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THE PREVENTION OF RISKY BEHAVIOUR

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## *The prevention of risky behavior*

**Radosław Nowak MA, Anna Rejkowska MA: The prevention of risky behavior**

Having experience in the preventive cooperation with schools and organizations in Gdansk we could say that preventive activities for young people shouldn't be treated as an action separated from their needs (eg. adult knows better), without taking into account other areas of student life outside of school such as family, the local environment, the virtual space. Preventive activities which, according to a previous experience, are the most effective are those activities that take into account the identity of the student, give a possibility of the development, educate about the dialogue, co-decision and participation, develop responsibility, increase social skills and social role training through role playing in safe conditions. The implementation of these prevention principles is possible only in terms of the dialogue, the teacher/adult - student/child, where adult acts as a partner and guide, while at the same time demanding teacher and friend. Thus, prevention programmes - prevention of risky behavior - should be implemented with the active participation of both young people (eg. students) as well as adults.

Other experts, who are involved in prevention, agree with these principles. In Marcin Sochocki's opinion: "A good preventive programme should engage not only students, but also other participants of the school or local community, such as parents, teachers, etc. From my experience I know that engaging parents in preventive programmes is very difficult. This is a problem, because the involvement of parents in school activities - except for the compulsory parents meetings - is not obvious. I think that it comes from the fact that many parents are not open to participate in the school life and many schools are not open to the fact of parents appearing in schools outside the strictly designated frames. This requires long-term changes, and so far the originators of prevention programmes have to reckon with the fact that the active involvement of parents in their ongoing projects will be a difficult challenge. It is known that the influence of the family, the impact of primary socialization, is paramount in the development of young people and the choices they made. Let us also remember that the school has a corrective role and may change inappropriate patterns brought from home. However, in many cases, schools do not perform well this task. On the contrary, by various mechanisms, educational institutions reinforce social stratification, instead of leveling their lead."

The time of adolescence, and thus the period of study in the middle school is a special time for learning the skill of dialogue, which at that time both the youth and adults simply miss. Each of these age groups has its own explanation for this situation - both worth hearing and reflecting. Young people usually believe that most adults do not understand them, do not listen to them and do not treat them seriously, while the adults argue that youth is arrogant (we were not like them), that it's all because of Internet which is dangerous (at least there is an excuse) or the Polish school system which isolated middle schools ("gymnasiums") and thus isolated a very specific and demanding period of development. Specific and demanding, both for young people as well as their caregivers, in which the parent has often no way out and headed by love or helplessness begins seeking for help, reading guides, improving his education to understand his child; and the teacher, if he does not want to understand nor to improve his teaching skills, gets angry or burns, which often results in mutual frustration and lack of any benefits on both sides (youth - adult). It is worth remembering that young people

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in this age think and see the world through the context - "I" in the world, at school, in the family, in the virtual space, etc., and the questions that accompany them every day do not belong to the easiest and often wake fear in them, e.g.: Who am I?, Who am I going to become?, Who am I to the others?, How the others see me?, Who do I want to be? And many others of a similar nature.

Well-constructed preventive programmes can stimulate young people to look at themselves and learn skills that in the future may prove crucial in their professional, personal and social life. At the same time, a skillful theme opening for youth by an adult/teacher can cause an automatic inception of building a dialogue, which is so often missing to achieve understanding.

### **The prevention of risky behaviors and the Internet**

Common view today is that children and young people know very well secrets of new technologies, however, as different research shows, a specialization of youth in this field has no relative effect on their knowledge of the safety issues on the Internet. Although our pupils are efficiently using benefits offered by a global network of Internet connections, at the same time they generally do not care about the protection of their own privacy. This negligence induces the most od Internet crimes. Young digital natives treat the network as a part of the space in which they had to grow up. We should remember that the "virtual backyard" offers great possibilities - the truth about us could mean facts, myths, ideas or everything what other users say about us. It is true that cyberspace gives a huge field for self-presentation and self-promotion. It is a source of knowledge, but we should remember that this knowledge is available for all users.

