

## Parents' Socio-Emotional Competences and Children Adaptation to Infant School

### Abstract

The presented study was carried out in 3 infant schools in Silesia in 2012 with an objective to find out whether parents' emotional intelligence modifies their children's adaptation to infant school. Social adjustment was verified in four aspects: emotional functioning, social relations with peers, relation and responsiveness to a teacher, self-reliance and meeting demands. Parents' emotional intelligence was estimated with the use of an emotional intelligence questionnaire (KBiE). According to the statistic verification, parents' socio-emotional competences and children's adaptation are correlated: children whose parents declared emotionally intelligent behavior adapted to infant school better than those brought up by less emotionally intelligent parents.

*Keywords: parents' emotional intelligence, social adjustment to infant school, children social functioning.*

In temporary science as well as meritocratic rhetoric, social adjustment is found as an ultimate aim of education and self-actualization. Social adjustment refers to a person's ability to be included in the environment. In the process the aim is to maintain a balance between a person's needs and surrounding demands (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2011, p. 37). The process of adaptation and re-adaptation is lifelong, but the first milestone seems to be the beginning of infant school. Every new situation creates a new context, expectations to which a person has to attune. The results suggest that even within early childhood maladaptive behavioral outcomes result

in subordinate positions in a group. Social adaptation is always associated with stratification as well as personal satisfaction.

### **Social and emotional aspects of the adaptation process**

Adjustment comes hand in hand with certain abilities, knowledge or competences which in early childhood are settled in the parent-child relation, although hopefully they can be strengthened by the educational processes. Thus, childhood inequalities (e.g. health disparities, mental disorders, family background, etc.) may figure prominently in the ontogeny of social development and are either balanced or strengthened by environmental conditions. Maladaptive or adaptive performance refers to behavior reflecting difficult or well-adjusted accommodation to novel or challenging circumstances, for sure infant schools are the first adaptation challenge (Boyce et al., 2012, p. 17168).

One of the notions which should be embedded in the discourse of educational processes is emotional intelligence. In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the role of emotional intelligence for school, work and private life success. Indeed, some authors (Romasz et al., 2004) suggest that acquisition of basic skills is a prerequisite for further learning and development. Studies on emotional intelligence have shown its relevance to many aspects of life and the role it plays in the interactions and adjustments in daily life. Self-regulation plays an important role in the successful adaptation to preschool and school contexts as well as in later academic achievement. The relationship between executive control and academic achievement at school has been established in previous studies (e.g. Naunswander et al., 2012, pp. 353–355).

The child's social development should take place only in the context of environmental sustainability. The relationship of the child with his/her parents is overall bonds since they operate on many levels such as: emotional, social or economic. Specific standards of governing the behavior of its members, as well as roles and positions result in mutual expectations and requirements. How the family operates depends not only on financial and organizational conditions, but mainly on parental attitudes and the kind of emotional bonds between the family members (Jugowar, 2003, p. 20). Parenting style demonstrated by the emotional attitude towards the child and other members of the family, imposed behavior standards, attention to needs and responsiveness, communication styles or the way of delegating obligation have an impact on the family climate and conditions of upbringing. At the same time, parents' behavior not only influences the child's well-being, but

also are a kind of pattern to imitate. That is why emotional intelligence seems so important in the socio-emotional development of the child and determines further development. This is due to the mechanism of identification, which makes the family a reference group, one which reviews evaluation and standards of behavior (Piaget, Inhelder, 1993, p.35). Thus, adaptation to kindergarten is marked by the emotional and social situation of the family home. A close relationship imprinted with love, everyday contact, pleasant experiences (everyday rituals, playing) and difficult ones (diseases, tensions, quarrels), generate an emotional bond and model socio-emotional behavior. It is the capital for future satisfactory interpersonal relationships as well as adjusting to group standards. Emotional maturity evokes social adaptation and that is why the process of adapting to infant school circumstances is, first and foremost, emotional experience for both children and their parents. The new situation, disconnection from parents, and unknown people can evoke strong negative emotional feelings. In order to cope with it the child needs socio-emotional competences and a strong family background. Referring to J. Lubowiecka's (2000, p.43) studies, parents' tutorial as well as emotional maturity has a significant impact on the fast, positive adaptation of the small child to kindergarten. The problem of infant school adaptation, especially in the area of emotional functioning, is only slightly emphasized in educational research. It seems accepted that the stress connected with the beginning of infant school is inevitable.

