

# Problematic Behaviour Among Students in Secondary Schools and the Role of Educational Counsellors

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## Abstract

Nowadays it is very important to focus on selecting a topic. Students begin to adopt various types of problematic behaviours in the education system. They engage in problematic behaviour in interactions not only with their peers, but also their teachers. Compared to the situation in other countries, the prevalence of such behaviour is still low in our country. Nevertheless, the present study is aimed at addressing those issues. Humiliation, bullying, truancy and similar behaviour constitute a problem that occurs at an increasing frequency and might transform into major pathological phenomena.

**Keywords:** Problematic behaviour, Secondary school students, Causes of problematic behaviour, Upbringing adviser

## 1 Introduction

*“In students and through students, schools strive to prepare and support the future human society.”* (J. Kalinčiak)

A school, as an institution, plays a key role in the lives of young people. It is a place where students learn about basic subjects, such as mathematics, history, literature, and other scientific disciplines. In schools, individuals develop and prepare for their future, while their character is being shaped. Another reason why schools are important is that they teach students how to think critically and analyse the received information. Moreover, schools

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provide young people with the opportunity to discover hobbies and develop their capacities. Various school activities, such as sporting and art, facilitate the development of the students' individual identities and self-confidence. Through collaboration and communication, they build relationships with their peers, which are important for both their personal growth and the future environment. However, despite all of that, teachers have increasingly been encountering problematic behaviour by students, and this increasing frequency constitutes a serious problem. As a result, such behaviour should be paid increased attention.

The problematic behaviour of students may include a wide range of undesirable forms of conduct, including aggression, disrespectful behaviour towards teachers, bullying, stealing, cheating, truancy, ignoring orders given by teachers, and interrupting the education and training process. At present, we are regularly witnessing attacks in schools and the misuse of narcotics and psychotropic substances. Other increasing problems are facilitated by a lack of parents' interest to participate in the education process, as well as the fact that students are paying too much attention to social media or to inappropriate computer games, and their physical activity is insufficient. All these negative phenomena may cause the development of aggressive behaviour and the extinction of emotions. Other reasons may include dysfunctional families and society, as well as a crisis of values that affects the mental balance of students.

The current political, economic, and social situation has a strong effect on students, and consequently alters their core values and behaviour, which eventually become different from those values that are taught in schools. The influence of media and appropriate role models may also impair their mental health, which is crucial for the proper development of young people.

## 2 Substance of Problematic Behaviour

Problematic behaviour is a term that means behaviour of an individual that causes problems to the individual itself, to others or to the society. It is improper, disturbing, aggressive or destructive behaviour and may include aggression, conflict, inability to cope with emotions, addictions, criminal behaviour, and maladaptive behaviour in respect of the social norms.

Horňák stated that problematic behaviour among students may be regarded improper particularly due to their failure to abide by the requirements determined for the school environment. In such a case, it is impossible to identify the boundaries of problematic behaviour. In general, problematic behaviour is attributed to exceptionally sensitive and unwilling students. It should be noted that particularly the term "*exceptionally*" is what distinguishes normal behaviour from problematic behaviour. Less serious characteristics are present in basically all students; however, students with problematic behaviour present with such characteristic more frequently and at an increasingly higher intensity. (Horňák, 2014)

Problematic behaviour in adolescents consists of minor disciplinary offences, demonstrations of resistance, anxiety and even aggression, as well as criminal offences. Not all types of undesirable behaviour may be classified as problematic behaviour.

Valihorová described the types of undesirable behaviour which may be regarded as problematic:

1. Behaviour of an individual who behaves that way while being fully aware of the respective social norms, i.e. the individual knows those norms and knows certain behaviour is not tolerated and in conflict with those norms, and still violates them and behaves in an inadequate manner.
2. Behaviour of a person with generally good mental health and normal personality (excluding, for example, behavioural disorders caused by a permanent and irreparable change in any of the bodily organs or functions; mental manifestations that are caused by various types of organic damage to the brain or disorders of the bodily organs; and behaviour of individuals who are difficult to educate, diagnosed as psychopathic, neurotic, or psychotic). (Valihorová, 2011)

The facts indicate that problematic behaviour is deliberate inappropriate behaviour of a completely healthy individual who is aware of behaving in conflict with the social norms.

