

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENCE IN COMMUNITY CARE HOMES

Rita Virbalienė

Vilniaus Kolegija / Higher Education Institution (VIKO), Lithuania

Janina Čižikienė

Vilniaus Kolegija / Higher Education Institution (VIKO), Lithuania

Abstract. *This article analyzes the role of social workers in developing children's independence in community care homes. The primary goal of a social worker's activity is to provide a suitable service and teach the recipients of their services to solve problems on their own. The children's opportunity to see and grow up in a close family environment depends on the employees' value orientation and worldview. During the deinstitutionalization processes in Lithuania, social workers had to create an environment close to the family and consolidate the family model in communal children's care homes. This article aims to examine how the training and competencies of social workers impact the preparation of children for independent living in society. Applied research methods are analysis of scientific literature and documents, expert interviews, analysis, and interpretation of research results. The review of the scientific literature, presented in the article and the research data, can be applied to improve community care homes providing social services to highlight the role of social workers in creating a safe environment for the child, involving the child in the planning and organization of activities, fostering self-confidence and their abilities.*

Keywords: *community children's care home, independence development, organizational activity, social services.*

Introduction

The Lithuanian strategy "Lithuania 2030" (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2023) calls for strengthening the family by creating a family-friendly environment, expanding the system of complex services and infrastructure, and creating and shaping a positive public attitude towards the family. The state must help and protect the family as an important value for the entire society, implement an appropriate family policy that would effectively protect the family and ensure favorable conditions for raising and children (Gražulis, Čižikienė, 2016; Kiaunytė, Lygnugarienė, 2019; Žalimienė et al. 2020; Tamutienė, Snieškienė, 2023). Article 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo kancelarija, 1992) states that "the family is the basis of society and the state. The state protects and nurtures the family, motherhood, fatherhood and childhood", but there are families who are unable to adapt to the rapidly

changing economic conditions, who are unable to solve their problems and take care of their children's future properly.

The following reasons can be distinguished when a child loses parental care: when parents do not take care of the child, do not take care of it, do not raise it properly, use physical or psychological violence, and so on. (Augutavičius, Butvilas, 2018; Simonovič, Osewska, 2023). Thus, these children need complex help that would correct and reduce negative life experiences and create conditions for the successful physical and psychological development of the child (Gudžinskienė, Raudeliūnaitė, Uscila, 2017). Social care is provided when solving the problems encountered by the child, which includes a whole range of services, providing the child with complex assistance and constant supervision by specialists. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, taking into account the General Assembly's 2009 December 20 annex to resolution 64/142 "Guidelines for alternative child care" (UN General Assembly, 2010), recommended Lithuania provide family or community care options for children who have lost their families, assessing the child's individual needs. Taking into account the General European guidelines for the transition (Stražinskaitė, Kvieskienė, 2015) from institutional to community care and quality standards and based on the best practices of the European Union, in 2014-2020, institutional restructuring of the childcare system was released, ensuring children's interests and the right to grow up in a family or community (Gvaldaitė, Šimkonytė, 2016; Pivorienė, 2020).

The problems of children who have lost parental care examined by Vitkauskas (2010), Ryan, Perron, and Huang (2016), Mazolevskienė, Morkvėnienė, (2016); separation from parents and placement in a care institution was analyzed by Pūras (2012), Snieškienė, Tamutienė (2014), Budrienė, Kiaunytė (2021); aspects of the education of children living in foster homes studied by Gudžinskienė, Augutavičius, (2014), Toliušytė, Plaušnaitienė, (2015), Dudaitė (2016), Bromer, Korfmacher (2017); aspects of the education of children living in foster homes analyzed by Valužytė, Žebrauskaitė (2020).

This article analyzes the role of social workers in developing children's independence in community foster homes that provide short-term or long-term social care. It is a "social care institution providing social services, where up to 8 children live in the community in separate premises (house, apartment) according to the family environment model" (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2014). When providing social services to children who have lost parental care, social workers must understand the importance of deinstitutionalization in the social services system and organize their activities as close to the home environment, taking into account the child's needs to grow and develop and prepare for independent life in society.

