
4. Modern phase (1990 to present): In modern society, social work in preschools has become a key element in providing comprehensive support to children. Social workers now play a key role in prevention, intervention in crisis situations, as well as in cooperation with various institutions (courts, social services, health care). Also, social work in preschools now includes working with children with special needs, as well as implementing social inclusion programs.
5. Current challenges: Although social work in preschool institutions has an important place, challenges remain, such as the lack of adequate resources, the lack of recognition of the role of social workers, and the need for continuous professional development of professionals. There is also a need for a broader understanding of the need for social work in educational institutions at all levels of society (Gavrilović and Vidanović 2016; Briggs 2020).

Therefore, the development of social work in preschool institutions relies on a long process of institutional recognition and professionalization of this discipline, which today encompasses many aspects of the life of the child and family (Gavrilović and Šućur Janjetović 2014; Greenberg et al. 2013).

## 2. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL WORK IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

The legal framework for social work in preschool institutions includes legal norms, regulations and rules that ensure the protection of children's rights and support for parents and caregivers in preschool institutions. In many countries, including those belonging to the European Union, social work in preschool institutions includes several key aspects:

- **Law on Social Protection and Social Services:** In some countries, social workers work in preschool institutions to support children at risk (such as children with special needs, children who are victims of violence, neglect or children from socially vulnerable families). The law often includes guidelines for the role of the social worker in providing social services, cooperation with parents and coordination with other professionals (such as psychologists, pedagogues).
- **Law on Preschool Education:** The law on preschool education often contains provisions related to the quality of services, obligations and responsibilities of preschool institutions and their employees, including social workers. This law may include provisions related to ensuring equal access to educational services for all children, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances.
- **Child Rights:** Many jurisdictions have legislation that protects children's rights, such as the rights to education, protection, health, and protection from violence and neglect. Social workers play a key role in identifying and responding to situations that threaten children's rights in preschools.
- **Domestic Violence Protection Act:** This law may apply to social workers working with children and families in preschools. Their role includes recognizing signs of abuse and neglect, and providing appropriate support to children and families in such situations.
- **Professional Ethics and Standards:** Social workers in preschools are required to adhere to standards of professional ethics, which include respecting children's privacy, safety, and well-being, and providing emotional and social support.
- **Collaboration with other institutions and organizations:** In many cases, social workers in preschools collaborate with schools, health care institutions, social work centers, and other organizations to provide comprehensive protection and support for children (Cocker et al. 2013; Briggs 2020).

In our country, social work was introduced into preschool institutions by the Law on Social Care for Children from 1992 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 49/92, 29/93, 53/93, 67/93, 28/94 and 47/94), while the work of a social worker within a preschool institution is more closely defined by the Regulation on the detailed conditions and manner of implementing social protection of children in preschool institutions (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 49/92, 29/93, 53/93, 67/93, 28/94 and 47/94).

This regulation stipulates that the function of social protection is implemented in accordance with the Fundamentals of the Social Work Program in Preschool Institutions, i.e. that with the help of social work, different organizational levels of activity within the institution, staffing standards, as well as the obligations of the social worker in maintaining documentation are ensured. The regulation also defines clear goals, principles and tasks of the social worker, as well as the activities that he undertakes to achieve social protection in the institution. The basic starting point the basis of the social work program in preschool institutions is the fact that the activity of a preschool institution is multiple and that its functions (educational, social and preventive protection) are complementary and equal. The social character of preschool institutions is recognized, given the reason for their establishment, which is to help the family in achieving its reproductive, developmental, social, protective, economic and other functions. In addition to the detailed goals that social work in preschool institutions strives to achieve, of which the prevention of various difficulties that children face during their development is certainly among the most important, this regulation pays attention to the principles on which social work in preschool institutions is based.

The legal framework for social work in preschools may vary depending on the country, but the goals are largely the same – ensuring a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for all children (Gavrilović and Vidanović 2016; Gavrilović and Šućur Janjetović 2014).

### **3. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS**

The role of social work in preschools is very important, as social workers play a key role in supporting children, their families and the entire community. Some of the basic roles and responsibilities of a social worker in preschools include:

1. Support for children with specific needs: Social workers help children with different types of difficulties (e.g. emotional, behavioral, developmental

disabilities), providing them with the necessary support to achieve their optimal development. They may work with children who have learning or socialization difficulties.

