

# Stress Sources in Kindergarten Teachers in the City of Zagreb

Sara Kozjak Dragčević<sup>1</sup> and Siniša Opić<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Kindergarten Košnica

<sup>2</sup>University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education

## Abstract

*The paper investigates the sources of stress at work for kindergarten teachers. Its aim is to explore various sources of stress in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb, as well as stress intensity regarding years of work experience and education group in which they have been working. The study involved 257 kindergarten teachers from Zagreb, aged 22 to 65. For research purposes, the Scale of Assessment of Stress at Work for the Kindergarten Teachers was used. The scale describes situations the kindergarten teachers encounter on a daily basis and asks them to estimate to what extent particular situation is stressful. The research has shown that the greatest intensity of stress in kindergarten teachers is caused by parent behaviour. Additionally, prolonged work experience reduces stress in certain situations. The research results contribute to a better understanding of the work of kindergarten teachers and specific sources of stress in their work environment. They should help in further development of recognition, prevention and solution measures.*

**Key words:** *stress at the workplace; stress in kindergarten teachers; stress sources at work.*

## Introduction

Each profession carries within itself particular stress sources. Provided they are recognised on time, it is possible to find solutions to alleviate or even completely eliminate them. Kindergarten teachers' profession is accompanied with its own stress sources, due to peculiarities of the profession itself. Kindergarten teachers are professionally trained and skilled to be able to organise and perform education and training for pre-school children in a kindergarten or some other institution dealing with pre-school training and education (State Pedagogical Standard for Pre-school Education and Training, 2008). Wiley (2000) pointed out stress in

teachers' and kindergarten teachers' professions as an important issue in society, as permanent exposure to stressful situations results in reduced quality of work with children in the long run, health problems and more frequent absence from work. Numerous international studies have been dedicated to studying stress in teachers and kindergarten teachers. A few studies have been carried out in Croatia dealing with the problem of stress in kindergarten teachers and they have revealed that kindergarten teachers consider their work extremely stressful. Researchers working in Rijeka developed a *Scale for assessing stress in kindergarten teachers' work* (Živčić-Bećirević & Smojver-Ažić, 2005), with 4 areas that represented the main sources of stress for kindergarten teachers. These were human (colleague) relations, working conditions, relationship with parents and children's behaviour. The research in Rijeka (Živčić- Bećirević & Smojver-Ažić, 2005) showed that the main stress source for kindergarten teachers were human relations. This primarily concerned cooperation with superiors, professional associates and other kindergarten teachers, i.e., their colleagues. Relationships with parents was the next stressor, followed by relationships with children, and finally, as the lowest source of stress, working conditions in the institution. The research in Split (Pavlović & Sindik, 2014), where the *Scale for assessing stress in kindergarten teachers' work* was also applied (Živčić-Bećirević & Smojver-Ažić, 2005), showed similar results. Generally speaking, stress as a problem at work has not yet been sufficiently recognised and there are no further and more detailed investigations of its effect on the quality of the kindergarten teachers' work.

The research presented here deals with stress sources in kindergarten teachers' work in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb. The *Scale for assessing stress in kindergarten teachers' work* was used (Živčić-Bećirević & Smojver-Ažić, 2005). The research was carried out in 2017, as part of a diploma thesis at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, at the graduate study of Early childhood and preschool education. Its aim was to investigate various stress sources in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb and their intensity, considering the years of professional experience and the group of children the kindergarten teachers work with.