The discussion about the fact of existence and effect on relationships between two worlds - virtual or real - by comparing them and revealing the resources and losses which the user may experience. The present generation of students are people who enjoy the benefits of the Internet while at school, during IT lessons and during breaks. This means that the network will be hit by information about school life with its problems and conflicts and by using the same channel schools will be hit with unresolved problem behaviors arising on the Internet. We are in a time of technological development, in which young people living in the real world must also take care of their own identities, their "I" in the virtual world. This current division recently melted affecting the whole of the unity of the young personality. The drama played on the Internet always affects the individual living in the real world.

At this context an educational mission of school is invaluable. The prevention of risky behaviors plays here an action ahead role. School prevention programmes too rarely contain specifications, which speak up openly about prevention activities related to the cyberspace, and therefore to the protection of personal data, ways of a self-presentation, law regulations for the user, etc. Their absence can result in unwanted behaviors such as addictions, self-inflicted injuries, suicide attempts. The Internet has a special role in young people lives due to the developmental characteristics of adolescence, such as the outliving desire and curiosity. Opportunities which virtual reality creates are perfectly adequate to these needs. Being online is often a source of additional incentives and positive reinforcements. It has been observed for few years now that building of an individual page on social media turns into a kind of "show off card". Young people publish detailed information about themselves,

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which are related to their casual activity in the real life. With the newest programmes and applications you can send a photo documenting “being here and now” to selected group by using your smartphone. The social perception of published things determines their self-perception. The amount of so-called “likes” and comments under each published information build the social prestige of someone on the Internet. Positive comments have an enormous power, especially in case of youth with social skills difficulties. Unfortunately their amount is not related to their real abilities and skills of coping with a group. Insecure youth building own identity based on received opinions and comments risks the negative comments. Even one of those comments can destroy the worth of much more positive feedbacks and the consequence of that could be the lower self-esteem of young people. The virtual reality, in which our pupils spend time, is very attractive and seemingly safe. Young people often know and understand threats related to being online, which is often the result of activities performed by preventive specialists working with youth.

One of the assumptions of preventive work should be online coexistence between both children and adults, based on a relations and using youth resources and abilities for a valuable creation of their image. Online profiling is not only related to the activity in social media. Very often unaware youth visits selected webpages and gives their personal data such as: name, surname, school address, e-mail, date of birth, not paying attention if it's an instant messenger, a commercial page or online game. It is interesting that research shows that the less ability for sharing personal information is being seen in a younger group more often than in older students group. It might be related to bigger social awareness of parents and guardians, which is related to the crime threats of publishing personal data.

In the situation of such an easy access to private information, we couldn't agree more that the prevention in the media education is important. The role of in this field is invaluable. A systematic raising of youth awareness about the link between building own online identity and the future work and private life should be one of the main preventive tasks of teachers and educators at the moment. We have to remember about the power and bearing capacity of the Internet as a source of information with a worldwide access (without borders). Accept for giving obvious information about the security regarding the legislation we must educate children and youth how to build their online virtual identities and their self-esteem pointing to the online image profiling as an investment to own future.

### **What does it mean a „good prevention“?**

Contrary to some trends, which assume that prevention is widely considered as a very easy thing: like only some workshop, which are funded by any community, the prevention is a first front line task and everything depends on its quality. It has several worth using characteristics: it could be joyful, it could be made by youth and together with youth. In this way it is possible to achieve very concrete results for both sides. Of course, under condition that the activities are realized by people who are prepared to this kind of job. Contrary to present common practice, the prevention cannot be done by anybody.

