



Original Scientific Paper

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSIOTHERAPISTS AS KINDERGARTEN WORKERS IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH MOTOR DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

Background: Having physiotherapists in kindergartens ensures that interventions are integrated into children's natural environments, providing personalized and consistent support aligned with their daily routines. This holistic approach not only promotes motor skill development but also enhances children's confidence, social interaction, and readiness for future learning experiences. The aim of this study was to examine parental satisfaction with the work of physiotherapists in kindergartens attended by children with motor difficulties.

Methods: The study included parents of children with motor disabilities from the Republic of Croatia whose children were enrolled in kindergartens, either with or without an employed physiotherapist. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire specifically designed and adapted for this research.

Results: The results showed a statistically significant difference in parental satisfaction with their child's developmental progress depending on the presence of a physiotherapist in the kindergarten. Additionally, over 90% of parents indicated that they consider a physiotherapist an essential professional in kindergartens that include children with motor impairments.

Conclusions: The findings indicate that parents of children with motor difficulties view physiotherapists as essential professionals in supporting their children both inside and outside kindergarten. Participants' responses also shed light on the daily challenges parents face, providing a clearer picture of the role of physiotherapists in Croatia.

Keywords: *Developmental disabilities, inclusion, kindergarten, motor difficulties, motor disabilities, pediatric physiotherapy*

INTRODUCTION

Pediatric physiotherapy is a constantly evolving field that supports children from premature infants to adolescents in their growth and development. Given the many developmental stages a child undergoes, professional support is crucial to guide this process (1,2). Early intervention for children with motor difficulties begins at birth and typically continues until the child enters school. It includes not only direct support for the child but also for parents and other family members, encompassing education, counseling, and comprehensive (re) habilitation services (3). The importance of early childhood in learning new skills was also demonstrated in a 2020 study by Byungmo Ku, which found that motor skill-based physiotherapy can positively affect both current and future motor abilities in children with developmental difficulties (4).

Children with developmental difficulties should have access to inclusive educational programs alongside their peers. Research emphasizes that reducing social disparities is essential for the overall progress and growth of society. Participation in mainstream education allows children with motor difficulties to engage actively in the learning process and to develop essential life skills (5,6). Inclusion in mixed educational groups teaches children to recognize and respect others' needs, offer help, solve problems, and share ideas and experiences. Such environments provide children the opportunity to grow and develop in the most natural way – through play and everyday activities (6,7,8).

Kindergarten is a place where children spend a great deal of time, making it an ideal setting to observe and monitor their growth and development. Providing physiotherapy services within kindergartens helps children gain greater

independence in daily activities. Through continuous therapy, the goal is to support their existing abilities while fostering the development of new functional skills (9,10).

Physiotherapists working in kindergartens collaborate with psychiatrists and can begin therapy only after a child has undergone a medical assessment. According to the Croatian National Pedagogical Standard for Preschool Education, a physiotherapist is considered a professional member of the kindergarten team and is required to provide therapy to children with motor, hearing, or speech impairments. This therapy is delivered individually, consisting of 25 minutes of one-on-one work per day (11). In addition to working directly with children, the physiotherapist, as part of an interdisciplinary team, plays an important role in organizing and planning activities. They assist in designing the kindergarten's Annual Plan and Program and in preparing and adjusting the physical environment, particularly to accommodate the needs of children with developmental difficulties (12). As the idea of inclusion – especially of children with motor difficulties in kindergartens and preschool programs – becomes increasingly recognized, this paper seeks to encourage stronger cooperation between kindergartens and physiotherapists to raise awareness of the importance of supporting and monitoring child development. The central research question of this study is what impact having physiotherapists in kindergartens has on parental satisfaction and child development.

This study aimed to explore how satisfied parents of children with motor difficulties are with the work of physiotherapists in kindergartens attended by such children. The research was based on the following hypotheses:

H1: Parents whose children attend kindergartens offering physiotherapy services report higher satisfaction with their child's development compared to those whose children attend kindergartens without such services.

H2: Parents believe that a physiotherapist is an essential professional in kindergartens that integrate children with motor difficulties.

