

**PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN:  
STANDARDS OF PROTECTION FOR MINORS IN POLAND**

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**Abstract**

Child abuse, in all its forms, is a common phenomenon. It occurs in every country and despite many measures taken, it still exists. This imposes on governments and various organizations working for children the obligation to develop strategies, rules and procedures that will provide relatively strong protection for children and young people against violence. One of the forms of protecting children against sexual exploitation and other types of violence are the Standards of the Protection for Minors, currently being introduced in Poland.

**Keywords:** *violence against children, standards of protection of children and youth.*

**Introduction**

Violence against children is a common phenomenon, present in every country and in every society. Abuse, psychological harm, sexual abuse or neglect are actions that carry the risk of loss of physical and mental health, and in some cases, even life. The younger the child, the more helpless and dependent he or she is on adults. Therefore, parents, guardians and all other people who work in contact with minors have a moral and legal obligation to protect the child. Unfortunately, we hear more and more often about crimes committed against children in the media. Physical and psychological violence, neglect and sexual abuse

are forms of violence that shock public opinion. It is debatable whether these cases are increasing. Certainly, they are being publicized more and more often, especially the extremely drastic ones that end in health loss or the death of a child. Violence and all kinds of other abuses against children cause suffering and have consequences for their development. Violence against children includes all forms of violence against persons under 18 years of age. It does not matter whether it is directed towards the child by parents, guardians, peers, partners or strangers.

Experiencing violence in childhood has a lifelong impact on health and well-being (WHO, 2022), and in many cases causes disability or death of the child. It is estimated that in 2015, worldwide, over one billion children aged 2 to 17 years experienced violence, including sexual violence, or physical or emotional neglect (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, Kress, 2016). In 2022, 1.5 million situations of child sexual abuse were reported across the European Union, including via the Internet (European Commission, 2024). In 2022, 10,982 cases of violence against children were recorded in Poland (Senate of the Republic of Poland, 2023). It should be noted that this is not the full scale of the phenomenon, because many events dangerous to the child are not disclosed.

The number of children/people sexually abused is particularly difficult to estimate. This situation results from several reasons: many victims are unable to report the events that happened to them due to age or intellectual disability. The problem of limited ability to communicate about one's experience also applies to adults. Many of them do not remember the abuse due to unconscious mechanisms of denial. Others, however, feel a strong aversion to traumatic events and do not return to them, despite remembering them. The consequence of this is not reporting these crimes to law enforcement authorities (Beisert, Izdebska, 2012, p. 52). An obstacle to disclosing an adult victim may also be a sense of shame or lack of knowledge about forms of sexual abuse, and therefore minimizing the importance of what happened to them.

Physical violence is the most visible form of child abuse. Physical injuries caused by punching, kicking, biting, burning or otherwise harming a child leave marks - bruises, swelling, fractures and scars. They also leave a mark on the child's psyche - fear, distrust of adults, and the child's belief that no one cares about them, that all adults beat them, and that life is suffering. Mental and sexual violence and neglect leave equally painful traces on a child's psyche.

Emotional abuse (mental violence) is the most difficult to prove form of violence against a child, the consequences of which a person experiences, often throughout all life. Words can hurt and emotional abuse can seriously harm a child's emotional development and mental health. This form of violence includes humiliation, ridicule, embarrassment, constant criticism, depriving the child of emotional closeness, being offended by the child, threats, emotional blackmail, rejection, failure to respect the child's needs, lack of support and love. Fayaz (2019, p. 876) emphasizes that emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms of violence are identified.

Children who are neglected may experience difficulties in the future, such as: problems in relationships with other people, including their own children, mental and health disorders, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Young people may engage in behaviours that are risky to health and life (e.g. addictions), run away from home, or engage in dangerous sexual relationships (Fayaz, 2019, p. 877). Emotional abuse is one area of neglect. According to the American Humane Society, they can be defined in four areas: physical, health, educational and emotional (Fayaz, 2019, p. 876).

