

COOPERATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND CHILD WELFARE AUTHORITIES IN ADDRESSING RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND CHILD ENDANGERMENT

SPOLUPRÁCE ORGÁNŮ SOCIÁLNĚ-PRÁVNÍ OCHRANY DĚTÍ A ZÁKLADNÍCH ŠKOL V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE PŘI ŘEŠENÍ RIZIKOVÉHO CHOVÁNÍ ŽÁKŮ

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Abstract

This paper deals with the system of social and legal protection of children (OSPOD) in the Czech Republic and its connection with the school environment. It describes the legislative framework, activities and working methods of OSPOD, including cooperation with schools in addressing various forms of risky behaviour and child endangerment. It also focuses on the role of the school counselling centre, its structure and the competences of individual experts. The text analyses specific situations such as truancy, bullying, cyberbullying, substance abuse, abuse and illegal behaviour by young people, and describes the procedures used by schools and OSPOD to address them. It emphasises the importance of early intervention, multidisciplinary cooperation and the need for clearly defined competences in crisis management. The aim is to promote effective cooperation between schools and OSPOD for the benefit of child protection.

Keywords: social and legal protection of children; school counselling centre; risky behaviour of pupils; cooperation between schools and OSPOD; intervention and preventive measures

Abstrakt

Článek se zabývá systémem sociální a právní ochrany dětí (OSPOD) v České republice a jeho propojením se školním prostředím. Popisuje legislativní rámec, činnosti a pracovní metody OSPOD, včetně spolupráce se školami při řešení různých forem rizikového chování a ohrožení dětí. Zaměřuje se také na roli školního poradenského centra, jeho strukturu a kompetence jednotlivých odborníků. Text analyzuje konkrétní situace, jako je záškoláctví, šikana, kyberšikana, zneužívání návykových látek, týrání a protiprávní jednání mladých lidí, a popisuje postupy, které školy a OSPOD používají k jejich řešení. Zdůrazňuje význam včasné intervence, multidisciplinární spolupráce a nutnost jasně definovaných kompetencí v oblasti krizového řízení. Cílem je podpořit účinnou spolupráci mezi školami a OSPOD ve prospěch ochrany dětí.

Klíčová slova: sociální a právní ochrana dětí; školní poradenské centrum; rizikové chování žáků; spolupráce mezi školami a OSPOD; intervenční a preventivní opatření

Social and legal protection of children: characteristics, legislative framework and measures

Social and legal protection of children in the Czech Republic is a comprehensive system of measures aimed at ensuring the favourable development of children, the protection of their rights and interests, and, if necessary, a substitute family environment. This system has historical roots in the Czech environment, but its current form reflects current social needs (Krausová, Novotná, 2006).

The basic legal regulation governing the social and legal protection of children is Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on the social and legal protection of children. Section 1 defines protection as an activity aimed at ensuring the child's right to favourable development, proper upbringing, protection of legitimate interests, including property, restoration of disrupted functions, and provision of a substitute family environment. The activities of the social and legal protection of children authorities (hereinafter referred to as OSPOD) thus affect a wide range of children's rights – from the right to life, identity, freedom of thought, protection from violence, neglect and exploitation, to the right to education and employment.

The legislative framework consists not only of national laws, but also of international documents that are binding on the Czech Republic. These include the Constitution of the Czech Republic, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international treaties. For example, Article 10 of the Constitution stipulates that international treaties take precedence over the law if they stipulate otherwise (Constitutional Act No. 1/1993 Coll.). The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality, the right to life, protection of the family and special protection of children and young people (Resolution No. 2/1993 Coll.). OSPODs include municipal authorities, authorities of municipalities with extended powers, regional authorities, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Office for International Legal Protection of Children.

