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## Interdisciplinary Cooperation for the Support of Families With School-Age Children

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### Abstract

**Research objective:** The aim of this article is to demonstrate the role and importance of interdisciplinary cooperation in supporting families with school-age children.

**The research problem and methods:** Two research questions were posed in response to the research objective: What is the role of interdisciplinary cooperation for the support of families with school-age children? What are the benefits of interdisciplinary cooperation for the support of families with school-age children? The answers to those questions were obtained through the qualitative method, namely focus group interviews.

**The process of argumentation:** The research process is epistemic and comprises an analysis of the author's research. It refers to the characteristics of the functioning of families with school-age children and the difficulties and challenges faced by those families. This presentation of the theoretical and research assumptions of interdisciplinary cooperation among family support institutions addresses the need to support families with school-age children.

**Research results:** The analysis of the research data revealed the significant role and benefits of interdisciplinary measures to support families with

school-age children. The analysis and synthesis of the literature on the subject and of the author's research focused on school education and the family support system.

**Conclusions, innovations, and recommendations:** The research presented herein aligns with the recommended development of social policy, including the development for the benefit of the family, for building readiness and openness in the family support services, and for undertaking interdisciplinary cooperation. Another important result of this analysis is recommendations for the effective development of an interdisciplinary model of action in education and family support.

**Keywords:** interdisciplinary cooperation, partnership, cooperation, family support, family support system, family with a school-age child, functioning of a family with a school-age child

## Introduction

Identifying temporary difficulties, crises, or conditions defined as dysfunction in the life of the family is a daily activity performed by family support services. The preamble of the Polish Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System (2011) states that cooperation among individuals, institutions, and organizations working with children and parents is essential for providing effective assistance to families facing challenges in child-rearing and for ensuring the protection and support of children (Polish Journal of Laws of 2023, items 1426 and 1429). Building effective interdisciplinary cooperation is currently the main direction of the family policy and its implementing instruments. The main objective of the state's family policy is to foster the establishment and development of families and to create conditions for them to fulfill their functions. The family's ability to develop and strengthen its sense of self-efficacy and empowerment is a particularly important aspect of its functioning (Błasiak & Dybowska, 2021). Multiple institutions support the family. School is one of the most important institutions in a child's schooling. If there are dysfunctions

in a family, the education system alone is not capable of addressing the diagnosed issues and needs.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the role and importance of interdisciplinary cooperation in supporting a families with school-age children. The analysis revealed the nature of the family's functioning in this phase of life and the challenges faced by the family support system. The article also includes the findings from a focus group interview with professionals engaged in interdisciplinary efforts to assist families with school-age children in Zielonki Gmina, Krakow County, Poland. The study concludes with recommendations from experts who participated in the focus group interview, with an emphasis on bolstering interdisciplinary cooperation.

### **Functioning of the family with school-age children**

The family is a child's primary living environment. The family setting is where the child is raised and where their personality develops. This process involves a system of relationships between the individual, the family, and the environment. The environment, including the family setting, encompasses all biological, social, and material conditions that determine the individual's life and activities (Kupisiewicz & Kupisiewicz, 2009). The family is a small, informal, institutionalized social group that is part of a complex system of interrelationships and dependencies between the family as a microstructure and the society as a macrostructure (Rembowski, 1986). The family, as a social group, functions by a process referred to as the family life cycle. The family functions and its needs go through natural and inevitable changes brought about by the phase of its life cycle, with tasks to be performed and problems to be addressed that are specific to each stage of life.

By the late 1940s, Evelyn Duvall and Reuben Hill identified eight phases of family life (which they later expanded to ten) that are characteristic of the developmental changes taking place in families. Phase four refers to families with school-age children. At this stage, a child begins

mandatory schooling, which presents numerous challenges for both the child and their parents. These challenges greatly impact children's experiences during crises, such as difficulties in peer group interactions, coping with new obligations, and adhering to social norms. Discrepancies between a child's behavior and their parents' expectations, disagreements in parenting attitudes, varying parenting techniques, or symptoms that, in a systemic view, are indicative of dysfunction within the family structure become apparent (Wasilewska, 2011). Thus, the functioning of the family, the values, norms, and behavioral patterns passed on to children, as well as the arrangement of the roles of each parent and the position of the child in the family, manifest themselves externally (Žernik, 2018). The child's broader functioning outside the family, in the school system, also reveals the parents' attitudes toward the child – the way the parents behave toward their child. As Maria Ziemska (1975) states, it is crucial that parents realize the importance of the role they play in the lives of their children, particularly when they start school.

