

ORGANIZATION OF THE ACTIVITY OF THE GROUP FOR PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Summary

The establishment of the Councils for the Protection of the Rights of the Child of municipal communities started in 2003. Their purpose is to submit (within the Council's competence) proposals to municipal councils on the formation of the strategy and policy for the protection of children rights, the establishment of community priorities, as well as the elaboration and implementation of measures for the protection of children rights and prevention measures against the violation of children rights in a community (Official Gazette, 2002, No. 110-4866.). Although the establishment of the above group is one of the major steps in ensuring and strengthening the protection of children rights, it has exceptionally an advisory function; therefore, with a view to approximating the services to beneficiaries, child assistance groups are instrumental at the level of neighbourhoods for the assurance of complex assistance to children.

Pursuant to the results of the interview of the members of the Working Groups for Protection of the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as the GPRC), the present article analyzes practical operational aspects of the GPRC at a community level: the principles for the establishment of the above groups, the organization and coordination of activities. At the end of the article the model of the resolution of the violations of the main rights of the child in social risk families is presented.

Keywords: social risk family, working groups for the protection of the rights of the child (GPRC), assistance.

Introduction

Family is the primary link serving as the basis for human existence, public stability, sustainability and development providing for the establishment of a person's material welfare, emotional, educational and supervision environment. Changes in the public social and economic conditions determined the changes in a family. It has to adapt to new circumstances, change its lifestyle, functions and behaviour. Family reflects and accumulates all progressive and negative changes of social and economic life. The National Family Policy Concept (Official Gazette, 2008, No. 69-2624) stipulates the main objective of the national family policy: to anticipate and execute the common policy supporting and strengthening the family institution with a view to ensuring common conditions in providing diverse assistance of the state and public institutions to family in order to create conditions for a family to become an autonomic, responsible, stable, active and independent institution capable of efficient execution of its functions. However, not all families are capable of adapting to new circumstances, changing lifestyle and executing relevant family functions. According to the statistical data of the Republic of Lithuania of 2008, the number of social risk families in Lithuania amounted to 11350, where the number of children comprised even 3.7 per cent of the total number of Lithuanian children. A social risk family is a family in which there are children under 18 years of age and at least one of the parents

abuses alcohol, narcotic, psychotropic or toxic substances; is gambling-dependent; due to the lack of social skills does not know how to or is not able to properly care for children, abuses them psychologically, physically or sexually; does not use the state support he receives in the interests of the family, which results in a threat posed to the physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral development and security of the children (Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania, Official Gazette, 2006, No. 17-589). Since family is a system having major impact on the behaviour of an individual, it is impossible to meet individual needs and solve its behavioural problems without changing the system. Therefore, in order to help children, social assistance to the entire family is instrumental.

The importance of this assistance to families at risk is defined in many regulatory enactments within the Strategy of the National Policy on the Child Welfare (Official Gazette, 2005, No. 25-802). Its purpose is to create the prerequisites for the well-being of children of the Republic of Lithuania, which is perceived as the creation of relevant conditions for a full-fledged life of children and the assurance of the right to protection, well-being and participation in public life. The National Education Strategy for 2003-2012 (Official Gazette, 2005, No. 12-391) provides for pedagogical and cultural assistance to all families raising children.

According to the European and global experience, children from social risk or socially excluded families need complex and long-term assistance. For such an assistance, inter-institutional cooperation and transparent coordination of activities are of high importance. However, inter-institutional cooperation in the provision of services to children and families is underdeveloped in the country. Although relevant legal acts oblige the persons rendering educational, social and health care services to provide information on the cases of the violations of the rights of children, and municipalities should have operating councils for the protection of the rights of children, usually a child who experienced violence, neglect, etc. is provided with short-term care or, if needed, health care services; thus, family problems are still unresolved. In the view of the above, it is necessary to ensure high-quality social assistance to social risk families in the future.

