

Erasmus+ project “Extending Social Educators Competences” ESEC

Project Nr. **2018-1-PL01-KA204-051126**

### **Evidence-based guidelines**

Topics of Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw (JKPU)

"Communication with professionals and educators", "Reducing Stress",

“Communicating with Other Parents”

The situation of COVID 19 in 2020 changed all the plans of the sessions and workgroups of the whole project. The projected activities and communication with the course participants were limited to totally on-line ways of communication and distance learning. The project organizers had to changed and adjuste the prepared organizational settings and materials to unexpected conditions of pandemic, as well as conducting sessions and activities. Therefore one of the results of training activities of ESEC is the offer of training handbook.

## Abstract

The guidelines consist of a few sub-chapters to provide more detailed reflection, considerations, and suggestions that are based on the 2020 sessions of educators who participated remotely using social media and communicators throughout Poland in the JKPU ESEC project group. This report contains the set of evidence-based guidelines, with the aim of the completion of a training course organized by Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw (JKPU), within the framework of the European project Erasmus + ESEC “Extending Social Educators Competences”.

The chapter that reveals *content and its organization* introduces the main idea of selecting the content for the sessions "Communication with professionals and educators", "Reducing Stress", "Communicating with Other Parents" and organization of the content. The conception of the session reflects achieving parent educator qualities appropriate for developing the strength of communicating and cooperating for parenting with competence. Also another course was to prepare parents to cope with all sorts of stress, especially with stressful situations connected to raising kids with special needs. All these courses have in common that communication activity is a fundamental basis of human individual development.

The content of the activities in the sessions of “Reducing stress” is especially useful and dedicated to three groups of stakeholders:

(A) People with disabilities: you deserve to be recognized for all of your strengths. Strengths could be things about your personality (like being friendly) or things you are good at (like using the computer).

(B) Professionals: helping people with disabilities and their families means recognizing that there are both benefits and burdens in raising a child with disability. It is also important to acknowledge and encourage parents' perceptions of their children's strengths.

(C) Policymakers: policy development should include a strength-based approach that fosters a positive outlook on children with disability and their families to create and promote acceptance" (Colavita, Luthra, Perry, 2014, p. 86).

In our proposed training topic of the course “Reducing stress” there were offered for participants the following structure of main needed content: DYNAMICS of STRESS in PARENT and CHILD FUNCTIONING; PARENTING STRESS and EMOTIONAL SUPPORT of PARENTS with INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CHILDREN. STRENGTH-BASED PARENTING with CHILDREN'S STRESS and COPING APPROACHES.

Strength-based approaches to parenting both typically developing children and children with developmental disabilities give evidence of bringing advantages to the process of raising and caring. It appears that a child with developmental disabilities is more than a set of challenges or skill deficits, as is frequently and stereotypically assumed. Parents are in the position to adapt a new perspective in the light of which they perceive their children as having interesting and positive personalities and characteristics exceeding those stereotypical expectations and assumptions.

In the case of almost every course the content of the activities in the sessions introduce such groups of activities or stages of the development of communication skills: (a) the active listening; communicate developing this skill, discuss and understand (these belong to a successful communication, nevertheless are seldom attended and included to parent education programs), (b) activities that are directed to evaluate and improve communication skills regarding the emotional intelligence; (c) activities that develop skills in order to learn how to normalize a feeling when parents go through undesired emotions...etc.

Another chapter is devoted to preparation & organizational issues and strategies, which deal with the considerations evolved while conducting the 2020 session and include information related to this training action, content and its organization, the learning units selected by JKPU for the online training modality such as “Communication with professionals and educators”, “Reducing Stress”, “Communicating with Other Parents” according to the materials of the project’s MOODLE platform (prepared by partner - RTA) provided, both for individual and collective learning.

On the other hand, our paper presents the methodology involved in carrying out the training courses, in order to explain the mode of the session and the activities that are chosen to implement the main idea of the parent educator developmental program. This section includes reflections on the solutions of the session, conclusions, suggestions, as well as some shortcomings and difficulties which are based on the experience.

Finally, the document collects information on the evaluation process basing on the ESEC project questionnaires that the participants are asked to fill for assessing their skills after the training completion. Evaluation is an integrating component of the process that also closes the session and serves as base for further planning of parent and parent educator individual development.

***1. Content*** and content organization of the course. (*learning units have been selected to be taught face to face (mostly using e-learning platform). In which order did you use the ESEC COURSE MATERIAL what content adaptations you did in order to meet your participants training needs difficulties encountered and solutions*).

The sessions of training units – “Communication with professionals and educators”, “Reducing Stress”, “Communicating with Other Parents” conducted by JKPU covered the most topical issues of *Communication and Emotional Skills* emphasizing communication.