We should remember that attitude changes or coming to some views needs time, regularity, long-term thinking and regular financing. Don't give up to the suggestions and temptations, that each year it has to be something new; that if something is continued for years, it should be changed to something new - to provide evaluation and to put necessary changes is of

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course yes good, but often we don't need creating something completely innovative. Unfortunately many people think that the prevention is also an incidental event like for example a picnic. We often forget how valuable it is to use developed, verified methods by others in preventive programmes. In many countries educators need previous solid diagnosis before they decide to start the work. Sometimes it seems that this issue is often ignored and research is unappreciated or treated as a needless expense, however by using research we can determine the direction of the rational money spending and evaluate the effects of our actions. To conclude, the prevention preceded by a previous diagnosis of needs, will always be cheaper than the harm reduction and the treatment.

**The prevention is not a picnic**, as Marcin Sochocki says: "Sometimes it looks like the preventive work is an occasion for media promotion of local notables, who could cut ribbons, organize picnics and events, during which they would have an opportunity to show themselves, give a press interview, allow and take some photos. These events – in my opinion – are acceptable only as a ceremony of preventive work ending. However, they are often it prepared instead of them. Therefore from effectiveness point of view, it means young people behavior changing, those events don't matter, but often nobody thinks about it. The statistics of PARPA (National Agency for Alcohol Problems Solving) show that the most funds are spent for the preventive work like: picnics, theater arts, sport activities. Can you imagine that even a nativity play is inside this category! Sport activities also don't have to be related with the prevention. You need something more then only a football pitch and a ball. Available information also certifies that school preventive programmes very often are created as a response to the formal requirement, and their aims are not real changes of educational institutions realities."

Preventive activities should light a "red light" in youth. When a young person starts having second thoughts about his actual behavior or opinion, he begins to think and hopefully he will make a right/positive choice. A good preventive worker believes in the wisdom of young people. A good preventive worker is a person who knows what he would like to achieve in a few years' time and thinks –if not in the long-term perspective – then at least in a several-months perspective asking himself "what future for my child do I want?". He should have a plan for expecting assumed results after work with young person for few months. A good preventive worker has an appropriate knowledge and skills for that. It's especially important when it comes to the solid knowledge sharing, because of the possibility of delivering of the "wrong knowledge". Let's assume that a young person didn't really know how to connected the pieces of information, didn't know "what is related with what", and after preventive workshops he already knows and now he can take this knowledge and use it in a different way, different from our assumptions. Therefore, it is important to talk with youth honestly, accurately move around topics which we are primed for. For that conversation the wise adult is needed, someone, who can listen and talk about values, life decisions of young people, who can confront the risk situations (harmful substances, behaviors) with what they want in their lives, or what they want to achieve to make their dreams come true. In a good dialogue young people often come to a conclusion that they cannot fix everything with drugs, alcohol, although peer community using psychoactive substances is acceptable and seems as a very attractive thing.

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In our prevention the point is to “plant a seed of uncertainty”, for example: “till now I used to smoke marijuana calmly from time to time, but after this meeting, I suddenly realize I start to have some doubts.”

We should remember that young people who are talking with adults more often ask them for help in threatening situations. The effectiveness of the preventive work for youth often depends on the relation which could be build.

**After all we would like to achieve** is the youth willing to cooperate and talk with adults. It is important that adults will open for young people and want to be with them. Adults should be friends with youth and be able to have fun together having ideas, realizing dreams, growing and developing. If building this relationship is the basic field of good prevention - the place like home, school or the Internet will not matter.

### ***Materials used in the article:***

1. *An extract from the interview with Marcin Sochocki – manager director of the Trainee - Research Center MONAR, sociologist, author of many publications and social research about inter alia education, prevention, evaluation.*
2. *An extract from the article of Radoslaw Nowak and Andrzej Skorupski “Positive growing up – aware relationship teacher – student”*
3. *An extract from the article of Anna Rejkowska “The Internet – Education for safety. Contemporary tasks for prevention”*
4. *An extract from the article of Anna Rejkowska and Monika Piotrkowska – Dziamska (Gdansk Centre for Addiction Prevention) – “The prevention in the era of the Internet”*