OSPOD focuses primarily on children identified as at risk, although the term „child at risk“ is not clearly defined in Czech law. Children at risk can be considered to be those who are at risk of being removed from their families, children who are neglected, abused, exploited, children with behavioural disorders, children who use addictive substances, children who are bullied or who live in a conflictual family environment (e.g. Pemová, Ptáček, 2022; Novotná et al., 2022). Assessing the situation of a child at risk is a key step in the work of the OSPOD, which requires a comprehensive assessment of all areas of the child's life, identification of risks and involvement of the wider family. Parental responsibility plays an important role, which

includes not only material security, but also care for the child's mental and moral development (Kovářová et al., 2022; Polišínská et al., 2019).

OSPOD social workers provide counselling, prevention and intervention services. They cooperate with parents, schools, healthcare facilities and other professionals. They arrange professional assistance and submit proposals to the court or the Czech Police in cases of suspected abuse (Mertin et al., 2020). Their activities also include arranging adoptions, foster care, care for children requiring increased attention, and resolving situations involving children in an international context (Šíp & Hájková, 2019).

The preventive activities of OSPOD include searching for children at risk, monitoring environments unsuitable for their development (e.g. gaming rooms, casinos), providing counselling to parents and organising educational activities. Municipalities and regions create conditions for cultural, sports and leisure activities for children (Špeciánová, 2007; Polišínská et al., 2019).

OSPOD's working methods include assessing the child's situation, individual child protection plans, and case conferences. An individual child protection plan is a mandatory document that sets out measures based on identified risks and aims to strengthen family functions (Matoušek, Pazlarová, 2016). A case conference is a tool for multidisciplinary cooperation, where OSPOD coordinates the entities involved (Hovorka, 2021; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2019).

Educational measures are another tool used by OSPOD. These include warnings, supervision, restrictions and the obligation to seek professional help. If these measures do not lead to improvement, the child may be temporarily placed in an educational care centre or other facility (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). The aim of these measures is to prevent problems from worsening and to avoid interference with parental responsibilities (Hovorka, 2021).

School counselling centre: characteristics, activities and entities involved

The school counselling centre (hereinafter referred to as SCC) is a key element in supporting pupils in the areas of education, upbringing and the prevention of risky behaviour. Its importance lies in its comprehensive approach to solving problematic situations that arise in the school environment and in connecting teaching staff with specialist institutions. As Březinová (2022) states, school is an important milestone in a child's life, where their long-term development, emotional experiences and the impact of teaching can be observed. Early recognition of warning signs, especially by the class teacher, can be crucial for initiating support measures.

The SCC consists of internal school experts – educational counsellors, school psychologists, school prevention methodologists, special educators and social educators. The counselling system also includes school counselling facilities, which comprise educational-psychological counselling centres and special education centres. Educational care centres are an important part of the system. These two lines form the pillars of the counselling system, which provides professional support to pupils, parents and schools. Its aim is to help solve educational, behavioural, personal and social difficulties. (Svoboda Hoferková, 2022)

The educational-psychological counselling centre provides services to children, pupils, parents and schools. Its activities include, for example, diagnosing school readiness, identifying special educational needs, proposing support measures, direct psychological intervention, career counselling and the prevention of risky behaviour. The Special Education Centre focuses on children and young people aged 3–19 with disabilities. It provides professional assistance on an outpatient basis, at home or in schools. The team consists of a psychologist, special educator, social worker and other experts. (Decree No. 72/2005 Coll.)

Educational care centres are intended for children at risk of behavioural disorders who have not been ordered to undergo institutional or protective education. The centres provide diagnostic, preventive educational and counselling services, with the intensity of cooperation depending on the severity of the difficulties. The services are provided by outpatient, day care and boarding centres; the stay at the centre is usually 8 weeks.

The teaching staff involved in the SCC includes an educational counsellor, a school prevention methodologist, a special education teacher, a school psychologist and, more recently, a social pedagogue. The activities of these staff members are regulated by Act No. 561/2004 Coll. and Decree No. 72/2005 Coll.