The agenda chosen for discussions according to the parent most attended questions of parent integrated roles, communication among parents and children, parents and all sorts of professionals, parent educator communication and active listening with parents, peculiarities of communication in digital age; these have been presented in the context of the current social frames. Course education trainer may add some activities to meet special needs of the course participants. Articles, links, presentations and clips are suggested to consider emotional interaction peculiarities, competence improvement, and discussion. The course consists of subject's activities that include short introductions and questionnaires for the course participant self-evaluation of their communication skills and stress mitigation or even prevention, as well as reflections on the content of the course.

In the context of COVID-pandemic there can be observed even more cases when the families with children with behavioral disabilities or children with special needs coping with all sorts of stressful situations of misunderstandings from the majority of society; they also deal with some sorts of breaks and disharmony in communication with other parents of classroom. Therefore enhancing cooperation, mainly communication among such group of parents is becoming very important. It should be stressed that parents of disabled children can benefit from the perspective of mutual cooperation under the condition that they preserve their freedom to exercise their own judgments. They need opportunities for experimentation, chances to experience failure and to learn from mistakes. One of the advantages of cooperation is thinking together, valuing and respecting each other's personal opinions and contributions for the purpose of new and creative solutions to problems.

Parents of young children with developmental delays, who mostly took part in the session, demonstrate similar levels of parenting daily difficulties and hassles to parents of typically developing children. However, there can be noticed greater parenting stress, as regards the impact of the child on the family. In our proposed training course "Communicating with other parents" we offered to the participants the following structure of primarily needed content of which we focus on:

- PARENTS' COOPERATION in the light of MOSTLY DEMANDED SKILLS,
- SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) and EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE in service of PARENTING SKILLS,
- GOOD PRACTICES in COMMUNICATING and COOPERATING with OTHER PARENTS,

Parents as adult learners usually need to know why specific knowledge is necessary for them before they decide to learn something. In the first place, they look for the practical use and implementation of the teaching content. They very rarely choose unnecessary courses. Parents give a particular emphasis on their own decisions and on self-direction for which they feel responsible. As adult learners, they do not expect to be offered advice or any kind of hints that are provided by teachers to school learners. Parents' motivation to acquire a new knowledge leading to skills and competences is driven by a desirable goal of coping with real-life difficulties or problems. Their motivation can be also connected with a sense of self-esteem. Teaching parents' emotional communication skills became priority of JKPU strategy of training units.

Significantly important soft skills understood in terms of necessary human qualities are: analytical thinking and innovation; creativity, originality and initiative; critical thinking and analysis; complex problem-solving; leadership and social influence; emotional intelligence; reasoning, idea-producing.

Parents, who participated in our training, aim at a successful cooperation with other mothers and fathers of the disabled children need to acquire knowledge in the field of developing psychology, be aware of scientific explanations of disorders, get familiar with family role models and relationships. From among other skills, they mostly require communication skills, accompanied with self-consciousness and the ability to properly diagnose and analyze the situation. From among desirable attitudes they need to express: patience, tolerance, acceptance, stress-resistance, responsibility, respect of differences.

During the session, parents were encouraged to take advantage of their soft skills which enable them to be better prepared to play a variety of roles in front of their children, no matter if they are disabled or within generally recognized norms of psychophysical development. A list of parents' roles proposed during the session can be immensely extensive and the selection of priorities should rather be left to the parents' themselves for the sake of the well-being of the child. Suggested parent roles cover a broad spectrum of activities as: advisers, coaches, assistants, guides, mediators, protectors, managers, care-takers, enablers, leaders, instructors, supporters, initiators, companions, evaluators, listeners, models, teachers, assessors, coordinators, facilitators, story-tellers, partners, or even trainers.

The content of the 2020 session held by JKPU was divided into three mutually integrated parts, referring to given subjects - *Communication with professionals and educators, Reducing Stress, Communicating with Other Parents*. These three subjects had in common a focus and communications skills and competences, therefore we decided to integrate content rather than suggesting separate topics - this breaks with the traditional form of content organization. Therefore, the content is offered through various activities in each part. But within those combined themes main activities were introduced by involving experiences of parent education. For instance coping styles can be measured by using the so-called Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS). The tool consists of three scales:

- 1) Task-oriented coping aimed at solving problems through cognitive restructuring or attempts to change the existing situation and find solution to problems;
- 2) Emotion-oriented coping reacting to stress with self-oriented emotional reactions whose objective is the reduction of emotional tensions precipitated by the stressor;
- 3) Avoidance-oriented coping tempting to prevent from stressful situations in one of two ways: keeping away by social diversion (e.g. visiting or calling a friend) or keeping away by distraction (e.g. go out for coffee, snack or meal).

