

## THE ROLE OF SUPPORT GROUPS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE SOCIAL WORK WITH FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** *In today's society, a person's ability to interact with society plays an important role - it depends on the social skills of each individual. This study reviews and cites several studies in Latvia and abroad, which indicate that families with children who lack knowledge and skills in raising children need to be educated, with special emphasis on the need to provide support as early as possible (early intervention) in order to prevent a significant lack of social skills in children in the future. The aim of this study is to investigate the social skills deficits of preschool children observed by social workers working with families with children, as well as the role and need for social skills support group activities in social work with families with children, by surveying social services in Latvian municipalities about the benefits of this social work method. The research uses theoretical and empirical research methods (structured questionnaire), data processing and analysis methods. The study concludes with findings on the causes of social skills gaps in families with children and the important role of support groups in social work with families with children in Latvia as an additional tool for social workers to help families with children integrate into society and develop these missing social skills.*

**Keywords:** *social skills, support groups, social work, socialisation, family with children.*

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### Introduction

The Global Programme of Action "Education for Sustainable Development 2030" (ESD 2030), adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2019, identifies the need to develop the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that support individual and collective decision-making in order to encourage and motivate people to participate in public life (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2021). The family is the most important socialising environment for individuals, but as they grow up and move into other groups, the knowledge they acquire needs to be applied, reinforced and developed. Ajilchi and Kargar (2013) point out that children's emotional and social attitudes are influenced by their parents: if a child experiences a caring and warm relationship in the family, the child's social behaviour is positive, cooperation skills are developed, self-control and self-confidence are high. Otherwise, the child is insecure, has a weak attachment to the parents, low self-esteem and lack of motivation. It is also emphasised (Līdaka, Samuseviča, & Strazdiņa, 2018) that one of the elements of positive parenting is knowledgeable parents who are clearly aware of the peculiarities of the child's age stage and are familiar with the basic conditions of child rearing. This means that as the child grows, parents need to continue to improve their knowledge as the child's age changes, which can lead to crises in parent-child interaction that require the involvement of a social worker.

More than 40 years ago, researchers (Michelson, Sugai, Wood, & Kazdin, 1983) pointed out that praising a child for positive behaviour contributes to the development of social skills, and this is still the case today. Social skills are considered (Witt & Ferris, 2003) to be a component of social behaviour that individuals need in order to interact with each other and receive feedback. Developed social skills enable young children to use a variety of

important communication approaches such as: being empathetic, empathising with peers' problems, developing stages of conflict resolution, listening to others and working in teams (Cimen & Kocyigit, 2010). Social skills are one of the most important skills, as these skills help children to make friends, fit into groups and develop their personality (Marinho - Casanova & Leiner, 2017), so this aspect should be given sufficient attention and consideration in social work with families with children. Children should acquire social skills by the time they reach school, as the intensive period of skill acquisition is the early preschool years, when children begin to learn existing social processes most rapidly (Mendo - Lázaro, León Del Barco, Felipe-Castaño, Polo-del-Río, & Iglesias-Gallego, 2018), so social work with families with children should pay special attention to this age.

In view of the above, the aim of the study is to find out what kind of social skills deficit in pre-school children is observed by social workers in their work with families with children, as well as the role and necessity of social skills development support group activities in social work with families with children by conducting a questionnaire survey in social services of Latvian municipalities about the benefits of this social service. The study concludes with findings on the causes of the social skills gap in families with children and the important role of support groups in social work with families with children in Latvia as an additional tool for social workers to help families with children integrate into society and develop these missing social skills.

