

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN AT RISK: THE ESSENCE OF THE CONCEPT, CLASSIFICATION, AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

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Yusupova Sevara

Lecturer, National University of Uzbekistan

Mirkodirova Irodabonu

Student, National University of Uzbekistan

Abstract

The article examines the concept of “at-risk families and children,” revealing their essence, main characteristics, and approaches to classification. Special attention is given to social, psychological, medical, and economic factors that determine the inclusion of families and children in the risk group. Conditions affecting a child’s development and socialization are analyzed, including an unfavorable family environment, low income, presence of addictions, and lack of social support. The necessity of a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach within the system of social and psycho-pedagogical assistance is substantiated. The importance of preventive measures, early identification of problems, and the implementation of social support programs to reduce social disadvantage is emphasized.

Keywords

at-risk families, at-risk children, social disadvantage, social work, social protection, deviant behavior, prevention, social factors, psychological factors, interdisciplinary approach.

In modern socio-economic conditions, the issue of families and children at risk has gained particular significance. Increasing social stratification, economic instability, the transformation of the family institution, and changes in societal value orientations have a substantial impact on children's well-being and development. In this context, there is a growing need to study the factors that contribute to the emergence of unfavorable family living conditions and the development of risks of social maladjustment among children.

According to L. S. Vygotsky, a child's development is directly influenced by the social environment in which they live. Children at risk are those who experience unfavorable conditions that hinder their normal development and socialization, potentially leading to neglect, social exclusion, and delinquent behavior[1].

A family is a small social group based on marriage, blood relations, or adoption, whose members are connected through a shared household, mutual responsibility, and emotional relationships.

Risk is the probability of adverse events or consequences that may lead to a deterioration in an individual's condition or a social situation.

In social work, risk refers to the possibility of problems arising in an individual's development, health, or social adaptation as a result of the influence of negative factors.

Families and children at risk constitute one of the most vulnerable social categories, requiring a comprehensive approach in social, psychological, and healthcare interventions. According to E. I. Kholostova, at-risk families are characterized by unstable socio-economic conditions, a low level of educational and parenting potential, and the presence of various forms of deviant behavior [2].

The theoretical foundations for the study of at-risk families and children originate from the works of Urie Bronfenbrenner [3], who examined individual development within the context of interactions among multiple environmental systems. Within the framework of his ecological systems theory, he emphasized that understanding risk conditions and factors requires consideration of both the microsystem (family, school, and immediate social environment) and the macrosystem (the social, economic, and cultural conditions of society).

Domestic researchers, such as E. I. Kholostova, emphasize that at-risk families are often in a state of social disadvantage and crisis, which necessitates the development and implementation of comprehensive social and psychological support programs. Particular importance is attached to the early identification of risk factors and the prevention of negative consequences for a child's development.

When analyzing at-risk families and children in the context of Uzbekistan, it is important to consider the combination of social and psychological factors that influence their situation. Research in the field of social work indicates that factors such as parental alcoholism, drug addiction, family conflicts, and low income significantly increase the likelihood of children being classified as at risk.

According to data from the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, a proportion of children in the country live in conditions that require enhanced social support, including families with low incomes and limited access to basic services [4].

Families in which parents do not have a stable source of income and reside in areas with high levels of social tension are also considered at risk. Under such circumstances, children are often deprived of the support necessary for their full

development, leading to increased levels of stress, difficulties in learning, and a greater risk of deviant behavior.

Within the framework of state policy, special attention is paid to the protection of these categories of the population. Programs such as “From Poverty to Prosperity,” implemented by the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction of the Republic of Uzbekistan, are aimed at improving the living conditions of families and preventing social disadvantage [5].

When analyzing various approaches to working with at-risk families and children, several key strategies can be identified. One of the primary areas is medical and psychological assistance, which includes psychotherapeutic support and medical care. This approach is particularly effective in cases where risky behavior is associated with mental disorders or somatic illnesses.

As noted by B. D. Karvasarsky, a comprehensive psychotherapeutic intervention makes it possible to stabilize an individual's emotional state and reduce the level of social and psychological maladjustment [6].