2. Support for families: Social workers often work with parents and families to provide support in solving problems such as financial difficulties, parenting problems, domestic violence, or other social and emotional problems. They are involved in providing information and education, but also in helping to navigate different social conditions.
3. Prevention and early intervention work: Social workers work to prevent problems that may arise in the future, such as neglect or abuse. Early intervention work allows for the rapid identification and response to potential problems.
4. Crisis management: In cases of crisis, such as a death in the family, serious injuries or accidents, social workers can provide emotional support to children, as well as help solve problems by providing appropriate social services.
5. Coordination with other professionals: Social workers often collaborate with teachers, psychologists, pediatricians, and other professionals to provide comprehensive support to children and families. This collaboration contributes to understanding all the needs of the child.
6. Awareness-raising and community education: Through education and workshops, social workers can raise awareness about the importance of children's emotional and social development. They can also work to eliminate prejudice and stigmatization, promoting an inclusive society (Gavrilović 1995; Gavrilović and Jugović 2011; Frankel 1991).

In our country, the Regulation on the detailed conditions and manner of implementing social protection for children in preschool institutions has been adopted in institutions (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 49/92, 29/93, 53/93, 67/93, 28/94 and 47/94 which stipulates that the social protection function is implemented in accordance with the Fundamentals of Social Work Programs in Preschool Institutions, as well as who performs social work, what social work should provide, the organizational levels at which social work is carried out in the institution, the staffing standard and the obligations of social workers in keeping records and documentation. The Fundamentals of the Program define: the basic principles and values of social work, the goal, tasks and areas of work – planning and programming of social work;

activities to improve the social function of preschool institutions; work with educators, work with parents, i.e. guardians, work with the director, professional associates, pedagogical assistant; work with employees in the institution; work in professional bodies and teams; cooperation with competent institutions, organizations, associations and local government units and documentation management, preparation for work and professional development.

The tasks of a social worker in the implementation of social protection in a preschool institution are as follows:

- Preventive action, recognition of the social context in which the child functions,
- Support for parents in adequately performing the parental function and improving the quality of family relationships,
- Monitoring the needs of the family in the local community for appropriate forms of work,
- Creating conditions for increasing the inclusion of children in the local community through various special and specialized programs,
- Support for parents and children with developmental disabilities in exercising the right to protection and assistance in all social security systems (social protection, child protection, health care, etc.) and the process of inclusion in a preschool institution,
- Participation in the process of developing an inclusive approach in the preschool institution and the community,
- Coordination in the implementation of the General and Special Protocol on the Protection of Children from Violence, Abuse and Neglect,
- Work with families in which there is violence, abuse and neglect,
- Participation in activities to initiate, define and implement the population policy of the preschool institution, the local community and other social community actors,
- Cooperation with other professional associates, associates, educators, parents and professional organizations,
- Cooperation with local self-government and relevant institutions on all issues related to the implementation of the social function of preschool institutions,
- Coordination in the activities of accepting children in accordance with the Regulation on the detailed conditions for determining priorities for enrolling children in preschool institutions.

When it comes to cooperation with parents or guardians, this regulation attributes the following forms of work: Implementing continuous cooperation with parents in

order to monitor the development of children and provide support and assistance in resolving pronounced problems in the functioning of the child and family; Informing the family about the rights of children and parents in the field of social care for children, social protection and other social security systems; Organizing lectures for parents or guardians in the field of social functioning; Providing professional assistance to parents or guardians in exercising certain rights in the field of social and family-legal protection; Direct participation in resolving family problems of service users; Advisory work with families of children with developmental disabilities; Determining specific individual social needs of children – risk factors for children's development; Organization of activities aimed at promoting parenting;

Proposing and undertaking appropriate measures and social work services for children and families in a state of social need.

It is important to note that this regulation, in addition to cooperation with parents or guardians, also prescribes cooperation with the director of the institution, educators, professional associates, various competent institutions within the local community, as well as maintaining documentation, preparation for work and professional development.

The following groups of professional social work methods are applied in preschool institutions:

- Individual social work: counseling, informational, diagnostic and therapeutic interviews,
- Group social work methods – group work with children and parents,
- Community social work, with the aim of integrating the institution and children into the social environment.

By analyzing the aforementioned legal regulation, we come to the conclusion that the Law defines the roles of professional associates and collaborators, but that it does not sufficiently respect the multifunctional activity of a preschool institution, but rather views it primarily as educational and as part of a unified system of education and upbringing (Gavrilović and Vidanović 2016). As stated in the law itself, the main task of all professional associates in a preschool institution is to improve the overall operation of the preschool institution through teamwork, based on their own competencies, professional knowledge and skills, with a special emphasis on educational work. It is also important to note that the aforementioned law also stipulates the provision of additional professional support and services to children, parents, and educators by all branches that manage the preschool institution.



