

CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

- Visegrad Fund

Hradec Králové
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Faculty of Education

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CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

***METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE
ON RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH
IN THE V₄ COUNTRIES***

Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková et al.

Hradec Králové

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INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

A WORD FROM THE PROJECT COORDINATOR

The publication you are holding is the result of a unique blend of youthful energy, academic experience, and professional expertise. The "Child at Risk" project was not created merely at office desks, but primarily through a vibrant dialogue and collective meetings involving students, academics, and dedicated practitioners from the field.

The journey to this handbook began in the spring of 2025, when we reached out to students from partner universities in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. For most of them, this project became an intensive work spanning two whole semesters. Students first immersed themselves in studying professional sources and prepared theoretical and empirical backgrounds, upon which they subsequently began to build proposals for specific preventive activities.

Throughout the project, we had the opportunity to meet in an online space. This meeting was crucial not only for clarifying technical requirements but primarily for getting to know each other and connecting our visions across the Visegrad region. During the autumn, student teams finalized their proposals and tested individual activities "for real" within their university teams.

The peak of our efforts was the international workshop in Hradec Králové, held on October 16–17, 2025 (a detailed program of the workshop is provided in the Appendix 1 at the end of this publication). This event brought together not only students and their mentors but also experienced professionals from practice, including social educators, psychologists, and primary prevention lecturers. Together, we experienced the activities, commented on them, and provided mutual reflection. This collaboration between the academic world and the professional field was vital for the final editing of the contributions that now form the content of this methodological guide.

It was incredibly inspiring to watch how future teachers, social educators, social workers and psychologists worked alongside seasoned experts to create tools with the potential to transform school reality.

Although we speak different languages, the challenges we face regarding children's mental health and risky behavior are remarkably similar across our region. This

handbook is therefore not only a methodological guide but also a symbol of sustainable Central European cooperation and a shared responsibility for the safe future of our children. I believe that the enthusiasm and expertise woven into these pages will be as much of an inspiration for your pedagogical practice as they were for us throughout the project.

Mgr. et Mgr. Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková, Ph.D.
Main Project Coordinator, University of Hradec Králové

ABOUT

THE CHILD AT RISK PROJECT

The publication you are holding is designed as a methodological guide and represents the output of the international project "Child at Risk: Risky behavior and mental health of children in the V4 countries" (project ID: 22430137). The project was created in response to growing challenges in the area of mental health among children and young people in the Visegrad Four countries, particularly in connection with the occurrence of risky behavior such as aggression (including suicidal behavior and self-harm), intolerance and discrimination, substance abuse, and risks in cyberspace.

This initiative is co-financed by the governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia through Visegrad grants from the International Visegrad Fund, whose mission is to support the ideas of sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe. The main coordinator of the project is the University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic) in cooperation with partners: Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia), Silesian University in Katowice (Poland), and the University of Debrecen (Hungary).

To stay updated on project developments and access additional digital materials, please visit our online platforms:

- [Project Facebook Page](#),
- [International Workshop Details](#),
- [International Visegrad Fund](#).

Institutional Partners:

- [University of Hradec Králové](#),
- [Matej Bel University](#),

- [University of Silesia](#),
- [University of Debrecen](#).

ABOUT THIS METHODOLOGICAL HANDBOOK

The tools and resources contained in this handbook were developed by university students under the guidance of academic staff from the participating countries. The materials are based on shared expertise and innovative approaches that were discussed and tested in practice during an international workshop in Hradec Králové on October 16–17, 2025.

The handbook is structured into thematic blocks covering key areas of mental health prevention and support:

- **Contextual framework:** Overview of the prevalence of risky behavior and prevention systems in the V4 countries.
- **Promoting tolerance:** Methods aimed at combating discrimination and developing respect.
- **Digital wellbeing:** Research and practical lesson plans for cybersecurity.
- **Emotional regulation and resilience:** Strategies for building inner strength and managing aggression.
- **Relaxation strategies:** Using relaxation as a preventive tool against stress.

Each block combines theoretical insights or research data with specific practical tools for working directly with children.

HOW TO WORK WITH THE HANDBOOK:

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING METHODOLOGY

The basic pedagogical approach of this handbook is activating teaching based on a constructivist and experiential approach. To make the educational process effective, we recommend that teachers and other professionals using this handbook adhere to the following principles:

- **From activity to understanding:** The activity itself, without subsequent processing, often remains only an isolated experience. The handbook guides the teacher through

a comprehensive teaching cycle: planning – activity – reflection – adjustment – new implementation.

- The role of reflection as a driver of learning: Reflection is not merely an add-on, but an integral part of the teaching cycle. It enables students to transform their experiences into understanding and structured knowledge, while serving as a valuable diagnostic tool for teachers (or other staff) to monitor student progress.
- Use of structured tools: Before implementing practical activities ([ACTIVITY], [LESSON PLAN], [WORKSHOP PROPOSAL]), we recommend studying the theoretical introduction in the given block, which explains the etiology and context of the problem being addressed.
- Application of reflective formats: To maximize the learning effect and develop social-emotional learning (SEL), we recommend using the specific reflection formats described in the methodology section:
 - Wheel of emotions: For naming feelings and developing empathy.
 - I.N.S.E.R.T. method: For structured processing of new information and critical thinking.
 - "I feel – I think – I do" model: For connecting experience with future action and personal responsibility.
 - Peer 2+1 peer feedback: For cultivating communication and safe sharing within the group.

We believe that this handbook will become a practical and inspiring guide for all those who strive to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for the healthy development of children and young people.

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METHODOLOGICAL

OPENING

FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING: THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN CONTEMPORARY PEDAGOGY

Alena Knotková

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education is increasingly focused on active teaching methods, which aim to increase student engagement, develop independent thinking, and promote the skills needed for the 21st century. The traditional model of frontal teaching no longer meets the needs of today's students or the requirements of curriculum documents. Activating elements – problem-based teaching, cooperative learning, project methods, and experiential pedagogy – lead students to greater independence, critical thinking, and the ability to collaborate (Maňák, 2011). Reflection is a key amplifier of the effect of these methods: targeted thinking about experience, its course, and its impact (Frišová, 2011; Colomer et al., 2020; Karakaya Cirit & Aydemir, 2020).

The aim of this article is to present the role of activation methods and emphasize the importance of reflection as an essential part of the teaching process.

ACTIVE LEARNING AND ITS BENEFITS

Active learning methods encourage students to participate actively in learning, develop independence, cooperation, critical thinking, and problem solving (Maňák, 2011; Colomer et al., 2020). Active learning methods include problem-based and project-based learning, cooperative activities, guided discussions, and experiential approaches. Research shows that such teaching increases motivation, engagement, and long-term understanding (Alharbi & Abdulrahman, 2022). The effectiveness increases further if each activity is explicitly linked to learning objectives and subsequent reflection.

Activating teaching is based on a constructivist and experiential approach to learning, according to which students actively construct knowledge based on their own

experiences and subsequent reflection (Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1933). In line with the socio-cultural perspective, learning takes place in social interaction through cooperation, dialogue, and mutual feedback, which not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the subject matter but also develops students' social skills and emotional intelligence (Johnson et al., 1998). Motivation also plays a key role – the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are naturally fulfilled by active teaching, significantly increase intrinsic motivation to learn. Another important aspect is supporting the transfer of knowledge to new contexts through authentic tasks and argumentation activities (Thomas, 2000; King, 1995). The basic principles of effective activation include the formulation of clear and shared goals, gradual provision of support (scaffolding), application of the SAFE framework for social-emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011), cooperative work with divided and rotating roles, the use of visible thinking tools, and regular short iterations with immediate feedback.

Activation methods are an effective means not only for developing cognitive abilities, but also for developing the social and emotional competencies that are essential for the comprehensive development of a student's personality. The systematic integration of elements of social-emotional learning (SEL) into the educational process contributes to improving the quality of interpersonal relationships, reducing stress and bullying, and at the same time positively influences behavior and school success (Learning Policy Institute, 2023). Group and project activities, discussions, role-playing, and peer learning support the development of communication, empathy, assertiveness, and cooperation skills, which are directly related to better school adaptation and performance. Active involvement in authentic and often challenging learning situations develops awareness and regulation of emotions, thereby promoting the growth of emotional intelligence (Kadam et al., 2024). The combination of challenges, feedback, and support strengthens mental resilience and adaptability, as evidenced by review studies of school programs focused on mental health (Weare et al., 2015). Activating teaching thus appears to be an effective means of holistic student development, linking the cognitive, social, emotional, and character dimensions of education.

REFLECTION AS A TOOL FOR DEEPER LEARNING

Reflection is a key element of learning that enables students to transform experiences into understanding and develop metacognitive skills – the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning process (Frišová, 2011). From the student's perspective, it is an active conversion of experience into structured knowledge, while from the teacher's perspective, reflection serves as a valuable diagnostic tool for monitoring student progress and understanding. In educational theory, a distinction is made between "reflection-in-action," which is a brief pause and adjustment of the process directly during the activity, and "reflection-on-action," which is a conscious and structured evaluation after its completion (Schön, 1983). The two types complement each other and form the basic framework for the development of conscious and self-regulated learning.

The mechanisms by which reflection supports learning can be understood on four interconnected levels. At the cognitive level, it enables the elaboration of knowledge – naming principles in one's own words and applying them in new situations. At the metacognitive level, it supports cyclical self-regulation of learning, which includes planning, monitoring, evaluation, and subsequent replanning (Zimmerman, 2002). The social-emotional level of reflection consists of naming emotions, developing empathy, and correcting interactions through peer feedback. Last but not least, reflection contributes to the development of resilience—the ability to respond to failure, formulate alternative strategies, and continue learning with new understanding. Quality reflection always has a clear goal, builds on previous activity, and produces a concrete output that is used in planning further teaching.

Reflection also contributes significantly to the development of students' social-emotional competencies and mental resilience. The systematic incorporation of reflective activities allows students to consciously process emotions, develop empathy, and learn from challenging situations such as conflicts or failures. Naming emotions and sharing perspectives in collective reflection strengthens self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to understand the motivations of others. In terms of long-term development, reflective practice contributes to the creation of adaptive strategies and strengthens internal control over learning and behavior. Research confirms that guided reflection after active tasks improves memory, promotes the transfer of knowledge to new contexts, and strengthens students' social skills and emotional intelligence (Colomer et al., 2020).

Effective integration of reflection into teaching requires a well-thought-out methodological framework that takes into account the goals, form, and use of reflective outputs. When planning a teaching unit, the teacher should define the specific benefits of reflection for student learning – i.e., what the student should understand, be able to do, or be able to formulate better after reflection. Based on this goal, an appropriate form of reflection is chosen, whether individual (e.g., diary, written report, audio recording) or group (discussion, peer feedback, symbolic expression). It is also important to create tangible artifacts that allow for a return to previous knowledge and planning of further steps. Reflection should be time-efficient but regular – alternating short micro-reflections with deeper final evaluations helps to maintain continuity and momentum in learning. The knowledge gained from reflection should then be used to adjust teaching, for example, in differentiating tasks, choosing difficulty levels, composing teams, or planning follow-up activities. Reflection conceived in this way becomes an integral part of the teaching cycle, not an addition to it, and enables both students and teachers to develop a culture of learning based on awareness, collaboration, and growth.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF ACTIVATION METHODS AND FORMS OF REFLECTION

The practical application of activation teaching and reflection can take many forms depending on the objectives, age group, and teaching context. Proven activation elements include brainstorming (Osborn, 1953), role-playing (Kövecses, 2017), the Think–Pair–Share method (Lyman, 1981), project-based teaching (Thomas, 2000), cooperative tasks (Johnson et al., 1998), and interactive games and quizzes (Garris et al., 2002). These methods promote active student engagement, the development of critical and creative thinking, and the ability to collaborate. In addition, mind maps (Buzan, 2010) and guided discussions (King, 1995) can be used to help organize knowledge and process it more deeply. Equally important is the systematic inclusion of reflection, which gives learning meaning and continuity. Popular forms include final group discussions (Moon, 1999), reflective journals (Boud et al., 1985), the Plus/Minus method (Black & Wiliam, 1998), peer feedback (Topping, 1998), self-assessment (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009), and creative and symbolic forms based on the traditions of Dewey and Schön (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983).

In addition to traditional approaches, so-called mini-scenarios have also proven effective – short but meaningful reflective activities that can be easily incorporated into regular teaching. These include, for example, unfinished sentences such as "Today I learned..." or "Next time I will try...", which encourage self-reflection and planning for further learning. Symbolically tuned techniques, such as the Basket of Experiences (expressing a key experience through metaphor) or the Meaningful Object (a specific object representing a piece of knowledge), contribute to connecting the cognitive and emotional components of learning. The Key to Knowledge method, which leads students to identify the most essential moment of an activity and its reasons, strengthens metacognitive awareness and the ability to transfer knowledge. Such activities are not time-consuming, fit naturally into the rhythm of teaching, and at the same time significantly support deeper processing of experiences and their integration into long-term memory.

EMOTION WHEEL

Objective: To promote awareness and naming of emotions that participants experienced during the activity, thereby developing their emotional intelligence and capacity for empathy.

Materials: Picture or card with the wheel of emotions (e.g., divided into basic emotions – joy, fear, sadness, anger, surprise, calm – and their nuances).

Procedure:

1. After the activity, introduce the Wheel of Emotions to the participants and explain that you will focus on the feelings that arose during the work.
2. Each participant individually chooses one to three emotions that they felt during the activity and briefly names or labels them.
3. The group will share their experiences – students will describe when and why they felt that way.
4. The instructor or teacher will reflect with the group on how emotions were reflected in their collaboration and the results of their work.

Conclusion: This method leads to more open communication and an understanding that different emotions within a team are natural and can be a source of learning.

REFLECTION: I.N.S.E.R.T.

Objective: To develop critical and metacognitive thinking, to help participants reflect on their own experience of the activity in a structured way.

Materials: A sheet of paper or board with an explanation of the symbols:

- ✓ I already knew that
- ! I learned something new
- – I disagree/something doesn't make sense to me
- ? I have a question/I want to learn more

Procedure:

1. After the activity, each participant independently fills in the table or a short note according to the symbols.
2. The group then shares selected notes – what surprised them, what they learned, what questions they still have.
3. The teacher follows up with a discussion that connects individual insights to the group's collective knowledge.

Conclusion: The I.N.S.E.R.T. method helps students think about how they learn and strengthens their ability to draw conclusions from their own experience.

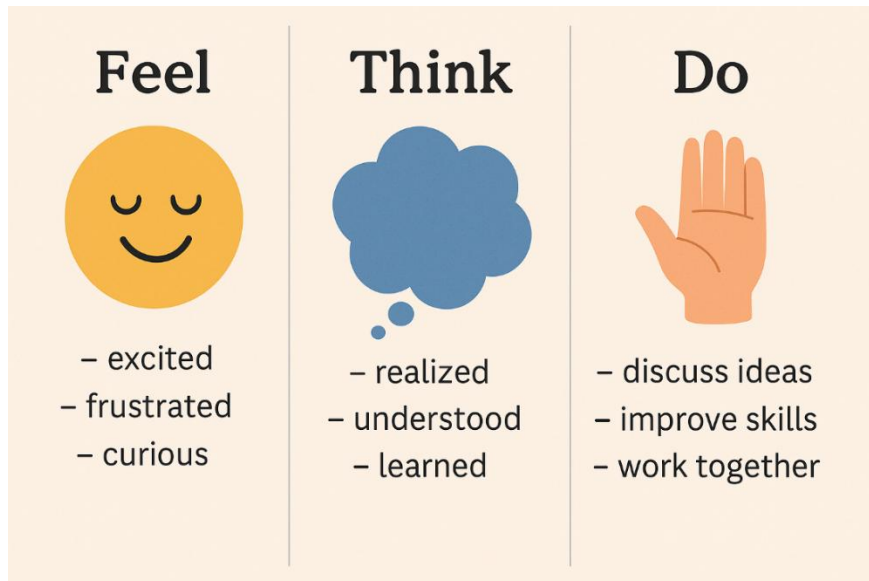
REFLECTION: I FEEL – I THINK – I WILL DO

Objective: To help students become aware of their own emotions, thoughts, and subsequent actions after the activity. The method helps bridge the experience to real behavior and encourages personal responsibility.

Materials: A sheet of paper, board, or worksheet divided into three parts – I feel, I think, I will do.

Figure 1

Infographic for reflection, I feel – I think – I will do



Procedure:

1. After the activity, the teacher asks students to reflect on their experience.
2. In the first section (I feel), everyone writes down what emotions the activity evoked in them – e.g., joy, frustration, curiosity, relief.
3. In the second section (I think), students record their insights and thoughts – what they took away from the activity, what they realized, what they understood better.
4. In the third part (I will do), they write down how they want to use their insights – what steps they will take next time or what they will change in their behavior, approach, or cooperation.

Conclusion: The method leads participants to connect emotions, thinking, and action. It teaches them to reflect on their own learning process and actively draw conclusions from it for further work or life situations.

REFLECTION: PEER 2+1

Objective: To strengthen the ability to give and receive feedback, develop self-reflection, and cultivate communication among peers.

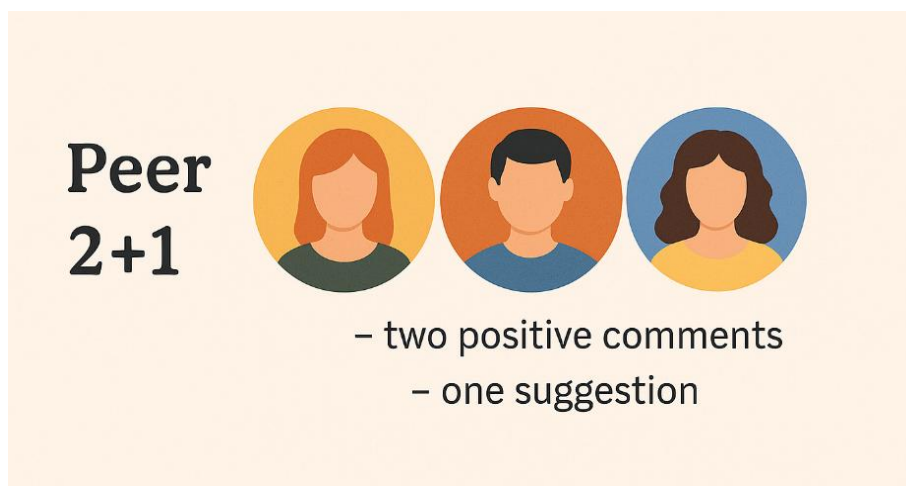
Materials: No special materials are necessary; a worksheet or verbal sharing can be used.

Procedure:

1. Each participant chooses one peer partner (classmate, colleague) to whom they will provide feedback.
2. The feedback has a 2+1 structure – two positive observations and one suggestion for improvement.
 - "What I liked about your work/approach."
 - "What I would appreciate that you did well."
 - "What you could do differently or try to improve next time."
3. Then they switch roles and each person receives and gives feedback.

Figure 2

Infographic for reflection, Peer 2+1



Conclusion: Peer 2+1 develops communication skills, promotes a respectful environment, and teaches participants to formulate specific, balanced evaluations. After the exchange, the teacher can lead a short group reflection on what it was like to give and receive feedback.

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, AND MENTAL RESILIENCE THROUGH REFLECTION

Activating teaching combined with structured reflection is an effective means of developing students' social skills, emotional intelligence (EI), and mental resilience. Research in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) confirms that systematic

programs focused on these areas lead to measurable improvements in social relationships, emotional regulation, behavior, and academic performance (Learning Policy Institute, 2023). Active, cooperative, and experiential forms of teaching create a natural environment for SEL development, as they connect the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. At the same time, the development of emotional competencies has a preventive effect against manifestations of anxiety, depression, or behavioral disorders and promotes a healthy classroom climate (Weare et al., 2015). Long-term longitudinal studies show that good social skills have a lasting impact on professional relationships, mental health, and overall life satisfaction in adulthood.

In terms of didactic goals, the development of social and emotional competencies can be structured into several areas: communication and active listening, empathy, self-awareness and self-regulation of emotions, constructive conflict resolution, teamwork, and resilience to stress or failure. For effective development, it is recommended to focus on one or two skills at a time (e.g., per week or per thematic unit) and to set a specific behavioral indicator and corresponding reflective question for each. Suitable reflection formats include short techniques such as I Feel–I Think–I Will, 2 + 1 peer feedback, micro-simulations of conflicts followed by debriefing, a resilience diary, or visual mapping of emotions using an "emotion wheel." These forms allow students to become aware of their own experiences, understand the emotions of others, and plan specific changes in behavior.

For practical use, various teaching scenarios can be chosen according to the age level of the students. At the secondary school level, for example, a team project with role negotiation can be implemented, accompanied by ongoing "stand-up" reflections and a final discussion on communication and coping with stress. In primary school, a similar purpose can be served by a cooperative activity such as Paper Bridge, followed by reflection in the form of a picture diary and simple self-assessment sentences. In higher education or teacher training, microteaching with video reflection has proven effective, in which participants analyze expressions of communication and emotion regulation. The impact of these activities can be monitored using a combination of tools – from questionnaires and SEL observation scales to self-assessment and peer assessment to analysis of reflective journals and teamwork outputs. A clear section with skill levels

(e.g., communication, empathy, resilience) allows for the tracking of individual and group progress.

A fundamental prerequisite for success is the creation of a safe and supportive climate. Reflection must take place in an environment of psychological safety, based on voluntariness, confidentiality, and respectful language. The teacher should ensure the equal involvement of all students, for example through role rotation or methods such as Think-Pair-Share, and be sensitive to emotionally challenging situations – reflection is not a therapeutic process and, if necessary, it is advisable to provide individual support or cooperation with the school counseling center. Ideally, reflection becomes a daily part of teaching, for example through a weekly mini-plan with regular micro-reflections and concluding discussions. This approach to activating teaching fulfills the modern concept of education, which combines academic learning with the development of personality, social relationships, and mental well-being of students.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

This article shows that activity without reflection often remains an isolated experience, while reflection without prior experience lacks content and context. Combining activation methods with targeted reflection creates a comprehensive learning cycle that includes the phases of planning, activity, reflection, adjustment, and new implementation. Within this cycle, students not only learn and consolidate the curriculum, but also develop metacognitive skills, social competencies, emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience.

From a theoretical perspective, activation and reflective teaching are rooted in constructivist and sociocultural approaches (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984), which promote deep understanding and the transfer of knowledge to new situations. From a didactic design perspective, clearly formulated goals and criteria, scaffolding, cooperation with defined roles, the use of visible thinking, and short iterations accompanied by immediate feedback have proven to be particularly effective. Reflection is most effective when it is regular, specifically focused (on a principle, process, or strategy), recorded in the form of an artifact, and naturally follows on from further lesson planning.

The article paid particular attention to the development of social skills, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Activating teaching naturally creates situations in which these competencies arise and are refined; reflection then gives them language, structure, and direction. Specific formats for reflection were presented (e.g., I Feel–I Think–I Will Do, peer "2 + 1," micro-conflict simulation, resilience journal, or emotion wheel), didactic scenarios for different school levels, suggestions for impact assessment methods (SEL scales, observation, rubrics, analysis of reflection journals), and principles for safe and ethically sensitive work with emotions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1. Plan reflection systematically – briefly but regularly.
2. Choose the format according to the goal: principle, process, strategy, SEL, or transfer.
3. Create a tangible artifact from the reflection and use it in further teaching.
4. Build a safe environment and encourage equal participation of all students.
5. Monitor the impact through a combination of self-assessment, peer assessment, observation, and performance.

Reflection bridges the gap between activity and understanding, between experience and learning. When thoughtfully integrated into activation methods, it becomes a tool that simultaneously supports cognitive learning, the development of metacognition, and the cultivation of social-emotional competencies—skills that are essential for modern schools and lifelong learning.

PART I:
CONTEXTUAL
FRAMEWORK –
PREVALENCE,
PREVENTION,
AND SYSTEMS

PREVENTION AND PREVALENCE OF RISKY BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RISKY BEHAVIOUR

Risky behaviour among young people can be considered an interdisciplinary problem that is the subject of research in several scientific disciplines – pedagogy (and social pedagogy), sociology and social pathology, psychology (e.g. in the context of risky behaviour syndrome in adolescence), criminology and addictology. The terms "risk phenomena", "risk behaviours" and "risk behaviour" currently dominate in the domestic environment, but as Širůčková (2015) points out, the definitions of risk behaviour vary and reflect the subject of interest of the given scientific field.

In its current documents, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports uses exclusively the term risk phenomena and defines them as *"various forms of behaviour that have negative impacts on the health, social or psychological functioning of an individual and/or threaten their social environment. Risky behaviour represents various types of behaviour ranging from extreme manifestations of "normal" behaviour (e.g. adrenaline sports) to manifestations of behaviour bordering on pathology (e.g. excessive use of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine or illegal drugs, violence)"* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2019). Several binding documents at the level of the Ministry of Education address the types of behaviour that fall into the category of "risky behaviour". The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports includes the following among risky phenomena (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2019, p. 9; similarly Sobotková et al., 2014, pp. 40–41):

- interpersonal aggressive behaviour – aggression, bullying, cyberbullying and other risky forms of communication via multimedia, violence, intolerance, anti-Semitism, extremism, racism and xenophobia, homophobia,
- delinquent behaviour in relation to material goods – vandalism, theft, graffiti and other criminal offences and misdemeanours,

- truancy and failure to fulfil school obligations,
- addictive behaviour – use of all addictive substances, internet addiction, gambling,
- risky sports activities and risky behaviour in transport, accident prevention,
- spectrum of eating disorders,
- negative effects of sects, and
- risky sexual behaviour.

It is clear from the list that risky behaviour includes both actions that endanger the health of the individual (truancy, eating disorders, addictive behaviour, risky sports) and actions that endanger those around them (delinquent behaviour). It also includes "risks" in the individual's social environment, such as domestic violence or abuse, exploitation and neglect.

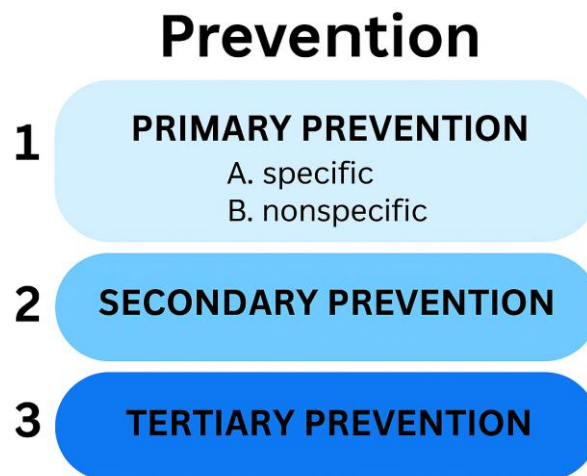
Since the 1990s, there has been a significant shift in the prevention of risky behaviour among children and young people in the school environment (which is to a certain extent determined by trends in socially pathological phenomena in society – e.g. the increased occurrence of certain phenomena, the emergence of new phenomena, an emphasis on primary prevention and healthy development, especially in the youngest age groups, or inspiration from abroad, see e.g. Kraus & Bělík, 2011). New trends in the prevention of risky behaviour can be seen particularly in the following areas:

1. the development of the school counselling system, especially in the area of specialised teaching staff at schools,
2. the integration of prevention into the school curriculum (so-called cross-curricular topics, separate specific subjects),
3. involvement of external entities in schools to strengthen activities in the area of primary prevention.

The term prevention is often used in everyday life and can be defined as a set of measures designed to prevent an undesirable phenomenon, in our case risky behaviour. The authors Miovský et al. (2015, p. 24) add that "it includes all types of educational, health, social and other interventions aimed at preventing the occurrence of risky behaviour, preventing its further progression, mitigating existing forms and manifestations of risky behaviour, or helping to address its consequences".

Diagram 1

Classification of prevention in the Czech school environment



Prevention, especially in the school environment, is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary.

Primary prevention involves a complex set of factors that affect individuals. These are primarily the family and school, but also local influences. The focus of primary prevention lies in influencing upbringing, education, leisure activities, counselling and working with the values of children and young people. In terms of its target audience, primary prevention affects a population that has not yet been affected. The family should be a strong link in primary prevention. Primary prevention can be further divided into A. specific and B. non-specific.

A. Specific primary prevention - i.e. a system of activities and services that focus on working with a population that, in the absence of such activities and services, can be expected to develop further negative trends, and which seeks to prevent or limit the increase in their occurrence.

Specific primary prevention is further divided by Miovský et al. (2015) in accordance with the Strategy for the Prevention of Risk Behaviour in Children and Young People within the remit of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports for the period 2009–2012 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2009) and later the National Prevention Strategy of 2013 into three levels:

- a) Universal primary prevention – the target group is the general population, without consideration of specific risk groups. Groups are divided only by age and are larger in number (e.g., school classes). programmes seek to influence children's attitudes, values, and behaviour.
- b) Selective primary prevention – focuses on groups at increased risk of various forms of risky behaviour (e.g. children from socially disadvantaged families, children with poor academic performance, behavioural disorders, etc.). The aim is to strengthen individuals' social skills, communication skills, relationships between them, etc. The professional qualification requirements for prevention specialists are higher here than for general primary prevention.
- c) Indicated primary prevention – precedes secondary prevention. It works with significantly at-risk individuals or individuals who have already engaged in risky behaviour. It focuses on reducing the frequency of risky behaviour and mitigating its consequences.

B. Non-specific primary prevention – this includes all methods and approaches that enable the development of a harmonious personality, including the opportunity to develop talents, interests, and physical and sporting activities. Non-specific prevention programmes (e.g. various leisure activities) would exist and be desirable even if there were no socially pathological phenomena, i.e. it would still make sense to develop and support such programmes. Unlike specific prevention, there is no requirement to focus on a specific type of risky behaviour, nor is there any distinction as to which target group it is aimed at. Through the promotion of meaningful leisure activities, individuals acquire positive social behaviour, a healthy lifestyle and develop their personality, which helps to prevent the emergence and development of risky behaviour.

Secondary prevention deals with at-risk individuals and groups of people who are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of crime (specialised social care), socially pathological phenomena (e.g. drug and alcohol addiction, truancy, gambling, vagrancy, vandalism, inter-ethnic conflicts, long-term unemployment) and the causes of criminogenic situations. Institutions involved in secondary prevention include counselling centres, crisis centres, preventive education centres, contact centres, helplines and detoxification centres.

Tertiary prevention consists of the resocialisation of disturbed individuals and efforts to prevent risks. Tertiary prevention primarily includes the concept of harm reduction, which means reducing the risks arising from existing social deviance. It promotes a non-judgmental, non-coercive approach and the provision of services to individuals or communities. Harm reduction embodies the idea of helping socially deviant individuals who are more vulnerable in society and minimising the consequences of their conflicts with society.

The basic document that defines the educational environment for children and young people in the Czech Republic and also contains a call for prevention is Act No. 561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher vocational and other education (the Education Act). There is no specific law in the Czech Republic that covers prevention in its entirety. The prevention of risky behaviour in the school environment is defined by a strategic document of the Ministry of Education for the relevant period. The current document is **the National Strategy for the Primary Prevention of Risk Behaviour among Children and Young People for the period 2019–2027**. The National Prevention Strategy is based on the conclusions of regular meetings with regional school prevention coordinators and prevention methodology, on the long-term goals set by the strategies of inter-ministerial bodies, and on experience with the implementation of previous concepts. The National Prevention Strategy is consistent with other policy documents, such as the crime prevention strategy, the national drug policy strategy, and other departmental documents.

The system for coordinating primary prevention activities operates on two fundamental, mutually influential levels: the central level and the regional (local) level. Horizontal (inter-ministerial) and vertical (from state to regional to local level) procedures and tools are used in the process of coordinating the system. Coordination mechanisms overlap at both the horizontal and vertical levels.

Horizontal level of prevention coordination: At this level, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is the main coordinator of prevention in terms of inter-ministerial cooperation, is responsible for prevention, prepares conceptual materials, initiates inter-ministerial communication, allocates funds for the implementation of prevention, coordinates the certification of risk behaviour prevention programmes, including the

creation of standards for such prevention, and has set up and administers an internet portal for prevention.

Vertical level of prevention coordination: Vertical coordination seeks to harmonise individual activities at the regional and local levels (i.e. regional and municipal) so that local conditions and needs are taken into account and, at the same time, the measures and interventions implemented are carried out in accordance with the main objectives, principles and procedures recommended by the national primary prevention strategy. At the vertical level, the Ministry of Education methodically leads and coordinates the activities of regional school prevention coordinators (regional authority employees), prevention methodologists (educational and psychological counselling centre employees) and, through regional school prevention coordinators and prevention methodologists, also the activities of school prevention methodologists (designated teachers in schools and educational institutions) (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2013).

THE EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING SYSTEM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Educational and psychological counselling aims to provide professional help to children with school and sometimes personal problems. Psychological counselling tends to focus on the child's personal and family problems, while educational counselling focuses on the process of learning, teaching and upbringing. It is clear that many topics overlap, but they are usually related to school life (which is why it is sometimes referred to as school counselling; Lazarová, 2008).

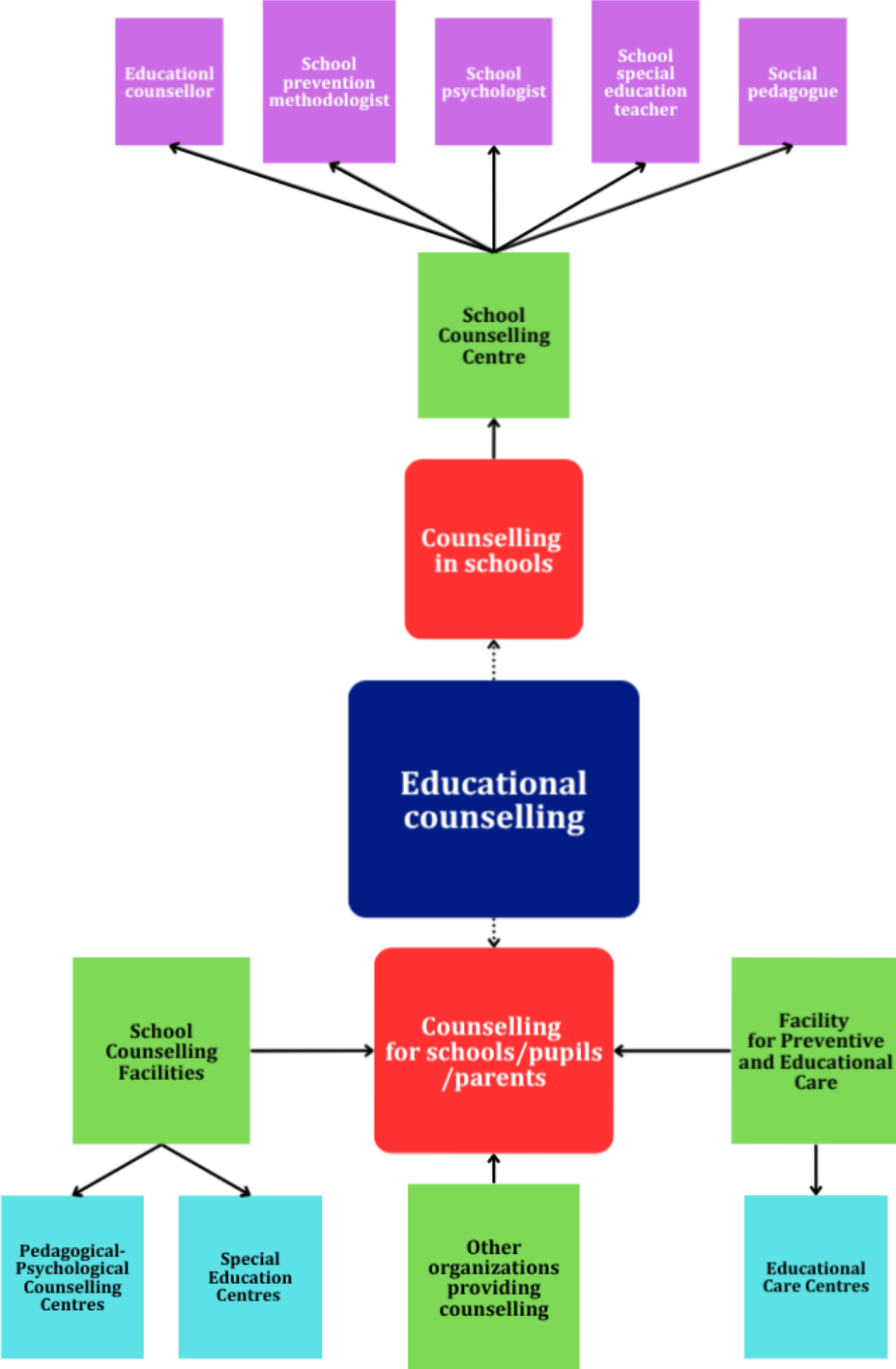
Educational and psychological counselling is, in practice, part of the so-called school counselling system. This system is regulated by Decree No. 72/2005 Coll., on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities. The organised school counselling system was established in the 1960s and has been developing since 1991. Currently, counselling focuses on three basic areas:

1. career counselling,
2. counselling focused on pupils with disabilities,
3. counselling focused on pupils with behavioural disorders.

The Czech counselling system is based on two fundamental pillars (see Fig. 2). The first pillar consists of school counselling facilities, while the second is represented by specialised teaching staff at schools.

Diagram 2

Counselling system in Czech schools



Note. Adapted from Svoboda Hoferková et al., 2025

The school counselling facilities include educational and psychological counselling centres, special educational centres and, since 1991, educational care centres. These centres work closely with schools and provide counselling and assistance in the field of social and educational counselling, care for pupils with disabilities and help prevent the emergence and development of negative behaviour in children. The second pillar of the counselling system is made up of the teaching staff themselves, who work in primary and secondary schools. Specialised teaching staff at schools include educational counsellors, school prevention methodologists, school psychologists and school special educators.

Educational and psychological counselling centres support the educational process, especially when it is difficult, provide individual and group care to children from the age of 3 until the end of secondary or higher vocational education and their parents, provide career counselling, prevention of risky behaviour, etc. Activities take place on an outpatient basis and in schools, and the professional team consists of psychologists, special educators and social workers. ESpecial education centres provide support to children with disabilities, cooperate with families and schools, and provide services on an outpatient basis and in the field. Educational care centres work with children and young people at risk or exhibiting behavioural disorders, focusing on the prevention of socially pathological phenomena and operating on the basis of client voluntariness and parental consent. They provide outpatient services as well as residential services (usually for two months).

Every primary and secondary school must have an educational counsellor and a school prevention methodologist. The educational counsellor identifies pupils who need help and whose upbringing or education requires special care, submits proposals for procedures and solutions to pupils' problems, is responsible for career counselling at the school, and is responsible for the integration of pupils with specific educational needs (chronically ill children, children with physical or sensory disabilities, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, gifted children, etc.), participates in the preparation and implementation of preventive activities at the school, and cooperates with parents and other organisations.

The school prevention methodologist monitors and addresses manifestations of socially pathological phenomena among pupils (truancy, addiction, violence, vandalism, sexual abuse, delinquent behaviour, bullying, etc.). If there is no school psychologist at the school,

they help to resolve educational and teaching problems. They may also be involved in career counselling.

The school psychologist is usually an external worker who provides professional diagnosis and counselling not only to pupils, but also to teachers and parents. They address teaching and educational problems and provide advice on careers and professional development. School psychologists have the necessary expertise and background and usually have more time to deal with individual pupil problems than educational counsellors. The existence of school psychologists seems necessary, but for financial reasons (), it is unfortunately not possible to introduce these specialists into all schools. Some schools also have a special education teacher, especially those that integrate children with health disabilities. For children with disabilities or disadvantages, the school may also establish the position of a teaching assistant, who is supervised by a teacher and works according to their instructions in the classroom. The prerequisite for performing this activity is a university, secondary or higher pedagogical education and completion of special training for these activities. A special education assistant can perform their activities in a pre-school facility, school and educational facility as part of their direct teaching duties.

Although the idea of a teacher specialising in social care for pupils is justified, it encounters many problems in practice. Unfortunately, especially in smaller schools, these two roles are often combined into one, leaving the teacher who performs them with little time for direct work with pupils. The low level of university preparation for this specialised activity is also under discussion, as the role of educational counsellor or school prevention methodologist is performed by ordinary teachers. The requirement for performance is a specialisation course of at least 250 hours, but it is questionable whether this is sufficient. Another problem is that these specialists are still teachers with teaching duties, so they are not 'full-time experts'. Their teaching role at school can also be an obstacle, as pupils may feel anxious or embarrassed, and the teacher's good knowledge of the pupil and their family can be both an advantage and an obstacle to impartial help and counselling. The options available to teaching staff are very limited in the case of developed behavioural disorders. Schools should play a key role in detecting and preventing risky behaviour among children and young people, and in serious cases,

intervention by school counselling centres and other correctional facilities (children's homes with schools and educational institutions) is necessary.

For the above reasons, there has been discussion for many years about the need to establish a full-time specialist position at schools who would be dedicated to social care and counselling and would be an expert in this field with appropriate university education. It seems appropriate to lean towards the model presented in Slovakia – i.e. a social pedagogue in the school environment (e.g. Niklová, 2014, Dulovics, 2014), who would replace the above-mentioned functions and perform their profession as a specialist. The social pedagogue would thus be a professional – a specialist trained through undergraduate education, whose job would be to prevent risky behaviour (Emmerová, 2014). The profession of social pedagogue was only legislatively established in 2025, and there are currently several hundred social pedagogues working in Czech schools.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RISKY BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CZECH RESEARCH

In the Czech Republic and other European countries, numerous studies are being conducted to determine the prevalence of risky behaviour in relation to selected personality traits, social aspects (e.g. family structure) and other types of behaviour (e.g. leisure activities). In the following section, we will highlight selected results concerning the development of the prevalence of risky behaviour in selected representative research or international studies.

This introduction provides a basic framework for understanding the complexity and importance of preventing risky behaviour among young people, with an emphasis on current trends. Further overviews can be found, for example, in the publication by Svoboda Hoferková et al. (2022).

ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE CZECH SCHOOL INSPECTORATE

The annual reports of the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI) reflect the prevention of risky behaviour in pre-school, primary and secondary education¹. Since the 2015/2016 school year, each annual report has also included a chapter on the prevention and occurrence of risky behaviour among children in pre-school and school education.

Several positive trends can be observed in primary education. In 97% of schools, the role of school prevention methodologist has been established; the number of schools where headteachers perform this role has decreased, as has the number of schools where prevention methodologists are also educational counsellors (the accumulation of functions can jeopardise the quality of support for pupils and school management). When problems arise, specialists provide methodological support and organise activities to develop pupils' social skills. Schools use strategic documents to address risky behaviour, and more than half of schools regularly update these documents based on their own needs. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a)

Table 1

Occurrence of risky behaviour in primary schools – percentage of schools

Type of risky behaviour	2018/2019	2020/2021	2021/2022
Truancy	51.4	42.1	50.4
Bullying	41.4	28.4	44.3
Smoking	31.8	26.4	41.1
Damage to property, vandalism	31.8	27.2	39.1
Verbal aggression towards teachers	35.2	25.3	37.4
Aggression, violence, bodily harm	39.1	20.7	35.8
Cyberbullying	32.9	28.6	33.8
Theft	26.1	10.2	23.3
Substance abuse	14.0	8.1	22.8
Physical aggression towards teachers	5.7	2.7	6.7
Other	11.9	7.7	17.1

Note. The incidence of risky behaviour that was addressed at school level is recorded.

Source: Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a, p. 73

¹ In the Czech education system, the term “základní škola” refers to primary and lower secondary education, which corresponds to ISCED levels 1 and 2. It typically covers grades 1–9 for children aged approximately 6 to 15 years. “Střední škola” refers to upper secondary education (ISCED level 3), usually for students aged 15–19, and includes general academic programmes (gymnázium) as well as vocational and technical tracks. Completion of střední škola may lead to a school-leaving examination (maturita), which is required for entry into higher education.

A less positive trend is the increase in all monitored manifestations of risky behaviour (Table 1). Truancy is a serious problem faced by more than half of Czech schools. The average absence of pupils in the 2021/2022 school year was high, amounting to 126 hours per pupil. Unexcused absences averaged 1 hour per pupil. School principals consider cooperation with educational counsellors, parents (including contracts), the Department of Social and Legal Protection of Children, school counselling facilities and pupils' doctors to be effective measures. A higher incidence was also recorded in the areas of smoking and substance abuse, as well as bullying, verbal aggression towards teachers, damage to property, cyberbullying, vandalism, and violence and bodily harm. At the same time, the CSI points out that the increase in the number of cases may be due to schools' greater ability to identify risky behaviour. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a)

In secondary education, the number of schools that regularly assess the climate using questionnaires or sociometry has almost doubled compared to the previous school year. To support the mental well-being of pupils, schools most often use the option of consulting personal problems with a designated school staff member, activities focused on relationships between pupils, quiet spaces for relaxation at school, or an anonymous suggestion box. The proportion of schools using programmes focused on positive self-perception among pupils has also increased. Among the activities focused on relationships between pupils, field trips (e.g. adaptation courses) and class meetings are popular. A positive finding is that almost half of the schools visited have established a pupil parliament. The assessment of some indicators of school climate differed significantly between school principals, teachers and pupils. Principals assessed the school climate more favourably than teachers. The greatest scepticism was expressed by pupils, especially those in secondary vocational schools. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a).

