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Prevention of Social Maladjustment in the Light of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Theory. The Concept of a *Programme for the Prevention of Social Maladjustment among Children and Adolescents in Siedlce*

Profilaktyka niedostosowania społecznego w myśl koncepcji Uriego Bronfenbrennera. Koncepcja *Programu zapobiegania niedostosowaniu społecznemu dzieci i młodzieży w Siedlcach*

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the article is to present the theoretical assumptions and actions undertaken to develop the *Programme for the prevention of social maladjustment of children and adolescents in Siedlce*, based on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. To this end, at the author’s request, the Mayor of the City of Siedlce appointed an interdisciplinary team composed of representatives of key institutions supporting child development in family and school environments. The team carried out diagnostic activities aimed at developing the Siedlce Child and Family Support Pathway, designed to enable early identification of risks and prevent the consolidation of risk behaviours. The article discusses the fundamental assumptions of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological concept and presents

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statistical data from institutions involved in interventions targeting children and adolescents at risk of social maladjustment. It also highlights the key role of schools and pre-school education institutions within the prevention system and presents results of a diagnostic survey conducted among principals of schools and educational institutions in Siedlce regarding their needs for preventive support.

Methods and materials. Analysis of statistical data from institutions key to the programme's development, results of a diagnostic survey among principals of schools and educational institutions in Siedlce, development of practical solutions for preventing social maladjustment among children and adolescents in Siedlce, grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological social prevention framework.

Results and conclusion. The article demonstrates that effective prevention of social maladjustment requires a shift away from reactive measures towards a coordinated, multi-level system of prevention oriented towards the resources of the entire local ecosystem.

Keywords: social maladjustment, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, integrated prevention, interdisciplinarity, support pathway

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie założeń teoretycznych oraz działań podjętych w celu opracowania *Programu zapobiegania niedostosowaniu społecznemu dzieci i młodzieży w Siedlcach*, opartego na koncepcji ekologicznej profilaktyki społecznej Uriego Bronfenbrennera. W tym celu, na wniosek autorki, Prezydent Miasta Siedlce powołał interdyscyplinarny zespół złożony z przedstawicieli kluczowych instytucji wspierających rozwój dziecka w środowisku rodzinnym i szkolnym. Zespół ten realizował działania diagnostyczne ukierunkowane na opracowanie Siedleckiej Ścieżki Wsparcia Dziecka i Rodziny, której celem jest umożliwienie wczesnej identyfikacji zagrożeń oraz zapobieganie utrwalaniu się zachowań ryzykownych. W artykule omówiono podstawowe założenia ekologicznej koncepcji Bronfenbrennera oraz zaprezentowano dane statystyczne pochodzące z instytucji zaangażowanych w działania interwencyjne wobec dzieci i młodzieży zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym. Uzasadniono również kluczową rolę szkół oraz placówek wychowania przedszkolnego w systemie profilaktyki, a także przedstawiono wyniki badania diagnostycznego przeprowadzonego wśród dyrektorów szkół i placówek oświatowych w Siedlcach, dotyczącego ich potrzeb w zakresie wsparcia działań profilaktycznych.

Metody i materiały. Analiza danych statystycznych przedłożonych przez przedstawicieli instytucji kluczowych dla powstania programu, wyniki sondażu diagnostycznego prowadzonego wśród dyrektorów siedleckich szkół i placówek. Przygotowanie na podstawie teoretycznej koncepcji ekologicznej profilaktyki społecznej Bronfenbrennera rozwiązań praktycznych mających na celu zapobieganie niedostosowaniu społecznemu dzieci i młodzieży w Siedlcach.

Wyniki i wnioski. Artykuł dowodzi, że skuteczne przeciwdziałanie niedostosowaniu społecznemu wymaga odejścia od działań reaktywnych na rzecz skoordynowanego, wielopoziomowego systemu profilaktyki, zorientowanego na zasoby całego ekosystemu lokalnego.

Słowa kluczowe: niedostosowanie społeczne, teoria ekologiczna Bronfenbrennera, profilaktyka zintegrowana, interdyscyplinarność, ścieżka wsparcia

Introduction – an Ecological Perspective on the Prevention of Social Maladjustment

Prevention constitutes a process of supporting individuals in coping with difficulties that threaten their proper development as well as their physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (Gaś, 2006). Its fundamental objective is to limit the impact of risk factors, strengthen protective factors, and create conditions conducive to the harmonious development of the individual (Hołyst, 1994; Kuberska-Gaca & Gaca, 1986). Effective prevention protects individuals, particularly children, from negative environmental influences (Kamiński, 1974; Lipkowski, 1980) and contributes to reducing criminogenic factors (Kalinowski, 1986).