## 2.1 Categorization Criteria for Problematic Behaviour Factors

- 1) According to Kalhous and Obst, the factors that cause problematic behaviour are divided into the following categories:
- 2) Biological factors – congenital, acquired during pregnancy or caused by an injury as the deviations in the body constitution and the function of the nervous system, for example ADHD.
- 3) Social factors – for example, the impact of the upbringing environment in the family; the impact of the group dynamics in the class; the impact of friends, a broader community, and the media.
- 4) Situational factors – the immediate atmosphere in the classroom; events that occurred during the previous lesson; or an uninteresting presentation of the lecture by the teacher. (Kalhous and Obst, 2009)

According to Kafka, behavioural disorders are categorised as:

1. Primary – initial disorders, such as age-related behavioural disorders of children and young people, e.g. speech disorders, disorders of school capabilities and emotional disorders. Disorders at the mental level of conduct and interactive disorders.
2. Secondary – derived from the primary disorders.
3. Interpersonal – personality disorders.
4. Extra personal – caused by the effects of the surrounding environment. (Kafka, 2015)

Based on the categories above, it may be stated that the causes of problematic behaviour are varied. It is therefore necessary to eliminate those causes in schools to the maximum possible extent with the assistance of respective experts.

## 2.2 Problematic Behaviour in Slovakia

The latest knowledge of problematic behaviour among students in secondary schools may be obtained from numerous research studies, as indicated in a paper by Žoldák, who presented a review of what teachers consider the most important form of behavioural disorders. Based on his research 51% of teachers stated it was truancy; 32% of teachers believed it was bullying; 13% thought it was experimenting with drugs; and 4% stated it was stealing. Žoldák also stated that the causes of problematic behaviour, as perceived by teachers, include inadequate upbringing environment in 46%; excessive impact of media and social networks in 30%; genetic predisposition in 14%; and a negative impact of peer groups in 10%. Teachers reported that they address problematic behaviour in students in cooperation with a pedagogical and psychological counselling centre in 32%; the school principal in 26%; an educational counsellor in 19%; a school psychologist in 17%; and the police in 6%. (Žoldák, 2020)

Džavoronková stated that 54% of teachers believed that the behaviour of students in secondary schools is affected by the family environment, while 46% of teachers thought it is affected by the social environment, 74% of teachers stated that the cause of problematic behaviour is their desire to attract attention; 18% thought that the cause is the rivalry among students; 6% believed it is the inferiority complex; and 2% stated other reasons. As for the most frequently occurring forms of problematic behaviour that the teachers encounter in secondary schools, 78% of teachers reported lying; in 70% it was insubordination; in 54% it was the use of vulgarisms towards other students; in 46% it was the use of vulgarisms during the lessons; in 34% it was physical violence towards other students; in 34% it was bullying; in 32% it was the destruction of the school property; in 32% it was arriving late to school; in 32% it was escaping from school; in 30% it was negativism; in 24% it was the use of vulgarisms towards the teachers; in 10% it was stealing; in 4% it was a self-directed physical violence; and in 2% it was physical violence directed towards the teachers. (Džavoronková, 2022)

## 2.3 Student Behaviour Worldwide

Chinese authors Guo et al. studied a correlation between the use of the internet and the occurrence of sleeping disorders and suicidal behaviour among the Chinese adolescents. The purpose of that extensive study was to test the correlation between the Problematic Internet Use (PIU) and the occurrence of sleep disturbances, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among the Chinese adolescents, and whether the sleep disturbances mediate the correlation between PIU and the suicidal behaviour. The data were obtained from the 2017 National School-based Chinese Adolescents Health Survey. A total of 20,895 student questionnaires were qualified for analysis. The Young's Internet Addiction Test was used to assess PIU, while the level of sleep disturbances was measured using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index. Multilevel logistic regression models and path models were used in analyses.

Results: Out of the total test group, 2,864 adolescents (13.7%) reported having the suicidal ideation, while 537 (2.6%) reported experiencing the suicide attempts. Following the adjustments for the control variables and the sleep disturbances, PIU was associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation (AOR = 1.04; 95% CI = 1.03–1.04) and suicide attempts (AOR = 1.03; 95% CI = 1.02–1.04). The findings of the path models showed that the standardized indirect effects of PIU on the suicidal ideation (standardized  $\beta$  estimate = 0.092; 95% CI = 0.082–0.102) and on the suicide attempts (standardized  $\beta$  estimate = 0.082; 95% CI = 0.068–0.096) through the sleep disturbances were significant. Conversely, sleep disturbances significantly mediated the correlation between the suicidal behaviour and PIU. Discussion and conclusions: There may be a complex transactional association between PIU, sleep disturbances, and suicidal behaviour. The estimates of the mediator role of sleep disturbances provide the evidence for the current understanding of the mechanism of the correlation between PIU and suicidal behaviour. The available means of the concomitant treatment of PIU, sleep disturbances and suicidal behaviour were recommended. (Guo et al., 2018).