Table 2

Occurrence of risky behaviour in secondary schools – percentage of schools

Type of risky behaviour	2018/2019	2020/2021	2021/2022
Truancy	59.4	45.9	55
Smoking	41.7	31.2	44.6
Bullying	36.7	16.5	33.9
Cyberbullying	38.3	18.3	33.5
Damage to property, vandalism	30	17.4	31.5

Type of risky behaviour	2018/2019	2020/2021	2021/2022
Excessive/inappropriate/problematic use of technology (internet, games, mobile phones)	—	—	30.3
Substance abuse	29.4	13.3	28.7
Verbal aggression towards teachers	28.3	17.9	25.5
Theft	20.6	8.7	20.3
Aggression, violence, bodily harm	18.3	4.6	16.7
Physical aggression towards teachers	2.8	0.9	2.8
Other	11.7	6.4	11.6

Note. The occurrence of risky behaviour that was addressed at school level is recorded.

Source: Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a, p. 114

In the 2021/2022 school year, secondary school headteachers dealt mainly with truancy and smoking. Compared to the previous school year, there was an increase in the number of cases of cyberbullying, bullying and verbal aggression towards teachers. A third of schools also reported problems with excessive or problematic use of technology (internet, games, mobile phones). The increase in digital technology may be linked to distance learning, which mostly took place online. A long-term significant problem is student absenteeism, especially in non-maturita programmes. The average number of hours missed per student is 141, and the number of unexcused hours is also high, averaging 3.3 hours per student (the proportion of students with unexcused absences out of all secondary school students was 8%). School principals cite the influence of the family environment and the extracurricular environment as reasons for students' failure to adapt to the school regime. High absenteeism has a significant impact on students' success in education. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a)

Almost 90% of headteachers report that their school has a minimum prevention programme that includes procedures for preventing bullying and cyberbullying tailored to the school's needs. 84% of secondary schools successfully implement a school strategy for the prevention and detection of bullying in cooperation with all teachers; in 9% of schools, only some teachers are involved in the implementation of the prevention strategy, or it is implemented by designated staff. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023a)

The involvement of external experts in prevention, which complements the school's activities, has several positive aspects. Firstly, the scope of the issue is so broad that school staff cannot be expected to be sufficiently knowledgeable and competent to cover all aspects in detail. Secondly, cooperation with other experts from the region makes it

possible to address specific risks in the area in a more targeted manner. Cooperation also contributes to building relationships with other actors in the region. Findings suggest that the optimal share of school prevention programmes provided by external collaborators is approximately half. On the contrary, providing preventive programmes entirely by the school or delegating them entirely to external entities appears to be less appropriate. The following conclusions can be drawn from the thematic report (Assessment of risk behaviour among primary and secondary school pupils with a focus on cyberbullying: thematic report, 2023):

Table 3

Proportion of prevention programmes provided by external organisations (proportion of schools in %)

To what extent are primary prevention programmes provided in cooperation with extracurricular organisations?	Proportion of primary schools	Proportion of secondary schools
Extracurricular organisations provide most of the primary prevention programmes implemented.	34.6	33.7
Extracurricular organisations provide approximately half of the primary prevention programmes implemented.	25.1	24.3
Extracurricular organisations provide a smaller proportion of primary prevention programmes.	29.0	31.2
All primary prevention programmes are implemented by the school itself.	11.2	10.8

Source: adapted from Czech School Inspectorate, 2023b, p. 22

It is unfortunate that approximately 10% of primary and secondary schools implement primary prevention "on their own" and do not involve any external entities. On the other hand, more than 30% of schools participate minimally in primary prevention programmes, with most programmes being provided by external experts. The main partners in prevention at primary and secondary schools are the Czech Police, non-profit organisations and school counselling facilities. An interesting finding is that primary schools use their services to a greater extent than secondary schools. A difference of up to 10 percentage points was recorded between the different types of schools in their cooperation with Child Protection Agency, the Czech Police and educational care centres. Cooperation with school counselling facilities has several levels. In addition to direct

activities aimed at pupils, these facilities also partner with schools in the area of methodological support and training for teaching and educational staff. The results of the survey show that secondary schools make greater use of coordination and methodological support, including further training for teachers. In contrast, cooperation in the form of direct interventions for pupils or their legal guardians is more common in primary schools. (Czech School Inspectorate, 2023b)

Table 4

Most frequent external collaborators of primary and secondary schools in the area of primary prevention of risky behaviour, including bullying (percentage of schools)

Entity	Primary schools	Secondary schools (SŠ)
Czech Police	62.4	53.5
Non-profit organisations	47.5	48.1
Educational and psychological counselling centres, special educational centres	44.0	43.7
Social and legal child protection authority	19.2	8.3
Founder	14.6	12.5
Educational care centre	12.6	7
Other	10.2	10.5

Source: Czech School Inspectorate, 2023b, p. 23, modified

The most common external entity providing prevention services at both primary and secondary schools is the Czech Police. This state entity has been involved in prevention for several years and organises lectures on various topics depending on the nature of the school and its level. The prevention of crime and other undesirable phenomena is an integral part of the work of every police officer, but there are police officers whose main job is prevention. These police prevention officers focus on vulnerable or at-risk groups of the population, such as pre-school children, schoolchildren and senior citizens. As part of their work, they organise various preventive events, projects and, above all, lectures and discussions. In most cases, these are one-off events, although cooperation with a given school is usually long-term within the region.

RESEARCH INTO RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG PUPILS IN PRAGUE SCHOOLS

Representative research on risky behaviour among pupils has been conducted regularly since 2016 by the Prague Social Services Centre in cooperation with the Prague Centre for Primary Prevention. The authors Petrenko et al. focus on mental health and manifestations of risky behaviour among pupils aged 11 to 21 from Prague primary schools, secondary schools and grammar schools. The research has been conducted annually since 2016, with the last survey taking place in December 2022 and involving 13,286 respondents. The aim is to provide schools, the municipal authority and other founders and experts in prevention and intervention with a data-based picture of the mental health and risky behaviour of children and young adult pupils. (Petrenko et al., 2024)

Summary of key findings in the area of mental health:

1. Pupils' life satisfaction is very low: fewer pupils are currently satisfied with their lives than before – in 2019, 65% of pupils reported overall satisfaction, compared to only 54% in 2022; on the contrary, the proportion of pupils who explicitly stated that they were dissatisfied increased (from 8% in 2019 to 15% in 2022); almost 27% of pupils in Prague currently have such a low level of wellbeing that the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends consultation and intervention by a specialist.
2. The mental health of pupils is very poor: almost 30% of pupils show high and moderate symptoms of anxiety disorders; 22% of pupils show severe and moderate symptoms of depression, and almost 17% show moderate symptoms of depression. These pupils (more often girls) exceed the values at which it is recommended to seek professional consultation and further intervention.
3. The most vulnerable group in terms of mental health and wellbeing are girls over the age of 14.
4. Reasons for optimism: in 2022, pupils' wellbeing improved slightly compared to the previous year, and the proportion of pupils at risk of eating disorders (both boys and girls) also decreased; symptoms of depressive disorders remained at approximately the same level.
5. Half of pupils do not have an adult at school to whom they can confide their problems: only 50.5% of pupils answer "yes" to the question "*Do I have an adult at school to whom*

I can confide my problems?" This is the average result for the period monitored since 2016; almost 15% of pupils reported that they felt repeatedly humiliated or ridiculed by a teacher.

STUDY ON THE HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE OF CHILDREN AND SCHOOLCHILDREN – HBSC RESEARCH STUDY

The HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) study is an international research study that maps children's lifestyles, such as health, physical activity, obesity, experiences with addictive substances, leisure time activities and other topics. The study is based on the WHO's position that behaviour and lifestyle in adulthood are the result of development in childhood and adolescence. The Czech Republic first participated in the study in 1994; Palacký University in Olomouc has been responsible for its long-term implementation and guarantee. Data collection is repeated every four years, with the last collection taking place in 2018 (an extraordinary data collection, Lockdown 2020, took place in 2020) (). Since 2014, the data in the Czech Republic has been representative of all 14 regions. In 2022, data was collected from 246 randomly selected primary and secondary schools, involving 14,588 respondents. (Kalman et al., 2019) The results from the 2018 collection, the extraordinary 2020 collection and some results from 2022 have now been published. The main results of the study include (Kalman et al., 2024):

- The number of children with problematic social media use and excessive gaming is growing: the number of young people whose virtual life shows problematic features has increased from 5% in 2018 to 8% in 2022. girls are more represented among problematic and intensive social media users; approximately 13% of boys and 5% of girls show signs of problematic gaming (a problematic user or gamer is defined as an adolescent who neglects their hobbies, gets into conflict with parents or friends, etc.).
/Final data from the 2022 survey./
- One-fifth of Czech children are health illiterate: the results show that up to one-fifth of children do not understand instructions from doctors or are unable to evaluate the health information they receive; they often have no idea what to do to ensure that their behaviour does not endanger their health or that of those around them.
- Children exercise and play sports, but it is not enough: the study states that adolescents aged 11–15 are active – 66% regularly participate in organised physical

activities in sports clubs and groups; but they lack unorganised outdoor play or active transport to school or clubs; moreover, the amount of active movement decreases with age.

- Czech children are active in their free time: they participate in team and individual sports, art clubs and youth organisations (86% of schoolchildren); only one in seven children does not have a regular leisure activity.
- Czech children eat better: parents give their children more fruit and vegetables, even more than is common in Europe and the world; adolescents also consume fewer sweets than in previous years. Czech adolescents drink fewer sweetened beverages, but more than a tenth tend to consume energy drinks at risky levels.
- Czech children are no longer among the biggest consumers of tobacco and marijuana: in 2010, the Czech Republic was still among the five countries with the highest consumption of tobacco and marijuana in Europe; however, the willingness of young Czechs to experiment with or regularly use these two addictive substances has declined significantly in recent years. In 2006, 71% of boys and 68% of girls sometimes smoked cigarettes, while in 2018, the figures were 37% of boys and 40% of girls (girls have long been at greater risk than boys in this regard).
- The frequency of alcohol consumption among 15-year-old Czechs is declining: Czech schoolchildren drink beer, wine and spirits less often than children of the same age did ten or fifteen years ago, but they still consume alcohol more often than their peers in Europe. Seventeen per cent of respondents drink alcohol at least once a week, while in 2002 more than a third of adolescents admitted to drinking alcohol every week (a decline of 18 percentage points ranks the Czech Republic among the countries with the most dynamic decline in consumption, yet it still remains above the European average). Nearly a third of 15-year-old boys and girls admit to repeated drunkenness (according to the study's results, experimenting with alcohol at this age is normal, but while there has been no significant change in this statistic among Czech youth between 2002 and 2014, the European average is steadily declining).

The results of a **special survey conducted in 2020** (3,440 schoolchildren from 144 Czech schools) showed that Czech children coped surprisingly well with the closure of schools in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. According to their own words, adolescents aged 11–15 exercised more, ate more fruit and vegetables,

reduced their consumption of sweetened and energy drinks, and slept better. They also praised the amount of time spent with their families and the new things they had the chance to learn. However, researchers also noted the negative aspects of lockdown. One in five children missed having someone to talk to; feelings of loneliness were more common among girls, and 15-year-olds pointed out the lack of contact more than younger schoolchildren. On the other hand, 63% of respondents said they rarely or never felt lonely during the crisis. How did Czech children perceive the closure of schools? (Bad'ura, 2020):

- 59.9% of schoolchildren reported sleeping longer,
- 40.9% of children exercised more,
- young Czechs ate more fruit (36.3%) and vegetables (32.1%),
- more than half (58.4%) of children had more time to spend on activities with their families – 69.9% of fifth-graders and 46.6% of ninth-graders,
- two-thirds of respondents (64.1%) said that school closures gave them space to learn new things,
- one in five children (20.9%) missed having someone to talk to,
- girls (18.5%) suffered from feelings of loneliness to a greater extent than boys (9.7%),
- one in five pupils felt cramped at home during the coronavirus crisis.

CONCLUSION

In 2022, a team of authors led by Svoboda Hoferková et al. (2022) analysed selected domestic and foreign research studies (especially longitudinal, time-repeated studies) and concluded the following: "The results of research projects indicate a clear decline in the incidence of risky behaviour (socially pathological phenomena) among Czech youth – particularly in the regular consumption of addictive substances, but also in other forms of risky behaviour, including crime and delinquency... The main changes can therefore be summarised as follows:

- an overall decline in substance use (and delinquency in general), although the Czech Republic still exceeds the European average and ranks among the highest,
- new phenomena are emerging – e.g. electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco, energy drinks,
- the levelling out of differences between the sexes,

- changes in leisure activities: more time spent in virtual reality (the internet and social networks) and less time spent "outdoors",
- changes in the lifestyle of young people are emerging: caring for one's health, appearance, reputation (influence of the internet; opinions of others about one's behaviour, actions, etc.),
- increased parental supervision and control,
- risks associated with ICT are emerging (addiction, cyberbullying, decline in physical activity, etc.)." (Svoboda Hoferková et al., 2022, pp. 77–78)

Unfortunately, the positive trends in the decline of selected types of risky behaviour are not continuing. On the contrary, current research indicates **an increase in virtually all areas of risky behaviour**, including substance use, bullying and cyber phenomena. **Mental health deterioration** (which plays a key role in risky behaviour) is particularly prevalent. Important information will be provided by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) from the 2023 collection, which will provide information on substance and non-substance addictions and trends among 16-year-old primary and secondary school pupils.

A negative phenomenon in the area of substance use is the emergence of new drugs (e.g. kratom), medicines and products targeting adolescents, such as electronic cigarettes (vapes) and low-alcohol drinks. These drugs appeal to young people through their various forms (candy), flavours and, last but not least, advertising. Prescription and over-the-counter medicines with analgesic or anxiolytic effects are becoming a problem, as they are becoming a common part of young people's lives (either in the form of long-term use, with or without a prescription, or as part of various challenges).

Deteriorating wellbeing is also linked to a wide range of self-aggressive behaviours, eating disorders and other mental illnesses (depression, phobic anxiety disorders, etc.). We are gradually "getting used" to the negative phenomena associated with the cyber environment, which are becoming a normal part of life for all generations.

The prevention system in Czech education is based on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, with primary prevention playing a key role through school programmes, counselling services and cooperation with external experts. Another important element is the school counselling system, which includes educational and psychological

counselling centres, special education centres and educational care centres. Although the legislative framework and strategic documents (e.g. the National Primary Prevention Strategy 2019–2027) provide basic support, practice shows that there is a need to strengthen human resources, methodological support and systematic training for teachers.

The future direction of prevention must reflect new challenges, in particular digital risks, increasing psychological stress and phenomena associated with the lifestyle of young people. Effective prevention requires coordinated cooperation between all actors – from the ministry to school founders to schools – and an emphasis on a comprehensive approach that includes not only the prevention of risky behaviour but also support for the healthy development and mental well-being of children and young people.

PREVALENCE OF RISKY BEHAVIOR AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Mário Dulovics

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF RISKY BEHAVIOR IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The phenomenon of risky behavior among children and youth in Slovakia is one of the fundamental problems faced by teachers, prevention workers in schools, parents, and decision-makers. Risky behavior among children and youth represents a serious social and educational problem. It encompasses a wide range of behaviors that can have negative consequences for physical and mental health, social relationships, and school performance.

The concept of risky behavior in Slovakia is influenced by Western (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) and, above all, Czech models. The influence of the Czech concept of risk behavior has also been reflected in the national project *Standardization of the Counseling and Prevention System for Inclusion and Success in the Labor Market*, within which *Content Standards for Professional Activities in Counseling and Prevention Facilities and in Schools* were developed, containing several comprehensive documents. Specifically, in the document *Professional Activities for the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023), its authors rely heavily on authors such as Miovský and Zapletalova (2006), Nielsen Sobotková et al. (2014), and others in defining risky behavior.

It can be said that there is a certain ambiguity in the understanding of the concept of risky behavior from a terminological and typological point of view. Emmerová and Bělík (2022) justify this fact by stating that risky behavior encompasses a wide spectrum of maladaptive behavior.

The document *Professional Activities in the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023) states that: "This term can replace the previously used term 'sociopathological

phenomena." As stated by Tichý et al. (2023): "The term 'sociopathological phenomena' is stigmatizing in the field of education, normatively biased, and places too much emphasis on group/social norms."

We agree with the view that, in relation to children and adolescents, it is more appropriate to use the term "risky" rather than "pathological" behavior, but these are not entirely identical phenomena. The reason is that risky behavior is temporary in nature and is typical mainly for the period of adolescence; it may or may not develop into social pathology. This fact is also stated in the document *Professional Activities for the Prevention of Risky Behavior*, which states: "The common denominator of all the mentioned types of risky behavior is the criterion of pre-pathological manifestations, i.e., there are no signs of pathology (e.g., drug addiction, eating disorders, personality disorders).

Čerešník and Gatíal (2014) synthesize a typology of risky behavior based on an analysis of the 10th revision of the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10) and the typology defined by Miovský and Zapletalová (2006), which includes the following forms of risky behavior:

- "Behavioral disorders: socialization disorder (socialization disorder with aggression), socialized behavioral disorder (e.g., group delinquency, truancy), oppositional defiant disorder, other unspecified behavioral disorders.
- Use of psychotropic substances: primarily alcohol, tobacco, and cannabinoids, but also opiates, cocaine, hallucinogens, solvents, etc.
- Addiction and impulse control disorders: pathological gambling, theft, arson, etc.
- Abuse of non-addictive substances, use of antacids, steroids, hormones, vitamins, laxatives, antidepressants, etc.
- Sexual behavior disorders: fetishism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, etc.

In the document *Professional Activities in the Prevention of Risky Behavior* (Tichý et al., 2023), we find the following classification of risky behavior. In the narrowest sense, we classify the basic types of risky behavior as follows:

- a) truancy,
- b) bullying, cyberbullying, and extreme manifestations of aggression,
- c) extreme sports and risky behavior in traffic,
- d) racism and xenophobia,

- e) negative influence of sects,
- f) risky sexual behavior,
- g) behavior leading to addiction.

In a broader sense, the following three areas are included in these seven areas, which, in terms of their prevalence in the population, are becoming the focus of preventive work, but which cannot be clearly included in the concept of risky behavior:

- h) disorders and problems associated with child abuse and neglect syndrome,
- i) the spectrum of eating disorders,
- j) self-harm.

However, even this typology does not fully cover all forms of risky behavior. Czech authors Miovský and Zapletalová (2006) and Širůčková (2015) also include crime and delinquency among risky behavior. At the same time, experts in Slovakia also include the issue of online risky behavior in the category of risky behavior (Dulovics et al., 2023; Vagaská et al., 2023; Niklová, 2024).

Given that the issue of risky behavior is extremely broad, the following section will focus on analyzing the prevalence of only selected forms of risky behavior among children and young people.

CRIME AND DELINQUENCY AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Crime and delinquency are specific in that they are closely intertwined with other forms of risky or pathological behavior, such as bullying, cyberbullying, substance and non-substance addictions, risky behavior in traffic, and, in certain circumstances, truancy and the like. At the same time, delinquent behavior in children and youth is the subject of interest in several sciences, such as criminology, law, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, and scientific disciplines such as the sociology of education, social pedagogy, and forensic psychology. Although crime and delinquency are classified by authors as socio-pathological phenomena (Hroncová et al., 2020; Ondrejko, 2001), another group of authors, especially forms of property crime committed by minors and juvenile offenders, describe it as risky behavior (Dolejš, 2010; Širůčková, 2015).

Under Criminal Code No. 300/2005, the age of criminal responsibility in the Slovak Republic is 14 years. Specifically, Section 22 of the Criminal Code states that "A person

who, at the time of committing an otherwise criminal act, has not reached the age of fourteen, is not criminally responsible."

Crime is a less frequent topic in research and scientific studies in the Slovak Republic. Research and studies focused on children and young people are even rarer in this area. When this issue is addressed, it is mainly in connection with other forms of risky behavior or in connection with marginalized groups of the population, especially the Roma ethnic group.

One of the authors who has dealt with crime among Roma children and adolescents is Daňo (2003). Based on research conducted between 1995 and 1998 among 370 Roma pupils under the age of 15, he states that the average age of a Roma child who commits a crime is 11.26 years. He also states that up to 56.76% of those surveyed had committed a crime, and the recidivism rate among children in the research sample at that time was 28.92%.

Sejčová (2009) states that the most common antisocial acts among children and young people include: "...theft, robbery, disorderly conduct, bodily harm, sexual offenses, vandalism, manifestations of ethnic, racial, and national intolerance. Other crimes, such as arson and murder, are not typical of the child and youth category."

This fact is also confirmed by *the Strategy for the Prevention of Crime and Other Anti-Social Activities in the Slovak Republic until 2028*, which, according to statistics from the Police Force Presidium for the period 2016 to 2021, states that there has been an increase in crime committed by minors in the area of property and sexual offenses. Juvenile offenders under the age of 14 most often committed theft of property on land and, strikingly, the production and distribution of child pornography. During the pandemic, the most common crime was theft of property on land, which was committed by 279 juvenile offenders in 2021. On the other hand, there was an overall decline in crime among juveniles. However, problems persist with theft, sexual abuse, and, as with minors, child pornography, which has grown by dozens of cases in recent years.

The strategy further states that: "Problems with the sexuality of children and young people were also reflected in computer crime during the pandemic, when there was a rapid increase in the number of cases of production and distribution of child

pornography by minors and juveniles. By way of comparison, while only 19 such cases involving minors were recorded in 2016, there were already 90 in 2021."

DRUG EXPERIMENTATION AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Drug experimentation among children and young people is a serious public health problem with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and society. The adolescent age group is particularly vulnerable, as it is characterized by a phase of identity seeking, a need for social acceptance, and a tendency toward risky behavior. Experimenting with drugs can be seen as a form of rebellion, curiosity, or a response to various psychological and social pressures.

In Slovakia, the incidence of drug experimentation among children and young people is regularly monitored through a number of studies and surveys. Among the institutions that monitor drug experimentation among children and young people is *the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology*, which, in cooperation with *the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic*, conducted *the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD – European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) in the Slovak Republic for 2024*. The aim of the ESPAD survey was to obtain data on the prevalence of drug use among 9th grade students and students of all grades of secondary schools.

The report states that statistics on the prevalence of tobacco use among girls and boys show significant changes: "In 2007, 50.3% of boys and 38.2% of girls started smoking their first cigarette at the age of 13 or younger. This proportion gradually declined in subsequent years, reaching 24.0% for boys and 25.2% for girls in 2024. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who had never smoked cigarettes in their lifetime increased significantly. In 2007, 21.6% of boys and 23.7% of girls had never smoked, while in 2024 this proportion increased to 48.5% for boys and 44.0% for girls. The proportion of regular smokers who smoke 1–5 or more cigarettes a day has also changed significantly. In 2007, 33.4% of boys and 31.8% of girls smoked regularly, but by 2024 this proportion had fallen to 17.0% for boys and 17.2% for girls. The decline was even more pronounced among those who regularly smoke 20 or more cigarettes a day. In 2007, this proportion was 3.9% for boys and 1.9% for girls, but by 2024 it had fallen to 2.1% for boys and 0.8% for girls.

With regard to alcohol consumption among adolescents, the ESPAD survey provides data on the type of alcohol consumed (beer, wine, spirits, cider, alcopops). The 2024 findings show that 18.5% of respondents had never drunk alcohol and 45.3% of students had never been drunk. The first consumption of alcohol at the age of 9 or younger was reported by 7.4% of respondents. At the same time, only 1.7% of them reported that they had also gotten drunk. At the age of 13, 11.5% of respondents had their first contact with alcohol, and 5.8% of respondents had also gotten drunk at this age.

With regard to trends in alcohol consumption in recent years, the ESPAD results indicate that risky consumption of individual types of alcohol is declining among both boys and girls compared to previous measurements. In this context, the average values of alcohol consumption at the time of last use, expressed in grams, were surveyed. As stated in the report, spirits, for example, show consistently high average values, especially among boys. "In 2007, the average values were 34.4 g, which increased to 47.1 g in 2011. After a slight decline in the following years, they reached 43.7 g in 2019 and 32.1 g in 2024. Among girls, average consumption of spirits appears to be relatively stable, with a slight increase to 37.5 g in 2019 and a decrease to 26.9 g in 2024."

In terms of illegal drugs, at least one-time use of marijuana has been declining, reaching its lowest level in 2024 (28.4% of boys and 25.3% of girls). There is a downward trend in experimentation with ecstasy, with 5.7% of boys and 5.2% of girls experimenting with it in 2024. Other drugs with low prevalence included amphetamines and methamphetamine, LSD, magic mushrooms, heroin, cocaine, and synthetic cannabinoids.

According to research conducted as part of the international *HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children)* project, which was carried out on a sample of nearly 10,000 students aged 11, 13, and 15, it is reported that: "In the last 30 days, about one-fifth of 15-year-olds and one-tenth of 13-year-olds smoked cigarettes, and about one-third of 15-year-olds and less than one-fifth of 13-year-olds drank alcohol at least one day. About one-fifth of 15-year-olds, 5% of 13-year-olds, and less than 2% of 11-year-olds have been drunk at least twice in their lives." The report also states that the incidence of smoking and alcohol consumption has been declining since 2010, which can be at least partly attributed to changes in the social environment, probably related to the increase in online communication, as well as the enforcement of relevant legislation.

Another institution that monitors drug-related issues is *the National Health Information Center* (NCZI), which, unlike the ESPAD report, focuses on data related to the treatment of drug addiction. In 2024, 3,023 people underwent treatment for drug use in Slovakia, of whom 76.6% were men and 23.4% were women. In terms of age structure, 200 people under the age of 19 were treated, with a long-term downward trend in this age group. A total of 834 people aged 20–29 were treated, which is the second most frequent age category after people aged 30–39, of whom 1,045 were treated in 2024.

Currently, it is important not only to monitor the prevalence of drug experimentation among children and young people, but also to promote prevention strategies based on proven principles of effective prevention. Preventive measures should include school prevention, support for parental education, and building skills in children and adolescents focused on coping with pressure and strengthening their resilience. Effective links between schools, health care facilities, local governments, and non-profit organizations are also key.

In conclusion, it can be said that although drug experimentation among Slovak youth is not increasing dramatically, its existence and specific characteristics require the focused and systematic attention of all actors involved in shaping the healthy development of young people.

BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Bullying is a persistent form of pathological behavior in the school environment. At the same time, it is one of the most common forms of human rights violations. Based on a comparison of studies conducted by *the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information* (CVTI) in 2005, 2009, 2014, 2020, and 2022, Janková (2023) states that from 2005 to 2022, the number of students who were victims of bullying increased by 12% and, compared to the 2009 study, by as much as 20%. In her survey, the author identified 25% of students as victims, 9% as aggressors, and 43% as witnesses. Differences according to gender were confirmed among the aggressors. Boys (12%) were identified as aggressors more often than girls (6%).

In the classroom, primary and secondary school students most often experienced vulgar insults (44%), ironic comments, and ridicule (36%). To a lesser extent, their classmates

ignored them (17%) or physically assaulted them (12%). Approximately one in ten respondents had their personal belongings destroyed by aggressors (9%), were threatened, given nonsensical orders that they had to carry out (8% each), had various things extorted from them, and were sexually harassed (7% each) (Janková, 2023).

Sejčová (2021) presents research conducted in 2018, which identified up to 51% of victims and 30% of perpetrators of bullying. The perpetrators committed bullying in the form of physical (5%), psychological attacks (5%), theft (4%), ignoring the victim (4%), etc.

As part of the international HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children), a report entitled *Social Determinants of Schoolchildren's Health from 2019* points out that the number of students who were victims of bullying (aged 11, 13, and 15) ranged from 4% to 8% depending on age and gender. The highest number of victims among boys (7%) and girls (8%) was among 11-year-old pupils. The number of aggressors of both sexes was highest in the 15-year-old age group (girls 6%, boys 8%).

Extensive research in the field of cyberbullying was conducted by Dulovics et al. (2023). In a research sample of 2,768 secondary school students, the authors identified 11.6% of victims of cyberbullying, of which 51.6% were boys and 48.4% were girls. Cyberbullying perpetrators accounted for 9.3% of students, of whom 66% were boys and 34% were girls.

The author Hollá (2016) pays close attention to the issue of cyberbullying, its monitoring and analysis in various contexts. In one of her studies, based on a sample of 1,619 respondents aged 11 to 18, she examined the interrelationships between cyberbullying and sexting. The author found that among the victims of cyberbullying, up to 63.4% were boys who did not engage in sexting. A quarter of the boys (25.8%) who were victims of cyberbullying were also recipients of sexting. This means that they were victims of online attacks associated with cyberbullying as well as recipients of sexting. In the group of boys in the position of victims, 8.5% were also senders of sexually explicit content. In the group of girls, 64.6% of victims did not engage in sexting. Less than a quarter of girls (22.5%) who were victims of cyberbullying were recipients of sexting. Girls who were victims of cyberbullying also acted as senders of sexting in 12.9% of cases.

Hollá (2017) states that the most common forms of cyberbullying among students include *vulgar or offensive language* in cyberspace, which is more common among boys (28.9%) than girls (17.6%), followed by *the publication of vulgar or offensive photographs* on the internet (19.6% of boys, 11.1% of girls). These results largely correspond with the findings of Dulovics (2018), who, based on his research, states that the most frequent forms of cyberbullying among primary and secondary school students (N=931) are *threats/insults via online communication* (13.6%) and the publication of offensive photos (9.7%).

ONLINE RISKY BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Online risky behavior has been on the rise in recent years. A wide range of online risks pose a threat to the younger generation and can leave a deep mark on the psychosocial development of young people, affecting them for the rest of their lives. In response to the new social situation, which is linked to the transposition of a significant part of the free time and a wide range of activities of children and young people into virtual space, several strategic measures have been adopted at national and international level. Protecting children in virtual space and preventing their digital vulnerability is becoming a global challenge.

Several studies focused on monitoring risky online behavior among children and young people have been conducted in Slovakia. One of the most comprehensive studies was carried out as part of the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* project, which focuses on the activities, opportunities, and risks of children and adolescents in the virtual environment. The research was conducted on a sample of 969 children and adolescents aged 9 to 17. The findings show that 9.1% of respondents aged 9 to 10 had come into contact with some form of sexual content in the last year, with the number of respondents increasing in direct proportion to age. Boys (31.6%) encountered sexual content to a greater extent than girls (28.6%). Up to 72.5% of respondents came into contact with sexual content online, again more often boys (75.2%) than girls (69.3%). Almost half of the respondents (48.7%) repeatedly encountered sexual content on Facebook or Twitter (now X), 60.9% on Instagram, 22.7% in online games, and 30.7% of respondents viewed pornographic websites directly, most of them aged 15–17 (42.8%). Alarmingly, children aged 9–10 also came into contact with sexual content to a high degree on social media (approx. 21%).

However, it should be noted that children of this age still come into contact with sexual content more often through traditional media such as *television and film* (91.4%) than online (43.2%). Only a few children aged 11–12 had experience with sexting, 7% aged 13–14, and one in seven young people aged 15–17 (Israel et al., 2022).

Another topic addressed in the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* report is excessive use of the internet and social media. Izrael et al. (2022) state that "1.3% of the Slovak population of children and young people meet four out of five criteria, which can be interpreted as behavior very close to excessive internet use leading to addictive behavior." The authors further state that: "A total of 10% of the representative sample meets at least one of the four criteria for excessive internet use. These 10% can be considered children and young people with a tendency towards excessive internet use and suitable candidates for preventive programs in this area. The toughest criterion in the survey appears to be the item *"I did not eat or sleep because of the internet,"* which was selected by only 1.2% of participants. The highest percentage, 5.1%, selected the item *"I tried to limit the time I spend on the internet, but unsuccessfully."*

Further empirical research in the field of online risky behavior was conducted by Dulovics et al. (2023) on a sample of 2,768 secondary school students aged 11 to 15. The research focused on monitoring excessive internet use, online risk challenges, social isolation due to problematic use of digital technologies, FoMO syndrome, and cyberbullying (discussed in the previous section). The CIUS (Compulsive Internet Use Scale) research tool was used to measure excessive internet use, with milder criteria set for determining excessive internet use. Based on the results, up to 56.61% of students fall into the category of excessive internet users. At the same time, a statistically significant relationship was found between social isolation and excessive internet use, as well as between FoMO syndrome and excessive internet use. The research identified 24.35% of students who participated in one or more risky online challenges at the same time. In terms of gender, 50.45% of boys and 49.55% of girls participated in risky online challenges once or repeatedly. The risky challenges identified included, for example: the Cinnamon Challenge (12.0%), the Choking Challenge (6.9%), and the Eyeballing Challenge (5.2%).

Another form of risky behavior in the online environment is the disclosure of personal data and information about oneself. Janková (2024) monitored this issue in her research. The author states that "...students who had at least one profile on a social network most

often published their surname (56.8%), and slightly less often a photo (48.7%). Significantly fewer, approximately a quarter of respondents, reported an overestimated age (25.5%) and a similar number reported their real age (24.5%). One in ten students had a phone number (9.9%) and information about their school (8.8%) on their profile. Less than 5% of respondents also published their address (4.1%). 17.2% of students did not provide any of the above personal information on their most frequently used profile, which was . At the same time, the author states that 10.5% of respondents had experience with the misuse of personal data.

PREVALENCE OF XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Racism and xenophobia are significant social problems that are not absent from the school environment. While public discussion of these phenomena often focuses on the adult population, education in tolerance and respect begins in childhood. School is the place where initial attitudes towards diversity are formed, and it is therefore important to pay attention to the extent to which prejudices, racial stereotypes, and xenophobic views are present among children and young people.

Research conducted in Slovakia and abroad shows that elementary school students are not immune to these phenomena. Although younger school-age children often do not yet understand the complexity of concepts such as "race" or "ethnicity," manifestations of intolerance and discrimination can already be seen in the first grade of elementary school. They most often affect children from the Roma community, migrants, or children of other faiths.

Research published in a report by *the Slovak National Center for Human Rights (2018)*, which was conducted among children and young people aged 11 to 19 (N=1333) throughout Slovakia, it appears that 33.18% of respondents do not feel safe around people of other racial, religious, cultural, and ethnic groups, which may indicate certain manifestations of xenophobia among respondents. The opinion of young people on the statement: "*All people, regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion, are equal.*" 8.5% of respondents disagreed with the statement. Of all respondents who gave negative answers, 62.8% were men. In terms of age, young people aged 16 and 17 most often disagreed with the statement. Respondents identified Roma (8.7%) as the most

problematic group in society. The majority of respondents, more precisely 51.40%, have a negative perception of Roma.

In her research report, Pétiová (2020) analyzed the attitudes and opinions of elementary and secondary school students on extremism and racism, comparing research conducted in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. The author states that "Since 2016, there has been an increase in the number of boys and girls who have seen frequent manifestations of extremism at school (2016 – 5.6%; 2019 – 8.4%). Occasionally, fewer respondents experienced this in 2019 (48.4%) than in 2016 (60.4%). There has been a significant decrease in the number of boys and girls who have not had these negative experiences at all (2016 – 34%; 2019 – 5%)."

Hate speech, discrimination, and violent extremism in the online space are also addressed in the *EU Kids Online Slovakia* research report. Israel et al. (2022) state that "... among children and young people aged 11-17, 29% of respondents said that they had encountered hateful or humiliating messages or comments directed at individuals or groups of people on the internet in the last year. Boys are more likely to have had this experience than girls." At the same time, 9.7% of respondents had searched for websites or articles on the internet in the last 12 months that spread hateful, humiliating messages or comments against people or certain groups (migrants, Muslims, Roma, Jews, etc.). This was more common among boys (12%) than girls (6.3%), most often among those aged 11-12 (11.8%).

Manifestations of racism and xenophobia also occur in primary and secondary schools, although they are often underestimated or not directly labeled as such. We therefore consider it essential to pay attention to this issue in the context of preventive and educational work, primarily through the long-term integration of the themes of equality, empathy, and diversity into the preventive program of schools and everyday teaching. Only in this way can a school environment be created in which every child, regardless of their origin, feels safe and accepted.

PREVENTION OF RISKY AND ONLINE RISKY BEHAVIOUR IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Miriam Niklová

INTRODUCTION

Preventing risky behaviour among pupils is a key tool for a safe and stimulating school environment that supports the healthy mental, social and emotional development of children and young people. In the current digital era, the prevention of online risks, including cyberbullying, excessive or inappropriate use of digital media, exposure to inappropriate content, and threats to personal data, is of particular importance. Risky behaviour, whether traditional or digital, is often complex in nature and requires an integrated approach based on systematic cooperation between schools, families, institutions and the wider community. Effective prevention involves not only the implementation of targeted programmes and interventions, but also the strengthening of pupils' social and emotional skills, the promotion of critical thinking and media literacy. In this context, it would be appropriate to integrate digital literacy education into school curricula. Such a step would help pupils not only to better understand the digital environment, but also to develop critical thinking, enabling them to effectively identify and avoid online risks (Emmerová & Bělík, 2022). An important part of this process is the coordination of preventive activities, the professional development of teaching and specialist staff, and the active involvement of pupils themselves in the creation and implementation of preventive programmes. The aim is not only to minimise the occurrence of risky behaviour, but also to create an environment that promotes the safe, responsible and ethical use of digital technologies, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and social development of young people.

According to Miovský et al. (2015), the prevention of risky behaviour can be understood as a set of educational, social and other targeted interventions aimed at preventing the emergence of risky behaviour, slowing its progression, mitigating its current

manifestations and supporting the resolution of its consequences. It is therefore a complex and multidimensional process that involves systematic action on the individual and social determinants of the behaviour of children and young people.

In order to effectively implement preventive and intervention strategies aimed at eliminating such behaviour in the school environment, it is necessary to conduct a thorough analysis of its occurrence, aetiological factors, forms of manifestation and contextual variables, which influence its emergence and persistence. This research-oriented and application-oriented approach makes it possible to formulate targeted measures that are in line with the needs of a specific school environment and current trends in the area of digital behaviour among pupils.

The counselling and prevention system is one of the fundamental pillars of ensuring an inclusive and supportive environment in the educational process. According to Section 130(1) of Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act), this system includes professional multidisciplinary activities consisting of counselling, psychological, pedagogical, special pedagogical, speech therapy, therapeutic pedagogical, socio-pedagogical and social work. These activities are aimed at supporting and optimising the personal, intellectual, psychological, social and career development of children and pupils from birth to the end of their vocational training.

Counselling is provided not only to children and pupils, but also to their legal guardians, teaching and specialist staff, and representatives of educational institutions. The system consists of a network of counselling and prevention facilities and support teams directly in schools, which together form a multi-level support infrastructure. These entities include counselling and prevention centres and specialised counselling and prevention centres, which cooperate on a multidisciplinary basis with schools, legal guardians, public authorities and other organisations active in the field of education and training.

In line with the above-mentioned legislative framework, it is also necessary to ensure the institutional and legal anchoring of support measures and professional activities directly in the school environment. These support measures are defined in Act No. 245/2008 Coll., as amended by Amendment No. 182/2023 Coll., which regulates the general principles of education and training, including preventive and educational work. The amendment also provides for the transformation of the educational counselling system and introduces

a new hierarchical model of support, which is divided into five levels of professional activity.

According to Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on teaching staff and professional staff, professional activities in the field of prevention and counselling are carried out by teaching and professional staff and the school support team, whose rights, obligations and tasks in the field of preventive and educational work are explicitly defined. These activities are implemented in schools at the first and second levels of support.

At the first level of support, teaching and professional staff, in cooperation with the school support team, carry out pedagogical diagnostics, pedagogical intervention, educational and career counselling, social counselling, support inclusive education and carry out preventive activities (Section 131(2) of Act No. 245/2008 Coll.). At the second level of support, the school special education teacher and professional staff, in cooperation with the relevant counselling and prevention centre, carry out orientation diagnostics, prevention, counselling, intervention, crisis intervention, therapy, re-education, as well as methodological support and professional counselling for teaching and professional staff or legal representatives.

According to Section 145(a) of Act No. 245/2008 Coll., support measures are defined as measures provided by a school or school facility that create conditions for the full participation of a child or pupil in the educational process and enable the development of their knowledge, skills and abilities. The legislative anchoring of preventive activities thus creates a framework in which it is possible to systematically carry out targeted work with children and pupils, whereby a clear division of competences between the school's teaching and professional staff and cooperation with the relevant counselling and prevention facility is desirable.

However, as Papp et al. (2024) point out, in practice, the quality and scope of preventive activities in schools vary considerably. These differences are influenced by several factors, in particular the attitude of the school management, the availability of specialist staff (e.g. school psychologist or social pedagogue) and the range of external prevention programmes on offer. Some schools perceive prevention as one-off events without a systematic impact, such as discussions or activities based on cautionary tales that do not reflect the individual needs of pupils. This variation in approach highlights the need for

systematic coordination, planning and evaluation of preventive activities that would meet the current needs of pupils and reflect the objectives of modern school counselling.

To support the quality of professional work within the counselling and prevention system, the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology has developed a content standard entitled *Professional Activity – Prevention of Risky Behaviour*. This document represents a key reference framework for the planning and implementation of preventive activities and is intended for both teaching and professional staff in schools.

Within this standard, the term '**risky behaviour**' is understood as behaviour that demonstrably leads to increased social, health, educational or other risks for individuals or society. The document covers areas such as the prevention of violent behaviour, radicalisation and extremism, substance addiction, and the prevention of online risky behaviour.

According to the *Methodological Guide to Creating a Quality School Prevention Strategy* (2024), the basic types of risky behaviour include truancy, bullying, cyberbullying, extreme manifestations of aggression, risky sports, risky behaviour in transport, racism, xenophobia, the negative influence of sects, risky sexual behaviour and behaviour leading to addiction.

Online risky behaviour is a separate and dynamically developing area of prevention. It includes, in particular, cyberbullying, sexting, grooming, sharing personal data and intimate material, excessive use of digital technologies, addiction to social networks, risky online challenges, access to inappropriate content (including extremism and pornography), as well as digital manipulation and disinformation. These phenomena can lead to serious psychological and social consequences, including increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, social isolation, and threats to the integrity of children and young people's personalities. Prevention in this area requires digital literacy, media education, the development of critical thinking and the strengthening of digital resilience (Miovský et al., 2015).

In the context of systematic support for the mental health of children and pupils, professional and methodological materials have been developed within the education sector, based on legislatively defined professional activities, and are freely available on the website of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak

Republic. These documents form a professional basis for the development of preventive strategies in schools and contribute to improving the quality of multidisciplinary support in the school environment.

The legislative framework for the prevention of online risky behaviour provides the basic framework for creating a safe digital environment and protecting the rights of children and young people. The protection of cyberspace and the prevention of behavioural risks for children and pupils in the Slovak Republic is ensured by a set of legal regulations and strategic concepts, including:

Regulatory documents:

1. Directive No. 1/2025 on the prevention and resolution of bullying of children and pupils in schools and school facilities: This document, based on *Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act)*, is a key ministerial regulation. It explicitly defines the characteristics, forms and manifestations of bullying, including its digital forms (cyber security and protection in the digital space), and sets out preventive measures and a methodology for schools and school facilities.
2. Criminal Code No. 300/2005 (§ 360b – Dangerous electronic harassment): The provision of § 360b criminalises intentional acts carried out by means of electronic communication that seriously interfere with the rights and life of the victim. This includes long-term humiliation, intimidation, unauthorised actions on behalf of the victim, or the publication of audiovisual recordings of a personal nature that damage the victim's reputation.
3. Act No. 69/2018 Coll. on Cyber Security and the Amendment to this Act: This Act is the legislative pillar for ensuring cyber and information security at the national level. It defines strategic documents, regulates the competences of public authorities and sets out the obligations of entities providing essential and digital services (including the organisation of CSIRT teams). The amendment to the Act strengthened the protection of critical information systems and introduced stricter requirements for the implementation of security measures and the reporting of cyber incidents.

