

Shared activities of parents and their preschool children during family pastime

Vladimir S. Sobkin*, Ksenia N. Skobeltsina

Institute for the Management of Education of the Russian Academy of Education, Moscow, Russia

*Corresponding author. E-mail: sobkin@mail.ru

This article studies the structure of the pastime of contemporary preschool children and the importance and prevalence of various kinds of activities that parents and their children share. The emphasis is on those features of parental behavior that are determined by gender role (mother/father), family status (two-parent/separated family), style of parent-child relationship, and also child's gender. The work is based on data from 1,936 questionnaires received from parents of preschool children (from 1.5 to 7 years old) who were attending Moscow kindergartens. The research was carried out in 41 kindergartens in 9 districts of Moscow. The survey uncovered several social-psychological features of the position parents take while organizing their shared pastime with preschool children: the influence of traditional gender-role models of parental behavior; the "complementary" principle of mother's and father's social-role positions in the upbringing of a daughter; the distortion of traditional maternal behavior in the upbringing of a son in a separated family; the reduced organization of shared play with a child in a separated family; the influence of the style of the parent-child relationship on the participation of parents in their children's activities. The dynamics show how the parents' position changes as their children grow older (from 1.5 years to 7 years): namely, the decrease of parents' organization of and participation in a preschool child's activities has a negative impact on their emotional state while interacting with the child.

Keywords: preschool childhood, family pastime, shared activity of parents and children, parental position, parent-child relationship

Introduction

How a preschool child's pastime is organized is extremely important for the formation of the child's personality and for the development of the child's potential for successful socialization in the future. Parents' pedagogical attitude toward education and upbringing affects how they organize their children's pastime. Despite the importance of this endeavor, however, special sociological, pedagogical, and psychological research in this area is rather scarce (Antonova, Volkova, & Mishi-

na, 1998; Azarov, 1985; Bocharova, 2003; Bocharova & Tihonova, 2001; Bolotova, 2001; Doronova, Solov'eva, Zhichkina, Musienko, 2001; Krulekht, 2001; Smirnova, 2006; Sozinova, 2004; Tubel'skaya, 1999; Vershinin, 1998; Vinogradova & Kulikova, 1993; Zatsepina, 2005; and others).

Matters of pastime organization at home are discussed in several contexts. The first is related to the connection between home and kindergarten upbringing (as a rule, parents acknowledge the kindergarten's educational plan while interacting with the child, and parents provide additional education, such as hobby groups). The second context is connected to supporting a child's health and physical development (walks, sports classes, for example). The third context is related to various kinds of esthetic activities and the introduction of children to the arts (reading, drawing, listening to music, modeling, for example). The fourth context is in regard to the use of play activities by parents as an important tool in a child's psychological and social development (how play is organized, whether parents take part in it, and so on). And, finally, a special context is the activities shared between parents and children (involving the child in housework, in the care of pets, in grown-ups' activities, for example).

An important aspect of pastime in preschool childhood is children's cultural development, their "growing through the culture." Through culture children are introduced to sociocultural values and norms, integrated into society, and helped to assimilate social experience and to form national and cultural identity (Bahtin, 1979; Bibler, 1991; Lihachev, 2001; Shpet, 1996; Vygotsky, 1999; and others). Children's growing through the culture occurs through the assimilation of the cultural and historical experience of their family and their nation. According to the cultural-historical concept of L. S. Vygotsky, the cultural becomes the individual through intermediary activity: grown-ups transmit cultural tools to children (Zinchenko, 1996). The child is introduced to culture through daily family life, traditions, national folklore (fairy tales, sayings, riddles), holidays, arts (literature, music, fine arts), and play (Azarov, 1985; Lesgaft, 1991; Mudrik, 1997; Simonovich & Simonovich, 1874; Vodovozova, 2012; and others).

This article studies the structure of contemporary preschool children's pastime and the importance and popularity of various activities shared by parents and children. The emphasis is on those specific features of parental behavior that are determined by gender role (mother/father), family status (two-parent/separated family), style specifics of parent-child relationships, and child's gender. The article follows a series of articles dealing with the sociology of preschool childhood (Sobkin & Skobeltsina, 2011, 2014; Sobkin, Skobeltsina, & Ivanova, 2013; Sobkin, Skobeltsina, Ivanova, & Veryasova, 2013; and others).

Methods

The research method used was paper questionnaires, which allowed us to detect the qualitative and quantitative parameters of the social and psychological features of the parents' position in organizing children's pastime. We used the questionnaire for parents of preschool children developed by the Institute for the Sociology of Education (led by V. S. Sobkin). The gathered data were analyzed using methods of mathematical statistics with the help of statistical packages SPSS 18.0 and STA-

TISTICA 6.0. In all, 1,936 parents of preschool children (from 1.5 to 7 years) were surveyed. All children were attending kindergarten (41 kindergartens in 9 districts of Moscow).

