

Prevalence of Aggressive and Prosocial Behavior of Preschool Children in Relation to Family Structure

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine whether there are differences among preschool children pertaining to the exhibition of aggressive and prosocial behavior in relation to family differences. The survey was conducted using the assessment scale for aggressive and prosocial behavior in preschool children PROS / AG (Žužul & Vlahović-Štetić, 1992). The scale consists of 20 variables making up 2 subscales, namely aggressive and prosocial behavior, which are the most common reactions of children in the kindergarten. The sample consisted of children from preschools in the Sisak- Moslavina County (N = 669). Mann Whitney test results confirm that there is no difference between only children and children with siblings in relation to the prevalence of manifesting aggressive and prosocial behavior. Also, no differences were found between children from single-parent and two-parent families in the prevalence of those behaviors.

Key words: family structure; preschool institutions; prosocial and aggressive behavior.

Introduction

Numerous authors have tried to answer the questions pertaining to the influence of family relationships, parents and parenting styles on children. In spite of the abundance of research contemplating this topic, there are still insufficiently represented studies on interactions of children among themselves and within the family. Family is a complex system teaching and shaping one's values, promoting communication skills and establishing relationships. While it should be a safe haven and offer uncompromising support, it can also be quite the opposite. Opić (2016) describes in his work the

quality of family upbringing as a network of complex relationships of all its members, where each member has a role and responsibility for the benefit of the whole family. The author states that a child will remember all these relationships throughout their life, and if they are disturbed, that feeling will not only stay with the child, but the child will experience every event fully, just as if it was happening to him or her directly. Accordingly, it can be stated that the role of the family in forming a child as a person is of extreme importance, and the quality of relationships between all its members is an inevitable component in building a stable micro community. A nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and two children with gender-specific roles was considered a healthy and normal family by the mid-20th century. According to Heilman (2008), such families are in decline and we can no longer speak of a normal or statistically typical family. Despite the fact that the family structure is changing rapidly and that families vary greatly in their structure, lifestyle, values and relationships between family members, the traditional family structure remains a synonym for family in collective consciousness. Maleš and Kušević (2011) state that being brought up by both parents is the most important aspect in every child's development, provided that such a nuclear family structure ensures healthy family relationships, provides the child with love and security, and satisfies all his/her needs. Today, numerous social and economic changes are inevitably changing the image and structure of family. According to Maleš and Kušević (2011), 90% of children in Croatia are born in marriage. Hence, the demographic picture of the population shows that the family structure in Croatia is changing relatively slowly compared to other European countries. However, it can still be said that Croatia is following the trends of most developed countries.

Family as the Most Important Factor for the Child's Social Development

Family environment is considered the primary place where the child adopts and develops all his/her skills. A prerequisite for successful, comprehensive child development, especially its social component, is the involvement of both parents in the child's upbringing and the establishment of a high-quality family atmosphere. Engle and Breaux (1994) state that the quality of family relationships is simply based on the interactions between the father, the child and the mother. Such interactions form the basis of strong emotional relationships, which are crucial for the child's maturing into a socially competent individual. Numerous authors have studied the relationships between children and their parents (Bradford, 2006; Fishman & Meyers, 2000; Keresteš, 2001, 2002; Low & Stocker, 2005). Their research emphasizes the importance of establishing quality relationships, which will serve as a model for children's further relationships with their siblings, peers and other people in their environment. Although the role of the family in the earliest childhood is the most important, its influence does not end once a person has grown up. It is therefore very

important to provide all the necessary support to parents with an aim of supporting the child's upbringing and growing into a mature adult. This research was based on the question whether socially competent individuals could come from restructured families. A similar issue was studied by Stanton (2008), according to whom children growing up in two-parent households achieve greater success than their peers from single-parent families. Furthermore, Schaffer (2000) points out that children growing up in families with frequent conflict situations show more behavioral problems than children from conflict-free single-parent families. Also, these children are even more adaptable to life situations than children from nuclear families with frequent conflicts. It is considered that it is best for children to grow up with both parents, provided that such a nuclear family structure ensures healthy family relationships, gives the child love and security, and satisfies all their needs. While observing parents' relationships children learn about life, love, understanding, closeness, comfort, but at the same time they witness the clashing of different opinions, conflict situations, and solution-finding to various crises and problems. In all the above-mentioned situations parents are role models according to whom the child forms his/her position. It is therefore important to provide the child with a good example of a family, be it a single- or a two-parent one. In this way the child will learn about life and develop into a socially competent person. Jurčević-Lozančić (2011) describes a socially competent individual as a person sensitive to reactions of people around them, who is ready to help in meeting others' needs and has adopted prosocial behavior, empathy and altruism. Contemporary society is built on contemporary families and their structures. The expectation that each parent responsibly brings up an equally responsible individual is crucial in this sense. Accordingly, it is indisputable that each parent sometimes needs to improve their knowledge of child education, i.e. parenting competencies and this applies to all parents regardless of their education qualifications. In this sense the educational institution and its staff can be of great help. For this reason, the emphasis of this paper is precisely on the development of partnerships between educators and parents, as various forms of cooperation and educator support can positively influence the roles of parents in child upbringing.