H3: Parents observe greater developmental progress in children who receive physiotherapy both inside and outside kindergarten compared to those who receive physiotherapy only outside the kindergarten setting.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This study included parents of children with motor difficulties across the Republic of Croatia whose children were enrolled in kindergartens. Data collection was conducted in 2024 using

a questionnaire developed and tailored specifically for this research. Participants were divided into two groups: the first group consisted of parents of children attending kindergartens that employed a physiotherapist as a professional associate, while the second group included parents of children attending kindergartens without an employed physiotherapist. The exclusion criterion was parents who did not have a child with motor difficulties enrolled in a kindergarten.

Respondents completed the questionnaire via Google Forms, which was shared on social media platforms dedicated to parents of children with motor difficulties. The questionnaire was distributed through Facebook in two relevant groups: "Neurorisk Children with Developmental Disabilities" and "Initiative of Parents of Children with Developmental Difficulties." These groups were intentionally selected for their relevance to the study population. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time. The questionnaire contained 34 questions divided into two sections. The first section collected general information about the respondents, such as age, gender, educational level, area of residence, and child's age. Also, it included items related to the presence of physiotherapists in kindergartens. The second section focused on parents' satisfaction with their child's developmental progress and their opinions on the importance of physiotherapy in working with children with motor difficulties in kindergarten. It included 21 Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions addressing the challenges, advantages, and disadvantages associated with the child's attendance in kindergarten. The questionnaire was refined through consultation with four parents of children with motor difficulties to ensure comprehensive coverage of all relevant aspects. It was further validated by the academic supervisor, as it was originally developed for a master's thesis.

A large language model developed by OpenAI was used to assist with language refinement, including grammar, style, and clarity. All revisions were carefully reviewed and approved by the author to ensure accuracy and maintain scientific integrity.

ETHICAL ASPECTS

An ethical statement was obtained, as the study was classified as low-risk. The survey results were anonymous and accessible only to the researcher.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The collected data were processed using Microsoft Excel and analyzed with Statistica 14.0.0.15 (TIBCO Software Inc.). Results were presented both numerically and graphically for ease of interpretation. Data obtained from the analysis of open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. Statistical significance was tested using the Mann-Whitney U test. All tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

A total of 51 individuals completed the survey (N = 51), of whom 94.1% were women (N = 48) and 5.9% were men (N = 3). Eight participants did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study – five were not parents of a child with motor difficulties, and three did not have a child attending kindergarten. Consequently, 43 participants were included in the final analysis – 93% women (N = 40) and 7% men (N = 3). All respondents resided in the Republic of Croatia, and data were collected from 18 counties. The highest number of participants came from the City of Zagreb, while there were none from Bjelovar-Bilogora, Požega-Slavonia, or Šibenik-Knin Counties.

The study also examined the presence of physiotherapists in kindergartens. Of the 43 participants, 23.2% (N = 10) reported that a physiotherapist was employed at their child's kindergarten, while 76.7% (N = 33) reported the opposite. Additionally, 30.2% (N = 13) of parents confirmed the existence of a kindergarten with a physiotherapist in their area of residence, while the majority, 69.7% (N = 30), stated that such an option was unavailable. When asked whether they would enroll their child in a kindergarten employing a physiotherapist, 95.3% (N = 41) responded affirmatively, while only 4.7% (N = 2) said they would not choose this option.

The study also analyzed participation in physiotherapy outside kindergarten. A total of 72.1% (N = 31) reported that their child attended external physiotherapy sessions, while 27.9% (N = 12) did not. Among those receiving external physiotherapy, most attended a special hospital or private practice (N = 11), while the fewest attended a rehabilitation center. Only 9.7% (N = 3) reported combining private and hospital-based physiotherapy.

Considering the grouping variable "Is a physiotherapist employed as a professional associate in your child's kindergarten?", the p-value was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) in all cases except the first ($p = 0.336$), as shown in Table 1. Thus, a statistically significant difference was found, at the 95% confidence level, in parental satisfaction with children's developmental progress depending on the presence of a physiotherapist in the kindergarten. These results support the first hypothesis.

