

CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

- Visegrad Fund

Hradec Králové
2026

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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

2026

This methodological guide has been published thanks to the support from the V4 International Project no. 22430137 titled *Child at Risk: Risky behaviour and mental health of children in the V4 countries*.

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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.



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DOI: 10.36689/uhk/978-80-7435-967-5

e-ISBN 978-80-7435-967-5



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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.

CHILD AT RISK: FROM ACTIVITY TO UNDERSTANDING

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

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Year of publication: 2026

Place of publication: Hradec Králové

Graphic editor: PaedDr. Martin Knytl, Ph.D., MBA, MCS

Publisher: Gaudeamus

Number of pages: 288

Edition: 1st edition

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Published by the University of Hradec Králové, Gaudeamus as its 1901. publication.

DOI: 10.36689/uhk/978-80-7435-967-5

e-ISBN 978-80-7435-967-5