A specific form of violence against a child is sexual abuse. In addition to legal and clinical definitions of sexual abuse, there are also social definitions that treat the problem quite narrowly, limiting themselves to drastic forms publicized, most often by the media. Societal definitions are rarely based on scientific knowledge, which distorts the picture of sexual abuse. As Beisert and Izdebska (2012) write, there is little space for less spectacular forms of use, such as contactless use (p. 51). Despite the passage of time, knowledge about sexual abuse is still low in society, perhaps also due to the lack of sexual education.

The consequences of child sexual abuse can include depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress and impaired ability to cope with stressful situations. It turns out that sexual abuse of a child may affect the functioning of his or her brain (Mizenberg, Poole and Vinogradov, 2008). The consequences may also include dissociation, impaired memory and concentration, and difficulties in social functioning (Fayaz, 2019). Radmanović (2020) indicates that sexual abuse in childhood may affect trust in people and the world, self-esteem, and difficulties in coping with stress. The consequences may also include anger and impulsivity (p. 349). The mentioned consequences do not only refer to sexual abuse.

Taking all this into account, it becomes reasonable to take all actions to protect children and young people against all types of violence and abuse. Caring for young

generations means caring for children - adults in the future and for the mental health of society.

The article presents current activities undertaken in Poland in the field of protection for minors against violence in all its varieties. It describes the standards of the protection for minors that are introduced into educational institutions and all other organizations where children and young people stay.

## **2. Standards of protection for minors. Who do they concern?**

In accordance with Polish law, regulations on the protection of minors have been in force in Poland since February 15, 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2024) The acts (Journal of Laws, item 1606) lay down specific protection measures that counteract the threats of sexual crime and specific measures to protect minors against violence. Therefore, educational institutions have been obliged to introduce specific standards, which they must meet within 6 months (Ministry of Justice, Serwis Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej 2024).

The following governing bodies are obliged to introduce standards for the protection of minors:

- a. units of the education system;
- b. another educational, care, upbringing, resocialization, religious, artistic, medical, recreational, sports or interest-related facility that minors attend or stay or may stay in (Family Code Act, Journal of Laws of 2023, item 1606, Article 22(b)).

This obligation has also been imposed on:

- a. organizers of educational, care, upbringing, resocialization, religious, artistic, medical, recreational, sports activities or activities related to the development of interests of minors;
- b. entities providing hotel and tourist services, as well as other places of collective accommodation, to the extent necessary to ensure the protection of minors;

Educational entities that are obliged to develop rules for the protection of children and youth include, among others: nursery, kindergarten, school, dormitory, community centre, orphanage, and sports facilities for children. Directors of facilities and other forms of organization of care and upbringing are obliged to verify standards at least every two years.

### **3. Standards of protection for minors. What are they about?**

Standards for protecting children against violence (harm) are detailed rules of conduct for the safety of minors. The implementation of the standards means that each employee is able to identify risky and child-threatening situations and knows what protective actions should be taken. The standards are a kind of showcase of the entity as a safe place. They constitute an important complement to the protection of children against violence, included in acts and legal provisions, and involve employees of facilities where minors stay in this protection. At the same time, employees themselves are subject to verification for sexual crimes against children. The standards are known not only to employees, but also to parents. And with regard to minors, they oblige the directors of institutions to provide them with specific information that will help them know how and where to seek help in difficult situations.

The rules help create a safe, child- and youth-friendly environment, and at the same time allow to go beyond the facility itself, through the obligation to notify law enforcement authorities of suspected child abuse, for example in the family. This situation will be regulated by the operational standards. It is true that, due to their profession, teachers, educators, social workers and other people working with children have so far been obliged to report suspicions or facts of child abuse - neglect, violence or sexual abuse to law enforcement authorities, but the standards emphasize this obligation even more clearly and strictly regulate.

The standards serve as a guide for parents. By assumption, in the facility/organization where they have been implemented: there are no people who could threaten the child's safety; employees know how to recognize the symptoms of child abuse and how to intervene when a child is harmed in the facility or in the family home. In a facility where standards apply, all minors have access to knowledge on how to avoid threats in contacts with adults and peers (in the real world and on the Internet) and where to seek help in difficult situations. In such a place, parents and guardians also learn how to raise a child without violence (<https://standardy.fdds.pl/standardy>).

