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Review paper

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CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

Children with behavioral problems are among the most vulnerable groups within the social welfare system. Their behavior often results from complex psychological, social, and family-related factors, requiring a multidisciplinary and individualized approach to support. This paper analyzes the position of these children in Serbia's social welfare system, identifies key challenges, and reviews existing support models. The analysis draws on relevant literature, legal frameworks, and examples of good practice both domestically and internationally. Findings indicate gaps in capacities, limited access to specialized services, and challenges in intersectoral cooperation. Improvements can be achieved by strengthening professional capacities, developing new services, and enhancing collaboration among sectors to provide more effective protection and support.

Keywords: children with behavioral problems; social welfare; multidisciplinary approach; intersectoral cooperation; support models

INTRODUCTION

Children with behavioral problems often face social exclusion, stigmatization, and marginalization. Their behavior arises from a combination of individual, familial, school-related, and broader social factors (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Families of children with behavioral difficulties frequently encounter multiple risk factors, including

poverty, domestic violence, neglect, or insufficient parental support (Murray & Farrington 2010; Rutter 2012).

Modern social welfare approaches highlight the need for individualized, multi-disciplinary interventions addressing the child, family, and community simultaneously (Kazdin & Weisz 2017). The social welfare system is expected not only to provide protection but also to implement preventive and rehabilitative programs that facilitate social integration and promote healthy behavioral development (Pereira & Araujo 2022). In Serbia, the legal framework recognizes children with behavioral problems as beneficiaries of special protection measures; however, challenges such as limited service capacities and inconsistent intersectoral cooperation remain (Law on Social Welfare, Official Gazette of RS, No. 24/2011 and 117/2022; UNICEF 2020).

The aim of this paper is to examine the position of children with behavioral problems within Serbia's social welfare system, identify key challenges, and review existing support models, with the objective of proposing improvements for more effective protection and inclusion.

1. BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS: DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Behavioral problems in children and adolescents encompass patterns of conduct that deviate from social norms, including aggression, defiance, or antisocial behaviors (Achenbach 1991; Radovanović 2025). Externalizing behaviors involve conflicts with others and rule-breaking, while internalizing behaviors are directed inward, causing emotional distress (Achenbach 1995; Đurišić & Žunić Pavlović 2021).

The development of these problems is influenced by individual predispositions, such as temperament or experiences of trauma, and by family factors, including dysfunctional relationships, neglect, or abuse. Broader social environments, including peers, school, and community conditions, also shape behavior (Gajić et al. 2023; Hrnić et al. 2010).

Effective interventions require multidisciplinary collaboration among social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, teachers, and healthcare professionals to assess needs, plan individualized support, coordinate with families, and monitor progress (Testa 2022). A bio-psycho-social perspective enables professionals to address both immediate behaviors and underlying causes, supporting long-term development and social inclusion.

2. THE POSITION OF CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM OF SERBIA

Children with behavioral problems in Serbia require continuous and specialized support. The social welfare system provides protection, as well as preventive, educational, and rehabilitative programs that promote social inclusion and reduce escalation of behavioral issues (Gherardi et al. 2022; Testa 2022).

The Law on Social Welfare (Official Gazette of RS, No. 24/2011 and 117/2022) and the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2017–2024) define the rights and obligations for children needing special support, emphasizing community-based services and multidisciplinary cooperation. Practical challenges persist, including resource limitations, uneven regional service distribution, and insufficient capacities in Centers for Social Work (Provincial Institute for Social Protection, 2021).

Children access services through Centers for Social Work, day care centers, and counseling programs. Centers for Social Work assess needs, plan individualized interventions, and coordinate with schools, healthcare providers, and NGOs. Staff shortages and limited resources can delay interventions and restrict access, particularly in rural areas, increasing the risk of institutionalization.

Community-based services, such as day care and therapeutic programs, support family environments, provide emotional support, and develop social skills. Multidisciplinary teams ensure interventions consider both the child and broader family and community contexts (Žegarac 2015). Strengthening professional capacities, expanding services, and improving intersectoral collaboration are essential to effectively support this population (UNICEF 2020; Provincial Institute for Social Protection 2021).