### ***Stress and Types of Stress***

Lazarus' theory is the most prominent theory of stress. According to this theory, stress always denotes a harmful interaction between an individual and a particular characteristic of the environment. This means that events are not stressful by themselves, and the evaluation by an individual determines whether any stimulus will act as a stressor or not. A process perpetually occurs in us that Lazarus (1991) named "a primary evaluation". This is a perpetual evaluation of the events in our environment related to the importance these events have for us. This means that some events can be evaluated as inconsequential, some can be positive and some stressful. If an event is evaluated as stressful, it can represent direct danger, a threat or a challenge. It is important to note that primary evaluation is a subjective process, and does not

necessarily have to be realistic, meaning it can vary from one individual to another. If an event is estimated to be stressful (dangerous, threatening, challenging), secondary evaluation follows: the person evaluates his/her ability to confront and prevail the situation in question. If a person estimates he/she can cope with the situation confronting him/her, it can be changed into a challenge. Likewise, a challenge can be transformed into a threat if the conclusion is that we cannot cope with particular situation we are confronted with. Lazarus names the manners and techniques persons use to confront stressful situations as the mechanisms of confronting stress. They help in deciding whether it is possible to tolerate the activity of a stressor, whether to act and influence the conditions causing stress and/or the reactions resulting from a stressful situation, or whether it is feasible to give up the attempts to overcome a stressful situation. Lazarus considers the manner of confronting stress to be essential for personal health, meaning that the way a person copes with stress is more important for personal health than the amount and intensity of the stressor a person is exposed to. Numerous investigations have been conducted based on the Lazarus' theory, all of them dealing with the study of the impact of various stressors on health. General conclusion is that the impact of a stressor on health can in no way be attributed to the stressor itself, as it always depends on physical and psychological characteristics of the individual exposed to the stressor, as well as on the circumstances in which the stressor occurs. Lazarus and Folkman (2004) pointed out that stress is a relationship between a person and his/her environment, evaluated by the person to be too demanding and threatening.

When the term "stress" is used, it should be kept in mind that it can vary by type, duration and intensity. There are two types of stress: eustress and distress. Wiley (2000) pointed out that stress need not be something necessarily bad or necessarily beneficial for a person. It is simply something that is unavoidable. Eustress is a good type of stress, motivating, challenging and inspiring a person to achieve the best possible results in a certain situation. Distress, on the other hand, is a bad type of stress, which develops after several bad situations, i.e., when the amount of stress is too high, and the person feels as if he/she loses control over the situation. By duration, stress is divided into acute and chronic. Acute stress is most often caused by sudden changes in the environment. It is unpleasant, of short duration, temporary and can easily be overcome. It usually passes in a few hours or days and occurs within a month from the stressful event that causes it. Bodily reactions are most prominent with this type of stress. Chronic stress is a long-term one and is caused by a permanent unpleasant situation. Long-lasting chronic stressful events have most serious consequences for human organism. Everything that seems a "trifle" at the beginning, such as occasional longer stay at work, sudden changes, additional tasks at work etc., accumulates in the individual and leads to chronic stress at workplace. Studying stress by intensity shows that everyday situations, such as traffic rush or being late for work, have lower intensity, while high intensity stressful events are more important types of life stress, such as

losing a job, the death of a close relative, etc. Telebec (2014) defined stress as a dynamic reaction between an individual and the exposure to the environmental conditions, pointing out that the evaluation of the situation by the individual plays a key role. Stress is the result of the individual's evaluation indicating that his/her relationship with the environment has been disturbed, meaning there are some requirements he/she is unable to fulfil. Bad stress (i.e. distress) will be described further on and the work will concentrate on the stress at workplace.

### ***Stress at the Kindergarten Teachers' Workplace***

Čudina-Obradović and Obradović (2001) discussed two areas that impact an individual: work and family. Every person defines his/her identity through them, achieves his/her self-actualisation, and fulfils his/her purposes and values. They point out that success in these areas impacts general satisfaction with life, as well as physical and psychological health of everyone. Consequently, work constitutes an essential determinant of everyone's life, as everybody spends most of his/her day at the workplace, performing tasks for which he/she is paid every month. Some jobs are routine and predictable, while some ask for higher concentration or promptness in deciding. The expression "stress at workplace" is used to describe stress caused by stress sources – stressors, arising from the working environment and the process of work. The way an employee performs his/her job within an institution or an organisation depends on various factors. Working atmosphere, encouraging environment, freedom in making decisions and inner motivation are some of these factors that impact our positive or negative image of the work we are involved in.