An educational counsellor is an educational worker who focuses on career counselling and support for pupils with special educational needs. Their role includes cooperation with parents, colleagues, experts and institutions such as the social and legal protection of children authority (hereinafter OSPD), the police, or school counselling facilities, including educational care centres. The educational counsellor is a mandatory part of the school counselling system, as is the school prevention methodologist. The school prevention methodologist coordinates the creation of the school's prevention programme, the implementation of activities focused on the prevention of risky behaviour among pupils and students, provides methodological guidance to teachers, coordinates education in the field of prevention and cooperates with specialist institutions. Educational counsellors and school prevention methodologists are usually teachers at the school in question, who are recommended to complete specialised training as part of continuing education for teaching staff.

The school psychologist is a professional whose work mainly includes diagnosing school readiness, identifying risky behaviour, consulting with pupils, parents and teachers, drawing up individual plans and providing methodological support. The school psychologist is an important element in the diagnosis and early intervention of risky behaviour and the wellbeing of pupils and the entire teaching staff. Special education teachers are mainly employed in primary schools, where they work individually or in groups with pupils with special educational needs (e.g. Mertin et al., 2020). They help support pupils with learning disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, etc., and contribute to the inclusion of these pupils in mainstream classes. Although the working hours of school psychologists and special education teachers are often reduced, their presence is very valuable to the school.

A social pedagogue at school is a professional focused on connecting the educational environment with the social sphere. Their main activities include supporting pupils at risk of social disadvantage, preventing risky behaviour, cooperating with families, and mediating cooperation between the school and other institutions (both state and non-state). For a long time, their position was financed mainly from projects (e.g. European funds), but since 2025 it has been enshrined in the Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.) and in the Act on Pedagogical Workers (No. 563/2004 Coll.), which allows for its financing from the state budget and sets qualification requirements (university education in social pedagogy or social work).

The school counselling centre is therefore made up of a network of experts who work together to create a safe and supportive environment for pupils. Their cooperation is key to the early identification of problems, effective intervention and linking the school with external specialist services. Given the growing demands on the school environment, it is essential that schools have sufficient staff and expertise in the area of school counselling.

Cooperation between the social and legal protection of children authority and primary schools in addressing selected forms of risky behaviour or threats to children

Cooperation between the OSPOD and the school can be divided into two basic situations, which can be found in the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children: Section 10 stipulates a reporting obligation for schools and educational institutions, as well as for state authorities, authorised persons and healthcare providers, or other institutions designated for children, that children defined by this Act are at risk. In Section 53, schools, educational institutions and other similar institutions are obliged to provide the necessary information for the provision of social and legal protection free of charge (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). The term „child at risk“ is vaguely defined in Czech law. Teachers therefore often follow the methodological guidelines and recommendations of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Ministry of Education,

Youth and Sports, 2013–2025) when deciding whether to report certain facts to the OSPOD.

Illegal behaviour of young people and cooperation between schools and OSPOD

Youth delinquency is an interdisciplinary topic, as adolescence is associated with a higher risk of undesirable behaviour. Although statistics show a downward trend in registered youth crime in the long term, experts point to the increasing brutality of violent acts and the shift of illegal behaviour to the online space, where children and young people become both victims and perpetrators (e.g. Hoferková et al., 2017).

As mentioned above, Act No. 359/1999 Coll. in § 6 defines the group of children on whom social and legal protection focuses – for example, children who have committed an otherwise criminal act, have been victims of a criminal act, repeatedly run away from home, use addictive substances, do not attend school or are at risk of violence in the family. Section 31 of the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll. imposes an obligation on school principals to inform the OSPOD of particularly gross and repeated behaviour by pupils towards employees or classmates.

A teacher who has reasonable suspicion of a criminal offence is obliged to pass on the information – ideally through the school principal – to the Police of the Czech Republic or the public prosecutor. After receiving the report, the school has the right to be informed within one month about the measures taken (Puškinová et al., 2021).

If there is suspicion of unlawful conduct that does not meet the criteria for a criminal offence (e.g. petty theft, vandalism), the school informs the headteacher. Sanctions should be defined in the school rules. If the behaviour is repeated even after educational measures have been exhausted (e.g. warning, reprimand, educational committee), the school contacts the OSPOD. As mentioned above, in the event of greater damage or associated violence, it is necessary to report the matter to the Czech Police.