Significance of Family Structure for the Child's Social Development

Social behavior of children is partly influenced by interactions within the family and its structure. Proper functioning of the family as a community requires well-functioning relationships between siblings as well. Wagner Jakab, Cvitković, and Hojanić (2006) describe the sibling relationship as the most enduring one in a family and consider it one of the fundamental relationships in human life. Accordingly, it could be said that this is an extremely strong emotional relationship with a very important role in forming a child as a socially competent being. According to Jiao, Ji, and Jing (1986), children who have siblings are more cooperative, more compliant and more likely to form and maintain peer relationships, as opposed to only children,

who score higher in egocentricity. Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that interpersonal relationships between siblings affect the cognitive, emotional and social development. According to studies by Howe, Karos, and Aquan-Assee (2011) and Bun Lam, Solmeyer, and McHale (2012), close sibling relationships are important for the development of social skills. Therefore, siblings form an important aspect affecting the child's full development at an early age and greatly influencing the process of socialization. Through daily interaction children train their communication skills needed to establish peer relationships. By doing so, they build and strengthen their prosocial behavior. If these relationships are disrupted or negatively influenced by some other factors, such as a difficult divorce, the child will exhibit more aggressive behavior in interaction with peers. McCoy, Brody, and Stoneman (2002) state that if an older brother or sister exhibit certain behavioral problems, such behavior will often be noticeable in a younger brother or sister. Furthermore, according to their findings, only children show a more difficult adjustment to divorce than children who have siblings. Gass, Jenkins, and Dunn (2007) hold that children with older siblings adapt to stressful situations more easily than those without them. Consequently, it can be concluded that a child who has a sibling is more likely to accept family changes like divorce. The reason for this can be their mutual support, sharing the same feelings, and thus faster adaptation to the new family structure compared to children who only have the opportunity of sharing their feelings with their parents. As parents can be too occupied with the divorce, the child may be more inclined to exert aggressive forms of behavior. Ostrov, Crick, and Stauffacher (2006) found that children whose siblings exerted aggressive behavior also showed a greater inclination to it. According to the purpose of our research, as well as the aforementioned, it can be said that children in post-divorce family structures are more inclined to seeking parental attention, especially if the divorce caused their separation from siblings. Also, they can be more prone to aggressive behavior in interaction with siblings. Research carried out by Stormshak, Bellanti, and Bierman (1996) has shown that children who express some forms of aggressive behavior toward their siblings, parents or friends find it more difficult to develop adaptive social skills as adults. Brody (1998) highlights the correlation between child aggression and family processes, particularly pertaining to the quality of interaction within the family and different dimensions of parental behavior. In accordance with the above-mentioned it can be concluded that some forms of punishment, inconsistent procedures, a strict educational approach, authoritarian, but also a permissive education style greatly contribute to the development of aggressive behavior in children. Furthermore, research carried out by Jurkin and Ombla (2015) has shown that interactions are significant in explaining aggression. The authors explain that frequent interactions in which conflicts and mild physical confrontation can occur form a favorable context for aggression. Buist (2010) emphasizes the characteristics of such relationships as well, because they increase the likelihood of the child's copying of sibling behavior. Precisely in view of these factors the influence

of parental behavior and education style and strategies is very important when dealing with conflicts among children. Their impact on social learning and development of pro-social skills can be very beneficial and is necessary for a harmonious functioning of the child in a socially acceptable way. In accordance with the above-mentioned it can be said that by interacting and resolving conflicts with their parents, children acquire and develop the skills needed later in peer interaction. The aim of this study was to examine the prevalence of manifesting prosocial and aggressive forms of behavior with regard to family structure. In accordance with the research objectives, 4 hypotheses were set up:

H1: Children with one or more siblings express prosocial behavioral patterns more often than only children.

H2: Only children are more likely to express aggressive forms of behavior than those who have siblings.

H3: Children from single-parent families manifest aggressive forms of behavior less frequently than children from two-parent families.