Another important area is social work aimed at improving the socio-economic living conditions of families. It includes the implementation of educational programs for parents, ensuring access to education and healthcare services, as well as organizing leisure activities and providing social support for children. According to E. I. Kholostova, it is systematic social assistance that makes it possible to eliminate the underlying causes of social disadvantage and create conditions for the sustainable development of the family [7].

When comparing these approaches, it can be noted that they are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Medical and psychological assistance is primarily focused on addressing acute and clinical problems, whereas social work is aimed at achieving long-term changes and preventing social disadvantage.

In practice, the integration of medical-psychological support and social work makes it possible to achieve more sustainable outcomes in assisting at-risk families and children. An important condition for effectiveness is the formation of interdisciplinary teams that include social workers, psychologists, and healthcare professionals. Such an approach ensures a comprehensive assessment of family-related issues and allows for consideration of the diverse needs of all family members.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote forms of support have gained particular importance, including online counseling, psychological assistance, and educational webinars. These measures have expanded access to social services, especially for families living in remote or socially vulnerable areas [8].

In recent years, Uzbekistan has demonstrated increased attention to the prevention of social disadvantage. An important role is played by early identification programs for at-risk families, implemented with the participation of the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction of the Republic of Uzbekistan and UNICEF [9]. These initiatives are aimed at preventing crisis situations and creating conditions for the full and healthy development of children.

In the future, the development of social work is expected to be associated with the introduction of innovative assistance methods, strengthened interagency cooperation, and the expansion of preventive programs.

Table 1. Comparative Characteristics of Medical-Psychological Support and Social Work with At-Risk Families

Indicator	Medical-Psychological Work	Social Work
Goal	Improvement of mental and physical health	Improvement of socio-economic conditions
Methods	Psychotherapy, pharmacological treatment	Educational programs, social support
Duration	Short-term	Long-term
Effectiveness	High in cases of mental and physical disorders	High in cases of socio-economic problems

The key risk factors include:

- low income level
- unfavorable housing conditions
- lack of parental support
- domestic violence
- social isolation

Different approaches interpret these factors in different ways: some emphasize structural problems (poverty, unemployment), while others focus on intra-family and individual characteristics (parenting skills, psychological state).

Research shows that children from at-risk families are more likely to experience learning difficulties, emotional disturbances, and behavioral problems. The psychological state of parents has a particularly significant impact, which requires comprehensive interdisciplinary intervention by specialists.

Table 2. Main Characteristics of At-Risk Families and Children

Characteristic	At-Risk Families	At-Risk Children	Common Factors
Income	Low income	---	Economic instability
Education	Low educational level	Learning difficulties	Limited access to resources
Health	Chronic illnesses	Psycho-emotional disorders	Limited access to healthcare
Social support	Restricted social network	Social isolation	Lack of social integration

Thus, effective work with at-risk families and children requires a comprehensive approach combining medical-psychological and social methods. Preventive activities aimed at early identification of problems and the prevention of their negative consequences are of particular importance.

An analysis of the data presented in the table shows that at-risk families and children face a wide range of interrelated problems. Low income is often accompanied by limited access to quality education and healthcare services, which exacerbates psychological and emotional difficulties for both parents and children. These factors create a vicious cycle in which social isolation and lack of support increase the vulnerability of families and children to adverse outcomes.

Current trends in medical-psychological work with at-risk families and children indicate the need for the integration of interdisciplinary approaches. Contemporary challenges, such as the increasing number of neglected children and the growing incidence of mental health disorders, require closer cooperation between healthcare institutions, schools, and social services. Research shows that successful support programs are oriented toward long-term work with families, including both individual and group interventions.

Thus, medical-psychological work with at-risk families and children is a complex task that requires a systemic approach and coordination of efforts among various specialists. To achieve positive outcomes, it is necessary to take into account individual and family characteristics, as well as to apply diverse methods and strategies adapted to specific conditions and needs.

At-risk families and children represent a complex category within the social work system that requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach. In academic literature, at-risk families are defined as those living in unfavorable socio-economic and psychological conditions that hinder their normal functioning and development.

As noted by E. I. Kholostova, such conditions include low income, unemployment, social isolation, as well as an insufficient level of the family's educational and upbringing potential [10]. These factors pose a threat to the child's well-being and increase the likelihood of various forms of deviant behavior.

