

THE RELATION BETWEEN PRESCHOOLERS' QUALITY FAMILY TIME AND THEIR LEVEL OF SOCIAL SKILLS

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Abstract

The existing curriculum gives family, respectively parents, the role of active partners in the children's education. For a long time, it was believed that educational institutions carry full responsibility for a child's education, the family being regarded as the beneficiary of the schools' activity. But, the truth is that family cannot be separated from the school's educational context. The role of parents does not stop when the child is admitted to the educational institution, but it changes in terms of approaching the child, given the latter's new status and in full agreement with what happens in the educational environment. The role of parents in building social interaction skills at a child may be identified in terms of cause, as well as effect. On the one hand, this means that family interaction defines a child's social interaction potential and, on the other hand, a child's general developmental state is indicative, to a certain extent, of the family background. In this paper, we shall try to identify the relevance of quality time spent by the child in the middle of his/her family and the child's social interaction skills. The methods we have used are the open-ended questionnaire and observation.

Key words: active educational partner, preschoolers, quality family time, social interaction skills

Introduction

A child spends most of his time with his family. The family environment shapes the way in which a child grows and develops first of all mentally and, to a greater or smaller extent, physically. Recent studies claim that there is a strong connection between a high level of social interaction skills and success in any area of life (Martin and Chaney, 2007). Social skills are defined as "the ability to express feelings or to communicate interests and desires to others" (Lieberman et al.,

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1975, p. 23), or as “the ability to express both positive and negative feelings in the interpersonal context without suffering consequent loss of social reinforcement” (Hersen and Bellack, 1977: 11). Although there is no consensus regarding the definition of social skills, they are nevertheless commonly understood as the ability to interact with other people in an appropriate and effective way (Segrin, 2000; Spitzberg, 1989). Appropriateness in behaviour is achieved by conforming to social norms, values and expectations, so as to be positively viewed by others, which, in turn, requires the ability to perceive and analyze subtle cues that define the situation and the identification of suitable responses. Effectiveness, from the perspective of social skills, means achieving one’s goals through interaction (Segrin and Givertz, 2003, p. 276). Social skills are necessary in maintaining social, psychological and, quite often, occupational well-being (Segrin and Givertz, 2003, p. 280). People with poor social skills seem to be less popular among their peers and less satisfied/successful with their romantic relationships than those equipped with better social skills (Burleson 1995: 560). People with poor social skills are also at a higher risk for psychological problems such as depression, social anxiety, loneliness and alcoholism, academic underachievement (Segrin, 2000). Social skills include, according to Bellack et al. (1997), expressive and receptive skills. Expressive skills include verbal behaviour (form, structure, content and amount of words used during conversation), paralinguistic behaviour (the voice particularities during conversation, such as volume, pace, intonation, pitch) and nonverbal behaviour (facial expression, eye contact, posture, personal distance, subtle muscle changes around the mouth and eyes). Receptive skills may be translated as the ability to perceive social situations accurately and respond accordingly.

The factors which affect social skill performance include, but are not limited to, cultural norms or mental illness. Studies also reveal the role of the family in child development. The ways in which parents may influence their children include mechanisms such as: rewarding desirable actions, punishing undesired actions and transferring knowledge (Kagan, 1999, p. 164). For example, a mother praises her 3-year-old for eating properly, a father threatens the loss of a privilege because his child refuses to go to bed, a parent names an unfamiliar animal in a picture. All these mechanisms share the need for direct interaction between parents and children. The parents’ failure to discipline the children’s acts of disobedience and/or aggression is correlated with the latter’s asocial behaviour, whereas interest in a child’s activities is correlated with higher levels of responsiveness in the child (idem.).

Methods, tools and participants

In this study, we attempted to find whether there is any correlation between a child’s level of social skills and the way in which s/he spends her/his leisure time with his/her family. For this, we have constructed a questionnaire in order to find out how a number of 20 preschoolers from the small group at “Dumbrava Minunată” Kindergarten usually spend one of the two week-end days with their families. We have applied the questionnaire to 20 parents, during the first meeting with the parents, at the beginning of the first semester from the 2012-2013 school year. The method of observation implied the attentive observation of all the 20 preschoolers during the entire first semester, of the same school year. A child’s observation sheet included the following categories, which we regard as illustrative for the children’s level of social skills: level of creativity, level of curiosity, level of the wish to interact/integrate in the group, level of empathy, level of the wish to communicate, level of the persistence in an activity, level of interest and cooperation, with the possibility to tick, for each child, one of the alternatives: very low, low, average, high, very high.