The standards refer to 4 areas of the organization's functioning: policy, personnel, procedures and monitoring, and are adapted to the nature of the institution (Table 1).

**Table 1. Standards of protection for minors**

Standard	Assumptions and actions
<p>Standard I POLICY</p> <p>The organization/institution has established and implemented a Child Abuse Protection Policy</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The policy applies to all staff (employees, interns, apprentices, collaborators and volunteers - at all levels of the organization).</li> <li>2. The managing body of the organization/institution approved the Policy.</li> <li>3. The management of the organization/institution is responsible for implementing and supervising the policy.</li> <li>3. The management of the organization has appointed a person responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Policy. The role, tasks and qualifications of this person are clearly defined.</li> <li>4. The policy is published and widely promoted to all staff, parents and children.</li> </ol>
<p>Standard II PERSONNEL</p> <p>The organization/ institution monitors, educates and engages its employees to prevent child abuse.</p>	<p>Basic standards:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As part of the recruitment of staff members working with minors, candidates' preparation for working with children is assessed and their references are checked.</li> <li>2. The organization/institution obtained data about each staff member from the Register of Sexual Offense Perpetrators and information about their clean criminal record.</li> <li>3. Rules for safe relationships between all organization/institution staff and children are defined, indicating what behaviours are prohibited in the organization and what are desirable in contact with children.</li> <li>4. The organization/institution provides its employees with basic education on protecting children against abuse and helping children in dangerous situations, including: recognizing the symptoms of child abuse, intervention procedures in the event of suspected abuse, and legal</li> </ol>

	<p>liability of the facility's employees.</p> <p>Supplementary standards:</p> <p>4. All staff of organizations/institutions working with children and their guardians are prepared to educate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- children about protection against violence and abuse,</li> <li>- guardians of children about raising children without violence and protecting them against violence and abuse.</li> </ul> <p>5. Staff have educational materials for children and parents and actively use them.</p>
<p><b>Standard III PROCEDURES</b></p> <p>The organization/institution has procedures for reporting suspicions and intervening in the event of a threat to a child's safety</p>	<p>1. The organization/institution has developed procedures that specify step by step what action should be taken in the event of harm to a child or a threat to his or her safety by the organization's staff, family members, peers and strangers.</p> <p>2. The organization/institution has contact details of local institutions and organizations that deal with intervention and assistance in situations of child abuse (police, family court, crisis intervention centre, social welfare centre, health care facilities) and provides access to them for all employees.</p> <p>3. The organization/institution displays information for children on the possibilities of obtaining help in difficult situations, including free telephone numbers for children and young people</p>
<p><b>Standard IV MONITORING</b></p> <p>The organization/ institution monitors and periodically verifies the compliance of its activities with the adopted child protection standards.</p>	<p>Basic standards:</p> <p>1. The adopted child protection policy is verified - at least once a year, with particular emphasis on the analysis of situations related to threats to children's safety.</p> <p>Supplementary standards:</p> <p>2. When reviewing the policy, the organization/institution consults with children and their parents/guardians.</p>

Source: FDDS, <https://standardy.fdds.pl/standardy>

The standards developed by the institutions and the resulting principles and procedures ensure safe relationships between minors and adults, the action plan and persons responsible for intervention and reporting in the event of suspicion or detection of child abuse, persons responsible for updating the standards and preparing staff for their application . The document also focuses on safe use of the Internet and protecting children from harmful content. The standards include specific action plans (procedures) and a support plan for a minor after disclosing abuse (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 1606, Article 22 b).

### **Conclusion**

Taking into account the threats to the safety of children and young people, both in the real and virtual world, actions taken to introduce standards for the protection of minors in schools and other institutions are fully justified. This is also supported by cases publicized in the media of children being mutilated, abused and dying because they did not receive help. The dispersed system of child support and professional responsibility of employees of educational institutions and social services does not always bring positive results. An additional value of the standards for the protection of minors is that they oblige the employer to train staff on the symptoms of violence, which will strengthen employees' confidence, but above all, increase their awareness of the consequences of violence against children. Standards are a specific tool (procedures and responsibilities) for protecting the rights of children and young people.

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