

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN COMMUNITY CARE HOMES

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Abstract. *The purpose of the article is to reveal the need for the social skills of young people living in community care homes based on the experience of young people. Problematic study questions: What social skills, which are important to a person's independent living, do the adolescents lack? How do opportunities to develop social skills change while living in the community care homes? Eight young people aged 17-18 years old from three community care homes, which are in different parts of Lithuania, participated in the study. The study revealed that young people lack communication skills: they have difficulty establishing and maintaining contact, communicating politely, being empathetic (careful, attentive and understanding to others), addressing emerging issues and conflicts constructively. The study found out that young people lack intrapersonal skills: self-control, responsibility, and self-confidence. Young people lack activity organisation skills: activity planning and activity realisation skills. The study reveals that, while living in community child care homes, opportunities to develop social skills change in a positive way. In everyday practical activities, more opportunities to solve problems and plan and organise various activities occur. By communicating and cooperating in the family environment, young people acquire more empathy, building rapport and maintaining it, polite communication and conflict resolution skills. A family atmosphere and close and positive mutual relationships, which are built in the community child care homes, contribute to the strengthening of self-confidence and trust in others.*

Keywords: *community care homes, social skills, young people.*

Introduction

One of the priority objectives of the restructurisation of child care is to create conditions for the children to prepare for independent living in the ever-changing, dynamic society. In this context, personal social skills are very important. The creation of social skills empowers the person to manage social situations, to resolve life's problems effectively, to adapt in the new ever-changing environment successfully and to affect his environment correspondingly or even to change it (Raudeliūnaitė, 2007). Social skills, as the prerequisite for fully-fledged social life, are necessary in order to achieve a person's independence in daily life and for his ability to find his bearings in complicated situations or

interactions (Segrin & Taylor, 2007; Demir et. al., 2012; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014 et al.). The quality of a person's social functioning is determined by a series of different social skills – communication and cooperation, problem, conflict resolution and other social skills.

When social skills are developed, the powers of a person's social functioning improve, the potential possibilities of the person to participate in society's life increase. In addition, when social skills form, a person's self-confidence increases, he begins acting more effectively when problematic situations arise, communicating more freely in the context of formal and informal mutual interactions, creating an effective mutual relationship and cooperating effectively when performing joint group activity (Merrell & Gimbel, 2014). The development of social skills is extremely relevant to resolving the problems of effective functioning in public life of children living in care homes. It is not by chance that quite a few authors (Raudeliūnaitė & Paigozina, 2009; Samošonok, 2013; Gudžinskienė & Raudeliūnaitė, 2016), who examine the social and educational situation of the children living in care homes, emphasise the relevance of the development of social skills as an important factor of a personal social integration. On the other hand, the majority of them also point out some lack of social skills, which aggravate the integration these children into their social environment. Therefore, in the context of deinstitutionalisation processes, it is important to analyse the preparation of the children for independent living in the community childcare homes, because the preparation of the children for independent living in the community and its improvement remain one of the most important and the most relevant tasks in order to achieve successful integration of the children in care into society. Community childcare homes are childcare homes (up to 8 children), which operate in accordance with the model of the environment, which is close to the family environment and are established in separate premises (e. g., a house, flat) in the community, intended for the children, who are destitute of parental guardianship, children with disabilities or children with other special needs.

On the other hand, while the restructurisation of childcare homes in Lithuania is underway, there is a lack of studies, analysing the development of social skills of children growing in the community childcare homes. The objective of the study is to reveal the need for the development of social skills of the adolescents, who live in the community care homes, on the basis of the experience of the adolescents. Problematic questions of the study: What social skills, which are important to a person's independent living, do the adolescents lack? How do opportunities to develop social skills change while living in the community care homes?

Research methodology

Research methods. Qualitative research type was chosen for the study. According to Creswell (2009), the purpose of a qualitative study is to research complex phenomena with the properties that are characteristic of them and present the meanings and approaches, that were expressed by the participants of a study, on a researched phenomenon. In the study, the method of a semi-structured interview, which enables to come close to the understanding of human experiences, designation of meanings, the definition of meanings and the construction (explanation) of reality, was used. This article overviews two problematic questions of the study: What social skills, which are important to a person's independent living, do the adolescents lack? How do opportunities to develop social skills change while living in the community care homes?

