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## PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR AND THE RESPONSES OF SOCIETY

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the publication is to get acquainted with the many points of view of various stakeholders on the emergence, course, and changes in the behavior of children in the Republic of North Macedonia today and the ways in which society copes with this phenomenon and the effectiveness of social interventions. A quality research methodology was applied and interviews and focus groups were conducted with a total of 85 participants (children, parents, teachers, experts, journalists, and decision-makers). The data were processed according to the principles of qualitative thematic analysis, and the results provided answers to the research questions. In this research, the multi-perspective proved important for understanding how the phenomenon is understood, its origin and consequences, and identifying what does not work, that is, in part, and what needs to be done to mitigate the phenomenon.

**Key words:** children, behavioral problems, multiple points of view, qualitative methodology.

### Introduction

A significant number of authors agree on the definition of a social problem as something that is undesirable, harmful, or threatening, that is socially determined and accessible to the influence of social mechanisms and controllable (Magai, D. N., Malik, J. A., & Koot, H. M. 2018). Moreover, in today's postmodern times, a significant number of social problems belong to the category of unsolved problems. (Turpin, M., Phahlamohlaka, J., Marais, M., 2009) Turpin, Falamolaca, and Marais describe unresolved issues as complex phenomena, in the identification and understanding of which disagreements arise, and there is great uncertainty regarding the way and possibilities of their resolution. The focus of this publication is on children's behavioral problems. It is well documented in the literature and well known in practical work that children's behavioral problems are an extremely complex and changing phenomenon (Buzarovska - Lazetik, G., and Nanev, L. and Kosevaliska, O., 2012). Society's views on the nature and severity of the problem and the appropriateness, quality and effectiveness of the social response need not be the same (Ogundele MO., 2018). The more participants are involved in the process of identifying and assessing behavioral problems and then in providing responses to those problems, the more potentially different understandings of that problem exist (Hukkelberg, S., Keles, S., Ogden, T. et al., 2019). Then we talk about multiple perspectives. The term multiple perspective refers to different relationships, views, and attitudes that towards the same part of reality (facts, situations, phenomena, things) are expressed by individuals and groups who have different roles and positions in society, i.e., come from different backgrounds (Mitchell, B. S., Kern, L., & Conroy, M. A., 2019). In the case of behavioral problems in children, multiple perspectives are a combination of views defined by different positions of many individuals in society and especially in systems that implement or influence the implementation of society's response to this problem (Tunić-Pavlović, V., Kovačević-Lepojević, M., 2011). A theoretical

perspective is a set of interrelated ideas, principles, or assumptions about the phenomenon being studied. It is based on theories that are generally well described in the literature, advocated by experts in the given field, and often verified through scientific research (Ogundele M. O., 2018). The theoretical perspective itself is multi-perspective because there are several theories about the same object of research that explain it in different ways. This perspective is often equated with a professional perspective (Papa, R., (Ed.), 2019). The professional perspective is different; it is based on the personal professional experience of experts in a certain specific field and under specific conditions. The professional perspective may reflect the way some aspects of the theoretical perspective are used in a particular field, setting and/or by a particular expert (Proseva A., Boskova M., 2018). When it comes to social problems, the views of those individuals and groups that have an influence on the decision-making process about what the problem is and how to solve it are especially important. This group can use their social (political, administrative, and sometimes professional) position and power to incorporate their views into laws, professional policies, strategies, and similar documents (Mayer, M. J., & Jimerson, S. R., 2019). Research on behavioral problems in children from perspectives other than theoretical is more recent and still insufficiently present, especially in a way that the phenomenon is investigated and described simultaneously from several different perspectives (Kislin, N., 2019). Researchers and experts are particularly interested in the children's perspective, and when it coincides with the consumer's perspective, it becomes especially important (Conroy, M. A., Sutherland, K. S., Algina, J., Werch, B., & Ladwig, C., 2018). The focus is on the research of children's behavior problems and society's response to these problems from the perspectives of children, parents, professionals, and decision makers.

