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IMPLEMENTING THE PYRAMID OF OPTIMISM IN KINDERGARTENS

Summary: *Endeavour to teach preschool children to think optimistically has two major influences on children's development. First, children learn to adequately relate their success with their abilities and knowing how to deal with their failures. Second, in the healthiest way, they are prevented from depression and are able to build their resilience. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the importance of teaching the positive thinking in children and to try to implement Seligman's pyramid of optimism in kindergartens. This paper has two major aims. The first one is directed toward sensitizing preschool teachers to importance of positive thinking in children, thus some theoretical concepts are presented. The second one is related with showing the implementation of the pyramid of optimism in kindergartens through practical examples. Finally, a few practical guidelines are proposed.*

Key words: *preschool children, prevention, pyramid of optimism, well-being, kindergarten.*

1. Introduction

Daily changes that mark our present day society have transformed it from an achieving society into a feel-good society. Such society has a series of positive, but also negative consequences for the individual. Positive

transformation involves the creation of new freedoms, while the negative sides manifest themselves as growing alienation and the search for meaning in life. The number of self-occupied people is conspicuously on the rise; such people, in the pursuit of their inner peace, alienate themselves from a larger, base entity because of their belief in the indisputability of their own pleasures and their egocentric worldview. When faced with failure, such individuals might feel helpless and unsuccessful, which can often lead to pessimism. Seligman argues that pessimism may have an adverse effect on people's ability to fight off depression (Seligman, 2007).

Although some research (Eckersley, 1997) claim it is in vogue to think pessimistically, other studies (Forgeard, Seligman, 2012; Rijavec, Miljković, Brdar, 2008; Taylor, 1989) showed that humans are inclined to think positively rather than negatively or realistically, and that individuals can influence their way of thinking to a significant degree. The majority of people view themselves, the world and the future in a positive light. However, whether a person's worldview will be pessimistic or optimistic, depends on them and their way of thinking. Everybody wants to be happy and desires a good, meaningful and active life. We want the same for our children. We want our children to be positive and optimistic. The behavior of parents and other significant people bears a major influence on children. Frequent exposure to quarrels between parents or pessimistic worldviews may contribute to the development of depression in children, which then takes root and becomes the way of thinking and feeling for life.

Research on encouraging optimism in children is extremely rare, and there has practically been none conducted in Croatia. The aim of this study is, therefore, to encourage parents and preschool teachers to realize the importance of positive thinking for the mental development of children, and to provide guidelines on the implementation of the pyramid of optimism in kindergartens.

2. Optimistic thinking

Despite the contemporary research on well-being moving into two main directions – in the context of defining hedonic (subjective) well-being, which

implies satisfaction and happiness, and in the context of defining eudaimonic well-being, where well-being is related to the actualization of human potential and fulfillment of one's true nature (Kahneman, 1999; Keyes, Shmotkin, Ryff, 2002; Ryan, Deci, 2001) – it is crucial to identify factors which determine the short-term and long-term well-being of children. Studies have shown (Fernandes, Mendes, Teixeira, 2011, 2012) that there are some internal factors which are vital for the development of well-being, for example personality traits and the characteristics of the emotional and cognitive experience of the world. Following this division, we come to the positive way of thinking, i.e. optimism, which is partly conditioned by the environment, and which is, according to the most recent studies (Jovanović, Brdarić, 2013), a powerful factor in the prevention of the negative consequences of, for example, neuroticism – the level of which cannot be modified because it is highly genetically determined – on the overall satisfaction with life.

According to Scheier and Carver (1985, 1993), optimism is the general expectation that good rather than bad things will occur in our lives (dispositional optimism), while Seligman (1998) claims that a person's way of thinking about causes (explanatory and attributional style) forms the basis of optimism.

When discussing the origins of optimism, many authors agree that dispositional optimism in particular is genetically determined, but it may also be influenced by early childhood experiences which promote trust and the sense of attachment (Mosing, Zietsch, Shekar, Wright, Martin, 2009). With respect to explanatory style, there is a genetic component, but its development in children is mainly influenced by their parents and other important adults in their lives. Thus, there are several sources of optimism: genetics, parents' optimism, optimistic stimuli which parents may provide for their children and experiences of mastery. However, generally speaking, the origins of optimism and pessimism are still largely unknown.