In contemporary approaches, a distinction is made between defensive (negative) prevention, aimed at reducing individual deficits and environmental risks, and offensive (positive) prevention, focused on developing individual resources, psychosocial competencies, and a supportive educational environment (Ostaszewski, 2006). At the same time, strategies based on arousing fear, considered to be of limited effectiveness (Szymańska, 2012), are being abandoned in favour of actions grounded in empathy and the strengthening of psychosocial competencies. Preventive interventions may be universal (addressed to the entire population), selective (directed at groups at increased risk), or indicated (concerning individuals requiring specialised intervention). Their theoretical foundations include, among others: the theory of reasoned action (TRA) by Ajzen and Fishbein, which conceptualises behaviour as a result of intention (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980); Bandura's social learning theory, emphasising the role of observation and modelling (Bandura, 2015); Jessor's problem behaviour theory, highlighting the interaction of individual and environmental factors (Jessor, 1991); Bowlby's attachment theory, indicating the importance of early relationships (Bowlby, 2016); and the theory of psychological resilience developed by Rutter, Garmezy, and Werner, which emphasises the role of protective factors (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 2009; Werner, 2000).

Social prevention constitutes a key strategy for preventing social maladjustment and involves equipping children and adolescents with social competencies,

meeting their developmental needs, limiting negative environmental influences, and modifying social and physical factors conducive to the emergence of problems (Szymańska & Zamecka, 2002).

Social maladjustment manifests itself, among other things, in resistance to social norms, which may take the form of disobedience, aggression, truancy, or the use of psychoactive substances. This phenomenon is characterised by a complex aetiology involving the interaction of individual and environmental factors (Jaros & Jaros, 2014). Although the concept of social maladjustment remains difficult to define unequivocally (Pytko, 2002; Szulc & Pawlewicz, 2015), it refers to persistent educational difficulties, a negative attitude towards social norms, and a syndrome of antisocial behaviours (Wysocka, 2006).

The contemporary biopsychosocial perspective on social maladjustment (Frąckowiak *et al.*, 2024; Robson, 1997; Woynarowska, 2007) emphasises the reciprocal interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Biological factors include, among others, genetic predispositions, neurobiological dysfunctions (*e.g.*, ADHD), and chronic illnesses (Borrani *et al.*, 2019). Psychological factors encompass personality traits (such as impulsivity and reduced empathy), emotional disorders, and cognitive deficits (Kiliszek, 2013; Mudrecka, 2013). Social determinants include parenting inefficiency, family dysfunctions and pathologies, violence, and the negative influence of the media, including cyberbullying (Frąckowiak *et al.*, 2024; Pytko & Zacharuk, 1995; Siemionow, 2011).

Preventing social maladjustment among children and adolescents requires a comprehensive approach to its determinants and the application of a multifunctional and interdisciplinary preventive framework. The theoretical basis for such an approach is provided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development, which conceptualises human development as a process occurring within a multi-level, dynamic, and historically embedded system of reciprocal relations between the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner distinguishes five interrelated systems: 1) the microsystem, encompassing the individual's immediate environments (family, school, peer group), characterised by direct, bidirectional interactions; 2) the mesosystem, referring to relations between microsystems (*e.g.*, cooperation between the family and the school); 3) the exosystem, encompassing institutions and structures that exert indirect influence (*e.g.*, parents' workplaces, the social welfare system); 4) the macrosystem, which constitutes the cultural, normative, and socio-political context; 5) the chronosystem, which takes into account the temporal dimension, both in relation to biographical events and socio-cultural changes.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provides important implications for the model of preventing social maladjustment, indicating the necessity of strengthening

cooperation between schools, families, and supporting institutions; taking into account the local socio-cultural context; building networks of institutional support; respecting the temporal dimension of development; and individualising the processes of teaching and upbringing.

Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to identify local determinants of the risk of social maladjustment among children and adolescents and to identify areas requiring preventive support within the school and local environments. The adopted methodology was mixed in nature (qualitative–quantitative), which made it possible to adopt a multi-faceted approach to the analysed problem and to integrate data obtained from various sources.

In the empirical research, the diagnostic survey method was applied. The research technique used was a questionnaire survey, supplemented by an analysis of documents and secondary data obtained from institutions working for the benefit of children and families. The application of diversified research techniques enabled data triangulation and increased the validity of the results obtained.

The questionnaire survey involved headteachers of all schools and educational institutions operating within the city of Siedlce. The selection of respondents was purposive and resulted from their managerial functions and their knowledge of educational, care-related, and preventive problems occurring in the institutions they manage.

The research instrument was an original questionnaire developed specifically for the purposes of the present study. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents during a working meeting with school and institution headteachers and was then collected immediately after its conclusion, which made it possible to obtain complete and homogeneous empirical data and to limit the risk of missing responses.

Below are presented the synthetic conclusions from the questionnaire survey of the needs and opinions of headteachers of schools and educational institutions in Siedlce, which constitute the basis for work on the programme: 1) prevention should be systemic and differentiated by educational stage – effective prevention of social maladjustment requires coherent, long-term actions covering all stages of education and adapted to changing forms of problem behaviour; 2) early intervention and support for the child's micro-environment are of key importance – the predominance of aggression and withdrawal in preschools confirms the validity of investing in the development of emotional and social competencies and early specialist support; 3) strengthening adults' competencies constitutes the foundation of effective prevention – the greatest needs concern the professional development of teachers and activities addressed to parents; 4) low cooperation with parents remains a significant barrier – limited parental involve-

ment reduces the effectiveness of preventive and intervention activities; 5) primary school constitutes a critical stage – the emergence of cyberbullying, theft, and truancy requires intensive, direct interventions combining education, emotional support, and strengthening of school motivation; 6) during adolescence, integrated systemic solutions are necessary – the complexity of problems in upper secondary schools justifies the implementation of comprehensive preventive programmes; 7) staffing and financial deficits limit the effectiveness of prevention – the lack of specialists and stable funding confirms the need for support from local government authorities; 8) interinstitutional cooperation requires coordination – the fragmentation of activities reduces their effectiveness and justifies the formalisation of cooperation procedures; 9) the highest effectiveness is demonstrated by individual and small-group interventions – in particular, social skills training, sociotherapy, and close cooperation with the family; 10) preventing social maladjustment requires constant monitoring and evaluation – systematic diagnosis and ongoing assessment of activities enable their adjustment to the real needs of the school environment.

The questionnaire survey was supplemented by an analysis of documents and secondary data submitted by members of the interdisciplinary team. These materials were prepared within individual institutions on the basis of statistical analyses concerning the scale and structure of undertaken educational, preventive, and intervention activities. The document analysis enabled the formulation of qualitative conclusions and the embedding of the questionnaire survey results in a broader institutional and environmental context.

Institutional Analysis of the Risk of Social Maladjustment in Siedlce

The concept of the *Programme supporting schools and educational institutions in preventing social maladjustment among children and adolescents in Siedlce* is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development, which assumes the necessity of undertaking coordinated preventive actions at all systemic levels of the child's functioning. At the microsystem level, key importance is attached to strengthening family, school, and peer relationships through parental support, the development of parenting competencies, and the organisation of extracurricular activities and mentoring programmes. The mesosystem encompasses cooperation between the family and the school, implemented through regular contacts, joint initiatives, and the exchange of information between educational institutions, counselling centres, and families. Within the exosystem, a significant role is played by the activities of the local government, including the financing of psychological and social support, the development of community infrastructure, and the building of networks of institutional cooperation.

The macrosystem defines the cultural and legal framework of prevention, including the promotion of prosocial attitudes, volunteering, civic education, and the strengthening of local ties.

On the basis of the above assumptions, in April 2025, a blueprint of actions aimed at developing the *Programme supporting schools and educational institutions in preventing social maladjustment among children and adolescents in Siedlce* was submitted to the Mayor of the City of Siedlce. Subsequently, in September 2025, a team for the prevention of social maladjustment among children and adolescents was established. Its members included representatives of key institutions and services operating for the benefit of children and families, with the simultaneous assumption that the composition of the team could be further expanded.