Table 1. Parents' satisfaction with their child's developmental progress

Mann-Whitney U	Z	p-value
Child's development is connected to physiotherapy.		
13.000	-0.963	0.336
Kindergarten adequately addresses child's needs.		
45.000	-3.435	< 0.001
Child's motor development improved after starting kindergarten.		
75.000	-2.559	0.011
Resources for developmental activities are sufficient.		
43.000	-3.478	0.001
Kindergarten effectively supports child's needs.		
54.000	-3.177	0.001
Improvement in daily tasks noted after kindergarten attendance.		
80.000	-2.429	0.015
Equal participation in kindergarten activities.		
71.000	-2.688	0.007

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PHYSIOTHERAPIST IN KINDERGARTEN.

Table 2. presents the results comparing groups regarding the perceived importance of physiotherapists in kindergartens. The p-values from the Mann-Whitney U test indicated no statistically significant differences between groups. Therefore, both groups, regardless of whether a physiotherapist was employed, expressed similar views. Considering the grouping variable "Is a physiotherapist employed as a professional associate in the kindergarten your child attends?", no statistically significant difference was found between the groups based on the available data and the selected significance level. However, when comparing the research data presented in Table 3., where responses were provided on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 2 = "somewhat disagree", 3 = "neutral", 4 = "somewhat agree", 5 = "strongly agree"), it is evident that parents of children with motor difficulties emphasize the importance of having a physiotherapist in kindergarten. Thus, the hypothesis stating that parents of children with motor difficulties consider a physiotherapist to be an essential professional associate in kindergartens where children with motor difficulties are integrated is confirmed.

Table 2. The importance of a physiotherapist in kindergarten

Mann-Whitney U	Z	p-value
Physiotherapist is a necessary kindergarten staff member.		
140.000	-0.704	0.481
Physiotherapist is an important professional team member.		
156.000	-0.230	0.818
Physiotherapist is more qualified than teacher for motor difficulties.		
158.000	0.172	0.863
Presence of physiotherapist increases sense of safety.		
145.000	-0.561	0.575
Physiotherapy in kindergarten improves overall child support.		
150.000	-0.417	0.677

Table 3. Parental attitudes toward the role and importance of the physiotherapist in kindergarten

N	%	\bar{x}	C	min	max	SD
I believe that a physiotherapist is a necessary member of staff in a kindergarten.						
43	100	4.884	5	4	5	0.324
A physiotherapist is an important member of the professional team.						
43	100	4.860	5	4	5	0.351
A physiotherapist is more qualified to work with children with motor difficulties than a kindergarten teacher.						
43	100	4.930	5	4	5	0.258
I would feel more secure knowing that a physiotherapist is employed in the kindergarten.						
43	100	4.791	5	1	5	0.741
I believe that the inclusion of physiotherapy services in kindergarten improves the overall approach to the child.						
43	100	4.930	5	4	5	0.256

For the analysis presented in Table 4., responses from participants whose children attend physiotherapy outside of kindergarten were compared with those from participants whose children receive physiotherapy both inside and outside the kindergarten. Based on the significance values (p-value), a statistically significant difference was found between the observed groups in items 3 (p = 0.002) and 4 (p = 0.001) of Table 4. Therefore, the hypothesis is confirmed that parents of children with motor difficulties perceive greater progress in their children who receive physiotherapy both within the kindergarten and outside of it, compared to children who only receive physiotherapy outside the kindergarten setting.

Table 4. Child's developmental progress

Mann-Whitney U	Z	p-value
Child's development is connected to physiotherapy.		
75.000	-1.247	0.213
Physiotherapy in kindergarten complements regular sessions.		
100.000	-0.190	0.849
Child's motor development improved after starting kindergarten.		
32.500	-2.042	0.002
Improvement in daily tasks noted after kindergarten attendance.		
25.000	-3.359	0.001

Correlation between parents' attitudes on the importance of physiotherapists in kindergarten. The correlation between parents' attitudes toward the importance of physiotherapists in kindergartens, their satisfaction with their child's progress, and their awareness of the physiotherapist's role were calculated using correlation coefficients.

The following grouping variables were used for the analysis:

a. Grouping variable: Is a physiotherapist employed as a specialist collaborator in the kindergarten your child attends? = Yes; Does your child attend physiotherapy in a private or public institution? = Yes;

b. Grouping variable: Is a physiotherapist employed as a specialist collaborator in the kindergarten your child attends? = No; Does your child attend physiotherapy in a private or public institution? = Yes.