What is the basis of optimism? Forgeard and Seligman (2012) argue that it is the way we think about causes, or, in other words, the peculiar view of life and the world. Focusing on the notion of "thinking", it is undeniable that every individual has her or his own way of thinking, which means that different individuals will react to, behave, experience and think about the same event differently. We have to think, but the fundamental question is how we think

and interpret certain events and the reality around us. Consequently, it is possible to speak of positive and negative thinking.

It is obvious that some people view themselves, the world and the future in a negative context, while others view those in a positive context. However, the majority of people think in the positive way – that is to say, people are more inclined to think positively. In spite of that, people are more consciously aware of the negative aspects in life (Peterson, 2006). In fact, “this is understandable because the positive things do not threaten our well-being, while the negative things may be unpleasant or even dangerous” (Rijavec, Miljković, Brdar 2008: 113). While negative thinking happens on a conscious level, positive thinking most likely prevails on the unconscious level.

Dispositional optimism. Scheier, Carver and Bridges (2001) defined optimism as a stable predisposition (expectation) that good rather than bad things will occur in one’s life. Bryant and Cvengros (2004: 275) wrote that dispositional optimism was originally conceived of as a one-dimensional characteristic (personality trait) which represents a bipolar continuum with optimism at the one end and pessimism at the other end of the spectrum. In conclusion, dispositional optimism is genetically conditioned (Plomin et al., 1992) and influenced by early childhood experiences (Scheier, Carver, 1985).

Explanatory style (attributional style) or the style of explaining. Social psychologist Weiner (1986) considered the reasons why some people are high achievers, and some are not. He concluded that the determining factor was how people thought about the causes of their successes and failures. His approach became known as the attribution theory on achievement (Seligman, 1998). Weiner (1986), in fact, looked at the factors to which people attribute their successes or failures. In 1978, Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale introduced attributional style as a trait of cognitive personality. As already mentioned, Seligman (1998) applied this concept to optimism; what he terms “explanatory style” is the way people explain the causes of events in their lives. According to him, there are three main dimensions of explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization, which can be optimistic or pessimistic. Explanatory style is more than just the words said in the case of failure or success and it represents a habit of thought, which was learned in childhood and adolescence (Seligman, 2006). Seligman argues that explanatory style derives

directly from one's realization of their place in the world, or, in other words, whether a person considers themselves to be valuable and worthy of good, or worthless and hopeless.

Permanence: sometimes vs. always. Permanence is a temporal dimension. Pessimists believe that the causes of their bad experiences are permanent; will never disappear; and will continue to affect their lives in the future. Optimists, on the other hand, believe that such occurrences are temporary. An example of pessimistic versus optimistic explanatory style of children in the temporal dimension when explaining bad occurrences would be: "I can't draw cars very well" (permanent – pessimistic) and "I couldn't draw a car well this time" (temporary – optimistic). The optimistic style of explaining positive events is the exact opposite of the optimistic style of explaining negative events. In other words, good events are explained in terms of permanence ("I always draw well"), and bad in terms of transience ("I couldn't draw a car well this time"). The pessimistic point of view is the exact opposite. Therefore, people who believe that good events have permanent causes try even harder when they achieve success. Pessimists consider the causes of good events to be transient rather than permanent, and are prone to quitting even after achieving success, convinced that it was mere luck (Seligman, 1998).

Pervasiveness: specific vs. universal (global). Pervasiveness is a dimension relating to space. Pessimists explain their failures pervasively. They often quit everything after experiencing a failure. For those who make specific explanations for failures, failure may lead to helplessness only in certain problematic areas of life, but they carry on with their lives; they have the optimistic style of explaining bad events. Examples with bad events would be: "No teacher is fair" (global – pessimistic) vs. "This teacher is unfair" (specific – optimistic); and with good events: "I'm good at doing puzzles" (specific – pessimistic) vs. "I'm very skillful" (global – optimistic). Optimists believe that good events will enhance everything they do, while pessimists believe that bad events have pervasive causes, and good events are caused by specific factors.

Personalization: internal vs. external. Unlike permanence and pervasiveness, personalization is a dimension of explaining which can easily be faked. People may have no problems speaking of their misfortunes as if they are somebody else's fault, even though they might be "chronic internalizers".