Results

Characteristics of the structure of family pastime

To determine the structure of each family's pastime, the parents marked on the questionnaires their preferences for kinds of activities shared with their child at home (Table 1). The table shows that most of the parents preferred reading (53.9%), playing (49.1%), taking walks (44.5%), and watching TV (25.5%). Other kinds of pastime were marked much less often. An important determining factor in the choice of activities was the parent's gender role. Thus, the mothers more often preferred walks and reading ($p < .008$), while the fathers were oriented to watching TV and playing video games ($p < .02$). This gap is rather significant, and it allows us to conclude that the mothers as opposed to the fathers were more active and more often involved in activities that they shared with their children.

Table 1. Parents' preferences for different kinds of activities shared with their child (%)

No.	How do you usually spend time with your child at home?	%
1.	Reading books	53.9
2.	Playing together	49.1
3.	Taking walks	44.5
4.	Watching TV	25.5
5.	Watching DVDs	18.3
6.	Doing housework together	16.8
7.	Building, constructing	16.2
8.	Modeling, drawing, painting	15.2
9.	Listening to music, singing, learning songs	10.2
10.	Playing video games	6.1
11.	My child arranges his/her pastime independently	9.3
12.	Unfortunately I do not have time left for my child	1.6

As the children grew older (up to 7 years), the parents' participation in activities shared with them decreased. More often the parents preferred to involve their older children in household tasks and invited them as partners and helpers in these tasks. The parents' withdrawal from activities shared with their children shows in a negative way in their own emotional disposition (Figure 1).

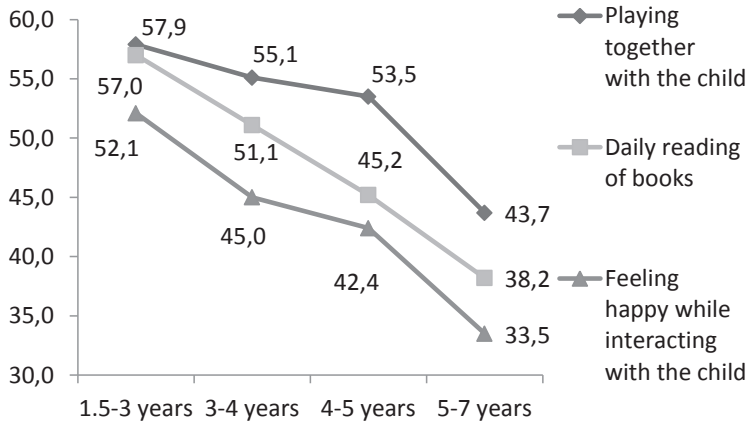


Figure 1. The dynamics of parents' involvement in activities shared with their child (playing, reading) and their emotional well-being as their child grew up (%)

The style features of parent-child relations (authoritativeness, orientation to equality) played a role in the organization of the parents' pastime with their children. Thus, among the parents who followed an authoritarian style of upbringing ("I believe that the child should implicitly obey parents and other grown-ups in the family") the percentage who preferred to read aloud to their child was 33.9%, while among the equality supporters ("I believe the child is an equal family member as well as the grown-ups") the percentage was much higher — 55.0% ($p = .004$). At the same time the authoritarian parents more often than the equalitarian parents said that their children independently organized their own time (21.4% and 8.1%, respectively, $p = .004$). Consequently, authoritative inclinations restricted the interaction between grown-ups and children in shared activities.

Analysis of the organization of a preschool child's pastime in a family

To gain more detailed information about the social and psychological characteristics of shared pastime, we used factor analysis to dissect the parents' preferences for various kinds of pastime by taking into account their family status (two-parent/separated family) and gender roles (mother/father), as well as the gender of their child. In other words, we looked at the difference between pastime organization for the boys and for the girls in two-parent and separated families. In our factor analysis a data matrix was formed in which the rows defined various kinds of family pastime (reading books, playing together, taking walks, watching TV, and so forth), and the columns represented fathers, married and single mothers, of boys and girls. A mesh (where a row and a column cross) indicated the percentage of the choice of a certain kind of pastime in a relevant group (among fathers of boys, fathers of girls, married mothers of boys, married mothers of girls, single mothers of boys, single mothers of girls). Thus, we put a 12*6 matrix through a factor analysis. Factorization of this matrix according to the Main Components method with a following rotation by Kaiser's Varimax criterion allowed us to create a simplified three-dimensional factor model that describes 85.9% of the total variance. As a

result three bipolar factors were determined: factor F1 (41.7%) “virtual communication (watching TV, playing video games) — real partnership (modeling, drawing, doing housework together)”; factor F2 (31.1%) “playing together — shared esthetic experience (listening to music, singing, watching videos)”; factor F3 (13.1%) “parents’ passivity (lack of time) — interaction with children (walking together, reading books).”