Strategic and conceptual documents:

1. *National Cybersecurity Strategy of the Slovak Republic for 2021–2025 and Cybersecurity Action Plan*: The strategy, approved by the Slovak Government, establishes

a conceptual framework for the protection of cyberspace in accordance with international standards (NATO, EU, OECD, UN). The main priorities are:

- State security and increasing infrastructure resilience.
- Prevention and investigation of cybercrime.
- Increasing the resilience of the private sector and public administration.
- Development of partnerships and international cooperation.
- Education and awareness-raising activities aimed at increasing expertise and awareness. The action plan specifies in detail the steps for implementing the strategy, identifying cyberbullying, grooming and the distribution of inappropriate content as significant threats.

2. *National Concept for the Protection of Children in the Digital Space until 2025:*

This strategic document aims to create a coordinated system for the protection of children in the online environment, based on three pillars:

- Prevention: Educating children, parents and professionals about the risks of the digital world through formal and informal education.
- Intervention: Strengthening legislative and institutional tools to address online threats.
- Support for victims and prevention of recidivism: Providing professional assistance to victims and implementing programmes to prevent repeat offences by perpetrators.

The above-mentioned strategic and legislative documents define the legislative, strategic and methodological framework for the prevention of risky behaviour and the resolution of cyber security issues in the Slovak Republic, with a specific emphasis on the educational environment.

Effective prevention of risky behaviour must be conceptually well thought out, implemented over the long term and tailored to the specific needs of individual groups. As stated by Miovský et al. (2015), effective prevention of risky behaviour is based on several fundamental principles that determine its sustainability, effectiveness and long-term impact.

One of the fundamental principles is a comprehensive and interconnected approach. Preventive action should not be one-sided, but should integrate several complementary

strategies and methods. Effective prevention goes beyond the school setting and requires the cooperation of families, communities and other institutions, thereby increasing its overall reach and impact.

Another principle is long-term and systematic implementation. Preventive activities should not be one-off or disjointed, but should build on each other over the long term. Systematic work with the target group brings about more lasting and profound changes in attitudes and behaviour than short-term projects or isolated lectures.

Adapting the content to the target group is another key element of effective prevention. The success of prevention programmes depends on the extent to which the content, form and language of communication are adapted to the age, experience and social environment of the recipients. Preventive interventions should therefore be differentiated and culturally sensitive.

It is equally important to start preventive measures early. The best results are achieved when preventive activities begin in early childhood, ideally in the pre-school period, when basic values and social habits are formed. Early intervention promotes the internalisation of healthy behaviour patterns and minimises the likelihood of later risky behaviour, including in the online environment.

Effective prevention should also focus on reinforcing positive alternatives. Instead of emphasising prohibitions and sanctions, it should offer attractive, healthy and meaningful behavioural alternatives – for example, by supporting sports, artistic and community activities that strengthen young people's identity and social integration.

Shaping attitudes and behaviour is also an important part of prevention. Prevention is not just about providing information about risks, but must aim to bring about real change in attitudes and develop the ability to make responsible decisions. Children and young people should be guided to understand not only what is right, but also how to act in specific situations.

Peer education and interactive approaches are considered to be very effective. Young people often trust their peers more than authority figures, so involving them in prevention programmes increases the effectiveness of interventions. Interactive forms of

work – such as discussions, model situations and group activities – encourage active participation and internal acceptance of preventive values.

A key prerequisite for success is the creation of an environment that does not encourage risky behaviour. Prevention should be supported by a social and school context that clearly defines values, norms and rules of behaviour while reinforcing positive role models and a healthy lifestyle.

Effective prevention also focuses on strengthening protective factors – mechanisms that increase young people's psychological resilience. These include promoting self-confidence, developing social skills, fostering quality relationships in the family and at school, and providing access to safe and stimulating leisure activities. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid ineffective and counterproductive methods such as intimidation, moralising or overemphasising negative consequences. These approaches can have the opposite effect and provoke resistance or disinterest. Effective prevention is therefore based on developing critical thinking, positive motivation and supporting young people's personal responsibility for their own decisions.

The effectiveness of preventive interventions is determined by the careful selection, systematic integration and long-term continuity of preventive approaches, which must be goal-oriented and tailored to the empirically identified needs of a specific student population (Kunčaková et al., 2023). Preventive measures should be based on a diagnostic analysis of needs, the school environment and the social context in order to achieve maximum effectiveness and sustainability.

As Veřká (2021) points out, in current pedagogical and psychological practice, preventive interventions are not implemented in a uniform manner, but are designed within a three-stage prevention model that allows for the differentiated and effective targeting of professional resources depending on the degree of risk and the needs of individuals or groups. This model includes universal, selective and indicated levels of prevention, which differ in scope, target group and intensity of intervention.

Universal prevention represents the basic level of preventive work and is aimed at the entire population of children and pupils, regardless of the presence of risk factors. Its aim is to strengthen protective factors, develop social and emotional competences, shape pro-social behaviour and create a healthy school environment. This type of prevention has the

widest reach and represents the primary protection against the emergence of risky behaviour.

Selective prevention focuses on groups of children and pupils who have been identified as having increased risk factors, such as social disadvantage, family conflicts, low academic achievement or signs of adjustment difficulties. The aim of selective interventions is to reduce the risk of developing problem behaviour through targeted support, group activities, counselling and the development of adaptation skills.

Indicated prevention represents the most intensive level of intervention, intended for individuals who have already exhibited specific forms of risky behaviour or psychological difficulties. At this stage, specialised interventions are implemented, such as individual counselling, therapeutic work, re-education or crisis intervention. The aim is to prevent the progression of problematic behaviour and support the reintegration of the student into a healthy social and school environment.

The three-stage prevention model thus allows for effective differentiation of approaches – from general support and resilience building, through targeted work with at-risk groups, to individual therapeutic interventions. This approach increases the effectiveness of the use of professional capacities, supports the early identification of problems and contributes to the systematic development of a culture of prevention in schools.

The coordination of preventive activities is an integral part of the counselling and prevention system and constitutes its practical implementation in the school environment. The effective implementation of preventive strategies requires well-thought-out organisational management, a clear division of responsibilities and multidisciplinary cooperation between professionals working both inside and outside the school.

In schools where a school support team (ŠPT) has been established, the coordination of preventive and support activities takes place under its auspices. The ŠPT is established as a tool for strengthening inclusive education and its establishment results from legislative amendments effective from 1 January 2023. The team consists of teaching and specialist staff from the school, in particular a special needs teacher, psychologist, social pedagogue, educational counsellor and other members who together provide comprehensive support to pupils.

The main tasks of the ŠPT include coordinating and implementing preventive and supportive measures, identifying pupils at increased risk of school failure, organising educational activities for parents and teachers, supporting newly admitted pupils, and implementing primary and secondary prevention. If the school does not have an ŠPT, the headteacher assigns these tasks to the school coordinator for education and training, who is selected from among the teaching staff on the basis of their professional competence and personal qualities.

Effective prevention requires close cooperation between internal school staff and external experts, particularly school psychologists, social pedagogues and paediatricians. Their professional expertise in the areas of diagnosis, intervention and educational activities contributes significantly to the early identification of risky behaviour and the implementation of appropriate measures to eliminate it (Emmerová, 2024; Tichý et al., 2023, and others). In addition, effective prevention goes beyond the school environment and requires active cooperation with parents, ensuring a consistent approach and reinforcing pro-social behaviour patterns at home (Emmerová, 2022).

As Bezáková (2022) points out, a clear definition of the competences, status and functions of the ŠPT is essential for its effective operation within the transformed counselling and prevention system. The new model of counselling support is based on the principle of a multi-level care system, which is designed to ensure equal access to quality professional assistance for all pupils, regardless of their individual needs.

The school support team plays a key role in the first two levels of support. At these levels, it focuses primarily on the early identification of risk factors, preventive action, diagnosis, educational counselling and cooperation with the family. Higher levels of support (levels 3–5) are the responsibility of counselling and prevention facilities, which provide specialised diagnostic, therapeutic and re-educational services.

Many schools already have specialist staff, such as special needs teachers, psychologists, social pedagogues, educational and career counsellors. Nevertheless, their systematic coordination and interdisciplinary communication remain a challenge. For support to be truly effective, it is essential that the ŠPT does not function as a group of isolated experts, but as a coherent, interconnected and goal-oriented team with clearly defined roles,

a common vision and shared responsibility for the development of a preventive culture in the school.

A multidisciplinary approach is a fundamental principle of the ŠPT's functioning and, at the same time, a standard of professional work in inclusive education. The aim is to ensure comprehensive support for pupils and minimise duplicative or uncoordinated interventions through coordinated cooperation between various disciplines (psychology, special education, social pedagogy, andragogy). This approach increases the effectiveness of interventions, the quality of professional decision-making and helps to identify risky behaviour in a timely manner.

Effective team functioning requires the creation of a safe, confidential and collaborative environment that promotes open communication, professional dialogue and an ethical culture of cooperation. An integral part of teamwork are intervision and supervision processes, which enable reflection on practice, sharing of experiences, prevention of burnout syndrome and continuous improvement of the quality of services provided.

It follows from the above that effective prevention in the school environment is conditional on the coordinated action of professionals, a clear organisational support structure and an integrated multidisciplinary approach that reflects the current needs of pupils, schools and the wider social environment.

The conceptual definition of prevention in an educational context distinguishes between preventive-educational activities and preventive programmes, with this distinction corresponding to the degree of systematicity, time modality and ambition of the intervention. Kunčáková (2021) emphasises that prevention in the school environment serves as an essential tool for eliminating behavioural risks and supporting the positive development of pupils. Preventive-educational activities are defined as one-off or short-term educational interventions whose primary function is to increase the cognitive awareness of recipients about risky behaviour. Their scope is limited in time, usually not exceeding three meetings with the target group, and includes formats such as lectures, discussions, awareness campaigns, courses, workshops or training groups. Each activity must be methodologically adapted to the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of the target cohort, with a clearly defined educational goal and content. In contrast, prevention programmes represent a systematic and long-term approach, comprising a set

of interconnected, structured and pre-sequenced measures. These programmes, developed by professional staff or specialised counselling facilities, are primarily focused on preventing school and educational dysfunctions, strengthening successful psychosocial adaptation and the comprehensive development of social and personal skills. Long-term programmes (typically four or more meetings) use professional methodological guides and their effectiveness is subject to regular monitoring and evaluation. The key is purposeful interactive work that facilitates the internalisation of new behavioural patterns and their subsequent application in a real environment. School practice most often uses universal programmes designed for the entire population and selective programmes targeting subpopulations with higher vulnerability to problematic behaviour (Antalová, Papp, Vernarcová, 2020), while the integration of peer programmes offers a more authentic and relevant channel of communication with peers (Dulovics et al., 2023). Other forms of prevention of virtual threats in the school environment include occasional preventive activities, special projects and online portals providing methodological materials, counselling and educational resources for teachers, parents and pupils. One important project is **Zodpovedne.sk**, which focuses on the safe and responsible use of ICT and offers training, methodologies, competitions, online games and helplines. Related projects include **pomoc.sk**, **nehejtuj.sk**, **kyberšikanovanie.sk**, **neZavislost.sk**, **NoProblemos.sk**, **Ktojed'alší.sk**, **Matfilipa.sk** and **IPČKO**, which provide advice, interactive activities, methodological guides and applications supporting media literacy, critical thinking, safe use of the internet and addiction prevention. Supportive initiatives are also implemented by companies, e.g. ESET's **Safe on the Internet** project and **Dove's Self-Esteem Project**, which provide practical materials, workshops and guides to increase the safety and self-confidence of young people (Zošáková, 2022).

Specific topics, such as the prevention of internet addiction, are integrated into media education, where students learn about the harmful consequences of excessive online behaviour, with the aim of promoting a responsible digital community (Šavrnochová, Holdoš, Almašiová, 2020). Domain-specific and cross-curricular literacy skills are a mandatory part of the educational content and are integrated across individual educational areas. Prevention in relation to online risks is applied primarily in the context of IT, media and digital literacy, while social science literacy, health and physical literacy, social and emotional literacy, intercultural literacy and other competences also have

a preventive dimension (Emmerová, 2025). This ensures the systematic integration of risk behaviour prevention into the educational process and strengthens the comprehensive development of pupils, promoting their responsible, safe and ethical behaviour in both the digital and real environments.

Ensuring effective and systematic prevention in the school environment is an essential competence of the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic (MŠVVaM SR). A key methodological tool for managing primary prevention is the publication *Creating a School Prevention Strategy and Supporting Quality in Prevention*, which is designed as a strategic framework for prevention management at school level. The primary objective of this document is to facilitate the process of planning and implementing preventive activities, with an emphasis on systematicity and strategic thinking on the part of school management. The methodology establishes a four-step process necessary for the effective creation and execution of a local prevention strategy: (1) Information gathering (diagnostic phase), (2) Setting goals and areas of prevention (planning phase), (3) Effective use of available resources (allocation phase), and (4) Communication of the strategy (implementation and dissemination phase). The document is primarily intended for managers and members of school professional teams and, in addition to the structure of the strategy, also provides guidelines for the valid selection of prevention programmes from non-state providers, thereby guaranteeing the implementation of evidence-based and proven methods in an effort to eliminate socio-pathological phenomena such as aggressive behaviour, bullying, truancy and mental health problems.

CONCLUSION

Effective prevention of risky behaviour is **a complex and systematically developed process** that requires **long-term, well-thought-out and coordinated planning**. Its effectiveness depends on the ability to respond to **the specific needs of individuals and groups** while **promoting positive behavioural alternatives** that reinforce the healthy psychosocial development of children and young people.

A key prerequisite for success is **the early initiation of preventive activities**, ideally at an early age, and **the creation of a school and social environment** that **systematically develops protective factors** such as self-confidence, coping strategies, pro-social

behaviour and quality peer relationships. Prevention must be based on **cooperation between multiple actors** – schools, families, counselling facilities, communities and professional institutions – and function as **a multidisciplinary process** focused on developing students' **social, communication, emotional and moral competencies**.

Comprehensively understood prevention thus takes on the character of a long-term sustainable process that not only minimises the occurrence of risky behaviour, but also strengthens a culture of safety, tolerance and mental well-being in the school environment.

Effective prevention must be coordinated across disciplines, based on cooperation between schools, families, specialist institutions and community organisations, with the school support team (ŠPT) playing an important role as a key link in the counselling and prevention system.

Effective prevention should be based on empirically proven and participatory methods that engage pupils in the learning process through experience, promote critical thinking, self-reflection and responsibility for behaviour, and develop social and emotional competences. Sensitive media and digital education that responds to the growing challenges of the online environment (e.g. cyberbullying, risky online challenges, sexting, addiction to digital technologies) is also important.

An integral part of effective prevention is the professional development of teaching and specialist staff, with regular training recommended in the areas of socio-pathological phenomena, mental health, media literacy and working with at-risk groups of pupils. Another effective tool is pupil participation, which involves involvement in the creation of prevention programmes through peer activities, discussions and project-based learning, which increases their engagement and sense of responsibility. Prevention should also be based on links between schools, families and communities, with partnership cooperation with parents and links with community and counselling centres enabling the provision of professional and methodological support. A key aspect is the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, which consists of building a safe and stimulating school climate that promotes open communication, trust, respect and psychological well-being

for all members of the school community. Systematic evaluation and reflection on preventive activities is also essential, with each school continuously assessing the effectiveness of its measures, analysing feedback from pupils and staff, and updating its preventive strategy based on the results obtained.

SCHOOL SOCIAL SUPPORT ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO THE FAMILY IN HUNGARY

János Szecskó

INTRODUCTION

In the years following the change of regime, Hungary underwent significant social, economic and cultural changes that profoundly affected the lives of children and young people, as well as the everyday life of educational institutions. Rising unemployment, deepening social inequalities, the transformation of family functions and the loosening of norms led to the spread of deviant behaviour (Bányai, 2006). Teachers working in schools and designated child protection officers were often unable to respond effectively to the complex problems arising from the changed circumstances using traditional pedagogical tools. The situation necessitated the introduction of institutionalised forms of social assistance into the education system, which finally came about in 2018 with the introduction of social assistance activities in kindergartens and schools.

The legal framework for these activities is provided by Act XXXI of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship administration, as well as Decree 15/1998. (IV. 30.) NM, as amended by Decree 2/2018. (I. 18.). Following the introduction, the Ministry's professional recommendation emphasised that, according to feedback from teachers, socialisation difficulties, social behaviour disorders and aggressive behaviour among pupils, the management of which exceeds the traditional educational tools available to schools (Bunyevác et al., 2018). At the same time, significant changes have taken place in the structure and functions of families: the proportion of traditional family models has decreased, the number of divorces and single-parent households has increased, and primary socialisation influences have weakened. Schools are thus forced to perform not only educational but also corrective and socialisation tasks.

The introduction of social work in schools follows the ecological model approach, which interprets child development in the context of environmental systems – family, peer community, school, wider society. Accordingly, support activities are directed not only at the client, but also at the child's immediate and wider environment, promoting communication and cooperation between the systems concerned (Bunyevacz et al., 2018). According to the Child Protection Act, "in order to prevent children from being at risk, social support services in kindergartens and schools provide support to children attending public education institutions, their families and the teachers of public education institutions through the tools of social support work" (2/2018. (I. 18.) EMMI decree, 25.  (1)–(2)). This approach is based on prevention, complex support and community-level intervention.

In international literature, the roots of school social work can be traced back to the early 20th century. In the United States, three large cities began to employ school social workers in the early 1900s (Allen-Meares et al., 1996). The development of the profession was significantly influenced by Alderson's (1969, 1972) typology, which distinguished four models: the traditional clinical model, the school change model, the social interaction model, and the community school model. The first focuses on individual case management, while the school change approach seeks to transform institutional structures. The social interaction model analyses the interactions between the student and their environment, while the community model emphasises the integration of disadvantaged groups and community development (Mate, 2015).

In later theoretical developments, Florence Costin's (1969) ecological model, which examines the interactions between the individual, the family and the school, played a key role. The aim of this approach is to develop children's competencies and sensitise schools to the social needs of pupils (Soliman, 2017). Germain (1991) similarly emphasises adaptive processes: harmonising the dynamic relationship between the child and their environment is one of the main goals of school social work.

American and Western European literature points out that social workers' understanding of their role often differs from the functions expected by school leaders and colleagues (Costin, 1969; Allen-Meares, 1994). While social workers consider individual case management to be their main task, schools often see their most important role as building community relationships, communicating with parents and supporting teachers

(Altshuler & Reid Webb, 2009; Franklin & Harris, 2007). The lack of clarity regarding roles sometimes leads to interprofessional tensions, which can hinder cooperation (Richard & Villareal Sosa, 2014).

In Hungary, the history of school social work dates back to the early 2000s. Professional practice was organised around three main models: the "internal" or traditional model, the "external" (Ferencváros) model and the Pécs model (Máté, 2018; Gergál-Máté, 2018). In the internal model, the social worker is employed by the school and spends all of their working hours at the institution, thus establishing close daily contact with students and teachers. In contrast, the external model links support workers to family and child welfare centres, who serve several institutions in parallel, while in the Pécs model, the service is provided by civil or church-run organisations. All three forms implement inter-professional cooperation and supervisory support to varying degrees.

In addition to their existing specialised services, district family and child welfare centres are required to provide services aimed at promoting the upbringing of children in their families and preventing and eliminating risks to their welfare. To this end, they provide individual, group and community activities (Rákó, 2016). With the introduction of social support activities in kindergartens and schools, an integrated, preventive system has been created with the aim of preventing children from becoming at risk, supporting family education and promoting social integration (Bertók et al., 2019). Through individual, group and community work, social workers build bridges between students, teachers and parents, promoting cohesion in school communities and strengthening equal opportunities.

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive picture of the characteristics, difficulties and possible areas for improvement in the relationship between social workers in kindergartens and schools and families and parents. The study seeks to answer the question of how and by what means cooperation between support workers and families is achieved, how mutual trust is built, and what factors help or hinder the establishment and maintenance of relationships. In addition, the research aims to explore the methods and strategies used by professionals to involve families in solving children's problems, as well as the role of teachers and child protection services in interprofessional cooperation.

SAMPLE

The study is based on twelve Hungarian studies published between 2018 and 2025, which present the practice of social assistance in kindergartens and schools and its family dimensions from different perspectives. A common feature of the sources is that they interpret the issue of school social work and relations with families in the context of the Hungarian public education system, making them suitable for a comprehensive examination of the topic in Hungary.

The studies analysed use different methodological approaches: qualitative interviews, case studies, questionnaire-based data collection, and professional reflections based on practical experience. As a result, the study presents not only the theoretical framework of professional discourse, but also the experiences and difficulties of professionals working in the field. The study therefore carries out a secondary, qualitative synthesis: the aim is not to collect new empirical data, but to synthesise existing research results and identify the main patterns of the family-helper relationship.

The main research questions of the study are:

- *In what form and with what intensity do kindergarten and school social workers interact with families?*
- *What factors influence the development of trust, communication and cooperation?*
- *How does work with families manifest itself in the broader system of cooperation?*

Homoki (2018) analyses the child protection orientation of school social work from a theoretical and practical perspective, with a particular focus on the needs-based approach. The study is based on a qualitative literature review and interprets the role of school support workers in the system of prevention and early intervention. Roth (2019) presents the process and challenges of introducing social work in kindergartens and schools at the local level in a case study-type research based on interviews and local institutional experiences, highlighting the difficulties of professional cooperation and the process of building trust. Budai (2019) uses a qualitative approach and literature review to examine the interprofessional role of school social workers. The central theme is professional cooperation, with a particular focus on partnerships with teachers and families. Bozó-Kutyifa's (2020) study draws on interviews and field experience to present the dilemmas of the professional identity of school social workers. The research analyses

the institutional embeddedness of social workers and the boundaries of their relationships with parents and teachers. Boros's (2020) examines social workers' access to professional training and its impact on their work based on a questionnaire survey. His findings highlight the links between professional development and effective collaboration. Csók (2020) uses qualitative interviews to examine the characteristics of relationships with parents and the challenges of building trust. The research identifies three types of parental attitudes (cooperative, expectant, dismissive) and analyses their impact on social work.

Szecsó (2022) compares Hungarian and British models of school social work in a comparative study. The study is based on professional interviews, paying particular attention to the role of trust and social perception in the acceptance of the profession. Kalocsai et al. (2018) present the professional and organisational experiences of the introduction based on interviews and institutional documents in their empirical study. The research also explores forms of cooperation with families and educators and the challenges of embedding. Herczeg's (2023) study uses empirical data to examine the individual case work of helpers, the dynamics of the child-parent-helper triangle, and the most common types of problems. The research combines a questionnaire method and interviews. In another study, Herczeg (2024) analyses the role of group and community events in building trust and cooperation. The study is based on field experience and case studies, with a particular emphasis on strengthening parental involvement and partnership.

Herczeg and Héderné Berta (2023) discuss the institutional role and tasks of helpers and the importance of maintaining contact with families from a theoretical and practical perspective. The study is based on the literature but illustrates the importance of interprofessional cooperation with practical examples. In their interview-based research, Kopasz, Balogh and Kiss (2025) examine the task interpretation and professional practice of school social workers in several institutions. The results show that direct contact with parents is less common in practice than professional guidelines prescribe.

Table 5*Characteristics of the selected studies*

Author and journal title	Journal name	Year
Andrea Homoki: <i>Opportunities inherent in school social work taking into account the principle of child protection needs orientation in school social work</i>	Dialogue	2018
Gyuláné Roth: <i>The introduction of social support activities in kindergartens and schools in public education institutions in the Sopron district</i>	Training and Practice	2019
István Budai: <i>The collaborative school social worker</i>	Dialogue	2019
Eszter Bozó-Kutyifa: <i>"Guest at the house" – The role and dilemmas of kindergarten and school Social pedagogy (thematic issue)</i>	Social pedagogy (thematic issue)	2019
Julianna Boros: <i>Opportunities or obligations? Further training for social workers employed in public education institutions</i>	Social Pedagogy (thematic issue)	2020
Cintia Csók: <i>Supporting value-creating child-rearing professionals</i>	Kapocs	2020
János Szecskó: <i>School social work in Hungary and Great Britain</i>	Special Treatment	2020
Adrienn Kalocsai, Rita Pátkainé Szmulai, Henrik Tisztli: <i>Experiences of introducing social work in kindergartens and schools as summarised by the service manager, professional coordinator and social worker providing the service</i>	Dialogue	2020
Viktória Herczeg: <i>Practical experiences of social support activities in kindergartens and schools at the individual intervention level</i>	Opportunity	2023
Viktória Herczeg: <i>Practical experiences of social support activities in kindergartens and schools at group and community level.</i>	Opportunity	2024
Viktória Herczeg, Edina Héderné Berta: <i>Introductory thoughts on the possibilities of social work in kindergartens and schools</i>	New Pedagogical Review	2023
Marianna Kopasz, Karolina Balogh, Márta Kiss: <i>Variations on social work in schools</i>	Socio	2025

Source: Own compilation

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The dimension of trust building

Several authors of the studies examined (Budai, 2019; Kutyifa, 2020; Boros, 2020) also deal with the tasks of school social workers and issues of cooperation with families and trust, but these works are based primarily on the recommendations set out in the Professional Guidelines rather than on empirical research results. These studies highlight the role of social workers in resolving conflicts between families, supporting the resolution of parenting problems and managing crisis situations within families. According to the authors, social workers perform these tasks using methodological tools such as family visits, consultation hours, counselling, mediation, and the organisation of

group and community programmes, which serve both prevention and relationship building.

In line with this, Herczeg and Héderné Berta (2023) emphasise that the activities of kindergarten and school social workers extend not only to the child but also to their family. The task of social workers is to involve families in the problem-solving process, to map the family background and to activate support resources. Families are often connected with other professionals or institutions, such as family and child welfare services, when the situation requires care or official intervention. This coordinating, "bridging" role is one of the main elements of case management (Máté, 2018).

The study by Herczeg and Héderné Berta (2023) also highlights that social workers in kindergartens and schools play a key role in building trust with parents. Support workers often mediate between the school and the family, facilitating communication and cooperation, especially when the child is struggling with educational, behavioural or learning problems. Participation in community events, such as parent-teacher meetings and school programmes, also contributes to strengthening the relationship between the support worker and the family. The authors conclude that the coordinating and mediating role of kindergarten and school social workers is important not only between the institution and the child, but also in strengthening cooperation between the school and the family. Social workers support families in mobilising their own resources and reactivating the support network around the child.

According to Szecskó's (2022) study, based on the experiences of school social workers, parents who have not previously met such professionals often treat them with distrust or aloofness. This is mostly due to the negative image that has developed of child protection professionals. At the same time, respondents also reported positive examples, according to which parental trust can be gradually strengthened through persistent work and the building of personal relationships.

Research by Homoki (2018) and Csók (2020) confirms that building a relationship of trust with parents is more difficult than cooperating with teachers. Lack of information, role confusion (e.g., identification with a social worker or psychologist), and previous negative experiences all contribute to mistrust. Csók (2020) classified parental attitudes into three categories: collaborative, expectant, and indifferent-rejecting. He refers to those who

cooperate with the helper, regularly seek them out, and use their services as collaborative. Miracle workers are those who also turn to the social worker with trust but expect immediate help. Indifferent-rejecters are those who do not accept the school social worker and do not turn to them even when they have a problem. The level of cooperation therefore depends largely on the openness of the parents and the credibility of the social workers.

From the point of view of building trust, it is important that social workers also build relationships with families through community events and programmes. According to Herczeg's (2024) research, group and community events are opportunities for connection not only with children but also with parents, and in many cases the parents themselves take the initiative. These joint occasions contribute to parents becoming active participants in the support process, which is one of the basic conditions for building trust.

The dimension of communication and cooperation

Communication plays a central role in maintaining the relationship between the helper and the family and in coordinating problem-solving processes. Herczeg and Héderné Berta (2023) also provide examples of how, in specific cases, the helper cooperates with the parents and even with the wider family when the aim is to identify and address the child's behavioural difficulties. The information obtained in this way is fed back to teachers and psychologists, and a joint intervention plan is developed, which may also include modifying parental behaviour (Herczeg, 2023).

Support workers also act as advisors and information providers for families: they guide them through the social care system, provide information about services and support, and, if necessary, assist them directly with administrative tasks (Budai, 2009). The communication tasks of school social workers also include informing parents about the nature, availability and objectives of the service – however, according to several studies, this information does not always reach the target group (Homoki, 2018).

The forms of contact with parents are varied: professionals regularly attend parent-teacher meetings, especially in lower grades, where they can personally present their role and tasks. Participation in school community programmes is one of the most effective tools for relationship building and informal communication. However, the majority of respondents also indicated that home visits are rare and that they prefer meetings

organised at school. If home visits do take place, they are typically conducted together with teachers or family support colleagues. (Szecskó, 2022)

Herczeg's (2023) empirical study showed that support workers maintain contact with an average of 7–8 people in each case, and that communication extends not only to the family but also to the professional community at school. This multi-level communication serves both problem solving and maintaining trust, but can often become fragmented due to coordination difficulties.

Interprofessional cooperation is one of the most important virtues of school social work (Boros, 2020; Csók, 2020). The work of professionals is characterised by close cooperation with teachers, psychologists and other social service providers, with the aim of coordinating the support network organised around the child.

At the same time, Kopasz et al. (2025) found that only a minority of school social workers consciously focus on relationships with parents and teachers. In practice, contact with parents often takes place indirectly, through other institutions. This suggests that although regulations require support to be extended to families, there are practical obstacles to implementation.

In their study analysing the experiences of the school social support service operating in the Székesfehérvár district, Kalocsai et al. (2018) emphasise that activities with families are present at both the individual and group levels. The assistants act as mediators in the parent-child-teacher relationship and, in crisis situations, initiate supportive conversations or refer those affected to specialised services. Group programmes addressing the whole family, such as parent training or community events, are important areas for building connections and trust, as well as practical examples of cooperation.

Kalocsai et al. (2018) provide practical examples of group activities for the whole family, the child's parents and relatives. The group activities are separated by age group.

For pupils in grades 1–4, they offer an optional activity called "Family Puzzle I", which draws attention to the joys of family life. The game is suitable for building relationships while learning about different family motifs, getting to know one's own family history, and learning about family functioning. In addition, children can learn about the concept of love language and its different forms.

For upper school pupils, the "Family Puzzle – II" game is used, which introduces the role of the family, family roles and commitment to family life, develops communication within the family and provides support in solving problems that may arise within the family. The game continues by addressing topics related to changed family circumstances. For example, if the previous family unit breaks down, what options are available for adapting to the situation?

The study mentions another game by name, "Szociopoly", which provides insight into the difficulties of disadvantaged families in managing their lives, contributes to the development of solidarity and team building, and is also suitable for raising awareness.

Roth (2019) came to similar conclusions in his research conducted in the Sopron district and also writes about group activities among the services to be provided to social support parents and families. He organises group sessions for parents to develop their parenting skills and "sensitivity", as well as informal parenting clubs. There were professionals in the district who organised thematic group sessions for families raising children with special or specific needs.

It often happens that conflicts between parents also arise at school, in which case the school social worker can play an important mediating role. It is often difficult for teachers to identify the reasons for rule-breaking behaviour, as they are not familiar with the family background. Teachers are not always able to provide adequate responses to problems that can be caused by a variety of family issues, such as separation, divorce, remarriage, and foster care. (Huffman, 2013)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Both the literature reviewed and empirical research support the view that one of the most important dimensions of the work of social workers in kindergartens and schools is their relationship with families. The work of social workers is not limited to the child, but is based on involving and coordinating the network of relationships surrounding the child – parents, teachers, professionals and communities. This systemic approach makes it possible to understand children's social, emotional and learning difficulties not in isolation, but in the context of their family and institutional environment.

Based on the studies reviewed, the coordinating and mediating ("bridging") role of social workers is key to the effective functioning of the child protection and education system (Herczeg & Héderné Berta, 2023; Máté, 2018). Support workers not only convey information between families and institutions, but also promote the development of mutual trust, understanding and cooperation. This role is particularly important in crisis situations, educational difficulties and conflicts in parent-child relationships (Szecskó, 2022; Herczeg, 2023).

Several sources in the literature point out that cooperation with parents is often difficult. The negative social image of child protection professionals, role confusion and lack of information may be behind this mistrust (Csók, 2020). Parents are often unfamiliar with the content and methods of the work of support professionals, so establishing contact and cooperation requires a long process of building trust. At the same time, several studies (e.g. Herczeg, 2024; Kalocsai et al., 2018) emphasise that group and community programmes are the primary areas for connection, where parents can naturally connect with support workers and the institution through active participation. These events create opportunities for direct communication and positive experiences, and contribute to the gradual strengthening of trust.

Another lesson from the studies is that, in practice, the tasks of school social workers are often narrower than what is prescribed by professional guidelines. According to research by Kopasz, Balogh and Kiss (2025), the majority of social workers work primarily with children, while conscious contact with parents and teachers is less common. This phenomenon highlights the need for further strengthening, institutional support and methodological development in order to fulfil the professional role and extend support work to families.

Overall, various studies paint a professional picture in which kindergarten and school social workers are central, integrative actors in the child-family-institution triangle. The effectiveness of their work is largely determined by how well they are able to establish relationships with parents, break down barriers of mistrust, and involve families as active partners in the support process.

Based on the above, the following areas may be important directions for future research and professional development: targeted development of relationships with parents,

strengthening communication and mediation techniques; supporting integration into local communities, especially in smaller settlements where personal acquaintance and trust are key (Homoki, 2018); and further expanding interprofessional cooperation, which combines pedagogical, psychological and social aspects.

In summary, it can be concluded that the activities of social workers in kindergartens and schools can only be truly effective if families are treated not only as participants to be involved, but as cooperating partners who, by activating their own resources, are the most important supporters of their children's development.

PART II:
PROMOTING
TOLERANCE AND
ADDRESSING
DISCRIMINATION

DISCRIMINATION AND MANIFESTATIONS OF INTOLERANCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN POLAND

Wiktoria Barnat, Oliwier Drobik, Wiktoria Sadłowska

INTRODUCTION

The media increasingly report cases of verbal or physical violence, exclusion or hate speech against other people motivated by national differences, financial status or sexual orientation. Discriminatory behavior and intolerance are well-known problems that particularly affect young people. On the one hand, this is related to the intense process of growing up, and on the other, to cultural and economic influences characteristic of a particular place and different socialization processes.

Often, young people facing these problems go unnoticed by their immediate environment. Discrimination and intolerance can take many forms, but most importantly, there are situations in which they are downplayed or the response to them is insufficient.

The aim of this publication is to present manifestations of discrimination and intolerance among young people in Poland. In addition to defining these phenomena, the situation of LGBTQ+ people and Ukrainians is discussed. The second part proposes an educational game as a tool for working with young people to broaden their knowledge about discrimination and intolerance, and presents selected programs, projects, and campaigns implemented in Poland that support people experiencing such problems.

DISCRIMINATION AND INTOLERANCE IN TERMS OF DEFINITION

Becoming aware of manifestations of discrimination and intolerance implies the need to clearly define these terms. The concepts of “intolerance” and “discrimination” are often used interchangeably, as can be seen when analyzing studies on the unequal treatment of other people due to differences related to, for example, appearance or origin. However, researchers emphasize the differences in the definition of both terms. Intolerance is

usually considered to be a negative attitude or judgment towards people whose value system or behavior is different. Its manifestations include marginalization or social exclusion. It is worth noting that it is not always associated with emotional aversion (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). According to Tadeusz Plich, intolerance can take many forms, which is why he has identified several types. The first is verbal intolerance, which is characterized using offensive language towards another person, e.g., because of their origin. At the same time, this is an example of active intolerance, also known as behavioral intolerance, which does not have to be related only to verbal attacks, but also to intentionally avoiding someone or trying to exclude them from a group. Another type of intolerance is silence when various acts of verbal aggression happen around a person, e.g., based on their sexual orientation – this is called passive intolerance. Active intolerance, on the other hand, is when a young person does not accept a peer and openly shows their dislike by verbalizing hostile, hateful slogans. In addition, Tadeusz Plich makes a difference between spontaneous intolerance, which is related to a particular moment or impulse, and organized intolerance, which is, for example, in the form of gatherings aimed at spreading harmful content about migrants or other religious beliefs. The last types of intolerance are voluntary and forced intolerance. The former is related to the belief that a certain behavior is correct because a person is “worse” than oneself, while the latter refers to the belief that one’s environment expects one to behave intolerantly towards someone. It is worth adding that some of the above intolerant attitudes are expressed in a group, while others are expressed individually. Some of them will be related to a specific social mood towards, for example, refugees or to a clearly defined social hierarchy, which is why intolerance can be additionally divided into individual and group intolerance, as well as systemic and state intolerance (according to: Majerek, 2005).

Discrimination, on the other hand, is defined as active behavior that negatively affects the functioning of a person or group of people characterized by a specific trait, such as gender, age, nationality, religion, sexual orientation or financial status (Jarosz et al., 2023). An example of discrimination would be a situation in which heteronormative people attribute negative characteristics to non-heteronormative people, calling them “different”. This leads to stigmatization and different – often worse – treatment, e.g., by denying them the rights that heterosexual people enjoy. Erving Goffman indicates three main categories of stigmatization, which is an important element of discriminatory

actions. The first is related to physical impairments, a different appearance that deviates from the “norm” – e.g., various types of disabilities. The second type is related to the psychological sphere of a person – more precisely, importance is attributed to a person's personality and character, which influence their functioning, e.g., alcohol addiction, sexual orientation or long-term unemployment. The last type draws attention to stigmatization on religious, cultural or national grounds. These types of stigmatization affect the image of people belonging to these groups as less valuable in society, because they represent minority groups (according to: Winiarska & Klaus, 2011). Students usually define discrimination as: persecution, exclusion from a group, unequal treatment, humiliation or mockery. In addition, they distinguish between different forms of discrimination: physical aggression, verbal aggression, and disregard and rejection (Szydłowska & Ćwirynkało, 2024). It is worth noting the definitional framework of the concept of “aggression,” which can be a single act that violates a person's well-being. On the other hand, repeated behavior that causes harm to another person while exploiting one's advantage over that person is referred to as violence (Leżucha, 2020, p. 106). The essence of behaviors that are considered discriminatory are stereotypes and prejudices. They are the main motivation for actions that violate human rights. According to Philip Zimbardo and Richard Gerrig, a stereotype is “a generalization about people that involves attributing the same characteristics to all members of a group” (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 2012, p. 747). Thus, stereotypes make it easier for people to understand the world around them — they are widespread and give the impression of being accurate opinions that are difficult to challenge because they are upheld by people who are considered authorities in society (Rutkowska, 2007, p. 34). Moreover, they are the basis for the formation of prejudices, which are characterized by a specific emotional attitude, resulting in discrimination in the form of specific actions towards another person (Garbacz, 2020).

According to available publications and studies on this issue, the most common reasons for discriminatory behavior among young people in Poland were: physical appearance, financial status, nationality, race, religious differences, gender identity and sexual orientation. In addition, researchers emphasize the importance of categories that are seemingly acceptable in society but whose functioning leads to the marginalization and exclusion of people from minority groups: the canon of male characteristics based on physical strength and heterosexuality; the higher position of men in society, differences in the upbringing of boys and girls, the leading position of the Roman Catholic Church, an

education system that is not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities and a hierarchical model of adult-child relations (Jonczy-Adamska, 2015).

MANIFESTATIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AND INTOLERANCE IN POLISH SCHOOLS

Adolescence is an extremely intense period in every person's life due to the variety of changes that the human body experiences. In addition to intense physical development, young people begin to form their own unique attitudes, develop their own view of the world and try to adapt to the specific norms and values manifested in a given society (Zimbardo et al., 2010). During adolescence, school and the people who are a part of it start to play an increasingly important role. Teenagers make new friends and interact with their peers in various ways. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial model of human development, young people face the enormous challenge of defining their own identity during adolescence. In order to protect their own "self," they may create situations in which any "differences" lead to increased discrimination against others. Above all, this is aimed at maintaining a sense of identity as an integral and coherent whole. The peer group with which they establish relationships is important. This is because it creates a dichotomous division – "us" or "them" – towards their peers (Chajbos-Walczak & Małkowicz, 2023). If a teenager is a member of an informal youth group that manifests violent behavior, there is a significantly higher risk that these patterns of behavior will be carried out not only at school, but also outside of it, e.g., at home or in public places. It is worth mentioning that a young person who is not accepted by their peers – who has no friends or colleagues – may experience enormous frustration, which may in time transform into discriminatory and violent behavior towards others (Cudak, 2023).

It should be emphasized that school is a place where teenagers spend a significant amount of their time during the week. A very important factor shaping the well-being of young people at school is safety, which, in addition to establishing and building appropriate relationships with peers and teachers, means not feeling threatened by fear, worries and anxiety about other people. According to data from the report "Behaviors and situations of discrimination in Katowice schools and ways to prevent this phenomenon in the opinions of students" from 2023, 24% of people in Katowice primary schools and 14.5%

of teenagers in secondary schools felt unsafe (Jarosz et al., 2023). According to the students, the lack of appropriate measures to prevent discrimination at school is related to the small number of teachers, a lack of information and low level of knowledge about the phenomenon and its consequences, dissatisfaction with attending school and frustration caused by the education system (Szydłowska & Ćwirynkało, 2024).

Discrimination at school is still a very important issue, which often goes unnoticed. The study “Who is treated the worst at school? Discrimination and peer violence in Polish schools. Poznań educational research 2021”, which considers various forms of violence (including humiliation, exclusion, ignoring due to a certain characteristic) compared with the concept of “discrimination,” it was shown that among primary and secondary school students, the most common cause of aggression was appearance – respectively 63.8% and 48.2%. In second place in primary schools was low material status – 38.2%, and in secondary schools, worldview – 26.8%. The next positions among primary school students were: intellectual disability – 38.2% and sexual orientation – 32.5%. In secondary schools, the next most common reasons were sexual orientation (26.1%), low material status (24.9%), and intellectual disability (23.8%). It is worth noting that the study revealed more frequent declarations of worse treatment of girls than boys in almost all of the categories mentioned (Chmura-Rutkowska et al., 2023).

One form of discriminatory behavior is violence. According to research conducted by the Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation (We Give Strength to Children) – “Diagnosis of violence against children in Poland 2023” – 66% of the young people who were surveyed experienced some form of violence from their peers between the ages of 11 and 17. In addition, the research indicates that young people living in rural areas were less likely to experience acts of aggression from their peers (63%) than teenagers living in cities (70%). The report clearly states that physical violence is the most common type of aggressive behavior among teenagers. 27% of young people admitted that they had experienced a physical attack during the study. Meanwhile, 48% of those surveyed confirmed that they had experienced physical violence at least once in their lives. The manifestations of this violence included cuts, bruises, and fractures, which were reported by over 25% of teenagers. The researchers also presented data on other forms of peer violence. Psychological violence ranked second in terms of popularity – 27% in 2023 and 44% ever. Further positions: bullying – 10%, group assault – 8% in 2023 and

18% and 17% respectively in the period preceding the survey. In the majority of cases of violence experienced by teenagers, the abusers were people from their environment – peers from school or siblings (Makaruk et al., 2023).

THE SITUATION OF UKRAINIANS IN POLAND

The situation related to the war in Ukraine and the acceptance of refugees from this country means that the issue of prejudice and aversion to otherness is gaining importance in Poland. Alongside the early wave of aid and sympathy for refugees from Ukraine, attitudes of exhaustion, concern, and increased sensitivity to the potential consequences of accepting such many war migrants have also begun to appear. Poland had not previously dealt with such a large influx (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023) – in February 2025, almost one million Ukrainian citizens were benefiting from temporary protection (Urząd do spraw cudzoziemców, 2025).

The issue was already being discussed among the Polish people during the migration crisis in 2015. Although it did not directly concern Poland, it had an impact on the social perception of refugees, and a CBOS survey conducted in December 2015, i.e. after the terrorist attacks in Paris, noted a deterioration in attitudes towards immigrants (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2015). However, as a 2016 study shows, opposition at that time mainly concerned newcomers from the Middle East and Africa, with much less hostility directed towards Ukraine (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2016).

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 caused a great deal of activism among Poles and a willingness to help. Over 90% of Poles surveyed in an April 2022 CBOS poll declared that Poland should accept war migrants from Ukraine, with only 4% of respondents disagreeing (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2022). The aid took the form of financial, material, and even housing support – Ukraine quickly became part of Polish society (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023). Over time, support for accepting refugees began to decline – for example, in October 2022, 76% of Poles supported accepting Ukrainian refugees, thus continuing the downward trend that had been visible for months since the outbreak of the war and the early enthusiasm. In this survey, 17% of Poles were against it (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2022).

There was also a rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiment among the Polish population – a 2025 survey (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2025) showed a decline in sympathy from 40% to 30% and an increase in hostility from 30% to 38% compared to the previous year's survey (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2024). For comparison, one year after the outbreak of the war, i.e. in 2023, 51% of respondents declared sympathy, and 17% declared antipathy (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2023).