A correlation analysis revealed varying associations between parental attitudes toward physiotherapy in preschool and

their perception of their child's development. A statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.001$) was found between statements "Physiotherapy positively influences motor development" and "Child's development is connected to physiotherapy", indicating that parents who valued physiotherapy highly also perceived greater developmental progress in their children. Although no other significant differences were observed, parents of children attending preschools with an employed physiotherapist reported high confidence and satisfaction, highlighting the importance of professional support in early childhood education. In conclusion, parents view physiotherapy as important for children with motor difficulties, but their satisfaction and perception of equal opportunities depend on therapeutic, social, and organizational factors within the preschool.

Table 5. Correlation between parents' attitudes on the importance of physiotherapists in kindergarten

Child has equal opportunities to participate in activities.	
Child's motor development improved after starting kindergarten.	pa = 0.263; pb = 0.690
Improvement in daily tasks noted after kindergarten attendance.	pa = 0.661; pb = 0.795
High satisfaction with methods addressing child's needs.	pa = 0.555; pb = 0.751
High satisfaction with role in child's development.	pa = 0.624; pb = 0.727
Physiotherapy positively influences motor development.	pa = 0.1283; pb = 0.700
Physiotherapist is more qualified than teacher for motor difficulties.	
Physiotherapist is an important professional team member.	pa = 0.690; pb = 0.183
Physiotherapist assesses child's motor skills.	pa = 0.539; pb = 0.667
Presence of physiotherapist increases sense of safety.	pa = 0.725
Physiotherapy positively influences motor development.	
Physiotherapist assesses child's motor skills.	pa = 0.215; pb = 0.391
Child's development is connected to physiotherapy.	pa < 0.001; pb = 0.374
Child has equal opportunities to participate in activities.	pa = 0.128; pb = 0.700

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the satisfaction of parents of children with motor difficulties regarding the work of physiotherapists in kindergartens serving children with motor difficulties. The research revealed that the presence of physiotherapists in kindergartens is rare, and parents often do not have the opportunity to enroll their child in such kindergartens. This also represents a limitation of the study – the sample size of parents whose children attend kindergartens with physiotherapists was small compared to the other group, which was four times larger, potentially affecting the reliability and accuracy of the statistical analyses. A smaller number of respondents reduces the ability to detect true differences between groups and increases the risk that the results may not reflect the situation in the broader population. Another limitation of the study is the lack of supervision over participants and the possibility that questions were interpreted differently or answered inaccurately. As the data were based on parents' self-assessments through a questionnaire, there is a risk of subjective bias. Responses may reflect parents' personal experiences, expectations, or attitudes, potentially affecting the objectivity of the findings. Furthermore, due to the voluntary nature of participation, selection bias cannot be ruled out, as parents who were particularly motivated or interested in the topic may have been more likely to participate.

In a 2025 study by Dlamini and colleagues, data were collected on how parents of children with motor developmental difficulties perceive physiotherapy. They investigated parents' experiences of physiotherapy, motivational factors, potential barriers, and shortcomings, as well as the long-term feasibility of physiotherapy treatment. The study included eight studies with a total of 150 participants. Parents in the reviewed studies considered physiotherapy to be a valuable treatment that provided significant benefits for their children. They also highlighted the importance of physiotherapists' education, receiving clear explanations about therapy objectives from the start, and being actively engaged in the planning of care to support consistent participation. The main challenge highlighted was the limited accessibility of therapy. Participants emphasized the importance of incorporating therapy into community health centers and educational settings, ensuring a coordinated, holistic approach and adequate guidance for parents. Insufficient coordination and limited therapist availability were associated with lower levels of satisfaction with physiotherapy (13).

When compared with the present research, similarities in the distribution of results can be observed. Findings showed that all participating parents considered the physiotherapist to be an important member of the professional team and that physiotherapy had a favorable impact on their child's motor development, with 95% of parents associating their child's developmental progress with physiotherapy treatment. Both this study and that of Dlamini and colleagues indicate that

parents perceive physiotherapists as essential for their child's development and believe that physiotherapy has a positive effect on motor development. Furthermore, according to parents' perspectives, physiotherapy supports the child's daily functioning and consequently facilitates everyday routines between parents and children. However, parents also reported that physiotherapy, both in institutions and at home, occupies a large part of their day, leaving them with insufficient time for their own and their child's other needs.