To describe the different styles of the parents in organizing their children’s pastime, we will show how the positions of the fathers and mothers spread across the factor spaces. As can be seen in Figure 2, factor F1 clearly differentiates the positions of the married and single mothers of girls on the negative pole (“real partnership”) and the positions of the girls’ and boys’ fathers as well as of the single mothers of boys on the positive pole (“virtual communication”). Factor F2 differentiates the married mothers of boys and girls and the fathers of boys (positive pole — “playing together”), and the single mothers of boys and girls as well as the fathers of girls (negative pole — “shared esthetic experience”).

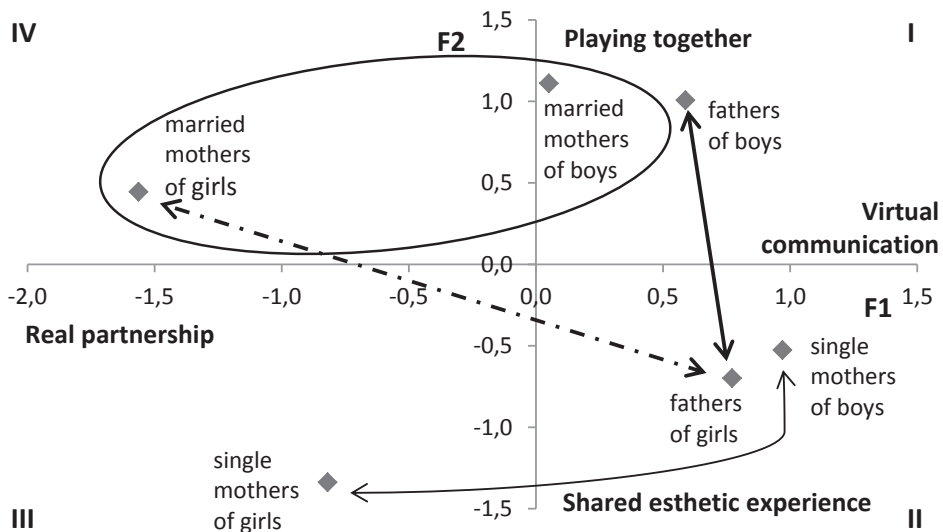


Figure 2. Location of fathers and of single and married mothers of boys and girls on the axes of factors F1 and F2

To aid understanding of the children’s pastime organization, we will describe the positions of each of the parents. The married mothers of girls (see quadrant IV) played together with their daughters and involved them in a real partnership (modeling, drawing, doing housework). Thus, in the two-parent families the mothers were inclined to introduce their daughters to traditional forms of female behavior through play and housework. In the upbringing of boys (see quadrant I) the married mothers were less likely to involve their sons in shared practical activities; their main shared activity was playing together. A somewhat different position was occupied by the fathers of sons (see quadrant I). Like the married mothers, they preferred to play together with their sons, but at the same time they often chose

to watch TV together and to play video games (virtual communication). In other words, the fathers were oriented toward introducing their children to traditional forms of male pastime. Thus, in the two-parent families we can see the clear influence of the parents' gender roles: the mothers involved their daughters in traditional kinds of pastime for women, and the fathers in their turn introduced their sons to the typical ways men spend their free time.

It is interesting to note the variety of the fathers' positions in bringing up girls (see quadrant II). On the one hand, as with bringing up boys, the fathers involved girls in the traditional types of pastime for men (watching TV, playing video games); on the other hand, they were not inclined play together with their daughters, as they did with their sons (see quadrant I). Instead, they preferred to have an esthetic experience together with the child (listening to music, watching DVDs). We can conclude that in this case play activity was replaced by introducing the children to art. Notably, this introduction involved the active use of technical devices, and in these cases the grown-ups did not act as real mediators (did not read aloud to the children, did not draw with them, and so on).

It is interesting to compare the positions of the married mothers and the fathers when bringing up girls (see respectively quadrants IV and II). As we noted previously, when bringing up girls, the mothers, followed a traditional female line by spending time with their daughters (involving them in housework), and they also played together with the girls. Fathers, in their turn, were not inclined to play together with their daughters; instead, they shared esthetic experiences together. Note that in the figure the married mothers of girls and the fathers of girls are located in different quadrants. Thus in these two-parent families with a daughter the parents appeared to use a special strategy by employing the principle of the complementarity of maternal and paternal social-role positions.