The scientific problem is formulated as the question of the role of the social worker in creating a safe and family-friendly environment for the child and

involving the child in the organization of various activities in community care homes. The purpose of the article is to reveal the influence of the social worker's training and competencies in preparing children for independent life in society. To achieve the goal, the following tasks are set: evaluate the aspects of social work with children who have lost parental care in community foster homes; reveal the role of the social worker in creating an environment close to the family and developing the independence of children in community care homes.

Changes in social work with children lost parental care in community care homes

The family is one of the first shapers of a child's comprehensive education and moral values. While growing up in the family, the child begins to learn the peculiarities of socialization, his character is formed, unique traits of character emerge, and parents must provide the child with all the necessary conditions to grow up in a socially safe environment and learn by observing others. The family is a kind of small community with its structure, and regularity of functioning, which determines the upbringing, education, and social well-being of children. We live in a constantly changing society, so when economic and social conditions change, the institution of the family is inevitably affected. Major changes in the state usually lead to fundamental changes in family life but are influenced by various negative factors. The family can become a not-safe and nurturing small community that is unable to solve existing problems and adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions, cannot independently solve its problems, and properly care for the children's future. Children who grow up in families and experience difficulties due to certain reasons - family life conditions (alcohol consumption, violence, neglect, crisis of values, unemployment, non-compliance with social norms, impaired cooperation, emotional communication, etc.) are more vulnerable and need help (Cudak, 2011; Ivanauskienė, 2012; Simonovič, Osewska, 2023).

Children, lacking a positive model of parental behavior, do not have enough social skills to solve the problems that arise. This is why they are often rejected by their peers, experience loneliness, and are unable to name their feelings or fit in the social environment. Bartkutė, Čižikienė (2012) states that when a family is no longer able or does not have the necessary conditions to perform family functions, it experiences a family institute crisis. Such a family, affected by demographic, cultural, and socio-economic problems that harm the stability of the family institution, is "pushed" to the social fringes (Masiliauskienė, Griškutė, 2010; Cudak, 2011; Vaitiekienė, 2013; Simonovič, Osewska, 2023). Children face various psychological, emotional, and spiritual difficulties and experience communication problems. It was established that children from problematic families adopt social value attitudes more slowly and have difficulty making

decisions in their independent lives (Gražulis, Čižikienė, 2016; Čižikienė, 2018; Račkauskienė, Zbarauskienė, 2023). Scientists agree that children of families experiencing difficulties often lack social skills because the people closest to them face the same problems and they do not have the opportunity to acquire social skills, so it is necessary to provide conditions for socialization and integration into society for the children of these families (Bartkutė, Čižikienė, 2012; Gudžinskienė, Augutavičius, 2014; Augutavičius, Butvilas, 2018; Čižikienė, 2018; Račkauskienė, Zbarauskienė, 2023; Bernedo et al., 2024; Philip et al., 2024).

In the activity description of community children's care homes (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2021), the municipality must ensure that the child grows up in a close family environment. "Services provided by Community Children's Care Homes (CCCH) can be supplied by social care institutions whose social care meets the norms of social care and which have a license to provide social care" (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2021). The purpose of community children's care homes is to ensure quality services and create suitable conditions that would allow the child to grow safely, develop, and prepare for an independent life. Therefore, the activities of social workers must be directed towards the development of children's social competencies. They must help children adapt more successfully in the community, integrate, and live a full life. Social workers perform many and varied functions. It is necessary to note that, in the course of their activities, social workers must assist children facing various problems. Social work in community care homes has a wide profile, so in order to provide effective help and quality services to children who have lost parental care, it is important to improve the skills and creativity of social service workers to achieve changes in children's lives. Social work is a specific activity requiring special skills. As enshrined in the Law on Social Services (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinių paslaugų įstatymas, 2006), "social services are provided to a person (family) who, due to age or disability, has lost the abilities and opportunities to independently take care of his personal life and participate in society" (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinių paslaugų įstatymas, 2006). Social workers working in community care homes help and assist children with difficulties and problems in life, and persons performing social work must have certain character traits and abilities based on the values of social work (Prakapas, 2007; Čižikienė, 2020).

