

# Preventive work with children and families in Finland and Russia: needs and challenges

## Preliminary results of the sociological study in Leningrad Oblast, Russia

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### Background

At the present time supporting family is one of the key issues of social policy in Russia. The government connects with the development of the institution of families the decision of many actual social problems, including demographic ones. The contemporary family policy is characterized by dynamism and the government takes measures on increased well-being of family and social service infrastructure for families with children. A state program for the stimulation of births is accepted. The regional programs of social support of families with children, improvement of conditions for children health, development and successful socialization are realized at a local level.

A necessary component of the evaluation of the efficiency of the undertaken arrangements is the analysis of independent information from the population by getting a feedback. It allows to trace the influence of policy on the everyday life of people. The knowledge and the account of actual needs of various types of the families, parents and children should be taken as the basis of development of family policy at local level.

In 2007-2008 St. Petersburg State University, The International Center of Social Service Studies with co-operation of the University of Helsinki realize the project “EMPATHOS RUSSIA – Preventive Work with Children and Families in the Russian and Finnish Border Region” in Leningrad Oblast.

Leningrad Oblast is a federal subject of Russia (i.e. oblast). It was established on August 1st, 1927, although it was not until 1945 that the oblast’s borders had been mostly settled in their present position. The oblast was named after the city of Leningrad. The administrative center of the oblast is Saint Petersburg, although it constitutes a separate federal subject (a federal city) and is administratively separate from the oblast. Leningrad Oblast is bordered by Finland in the northwest, Estonia in the west, as well as five federal subjects of Russia. The oblast has an area of 84,500 km<sup>2</sup> and a population 1,669,205 (as of the 2002 Census). Leningrad Oblast is one of the most dynamically developing regions of Russia. The contemporary demographic situation in the region determinates the main direction of social work with children and families.

The research aim of the project is to indicate direction and resources of primary preventive work with children and families that are characterized by many important advantages such as:

- broad coverage of the population,
- system impact on the quality of families’ lives,
- limited intervention in private life,
- higher probability of providing conditions for children’s well-being,
- using the resources of families.

In the framework of the project a sociological study was conducted, and data about situation of families with children and level and directions of social work with these client groups in the Russian border region were collected and analyzed.

### Methods

The study was conducted in three main border towns of Leningrad Oblast (Vyborg, Priozersk, Svetogorsk). There were 3 research stages including different methods of collected data.

1. Expert – Interviews to analyze the problem and perspectives of preventive social work (11 experts)
2. Surveying of social workers and clients (children and parents) concerning needs and demands in preventive social work (questioning of parents (122 respondents), questioning of social service specialists (69 respondents), questioning of adolescents (90 respondents))
3. Conducting focus groups with clients (parents) for evaluation of resources for realization of innovative models (65 participants)

In total 357 respondents took part in the research.

In this article we would like to present the preliminary results of the interviews and surveys.

## **Results**

In the centre of attention of social services are now families, who are not capable to solve problems without external help. Children in such families are in socially dangerous situations. Intensive efforts of social services workers and other specialists are required to improve the situation of the families and to protect the children's rights. Despite of strong efforts of social workers, the situation does not change radically. Official statistical data show that tens of thousands of children and adolescents are escaping from the families annually.

Social services put insufficient attention to primary prevention, first of all they have to much work with families, which are already in difficult situations. But the importance of primary preventive social work is realized by both experts and social workers who were taking part in the survey.

### ***The main characteristics of families***

The results of questioning the parents (122 respondents) show a very high percentage of families with single parents, which in fact means with single mothers (see diagram 1).

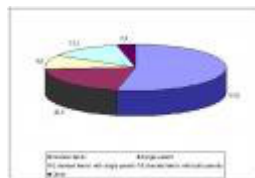


Diagram 1: Typology of families in %

### ***Financial circumstances of families***

- “We have enough money, but for major purchase we have to borrow rather for a long time or buy on credit” - 55,7%
- “We have enough money only for every day needs “ - 25,4%
- “Sometimes we don’t have enough money for food and clothes” - 15,6%
- “We can manage ourselves well” - 3,3%

### ***Living conditions***

- Comfortable accommodation, but small (not enough) size - 41,0%

- Comfortable accommodation - 32,8%
- Uncomfortable accommodation (shared apartment, dormitory) or lack of accommodation - 26,2%

### ***Health conditions***

85,2 % of families have children, which are practically healthy, 9,8% – children have chronic diseases, 4,9% of families have handicapped children.

