

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATION OF THE SITUATION OF THE CHILD AND HIS FAMILY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, OR THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD ARE A PRIORITY

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Abstract

One of the principal elements of socio-legal child protection (further referred to as SPOD) is to enable children to safely live with their families, as such an environment is the best for child development. Intervention towards family must be based on risk identification, its elimination and regulation, in a way to provide safety of the child as well as adequate and effective support. Goal of our basic (introductory) assessment of child and its family situation evaluation is to determine whether the child is endangered (as in the situation mentioned in §6 of SPOD law) and whether SPOD relates to him or not. If it is determined that the child is endangered, organs of SPOD will perform detailed evaluation. Its result is an individual plan of child's protection. The plan is based on collaboration between social workers of the Organ of Socio-Legal Child Protection (further referred to as OSPOD), family and child and further interested parties involved in the solution of the child's situation.

Assessment process and individual planning has been enshrined in Czech legislation since 2013 and it relies on a so-called consensual model (professional involved questions all individual parts of the problem, but he does not rate them on scale). Ability to plan individually is the basic skill set of social workers of OSPOD, and it's important to support and further develop the skill. Since the year 2019, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Czech Republic (further referred to as MPSV) implemented several online workshops with topics of assessment and individual planning designated mainly for social workers of local governments with extended jurisdictions, but also for services provided by non-profit organizations, including workers from universities and higher vocational schools with social matter focus. These workshops emphasize the understanding of the connection between detailed evaluation and individual planning of child's protection. Main point of these processes is to provide an individual plan that best reacts to a child's unfulfilled needs.

The development of assessment of the situation of the child and his family in the Czech Republic

The aim of the evaluation of the situation of the child and his family is to assess whether the child is at risk (a situation referred to §6 of Act No.359/1999 Coll., On the Social-Legal Protection of Children, as amended by the current regulations), which is covered by the social-legal child protection, or not. If a child is assessed as being at risk, the social-legal child protection authority carries out a so-called detailed evaluation and compiles a so-called individual child protection plan (further referred to as IPOD). The IPOD is a plan between the social worker of the SPOD authority, the family, the child and other subjects involved in solving the situation. IPOD is the result of a detailed evaluation. Evaluation and individual planning has been enshrined in Czech legislation since 2013, and is based on the so-called consensus model. Approaches to these processes implemented within the framework of work with the child and his family have changed significantly over the years, and in order to provide the child and family with adequate and effective support, it is always necessary to start from the specific needs of the child and the analysis of information.

The benefits of evaluation and individual planning

Working with an endangered child and its family is often a long-term and very demanding process that is influenced by a number of variables (such as development or age of the child, personality characteristics of the parents, environment, etc.). Within the framework of structured work with the child and the family, the social workers play the most important role as „coordinators“ (key workers), who direct and monitor the work with the child, family of the child and with the entities involved in the cooperation (NNO, experts etc.). At the same time, it is necessary not to lose sight of the child himself, his safety and best interest. That is where social work should lead to. The emphasis is on activating the family itself and to share responsibility with other professionals involved into the process. OSPOD is not responsible for the result, but for the process in the sense of whether the child and the family received the protection, help and advice that is given by the law.

If the form we use for evaluation contains all the relevant details (including the analytical part), then it can very well serve to:

- mapping the situation of the child and his family
- obtaining an objective and holistic view of the individual needs of the child and his family
- prevention of neglecting the child's individual needs
- quick orientation in the case, finding out the measures (including their results) implemented by OSPOD and other entities
- base for planning of social work with the child and his family (main line of case resolution)
- easier and faster substitutability of social worker when managing case
- revision of the given case both as part of the mentoring and as part of control activities for improving the quality of OSPOD procedures.

Basic principles of evaluation and individual planning in SPOD

In order for the evaluation to be effective, it must be based on several basic principles, such as:

Monitoring of the individual needs in all areas of evaluation

→ It is necessary to monitor the needs of the child in all areas of evaluation; while each child is unique.

Child participation

→ During the evaluation (description of areas, detection of the child's wishes, when compiling the IPOD), the emphasis is on the child's ubiquitous opinion and view of his and his family's situation.

Link between evaluation and individual plan

→ Evaluation of the situation of the child and his family and IPOD are two connected tools of social work that follow each other and cannot function effectively on their own.

Objectivity and balance

→ Emphasis is placed on an objective description of the situation and trying to look for the positive sides of the child and his family (i.e. record what the child does, what he can do). In the evaluation, balanced language should be used without pejorative expressions and subjective judgments. When the information refers to its source it helps to the relevance of the whole description.

The analysis of needs and its importance in the whole process

→ An integral part of the evaluation is its analytical part (partial and overall analysis); at the same time, the child's needs are divided according to their fulfillment into fulfilled, unfulfilled and partially fulfilled needs. In the overall analysis, needs are further prioritized, and then subsequently responded to by targets in the IPOD.