Lithuanian authors Lone & Kuginytė-Arlauskienė published a study titled “Manifestations of Problematic Student Behaviour in Norwegian Schools: Individual and Inclusive Education System Perspective”. They stated that in terms of problematic behaviour, several aspects should be taken into consideration. First, it is important to define the concept of problematic behaviour. However, that is not an easy task because the analyses of the manifestations of problematic behaviour often identify also certain links with emotional disorders. It is therefore almost impossible to separate the two and foresee the causal relationship. That is why it is very common that the problematic behaviour coexists with emotional issues, such as social isolation. Experts working in the Norwegian education system define the problematic behaviour as a behaviour related to learning disorders, i.e. inappropriate behaviour during lessons that causes various discipline disorders; provocative/aggressive behaviour manifested in physical and verbal attacks towards other individuals; social isolation and severe behavioural problems, such as disregard of social norms and rules, stealing, harm-causing physical attacks, constant harassing, omitting lessons and bad habits. Data used in this study was collected during the SPEED Norwegian national project (2012–2016), implemented in 95 secondary schools in 16 municipalities. The collected data was also used by one of the authors for his diploma thesis. During the study, students of 5–10 grades and their teachers were interviewed. Subsequently, the key current challenges concerning the problematic behaviour in the education system and their correlation with the social skill development were characterised. The analysed data facilitated the assessment of the current situation with an emphasis on the prevention and the individual problem solving in respect of the individual and inclusive education system, with a focus on the relationship between them. Furthermore, the obtained data was compared with the results of the previous research studies conducted in Norway, where the correlations between various forms of problematic behaviour and various social skills have already been proved. (Lone & Kuginytė-Arlauskienė, 2018).

In Finland, authors Männikkö et al., studied the problematic digital gaming behaviour and its relation to the psychological, social, and physical health of Finnish adolescents and young adults. The aim of this study was to identify problematic gaming behaviour among Finnish adolescents and young adults and evaluate its connection to a variety of psychological, social, and physical health symptoms. This cross-sectional study was conducted with a random sample of 293 respondents aged 13–24 years. Participants completed an online survey. Problematic gaming behaviour was measured using the Game Addiction Scale (GAS). Self-reports covered the health measures, such as psychological health (psychopathological symptoms, satisfaction with life), social health (preferences for social interaction), and physical health (general health, Body Mass Index [BMI], body discomfort, physical activity).

The study results showed that problematic gaming behaviour relates to psychological and health problems, namely fatigue, sleep interference, depression, and anxiety symptoms. The multiple linear regression analysis indicated that the amount of weekly gaming, depression and a preference for online social interaction predicted increased problematic gaming symptoms. This research emphasised that problematic gaming behaviour had a strong negative correlation to a variety of subjective health outcomes. (Männikkö et al., 2015)

### 3 Educational Counsellors Role

According to Act No. 138/2019 Coll., Section 38, an educational counsellor provides educational counselling through informative, coordinating, consulting, methodical and other related activities and intermediates professional therapeutic and educational activities.

Educational counsellor is a pedagogical employee of a school appointed by the school principal under the appointment letter. The term of this office is not limited in time and depends on the quality of the work performed. At present, the emphasis is being put on the prevention of negative effects and the mental development of students.

Educational counselling is provided to children, their legal representatives and school employees in schools and educational establishments through the activities performed by educational counsellors. Where necessary, educational counsellors intermediate the pedagogical, psychological, social, psychotherapeutic, re-educational and other services for children and their legal representatives and coordinate such services in cooperation with class teachers. The purpose of educational counselling is to provide counselling when addressing the personality-related, educational, professional, and social needs of children, as well as the career counselling. Educational counsellors closely cooperate with a school psychologist, special education teacher and experts from the counselling institutions.

#### 3.1 Legislation Regarding Educational Counsellors

The position and tasks of educational counsellors are defined in the related legislation, such as the laws of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, decrees of the Ministry of Education

of the Slovak Republic, and decrees of the Government of the Slovak Republic. The relevant laws specify the characteristics, occupational duties and required qualification of an educational counsellor for performing not only the pedagogical, but also expert activities. The laws also specify the further education, career positions, evaluation, and care of pedagogic employees.