3. SERVICES AND SUPPORT MODELS FOR CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN SERBIA

The development and implementation of various services and support models are essential for safeguarding the well-being of children with behavioral problems and promoting their social inclusion (Gajić et al. 2023; Žegarac 2015). In Serbia, work with this population is based on the principle of preserving the family environment and integrating the child into the local community, aiming to reduce the risk of institutionalization and social isolation (Provincial Institute for Social Protection 2021).

Day care centers provide structured activities and ongoing social, emotional, and educational support. Programs are planned according to each child's individual needs and include individual and group work, social-educational workshops, and therapeutic activities. These programs help children develop positive social skills, conflict resolution strategies, and emotional regulation, while parents receive professional guidance and counseling related to their child's behavior (Gajić et al. 2023; UNICEF 2020).

In addition to day care services, school-based counseling and preventive interventions, socio-educational programs, and therapeutic work with children and families also play a significant role. The integration of these services allows for multi-level interventions, targeting the child's individual development, family relationships, and the quality of the community environment (Testa 2022; Gherardi et al. 2022).

Multidisciplinary teams, consisting of social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, and healthcare professionals, enable coordinated intervention planning and accurate monitoring of a child's progress (Žegarac 2015). Legal frameworks and international standards contribute to aligning practices with children's rights and social protection principles (UNICEF 2019; WHO 2020).

4. CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES IN PROTECTING CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

Children with behavioral problems in Serbia face numerous challenges within the social welfare system, which directly affect the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of available support (UNICEF 2020; Provincial Institute for Social Protection 2021). One of the main issues is the shortage of qualified professionals in Centers for Social Work and related institutions. This deficit often delays timely identification and intervention, which is critical since early support is essential for preventing escalation of behavioral issues (Žegarac 2015; Gajić et al. 2023).

Insufficient staff and resources limit the possibility of individualized interventions, which are necessary for addressing the complex needs of each child. Fragmented intersectoral cooperation between social work, education, healthcare, and local authorities further complicates continuous monitoring and coordinated support (Hrnčić & Radoičić 2018; Testa 2022). As a result, interventions can overlap, repeat unnecessarily, or fail to address all family and child needs.

Access to high-quality community-based services remains uneven, particularly in rural areas. Day care centers, counseling, and specialized therapy programs are either

limited or unavailable, reducing opportunities for continuous support and increasing the likelihood of institutionalization (Provincial Institute for Social Protection 2021; Gajić et al. 2023). Families often lack professional guidance in managing behavioral problems at home, which places additional strain on parental capacities (UNICEF 2020; Sanders 2012).

Education and support for parents and caregivers are also limited. Parents are frequently underprepared to recognize behavioral problems or implement effective strategies, impacting the child's social integration and well-being. Empowering parents through workshops, counseling, and group support programs is crucial to improving outcomes for children (European Commission 2013; OECD 2015).

Overcoming these challenges requires a strategic, systemic, and multidisciplinary approach. Increasing the number and training of social work professionals, formalizing intersectoral cooperation protocols, and expanding community-based services such as day care and counseling are key steps. Continuous education of both professionals and parents strengthens intervention effectiveness, supports family resilience, and promotes social inclusion (Kazdin & Weisz 2017; WHO 2021).

Evidence from Serbia and international practice suggests that a combination of early intervention, prevention programs, and family empowerment is essential to achieving sustainable and effective outcomes (UNICEF 2019; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2018).

5. INTERNATIONAL MODELS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

Experiences from other countries show that effective interventions for children with behavioral problems rely on early identification, structured strategies, and stable institutional support (UNICEF 2019; WHO 2021). In well-developed social welfare systems, prevention and integrated approaches are prioritized, with close cooperation among social services, schools, healthcare systems, and local communities (OECD 2015; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2018).