The structural characteristics of families, who were involved in the research, reflect a typical average situation of the project participants who live in towns and differ from characteristics of families who are clients of social agencies. According to data of the experts' interviewing among families in a difficult living situation and who are in the sphere of social services organizations activities 83,8% are poor families, 76,5 % are families with single parents and 63,8% are families with children with health problem.

### ***The main problems of families***

Despite the families involved in the study are considered by state social work system as socially well- being they have a lot of different problems, therefore they should be considered as targets for prevention. Accordingly of the parents survey, the typical family problems are follow:

- Too much work, not enough time for rest - 78,0
- Financial problematic circumstances - 76,2
- Health problems among adult family members - 58,2
- Conflict between adults family members on questions of upbringing - 50,0
- Too much house work - 45,1
- There is no place for family rest in town - 44,3
- Lack of support from relatives - 35,3
- Bad living conditions - 35,2
- Difficulties on upbringing children - 30,3
- Health problems of children - 28,7
- Problem behavior of children in the school - 28,7
- Poor school advancement of children - 26,2
- Lack of understanding with teachers - 24,6
- Indifference - 23,8
- Unemployment - 18,8
- Ill parents in care - 12,3
- Problems with alcohol - 8,2

According to data of survey of children, we can see their perception of their everyday life and troubles. On the question “About what do you worry most of all?” the following answers were collected:

- Health of relatives - 64,4%
- Private life - 60,0%
- Financial problems of family - 50,0%
- Relations with parents - 50,0%

- Relations with peers - 48,9%
- Difficulties of school learning - 41,1%
- How they are looked - 33,3%
- Conflicts to teachers - 30,0%
- No activities for leisure time - 24,4%
- Relations between parents - 20,0%.

A comparison of the results of the parents and children questionnaire shows, that there is a lot of differences, that means there is no effective communication between parents and children.

### ***Types of the help***

The mechanisms of blocking significant needs of the person, restriction or absence of opportunities of their satisfaction lay in the basis of the problem. Accordingly, widening these opportunities is considered as useful and desirable.

The results of survey indicate those types and forms of the social help to families which are necessary to develop in the district where they live from the respondents' point of view as well as types and forms of the social help in which the participants of research are personally interested. This data is presented in the following table.

*Kinds and forms of social help (survey participants regard it as necessary to develop / are personally interested in it)*

- Direct financial support: 81,1 / 48,4
- Help in employment: 75,4 / 26,2
- In-kind aid (food, clothes, etc): 58,2 / 16,4
- Support in an accomplishment, repair of accommodation: 63,1 / 27,9
- Support in cleaning of appartments: 32,8 / 4,1
- Increase of pedagogical and psychological competence of parents: 77,9 / 26,2
- Development of mutual support between families: 54,9 / 13,1
- Legal aid : 68,0 / 30,3
- Psychological help to children and parents: 82,9 / 31,3
- Programs of preparation to be parents for young families: 79,5 / 14,8
- Empathy and understanding of social services organizations' specialists: 58,2 / 16,4
- Developing charity, sponsoring: 66,4 / 14,8
- Drug and alcohol preventive programs for children: 87,7 / 30,3
- Organization of family leisure time (parents with children): 78,7 / 35,2
- Organization of leisure time for parents: 52,5 / 12,3
- Baby sitting in out-of-school time: 56,5 / 25,4
- Home care of ill members of family: 45,1 / 8,2
- Accessible hobby groups for children: 86,1 / 54,1
- Accessible literature about up-bringing, rights' protection, health: 60,7 / 28,7

“Accessible hobby groups for children” is the most interesting point for parents. In the questionnaire was the question: “What are children would like to go in for, but it is impossible for any reasons?”.

