

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract: Educators play a significant role in the development of social skills of preschool children. The aim of the research was to examine the attitudes of educators about children's social skills, the approaches they use in their work and their recommendations for further work. The research was carried out during 2024 in the kindergartens of the Srem district, and it included 62 preschool teachers. The questionnaire was created for the purposes of this research, and it examined views and attitudes in accordance with the goal of the research. The results indicate that children of preschool age manifest both socially desirable and socially undesirable and unacceptable patterns of behavior. It implies the promotion of better and more inventive approaches in work, as well as the active participation of parents in various activities that can have a significant impact on the development of children's social skills.

Key words: social skills, social competences, teachers, preschool institution, family

1. INTRODUCTION

Years of Ascension [1] emphasize that a child is a social being, naturally focused on relationships with peers and adults. The child is an active participant in social relations and processes in the family, kindergarten and the community to which he belongs, and with his participation contributes to the shaping of that community. Raising a child means expanding his opportunities, which creates social justice and equality and critically examines the issue of power in the relationship between a child and an adult, control and fairness [1].

Stojanović and Bogavac [2] point out that the development of a child's personality begins at preschool age and that it is conditioned by his social environment, especially by adults. Adults who have the strongest influence are parents in the first place, followed immediately by educators with whom children spend most of their time. The preschool teacher not only provides a model of behavior, but also creates learning situations and a stimulating environment through activities, projects, or spontaneous moments during the play, within which the child builds his sociability. The teacher is an important initiator of children's social development.

Definitions found in the literature are mostly based on the view that children's social development represents behaviors and attitudes, but also affects that children manifest through interaction with their environment, which includes adults and peer groups. The socio-emotional development of children mostly depends on genetic factors and the environment in which the child grows up. As children learn according to the model, it is clear that the influence of people whose behavior children observe during childhood is one of the main factors in their social development. There are several theories of social development, and among the most significant are Bowlbi's theory of affective attachment, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, socio-cultural theory of Leo Vygotsky, social learning theory of Albert Bandura, Ecological approach to development - Bronfenbrenner's and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development [3].

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2. SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

From the first days of life, children begin to acquire and develop the skills that are necessary to cope with different life situations by learning them. This learning includes the development of the ability to apply knowledge, to recognize and later understand other people's feelings, to manage one's feelings, to set and achieve some goals, to empathize with others, to solve problems, to make decisions, to bear the consequences and build friendships. Socio-emotional learning includes: self-awareness, self-regulation, awareness of others (putting yourself in the position of others), responsible decision-making, relationship-building skills (ability to establish and maintain healthy and successful relationships with different individuals and groups) [4].

All the aforementioned competences are developed, among other things, in kindergartens, through play and experiences, by using different approaches in the work. An important role is played by the practice of the kindergarten, as well as the partnership with parents and the social community. In this sense, educators should create and develop an environment in which children will feel satisfied, fulfilled and accepted every day, because in this way the overall development of children is supported. At the same time, they should create a socially and emotionally supportive environment in kindergartens that will positively guide children's behavior and contribute to their well-being. Vranešević et al [4] describes the process of socio-emotional learning in which educators organize a physical and social environment in which children will feel safe and secure, and have the opportunity to further develop the skills necessary for successful functioning in everyday life.

In order for children to be able to function in the peer group and society in which they live, to be able to build relationships and friendships, they must know the norms and rules of the society they belong to, that is, they must have certain social knowledge. Panić and Dedaj [5] state that social competence includes the regulation of emotions, knowledge and understanding of society, as well as social skills that are necessary to act in accordance with this knowledge. A child learns and develops his skills and abilities for social functioning from birth, thereby gaining success in interpersonal relationships. The development of social competences is closely related to the development of morality, cognitive and emotional development [6].

2.1 How educators influence the social development of a child

During childhood, children learn to cooperate with other children in play, learn to compete, resolve conflicts, take initiative, be leaders or be led, and this is what relationships with children are for. Pavlović [7] states that through joint practical life activities and play with peers, young children learn from each other how to share, how to understand and take into account the needs and expectations of others and respect other people's opinions and viewpoints, how to control their own impulses and resolve conflicts. Pavlović Breneselović and Krnjaja [8] point out that through relationships with peers, children question their own identity, notice strengths and weaknesses in themselves and others, take on new roles and responsibilities, and develop a sense of belonging and acceptance. All these are learned skills, and the teacher's task is to create an atmosphere that encourages social relations between children, as well as to organize learning situations or games in which children will develop their sociability. What is additionally significant, according to research, is that children who were able to engage in complex play with their peers at an early age were more competent in working with other children in preschool years and in middle childhood. Acceptance of peers in early childhood is a predictor of later relationships with peers [7].

The goal of preschool upbringing and education is a happy, satisfied, fulfilled and accepted child, who builds relationships of trust, respect, closeness and friendship, as well as developing communication competence and abilities, especially in peer communication [8]. Social relations with other children have a positive effect on cognition, prosocial behavior and the development of emotions, and by developing these skills, it is possible to prevent violence and aggressiveness in children, which are increasingly prevalent today as unfavorable patterns of behavior. The preschool teacher's role is to create opportunities for children to learn and practice appropriate social skills, which requires the teacher to understand the social needs and possibilities of preschool age. He must understand that often the problem with a child's behavior arises in a family where there is not enough

time for play and entertainment, where children are offered alternatives for socializing in the form of material gifts or technical means that are detrimental to the child's development, and that every child needs a little motivation and a positive example to feel important enough, accepted in order to be ready to accept new patterns of behavior.