H4: Children from two-parent families manifest more prosocial forms of behavior than children from single-parent families.

Method

Participants

A cluster sample was used for the survey, which included preschool children from the Sisak-Moslavina County (N = 669), of which 319 boys and 337 girls. The children attend preschool institutions in Sisak-Moslavina County, with 67% of them attending a regular kindergarten program, and 33% preschool programs.

Procedure

Data were collected using the scale of assessment of aggressive and prosocial behavior in preschool children PROS / AG (Žužul & Vlahović- Štetić, 1992). The scale consists of 20 variables making up 2 subscales (even variables describing aggressive behavior, odd variables describing prosocial behavior) pertaining to the most common reactions of children in kindergarten. This paper is part of a larger study (Kokanović, 2016) and the variables for this purpose have been suppressed in two composite variables. The task of the evaluator, in this case the educator, was to evaluate the frequency of each type of behavior for an estimated child. Types of behavior were listed on the negatively polarized five-degree ordinal Likert-type scale where the frequency of specific behavior was assigned a number from 1 to 5 (1- never demonstrates such behavior, 5 – almost always demonstrates such behavior). In each preschool institution the teachers evaluated the first ten children listed in the alphabetic registry of a given preschool group. The socio-demographic part of the scale contained a variable of 4 categories related to family roles (brother, sister, brother and sister, only child) determined for the purposes of the previous research. For this

purpose, the scale included dichotomous categorical variables, and the results show that 477 (71.3%) children have one or more siblings while 192 (28.7%) are an only child. It was also established that 371 (55.5%) children have both parents, while 289 (43.2%) live in single-parent families.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the basic descriptive values of the sub-scales, with a high value of the arithmetic mean on the sub-scales of prosocial behavior ($M = 3.44$). This implies that children express these forms of behavior more often than aggressive behaviors, for which the arithmetic mean is considerably lower ($M = 2.36$).

Table 1
Basic descriptive values of subscales

	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Stat	Stat	Stat	Stat	Stat	Stat	Std. Error	Stat	Std. Error
Prosocial behavior	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.44	.896	-.18	.096	-.84	.191
Aggressive behavior	4.00	1.00	5.00	2.36	.977	.31	.095	-.93	.190

Valid N (listwise)

The response range is maximal, indicating the representation of all the values for all items. Subscale reliability was confirmed by the internal consistency method based on the Alpha model and Cronbach coefficient, amounting to 943 for prosocial, and 942 for aggressive behavior. As deviations of symmetry are small, distribution asymmetries are not significant. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was applied in testing the hypotheses:

- H1: Children who have one or more siblings express prosocial behavioral patterns more frequently than those without siblings;
- H2: Only children are more likely to express aggressive forms of behavior than children who have siblings.

As seen in Table 2 (and Figures 1 and 2) the results show that in relation to the frequency of manifesting prosocial ($p=.668$) and aggressive ($p=.609$) behavioral patterns there is no statistically significant difference between children with and children without siblings. Both hypotheses are therefore rejected.

Table 2
Test values

	Prosocial behaviour	Aggressive behaviour
Mann-Whitney U	44220.500	43146.000
Wilcoxon W	61978.500	60912.000
Z	-.429	-.511
	.668	.609