According to the Activity Description of Community Children's Care Homes (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2021), the goal of community children's care homes is to provide the child with living conditions close to the family, corresponding to his well-being, physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. When describing social work, the following areas are distinguished in CCCH: social work as a response to concern and need; a creative combination of knowledge, values, and skills; problem-solving process;

and intervention in human interaction. The help provided by the social worker to the child is expressed in the following ways: providing social services, implementing adaptation and social correction, and carrying out supervision and prevention.

The Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Social Services (*Lietuvos Respublikos socialinių paslaugų įstatymas, 2006*) states that the following principles must be followed when doing social work: cooperation, participation, complexity, accessibility, social justice, suitability, comprehensiveness of effectiveness (Augutavičius, 2019; Čižikienė, 2020). When providing help, a social worker encounters principles that require tolerance and empathy. Children expect social workers to give them moral support and understanding. Therefore, a social worker not only performs functions but is also a creative and empathetic person who can understand the personal needs of each child.

When defining the areas of activity of a social worker in community care homes, the following can be distinguished: determination and assessment of the child's needs; support and aid planning; provision of assistance; assessment; organization of activities; improvement of professional activity and upgrading of qualifications. Thus, the specified areas of activity and their diversity in social work require special abilities of social workers. Therefore, when performing his functions, the social worker faces certain professional roles, which ensure the child's well-being and interests between institutions in solving various problems (Milkintaitė, Marcinkevičienė, 2013; Račkauskienė, Zbarauskienė, 2023). The main goal of a social worker's activity is not only to provide help but also to teach children to solve problems independently (Kiaunytė, Lygnugarienė, 2019). By representing the child's interests, the social worker fulfills one of the main goals - developing the person's ability to solve problems independently. This means that the social worker does not have to solve the problems themselves but find a way to do it by involving the interested parties.

Children who have lost parental care are the most vulnerable members of society. To provide them with effective help, qualified employees are necessary, so social workers must constantly improve and use creativity to find new ways to solve the problem. However, when applying new methods, it is necessary to combine creativity with the rules and norms of the organization and not to deviate from the law. Community children's care homes are special in the nature of their activities because they work with vulnerable children. The aim is to help children who have lost parental care to become independent and able to properly organize their lives, therefore it is necessary to look for a modern human resources management model that would offer effective ways to overcome social risks, exclusion, and poverty (Samašonok, 2013; Čižikienė, Gražulis, 2016; Čižikienė 2018; Raudeliūnaitė, Gudžinskienė, 2022). When representing the child's interests, the social worker often experiences stress, because he has to help solve problems independently and make decisions efficiently, he must not lack

sensitivity and reflection (Toliušytė, Plaušinitienė, 2015; Čižikienė, Gražulis, 2016; Čižikienė 2018; Valužytė, Žebrauskaitė, 2020). A social worker cannot be impulsive and act recklessly. A work in a care home requires not only physical and mental abilities but also the ability to manage emotions and anticipate problematic situations in which they must represent the child's interests and make the best decisions for the growth of the child's personality.

Research methodology

The research problem is what is the role of the social worker in creating a safe and family-friendly environment for the child and involving the child in the organization of various activities in community care homes.

The object of the research is the role of social workers in developing children's independence.

The purpose of the study is to reveal the aspects of the activities of community care institutions, implementing the transition from institutional care to services provided in the family and community.

The tasks of the empirical research: 1) to conduct a survey of the opinion of social workers, which would help to determine the work methods of the social worker in developing children's independence; 2) to propose ways and means that can be applied in social work in creating a model close to the family, in creating cooperative relations with the child in community care homes.

A qualitative research strategy was chosen for the study (Maxwel, 2008; Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017). Qualitative research is a systematic study of a situation, case, event, individual, or group in a natural environment, where the aim is to understand the researched phenomena and to present an interpretive, holistic, generalizing phenomenon from the analysis of situations (Žukauskienė, 2008; Lichtman, 2014). This research strategy was also motivated by the fact that the necessary information was obtained through a direct, targeted interview with the research participant. The direction and content of the conversation is determined by the research problem. Empirical research based on the chosen strategy provides an opportunity, taking into account human experience, to reveal the investigated phenomenon, and to understand the problem areas of the research related to the topic. Qualitative research is not limited by the characteristics of the sample size. That is why the sample size is not important (Bitinas, Rupšienė, Žydžiūnaitė, 2008; Lichtman, 2014; Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017).

