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**SCHOOL-BASED RESPONSES TO CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO
ABUSE AND NEGLECT AT HOME IN GERMANY
REAȚIA ȘCOLII LA CAZURILE COPIILOR CARE AU FOST EXPUȘI ABUZULUI ÎN
FAMILIE**

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Summary. This presentation focuses on school-based responses to children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect at home in Germany. The aim of this presentation is twofold: 1) to present relevant aspects of school social work worldwide and in Germany and 2) to describe the interventions made by German school social workers in child endangerment cases to protect children from harm to their well-being. Thereby, the potential of school social workers to intervene in cases of child abuse and neglect will be demonstrated.

Key words: School social work, social work, school, child maltreatment, child endangerment, Germany

Thank you very much for inviting me here today. My name is Kathrin Franziska Beck, and I work as a professor of youth work and social work in schools at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences in Munich. Today, I will talk about school-based responses to children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect at home in Germany. The purpose of this presentation is to present relevant aspects of school social work worldwide and in Germany and to describe the interventions made by school social workers in child endangerment cases to protect children from harm to their well-being.

School social work is a practice area within the social work profession and is practiced in at least 53 countries [1]. School social work practitioners work with children and minors in schools and deal with a broad range of child-, school-, family- and community-related issues. For example, child-related issues include behavioral problems and physical and mental health issues; school-related issues include attendance and motivation problems as well as violence in schools; family-related issues include divorce, single parenting as well as parental physical and mental health issues; and community-related issues include crime and violence [2, pp. 15–16].

In international publications, school social work refers to several professional roles. The traditional role of school social work is to support children in getting enrolled in and completing school [3, pp. 3–4]. Other roles include reducing the number of school dropouts [4]; preparing for, responding to and providing recovery services for students, school staff and community members in cases of mass school violence and crisis [5]; reducing conflicts between pupils and their parents [6]; and detecting early signs of child maltreatment [7, p. 27]. Thus, school social work is focused on a

broad range of problematic situations and encompasses several professional roles that go beyond responding to school-related issues; hence, school social workers are charged with promoting children's well-being and protecting them from harm [8].

To understand the school-based response to children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect, it is important to examine the German child welfare system and its aims, which are as follows:

- Promote children's individual and social development
- Contribute to avoiding and/or reducing disadvantages
- Support and advise parents and other guardians concerning parenting
- Protect children from harm
- Contribute to creating and maintaining favourable living conditions and an environment that is friendly to children and families (SGB VIII, Section 1, Subsection 3)

Thus, the child welfare system provides a broad range of support, starting with preventive services that can escalate to interventions in child endangerment cases [9, p. 18].

School social work is an intensive form of cooperation between the institutionally divided systems of child welfare and education. It can be described as a very diverse professional field. Thus, school social work may provide services for either children and young people who are socially disadvantaged or for all children in a school. In either case, school social work plays an important role in the early detection of and intervention in cases of child endangerment; thus, all professionals, including school social workers, who work in conjunction with the SGB VIII, are obligated to perform a risk assessment if they have credible information that the well-being of a child is at risk (for further information, see [8]).

I would like to introduce to you the procedure followed by school social workers in cases of child endangerment. Let us imagine that a school social worker has observed significant indications of child endangerment, such as unexplained bruises, poor hygiene, inappropriate dress, lack of supervision, poor school attendance and poor school performance. In this case, the school social workers who are employed by non-public or private providers are obliged to evaluate the risk of endangerment together with a specialist and the parents, unless the protection of the child is not in question. In case of possible endangerment, school social workers have to make attempts to get the parents to accept the necessary assistance (e.g. child-rearing support, such as parenting courses, the support of a social educator or direct assistance for the child). Nevertheless, if sufficient support is not available or if the parents do not accept the necessary help, school social workers must call the Youth Welfare Department upon (SGB VIII, Section 8a, Subsection 4).

One of the most difficult challenges for school social workers in such a case is to evaluate whether there is an upbringing that does not guarantee a child's well-being (SGB VIII, Section 27 Subsection 1) or, if we have already crossed the risk threshold, then we can talk about child endangerment (Civil Code, Section 1666). School social workers find themselves maintaining a professional balance between care and control. On the one hand, they provide voluntary and low-threshold services for disadvantaged children and their parents and see themselves as being at eye-level with them. On the other hand, they have a protection mandate in cases of child endangerment. Therefore, school social workers need to reflect on their own behaviour to avoid abusing their power. Also, they must follow a clearly structured and standardised procedure and collaborate with other disciplines in their efforts to protect a child's well-being.

To conclude, schools are seen as "excellent places" to support a child's well-being [10, p. 97]; thus, school social workers can use the organisation of schools to reach all children at an early

stage [8]. Nevertheless, a clear focus must be placed on children and minors who are socially disadvantaged, who struggle with major challenges and/or who are subjected to abuse and neglect. These are problematic issues that are of specific relevance to the affected child and to the society of which the child is a member [11]; hence, combating these problematic issues is in the interest of us all.

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