According to the Law on Social Services (Official Gazette, 2006, No. 17-589), social services are provided to a person or his/her family in a community. Pursuant to the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 'On the Approval of the Plan of Measures for 2007-2010 for the Implementation of the Concept of Internal Decentralization of Municipalities', in organizing social services the focus would be on communities. Following the above Resolution, the Councils for the Protection of the Rights of the Child in municipal communities were established in 2003. Their purpose is to submit (within the Council's competences) proposals to municipal councils on the formation of the strategy and policy for the protection of children rights, the establishment of community priorities, as well as the elaboration and implementation of measures for the protection of children rights and prevention measures against the violation of children rights in a community (Official Gazette, 2002, No. 110-4866.). Although the establishment of the above groups is one of the major steps in ensuring and strengthening the protection of the rights of children, it has exceptionally an advisory function; therefore, with a view to approximating the services to beneficiaries, child assistance groups are instrumental at the level of neighbourhoods for the assurance of complex assistance to child. This assistance is perceived as a coordinated provision of education programmes, social assistance, health care services and education to a child and his/her family at the request of parents (adoptive parents, guardians) or relevant institutions responsible for the protection of the rights of the child.

There is a lack of scientific research into practical operational aspects of the above groups; therefore, it is necessary to describe practical operational aspects of the GPRC in a community.

Research object: activity of a complex group for the protection of the rights of the child.

Goal: to analyze practical operational aspects of the GPRC at a community level.

Tasks:

1. To define the concept of the GPRC.
2. To analyze aspects of the organization of the activity of the GPRC.
3. To present the model of the resolution of the violations of the main children rights in social risk families.

Research sample: the survey includes the members of four GPRC (30 members in total)—one member from each Lithuanian county. The groups were selected according to the recommendations of the Councils for Protection of the Rights of the Child of municipal communities: investigators were informed about the most active GPRC. Respondents were interviewed by applying the method of a non-structured interview.

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature, half-structured interview of the members of the GPRC.

1. Concept of the GPRC

Pursuant to the Law on Self-Government of the Republic of Lithuania (Official Gazette, 2008, No. 113-4290), neighbourhoods organize (within their competence) the protection of the rights of the child and work with problem families raising children or having restricted rights to their children. Under the provision regarding active participation of community representatives in the decision-making process in municipalities (within the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 'On the Approval of the Plan of Measures for 2007-2010 for Implementation of the Concept of the Internal Decentralisation of Municipalities'), the head of a neighbourhood is under an obligation to cooperate with community members and their representatives, consult the neighbourhood and other non-governmental organizations (hereinafter referred to as NGOs) in administering the provision of public services. Thus, the establishment of the GPRC in neighbourhoods is one of the measures ensuring the implementation of the above provisions at a community level.

The concept of the GPRC (as a unit) corresponds to the definitions of a group presented in scientific literature, where a group is qualified as a totality of persons connected by common goals, interests, etc. (Johnson, 2001; MLD; Legkauskas, 2008). Thus, the GPRS are groups established for the realization of a common goal—the protection of the rights of the child in a specific community. These groups execute their activities pursuant to the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (Official Gazette, 1992, No. 33-1014), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Official Gazette, 1995, No. 60-1501), the Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania (Official Gazette, 2000, No. 74-2262), the Law on Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child of the Republic of Lithuania (Official Gazette, 1996, No. 33-807; 1999, No. 66- 2129; 2001, No. 71-2523; 2002, No. 95-4090), other regulatory enactments, decisions of municipal councils or mayors, and orders of administration directors.

In Lithuania, the GPRC can be initiated by all community members; however, usually they are initiated by the heads of neighbourhoods, social workers, community centres, child day centres and social pedagogues of schools.

The group of each neighbourhood can establish its own priority operational trends (according to the situation and communal needs); however, the advisory function is the key one (Figure 1) and is perceived as the submission of proposals to the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child concerning the children rights, their protection, and the elaboration/implementation of the measures for the prevention of the violations of children rights in a community as well as the provision of social support and other proposals facilitating the establishment of an effective system for the protection of children rights in a municipality. With reference to the defined goals and the purpose of the GPRC, the following additional functions of the above groups could be specified: diagnostic, preventive, organizational and prognostic.