The target criterion was selected for the sample of research participants, the following criteria were distinguished: social workers with social work education, and experience of social work in community children's care homes for more than one year. Due to the detail of the phenomenon under consideration, a semi-structured interview was selected for the study, which helps to obtain detailed answers from the informants and systematize the data (Maxwel, 2008). The

interview method makes it possible to acquire information in a targeted way by communicating with the research participant, while semi-structured questions help to reveal a broader picture of the researched phenomenon during the interview. Five social workers who met the selected criteria participated in the study. Experience of social workers in community care homes - from 2 to 5 years. All research participants have a university education in social work: two social workers have a bachelor's degree, and three participants have a master's degree. During the qualitative research, all the ethical principles of the research were followed. Therefore, before conducting the semi-structured interview, a meeting time and place convenient for him was discussed personally with the social worker. It should be emphasized that the respondents participated in the study voluntarily. Before the interview, they were introduced to the purpose of the study and, the information received, and the issues of confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants were discussed.

Research results and their discussion

The study revealed that the role of social workers in developing children's independence is particularly important. The children's opportunity to see and grow up in a close family environment depends on the employees' value orientation and worldview. In community care homes, social workers introduce and develop the social skills of children who have lost their parents' care: *Children go to the clubs themselves. They go to the city, to sports clubs, go to the cinema... They clean their rooms because they live here themselves. There is general cleaning, on weekends, when the children tidy up their room and change the bed linen... (SW_1); We try to have the children plan the menu and cook it themselves. The children clean the rooms every day, make the bed, take out the garbage, and clean the dust (SW_2); We show how to pay via the Internet (SW_1); we go shopping together at the store, the children help carry, and they can also compare the prices of products (SW_4); Older children willingly cook, younger children watch, get involved and help prepare lunch for the whole family..... the children themselves maintain order in the rooms (SW_5); children cook by themselves with our help, according to their needs, together we made a menu, a shopping list, we look according to the money we have (SW_3).* In conclusion, it can be said that social workers develop children's social skills and independence in everyday life, allowing them to cook, shop, and manage their environment.

When talking about preparing children for independent life, social workers say that their role is particularly important, they play a key role in preparing children who have lost parental care for independent life. The research participants mentioned that they play the role of mother and father in their children's lives, most of the informants emphasized that they often take on the functions of parents because the children even say: *You are like a mother to me*

(SW_3). *The role of the social worker is monumental. You are also in the role of mother. You have to predict where the child may not succeed, and what he needs in his independent life... (SW_1); You have to gain trust from the child so that he recognizes you as a close person, and then only as an employee (SW_2); I am an example for them... My example for them is this: not only my family is important to me, but the children in the orphanage are important, they see it and appreciate it... (SW_4).*

The research aimed to find out the influence of social workers in contributing to the successful integration into society, when children reach adulthood and start living independently: *We release them as our children, and we continue to provide support and care for them. Support, that we will always be there to help, they can turn to if they need advice, help... (SW_2).*

During the research, it was found that the social competencies of social workers are important for the successful future of children: empathy, self-control, and patience: *You need a lot of patience with children (SW_2). Sometimes we want to do things for the children because here it is easier and simpler than asking them to do the set work, but you explain long and patiently how to do it and wait for the child to do the work independently (SW_3); They need to be understood and motivated so that they try to be more independent as much as possible (SW_4).* The informants agreed and confirmed that it is necessary to prepare children for independent life as early as possible: *children's personal accounts are opened, we teach how to use them... preparation for independent life starts from the age of 14 (SW_5); independent life plans are made for children from the age of 14. We explain about the future, about the need to choose a specialty... (SW_1); children are introduced to the possibilities of social housing and the procedure for obtaining housing: ...we process together documents for social housing for the municipality from the age of 16 (SW_2).*

