

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE REALISATION OF THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN CHILDREN'S DAY CARE CENTRES

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Abstract. *The aim of the study is to reveal the importance of the realisation of the right of the child to participate in children's day care centres based on the experience of social pedagogues and social workers. Qualitative research was chosen for the study by using the method of semi-structured interview. 11 employees, who work in children's day care centres in different Lithuanian regions, participated in the study.*

The study revealed the importance of the implementation of the right of the child to participate to the child, employees, the quality of provided socio-educational services and the continuity of the implementation of this right when cooperating with the family of the child successfully. The importance to the child should be associated with the strengthening of his/her dignity, self-esteem, self-confidence, the ensuring of his better well-being and emotional security; the self-realisation of the child, his/her problem solving, communication, cooperation, activity planning and organizational skills improve, the child develops responsibility and autonomy when taking and realising decisions. The importance to employees should be associated with the better knowledge of the child and understanding of his/her situation, satisfaction of his/her needs, the formation of the relationship with the child based on cooperation. The importance to the quality of provided services should be associated with activities, which meet the needs of the child, the guarantee of a favourable socio-educational environment in children's day care centres, the opportunity for the child to influence the planning and organization of activities in children's day care centres. The cooperation with the family of the child guarantees the continuity of the implementation of the right of the child to participate, because parents understand the importance of this right to the well-being of the child and create possibilities for its implementation.

Keywords: *child, day care centres, participation, right.*

Introduction

The guarantee and protection of the rights of the child require particular attention. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted in 1989, is an important international document regulating the rights of the child, the ratification of which establishes obligations which should be observed by the Member States, including periodic reports to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child on progress achieved when ensuring the

rights of the child in a respective country (Manful & McCrystal, 2010). Therefore, it is no coincidence that, both in political and scientific and public discourse, particular attention has recently been focused on the protection of the rights of the child and effective implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Lithuania ratified the Convention in 1995 and committed itself to guarantee the rights outlined in the Convention for every child.

One of the rights of the child is his/her right to participate in decision-making. The right of the child to participate in decision-making is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which points out that the child must be guaranteed the right to express his/her opinion and participate in decision-making when discussing issues related to him.

The essence of the right to participation is that every child has his/her opinion and can express it on issues related to them. M. Henagham notes that children must be given an opportunity to be heard in any processes affecting them and that each child would have an opportunity to choose an as high as possible level of participation corresponding to his/her possibilities (Henagham, 2017). The children's right to participation is unique, because it recognises that, although children are dependent on their parents and other adults, however, they have a right to be respected as persons, who have also right to participate when taking decisions, which are pertinent to them (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014). In realising the child's right to participate it is important to interpret children's participation without thinking about children's participation as something other than the participation of all others (Skauge, Storhaug, & Marthinsen, 2021). The implementation of the child's right to participation must become a usual practice in everyday life and various environment and not only in episodic or special events, one-off projects. The effectiveness of the child's right to participation is conditional on whether the adults are guided by the philosophy that the child's voice is important and look for means how to facilitate children's involvement in the participation process, their independent voice, whether a situation is really in the child's interests (Olsen, 2022). Children's participation is a multidimensional process and covers various aspects of the decision-making process: children must be seen, informed, heard and involved in decision-making (Woodman, Roche, & Morag, 2023).

The studies that have been carried out (Bessell, 2011; Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2012; Olsen, 2022) demonstrate that an opportunity, which is given to children to participate in processes, which pertain to their well-being, develop their self-esteem, self-confidence, and independence skills. Children's participation in decision-making processes increases their self-confidence, enhances their dignity and the sense of self-esteem, affects their mental well-being, and an overall sense of security. In addition, the appreciation of the child's opinion and the taking of it into account when taking decisions and the

encouragement of the child to take decisions independently increase his/her ability to cope with arising difficulties in the future.

One of the environments in which conditions for children's participation should be created is children's day care centres (further in the text - CDC). Children's day care centres are most often attended by children from families experiencing social risk factors, in which children's rights are often not guaranteed, including the right to participation. The purpose of children's day care centres is to organise children's busyness after their school, develop the social and life skills of a child and his/her family members, as well as implement children's rights (Gudžinskienė, Raudeliūnaitė, Uscila, 2016). Therefore, one of the functions of the employees working in CDC is the implementation of the children's right to participation. Having performed the analysis of studies analysing the activity of day cares centres in Lithuania, it was established that there is a lack of studies revealing the realisation of the children's right to participation in CDC. Therefore, it is appropriate to research the practical experiences of the realisation of the children's right to participation in CDC. The purpose of the study is to reveal the importance of the implementation of the child's right to participation in CDC based on the experiences of social pedagogues and social workers.

