

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION IN SCHOOLS – CURRENT POSSIBILITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

PREVENČIA A INTERVENČIA V ŠKOLÁCH – AKTUÁLNE MOŽNOSTI A PERSPEKTÍVY

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Abstract

The paper focuses on theoretical reflection on prevention and intervention in the school environment, taking into account current trends and approaches in this area. It analyses the importance of systematically addressing bullying and other social risks in schools, emphasising the need for coordinated measures at the school, family, and broader community levels. The study points to the need for preventive and intervention strategies in line with current legislation and changing social conditions. The study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of current options and highlight prospects for further development of practice.

Keywords: prevention, intervention, school, bullying, legislation, school programmes, social risks

Abstrakt

Príspevok sa zameriava na teoretickú reflexiu prevencie a intervencie v školskom prostredí so zreteľom na aktuálne trendy a prístupy v danej oblasti. Analyzuje význam systematického riešenia problematiky šikanovania a iných sociálnych rizík v školách, pričom zdôrazňuje nevyhnutnosť koordinovaných opatrení na úrovni školy, rodiny a širšej komunity. Štúdia poukazuje na potrebu preventívnych a intervenčných stratégií v súlade s platnou legislatívou a meniacimi sa spoločenskými podmienkami. Cieľom štúdie je poskytnúť komplexný prehľad súčasných možností a vyzdvihnúť perspektívy ďalšieho rozvoja praxe.

Kľúčové slová: prevencia, intervencia, škola, šikanovanie, legislatíva, školské programy, sociálne riziká

Introduction

Prevention and intervention in the school environment are an integral part of the current education system, and their importance is conditioned not only by the protection of pupils' mental health, but also by the promotion of social cohesion and the inclusive nature of schools (Križo & Krnáčová, 2020; Soroková, 2023). Schools are no longer seen exclusively as places for the transfer of knowledge, but as complex institutions that provide multidimensional support for children and their family environment (Reschová & Polášková, 2019). This shift requires the implementation of targeted prevention, systematic monitoring of risk factors, and professionally guided intervention procedures in crisis situations.

According to Špatenková (2011), effective crisis intervention must be based on clearly defined principles, from immediate response, through risk reduction and stabilisation, to an individualised approach that respects the subjective experience of the crisis. Prevention is of strategic importance because it minimises the likelihood of crises occurring and reduces their negative impact (Durlak et al., 2011; NASP, 2020). Postvention models developed by the Ontario Centre for Mental Health (2024) emphasise the need for a proactive, integrated, and interdisciplinary approach.

The Slovak context is undergoing a gradual transformation, which is reflected in the introduction of systemic solutions in the form of school support teams (SST) – multidisciplinary groups of experts working directly in schools, whose task is to implement preventive programmes, risk detection, acute intervention, and follow-up (Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023; Križo & Krnáčová, 2020). Despite this shift, ensuring equal access to and quality of these services across regions, as well as systematic training of team members in line with current international standards, remains a challenge.

The prospects for further development of prevention and intervention in schools lie in linking proven international practices with local specificities and the legislative framework. The effective implementation of these strategies requires not only interdisciplinary cooperation between professionals, teachers, and families, but also adequate material and human resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019/2020; Shultz et al., 2016).

According to Kunčáková (2021), prevention in the school environment is implemented through preventive and educational activities and programmes, which are an important tool for reducing risky behaviour and supporting the positive psychosocial development of pupils. Preventive activities include one-off or short-term educational interventions aimed at raising pupils' awareness of risky behaviours and providing practical strategies for preventing them. This category includes, for example, lectures, discussions, awareness campaigns, courses, workshops, and training groups. These activities are time-limited, usually not exceeding three meetings with a specific group, and are designed with a clearly defined goal and content, while being methodologically adapted to the specific characteristics of the target group.