Research participants agree that to prepare children for an independent life, the development of financial literacy is necessary, children must understand the management of financial affairs, anticipate the management of their finances, and know the consequences of financial risks: *From the age of 14, children can dispose of pocket money and can spend money from a card at their own expense (SW_2); expenditure planning is necessary, children were given a certain amount, they have to buy clothes for themselves, keep money for entertainment (SW_5); We have financial literacy classes... children from the age of 16 participate in the class, when the child is conscious and understands what finance is... (SW_1); For older children, we even organize meetings with the bank... Trainings are held with bank employees who voluntarily introduce them to financial management, and answer children's questions...(SW_4).*

During the research, the opinion of the respondents was evaluated as to how it is necessary to create an environment close to the family according to the established family model, the respondents distinguished that it is necessary to

include the child in common activities at home, to create such an atmosphere that the child would like to return to the foster home, to protect and preserve it: *We create such an environment, that the child has his personal belongings, i.e. i.e. wardrobe, bed, drawer, own personal space (SW_3); they felt that we took care of them more, we became like a large family (SW_5); the children realized that they live in a different environment... their experiences in the family are really negative... so when they start caring about the beauty of the care home, you realize that the child wants to live in a more beautiful world (SW_4).* When creating an environment close to the family, social workers stated that they try to create and maintain family traditions: *We have a tradition of celebrating St. Christmas, St. Easter, we prepare traditional meals, remember family customs (SW_1); ... we like to sit together, talk together, cook together (SW_3); from traditions, from quiet conversations, shared dinners, tea drinking afternoons... and a family begins (SW_2).*

When discussing the opinion of social workers regarding the competencies in working with children in foster homes, the research participants agreed that additional training is needed, especially, *"training about the traumatic experience of children would be useful because sometimes they cannot be interested in taking care of themselves, children often express anger when they need to do daily tasks (SW_3); Psychological resilience must be developed, the ability to recognize the burnout syndrome, because you must notice when the work in the care home becomes difficult...you must stop...you cannot help the child (SW_2); We have to learn and improve, review something we could improve...so that the children are happy with the current situation in the care home (SW_5).* Evaluating the interviews of the participants, it can be said that the training of social workers is not enough, team and personal supervision of employees should be regularly organized, training should be organized to develop the missing competencies, so that social workers have a good emotional well-being to work with children.

In summary, it can be said that the influence of social workers is very important in contributing to successful integration into society, when children reach adulthood and start living independently, and properly applied social work methods strengthen the sense of security of children who have lost parental care, increase their abilities, develop independence skills and have a positive effect on their attitude towards future life.

Conclusions

The purpose of community children's care homes is to ensure quality education, care, and social services for the child under care, to create suitable conditions, and to maintain an environment where the child can safely grow, develop, and prepare for an independent life in the community. Therefore, the activities of social workers must be directed towards the development of

children's social competencies, these activities should help children to adapt more successfully in the community, integrate, and live an active, fulfilling life.

Analyzing the experiences of social workers working with children who have lost parental care in community care homes, it has been determined that the quality of social services provided, the satisfaction of the child's needs, and problem-solving depend on the preparedness of the staff. When working with children who have lost parental care, a social worker must be highly qualified and motivated, as not only the quality of services provided, but also the ability of the child, who has experienced various life difficulties, to independently solve problems and future prospects depend on them. Thus, the study revealed that, for the well-being of the child, the most important person is the social worker, who bears great responsibility not only for providing assistance to the child and cooperating with various institutions but also for nurturing the individual, fostering values, and social norms. The study revealed that the social worker plays the role of a parent, but whether they always have the opportunity to make decisions and act at their discretion, social workers did not comment.

Social workers perform many and varied functions. It is necessary to note that, in the course of their activities, social workers must assist children with various problems. Social work in community care homes requires not only good physical but also psychological health, therefore, in order to provide effective help and quality services to children who have lost parental care, it is very important to improve the skills and creativity of workers providing social services in order to achieve changes in children's lives. When providing services to children, it is necessary to organize their daily lives in such a way that the children get involved in various activities, move away from the negative social environment, and develop social resilience to meet the essential needs of the child and create opportunities for the child's well-being. In community foster homes, children learn social skills that are necessary for children's successful socialization and integration into society.

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