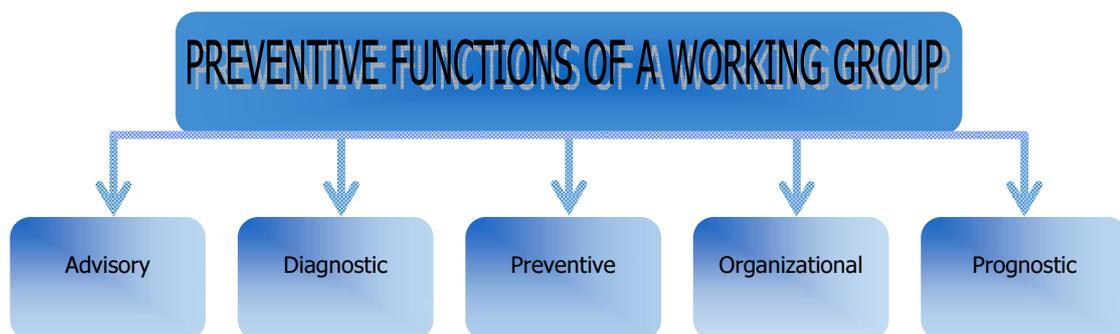


Figure 1. Functions of the GPRC (Merfeldaitė, 2008)

In order to execute advisory, preventive and other functions, it is necessary to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a community; thus, the GPRC need a diagnostic function.

Since one of the GPRC tasks is to involve the community into the formation of the system for the protection of children rights in a municipality, preventive and organizational functions become instrumental; they include elaboration and implementation of social and pedagogical assistance plans. Prognostic function is perceived as the elaboration of individual social pedagogical programmes for an individual, group or community with a view to solving relevant problems.

The highlighted functions comply with the trends of active social integration in a community, specified in scientific literature:

- 1) *Search for and development of relations*: a situation analysis and the anticipation of common actions (identification of strengths);
- 2) *Employment*: specific purposeful education, information, new experiences, encouragement of creative activity.
- 3) *Systematic work with the social environment of the child*: diverse investigation of the child's problems (school, family, service for the protection of the rights of the child, police, special institutions) and environment (friends).
- 4) *Development of a sensitive society*: information about the problem (articles in newspapers); encouragement to take responsibility for the resolution of a problem (various campaigns, change of attitude, other socio-cultural spheres, social partnership, social communication, social skills and self-sufficiency, self-realization and identity, choice of freedom (Štuopytė, 2002).

2. Organization of the Activity of the GPRC

Survey proceedings. In order to analyze the practical aspects of the activity of the GPRC at municipal level, the members of the GPRC of four different Lithuanian counties were interviewed (30 respondents). The interview included questions regarding the principles of the establishment of the GPRC as well as the strengths and weaknesses in work organization.

The survey was executed in three stages. *During the first stage, the time of the interview with the members of the GPRC was arranged.* Interviews were executed separately with each group; later the data of all groups was analyzed, interpreted and systemized. *The second stage included the acquaintance with the respondents, the presentation of the survey goals and the submission of questions.* The sequence of questions depended on the process of conversation with respondents. The data was recorded in a written form, since the members of the GPRC refused audio recording (for the assurance of their security). Written recording of the interviews was necessary, since the answers of the respondents were interpreted separately according to their job positions (audio recording aggravates the attribution of the authorship of a speaker). *In the third stage, the data was analyzed and interpreted.* The results of the interview were analyzed by applying the method of content analysis, including the identification of categories and sub-categories. A summary of the survey's data was presented to the respondents. The credibility of the analysis was ensured by following the requirements specified for a content analysis.

Survey results. During the interviews, the respondents were asked to indicate the criteria which were applied in establishing the GPRC. The analysis of the results of the interview revealed that the GPRC were established so as to include a higher number of diverse community institutions, i.e. they were based on the network of functioning institutions.¹ The summary of the survey results revealed that the representatives of organizations functioning within the territories of neighbourhoods usually take part in the activity of the GPRC; in large territories of neighbourhoods, where children reside in remote settlements, each member of a group might be required to represent specific settlements or villages. According to group members, the GPRC were established on a voluntary basis. Thus, the composition of the GPRC was predetermined by the network of operating organizations. Members of the GPRC included: health care specialists (6 nurses and 4 general practitioners), representatives of social assistance and support (6 organizers of social work); representatives of an educational institution (2 school directors, 4 social pedagogues, 4 teachers); police officers (4). The GPRC included from 9 to 15 members. According to the analysis of the scientific literature (Seilius and Šimanskienė, 2009; Kepalaitė, 2008), researchers most often recommend a group of 5-9 persons for an efficient activity. However, during the interview group members said that their groups involved several nurses, teachers and physicians, who were invited to meetings in their service territories.

