



Children At Risk: Definition, Types, And Mechanisms of Social Protection

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Abstract

In modern society, the social protection of vulnerable children has emerged as a major priority, particularly in countries undergoing rapid socio-political and economic transformations such as Uzbekistan. Following independence, Uzbekistan adopted several legal frameworks to support children's rights and promote mechanisms to ensure their safety, education, and well-being. Despite legislative progress, there remains insufficient clarity and coordination in the identification, classification, and support mechanisms for children at risk, particularly concerning psychological and developmental needs. This study aims to define the concept of children at risk, classify the types of risks they face, analyze their psychological characteristics, and assess mechanisms of social protection and support from pedagogical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. The findings show that children at risk often face cognitive, behavioral, and emotional challenges due to factors such as parental neglect, institutional upbringing, poverty, or exposure to criminal environments. These children demonstrate significant delays in speech, learning abilities, and emotional development. Social pedagogues, psychologists, and educators must work collaboratively to provide targeted, individualized support. The research offers a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis by combining national legal frameworks with psychological, pedagogical, and sociological assessments. It systematically outlines the stages of development for at-risk children and correlates their needs with specific support mechanisms. Effective intervention requires the joint efforts of educators, healthcare providers, social services, and community organizations. A differentiated and systemic approach will enhance the social integration, self-esteem, and development of at-risk children, ensuring their inclusion in broader societal progress.

Keywords: risk group, children at risk, family, children, adolescents, adolescents, preschool age, school age.

Introduction

The issue of protecting children at risk has become an urgent task in many countries undergoing socio-economic transformations, including Uzbekistan[1]. After gaining independence, Uzbekistan implemented a number of important laws aimed at guaranteeing the rights, freedoms, and social protection of children and youth. These legislative frameworks—such as the Law “On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child,” the Law “On the Prevention of Child Neglect and Juvenile Delinquency,” and the Law “On State Youth Policy” —establish institutional and legal mechanisms to support vulnerable groups[2]. Despite these developments, the concept of “children at risk” remains underdefined, with insufficient consensus among educators, psychologists, and social

workers on the categorization, psychological characteristics, and required support mechanisms for this group[3]. Children at risk are typically more vulnerable to negative social influences due to adverse life circumstances such as parental neglect, abuse, institutional upbringing, or poverty[4]. They often experience delays in speech, cognitive development, and emotional regulation, leading to challenges in education and socialization. A comprehensive understanding of childhood from sociological, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives is essential for effectively addressing the needs of at-risk children. These children require multidisciplinary support involving psychologists, social pedagogues, defectologists, and speech therapists[5]. Within this context, the need for a systemic, integrated approach that unites legal, institutional, and professional frameworks is crucial. The goal is not only to mitigate risks but also to promote healthy development, self-esteem, and successful integration into society for children identified as vulnerable, ensuring their rights and opportunities are fully realized[6].

Materials and Methods

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology rooted in pedagogy, psychology, and sociology to investigate the definition, classification, and support mechanisms for children at risk in Uzbekistan. The research relies on general scientific principles such as systematicity, historicity, and interconnection[7]. It employs qualitative methods including content analysis and hermeneutic analysis of national legal documents and scholarly literature to construct a conceptual framework for understanding at-risk children. Observational analysis is used to examine behavioral and developmental traits of children from institutional settings, while comparative approaches analyze the psychological development of at-risk children versus those raised in family environments. The study classifies the risk factors—such as parental neglect, antisocial behavior, abuse, and institutionalization—and correlates them with psychological consequences including cognitive delays, emotional disturbances, and maladaptive social behaviors. The research also assesses the roles of specialists such as psychologists, defectologists, social pedagogues, and speech therapists in providing targeted interventions[8]. This multifaceted approach ensures a holistic understanding of the social and developmental challenges faced by at-risk children and allows the formulation of comprehensive support mechanisms based on real-world observations and expert input[9].

Results

After gaining independence, our country adopted a number of laws to support children and ensure their rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests. These include: the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated January 7, 2008, “On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child”; the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated September 29, 2010, “On the Prevention of Child Neglect and Juvenile Delinquency”; the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated September 23, 2020, “On Education”; and the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated September 14, 2016, “On the State Youth Policy”[10].

The main goal of the state youth policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan is to implement a system of socio-economic, political, organizational, and legal measures aimed at supporting and providing social protection for children and youth, as well as fostering their civic and professional development and promoting social activity.

The implementation of all the aforementioned laws requires the cooperation of all relevant organizations involved in the social adaptation of children in need of social protection. Cooperation among these institutions—including educational institutions, government agencies, mahallas

(community organizations), and families—helps prevent existing problems. Identifying disadvantaged families and at-risk children in their places of residence, organizing educational work among them, ensuring meaningful leisure time for children, and increasing the effectiveness of activities to keep them occupied have a practical impact on improving outcomes[11].

Within this system, children and youth hold a special place, representing the most educated, mobile, and socially active segment of the younger generation[12].