The obtained data were analyzed by using the content analysis method. The qualitative content analysis was performed in the following sequence (Creswell, 2009): the repeated reading of the content of transcribed interview texts, the distinction of meaning elements in the text analysed, the grouping of the distinguished meaning elements into categories and sub-categories, integration of the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed and the description of their analysis.

The sample of the research. A criteria-based sample was used in the study. The informants were chosen according to the following criteria: 1) adolescents living in the community care homes; 2) the age of the adolescents, from 17 to 18 years old, who will leave the care home not later than after one year.

The study was conducted in the April - May of 2017 in the community foster care homes established under "The List of Residential Social Care Institutions and the Homes of Infants with Impaired Development Selected for Restructuring" (2015). 8 young people (4 boys and 4 girls) participated in the study.

Ethics of the research. The permission of the heads of the community foster care homes to conduct the research in their organisation has been obtained. Personal permission of the informants to take part in the research was sought. The researchers obliged themselves to the research participants not to divulge the information related to the organisation and the informant. The principles of anonymity, volunteerism and benevolence were followed. The young people were acquainted with the goal of the research, the interview questions, and the importance of a reasoned reflection on their experience.

Analysis of research results

Social skills are one of the most important life quality factors, assisting the person in integrating into society, coping with daily independent living problems

in ever-changing situations successfully. Therefore, during the study, it was sought to reveal what social skills, which are important to a person's independent living, adolescents, living in the community care homes, in their subjective assessment, lack. The study has revealed that the adolescents, having begun living in the community care homes, acknowledge that they lack communication, empathy, problem and conflict resolution, intrapersonal and activity organising skills (Table 1).

Table 1 Lack of social skills important to adolescents' independent living

Category	Subcategory	Proving Statements
Communication skills	Contact establishment	“sometimes I begin feeling ill at ease having said something too openly, improperly and not to the proper people” (F), “I don't know how and from what to start a conversation” (A), “when there are outsiders present I don't dare to talk” (C)
	Contact maintenance	“it happens to me that while talking I cut off another person” (H), “I'm told that I'm not able to listen to others” (B), “people sometimes don't understand what I say, I'm no good at presenting my thoughts clearly” (E), “my friends blame me that I don't look at the other while talking” (D)
	Polite communication	“I often swear while talking” (F), “I often forget to greet and to bid farewell (D), “I sometimes get remarks for politeness: they say that I could have thanked at least” (A), “There is one thing I'm really unable to do – I can't say 'sorry'” (G), “I haven't learned to keep my tongue behind my teeth” (H)
Empathy	Attentiveness and carefulness	„I have a hard time understanding others, what other people feel” (C), „It happens that I don't understand how people feel” (B)
	Understanding	„When you don't know how somebody feels, then you don't know how to help” (E), „I often tell a joke out of time and out of place” (H), „I often happens among us that, when someone feels bad, others laugh” (G)
Problem resolution	Problem acknowledgement	„Most often I „accumulate” problems, and don't resolve them” (F), „it happens that it's hard to understand that it's a problem” (D)
	Search for decision	„I take decisions without thinking over” (C), „I firstly do, and then think that I could have done it in another way” (A), „I don't think about other possibilities of resolving a problem, I don't weigh them” (B), „I don't think about possible consequences...” (H)

	Decision taking	„I put off taking decisions, I think that everything will resolve itself” (B), „I often take decisions without giving them enough thought, I’m sorry about them later” (E)
Conflict resolution	Lack of search of conflict causes	„I don’t care at all why we are at odds and that’s it” (C), „I sometimes fail to agree with some people, I don’t even know why...” (G)
	Refusal to acknowledge that he/she is not right	„I dislike losing” (D), “I’m angry when I’m told to apologise...I can’t stand that” (F)
	Unwillingness to consult with others	„I don’t want to consult...” (A), „I’ve got to be on top” (E)
Intrapersonal skills	Self-control	„Others can easily get me out of balance” (B), „if there are differences of opinion, I start shouting” (H), „I break rules” (C), „I have a hard time saying ,no” (A)
	Responsibility	„I fail to perform obligations I’ve been entrusted with” (A), „Sometimes I promise, then I forget...fail to do” (D)
	Self-confidence	„I’m afraid to make a mistake, to say what I think” (G), „I don’t trust myself or others ” (F)
Activity organising	Activity planning	„Sometimes I work, but I don’t know exactly what will come out...” (C), „I don’t set any objectives for myself here, you just do and that’s it ” (E)
	Activity realisation	“I plan, but I don’t finish my work... it somehow falls flat” (B), “I sometimes lack patience, carefulness and you just give up” (A), “maybe it’s possible to fix some things, but I don’t like it” (D)