According to Puškinová et al. (2021), the school should only contact OSPOD after exhausting its own options, with the exception of serious, repeated behaviour that threatens the child's development. However, Korbek and Lejsková (2019) emphasise the importance of early detection of the problem and cooperation with other organisations. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports recommends that each school have a clearly defined crisis plan with a division of responsibilities. The class teacher, who has the most information about the pupils, plays a key role here.

OSPOD deals with minors who commit criminal offences or misdemeanours on the basis of investigations by the Czech Police or reports from schools. It assesses whether the child is at risk and cooperates with the family, including in court proceedings. OSPOD does not have the authority to sanction the child or investigate the crime – this is the responsibility of the Czech

Police. The school first discusses the situation with the parents, convenes an educational commission and, only after exhausting all other options, contacts OSPOD, which decides on the next steps (Regional Authority of the Central Bohemian Region, 2019, online).

The school counselling centre (educational counsellor, school prevention methodologist, or social pedagogue) may initiate a case meeting with OSPOD and the Czech Police. The school principal must be informed about every child at risk and approves the content of reports sent to OSPOD or the Czech Police (Sirius Foundation, 2023).

Truancy and the procedure of the school and OSPOD

Truancy can be defined as the deliberate absence of a pupil without a valid excuse, which may be an indicator of the risk of early school leaving or other educational problems. Although it most often occurs in lower secondary school (most commonly between the ages of 12 and 14), it can also occur in younger pupils with more serious problems, or in pupils whose parents do not consider school attendance a priority.

According to Section 50(1) of the Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.), the reasons for a pupil's absence must be documented within three calendar days. If a pupil exceeds the specified limit of unexcused hours (10 in the first stage of primary school, 12 in the second stage; note: the first stage of primary school, grades 1–5, corresponds to ISCED 1, the second stage of primary school, grades 6–9, corresponds to ISCED 2), the school initiates communication with the legal guardian. In the event of higher absenteeism, the headteacher convenes an educational committee. If these measures do not lead to improvement and absenteeism exceeds 25 hours per quarter, the school contacts the OSPOD (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2024).

After truancy is reported, the child may be assigned a child and youth curator (OSPOD employee) who regularly consults with the family about school attendance. In extreme cases, the child may even be removed from the family, as failure to attend school is considered a form of neglect (Mertin et al., 2020).

OSPOD may also intervene earlier, for example when developing an individual educational programme. This process involves the school, the pupil, their legal representative, the school prevention methodologist, the school counsellor and, where appropriate, the Probation and Mediation Service of the Czech Republic. The aim is to identify the causes of inappropriate behaviour and to seek corrective measures (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2024).

Abused, exploited and neglected children – recognition and procedure of the school and OSPOD

There are four forms of child maltreatment syndrome: physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. Ciklová (2016) points out that inaction in the knowledge that a child is being harmed can be considered complicity. Březinová (2022) emphasises the importance of trust between teacher and pupil, which can lead to the child confiding in the teacher. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to recognise changes in children's behaviour due to distance learning. Recognisable signs include bruises, fractures, delayed development, anxiety, eating disorders, frequent illness or seeking substitute emotional bonds (e.g. Kalibová & Kaliba, 2014).

If a school employee suspects that a child is at risk, they contact the class teacher. The teacher cooperates with the school counselling centre, which assesses the situation and decides on the next steps – reporting to the OSPOD or the Czech Police. If the family does not cooperate and the situation does not improve, the school is obliged to report it to the OSPOD. In the event of an acute threat to the health or development of a child, the school must inform the OSPOD and the Police of the Czech Republic immediately (Blažková et al., 2024).

Upon receiving the report, the OSPOD initiates steps to protect the child – family rehabilitation, mediation of professional help, monitoring of the situation. Unlike other services, the OSPOD can intervene even without the family's consent. The parents' reaction may be negative at first, but cooperation between the school and the OSPOD often leads to an improvement in the child's situation (Blažková et al., 2024).