What the process of adaptation will be like depends mainly on some innate cognitive- emotional and intellectual abilities. Instrumental performance, communication skills, self-awareness or abilities to satisfy one's own needs are modified by hitherto gained experience mainly in the family environment (Lubowiecka, 2000, p. 247). According to research (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2011, p. 37), the process of adaptation and its effects depend chiefly on the family, where from the very beginning the child is subjected to intentional and unintentional influences determining child development. That is why the family is supposed to provide not only proper care and meet biological needs, but mainly to endow with socio-emotional safety and constructive stimulation. Socio-emotional maturity is a prerequisite for the proper social functioning and self-development, not to mention joyful activity. Therefore, the child enters kindergarten already "shaped" with his/her own socio-emotional "baggage".

One of the reasons for failure or difficulties in early adaptation to infant school is lack of emotional maturity. The reasons for the problems are manifold, but the most obvious seems to be parents' low emotional intelligence. More and more often children starting pre-school education cannot find their way in their peer group, they are not able to interact within the group, are very dependent and unable

to focus attention or become quickly discouraged. These are mainly emotional competences (cf., Gruszczyk-Kolczynska, Zielińska, 1993, p. 54). A child going to infant school must assimilate a lot of different information from the environment, learn new standards of behavior, adjust to new socio-emotional reality. Parents who encourage children to behave in a mature way up to the age prepare them for the next stages of emotional development (Filipczuk, 1991, p. 181).

Even for emotionally grown up children a completely new situation is a challenge. Emotional tension, fear, uneasiness, stress in the condition of an unfamiliar situation can be natural reactions, but if the state prolongs it may result in a negative impact on the processes of adaptation and further development. Negative emotional experiences lower the efficiency of cognition and disturb psycho-motor activity. Children who have low self-confidence, are not supported by their parents, or are engulfed by overprotective parents go to kindergarten with reluctance, even hostility. Strong, positive emotional bonds, acceptance, neither neglect nor overprotection are parent attitudes which can be induced by parents' emotional maturity (Lubowiecka, 2000, p. 246). Having considered the importance of emotional experiences in the process of adaptation, the presented survey was planned, whose methodology and short data interpretation will be presented in further parts of the article.

## **Methodology**

While there have been a lot of assumptions about the usefulness of emotional intelligence in different areas of social functioning and life achievement (cf., Goleman, 1999), there is still a lack of empirical data in this regard. That is why the purpose of the presented study was to determine the extent of relationship between parents' emotional intelligence and adjustment to the demands of infant schools. Hence, the research was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. to diagnose parents' emotional intelligence and the level of adjustment to infant school;
2. to find out the relationship of parents' emotional intelligence variables and their children infant school adaptation.

The main hypothesis was that the parents' emotional intelligence correlates with the child's adaptation to infant school. Emotionally intelligent parents are more apt to bring up more independent and emotionally mature children.

Two techniques were implemented in the survey: a questionnaire to assess emotional intelligence and directed observation of child behavior at infant school.

Parents were asked to fill in the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (KBiE), a tool prepared and verified by the author of the article (Przybylska, 2007). The questionnaire consists of 4 scales, which are intended to assess emotional intelligence in the following aspects: awareness of emotions, self-regulation, use of emotional knowledge and the interpersonal aspect of recognizing and following others' emotions.

Social adaptation was ascertained with the use of a naturalistic behavioral observation method. Observations were conducted at the beginning of school year, during structured, semi-structured, and free play activities. Adaptation was operationally defined in four areas, which were converted in 4 scales in the observation sheet. Teachers were asked to observe their pupils' behavior concerning their relation and responsiveness to the teacher, interactions with peers, emotional stability meant as expressing emotions and self-regulation in different situations (e.g. separation from parents, contact with adults and peers, reactions to demands) and a self-autonomy scale including both decision making or expressing one's own opinions and self-service. The observation was scheduled for the very beginning of a new school year and referred only to children who started infant school for the first time (mostly three- and four-year-olds).

The surveyed group consisted of 80 children (71 children aged 3, 9 – aged 4) and one of their parents. It was impossible to question both parents as some of them were single or the other parent did not agree to take part in the survey. The survey was possible thanks to the courtesy of 3 infant schools in the Silesia district and also the agreement of the teachers and parents.