Individuals who blame themselves for bad events internalize their failures. Such people have very low self-esteem and consider themselves worthless, talentless and unworthy of love. Those who blame others for bad events in their lives are externalizers. They do not lose self-esteem when bad things happen; on the contrary, they are more self-content than people who blame themselves. According to Seligman, low self-esteem is often the result of the internal style of explaining bad events. Examples with bad events would be: "I am stupid" (low self-esteem – internal) vs. "You are stupid" (high self-esteem – external); and with good events: "My team is smart" (external – pessimistic) vs. "I am smart" (internal – optimistic). The optimistic style of explaining in the dimension of personalization is internal rather than external. People who believe that they themselves cause good events to occur are more self-content than people who believe that good events are caused by other people or circumstances (Seligman, 1998). Personalization is the easiest of the three dimensions to grasp because it is related to one of the first concepts learned in early childhood, namely, the concept of self. A child might say, "It wasn't me, it was him." Personalization enables us to control what we think about ourselves. A summary of the optimistic and pessimistic styles of explaining would reveal the following: people with an optimistic style explain good events as permanent, enhancing other activities, and self-caused. When it comes to bad events, they "believe that a bad event is temporary, caused by external circumstances, and limited only to a certain situation in their lives" (Rijavec et al., 2008: 118). In contrast, people with a pessimistic style of explaining think that good things are temporary, success is mere luck, and other people or circumstances cause good events. Those who have a pessimistic style of explaining can acquire an optimistic style by internalizing some skills (techniques) to change their explanatory style. Optimism can therefore, he argues, be learned regardless of the influence of genetics and various experiences, and especially in the context of working with preschool children.

3. The importance of positive thinking in children – the pyramid of optimism in children

Seligman (2007) argues that there are three principles which are crucial for the establishment and development of optimism in preschool children, and all

of them come from basic research on learned helplessness: mastery, positivity, and explanatory style. Mastery is the base of optimism, positivity its extension and explanatory style is at the apex of the pyramid.

Optimism in children develops from birth, through the time children take their first steps, and up to the school age. Basic optimism is formed in that period. As noted earlier, the origins of optimism are very little known, but the above-mentioned principles empower children and give them a positive outlook. Little children develop a personal explanatory style, which they use to explain the causes of their experiences. Masterful *action* is the crucible in which preschool optimism is forged.

Mastery. In the context of working in early education institutions which have provided an adequate environment, it is crucial to present children with developmentally appropriate challenges on a daily basis, which equips them with **mastery**. Mastery is the basis of optimism and a behavioral category, which means that children are in control of the results. Children gain mastery because causes and effects are conditioned. Children experience mastery when they are in control. The inability to affect events by their actions or master something can lead to the development of passivity and depression in children because they have no control and the outcomes do not depend upon their actions. There are countless opportunities throughout the day to enhance a child's mastery and prevent the feeling of helplessness when a variety of activities is implemented. There are two main strategies that may be used: **the strategy of gradualism** and **strategy of choice**. A new task can seem impossible and extremely difficult to a child. It is the teacher's duty to help the child to complete the new task as painlessly as possible by breaking down the task into smaller, more achievable steps, so that the child can gradually complete the new challenge. The child should first be presented with a level that she or he will have no difficulties mastering. It is important that the strategy of gradualism be developmentally appropriate. It is also of utmost importance to talk during the course of every activity, using a soothing tone of voice. Another extremely important point is to give children choice, or in other words, to enable them to choose on their own whether they want to participate in an activity or not.

Positivity, as the extension of mastery, refers to a child's feelings, or to growing up in a sunny and warm emotional atmosphere. Positive feelings are a means to a higher end, and that is mastery. The feeling of happiness and safety entices children to explore, which makes them feel good, and, in turn, encourages them to explore even further and gain more mastery. **Praise**, as

a means to strengthening mastery in children, should come as a result of a child's success, and not because of a wish to make the child feel good. Seligman (2007) warns that it is unwise to overpraise children, because giving praise regardless of their success and the degree of achievement educes helplessness in children. Unconditional praise may undermine a child's confidence. If a child experiences failure because a task was too difficult, it is advisable to apply the principle of gradualism, i.e. to break down the task into a series of smaller, easier segments, or to unobtrusively switch to some other activity. Embellishing reality and praising children for no good reason is counterproductive. Seligman argues that by doing the game called "bedtime nuggets" with children before they take their daily rest, preschool teachers may be able to help children to keep the ratio of good to bad thoughts 2:1. The purpose of the game is to give a review of all the good things and the bad things that happened during the day. Seligman (2007) attempted to shape a positive state of mind in his children using the game. He believes that it is a way to provide a foundation for a positive mental life and give children "sweet dreams".