Multidisciplinary teams engage with children and families at the first signs of behavioral difficulties, helping to prevent escalation and reduce the risk of institutionalization (Testa 2022; Kazdin & Weisz 2017). Parents are considered key protective factors, and parent-training programs such as the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program (Sanders 2012) or Scandinavian parent support initiatives have proven effective in

improving parenting practices and reducing children's behavioral problems (European Commission 2013).

International recommendations emphasize individualized interventions tailored to the child's and family's needs, rather than uniform solutions. Programs are adapted to local resources and conditions to allow children to remain in their natural environments, thereby minimizing social exclusion (OECD 2015; UNICEF 2019).

Schools play a central role, as behavioral problems often first appear in the classroom. In countries like the UK and Scandinavia, schools collaborate closely with social services to provide psychological support, inclusive education, and preventive measures, while also addressing stigmatization and promoting social integration (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2018).

The adaptation of these international practices to Serbia requires careful consideration of local economic, cultural, and institutional conditions. Strengthening intersectoral collaboration, developing professional capacities, and ensuring accessible, community-based services can help implement evidence-based interventions (UNICEF 2020; Gajić et al. 2023). Combining legal frameworks, professional expertise, and international guidelines creates a foundation for a system that is not only reactive but also preventive and developmentally oriented.

CONCLUSION

Children with behavioral problems represent a highly vulnerable group within the social welfare system of Serbia, with development influenced by complex individual, familial, and social factors. Their needs require comprehensive, individualized, and multidisciplinary support (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Kazdin & Weisz 2017).

The analysis shows that, despite clear legal frameworks such as the Law on Social Welfare and the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2017–2024), practical implementation faces significant challenges. These include shortages of qualified professionals, limited capacities of Centers for Social Work, fragmented intersectoral cooperation, and uneven availability of community-based services, particularly in rural areas (Provincial Institute for Social Protection 2021; UNICEF 2020).

Nevertheless, progress has been made through the development of community-based services such as day care centers, counseling, and therapeutic programs, which help maintain family environments, support emotional development, and enhance social skills. Evidence from international practice highlights the importance of early intervention, preventive programs, and parental empowerment for improving out-

comes and reducing the risk of institutionalization and social exclusion (Sanders 2012; European Commission 2013; OECD 2015).

Strengthening the social welfare system in Serbia requires a focus on expanding professional capacities, ensuring continuous training, developing accessible community-based services, and improving intersectoral collaboration. Equally important is the empowerment of parents and caregivers through education, counseling, and support, as well as the adaptation of international best practices to the Serbian context, taking into account local economic, cultural, and institutional factors (UNICEF 2019; Gajić et al. 2023).

Addressing behavioral problems in children is not a matter of isolated programs or short-term interventions. A strategic, systemic, and evidence-based approach is essential to provide effective protection, promote social inclusion, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop their full potential, regardless of behavioral challenges.

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DECA SA PROBLEMIMA U PONAŠANJU U SISTEMU SOCIJALNE ZAŠTITE

Summary:

Deca sa problemima u ponašanju spadaju u jednu od najranjivijih grupa unutar sistema socijalne zaštite. Njihovo ponašanje često je rezultat složenih psiholoških, socijalnih i porodičnih faktora, što zahteva multidisciplinarni i individualizovan pristup u pružanju podrške. Rad analizira položaj ove dece u okviru sistema socijalne zaštite u Srbiji, identifikuje ključne izazove i prikazuje postojeće modele podrške. Analiza se zasniva na relevantnoj literaturi, zakonskim okvirima i primerima dobre prakse, kako domaće, tako i međunarodne. Rezultati ukazuju na nedostatke u kapacitetima, ograničen pristup specijalizovanim uslugama i probleme u međusektorskoj saradnji. Unapređenje sistema moguće je kroz jačanje

profesionalnih kapaciteta, razvoj novih usluga i intenzivniju saradnju među sektorima radi efikasnije zaštite i podrške ovoj ranjivoj populaciji.

Ključne reči: deca sa problemima u ponašanju; socijalna zaštita; multidisciplinarni pristup; međusektorska saradnja; modeli podrške

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