According to Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act) and on Amendments and Supplementation to Certain Acts, Section 145a, effective since 1 September 2023, educational counsellors in cooperation with their support teams implement 21 support actions, which are characterised as the actions implemented by a school or an educational establishment that are required for a child or student to be able to fully engage in the education and training process and enhance their knowledge and develop their skills and capabilities. The support actions include the following:

- 1) Provision of education and training based on the determined objectives, methods, forms and approaches applied in the education and training process; it is provided by schools, educational establishments or special education facilities.
- 2) Provision of education and training based on the determined curricula and the evaluation of the achievements accomplished by children or students in the education and training process; this is provided by schools, educational establishments, or special education facilities.
- 3) Activities aimed at the development of physical capabilities, sensory functions, communication abilities, cognitive ability, social communication abilities, emotionality and self-help skills; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or special education facilities.
- 4) Activities supporting the achievement of the capacity to attend a school; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, counselling and prevention facilities or therapeutic and educational sanatoria.
- 5) Courses for learning the language used in the teaching process or other support for learning the language used in a particular school; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs, except for bilingual schools or special education facilities.
- 6) Tutoring or targeted learning aimed at achieving the highest possible level of the individual cognitive potential of children or students; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or special education facilities.

- 7) Improving the conditions for the education and training of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.
- 8) Education in a particular school subject or education area in higher grades; this is provided by elementary schools, elementary schools for talented children, secondary schools, or secondary schools for talented students.
- 9) Providing special forms of communication for children/students with disabilities to communicate with a school or an educational establishment; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.
- 10) Activities supporting social inclusion; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.
- 11) Activities supporting the prevention of cases where children terminate their school attendance in a grade lower than the last grade of an elementary or secondary school; this is provided by elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs, counselling and prevention centres or special education facilities.
- 12) Specialised career counselling: this is provided by elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or counselling and prevention centres.
- 13) Provision of services of a pedagogic assistant in the classroom; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or special education facilities.
- 14) Provision of healthcare; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or special education facilities.
- 15) Provision of self-help actions according to a special regulation during the education and training process; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.
- 16) Provision of special educational publications and compensatory aids; this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs or special education facilities.
- 17) Adjustment of the school premises aimed at supporting the perception capacities and developing skills; this is provided by schools or special education facilities.
- 18) Elimination of physical barriers in schools or educational establishments, as well as organisational barriers in the education and training process; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.

- 19) Provision of dietetic food; this is provided by school catering facilities.
- 20) Prevention aimed at promoting physical and mental health and the prevention of high-risk behaviour; this is provided by schools or educational establishments.
- 21) Crisis intervention: this is provided by nursery schools, nursery schools for children with special educational needs, elementary schools, elementary schools for students with special educational needs, secondary schools, secondary schools for students with special educational needs, counselling and prevention centres or special education facilities. (Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training (School Act) and on Amendments and Supplementation to Certain Acts, Section 145a, 2023)

### 3.2 Educational Counsellor's Duties

An educational counsellor performs duties towards the individual entities related to surveys, identification, evaluation, diagnostics, screening, consulting, methodology, communication, raising awareness and prevention, conceptual planning, organising and administration. Educational counsellors perform the educational counselling tasks, usually in cooperation with class teachers, through the monitoring of students who have problems with education, training, and development of their personality. They also inform and help students and their parents (legal representatives) when selecting a study, an occupation, or a job position. They help class teachers when working with intellectually gifted and talented students, as well as students who are socially disadvantaged, who have special educational and training needs, and students who enrol in secondary schools. They also cooperate with experts in the provision of social counselling and organise and participate in the implementation of preventive activities for students. They also coordinate the educational process in the school, cooperate with the school management, parents, teachers, class teachers and with a coordinator of the prevention of socially pathological issues. At pedagogical meetings, they provide information on the educational and training activities and the measures that are required to solve the problems. They provide consulting and assist to students and actively participate in the meetings, seminars. and trainings for educational counsellors. Together with pedagogical and expert employees, they may assist with the preparation of educational recommendations that ensure a positive atmosphere in schools.