## **Research results**

The relationships between the emotional competence of the parents and their children, and consequently the adaptation capabilities of the latter emerge apparent although there is little research into the relationships between parents' emotional intelligence and children's adaptive behavior. The presented study explores this relationship.

The study on the adaptation of three-year-old children to kindergarten shows that most of them have no significant problems with adaptation. They manage to cope with new rules and standards prevailing in the environment and self-service activities quite soon. In 31% of the cases (25 children), the adaptation process shuts down correctly at all levels: self-service, relationships with peers, relationships with adults, while parting with parents or while resting. These children, striving for

positive interactions with their peers, adhere to social norms, are able to cope in situations of conflict and stress. What is characteristic of this group is its emotional and social maturity appropriate to the age.

According to the teachers' observation, the majority of the children adapt in a "normal" way: with some difficulties and successes. 40% (32 children) of them were assessed as rather well adapted. Based on observation, it can be concluded that they are able to interact in the peer group, establish positive relationships with both the teacher and peers. Moreover, they can satisfy their needs and meet all the requirements sufficiently. At the same time, the teachers pointed out that from time to time these children experienced mood swings, lack of appetite, were tearful, had problems when parting with their parent. These behaviors may indicate that the adaptation process proceeded correctly, but with some difficulty and had not yet been fully completed. At the same time, prognoses are promising. Unfortunately, this assumption cannot be referred to the following group of children.

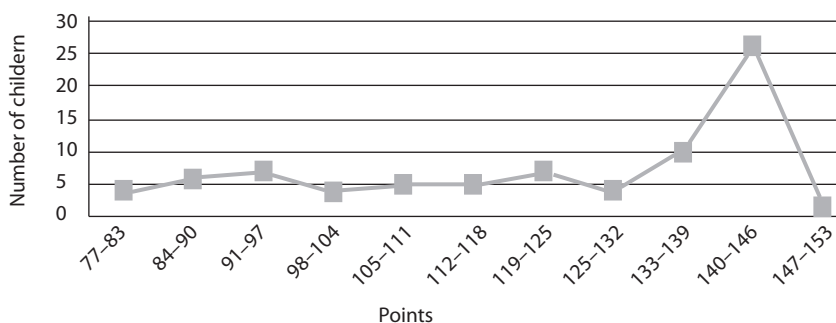
Up to 23 children, representing 29% of those observed in the survey, posed numerous behavioral problems at the beginning of the school year. Their adaptation results were the lowest according to the teachers' assessment. These children were characterized by inadequate adaptation at all the tested levels: self-service, relationships with peers, as well as relationships with adults, while parting with their parents and during rest. Insufficient adjustment was demonstrated mainly while relating to others: in the group the children could not cooperate, attempts at communication often ended with aggression or crying. That led to the teachers' frequent intervention.

A child who does not adapt to kindergarten sufficiently has to overcome many difficult and complex tasks. The surveyed children tended to be nervous, often downright aggressive, or separate from the group, avoid communication. Self-service happened to be a problem in all the groups even that of the well-adapted; in the group referred to the problems were much more complex and multilayer. Having experienced adaptation problems, special attention and cooperation of teachers and parents is necessary. Nevertheless, it appears that it is easier to overcome self-service shortcomings even social ones than emotional difficulties.

As seen in the above scheme, the surveyed group of children is characterized by a normal level of adaptation to the conditions of kindergarten. The calculated mean of the results of adaptation observation was 121.94 points and the standard deviation from the mean was 21.90. It must be highlighted that a third of all the children experienced more or less serious problems with adaptation. The sources of difficulty in social adjustment, as elaborated in the previous part, are numerous and different. What is the most interesting problem for the author is whether

the parents' emotional behavior influenced the social and emotional aspects of adaptation.