### **The value of social skills for positive child development**

One of the reasons for behavioural problems and deviant behaviour in young people, which can lead to delinquency, is the lack of early intervention when the child's needs were not met by an adult at an early age (Stankus - Viša, 2015). Therefore, in social work with families with children, it is important to provide support as early as possible, especially in families with preschool and school-age children, or where parents have a marked lack of social skills and insufficient knowledge in the emotional upbringing of the child. For example, a study was conducted in Turkey between the 2016 and 2017 school years (Gurbuz & Binnaz, 2018), which analysed the development of social skills in preschool-age children (2-6 years) in relation to parental occupation, number of children in the family and parenting principles. It finds that children raised by mothers with democratic and positive attitudes have more developed social skills than children whose mothers use authoritative parenting styles, which is likely related to parental responses to child behaviour. The study concludes by recommending the following support measures to improve social skills: outreach activities for parents, inclusion of parents in social skills programmes, implementation of services where mothers with pre-school children can participate in group activities together (Gurbuz & Binnaz, 2018).

Research published in 2015 (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015) shows that kindergarten students with social skills such as sharing and cooperation are more likely to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. The findings from this study support the value of early learning and the potential to increase children's chances of future success in school, work and personal life by helping them learn social skills. The study also found that children with poorer social skills were 64% more likely to be sent to a juvenile detention centre, 67% more likely to be arrested as an adult, 52% more likely to have an alcohol problem and 82% more likely to use cannabis. The research team believes that implementing effective, evidence-based programmes to develop and improve children's social skills at an early age can result in significant cost savings over time - savings that would be achieved through reduced incarceration costs, addiction treatment programmes and support for public spending (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015).

## **Support groups as an important social service in social work with families with children**

In social work with groups, there are different types of groups, one of which is support groups. It is pointed out (Kirst-Ashman & Grafton, 2009) that support groups are based on self-help and are professionally and purposefully led to address a problem, solve a difficulty or turn a life situation into a positive one. Support group work focuses on the development and growth of the group members. Peer support in a group aims to improve the social competence and psychological well-being of the participants in order to contribute to a better quality of life (Kirst-Ashman & Grafton, 2009). Inese Stankus-Viša (2015) points out that in a support group special attention is paid to psychosocial areas of a person, such as experiences (positive, negative experiences and the ability to learn from them), value orientation and attitudes, mutual support, knowledge acquisition and the way of acquiring knowledge, identification of needs, resources and opportunities, future vision (self-development perspective).

The aim of the Family Support Group is to promote the recovery of families and to improve the living conditions of parents and children. The support groups help families to become aware of their existing resources and to use them in their daily lives, strengthening and building their confidence and strength to apply the skills they have learnt in their future lives. The activities of the family support groups can take place on four levels: ongoing support (regular meetings with children and parents, spending time together, involvement of representatives of other organisations), organisation of events (camps and celebrating holidays together), social and psychological support (various trainings, thematic evenings on topics relevant to families, other activities and games), economic support (free events and provision of transport) (Biedrība «Latvijas Sarkanais Krusts», 2019).

For example, the “Dardedze” Centre runs a support group programme for expectant or new parents called “Guardian Angel”. The aim of the support group is to support and educate parents in the care and education of a child up to the age of two. Participants in the group meet each other, exchange impressions and experiences, learn skills in the areas of child education and care, the establishment of a support system and integration into society. The knowledge gained can serve as a basis for building safe and respectful family relationships and establishing new traditions (Centrs Dardedze, 2021). The “STOP 4-7” Early Intervention Programme (or “Together on the Road We Are Stronger”) is a multimodal (working with the child, parents and teachers in separate groups) early intervention programme for children who are aggressive or easily irritated - lose their temper, take offence easily, behave defiantly, argue, ignore rules, annoy and blame others, hit, kick, fight, throw and tear things. The programme is free and open to any community, but the community must provide the facilities and technical equipment. The aim of the programme is to reduce children's problem behaviour by teaching parents the principles of positive parenting and training parents to use positive discipline techniques in their daily lives. Benefits after the full programme: children's aggressive behaviour decreases relatively quickly and the changes are sustained after 6 and 12 months; children learn problem-solving skills and challenging and aggressive behaviour gradually decreases. In turn, parenting practices change after parent training: physical punishment of the child is reduced and the positive parenting model is reinforced (Ministru Kabinets, 2023).