Explanatory style is at the very apex of the pyramid of optimism. It is still largely unknown when explanatory style develops, but it is assumed to be inherent and to consolidate in preschool years. Positive explanatory style could be taught during preschool years (Hall, Pearson, 2004). Optimism and pessimism, which then develop, are of utmost importance, because they filter hardships and victories and become the fundamental way of thinking. Explanatory style is established very early; it is conspicuously present in eight-year-olds. Parents are the dominant influence on the development of explanatory style during preschool years, but preschool teachers can directly affect its development as well. In this context, Seligman (2007) emphasizes the significant impact of criticism on the construction of self-respect in children; because children believe the criticism they receive and use it to shape their explanatory style. Adults, preschool teachers especially, should mind how they express criticism to children; if criticism is frequent and extensive, a child is likely to form a pessimistic image of her or himself (Miljković, Rijavec, 2004).

4. Teaching preschoolers to think optimistically – examples from practice

From a child's birth, parents, teachers and other close persons have endless possibilities to influence the establishment and development of optimism through various activities, materials and well designed space. The following

example illustrates how the mother can instill mastery – one of the three principles for grounding children in optimism – in her child during the early childhood years.

Ida is a young mother. She is only 22. Her son Gabriel is one month old. Gabriel is not thrilled by his bath before bedtime. Although very young, Ida realizes that if she were to simply immerse Gabriel in water, Gabriel would react strongly and show resistance by crying loudly, twisting, and twitching his little body. Ida therefore employs the strategy of *gradualism*. She fills the bathtub with only an inch of warm water. She first places his feet in, and keeps gradually immersing other parts of his body while telling a story about a little duck in a gentle and soothing voice. Gabriel is tense at first, but eventually starts to relax because of his mother's gentle, encouraging voice. From day to day, Ida gradually increases the amount of water in the tub, simultaneously adding in new activities: she taps the water gently with her hands, and then takes Gabriel's arms and legs and encourages him to do the same. Gabriel learns that moving his legs makes the water splash and produce a particular sound. At first, he does it cautiously, but grows bolder with every passing day. At the five months of age, Gabriel starts to move his arms and legs happily and animatedly as soon as he is put in water. The water splashes, and his every move produces a sound. Gabriel enjoys his baths more and more, reacting with loud laughter and happy screams.

Ida has thus set the foundation for Gabriel's lifelong optimism, although a child that small still does not have the cognitive skills to identify and challenge his own thoughts (Seligman, 1995). Ida encouraged Gabriel to act, and he realized that his actions had consequences and were under his control, which gave him mastery. This conditioning of action provoked him to enjoy the activity and engage in it more actively.

Earlier studies (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujičić, 2013) empirically confirmed that there was a distinctive need to implement basic principles of positive psychology in Croatian kindergartens. The logical next step would be to focus on the construction of optimism in preschool children, which is very important because it will help a child to fight depression when the inevitable setbacks and tragedies of life befall him. It will help him achieve more – on the playing field, in school, and later in work – than others expect of him. Optimism also

improves physical health and may ensure a longer life. It is thus important to consciously influence the development of optimism from a very early age.

The kindergarten is an institution where children establish specific relations with their peers, as well as adults other than their parents. The relationships that children establish with children and adults can foster a sense of mastery in them; on the other hand, they can also have the opposite effect, by nurturing the feeling of helplessness. It is therefore imperative that kindergarten teachers from the very beginning elicit social conditioning by subtle interventions. A child is not alone in his or her group. In the course of their interactions, children often get into verbal or physical conflicts, which can escalate and result in serious consequences. One of the important roles of the teacher is to teach children problem-solving and social skills. She or he has to keep in mind three important rules (Seligman, 1995):

1. to provide support and show interest in solving a child's problem, but with the possibility that the child consider the problem by him or herself;
2. when letting a child handle his or her own problems, the teacher cannot be too critical of the child's efforts; and
3. with their flexible strategies of problem solving, teachers provide examples for children.