**Scheme 1.** Distribution curve of sten results of adaptation survey



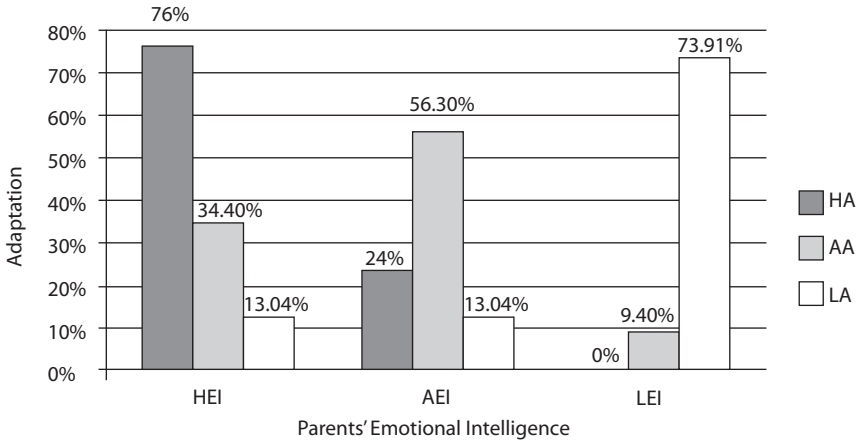
Source: own research. Key: 77–108 low results; 109–140- average; 141–153 high.

The results of the observation of 80 children's behavior were standardized (sten standards), the same was done with the emotional intelligence questionnaire responses. Summary of the outcomes reveals a correlation between the result obtained by a child and a parent almost in all dyads. The vast majority of the parents obtaining the highest scores in the emotional intelligence questionnaire have children who are observed as coping well or very well with new situations at infant school. At the same time, the children of the parents obtaining low scores in the study experienced more adaptation problems. The relationship between two variables is quite clear taking into consideration both the graphic representation and raw results. The calculated linear correlation Pearson coefficient suggests that the relationship is quite strong and it is  $p = 0.40$  at 5 per cent level of significance. The correlation between the variables is linear. In the surveyed group, an increase in one variable is accompanied by the rise in the other, apart from a few cases (10 children and parents) where the children's adaptation processes seem to be independent from the parents' emotional capabilities.

A child can be deemed socially adapted if he/she can successfully cooperate with others and abide by social standards. According to the research data, the children one of whose parents is emotionally intelligent meet the standards of adaptation. In teacher observation, these children did not show significant, observable problems with social behavior. Relationships with their peers and adults or self-service operations were assessed by the teacher as very fluent or at least satisfactory. For the proper adaptation of the child to new surroundings, in this case to the infant

school, it is essential to have a clarified representation of “self” (socio-psychological needs) and “other people” (mental and social needs of other people). One of the basic conditions for taking action on behalf of others is a positive attitude towards oneself. Children of emotionally intelligent parents seem to function well both on the intrapersonal as interpersonal basis (cf., Scheme 2).

**Scheme 2.** Children’s adaptation and parents’ emotional intelligence



Source: own research. Key: HEI- high EI; AEI-average EI; LEI-low EI. HA-high adaptation; AA- average adaptation; LA-low adaptation.

Considering the data from the above scheme, the children of the less emotionally apt parents were more often emotionally inadequate in social relations: too expressive or inhibited, passive, not responding to adults’ requests or not prepared to cooperate when problems appeared. What was apparent in that group was that maladaptive behavior was more frequent and more serious in the teachers’ opinion.

As pointed out, in 10 cases the parents’ emotional intelligence did not appear to correlate with the children’s adaptation. All of these children encountered some problems with adaptation while their parents declared average or high emotional qualities. Explanation can vary. First of all, it seems that although emotional qualities of the home environment influence children’s capabilities and competences there are other factors, such as parents’ character, temper, social and communication competences or parental attitudes towards children. Besides children’s potentials, needs and expectations differ, which can influence children’s social experiences. Therefore, multifactor research into the area is necessary as well as a bigger research



group. A diagnosis of the second parent or other qualities of home environment is assumed to be crucial, as well.

The results are contrary to, e.g., Sjoberg (2004) and Adeyemo (2005), who advocated that a person's emotional intelligence was related fairly strongly to his/her social adjustment. Yet, it must be mentioned that the studies referred to concerned school adaptation.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

It is a truism, supported by everyday observation and educational research, that family experiences are determining for further achievements. The success of relatively fast adaptation to infant school is dependent not only on stable conditions in the family environment (structure, organization, daily routine, meeting needs, etc.). In the instructions (more or less professional) for parents whose child is going to start the first year at kindergarten, it is emphasized that they should prepare the child to perform simple, daily activities such as dressing, undressing, eating alone or using the toilet (Lubowiecka, 2000, p. 247). Rarely is it indicated that teaching (modeling) proper emotional expression, controlling emotions, understanding others' emotions, talking about feelings and needs is far more important than only self-service. The emotional atmosphere at home, kind of emotional bonds, but also temporary emotional communication concerning attendance of infant school, are emotional dimensions which play a crucial role in the process of adaptation to a new environment. Intelligent (competent) dealing with emotional information brings about adaptation to different emotional aspects of the environment (cf., Salovey, Mayer, 1990, p. 189). Being aware of emotional states, respecting and expressing emotions are essential for both well-being and social relations. They are core abilities which are induced by different stages of socio-emotional growth. Parents who behave in an emotionally mature way at the same time create safe and stimulating surroundings for their child's development.