The GPRC are usually established on the initiative of social workers or the heads of neighbourhoods. According to the respondents, this is related to the direct activity of these persons as well as to their commitments to the community. Several respondents related the establishment of the GPRC to direct results of all activities (Table 1).

¹ As the respondents indicate, *'in order to ensure the global attitude toward the child and his/her problems, the group involves representatives of various professions: organizer of social work, social worker for work with risk families, social pedagogues, physician, psychologist, policeman, etc.'; 'specialists of various professions were selected, i.e. the specialists capable of solving education, health, crime and other problems'.*

Table 1. Ways of the establishment of the GPRC

<i>Sub-category</i>	<i>Confirmative statement</i>
Social worker's initiative	<i>... he is responsible for social assistance and, certainly, for children; ... mostly problems occur with social risk families; it is normal that a social worker has to show the initiative and he/she could do it more easily;one way or another, we communicated with each other; certainly, this activity was not regulated, we simply used to meet as specialists and discuss all problems...until we have been assembled into one group.</i>
Initiative of the head of a neighbourhood	<i>...namely he/she is responsible for the establishment of a group; ..what if we get together but no support is provided.</i>
Good relationship result	<i>..we could say: this person or another, but we are all responsible for work of such a group...the merit should not be attributed to this or that person... Anyway, we used to work together...today we were given a name, but activities have been executed before that...</i>

Group members share responsibilities according to the existing competences (*'the one who is responsible for certain activity at work, undertakes relevant responsibility...'*, *'in case a task is not related to none of the members' responsibilities, we see who has more time'*; *'...usually the organizer of social work undertakes the responsibility'*).

In order to define the motivation of group members (as all the members of the GPRC work free of charge), the researchers asked the respondents to indicate their motives for the work in the group. The review of the respondents' answers revealed the following main motivation factors: work interests (4); public interests (3); moral satisfaction (2); care of families (2).

The purpose of the interviews is to specify the role of the GPRC. The mission of two of the interviewed groups working in two counties is the accumulation and submission of information on the violation of children rights. The vision of the third group is to become the main provider of operative information to the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child on the violation of children rights by contributing to the assurance of the well-being of the child; the vision of the fourth group is to ensure the provision of complex assistance and the exchange of information.

Notably, priority operational trends of all groups were identified according to the mutual group agreement on priority problems (and not according to the community situation analysis). It can be assumed that community members are aware of the community problems even without special investigations; however, a situation analysis is advisable in pursuance of the operational effectiveness of a group.

Although the goal of two of the interviewed GPRC is the accumulation of information, discussions of executed activities revealed that groups are not restricted by the advisory or information function only; they provide all possible social assistance to social risk families and their children and serve as mediators between neighbourhoods/other institutions in meeting social and educative needs of children.

When asked to describe the group activity, respondents identified (according to the purpose of relevant groups) three main categories of group activities: visits to social risk families, supervision, counselling; record of the violations of children rights, provision of information to the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child; submission of proposals to municipalities on the improvement of the living conditions of social risk families; preventive activity (*'seminars to social risk families on the improvement of social skills'*; *'recruitment to AA clubs'*; *'organization of leisure time'*).

Respondents were asked to identify difficulties faced while implementing the goals of group activities. According to the survey results, all the groups faced problems such as the lack of parental responsibility, the assurance of complex assistance (*'this is the most difficult condition, since it requires constant, continuous and complex assistance, involving psychologists, organizers of social work, environment, school etc'*), and the lack of parents' motivation to change.

All the GPRC emphasized the dissemination of information on services provided to children and their families. According to group members, *'if parents don't need assistance, community might be the way out for children from social risk families in finding lodging, food, money, etc.'*, and *'for children it is very important to know that they'll be protected'*. Thus, the importance of complex assistance to the entire family increases. According to group members, a general support centre could increase the occupation of children from social risk families, provide a possibility to organize training and psychological assistance (*'concentration of various services in one place would facilitate the work of the group, consideration of problems would be more effective and efficient'*).