There are many reasons why more and more Poles have begun to feel antipathy towards those whom they had thronged to help just a few years earlier. Due to the benefits and rights that Ukrainians have received, including the possibility of legal residence, work, various types of benefits, free education, and the right to receive a PESEL number, they have become a kind of rival to Poles for the public goods offered by the state (Długosz & Izdebska-Długosz, 2024). There is a concern among the Polish population about losing priority, access to housing or job offers (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023). At the same time, Poles do not have enough trust in institutions or the state to make this concern seem unreasonable (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022).

Public opinion is rife with accusations of Ukrainians being “demanding,” despite their “privileged status” and “better treatment” (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022). Perhaps this is because they differ too much from the stereotype of the “poor refugee” (Długosz & Izdebska-Długosz, 2024). These prejudices are maintained by widespread stories from people who have heard “from friends” about events that are supposed to be proof of the demanding nature of Ukrainian refugees and their exploitation of the Polish state (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022). At the same time, one cannot ignore the natural exhaustion of Poles with the topic of war, which will also affect attitudes towards helping Ukrainians (Bogoni & Normann, 2024).

The beliefs of Poles about their history and their attachment to it will also be significant – 76% believe that the Polish nation has been harmed much more often than other nations, and 73% say that Poles have acted more nobly than other nations throughout history (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2016). Therefore, the Volhynia massacre, during which Ukrainian nationalists, supported by the Ukrainian population, murdered the Polish minority in the 1940s, is still remembered by Poles and makes integration with the Ukrainian nation difficult (Balcer, 2023). In a study on hate speech against Ukrainians,

nearly 400,000 anti-Ukrainian statements were collected, some of which used the Volhynia massacre to spread hatred against Ukrainians (Jakubowski & Tatar, 2023).

Despite the rather negative data presented, there are also positive aspects to the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees. Mainly, it's a chance for Poles to learn tolerance towards differences as well as to learn to be more open (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023). This influx of people, especially kids, isn't a neutral thing for the country either, considering the demographic decline (Długosz & Izdebska-Długosz, 2024). There is also a stated contentment that Ukrainians are taking up work in Poland, thus contributing to the national income, and that the jobs they take on are often less appealing to Polish workers (Sadura & Sierakowski, 2022).

THE SITUATION OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE IN POLAND

Today, we live in a world undergoing numerous changes, including economic, social, and political transformations. However, discrimination continues to permeate fundamental areas of life such as race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Although sexual minorities exist in all societies – making up about 5% of the population, and nearly 2 million in Poland – they continue to face intolerance, harassment, and even persecution (Czeszejko-Sochacka, 2019).

The year 2019 marked a period when issues related to LGBTQ+ communities gained increasing attention in public discourse, particularly in connection with the controversial LGBT+ charter adopted in Warsaw. This topic also became a high-profile element during the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 presidential elections. Against this backdrop, the Public Opinion Research Centre – Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS) analyzed public perceptions of sexual minorities by asking Poles about their attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [CBOS], 2021).

The presence of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland and awareness among Polish citizens has varied over the years. In 2008, only 15% of respondents personally knew someone who identified as LGBTQ+. By 2021, this percentage had risen to 43% – an approximately threefold increase. Reports suggest that this growth may be due both to greater openness in revealing one's sexual orientation and to respondents no longer hiding their

acquaintance with LGBTQ+ individuals, due to taboos and controversies that were more prevalent in the past (CBOS, 2021, p. 1–2).

Respondents were also asked whether they considered homosexuality to be the norm or a deviation from it. In 2021, approximately 23% of respondents stated that "homosexuality is normal," six times higher than the 4% reported in 2005. However, the majority in 2021 believed that "homosexuality is a deviation from the norm, but it should be tolerated" – 51%. On the other hand, 17% of respondents stated that homosexuality is not normal and cannot be tolerated (CBOS, 2021).

Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals have a significant impact on how Poles perceive their rights. Approximately 34% of respondents believed that LGBTQ+ people should have the right to publicly express their sexual orientation, representing a 6-percentage-point increase compared to 2019. Similar results were observed regarding the right of same-sex couples to marry, with about 34% in favor – a 5-percentage-point increase since 2019. A notable increase, nearly doubling, was recorded regarding the right of same-sex couples to adopt children: in 2019, 9% of respondents were affirmative, while in 2021, this rose to 16%. Despite these changes, a significant proportion of Poles still believe that people of different sexual orientations should not have certain rights: publicly expressing their lifestyle (57%), marrying (56%), or adopting children (75%) (CBOS, 2021, p. 7–8).

According to the latest IPSOS report from 2025, covering 26 countries and involving 17,525 adults aged 16–74, 36% of respondents in Poland support LGBTQ+ people being open about their sexual identity. This does not place Poland last among the countries surveyed, but support is nearly half of that in Spain, Thailand, or Ireland, while 26% expressed opposition (Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur [IPSOS], 2025, p. 11). The survey also asked about attitudes towards public displays of affection by LGBTQ+ individuals (e.g., holding hands): 26% of Poles approved, while 38% opposed it (IPSOS, 2025, p. 12), which aligns with the 2021 CBOS survey results. A large percentage of Poles do not view the increasing presence of LGBTQ+ characters in films, TV series, or advertisements positively – 43%, which is much higher than in Thailand (7%). Only three countries recorded higher opposition: Turkey (53%), Hungary (48%), and South Korea (45%). Only 18% of Poles expressed a positive attitude towards this phenomenon (IPSOS, 2025, p. 15), indicating that some Poles may avoid media featuring LGBTQ+ individuals. Similarly, 41% opposed workplace programs supporting LGBTQ+ people, placing Poland

second among the biggest opponents, after Turkey (48%). Only 23% expressed support, a 4-percentage-point increase compared to 19% previously (IPSOS, 2025, p. 19). Despite high opposition to certain measures, Poles broadly support rights protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in employment, education, housing, and social services – 43% – which, while not the highest globally, prevents Poland from being ranked last (IPSOS, 2025, p. 27).

According to the 2025 report, 31% of Poles believe that same-sex couples should have the legal right to marry, another 31% support some form of legal recognition short of marriage, 14% have no opinion, and 24% oppose any legalization of same-sex relationships – higher opposition was observed in Turkey (42%), South Korea (28%), Singapore (28%), and Peru (25%). A majority oppose adoption rights for same-sex couples – 55% – with higher opposition found only in Turkey (62%) (IPSOS, 2025, p. 42–43).

The "Młodzież 2021" survey highlights that attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals vary by age and generational change. Secondary school students were asked about their attitudes towards gay and lesbian people. Results showed that 61% held positive attitudes – almost half higher than adults (37%) – while only 20% expressed dislike, and only 10% reported "extreme dislike." This indicates that teenagers hold diverse attitudes, with positive ones prevailing over negative (Kawalec, 2022, p. 158–160).

Several factors contribute to this situation. Discrimination and hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities may be strongly linked to the influential role of the Church in Poland – including concerns about the perceived negative social impact of "gender ideology" and the constant presence of this issue in political debates and election campaigns (Kawalec, 2022, p. 158). It may also be influenced by Poles' promotion of traditional gender roles, conservative principles, and attachment to conventional social and family models, which shape worldview and identity. Additionally, disinformation campaigns about sexual minorities contribute to widespread discrimination. According to the 2021 report by the "Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE)," countries outside the EU attempt to spread misinformation about LGBTQ+ communities. The report identifies six main areas: intimidation using "gender ideology," defending a traditional social and divine order, portraying LGBTQIA+ as Western neo-colonialism, fostering negative perceptions

of diversity, defending traditional family rights, and presenting LGBTQIA+ as a threat to children and youth. Such campaigns primarily aim to create social conflict and weaken national cohesion (Kłos & Świącicki, 2024, p. 143–144).

In Poland, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals are slowly changing, with studies showing increased acceptance in recent years. Poles are generally more positive towards sexual minorities than a decade ago. Nevertheless, many still oppose same-sex marriage legalization and adoption rights, and remain reluctant to allow LGBTQ+ individuals to publicly express their lifestyles or participate in workplace support programs. Reports indicate that younger generations exhibit lower levels of negative attitudes, suggesting the potential for broader social change in the future.

PREVENTION AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION AND INTOLERANCE IN POLAND

Mental health is an important component in every person's life, allowing them to function properly in society. Thanks to it, teenagers can pursue their passions, expand their knowledge, develop spiritually and physically, discover their needs, and understand their emotions. In this way, young people acquire all the necessary skills to effectively counteract and respond to stressful situations, pursue developmental tasks, and cope with various problems (Kluczyńska & Sokołowska, 2023). However, belonging to a minority group and the lack of appropriate actions aimed at educating the public about tolerance, acceptance, and equality can significantly worsen the mental and physical health of young people, which is why various initiatives and social projects are so important. In view of the challenges facing Poland in combating discrimination and manifestations of intolerance, public institutions and non-governmental organizations are conducting campaigns, programs, and initiatives aimed at both educating the public and providing support to those experiencing these phenomena.

Nowadays, school not only lets you learn about humanities and science, but also shapes young people's attitudes, worldviews, and behavior. Various manifestations of discrimination and intolerance among young people in educational institutions in Poland have already been described, which is why it is so important to be able to meet the challenges faced by teachers, educators, and psychologists in preventing the spread of these phenomena. Students from primary schools in Katowice who took part in the study

“Discrimination at school. The perspective of students and teachers indicated that the most desirable way to intervene in acts of discrimination and intolerance at school is to punish the perpetrators – as many as 59% of respondents chose this answer. In addition, students indicated that the following are important: the professional abilities and skills of teachers to deal with a given situation appropriately (50%), ensuring a comfortable, confidential, and safe way to report incidents (56%) and lessons during which students can learn about the potential consequences of intolerance and become aware of the responsibility associated with it (49%). The situation is slightly different among secondary school students in Katowice, where as many as 65% of teenagers emphasize the option of safely reporting incidents of discrimination and intolerance, e.g., by creating a designated place where they can anonymously write a message and drop it into a box. Responses regarding punishing perpetrators (64%) and training teachers on how to respond to such incidents (63%) were equally high. In addition, 46% of secondary school students and 41% of primary school students indicated that teachers, educators, and class leaders should educate students on how to defend themselves against various acts of discrimination (Jarosz et al., 2023).

One of the problems associated with discrimination among young people is the financial situation of their families. Children and young people from poorer backgrounds are often made fun of and humiliated because they cannot afford to buy branded clothes or modern technological devices. In 2016, the Polish government developed the “Family 500+” child benefit program, which was paid for the second and subsequent children until they reach the age of 18. Initially, the program was intended to improve the demographic situation in the country, but over time it was recognized that it reduces poverty and deprivation among families, contributing to the better functioning of children and young people in society and equalizing life chances. In 2019, a decision was made to extend the benefit to the first child born in a family, and in 2024, the amount of the benefit increased to PLN 800. The “Family 500+” program, and later “Family 800+,” is paid out every month, and from the very beginning, every family that met the conditions received it – there was no specific financial threshold (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2016: 2019: 2024). However, it is worth noting that according to a report by the European Anti-Poverty Network – Poland, in 2022, the percentage of children living in extreme poverty increased to almost 400,000 compared to 2021 – from 5.3% to 5.7% (Europejska Sieć Przeciwdziałania Ubóstwu, 2023). It is worth considering whether the assistance

provided by the state is enough and doesn't need more in-depth analysis and improvements.

Projects aimed at supporting LGBT+ people are becoming increasingly common in Poland. One such example is the “Safe School for Everyone” project, sponsored by the Campaign Against Homophobia and implemented by the Tkalnia Association in Łódź and the surrounding area. In addition to young people studying in the Łódź Province, teachers can also participate in the project, including training courses on non-discrimination. Project participants attend anti-discrimination workshops. They also can receive psychological counseling (Kampania Przeciw Homofobii, 2025). Another example of support for young people belonging to the LGBT+ community is the activity of the Stonewall Group Association – Training “For Schools,” which organizes anti-discrimination workshops for students addressing issues of homophobia and transphobia, explaining what discrimination is, and analyzing and discussing stereotypes. In addition, training courses are organized for teachers, during which they can learn about gender identity and psychosexual orientation, and the concept of minority stress is described (Stowarzyszenie Grupa Stonewall, 2023). Another interesting idea aimed at supporting LGBT+ youth in schools and raising students' awareness of this issue is the “Rainbow Lessons” initiative, which has resulted in the creation of topics related to the functioning of the LGBT+ community, adapted to specific school subjects, including biology, philosophy, homeroom, history, Polish language and English language, with the involvement of professors from various universities in Poland and abroad. The website provides individual lesson plans and downloadable materials that teachers can use when teaching lessons on the subject. For example, in biology class, you can talk about “Minority stress and the health of homosexual and bisexual people” (Dr. habil. Grzegorz Iniewicz, Professor at Jagiellonian University), in homeroom about “Beauty care or body discipline?” (Professor, Dr. habil. Małgorzata Fuszara), in history about “Marriage between men in Renaissance Rome” (Dr. habil. Piotr Laskowski, University Professor), and in Polish language about “Gender inequalities in language” (Professor Lucyna Gebert, Sapienza University of Rome) (Tęczowe lekcje, n.d.).

Another example of a program, this time aimed at combating exclusion and violence in schools, is the “Human Rights Friendly School” program in Warsaw, which mainly emphasizes respect for the rights of others and preventing violent behavior in schools.

In addition, the program helps to initiate the process of integration and create an environment open to diversity by developing interpersonal and communication skills, particularly when conflicts arise and responding appropriately to such situations. The pilot program began in 2018 and ended at the end of 2019, with a decision to extend it to all primary schools in Warsaw by 2025. Non-teaching staff and parents are also involved in the project activities. Participants have the opportunity to take part in student debates, workshops, and integration activities. In addition, the project program offers the use of tools such as the Self-Reg approach and the Common Cause Method (Warszawskie Centrum Innowacji, 2025).

Another type of activity aimed at reducing discrimination and intolerant attitudes among young people in schools is helping children and teenagers from Ukraine who, because of the war in Ukraine, were forced to leave their country and settle in Poland. The language barrier, difficulties in adapting to a different reality and war experiences are just some of the problems faced by teenagers from Ukraine. Cultural differences should also be considered. Therefore, in 2025, a project called “Strengthen, educate, integrate: support for refugee children through Intercultural Assistants in schools in Lower Silesia” was launched in Lower Silesia, with the aim of facilitating adaptation, integration and learning for refugee children in Polish schools through the involvement of intercultural assistants, Polish language lessons, training and support for teachers, and the preparation of school activities to break down barriers, make friends, and understand cultural differences. Project implementation period: February 2025 – August 2025 (Fundacja Ukraina, 2025). Another example of a similar initiative is the government's “Friendly School” program for 2025–2027, financed by the European Union. The program is divided into three modules: “Assistant support – funding for the employment of intercultural assistants,” “Well-being of school communities” and “Improvement of education system staff”. During the project, the needs of young people from Ukraine are diagnosed, so cultural assistants can come up with the right activities to help students, like making sure they have equal educational opportunities. In addition, participation in the project provides specialist consultations for students, career counseling, teacher support, student integration and the creation of a friendly atmosphere in schools based on equality, empathy, and mutual understanding (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2025).

It is worth noting that Poland has a helpline for children and young people, which provides support for teenagers in difficult situations and works 24 hours a day, every day. Anyone in crisis can call 116 111 and talk to a specialist about their problem, whether it concerns puberty and sexuality, family situations or violence they are experiencing. If the situation poses a threat to the health or life of the child, helpline staff are required to inform the appropriate services, which will provide protection and support to the teenager (116 111 – telefon zaufania dla dzieci i młodzieży, b.d.). Telephone support is also offered by the National Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence “Blue Line” operating 24 hours a day at 800 12 00 02, for people who experience various types of violence (Niebieska linia, b.d.). Another example of telephone support for children is the Public Benefit Organization – Children’s Friends Association, which operates every day from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at 800 119 119 and allows children to talk to a psychologist about their difficulties. It is a form of support for young people in mental crisis (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci, n.d.).

Mentioned above are only a few of the initiatives, programs and projects aimed at supporting young people in Poland. The most important conclusion to be drawn from these examples is that Poland is actively working to raise awareness among the general public and young people about discrimination and manifestations of intolerance, providing financial, psychological and educational support, particularly to children exposed to violence, young people from LGBT+ communities, and refugee children from Ukraine. And although public attitudes can vary, and stereotypes and prejudices against minority groups still exist, it is necessary to continue taking action to promote intercultural education, shape attitudes of equality, lessons in empathy and understanding of other people, so that as many people as possible can participate in social life on an equal level without fear for their health and life.

CONCLUSIONS

Risky behaviors such as intolerance and discrimination are quite a serious problem among young people, as they have an impact not only on the victims and abusers, but also on their environment. Apart from the family, which is responsible for the primary socialization of the child, school has a huge impact on shaping and correcting the behavior

of young people. The proper assimilation of norms and values contributes to the safe development of the school environment and limits various signs of intolerance.

Every day in Poland, various forms of discrimination take place, from inappropriate and offensive comments to various acts of physical aggression, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of other people – usually representing minority groups. Counteracting intolerance and discrimination among young people, as well as among older people, should involve raising public awareness of these phenomena and emphasizing their consequences. All kinds of preventive and educational actions play an important role.

The situation of people from Ukraine who came to Poland because of the war in their country has changed significantly. After several years, the Polish nation has become increasingly hostile towards Ukrainians. Poles have begun to fear for their own safety and, at the same time, feel social injustice in relation to the rights granted to Ukrainians, which were formerly reserved for Poles. However, there are increasingly frequent initiatives aimed at helping refugee children from Ukraine adapt to life in Poland so that they can function properly without the need for long-term state support, e.g., in the form of benefits. These include Polish language lessons, the involvement of intercultural assistants in schools and psychological support.

Over the decades, it has been noticeable that Poles' attitudes towards members of the LGBT+ community have been changing. Research shows that young people are more tolerant towards the LGBT+ community than older people. Various forms of support for young people belonging to LGBT+ communities are becoming increasingly common, including the organization of anti-discrimination workshops. However, this group continues to be at risk of marginalization in society, for example due to the lack of opportunities to formalize same-sex relationships and the negative attitude of the rest of society towards such solutions.

In Poland, there are an increasing number of foundations, associations and government initiatives aimed at reducing the negative consequences of discrimination and intolerance among young people – both in terms of assistance, intervention and education. Thanks to them, Poland could slowly but effectively create an inclusive society in which every person is respected regardless of their origin, sexual orientation, financial status or health condition.

THE CONCEPT OF TOLERANCE AND DIVERSITY IN THE SLOVAK EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Zuzana Hrabovská, Soňa Szabó

Tolerance is a fundamental societal value closely linked to human rights, equality, and democratic principles. It does not require agreement with others' views but rather respect for their right to hold different opinions (Flowers, 2007). Contemporary Slovak society, similarly to other European countries, faces increasing polarization, social fragmentation, and reduced acceptance of diversity related to culture, beliefs, lifestyles, or political views, which significantly affects the school environment

In Slovakia, systematic attention to tolerance in education began primarily after 1989 and is grounded in international human rights frameworks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as national legislation such as the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and the Anti-Discrimination Act (Flowers, 2007). The current educational reform emphasizes tolerance as an essential component of inclusive education, aiming to support respect for diversity and the harmonious development of children's intellectual, emotional, and social capacities (Act No. 245/2008 Coll.; Act No. 138/2019 Coll.).

Key strategic documents of the Ministry of Education further support inclusive and tolerant school environments, including the First Action Plan for the Inclusive Education Strategy 2022–2024 and methodological materials focused on school desegregation and barrier removal (Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic [MESRS], 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). These documents highlight the importance of school support teams, positive school climate, and equal access to education for all pupils, including those with special educational needs.

Despite this framework, Slovak schools face significant challenges related to social change, parental attitudes toward diversity, and insufficient professional preparedness of teachers. Educators often experience uncertainty and psychological strain when working

with diverse student populations, underscoring the need for enhanced pre-service and in-service teacher training focused on tolerance, diversity management, and prevention of risky behaviour (MESRS, 2022a).

Research indicates that adolescent risky behaviour results from the interaction of individual vulnerabilities and environmental factors, with family relationships playing a crucial role (Baranovská et al., 2020). Self-regulation has been identified as a key protective factor, as lower levels of self-regulation are strongly associated with higher involvement in risky activities (Banárová et al., 2023).

National research confirms a decline in mental well-being, increased exposure to online hate, persistent bullying, and excessive internet use among Slovak children and adolescents (Holdoš et al., 2022; MESRS, 2024). In response, Slovakia has introduced legislative, preventive, and educational measures, including criminalization of dangerous electronic harassment and national prevention projects focusing on mental health support and professional training.

Tolerance remains a cornerstone of peaceful coexistence, but legislation alone is insufficient. Sustainable progress depends on coordinated efforts among schools, families, professionals, and institutions, with a strong focus on prevention, self-regulation, and emotional competence as key tools for reducing risky behaviour and supporting healthy development in Slovak schools.

[WORKSHOP PROPOSAL]:

UNMASK THE INTOLERANCE

Wiktoria Barnat, Oliwier Drobik, Wiktoria Sadłowska

After analyzing research and academic publications related to discrimination and intolerance in Poland – particularly in the context of young people – it was decided to develop a tool to support conversations with teenagers about prejudice, marginalization, diversity and equality. As a result, an educational game was created to raise awareness of intolerance and discrimination, including against people from Ukraine and the LGBTQ+ community, who face various forms of violence and social isolation.

The game “Unmask the Intolerance” was created based on the popular game “Mafia”. A total of 11 people can participate:

- 1 „narrator”,
- 3 „prejudiced”,
- 1 „educator”,
- 1 „social worker”,
- 5 „tolerant”.

However, you can increase or decrease the number of players by modifying the number of individual roles as you wish. The recommended minimum number is 6 players. Roles are randomized or assigned by the narrator, but it is important that no one knows what role the other players have been assigned. Players are randomly divided into two main groups: “tolerant residents” and “prejudiced residents.” In addition to this, the game requires a narrator, who also acts as the game moderator.

GAME GOALS:

- For the “prejudiced” group – to exclude “tolerant” residents from the city so that the city can be taken over by intolerance.
- For the “tolerant” group – to eliminate the “prejudiced” from the city so that they do not spread intolerance and exclusion.

Among the “tolerant” residents, there are two additional roles with special abilities: ‘educator’ and “social worker.”

- The “educator” can indicate to the narrator at the appropriate moment in the game which person they want to protect from intolerance, including themselves.
- The “social worker” can check the identity of a particular player in each round – at the appropriate moment in the game, the narrator can reveal the role of the person indicated by the social worker – and will then find out whether they are a prejudiced or tolerant resident.

GAMEPLAY:

The game is based on the “night” and ‘day’ of the city. At night, the “city sleeps,” i.e., all players except the narrator close their eyes. During the night, the narrator calls on individual players to “wake up,” i.e., open their eyes. At the beginning, the group of “prejudiced” players who are called by the narrator “wake up” and at this point they find out each other’s identities. Their task is to silently (e.g. with their finger) indicate to the narrator who will be the victim of intolerance and exclusion that night. When they succeed, they close their eyes. Then the “educator” opens his eyes and silently shows the narrator who he wants to protect from the attack of intolerance (he does not have to indicate correctly) and then closes his eyes again. Finally, the “social worker” wakes up and silently indicates to the narrator the person whose identity they want to know. The narrator is then required to silently indicate whether the person is ‘prejudiced’ (thumb down or shake of the head) or “tolerant” (thumb up or nod of the head). After receiving the information, he also closes his eyes. After the night, the day follows, when all participants open their eyes and the narrator informs who was excluded that night by the “prejudiced” and will therefore no longer actively participate in the game.

A discussion begins, during which players try to figure out who among them is “prejudiced” At this point, the game organizer may raise the topic of intolerance from a theoretical perspective – presenting statistics, discussing the issue, and giving examples of such behavior from real life. After the discussion, each player votes for the person they believe to be “prejudiced” and spreading intolerance. The person with the most votes is eliminated from the game. In the case of a draw, no one is eliminated. This is followed by another night and the pattern repeats itself.

POSSIBLE ENDINGS:

- The “tolerant” group wins the game when all “prejudiced” players are revealed and eliminated.
- The “prejudiced” group wins when the number of “prejudiced” players equals the number of “tolerant” players (which also includes the “educator” and ‘social worker’ roles) – at which point intolerance reigns in the city.

After the game, the game organizer asks individual players questions about the emotions they experienced during the game:

- How did you feel as a prejudiced person?
- How did you feel as a tolerant person?
- Which moment in the game caused the strongest reaction in you and why?
- What signals (facial expressions, gestures, arguments) most often indicated intolerance?

The game can be emotionally taxing, especially for people who must face the role of “prejudiced,” so it is important that the person organizing the game ensures at the beginning that the assigned role is not the same as the person playing that role. In addition, it is a good idea to establish a short **contract** with the participants – if any participant feels uncomfortable with their assigned role, they can raise their hand at any stage of the game and then become an observer.

THE GAME “UNMASK THE INTOLERANCE”:

- It can be a useful tool for educators, psychologists, and social workers working with young people to address issues related to discriminatory behavior.
- It provides information about the group and its possible tendencies to engage in discriminatory behavior, allowing for example the class teacher to know what topics to educate teenagers about.
- It shapes and develops young people's reasoning skills – why engaging in risky behavior related to intolerance towards others is harmful.

[ACTIVITY]:

TOLERANCE & DIGITAL SPACE ACTIVITY – IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES

Soňa Szabó, Diana Rybárová

This activity focuses on developing empathy, tolerance, and responsible behaviour in both offline and digital environments. Participants work with role cards that describe different life situations related to diversity, inclusion, and digital challenges. By stepping into someone else's perspective, participants reflect on emotions, obstacles, and possible supportive actions.

Participants draw or are assigned a role card and are given time to think individually or in small groups about the situation. Guided questions help them imagine daily experiences, emotional reactions, and potential solutions.

MAIN GOAL:

- To develop empathy and perspective-taking
- To strengthen tolerance toward diversity and difference
- To raise awareness of digital risks and responsible online behaviour

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Printed role cards
- Paper and pens (optional, for notes or reflections)

TIME FRAME:

- 30–45 minutes

REFLECTION:

The activity concludes with a group discussion. Participants share insights about how it felt to imagine another person's situation and what surprised them most. The facilitator guides reflection toward practical actions—how participants can contribute to a more inclusive environment and how they can behave responsibly and supportively in digital spaces.

ROLE CARDS USED IN THE ACTIVITY

- **Participant using a wheelchair in a small-town school** – focuses on accessibility and inclusion
- **Participant from a Muslim family** – explores cultural diversity and respect
- **Participant with ADHD** – highlights invisible challenges and supportive strategies
- **Cyberbullying in a class group chat** – addresses bystander behaviour and help-seeking
- **Social media addiction** – raises awareness of unhealthy digital habits

ROLE CARD 1: PARTICIPANT USING A WHEELCHAIR IN A SMALL-TOWN SCHOOL

You use a wheelchair and attend a school in a small town. Some parts of the school building are not accessible, and you cannot freely move everywhere. Sometimes you cannot participate in class trips or activities because the transport or location is not adapted for wheelchair users.

THINK ABOUT:

- What do you enjoy most at school despite these barriers?
- How do you feel when your class goes somewhere you cannot join?
- What changes would make your school more accessible and inclusive?

ROLE CARD 2: PARTICIPANT FROM A MUSLIM FAMILY

Your family comes from another country, and your household follows Muslim traditions. You do not eat pork, and during Ramadan you fast. Some classmates ask questions that feel uncomfortable or make jokes about your food or customs.

THINK ABOUT:

- How do you usually explain your traditions to others?
- When do you feel respected, and when do you feel misunderstood?
- What helps others learn about your culture in a respectful way?

ROLE CARD 3: PARTICIPANT WITH ADHD

You have ADHD. Sometimes you forget homework, interrupt others, or find it difficult to sit still during lessons. Teachers and classmates may tell you to “try harder” or “behave better,” even though you are already trying.

THINK ABOUT:

- What helps you focus better during lessons?
- How do you feel when others get annoyed with your behaviour?
- What could teachers or classmates do to support you more effectively?

ROLE CARD 4: CYBERBULLYING IN A CLASS GROUP CHAT

You are part of a class group chat on WhatsApp. Some participants start sharing mocking photos and jokes about one classmate. Most people stay silent, some laugh, and a few forward the messages to others.

THINK ABOUT:

- What would you do as a bystander in this situation?
- Why do people often hesitate to intervene in online bullying?
- Where can the targeted participant seek help and support?

ROLE CARD 5: SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

A participant in your class spends 6–7 hours a day on TikTok and Instagram. Schoolwork, sleep, and real-life friendships are neglected. When others express concern, the participant insists everything is “under control.”

THINK ABOUT:

- How can excessive social media use be recognized?
- What are the possible consequences for mental health, school performance, and relationships?
- What are examples of healthy and balanced digital habits?

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING TOLERANCE THROUGH STORYTELLING, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND VISUAL EDUCATION

Alexa Fábrián, Zsanett Márta Kocsis

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Intolerance, prejudice, and their opposites – tolerance and acceptance of others – are pressing issues both in Hungary and around the world. Defining these concepts is complex even for experienced professionals. According to Rózsa Bertók, tolerance is a relative concept, as it is both a relational concept and a reciprocal concept. It is difficult to determine whether tolerance has a positive or negative meaning, as it is good to tolerate good things, but not good to tolerate bad things. If we want to go beyond defining the term, we must take into account the concept of personalization, which is inherent in intolerance in today's European thinking. Individuals not only do not tolerate certain hairstyles or clothing, but also exclude those who wear them. Following Bertók's example, *'it matters whether someone does not tolerate fish in their own diet or stigmatizes and excludes fish eaters,'* which adequately illustrates the phenomenon of personalization (Bertók, 2006, p. 2).

Prejudice is another key concept, defined by Eliot Aronson, who describes prejudice as *'a hostile or negative attitude toward a group of people - an attitude based on false or incomplete information'* (Aronson, as cited in Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006, p. 185–186).

Stereotyping is closely related to the concept defined above. It is usually based on preconceived impressions projected onto a group. Similar characteristics are attributed to the members of the group, while failing to recognize actual differences among them (Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006).

These are all related to the phenomenon of racism. In this concept, individuals also unjustifiably attribute certain personality traits or behavioral characteristics to another group, but the difference is that it is directed at specific groups of people (Giddens, as cited in Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006). A racist is a person who is convinced that people with certain physical characteristics are inferior or superior to other people, and that this can be biologically substantiated (Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006).

People exposed to this are often victims of discrimination. Discrimination, i.e., unfavorable treatment, can be indirect or direct. A direct form of discrimination was, for example, when black people were not allowed to enter cafes designated for white people, thus deliberately and openly expressing the fact of discrimination. Indirect discrimination is disguised, and those outside the minority group do not notice the discrimination because it does not affect them (Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006). It can manifest itself in several ways, either verbally (deliberately dropped sarcastic remarks) or through discrimination (exclusion of group members) (Torgyik & Karlovitz, 2006).

School bullying is another very important concept. Its definition is linked to the name of Olweus. We talk about school (peer) bullying when there is a conscious intention to hurt, i.e., the goal is to cause physical or emotional pain, there is an imbalance of power, meaning that the victim is unable to defend themselves, and the acts are repeated, typically over a longer period of time (Buda, 2008).

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, the following section presents practical activities that demonstrate how tolerance and acceptance can be developed in educational settings. These activities are adapted to different age groups and rely primarily on story-based and experiential methods.

ACTIVITIES

The following activities are designed to promote tolerance, acceptance, and empathy among children and young people in educational settings. They are primarily aimed at lower and upper elementary school students but can be adapted for older age groups as well. The activities use age-appropriate, engaging, and interactive methods, such as story therapy, imaginative games, and guided discussions to help participants explore social differences, understand the experiences of others, and reflect on inclusive behavior. These

sessions can be implemented in classrooms, workshops, or other group settings and are intended both for preventive education and for developing a supportive and inclusive group atmosphere.

[ACTIVITY]:

THE LOST BIRD FEATHER

Alexa Fábrián, Zsanett Márta Kocsis

The first session is designed for 6 to 10-year-olds, i.e. lower elementary school students. For them, sensitization to the topics of tolerance and intolerance would take place within the framework of story therapy. We have chosen books that, while not addressing the topic literally or technically, nevertheless deal with it in a way that is understandable to children.

In Hungary, Ildikó Boldizsár plays a prominent role in fairy tale research and the development of fairy tale therapy. She believes that everything can be communicated to children through fairy tales (Boldizsár, 2001). She has also written storybooks for elementary school students, which allow them to process the stories as well as listen to them (Kovács, 2015).

In connection with the theme of the conference, we selected Ildikó Boldizsár's book entitled *Az elveszett madártoll* (The Lost Bird Feather), which deals with children's rights in a sensitive and thought-provoking way. The volume contains ten stories, each of which revolves around a fundamental issue of children's rights.

We have selected three stories that are particularly relevant to the topic of tolerance. The selected stories reflect on important social issues such as abuse, bullying, discrimination, respect for the elderly, and respect for human dignity. The stories provide an opportunity for children to learn about these issues in a way that is appropriate for their age, thereby promoting the development of tolerant and accepting attitudes (I1).

The book contains stories based on real-life situations, which make it easier for children to identify with the characters and their problems. The book is accompanied by a methodological guide to help teachers work through the stories with children in a structured way, with specific educational goals in mind (I1). In 2020, the second, revised edition of *Compass: A Handbook for Human Rights Education for Young People* was published and is now available in more than 30 languages. (I2) The handbook offers useful

practical and theoretical tools for teachers and educators to effectively convey human rights knowledge to young people (Brander et al., 2020).

The three stories are particularly suitable for dealing with group situations where rejection, exclusion, impatience, and verbal or physical abuse occur. At the same time, the stories can also serve a preventive purpose, contributing to the creation of an empathetic and inclusive group atmosphere (I1).

The themes of the stories include religious affiliation, skin color, nationality, origin, birth circumstances, and the impact of parental behavior on children. The stories encourage children not to judge others based on these differences and not to exclude anyone from their community.

The session begins with a preparatory discussion, followed by the reading of the story. After the story, there are imaginative games related to the story, which develop the children's self-awareness, empathy, problem-solving skills, and ability to express their emotions in a playful way. This is followed by a group discussion, where children can process the legal issues raised in the story based on their personal experiences. The session ends with a wrap-up or craft activity, which helps the children process their experiences and creates emotional security (I1).

We therefore believe that story therapy can be an appropriate method for teaching and learning about tolerance and intolerance for younger children.

Methodological guide for *The Lost Bird Feather* is [available here](#).

Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education is [available here](#).

[LESSON PLAN]:

A FAIRYTALE FOR EVERYONE

Alexa Fábrián, Zsanett Márta Kocsis

Another volume that will be used is the book *Meseország Mindenkié* (A Fairytale for Everyone), published in 2020 by Labrisz Lesbian Association. The team behind the book consisted of children's literature expert Boldizsár Nagy, psychologist and literary scholar Anna Borgos, Hungarian teacher Noémi Lőrincz, and gender researcher Dorottya Rédei. The characters in the stories are all marginalized protagonists living on the periphery (I3).

With the help of various experts, the editors created guides for using these stories in classrooms or other groups. Each lesson plan has a stated goal and describes in detail what the instructor's tasks are in order to convey this to the children. The lesson plans for lower and upper elementary school students are lighter, while those for middle school students deal with more serious topics (I4). One story that is relevant to all three age groups is „Kincső és Karola” (Kincső and Karola) by Sára Harka. Kincső is the child of a wealthy family, while Karola is raised in a family living in extreme poverty. The girls swap lives for a day and experience what it is like to belong to the other social class (Labrisz, 2020). György Botzheim has developed a lesson plan for lower and upper elementary school students based on this story, with the aim of preventing prejudice, developing cooperation, and standing up for the freedom of our peers (I5). Anna Surányi developed a lesson plan for high school students with a similar goal, but using different tools (e.g. the use of role cards) (I6). All lesson plans can be downloaded free of charge from the website of *Meseország mindenkié* (A Fairytale for Everyone), making them easily accessible to anyone.

In addition to the lesson plans, some stories come with a so-called digital game. These can be incorporated into the lesson in several ways. It is possible to use it as group or individual activity. In the former, children are not only able to process the given topic through a discourse, but it also strengthens their assertiveness and cooperation within the group. In the latter, children have to rely on their own memory, and the questions and impressions that arise during the game can develop within them free from external

influences. After that, we naturally give the child space to ask questions and share their thoughts, either in front of the group or in private, so that they can be processed (17). These games are also available on the website of Meseország mindenkié (A Fairytale for Everyone), making it easier to use.

A Fairytale for Everyone – Official Website & Lesson Plans:

- [Homepage](#),
- [Job plans](#),
- [Harka Sára – Kincső És Karola: Botzheim György](#),
- [Harka Sára – Kincső És Karola: Surányi Anna](#),

Digital Games for Story Processing:

- [Digital games](#).

[EXPERIENTIAL GAME]: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH ROLE PLAY

Alexa Fábíán, Zsanett Márta Kocsis

The other activity we present focuses on older children and young people and builds on experiential learning and role play to raise awareness of social inequalities, tolerance, and empathy. While the story-based sessions described above invite younger children to step into a character's life through imagination, this activity allows participants to physically experience differences in life opportunities.

The activity is designed for small groups and begins with a short introduction aimed at engaging participants and setting a reflective tone. During this introduction, participants are invited to reflect on whether everyone has the same chances in life and what it might feel like to live as someone else. This opening helps prepare them emotionally for the exercise.

Each participant then receives a role card, describing the life circumstances of a child living in a specific social situation. The roles are kept secret to encourage personal reflection rather than comparison. Participants are asked to imagine the everyday life of their character, guided by questions such as where they live, what makes them feel safe or afraid, and what brings them joy. This imaginative phase parallels the visualization used in story therapy, but in a more active and embodied form.

The core of the activity is the "Step Forward" game. Participants stand side by side and respond to a series of statements by stepping forward if the statement is true for the child they represent. The statements relate to everyday experiences such as access to food, education, emotional support, housing security, and relationships at school. As the exercise progresses, visible differences emerge within the group, illustrating how unequal life chances lead to unequal positions, even when everyone starts from the same line.

After the game, a guided reflection and group discussion follow. Participants are encouraged to share how it felt to make decisions, to see others move ahead, or to remain behind. The discussion focuses on recognizing structural inequalities and exploring what individuals and communities can do to create a fairer and more inclusive society.

[VISUAL TOOL]:

VISUAL REPRESENTATION

Alexa Fábrián, Zsanett Márta Kocsis

We would like to introduce the concept behind our visual product, which is also related to the theme of tolerance. Our goal is to convey this message in a playful way that is understandable and enjoyable for children. Staying close to the world of fairy tales, we sought a visual solution that is both symbolic and easily accessible.

After much deliberation, we came up with the idea of a multi-headed dragon character. However, we quickly realized that a dragon traditionally depicted with uniform, similar heads would not adequately reflect diversity. This is how the idea of a dragon figure with each head representing a different character came about, symbolizing that although we are different, we still form a whole and must accept everyone despite our differences.

We also associate a short but expressive slogan with the visual element: 'One dragon, many heads. One world, many people.'. This message is simple but profound, and it conveys the essence of the project well to both children and adults.

In addition to the aesthetic realization, interactivity was also important to us. Therefore, we did not just think of a traditional poster, but planned to create a cut-out photo board, which would give children and even adults the opportunity to 'become part of the dragon' and identify with the message playfully. We believe that humor and shared experiences help to promote deeper understanding and longer-term retention of the message.

Furthermore, we believe that this character could be developed further over time, given a name and its own story, and appear in various image and video formats, even as a puppet or animated character. Since characters conveyed by the media have a great influence on children, we believe it is important for them to encounter figures that convey positive values.

The cut-out photo board and the associated dragon character could appear in kindergartens, schools, various events, or awareness-raising programs. In addition, in the

longer term, there may be opportunities for cooperation with foundations and associations in order to spread the message of acceptance to as many people as possible in a playful, lovable, yet thought-provoking way.

SUMMARY OF METHODS FOR TOLERANCE

This study demonstrates that intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination are complex social phenomena with multiple dimensions, including personalization, stereotyping, and structural inequality. Understanding these concepts is essential for promoting tolerance and acceptance in educational contexts. The practical activities presented (story-based sessions, experiential learning, and role-play exercises) show how children and young people can engage with social differences, develop empathy, and reflect on inclusive behavior in age-appropriate ways.

Story therapy, as exemplified by *The Lost Bird Feather* and *A Fairytale for Everyone*, provides a safe and engaging framework for discussing sensitive topics, while experiential role-play allows participants to experience unequal opportunities firsthand, deepening their understanding of social inequalities. The visual and interactive dragon tool offers an accessible and engaging tool to convey the message of tolerance, encouraging both children and adults to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Overall, these approaches illustrate that combining theory, narrative, and interactive methods can effectively support the development of social sensitivity, empathy, and acceptance in educational settings.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF (IN)TOLERANCE

Eliška Matějková, Aneta Světelská, Michaela Rychetská, Hana Hloušková

The topic of (in)tolerance is one of the fundamental issues of human coexistence, because every person is different and naturally differs in appearance, culture, opinions, religion or lifestyle. These differences are not negative in themselves; on the contrary, they can be a source of enrichment and new experiences. However, if they are not accepted with openness, they can lead to prejudice, mistrust and tension between people. In such situations, tolerance helps us to promote respect, teaches us to perceive different views of the world and enables us to live side by side in peace and understanding. Intolerance, on the other hand, arises when people fear or reject differences, which often leads to discrimination, bullying or even hatred. Typical examples are racism, xenophobia or intolerance towards sexual minorities, where people are rejected simply because of their orientation or identity.

A key element in combating intolerance is respect, i.e. the ability to understand and accept each other, even if we do not always agree with the other person. Respect is not about unconditional agreement, but about a willingness to listen and seek common values. That is why communication, which includes listening, empathy and the ability to express one's own opinions critically but respectfully, is also of fundamental importance. It is thanks to communication that we can better understand the feelings and experiences of others, avoid misunderstandings and resolve disputes constructively. Tolerance is therefore not just an abstract concept, but a concrete attitude that manifests itself in everyday situations. It is a way to learn mutual respect, cooperation and living in an environment where diversity is not a source of conflict, but rather a strength that can unite us.

[ACTIVITY]:

BUS OF PREJUDICES

Eliška Matějková, Aneta Světelská, Michaela Rychetská, Hana Hloušková

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS:

11–15 years (secondary school)

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

Approx. 10 people

NUMBER OF ORGANISERS:

1 organiser per 10 people

ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES:

- To familiarise participants with the concepts of prejudice, the halo effect, first impressions, intolerance and respect
- To become aware of one's own prejudices and attitudes towards various characteristics, as well as the negative and positive consequences of prejudice.

ACTIVITY AIDS:

Worksheet with a bus, writing materials, the organiser will also prepare positive and negative information about the passengers

ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

Suitable for a room where a circle can be formed

MOTIVATION FOR THE ACTIVITY:

"Imagine that you are just getting on a bus, travelling to visit a friend far away, and your journey will take about 4 hours. Unfortunately, there are no double seats available, and you have to choose someone to sit next to.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY:

- 1) We hand out worksheets with a picture of a bus. We choose a suitable bus and if we have someone in the class who represents a particular minority, we replace that passenger with someone else, so that the minority is not included. We must also be careful that none of the people resemble the pupils, as this may be sensitive for the group. The activity needs to be adapted to the needs of the group.
- 2) The pupils are tasked with ranking their fellow passengers according to whether they would sit next to them or not. It depends on their personal preference. The scale from 1 to 8 means that 1 is the person we would most like to sit next to and 8 is the person who would be our last choice.
- 3) We then reveal one piece of positive information about each passenger without mentioning that the information is positive. Pupils have the opportunity to change their ranking.
- 4) In the next phase, we reveal one piece of negative information about each passenger and again give the pupils the opportunity to change their decision.
- 5) Finally, when each pupil has written down their ideal option, we reflect on and discuss the course of the activity.

REFLECTION:

The aim of the reflection is to become aware of our own prejudices and what causes them. We ask about the course of the activity, the change in their order and the reason for the change. We do not pressure anyone and it is a voluntary expression.









- Was it easy to evaluate individual people?
- Who changed their original decision and why?
- Who changed their decision based on the first (positive) piece of information?
- Who changed their decision based on the second (negative) piece of information?
- Did anyone decide that the first original option was the ideal one?