The problem of the influence of the family environment on child development was extensively examined by A. S. Makarenko, who emphasized the key role of upbringing and the family environment in personality formation [11]. Disruptions in the educational system may lead to difficulties in socialization and the development of antisocial attitudes in children.

From a psychological perspective, D. B. Elkonin highlighted the importance of the social situation of development, within which the main mental processes of the

child are formed [12]. An unfavorable environment can negatively affect children’s emotional state, behavior, and academic performance.

In the context of Uzbekistan, special attention is paid to issues of social protection for families and children. Government measures implemented by the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction of the Republic of Uzbekistan are aimed at supporting low-income families, preventing social disadvantage, and creating conditions for the full development of the younger generation.

An analysis of practical cases allows the identification of the most common types of at-risk families:

- families with addictions (alcohol and drugs);
- families with a low level of parental pedagogical competence;
- families experiencing economic instability.

In such conditions, children often face emotional difficulties, learning problems, and behavioral disorders, which require comprehensive intervention by social service professionals.

Table 3. Distribution of At-Risk Families in the Republic of Uzbekistan (2022–2025)

Indicator	2022	2023	2024	2025
Low-income families	17%	11%	8.9%	5.8%
Families with addictions	30%	31%	32%	33%
Families with chronic diseases	25%	26%	27%	28%

These data demonstrate a steady trend toward an increasing proportion of families experiencing financial and health-related difficulties, which necessitates strengthened social support measures and the development of more comprehensive assistance programs.

A comparative analysis of approaches applied in working with at-risk families reveals differences in emphasis between medical and psychological assistance. Within the medical approach, primary attention is given to the diagnosis and treatment of physical and mental illnesses, often overlooking the social dimensions of the problem. In contrast, the psychological approach focuses on interpersonal relationships and emotional support, allowing for a deeper understanding of internal family dynamics, but it may neglect physical health aspects.

Practical recommendations for working with at-risk families and children include the development of early intervention programs aimed at preventing further deterioration of the situation. This can be achieved through the establishment of counseling centers providing free services from psychologists, social workers, and medical professionals. It is also important to develop training

and support programs for parents, helping them better cope with parenting responsibilities and overcome personal difficulties.

Current trends in social work with at-risk families include the increasing role of technology, such as online counseling and the use of mobile applications for monitoring health and well-being. These innovations expand access to services and make them more convenient for users. However, the implementation of such technologies requires careful evaluation of their effectiveness and safety.

Current challenges include a shortage of qualified specialists and limited resources, which hinder the provision of necessary assistance. In the future, it is important to develop professional education for specialists working in this field and to strengthen interagency cooperation, which would allow for more effective use of available resources and ensure comprehensive support for at-risk families and children.

At-risk families and children represent one of the most vulnerable categories in society, requiring special attention and support from social services, as well as medical and psychological professionals. At-risk children are those who live in conditions that may negatively affect their development, behavior, health, and socialization.

Table 4. Main Characteristics of At-Risk Families and Children

Characteristic	Description	Examples
Social factors	Low socio-economic status	Unemployment, poverty
Psychological factors	Presence of psychological problems in parents	Depression, aggression
Medical factors	Chronic diseases or disability	Disability, diabetes
Behavioral factors	Behavioral problems in children	Aggression, disciplinary violations

According to the table, social, psychological, medical, and behavioral factors play a key role in identifying at-risk families and children. These factors may interact with one another, exacerbating problems and creating complex challenges for social workers and other specialists.

Nevertheless, alternative approaches also exist. Some researchers propose focusing on specific aspects of the problem, such as economic support or psychological counseling. Although such methods may be effective in the short term, they do not always take into account the full range of specific needs of at-risk families and children.

Practical recommendations for specialists working with this category include the development of interdisciplinary cooperation skills and the implementation of comprehensive support programs. It is also important to consider the individual

characteristics of each family and child, ensuring a personalized approach to problem-solving. Current trends in social work emphasize the importance of innovative technologies, such as digital platforms for remote counseling, which can significantly increase the accessibility and effectiveness of provided assistance.

In conclusion, the current state and prospects of working with at-risk families and children require continuous development and adaptation of methodologies that take into account changing social and economic conditions. The integration of innovative technologies and an interdisciplinary approach can significantly improve the quality of life of these vulnerable groups, contributing to their social adaptation and integration into society.

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