Group members were asked to tell about the community's contribution to the above activities. According to the majority of respondents, community is still indifferent to the violation of children rights ('not all community members want to communicate and hide many facts'; 'passive participation'; 'no contribution at all'); however, it performs the function of a provider of information on the violation of children rights ('inform on how parents take care of their children'). Members of the GPRC emphasized the importance of cooperation with municipalities. All respondents were of the opinion that municipalities were quite attentive to the activity of the GPRC; however, they indicated a lack of cooperation with the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child ('lack of close cooperation'; 'not enough attention to the above issue', 'sometimes we feel alone in the battlefield'). According to the respondents, cooperation with the above Service is instrumental, since 'this Service is the only capable of making decisions concerning children, i.e. capable of taking relevant actions at the neighbourhood level', and the GPRC are responsible only for supervision and information.

Thus the summary of the GPRC's cooperation aspect revealed that ties with the community, which could be the main provider of information on the violations of children rights, is still weak. This could be affected by both, the lack of efforts of the group to establish these ties and the peculiarities of a community (e.g. reluctance to solve other people's problems, etc.).

As the results of the interview show, the procedure for solving problems in the GPRC consists of the following stages: identification of risks and protective factors; planning of assistance; cooperation with the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child; provision, supervision and evaluation of assistance. The above complies with the model for solving social, pedagogical and psychological problems; however, the focus in this process is on the search for organizations capable of solving the problems of a specific child/family as well as on the family supervision process (in an ordinary child or family environment, none of institutional workers would be able to accomplish this task).

Table 2. **Problem resolution procedure**

<i>Stages</i>	<i>Description of stages</i>
Identification of risk and protective factors	<p><i>Violations of the rights of the child are usually recorded in social risk families; therefore, the first stage is the identification of risk factors. Upon the receipt of information from the community or the GPRC, an organizer of social work, an organizer of work with social risk families, police representative (they all are members of the GPRC) shall pay an urgent visit to the family. Problems of social risk families indicated by the GPRC members are divided into three groups:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>✓ Social and economic factors: bad living conditions, unemployment, lack of money, restricted development opportunities;</i> <i>✓ Psychological factors: disagreement between parents or cohabitants, problems in children's behaviour, weak family relations, one of the parents does not take care of children, violence;</i> <i>✓ Social and criminal factors: alcohol; violence.</i> <p><i>All factors are related to the internal or external environment of a social risk family.</i></p>
Planning of assistance	<p><i>Upon the identification of the problems of a social risk family, it is important to anticipate persons and organizations capable of providing assistance; they have to be included into the process of the resolution of a specific problem.</i></p>
Cooperation with the Service for Protection of the Rights of the Child	<p><i>When solving urgent family problems, direct connection with a representative of the Service is instrumental.</i></p>
Provision of assistance	<p><i>A group (or a group together with workers of the Service for Protection of the Rights of The Child) considers the plan for the provision of assistance and distribute responsibilities.</i></p>
Family supervision	<p><i>Supervision is a long-term process. All violations shall be recorded. Neighbours are also asked to provide information. Community usually assists in the above situation, since members of the GPRC cannot pay visits to families every day.</i></p>
Evaluation. Efficiency	<p><i>Evaluation of changes in a family and/or the efficiency of problem resolution.</i></p>

In order to identify the strengths, weaknesses, possible scenarios of the development of activities and threats identified by the GPRC members, the SWOT analysis was applied. Respondents were asked to identify the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities of a working group.

Respondents related the strengths to the concentration of a group ('good composition of a working group both from the professional and territorial point of view'; 'constant relations between the GPRC members'; 'regular exchange of information during the GPRC meetings'; 'understanding of the use of group activity') and public values of group members ('sensitivity towards the violations of the

rights of the child’; *positive (preventive) impact on parents from social risk families*’; *moral assistance to children and families*’).