The discussion should focus on the fact that we are influenced by negative information about people and that, in general, we tend to talk more about the bad. Negative information also influences our opinion more than positive information. We can also touch on the topic of first impressions and prejudices. Prejudices are usually linked to fear of the unknown. The discussion will be based on the pupils' reactions, so it will always be authentic. We will mostly encounter the topics mentioned by the passengers, but we must be prepared for the possibility that other topics may also come up. It is important to conduct the debate with respect and not to encourage stereotypes.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION:

We can also carry out the activity with older children and a larger number of participants, but we must be prepared for the fact that as the number of participants increases, the openness of some individuals decreases and they may not express their opinions. The activity can also be carried out outdoors, but we must be careful that the surrounding environment does not disrupt the activity.

Attachments – Passenger information

Image	Negative information	Positive information	What may appear in reflections
	Martin isn't sure, but he might be gay	His parents are quite wealthy and have a family sailing boat	LGBT community Wealth and advantages
	David is often depressed and is undergoing psychiatric treatment	He plays electric guitar in a band	Mental health ! Appreciate that he is receiving treatment and working on his mental health
	Karel and his friends spray-painted a train	Karel helps his grandmother with shopping, cleaning and gardening	Roma minority, risky behaviour, helping the vulnerable
	Honza is undergoing treatment for leukaemia	He is a junior chess representative	The topic of illness, why we naturally choose not to sit with sick people.
	Aneta has ADHD and has trouble concentrating	She excels at solving crisis situations and tries to burden the planet as little as possible	Autism spectrum disorders Ecology
	Klára experiments with drugs	She likes to write fantasy stories and is interested in literature	Addiction and addictive substances
	Marika fled Iraq with her parents and does not yet speak much Czech.	She paints beautifully and enjoys creative activities	Fear of the unknown Terrorism – immigration
	Kevin is growing up with his grandmother; his parents had to return to Vietnam.	He is an excellent footballer	Vietnamese convenience stores Minorities



You are just getting on the bus and heading to visit a friend. The ride will take about 4 hours. Unfortunately, there are no free double seats left, so you have to choose someone to sit next to. It's possible that you might have to talk to them.

Put them in order of preference



1



8



Sequence: _____
Notes:

Sequence: _____
Notes:



Sequence: _____
Notes:

Sequence: _____
Notes:



Sequence: _____
Notes:

Sequence: _____
Notes:



Sequence: _____
Notes:

Sequence: _____
Notes:



[INFOGRAPHIC]:

POSTER (IN)TOLERANCE

Eliška Matějková, Aneta Světelská, Michaela Rychetská, Hana Hloušková

Visegrad Fund

(IN)TOLERANCE

What is this

Diversity
We are naturally different, and that's great!
It just sometimes creates a bit of a mess.
Sometimes it's hard to understand others, and that's when prejudices arise

Tolerance
It helps build friendship and respect, it helps us understand others, thanks to it we can live openly and peacefully

Intolerance
Does not accept differences among people. Arises from fear or misunderstanding. Leads to arguments and injustice.

Prejudice
An idea we attribute to others based on their status (appearance, gender, etc.)

Respect
Mutual understanding and acceptance. Even if I disagree, I accept

Communication
The key to efficiency:
Naslouchání - being aware of and listening to others
Empatie - having understanding and empathy
Kritika s respektem - evaluate the situation, not the person

Food intolerance?
That's a slightly different intolerance
The body cannot process certain foods, which can make us feel unwell.
It's not an allergy - more like a sensitivity.
Avoiding certain substances can help.

What can be not tolerated?
Well, actually everything, but these are probably the first things that came to your mind

Racism intolerance
Racism - the belief that one race is superior to another
Discrimination - disadvantaging people because of their race
Xenophobia - fear or hostility towards foreigners (their culture, etc.)
And yet, we are all the same, like eggs

Sexual intolerance
Sexual minorities
Lesbians - women attracted to other women
Gays - men attracted to other men
Bisexuals - attracted to both genders
Asexuals - do not experience sexual attraction
Transgender - gender identity differs from assigned sex at birth
Queer - a broader term for people who do not fit traditional norms

And how do we deal with it?
If only interpersonal intolerance could be solved so easily

Do you want to know more? LOOK HERE!

We all have the right to choose
Finding names can help us make sense of things
Sometimes our feelings are chaotic

PART III:

DIGITAL WELLBEING

AND SAFETY

IN CYBERSPACE

DIGITAL INEQUALITY AND INTERNET ACCESS CHALLENGES IN HUNGARY

Anita Túri-Galán

The penetration of the internet and information and communication technology devices (hereinafter referred to as ICT devices) has an impact on education, the labour market, interpersonal relationships, deviance (new types of addiction, the emergence of cyberbullying, etc.), and a new concept has been added to the range of social inequalities (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Wallace, 2006; Galán, 2013; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Pikó & Kiss, 2019; Dulovics, Stehlíková & Niklová, 2023; Fekete, 2024; Svoboda Hoferková, Belík, & Knytl, 2024; Szapary et al., 2024; Dulovics & Riaposová, 2025; Pikó et al., 2025). The latter is based on the fact that individuals cannot benefit equally from digital devices, and even if they do, different uses can result in further divisions between them.

The concept of digital divide first appeared in the 1990s, focusing on access to the internet and ICT devices within society. Researchers examined who had access to the internet and the devices necessary for internet use, and who did not (Norris, 2001; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; DiMaggio et al., 2004). According to optimistic approaches (Dyson, 1997; Bonfadelli, 2002), the spread of the Internet can override and reinterpret the social inequalities, as it can help to compensate to a certain extent for social differences, which are most evident in the areas of quality education and access to information. However, pessimistic views suggest that differences in the geographical and social dimensions of technology access exacerbate inequalities. The reason for this is that some people do not have access to the internet, which can hinder their social integration (Tapscott, 1996; Golding, 1998; Glotz, 1999; Kubicek & Welling, 2000; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; DiMaggio et al., 2004). However, the digital divide and digital inequalities are not just temporary social phenomena that will disappear with the advent of better quality devices and the widespread use of the internet. Even if inequalities in social status with regard to technical equipment may decrease, status-based differences in internet use are likely to persist (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). With penetration, the focus of research has thus shifted

from access inequalities (first-level digital inequalities) to differences in the manner, purpose and content of use (second level digital inequalities) (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013).

To examine second-level digital inequalities, DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) identified five dimensions, which are as follows. The first is *inequality in technical equipment and network connections*, which stems from physical differences in the quality of computers, the software used on them, and internet connections. The second is in the *purpose and content of use*. The purpose of internet use can vary; it can increase cultural capital, but some people use it solely for entertainment or socialising. While many online activities may seem trivial to users, most require a certain level of expertise, which is measured by the third dimension, *inequality in skills and abilities*. The fourth dimension of differences between users is the level of *social support available*, i.e. the extent to which internet users can count on help from other, more experienced users when they reach the limits of their user knowledge. The fifth dimension, *inequality in autonomy of use*, stems from the location of use and the control over use. This includes where the user has the opportunity to use the internet, how far they have to travel to do so, whether there are any restrictions on the duration or methods of use, the extent to which their use is monitored, and how many people they have to share access with. These dimensions of inequality add up to heterogeneous opportunities for gaining advantages, which show a significant correlation with the factors underlying social stratification (DiMaggio et al., 2004).

In recent years, the theory of digital inequalities has been expanded with a new concept, third-level digital inequalities, which refers to outcomes. This is the level that most clearly reveals how digital inequality recreates social inequalities by tracking how access and skills can actually help change people's lives (Katz et al., 2021).

In the following, I present a summary of the results of my previous research on digital inequalities (Galán 2019; 2021) and outline possible directions for further research. Before that, however, I will describe the first-level digital inequalities experienced in Hungary.

DIGITAL INEQUALITIES IN HUNGARY

In recent years, internet access in Hungarian households has increased significantly. While in 2010, 61.4% of households had internet access (EU average: 66.5%), by 2023

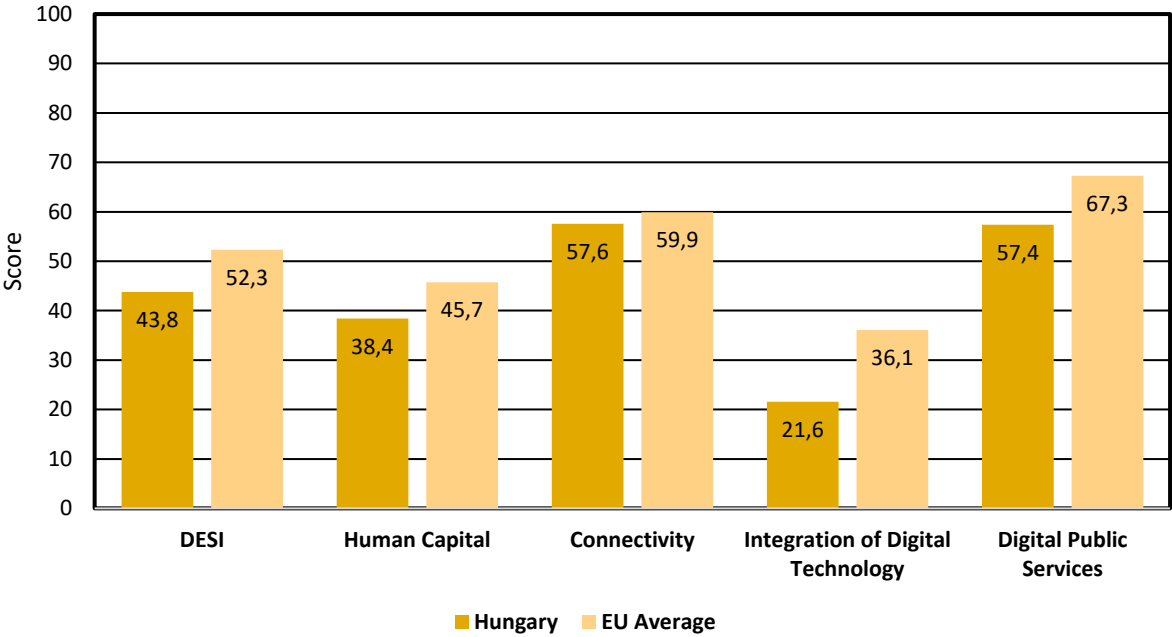
this figure reached 91.5%, which is in line with the European Union average (Eurostat, 2023).

Competition between service providers is driving down the price of services, making them affordable to more and more people. Nevertheless, there are significant regional differences in penetration, infrastructure quality, speed and even price. In smaller towns and villages, residents typically have access to slower and more expensive internet connections (Eurostat, 2023).

In addition to measuring penetration, Eurostat has also created an index consisting of five indicators, which allows for further analysis of differences in digital economic and social development between countries. The dimensions of the DESI (The Digital Economy and Society Index) are as follows: connectivity/access, digital skills/human capital, internet use by citizens, integration of digital technology into the business sector, and digital public services. In 2022, Hungary ranks 22nd out of the 28 EU Member States with a score of 43.8 points, placing it among the poorly performing countries (European Commission, 2022).

Figure 3

DESI scores in Hungary in 2022

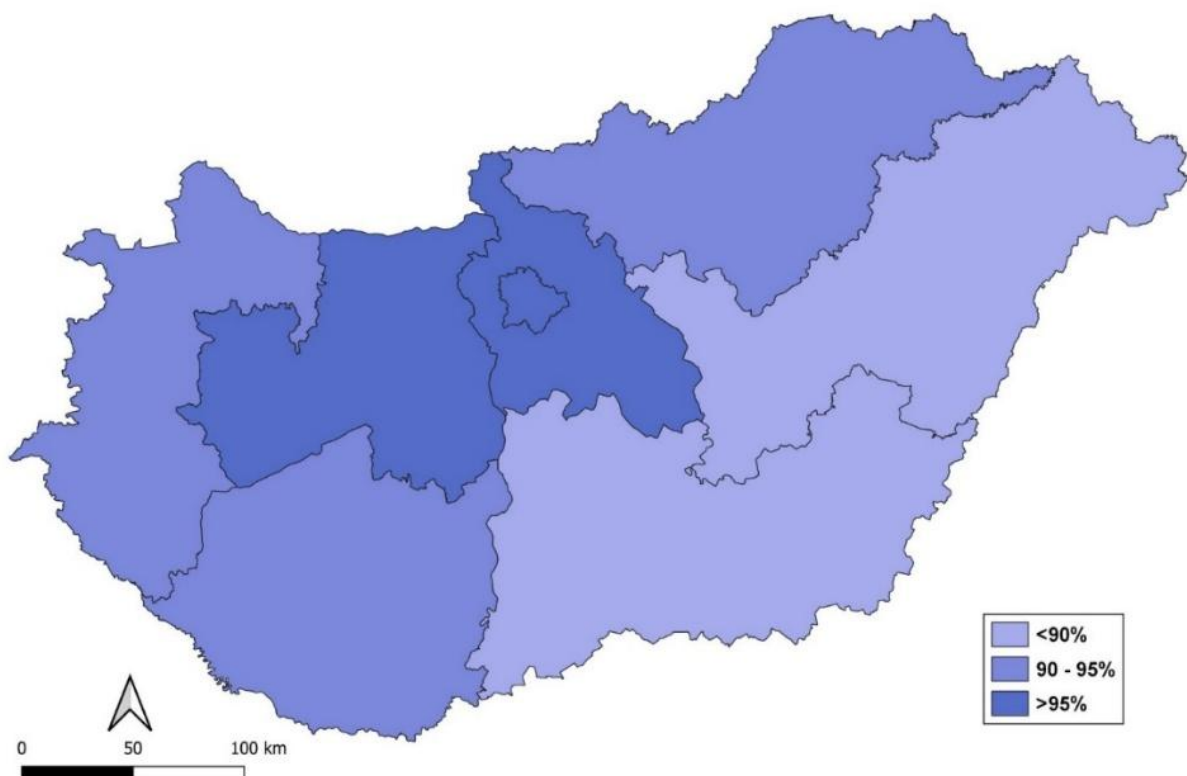


Source: European Commission, 2022

The domestic spread of the Internet and the first-level digital inequalities are in line with regional inequalities. The highest proportion of households in Budapest and the Central Transdanubian region have access to the World Wide Web, and the West-East diversity characteristic of territorial inequalities can also be observed (Eurostat, 2023).

Figure 4

Internet penetration in Hungary



Source: Eurostat, 2023

First-level digital inequalities have therefore not yet been completely eliminated and are most prevalent in smaller settlements in the eastern part of the country. What about second-level digital inequalities resulting from differences in usage?

In our previous research (Galán, 2019), we examined digital inequalities using qualitative and quantitative methods on a sample of Generation Z young people in Debrecen.

METHODOLOGY

In our 2019 research, we examined digital inequalities among Generation Z young people in Debrecen using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. A total of 107 young people

born after 1995 participated in the study; 30 focus groups and 1 interview were conducted, with the latter not attended by the other participants of the focus group.

The focus groups were recorded at a church primary school, a state secondary school, a vocational school, several university departments, a Tanoda programme², and a community centre in Debrecen with young people who are cumulatively disadvantaged and partly live in residential homes. We will refer to the latter as "marginalised", as the members of this group are not affiliated with the same educational institution, and we also wish to use this term to highlight their special situation. We included 68 girls and 39 boys in the focus groups. The oldest participants were born in 1995 (15 people), and the youngest in 2006 (1 person). Participation in the focus groups was voluntary at the institutions, where girls were generally more willing to respond.

We administered two questionnaires to the participants. The first questionnaire was administered before the focus group study and helped us to create homogeneous groups within each school type based on cultural capital, cultural consumption and financial status. We performed descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation analyses on the data from the second questionnaire, which was administered after the focus groups. However, it is important to emphasise that due to the sample size (n=107), these results are not suitable for drawing conclusions about Generation Z society as a whole, but only represent trends among the young people surveyed, which are nevertheless an important supplement to the soft data obtained during the focus groups.

The 2021 study was an exploratory research project aimed at understanding the problem, preparing for a later, larger study, and exploring possible research directions. To this end, we conducted interviews with social workers in eastern Hungary who, in the course of their work (in schools, family support and child welfare centres), come into contact with disadvantaged families who found it most difficult to participate in distance learning. During the research, a total of four semi-structured interviews were conducted with social workers. The subjects were reached using the snowball method. Due to the pandemic situation, the interviews were conducted online. As our aim is not to compare the subjects'

² The Tanoda program is an educational and outreach initiative that provides disadvantaged students with support in school learning and social skills development, often through mentoring, cooperative tasks, and digital tools. The program aims to overcome learning difficulties, reduce the digital and educational divide, and prepare students for the challenges of adult life.

responses, but only to illustrate general trends, we will present them collectively and summarise them.

In the following, we will first present the results of the 2019 research, followed by those of the 2021 research.

DIGITAL INEQUALITIES AMONG GENERATION Z YOUNG PEOPLE

The young people from Debrecen born after 1995 who were included in the 2019 research sample started using the internet at an average age of 10, but some were already regular users at the age of 3, while others encountered the online world for the first time at the age of 15. Most of them became regular users between the ages of 12 and 15.

Although the sample included young people from Generation Z born after 1995, who, according to theory (Prensky, 2001a; 2001b; Ságvári, 2008; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Tari, 2011; White, 2011), were born into the online world and grew up with it, this is not uniformly the case in Hungary. As we saw from their responses, a significant proportion of young people (41%) reported that their first encounter with computers and the internet was at a friend's or relative's house, in a public place or at school, and it was only a few years later that they had access at home, at which point its use became part of their everyday lives. The digital breakthrough for the generation born after 1995 can be dated to between 2006 and 2010, when most of the young people involved in the research got their first computer and became regular users. The spread of smartphones was even faster. After they appeared on the market around 2009-2010, within a year or two, most young people had replaced their old push-button phones with smartphones, but mobile internet was not yet widespread at that time. Despite the slower spread of computers – for some users, it took six to eight years between their first use and regular use – the students participating in the research quickly adapted to the online world, and as we will discuss later, most of them now have no problem handling new technologies.

Among the Generation Z young people in Debrecen who were included in the sample, internet penetration was almost complete (93.5%) at the time of the study, with only seven individuals not having access to the internet at home. This is supported by other studies (including Selwyn et al., 2003; Livingstone & Helpser, 2007; Brandtzaeg, 2010; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013), who found that certain socio-demographic groups have a higher

level of access within society, including young people. Furthermore, these high values also stem from urban life, where infrastructure is more developed and device penetration is higher. It is interesting to note that although 93.5% of young people have internet access at home, fewer of them have a computer (92.5%), and even fewer have their own computer (80.8%). Some of them therefore accessed the web on devices also used by other family members or only on smartphones (91.5% had their own). Financial status and cultural capital also have a significant impact (Chi-square test $p < 0.05$) on home internet access.

In terms of second-level digital inequalities, the picture is mixed. Analysing the data, we can conclude that the majority of young people were online all day, even during school hours, at the time of the survey. On weekdays, they spent an average of 4.7 hours online, but on weekends, they spent an average of 54 minutes more, or 5.2 hours, according to their statements. Most of them (102 people, 95.3%) watch videos online, and based on focus group discussions, they mainly use YouTube for this purpose. The second most common activity is using social media (94 people, 87.5%), followed by general browsing (85 people, 79.4%) and using instant messaging applications (84 people, 78.5%). The least common activities are blogging (10 people, 9.3%), caring for virtual characters (15 people, 14%), reading forums (17 people, 15.8%) and blogs (21 people, 19.6%), and – due to the average age of the young people in the sample – dealing with personal matters (25 people, 23.4%).

There are significant differences between online activities. According to foreign studies (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Anderson, 2008; Buente & Robbin, 2008; Eynon, 2009; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Hargittai, 2011), there is a correlation between socio-economic status and the use of the internet to increase capital³, which we were also able to prove in our empirical research. The online activities of young people are primarily based on entertainment,

but cultural capital, offline cultural consumption, IT knowledge and type of school significantly determine whether and to what extent the young people involved in the research engage in capital-building activities online. While 88.9% of respondents with

³ Capital-building online activities are any activities that are suitable for increasing cultural capital, such as language learning, language practice, searching for information, studying, and reading the news.

high cultural capital use the internet for their studies, this proportion is only 45.8% among those with low cultural capital. Those attending higher-status schools not only visit more websites, but also higher-quality ones (e.g. Hungarian Electronic Library, Matarka, Google Scholar, etc.) than those attending lowerstatus schools, who only know and use Google search and Wikipedia when they use the internet for their studies.

Table 6

Use of the internet for learning by school type

University	Secondary school	Vocational school	Church primary school	Marginalised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google (7) • Wikipedia (4) • use of e-book programmes (3) • preparing presentations (3) • zanza.tv (2) • mini encyclopaedia (2) • Matarka (2) • searching for concepts (1) • searching for materials (1) • glossary (1) • Hungarian Electronic Library (1) • Collection of Foreign Words (1) • Google Scholar (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wikipedia (6) • Google (4) • looks up conjugations when learning languages (3) • searching for animations for biology lessons (1) • dictionary (1) • sulinet (1) • Hungarian Electronic Library (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google (3) • asks classmates for material on Facebook (2) • cheating (1) • short presentation (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google (2) • Asking classmates for material on Facebook (2) • translation (1) • Wikipedia (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google (3) • Dictionary (2)

Note. Own compilation
Source: Own research

The most striking differences are caused by the type of school, which affects, among other things, the quality of IT education, the websites and applications used in the course of their studies, the online language learning applications they use, but also influences the level of their IT skills. The more IT knowledge someone has, the more likely they are to use the internet above average to increase their capital (Galán, 2019).

One form of online capital accumulation is the use of the internet to practise foreign languages. Knowledge of foreign languages (especially English) is extremely important in relation to IT skills, as approximately 80% of online content is only available in English, so those who do not understand English miss out on many opportunities (e.g. books, news, films, plays, foreign analyses, scholarship opportunities, etc.). 38.3% of young people use the internet to practise languages.

Table 7

Use of the internet for language learning by school type

University	Secondary school	Vocational school	Church primary school	Marginalised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minutes of English • TV series, films in foreign languages, with foreign language subtitles • academia.edu studies in English • BBC • Duolingo • YouTube language learning videos • browsing in foreign languages • meme sites (e.g. 9gag) • https://gloss.dliflc.edu/ • TV programmes • Learn English Easy app • talking to foreigners in English • Interpass • Google Translate • Sztaki dictionary • Reading English forums about hobbies • translating English songs • reading global news • online school leaving exam/language exam tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online dictionary • Wikipedia • website about verb conjugations • 5 minutes of English • Word Reference • games (Sims2) • vloggers • bloggers • Duolingo • Sztaki dictionary • Google Translate • lyrics translation • Oxford Dictionary • films, series • YouTube videos • scientific articles in everyday language • ted.com • Quizlet • website where native speakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google • Translate • YouTube language learning videos • webforditas.hu • TV series in foreign languages with Hungarian subtitles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duolingo • webforditas • Google Translate • lefordit.hu • vlogs • English language videos • series • dictionary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google • Translate • Wikipedia • Duolingo • films in English with Hungarian subtitles

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> correct uploaded texts • English media, news programmes • conversations with foreigners • listening to texts • listening to music • smartphone applications • reading • searching 			
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Source: Own research

Based on the results of our focus group studies, there is no difference between young people; most students use various websites and applications that help them learn languages, practise languages and do their homework, but there are sharp differences in their quality. While secondary school students listed 26 types of online language learning opportunities that they use regularly, university students listed 19. They are followed by church primary school students with 8, and then vocational school and marginalised students with 4-4 different activities. Students with higher cultural capital who attend higher-status schools (university, secondary school) tend to use the internet much more consciously for online language practice (e.g. they use monolingual dictionaries, searching for foreign news sources and academic websites, watching films with English subtitles), while those with lower status are less conscious (using bilingual dictionaries, watching dubbed films).

Cultural capital is of paramount importance, as according to Angelusz et al. (2004, p. 310), in the inequality system of the information society, the role of human (cultural) capital (school education, training, language skills, etc.) and, within this, digital literacy and the knowledge and skills necessary to use information and communication tools are becoming increasingly important in cultural capital. The results of our research (Galán, 2019) clearly support Angelusz et al.'s findings; those with low cultural capital make little use of the internet to increase their capital, thereby exacerbating and perpetuating their existing disadvantages.

In order to overcome these digital disadvantages, it is important that young people have access to social support when they reach the limits of their user knowledge. In the following, we present the data collected on this dimension of second-level digital inequalities. Analysing their responses in the focus groups, we can say that there is no inequality in this dimension of second-level digital inequalities, as none of the young people in Debrecen born after 1995 who were included in the study were unable to ask others for help when they reached the limits of their skills. The differences between them are more likely to be found in who they can ask for help. According to DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001), help can come informally from family members or friends, or formally from trained professionals. According to this categorisation system, only four young people seek formal help, i.e. they turn to an official service or a professional IT specialist, while the others can count on informal help. However, the majority of respondents (45 people) seek informal professional help, i.e. not through an official service for money, but from people who have studied, are studying or work in this field, only they do not seek them out at their workplace, but go to their homes on the basis of the principle of reciprocity. For this reason, we cannot say that this is informal assistance, but instead the term "semi-formal" is more appropriate. The advantage of semi-formal assistance is that the individual receives professional help from someone who has studied or has experience in the field, but does not have to pay for it. ⁴If we examine who young people can ask for help from according to school type, we must conclude that the greater someone's cultural capital and the higher the status of the school they attend, the more likely they are to be able to access semiformal assistance. The reason for this may be that young people with higher cultural capital also have higher social capital, as they are more likely to spend their free time in places (extra-

curricular activities, sports training, etc.) where they can meet other young people with high cultural capital. Among university students, the university environment (inter-faculty orientation camps, joint parties, entertainment venues) provides ample opportunity to get to know people from different disciplines.

⁴ As we have shown earlier, there is a significant correlation between cultural capital and school type, i.e. young people with higher cultural capital are more likely to attend higher status schools (university, grammar school).

Based on our empirical studies (Galán, 2019), we can summarise that low cultural capital is associated with low ICT and internet literacy, which in turn leads to young people not learning to use the internet, which is theoretically open to everyone and offers numerous opportunities, for the purpose of increasing their capital. In light of all this, it is extremely important to examine the characteristics of digital inequality among disadvantaged students. In our previous research (Galán, 2021), we examined the implementation of distance learning during the COVID lockdowns among this group, with the involvement of social workers working with them. We explored the impact of distance learning on the lives of disadvantaged young people and how they are able to participate in it despite their lower internet skills and previous lack of experience in using online content for their studies.

DIGITAL INEQUALITIES AMONG DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE DURING DISTANCE LEARNING UNDER COVID LOCKDOWNS

In terms of access, it should be noted that almost every family has a smartphone, but often only one per family (which is often broken), which is used by the parent, so the child(ren) – in many families there are as many as six to eight children sharing one phone – only had access to it when the parent was at home. Fixed-line internet is extremely rare, as on the one hand there are no devices – or even electricity or tables – on which to use it, and on the other hand it represents a monthly financial burden that disadvantaged families cannot afford. As they do not have internet access, they were also unable to take advantage of the free internet service provided by the government. Card-based internet access is more common among them, but this is not unlimited, so they can usually only use it for a short period of time, a few days, and then they have no internet access until the beginning of the next month.

When examining second-level digital inequalities, an analysis of the technical apparatus shows that, in addition to access inequalities, disadvantaged young people also have to contend with quality gaps in distance learning, as the available devices are mostly computers and other ICT equipment received as donations, which are often not the latest models and therefore run slowly. Connecting via smartphone is often difficult, as the websites and pages used in distance learning are often not optimised for mobile devices.

In terms of the purpose of use, our previous research (Galán, 2019) showed that young people's online activities are mainly based on entertainment, and the use of capital-building applications shows a significant correlation with cultural capital and school type. Our statement was confirmed by the experts participating in this research, who emphasised – and this is important in relation to the dimension of skills and abilities – that since children had not previously used the online world for learning, they were unable to keep up with the pace of distance learning and use the programmes necessary for distance learning (e.g. Kréta⁵, Google Classroom, Word, etc.) or websites. According to the experts, disadvantaged students are unable to perform tasks that are easy for others, such as downloading, uploading, editing and converting documents and files, or installing and operating programmes. Due to the low number of devices and the poor quality/lack of internet, it was impossible to hold online group video lessons, and students were unable to even watch previously recorded video material, as downloading such large files was not possible due to limited mobile internet connectivity. For this reason, some schools created closed Facebook groups for their classes so that they could continue learning together, as the social networking site is one of the applications that everyone, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds, knows how to use and is easily accessible on smartphones. In other cases, students gathered at the home of a classmate who had a computer and internet access, and worked on the assignments together, or one person did the work and the others copied it.

Parents would have a very important role to play here in helping their children with online education, as foreign studies (Bol, 2020; Andrew et al., 2020) have shown, but the parents of the students involved in the study do not use the internet at all, so their help is not a realistic option. According to experts, the majority of parents were unable to help their children not only with the use of ICT tools but also with the curriculum due to their low level of education and functional illiteracy, and in many cases they do not consider learning important, so they do not provide the conditions for it. According to experts, many students dropped out of distance learning due to a lack of equipment and parental support, viewed the lockdown period as a holiday, or helped out around the house and with their younger siblings while they were at home.

⁵ Hungarian school administration system

There were settlements where distance learning could not function in any form due to the lack of internet and ICT equipment. In these communities, children could pick up their assignments in paper format every Monday at school, which they could then work on at home on their own for a week. However, the interviewees felt that even this was not easy, as the students were unable to interpret the assignments on their own, and writing and reading often posed a problem for them. According to the observations of experts, lower grade students were more likely to participate in distance learning in this way than upper grade students. Many of the latter dropped out, probably because they were forced to work or had to look after their younger siblings, whom their parents could not leave with anyone else due to the closure of institutions.

Disadvantaged students living in small settlements also lag significantly behind in terms of autonomy. Typically, the whole family lives in one room, so all the children would have to study at the same time, in the same place, and, as described above, on the same device, which is impossible. According to experts, neither the devices, nor the peaceful conditions, nor autonomous internet use are feasible among the target group of our research, and families do not typically have an attitude that supports learning. There were several cases where, although the student was able to log into the video chat, they were unable to participate because other family members were in the room, making noise and not caring about the online lesson.

After offline teaching resumed, schools experienced a huge backlog. According to experts, it was difficult to maintain students' motivation and interest in learning even during daytime school hours, and digital education has further exacerbated the lack of activity among children. In some places, they tried to catch up on the missed material at the end of the school year, while in others, they continued in September where they left off in March. Experts unanimously agree that the pandemic has exacerbated the educational disadvantages of disadvantaged children.

SUMMARY

In summary, we can say that digital inequalities exist in the population studied, but their dimensions vary in severity. Access inequalities have almost completely disappeared, as penetration is higher among the young people involved in the research than the national average, but financial status and cultural capital significantly influence who has

a computer and internet access at home. However, we can state that we did not find any first-level digital inequality in relation to smartphones.

In terms of second-level digital inequalities, the picture is also mixed. According to previous research (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Anderson, 2008; Buente & Robbin, 2008; Eynon, 2009; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009; Chou et al. 2009; Hale et al., 2010; Boyd, 2011; Hargittai, 2011), there is a correlation between socio-economic status and the capital-enhancing use of the internet, which we were also able to prove in our empirical research, since although most young people's activities are primarily based on entertainment, cultural capital and school type also significantly determine whether the young people involved in the research engage in capital-building activities. The most striking differences are caused by school types, which influence, among other things, the quality of IT education, the type of online language learning applications used, and the level of IT knowledge. These factors are essential for overcoming digital disadvantages.

Traditional socio-cultural disadvantages are also being transferred to the information space, and the previous social divide is being transformed into a multi-level digital divide. It is pointless to make progress in terms of device availability or network access if digital content and activities do not increase the pool of resources or solutions, and if integration mechanisms are not strengthened (Rab & Z. Karvalics, 2017). Based on this, we can conclude that our empirical studies also confirm that digital inequalities are likely to perpetuate the inequalities that arise from social inequalities and socio-economic and cultural differences.

In Hungary, educational institutions contribute in an almost unique way to the reproduction of social inequalities, as schools are unable to compensate for disadvantages brought from home (Ferge, 2008). Based on our 2021 research, this process has been further exacerbated by digital inequalities, lack of parental support, lack of adequate pedagogical assistance and lack of motivation during distance learning. The reason for this is that, according to research (Seymour et al., 2020), successful distance learning requires good equipment (internet and ICT devices) and support (both from schools and parents), which was not the case for disadvantaged children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG GENERATION Z YOUTH IN HUNGARY AND FOMO IN LIGHT OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Zsolt Cserős

INTRODUCTION

One of the most notable phenomena of the 21st century is how people's lives have changed radically and continue to change as a result of various technological advances (Székely & Rusu, 2022). Within this, digital devices that provide access to social media applications are particularly noteworthy. Social media is less prevalent among older generations, but many of them are already taking advantage of this opportunity. Nevertheless, it can be said that they are not the ones most at risk (Jancsák, 2013; Galán, 2013; 2019; Galán et al., 2018; Guld, 2022).

Social media has a much greater impact on the lives of those who have been familiar with and using these platforms since early childhood (Ságvári, 2008; Tari, 2010; 2011; 2012; Mcrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Dorsey, 2016). Nowadays, social dialogue and academic debate on this topic mainly revolves around Generation Z. Members of this age group live their daily lives in such a way that every aspect of their lives is permeated by their online presence, which also causes a kind of compulsion in them, as they do not want to miss out on anything. This is supported by the phenomenon of "Fear of missing out" (hereinafter: FoMO), as a result of which these young people are available almost 24 hours a day, so they cannot be alone – as is possible in the offline space – which can be a source of countless problems (Galán et al., 2018; Galán, 2019; Guld, 2022). Recognising this social phenomenon, we wish to take a closer look at and examine the characteristics of social media use and the FoMO phenomenon among Generation Z young people.

In the first part of our study, we define the most important concepts for our research. We briefly introduce the concepts and characteristics of Generation Z and social media.

We then move on to discuss the negative phenomena associated with social media by introducing FoMO. In our research, we explore the characteristics of social media use among Generation Z youth and examine the FoMO phenomenon among them. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study involving Generation Z youth (n=12). We conducted focus group interviews with members of the target group, differentiating them by gender and year of birth (2000, 2010) in order to create homogeneous groups based on these variables. We recorded four focus groups: girls born in 2000 (older), boys born in 2000 (older), girls born in 2010 (younger), and boys born in 2010 (younger).

In our research, we seek to answer the question of what differences can be identified in Generation Z young people's internet use based in Hungary on qualitative studies. Can they be differentiated by age or gender? How does FoMO manifest itself in their lives?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

GENERATION Z AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In recent decades, numerous researchers (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Tari, 2010; 2011; 2012; Dorsey, 2016) have described the differences between different age cohorts. One of the most widely accepted theories today is the one that uses the letters of the alphabet to distinguish age groups based on their year of birth. Before the emergence of Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010), we distinguish between Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981) and Generation Y (born between 1982 and 1995) in chronological order (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014; Tari, 2010; 2011; 2012; Dorsey, 2016; Kárpáti, 2019; Guld, 2022).

One of the most important characteristics of young people belonging to Generation Z is that the internet and the platforms found on it are an integral part of their everyday lives and take up a significant portion of their free time (Bocsi & Kovács, 2018; Székely & Rusu, 2022). Compared to previous generations, Generation Z is a generation whose members are the most knowledgeable and skilled due to technological advances and continuous innovation, and as a result, they are also highly qualified in terms of educational attainment. As a result of globalisation and changes in the linguistic environment, they can easily learn any language other than their mother tongue. Based on research, we can also say that they are very practical in their use of ICT tools and do not like unstimulating environments (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2014).

However, there are also downsides to all this, one of the most notable being that they are not as confident in the offline world, making it difficult for them to handle and resolve unexpected conflicts (Pais 2013; Kárpáti 2019). They spend a significant part of their lives on the internet and social media platforms, which has two important consequences: their human relationships change significantly, and their identity also depends heavily on the existence of these sites (Pais, 2013).

After this brief introduction to Generation Z, we must also mention the other pillar of our study: social media. Social media consists of social networks, blogs, video blogs, and video sharing sites. However, it should be noted that this media branch differs from the operating principles of traditional media. In the traditional media model, it is the media editor who selects, formats and distributes the content that is received by the target audience (Bódi, 2021).

In conventional media, a hierarchical relationship is established between the content creator and the user, where the user cannot address the content creator. In contrast, there is no such subordination among social media users; in fact, anyone can connect with whomever they wish (Bódi, 2021). Shortly after the internet gained popularity, social media platforms also became widespread among users (Pásztor & Bak, 2020). While in 2010 the number of users of these sites barely reached one billion, by 2024 this number had already exceeded five billion (14). Research confirms that these applications have a fundamental influence on the mindset of humanity, but especially on young people belonging to Generation Z, which is clearly reflected in their behaviour (Pásztor & Bak, 2020).

These sites have a kind of natural evolution, in the sense that when a new platform is created, teenagers are the first to use it. The main reason for this phenomenon is that it allows young people to feel that they are participating in something new and to avoid parental control. They are then joined by those a few years older than them, after which various economic actors also see the potential and attract the older generations. The result of this process is usually that the first users leave prematurely, as the platform loses the sense of privacy that was the very reason they wanted to join in the first place. All this explains why new social networking sites are created from time to time (Székely & Rusu, 2022).

Based on surveys conducted in the United States, the most frequently used applications by teenagers are, in order of popularity, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. However, since 2012, there has been a significant change in the popularity of social media platforms. Compared to 2012 data, Facebook usage has declined significantly, while Instagram has come to the fore, and since 2019, there has been a rapid increase in the use of TikTok. According to the latest data, 90% of 13- to 17-year-olds in the United States use social media, with 51% of them opening at least one page or application every day (Indah, 2023).

According to a 2022 survey of 5,580 American youths aged 13 to 17, the most frequently used site is YouTube. Approximately 95% of 13- to 17-year-olds said they had used the app, and 19% visit the site almost constantly. Sixty-seven per cent of this age group use TikTok, 62% use Instagram, and 59% use Snapchat. Facebook usage fell from 71% in 2014 to just 32% in 2022, while Twitter fell from 33% to 23%. The study also looks at the gender distribution of platform use: YouTube is used slightly more often by boys, while TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat are used mostly by girls (Smahel et al., 2020).

According to the findings of the Hungarian Youth 2020 study (Domokos et al., 2020), the largest proportion of Hungarian young people aged 15-29 use Facebook (90%), YouTube (80%), Instagram (57%) and TikTok (49%), meaning that Facebook's popularity among young people in Hungary remains unbroken. The NMHH (2024) study also found Facebook to be the most popular social networking site, but according to their research, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube follow closely behind. Galán's (2018) research on the use of social media by Generation Z found Instagram to be the most popular among them, followed by Snapchat and Twitter. Almost all of the subjects involved in the research use Facebook on a daily basis, but they prefer Instagram. According to Guld's (2022) research, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest and TikTok are the most widespread and popular social media platforms among Hungarian Generation Z young people.

The results of Hungarian and global research on young people's media use are therefore similar and can be considered a kind of global trend, with no distinction between Generation Z young people in different countries in terms of media consumption (Zsolnai, 2017). In the above, we have attempted to show which players young people are most committed to. In the next chapter, we will examine the amount of time spent on these platforms and the content shared there.

AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONTENT SHARED

As for the amount of time spent on social media, according to a quantitative study based on responses from more than 1,500 American adolescents in 2023, 51% of teenagers spend at least four hours on social media sites. Based on this, the average time spent here is 4.8 hours per day. By gender, boys spend an average of 5.3 hours and girls 4.4 hours. Taking into account the age of users, 13-year-olds spend the least amount of time on these sites, averaging about 4.1 hours per day, while 17-year-olds spend 5.8 hours on various social media platforms (Statista, 2024).

According to studies conducted by the NMHH (2024) in Hungary, Generation Z youth spend an average of five hours online per day, while Generation Y spends four hours. According to Guld's (2022) studies, the average social media time spent by individuals under the age of 30 – primarily Generation Z youth – differs significantly depending on whether they are primary school, secondary school or university students. While the youngest spend an average of six hours a day on social media, secondary school students spend twice as much time. University students fall somewhere in between, spending eight hours a day on social media. However, these research results only apply to weekdays, as studies show that this time can double on weekends. These data clearly show us that Generation Z young people spend almost all of their free time on social media platforms and in front of screens (Guld, 2022).

55% of respondents said that the amount of time spent on platforms was appropriate, while 36% said they spent too much time on social networks. In terms of gender, 61% of boys and 50% of girls said that the amount of time spent was appropriate, while 31% of boys and 41% of girls said that they spend too much time on these sites. Based on international data, we know that 53% of young people who use at least one social media platform almost constantly said that they use the platforms too much, while only 28% of young people who use social media less frequently said the same. The study also addresses the question of how difficult it would be to stop using social media: 54% of participants said it would be somewhat difficult (35%) or very difficult (18%), with 58% of girls and 48% of boys, 48% of 13-14-year-olds and 57% of 15-17-year-olds saying the same (Vogels et al., 2022).

Social media sites have become super important for young people, since that's where they share what's going on in their lives. 43% of teens post about their achievements and

accomplishments, while 34% post about their families. Furthermore, 25% said they post about their emotions and feelings, and 12% post about their dates. A smaller proportion, around 10%, share their thoughts on personal problems, political or religious views (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick & Massarat, 2022). In addition, a Swedish study found that active participation on social media platforms is much more important for women than for men. This includes posting, sharing, liking and commenting (Galán, 2018). Active presence on social media is therefore extremely important for young people. But what happens when they cannot do this?

FoMO – JoMO

One of the most significant phenomena among Generation Z young people who use social media is FoMO (Fear of Missing Out), which is when someone is afraid of missing out on something that is important to them in some way. The prevalence of FoMO has increased with the spread of smartphones, as it has become natural for us to be able to use these devices anywhere, anytime, and to obtain information about anything and anyone at any time. What starts out as a way to relieve boredom can later become a habit and even a compulsion, which can cause individuals to experience withdrawal-like symptoms when they feel the urge to pick up their phone (Bányai et al., 2017; Pásztor & Bak, 2020). The rapid flow of information also contributes to the development of FoMO, as individual facts and situations can change from day to day, even minute to minute, making it difficult to keep up and constantly filter important information (Bak & Kóvári, 2021).

This can be considered a natural human reaction, as people are fundamentally curious about what is happening to others and in the world, and the desire for connection and "belonging to a community" is also a fundamental human desire (Bak & Kóvári, 2021). However, based on research, it can be clearly stated that curiosity is mostly limited to people close to the individual (relatives, friends, acquaintances), and that a kind of anxiety can also be observed alongside this interest (Pásztor & Bak, 2020).

At the same time, it is important to mention that Generation Z is generally motivated to follow people they know, yet in 2020, school was the source of most anxiety. A very important aspect of this was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that year, which led to educational institutions switching to online education (Kóvári et al., 2023). This increased the level of tension among young people, as they feared that they might miss

out on something important that could have a negative impact on their academic performance (Pásztor & Bak, 2020).

In addition, researchers also examined how FoMO manifests itself among users. It is not always clear-cut, as several factors can influence whether someone experiences anxiety or not. According to research by Rifkin and colleagues (2015), experiencing FoMO is most often linked to friendships. This reaction can be triggered when someone is unable to use social media and therefore cannot see what their friends are sharing. This is more pronounced when someone is working or living alone abroad, while it is less prevalent during holidays (Pásztor & Bak, 2020). At the same time, anxiety can also be caused when young people can see the shared content but, for some reason, cannot physically attend an event posted by an acquaintance they follow (Kővári et al., 2023). However, the emergence of FoMO is not only linked to social media sites (Milyavskaya et al., 2018).

It is also important to note that loneliness or a stimulus-poor environment can exacerbate negative reactions. This also means that when people are busy, they are less likely to experience fear of missing out (Pásztor & Bak, 2020), but at times when young people are more likely to be engaged in social activities (late afternoon/evening, and on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays), it intensifies (Milyavskaya et al., 2018).

This phenomenon can be linked to the fact that young people want to participate in countless different programmes, which causes them to develop persistent anxiety. Among other things, this can lead to depression, sleep apnoea, attention deficit disorder, and the development and persistence of aggression (Guld, 2022; Kővári et al., 2023). In more severe cases, those struggling with FoMO may also experience alcohol or drug problems (Guld, 2022).

Researchers have found a correlation between the proliferation of portable digital devices and the intensity of FoMO. This also means that these popular devices can generate constant tension in individuals by allowing them to view social media content at any time. A further consequence of all this is that it creates addiction in their case (Pásztor & Bak, 2020).

It is also worth noting that although FoMO can indeed cause a number of problems, as discussed above, its opposite, the 'Joy of Missing Out' (hereinafter referred to as JoMO), has also emerged. The essence of this phenomenon is that people who have already

experienced FoMO strive to recharge themselves with activities that are free from digital devices and social media. For this reason, spending time outdoors in the forest is very popular (Kóvári et al. 2023). To conclude this chapter, it should be noted that although younger generations were the first to experience the FoMO phenomenon and its many symptoms, today it no longer affects only their age group, but can have an impact on virtually the entire society (Guld, 2022).