Considering the stress at kindergarten teachers' workplace, it occurs when the kindergarten teacher is unable to fulfil the requirements of his/her job. It is important to make a distinction between the challenges a kindergarten teacher faces and stress at work. Telebec (2014) pointed out that challenges motivate people and make them more productive at work. However, if people feel tiredness and exhaustion instead of pleasure, it simply means stress is present. Stress at workplace includes all the emotional, bodily and behavioural reactions that take place when the kindergarten teacher cannot meet the conditions and fulfil the requirements of his/her job in his/her working environment.

There are stress sources – stressors, that are equal for all jobs and professions. Each of them has its own characteristic stressors, typical for a particular profession. Kelly and Berthelsen (1995) pointed out that stress sources in kindergarten teachers are similar to those found in school teachers. However, kindergarten teachers experience additional stressors, associated with personal care and training of children. Lipnjak (2011) pointed out six work-related stressors that are also mentioned in some foreign studies. These are: workplace requirements, work role and responsibility, lack of control that people usually have over their jobs, lack of support by the workplace environment, bad social relationships and changes in the process of work. The stressors listed in

Table 1 are those that can be easily recognised and that have continuously been found in the studies dealing with stress encountered at workplace.

Table 1  
*Stressors at work (Telebec, 2014)*

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Physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– noise</li><li>– unpleasant indoor or outdoor space</li><li>– inadequate lighting or glittering</li><li>– inadequate working conditions</li></ul>
Workload and rhythm of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– too much or too little work</li><li>– work under time pressure</li><li>– too heavy physical load or bodily load</li></ul>
Working hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– working in shifts</li><li>– inadequately organised working shifts</li><li>– working hours that cannot be predicted</li><li>– strict and fixed work schedule</li><li>– overtime work and “unsocial” work</li></ul>
Factors connected with organisation of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– insufficient equipment for work</li><li>– insufficient training for the tasks at work</li><li>– inadequate leadership</li><li>– poorly defined goals and insufficient communication</li></ul>
Task contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– performing monotonous and repetitive tasks</li><li>– performing unstimulating and meaningless tasks</li><li>– performing unpleasant tasks</li></ul>
Career development, status, salary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– job insecurity</li><li>– inability to advance professionally</li><li>– work of “low social value”</li><li>– non-transparent or unjust system of rewarding the effect of work</li><li>– overqualification for the job</li><li>– lack of qualifications for the job</li></ul>
Position in the organisation or institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– badly defined work and tasks at work</li><li>– unclear roles</li><li>– conflicting roles within the same job</li><li>– responsibility</li><li>– permanently dealing with people and their problems</li></ul>
Interpersonal relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– bad interpersonal relations</li><li>– bullying and violence at work</li></ul>

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When speaking of the physical environment in the kindergarten teachers' profession, it should be noted that kindergarten teachers are surrounded by murmur, child laughter, crying, music, etc. almost throughout the entire working hours. Concerning the furniture, living rooms are adapted to children's needs, meaning the kindergarten teacher usually sits on too small a chair or on the floor. Each day in the kindergarten has its own daily rhythm, adapted to the children's age and their needs. It includes a series of activities, meals, preparations for taking an afternoon nap, for going outside, etc. The kindergarten teacher can feel time pressure or experience the rhythm as an additional pressure. As regarding physical, bodily pressure, kindergarten teachers' profession includes rapid changes of sitting, walking, dancing and similar activities. The work of kindergarten teachers in Zagreb is usually performed in two shifts, morning and afternoon, changing from day to day. This rate of changing shifts is also one of the sources of stress at work. Kindergarten teachers do not work on weekends, nights and holidays. Organisation of work in kindergartens is primarily defined by the institution itself. Some factors are the same for all kindergartens, but there is still enough room to adapt the work to the needs of a particular kindergarten since they are flexible. Kindergarten teachers, professional assistants and directors cooperate and have at their disposal all the equipment, create their goals and define the manners of reaching these goals. Additional sources of stress, in most professions and with kindergarten teachers alike, are job insecurity, limited employment contract, problems with promotion, acquisition of new qualifications, as well as the scope of responsibility for particular tasks. The work of low social value relates to the perception of the society, together with the perception of the kindergarten teachers themselves, regarding their profession. Naturally, one of the most important factors is also the atmosphere in the institution, relations with their colleagues and their superiors. The stress sources listed in *Table 1* are those recognised as general stress sources at work.