The study revealed that the adolescents have difficulty establishing contact. They have difficulty assessing their real communication situation. The informants noted that they have difficulty both beginning a conversation and also joining a conversation, they feel ill at ease among strangers. The adolescents also lack verbal and non-verbal contact maintenance skills: to listen to another person without interrupting, to express thoughts clearly, to keep eye contact. It should be noted that the adolescents lack polite communication: not to use improper words, to greet properly and to bid farewell, to thank properly, to apologise, to get their bearings in the communication situation and to choose appropriate communication strategy.

In order to create a constructive mutual interaction, it is important to be able to feel another person’s condition, his situation. Human relationships are impossible without empathy, which is the foundation of many decisions and actions. D. Goleman points out that those, whose are capable to empathise with the feelings of other persons, “possess a better social “hearing”, which enables to perceive the needs of others better” (2001: 64). In addition, it is important not only to perceive another person’s emotional condition, to be able to empathise with it,

but, if need be, to offer assistance sometimes. The study established that adolescents lack empathy skills. They have difficulty being attentive, careful and understanding.

The ability to resolve problems is one of the most important person's abilities, assisting him in acting in different areas successfully and adapting in ever-changing situations successfully. The study identified that the adolescents, living in the community care homes, lack problem resolution skills. The adolescents pointed out that their greatest lack is the ability to acknowledge a problem, to perceive various possibilities to resolve it, to assess positive and negative aspects to the problem resolution and possible consequences and to take appropriate decisions.

In the presence of interpersonal interaction, it is natural that various conflicts arise and it is important to know how to resolve them constructively. The study revealed that the adolescents lack conflict resolution skills. The informants acknowledged that they seldom inquire into the causes of the origin of a conflict, they have difficulty acknowledging that they are wrong, and they are reluctant to consult another person. The researchers (Sellman & Edward, 2011) maintain that, during a conflict, it is important to clarify the causes of misunderstanding and to look for constructive methods to resolve a conflict. The clarification of positions ensures a better platform for constructive communication. L. Ismayilova et al. (2014) studies also reveal that children from care homes lack communication, problem resolution, and conflict management skills.

Intrapersonal skills, which assist in retaining inner balance, allow for the possibility to interact positively with other persons and the resolution of arising conflicts and problems constructively, are of great significance for the successful adjustment of the person in life, his relationships with surrounding people. The study revealed that the informants lack self-control, responsibility, and self-confidence. According to the informants, they have a difficult time managing their emotions, receiving the opinion of another person without anger, irritation, adhering to the rules of polite behaviour, not giving in to the bad influence of others and resisting the pressure of others. The adolescents acknowledged that they do not always fulfill their promises or obligations, lack self-confidence and confidence in others. Responsibility and self-confidence are important to overcoming difficulties and obstacles arising while achieving the set objective. R. Bubnys & Z. Jasevičienė (2013) study revealed that children with self-confidence feel independent, do not feel rejected when planning their future and communicating with surrounding people, share their cares and difficulties easily. According to M. Scannapieco et al. (2007), the lack of self-confidence, will, and responsibility in the cared children is one of the most serious obstacles for their successful learning, acquisition of profession/trade and getting established in the labour market.

Activity organising skills assist the person in planning his activity, getting involved in it maximally and using his abilities effectively to achieve the set objective. The study established that adolescents lack both activity planning and its realisation skills. They have difficulty setting an achievable objective of their activity, foreseeing the result of their activity and pursuing it patiently and purposefully. The informants acknowledged that they have difficulty linking the success of their activity with the efforts they made, performing tasks carefully and fully, whereas, having performed a task improperly, performing it anew.

During the study, it was sought to reveal how the possibilities of the adolescents to develop their social skills, while living in the community care homes, change. The study revealed that, while living in the community childcare homes, the possibilities to develop social skills change in the positive direction: the community care homes are dominated by a more favourable family atmosphere, the organising of the daily activity changes in the positive direction and the network of social relationships expands (Table 2).