The most frequently answers were:

- sports – 29,5%
- computer – 13,1%
- dances – 13,1%
- music – 11,5%
- learning foreign languages – 11,5% and also drawing, theatre, driving, embroidery.

As concerning the reasons, why it is impossible:

- absence in the town – 16,4%
- no money – 22,9%
- no time – 13,1%.

According to the children's answers, 42,3% of them visit sport and hobby groups not less often than once a week, 31,1% are not interested in it. Children take interest in meeting with psychologists (54,5%) and 73,3 % of children think, that a helpline is necessary in the town.

### ***Pedagogical competence of the parents***

All participants evaluate the different needs connected with pedagogical competence in general much higher than personal needs.

For example 77,9 % of parents participated in the study believe that it was necessary to increase the pedagogical and psychological competence level of parents, and only 26.2 % think that they themselves have such kind of need.

- Need of accessible literature on questions of education, protection of rights, health in general supported 60,7% of respondents and personally 28,7% correspondingly
- getting legal assistance – 68,0% and 30,3% correspondingly
- psychological help to themselves and children 82,8% and 31,3% correspondingly

A personal interest in training programs for teenagers to protect them from drugs and alcohol abuse have 30,3 % of the respondents. But 87,7 % would like to have such programs in town. Also programs of preparation for being parents for young families have got wide support with 79,5%, though personally interest is rather low: 14,8% (perhaps parents think that it is already late for them, and still early for their children).

Parents' interest in psychological consultations, lectures, trainings, conversations about education was showed while answering the open question on measures which would be useful to improvement of work with families. 26 (29,9%) parents from 87 persons have written suggestions which are related to these forms of work.

Nowadays there are a lot of publications on questions of education. Educated and "advanced" parents turn to it and know how to communicate with children correctly, but in fact they could be inconsistent. Parents try to react not aggressively in case of children's faults (60,4% from the general number of parents' reaction on a child's fault, marked by them in questionnaires, have no aggressive character), but only 24,4% consider that physical punishments are inadmissible, and 75,6 % of parents tolerate corporal punishments in various situations, for instance, «when the child behaves disrespectfully, rude» (32,6%). The application of corporal punishment by parents testifies their feebleness in questions of upbringing and limited methods of influence on the child.

Participation of parents in education programs is the important and accessible tool to increase their social competence. The larger part of the interrogated parents would like to receive knowledge from literature on education, from experts at lectures, or «discussing and

exchanging experience with other parents», and only 34,4% consider, that «know how to bring up the child» or «do not think of these questions».

### ***Satisfaction with city infrastructure***

Life of families depends in many respects on features of the district in which the family lives, on whether the environment is convenient and comfortable or not. This concerns especially families with children who have limited mobility and who “are adhered” to certain socialization institutes, use local establishments etc. The quality of the social environment influences whether it is difficult or not for parents to grow children, to carry out the parental duties and functions. This level of preventive work is pretty much in the competence of local authorities, and the satisfaction / dissatisfaction of the population is the important indicator of social policy’s success at a local level.

The analysis of opinions on the condition of the city environment objects shows, that there are significant territorial distinctions.

Respondents have expressed “dissatisfaction” towards

- Public health services – 82,8%
- School – 37.7%
- Cleanliness of streets and yards – 56.6%
- Children’s playgrounds – 57.4%
- Teenage clubs and hobby groups – 50.8%
- Stadiums, sports grounds – 52.1%
- Kindergarten – 34.4%
- Social services – 31.1%
- Transport – 38.5%
- Police – 52.5%
- Libraries – 18.0%
- Shops – 29.5%
- Recreation centers – 34.4%
- Cinemas – 29.7%
- Cafe – 27.7%

The results show that a significant number of participants are not satisfied with the conditions of the local infrastructure. Though the sample size on the different areas is not sufficient to consider the results as common, nevertheless, the high level of similarity in the opinions on certain points is a signal that it is necessary to understand the reasons of the existing situation. Participants of the questionnaire marked what exactly does not satisfy them. Thus the dissatisfaction with health services is caused by the following reasons:

- «Bad equipment» – 43.6%;
- «Malevolence of staff» – 25.7%;
- «Incompetence of staff» – 25.7%;
- «Limited services» – 23.8%;
- «High price of services» – 21.8%;
- «Far from home» – 10.9%;
- «Inconvenient work time» – 5.9%.