The justification for establishing and operating the team was already provided by preliminary conclusions resulting from the diagnosis of activities undertaken by the indicated institutions in the area of preventing social maladjustment among children and adolescents: 1) Data from the District Court in Siedlce (2022–2025) indicates a relative stability in the number of applied educational and corrective measures in the years 2022–2024, followed by a marked increase in 2025 (data for three quarters). In the structure of cases, a change in proportions between demoralisation and punishable acts is visible: from 2024 onwards, there was an increase in the number of cases concerning demoralisation (77 in 2024 and 86 in 2025), accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in the number of punishable acts (50 in 2024). This trend may indicate an intensification of risky behaviours at earlier stages of the trajectory of social maladjustment. The most frequently applied measure remains a warning, which confirms the dominance of mild and preventive interventions. At the same time, an increase in the number of probation supervision orders was observed in 2023 and 2025, indicating a growing need for more intensive educational work and environmental supervision. Institutional measures are applied sporadically, and corrective measures occurred exclusively in 2022, which is consistent with a policy direction limiting isolating forms of intervention. 2) Data from the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Siedlce (2022–2024) reveal the coexistence of two trends: a decrease in the number of families receiving social assistance benefits (from 1,213 in 2022 to 978 in 2024) and an increase in demand for intensive and community-based support. The number of families covered by family assistance increased from 54 to 73, representing an increase of over 35%. This phenomenon indicates an intensification of complex care and educational problems requiring long-term and individualised interventions. A decline in the number of recipients of financial benefits does not, therefore, indicate a reduction in social risk but rather confirms the dominance of psychosocial problems over economic ones. 3) Data from the Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre (2022–2025) indicate an increase in the number of rulings on the risk of social maladjustment from 31 in the 2022/2023

school year to 45 in 2023/2024, with a slight decrease to 42 in 2024/2025. The greatest increase concerned the preschool stage and grades I–III of primary school, which may indicate earlier identification of difficulties and increased diagnostic effectiveness. In grades IV–VIII and in upper secondary schools, the number of rulings was lower; however, signs of the accumulation of problems at subsequent educational stages are visible. The distribution of data confirms the need to intensify early diagnosis, strengthen teachers' competencies, and increase the availability of specialist support. 4) The activities of the Interdisciplinary Team and the Crisis Intervention Centre in Siedlce indicate an increase in the number of Blue Card procedures in 2024, also in families not receiving social assistance. This may indicate both improved detection of violence and an intensification of crisis situations. An increase in the number of police interventions and participants in preventive activities was also recorded. Despite a high completion rate of corrective and educational programmes, the number of their participants remains limited, indicating the need for further development of this form of intervention. The presence of migrant families in Blue Card procedures highlights the necessity of strengthening intercultural competencies and adapting informational activities. 5) Police data (2022–2025) indicate that the highest number of reports concerning demoralisation was recorded in 2024 (244 cases), followed by a decrease to 203 in 2025. The vast majority of cases were referred to family courts, which confirms their key role in the response system. After a decrease in detections in 2023, a renewed increase was observed in 2024–2025, particularly with regard to alcohol consumption, with a relatively stable level of drug-related detections. These trends indicate the need to continue educational and community-based activities and to further strengthen inter-institutional cooperation. The decrease in the number of reports in 2025 may be the result of earlier responses at the school and family levels, which requires further observation.

Main Conceptual Assumptions of the Programme Supporting Schools and Educational Institutions in Preventing Social Maladjustment among Children and Adolescents in Siedlce – A Synthetic Overview

Schools and educational institutions constitute an important environment in which deficits in the social functioning of children and adolescents become apparent, such as difficulties in cooperation, aggressive behaviour, impulsivity, or withdrawal. At the same time, they may generate secondary developmental problems, including academic failure, stigmatisation, and grade repetition, but they may also fulfil a protective and compensatory function. Behavioural disorders and developmental difficulties of biopsychological or environmental aetiology often escalate as a result of inappropriate interactions within the systems surrounding the child, particularly within the school

microsystem. Inadequate reactions of teachers and peers, educational practices based on labelling and sanctions, as well as peer group pressure, foster stigmatisation and exclusion, reinforcing attitudes of resistance and consolidating antisocial patterns of behaviour (Domagała-Kręcioch, 2008; Dudzikowa, 2001; Hołyst, 1994; Konopnicki, 1971; Pospiszyl, 1998; Spionek, 1956; Wirkus, 2020).

