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## DIFFICULTIES IN SOCIAL ADAPTATION OF A CHILD TO KINDERGARTEN: RESEARCH OF FACTORS

**Abstract:** The article will discuss the problem of social adaptation of children to nursery school. Based on the conducted surveys, difficulties of the adaptation period were identified, in particular, as caused by a high level of anxiety and the specifics of interpersonal relationships. A high level of anxiety, as the acquired property of an individual, implies such things as high sensitivity to emotional situations, unconscious uncertainty in one's abilities, the desire to preserve a familiar position that satisfies the individual's attitude towards itself, and the occurrence of acute emotional reactions when a familiar position is threatened to change. The ways of coping with them are provided herein. Particular attention has been given to specially selected active motor games that contribute to not only uniting children and overcoming isolation, but also to relieving stress in children, which may arise in the process of children's adaptation to kindergarten.

**Key words:** preschool age; kindergarten; nursery school; social adaptation; the level of anxiety; active motor game.

### Introduction

A child adapting to new social relationships, as well as developing abilities to establish and enrich interpersonal relationships, is very important for a child's health and overall development. The immaturity of many components of the functional system of adaptive mechanisms often leads to difficulties of adaptation when changing the environment. Deterioration of the emotional state, disorders of appetite and deviations in behaviour are observed: obstinacy, whims, rejection of communication with the teacher and children and delays in motor functions.

Disorders of the emotional state, and hence inadequate behavioural reactions, are the consequences of mental stress in children and the increase in anxiety level. A high level of anxiety, as the acquired property of an individual, implies such things as high sensitivity to emotional situations, unconscious uncertainty in one's abilities, the desire to preserve a familiar position that satisfies the individual's attitude towards itself, occurrence of acute emotional reactions when a familiar position is threatened to change, and also 'fear not to justify the social expectations or to lose the approval of others' (Imedadze 1966).

One of the challenges facing the nursery teacher is to reduce the level of anxiety in children during the adaptation period and to create positive conditions for them during the stay in kindergarten. In Georgia this problem is aggravated with the number of children (25-30) peer group, under one teacher and one carer that impedes to make contact with an individual child closer.

An effective way to relieve stress in children is a game during which children can establish relationships with each other and gain experience in communication. But at the preschool age, children experience difficulties in organizing games. As usual, active children who have gaming skills become the organizers of the games, but passive, closed children stay aside and they only watch the games of their peers. Therefore, at this stage the assistance of an adult is required in order engage the children in mutual games. In the spontaneous children's games, a teacher must intervene only in crucial moments (Isenberg, Jalongo 2000). Therefore, a teacher should organize such cooperative games, in which the teacher will be able to manage the process of the game and regulate the activities of its participants. One such game is an active motor game.

The interaction of emotion regulation and social adaptation in preschool children is covered in the literature (Rubin et al. 1995). The influence of the individual characteristics of children on the relationship in the group of peers and their academic learning in preschool institutions has been explored by Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2012). The harmonious development of a child and his or her further preparation for school largely depends on the speed of adaptation to nursery school (Katz, McClellan 1997).

### Hypothesis

1. The adaptation period to nursery school is characterized by a high level of anxiety;
2. The adaptation period is mainly due to the restructuring of relationships with adults and peers;
3. The use of specially developed active motor games helps with adaptation to kindergarten.

**The aim** of our study is to:

1. Identify the factors determining the difficulties of adapting children to kindergarten;

2. Develop the ways to overcome these difficulties with the use of specially organized active games.

## **Methods**

### **Study 1: Identification of difficulties of social adaptation of children to nursery school**

#### **Research instrument**

In order to diagnose the level of anxiety in children during their adaptation process to kindergarten, the method by Dorkey et al. (2002) was applied. The use of this and the following methods was agreed with the preschool administrations and the children's parents.

Early adaptation of anxiety projective test for children was conducted by N. Imedadze (1966). Identification of the level of anxiety is based on an assessment of a child's attitude to certain types of situations, and gives indirect information about the nature of the child's relationship with peers and adults in the family and in nursery school.

The material of the test comprises 14 drawings, which show situations in the typical life of a preschooler. The test consists of three parts: the situation of communication with adults (e.g., walking with parents, being scolded by the mother), communication with children (playing with elder children, playing with younger children, isolation from a game, aggressive attack), and daily life activities (getting dressed, eating separately, and going to bed).