The **hypothesis** of our study is that the quantity and quality of the time that a child spends with the family has a positive impact upon the level of development of the respective child’s interaction and communication skills.

Data interpretation

Table 1 shows the parents’ answers to the questionnaire. Instead of the parents’ full names, we have used the initials of the child’s name, shown on the first row. Q 1, Q 2 etc. stand for question number 1, respectively question number 2 etc. from the questionnaire applied to parents.

Table 1. *The results of the parents’ answers to the questionnaire*

	LM	MA	LA	OP	SV	GV	MG	OA	HD	CS	PI	NM	NA	CT	DC	GA	CD	DS	MI	OF
Q1	Su	Su	Su	Sa	Su	Sa	Su	Su	Su	Su	Su	Sa	Su	Su	Sa	Su	Su	Su	Su	Su
Q2	b, d	b, d, e	b, c, d, e	a, b, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, d	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	a, b, d	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, c, d, e	b, d, e
Q3 (hrs)	4-6	24	24	24	24	24	-	6	5	24	24	24	12	24	6-7	24	24	12	24	5
Q4 (hrs)	5-6	2	2-6	4-5	6	2-3	-	1-2	2	1-2	2-3	2-3	1	4	1-2	2-3	2-3	4	2	1
Q5 (min.)	10-20	<10	>20	<10	10-20	10-20	-	10-20	>20	10-20	>20	>20	<10	10-20	<10	>20	10	>20	10-20	<10
Q6	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	-	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Q7	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Q8	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	m	b	b	b	m	b	b	b	b	b	b	b

Table 2 shows the level of development of the children’s interaction and communication skills, based on the observation sheets filled in by the two pre-primary school teachers of the respective group.

Table 2. *The level of development of the children’s interaction and communication skills*

	Creativity level	Curiosity level	Desire to interact/integrate in the group	Empathy level	Desire to communicate	Level of persistence in activity	Cooperation and interest level
LM	low	average	average	high	average	low	low
MA	low	low	average	average	low	low	low
LA	high	very high	high	average	high	high	high
OP	high	high	average	high	high	high	high
SV	average	average	average	high	average	average	high
GV	average	high	high	high	high	high	high
MG	average	average	high	high	average	high	average
OA	low	average	average	average	average	low	average
HD	low	average	low	average	low	low	average
CS	average	high	high	high	high	average	average
PI	high	high	average	high	average	average	high
NM	high	high	average	average	average	average	high
NA	average	average	low	average	average	low	low
CT	average	high	very high	average	high	average	average
DC	low	low	average	average	average	average	average
GA	high	high	very high	very high	very high	high	high
CD	average	very high	high	average	high	average	average
DS	high	average	average	high	high	low	high
MI	average	average	average	average	average	average	average
OF	low	low	average	average	average	low	low

Before proceeding to analysing the data we have obtained, we should mention the fact that the small number of children included in the study is insufficient to support the reaching of a definite conclusion. However, this study has shown the potential of extending such an inquiry to a larger number of children, with a view to identifying the most unconstructive and constructive attitudes of the family in relation to the child’s level of social skills and general development.

A first comparative look at the two tables reveals the fact that our hypothesis has been confirmed, respectively that the quality and quantity a child spends with his family impacts positively upon the level of his/her interaction and communication skills. Regarding question number 1 (Mention the week-end day in which you spend most of the time with your child?), four out of twenty parents said Saturday was the day they spent most of their time with the child, whereas the other

parents said it was Sunday. If we look at the two tables, we see that the day does not affect the amount of time spent with the child in any way.

As far as question number two is concerned [How does your child spend his/her leisure time (chose from the following activities: a. plays on the computer; b. watches cartoons; c. plays outdoors with other children; d. plays inside with his/her toys; e. draws)?], we may notice the fact that children who do not spend time playing with other children on a regular basis have lower levels of the desire to interact, communicate, a lower level of persistence in the activities conducted by the pre-primary teachers with the whole group of children during the kindergarten hours, as well as lower level of cooperation and interest (LM, MA, HD, NA, OF). The exception in this case (OP) shows that children are unique and there are other factors which have an impact upon the social skills of a person, for example a child's character.