In our research, we use qualitative methodology to explore the characteristics of social media use and the presence of FoMO among Generation Z young people. Which sites do young people use and for what purposes? Do they experience fear of missing out? Are there differences in social media use based on gender or age?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of our empirical research is to examine the relationship between today's teenagers and young adults in their early twenties and the online space, with a particular focus on social media in Hungary. Our goal is to examine the characteristics of social media use among Generation Z youth, as well as FoMO. In addition, we explore whether there are differences between Generation Z boys and girls in terms of social media use.

To answer our research questions, we conducted focus group interviews with Generation Z youth. We created four separate groups for the interviews, as follows:

- Girls born in 2010 (3 people),
- Boys born in 2010 (3 people),
- Girls born in 2000 (3 people),
- Boys born in 2000 (3 people).

We used the snowball method to find and recruit participants for the focus group interviews. We chose two age groups within Generation Z because we thought this would give us a more complete picture of our topic. Furthermore, we considered it important to involve both boys and girls in the research in order to find out whether gender influences social media use and, as a result, whether young people have different experiences in relation to its effects. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2024 at an educational institution. They lasted an average of 1-1.5 hours. During the interviews, we

used notes and a dictaphone to record what was said for later recall and to facilitate analysis.

We asked for their verbal consent to participate in the research, which they all agreed to. For the sake of anonymity, the subjects are referred to by number and gender, and we will refer to them as such in the following.

The focus group questions were organised along the following four dimensions:

- General questions about the internet,
- Questions about time spent on social media,
- Questions about the most popular sites and shared content,
- Questions concerning the negative effects of social media.

Looking at Table 8, we can see that boys and girls, as well as their ages, were evenly distributed during the interviews. In total, six boys and six girls participated in the research. In terms of age, three boys and three girls were 14 years old, meaning they were the youngest at one end of the scale, while the boys and girls in the other age group were 24 years old, meaning they were the oldest at the other end of the scale. All of them identified themselves as Hungarian citizens living in small towns in Hungary.

Table 8

Characteristics of interviewees

Serial number	No	Year of birth	Occupation/type of school	Type of residence
1	girl	2010	primary school student	small town
2.	girl	2010	primary school student	small town
3.	girl	2010	primary school student	small town
4.	boy	2010	primary school student	small town
5.	boy	2010	primary school student	small town
6.	boy	2010	primary school student	small town
7.	girl	2000	sales assistant	small town
8.	girl	2000	sales assistant	small town
9.	girl	2000	chemist	small town
10.	boy	2000	firefighter	small town

Serial number	No	Year of birth	Occupation/type of school	Type of residence
11	boy	2000	firefighter	small town
12.	boy	2000	university student	small town

Source: Own research

All of the younger interviewees were in their final year of primary school, and will be starting secondary school in the next year. They all come from stable, two-parent families, with the exception of one boy (boy 5), who is being raised by his mother alone. Of the girls in the adult age group, one lives separately from her partner and works as a shop assistant, another lives with her mother and also works as a shop assistant, while the third girl is a university student and lives in a dormitory. Two of the older boys said they lived separately from their parents and both worked as firefighters.

Next, we will examine what devices Generation Z young people use to access the internet and browse social media sites. We will then reveal how much time young people typically spend on these platforms. Our study will also examine which social media platforms are the most popular and what respondents share on them. We will also discuss whether they are familiar with FoMO and whether they have experienced it themselves.

RESULTS

DEVICES USED FOR INTERNET ACCESS

At the beginning of the focus group interviews, we assessed the devices that the subjects use for internet access. Previous studies (Gyivicsán, 2023; Tessényi, 2024) have found that smartphones are the primary device used by young people for internet access.

Taking this into account, it can be said that, after analysing the responses, the Generation Z young people surveyed form two distinct groups. One group consists of those who only use their phones to access the internet, while the other group uses both smartphones and laptops. The group that only uses phones consists of 5 people (girl 1, girl 2, girl 3, boy 4, boy 6), while the group that uses both phones and laptops consists of 7 people (boy 5, girl 7, girl 8, girl 9, boy 10, boy 11, boy 12). Below, we will describe the characteristics of the two groups in this regard. In terms of usage, all interviewees mentioned listening to music, using social media and keeping in touch with friends, but only the boys (boy 5, boy 10, boy 11, boy 12) among those interviewed play computer games.

Those who only use the internet on their phones: This group includes girls born in 2010, who, without exception, stated in response to our questions that they only use the internet on their phones, which one interviewee explained as follows: *"I like to use the internet on my phone because it allows me to retreat from the world much better, and no one can see what I'm doing on it"* (girl 1). In addition, two of the three boys born in 2010 stated that they only use the internet via their phones. One of the boys who uses a phone gave the following explanation when asked why he does not use a laptop to access the internet: *"My parents have a laptop, but they never let me use it because they think I can do everything I need to do on my phone. They are right, of course, although if I had one, I would definitely play a lot of computer games on it, as most of my peers do"* (boy 4). After examining the comments made during the interviews and the above quotes, we concluded that even among the members of this group, there are differences in why they only use their phones to access the internet. The younger members of Generation Z are influenced by personal preferences and parental restrictions when it comes to the devices they use to access the internet. Subject 1 only uses a phone to access the internet because, for him, this activity is an intimate thing that he would not be able to do on a laptop. At the same time, subject 4 would like to use a laptop, mainly to play computer games, but his parents do not allow him to do so.

Those who use both phones and laptops to access the internet: Compared to the previous groups, the members of this group use both phones and laptops to access the internet. All of the boys and girls born in 2000, i.e. a total of six people, also said that they use both devices. One of the respondents explained why they use a laptop in addition to a phone as follows: *"Because of my job, it is essential that I also use a laptop when surfing the internet. Since the shop where I work also sells through a webshop, there is no other way to do this. Besides, sometimes it's better to watch a film or just browse the internet on a bigger screen"* (girl 7). One of them said the following about the use of laptops and computer games: *"If it weren't for computer games, I would probably never use a laptop"* (boy 5). Those Gen Z young people who belong to the older group typically already have their own income, so they can more easily afford to buy a laptop in addition to their phone and use it to access the internet. In addition, several mentioned that it is an essential tool for their work.

TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to understand and map Generation Z's internet and social media usage, it is essential to consider the amount of time spent online, so we will explore this issue by analysing the responses. During the interviews, we tried to get as accurate a picture as possible of exactly who spends how much time online. Based on this, we concluded that, as in the previous subchapter, we had to divide the four groups into two for the analysis in order to present the most significant patterns relating to time spent. We did this despite the fact that we received a wide variety of responses regarding time spent online, but we were still able to distinguish between two important attitudes.

Time-limited internet users: Based on the responses received, it can be stated that the subjects in this group (girl 1, girl 2, girl 3, boy 4, boy 5, boy 6, girl 7, girl 9, boy 10, boy 12) spend an average of four hours a day on the internet. This finding is supported by the theoretical section (Vogels et al., 2022). Of these four hours, at least two hours are spent on social media. These figures may vary slightly upwards or downwards depending on the individual at weekends. One subject, who spends more time on the internet and other social media platforms at weekends, expressed his opinion on this as follows: *"Since there is no school at weekends and my parents don't interfere, I have more time to surf the internet. I can spend up to eight hours a day browsing, but I spend most of my time on Facebook looking at other people's posts and sharing things myself"* (vgirl 1). Another subject, who spends less time online at the weekend, expressed her thoughts as follows: *"I tend to spend less time on the internet and consuming social media content at the weekend because I prefer to relax actively, travel and spend as much time as possible with my partner"* (girl 7). Based on what was said in the focus groups, it can be said that although the members of this group spend different amounts of time online on weekdays, it is clear that they are aware of their own time use and exercise some control over it. At the same time, there may be significant differences between them in terms of how they spend their time at the weekend, depending on who they are and what social relationships they have, and thus how much they are able to recharge their batteries. In this respect, those born in 2000 have an advantage over those born in 2010, as they can dispose of their own free time, while their younger peers are more dependent on their parents and have less freedom in how they spend their free time at weekends.

Unlimited internet users: This group consists of two interviewees (girl 8, boy 11). They were placed in this group after analysis because both gave answers regarding time use that showed a significant difference compared to the others. One of them replied: *"On weekdays, I spend a maximum of four hours on the internet, with 2-3 hours on social media, but at the weekend I completely lose control. Sometimes I spend the whole day on the internet because I have nothing else to do, so I kill time that way"* (girl 8). The former response is confirmed by Guld (2022), who states that time spent online at weekends can be up to twice as much as on weekdays. In contrast, another subject shed light on this issue from a different perspective, responding as follows: *"I can't answer how many hours a day I spend online and how much of that time is spent on social media, because I think that in today's world, everyone is constantly available. Since I also have notifications turned on on my phone, I am constantly available, so to speak, and I respond to them immediately."* (boy 11). This response supports Guld's (2022) assertion that Generation Z youth are completely under the influence of social media. Based on the above quotes, it is clear that although they both have different attitudes towards the online world, they have in common that they spend significantly more time on the internet and use social media platforms than the first group. While in the former case (girl 8), boredom and a lack of meaningful activities cause excessive online presence, the latter subject (boy 11) believes that there is nothing he can do about it and considers it completely normal to be constantly available and to use his phone or laptop all day long. Girl 8 also said that she finds this situation frustrating, but apart from a few successful attempts, she has not been able to reduce her weekend use of digital devices, which can also be attributed to the fact that there are no activities in her life that would get her out of this situation. For this reason, it can be said that the number and quality of social relationships can significantly determine how time is spent, but at the same time, it is possible for someone to spend a lot of time online regardless of this.

THE MOST POPULAR SITES AND SHARED CONTENT

In the following, we explore the respondents' preferences regarding social media sites and what they share on them. Several previous studies (Hargittai and Hsieh, 2010; Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2010; Wallace et al., 2014; Galán, 2018) have been conducted on the use of social media sites, but in this study, we group young people based on their individual preferences rather than their usage patterns.

Based on their responses, the three most significant online social platforms are TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, which is consistent with the results of recent domestic studies (Domokos et al. 2020; Guld 2022; NMHH, 2024). Based on their preferences, young people can be divided into three groups: TikTokers, Instamaniacs and Facebookers. The characteristics of these groups are briefly presented below.

TikTok users: The members of this group unanimously stated that their favourite social media site is TikTok, but only as observers, they do not share anything (girl 7, girl 8, boy 11, boy 12). All four agreed that it is very important for them to be able to access information quickly, which is why it has become their favourite, but the two girls also mentioned that there are certain things that bother them greatly. Below are their opinions on this: *"I love TikTok because I can find almost anything I want almost instantly, but I am terribly bothered by the content that sometimes appears while I am using the site. The company should pay much more attention to this so that such things do not happen"* (girl 7). Another girl had a similar opinion: *"I use TikTok a lot and learn many new things through it, but sometimes I think about deleting it because it takes up too much of my time and there are many disturbing videos"* (girl 8). It can therefore be concluded that the four Generation Z interviewees who like TikTok were all among the older ones, who all agreed that the undoubted advantage of this platform is the rapid flow of information, but the two girls found the content that they thought was inappropriate disturbing. There was also consensus among them that they are only observers on TikTok and do not share anything, which may indicate that as adults, they are better able to assess the dangers of sharing something about themselves on such a popular site, and as older Generation Zers, they may not prefer to make and share videos about themselves.

Instamans: Six people were placed in this group, as they all indicated Instagram as their favourite social media platform. This group includes girl 2, girl 3, boy 4, boy 5, boy 6 and boy 10. All of the girls stated that they enjoy following others and communicating through this platform, but they also post and share videos/photos regularly. Girl 2 described her relationship with Instagram as follows: *"I only use this because it annoys me that my parents are on Facebook, and I think Insta is much cooler. I regularly post pictures and videos of myself"* (girl 2). Guld (2022) writes that there is a kind of natural evolution of these sites, which is confirmed by the above quote, i.e. compared to the initial state, as more and more older users join a given platform, the younger ones who have been there

since the beginning leave it. Boys have a different attitude towards Instagram: *"I don't do what girls do, posing all the time and then uploading it to Instagram"* (boy 5). *"I think it's stupid to share things, I only use it to chat with my classmates and friends"* (boy 6). Based on the responses received, it became clear that while girls use almost the entire spectrum of Instagram, this is not at all typical of boys; in fact, they are quite dismissive of those who do anything other than chat and browse on the site. As other studies have confirmed (Falmann, 2015; Galán, 2018), active social media behaviour – i.e. posting, sharing, liking and commenting – is more important to women than to men, which was confirmed by the responses of the girls participating in the interview.

Facebookers: Of the two members of the group, only one (girl 1) said that she really likes Facebook, while the other (girl 9) considers it a necessary evil, which she expressed as follows: *"I wouldn't say that any social media platform is my favourite, but I would say that Facebook and the Messenger app that can be used through it are the ones I use because I use them to keep in touch with my friends and relatives, and I only use them for this purpose"* (girl 9). In contrast, girl 1, like her peers born in 2010, is just as active on Facebook as they are on Instagram. Her opinion of the app is: *"I know that many of my peers no longer use Facebook because our parents are on it, but it doesn't bother me; in fact, we use it to chat or send videos to each other"* (girl 1). In this group, as in the previous one, it became clear that the older member (girl 9) uses social media more consciously than her younger counterpart (girl 1), which is why she does not post anything. This is confirmed by her opinion below: *"Since I have read a lot and learned about the activities of the companies that operate social media sites in various ways, it is clear to me that they should only be used with due care and awareness, otherwise it is not me who uses these sites, but they use me, which is definitely something to avoid"* (girl 9). Based on this, it can be said that girl 9's knowledge significantly influences her use of social media, making her much more protected from the effects that I will examine and analyse in the following questions.

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA – FoMO

Based on what was said during the focus group interviews, we will attempt to present below how Generation Z young people feel about the negative effects that the rise of social media has brought about today. We also discussed FoMO during the focus groups.

There was consensus among the respondents that social media has negative effects. Compared to the previous question dimensions, it can be said that this is the only topic on which the interviewees agreed completely, regardless of age or gender. To illustrate this, we will quote one member from each of the four groups. One of those born in 2010 expressed her thoughts as follows: *"Almost all of my classmates are constantly on Facebook/TikTok/Instagram, which I don't like because you can't talk to them then. That's why I have a negative view of social media"* (girl 1). One of the boys in the same age group explained why he thinks the statement that social media has negative effects is true *"my parents are always on their phones, checking Facebook, which really annoys me. No matter how much I talk to them, they don't listen to me"* (boy 4).

Following the younger respondents, we quote the answers of a girl and a boy born in 2000, in line with the above: *"Although social media is the collective name for these sites, I believe that it alienates people from each other rather than bringing them closer together"* (girl 9). One of the boys also expressed his strong feelings about social media: *"Sometimes I just scroll through Instagram, but I don't even know what I'm looking at or why I'm doing it. I think this is exactly what it means when it is no longer the person using the platform, but the other way around, the platform using them. This is obviously not healthy, so I dare say that this is a serious negative effect of social media"* (boy 10). Referring to the quoted responses, it can be said that all of them have reservations about social media, although they use different wording, but the common point of all their opinions was the negative impact on human relationships.

FoMO: As was characteristic of previous studies (Bak & Kővári, 2021), Generation Z had a low level of knowledge about the phenomenon, and the girls and boys born in 2010 who participated in the study were unfamiliar with the concept when first asked about it. We then tried to explain the definition to them, but not a single person in the group of girls was familiar with this phenomenon or had experienced its effects personally. The members of the boys' group had not heard of it either, but one of them noted that he experienced its symptoms, which he described as follows: *"I don't know, I've never heard of FoMO, but I understand what it means. I often feel that I have to check my phone so that I don't miss anything. Mostly I check to see who has written to me"* (boy 4). The other two participants said that they did not struggle with this problem, but neither of them could imagine not checking Instagram for a day. Although all of the respondents in the two

groups spend several hours a day on the internet and social media, only one of them (boy 4) thought that FoMO might apply to them to some extent. Based on their reports, we can conclude that although online presence is important to all of them, based on their subjective experiences, it is always associated with the inability of the individual to detach themselves from social media.

While Pásztor and Bak (2020) found no significant correlation between gender and age in relation to FoMO among Generation Z youth in their quantitative research, the present study found differences based on age. Unlike those born in 2010, girls and boys born in 2000 were mostly familiar with FoMO and had experienced it themselves. One girl described FoMO based on her own experience: *"I've heard of this concept, and I think it applies to me, unfortunately. I check my phone a lot because I feel like something must have happened since I last checked, and I don't want to miss out. There are influencers whose updates I want to see as soon as possible"* (girl 7). One of the boys responded to the question of whether they were familiar with FoMO and what their experiences with it were as follows: *"In the past, when I was still addicted to social media, I experienced this countless times, but since I've been trying to spend less time online, I haven't had this feeling"* (boy 12). Another participant described the phenomenon as follows: *"I mostly feel like FoMO is taking over when I know I'm missing out on a social event with friends that I would have liked to attend, so I constantly check my friends' posts. I feel a bit jealous then"* (boy 10). Apart from the girls born in 2010, all members of the other three groups have experienced FoMO in some form.

Based on their responses, they associate FoMO most with infatuation with a person, addiction, and distancing themselves from their interpersonal relationships. In one case, the subjects want to know immediately everything that the person they follow posts; in another case, withdrawal symptoms caused by addiction cause anxiety; and in the third case, increased online presence due to a lack of time spent with friends causes FoMO.

Overall, it can be concluded that Generation Z's attitude towards negative effects is fundamentally determined by whether the individual belongs to the younger or older age group. It seems that the former are less realistic in their assessment of the dangers and negative effects. However, it should also be noted that among the older generation, those who are more knowledgeable about this topic tend to be more aware of it. This may also explain the difference in experiences, as it is possible that younger people reported

negative effects less frequently not because they had experienced fewer of them in their lives, but because they did not always recognise them.

SUMMARY

In our research, we used qualitative methodology to examine the use of social media and the presence of FoMO within the Generation Z cohort (n=12). Our aim was to explore whether there are differences in the use of social media and FoMO among Generation Z young people based on age and gender.

Based on the focus group interviews, we can conclude that there are certain differences within Generation Z age groups in their attitudes towards the internet and social media platforms. Nevertheless, it can be said that they all use the internet and social media platforms for several hours a day.

The older Generation Z girls, born in 2010, differ from the others in that they like to post and share on various social media platforms. Furthermore, it was this same group whose participants only use the internet and social media on their phones.

Our research also addressed the FoMO phenomenon. Most of the Generation Z young people involved in the study were unfamiliar with FoMO, but after reading the report, the majority acknowledged that they had experienced it themselves. These experiences are mostly related to following influencers, withdrawal symptoms resulting from addiction, and missing out on offline activities.

Based on the literature and research results, it can be said that the lives of Generation Z are now inextricably linked to the internet and social media platforms through smart devices. They spend most of their time online, but their main motivation remains their need for human connection. Based on the results of our research, older members of Generation Z typically use social media more consciously than younger ones. Another important factor is the type of social relationships an individual has, if any, as this significantly influences their attitude towards social media, regardless of their age group. There are similarities and differences between age groups and genders in terms of usage.

In view of the mental health of both Generation Z and subsequent generations, as well as the constant and rapid changes in the online space, we consider further research on this

topic to be important. In addition, education can also contribute significantly to the prevention of problems, so it is important to make parents and professionals working with children sufficiently knowledgeable about the topic. The research results show that children and young people who have an adequate social network and, as a result, are able to enjoy appropriate leisure activities, consider social media less important, and are therefore less likely to experience negative effects.

THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND ONLINE RISKS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Jakub Šoltés, Adriana Eremiášová

The digital space, often referred to as the online environment, is created by digital technologies and the internet and represents a significant part of everyday life for children and adolescents in Slovakia. It includes activities such as social media use, online communication, gaming, shopping, and digital learning (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; OECD, 2021). According to European research, Slovak children are among the most active internet users in Central Europe, making the digital environment a key context for their socialisation, education, and identity development (Smahel et al., 2020).

While the digital space offers numerous benefits, including access to information, educational opportunities, and social connectivity, it also poses significant risks to children's mental health and well-being. One of the most prevalent risks in Slovakia is cyberbullying, defined as repeated aggressive behaviour carried out through digital technologies with the intent to harm others (Kowalski et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Studies conducted within the EU Kids Online framework show that Slovak children experience online harassment, hate speech, and peer violence at rates comparable to or higher than the European average (Smahel et al., 2020).

Another serious challenge is the spread of misinformation and fake news, which can negatively influence children's opinions, values, and decision-making abilities, particularly in the context of social media algorithms and low digital literacy (Guess et al., 2019; OECD, 2021). Excessive use of digital technologies is also associated with problematic internet use and symptoms resembling behavioural addiction, such as loss of control, emotional distress, and neglect of offline relationships (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Anderson et al., 2017). These risks are particularly relevant in Slovakia, where children spend a substantial amount of time online each day (Smahel et al., 2020).

Furthermore, children in Slovakia are exposed to risks related to privacy violations, misuse of personal data, sexting, and contact with inappropriate or sexually explicit

content (Madigan et al., 2018; Wolak et al., 2010). Such experiences may have long-term consequences for children's psychological well-being, including increased anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

For these reasons, promoting responsible and safe behaviour in the digital space is essential. Children should be educated to protect their personal data, use strong passwords, critically evaluate online content, and behave respectfully towards others (OECD, 2021). Strengthening digital literacy and resilience is a key preventive measure for protecting children's mental health in Slovakia (Livingstone et al., 2018).

IPČKO.SK – CIVIC ASSOCIATION IN SLOVAKIA

IPČKO.sk is a Slovak civic association composed of psychologists, social workers, and trained volunteers who focus on providing psychological support and prevention services for children and adolescents, particularly in relation to online risks and cyber violence. Research indicates that approximately 96% of Slovak children aged 9–17 use the internet daily, often for more than two hours per day, highlighting the central role of the digital environment in their lives (Smahel et al., 2020).

Online anonymity may facilitate emotional self-disclosure and help children seek support for sensitive issues; however, it simultaneously increases exposure to cyberbullying, sexting, grooming, and online sexual exploitation (Livingstone et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2018). Professionals, parents, and educators in Slovakia often struggle to keep pace with the rapid development of digital technologies and emerging online risks (Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

Although Slovak legislation defines criminal offences committed in digital space, including child sexual abuse material and online harassment, effective child protection requires coordinated prevention, education, and accessible support services (Council of Europe, 2016). In this context, organizations such as IPČKO.sk play a crucial role by offering counselling, crisis intervention, and guidance for children, parents, and schools affected by online violence (UNICEF, 2021).

NATIONAL PROJECT – TOGETHER FOR A VIOLENCE-FREE CHILDHOOD

The national project *Together for a Violence-Free Childhood* aims to strengthen intersectoral cooperation in Slovakia to protect children from all forms of violence, including digital violence. Effective child protection requires systematic coordination between healthcare providers, educational institutions, municipalities, social services, law enforcement agencies, courts, non-governmental organizations, and civic associations (Council of Europe, 2016; UNICEF, 2021).

Child Protection Coordinators play a key role in building professional networks, facilitating interdisciplinary cooperation, and raising public awareness about the prevention of violence against children in both online and offline environments (European Commission, 2022).

STRATEGIC DOCUMENT – NATIONAL CONCEPT FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN DIGITAL SPACE

The *National Concept for the Protection of Children in Digital Space* in Slovakia defines various forms of harmful digital behaviour, including cyberbullying, online grooming, and misuse of personal data, and outlines legal and institutional responsibilities for child protection. The framework reflects international standards and is based on prevention, early intervention, and recovery measures (Livingstone et al., 2018; Council of Europe, 2016).

EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR A BETTER INTERNET FOR CHILDREN (BIK+)

The European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (BIK+) provides a key policy framework for Slovakia's approach to child protection in the digital environment. The strategy aims to ensure that every child is protected, empowered, and respected online and is built on three pillars: protection, empowerment through digital skills, and active participation of children (European Commission, 2022).

Initiatives such as the Better Internet for Kids portal and the network of Safer Internet Centres support national efforts in Slovakia and contribute to improving children's digital well-being and mental health (European Commission, 2022; Smahel et al., 2020).

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF AGGRESSION: BIOLOGICAL ROOTS AND THE IMPACT OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Klaudia Czekańska

Emotions play a very important role in human life. The function of emotion is to signal when something significant is happening and to prepare the individual to respond appropriately. However, at times, these emotions may become more intense and persist longer than is typical. In such cases, the cause may lie in dysfunctions, for example, within the brain.

NEUROBIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

Due to advances in neuroimaging techniques, it has become possible to study brain structures and functions with greater precision. It is well established that it has a significant impact not only on the functioning of the human body but also on the processes involved in the formation of emotions and feelings. Certain parts of the brain play a significant role in this process, for example, the hypothalamus (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007). It is involved not only in regulating vital functions but also in controlling emotional reactions and the autonomic nervous system. The amygdala (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007), on the other hand, analyzes and integrates complex sensory stimuli. It mediates the transmission of impulses between cortical sensory areas and the motor and autonomic systems, as well as the hypothalamus and the midbrain, processing external stimuli into meaningful information and triggering emotional responses. It also plays an important role in the conditioning of fear reactions.

The hippocampus (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007) is another important part of the brain that plays a significant role in the formation of emotions. It is involved in modulating emotional responses and in memory processes. It also plays an important role in the acquisition of individual experience by forming associations between fear-inducing stimuli and the contextual features of a situation. Numerous connections with the

amygdala allow these structures to interact in the generation and modulation of emotional responses. The midbrain (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007), as mentioned above, is another key structure. It houses a reward system that forms a component of the limbic system. That system (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007) is involved in regulating drive- and emotion-related behaviors. It includes structures such as the aforementioned hippocampus and anterior nuclei of the thalamus, as well as the cerebral cortex. Activation of the limbic system structures is thought to constitute the neural mechanism underlying emotional states. The anterior nuclei of the thalamus (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007) transmit impulses between the cortex, hippocampus, subthalamus, and thalamus, forming a circuit known as Papez's emotional circuit. Damage to any of these structures can lead to emotional disorders or a loss of emotional spontaneity. The prefrontal cortex and associative cortex (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007) are involved in the cortical analysis of sensory information. This process enables a more accurate, albeit slower, assessment of the nature and magnitude of potential threats. Cortical processing also allows for the inhibition of unjustified emotional reactions.

Based on this, we can say that positive emotions (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007) arise when the reward system is active and the amygdala reduces its activity. Fear (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007), for example, activates the hypothalamus, periaqueductal gray, and amygdala, which recognizes the threat, as well as the prefrontal cortex, which helps regulate the response. In the case of anger (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007), the hypothalamus, periaqueductal gray, and amygdala are involved, with the amygdala playing a key role in controlling anger through descending inhibitory mechanisms. Clinical studies (Sano, 1966; Spiegel et al., 1951; Whitty et al., 1952; cited Sadowski, 2007) have shown that there are regions in the brain whose activation can result in aggressive behavior. Damage to parts of the cingulate gyrus, certain thalamic nuclei, or the posterior hypothalamus has been found to reduce aggressiveness in patients. Another case (Terzian and Ore, 1955; cited Sadowski, 2007) demonstrated that the removal of both temporal lobes in a patient with schizophrenia reduced his aggressiveness toward family members and medical staff. King's studies (1961, cited Sadowski, 2007) have shown that stimulation of areas surrounding the amygdala affects verbal aggression toward medical staff. Similar results were obtained when stimulating areas of the frontal and temporal lobes as well as the septal nuclei (Heath, 1963; cited Sadowski, 2007).

Hormones and neurotransmitters (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski 2007; Aronson, 1997; Archer, 1991; Book et al., 2001) are also important in the process of emotion formation. There is a relationship between the experience of various affective states and changes in the levels of neurotransmitters, including dopamine, noradrenaline, adrenaline, and serotonin. Hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, and testosterone likewise play a significant role in emotional processes. Studies have shown that administration of testosterone to animals results in increased aggression (Moyer, 1983; cited Aronson, 1997). In humans, higher testosterone levels have been observed in inmates convicted of violent offenses compared to those convicted of non-violent crimes, although not all researchers agree with this theory (cited Aronson, 1997; Archer, 1991; Book et al., 2001). In women, some scientists suggest that aggression may be related to disruptions in the balance between progesterone and estradiol levels in the blood (Reid and Yen, 1981; cited Sadowski, 2007).

Some psychoactive substances can also have a significant impact on human aggressive responses. Alcohol, for example, reduces inhibitions against engaging in behaviors that violate commonly accepted social norms, including acts of aggression (Aronson, 1997; Wojciszke, 2011; Erickson, 2024). Experimental studies (Taylor & Leonard, 1983; cited Aronson, 1997) have shown that participants who were intoxicated during an experiment responded to provocation more violently and with greater hostility than those who received no alcohol or only small amounts. Under the influence of alcohol, primary drives and desires tend to surface—an individual predisposed to aggression is therefore more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior.

IS AGGRESSION ALWAYS INTENTIONAL?

As highlighted above, aggression can be triggered by certain types of stimulation. Consequently, it is not always intentional. Given that certain brain structures are responsible for specific behavioral responses, dysfunctions in these areas can lead to hostility. Stimulation does not have to be intentional. Certain disorders, such as brain tumors, can also cause such activation (Sadowski, 2007). Aggressive reactions may also occur during the epileptic aura in temporal lobe epilepsy (Łosiak, 2007; Sadowski, 2007; Haller, 2006). Normal aggression is regulated by the temporal cortex and the amygdala, which exert inhibitory control over hypothalamic regions responsible for generating uncontrolled rage responses. In temporal lobe epilepsy, the activity of the temporal cortex

and the deeper regions of the amygdala is disrupted, resulting in the release of uncontrolled rage reactions from the hypothalamus. Fury can appear as one of the manifestations of emotional dysregulation and pathological aggression (Jędrak, 2011). Emotional dysregulation (Jędrak, 2011) may manifest as episodic emotional outbursts that occur within the context of otherwise appropriate behavior. The intensity of these reactions may be disproportionate to external circumstances and may not accurately reflect the individual's current emotional state. Aggressive behavior normally serves as a vital defensive function in threatening situations. However, pathologically conditioned attacks (Jędrak, 2011) differ from normal aggression in that they are triggered by nonspecific, non-threatening circumstances, continuously escalate, do not achieve any purposeful goal, and cannot be voluntarily controlled.

Dementia (Jędrak, 2011; Gotovac, 2016; Lane, 2011) is another condition that can lead to impaired control over impulses and emotions. One of the symptoms highlighted in the ICD-10 (1996) is reduced control over emotional, social, behavioral, and motivational responses. Neuroimaging techniques allow for the observation of changes in the temporal lobes (where the amygdala is located) and the hippocampus. Symptoms may include irritability and emotional instability. Depending on the location of the pathology, different clinical manifestations may arise; for example, subcortical lesions may lead to difficulties in regulating emotional reactions. Linking dementia with Alzheimer's disease, aggressive behaviors may be observed in some patients (Hallr, 2006). Pathological changes in the caudate nucleus in Huntington's disease, along with other degenerative processes and the progression of the disease, can manifest in various ways, including irritability and aggression (Jędrak, 2011).

Brain injuries in specific regions can lead to aggression and changes in personality. A classic example is the case of Phineas Gage, in which a metal rod penetrated his skull, damaging the orbital (prefrontal) regions of the frontal lobes. Before the accident, Gage was described as thoughtful, kind, responsible, and a competent worker, highly valued by his supervisors. After the injury, he became aggressive, rude, and irresponsible, lost his job, became a drifter, and began abusing alcohol. His drives came to dominate his behavior, illustrating a classic case of frontal personality disorder (Jędrak, 2011; Rolls, 2011).

Some disorders that may lead to aggressive behavior can also be observed in children and adolescents. There is a group of contributing factors that may predict difficulties with emotional regulation. The first group includes biological and developmental factors, such as genetic predisposition, pregnancy and perinatal complications, chronic illnesses, temperament, neuropsychological deficits, and variables related to sex and hormone levels (e.g., testosterone and adrenaline). Family-related factors are associated with parenting practices and overall family functioning (Jędrak, 2011). Environmental factors are related to the child's functioning within the school and peer environment. The final group is associated with early onset of symptoms, their persistence and high intensity, as well as legal conflicts and the broader environmental context (Jędrak, 2011).

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Cytowska, 2008; McKay, 2006; Grzegorzewska, 2020; Retz, 2009) is associated with impaired functioning of the frontal lobes, which are responsible for executive control (Krahe, 2005; Pilecka, 2011; Kendall, 2018). Neuroimaging studies have confirmed significantly reduced blood flow in these frontal regions and their connected areas, as well as decreased glucose metabolism in the frontal cortex and striatum (Krahe, 2005). This dysfunction is linked to impulsivity (Haller, 2006; Cytowska, 2008; McKay, 2006; Retz, 2009; Gałeczki, 2023), which may manifest as aggressive behavior and its initial symptoms can be observed in early childhood. Another behavioral disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), is characterized by a persistent pattern of angry or irritable mood, argumentative and defiant behavior toward authority figures, spitefulness, and a tendency toward emotional outbursts. These behaviors may occur in only one setting (e.g., at home) and are marked by defiant, disobedient, and disruptive actions, although they do not involve criminal acts or more severe aggressive or antisocial patterns (Grzegorzewska, 2020; ICD-10, 1997; Gałeczki, 2023). A more severe form is conducting disorder (CD), which is characterized by a persistent disregard for the rights and rules of others. Aggressive and antisocial behaviors are more pronounced, ranging from milder forms to serious violations of the law (Grzegorzewska, 2020; ICD-10, 1997).

Some deviant behaviors may contribute to the development of substance use disorders. As mentioned previously, alcohol can increase aggressiveness and impulsivity. Research suggests a causal relationship between behavioral disorders and early substance use, which may later contribute to the development of antisocial personality traits

(Grzegorzewska, 2020), such as disregard for the feelings of others, neglect of social norms, and a tendency toward aggressive behavior (ICD,10, 1997, Haller, 2006). Substance use during childhood and early adolescence can lead to structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions responsible for emotional regulation. These changes contribute to the emergence of the personality trait known as impulsivity. Emotional impulsivity is defined as the tendency to respond immediately under the influence of intense negative emotions, without considering the consequences of one's actions. It is a key indicator of the psychosocial functioning patterns observed in individuals with various personality disorders associated with elevated levels of aggression.

Regarding addiction, an increasing number of children and adolescents are becoming dependent on the Internet, mobile phones, and other digital technologies. A study presented by pacjent.gov.pl indicates that in 2019, 9 out of 10 children used the Internet daily, and over 80% of children and adolescents aged 7 to 15 owned their own mobile phone. An analysis published on the Ombudsman for Children's website in 2021 showed that 13% of second-grade students, 11% of sixth-grade students, and 15% of second-grade high school students required assistance due to addiction to social media. Another study revealed that in 2022, 67.1% of the global population owned a smartphone, which was a larger proportion than those who had access to a toothbrush and toothpaste (Bogusiak, 2023). The NASK report (2025) indicates that on weekdays, adolescents spend an average of almost 5 hours online. It was found that 93% of teenagers access the Internet via their phones, surpassing laptops and tablets. One in seven thirteen-year-olds reports receiving visual materials depicting nudity, and the first exposure to pornography occurs on average at 11 years and 3 months.

Excessive use of electronic devices in modern society is a significant problem, with signs of overuse appearing in increasingly younger children. Gentile's study (2009) supports this observation, showing that one in ten children exhibits symptoms of video game addiction. Today, people do not use phones solely for gaming. There are numerous other reasons why individuals check their devices, on average, every 10 minutes during the day (Hansen, 2020). Research by Sowińska (2010, cited in Jarczyńska & Orzechowska, 2014) revealed that adolescents use their phones as a source of information, as a medium for social communication (e.g., through social media), and as a means of entertainment,

including gaming. Observations of school-aged youth show that they frequently watch and often record videos. An increasing number of applications allow users to interact with others and present their own image online. This occurs because social media platforms and incoming notifications are associated with dopamine release in the brain, which is responsible for the sensation of pleasure (Hansen, 2020; Lieberman & Long, 2019).

Alarmingly, data show that each year, more children have access to the Internet and spend longer periods online, which also correlates with receiving their own mobile phones. The creators of these devices and applications are aware of how potentially dangerous their innovations can be, based on observed usage patterns (Hansen, 2020). Recent research shows that one in four infants and over half of two-year-olds already use the Internet (Hansen, 2020). Numerous studies indicate the negative impact of electronic device use on development, not only emotionally but also neurologically. Observed effects include weakened communication and social skills, difficulties in interpreting emotions, processing speech, and expressing opinions, as well as cognitive impairments such as problems with concentration and even alterations in brain structure (Ciszkowska, 2017; Hansen, 2020; Jarczyńska & Orzechowska, 2014; Karaś, 2019; Kiper, 2022). Authors emphasize that addiction to and improper use of electronic devices negatively affect peer and family relationships, as well as educational outcomes. Difficulties also appear in the psychophysiological domain, including sleep disturbances, irritability, distractibility, neglect of health due to lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, fatigue, back pain, neglect of personal hygiene, and vision problems (Hansen, 2020; Jarczyńska & Orzechowska, 2014).

SUMMARY

Thanks to neuroscience, we can better understand why some behaviors may not align with our intentions. Aggression is a common phenomenon, and the easy access to violent games and videos can blur the boundaries between the real world and the digital world which is especially concerning when it comes to children.

[LESSON PLAN]:

PREVENTING PHONE ADDICTION

Klaudia Czekańska

PARTICIPANTS:

Students aged 11 and above (especially at risky behaviours)

DURATION:

45 minutes

TOPIC:

Phonoholism – How to Avoid Phone Addiction in the Digital World

MAIN OBJECTIVE:

To prevent the development of phone addiction among students.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define what phone addiction is.
2. Identify the consequences of excessive phone use.
3. Propose alternative ways of spending free time.
4. Express and justify their opinions in front of the class.
5. Collaborate effectively in group activities.
6. Recognize the risks associated with phone overuse.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES:

- Video presentation
- Group work
- Brainstorming

- Guided discussion
- Simple experiment

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES:

Paper, sticky notes, pens, interactive whiteboard, laptop

LESSON FLOW (PROCEDURE):

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

The teacher greets the class and begins without introducing the topic. Each student writes on a piece of paper the device they use most frequently or for the longest period during the day. Afterward, each student reads their response aloud. Those who wrote “phone” or “computer” are asked to stand up.

Purpose:

To visualize how many students primarily use their phones and to raise awareness of the prevalence of this behavior within the group.

2. Exercise 1 – Generations and Technology (5 minutes)

A slide with several numbers and dots appears on the board. Students are asked to guess what the data refers to:

- 10,000 – number of generations on Earth since the emergence of our species in Africa
- 8 – generations that have lived in a world with cars, electricity, running water, and television
- 3 – generations that have lived with computers, mobile phones, and air travel
- 1 – the generation that has never known a world without smartphones, Facebook, and the Internet

Purpose:

To introduce the topic and make students aware that they are the first generation born into an era of widespread Internet access.

3. Exercise 2 – Could You Live Without Your Phone? (10 minutes)

Students sit in a circle. The teacher asks those who could leave their phone in a locker for an entire day to stand up. After the experiment, students discuss the following questions:

- Why did you decide to do it?
- What made you decide not to?
- Was it an easy decision?

Purpose:

To help students realize how difficult it can be to separate from their phones, even temporarily.

4. Video Segment – Behavioral Addictions (10 minutes)

The class watches a short educational video titled *Behavioral Addictions – Internet* ([YouTube](#)).

Purpose:

To introduce the concept of behavioral addiction and encourage reflection on its connection to phone use.

5. Exercise 3 – Group Work (10 minutes)

Students are divided into three groups by counting off from one to three. Each group receives a sheet labeled “PHONE.”

- Group 1 lists possible uses of the phone.
- Group 2 lists the negative effects of phone overuse.
- Group 3 lists strategies to reduce phone use.

Purpose:

To increase awareness of the consequences of excessive phone use and to develop ideas for alternative behaviors. The activity also supports group integration and teamwork skills.

6. Exercise 4 – Offline Games (5 minutes)

The teacher introduces three classic games that do not require a phone: tic-tac-toe, battleships, and *cities and countries*. Students learn the rules and then play *countries and cities* together.

Purpose:

To demonstrate enjoyable alternatives to phone use and promote social interaction among students.

7. Conclusion (5 minutes)

The teacher facilitates a brief discussion, asking each student to respond:

- Do you know what the goal of today's class was?
- What conclusions did you draw from today's activities?

Purpose:

To summarize the key insights gained during the session and reinforce the importance of balance in technology use.

EVALUATION:

Students' participation, engagement, and ability to reflect on their behavior will serve as indicators of the lesson's effectiveness.

[ACTIVITY]:

SAFE ONLINE BEHAVIOUR – BINGO

Natálie Provazníková, Anna Nováková, Kateřina Pšeničková, Valerie Laciková

The topic of digital wellbeing can be viewed from multiple perspectives – it can relate, for example, to the use of digital technologies in healthcare, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle through applications, or the monitoring of bodily functions using smart devices. We have decided to focus primarily on the area of safe behaviour in the online environment. Digital technologies and the internet are an integral part of everyday life, especially for the younger generation. However, along with the benefits, they also bring risks that can threaten not only the privacy but also the mental and social health of users. That is why it is important to pay attention to the rules of safe internet use and at the same time familiarise yourself with basic terms such as phishing, cyberbullying or sexting, which represent specific threats in the online world.

ACTIVITY NAME:

Safe online behaviour – Bingo

TARGET GROUP:

Secondary school pupils (aged 11–15)

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS, NUMBER OF ORGANISERS:

Participants: 10–30 (ideally the whole class)

Organisers: 1–2 (teacher/instructor)

OBJECTIVE:

- To familiarise pupils with selected concepts and situations relating to safe behaviour on the internet
- To encourage open communication between pupils

- To raise awareness of the risks in the online environment (phishing, sexting, cyberbullying, hoaxes, etc.)

ACTIVITY AIDS:

- Bingo cards (9 boxes with situations/statements related to safe online behaviour) – 1 per participant
- writing materials
- Possibly a reward for the winner (e.g. a small sweet, sticker)

ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

A classroom or other space where participants can move around freely and communicate with each other.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE AKTIVITY:

Participants move around the classroom and ask their classmates about individual situations. If they find someone who has experienced or agrees with a given situation, they have that person sign the box.

Each classmate can only be used once.

AIM OF THE GAME:

To fill in all 9 boxes. The first person to complete the table shouts BINGO! and wins.

DISCUSSION:

Afterwards, go through some of the statements together, explain the terms and share experiences (voluntarily).

REFLECTION:

Possible questions:

- Which statements were the easiest/most difficult for you?
- Did you learn anything new about your classmates?
- Which dangers of the internet do you consider to be the most common?

- How would you help someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying or phishing?

Ways to reflect:

- discussion in a circle – voting (e.g. by raising your hand if you have ever heard of phishing, etc.),
- short notes in a notebook.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS:

Different age groups: For younger children, the activity can be simplified (pictures instead of terms, simpler statements).

Fewer participants: Smaller table (3×2 boxes).

Older pupils/secondary school pupils: More challenging statements, more technical terms, discussion after each bingo.

Different goal: Instead of internet safety, the topic can focus on healthy lifestyles, bullying at school, etc.

Environment: Can also be played outdoors or online (shared bingo table).

BINGO table

<p>I do not use a strong password</p>	<p>I know where to turn in case of danger</p>	<p>I can recognise phishing</p>
<p>I can tell a hoax from a real message</p>	<p>I have experienced cyberbullying</p>	<p>I have been a victim of sexting</p>
<p>I have witnessed cyberbullying</p>	<p>I use two-factor authentication</p>	<p>I spend more time online than offline</p>

[INFOGRAPHIC]:

POSTER DIGITAL HEALTH

Natálie Provazníková, Anna Nováková, Kateřina Pšeničková, Valerie Laciková

DIGITAL HEALTH

Provazníková Natálie, DiS.
Pšeničková Kateřina
Laciková Valerie
Nováková Anna

Can you stay safe online?
Check out the poster and see how you're doing!