**Educational counsellor's duties towards students.** Educational counsellors strive to facilitate that the students objectively discover their own personalities and have an opportunity to obtain high-quality information for the purpose of harmonising their ambitions with the current societal needs. In cooperation with class teachers, educational counsellors monitor changes in the behaviour of students. Subsequently, they monitor the process of adaptation of first graders and solve the potential issues in cooperation with other teachers and parents. They pay special attention to gifted and talented students and students from the socially disadvantaged backgrounds. They raise awareness among students of the issues related to discrimination, racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, as well as other manifestations of

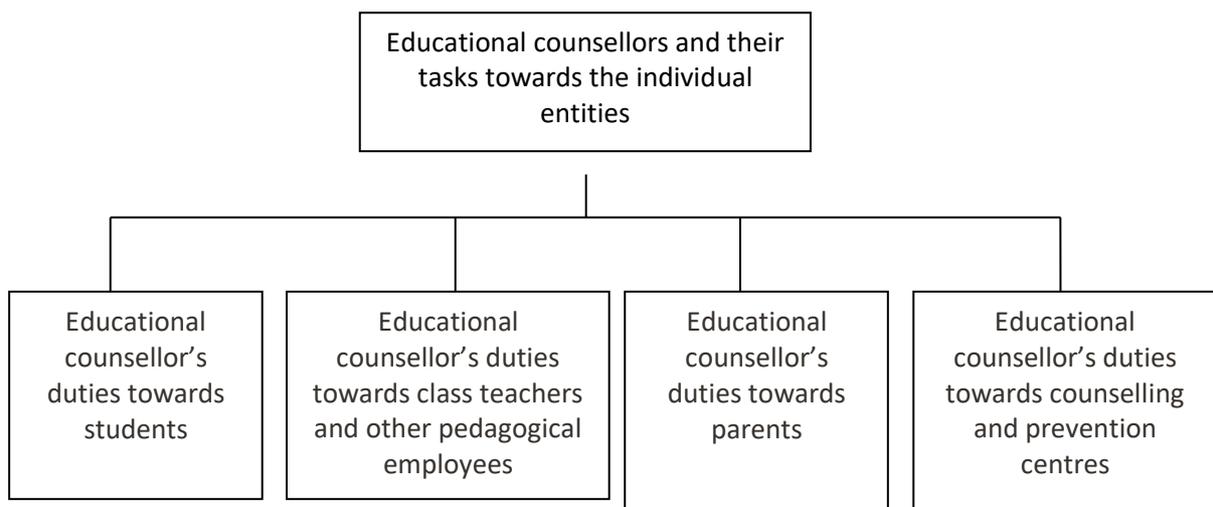
intolerance. They provide the latest information to students of the last grade, including the reviews of the available studies at universities, post-secondary, and further education studies. They pay attention to the education of students about respecting human rights in their classrooms and schools with the aim of promoting the value of a human being. Finally, they provide methodical assistance to students who fill out the application forms for university studies.

**Educational counsellor’s duties towards class teachers and other pedagogical employees.**

They provide consulting regarding conflicts or other extraordinary situations in classrooms, arrange the cooperation with the centres for pedagogical and psychological counselling and prevention and the police. They continuously monitor absenting students and cooperate with class teachers. They help in the preparation of awareness-raising discussions with students.

**Educational counsellor’s duties towards parents.** They intermediate pedagogical, psychological, social, psychotherapeutic, and re-educational services when requested by parents. They inform parents on the preventive activities organised in the school and on the available means of assistance to children in danger.

**Educational counsellor’s duties towards counselling and prevention centres.** In cooperation with class teachers, they prepare documents for the specialised psychological and special pedagogical examinations. As required, they consult the findings and recommendations from those examinations with experts from the counselling and prevention centres and participate in meetings with such experts.



Picture 1 Educational counsellors and their tasks towards the individual entities  
(Source: authors)

## 4 Conclusion

Problematic behaviour and behavioural disorders in children and young people should be perceived systematically, with close connections to their age, life situation, family background and current health. In everyday life, there are situations in which all of us encounter various forms of improper behaviour, such as aggression, disturbances in lessons and bullying, as well as other, more serious types of behaviour. Problematic behaviour reflects the times we live in. Our society creates the conditions for positive, as well as negative phenomena, which may be manifested in the behaviour of children who are beginning to attend schools. In their families, children often lack a positive role model in their parents, and such families may lack love and financial security. In modern hectic and difficult times, parents also have difficulties in managing the upbringing of their children. That is why these children seek role models in their peer groups or on social media, as a replacement for the absent role models in their families. The absent parenting role is therefore transferred into schools, where this role is assumed by teachers, educational counsellors, psychologists, and special teachers.

The decline of our society has brought about increasing problems, as well as certain toleration in respect of the misuse of addictive substances – for instance, drug vending machines are now available, even to the minors. Physical activity has been replaced with time spent on the internet and in the virtual reality. All the aforesaid factors result not only in problems with behaviour, but also in numerous, increasingly prevalent health issues. It is therefore our responsibility to be able to recognise these serious problems and address them, because in our common future we will encounter such inappropriate and problematic behaviours more and more frequently.

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