### **Aim**

The aim of this publication is to explore, understand and integrate the messages about children's behavior problems and the ways in which society deals with this phenomenon, which come from people who in different ways (personally or professionally, directly or indirectly) come into contact or deal with this phenomenon in the Republic of Macedonia. The results are expected to suggest new ideas, open some new questions, or encourage different thinking about this phenomenon and society's responses to it (Hukkelberg, S., Keles, S., Ogden, T. *et al.*, 2019).

The focus of this paper is on the following research questions:

- How do the different participants in the intervention system and the interested segments of the society see and describe the problems in children's behavior?
- What are the attitudes of the public in the Republic of Macedonia towards the problems in children's behavior? What are the values of society's responses to the emergence of children's behavior problems according to the opinion of different stakeholders in the intervention system and interested segments of society?
- How are social interventions for children with behavioral problems seen and described by different stakeholders in the intervention system and interested segments of society?
- What do people in different positions in society think is necessary and desirable to better deal with this phenomenon?
- Can different perspectives be integrated in a way that suggests new, more relevant solutions and ways of looking at children's behavior problems?

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants in the research**

Qualitative methodology was used in the research; the research participants were selected according to the position they have as stakeholders in the system and therefore the perspective they can provide regarding the phenomenon under research. The criteria for the selection of participants were aimed at including persons who are directly related to the

observed phenomenon (primarily children), but also those who live and work directly with children and are responsible for their development (parents, teachers, and specialists), to those whose participation and responsibility are indirect and more focused on decision-making related to this field (experts at different levels, politicians, and journalists). Such a choice of research participants created conditions for children's behavior problems to be considered from several different points of view.

The children, participants in this research, come from

- elementary schools Tosho Arsov (8) and Vancho Prke (7) students from fifth to seventh grade
- PI Inter-municipal Center for Social Work Stip, A small group home for parentless children (4)

The group of parents consists of parents of students from:

- primary schools Tosho Arsov (7) and Vancho Prke (7)
- parents who turned for help for various reasons to the PI Inter-municipal Center for Social Work - Stip (7)

The research involved teachers from

- primary schools Tosho Arsov (6) and Vancho Prke (6)

The Expert Group consists of experts from different roles and from different areas of activity as follows:

- professional associates from primary schools in Stip (10),
- expert associates from PI Inter-municipal Center for Social Work Stip (4),
- experts from PI Inter-municipal Center for Social Work Stip, A small group home for parentless children (2)
- sector for public services, education, and local economic development - Municipality of Stip (2)

The media perspective is provided by journalists

- TV Star (1)
- MNet HD (1)

The decision-makers – i.e., politicians and experts in state or local government authorities

- chairpersons or members of parliamentary committees (committee on family, youth and sport, committee on education, science and culture, committee on justice) (4)
- ombudsman for children
- Head of the Ministry of Health, Health Service, Department of Outpatient Health Care and Department of Child Protection (3)
- Head of a Center for Prevention and Treatment of Drug Addicts Stip (1)
- Head of the Service for Marriage and Family and Protection from Domestic Violence (1)

Based on the consent given after presenting the aim and objectives of the study, 85 participants participated in the study.

### **Data collection method**

Data are collected through interviews and focus group interview techniques. Thus, children, parents, teachers, and experts were interviewed in focus groups, while politicians and experts from state and local government bodies and reporters were interviewed at their workplace. All conversations were conducted according to an identical template.

Four topics were covered with ten previously prepared questions:

1. defining behavioral problems and changes in the type and extent of this phenomenon
2. public attitudes towards the phenomenon and the values on which the responses of the society are based
3. success of social measures and responsibility for their organization
4. assessment of development opportunities and suggestions for improvement

The length of the conversation or focus group interviews varies from one to two hours. The interviews with the study participants were conducted in 2022.

### **Data processing method**

Data were processed using the method of qualitative analysis. The analysis should lead to the formulation of concepts and interpretations, i.e., to theoretical formulations. The basis of analysis is the procedure for classifying and shaping abstract concepts from empirical data.