10 Rules for Safe Online and Social Media Behavior

- 1 Think About Your Digital Footprint**
Everything you share online can stay there forever and affect your future - studies, work, and personal life. Think before you post!
- 2 Not Every Online Friendship is Safe**
Be careful when accepting requests from strangers. They might pretend to be someone else and have bad intentions.
- 3 Check Before You Share**
Don't spread unverified information. You might fall victim to a scam or unknowingly spread misinformation.
- 4 Protect Your Personal Information**
Never share your full name, address, phone number, or other sensitive data. Scammers could misuse it.
- 5 Don't Trust Everyone Who Sends You a Photo**
Never send or accept inappropriate pictures. It could get you into trouble or be used to blackmail you.
- 6 Respect Social Media Rules**
Every platform has its own rules. Follow them so your account isn't blocked or deleted.
- 7 Be Careful in Private Messages**
Don't send sensitive information to people you don't know. They might misuse it against you.
- 8 Balance Your Online and Offline Life**
Social media is fun, but don't overdo it. Take care of real-life relationships and your free time.
- 9 Don't Support Cyberbullying**
Don't mock or insult others. If you see someone bullying others, speak up.
- 10 Don't Be Afraid to Report a Problem**
If you encounter inappropriate or unsafe online behavior, talk to a trusted adult or contact a helpline or the police. You're not alone.

YES vs NO

YES	NO
Use a strong password	Respect rules
Share wisely	Share wisely
Protect your password	Don't share personal information on the internet
Think about what you post on the internet	Don't post rudes on social media

Project ID 23430137: Child at Risk: Risky behaviour and mental health of children in the V4 countries

Child Helpline International - 116 111
Child Helpline International (CHI) - <https://childhelplineinternational.org>
Red Button / Hotlines (INHOPE) - <https://inhope.org>

Visegrad Fund

PART IV:
EMOTIONAL
REGULATION
AND
BUILDING
MENTAL
RESILIENCE

AGGRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RISKY BEHAVIORS

Klaudia Nowak, Katarzyna Jurasz

Aggressive behaviors occur among children, adolescents, and adults, and human aggression, in its most dangerous form, remains unparalleled. In the United States, approximately 64% of child referrals to psychiatrists are due to aggressive behaviors. Every day, about 1,000 children require emergency medical attention because of injuries resulting from aggression, and as many as 190,000 homicides annually are committed by adolescents and young adults (Koyama et al., 2024; Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Aggression is defined as behavior directed toward causing harm or suffering to another person. The perpetrator must believe that their behavior causes suffering, and the victim must be motivated to avoid that suffering. Aggression can be divided into two primary types, which may occur either together or independently (Bushman & Anderson, 2001):

- Reactive aggression: hostile aggression — a response to a perceived threat, in which causing the victim's suffering is the main goal of the perpetrator. This form of aggression is impulsive and angry behaviour.
- Proactive aggression: instrumental aggression — behavior intended to harm or cause suffering in order to achieve other instrumental benefits. This form of aggression is premeditated and calculated behavior.

Aggressive behaviors have multiple causes, and researchers continue to search for a comprehensive explanation. It is estimated that approximately 50% to 65% of the variance in aggression can be attributed to genetic factors. Childhood aggression is primarily explained by polygenic influences, meaning that many genes with small individual effects collectively contribute to the emergence of aggressive behaviors (Koyama et al., 2024).

Furthermore, explaining aggression requires consideration of the interaction between biological and environmental factors. Gender appears to be one of the variables that moderates the relationship between genes and behavior. Men are about three times more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors than women (Berkout et al., 2011). Such differences may stem from sex-specific characteristics, such as Y chromosome–linked genes or testosterone levels. However, these remain hypotheses, and further research is needed to better understand the genetic foundations of aggressive behavior.

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

For decades, psychologists have sought to explain the origins of aggression by developing various theories that shed light on its underlying causes.

The evolutionary approach, represented by researchers such as Buss and Shackelford (1997), suggests that aggression is a learned adaptation that increased the likelihood of survival and reproductive success among our ancestors. Another perspective, the frustration–aggression theory, proposed by Dollard and colleagues (1939), posits that aggression often stems from frustration resulting from the inability to achieve an important goal. When an obstacle arises (such as a workplace conflict) anger may be directed toward the source of frustration or displaced onto another target, such as family members at home. This mechanism explains why stressful situations frequently lead to aggressive outbursts. A further concept is Albert Bandura’s social learning theory (1973), which assumes that aggression is learned not only through direct personal experience but also by observing others’ behaviors and the consequences those behaviors produce.

Another factor observed to intensify aggression is emotional arousal. Based on this observation, Dolf Zillmann (1983) proposed his own framework: the excitation transfer theory. The theory posits that an emotional response to a specific situation can be amplified by residual physiological arousal that has accumulated and remained in the body from previous events. What matters here is not the content of prior emotions but rather the intensity of physiological arousal – that is, the activation of the sympathetic nervous system triggered by those emotions.

The sources of such residual arousal can vary, including exposure to aggressive, erotic, or dramatic media content; loud noise; listening to stimulating music; or even emotionally neutral yet arousing physical activity (Zillmann, 1983; Broadhurst, 1957).

Human behavior under the influence of accumulated emotional arousal can be further explained by referring to the Yerkes–Dodson law and the distinction between automatic and controlled responses (Necka et al., 2020). The Yerkes-Dodson law describes the relationship between stimulation (e.g., motivation) and task performance, showing that the more complex a task is, the lower the level of arousal needed to perform it effectively.

Cognitive control enables individuals to respond to stressful situations in a rational and deliberate manner. However, such a response during provocation is a demanding task for the organism (Necka et al., 2020). According to the Yerkes–Dodson law, rational reactions are most likely when arousal levels are low, leading to optimal performance. In contrast, during provocation, when arousal accumulates, cognitive processes may become disorganized, and behavior begins to be regulated by automatic responses defined as learned behaviors and habits. When arousal reaches an extreme level, even these automatic reactions may fail, leading the individual to act blindly and impulsively, effectively “striking out at random” (Wojciszke & Dolinski, in Strelau & Dolinski, 2015).

This mechanism highlights the importance for psychologists and educators of teaching young people how to manage anger and emotional arousal. Developing effective strategies for coping with anger and as a result reinforcing them until they become automatic may reduce the likelihood of uncontrolled aggressive behaviour and support healthier emotional regulation in everyday life.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF TEACHER AUTHORITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL AGGRESSION

The phenomena outlined call for a deeper scholarly reflection on the transformation of the teacher’s authority and its implications for their position within the social and educational structure. The term *auctoritas* originally denoting „the gravity of power or an individual capable of influencing the lives of others or entire communities” (Tchorzewski, 2017), has acquired new connotations in discourse. The contemporary understanding of authority encompasses a broader spectrum of individuals beyond those with formally

established social roles. Almost anyone may now be regarded as an authority figure, ranging from moral leaders and politicians to artists, influencers, and members of the clergy (Jazukiewicz, 1999).

Across various spheres of cultural life, authority is attributed to individuals who demonstrate exceptional conduct, talent, popularity, courage, or certain personality traits perceived as appealing by a given audience. The criteria for conferring authority have also undergone substantial change. Currently, authority is often shaped by the subjective perceptions of a community rather than grounded in demonstrated competence or societal contributions (Jaroszyński, 2011/2012). This shift has profound implications for general education, particularly in relation to classroom dynamics, levels of discipline, and the frequency and forms of aggression manifesting within school environments (Jurczyk, 2023).

Historically, the concept of teacher authority was largely characterized by its formal nature (Kołakowska, 2016), grounded primarily in the official position occupied rather than in reciprocal relational dynamics with pupils. Such authority was typically enforced within a vertically structured hierarchy. While this phenomenon continues to hold relevance in numerous contemporary contexts (Kuzin & Walat, 2019), the evolving landscape characterized by relational paradigms, widespread online access to information, and instantaneous feedback mechanisms such as those provided by social media has fundamentally altered the traditional status of the teacher. This professional educator no longer monopolizes knowledge nor occupies the exclusive position of an authoritative source. Rather, they function as one interlocutor among many within an ostensibly boundless network of connections, nodes, and webs (Castells, 2008).

Simultaneously, student aggression related to a perceived lack of teacher authority may today be understood as a response to unstable boundaries, difficulties in critical thinking and information selection, as well as other socio-cultural factors associated with the functionality of an information-overloaded society, often described as fatigued (Byung-Chul, 2022). Numerous causes can thus be identified; however, in the context of aggression, it is worthwhile to revisit the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939). When frustration arises due to (for example) a deficient grasp of established rules and systemic structures or as a consequence of emotional difficulties, it can manifest as

impulsive or displaced aggression, frequently directed at the teacher in their role as a symbol of the institution (Przybysz-Zaremba, 2015).

The teacher, whether consciously or unconsciously, assumes a role of authority by exercising control, enforcing regulations, and assessing student performance, thereby becoming a symbolic representative of the system that provokes student frustration. Consequently, dissatisfaction, anger, or rebellion may be focused on the educator, even when the root causes lie elsewhere – in family problems, lack of emotional support, difficulties in peer relationships, or unmet psychological needs. The occurrence of this phenomenon emphasizes the need for a sensitive and nuanced understanding of aggressive conduct, recognizing that such behaviors often reflect deeper emotional and social difficulties rather than intentional hostility from the student.

TEACHER AS COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SCHOOL AND THE DIGITAL WORLD

In contemporary times, teachers are increasingly subjected to verbal and emotional aggression (Barabas, 2020). There is a growing tendency among students to undermine teachers' qualifications, belittle their societal roles, and, in serious cases, manifest cyberbullying through acts such as covertly recording teachers, sharing disparaging memes, and conducting harassment via online platforms. These behaviors are commonly reinforced on social media platforms such as TikTok, where brief video content frequently depicts teachers in a derisive, humiliating, or demeaning light (Peckham, 2021).

Rather than relying on the instruction and authority of teachers, students are increasingly turning to their peer groups, online influencers, and characters from video games and television shows as primary sources of behavioral and attitudinal model. This inclination corresponds with a normative developmental challenge observed during adolescence, referred to as *identity versus role confusion*, as conceptualized in Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory (Brzezińska, 2014). In contemporary culture, where self-image and personal branding dominate public discourse (Bogunia-Borowska & Sztompka, 2012), social recognition in digital spaces often outweighs traditional forms of authority rooted in intellectual or pedagogical credibility (Piórkowski, 2016). This shift significantly informs the identity-building processes of youth, with new authority figures frequently

legitimizing aggressive or oppositional behaviors, thus contributing to the internalization of maladaptive conduct patterns (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska & Pyżalski, 2011).

Within this framework, the ethically and socially engaged teacher may emerge as a source of cognitive dissonance for students whose developmental stage renders them particularly susceptible to conflicting value systems. This phenomenon arises from a profound axiological dissonance between the humanistic values intentionally cultivated within the school context (such as respect for others empathy emotional literacy and socially responsible behavior) and the normative structures of digital culture which increasingly valorize immediacy provocation performative expression and at times verbal aggression. The divergence in values may contribute to inner conflict in adolescents who are actively constructing their sense of self and ethical frameworks.

FROM DOMINANCE TO DIALOGUE: EVOLVING NOTIONS OF TEACHER AUTHORITY IN THE FACE OF AGGRESSION

A key competency of the contemporary teacher is the ability to build authority from the perspective of relationships rather than power. Authority founded on socio-emotional competencies proves to be more effective in exerting long-term influence on the student than authority based on mechanisms of fear and punishment (Izdebska, 1990). A fundamental aspect of this is the teacher's ability to cultivate relationships where the student willingly and engagedly embraces the educational guidance. Therefore, a teacher's authority is grounded not only in their personal stance and values but also in their ability to engage in dialogue and assist the student in progressively attaining autonomy (Drzeżdżon, 2011).

Research indicates that students are less likely to exhibit aggressive behavior toward teachers with whom they maintain relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect (Li, Bergin, Olsen, 2022; Meehan et al., 2003). A teacher who effectively communicates clear boundaries while simultaneously attending to and comprehending students' needs cultivates a durable authority, even within ethnically diverse and challenging classroom settings.

In educational settings, this dynamic frequently manifests as a cyclical interaction wherein a student initiates provocation toward the teacher, who subsequently reacts

either with an emotional response or a lack of response altogether. This reaction is often perceived by the peer group as an indicator of vulnerability or diminished authority, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating further provocations. As a result, the educator may experience escalating feelings of inefficacy and frustration, which in turn increases the probability of either impulsive aggressive responses or complete disengagement from the classroom interaction (Jiang et al., 2016; Solomon & Wahler, 1973). This pattern fosters an escalating cycle of aggressive behaviors that is resistant to resolution absent coordinated systemic support and critical reflection on the relational climate of the classroom. Some studies also emphasize that involvement in bullying behaviors and a negative perception of school norms are correlated with the escalation of disruptions as well as verbal and emotional violence, thereby exacerbating the phenomenon (Díaz-Aguado Jalón & Arias, 2013).

The reinforcement of teacher authority often involves cultivating proximity to the student rather than creating separation. When students feel valued, understood, and collaboratively involved in maintaining the classroom atmosphere, they are less inclined to participate in oppositional actions. It is essential for educators to seek comprehension of the root causes underlying aggressive behaviors. Key factors facilitating student motivation to adopt positive attitudes regarding the teacher include fostering active engagement in addressing personal challenges, exhibiting empathy, offering support, and strengthening students' sense of agency and self-esteem (Jakubowicz-Bryx, 2014).

It is important to underscore that the initial years of education are pivotal in shaping a child's disposition toward learning in subsequent developmental stages. During this period, children acquire fundamental knowledge about the world, develop essential skills, and form character traits that influence their future predispositions to aggressive behavior as well as their perceptions of authority figures (Jakubowicz-Bryx, 2014).

To conclude, the transformation of teacher authority is not entirely a matter of professional status but is intrinsically linked to the security and dynamics of the classroom as a social entity confronting the complexities of modern society. Without teacher authority, students are left without the structural foundation necessary for feeling safe. In such circumstances, aggression frequently manifests as a means of releasing frustration and negotiating social status within the classroom, peer networks, or, more broadly, within the local community and digital contexts. The restoration of teacher

authority cannot be achieved without simultaneous interventions at systemic levels, such as within the school, parental involvement, and administrative structures, as well as at the individual level, encompassing relational dynamics, professional competencies, and effective communication. The process involves moving beyond established educational conventions towards an approach that embraces the demands of the digital era alongside the emotional complexities of contemporary learners.

CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL CLIMATE IN THE CONTEXT OF AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS

In the context of student aggression, especially among at-risk populations, the influence of school climate and culture assumes a significant role. The features of the educational environment, including the quality of teacher-student relationships, the sense of belonging, and the organization of activities, can influence the occurrence and escalation of aggressive behaviors (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013).

For the purposes of this article, school climate is defined as „the way teachers and students perceive their work or learning environment, and the impact of this perception on their behavior” (Ostaszewski, 2012). Classroom climate, in turn, refers to „all the rules governing classroom work and life that the teacher actually imposes and reinforces while addressing ongoing educational and behavioral situations” (Konarzewski, 1995). Both classroom and school climate play a critical role in supporting students' mental health at various stages of education. They contribute meaningfully to shaping the levels of motivation, academic achievement, and the reduction of risky and aggressive behaviors. Moreover, their impact often extends beyond the school years, shaping students' future well-being and social functioning in adulthood (Rozenbajgier, 2020).

A comprehensive understanding of these interdependencies is fundamental to the effective support of students, the prevention of behavioral issues, and the enhancement of educational achievement. Promoting mental health among students facilitates the creation of a secure and developmentally enriching educational milieu. Empirical evidence indicates that such an environment fosters higher levels of self-esteem among students, strengthens their resilience to stress, and mitigates the manifestation of depressive symptoms and feelings of hopelessness (Wong et al., 2021). Additionally, research conducted in England suggests that students who perceive their school climate

as positive report fewer emotional and behavioral difficulties and experience greater long-term psychological well-being (Leurent et al., 2021).

Contemporary schools, understood as social spaces, fulfill not only educational but also caregiving and preventative roles. A growing number of studies highlight the importance of classroom and school climate as a key protective factor for the mental health of children and adolescents, as well as for mitigating aggressive behavior, irrespective of geographic location or cultural background (Frankowiak, 2019; Espelage et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2024). High-quality communication, embodying respect, attentive listening, and cooperative problem-solving, serves to ease emotional tensions among classroom members. Such outcomes are reinforced through the effective application of curricula founded on the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework (Durlak et al., 2011).

Schools are progressively being seen as fundamental actors in the mental health prevention system for children and adolescents. Peer mediation and school-based psychological support services have demonstrated greater effectiveness compared to individual or reactive approaches (Durlak et al., 2011). Classroom and school climate represent a dynamic factor that significantly informs and guides particular educational actions, beyond simply providing a backdrop for learning processes. Such measures can be implemented by specialists and all educational stakeholders today, irrespective of material resources, social status, or ethnic background.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING AT-RISK STUDENTS CONFRONTING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS

Students, especially those identified as belonging to at-risk populations, necessitate focused interventions to address the escalating prevalence of aggression in the school setting, taking into account the socio-psychological factors delineated in this article.

A robust psychosocial assessment, including a functional diagnostic component, forms the basis for identifying risk factors alongside the strengths of the student and their surrounding context (Knopik, 2018). Early-stage intervention, applied before critical difficulties manifest, increases the potential to prevent the aggravation of aggressive conduct and the impairment of the student's psychosocial health. This also increases the chances for children to fully develop their potential (Sidor-Piekarska, 2010).

In educational settings, this is reflected through activities such as regular monitoring of students via standardized assessment tools, continuous environmental observation, and interdisciplinary collaboration with specialists including school psychologists, pedagogues, and psychological-pedagogical counseling centers.

Findings indicate that access to reliable and supportive adult connections within schools plays a significant role in protecting at-risk students from aggression (Black et al., 2010; Cavell et al., 2009). Educators and professionals ought to enhance their socio-emotional skills, especially in areas such as non-violent communication, active listening, self-regulation, and self-awareness, thereby promoting the development of relationships that support feelings of safety and belonging (Wawrzyniak, 2021; Wojda & Dziurzyński, 2020). These competencies cultivate emotional support that enables students to build resilience and cope with tension and frustration without resorting to aggression (Gebre et al., 2025).

In addition, *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL) programs serve as effective preventive interventions, equipping at-risk students with skills including emotional recognition and expression, conflict management, interpersonal relationship development, behavioral regulation during crises, socially responsible decision-making, assertiveness, and teamwork. (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2020). Incorporating SEL into everyday school routines facilitates a decrease in aggression and fosters a more positive classroom climate, which is particularly beneficial for vulnerable students facing challenges with self-regulation (Durlak et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2003).

Effective support requires a multi-level approach. Partnerships among schools, families, and support institutions are essential for providing coordinated and holistic support to students at risk (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Family-centered systemic support, involving education, development of caregiving capacities, and therapeutic assistance, constitutes an essential strategy in the prevention of children's adaptive difficulties and in lessening the effects of risk factors. As specialists, we must mobilize all educational actors to deepen their awareness of these phenomena and challenges, in order to nurture a society characterized by healthy interpersonal relationships.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Aggression is a complex phenomenon influenced by biological, psychological, and environmental factors. The interaction between those factors shapes how individuals express anger (Koyama et al., 2024; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Theoretical perspectives, from evolutionary through genetic frameworks to social learning and excitation transfer theories demonstrate that aggression is not driven by a single cause but by the dynamic interplay of innate and learned mechanisms.

Understanding these processes has practical implications for mental health professionals and educators. There is a need to instruct children and adolescents effective methods of emotional control and constructive anger regulation. These actions can help them develop automatic responses to provocation and, as a result, significantly reduce the risk of aggressive behaviour.

A conducive school and classroom climate has been shown to significantly contribute to the promotion of students' mental health while simultaneously mitigating the occurrence of risky behaviors, including aggression. Effective prevention of aggressive conduct necessitates not only early identification of psychosocial risk factors but also the implementation of a comprehensive, multi-tiered support framework for children and adolescents. In practical terms, this entails systematic monitoring of student behavior and well-being, sustained collaboration between educators, school psychologists, and counseling professionals, the cultivation of robust school–family partnerships, and active parental engagement in the educational process. These strategies enable the development of individualized support plans and timely interventions before aggressive patterns become entrenched and more resistant to change.

Moreover, the intensification of digital culture and the transposition of social norms into virtual spaces exert a tangible influence on students' behaviors within school settings. Educators increasingly report becoming the targets of verbal and emotional aggression, including acts of cyberbullying. Consequently, it is imperative for educational institutions to implement structured programs aimed at fostering digital literacy and ethical online conduct among students, to provide systemic support for teachers in addressing online aggression, and to actively seek the integration of humanistic values with students' digital experiences.

Contemporary educational challenges call for a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of student aggression. Not solely as a manifestation of dysfunction or deviance, but as an indicator of more profound emotional, relational, or socio-cultural difficulties. Addressing these issues requires the construction of a school culture grounded in relationality, community, and dialogical engagement. Within such a framework, teachers are re-established not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as trusted mentors and facilitators in students' processes of identity formation and value development. This relational and human-centered approach offers a more sustainable and ethically grounded pathway to counteracting aggression and fostering the long-term psychological well-being of the younger generation.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Viktória Peťková, Diana Rybárová, Samanta Giertliová

Mental health and the development of psychological resilience must become an integral and systematic part of education in Slovak schools. Contemporary societies worldwide are responding to rapid social changes, uncertainty, and unexpected crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability, and economic pressures, all of which have significantly affected children and young people's mental well-being (UNICEF, 2021). Several countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, have made mental health a national priority, with a strong emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and school-based mental health support for children and adolescents. In comparison, Slovakia has long lagged behind these countries in the systematic integration of mental health support within the educational system (OECD, 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

Nevertheless, recent developments indicate that progress has begun. The Slovak Ministry of Health has announced systemic changes in the area of mental health care, and a comprehensive reform of mental health services is expected. Experts and organizations such as the League for Mental Health emphasize that mental health should not be viewed solely as a medical issue, but rather as a broader societal challenge requiring coordinated action across education, social services, healthcare, and community support systems (WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021; Ďuriková, 2023).

A landmark Slovak study conducted by the research team led by Professor Jozef Hašto mapped childhood trauma in a representative sample of the Slovak population. The findings revealed that up to 41% of respondents experienced at least one form of childhood trauma, and when stricter criteria were applied, this proportion increased to 59% (Kaščáková et al., 2025). This research is unique in the Slovak context not only because it was the first large-scale study of its kind, but also because it demonstrated

a clear association between adverse childhood experiences and both mental and physical health outcomes in adulthood. The study confirmed that emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and cumulative or combined trauma significantly increase the risk of long-term health problems later in life. These include chronic conditions such as hypertension, obesity, diabetes, ulcerative diseases, and various pain syndromes, including migraines, back pain, pelvic pain, and generalized chronic pain (Kaščáková et al., 2025). These findings align with international research demonstrating that adverse childhood experiences are strongly linked to poorer health outcomes, increased healthcare utilization, and reduced quality of life in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2017).

Importantly, the Slovak research emphasizes the urgent need to address mental health issues already in childhood through prevention, education, and early intervention, particularly within the school environment. Preventive approaches focusing on emotional literacy, resilience building, and trauma-informed education have been shown to significantly reduce long-term mental health risks (WHO, 2021; Kaščáková et al., 2025).

MENTAL DISORDERS AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN SLOVAKIA: STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Statistical data from the National Health Information Center (NCZI) indicate that the number of children and adolescents examined in outpatient psychiatric care fluctuated between 2017 and 2021. In 2020, the number of examinations decreased markedly due to anti-pandemic measures and limited access to healthcare services; however, a renewed increase was observed in 2021 (NCZI, 2021; Portal školskej psychológie, 2022).

In the 0–14 age group, 5,386 children were examined in outpatient psychiatric care in 2017, increasing to 5,572 in 2018. In 2019, the number slightly decreased to 5,300, followed by a more substantial decline in 2020 to 4,473 children. In 2021, the number rose again to 5,273 examined children. A similar trend was observed in the 15–19 age group. In 2017, 4,343 adolescents were examined in outpatient psychiatric care. This number declined to 3,881 in 2018 and further to 3,508 in 2019. In 2020, the number dropped to 2,968 adolescents, before increasing again in 2021 to 3,812 examined individuals. Among children under 14 years of age, the most frequently newly diagnosed disorders in 2021 were behavioural and emotional disorders with onset typically

occurring in childhood and adolescence (ICD-10 codes F90.0–F98.9), including hyperkinetic disorders. These diagnoses accounted for 49.4% of all newly diagnosed mental disorders in this age group. In the 15–19 age group, which recorded the highest year-on-year increase in new patients (29.2%), the most prevalent newly diagnosed disorders were neurotic, stress-related, and somatoform disorders (ICD-10 codes F40.0–F48.9), representing 36.4% of all new diagnoses (NCZI, 2021; Portal školskej psychológie, 2022). These findings reflect a growing burden of anxiety- and stress-related conditions among Slovak adolescents, consistent with recent international evidence highlighting the long-term psychological impact of the pandemic and social stressors on young people (Vildalen et al., 2024).

Despite these concerning trends, research suggests that timely prevention, accessible mental health services, and school-based interventions can significantly mitigate the negative consequences of mental health problems in childhood and adolescence (WHO, 2021; Vildalen et al., 2024).

[WORKSHOP PROPOSAL]:

CHECK THE FIRE, INSPIRE THE QUIET

Klaudia Nowak, Katarzyna Jurasz

MAIN TOPIC:

Recognizing anger and regulating emotions; aggression prevention among at-risk children through the development of selected socio-emotional and cognitive skills.

TARGET GROUP:

Students in grades 4–8 (or 4–6), particularly those from at-risk groups (e.g., children with emotional difficulties, low frustration tolerance, adjustment problems, or from dysfunctional families).

DURATION:

45 minutes

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

- Supporting children in managing anger without resorting to aggression.
- Developing alternative ways of responding to emotionally challenging situations.
- Strengthening the sense of control over one's own behavior.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES (THE STUDENT IS ABLE TO):

- Recognize signs of anger in their own body.
- Use the *STOP* technique as a way to pause an impulse.
- Visualize safely „releasing” anger (e.g., body scan technique).
- Identify at least two alternative ways to respond instead of yelling or hitting.
- Work in a group and express emotions in a socially acceptable way.

METHODS:

Brainstorming, visualization, elements of psychodrama, guided discussion, practical exercises (individual and group work).

MATERIALS:

Small colorful sticky notes, poster/chart with the STOP technique, audio recording with relaxing sounds or ticking clock (optional), large sheet of paper for collecting the class's ideas.

PROCEDURE:

1. Introduction to the lesson (5 minutes):

The teacher welcomes the students and hands out small colorful sticky notes. Everyone sits down in a designated area. The teacher asks the students a question: When was the last time you felt angry? What did you want to do with that anger? The students take a moment to reflect, then write their answers on sticky notes and stick them in a designated spot in the classroom. This is followed by a discussion, during which the teacher emphasizes that anger is an emotion – neither good nor bad – and that we have control over what we do with it and how we perceive it.

2. Learning the STOP technique (15 minutes):

The teacher presents a specially prepared poster illustrating the STOP technique (see: Poster 1):

- S – Stop
- T – Take a breath
- O – Observe
- P – Proceed

The teacher explains each of the individual steps. Next, students apply the technique during practical exercise. Volunteers are asked to act out a short scene – for example, one person takes something that belongs to another. The other person in the pair is to stop, breathe, observe their reaction and surroundings, and think. After the demonstration, students pair up and practice their own imagined situational reactions using the STOP technique.

3. Applying the body scan technique to recognize and manage anger (10 minutes):

The teacher introduces the exercise by saying: *Sometimes when we feel angry, our body tries to tell us (through tension, heat, or discomfort). Today, we will do a short body scan to notice those signals and learn how to calm them.* Then, students sit comfortably on their chairs (or on mats, if available in the classroom). They do not have to close their eyes, but they can if they feel safe and comfortable. When everyone is ready, the teacher speaks again in a calm tone: *Let's try to be still and quiet for a moment. You can close your eyes or just look at one spot. Try to focus only on your body and your breathing.* The slow body scan practice begins.

Example guiding phrases include:

- *Start by noticing your breath. Don't change it, just notice how it feels to breathe in... and out.*
- *Now, bring your attention to your feet. Are they touching the floor? Are they warm or cold? Tight or relaxed?*
- *Move your attention slowly up to your legs... your knees... your thighs. Notice any tension.*
- *Now your stomach. Is it tight or relaxed? Can you breathe into your belly slowly?*
- *Notice your chest... is it moving fast or slow?*
- *Bring your focus to your shoulders. Are they raised? Try to relax them down.*
- *Now your hands... are they clenched or open?*
- *And finally, your face. Is your jaw tight? Are your eyebrows pulled together? Try to let your face relax.*

Ending the body scan practice: *Take a final deep breath in... and let it go. Notice how your body feels now compared to before. When you are ready, gently return your focus to the room and open your eyes.*

At the end of the exercise, the group takes part in a brief discussion to share their impressions during and after the body scan. The teacher may ask specific questions such as: *Did you notice any part of your body where you felt tension or discomfort? Or: What part of the body tells you when you are getting angry?* Students can also write their answers on sticky notes and post them in a designated spot in the classroom.

4. I choose how I react – visualization and sorting activity (10 minutes):

Students receive slips of paper from the teacher with a list of alternative ways to respond to anger (e.g. count to 10; talk to someone; go for a walk; draw your anger; squeeze a piece of paper, etc.). Next, the students sort these reactions into categories, which they write down in their notebooks using the table format shown below.

Table 9

Frequency of anger-related reactions (How often I react this way when I feel angry)

Often	Rarely	Never

Source: Author's own work

Next, students are asked to visualize the chosen reactions, by recalling specific situations from their own lives when they reacted in those ways. They can illustrate their visualizations on paper by creating a simple drawing to represent the situation. Afterward, students work in pairs to share their experiences and the drawings they created. Each student should pay attention to the similarities and differences in how they and their partner responded to anger. Finally, the class takes part in a group discussion to reflect on the idea that we always have a choice in how we respond to anger.

5. Summary and evaluation of the lesson (5 minutes):

Students write on a piece of paper what they learned today about anger, along with the target reaction they would like to choose when they feel this emotion in the future. The teacher encourages them to use the techniques they have learned in different real-life situations. At the end, each student also leaves a feedback note for the teacher, sticking it in a visible spot in the classroom.

Poster 1

The STOP technique

• Visegrad Fund

S.T.O.P

technique

S **STOP whatever you're doing.**
Take a moment to interrupt the automatic reaction.

T **Take a deep breath.**
It helps calm your body and mind.

O **Observe**
what is happening inside and around you.

P **Plan and proceed.**
Move forward with intention.

Source: Author's own work

[ACTIVITY]:

RAINFOREST OF MENTAL RESILIENCE

Viktória Kiss, Johanna Kepics, Fruzsina Sára Katonka

Zsófia Miklódi-Simon (supervisor)

The topic of **mental resilience** can be viewed from various perspectives. Mental health is multifaceted, and we must address all aspects of it in order to maintain our health. In addition to physical health, mental health plays an equally influential role in our lives.

There are countless opportunities in today's modern world to maintain our health. In this topic, we would like to present six different aspects of mental health, which children can easily use to develop the small routines they need to achieve peace and health. We focused on both physical and mental health in order to find the right balance for our bodies.

We have compiled this methodology based on our experience, studies, and scientific research. We have examined the effects of mental health within the context of sports, friends, relaxation, sleep, nature, and art. Our topic includes exercises and professional support. Our goal is to help children find activities that they enjoy and that are good for their mental and physical well-being. We believe that it is important to talk about this even in childhood and to find methods that children can use to disconnect during difficult times at school or in life.

ACTIVITY NAME:

Rainforest of Mental Resilience

TARGET GROUP:

Secondary school pupils

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AND ORGANISERS:

Participants – 6 to 30 (preferably the entire group/class)

Organisers – 1 to 3

OBJECTIVE:

- Paying attention to ourselves and our peers.
- Imagining ourselves in a different place (rainforest).
- Developing skills during the task.

ACTIVITY AIDS:

It is not necessary.

ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

A classroom or other space where the children doing a big circle.

MOTIVATION FOR THE ACTIVITY:

Relaxation

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY:

We form a large circle with the children. The game leaders stand in different places in the circle so that they can help with the task. First, the children close their eyes and the organizer describes to them that they have traveled to a rainforest. The different sounds of the rainforest can be heard, which the members of the circle perform together. The first sound is the sound of the wind, at which point we rub our hands together. The leader starts the circle and the person standing next to them continues, and everyone must wait for the circle to reach them before joining in the task. The second sound is the sound of raindrops, at which point the leader begins to clap and everyone in the circle follows in turn. The second step takes place when the last child (standing next to the leader) has started the first step. The third step is the rain, at which point we begin to clap. The fourth step is the sound of the storm, at which point we begin to drum with our feet. When the fourth step has been completed in the circle, the leader begins to repeat the sounds in

reverse order, indicating that the storm is slowly coming to an end. All the sounds are repeated by the members of the circle in turn. At the very end, we close the exercise with 30 seconds of silence.

After the activity, there may be a discussion about the statements that most interested the participants.

REFLECTION:

After the activity, we thank everyone for participating and talk together about our feelings and observations during the task. We explain that the importance of the activity was to tune into each other, pay attention to ourselves, relax, and imagine ourselves in another space. Relaxation is one of the main alternatives for mental health, which can be useful in tense situations when we imagine that we are somewhere else, thereby calming our souls.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

To begin with – feelings about the activity:

- How difficult/easy was it to imagine yourself in another place?
- How did it feel to be in the rainforest?
- What feelings did the sounds of the storm intensifying and receding evoke in you?

Perceptions of others:

- What do you think about the relaxing effects of the game?
- Which sound did you identify with most during the task?
- How did it feel to exist in the midst of a great storm?

Self-reflection:

- Which part of the task was the most difficult for you?
- What type of personality do you consider yourself to be, loud or quiet?
- What exercises do you usually do to calm yourself down in a tense situation?

Conclusion:

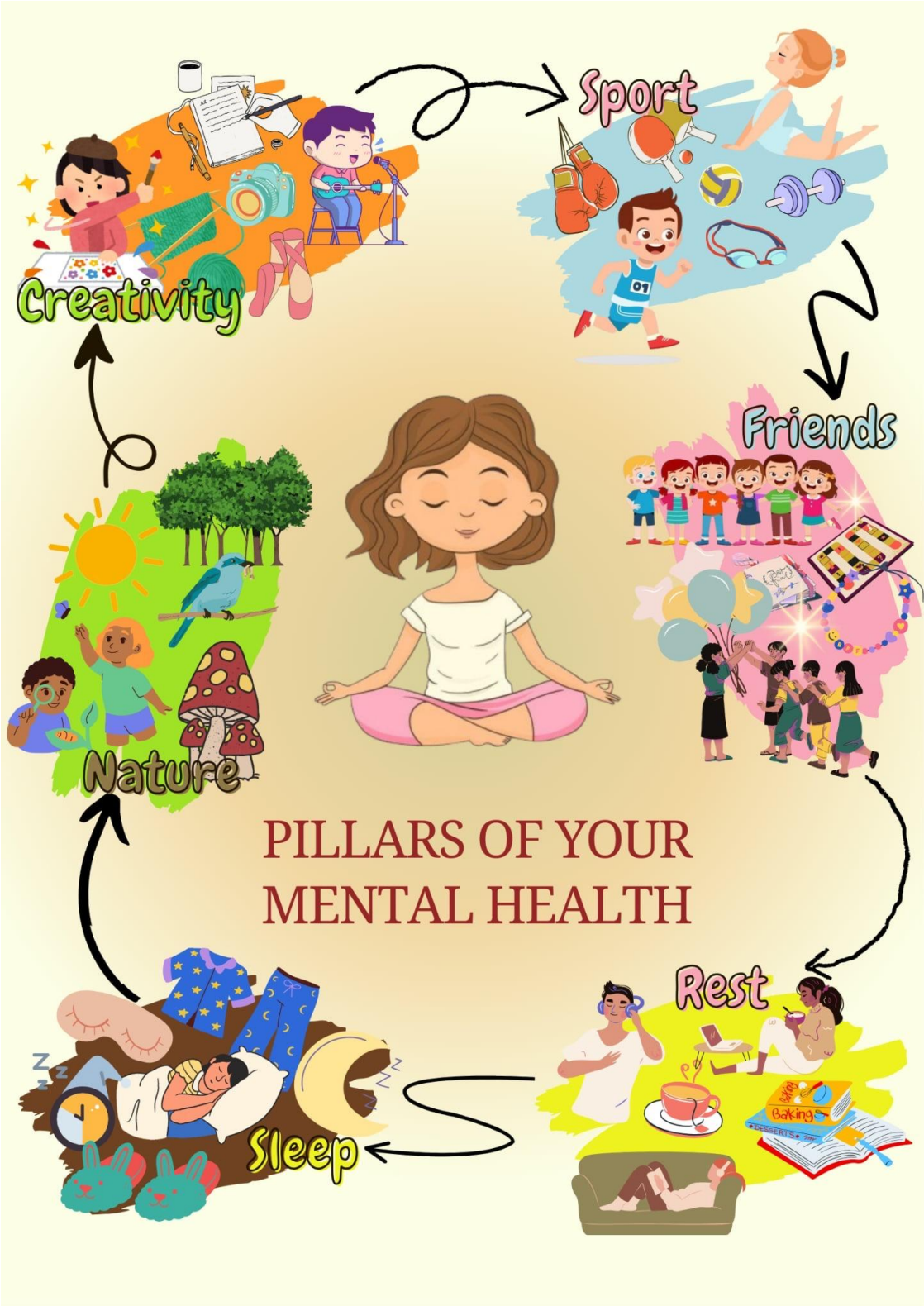
- What have you learned about yourself from today's activity?
- Melyik hang nyugtat meg téged, ami a természethez kapcsolódik?
- What idea or sentence sticks in your mind the most?

LIST OF STATEMENTS:

- I can remain calm even in stressful situations.
- I can handle difficult situations.
- I always appear strong on the outside.
- I am patient with myself.
- I take breaks when I am under a lot of pressure.
- I am in control of my life.
- I am able to calm myself down.
- Rest is important to me.
- I don't believe in mental health professionals.
- I feel guilty when I focus on myself.
- When I fail at something, I blame myself for a long time.
- I find it difficult to accept other people's opinions.
- Stress is an integral part of life.
- I don't usually relax or unwind.
- I admit that I take on too much at school.
- I have hobbies that help me unwind.

Poster 2

Pillars of mental health



Source: Author's own work

[ACTIVITY]:

MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITY

– WELL-BEING CARD

Vitkória Peťková, Samanta Giertliová

This creative and reflective activity helps participants identify and visualize what supports their mental well-being. Each participant creates a personal Well-being Card, which serves as a symbolic and practical reminder of positive resources in their life. The activity combines self-reflection with artistic expression and encourages awareness of emotional needs and coping strategies.

Participants are asked to visually represent—through drawings, symbols, colours, or keywords—what brings them joy, what helps them calm down when stressed, and which people, places, or activities provide a sense of safety and balance.

MAIN GOAL:

- To strengthen self-awareness and positive thinking
- To help participants recognize personal sources of well-being
- To create a tangible coping aid that can be used in difficult moments

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- A4 paper or sturdy card paper
- Markers, crayons, or coloured pencils

TIME FRAME:

- 20–30 minutes (flexible according to group needs)

REFLECTION:

After completing the cards, participants place them next to each other to create a Well-being Gallery. The group walks around the gallery and observes the different drawings. Participants are encouraged to notice similarities and differences in what supports well-being and to compare how each person expresses it visually.

Voluntary sharing is encouraged, but not required. The facilitator highlights that there is no single “right” way to feel well and that everyone’s sources of well-being are unique. Each participant keeps their card as a personal reminder, which they can store in a pencil case, notebook, or wallet.

[ACTIVITY]:

THE RIVER OF MENTAL RESILIENCE

Kateřina Ducháčková, Tereza Fiřerová, Robin Maxmilián Tomík

The topic of mental resilience can be viewed from various perspectives. It can refer to the ability to cope with everyday stress, adapt to unexpected changes, or regain inner balance after experiencing crises. However, mental resilience does not mean being invincible. Rather, it is about maintaining hope, flexibility and inner strength even in moments when one is faced with great challenges.

Each of us encounters difficulties in life that test our limits, and it is in these moments that we see how much we can withstand the pressure of circumstances, not let ourselves be broken, and find ways to move forward. Mental resilience is not an innate and unchangeable trait, but a process that can be developed. It is strengthened through experience, working on oneself and thanks to the support of others.

Within this methodology, we will focus on practical ways to strengthen mental resilience. We will offer activities that promote self-awareness and the development of coping strategies. The aim is to show that mental resilience is not the privilege of a few individuals, but a skill that anyone can build step by step. It is a key prerequisite for coping with difficult situations, maintaining mental health and finding balance even when life presents challenges.

ACTIVITY TITLE:

The River of Mental Resilience

TARGET GROUP:

Secondary school pupils

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AND ORGANISERS:

Participants – 10 to 30 (preferably the entire group/class)

Organisers – 1 to 3

OBJECTIVE:

- To familiarise pupils with their own mental resilience skills.
- Reflect on their own mental resilience and mental health.
- To stimulate discussion on topics related to mental resilience and mental health.

ACTIVITY AIDS:

List of statements about mental resilience/mental health.

ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

A classroom or other space where it is possible to form two rows.

MOTIVATION FOR THE ACTIVITY:

Self-awareness

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY:

Participants line up in two rows with their backs to each other. The organisers read out statements. If a participant agrees with a statement, they take a step forward. If they disagree or do not know, they remain where they are.

After the activity, there may be a discussion about the statements that most interested the participants.

REFLECTION:

After the activity, thank the participants and emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers. First, ask them about their feelings. Then we open up the topic of group perception, e.g. what surprised them when observing the reactions of others. We then direct questions towards self-reflection. We then link the reflection to the topic of mental

resilience and ways to develop it. We conclude the activity with a final round of sharing, where each participant shares one thought or sentence that they have taken away from the activity.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

To begin with – feelings about the activity:

- How did it feel for you to move physically and share something about yourself at the same time?
- Did you feel comfortable during the activity, or was it uncomfortable for you?
- Was it difficult for you to decide whether to take a step or stay standing?
- Perception of others
- What came to mind when you looked around and saw the responses of others?
- Were you surprised by which statements the group was very united or, conversely, divided on?
- How did you feel when you realised that you were not alone, or, conversely, that you were "alone"?

Self-reflection:

- Which statement did you hesitate over the most? Why?
- Which statement made you think more about yourself?
- If you were to return to a statement in a year's time, do you think you would answer differently?

Connection to resilience and mental health:

- What does this activity show us about mental resilience?
- What strategies work for you personally when you feel overwhelmed?
- Is there anything you would like to "pick up" from others and try?
- To what extent do you think resilience can be trained and strengthened?

Conclusion:

- What have you learned about yourself from today's activity?
- Is there anything that made you happy or calmed you down?
- What idea or sentence sticks in your mind the most?

LIST OF STATEMENTS:

In difficult situations, I am usually able to calm down quickly.

When I fail at something, I worry about it for a long time.

I consider asking for help a sign of strength, not weakness.

When I am under a lot of stress, I know how to cope with it in a healthy way.

Criticism always affects me deeply.

I can tell when I need a break.

I consider long-term stress to be a normal part of life that cannot be helped.

When I fail, it means I'm not good enough.

I don't believe that a mental health professional could help me.

When things get too much for me, I feel like I'm losing control.

I talk to myself in a kind rather than critical way.

I tend to hide my feelings, even when something is bothering me.

I know techniques that help me calm down (e.g. breathing, mindfulness, exercise).

Mental resilience is something that can be trained and improved.

I am usually able to remain calm in crisis situations.

I know how to set boundaries with people who drain me.

I feel that I have to be strong for others at all costs.

I feel that I am in control of my life.

When I rest, I feel guilty.

I can function even when I am not feeling well mentally.

I believe that every crisis can bring something positive.

I can tell when my mental health needs attention.

I have strategies that help me get back to feeling good.

I can be patient with myself.

When I experience failure, I consider it part of the learning process.

I believe that mental health is just as important as physical health.

[ACTIVITY]:

EMOTIVITY

Kateřina Ducháčková, Tereza Fiřerová, Robin Maximilián Tomík

ACTIVITY NAME:

Emotivity (Emotions + Activity)

TARGET GROUP:

Secondary school pupils

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AND ORGANISERS:

Participants – 10 to 30 (preferably the entire group/class)

Organisers – 1 to 3

OBJECTIVE:

- To show participants that we all experience emotions differently.
- To increase participants' awareness of the types and number of emotions.
- Develop creativity.

ACTIVITY MATERIALS:

Pencils, paper (or a blackboard and chalk/markers) and emotion cards.

ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

A classroom or other space where it is possible to perform pantomime and draw.

MOTIVATION FOR THE ACTIVITY:

Recognising emotions and experiencing them

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY:

Participants are divided into two or more groups. Each group receives emotion cards and paper. Gradually, as in the game Activity, they draw cards and can act out the given emotion or draw it, and the rest of the group guesses what emotion it is.

After the activity, there may be a discussion about experiencing and understanding emotions.