In the area of providing assistance and support in crisis situations involving children and pupils in educational institutions, a key role is played by professional staff who are competent to carry out crisis intervention. The status and activities of professional staff in schools are regulated by Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on pedagogical staff and professional staff, as amended (effective from January 1, 2025). According to Section 6(2) of this Act, the work of a professional employee includes:

- a) psychological, speech therapy, social-pedagogical, therapeutic-pedagogical or special-pedagogical activities, including the re-education of children and pupils,
- b) providing career and social counselling and prevention in the field of education and training,
- c) performing specialised or managerial activities in a school or school facility.

According to Act No. 318/2019 Coll., professional staff working in schools who are also members of the school support team include:

- school psychologist,
- special education teacher,
- social pedagogue,
- career counsellor,
- school speech therapist,
- therapeutic pedagogue.

Professional school staff play a key role in assisting children and pupils in crisis situations and are authorised to carry out crisis intervention. Their activities are defined by Act No. 138/2019 Coll., which specifies the performance of psychological, pedagogical, and counselling work, as well as specialised and managerial activities. According to Act No. 318/2019 Z. z., the members of the school support team include a school psychologist, a special and social pedagogue, a career counsellor, a school speech therapist, and a therapeutic pedagogue.

According to Križ and Krnáčová (2020), the school support team (SST) is a multidisciplinary group of experts who work directly in the school environment and actively participate in shaping the school culture. Its activities focus not only on direct work with pupils, but also on supporting teachers, parents, and school management. An important element of the SST's work is the establishment of systematic processes that support prevention, intervention,

and the inclusive orientation of the school.

Križo and Krnáčová (2020) define the main functions of the school support team as follows:

- Searching for and identifying resources and risk factors among pupils, classes, and teaching staff.
- Providing comprehensive feedback (so-called 360° feedback), using sociometric tools, and evaluating the climate of the teaching staff.
- Counselling, support, and training for teachers and parents, as well as assistance to school management in fulfilling its vision and strategic direction.
- Implementation of preventive and screening programmes, such as art therapy or morning communication circles.
- Conflict mediation through non-violent communication and regular reflection with pupils.
- Targeted intervention, including re-education of learning disabilities (individual and group), supportive therapy, mentoring and supervision of teaching assistants, as well as support for class teachers.
- Active cooperation with counselling and prevention centres (CPC), including regular team meetings, intervision, supervision, and case conferences.

The school support team has a comprehensive and ongoing role in the crisis intervention process that goes beyond the acute response itself. It creates basic preventive mechanisms, prepares the school to cope with crises, actively participates in the intervention, and subsequently ensures the long-term stabilisation and adaptation of the school environment.

According to Soroková (2023), crisis intervention is a sensitive and targeted response by the school to a serious, acute crisis situation experienced by individuals in the school environment that they are unable to cope with or influence on their own. These are various unforeseen events or the escalation of a problem into a significant and non-standard conflict.

In the school environment, crisis intervention is implemented through the support measure “crisis intervention”. In accordance with the Catalogue of Support Measures, its aim, pursuant to Section 145(2)(u), is to provide children and pupils with professional care focused on a specific period of their lives immediately after a crisis event.

The effective implementation of crisis intervention requires compliance with a set of principles that determine its quality and effectiveness. Špatenková (2011) identifies the following specific characteristics of crisis intervention:

- a) immediate intervention – urgent provision of assistance immediately after the crisis situation arises,
- b) minimisation of threat – providing emotional support and a sense of security to the affected individual,
- c) focus on the current situation – primary focus of the intervention on the present state and a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing crisis,
- d) time limitation – regular implementation at least once a week with a recommended range of six to ten meetings,
- e) intensity of contact – frequency of meetings appropriate to the severity of the situation, from daily contact to weekly intervals,
- f) structured, active and, if necessary, directive approach of the intervener,
- g) individualised approach – respect for the subjective nature of the crisis experience and the variability of individuals' responses to identical stimuli.