### *Social services activities*

Social work represents a field of activities characterized by the diversity problems to be solved, directions and methods of work, functions, criteria of estimation of efficiency etc. The data of this research show as well that social work with families and children is carried out on many directions and constantly extends due to the development of new directions and the introduction of new methods. The research with the experts' answers a question «what functions are important in your work now?» testifies to multifunctionality. The following functions have been estimated as “extremely important”, (and as “rather important”)

- Rehabilitation – 75,0% (25.0%)
- Preventive – 61.7% (35.3%)
- Psychological support – 61.5% (32.3%)
- Diagnostic – 46.6% (41.4%)
- Material support – 32.7% (30.9%)
- Organizational – 32.2% (61.0%)
- Educational – 28.3% (51.7%)
- Prognostic – 13.0% (37.0%)
- Empowerment – 12.5% (42.9%).

By the received data empowerment is one of the intrinsic characteristics of preventive work and is perceived by the experts as important, but nevertheless a by-product of the work with the client. Empowerment, in that measure that the person has got the ability to cope with arising problems and better: to prevent their occurrence, is represented the most difficult purpose in work with many problem families, especially with alcohol abusing family members (according to experts interviews each second or third family with which social agencies deal with have alcohol abusing members). It once again confirms the value of primary prevention which helps to develop resources of the family to prevent the occurrence of problems or helps to cope with them more effectively.

The analysis of the methods used by experts in the work with parents and children shows that the most useful methods for formation/intensification of the adaptable potential of a person, increasing his/her activity, independence, responsibility are used not enough.

In the «minority of cases» or “never” used are the following methods in the work with parents:

- Trainings – 60.4%;
- Network therapy – 72.1%;
- Club work with family – 60.0%;
- Organization of mutual help groups – 65.9%;
- Group therapy – 56.3%;
- Education – 40.4%.

In the work with children:

- Trainings – 45.5% of answers;
- Network therapy – 65.0%;
- Club work with family – 59.1%.

Specialists understand quite exactly what problems and needs are typical for the population and what directions of help are more claimed.

As to the majority of points we can observe the similarity of opinions expressed by the specialists who work in different towns, but some types of help are estimated in different ways. So, the valuation of the necessity of help in employment assistance is higher in Priozersk (82,2% of responses of specialists), the valuation of the necessity of help with products and goods is higher in Vyborg (70,4%). But in Vyborg there is a lower value of the improvement and repairing of housing (25,9%) and of training programs for parenthood (59,3%)

### ***Resources for the preventive work with children and families***

According to the specialists the basic resources are infrastructure of government agencies, financing, professional training, activity of population, public organizations, mutual help of families, help of deputy, mass media. The above listed resources were estimated by the specialists with respect to their importance and sufficiency. The comparison of the received valuations shows that there is an imbalance between the importance of all types of resources and their sufficiency. The lack of financing is felt as the most sharp one: the majority evaluate it as an extremely important resource (81, 2%) and only 13 % as enough developed. The level of professional qualifications is extremely important for 87,0% and only about one-third of interviewees consider it as sufficient. In the opinion of the social workers the development of infrastructure falls behind. 58, 0% of the specialists think that it is extremely important and only 24,6 % evaluate it as enough developed.

Financing and professional qualifications as resources have an universal character and refer to social work in common. Their deficit, especially a lack of finances, is felt in the work of social services and makes difficult to provide help for families. The development of activities in the direction of social services and active work of primary prevention has probably to be done mainly in the case of the increase of financing. It seems, local authorities when they define the priorities and articles of expenditure, have to draw attention on the primary prevention of families' ill-being on their territory.

### ***Main problems of specialists in the work***

In this part the main goal is to know the main problems of specialists in their work, what they would like to change in the organization of work. The responses on these questions can give an overview on the situation with internal resources of social services, extract the main factors which have negative influence on their activity.