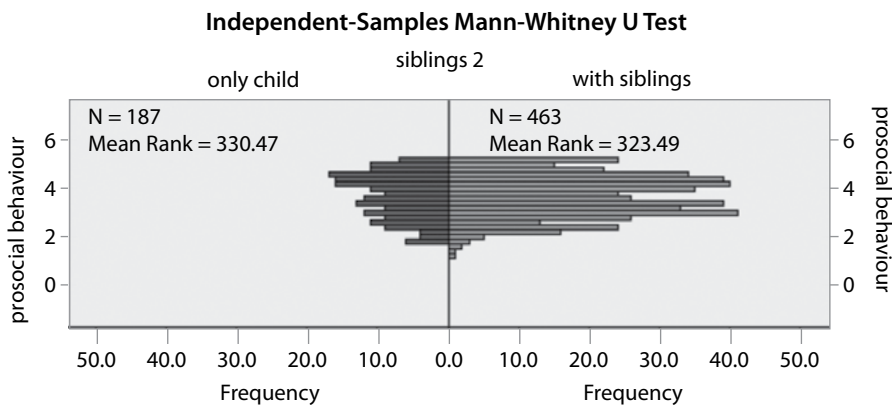


Figure 1. Range means - prosocial behavior

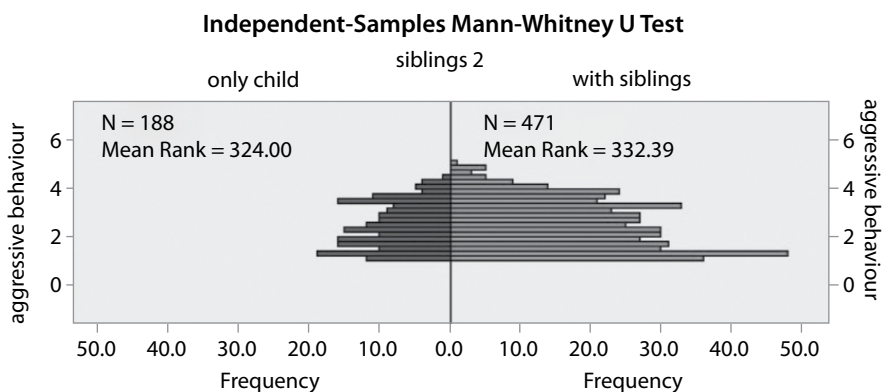


Figure 2. Range means - aggressive behavior

Children spend up to ten hours a day in an institutional context, and the profession of educators as primary representatives of this system has been advancing greatly in the last couple of years. Hence, educators are becoming more competent in responding to increasingly complex demands of children and their families. All the key persons in the life of a child have a role of equipping the child with the necessary competencies so as to prevent, in a timely and adequate manner, the emergence of socially unacceptable forms of behavior. In addition, parental competencies should be improved with an aim of reducing intuitive parental reactions. Furthermore, in the development of prosocial skills peer influence can have a decisive role because children strengthen these skills through daily interaction. According to the aforementioned and to the results of this research it can be concluded that the influence and impact of peer interactions on the social component of our research participants is notable.

When testing the hypotheses 3 and 4, Mann Whitney test was applied due to the disproportion of the subsamples. The hypotheses were as follows:

H3: Children from single-parent families manifest aggressive forms of behavior less frequently than children from two-parent families.

H4: Children from two-parent families are more likely to manifest prosocial behavior than children from single-parent families.

Table 3 (and Figures 3 and 4) shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of manifesting aggressive ($p=.466$) and prosocial ($p=.974$) behavioral patterns among children from single-parent and two-parent families. Both hypotheses are therefore rejected.

Table 3
Test values

	Prosocial behavior	Aggressive behavior
Mann-Whitney U	50797.500	50201.000
Wilcoxon W	90418.500	90387.000
Z	-.033	-.729
Stat. significance (two-way)	.974	.466