Research methodology

Method of data collection. In order to reveal the realities of the realisation of children's right of participation at CDC a qualitative study was chosen. The study was conducted by using the method of a semi-structured interview, which enables to move closer to the perception of human experiences, the identification of meanings, the definition of situations and the interpretation of reality (Creswell, 2014). In order to reveal the realities of the realisation of children's right of participation at CDC, during the interview, the social pedagogues and social workers were asked: How is the importance of the implementation of the child's right to participation expressed in CDC?

The sample of the research. Targeted selection of the study participants was used in the study. The participants of the study were selected according to the following criteria: 1) social pedagogues and social workers who work at CDC, 2) at least 3 years of work experience at CDC. The study was conducted in the February-March of 2023. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face while recording interviews at the same time. 11 employees, who work in CDCs in different Lithuanian regions, participated in the study. Collection of the research data was stopped in compliance with the data saturation principle. When it was noticed that the answers obtained during interviews started repeating the earlier received data, the new research participants were not included in the research.

Method of data processing. The obtained data were analysed by using the content analysis method. According to Creswell (2014), a content analysis is a technique, which, having examined the specificity of a text, allows to draw reliable conclusions objectively and systematically. When performing a qualitative content analysis this consistency was adhered to: multiple reading of the transcribed interview texts and reflection on them, data encoding while singling out semantic units in the text, grouping codes into subcategories, formation of categories from subcategories, integration of categories/subcategories into the context of the phenomenon under analysis, the interpretation of study data (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) emphasises that content analysis is a valid method for making specific inferences from the analysed text.

The study data were analysed by the two researchers. According to V. Žydžiūnaitė and S. Sabaliauskas (2017), if only one researcher analyses the findings, it is difficult to ensure the validity and reliability of the results. Before beginning to analyse the data, the researchers agreed regarding the data analysis. The initial data analysis was performed by the researchers separately by coding the data and forming initial subcategories and categories. After that, the researchers compared initial subcategories and categories, discussed and completed their formation by consensus.

Ethics of the research. The study was based on the respect for personal privacy, benevolence and attitude not to harm a research participant, confidentiality and anonymity (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). The participants of the study participated voluntarily. They were briefed on the purpose and the use of the study, the method of study data collection and the procedure of the study, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. Study participants were assigned a code by using the letter 'A, B, C' and so on.

Research results

The study highlighted the importance of the right to participation to a child, employees, the quality of the provided socio-educational services and the continuity of the implementation of this right to participation in a successful cooperation with the child's family (Table 1).

Table 1 Expression of the importance of the implementation of the child's right to participation in CDC (Raudeliūnaitė & Gudžinskienė)

Categories	Subcategories
Importance for a child	Strengthens child's dignity
	Strengthens the child's self-esteem and self-confidence
	Ensures a better child's self-feeling, his/her emotional safety
	Assists a child in realising himself
	Contributes to the development of his/her problem-solving skills
	Strengthens his/her communication and cooperation skills
	Develops his/her responsibility
	Learns activity planning and organising
	Develops independence when taking and realising his/her decisions
Importance for an employee	Gets get to know a child better and understands his/her situation
	Can respond to the child's needs better
	Forms the relationships with a child based on cooperation
Importance for the quality of the provided socio-educational services	Activities respond to the child's needs
	Child's participation guarantees a favourable socio-educational environment in CDC
	Children can exert influence on the planning and organising of activities in CDC
Cooperation with child's family ensures the continuity of the implementation of the child's right to participation	Parents understand better the importance of the child's right to participation to the child's well-being
	Parents create conditions to implement the child's right to participation in daily life