According to the questioning following distribution is received:

- low wages - 82,1%
- financial domestic problems - 44,8%
- big work stress - 40,3%
- lack of professional knowledge - 28,4%
- transportation problem - 23,9%
- lack of mobile communication - 7,5%
- lack of recognition by colleagues - 6,0%

Among other problems were called: uncomfortable working hours, lack of qualified staff, incomplete software, no access to professional improvement and literature, absence of possibilities for career development, no possibility to use rationally finances for the institution, lack of exchange of experience and cooperation between same institutions, no wages for the specialists.

On the opinion of 27,7 % of specialists, some juridical difficulties for efficient work exist on federal and regional levels.



What could make the work more effective? Below we put suggestions of the specialists (as the specialists wrote them in the questionnaire):

- decrease responsibilities, because a lot of tasks are imposed on one specialist or to increase number of specialists who work with families;
- increase a number of specialists who work directly with children (psychologists, culture workers etc.);
- raise salaries, because there is a direct disparity of the charge and salary of social worker;
- involve public organizations for rendering assistance to concrete families;
- involve parents in the problems of their children, more active participation of parents in the life of their children;
- increase the financial support for the organization of leisure activities for children;
- increase the time of rehabilitation for children and work with families;
- enhance the duration of the psycho-pedagogical rehabilitation of children with disabilities and invalids, because 3 months per year are not sufficient;
- get more power for the organization of the work of institutions;
- create a flexible system of trainings for social workers and specialists of work with families who live in small towns and in the countryside.

Among the specialists enough pessimistic minds exist: “we would like to change a lot, but what we really want to change, is not in our competence”.

The biggest part of propositions of social workers is about the material encouragement, the optimization of the time sheet, the reduction of the level of bureaucratization, trainings of personnel and the attraction of new specialists, who work directly with families.

### ***Professional education of staff***

The lack of staff who is completely prepared for the social work, whatever direction we talk about, has evident explanations which are connected with the “youth” of the institution of social work in Russia. Social services were opening, but there were not graduated specialists of social work. That is why the formation of practical social work is realized by specialists-scholars from different fields, who need additional and more specific knowledge. The best part of staff of social work (according to the data of our previous studies in Saint-Petersburg more than 25%) consists of workers with technical education, who came in social work as a result of changes on the employment market. Data of the present research show the following distribution of specialists according to the factor of education.

- 55,1% have an education for the work with families and children including: high pedagogical -18,8%, high psychological – 5,7%, specialized secondary education in pedagogy – 8,6%, specialized secondary education in psychology – 1,4%, courses of social work with family and children – 11,3%, and any information about level of education – 9,3%.
- 28,8% of specialists have passed the further education programs on social work.
- 44,9% of respondents don't have any education for the social work with family and children and did not pass any trainings.

Own practical experience as a source of knowledge has great significance, but it is more solid, when specialists rely on a fundamental basis. But the comprehension of the necessity of professional knowledge is caused by the fact that many specialists improve their qualifications themselves – 82,0% (do not improve – 7,2%, difficult to answer – 10,2%).

Moreover, 80,3% receive their information from books by profession, 12,1% from magazines by profession, 6,1% during the discussions with colleagues, 1,5% from journals, radio and TV and nobody uses Internet.

So, the availability of special literature is especially important. On the question, if there is any library or methodical cabinet in the organization, where it is possible to take actual literature, to have access to the Internet, 53,8% answer positive, 9,2% answer negative and that they do not need any additional professional information and further 36,9% tell that they do not have it, but would need it.

The development of staff is considered as a key-task in modern management, the permanent education allows to have resources which are necessary for qualitative work. That is why the improvement of qualification has to have a regular character and has to be based on the analysis of needs of specialists in some knowledge.

It is well-known that the professional development of staff is not only a necessary condition for effective work, but it is also an important motivational factor, which strengthens the interest and adherence towards work even in the case when the salary is not sufficient.

At the present time 75,0% of interviewee specialists are going to continue to be occupied in social work, 22,1% have difficulties with that answer and 2,9% (1 person) want to change the work.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the study demonstrate that the families who are socially adaptive also have a lot of different problems which could lead to difficult situations in the future. Social service organizations, governmental as well as non-governmental, should pay attention on different types of families and primary prevention should develop as much as possible.

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