Regarding question number 3 [How much time do you spend with your child during one of the two week-end days? (indicate number of hours)], 12 parents (60%) said they spend all the respective week-end day with their child (24 hours), 2 parents (10%) said they spend 12 hours with their child, 4 parents (20%) said they spend between 5 and 7 hours with their child, 1 parent (5%) answered between 4 and 6 hours, whereas 1 parent (5%) did not provide any answer to this question. Regarding this question, we may see clearly that the children who spend more time with their families during the weekend score average, high and very high levels of all the social skills taken into consideration: creativity, curiosity, desire to interact, empathy, desire to communicate, persistence in activity, cooperation and interest (MG, LA, OP, SV, GV, CT, PI, NM, GA, CD, MI).

The answers from question number 4 [How much time does your child spend outdoors during the week-end? (indicate number of hours)] also reveal a connection between the number of hours spent outdoor by the child and his general level of social skills. On the one hand, children who spend a larger number of hours doing outdoor activities, with their families and other persons (family friends, relatives) have indeed a higher level of social skills, between average, high and very high (OP, SV, LA, GV, PI, NM, GA, CD, CT, DS), one exception also being visible in this case (LM), and one parent giving no answer to this question (MG). On the other hand, children who spend less time doing outdoor activities with their families, friends and relatives, have a general lower level of social interaction skills (average and low: MA, OA, HD, NA, DC, MI, OF), with one exception in this case also (CS).

The answers to question number 5 (How much time does your child spend drawing/colouring/painting during a week-end day? Choose from: less than 10 minutes; between

10 and 20 minutes; more than 20 minutes.) show that there is a connection between the little time spent by a child drawing/colouring/painting and his average and low levels of all the social skills included in the table (OF, DC, NA), with one exception (OP). Children who spent more than 20 minutes drawing/colouring/painting seem to have higher levels of all the social skills included in the table: 3 children have average and high scores (PI, NM, DS), 2 children have average, high and very high scores (LA, GA), whereas 1 is an exception (HD).

Regarding question number 6 [Is your child involved in extra-school activities (ballet, swimming, piano lessons, skating etc.)? Answer by yes or no.], we may say that the parents' answers support no conclusion in this respect: only two parents mentioned that their child was involved in extra-school activities (LM and LA). Out of the two, one of them has low to average scores for all the social skills included in the observation sheet (LA), whereas the other one has average to very high scores (GA).

Regarding question number 7 (Do you use to punish your child during the week-end? If yes, how do you punish your child? How many minutes do you give to punishing?), all parents except one (MG) said that they do not punish their children during the week-end. Given the fact that almost none of the parents punish their children, we may either draw the conclusion that absence or presence of punishment has no influence upon a child's level of development of his social skills, or that some parents have (willingly or unwillingly) lied when answering this question.

Regarding question number 8 (Is your family monoparental or biparental?), 18 children (90%) live in biparental families, whereas 2 (10%) live in monoparental families (HD, NA). Both of these children (HD and NA) display a level of their social skills between average and low.

Reading the two tables by sections may also provide us with further connections. For example, the greater amount of time spent by the child drawing/painting is connected to a high and very high level of creativity and curiosity. There is also a connection between the larger number of hours spent by the child with his parents, as well as the number of hours spent doing activities outdoors, and a average, high and very high level of the desire to interact, communicate, cooperate and show persistence in an activity.

Conclusions and discussions

It is worth mentioning the fact that all the children observed, irrespective of their low, average or high scores for the other categories in the table) scored average, high and very high in their level of empathy. We believe that showing empathy is an indicator of the child's open mindedness and

potential for personal growth, because the ability to recognize and sympathise with the feelings of others implies a rather complex imaginative process. Moreover, empathy is considered to be a motivating factor, supporting a pro-social behaviour (Eisenberg, 1987: 99). This means that the children who have low levels of creativity, curiosity, interaction, communication and cooperation, but have average and high levels of empathy have, in fact, the potential to improve these skills. It is also worth mentioning the fact that children who use to draw more, spend more time outdoors and, generally, more time with their families and other children are better developed in terms of creativity, curiosity, desire to interact and cooperate.

The reasons for which parents spend a larger or more limited amount of time with their children during the week-end are various: some of them work also during the week-end; some parents are simply too tired to interact with the child; some parents are not aware of the importance of parents in the education and emotional development of a child. Also, the main reasons for which parents do not involve their children in extra-curricular activities (swimming, piano lessons, dancing etc.) are lack of money, lack of time, the distant location of the place where these activities are organized. Given these problems, we believe that our small-scale study may provide an important line for future extended research, with a view to identifying ways of raising the parents' awareness regarding the fact that a child's education, intellectual and emotional development starts at home.

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