## 4. SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

Social workers in preschool institutions play a key role in creating a supportive and safe environment for children, as well as in helping families cope with the challenges that affect their daily lives. Social work interventions in preschool institutions aim to promote the well-being of children, support families, and enhance the overall functioning of the educational environment. These interventions address the social, emotional, and developmental needs of young children while fostering a collaborative approach between educators, families, and community resources (Block and Block 2002). Here are key interventions commonly implemented in preschool institutions:

**Table 1.** Interventions in preschool institutions

Interventions	Purpose	Activities
1. Early Identification and Assessment	Identify developmental delays, behavioral issues, or family challenges early on to provide timely support.	Conduct developmental screenings and assessments. Collaborate with teachers and caregivers to observe and identify areas of concern. Refer children to specialized services (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy).
2. Individualized Support for Children	Address specific challenges children face, such as emotional regulation, social skills, or trauma.	Create individualized plans to support children's social and emotional development. Implement therapeutic activities, such as play therapy or storytelling. Work with children on conflict resolution and coping strategies.
3. Family Support and Education	Strengthen family engagement and provide resources to support children's development.	Offer parent education programs on child development, positive discipline, and stress management. Connect families with community resources, such as housing assistance, healthcare, or counseling. Facilitate regular communication between teachers and families.

4. Crisis Intervention	Address emergencies, such as family instability, abuse, or significant behavioral issues.	Provide immediate support during crises, such as temporary housing assistance or counseling. Report cases of neglect or abuse to the appropriate authorities while ensuring the child's safety. Offer ongoing support to help families stabilize after a crisis.
5. Group Activities and Social Skills Training	Foster peer relationships and teach cooperation, empathy, and problem-solving.	Facilitate group activities like cooperative games, art projects, or role-playing scenarios. Teach children how to express emotions and manage conflicts constructively. Encourage inclusion and respect for diversity.
6. Teacher Training and Support	Equip teachers with tools to address students' social and emotional needs effectively.	Provide professional development on trauma-informed care and classroom management. Offer strategies to handle challenging behaviors and foster inclusive environments. Serve as a consultant for complex cases requiring additional expertise.
7. Advocacy and Policy Development	Ensure that preschool institutions have adequate resources and policies to support children's well-being.	Advocate for smaller class sizes, better teacher-student ratios, and access to specialized services. Collaborate with policymakers to integrate child welfare and mental health initiatives in early education. Promote inclusive practices for children with disabilities or from marginalized communities.
8. Multidisciplinary Collaboration	Build a network of support around the child by working with various professionals.	Partner with healthcare providers, psychologists, and community organizations. Create integrated intervention plans addressing the holistic needs of the child. Facilitate regular case meetings to ensure cohesive support.

By focusing on these interventions, social workers in preschool settings play a vital role in nurturing children's growth, strengthening family dynamics, and creating an environment where every child can thrive (Jovanović 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Social work in preschool institutions plays a vital role in fostering a nurturing and inclusive environment that supports the holistic development of young children. By addressing social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, social workers contribute significantly to creating a foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. Their efforts include working closely with families, educators, and communities to identify and address barriers that may hinder a child's development.

Through early intervention, advocacy, and collaboration, social workers help promote positive relationships, enhance resilience, and ensure that every child has equitable access to educational and social opportunities. Their work emphasizes the importance of early childhood as a critical period for shaping attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will influence future success.

In conclusion, social workers in preschool settings are essential for addressing the complex needs of children and their families. By fostering a supportive environment and advocating for resources and policies that benefit early childhood education, they contribute to building stronger, healthier communities. Their role underscores the need for a multidisciplinary approach to child development, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

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## СОЦИЈАЛНИ РАД У ПРЕДШКОЛСКИМ УСТАНОВАМА

### Сажетак:

Социјални рад у предшколским установама игра кључну улогу у подршци целокупном развоју деце, стварању подстицајног окружења и унапређењу ангажовања породице. Образовање у раном детињству је од пресудног значаја, јер емоционални, социјални и когнитивни развој постављају темеље за будуће учење и благостање. Социјални радници у предшколским установама фокусирају се на задовољење различитих потреба деце и породица, обезбеђујући да свако дете добије потребну подршку за напредовање. Сарађују са васпитачима, родитељима и локалном заједницом како би идентификовали и одговорили на изазове попут емоционалних потешкоћа, проблема у понашању, занемаривања, злостављања и социјално-економске разлике. Пружају саветодавне услуге, олакшавају интервенције у породици и залажу се за ресурсе како би деца одрасла у срединама које подстичу њихове емоционалне и развојне потребе. У овом контексту, социјални рад се не односи само на решавање проблема, већ и на изградњу отпорности, унапређење социјалних вештина и обезбеђивање приступа образовним ресурсима. Промовишући подржавајуће и инклузивно окружење, социјални радници доприносе смањењу препрека и стварању позитивних темеља за целоживотни успех. Овај рад истражује улоге и одговорности социјалних радника у предшколским установама, изазове са којима се суочавају и стратегије за ефикасну интервенцију.

**Кључне речи:** социјални рад; развој детета; подршка; предшколска установа; систем

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