Enrolling a child with motor difficulties in a regular or special kindergarten program often raises various concerns and uncertainties for parents. The research results also indicate parental insecurity and dissatisfaction regarding their child's inclusion in the kindergarten group. More than 50% of parents reported that their biggest concern is the lack of qualified staff knowledgeable and trained in handling their child's needs, and as many as 93% of parents said they would feel more secure if a physiotherapist were employed at their child's kindergarten. Parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time their child spends in the educational setting, as most children admitted to kindergarten attend only two hours daily due to restrictions on five- or ten-hour programs, due to lack of permission for five- or ten-hour programs as prescribed by the Croatian kindergarten standards. Moreover, the research findings indicate insufficient adaptation of spatial and material conditions in kindergartens for children with motor difficulties, as well as a lack of individualized approaches – children often do not have the opportunity to perform activities at their own pace and are frequently excluded from activities. Only 33% of parents believe their child has equal opportunities and possibilities to participate in various activities. Parents of children attending kindergartens with physiotherapists reported feeling safe leaving their child in a professional and educated environment, and they were satisfied that their child's motor development was being addressed. Ninety percent of these parents believe their child has equal opportunities to participate in various kindergarten activities. Comparing parental responses shows that 90% of parents whose children attend kindergartens with physiotherapists notice greater motor development progress, and all notice improvements in daily activities. Conversely, only 39% of parents whose children attend kindergartens without physiotherapists observe motor development progress, and 48% note progress in daily tasks. A 2015 study with 407 parents of children with motor difficulties attending preschool groups highlighted the importance parents place on interpersonal relationships among educators and children. These parents also reported that educators were unprepared and insufficiently trained to meet the needs of their children, which sometimes leads to children not being enrolled despite availability (14). Similarly, a 2023 study by Kinczel and colleagues in a Hungarian kindergarten showed that parents appreciated the availability of physiotherapy treatments within the kindergarten, removing the need for external appointments

and additional financial strain. Parents emphasized the importance of their child being part of the group with professional support guiding functional activities. They also noted that children were motivated and eager to attend therapy, with observed improvements in posture, flexibility, coordination, dexterity, and daily functioning (15).

The cooperation between physiotherapists and kindergartens is well illustrated by the annual reports from Pahuljica Kindergarten in Gospić, where a physiotherapist has been working since 2015. The latest report for 2022/2023 shows that 13 children with motor difficulties regularly attended the kindergarten program and took part in individual therapy every day (16).

Physiotherapists should be systematically integrated into kindergartens to provide a comprehensive approach for children with motor difficulties and their families. While therapy is crucial for developing motor skills, it is equally important to allow children time outside of therapy for play, social interaction, and emotional support, as these activities greatly contribute to their overall development and well-being. Many parents of children with motor difficulties tend to focus solely on therapeutic activities, leaving limited time for other experiences, including peer interaction. Research, such as that by van Engelen and colleagues, indicates that social barriers, rather than motor difficulties themselves, often pose the greatest challenge to children's development, and these can be addressed within the kindergarten setting (17). When therapy is provided within the kindergarten, children can spend the rest of the day interacting with parents and peers, ensuring a balanced combination of therapeutic support and social development.

CONCLUSION

The conducted research highlights the importance of the physiotherapist as a professional collaborator in kindergartens. This is supported by studies and the views of parents who face daily challenges related to kindergarten enrollment, inclusion, activity planning, excursions, and many other aspects. With growing awareness of motor difficulties in child development, it is crucial to increase research on physiotherapy in early childhood, reflecting the expectations and experiences of parents of children with motor difficulties.

The research results confirmed the hypotheses that parents of children with motor difficulties who attend kindergartens offering physiotherapy services are more satisfied with their child's developmental progress compared to parents of children attending kindergartens without physiotherapists. Furthermore, parents notice greater progress in children who receive physiotherapy both in kindergarten and outside of it, compared to those who receive physiotherapy only outside of kindergarten hours. Additionally, parents' attitudes support

the hypothesis that a physiotherapist is an indispensable professional collaborator in kindergartens where children with motor difficulties are integrated.

Due to the limited number of similar studies on this topic, further research with larger sample sizes is needed to achieve a more objective and reliable representation of the role and importance of physiotherapists in kindergartens in the Republic of Croatia.

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