Emotional intelligence is an adaptive set of abilities. Even if parents are not aware of the fact they emotionally coach their children. Having considered personal growth of infants maturity, competence or intelligence, whatever we call emotional aptness (cf., Przybylska, 2007), is crucial for adaptation and well-being. Summing up, there seems to be a correlation between emotional intelligence of parents and their children's adaptation to the first outer environment.

Certainly, there are pervasive links between socio-emotional competences and family emotional background, further between socio-emotional competences and

the adaptation process. In the reported research, the majority of the respondents had a normal to high level of emotional intelligence and their children presented average to excellent adjustment. Parents' emotional intelligence had a significant positive relationship with social adjustment of their children. Emotional intelligence and social adjustment of children at the age of 3–4 were found to be significantly correlated ( $p=0.40$ ) at the 5 per cent level of significance.

This study is only a stepping stone in the field of emotional intelligence. This aspect requires much more exploration as there is a deficiency of research in the area, especially in Poland. Undoubtedly, there is an urge to examine in detail the relationship between socio-emotional competences and adaptation processes at different stages of development.

The importance of the reported findings resides not in the statistical confirmation of the correlation, whose meaning is actually weakened by a small sample. Rather, the importance lies in educational implications – seeking for broader contexts of inter- and intrapersonal adaptation. Certainly, such results converge on common principles concerning key adaptation competences. In conclusion, hitherto obtained data may prove beneficial for educators, parents, counselors, etc. while preparing children for the beginning of a formal education.

## **References**

- Adayemo, D.A. (2005). The buffering effect of emotional intelligence on the adjustment of secondary school students in transition. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*. No. 6–3 (2), pp. 79–90.
- Bielecka, J.M. (2000). Adaptacja dziecka w przedszkolu. *Problemy Psychologiczne*, No. 2.
- Boyce, W.T., Obradovic, J., Bush, N.R., Stamperdahl, J., Young Shin Kim, Nancy Adler, N., (2012). *Social stratification, classroom climate and the behavioral adaptation of kindergarten children*. PNAS, vol. 109, pp. 17168–17173.
- Sjöberg, L. (2008). *Emotional intelligence and life adjustment*. In J.C. Cassady & M.A. Eissa (Eds.), *Emotional Intelligence: Perspectives on Educational & Positive Psychology* (pp. 169–184). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Filipcuk, H. (1991). *Rodzina a rozwój psychiczny dziecka*. Warszawa: WSiP.
- Goleman, D. (1997). *Inteligencja emocjonalna*. Poznań: Media Rodzina.
- Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, E., Zielińska, E. (1993). *Wspomaganie rozwoju umysłowego trzylatków i dzieci starszych wolniej rozwijających się*. Warszawa: WSiP.

- Jugowar, B. (2003). *Wiek przedszkolny. Psychologia rozwojowa dla rodziców*. Łódź: WSiP.
- Klim-Klimaszewska, A. (2011). *Witamy w przedszkolu*. Siedlce: Instytut Wydawniczy ERICA.
- Neuenschwander, R., Marianne Röthlisberger, M., Patrizia Cimeli, P., Roebbers, C.M. (2012). How do different aspects of self-regulation predict successful adaptation to school? *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, No. 113, pp. 353–371.
- Piaget, J., Inhelder, B. (1993). *Psychologia dziecka*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Siedmiogród.
- Przybylska, I. (2007). *Inteligencja emocjonalna a uzdolnienia twórcze i funkcjonowanie szkolne młodzieży*. Katowice: Wyd. UŚ.
- Romasz, T.E., Kantor, J.H., & Elias, M.J. (2004). Implementation and evaluation of urban school-wide social-emotional learning programs. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, No.27, pp. 89–103.
- Salovey, P., Mayer, J.D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, No. 9, pp. 185–211.