Table 2 Opportunities to develop social skills for the adolescents while living in the community care homes

Category	Subcategory	Proving Statements
Favourable family atmosphere	Warmer mutual relationships	“We communicate with each other more, and we do it nicer” (D), “Our social worker is more like a mother now” (A), “We live like a family” (H), „After we began living in households, we became safer, calmer, our mutual relationships got stronger” (G)
	More time allotted for mutual communication	“We talk more and about everything” (B), “We spend our evenings while talking” (E), “Now I communicate more, the workers pay more attention” (F)
	Communication quality improves	“Even the workers perhaps communicate more openly, the feelings are warmer” (B), “they’re friendlier now, communication improved, I’m a warmer communicator” (C)
Changes in daily activity organising	More independence when planning and realising different activities	“We plan our leisure more themselves now” (F), “we do everything ourselves: we cook, tidy rooms and our environment” (H), „In the household, I feel as if I were at home. Here, as in the family too, we can decide on our own what we are going to eat, what we are going to do, we are much more independent” (B)
	Assumption of obligations and responsibility	“We distribute various work themselves” (E), “We learn to keep promises, to perform the assumed or delegated work well”
	Cooperation in activities	“We consult together how to make household more beautiful, who will do it and what will be done” (A), “We

		help each other” (G), “We learn to consult nicely, without anger, dictate, although it’s not easy” (C)
Expansion of social relationships	Cosying up with neighbours	“We communicate with neighbours, their children” (H), “We live with our neighbours in a friendly manner, we invited them to our house-warming party” (D)
	Participation in the community events	“Our household participates in the community festivals” (E), “We contribute to the organization of community events” (C)

One of the most important Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community Based Care (2012) objectives is to create conditions, for the child, to grow in the family environment or in the environment, which is close to the family environment. The study revealed that, when the adolescents begin living in the community care homes, mutual relationships become warmer: the adolescents communicate more and more closely both among themselves and with workers. According to the informants, they feel safer, their mutual relationships become stronger and they live “similarly to the family...” (H). It should be noted that the research conducted abroad indicates that those adolescents, who lived in small care homes, in which the conditions resembled the family model, are better prepared for independent living. In addition, warm, stable relationships dominated the relationships among the children and the relationships between the children and the staff (Spray & Jowett, 2012).

The study showed that more time is allotted for communication in the family environment and communication quality improves. The informants note that they communicate with the workers more openly and warmer, whereas, among themselves, they are more polite.

It has been established that the organising of daily activity changes in the positive direction. There is more independence when planning and realising different activities in the community care homes. According to the adolescents, they plan their leisure themselves in a greater measure and get involved in practical activities in daily life (they cook, organize their household, go shopping etc. themselves). According to the adolescents, „in the household, they feel as if they were at home... we are more independent“ (B). It can be said that, in the community care homes, children are given opportunities to learn real life, they are more independent to resolve problems.

The findings of the study reveal that the adolescents are prone to assume obligations more and are more responsible. The adolescents note that they consult with each other, assist each another, assume obligations and learn to adhere to them.

It has been established that, in the community care homes, social relationships expand. The adolescents maintain that they communicate with the

neighbours living next door, their children, participate in the community events and contribute to their organisation.

Based on the findings of the study, it can be said that, in the community care homes, conditions are created to develop communication, cooperation, activity organising skills by creating a favourable family environment and close and positive mutual relationships. Family atmosphere enables the development of intrapersonal skills.

Conclusions

The study revealed that the adolescents, having started to live in the community care homes, lack communication skills. They have a hard time establishing and maintaining contact, communicating politely, being empathic, resolving problems and conflicts constructively. The adolescents also lack intrapersonal skills, especially self-control, responsibility, and self-confidence. The adolescents lack activity planning and its realisation skills.

The study revealed that, while living in the community child care homes, the opportunities to develop social skills change. In a daily practical activity, more opportunities occur to learn to resolve problems and conflicts and to plan and organise different activities. When communicating and cooperating in the family environment, the adolescents acquire more empathy, contact establishment and maintenance and polite communication skills. The family atmosphere, which is created in the community care homes, and close and positive relationships not only assist in acquiring social skills, but also contributes to the strengthening of self-confidence and confidence in others.

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