According to the above mentioned definition of stress, the kindergarten teacher is the one who may or may not experience a situation as a stressful one. Lacković-Grbin (2000) emphasized the importance of support provided by close persons. Individual reaction to stress depends upon the amount and quality of social support. Events in the working environment are constantly being evaluated, concerning the importance they have for the kindergarten teachers. This means that the same events can be evaluated as irrelevant, positive or stressful. If they are evaluated as stressful, they can represent immediate danger, a threat or a challenge. This leads to subjective interpretation of stress, varying from one kindergarten teacher to another. If the kindergarten teacher presumes that he/she can cope with a situation, potential threat can be transformed into a challenge. Likewise, a challenge can be transformed into a threat, or a source of stress, if he/she evaluates that he/she cannot cope with the situation. Individual reactions to stress can be psychological (cognitive and emotional), physical or manifest as changes in an individual's behaviour.

Stress is a personal experience and reaction to a situation, or a stressor, which means there are no general and equal rules for coping with stress that would apply

to everyone. It is important to note that relieving stress is not only the task of the employee but of the employer as well. Institutions such as kindergartens, due to specific character of their employees' work and their work with children, should pay special attention to the satisfaction of the employees' needs. Psychologists usually deal with this issue in kindergartens. In any case, a person in charge of the care for the employees should be able to recognise stress, its type and sources.

Recognising stress at workplace is the first step in solving the problem. The most widely recognised method used today is the one involving interview and questionnaires, designed to measure the level of employee satisfaction at his/her job. The questionnaire most frequently includes the employees' opinions on satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, working environment, working conditions, etc. This method has some outstanding advantages, like anonymity, for example. If the questionnaire is anonymous, the employee can express his/her opinion honestly and without fear. The negative side of anonymous questionnaires is that they cannot separate the employees who are under stress from the rest of the working unit. Rijavec and Miljković (2009) discussed unavoidable negative situations at work, as well as the importance of positive emotions in such circumstances. They presented the studies by Barbara Fredrickson, who submitted her subjects to a sudden stressful situation and monitored their physiological reactions. After this, each group was watching a movie. The first two groups were watching a movie with positive emotions, the third group was watching a sad movie, while the fourth group was offered an emotionally neutral movie. The time was measured for cardiovascular activities of each subject to return to the initial state, prior to the stressful situation. The longest time was recorded for the subjects who were watching a sad movie, i.e., the movie with negative emotions.

Tsai (2006) pointed out that prolonged emotional stress and fatigue can cause serious pathological symptoms in some individuals, that could lead to self-destructive behaviour (suicide). Since the tolerance to stress varies from one individual to another, it is important to recognise on time the changes in behaviour among the colleagues and employees in general. Early recognition and adequate measures can often remove or at least alleviate dangerous condition. Stress at workplace seldom occurs in a single employee only. Stress in the case of kindergarten teachers can lead to reduced quality of work, which, as a result, endangers the quality of the whole educational institution. Lučanin (2014) pointed out that employers and employees should be involved together in designing preventive measures. These measures should be active, and their purpose must be to protect employees. The employer should exhibit his intention and wish for changes, readiness to meet the requirements of his employees and to eliminate stress sources as much as possible. The employer should also try to improve working conditions, as well as ensure adequate equipment and material. This is the only way to develop a positive environment among the employees, both friendly and supportive. The obligations of employees and employers in Croatia regarding stress at work are regulated by the Law on Safety at Work (2014). The employer is obliged to prevent