REFLECTION:

After the activity, thank the participants and emphasise that there is no right or wrong way to experience emotions. First, ask them about their feelings. Begin the reflection by opening up the topic of group perception. Ask the participants questions such as: What surprised you when watching the reactions of others? How did you feel when someone acted out or drew an emotion? What helped you guess the emotion? We then steer the discussion towards self-reflection. Participants can think about how they themselves experience and express emotions. What was difficult for them, and what was easy? How would they describe the way they show others how they feel?

We then link the reflection to the topic of mental resilience. We discuss how the ability to perceive and recognise our own and others' emotions is related to resilience in difficult situations. We can ask: How does a better understanding of emotions help us in life? How can we practise this skill to make it easier for us to cope with stress or conflict?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Group perception:

- What surprised you when observing the reactions of others?
- Was it harder to guess emotions or to act them out/draw them?
- What strategies helped you recognise emotions?
- Did you notice any differences in how different people expressed emotions?

Self-reflection:

- How did you feel about acting out or drawing emotions?
- Which emotion did you feel most uncertain about, and why?

- Do you feel that you sometimes have difficulty expressing your feelings in everyday life?
- How do you think the people around you know how you feel?

Connection to mental resilience:

- How can the ability to understand emotions help you cope with stress or conflict?
- When has being able to read other people's emotions helped you in your life?
- How do you think this skill can be trained?
- How is perceiving emotions related to being more mentally resilient?

Emotion cards:

Anger	Irritation	Impatience	Tension	Sadness
Regret/Disappointment	Fear	Fatigue	Helplessness	Pain
Confusion	Nervousness	Embarrassment/Shame	Boredom	Loneliness
Gloom	Anxiety	Energy	Joy	Calm
Surprise	Satisfaction	Enthusiasm	Disgust	Hope

[INFOGRAPHIC]:

POSTER MENTAL RESILIENCE

Kateřina Ducháčková, Tereza Fiřerová, Robin Maximilián Tomík

MENTAL RESILIENCE

is the ability to cope with challenging, stressful or crisis situations, to adapt to change and to recover from difficulties. It does not mean to be invincible, but to remain hopeful, resilient and strong even in difficult times.

Talk about what you're experiencing.

Seek help when you need it.

Create a routine.

Practice mindfulness.

Take care of yourself

Learn from crises.

Practice meditation.

Set realistic goals.

Call a friend.

Write down 3 things you did well today.

5 minutes to yourself.

Self-confidence

Purpose and goals in life

Support from loved ones

Ability to manage stress

Flexibility in thinking

Visegrad Fund

"Resilience is not that you won't break. It's that you put yourself back together."

Project ID 22430137:
Child at Risk: Risky behaviour and mental health of children in the V4 countries

PART V:
RELAXATION
STRATEGIES
FOR
PREVENTIVE
INTERVENTION

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF RELAXATION AND LEISURE TIME IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Olha Trubenko, Diana Stakhovska

Relaxation can be defined as the process of reducing physical and psychological tension, allowing the body and mind to recover from stress, fatigue, or emotional strain. For children, adequate relaxation is essential for healthy development and contributes significantly to overall emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Meaningful and balanced use of free time plays a crucial role in shaping children’s personality, supporting emotional regulation, creativity, and resilience (OECD, 2021).

In contemporary society, children increasingly use digital screens—such as televisions, mobile phones, and computer games—as a primary form of relaxation. Although screen-based activities may subjectively feel restful, research shows that excessive screen time is associated with mental fatigue, sleep disturbances, increased stress levels, and sensory overstimulation (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; WHO, 2020). Passive screen use does not represent genuine relaxation, even when children are not actively engaged, as it fails to support psychological recovery and may instead place additional cognitive demands on the developing brain (OECD, 2021).

Effective relaxation for children typically involves active and sensory-based experiences, such as sensory play with sand, clay, or water; outdoor activities including sports and nature-based play; and creative activities such as drawing, music, imaginative play, and crafts (Ginsburg, 2007). Research conducted in Slovakia indicates that children express the greatest interest in sports, outdoor and cultural activities, and creative crafts, although digital games on computers and mobile devices also remain highly popular (Smahel et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that approximately 70% of children spend between 1.5 and 4 hours per day using digital screens, a level of exposure that has been linked to poorer academic performance, reduced social skills, and lower emotional well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; OECD, 2021). When children primarily engage in unstructured and passive activities, such as prolonged screen time, limited developmental progress is observed. In contrast, participation in structured leisure activities—including organized play, sports, and creative programmes—supports the development of self-confidence, social competence, and practical skills (Ginsburg, 2007; WHO, 2020).

Gender differences in leisure preferences have also been observed. Boys tend to prefer team-based sports, while girls more often choose individual activities; however, overall interest in physical activity remains high among both groups (Smahel et al., 2020). Despite this interest, children in Slovakia frequently discontinue sports and organized activities due to financial barriers, limited accessibility, or insufficient local infrastructure (OECD, 2021).

Physical education (PE) is a compulsory component of the Slovak school curriculum; however, several challenges persist. Although two hours of PE per week are mandated, many schools fail to meet this requirement, and participation rates remain low. Data indicate that up to 48.1% of girls and 39.6% of boys regularly skip PE classes, with schools often compensating through extracurricular activities rather than integrating physical activity into regular school hours (NCZI, 2021).

The legal framework for children's rest and leisure in Slovakia is established by Act No. 245/2008 Coll. (the Education Act), which addresses children's balanced development in multiple provisions. The Act defines education as a process aimed at the harmonious development of children's intellectual, mental, physical, and emotional capacities, explicitly recognizing the importance of rest, leisure, and balance. School facilities are legally defined to include school clubs for children and leisure-time centres. School clubs provide structured space for rest, play, and the development of interests after classes, while leisure-time centres enable children to engage in active free-time activities, develop talents, and participate in recreational and holiday programmes. Together, these provisions form a comprehensive legal framework supporting children's relaxation, leisure, and balanced development within the Slovak educational system (Act No. 245/2008 Coll.).

RELAXATION AS A PREVENTIVE STRATEGY FOR SELECTED RISKY BEHAVIORS AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN POLAND: IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND A PROPOSAL FOR PRACTICE-BASED SESSIONS

Klaudia Nowak, Sara Piątek

Contemporary children and adolescents function within a socio-cultural environment characterized by prominent levels of social pressure, chronic stress, and increasing adaptive demands. The emotional challenges they face often outpace their stage-appropriate regulatory mechanisms and the maturity of their social-emotional skill set, thereby compromising their ability to respond adaptively to psychosocial stressors. Accordingly, the coping responses utilized by adolescents in attempts to mitigate emotional dysregulation or attain social validation may be externalized through maladaptive, risk-prone behaviors that undermine normative functioning and threaten healthy psychosocial development.

The imbalance between external demands and internal adaptive resources may lead to an escalation of problematic behaviors, including self-harm, behavioral addictions, and engagement in delinquent activities. Furthermore, the education system, particularly in the era of 'McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 2009) and a networked society (Castells, 2008), is often primarily focused on measurable outcomes, standardization, and curriculum delivery. As such, it frequently fails to adequately address the genuine social-emotional needs of students, which may further exacerbate their sense of isolation, helplessness, and chronic stress.

From this perspective, risky behaviors may be understood as maladaptive coping mechanisms through which young individuals attempt to regulate stress, fulfill emotional deficits, and temporarily distance themselves from a difficult life situation. In this context, raising awareness within educational environments regarding the need for alternative, non-harmful coping strategies becomes particularly important, especially those that support psychological well-being. One such approach is relaxation, understood as the intentional and safe reduction of stress and tension through techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation, physical activity, or mindfulness training. This article explores the topic from a theoretical standpoint and offers practical implications for educational implementation of the selected relaxation techniques.

PSYCHOSOCIAL CHALLENGES IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE: DATA ANALYSIS AND EXAMINATION OF SELECTED RISK BEHAVIORS

Analyzing data from recent years, attention should be drawn to the deteriorating mental health of children and adolescents in Poland. This crisis manifests itself in the subjective well-being of young people, the prevalence of diagnosed disorders, and the alarming increase in risky, self-destructive, and suicidal behaviors.

According to reports from organizations such as *Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation* (Szredzińska, 2022) or *UNAWEZA Foundation* (Dębski & Flis, 2023), it has been shown that a significant proportion of children and adolescents struggle with problems that directly affect their daily functioning and quality of life.

Mental health depends on many factors. The key spheres of influence that dynamically shape a young person's development – from the prenatal period through adulthood – can be divided into three categories (Szredzińska, 2022; Dębski & Flis, 2023):

- The child's world – encompassing their immediate environment. Fundamental factors for mental health at this stage include a safe home, proper nutrition, and engaged, supportive caregivers.
- The world around the child – extending to preschool, school, peer groups, and the online environment. Safety within these settings and the quality of relationships formed there play a crucial role.
- The world as a whole – referring to the broadest social determinants, such as poverty, conflict, discrimination, climate change, and pandemics.

Within this framework, both protective factors (e.g., a safe school, a supportive family) and risk factors (e.g., violence, poverty, isolation) are working. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for identifying needs and designing effective interventions (UNICEF, 2024).

According to the 2022 report by the *Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę* Foundation (FDDS), one of the most serious threats to the mental well-being of young Poles is the growing school-related stress (Szredzińska, 2022).

The HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children) studies show an alarming rise in school stress levels across most European countries. In Poland, there has been a significant increase in the experience of school stress among students aged 11–15 between 2014 and 2022 (Badura et al., 2024).

Modern times are complex, and the constantly changing world poses growing challenges for young people. The etymological root of the word stress refers to tension, pressure, and strain. In the psychological sense, it describes a complex state of mental tension – the body’s reaction to stressors, that is, stimuli perceived as exceeding one’s resources, threatening well-being, and triggering mobilization (Terlak, 2012). Stress can be positive or negative; however, prolonged tension leads to overload, which can cause destabilization and reduced effectiveness. Such a condition often results in grave consequences for students’ functioning (Półtorak, 2018).

There are three common approaches to defining stress: as a stimulus, as a response, and as a transaction.

- Stimulus – a negative external factor that triggers a stress reaction (e.g., a difficult life situation).
- Response – the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reaction of the body to stressors, representing a coping strategy in overload situations (Korczyński, 2015).
- Transactional approach – stress is seen as a relationship between the individual and their environment, in which cognitive appraisal determines the balance between external pressure and personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

When an individual’s adaptive resources are overwhelmed, internal homeostasis is disrupted, resulting in psychosomatic imbalance and a decline in overall functioning.

According to Wincenty Okoń, “school stress is the kind of stress experienced by students under the influence of stressors typical of the modern education system, such as one-sided teaching methods, prolonged silence during lessons, constant demands for high achievement, frequent tests and performance checks that provoke anxiety, unkind treatment by some teachers, and excessive parental ambition” (Okoń, 2001).

Data presented in the FDDS report (Szredzińska, 2022) show that in 2018, over 40% of examined students aged 11–15 experienced high or extremely high stress – an increase of 19 percentage points compared to 2010. Meanwhile, the share of students who did not feel stress at all fell from 23.9% to 13% during the same period.

The persistence of chronic stress associated with everyday school responsibilities, which dominate much of students' time, raises serious concerns, especially considering that educational institutions are fundamentally expected to provide a secure context conducive to holistic development.

Another major issue highlighted by the *Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę* Foundation is the experience of abuse. Data from the report indicate that children who have experienced harm are 7 to 10 times more likely to attempt suicide. Experiencing four or more adverse childhood events increases the risk of a suicide attempt seventeenfold.

The risk of suicide among youth is rising. According to the *Młode Głowy* report by the *UNAWWEZA* Foundation (Dębski & Flis, 2023), nearly one in three of the 184,000 surveyed students showed signs of depression. 39.2% had suicidal thoughts, 18.6% had made plans, and 8.8% had attempted suicide. One in five young people stated that they “no longer want to live”.

Suicide is a complex issue involving multiple factors. Literature identifies several interconnected phases. Hołyst describes four stages of suicidal behavior: imagined suicide – initial thoughts of suicide to solve problems; desired suicide – intensifying thoughts forming a concrete plan; attempted suicide – suicide attempts without achieving the intended goal; completed suicide – ending in death (Hołyst, 1983).

The *UNAWWEZA* report also highlights the issue of low self-esteem among children and adolescents – one of the key risk factors for depression and risky behaviors (Dębski & Flis, 2023). Almost half (46%) of the respondents showed extremely low self-esteem.

Another worrying indicator is the lack of a sense of agency among young people. Feelings of helplessness in the face of everyday challenges lead to loss of motivation. According to the same report, 81.9% of respondents said they were unable to find a solution when faced with a difficult situation, reinforcing helplessness and discouragement.

In today's digitalized world, where internet access is universal, online behavior is becoming an increasing concern. Users often feel anonymous, which fosters aggression and dehumanization. According to *UNAWWEZA* report behaviors (Dębski & Flis, 2023), almost half of students (49.8%) experienced online hate within the past month, and one in three (32.5%) admitted to perpetrating it. Young people often fail to recognize hate speech as a form of peer violence and show low awareness of its definitions.

The number of children and adolescents in need of professional psychological support is growing rapidly. During the observed period, there was a 63% increase in diagnosed mental health problems among youth. The causes are increasingly linked to modern lifestyle factors – chronic stress, pressure, isolation, and technological addiction. The most common issues include depression, self-harm, eating disorders, addictions, and anxiety or stress-related disorders. However, there is also a reluctance to seek help. Even though 9 out of 10 students know there is a psychologist at their school, only 1 in 20 would seek support. The main barriers are lack of trust in effectiveness and confidentiality. A trust crisis is also evident in relationships with family – parents remain the primary source of support for more than half of the respondents are often the source of hurtful communication yet. Nearly half (49.6%) of surveyed youth say they do not trust other people, deepening their isolation.

More and more young people are facing emotional crises rooted in three main pillars: loneliness, low self-esteem, and helplessness. Many teenagers feel isolated, lack self-confidence, and believe they are unable to cope with their problems. These emotions can escalate into deeper issues – depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and eating disorders. The situation is worsened by limited access to professional support. The mental health care system for children and adolescents still fails to meet real needs. There is a shortage of specialists and waiting times for help are too long. Preventive measures are insufficient – crisis interventions dominate instead of early support. As a result, many young people choose not to seek help, due to lack of trust or the belief that no one will understand their problems. Environmental factors also play a crucial role. Families often

lack time and effective communication, while schools have become places of stress, pressure, and competition. Additional tensions stem from online hate, social comparison, and lack of online safety. To reverse this alarming trend, concrete, integrated actions are needed. These include strengthening prevention and emotional education, creating spaces for open dialogue about feelings at home and in schools, improving funding and access to psychiatric care, and ensuring effective protection for young people online. Such an approach could help restore their sense of safety, understanding, and agency.

RELAXATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND UNDERLYING MECHANISMS

Relaxation constitutes a systematic ensemble of methods and techniques designed to facilitate the deliberate induction of a state characterized by diminished physical and psychological tension, thereby regulating autonomic arousal levels and promoting cognitive and emotional recuperation (Litwic-Kamińska & Kotyśko, 2021). This process exerts effects on the psychological dimension by modifying self-assessment of competencies and the cognitive appraisal of encountered difficulties, as well as on physiological mechanisms, including muscle relaxation and the deceleration of respiratory and cardiac rhythms (Rygiel, 2017).

The English word *relax* means “to loosen, to slow down, to relieve, to ease.” Relaxation, then, refers to the activity or process of loosening, unwinding, or slowing down. In essence, it involves inducing or facilitating a state of physical and mental calm, release, and ease (Grochmal, 1979).

The Latin root *relax* originally appeared as *laxo* or *laxus*, meaning “to stretch” or “loosened.” Later, the prefix *re-* (indicating repetition or doing something again) was added, forming *relaxo*, meaning “to loosen what is tight, to free from bonds, to relieve, to rest, to ease sorrow” (Buski, 2005). Thus, there is a meaningful distinction between the terms *relax* and *relaxation*: *relax* refers to the state of physical and mental ease, while *relaxation* describes the process of achieving that state.

Three names are particularly important when it comes to relaxation – Edmund Jacobson, Johannes H. Schultz, Herbert Benson.

Edmund Jacobson is the creator of progressive relaxation. According to his concept, two fundamental states of the organism are possible – active and relaxed. The tension

associated with effort manifests itself as a shortening of muscle fibers in humans, and its removal can also eliminate anxiety. The source of tension lies in impulses from the brain and muscles, which interact with each other. Strong stress causes the entire body to become stiff and ready to react, while with milder tension, its distribution depends on the situation and the temperament of the person. However, if the state of tension lasts too long, it can have a negative impact on health. Therefore, Jacobson developed a method of progressive muscle relaxation, which teaches the recognition and conscious release of muscles, helping to restore balance between tension and relaxation.

Johannes Heinrich Schultz developed autogenic training (Linden, 2021). The name is based on the word *autogène*, meaning “self-generated.” It means that it is evoked by internal causes, and therefore it is natural and considers the active participation and subjectivity of the person who practices it. Schultz wanted to free patients from the practices of hypnosis and the religious conditioning of the Middle East. The “basic autogenic training by Schultz” and its higher level called “autogenic meditation” were created. The training is intended to help develop such personality traits as perseverance, willingness to cooperate, and self-observation, allowing for better self-insight. It is also meant to help in overcoming negative mental states such as anxiety, depression, and uncertainty. It also serves for physical and mental regeneration of the organism’s strength.

This method consists of achieving a deep state of relaxation through autosuggestion and calm concentration on experiencing one’s own body (Linden, 2021). The practitioner repeats certain phrases in their mind, which help evoke a feeling of heaviness or warmth in the limbs, while also focusing attention on slowing down breathing and calming the heartbeat.

Herbert Benson is a pioneer and one of the most important representatives of research on relaxation (Benson, 2000). He developed the concept of the “relaxation response”, which he described as a special physiological state of the organism, in which mechanisms favoring regeneration and psychophysical balance are activated. It is characterized by a slowing down of metabolic processes. In this state, the body slows its pace: oxygen consumption decreases, the heart beats more slowly, breathing becomes calmer, and the muscles relax. Alpha and theta waves, characteristics of relaxation and meditation, appear in the brain, and the body begins to regain balance. Benson claimed that it constitutes

a biological counterbalance to stress; however, in the modern world, full of pressure and haste, the ability to activate it spontaneously is becoming increasingly rare (Benson, 2000).

It consists of silently repeating a chosen word or short phrase while simultaneously focusing attention on calm breathing and the gradual loosening of the muscles. The exercise usually lasts about 15–20 minutes, and its goal is to calm the mind, stop the flood of thoughts, and reduce tension and anxiety.

Relaxation constitutes a progressive reduction of psychological arousal and muscular tension, contingent upon sufficient temporal, spatial, and methodological conditions. As Dagmara Gmitrzak notes, it is a state of physical, mental, and emotional relaxation, in which we do not feel tension, but only peace and pleasure (Gmitrzak, 2017).

The importance of relaxation arises from the need to balance the stress response – the body’s natural reaction to danger, which prepares us to fight or flee. In everyday life, stress often persists much longer, which can negatively affect physical and mental health. Regular engagement in relaxation practices serves to restore physiological and psychological equilibrium, thereby promoting overall well-being and resilience.

The most used relaxation techniques include breathing exercises, Schultz’s autogenic training, Jacobson’s progressive muscle relaxation, visualizations, and mindfulness practices. Each of them enables conscious calming of the body and mind, which translates into improved well-being and reduction of tension.

Within scholarly discourse, relaxation exercises are systematically classified into five distinct categories (Kulmatycki, 2021). The initial two categories predominantly engage somatic modalities, encompassing both static and dynamic bodily states, which constitute the fundamental mechanisms for inducing relaxation. The third category functions as an integrative interface between somatic and psychological domains, emphasizing respiratory regulation and the modulation of energetic flow. The remaining two categories are primarily concerned with psychological processes, including cognitive-imaginative activities and affective-intuitive dimensions of relaxation. This taxonomy underscores the complex, multidimensional character of relaxation and its broad-spectrum applicability within therapeutic contexts.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF APPLYING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES IN SCHOOLS

The relevant literature includes numerous studies examining the effects of selected relaxation techniques within the broad context of education. One of the first studies (conducted in Poland) mentioned was carried out in upper secondary school settings by researchers affiliated with the School of Gastronomy and the University School of Physical Education, both located in Wrocław (Urbańska et al., 2019).

Relaxation techniques incorporated into physical education lessons have been shown to effectively aid adolescents in coping with stress (Urbańska et al., 2019). According to the study, female students in upper secondary school who engaged in lessons with relaxation components more often utilized adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly active problem-solving and social support seeking, relative to the control group. While emotional-focused coping represented the least utilized strategy across both cohorts, the experimental group exhibited slightly elevated mean values in this regard. A comparative analysis indicated a modest yet positive increase in the utilization frequency of coping strategies within the experimental group, whereas the control group exhibited no statistically significant changes. These findings suggest that relaxation techniques not only improve psychological well-being but also enhance young people's ability to respond constructively to stress.

Relaxation is closely linked to the practice of mindfulness, which was popularized and systematized by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Kabat-Zinn, 2018). This approach, based on “cultivating awareness of mind and body and living in the present moment” (Stahl & Goldstein, 2015), was thoroughly developed by Kabat-Zinn within the framework of the *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program. This approach has achieved worldwide acclaim and has been adopted in Poland (Polish Mindfulness Institute, 2025b). Furthermore, it has received backing from organizations such as the U.S. National Institutes of Health, which has financed numerous investigations into its effectiveness (Wilczyńska-Aleksandrowicz, 2024). Moreover, research indicates that techniques based on this program, when implemented in schools, can serve as an effective method for supporting students' mental health and enhancing learning processes within the educational environment (Nur'aeni & Patry, 2024).

Mindfulness-based interventions in schools have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing students' psychological well-being by mitigating stress, anxiety, and depressive symptomatology (Phan et al., 2022). These practices have been associated with enhanced attentional capacities, improved emotional regulation, and the optimization of broader cognitive processes. The integration of mindfulness-based programs contributes to the cultivation of a positive classroom social environment, strengthens peer interactions, and mitigates the occurrence of behavioral challenges (Phan et al., 2022; Nur'aeni & Patry, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these interventions varies depending on factors such as program quality, duration, and the engagement of both teachers and students.

It is essential to acknowledge that relaxation is intrinsically linked to the domain of art therapy (Arunadevi & Ajantha, 2024; Río Diéguez et al., 2024). Music therapy, choreotherapy, and dance/movement therapy constitute integral components in facilitating the relaxation process in children, effectively contributing to the alleviation of psychological, emotional, and somatic tension (Kłysz-Sokalska, 2017). By harnessing the inherent human drive for movement and expression, these therapeutic approaches facilitate the effective relaxation of both the body and mind, thereby promoting tranquility and enhancing overall well-being. The relaxation components inherent in dance and music contribute not only to the alleviation of stress and tension in children but also to the cultivation of emotional regulation abilities and the enhancement of positive social interactions. Consequently, such therapeutic interventions support the holistic development of the child, integrating emotional, physical, and social domains.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES INVOLVING RELAXATION

TECHNIQUES IN POLAND

The implementation of programs and projects based on selected relaxation techniques is currently taking place in various educational institutions across Poland. One of the most significant initiatives has been introduced by the Polish Mindfulness Institute, namely the *Mindful School®* project. This initiative was developed in response to the escalating educational demands associated with the mental health and psychosocial well-being of children, adolescents, and teaching staff (Polski Instytut Mindfulness, 2025a). Initially launched as a pilot program in 2021, it has since been systematically implemented across diverse educational contexts.

The primary objectives of the project encompass the promotion of mental well-being among all educational stakeholders, with particular emphasis on the prevention of teacher burnout; the provision of methodological support for educators through the integration of tools grounded in selected mindfulness practices, stress management strategies, and self-regulation techniques; the mitigation of school-related stress; and the development of competencies associated with attention regulation, emotional self-management, and interpersonal functioning (Polski Instytut Mindfulness, 2025a).

A further initiative of particular relevance is the project *Mindfulness in Education: Kosmos and Kajo*, developed and implemented by the Mindfulness Foundation and Jowita Wowczak (Fundacja Uważność, 2025; Wowczak, 2024). It represents the first structured Polish initiative targeting children and adolescents that incorporates mindfulness practices, somatic awareness, and emotional competence development within an educational framework.

The program aims to facilitate emotional growth in children by employing structured interventions that promote the development of interrelated social-emotional and cognitive skills, such as sustained attention, emotional self-regulation, metacognitive awareness, behavioral control, impulse management, and collaborative functioning. Furthermore, the program operates as a preventive intervention aimed at mitigating emotional difficulties commonly experienced by children and adolescents, such as academic burden, social stressors, persistent school-related anxiety, and challenges in emotional and social adjustment (Fundacja Uważność, 2025).

The initiatives outlined above represent substantive approaches designed to enhance psychological well-being among pupils, adolescents, and teaching personnel in Polish schools. Nevertheless, their nationwide implementation in Poland remains limited, and there is a notable paucity of large-scale empirical research substantiating their efficacy. These interventions are intended to foster self-regulation, enhance concentration, and decrease participation in risky behaviors; nonetheless, definitive documentation of their effectiveness has yet to be established. Conversely, international programs (Ong et al., 2024) as well as select localized applications have demonstrated favorable outcomes (Nowakowska-Kaliszuk, 2025).

To translate the full potential of these initiatives into sustainable educational outcomes, coordinated and systemic policy-level support is essential. This includes their formal integration into the national core curriculum, the provision of high-quality teacher training and ongoing professional supervision, as well as the capacity to adapt implementation flexibly to the contextual specificities of diverse educational settings. The active participation of parents and caregivers, along with the implementation of empirically grounded evaluation methodologies, is equally vital to ensuring the validity, continuous improvement, and scalable dissemination of these interventions. Addressing dominant narratives and resistance concerning mindfulness is critical to facilitating its integration as a scientifically grounded and pedagogically legitimate tool within national frameworks for emotional education and prevention.

POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RELAXATION PRACTICES

The integration of relaxation practices into the school routine, for example through brief sessions incorporated into the timetable, adaptation of validated programs, or the creation of *mindfulness zones*, may positively impact students' well-being and the effectiveness of teaching (Sciutto et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it is imperative to secure comprehensive teacher training and adequate organizational support within educational institutions to mitigate the risk of these techniques being implemented in a superficial or instrumental manner.

Furthermore, relaxation should be implemented with respect for individual needs, psychological boundaries, and the cultural context of students, thereby minimizing potential negative effects and misuse (Nowakowska-Kaliszuk, 2025). Active parental involvement, coupled with the integration of contemporary digital technologies, may further augment the efficacy and beneficial impact of these interventions.

Many relaxation exercises do not necessitate specialized equipment or substantial financial investment, which significantly enhances their accessibility and feasibility across diverse educational settings. This low-cost and low-resource nature allows for widespread implementation regardless of a school's economic status or infrastructure limitations. Consequently, such practices can be integrated seamlessly into the daily routine, enabling regular engagement without imposing additional burdens on school

budgets or logistical capacities. Moreover, the simplicity and adaptability of these techniques facilitate their customization to meet the specific needs of different student populations, including those from at-risk groups, thereby promoting equitable access to effective stress reduction and concentration-enhancing interventions within inclusive educational environments.

Conversely, a prevalent challenge in the effective implementation of relaxation interventions within educational settings is the frequent insufficiency of teachers' and educators' knowledge and competencies required to facilitate such sessions competently, thereby constituting a substantial impediment to their successful integration (Roeser et al., 2012). In the absence of adequate training and continuous support from qualified professionals, relaxation techniques risk being implemented incorrectly or superficially, which may diminish their effectiveness or, in some cases, lead to unintended adverse outcomes.

Tight school schedules and the pressure to fulfill the core curriculum may lead to perceiving additional practices as a burden or competition with other activities, thereby hindering their systematic implementation. Additionally, heterogeneous levels of student engagement represent a considerable challenge, as not all students willingly partake in relaxation exercises; some may demonstrate impatience, lack of focus, or skepticism concerning their efficacy and relevance.

Furthermore, challenges associated with the objective assessment of relaxation outcomes may undermine the motivation of educators and school administrators to implement and sustain the development of such programs. Another critical factor to consider is the cultural and social context, which in certain school environments may lead to the perception of these practices as less relevant or even inappropriate, thereby necessitating careful attention to local conditions and the tailored adaptation of implementation strategies.

CONCLUSIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

It should be emphasized that the full utilization of the potential of relaxation techniques in the educational context requires active engagement and a reflective approach from the teacher or educator during their implementation (Dobińska & Cieślikowska-Ryczko,

2019). Relaxation exercises constitute only one stage in the process of acquiring these skills. Effective introduction and consolidation of relaxation practices primarily demand awareness of their functions and value, as well as the attainment of an adequate level of theoretical competence.

Examples of good practices in Poland, such as the *Mindful School®* and *Kosmos and Kajo* projects, demonstrate growing interest and positive results, although their implementation remains limited and calls for further empirical investigation. Despite these promising findings, the implementation of relaxation practices within school settings faces significant challenges. These include time constraints and pressure to fulfill the core curriculum, which may lead to perceiving relaxation as an additional burden.

Equally important is the consideration of cultural and social contexts, which may affect the perception and acceptance of such practices. This is particularly critical for children from at-risk groups, who often experience heightened levels of stress, emotional difficulties, and social challenges; thus, tailored and sensitive implementation of relaxation interventions is necessary to meet their specific needs and promote equitable access to mental health support.

Therefore, systemic support at the educational policy level is essential, including the formal integration of relaxation programs into the national curriculum, professional teacher training with emphasis on working with vulnerable populations, and the active involvement of parents and the broader school community. Such measures are crucial for the lasting incorporation of these interventions into daily school practice, ensuring their accessibility and efficacy for all students, and maximizing their overall benefits.

[PRACTICE SESSION]:

UNTANGLING THE BUNDLE OF NERVES

Klaudia Nowak, Sara Piątek

MAIN TOPIC:

Recognizing stress and regulating emotions; prevention of emotional problems in at-risk children through the development of social-emotional and cognitive skills with relaxation techniques.

TARGET GROUP:

Students in grades 1-3, particularly those from at-risk groups (e.g., children with emotional difficulties, low frustration tolerance, adjustment problems, or from dysfunctional families).

DURATION:

3 hours

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

- Supporting children in managing stress without avoidance or escalation of symptoms
- Developing alternative ways of responding in emotionally difficult situations
- Strengthening the sense of control over one's emotional and physical reactions
- Building a safe space for expressing difficult emotions

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES (THE STUDENT IS ABLE TO):

- Recognize at least three signs of stress in one's own body (e.g., tight stomach, faster heartbeat, tense shoulders).
- Use visualization to safely "release" tension.
- Independently perform at least one breathing technique (balloon or flower breath).

- Name at least two alternative reactions to stress instead of shouting, crying, or withdrawing.
- Work in a group and express emotions in a socially acceptable way.

METHODS:

Brainstorming, visualization, elements of psychodrama, guided discussion, practical exercises (individual and group work), modeling (teacher demonstrates techniques), movement and somatic exercises.

MATERIALS:

A4 paper and crayons/markers, bundle of yarn, colorful yarn, audio recording with relaxing sounds, large sheet of paper.

PROCEDURE:

1. Getting to know Bundle of nerves – the project’s main character:

- Bundle is the personification of stress – a real tangled ball of yarn
- The teacher introduces Bundle, the character who will accompany students throughout the project. The children greet the character and, together, come up with a name for it.

2. Conversation about stress:

- Circle discussion moderated by the teacher
- The teacher facilitates a discussion about stress, asking: “Does anyone sometimes feel tangled up inside?” Together, the group identifies and names difficult situations.

3. Play with Bundle:

- The children sit in a circle. They toss a ball of yarn to one another, saying what causes them stress: “Bundle grows when...” (for example: Loud shouting, grades, being laughed at, new situations etc.). A web begins to form a visualization of “how many things cause us stress.”

4. Listening to the Bundle:

- Introduction to mindfulness

- Exercise in Silence and Listening to the Body: Place your hand on your stomach. How does your Bundle feel right now?, Is it tight or relaxed?

5. Stress map:

- Body scan activity
- Students trace the outline of a body on a large sheet of paper. Using colorful yarn, they mark the places where they feel different emotions. Each student chooses yarn colors freely and attaches them to the chosen areas. After completing the activity, there is time for sharing and reflection.

6. How to untangle the Bundle:

- Mindstorming, conversation to find the answer.
 - Identify the knots – Notice where stress or tension shows up in your body and mind.
 - Take a deep breath – Use slow, mindful breathing to calm your body.
 - Name your feelings – Put words to what you are feeling: “I feel angry,” “I feel worried,” etc.
 - Use a coping technique – Try a method like the STOP technique, visualization, or a breathing exercise.
 - Stretch and move – Gentle movement or muscle relaxation helps release physical tension.
 - Share or express safely – Talk with someone you trust, draw, or act out your feelings. Take it step by step – Untangling stress is gradual; go one knot at a time, focusing on calm and control.

7. Breath techniques:

- Balloon Breath (10 min)
 - Inhale – the balloon inflates (stomach moves outward)
 - Exhale – the balloon deflates (stomach moves inward)
 - Make a “shhh...” sound with the air
 - Repeat 5 times
- Flower Breath (10 min)
 - Smell the flower (inhale through the nose for 4 seconds)
 - Blow on the dandelion (exhale through the mouth for 6 seconds)

- Visualize a calming color (e.g., peaceful blue)
- Ocean Wave Breath (10 min)
 - Hand up = the wave comes (inhale)
 - Hand down = the wave goes (exhale)
 - Make a “shhhhuum” sound
- 5-5-5 Breath (10 min)
 - Inhale for 5 seconds
 - Hold for 5 seconds
 - Exhale for 5 seconds
 - Visualization: “Imagine the yarn is slowly untangling

8. Dance of knots:

- Calm music → the yarn flows freely
- Energetic music → the yarn dances
- We express our emotions through movement
- Ending in a relaxed position

9. My place to relax:

- Create a place to relax
- In small groups children work on project of relaxation friendly place
- Time to share with class and choose the best one.

10. Do the work:

- Built the area from the best project if it is possible
- Choose the rituals for class to make students feel better

[ACTIVITY]:

RELAXATION GAMES

– BALLOON & WINDMILL

Soňa Szabó

These relaxation games are designed to help participants consciously slow down, release accumulated tension, and reconnect with their breathing and body awareness. Through imagination, controlled breathing, and gentle movement, participants experience relaxation in a playful and non-threatening way. The activities are suitable as a short calming exercise during the school day, at the beginning or end of a session, or after emotionally demanding activities.

BALLOON:

Participants are invited to close their eyes and imagine that they are a balloon. They focus on sensory details such as the colour, texture, size, or design of the balloon. With slow inhalation, they imagine that the balloon is filling with air and expanding; with slow exhalation, the balloon gradually deflates. At one point, participants imagine that someone is holding the neck of the balloon, prompting them to hold their breath briefly. When the balloon is released, participants exhale quickly while making a sound, imitating air escaping from a real balloon. This sequence is repeated several times.

WINDMILL:

Participants work in pairs. One participant represents a windmill, standing with arms extended, while the other represents the wind. The “wind” gently blows into the “windmill’s” arms, prompting slow, circular arm movements. After a short period, participants switch roles. The exercise encourages cooperation, body awareness, and gentle rhythmic movement.

MAIN GOAL:

- To reduce physical and mental tension
- To promote conscious breathing and body awareness
- To support emotional regulation through imagination and movement

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- No materials required
- A calm and safe space allowing free movement

TIME FRAME:

- 5–10 minutes (each exercise can be used separately or combined)

REFLECTION:

At the end of the activity, participants are invited to briefly reflect on how their body feels (e.g., lighter, calmer, more relaxed). The facilitator emphasizes that these simple techniques can be used independently whenever participants feel stressed, restless, or overwhelmed.

[ACTIVITY]:

MELODIC MOSAIC

Baladová Tereza, Hložná Kateřina, Kollertová Nikola, Mašková Lucie, Radová Adéla

Relaxation is one of the simplest and most effective ways to care for the body and mind, not only for adults but also for children. In today's fast-paced world, children often struggle with overload from school, extracurricular activities, or relationships with peers, which is why rest and relaxation techniques are so important for them. These techniques can take many forms, from muscle relaxation and breathing exercises to visualisation and mental rest, to creative forms such as music, dance or painting. They help children release accumulated tension, better manage their emotions and concentrate. The goal of relaxation is not just a short rest, but above all long-term balance, joy of learning and overall well-being. Relaxation is therefore an important part of a healthy lifestyle and natural child development.

TARGET GROUP:

12–99 years

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

Depending on the capacity of the equipment/any number

NUMBER OF ORGANISERS:

Min. 2

OBJECTIVE:

To induce a feeling of calm and relaxation through listening to music and creative work. Then to reflect on the feelings that music evokes in us.

EQUIPMENT:

White A4 paper, pre-cut coloured paper of various shapes, speaker, device from which we can play audio recordings, pre-prepared music

ENVIRONMENT:

Closed room

MOTIVATION:

Listen to the song and try to choose the coloured paper that you think suits it best. Think about what colour the music reminds you of, it can be calm like blue, cheerful like yellow or fiery like red. Each melody has its own colour according to each of us, you just have to discover it.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION:

Before the programme begins, it is necessary to set up a table with coloured pieces of paper near everyone. Each participant will then receive a white A4 sheet of paper, which will serve as their workspace. Pre-edited music will then be played throughout the entire process of selecting the pieces of paper. Everyone's task is to choose a piece of paper based on how the music affects them. After all the songs have been played, the participants will have time to create a mosaic from the pieces of paper they have collected. The theme of the mosaic will be accompanied by the sentence: Put together a picture that evokes calm in you (it can be an environment, an object, or anything else that comes to mind).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What have you created?
- Why does this thing evoke calm in you?
- Did you find during the activity that you chose an inappropriate colour or shape?
- What did the composition evoke in you and why did you choose this colour?
- Did you enjoy the activity?

REFLECTION:

Finally, let's look at the colours you chose and realise how the music calmed us down and helped us pause for a moment. The colours you chose show what mood the melody evoked in you and remind us that music can be a great way to relax and unwind. By creating a colourful mosaic, you had the opportunity not only to listen to music, but also to relax creatively and express your feelings. Together, we will discover that music is as colourful as a rainbow, that everyone can perceive it a little differently, and that is why there are no wrong answers.

EVALUATION:

- Do you have any recommendations for us as part of your feedback?
- What would you do differently to make the activity better/more enjoyable?

[INFOGRAPHIC]:

POSTER RELAXATION

Tereza Baladová, Kateřina Hložná, Nikola Kollertová, Lucie Mašková, Adéla Radová

Project ID 22430137: Child at Risk: Risky behaviour and mental health of children in the V4 countries

RELAXATION

What do you do when you feel stressed or tired?
Does **movement**, **calm breathing**, or maybe **painting** help you?

That's all **relaxation** – moments when your body and mind rest and recharge. Thanks to relaxation, you feel better, have more energy, and can handle school and free time with more ease.

IT MAY BE

PHYSICAL

Muscle relaxation means you consciously relax your muscles, so you feel better and can manage stress or fatigue.

HOW TO DO IT?

WITH MOVEMENT

- Yoga
 - simple exercises that relax body and mind
- Light activity
 - walking, stretching, dancing, or cycling help relieve stress

WITHOUT MOVEMENT

- Autogenic training
 - imagine your body is calm and heavy
- Deep breathing
 - a slow breath in, a short pause, and a long exhale
- Progressive relaxation
 - tense and then relax your muscles

THROUGH ART

Art relaxation means creating something nice, which helps release emotions and makes you feel better.

HOW TO DO IT?

- Music therapy
 - listen to music, sing, or play an instrument
- Writing techniques
 - write stories, poems, or just your thoughts
- Art therapy
 - draw, paint, or make collages

MINDFULNESS

Mental relaxation helps calm your mind when you are worried, stressed, or tired. It allows you to rest better, manage emotions, and feel more at ease.

HOW TO DO IT?

- Meditation & breathing
 - close your eyes, focus on your breath, and try to stay in the moment for 2–3 minutes
- Safe place visualization
 - imagine a safe, calm place where you can relax
- Sleep hygiene
 - 8–9 hours of sleep, keeping a regular sleep schedule
- Color therapy
 - surround yourself with colors that lift your mood
- Journaling
 - write how you feel, what worries you, and what makes you happy

• Visegrad Fund

This video will guide you through music relaxation!

It doesn't matter what your creation looks like -- the process of drawing itself calms the brain and helps you release emotions!

Try writing down five things that made you happy each day :)

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

V4 international workshop details



The poster features logos for the University of Hradec Králové Faculty of Education, the Visegrad Fund, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, the University of Debrecen, and the University of Silesia in Katowice. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold and regular fonts in teal and dark blue colors.

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP PROGRAM

Child at Risk: Risky behaviour and mental health of children in the V4 countries

Sharing good practice in the prevention and intervention of risky behaviour

16. 10. – 17. 10. 2025
Hradec Králové

Project ID 22430137 "Child at Risk: Risky Behaviour and Mental Health of Children in the V4 Countries"
The project is co-financed by the governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from the International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.
International Visegrad Fund website: <https://www.visegradfund.org/>



WEDNESDAY, 15. 10. 2025

Arrival and accommodation of participants
(<https://www.usvatehojana.cz/>)

18:00 – 20:00

Evening refreshments

19:00

Introduction of participants

THURSDAY, 16. 10. 2025

Venue: Pension u sv. Jana (large lounge)

8:45 – 9:00

Registration and attendance check

9:00 – 9:20 – Workshop opening

Project leader Mgr. et Mgr. Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková, Ph.D.

On behalf Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

prof. PhDr. Miriam Niklová, Ph.D.

On behalf University of Silesia in Katowice dr hab. Karina Leksy

On behalf University of Debrecen: Dr. Anita Túri-Galán

9:20 – 10:50 – I. Workshop panel

**Prevention of risky behavior in children – activities of students
from the Czech Republic**

10:55 – 11:15

Break

11:15 – 12:45 – II. Workshop panel

**Prevention of risky behavior in children – activities of students
from Poland**

13:00 – 14:00

Lunch

14:00 – 15:30 – III. Workshop panel

**Prevention of risky behavior in children – activities of students
from Slovakia**

15:30 – 15:50

Break

15:50–17:20 – IV. Panel of workshop

**Prevention of risky behavior in children – activities of students
from Hungary**

18:00–19:30

Social evening



FRIDAY, 17. 10. 2025

**Venue: University of Hradec Králové
(Room 302, Building A, Hradecká 1227/4, 500 03 Hradec Králové)**

Block I: 9:00–11:25

09:00–09:30

**prof. PhDr. Miriam Niklová, PhD., doc. PhDr. Mário Dulovics, PhD.,
Mgr. Zuzana Hrabovská**
"Prevalence and prevention of risky behavior in Slovakia"

09:30–09:50

dr hab. Karina Leksy, Mgr. Klaudia Nowak
**"Searching for the causes of health-risk behaviors exhibited by
Generation Alpha"**

09:50–10:10

Mgr. Magdalena Szołtys
**"Systemic Psychoprophylaxis in Work with Children and Families:
Lessons from 30 Years of 'Dom Aniołów Stróżów'"**

10:10 – 10:50

Mgr. Lucie Mrázová, Mgr. Pavlína Pošvářová
**"Prevention and Intervention of Risky Behaviour in the Semiramis
Organisation"**

10:50 – 11:05

Break

Block II: 11:05–12:30

11:05 – 11:25

Janos Szecsko
**"Child protection in educational institutions – school social work
in Hungary"**

11:25 – 11:45

Dr. Anita Túri-Galán
**"Digital inequality: How do young people become disadvantaged when
using the internet?"**

11:45 – 12:25

Mgr. Bc. Tereza Pokorná
"Working with vulnerable children at Nomia"



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•

12:25 – 12:40

Mgr. et Mgr. Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková, Ph.D.
"Teachers' views on the prevention of risky behavior"
Conclusion of the morning program

13:00 – 15:00

Lunch and excursion, organized by Asalto
(Skok do života; <https://www.skokdozivota.cz/>)

16:00

Excursion to the Hradec Králové Remand Prison

Garants of International Workshop:

Mgr. et Mgr. Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková, Ph.D.

Mgr. Alena Knotková, Ph.D.

prof. PhDr. Miriam Niklová, Ph.D.

doc. PhDr. Mário Dulovics, PhD.

dr hab. Karina Leksy

Dr. Anita Túri-Galán

Janos Szecsko

Project ID 22430137 "Child at Risk: Risky Behaviour and Mental Health of Children in the V4 Countries"
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International Visegrad Fund website: <https://www.visegradfund.org/>

Appendix 2

Photos from the V4 international workshop (Photographs: the project's organizing team)









CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE ON RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

Stanislava Svoboda Hoferková et al.

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