As regards challenges, seven meta-themes have been formulated to achieve by trainees:

- 1) Behaviour problems with the components of: aggression, self-injurious behaviors, anger outbursts, non-compliant/stubborn, destruction of property, arguing, safety/flight concerns, other behavior issues, inappropriate social interactions;
- 2) Adaptive skill deficits with the components of: self-help skills, life skills, social interests and skills, gross motor, fine motor;
- 3) Cognitive communication skills deficit with the components of: communication, academic, cognitive, social cognition;
- 4) Restricted/repetitive behavior with the components of: rigidity/routine, repetitive behavior, narrow interests/lack of motivation;
- 5) Anxiety/sensory with the components of: anxiety general, anxiety sensory, sensory general, frustration/emotion regulation/patience;
- 6) Attention difficulties with the components of: hyperactivity/impulsivity/fidgety, inattention/poor attention span;
- 7) Other medical issues with the components of: seizures, sleep problems, food sensitivities, lethargic/tired/low energy, other issues.

All activities with the selected pieces of content are under the umbrella of the evidence-based positive parenting framework with the content approach of reducing parent-kids stress and enhancing communication skills.

**2. Organizational issues** and strategies (*how did you conduct the participants how did you communicate during and after training course difficulties encountered and solutions*).

*Introduction to the workshop format* that consists of

- (a) allowing bigger autonomy and respect to all family members, creating more space and time for inner communication to reduce stress too;
- (b) covering the activities of the on-line format training.

The steps are adjusted to on-line way of communicating and consist of:

- The establishment of an online environment where the interaction between the trainer and the participants as well as starting with a activity linking the theoretical introduction with some of the content material.

- Revealing more appreciation, respect and more empathy from the trainers towards the trainees in the same time by discussing the group, couple, individual, plenary discussions in on-line model.
- Introducing into the session in clear and communicative language, informing the participants about activities of the content and tasks connected with.
- Introduction of activities encouraging participants to providing personal contributions.
- Exchanging of reactions and observations by involving critical thinking and reflection on what happened in their cases and during this session; comparative evaluation of experiences and exercises carried out.
- Generalizing to discover what was learned and how it connects to real life.
- Suggesting participants to give some examples of gaining new experience and first steps of evaluation; encouragement of the trainees to create their own diary or depictions of their own practical exercises or solutions (maybe blogging, vlogging...etc.). Afterwards there is possibility to evaluate assessment forms through Google forms or the internet platforms...etc.

JKPU organized educators/social workers who wanted to take part in the course; JKPU's staff helped them in understanding the given units of the courses translating English terms and version into Polish. The e-learning units were uploaded into the Moodle system according to the requirement of the Rezekne Academy of Technologies.

Participants have been divided into 4 smaller groups in order to manage interactivity with them and respond to the needs of those that cannot participate in the morning sessions. Indeed, in some cases, in the morning, the same computer was shared for parents' smart working and distance learning of children.

The same distance lectures were held in the morning and the evening. The distance learning particular units were divided into parts of 45 minutes sessions. Exercises were organized, dividing the participants into smaller groups, and giving them tasks to perform together.

The materials of training should be accessible for those who will use them for the purpose of knowledge improvement and competence development in their interests. The materials are discussed in the country project group when being prepared; therefore, all up-loaded original materials should not have the name of their authors, except for the otherwise published materials – either cited, completely downloaded, or modified - the author and source should be mentioned.

Steps on access to the ESEC website and course agenda and materials are under link address:

<https://tdl.rta.lv/mod/page/view.php?id=28>.

Recording unit lectures which had been sent to platforms in the form of a recording or training movie, is also a form of distance learning that some educators/teachers use. Participants also have the ability to re-play a unit, what is quite useful solution. External sources are also increasingly used, to which students get access via teacher's internet links (films, radio programs, press articles). Therefore the ESEC course based on the Moodle, which is an online learning platform designed to provide personalized learning environments. It is free and uses open source software. The target users are educators, administrators and learners. Moodle can be used with downloaded software or online, and it is available on a variety of devices.

### **3. Methodology** (*teaching-learning modality, difficulties encountered and solutions*) *Teaching-learning modality*

Parents of children, and social educators and others participants of session mostly will be training so called “values of group work” and they are going to train on the following categories:

- sharing - people feel less alone when they see that others feel the same;
- identification - people are willing to identify with others in a similar situation;
- accepting help from <similar people> - people accept help more easily from those who are in a situation similar to theirs, who understand them;
- checking - people in a group can be checked, tested in a variety of important roles;
- mutual assistance - people are often able to provide assistance to others who are experiencing the same or similar situations, which raises their self-esteem;
  
- social exchange and acceptance - people need a sense of belonging and acceptance, which is possible to gain in a group of people with the same experience.

Suggested exercises used at the training should be described in the part of the program prepared by JKPU in major follows the interactivities of the workshop meetings:

- suggested short hands-on activities as searching on the internet parent training materials to realize a short report.
  