stress at work, estimate whether there are any indications of stress at work and act in accordance with this estimate. There is more than one approach to solving this problem. When speaking about prevention, employer is in the position to employ adequate methods to recognise and prevent occurrence of stress. This primarily includes regular investigations of workers' satisfaction, bringing stress at workplace to individual consciousness and/or employing a competent person to be in charge of employee welfare. These persons can, besides offering necessary information, direct employees to various relaxation exercises and exercises of managing time. Juras et al. (2009) pointed out the existence of social responsibility towards individuals exposed to stress, putting this in context with the consequences on the economy of the country. McCunney (1994) described the way unhealthy business climate exhibits far-reaching consequences to the whole working unit. These consequences include reduced workers' efficiency and lower dedication to work, and finally lower productivity. Thus, stress at workplace negatively impacts the institution (working unit), resulting in bad relationship with the customers (clients), distorting a good image of the institution, which obviously raises the question of further existence of the organisation. According to the Law on Preschool Education (1997), kindergartens are an optional part of the education system, except for the year prior to attending elementary school (which is obligatory). However, in contemporary society, where multigeneration families do not exist anymore and both parents work full-time, kindergartens play an important role in the children's and family life.

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

The investigation included 257 kindergarten teachers as subjects, all of them from 7 kindergartens in the City of Zagreb - 254 of them being female and 3 male kindergarten teachers. 45.2% of them were aged between 22 and 32, 21.7% between 33 and 43, 25.5% between 44 and 54, while 7.6% of the subjects were aged between 55 and 65. Among the 257 kindergarten teachers, 34.6% had from 1 to 5 years of work experience, 25.7% subjects had 6 to 10 years of work experience, 25.3% of them had 10 to 15 years of work experience, 13.2% had 15 to 20 years of work experience, while 1.2% had more than 20 years of work experience in a kindergarten.

According to the age group of the children, 21.8% worked with an infant group, 19.8% worked with a younger group of children and 18.7% with an older group, 18.7% kindergarten teachers worked with a medium group and 21% worked with a mixed group.

### **Measuring Instrument**

The *Scale for assessing stress in kindergarten teachers' work* (Živčić-Bećirević & Smojver-Ažić, 2005) was used in this research. The subjects were asked to evaluate, on a scale from 0 to 3, their individual perception of stressfulness for a situation: 0 –

no stress, 1 – little/some stress, 2 – medium/moderate stress, and 3 – high stress). The scale consisted of 4 subscales which measure the following dimensions: interpersonal relationships with 6 variables, working conditions with 6 variables, parents with 8 variables, and children behaviour with 5 variables.

## Results

As can be seen in Table 2, the kindergarten teachers estimated that parents were the most prominent source of stress, while the lowest level of stress was caused by working conditions. Considering the MCT values, and following the number of degrees on the scale, it could be concluded that the kindergarten teachers were exposed to high stress by this stress source. The value of the one-sample t-test (criterion value = 2) indicated that the behaviour of parents was a strong stress cause in the case of kindergarten teachers (Table 3).

Table 2  
Description of the 4 stress sources subscales

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis			
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error			
Interpersonal relationships	255	2.0359	.03565	.56926	-.287	.153	-.570	.304
Working conditions	257	1.7036	.02419	.38785	-.153	.152	.089	.303
Parents	257	2.1046	.02181	.34966	-.175	.152	-.174	.303
Children's behaviour	257	2.0218	.02673	.42847	.039	.152	-.348	.303

Table 3  
One-Sample Test (Test Value = 2)

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Interpersonal relationships	1.008	254	.314	.03595	-.0343	.1062
Working conditions	-12.250	256	.000	-.29637	-.3440	-.2487
Parents	4.794	256	.000	.10457	.0616	.1475
Children's behaviour	.815	256	.416	.02179	-.0308	.0744

The researchers also wanted to see what the relationship between work experience and the level of stress in kindergarten teachers tested. The results of correlation analysis can be seen in Table 4.