Anyalaiová and Lednická et al. (2023) distinguish four phases of crisis intervention, which correspond to foreign models (Bellis et al., 2019; Szymanska, 2022; Center for Mental Health Ontario, 2024):

1. Prevention – creating and maintaining a safe and respectful school environment, systematic prevention of social and pathological phenomena, promoting the mental health of pupils, teaching and professional staff, implementing the principles of non-violent communication, continuous training of staff in crisis intervention, development and practical application of a crisis plan, as well as early detection of reactions to severe stress. Recommendations from the National PTA (Parents-Teachers Association) include, for example: open dialogue with children about their attitudes and feelings, clear formulation of rules and boundaries, recognition of warning signs of psychological stress, active intervention by parents in the event of inappropriate behaviour in the school environment, systematic communication between parents and teachers, and participation in violence prevention programmes in schools. Empirical findings show that with the active participation of all stakeholders, the incidence of violent behaviour in school communities can be reduced by up to 30%.

2. Preparation – a phase involving the mobilisation of the school's internal resources in the event of an impending or emerging crisis, clear definition of competences, tasks and

a timetable for activities, coordination of procedures with security and support authorities, and assignment of a specific employee to manage and organise the crisis intervention, including leading the crisis intervention team.

3. Intervention – the intervention phase is usually carried out within 48 to 72 hours after the crisis event, when pupils and teaching staff return to the school environment. In school conditions, crisis intervention is not usually carried out directly at the scene of the event or immediately during its course, but only after the situation has been partially stabilised and its safety aspects have been assessed.

At this stage, professional staff assess the extent and nature of the impact of the event on the school, the school community, individual pupils, and their legal guardians, and then mobilise internal and external support resources. Key intervention steps include:

- providing relevant information and consultations to all components of the school system,
- counselling and support activities for teaching and professional staff, as well as for pupils,
- stabilising the emotional and psychosocial state of individuals and groups,
- accompanying and supporting parents,
- implementation of specialised intervention methods (e.g. Critical Incident Stress Management – CISM, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing – EMDR),
- creation of a safe and quiet space (“quiet room”) equipped with means to promote emotional relaxation (e.g. soft toys, handkerchiefs, art supplies),
- managing chaos through the concepts of “circles of vulnerability and support”,
- ensuring long-term care not only for those directly affected, but also for professional staff,
- planning follow-up support strategies.

The Slovak Crisis Centre (2023) recommends systematically assessing the severity of a psychological crisis during crisis intervention through the following steps:

- Assessment of symptoms – identification of manifestations such as anxiety, depression, or other psychological difficulties,

- Assessment of the frequency, duration, and intensity of symptoms,
- Evaluation of coping skills – analysis of how effectively the person can deal with the situation,
- Confrontation with the possible consequences of an unresolved crisis – e.g. deterioration of mental or physical health, increased risk of suicidal behaviour, or disruption of interpersonal relationships.
- It should be emphasised that assessing the severity of a crisis is a subjective process that is influenced by individual characteristics and circumstances. If a serious psychological crisis is suspected, it is essential to seek professional psychiatric help.

4. Postvention – the post-crisis phase represents a continuum of care after the end of direct crisis intervention and is essential for the restoration of mental stability and adaptation of those affected. The school support team (SST) monitors the experiences and adaptation mechanisms of children, pupils, and adults in the school environment for at least six months after the event.

Post-crisis activities aim to restore a sense of security and create space for the natural processing of grief. Various approaches are used during this phase, such as symbolic rituals, commemorating the anniversary of the event, expressive forms of emotional expression, visiting the affected family in the case of bereavement intervention, maintaining the normal school routine, and providing bereavement counselling.

In the context of postvention, it is crucial to be aware that, for example, after the suicide of a member of the school community, there may be an increased risk of further suicidal behaviour for up to two years. This requires the implementation of targeted and well-thought-out postvention strategies that reflect the specific characteristics and needs of the school in question. Effective postvention requires close cooperation between the school, parents and caregivers, community mental health centres, and other professional and social institutions.

Discussion

Prevention and intervention in the school environment are an integral part of the school's response to risky behaviour among pupils, and their importance is particularly evident in the issue of bullying and its potentially fatal consequences, including suicide risk. The Slovak context is gradually approaching international standards through the introduction

of school support teams (SST), which bring together psychologists, special and social educators, speech therapists, and career counsellors. The multidisciplinary nature of SST enables not only systematic prevention but also targeted intervention and follow-up (Križo & Krnáčová, 2020; Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023). Its activities go beyond direct work with pupils and also integrate support for teachers, parents, and school management, creating a systemic support system in line with the principles of inclusive education (Štefániková & Lojová, 2021).