Entering the school education phase is both an important event and a challenge for the child and their family. The child faces the challenge of finding their place in an unfamiliar environment and of meeting the school requirements. How a child responds to these challenges depends greatly on not only the child and their abilities, intelligence, or aptitude, but also on the support they receive from their parents and other family members, decisions made in the family, parenting attitudes, styles of upbringing, and the functioning of the family system. This is the stage of the family life cycle in which family dysfunctions are most likely to manifest themselves. Starting school often marks the first step in a child's engagement outside the family. The child reflects the upbringing climate in the family: the conditions under which they are being raised. Therefore, the school plays a crucial role in assessing the family's functioning, its resources, relationships, the fulfilment of parental responsibilities, and the atmosphere within the family. Diagnosing the family becomes particularly important in the case of dysfunctional families, referred to as problematic or parentally inefficient. Children raised in such a family have generally unsatisfied biological and psychological needs, and the

way the parents treat them is a source of suffering for them, which may lead to underachievement and difficulties functioning in the school environment from the very start of school education (Krzesińska–Żach, 2007). This leads to care-taking and upbringing issues, domestic violence and conflicts, disrupted family relations, parents neglecting the child, or other family issues.

Therefore, it is vital that, when the child enters school, the family ensures proper conditions for the child's development, shapes the child's positive habits, instils the principles of social functioning, and creates a family environment conducive to the optimal development of the child (Tyluś, 2019). If the family is unable to meet these requirements, it must be provided with support from relevant institutions.

### **Interdisciplinary cooperation in the family support system**

Practitioners in child and family support, as well as theorists, are seeking efficient support system models. Nowadays, it is generally acknowledged that effective actions and assistance provided to families, especially to those with multiple issues, requires the involvement of various specialists and institutions. To this end, inter-sectoral, inter-ministerial, and inter-institutional cooperation is essential. It should be systemic, in the form of a sustainable partnership of entities and services operating in the local environment. This approach is conducive to holistically identifying needs, addressing social issues, encouraging joint initiatives, and planning courses of action. This approach has been developed, tested, and published as Cooperation Models.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the need to foster cooperation in activities for the benefit of local communities, the Polish Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy has launched a project as part of Priority Axis II – “Effective public policies for the labor market, economy and education”, Measure 2.5 – Effective Social Assistance of the Knowledge Education Development 2014–2020 Operational Program. The main objective of the project is to design and implement a model of cooperation between social assistance and social integration institutions and the entities dealing with other sectoral policies

The interdisciplinary model is based the assumption that cooperation should adopt the form of systemic action instead of interventionist, occasional, and selective actions taken by individual institutions – as is frequently the case. Therefore, interdisciplinary action involves collaboration between public and non-public entities at the municipal, *gmina*, and voivodeship levels, with those entities being committed to addressing social concerns such as poverty and preventing social exclusion. Interdisciplinary cooperation for the benefit of the family should also involve the family in planning and action, since its social and axiological functioning depends on the conditions generated by the surrounding socioeconomic macro-system (Cudak, 2017). Besides taking into account the complexity of the system by determining the variety of conditions affecting the assistance process, this systemic approach also entails identifying the interrelationships between the co-existing factors as well as the nature of the relationships (Duda, 2022). Thus, the idea of an interdisciplinary team is to bring together representatives of all institutions and services, whose joint activities are intended to contribute comprehensively to minimizing undesired issues and creating a system of support for individuals and families (Model współpracy interdyscyplinarnej, 2011). As set forth in the Polish Act on Family Support and Foster Care (2011), there should be cooperation between government and local government entities, relevant non-governmental organizations, and other organizations and individuals working for the benefit of children and families. Therefore, the parties should include local communities, in particular, *powiat* family assistance centers, social welfare centers, social services centers, courts of justice and their auxiliary bodies, educational institutions, healthcare institutions, churches and religious societies, and civil society organizations (Polish Act on Family Support and Foster Care, 2011).

Such cooperation in support of children and families should consider contemporary concepts of social policy:

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relevant to social inclusion and poverty prevention, as well as to promote the de-institutionalization and growth of social services. The project was implemented nationwide from 2018 to 2023 and was divided into three levels: in rural municipalities, in urban/rural municipalities, and in towns/cities with over 20,000 inhabitants.