Looking at good practice in other countries (Nordic countries) with similar support groups in social work with families with children, it is concluded that successful good practice can be observed in the Swedish capital Stockholm, where the parenting support programme KOMET (COMmunication METHod) is implemented. This approach focuses on parents who are often in conflict with their child, as well as parents who find it difficult to

deal with conflict situations. The COMET programme is based on international research and promotes interaction between parents and children by applying social learning theories. The programme, with an individual support plan, is designed for parents with young children (3-11 years) and adolescents (12-18 years) (Marklund, Andershed, & Andershed, 2012). Also worth mentioning is “The Incredible Years” support programme developed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton, a psychologist and researcher in the United States, and implemented in Denmark. It is aimed at parents of children aged 3-12 with emotional and behavioural difficulties. “The Incredible Years” programme teaches parents how to promote positive development in their children in two ways: through games, praise and a reward system aimed at improving the parent-child relationship. And, the second direction is that parents learn how to reduce their children's behavioural problems (Marklund, Andershed, & Andershed, 2012). The support programmes for families with children who lack social skills are a real example of how support groups in the Nordic countries aim to support parents, educate and nurture parenting potential, and involve both children and parents in shared leisure time with elements of social learning theory and play.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to explore the theoretical findings on the impact of parenting practices on children's emotional development and the factors influencing the acquisition of social skills, as well as the role of support groups as a community resource and the involvement of the social worker in promoting the development and acquisition of social skills in families with children. The research used theoretical research methods (literature and document analysis) and empirical research methods (structured questionnaire survey of social workers), data processing and analysis methods (data analysis using IBM SPSS v.22 predictive analysis and statistical analysis software package, Cronbach's alpha analysis, Kruskal-Wallis's test). The study was conducted in the period from 29 August 2023 to 8 September 2023, the research base - social workers of all municipal social services in Latvia who work with families with children on a daily basis.

Based on the results of a literature review, an online questionnaire was developed asking respondents (social workers working with families with children) to rate the most frequently identified problems in families with children with whom social work is carried out, what social skills are lacking in pre-school children, their views on the need for early intervention and support groups, the services social workers use and recommend to improve the social skills of families with children, and their views on the difficulties and benefits of organising support groups. The questionnaire consisted of 10 closed and open-ended questions, including multiple choice questions and a Likert scale, which is an ordinal scale that asks the respondent to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of statements. The survey was conducted among respondents (n=59) from all regions of Latvia (all women), the average age of respondents was 45.4 years, and respondents held positions such as social workers working with families with children, heads of family support units, social workers working with young people, as well as "universal" social workers who work with all target groups of social work on a daily basis.

### **Research results**

The results of the questionnaire were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha test and the test result ( $\alpha = 0,703$ ) showed good internal consistency, indicating that the results of the questionnaire are reliable. A Pareto chart was used to analyse the responses to the most frequently identified problems in families with children with whom social work is carried out

(respondents were allowed to choose several answers, but not more than four) (the data can be seen in Figure 1), thus giving special attention to the first three social problems (or in 80% of cases there are 2-3 main reasons why a family comes to the attention of the social services) faced by families at social risk, which should be the main concern when developing new social services, including support groups. It can be concluded that the most frequent are families in which the parents lack the necessary parenting skills (n=46), followed by families with violence (n=41) and parents with addiction problems (n=32).