The analysis of the weaknesses of the GPRC provided for the identification of four categories: lack of motivation related to the absence of financial reward (*work executed for public interests*’; *only moral satisfaction*’); weak relations with community (*weak relations with the community*’, *indifference of the community*’), lack of systematic assistance (*there is no model for a systematic provision of assistance*’; *assistance of a psychologist is not provided*) and lack of work equipment (*lack of transport means*’; *absence of separate work premises and technical tools*’).

Members of the GPRC related their opportunities directly to the encouragement of the activity of the community (*involvement of community members into a working group*’; *involvement of social risk families into community events and training*’); development of international and national projects (*participation in international and national projects in order to acquire practical skills and tangible experience*’) and development of the assistance network, i.e. the establishment of a day centre by increasing the occupation of children from social risk families.

The block of threats embraces the category of social and economic problems, which is directly related to the increase in the number of risk families and the absence of financial reward to group members; indifference of community to the activity of the GPRC (*indifference of community and neighbours of social risk families to the violations of children rights*’; *community’s attitude to the GPRC*’) and the increase in the indifference of the representatives of self-governance institutions (*decreasing interest of self-government top managers in providing assistance to the GPRC*’).

The summary of the activity of the GPRC revealed that effective activity of the group depends on its concentration, motivation and values, the attitude of the community and its involvement into the activity. Future perspectives of the GPRC are related to the development of national and international projects as well as to the processes of the establishment of the assistance infrastructure in the communities.

Conclusions

1. The GPRC were established for the accomplishment of a common goal: the protection of children rights in a specific community. Its key functions are: advisory, diagnostic, preventive, organizational and prognostic.

2. The GPRC, group composition and the number of members comply with the nature of solved problems. Main advantages of the group: adequate professional composition, group consistency, moral satisfaction of group members and the desire to provide complex assistance to families at risk.

3. The activity of the GPRC encompasses the attendance of social risk families, their supervision and counselling; record of the violations of children rights and the provision of information to the Service for the Protection of the Rights of the Child; submission of proposals to municipalities on the improvement of living conditions of social risk families; preventive activity.

4. Main obstacles of the GPRC activity are related to passive involvement of the community, the lack of parental responsibility for children and the lack of relevant specialists.

5. The activity of the GPRC is related to the development of national and international projects as well as to the processes of the establishment of assistance infrastructure in the community.

6. The model of the resolution of the violations of the main rights of children in social risk families complies with the model of the resolution of social, pedagogical and psychological problems.

7. The focus in the assistance process is on the search for organizations capable of solving the problems of a specific child/family, the process of family supervision and mitigation of social risk factors.

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VAIKO TEISIŲ APSAUGOS GRUPĖS VEIKLOS ORGANIZAVIMAS SENIŪNIJOJE

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Santrauka

Nuo 2003 m. įsteigtos savivaldybių bendruomenių vaiko teisių apsaugos tarybos, kurių pagrindinė paskirtis – pagal savo kompetenciją teikti savivaldybės tarybai siūlymus dėl vaiko teisių apsaugos politikos ir strategijos formavimo bei prioritetų nustatymo bendruomenėje, vaiko teisių apsaugos ir vaiko teisių pažeidimų prevencijos priemonių rengimo bei įgyvendinimo bendruomenėje (Žin. 2002, Nr. 110-4866.). Nors įsteigti šią grupę – vienas iš didelių žingsnių užtikrinant ir stiprinant vaiko teisių apsaugą, tačiau tokių grupių funkcija tik patariamoji, todėl siekiant priartinti paslaugas prie paslaugos gavėjų seniūnijose būtinos pagalbos vaikui grupės, kurios padėtų užtikrinti kompleksinę pagalbą vaikui.

Remiantis Vaiko teisių apsaugos darbo grupių (toliau – VTAD) narių interviu rezultatais straipsnyje analizuojami praktiniai VTAD grupės veiklos bendruomenėje aspektai: grupės sudarymo principai, veiklos organizavimas ir koordinavimas. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiamas vaiko teisių apsaugos darbo grupės narių pagrindinių vaiko teisių pažeidimų socialinės rizikos šeimose sprendimo modelis.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: socialinės rizikos šeima, vaiko teisių apsaugos darbo grupė, pagalba.