Today's families differ from those of the past, when members spent much more time together, and when consistency and a good example of the relationship between parents was the driving force behind "good behavior" at home. Parents today hardly have time for children, often tired and nervous, worried about economic existence they send negative signals to children and set a bad example, which they later reflect in kindergarten, through manifestations of undesirable forms of behavior such as lack of empathy, aggressiveness, anger management issues, intolerance, spite, uncooperativeness, withdrawal, lying, etc.

Preschool teachers should also create situations in which they teach children how to listen to the conversational-partner, wait their turn, share toys and other things, cooperate, reach their goal peacefully, while he will point out situations that include labeling, complaining, or ignoring as undesirable. So, in addition to personal example, the teacher should create a positive emotional climate, a stimulating physical environment, insist on group work and encourage children's play, motivate children to help each other, support cooperation, group games, etc.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PART

3.1. Research problem

The family plays an important role in the development of the child's social skills and there are numerous studies that deal with the connection of different dimensions of parental behavior with the characteristics of the child's personality and different forms of child behavior, which are mainly focused on the negative effects of certain parenting styles [9]. In addition to parents, preschool teachers, as well as teachers and peers also influence the development of social competences. The problem of the research is to investigate the approaches used by educators to encourage and develop social skills and competencies of preschool children.

3.2. The goal and tasks of the research

The goal of the research is to examine the opinions of educators about the social skills of preschool children, what forms of behavior they observe in children and what approaches they use in their work to develop socially acceptable forms of behavior at preschool age. 3.3. The sample, conducting research.

62 educators of preschool employed in kindergartens in the Srem district participated in the research. All research participants are female, with 6 to 27 years of work experience in preschool institutions. The research was conducted during 2024. The respondents completed the questionnaires in paper format. The code of ethics was fully respected during the research. The research participants were given written instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, and it was emphasized that the survey was anonymous, that it was not necessary to sign it, that participation in the survey was voluntary and that they could withdraw their answers at any time. In addition, the research participants were asked to provide their answers as spontaneously and honestly as possible in order to obtain the highest quality data.

3.3. Instruments

The research used a questionnaire that was constructed for the needs of this research and contains open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questions were defined with the aim of looking at educators' opinions about children's social skills and behaviors, to examine the approaches and work methods that educators use in the development of socially desirable forms of behavior and social skills in children, as well as educators' experiences of how the project approach can be used as a model for designing desirable patterns of behaviour.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The answers are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 - Social skills and competence that educators observe in children's behavior

Table 1 - Social skills and competence that educators observe in children's behavior

Social skills and competence	f
A tendency towards group activities and games	35
Tendency towards collaborative relationships	37
Warmth in addressing others	38
The ability to empathize with others	21
The skill of listening to other participants in the communication process	11
Tolerance and flexibility	17
The skill of constructive problem solving	9

Table 2 - Undesirable patterns of behavior that educators observe in children's behavior

Undesirable patterns of behavior	f
Uncooperativeness	14
Lack of empathy	43
Inappropriate speech	27
Selfishness	18
Aggressiveness	35
Stubbornness and spite	29
Disobedience	51

Educators state that social competences and skills they observe in the behavior of preschool children are a cooperative attitude towards others, warmth in addressing them and a tendency towards group activities. Considering the developmental characteristics of children and the egocentricity of children of that age, these are the expected results. In practice, educators encounter various forms of undesirable behavior or social patterns. They point out that disobedience, lack of empathy, aggressiveness, inappropriate speech, stubbornness and spite are the most prominent.

Approaches, methods or forms of work educators most often use as an incentive for the development of preschool children's social competences, that is, for correcting or preventing undesirable forms of behavior were analyzed, too. The answers are given in Table 3.

Table 3 - Which approach do educators recommend when it comes to correcting undesirable patterns of behavior in preschool children

	f (%)
Project approach with team activities	37 (59,68)
Group forms of work	51 (82,26)
Competitive games that include all children	42 (67,75)
Spontaneous situations	62 (100)
Practical everyday activities	45 (72,58)
Projects with family involvement	29 (46,77)
Workshops with children and parents	19 (30,61)

Obtained results lead to the conclusion that educators use different approaches in their work, that they prefer spontaneous situations as well as practical life situations, a project approach and

competitive games that include all children. They use learning situations and workshops with children and parents less often, which shows that they mostly use those program activities that enable both learning and socialization of children, where they integrate the necessary forms of work that aim to prevent the further development of unacceptable behavior patterns.

Educators were asked to provide recommendations for the development of social competencies and skills in preschool children. The question was open-ended, after which the answers were analyzed and grouped. The results obtained imply the introduction of changes in practice, which would include more innovative approaches and more active involvement of parents in the life of kindergartens, which would provide them with a model that they should apply in family settings through practical examples and activities. The recommendation is to include parents in projects that will, with their content, stimulate the development of social competencies in preschool children, and at the same time, influence the social competencies of parents. Also, expert teams in kindergartens should focus on creating workshop-type programs for children and parents, which would work more intensively on enriching parents' knowledge about patterns of good behavior, manners, and relationships with others.

5. CONCLUSION

Educators strive through practice to develop socially acceptable patterns of behavior and encourage interaction among children, as it is the basis of social development. An analysis of their opinions and experiences through research has determined that they gladly do this through a project approach that encourages and includes all children in activities. Adapted activities with well-planned content help children understand the inappropriateness of certain forms of behavior and correct them in the direction of acceptable ones. Group games, teamwork and an invitation to cooperation develop in children an awareness of the importance of the "other", and influence the overall attitude of children towards the environment in terms of social relations. Although, according to educators, children develop numerous positive behavioral patterns, they also develop negative behavioral patterns, the most common of which in kindergarten are a lack of empathy, aggressiveness, outbursts of anger, and an inability to work in groups and play. This is something that is constantly being worked on during projects and activities because positive social traits and behavioral patterns ensure children's success in later social life.

6. REFERENCES

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