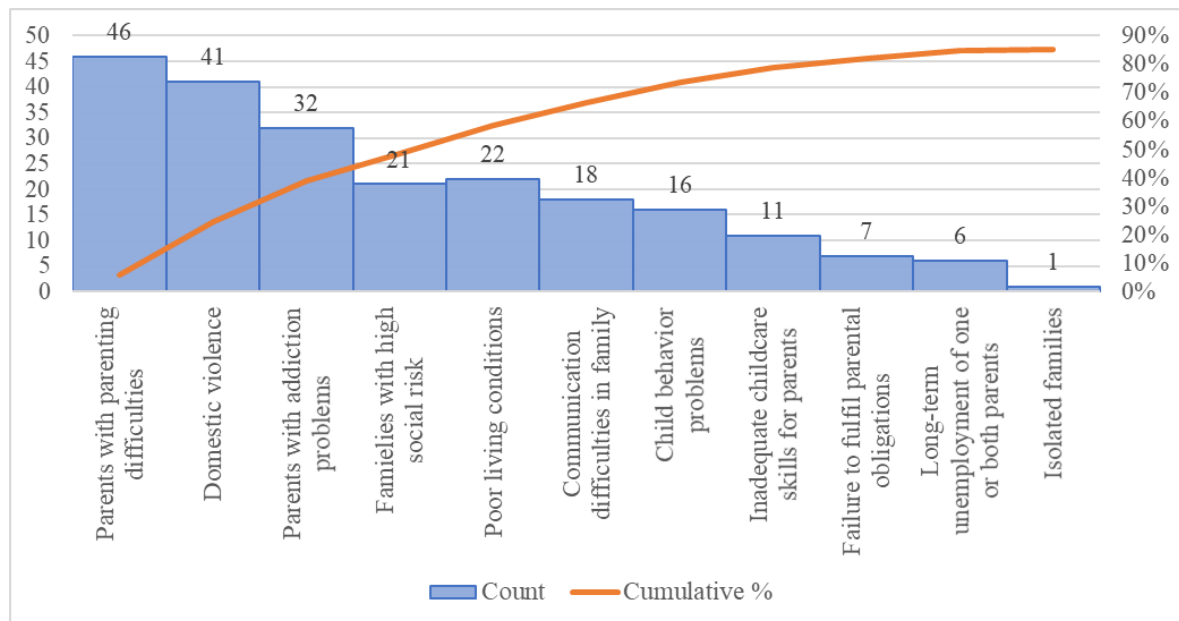


Figure 1 Social problems observed in families with children receiving social work services (made by authors)

These social problems can be defined as consequences that bring families to the attention of social services, and the lack of parenting skills of parents is one of the main reasons why children develop a lack of social skills at an early age (Līdaka, Samuseviča & Strazdiņa, 2018). The causes with the lowest impact on families with children are isolation (n=1) and long-term unemployment of one or both parents (n=6). This can be explained by the fact that socially isolated families are practically non-existent in Latvia, as all families with children are more or less involved in social processes (compulsory pre-school and primary education, supervision of children by family doctors, etc.). However, long-term unemployment can be misleading for parents, as a certain part of society works informally, without a contract, but with an income.

However, if such social problems persist in a family, children also suffer because children learn or do not learn the basics of socialisation in the family, e. g. if they grow up in a family where the parents themselves do not have adequate skills in daily household maintenance, maintaining a tidy environment or personal hygiene, children will not have such skills either (Ajilchi & Kargar, 2013). Therefore, respondents were asked to tick the most common social skills lacked by pre-school children from families with whom social work is carried out. The findings from the literature review were confirmed in the survey results, as the most frequently selected responses (respondents had the option of multiple choice) were identified when the fraction test was administered, and the social skills that were significantly lacking in these children were:

1. lack of politeness, self-control and manners (n=39);
2. difficulty in forming relationships (n=30);
3. lack of hygiene skills (n=26);

4. lack of cooperation skills (n=22);
5. poor self-care skills (n=18).

The diversity of social services in Latvia for families with children is positively assessed, as respondents had the opportunity to tick the social services available in their municipality and rank them according to their usefulness in improving the social skills of the families with children with whom social work is carried out. Of the total number of respondents (n=59), the majority (n=37) answered that they have access to support groups for families with children, and it is support groups for parents with children that social workers working with families with children (n=28) rate as the second most important social service that contributes positively to social work with families. The most suitable social service in the results was the family assistant service (n=48), which is explained by the fact that this social service is available in every municipality in Latvia and social workers appreciate its effectiveness. On the other hand, self-help groups are not available in every municipality and this fact has already been discussed above. The third important social service according to the respondents (n=27) is the Guardian Angel support group, which has already been mentioned as an example of good practice in the literature review (Centrs Dardedze, 2021).