As can be seen in Table 3, there was a statistically significant low negative correlation between the years of work experience and stress sources, such as: interpersonal

relationships, working conditions and parents' attitudes and behaviour. This means that the kindergarten teachers with more work experience resisted stressors more successfully, including disturbed interpersonal relationships, improper working conditions and parents' behaviour. Obviously, kindergarten teachers with less work experience are exposed to higher levels of stress than their older colleagues.

Table 4  
Correlations

		Interpersonal relationships	Working conditions	Parents	Children's behaviour
Work experience	Pearson Correlation	-.184**	-.224**	-.187**	-.050
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.000	.003	.428
	N	255	257	257	257

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Robust Welch test (Table 5) was used to test the differences between the groups of children from the testing sample and stress sources.

Table 5  
Robust Welch test

		Statistic <sup>a</sup>	df1	df2	Sig.
Interpersonal relationships	Welch	5.664	4	123.933	.000
Working conditions	Welch	4.545	4	125.364	.002
Parents	Welch	.854	4	125.408	.494
Children's behaviour	Welch	1.819	4	125.546	.129

a. Asymptotically F distributed.

Table 5 shows there was a statistically significant difference between the area of work (group) and stress source, such as interpersonal relationships and working conditions. The direction of the differences can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

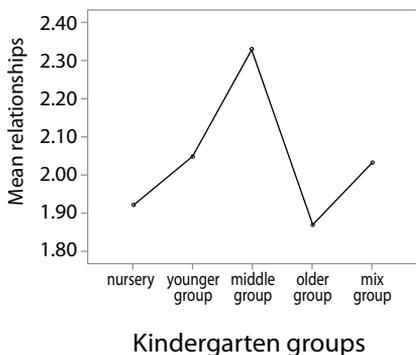


Figure 1. Group\* interpersonal relationships

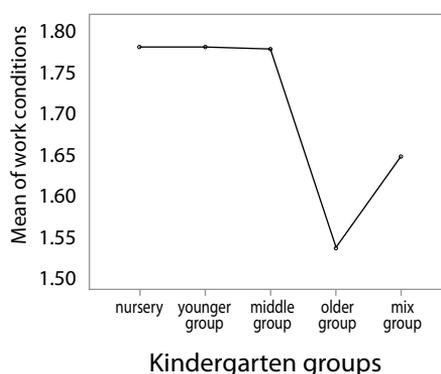


Figure 2. Group\* working conditions

Figures 1 and 2 indicate that the kindergarten teachers working in older kindergarten groups are less prone to recognising disturbed interpersonal relationships and the quality of working conditions as stressors at work. Predominantly medium kindergarten groups mostly experience disturbed interpersonal relationships and the quality of working conditions as stressors at work.