Filip is a 5.8 year old boy who goes to Didi Kindergarten. Children from his group often complain that he disturbs their games and activities and sometimes hits them. Kindergarten teachers keep close watch of Filip by documenting his activities, taking photos and videos, writing transcripts and so on, to get a better grasp of the situation. While reviewing the collected materials, the teachers sensed that Filip had a strong desire to participate in group activities with other children, but was not able to express well what he really wanted. For example, he at first only watched Emanuel (6.2 years), Luka (5.4 years) and Tomo (5.1 years) engage in a building activity. Then, without any notice, he added new elements to an already finished construction and removed some of the ones the boys had previously placed. The boys very calmly warned him several times that he was being a nuisance and asked him not to tamper with their construction. Filip's failure to heed their warnings angered Emanuel, so he asked Filip to leave them alone one more time, in a more pointed manner. This enraged Filip, so he tore down everything the boys had built. A kindergarten

teacher decided to intervene in that moment to prevent the conflict from escalating further, by asking each of the boys to express their wishes and intentions for the construction that they had been building. Filip expressed his wish to play with the boys, but Emanuel, Luka and Tomo said that they did not want to play with him because he was a nuisance. The teacher asked Emanuel, Luka and Tomo why they thought that Filip was a nuisance and why they did not want to play with him. They replied that they did not understand what Filip wanted to build and that they wanted to build something completely different. The teacher suggested that they draw what they wanted to build on the board and to adhere to the blueprint while building. All four boys accepted the proposal and drew a blueprint in stages, lead by Luka. When they were done building a particular construction, they would draw a new plan and keep building, all the while consulting each other. Interestingly, all four boys adhered to the agreement and their blueprint.

This example illustrates how the teacher, through subtle intervention, motivated the boys to solve the problem that presented itself before them in a few steps (Seligman, 1995). She first **slowed** them **down** by intervening at the right time and teaching the boys how to rein in their impulsive actions. She very competently eased the situation and asked of every participant in the conflict to verbalize the problem that appeared. Every boy next had to express his opinion and wishes, bringing out **various perspectives** to help solve the problem. In the third step, the boys **set the goal** in collaboration with the teacher, which was to build a construction together. The fourth step was **choosing a path**, or a means to reach the goal (the blueprint); and the teacher and the children concluded that the plan was successful and that everything worked smoothly, which illustrates the fifth step: **how did it go?**

The following example displays an especially sophisticated reaction of a kindergarten teacher who “immunized” a girl, Nika, against depression. Nika thus acquired an optimistic theory, or an optimistic image of herself. She learned how to recover after encountering a hardship. The teacher who helped her did not dismiss her problem, but taught her how to persevere and actively solve the problem at hand. She also helped Nika find optimistic and accurate explanations for the failure that she had experienced.

When she was 5.6 years old, Nika was very popular with her peers. In

spite of that, she was quick to waver, withdraw and quit. During one of her kindergarten stays, she decided to join a group of children who were sewing rag dolls. Unlike the other children, Nika was not very good at sewing. The needle was too small, she could not thread it, and her hands shook when she tried to master the way the other children were sewing. She was deeply disappointed with herself. After a while she quit the activity, explaining the teacher she was too stupid and never did anything right, withdrew into herself, and sat down at the table at the opposite side of the room. The teacher decided to discuss Nika's problem with Nika, and led her to disclose in detail what was really troubling her. Nika readily answered: "The needle is too small so it's hard to hold it in my hand and sew at the same time. The thread keeps getting tangled and it's hard to do the stitch that the other children are doing. You see, teacher, I'm so stupid!" The teacher replied consolingly: "I'm so sorry that you find it hard to sew. I know that you're disappointed. I often get disappointed as well. Especially if I can't do something the way that I want to. However, if I practice a lot and keep at it, I can do it a lot better. So I believe that if you practice more, you can learn how to sew; I can help you as well." The teacher helped her by showing her a simpler sewing technique, giving her a bigger needle and a more supple fabric, and marking the places through which to stick the needle. She asked a boy with whom Nika liked to play to join them. Encouraged, Nika dared to try again, and was much more successful. As other children also took part in the activity, Nika had the opportunity to see that sewing was not easy for others either, that it was all right to make mistakes, and that they could also be fixed. Nika continued to sew very often, and the teacher systematically presented her with more diverse and challenging fabrics. Through practice, Nika successfully mastered various sewing techniques and realized that she was not stupid, and she was therefore more pleased with her achievements and gladly showed her handiwork to other children and adults.