A meaningful IPOD

→ IPOD responds to unfulfilled needs of the child detected in the evaluation of the situation of the child and his family. At the same time the goals of IPOD are set in such way that is possible to verify their feasibility.

Knowing what evaluation and IPOD is about

→ The client (child, legal representative of the child, caring person) has information about how his situation was evaluated and what the social work plan is about. Such awareness is necessary for motivation to change and to participate in solving own situation.

Regular update

→ The information in evaluation needs to be updated regularly because only then it is possible to have a well-adjusted IPOD that fulfills its purpose.

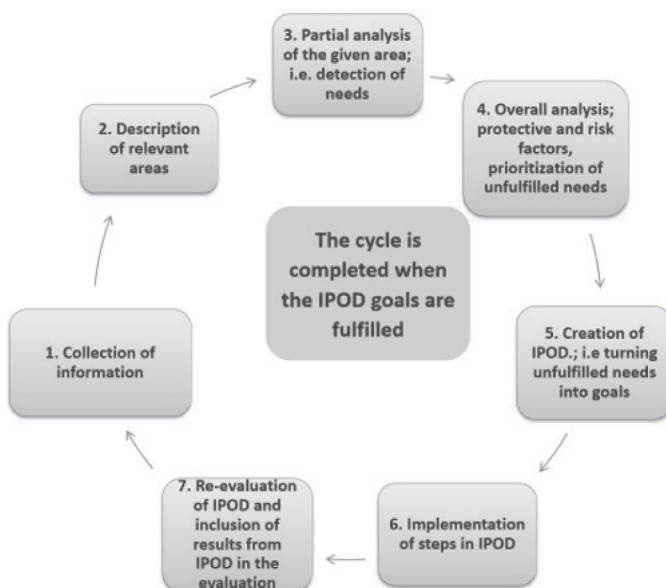
IPOD should be formulated in accordance with SMART principles.

The process of evaluation and individual planning of child protection

Structured evaluation responds to changes in the situation of the child and the family. It is an active process where its individual phases are repeated in cycles. It is not possible to create an IPOD without a detailed evaluation, because it is logically impossible

to start looking for a solution without knowing what the needs of the child are. Basically the assessment proces is completed when the goals in the IPOD have been fulfilled and there are no unfulfilled needs of the child identified in the terms of the SPOD.

Fig. 1 Basic phases of the process of evaluation and individual planning of child protection



Current project activities of MPSV

Evaluation and individual planning in SPOD practice

As part of the system project of the MPSV "Support for systemic changes in the field of care services for vulnerable children, young people and families in the Czech Republic", which was implemented between 2019 and 2022, we found out that access to evaluation, form and quality of evaluation and creation of an individual plan for child protection by socio-legal child protection workers of municipal authorities of the municipality with extended scope, which has been legislated in the Czech Republic since 2013, is very different. The different approach to their use in practice stems primarily from a lack of understanding of the meaning of these tools and the absence of basic skills of mapping and analyzing relevant information regarding the child and family.

We received evaluations and plans in the form of long documents from which it was not possible to find out specific steps taken by OSPOD or other entities, and which rather functioned as a transcription of information from file documentation. Other evaluations, on the other hand, were very austere, or the information in them was repeatedly stated without purpose. Exceptionally was possible to understand from the evaluation

why the child is placed in institutional education and what preceded the stay away from his family. In both cases, such evaluations could not make sense to the workers and bring benefit to their work in the form of effectively targeted support that responds to the child's needs. The main shortcoming in the IPOD was that the proposed goals and steps were often non-specific and without a link to the evaluation document (needs and risks analysis). It was evident that the evaluation and IPOD conceived in this way did not reflect the basic idea of the evaluation principle in the sense of the possibility of quick orientation of the OSPOD worker in the case with the aim of setting up effective help for the child and his family.

For the stated reasons, we revised the existing evaluation procedures with regard to the development of valid legislation, trends in the area of social and legal protection of children and, last but not least, with regard to monitoring the effectiveness of the evaluation method with an impact on the practice of SPOD workers. The result of this activity was:

- In cooperation with the regional authorities, the current model forms for structured evaluation and IPOD were created, which were updated after two years of implementation with an emphasis on their practicality and effectiveness. They are available for download at www.pravonadetstvi.cz. These model forms thus replace the recommended models of evaluation forms and IPOD of the MPSV from 2012, which proved to be unsatisfactory for current practice.
- Five auxiliary tools with auxiliary questions/points on how to describe the given area were created to support the description of the individual monitored areas of the evaluation. They are available for download at www.pravonadetstvi.cz.
- As part of the above-mentioned project activity, we have implemented regular online training since November 2020, which was organized for employees of OSPOD OÚ ORP, but also regional authorities, non-profit organizations operating in the SPOD system, and employees of universities and higher vocational schools with social orientation. The main goal of organizing these online seminars was to bring unity of procedures across the actors of the SPOD system and at the same time to provide practical methodological support. Support of the system changes.
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- We also provided a face-to-face form of education, so-called turnkey training, thereby supporting interest in improving skills in the given topic.

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