This process is further intensified at the level of the mesosystem when the inconsistency of educational influences exerted by the school and the family disorients the child and hinders the internalisation of social norms. An additional risk factor is a deficit within the chronosystem, manifested in the delay or trivialisation of early intervention, which favours the escalation of difficulties in subsequent phases of development. These phenomena are reinforced by a prevention model focused mainly on eliminating problem behaviours, while insufficiently developing psychosocial competencies and psychological resilience.

Although the school plays a key role in prevention and intervention, in practice it is often a selective institution, inadequately adapted to the diverse needs of students. The stigmatisation of children experiencing educational and behavioural difficulties, *inter alia* through the practice of grade repetition, fosters their exclusion and deepens processes of social maladjustment (Dudzikowa, 2001; Kania, 2016; Pospiszyl, 1998). In extreme cases, the school may exhibit characteristics of a total institution, subordinating the individual to rigid rules and hierarchies, which limits students' personal development and favours intentional educational absenteeism (Goffman, 2011; Wysocka, 2006). As early as Konopnicki pointed to three basic school-related risk factors: negative teacher–student relationships, peer conflicts, and academic failure (Konopnicki, 1971). These are complemented by systemic factors such as overcrowded classrooms, a lack of individualisation in teaching, and inadequate teaching methods (Hołyst, 1994; Spionek, 1956), as well as deficits in parents' pedagogical culture and their limited involvement in their children's educational process (Wirkus, 2020). From the perspective of developmental pedagogy, the school may be perceived both as a factor generating difficulties, a space in which they are revealed, and an institutional link in the pathologisation of the child's functioning (Stankowski, 2002). An alternative is the concept of a supportive school, based on resilience theory and oriented towards strengthening students' resources and their sense of agency.

The foundation of the functioning of a contemporary community-oriented school is autonomy understood as the ability to respond adequately to the needs of students, parents, and the local community. Under Polish conditions, this autonomy is selective in nature: relatively broad in the pedagogical and organisational dimensions and limited in the financial and legal sphere. It includes, among other things, the organisation of the teaching process, the selection of teaching methods, the implemen-

tation of educational and preventive programmes, and the development of internal documents, within the limits set by the core curriculum and pedagogical supervision.

The school also plays an important role in responding to manifestations of juvenile demoralisation on the basis of the *Ustawa o wspieraniu i resocjalizacji nieletnich* [Act on supporting and resocialising minors] (Ustawa [Act], 2022), which emphasises the principle of individualisation of interventions and the primacy of the child's best interests. These regulations are supplemented by standards for the protection of minors introduced by an amendment to the *Kodeks rodzinny i opiekuńczy* [Family and Guardianship Code] (Ustawa [Act], 1964; *Lex Kamilek*), which obliges schools to implement procedures for the prevention of violence, intervention, and support for the child after the disclosure of abuse (Obwieszczenie [Announcement], 2024).

The main objective of the *Programme* is to limit risky behaviour among children and adolescents and, consequently, to reduce the risk of social maladjustment. The implementation of this objective assumes interventions directed at children and adolescents, their families, schools and educational institutions, as well as the local community. The key specific objectives include: strengthening parents' parenting competencies, improving the diagnostic and educational competencies of schools, building a system of early psychological and pedagogical support, preventing stigmatisation, developing interinstitutional cooperation, initiating educational and social activities, and responding to cases of violence in accordance with applicable regulations, including the so-called *Lex Kamilek Act*.

Work on the *Programme* includes diagnosing the needs of schools and educational institutions, carrying out training and conference activities, and providing ongoing support to educational institutions. The *Programme* will be subject to annual evaluation based on the opinions of students, parents, teachers, and representatives of cooperating institutions. The results of the evaluation are intended to form the basis for formulating pedagogical recommendations and improving local preventive policy in the field of preventing social maladjustment of children and adolescents in Siedlce.

Conclusion

The main objective of the *Programme* is to reduce risky behaviour among children and adolescents and, consequently, to decrease the risk of social maladjustment. The implementation of this objective assumes interventions addressed to children and adolescents, their families, schools and educational institutions, as well as the local community. The key specific objectives include: strengthening parents' educational competencies, improving the diagnostic and educational competencies of schools, building a system of early psychological and pedagogical support, preventing stigmatisation,

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