- individual experiences and situation analysis to come to conclusions of possible usage to meet the parent particular needs; identifying experienced or possible situations when the conclusion or the activity might be helpful;
  
- posing a set of questions related to the content (included within the session program and plans);



- the participants share their testimonies and experience, they give examples of coping with communication skills, using ICT, IT, AI, Web. 4.0 devices, etc. to compare, analyze and come to a conclusion on their suitability for current situations and the needs of educators, social workers parents, children;

- involving video-clips, images, etc. that are selected for their essential message, such as apps, which are popular with children and less popular with parents; video clips that report features on communication, emotional skills, etc.

- sharing their own personal contributions to the proposed exercises, which support and make learning process more attractive;

The applied ESEC platform allows those who conduct session to make small groups or pairs for discussion – this reduces opportunity for participants to make their own groups. The suggested activities should be related mostly to issues of communication with professionals and educators, dealing with reducing stressful situations, and provide information on important parenting decisions, local strategies in a broader context, social skills, etc. Following units of session were self-paced and pre-designed. They were also organized into methodological categories such as watch, think, dig deeper, discuss.

On the ground of the theoretical content and the activities proposed, participants should debate and interact in order to conclude or make some own statements.

Here we are having an example (one for each part) of such activities which imply group cooperation:

#### Activity 2:

Read the article: Roya Koochak Entezar, Nooraini Othman, Azlina Binti Mohd Kosnin, Afsaneh Ghanbaripanah, *The influence of emotional intelligence on mental health among Iranian mothers of mild intellectually disabled children*, International Journal of Fundamental Psychology & Social Sciences, 2013, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 12-15.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>

#### Aim of the activity:

- Understand the impact of emotional intelligence on mental health among mothers of mild intellectually disabled children.

#### Task to carry on:

- Discuss with other participants if mental health or mental wellbeing can be of a better quality thanks to increasing emotional intelligence of individuals.

### Advices to practice:

The message for parents, as regards playing with their children, reflects the idea that mothers and fathers are children's best and most valuable toys. That is why they should play together. A set of tips for parents that encourage them to get involved in games give important advices to be followed, such as:

- Take time to play with your child every day and focus solely on him/her.
- Let the child choose the game to play.
- Draw your attention to positive feelings and good communication, in the mood of having fun together.
- Get involved as many family members as possible.
- Let playing become a routine family activity.
- Stress the child's skills and virtues, encourage initiative and the sense of competence.
- Teach your child to accept victory and defeat, as both need to be taken for granted.
- Respect the rule that time comes for the game to stop.

### *Difficulties encountered and solutions*

There were encountered some difficulties such as:

- problems with some professional terms and sometimes how to manage online materials and work with them;
- variety of backgrounds and experiences of participants;
- different level of digital technologies' skills, which means that not everyone of participants was ready for on-line model of learning.

### *Suggested accents for the future improvements*

- to simplify some units or use less scientific style of language because it would help an acquisition of these skills for their practical application in handling situations,
- to organize "after Covid 19 pandemic period" meetings between partners and exchanging own experience of courses inviting participants and educators,
- to create more opportunities and platforms for exchanging national and local experience of parents with children of special needs, educators, teachers, care givers, counselors...etc., especially after situation of pandemic COVID-19.

### *Evaluation (method, process, tools and results of the knowledge evaluation and method, posses, tools and results of training course evaluation)*

The leading idea of the evaluation is: the aim of the evaluation is to evaluate and identify the learning of new concepts and knowledge acquired by the participants. Evaluation, is also a continuous matter that occurs during the course of the training course, at each session and even at each activity, it is among the best means to make the program a unique, well-structured, or integrated affair.

- Self-assessment closes the session. A common questionnaire, developed within the framework of the ESEC project, was offered, which allowed the participant to evaluate their initial skills and compare them with those acquired during the session;

-All JKPU participants declared to be satisfied of the training experience as well as all participants improved their educational skills and competences.

There still is a high need in Polish society of positive change of attitudes towards parents and families who are dealing on every day basis with problems of the disabled kids or kids with special needs. Therefore it would be a very useful idea working on the new strategy of social change adjusted to new circumstances of lockdowns and pandemic conditions.

- An appreciation, respect and more empathy from the trainers towards the trainees.
- The establishment of an online environment where the interaction between the trainer and the participants.
- Encouragement of the trainees to create their own diary or depictions of their own practical exercises or solutions (maybe blogging, vlogging...etc.)
- Evaluation or assessment forms through Google forms or the internet platforms...etc

There is a very important to stress that recording unit lectures which had been sent to platforms such as YouTube in the form of a film, is also a form of distance learning that some educators/teachers may use. Participants also indicate that the ability to re-play a lecture or lesson is useful in this solution. External sources are also increasingly used, to which students get access via teacher's internet links (films, radio programs, press articles).