Nika changed her catastrophic image of herself and framed the theory of failure within the temporary and localized (when she realized that other children also experienced difficulties when sewing, as opposed to "I'm so stupid. I never do anything right."). Nika's problem moulded into a temporary difficulty, which could be changed. Nika will probably not become a seamstress when she grows up, but her effort and diligent practice may have helped her realize that

perseverance and cheerfulness were virtues which could help us achieve goals that we set for ourselves, and overcome any difficulties that stand in our way.

5. Conclusion

Besides parents, preschool teachers also have a major influence on the formation and development of optimism in preschool children. They deal with children's success and, even more importantly, failure, on a daily basis, and with their criticism they affect children's theories of how the world functions. Children mimic the explanatory styles of not only their parents, but also preschool teachers as "respected mentors" (Seligman, 2007). Preschool teachers therefore have to act prudently and be careful of the way they communicate with children, because children's optimism or pessimism may be affected by a single event, which may turn out to be the critical moment that changed optimism into pessimism and vice versa (the so-called *Hoving Effect*). The fundamental role of kindergarten teachers is to provide material and immaterial conditions to stimulate children's real interests and encourage them to act. In that way, they provide quality support for the formation and development of optimism by encouraging the development of "creative and critical thinking in children and the development of various competencies" (Slunjski, 2012: 95). Preschool teachers should realize a high degree of negotiation with children and encourage their independence, autonomy and emancipation, strengthening children's mastery and good sides, i.e. virtues. To achieve that, teachers should be flexible in their practice and be able to recognize "various unpredictable situations" and adjust their actions accordingly. They should pay special attention to children's developmental abilities and implement the strategy of gradualism and strategy of choice. Similarly, quality support for the foundation and development of optimism in preschool children should be directed at the carefully considered "organizational preconditions which enable children to act independently, freely, competently, guided by their own interests and, as much as possible, in cooperation with other children" (Slunjski, 2012: 95). Kindergarten teachers should help children to develop optimism in two stages: a) by accepting children's feelings, and b) by discussing children's thoughts on situations in a way that would make their thinking flexible and accurate (Colker, 2010).

Teachers' timely intervention in case of a pessimistic attributional style would include the development of a positive, optimistic way of thinking in order to develop a healthy self-image, high self-esteem and well-being, and prevent depression in children. In conclusion, one of the main roles of kindergarten teachers in the construction of optimism may be to let children know that they matter by trusting their ability to think, learn, make decisions and solve problems which stand in their way.

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IMPLEMENTACIJA PIRAMIDE OPTIMIZMA U VRTIĆIMA

Sažetak: *Inicijativa u poučavanju djece predškolske dobi da optimistično razmišljaju ima dvije temeljne značajke po njihov razvoj. Kao prvo, djeca uče kako adekvatno povezati svoje uspjehe sa svojim sposobnostima, uslijed čega uče i to kako se uspješno nositi sa svojim neuspjesima. Drugo, na tom su putu učenja na najzdraviji mogući način zaštićeni od depresije i sposobni razviti vlastitu psihološku otpornost. Stoga je od iznimnog značaja prepoznati važnost poučavanja pozitivnom razmišljanju u djece i implementacije Seligmanove piramide optimizma u vrtićima. Ovaj članak ima dva temeljna cilja. Prvi je usmjeren prema kreiranju većeg senzibiliteta kod odgajatelja s obzirom na važnost pozitivnog razmišljanja kod djece te su prikazani neki od teoretskih koncepta. Drugi cilj opisuje konkretnu implementaciju piramide optimizma u vrtićima primjenom relevantnih primjera iz prakse. Na kraju rada predložene su neke praktične smjernice.*

Ključne riječi: *djeca predškolske dobi, prevencija, piramida optimizma, dobrobit, vrtić*

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