### **Results and discussion**

#### **1. How do the different participants in the intervention system and the interested segments of the society see and describe the problems in children's behavior?**

##### **Determining behavioral problems and changes in the type and extent of occurrence**

When asked whether the institution in which the research participants were employed had dealt with children's behavior problems since they were in this position, the answer to this question could be given by teachers, school experts, journalists, as well as the experts in the centers for social assistance, the state prosecutor's office, the court, because this is their main job. All research participants in their work encounter the topic of children's behavior problems, through different forms and intensity of engagement. When it comes to teachers and experts in school, the intensity of dealing with this phenomenon is daily. The responses of teachers and experts in schools are surprising because the topic of dealing with this phenomenon and population prevails, to the detriment of other children and students. Despite the teachers' perception (a daily topic not only in meetings, advice, but also part of communication during breaks, in corridors, etc.) that it is a ubiquitous topic, their perception is that it has no effect. On the other hand, decision-makers and journalists deal with this topic/phenomenon sporadically and most often under the influence of public pressure in situations with severe consequences.

##### **Behavioral problems in children**

When asked what they thought children's behavior problems were and whether there was a single, generally accepted definition, the study participants showed some agreement as well as some disagreement.

The research participants agree in the definition that it is the emergence of a continuum of milder and more internalized disorders that harm the child more (absence from school, indiscipline at school, disobedience, defiance, outbursts of anger, withdrawal, seclusion, wandering through the day, lying, cheating, begging), to very serious and dangerous behavior that, in addition to harming the child itself, damages it very intensively and is dangerous to others / society (threats, smoking, use of drugs and alcohol, staying out despite parental prohibitions, violation of rules, lack of empathy, excessive fear, psychosomatic changes, violation of public order and peace). It is agreed that there is no single universally accepted definition of what constitutes behavioral problems, while opinions on the need for such a definition at national level are divided. All research participants emphasized the continuum of behavioral problems, and an additional criterion of differentiation arose from the interpretation of the term and the concern of adults with precisely defined behaviors of children in the environment in which they live and work.

##### **Movement and changes**

When asked if trends in children's behavior were following trends and what the trend data showed over the past few years, research participants expressed concern about the changes taking place. The main levels of change can be classified according to type / form of behavioral problems, and method of implementation, i.e., intensity and consequences. Violence, specifically, is unmotivated violence, violence without reason, out of obsession, out of boredom, violence without limits and control, with a huge dose of aggression and anger, ready for anything, callousness, cruelty, grouping of young people and attacking helpless individuals, lack of guilt and empathy for the victim, animal abuse, strange behavior. The research participants believe that today, compared to before, there are more serious crimes, attempted murder, robbery etc., and all this has much more serious consequences, often with a fatal outcome for the victim. According to the interviewees, changes can also be

observed at the population level. Today's children are more nervous, impatient, depressed, unhappy, disinterested, there are more and more children with neurosis, children with developmental difficulties, learning difficulties, more problems with concentration, self-control, hyperactivity, as well as passive disorders. When asked what, in their opinion, is the public's attitude towards children's behavior problems, in the responses of the participants, regardless of their belonging to the sub-sample, it is possible to identify the following categories of responses:

- Sensationalist approach (emphasis on the Black Chronicle and very short-lived interest, for example, it is all over the media today and will be forgotten tomorrow)
- Fear for your children, for yourself (the public's attitude is that the phenomenon is more dangerous than it really is)
- The need to protect society, not the individual
- Seeking revenge for the perpetrator and solidarity with the victim
- Excessive tolerance of society for behavioral disorders, which is why it does not react in time
- Unclear / double standards (tolerance of diversity and some inappropriate behaviors, on the other hand, seeking more restrictive measures for perpetrators)

The answers indicate that the research participants have a different perception of public attitudes. Thus, some people believe that the public is focused on protecting itself, i.e., the society, the victim, while others seem too focused on protecting the perpetrators. Fear and sensationalism are almost a regular side effect of the society.

## **2. What are the attitudes of the public in the Republic of Macedonia towards the problems in children's behavior? What are the values of society's responses to the emergence of children's behavior problems according to the opinion of different stakeholders in the intervention system and interested segments of society?**

### **Societal attitudes towards the phenomenon and the values on which public responses are based**

Question: What are the main determinants (values) of the intervention system of the Macedonian society towards such behavior / this population?

