

Recommendations



Based on the data collected in the third edition of the *Children Count* report, the Empowering Children Foundation generally upholds its earlier recommendations about the directions of change needed to improve children's physical and psychological wellbeing in Poland. The external challenges of the past few years, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or the economic downturn, have directed decision-makers' attention to other areas. However, we need to remember that natural disasters, warfare or economic crises have a special impact on the youngest inhabitants of our country, including those who came to Poland seeking protection from a variety of risks in their home countries.

Again, we emphasise a need for a wide and thorough debate of all interested actors and communities, as a basis for the development of appropriate legislation that will help to implement effective measures to protect children. Below we list a number of areas which should become social policy priorities in Poland. We describe general lines of action which require the development of specific intersectoral solutions based on in-depth analyses of child protection concerns.

These include, in particular:

- 1. Implementing permanent measures to prevent child maltreatment – at both universal and selective measures.** In developing and implementing preventive activities, it is important to:
 - target them at **all groups**: children and adolescents, their parents, professionals, and the general public;
 - use the **existing institutional resources**, engaging more intensely the health care and education sectors as those that have the closest contact with children and their families;
 - implement them **at each stage of children's lives**, from patronage nurse visits targeted at parents with newborns and infants, to parenting programmes, to education for children and young people and for their parents at all stages of parenting and schooling;
 - develop **comprehensive and inclusive social skills programmes for children and adolescents**, promoting positive behaviour and preventing potential risks such as sexual abuse and exploitation, online risks, peer victimisation, family violence, risky behaviours, etc., and target those programmes at the general population of children and young people, with special attention to the needs of vulnerable groups (such as foreign children, LGBTQ youth, children and young people with disabilities);
 - devote special attention to broadly understood **child and adolescent mental health**, enhance factors protecting children's psychological wellbeing in the family, in educational and care facilities, and in the community;

- **systematically monitor situations and areas which may pose particular threats to children's safety**, including the online space, residential care and rehabilitation facilities, centres for foreigners, group accommodation settings, mass events attended by children and young people, etc.;
 - carry out **social campaigns** targeted at the general public and focused on child abuse – explaining the mechanisms and symptoms of abuse, and how to respond to and prevent it.
- 2. Taking further steps to systemically protect children from maltreatment.** In this respect, it is important to:
- create specialised **child protection services** within the social services sector (following the example of many other countries), responsible for preventing child maltreatment and coordinating child protection efforts;
 - introduce a legal obligation to implement **child safeguarding standards** in all settings attended by children, and in all institutions and organisations working for and with children. These standards should include the implementation of a child safeguarding policy (including intervention procedures), staff/recruitment checks, the development of safe interaction rules and intervention paths in cases of suspected child abuse, and staff training;
 - improve **multidisciplinary cooperation** in identifying child maltreatment and responding to such cases; in particular, it is important to increase the engagement of the healthcare sector;
 - continuously improve **skills of professionals** in various institutions and organisations, in particular among those responsible for preventing child maltreatment;
 - in all legal acts concerning children, emphasise their **full human dignity and subjectivity**, regardless of their origin, and their **right to be heard**;
 - evaluate all new legal regulations in terms of their short- and long-term **impact on children**.
- 3. Further development of child-friendly justice.** In this area, it is important to:
- introduce the protection of minor victims and witnesses under 18 in the form of a **uniform interviewing procedure**, regardless of the child's age, in Articles 185a and 185b of the Code of Criminal Procedure;
 - ensure the **full rights of minors** participating in legal procedures, e.g., through mandatory sharing of information about the child's health status with his or her legal representative, for the purpose of assessing the child's capability to be interviewed, regulating legal instruction for minors on their rights and obligations depending on the child's age, ensuring that minor victims receive full information about the course of the proceedings and their rights during the proceedings in a manner appropriate for their age, mental development, and health;
 - introduce **regular checks of the standards of interview rooms for children** and the equipment used there, instructions for creating and equipping a child-friendly interview room, and minimum technical requirements from equipment used in these rooms;
 - take action to improve the **quality of work and working conditions of court-appointed experts** in proceedings involving children, including the specialisation of experts in cases involving children, the development of lists of court-appointed experts with their specialisations marked, higher remuneration for experts, and allowing team work in the development of expert opinions;

- conduct regular activities **to improve judges, court experts, and prosecutors' skills and qualifications** related to children's participation in legal procedures.
4. **Developing assistance services for maltreated children and their families.** In this respect, it is necessary to:
- establish and develop **specialised centres** based on inter-agency, multidisciplinary cooperation, where victimised children and their caregivers could receive comprehensive mental health, legal, medical and social support under one roof;
 - improve **access to professionals** specialised both in physical and mental health care, and in counteracting child maltreatment, by running specialised clinics and establishing national, free of charge, highly specialised helplines;
 - improve the functioning of the **alternative care system**, in the best interest of children, when it is necessary to place a child in an out-of-home setting because his or her life or health is threatened, including the development of family-based forms of alternative care and providing them with comprehensive support;
 - develop and implement **comprehensive programmes for perpetrators** (and potential perpetrators) of child maltreatment, including minor abusers, to minimise the risk of further abuse.
5. **Implementing a family policy based on the best interest of the child.** In this area it is essential to:
- when creating family-supportive policies (including material support, direct cash transfers, and housing policies) and services for children (in such areas as education, health, culture, etc.) – develop solutions that help to **provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged families and children** (such as single-parent families, families of persons with disability, multi-child families, refugee families, and families in rural areas);
 - ensure common access to **various forms of high-quality care and education for young children**, leaving it to the parents to decide if they want to use these services;
 - help parents **reconcile work with parenting**, for example by offering more flexible forms of work and working hours, while increasing the perceived workplace safety;
 - promote fathers' higher involvement in childcare, from birth, through creating an engagement-supportive culture, paternal education, employer education, and promoting and developing parental leaves for fathers;
 - introduce a **national strategy for children and adolescents**, integrating all efforts for children which are now dispersed across several dozen programme documents and legal acts, improving their coordination and giving them a higher priority.
6. **Developing all prevention and assistance activities and legal solutions based on reliable research evidence, and systematically evaluate these activities and solutions.** In this respect it is recommended to:
- ensure that statistics are reliably collected by responsible services, using a **shared methodology** with uniform concepts and definitions, categorised by detailed victimology data on children's age, gender, place of residence, origin, family status, etc.;

- collect statistical data concerning not only risk factors for child maltreatment, but also **protective factors**, to obtain complete understanding of the mechanisms of maltreatment and effective ways to prevent and reduce the problem;
- ensure general **availability of statistics** on risks to children's safety and development;
- conduct **repeated social surveys**, using the same methodology, in order to track trends and tendencies related to child maltreatment, impossible to capture based on official statistics;
- include **children and young people's perspective** in the evaluation of preventive and assistance activities;
- conduct a **thorough, systematic analysis of each case of a child's death** or serious injury as a result of maltreatment or unexplained causes, in order to check the effectiveness of the procedures and solutions in place, and to propose improvements, if necessary.

The above recommendations certainly do not cover the complete range of issues that need to be addressed to improve the safety and wellbeing of children in our country. Introducing comprehensive, thoughtful, and systemic improvements to better protect children from all forms of maltreatment, requires time and a broad public debate involving all actors and stakeholders: children, their parents, professionals, representatives of the national government and local authorities, private entities, non-governmental organisations, and religious organisations, regardless of their political affiliation or views. Only solutions developed cooperatively, based on broad consensus, have a chance to improve the conditions for safety and development of all children in Poland.

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