Bullying and cyberbullying – characteristics and procedures of the school and OSPOD

Bullying is long-term and repeated behaviour aimed at intimidating the victim, gaining superiority over them and achieving benefits. Mertin et al. (2020) point out that educational counsellors are often under pressure to find a quick solution, which requires negotiation skills and cooperation with the family and experts.

Schools must be prepared to deal with bullying through a crisis plan, which is part of a prevention programme (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020). The initial stage is handled by the school prevention methodologist with the class teacher and school management. In more serious cases, the educational-psychological counselling centre, educational care centre, non-profit organisations or psychologists are involved. The educational commission is always convened, and it is advisable to invite OSPOD staff as well. The school principal is obliged to report bullying to the criminal justice authorities if the aggressor's actions constitute a criminal offence (Blažková, 2011).

Cyberbullying, as stated by Ehlová (2016), takes place through technology and can affect the victim continuously. Its anonymity increases the intensity of fear. In order to be classified as a criminal offence, it must meet the criteria for a criminal offence, e.g. stalking, defamation, breach of confidentiality of messages or documents (Svoboda Hoferková & Bělík, 2022).

The school has a duty to ensure the victim's safety, gather evidence, inform parents and consult with the relevant institutions on how to proceed. In serious cases, it is necessary to contact the Czech Police and OSPOD (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017).

According to the methodological guidelines of the Central Bohemian Region (2019), OSPOD provides counselling if the school has taken sufficient measures. However, if there are risk factors, it initiates active work with the family and may also work with the victim. Just as the school can invite OSPOD to the educational committee, OSPOD can invite teachers to a case conference. Participants are bound by confidentiality (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020).

Addictive substances – prevention and procedures of the school and OSPOD

The school has a duty to create a preventive environment – to clearly define the prohibition of the use and bringing of addictive substances in the school rules, to implement preventive programmes and to inform pupils and parents about the risks (Gabrhelík, Orlíková & Šejvl, 2019). In the event of the distribution or consumption of addictive substances, the school cooperates with the Czech Police and OSPOD. If the pupil's life is not in danger, the school contacts their legal guardian. If they cannot be reached, the school requests the cooperation of the Czech Police and OSPOD. In acute cases, it is necessary to call the emergency medical service.

OSPOD is obliged to investigate every report from the school and assess the degree of danger to the child. If a criminal offence is suspected (e.g. drug distribution), it cooperates with the Czech Police and may be present during interrogations (Regional Authority of the Central Bohemian Region, 2019).

The OSPOD cannot disclose information about procedures involving the family to the school or intervene urgently in cases of substance abuse – this is the responsibility of the school. If the school feels that a broader solution is needed, it can convene an educational committee with the participation of the OSPOD, which will thus gain a comprehensive view of the child's situation.

Conclusion

There are a number of situations where it is necessary for the school to take active measures in cooperation with the social and legal protection of children authority. The most common risk behaviours include truancy, child abuse, maltreatment and neglect, bullying and cyberbullying, substance abuse and illegal activities. In its methodological recommendations, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports sets out procedures for teachers in other areas of risky behaviour, such as alcohol use, self-harm, risky sexual behaviour, suicidal tendencies and gambling (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2013–2025). These recommendations imply that the school should first exhaust all available educational procedures and only then contact the OSPOD. Exceptions are cases involving children falling under the definition of Section 6 of Act No. 359/1999 Coll., i.e. children who are at risk of violence, criminal activity or serious neglect. In such cases, teachers are obliged to inform OSPOD without undue delay (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2013–2025). An effective tool for cooperation is to invite the OSPOD to the educational committee or to have teachers participate in a case conference. These forms of cooperation enable the school to better understand the child's family context and tailor individual support to it.

Cooperation between the school and the social and legal protection of children authority is key to effectively resolving situations that threaten the child. A joint approach can prevent problems from worsening and ensure comprehensive support that covers both the educational and social aspects of the child's life. Coordination between teachers and OSPOD staff makes it possible to respond quickly to risky behaviour, set up an individual support plan and involve other experts or institutions.

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