In comparing the positions of the married and the single mothers, we find that the married mothers were oriented toward playing together with their children (positive pole of factor F2), and the single mothers, on the contrary, preferred those kinds of pastime that involved having an esthetic experience together (negative pole of factor F2). Thus, in the separated families the child-parent interaction in the form of play was reduced. Moreover, it may be supposed that the lack of a spouse sharpens a mother's need for positive emotions, and she fulfills this need by arranging certain situations so that she and her child experience esthetic satisfaction together. At the same time we should note the distinction between the single mothers of girls (see quadrant III) and the single mothers of boys (see quadrant II). The single mothers of girls followed the traditional female style of behavior common for married mothers of girls (partnership, involvement in housework); the single mothers of boys were more oriented toward the typically male style of pastime organization (watching TV, playing video games); doing so distorted these mothers' role.

The data from factor F3 ("parents' passivity —interaction with children") also contribute to an understanding of different styles of organizing a preschool child's pastime (Figure 3). As shown in the figure, the fathers of both boys and girls formed a common cluster with high degrees of factor F3, which is evidence of their general passivity in interaction with their children because of a lack of time. The married and the single mothers of boys, on the contrary, took an active position in orga-

nizing their sons' pastime: they read books, took walks, for example. Finally, the mothers (married as well as single) of girls did not show a strong tendency toward passivity or toward interaction with their children (almost zero parameters of factor F3).

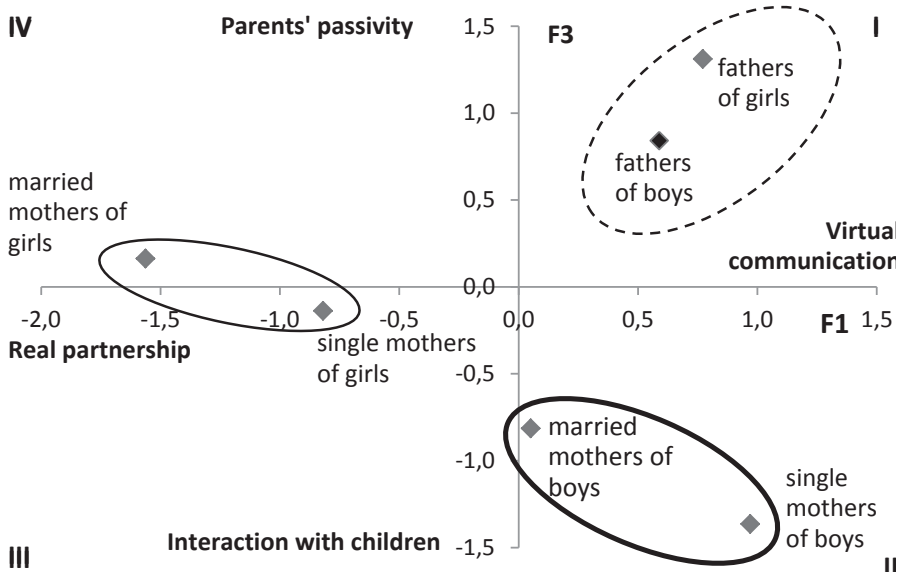


Figure 3. Location of fathers and mothers (married and single) of boys and girls on the axes of factors F1 and F3

Conclusion

The present research allowed us to draw several important conclusions:

1. As a child grows older (from 1.5 to 7 years), there is a decrease in parents' organizing of their shared pastime; this decrease has a negative impact on parents' emotional well-being.
2. Style features of parent-child relations influence the involvement of parents in sharing activities with their children. Parents who support equality actively interact with children more than do parents who are authoritarian.
3. Gender roles and family status determine the organization of shared pastime with children. Thus, mothers, in comparison with fathers, are more often involved in activities with their children. In two-parent families traditional gender roles have a distinct influence: mothers introduce daughters to housework, fathers invite sons to participate in various forms of men's pastime.
4. In the upbringing of a girl in a two-parent family, a special strategy is used in which parental roles are mutually complementary: fathers try to introduce daughters to culture using various technical means; mothers are more inclined to interact in partnership through playing together and doing housework.
5. In the upbringing of a boy in a separated family there is a clear distortion of the traditional maternal position in the organization of pastime: a single mother

reproduces the father's model, introducing her son to men's kinds of pastime (watching TV, playing video games, and such). Just as common for separated families is a reduction in shared play activities.

6. Analyzing parents' activity and dedication of time to their children allowed us to form three groups: (1) fathers of boys and girls, who specify a lack of time; (2) married and single mothers of boys, who take an active position in bringing up children; (3) married and single mothers of girls, who do not view their interaction with children as involving time-consuming effort.

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