The term "children at risk" is commonly utilised in teaching and psychology nowadays. At-risk children are individuals who, due to certain life circumstances, are more vulnerable than other youngsters to adverse societal influences and criminal elements, perhaps resulting in deviant behaviour. To effectively tackle the challenges of delivering psychological and social help to children and adolescents, it is crucial to comprehend this demographic and their psychological traits[13].

"Childhood" is considered the initial stage of development as a person, where the interaction of social and biological factors is balanced throughout the life path[14]. Childhood is determined by an "age" indicator and is characterized by the following interrelated elements: normative age criteria; age-related stereotypes; the symbolism of the process of youth, various rituals associated with age, and age subculture. Children are considered objects of care[15].

"Childhood" is not considered an independent object of study. The term "child" is used for statistical purposes (marriage, divorce, birth, death, average life expectancy, age structure, etc.), to study the reproductive functions of the family, and to analyze the status of women in society. From an economic perspective, "childhood" is not an independent object of study; rather, it is taken into account when measuring household living standards, per capita income, child allowances, the production of goods for children, and additional mechanisms for stimulating childbirth.

From a sociological perspective, children are considered an independent social and demographic component of the social structure of society. The "world of childhood" is "...an autonomous socio-cultural life with its own language, structure, functions, and even customs, constituting a unique subculture". The "field of childhood" is defined as "a space of continuous physical growth, development of mental and social norms, the child's process of determining their fate in society, and a place for the emotional development of children and adolescents".

From a psychological perspective, "childhood" is a complex, independent organism and an integral part of society – the initial stage of human development and the formation of a person as an individual. The main priority is to define the period of childhood, develop the child's cognitive abilities, and foster their relationships with the world around them.

Methodologically, the concept of the at-risk group and the children belonging to it have been substantiated and analyzed based on surveys using general principles of interconnection, historicity, systematicity, as well as methods such as content analysis and hermeneutic analysis.

At-risk children are those who, due to certain life circumstances, are more susceptible than other groups to the negative external influences of society and its criminal elements, leading to their deviant behavior.

The term "at-risk children" encompasses the following categories: • Children exhibiting developmental issues lacking clear clinical or pathological traits; • Children deprived of parental care due to diverse circumstances.

To offer psychological, social, and pedagogical aid to children and adolescents, it is essential to possess a comprehensive awareness of this demographic and their psychological traits.

The primary factors contributing to children being classified as at-risk are the following life circumstances:

- One or both parents exhibit alcohol dependency;
- One or both parents partake in antisocial conduct (e.g., parasitism, begging, theft, prostitution);
- Parents facilitate criminal and antisocial assemblies (such as brothels) within their residences;
- Parents engage in the sexual exploitation or trafficking of their own offspring;
- One parent's associates or others perpetrate homicide against the other parent in the presence of the children;
- One parent is incarcerated;
- One parent is receiving treatment for alcoholism or mental health disorders;
- Child maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse, severe injuries, starvation);
- Neglect of young children;
- Leaving children unattended without sustenance;
- Absence of shelter or stable housing, or residing in precarious or transient accommodations with parents;
- Running away from home, experiencing conflicts with peers, etc.

Children in this cohort exhibit substantial discrepancies in their behaviour and personal development. They possess a common attribute: broadly defined, a disruption in socialisation. This encompasses inadequate hygiene skills, inappropriate table manners, difficulty acclimating to novel environments and conditions, hypersexuality, disordered sexual orientation, theft, deceit, devaluation of human life, cruelty, aggression, apathy, work evasion, lethargy, absence of value orientation, lack of socially accepted moral standards and ethics, deficiency in spirituality, disinterest in knowledge, and detrimental habits (alcoholism, drug use, smoking, substance abuse, profanity, etc.).

Psychological Traits of "At-Risk Youth" In both local and Western psychological research, the comparative characteristics of "at-risk children" have been analyzed.

According to I.V. Dubrovina, Ye.A. Minkova, M.K. Bardyshevskaya, and other researchers, the overall physical and mental development of children raised without parental care differs from the development of their peers growing up in families. These children exhibit slower mental development and a number of negative traits, including: low levels of intellectual development, poor emotional sphere and imagination, delayed formation of self-regulation skills, and inappropriate behavior.

Children raised in institutions providing social-psychological and pedagogical support experience significant maladjustment, which is exacerbated by harmful factors such as removal from their family and placement in various institutions (e.g., hospitals, reception-distribution centers, temporary shelters, sanatoriums, and others).

Early childhood and preschool age. Preschool-aged children in social-psychological and pedagogical support facilities exhibit diminished cognitive activity, delayed speech development, intellectual disabilities, insufficient communication skills, and interpersonal conflicts with peers.

N.N. Avdeeva's research indicates that youngsters from orphanages recognise themselves in mirrors significantly later, exhibiting fear of their reflections and subsequently crying. The emergence of self-awareness in children reared outside familial environments is presumed to occur somewhat later than in those nurtured within families. T.P. Gavrilova asserts that the three-year crisis in these youngsters manifests in a subdued and postponed manner. The sensation of achievement, a crucial part of personal development for preschoolers, is inadequately developed in these youngsters.