Each of these situations was performed in two versions: for girls, the picture shows a girl of the same age as the test age, and for boys, the picture depicts a boy of the same age. The face was contoured. The test subjects were provided with two carved faces on the table: funny and sad. Depending on what kind of emotional meaning a child attached to a given situation, it was determined a normal or traumatic experience of communication.

#### **Participants**

The study was conducted one week after the children went to kindergarten (from 19 to 21 September 2013) in three nurseries of Tbilisi. The subjects of the study were three- and four-year-old children who went to kindergarten for the first time, in total 61 children.

## Procedure

After the introduction of the picture, the child was asked: 'Do you think the child will have a sad or cheerful face?' The child had to choose one of the suggested faces and attach it to the contour of the head of the child depicted in each of the 14 drawings.

The level of anxiety was determined by the number of chosen sad faces: low (0-20 per cent), average (20-50 per cent) or high (above 50 per cent).

## Results

Table 1. Level of anxiety in children

| Number of children | Level of anxiety |         |      |
|--------------------|------------------|---------|------|
|                    | High             | Average | Low  |
| 61                 | 23%              | 73.7%   | 3.3% |

Source: Author's own work

As the table shows, the majority of children showed high and medium levels of anxiety. The analysis of the findings showed that the high level of anxiety was determined based on a negative assessment of the situations that simulated the 'child-child' relationship (aggressive attack, isolation from a game) as well as modelling the 'child-adult' relationship 'Reprimand'. The sad face was less selected in the pictures 'Walking with a baby', 'Ignoring', and 'A child with parents'. The most frequent choice of the cheerful face, which determined the lower level of anxiety in the given situations, was made in the simulated everyday activities (getting dressed, washing, going to bed alone and having meals alone).

### Study 2: Identification of relationships with siblings, peers and adults

#### Research instrument

In order to identify the relationships with brothers and sisters, peers and adults, the visual-verbal method by René Gilles was used (Gilles 1995). The aim of the method is to reveal the social adaptation of a child and his/her relationships with others. The children were presented the images of groups of children and of children and adults at different distances from each other in different situations of interaction. The method provides information about the child's attitude to different people around him/her.

## Participants

The study was conducted from 22 to 26 September 2013 in three kindergartens of Tbilisi. It included the same 61 children of the age of three to four years that were involved in the previous study, conducted using the method of Dorkey et al. (2002).

## Procedure

A child had to choose his/her own place among the images of people by identification of himself/herself with a character occupying a particular place in the group. The child was told that he/she was expected to answer questions about the pictures. In the test tasks, the number of choices was counted – attitude to parents, siblings, friends and authoritative adults.

## Results

Table 2. Types of personal relationship

| Types of personal relationship                    | Answers                                       | Number of children |
|---|---|--------------------|
| Attitude (level of attachment) to parents         | Prefers parents                               | 67.2%              |
| Relationship with brothers and sisters            | With brothers and sisters                     | 60.6%              |
|   | Separate from brothers and sisters            | 39.3%              |
| Relationship with each other, friends             | Prefers friends                               | 72.1%              |
|   | Prefers to stay away from friends             | 27.9               |
| Relation with the authoritative adults, educators | Recognizes the authority of a teacher         | 78.7%              |
|   | Does not recognize the authority of a teacher | 21.3%              |

Source: Author's own work

As can be seen from Table 2, the majority of the children (67.2%) prefer to stay close to their parents. To the questions that reveal relationship to brothers and sisters, 60.6% preferred to stay in the company of both older and younger brothers and sisters. From the older siblings they expect care and attention, while in case of younger siblings they try to take care of them. In the study (see Table 2), 78.7% of the children preferred to stay close to their carers. This can be explained by the fact that the younger preschool children tend to seek a temporary replacement of

mothers in tutors. And if a teacher shows attention and care to a child, then the child tries to be closer to the teacher.

The analysis of the research conducted using the method of René Gilles revealed that a certain number of children expect help from their teachers in a conflict resolution, and to the question ‘If you get hit, then what will you do?’ the children’s responses were almost evenly divided. One part answered ‘I will ask the tutor for help’, i.e., children expect from the tutor effective assistance and attention in conflict resolution. The second part of the children decided to act for themselves and said, ‘I will hit back’ (see Table 3). The statistical deviation is insignificant.