## **Discussion**

The results obtained indicate that parents of kindergarten children and their behaviour represent one of the biggest stress sources for kindergarten teachers. Ljubetić (2008) emphasized that when speaking of successful integration of kindergarten children, we usually presume kindergarten teachers' communication skills, not only concerning their interaction with the children, but the communication with parents as well. Parents can go into two extremes in their care of children. They can be either aggressive and prone to conflicts, have too optimistic expectations of the kindergarten, or can be completely disinterested in the work of kindergarten teachers and children in the kindergarten. Both extremes can be frustrating for the kindergarten teachers. Communication skills are of key importance here. Kindergarten teachers encounter various profiles of parents daily and many of them may, or may not, have the same worldview as them. Ljubetić (2014) defined the partnership of kindergarten teachers, parents and kindergarten as the highest level of collaborative relationship of a family unit and a kindergarten, aimed at achieving the common goal – the welfare of a child. Having in mind the fact that parents are primary educators of their child, while kindergarten teachers are professionals offering their help in this work, we should consider methods and ways of developing this relation, this type of partnership. Parents and kindergarten teachers have the same task. Discrepancies or mismatching of their educational procedures can confuse the child. Reflexion is one of the frequently used terms in the kindergarten teachers' profession, when critically considering a particular activity, relationship with a child, or educational approach in general. Communication skills are again essential here, since, as said before, kindergarten teachers meet on a daily basis various profiles of parents who may, or may not, have the same worldview as them. Kindergarten teachers and kindergartens are those who must take the first step in developing a partnership with parents. A reflexive kindergarten teacher is the one who constantly seeks for feedback from his/her environment, who asks for a common and joint evaluation of the overall process and redefines his/her actions, as well as the actions of all other participants, with the aim of improving his/her own practice. Reflexive parents likewise, realising their subjectivity in evaluation, are welcome to ask for the kindergarten teacher's critical opinion. Since they have a common goal, education and upbringing of a child, kindergarten teachers and parents should put the child first and work on developing a trusting partnership. Epstein (1995) said that parents should be familiarised with kindergarten curriculum and should get involved in the kindergarten work. Organisation of work should be such

that parents get the chance to spend some time in the group and should be helped in any possible way to understand child development better. The kindergartens and kindergarten teachers that are open to parents and respect parents as equal partners are less prone to developing potential misunderstandings in communication.

The result is that working conditions, interpersonal relationships with the colleagues and parents become less important as stress sources with longer work experience. Sindik (2007) pointed out that, in practice, kindergarten teachers tend to maintain apparent good relations with their colleagues and parents. The point is they do not wish to bear a grudge with the people in the institution where they work. Of course, the problems are not solved this way. Regardless of the communication skills developed, Brajković (2013) claimed that a conflict was sometimes unavoidable among the collaborators. Conflicts are a part of communication. Moreover, he said that the lack of conflicts is characteristic of passive and unproductive kindergarten teachers. Rinaldi (2006) considered critical thinking a key skill of life-long education. Apart from continuous professional development, learning, investigating and acquiring new skills, kindergarten teachers are supposed to work permanently on their personal development, so as to be able to cope with complex situations at work. The results obtained in this study indicate that kindergarten teachers with less work experience find themselves under more severe stress than their older colleagues. Pavlović and Sindik (2014) indicate improved social skills as a stress prevention method, together with emotional competences and learning how to face stress at work. They pointed out the importance of the kindergarten teachers themselves and their attitude in preventing stress at work. Kindergarten teachers are supposed to develop communication skills, ways to express their thoughts and feelings, control their emotions, to be able to fight for their rights; however, all of this has to be done in a socially acceptable manner. Kindergarten teachers should avoid unproductive conflicts which do not lead to problem solving. Learning about stress, kindergarten teachers can recognise the problems themselves and ask for help on time.

A high-quality institution of early education is characterised by good relations on all social levels, based on understanding and acceptance of each and every individual. Miljak (2009) pointed out that the key task of a good manager is to create organisational synergy in the institution. Such an institution has in its core cooperation and joint activities with the aim of creating a positive environment in the institution. Participants help each other, and all the time feel the presence and support of their environment. Positive atmosphere rules, satisfaction of the kindergarten teachers can be seen, teamwork is prevalent in which all the participants share the responsibility for further development. Only such an institution can make progress and realise its full potential, to provide high-quality education for their children.

There is a serious lack of studies globally dealing with working conditions of kindergarten teachers, especially the studies focused on the type of group the kindergarten teachers work with. They group children according to their age, while

contemporary approach asks for mixed groups. The topics of such studies are the impact, advantages and disadvantages of a particular group on children, not on the kindergarten teachers. The results obtained in this research point out that kindergarten teachers working with older groups of children are less susceptible to the stress sources mentioned above than the kindergarten teachers in other age groups. It is interesting to note that the kindergarten teachers in medium kindergarten groups are at the highest risk of stress, among all the groups. The most prominent stress source for them are interpersonal relationships and working conditions. It is necessary to organise further studies of this target group to understand why this is so. However, this simple fact can be a guideline to the directors and kindergarten teachers who find themselves under the highest level of stress in kindergartens.