- Absence of social values
- The collapse of the old and the non-existence of a new value system
- There are no new values and moral guidelines at the level of society and thus towards the lower systems
- There are no boundaries, no guidelines
- No security (at all levels)
- Children cross all boundaries because there are none
- Children are manipulating adults
- The children's behavior is consistent with the motto Nobody can do anything to me.

Speaking about the determinants of society's value, the research participants most often talked about the reasons for such a state of occurrence of behavioral problems in children. Classified into three main themes: the value system, the behavior of adults and the availability of inappropriate content and resources for children in the community.

## **3. How are social interventions for children with behavioral problems seen and described by different stakeholders in the intervention system and interested segments of society?**

### **The success of social responses to behavioral problems**

When it comes to seeing the way and the success of the intervention, all groups of participants expressed their opinion, with the exception of journalists who felt insufficiently informed about the topic. All participants generally spoke either about their own experiences and experiences of the intervention or they spoke about it in general. Experts also expressed their views on the success of individual interventions and the reasons for failure. Children

are very critical of society's responses to children's behavior problems and describe them along the punishment-help continuum. They emphasize that they are aware that the same measure can be experienced by someone as a punishment and someone as a help, and so they find the same measures described as punishment or help. Children are very critical of the society's existing responses to behavioral problems. According to them, the society not only reacted late, but also inappropriately. In assessing society's response to behavioral problems, parents focus primarily on their own experiences as a starting point for this assessment. Therefore, they either talk about their relationship, most often emotionally tinged, according to society's responses, or they critically evaluate society's attitudes towards parents in general. It is especially important to emphasize the sense of loneliness and disinterest of others, including responsible institutions, that parents experience when a child's behavior problem occurs. Among the actions that parents "object" in society, critically examining society's attitude towards parents, we must single out the bad information of parents about the actions and measures taken towards children in various areas of social activity (schools, specialized institutions). Experts spoke regarding the success and the need for changes in the way society responds to this phenomenon. The most successful responses are pre-trial measures, i.e., special obligations, among which the out-of-court settlement, followed by counseling and extended professional procedure, is repeatedly emphasized. Experts see the reasons for the failure of the existing system, i.e., its individual segments, primarily in the lack of cooperation and mutual respect of experts from different sectors. Enhanced care and supervision and treatment in an educational institution are considered unsuccessful measures. Answering this question, the experts also discussed the need for a change in the intervention system. The connection of the way in which one reacts to the appearance of problems in children's behavior in our country with the general social situation is present in all participants from this group. Of particular importance in general, but especially when it comes from this level, is the message that children and young people and their problems are not a priority in our society.

#### **4. What do people in different positions in society think is necessary and desirable to better deal with this phenomenon?**

##### **Responsibility for the organization and implementation of social measures**

Extensive responses were received from all participants regarding the responsibility for organizing and implementing interventions for children with behavioral problems. Based on the answers of several research participants, one can notice the tendency for children to attribute responsibility for the behavior of the children on themselves. Because other groups of research participants did not particularly emphasize children's responsibility for their behavioral problems, this message from the children seems a particularly interesting call for dialogue between adults and children on issues of shared responsibility. Parents emphasize, above all, their own responsibility for child-related matters and even for behavioral problems. Equally common and equally important is society's assistance to parents in assuming parental responsibility in situations where problems arise. Interestingly, parents were much less concerned than the other groups with shifting responsibility to other actors in the social intervention system. In the groups of children and parents, there is a difference in the assessment of responsibility depending on whether the children / parents have had direct experience with behavioral problems, i.e., social interventions. Parents who have experienced behavioral problems in their own children talk more about the need for help from society and about the timeliness of this help. Children with behavioral problems do not mention their own responsibility for the behavior but, based on their own experience, they are able to identify a much wider range of responsible adults and social mechanisms (family, parents, adults, friends, social assistance center, hospitals, school, police, city, associations). In relation to the responsibility of stakeholders at the state and local level, similarities were recognized in the views of the three groups of research participants - experts, politicians / experts in state bodies, and journalists. Consistency is expressed in the belief that the responsibility of state bodies and institutions is related to the adoption and

implementation of a national policy (which includes national strategy - policy, legal regulations, personnel policy, responsibility for the minimum services available to all children), and the bodies and local community institutions to implement national policies according to the specific needs of a particular community. The journalists highlighted the role of the civil sector, adding a new dimension to the reflection on the responsibility to solve this social problem, which is the potential to perform activities. According to the journalists, for a qualitative solution to this problem, priority should be given to the civil sector, whose potential is recognizable primarily through better educated specialists. This makes the civil sector readier to take on greater responsibilities than it has now.