Table 3. Behaviour during conflicts

| Task                                    | Children’s responses            | Number of children | Notes               |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| A friend has hit you; what will you do? | I will ask the teacher for help | 36%                | Both girls and boys |
|   | I will hit the bully            | 39.3%              | Mainly boys         |
|   | I will do nothing               | 18.0%              | Both girls and boys |
|   | I will cry                      | 6.5%               | Mainly girls        |

Source: Author’s own work

### **Study 3: Active motor game as a way to relieve anxiety level before going to nursery school**

#### **Research instrument**

To reduce the anxiety level of and to accelerate the adaptation of a child to kindergarten, we carried out experimental work in a kindergarten of Tbilisi. We selected active motor games that promote children becoming closer with each other and the tutor as well. The selected games at this stage did not include any competitions and achieving success, which was due to the age characteristics of the children (three- to four-year-old children). The content of the games selected by us included simple movements, the general rules of the game, commonality of experiences due to the sense of danger, the opportunity to take care of others – all these contributed to unifying children, mitigating alienation and building positive relationships between them.

An example of one of the games: 'Waves'. Children are sitting in a circle. An adult asks them to recall a summer when they were swimming in the sea. The waves are kind and tender. The teacher asks the children to stand up and make the waves with their own hands. After this sort of game-simulation, the adult offers all the children individually 'to swim in the sea'. The 'swimmers' stand in the centre of the circle, and the 'waves' one after another run up to the swimmer and gently stroke him/her. When all the waves have 'patted the swimmer', he/she turns into a 'wave', and the next swimmer 'dives' into the sea.

### Participants

The study was conducted on 47 children, three to four years of age in a kindergarten of Tbilisi (from 29 to 31 October 2013).

### Procedure

In order to establish the level of anxiety, the methods by Dorkey, Amen and Temple (2002) were twice used, before and after the experimental gaming sessions. After the selection of active games, they were conducted daily, 3 times a day during the month (from 10:30 to 11:00, from 15:15 to 15:40 and from 16:10 to 16:40). In the course of the experimental work, the main focus was placed on unification of the children in the group and development of positive relationships between peers in order to speed up adaptation of the children to the nursery school. Repeating the games, systematic attempts were made to engage the closed, passive children in the process of the game, to assign them major roles, to pay attention how they performed the tasks, to assist them if necessary, and thereby to enhance their status among their peers.

### Results

Table 4. Level of anxiety before and after the games (Series 1 and Series 2)

| Number of children | Level of anxiety |          |          |          |          |          |
|--------------------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                    | High             |          | Average  |          | Low      |          |
| 47                 | Series 1         | Series 2 | Series 1 | Series 2 | Series 1 | Series 2 |
|                    | 36.6%            | 21.2%    | 53.1%    | 48.9%    | 10.6%    | 29.7%    |

Source: Author's own work

The results obtained revealed that prior to the game, a high level of anxiety was observed in 36.6% of children (series 1), but in 21.2% after the game (series 2), i.e.,

14.8% showed a significant improvement. The rate of low-level anxiety considerably increased in series 1 of the experiment – it was attributed to 10.6% of the children and in 29.7% in series 2.

Values for the anxiety level of the children for series 1 and series 2, that is, before and after the experiment (see Table 4), were checked for normal distribution and correlation (Pearson's correlation coefficient  $r = 0.85$ ), and based on that, the student's  $t$  criterion for independent samples to check statistical certainty of difference between the two series. It was confirmed that the difference between the values for the anxiety level of the children before and after the experiment is statistically significant (with  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Discussion

The problem of children's adaptation to kindergarten was considered from the perspective of new social relationships with peers and authoritative adults. In the preschool years the relationships – mainly with the members of the collaborative games – are getting closer, more intense and more stable. Of the children, 72.1 per cent prefer the company of friends (see Table 2). However, the most number of negative assessments of situations (in terms of anxiety tests) occur during communication with peers. The ambiguity of these indicators reflects the difficulties in the relationship of the child with a group of peers. They are associated with the lack of communication skills and inability to make the right, informed choice of a partner for the game. The reasons mentioned complicate the social adaptation of a child, which results in the development of a feeling of anxiety in the child entailing the negative attitude towards kindergarten. The establishment of these new relationships determines the high level of anxiety identified in the data.