Although the majority of respondents (n=32) believe that the most appropriate support groups to improve the social skills of families are groups that provide activities for parents with their children, using Kurskal-Walli's test, significant differences were found between the evaluation of approaches and methods of group activities and the region represented by the respondent (professionals had the opportunity to evaluate the given approaches and methods), as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 Comparison of different approaches and methods of assessment by region of the respondent (made by authors)*

Method or approach in a support group for parents with children	Region in Latvia	Mean Rank
Informative session	Kurzeme region	33,50
	Zemgale region	18,13
	Vidzeme region	31,36
	Latgale region	16,88
	Riga and peripheral regions	37,29
Informal approach ("tea table", catering, free conversations, discussions)	Kurzeme region	28,76
	Zemgale region	24,50
	Vidzeme region	30,50
	Latgale region	21,00
	Riga and peripheral regions	38,00
Active methods for parents with their children (games, drama) based on social learning theory	Kurzeme region	26,21
	Zemgale region	33,00
	Vidzeme region	35,79
	Latgale region	17,00
	Riga and peripheral regions	36,56

*Source: Survey of social services in Latvian municipalities.  
n=59*

Table 1 shows that professionals in Riga and the Baltic Sea Region have the highest opinion of the approaches and methods offered, but the lowest opinion in Latgale, for example, the informal approach of support groups for families with children is even rated very positively in the Latvian capital region (mean rank = 38.00), while the same approach is rated much lower in Latgale (mean rank = 21.00). According to this difference it can be concluded that the evaluation of Riga and the Baltic Sea Region is based on experience,

because in the capital city of Latvia many services and activities are implemented that focus on the needs of families, therefore social workers appreciate their positive impact on social work with families with children and are familiar with these approaches and methods in group work. However, in Latgale region support groups for families with children are not a common practice, as the majority of social workers (n=5), in general respondents from Latgale (n=7) representing the mentioned region answered that the municipality does not have such a social service (n=5), which explains the low evaluation of the given approaches and methods by specialists from Latgale region. At the same time, specialists agree on the positive benefits of support groups for families with children, e. g. parents in support groups are convinced that they are not alone and that others have similar problems (n=28), children together with their parents develop social skills (n=25), and over time group members become more open, find new friends and improve their communication skills (n=21).

At the end of the survey, social workers were asked about the main barriers to organising more support groups for families with children in their area and the main barriers were parents' reservations (n=30), funding (n=14) and lack of transport for themselves or clients (n=11). This suggests that a number of preparatory steps need to be taken before support groups can be set up: motivational work needs to be done with parents to get the group up and running, and professionals need to negotiate funding and transport with local authority social services.

### **Conclusion**

The family is the primary environment for every child to learn the values, behavioural norms and social skills needed in everyday life, but in socially vulnerable families the acquisition of such knowledge and skills may be limited, which is why it is necessary to provide such families with children with the earliest possible support (early intervention). The most common social problems in families with which social work is carried out in Latvia are parents' insufficient knowledge and skills in raising children, violence and addiction problems, and lack of social skills in preschool children from these families, such as behavioural problems, difficulties in peer relationships and lack of hygiene skills. Support groups are a valuable and important social service to address social skills deficits, as social work with groups can help multiple stakeholders at the same time - parents, children and the family system as a whole. Social workers in Latvia value support groups as a necessary resource and most professionals use this opportunity in their daily work with families with children, if this service is available in the municipality. At the same time, different regions of Latvia have different perceptions of the approach and methods of support groups, depending on professionals' previous experience with support groups and their interest in general. Taking into account the results of the study, it would be useful to introduce a social skills development support group in every Latvian municipality, which would be available to families with children in both urban and rural areas. The knowledge of the social worker working with families with children about the approaches and methods of group work, the support of the social service management in setting up such support groups, as well as the motivation of parents to participate in group activities are also important aspects of the organisation of the groups, as these can be significant obstacles that hinder the development and implementation of support groups.

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