- the concept of multi-sectoral social policy, which assumes that responsibility for the implementation of social services is distributed among entities from various sectors and involves the search for new mechanisms for the implementation of social policy (cooperation of multiple entities from diverse sectors, having at their disposal a variety of resources necessary to meet social needs)
- the concept of inter-sectoral cooperation in the form of cooperative partnership as the most effective way of performing tasks within the public remit, enabling joint analysis of needs and decisions on the type of activities, an approach which also fosters contact at the institutional and personal levels, builds trust and promotes networking, contributing to stronger social capital in local communities
- the concept of governance which, among other things, assumes that the state is not the only entity performing tasks within the public remit and that the effectiveness of the state is demonstrated primarily by its ability to create space for cooperation and that the essence of governance is to provide conditions to enable the public sector and non-state entities to take joint action towards specific goals
- the service perspective in social policy, in which public services are organized by the public sector and provided by all sectors, including the informal sector, understanding services as a central, activating, investment, and integration area of social policy and assuming that recipients should be involved in the creation and provision of services. Increased commitment to the provision of public services can improve their quality and reduce their costs, while greater participation in the creation of services increases the influence of citizens on the work of public institutions (Modele kooperacji, 2021).

Interdisciplinary cooperation enables effective intervention, thus building a support system that addresses the real needs of the child and the family. The integration and coordination of local institutions and entities around jointly agreed objectives reduces the likelihood of redundant activities, promoting a reasonable allocation of duties and facilitating the sharing of resources, responsibilities, risks, and achievements among part-

ners. The experience of such a partnership serves as the foundation for advancing teamwork within and between institutions or organizations and as the basis for establishing fresh, fulfilling interpersonal connections. Such an exchange between the partners contributes to a higher level of support, as the partners contribute their capabilities and resources to the cooperation. Communication channels expand and partners develop trust in one another, leading to more public trust in the cooperating entities.

The effectiveness of cooperation and activities depends significantly on the attitudes, knowledge, competence, and experience of those involved. In its essence, partnership aims at cooperation with another person or group, without resorting to orders and regulations (Torończak, 2001). Partnership is one of the more effective means of solving social, economic, and environmental problems and of overcoming institutional divisions and isolation. Thus, it leads to joint, integrated, and long-term endeavors of entities seeking to achieve, firstly, adequate efficiency of action by joining forces and resources, and secondly, synergy (Kalisiak-Mędelska, 2013).

Cooperative activities are assumed to be applied to individuals or families, or for entire communities with multiple unsatisfied needs or in crisis, in which cases the activities will be long-term. The essence of cooperative teams' work is to undertake such multi-professional cooperation with and for the benefit of the individual and the family so as to satisfy their needs. When examining cooperation models in the family assistance system, it is important to highlight the joint efforts of institutions and organizations, especially in areas such as preventing domestic violence, aiding families in care-giving and child-rearing responsibilities, and facilitating the reunification of a foster child with their biological family. Parties to the cooperation most often include a social worker, family assistant, school counselor, police officer, healthcare representative, foster care coordinator, addiction therapist, and probation officer.



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## Methodological assumptions and analysis of results

A study utilizing a focus group interview was undertaken to investigate the role and benefits of interdisciplinary cooperation in supporting families with school-age children. A focus group interview is a research method used in qualitative research in psychology, sociology, and marketing research (Banaszak, 2017). The interaction taking place within the research group, between the participants themselves, is crucial for a focus group interview. The discussion takes place in a broader social context, using projection techniques. The participants do not always have fully defined opinions on the subject. Rather, their opinions are largely influenced by the views expressed by others. The moderator plays a significant role in conducting the interview by managing the discussion. The discussion is held according to a pre-written script that describes the course of the various stages of the interview. The discussion is recorded, which enables an in-depth analysis of the material.

To achieve the objective, the group focus interview involved specialists working to support families with school-age children in an interdisciplinary capacity in Zielonki Gmina, Krakow County, Poland. Nine respondents participated in the interview, representing specialists with long-standing experience who are active in child and family support. The group comprised representatives of the Gmina Committee for Solving Alcohol Problems, a non-governmental organization: a logotherapist and a school counsellor (education), the head of a social assistance center, a family assistant, and a day support center caregiver (social assistance), and a probation officer (the judiciary). The study was conducted in June 2023.

The following research questions were formulated in connection with the research objective:

1. What is the role of interdisciplinary cooperation for the support of families with school-age children?
2. What are the benefits of interdisciplinary cooperation for the support of families with school-age children?

The interview data revealed univocal agreement among the respondents on the importance of interdisciplinary measures to support families with school-age children. The participants' assessment was that "effective work with families, especially with those manifesting difficulties in their functioning, is not possible on one's own." While noting the value of cooperation, the respondents revealed that they are aware it is lacking. They stated that "the work of an individual institution or a specialist requires great effort that may not bring tangible benefits... one can say that the risk of failure is high" and that "sometimes the system, through its uncoordinated actions, brings chaos to the family life, which is ultimately harmful to the affected family, while our role is to assist the family and support it in pursuing its aspirations, child-rearing."