An important role in the resolution of this problem is played by adults. Their attentive, caring attitude towards the child determines how quickly the child will overcome the above-mentioned difficulties. High rates of preference for communication with parents (identified by René Gilles) prove the significance of a tutor's role as a temporary replacement of the mother.

Active motor games come with the rules, and therefore, at the early stages of preschool age, children are organized by adults, as three- to four-year-old children are not capable of self-realization in games with even the most basic rules. In our chosen games, the children were interested in the plot of the game and those simple rules that they had to follow. This is the paradox of the game, as claimed by Vygotsky, that compliance with the rules and refusal of direct action on one's impulse is the way to getting the maximum pleasure (Vygotsky 2004). Mastering the rules of the game is a significant factor in developing the organization skills in a child and children's groups. The active motor games provide a great opportunity to develop agility, speed of movement, creativity and ingenuity in children. The active motor games help children to acquire social skills, in addition to physical



development, and most importantly, the ability to overcome stressful situations (Isenberg, Jalongo 2014). Another aspect of the impact of active games was also investigated – their impact on the level of anxiety. The findings demonstrated that the use of active games significantly reduced the level of anxiety in children and, consequently, facilitated the process of adaptation to kindergarten.

### **Limitations**

Playing active games still revealed a high level of anxiety among 10 children (21.2%). It was assumed that this was due to an unfavourable situation in the family: in 4 cases (0.4%) it was confirmed. Two children were from lone-parent families, whose mothers remarried, and one of these children was brought up by a grandmother and the other, by an aunt. Two others had authoritarian parents who applied physical punishment. This information was obtained from the kindergarten teachers, but the parents refused to communicate, saying they were ‘extremely busy’.

### **Conclusions**

The study explores adaptation of children to kindergarten through two projective methods for child anxiety by Dorkey et al. (2002) and interpersonal relationships by René Gilles (1995), as well as experimental works on social adaptation of children to kindergarten:

1. The difficulties of adaptation to a kindergarten were reflected in a high level of anxiety of the children measured in the first month (September) of their entering the kindergarten. Most of the negative assessments of the proposed situations were related to the relationship with peers, which are the leading factors in the preferences identified through the method by René Gilles. The ambiguity of these relations was one factor in the social difficulties of adaptation to kindergarten;
2. High rates of preference for a respected adult indicate the significance of the teacher in overcoming the difficulties in the process of social adaptation to kindergarten;
3. The importance of active games, which help to reduce the level of anxiety in children during their adaptation process to kindergarten, was experimentally confirmed, which is due to the peculiarities of these types of games, namely:
  - The dynamic nature of active games gives children a lot of joy, relieves emotional stress and satisfies the need for movement;
  - Regular outdoor games under the guidance of teachers contribute to the development of a positive relationship and unification of children in a group and, ultimately, contribute to rapid adaptation to kindergarten.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval:** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

**Informed consent:** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants (adults and children's parents) included in the study. This article does not include any identifying information for individual participants.

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## TRUDNOŚCI W ADAPTACJI SPOŁECZNEJ DZIECKA W PRZEDSZKOLU: BADANIE CZYNNIKÓW

**Streszczenie:** W artykule zanalizowano problem adaptacji społecznej dzieci w okresie przedszkolnym. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań udało się wskazać trudności etapu adaptacyjnego, w szczególności związane z wysokim poziomem lęku oraz specyfiką relacji międzyludzkich. Poziom lęku jako czynnik nabyty przekłada się na takie zjawiska, jak: duża wrażliwość na sytuacje, w których zaangażowane są emocje, nieświadoma niepewność w zakresie własnych umiejętności, pragnienie, by podtrzymać znaną sobie pozycję, która współgra z wizją swojej osoby, a także ostre reakcje emocjonalne w sytuacjach, gdy tej wizji grozi zmiana. W tekście przedstawiono możliwe sposoby radzenia sobie z tymi zjawiskami. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na specjalnie wyselekcjonowane gry motoryczne, które nie tylko pozwalają dzieciom się zintegrować i pozbyć poczucia izolacji, lecz także złagodzić stres towarzyszący adaptacji do środowiska przedszkolnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wiek przedszkolny, przedszkole, żłobek, adaptacja społeczna, poziom lęku, aktywna gra motoryczna.

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