Children reared outside the familial environment have a lack of interest in adult assessments, <https://sociometrics.us/index.php/ISMA>

frequently encounter failures in many activities, require positive reinforcement, and struggle to differentiate between successful and failed actions or between authorised and disapproved behaviours.

Discussion

A deficiency of adult attention throughout early infancy results in inadequacies in social development: Children exhibit a lack of communication and engagement with adults and classmates, leading to challenges in cooperation. This leads to delays in speech acquisition, less autonomy, and interruptions in personal growth.

The cognitive development of children reared outside the familial environment is marked by inconsistency, chaos, and imbalanced cognitive processes. Visual-figurative cognition continues to prevail. Simultaneously, verbal cognition may attain age-appropriate levels; however, nonverbal cognition significantly lags, since it evolves through play, informal interaction, and unstructured collaborative activities with adults and peers.

Consequently, preschool-aged children raised without parents differ from their counterparts from intact households in that they demonstrate diminished cognitive engagement, delays in linguistic development, intellectual disabilities, inadequate communication abilities, and interpersonal conflicts with peers. Primary school age.

At primary school age, children at risk experience delays in developing thinking skills, difficulties with self-regulation, and struggle to manage their behavior, which affects their ability to assimilate educational material. They often show a trend of not attending school regularly and have a tendency towards lower levels of intellectual development. These characteristics of children from orphanages lead to delays in acquiring learning skills and abilities, and result in lower quality of education.

Research conducted by M. Parishioner and Kh.N. Tolstykh indicates that 7- to 8-year-old children transitioning from orphanages to school lack proficiency in engaging in narrative role-playing games, rule-based games, or dramatisations derived from their preferred literature, cartoons, or television programs. They lack the games that provide delight and excitement to their contemporaries. At most, they possess access to basic manipulating games characteristic of younger children. The absence of such games at this age indicates squandered chances.

Adolescents. At-risk adolescents are characterized by difficulties in relationships with people around them, superficial emotions, dependence, the habit of living according to the orders of others, disorders in self-awareness, and an increase in difficulties with assimilating educational material. They also exhibit incidents of rude or antisocial behavior (neglect, theft, various forms of delinquent behavior). In relationships with adults, they experience feelings of worthlessness, loss of self-esteem, and a diminished sense of the value of others.

According to A.L. Likharnikov, adolescents deprived of parental care hold ideas about a "happy person" and "happiness" that differ significantly from those of children from ordinary families. The most common answers from at-risk adolescents regarding the main indicators of happiness include: food, sweets (lots of cakes), toys, gifts, and clothes. Such "material" characteristics show that even at the age of fifteen, toys are considered a necessary attribute of happiness. Among adolescents lacking parental care, 43% exhibit only minimal indicators of happiness, suggesting a "I am unhappy" stance; conversely, just 17% of adolescents from typical households provide comparable responses.

The education and upbringing of "at-risk children" must be carried out comprehensively to be effective. This involves specialists such as a psychoneurologist, defectologist, psychologist,

speech therapist, and social pedagogue. These children also require medication therapy administered by a psychologist.

The primary role of the psychologist is to optimize the communication of “at-risk children” with their peers and adults, to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence, to help them set goals, and to enhance their self-regulation abilities.

Since “at-risk children” have cognitive impairments, the defectologist’s work focuses on developing processes such as attention, memory, imaginative and logical thinking, as well as spatial perception and orientation in these children.

The social pedagogue plays a significant role when working with “at-risk children.” Together with a practical psychologist, the social pedagogue studies the children’s medical-psychological condition, age, personal characteristics, abilities, interests, attitude towards school, academic performance, behavior, and social environment. They identify positive and negative influences within the child’s personality. For the social pedagogue, it is important to know the material and housing conditions of the wards and to regularly analyze specific life conflicts in order to help the children and teachers find proper solutions and ways out of uncomfortable situations. The social pedagogue should provide the necessary support to the children and maintain interaction with various social services.

Conclusion

The study highlights the multifaceted nature of children at risk, emphasizing the urgent need for a differentiated and interdisciplinary approach to their social protection and development. It establishes that children in this group, often shaped by adverse familial, social, or psychological conditions, experience significant challenges in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains. These children, who may suffer from neglect, abuse, institutionalization, or exposure to criminal environments, demonstrate distinct psychological traits, such as delayed speech, impaired learning abilities, emotional withdrawal, and deviant behaviors. The research confirms that such vulnerabilities are deeply rooted in early experiences and can persist into adolescence if not addressed through comprehensive interventions. The conclusion stresses the vital role of collaboration among psychologists, defectologists, social pedagogues, educators, and healthcare professionals in forming a holistic support system tailored to the unique needs of each child. It advocates for systematic observation, individualized assistance, and the active involvement of families and communities to ensure continuity of care and rehabilitation. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of a legal and institutional framework that supports early identification, prevention, and intervention strategies. Overall, the findings call for an integrated model that combines educational, psychological, medical, and social efforts to reintegrate at-risk children into society as capable, confident, and socially adapted individuals. Such a model not only addresses the immediate needs of vulnerable children but also contributes to building a more inclusive and resilient society for future generations.

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