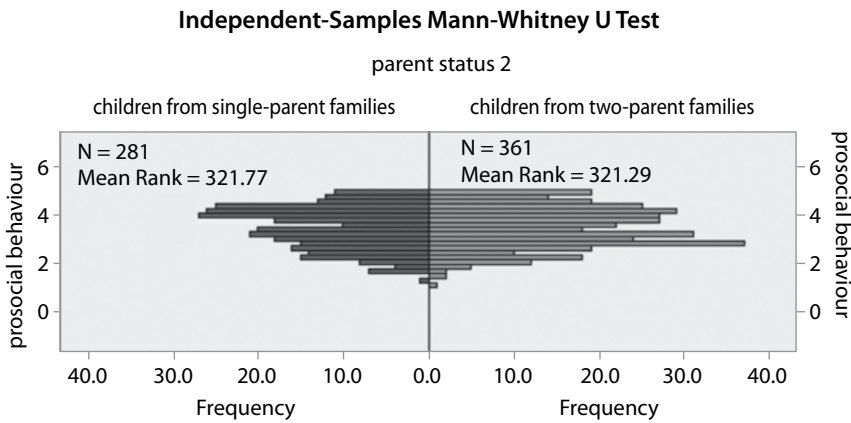


Figure 3. Range means - prosocial behavior

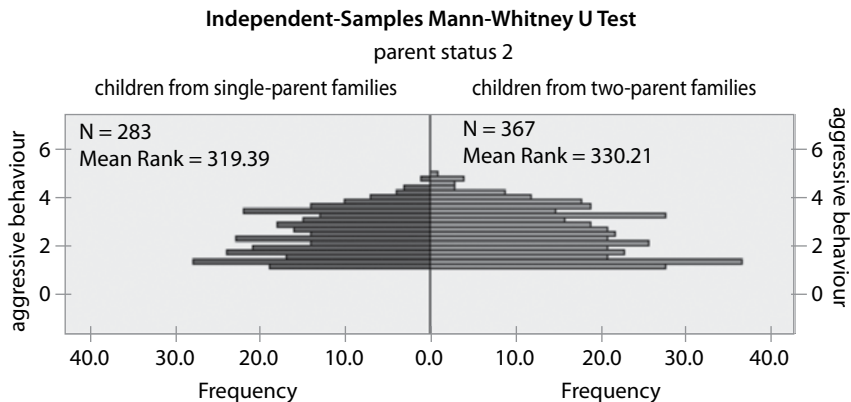


Figure 4. Range means - aggressive behavior

Numerous studies have been performed in relation to family structure. Based on their research, Čudina-Obradović and Obradović (2006) and Carlson and Corcoran (2001) outline some factors that could put single-parent families in an unfavorable position, such as the stress that comes from family breakdown, poor economic status, social context and the psychological state of the mother. In view of the above-mentioned and according to our research results, it can be stated that the child easily adjusts to the new situation and maintains the quality of his/her peer interactions provided the home economic situation and the emotional stability of the custodial parent are preserved. Furthermore, preschool facilities where children spend most of the day have a well-structured system of helping and supporting families in disintegration, with an aim of helping children adapt to the new family structure and minimize the potential risk factors. Future research on family circumstances and post-disintegration conditions could be done in order to confirm these findings.

Conclusion

When comparing traditional and contemporary families, significant changes can be observed pertaining to their structures and roles. Since there is an increasing number of incomplete or restructured families, which are most often a result of divorce, the quality of life within this micro community is also inevitably somewhat weakened. Therefore, significant support should be provided by preschool institutions so as to reduce the risk factors affecting proper and complete child development. In accordance with the above-mentioned, the task of educational institutions should be focused on developing and creating close partnerships with children's parents and on providing them the necessary support and assistance at any given time, with an aim of strengthening their parenting competences, especially in situations of change such as divorce. The trend of increasing changes in the family structure is prevalent and pedagogical competencies of educational staff are key to successful reaction and intervention. Child upbringing begins in the family environment, where his/her attachment to family members, primarily to the mother, is the most important aspect. Therefore, any changes of the nuclear family will affect the child's overall development, especially its socioemotional component. Today's preschool institutions are the stepping stone in a line of education institutions with intentional educational activity as a task. Although our research did not identify differences between the examined segments, an increasing presence of aggressive behavior in preschool children and an increasing number of socially estranged individuals, most commonly observed in early adolescence, should become a guideline in creating environments and relationships suited as a timely response to these occurrences. Since no hypothesis has been affirmed, it can be stated that there is either a good compensation mechanism in the sampled children, or that preschool institutions adequately respond to children's needs in challenging cases. Challenges in this sense refer to parents' divorce, changes of family structure, and interaction between peers who have and those who do not have any siblings.

This research was inspired by Kokanović (2016), whose study confirmed statistically significant differences and correlations in the prevalence of the mentioned forms of behavior according to age, gender and the preschool program the child attended. It was our aim to conduct research on the same sample, and to check whether the prevalence of specific behavior could be correlated with family structure. Although our hypotheses have not been confirmed, this research may serve as a guideline for further study of the above-mentioned phenomena with the aim of identifying the risk factors for the emergence of aggressive forms of behavior. In this way the necessary prerequisites and support plan can be made for appropriate intervention aimed at the well-being of children and their families.

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Prevalencija agresivnih i prosocijalnih ponašanja djece predškolske dobi u odnosu na strukturu obitelji

Sažetak

Cilj je ovog istraživanja bio utvrditi postoji li razlika među djecom predškolske dobi u manifestiranju agresivnih i prosocijalnih ponašanja s obzirom na strukturu obitelji. Ispitivanje je provedeno s pomoću Skale procjene agresivnog i prosocijalnog ponašanja djece predškolske dobi PROS/AG (Žužul i Vlahović-Štetić, 1992). Skala se sastoji od 20 čestica koje čine 2 subskale: agresivno ponašanje i prosocijalno ponašanje, a koje predstavljaju najčešće reakcije djece u dječjem vrtiću. Uzorak ispitanika činila su djeca predškolskih ustanova Sisačko-moslavačke županije (N=669). Rezultati Mann Whitney testa potvrđuju da ne postoji razlika između djece jedinaca i onih koji imaju braću i sestre u prevalenciji manifestiranja agresivnih i prosocijalnih ponašanja. Također nisu potvrđene razlike među djecom iz jednoroditeljskih obitelji i djece koja žive s oba roditelja u prevalenciji manifestiranja navedenih oblika ponašanja.

Ključne riječi: predškolske ustanove; prosocijalno i agresivno ponašanje; struktura obitelji.