The respondents attributed the special role of interdisciplinary cooperation to information exchange, joint diagnoses, and family assistance planning. The respondents noted that an "exchange of information allows for a more accurate assessment of the family, beyond the ideal image of itself it might present, and helps in diagnosing the family and its members." "The team's role is to establish a unified method when working with the family. The team is supposed to speak with one voice and pursue a jointly defined goal." They also emphasized the comprehensiveness of such an approach. According to the respondents, "the joint work of representatives of all institutions and organizations involved in working with the family provides an opportunity to implement a comprehensive and holistic approach to working with families." The experts participating in the focus interview also referred to the principles of teamwork, stating that "for the benefits to be quantifiable, cooperation must be integrated. This requires the interdisciplinary team to define the purpose, methodology, and model of work to be followed, and who will coordinate the team. Furthermore, the role of institutions and their legal obligation should be to commit to interdisciplinary cooperation to achieve objectives set for individual institutions and the collective objectives of the support system, including the objectives set by families."

When considering their role, the respondents prioritized the welfare of the family. They stated that "our actions need to be guided by the

welfare of the family. In particular, we have to plan actions aimed at the sustainability of the family and the quality of the child-rearing environment.” They added that “the role of the system is to build our credibility... We frequently work with families that are not *pathological* or *poor*, but rather are typical families with strong qualifications and social standing... We need to show ourselves as a group of professionals who know what they are doing, are familiar with the system and can effectively utilize it for the support of the family.”

The analysis of the collected research data also revealed the benefits of interdisciplinary cooperation in assisting families with school-age children. The respondents stressed that “a family going through a crisis needs action to be undertaken by multiple institutions: welfare, educational, justice institutions... These actions are often perceived by the affected family as a threat... It responds in a defensive, manipulative manner... Only by sharing information and working together are we able to address such attitudes.” They added that “cooperation brings tangible benefits, for both the family and the assistance system... Professionals working with the family are not ‘alone’ in this work. They also know the support system better, are perceived by families as more credible, and provide more effective assistance... Families gain partners who implement the joint assistance plan rather than duplicating one another’s actions. Stressing the benefits for families, the respondents do not forget about themselves. They emphasize that cooperation among professionals fosters mutual trust in one another’s actions, increasing their determination to implement the action, promotes openness to cooperation as the parties involved see the benefits it brings... These benefits are vital and represent the fundamental operational standard for the entire child and family assistance system today.” Also, through “joint action, our openness to undertake communication increases, relationships are forged, trust and a sense of security are fostered, as are flexibility and willingness to make sacrifices and seek experts... One can see that this work is meaningful. The family sees it, too.” The respondents also pointed out that “through cooperation, we use our resources, improve services, increase their availability and flexibility.”

The experts who participated in the focus group interview have many years' experience in fostering partnerships and interdisciplinary cooperation for the support of children and families. This study demonstrates that only when institutions cooperate and adopt a systematic approach can they effectively meet the demands of supporting the child and family, therefore providing opportunities to overcome the diagnosed crises.

### Summary

The findings from the focus group interview unambiguously demonstrate the importance and advantages of engaging in interdisciplinary cooperation for the benefit of family assistance. The results align with the proposed path to develop a support system that provides assistance to individuals, families, and entire communities. Until now, the work of institutions responsible for assisting people in crisis has often been performed without "exchanging information on actions taken," or treated as the joint work of a group of people performing tasks for which they are individually responsible. In both this research and as part of the social policy solutions being implemented, interdisciplinary cooperation is comprehensively portrayed as purposeful and conscious, free from rivalry, whereby team members complement one another (Modele kooperacji, 2021).

The family setting is an important environment, but not the only one that stimulates a child's development. Therefore, when family support institutions are willing and able to take joint, planned, coordinated actions, they provide the family with an opportunity to establish an environment conducive to child-rearing. Otherwise, there is a real threat to the child's safety, necessitating their placement in the foster care system.

The focus group study also provided recommendations for successfully developing an interdisciplinary action model. The respondents identified the following as crucial for establishing good interdisciplinary cooperation:

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- creating conditions for joint interdisciplinary supervision of activities, training, regular “working” meetings and expert meetings
  - building partnerships through clearly defined rules and coordinated cooperation
  - consistently fostering and developing mutual openness to cooperation by analyzing any difficulties, resolving conflicts, jointly evaluating activities, assessing the results, and celebrating successes
  - including the family as much as possible, as the subject and a partner in action
  - treating the family as expert in its own case, as the system is not omnipotent.

This analysis is a voice in the discussion on the directions for developing an effective family policy. It does not fully exhaust the subject, but it can significantly contribute to the process.

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