## **5. Can different perspectives be integrated in a way that suggests new, more relevant solutions and ways of looking at children's behavior problems?**

### **Evaluation of the possibility of developing an intervention system and suggestions of research participants**

What people in different positions in society consider necessary and desirable for better dealing with this phenomenon was possible to find out both through answers to questions that are directly related to it, and through answers to other questions. With their content, the answers made it possible to talk on the one hand about the prospects for development, and on the other hand about the specific proposals of individual groups of research participants for the development of the intervention system. There seems to be very little confidence in building a quality intervention system in Macedonia in the future. Most pessimism is found in groups of experts, teachers, politicians/experts in government bodies and journalists. The reasons for pessimism, according to the statements of the research participants, lie in the disorganization of society as a whole, the poverty of society, the failure to recognize that this is a social problem, the fact that children and their problems are not priorities in this society, the fact that politics dominates the profession, the fact that there is no development without new hiring of experts, etc. Parents and children talked much less about their views on developmental prospects. From this relatively small number of statements, there is an awareness that children and young people are not a priority of society and a kind of impossibility to influence it from the position of parents and children / young people.

### **Conclusion**

The characteristics of different stakeholders in understanding the behavior of children and young people and society's response to these problems, it remains to consider whether different perspectives can be integrated and offer something new. Two topics appear around which the views of all research participants on the problem and the ways to solve it are very close. It is about, on the one hand, understanding the complexity of the problem, while at the same time its inappropriate solutions, and on the other hand, about value confusion and hopelessness regarding the problem and its solution in the near future. All the research participants understand children's behavior problems as a complex social problem, noting its harmfulness for society and its intensification in recent times. Through the different points of view of the research participants, a general idea of the social conditioning of the phenomenon can be noticed. The research participants believe that it is possible to change, but in practice, in their general opinion, this does not happen satisfactorily. The consistency of views on the value confusion that prevails in relation to the problem and its solution and the lack of prospects in this area in the future is a very strong, although not unexpected, message. Building a value framework is the most difficult changing condition for improving the situation in terms of social intervention for children and youth with behavioral problems; on the one hand, it is not surprising that this research does not generate some key ideas, and, on the other hand, they see good prospects for this field in the future. Although they agree that the phenomenon is harmful and that society is not doing enough to deal with it, the research participants see differently what needs to be done, i.e., how to deal with the

phenomenon. Three key perspectives were identified, as children and parents send the same message, and the media perspective at this level offers nothing new:

- Children and parents express awareness of their own responsibility for the problem, but also the feeling that the system is not sufficiently involved in solving it and they feel powerless.
- Specialist experts and teachers show helplessness and incompetence in relation to the increasingly complex problems of children. Dissatisfaction with the ways to solve it is manifested by shifting the responsibility to experts from other systems and to organizational gaps and ambiguities. They are more self-centered than problem oriented.
- They have no system support for their own professional work. Decision makers say they are far from the problem, even though they see it and understand its complexity. They do not see the possibilities of their actions; they delegate their responsibility and power to influence the decision and delegate the problem of responsibility for this social problem to others.

In this research, multi-perspective proved important in getting to know the way the phenomenon is understood, its origins and consequences, and pointing out what is not working, that is, in part, and what needs to be done to mitigate the phenomenon. Awareness of the phenomenon, its harmfulness and the reasons that promote it are present in all social segments. Particularly important is the agreement on the lack of a value and conceptual framework and then on the inappropriate practice of social interventions. The results of this research provide some of the guidelines on how to achieve this goal through various views and suggestions of users, experts, and decision makers.

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