A pre-school institution, kindergarten, is composed of children, parents, kindergarten teachers and professional associates, all of whom are supposed to cooperate, help each other and offer support to each other. This is the only way the institution can make progress and create the environment necessary for further growth and development. The child should be in the focus of every activity, and maximum conditions must be ensured for each child to realise his/her full potential. Kindergarten teachers, who spend most of the time with children and who need to ensure that each child's potential is realised, should be relieved of stressful situations as much as possible. As kindergarten teachers work directly with children, they should learn not only to control their reactions but also, in cooperation with the institution, try to remove all the stressors in their working environment. Obviously, it is impossible to avoid stressful situations completely, but they can be alleviated, provided the problems are viewed with awareness. In terms of methodology, this research is based on kindergarten teachers' self-evaluation and need not be considered as an objective indicator of the real state of affairs in kindergartens. However, if the definition of stress is considered which says that stress is a subjective experience of an individual, it may be concluded that self-evaluation of the kindergarten teachers is exactly what is needed to get adequate results. The results obtained in this research can offer a guideline for better understanding of stress sources at work in the case of kindergarten teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Stress has become a growing problem nowadays. Lacking timely prevention, stress grows and can result in serious negative consequences for the kindergarten teacher and the educational institution he/she works in. The results of the investigation presented indicate stress is a serious problem in the pre-school educational institutions in the City of Zagreb. The results show that the predominant stress sources for kindergarten teachers are interpersonal relationships (such as cooperation with superiors and professional associates) and relationship with parents. The results obtained have also showed that greater work experience results in a lower level of stress. This means that younger kindergarten teachers are faced with a higher level of stress. The solution

can be reached only by timely recognition of the problem and adequate prevention. As particular situation can be stressful for one person and not stressful for another, it is necessary to regard stress as an individual phenomenon, related to a person (a kindergarten teacher), and as a group phenomenon in the institution. To develop a community in an educational institution, such that lives and breathes together, it is necessary to establish a high-quality cooperation among professional associates, kindergarten teachers and parents, who should all actively participate in the search for adequate solutions.

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**Sara Kozjak Dragčević**

Kindergarten Košnica  
Medpotoki 1A, 10090 Zagreb, Croatia  
[info@kosnica.hr](mailto:info@kosnica.hr)

**Siniša Opic**

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education  
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
[sinisa.opic@ufzg.hr](mailto:sinisa.opic@ufzg.hr)

# Izvori stresa kod odgojitelja u Gradu Zagrebu

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## **Sažetak**

Ovaj rad proučava izvore stresa na poslu odgojitelja u dječjem vrtiću. Cilj je rada istražiti različite izvore stresa u dječjim vrtićima na području Grada Zagreba, kao i njihov intenzitet s obzirom na godine staža i odgojnu skupinu u kojoj trenutno rade. U ispitivanju je sudjelovalo 257 odgojitelja iz Zagreba u dobi od 22 do 65 godina. Za potrebe istraživanja koristila se Skala procjene stresa na poslu odgojitelja. Skalom su opisane situacije s kojima se odgojitelji svakodnevno susreću te su morali procijeniti u kojoj je mjeri određena situacija za njih stresna. Istraživanje je pokazalo da najveći intenzitet stresa kod odgojitelja izazivaju ponašanja roditelja. Također je utvrđeno da se stres u određenim situacijama smanjuje porastom radnog iskustva. Rezultati istraživanja pridonose boljem razumijevanju odgojiteljskog posla i specifičnih izvora stresa za njihovo radno okruženje. Oni pomažu u daljnjim mogućnostima razvoja mjera prepoznavanja izvora stresa na poslu, njihove prevencije i njihova rješenja.

**Ključne riječi:** izvori stresa na poslu; stres kod odgojitelja; stres na radnom mjestu.