

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed rapid economical change in Russian society. There has been a shift away from the planned economy of the former Communist state, and considerable emphasis has been placed on the implementation of a Western-oriented free market economy. This development has been accompanied by a burdening of social conditions in Russia, marked by increased inflation, deteriorating housing conditions, reduced health care provision and soaring crime rates. The question is to what extent the increasingly harsh living conditions have adversely affected the quality of life in the Russian Federation, in particular for citizens that have less opportunity to participate in the new free market economy, such as the elderly, the disabled and children.

In the first contribution, *Hellinckx, Grietens and Bodrova* raise this issue with respect to adolescents living in the Russian Federation. They explore the prevalence of behavioural and emotional problems in a sample of two thousand 12-to-16-year-olds and tracked down the economic, demographic and family conditions that relate to emotional and behavioural difficulties in Russian adolescents. The authors found that Russian teenagers show many behavioural and emotional problems, and revealed a large incidence of withdrawal behaviour, psychosomatic complaints and delinquency among Russian youngsters. The main demographic factors that co-occur with higher levels of problem behaviour among Russian adolescents are living in large cities, such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, low family income and, particularly, the parents' perception of a problematic financial position. Higher levels of problem behaviour were also noted in adolescents who had moved or changed school frequently, in adolescents who did not have a room of their own and in adolescents from families in which at least one member manifested chronic somatic or psychological disease.

The quality of life of children living in poor social and economic conditions is an important issue that needs the closest possible attention from the child and family welfare sector in the nineties. Another main focus of attention is the quality of services offered to vulnerable children and families. The various contributions to this issue of the Journal discuss different ways in which to improve these services.

One method to promote the quality of child welfare services is to identify the core assignments of welfare services and to measure the extent to which the services meet them. To this end, the service providers need to work with methods that allow scientific assessment of their core targets. In the second article, *Nollan, Pecora, Downs, Wolf, Horn, Martine and Lamont* address this issue within the context of out-of-home care. The major assignment here is to equip youngsters with the skills that will enable them to participate successfully in society. However, many adolescents who leave out-of-home care are unprepared for successful independent living. They are at greater risk of homelessness, unemployment and dependence on public assistance than their peers in the general population. In order to reduce these risks, recent federal legislation in the United States requires that the life skills competencies for all youngsters ages 16 to 19 in out-of-home care should be assessed and that detected life skills deficiencies be remediated before emancipation from care. The authors present a questionnaire by means of which the life skills competencies of adolescents in out of home care can be assessed. Their instrument covers a broad area of social skills and competencies, such as personal care and appearance, health and safety concerns, money and household maintenance, work habits, emotional well being, social relationships, communication and a range of others.

Another way to promote the quality of child welfare services is to assess and to improve the organizational quality and the quality of life in the institutions that service youngsters. *Woznar, Golan, Davidson and Dekel* apply this approach in the third contribution. The authors present an instrument with which subjective evaluation of the organizational quality of residential institutions, and of the quality of life for the residents within these institutions, can be assessed. The proposed assessments cover a wide spectrum of individual and social aspects related to life in the institutions, ranging from physical health and abilities, self-actualization and personal integration to cultural activities, integrity of social norms and intimate friendships. The authors used their questionnaire to assess the quality of residential institutions in Israel. The overall quality of the institutions was found to be fairly satisfactory, although some areas qualified for improvement. The authors further suggest that the quality of life in the institutions, rather than the initial program goals or the type of residential program applied, is the principal success factor in residential programs.

Program evaluation is a third strategy to promote the quality of child welfare services. In the fourth contribution, *Strijker & Zandberg* apply this approach to foster care. They investigated the impact of foster day care on children in problematic rearing circumstances in a small Dutch sample, in order to identify the psycho-social factors that determine the success of foster day care programs. The key issue in foster day care is to select suitable foster day care parents. The authors found that parents that offer low-quality parenting discipline will cease to be available as foster daycare parents. Such day care parents also involve a higher risk of the placement being ended prematurely than parents who offer high-quality discipline. Discontinuation of placement was further associated with a non-optimal fit between a child and foster day-care parents. The authors stress the importance of prior assessment of the quality of parenting discipline of potential foster day-care parents in the selection of suitable foster day-care parents and the prevention of misplacement.

Still another approach to promote the quality of child welfare services is to identify the theoretical assumptions underpinning such services. To this end, *Waldijk* relates the central ideas of Janusz Korczak's philosophy of raising children in residential homes to the theory and practice of modern youth care. His conclusion is that most of the ideas that make up youth care today can indeed be traced to Korczak's philosophy, e.g. the importance of a comprehensive ecological diagnostic attitude, the significant roles the residential children have in relation to each other, the idea of child development as an active process and the view of the residential home as an active community.