The importance of the SST can be seen in a continuous context, as its functions correspond to all phases of crisis intervention – from prevention, through preparation and intervention, to postvention. From a prevention perspective, the early identification of risk factors and the strengthening of protective mechanisms in pupils are of fundamental importance (Reschová & Polášková, 2019). International research confirms that systematic prevention programmes based on the development of social and emotional competencies and targeted work with the classroom climate can reduce the incidence of bullying by 20 to 30 per cent (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Olweus, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011). In the Slovak environment, methodologically refined programmes such as morning circles and artephiletics, which promote trust and open communication, have proven effective (Miková, 2018).

In the event of an acute crisis, intervention is carried out according to clearly defined principles, which include speed, structure, and an individualised approach (Špatenková, 2011). In the Slovak context, these principles are also reflected in the recommendations of the Slovak Help Centre (2023), which emphasise a combination of professional intervention techniques (CISM, EMDR) and the provision of psychological support in a safe school environment.

Postvention, which is often marginalised, is essential for the long-term stabilisation of the school environment. Empirical studies confirm that the absence of follow-up care can lead to a recurrence of risky behaviour or an increased risk of suicidality (Kalafat & Elias, 1994; Center for Mental Health Ontario, 2024). Therefore, Anyalaiová & Lednická et al. (2023) recommend systematic monitoring of the adaptation processes of affected pupils and teaching staff for at least six months after a crisis event.

Special attention should be paid to the link between bullying and suicidal behaviour. Several international studies (Holt et al., 2015; Arseneault, 2018) confirm that long-term victimisation significantly increases the risk of developing depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts. School prevention and intervention programmes must therefore explicitly include a suicide risk management strategy, including screening mechanisms, procedures, and close cooperation with health and community services (Anyalaiová & Lednická et al., 2023).

The legislative framework in Slovakia provides professional staff with clearly defined competences through Act No. 138/2019 Z. z. and Act No. 318/2019 Z. z., which form the

basis for the systematic work of the SST. However, the implementation of these measures faces challenges related to staff availability, material resources, and the need for continuous supervision and further training of professional staff.

From the perspective of prevention and intervention in risky behaviour in schools, including bullying and its most serious consequences, the application of evidence-based, long-term, interdisciplinary approaches that are part of everyday school practice and linked to the community and healthcare systems is necessary. The above is the only way to ensure not only a reduction in the incidence of bullying, but also the protection of pupils' mental health and the prevention of suicide.

Conclusion

An analysis of prevention and intervention in schools showed that they play a key role in promoting mental health, developing social skills, and protecting pupils from risky behaviour and crisis situations. The results of the study confirm that effective prevention and intervention require a systematic, coordinated, and interdisciplinary approach that combines the professional competencies of the school support team, teachers, parents, and external professional institutions.

Slovak practice is gradually approaching international standards, in particular through the establishment of school support teams and the implementation of methodological procedures for crisis intervention. At the same time, however, challenges remain in relation to the uneven availability of these services, the need for continuous professional development of specialist staff, and the provision of adequate human and material resources.

The future direction of prevention and intervention in schools should be based on a combination of proven foreign models and domestic legislative and institutional specificities. Emphasis should be placed on:

- systematic collection and evaluation of data on the effectiveness of preventive and intervention measures,
- introducing innovative approaches that reflect the changing needs of children and young people,
- strengthening cooperation between schools, families and community resources,
- promoting mental health as a key component of the educational process.

A comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention in schools has the potential not only to mitigate the impact of crisis situations but also to contribute to building resilient and supportive school communities in the long term. Only systematic, professionally informed and sustainable action can ensure that schools can respond to the challenges of today while creating an environment in which every child can develop safely and harmoniously.

Affiliation to the project: The contribution is the output of the KEGA project No. 021UMB-4/2025 entitled Prophylactic aspects of bullying in educational practice.

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