The results of the study demonstrate that the employees of CDC recognise the importance of the child's right to participation. On the one hand, child involvement in decision-making process strengthens the child's dignity, his/her self-esteem, self-confidence, guarantees a better self-feeling of a child and provides a sense of security. On the other hand, child participation creates conditions for a child to realise himself, contributes to the development of his/her problem-solving, communication and cooperation, activity planning and organisational skills. In addition, a child develops responsibility and independence when taking and realising his/her decisions. This is illustrated by the following statements of the study participants: "when the adults demonstrate that the child's opinion is important, when his/her opinion is not only asked for, but also taken into account while taking decisions, a child feels important and, in the long run, begins to trust himself/herself more, express his/her opinion, he/she discusses" (G), "when we ask children for their opinion, encourage to speak it up,

then it brings security to children, they feel significant...” (J), „when children notice that their opinion is listened to, they open up more and express their needs, whereas we as employees can create conditions for their self-realisation, for example, to organise activities, in which children can unfold their potential” (D), “in discussions children develop their communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skills” (A), “by getting involved in the planning and organising of various activities in CDC children develop responsibility, their planning, organisational, and self-regulation skills improve” (F). Consequently, the study highlighted multifaceted benefits of the right to participation for a child. Other authors also emphasise the importance of participation for the child’s dignity and self-esteem (Bessell, 2011), self-confidence, and self-respect (Saracostti, Caro, Grau, Kinkead, & Vatter, 2015). Children, who are more involved in decision-making, evaluate themselves better, their social skills improve, their respect for another person increases (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014). Children’s participation when taking decisions not only contributes to the development of their personal and social skills, but reduces the level of their stress and anxiety, and increases interest in their life as well (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011). The participation of children allows for the formation of critical thinking, and the improvement of decision-making skills, which children will be able to use in the future (O’Hare, Santin, Winter, & McGuinness, 2016).

The study demonstrates that the employees of CDC identify the benefit of the realisation of the child’s right to participation for themselves as well: they get to know a child better and understand his/her situation, are able to respond to the child’s needs better, furthermore, the relationships with a child form on the basis of cooperation. According to the study participants, “when you hear the child’s opinion, his/her arguments, you understand better why that child thinks so and acts so” (B), “when the children say what they want we’re able to understand their needs better, perceive what a child wants” (I), “by listening to children and showing attention to them, responding their needs, supporting the child, better relationships with children, which are based on trust, form” (C). S. Palmer, S. Maiter, and S. Manji also underline the importance of the relationship between an employee and a child and point out that a good relationship guarantees positive changes (Palmer, Maiter, & Manji, 2006). Furthermore, A. J. Hurd (2011) points out that the realisation of the children’s right to participation deepens the knowledge and understanding on children’s rights.

The results of the study demonstrate that the realisation of the child’s right to participation in CDC conditions the quality of the provided socio-educational services due to the fact that activities respond to the child’s needs, child participation guarantees a favourable socio-educational environment in CDC and children can exert influence on the planning and organizing of the activities of CDC. The study participants noted that “by allowing the children to give voice, responding to their interests, permitting them to organise activities according to

their preferences and suggestions, appreciating the child's opinion, we improve the microclimate inside the day care centre and the quality of services itself" (K), "when listening to children there's a feeling that services respond to their expectations, whereas that is related to the quality of services" (J). Other authors also agree that the child's involvement in decision-making is a necessary condition to achieve the quality of social services (Brummelaar, Harder, Kalverboer, Post, & Knorth, 2018; Heimer, Näsman, & Palme, 2018). By creating conditions for a child to participate in decision-making, the provided socio-educational services are more in line with the needs of the child (Heimer, Näsman, & Palme, 2018). J. Aldgate and J. Stratham point out that the realisation of the children's right to participation creates preconditions to achieve the effectiveness of services (Aldgate & Stratham, 2001).

Attention should be drawn to the fact that the continuity of the implementation of child's right to participation can be guaranteed when cooperating with the child's family. When the employees of CDC cooperate with the child's family parents understand better the importance of the child's right to participation for the well-being of the child and create conditions to implement the child's right to participation in a domestic environment, in daily life. This is illustrated by the following statements of the study participants: "it is often difficult for parents to acknowledge the importance of the child's opinion, involve him in decision-making, however, when we talk with parents they listen to our statements and arguments and it happens that the situation takes a turn for the better" (D), "few, but there are some parents who understand that it is important that a child takes decisions independently, that, in his/her family, they must learn to do that...by sharing their experiences, they help us and inspire other parents" (G). Hence, the data of the study demonstrate that it is not sufficient to create conditions for the child's right to participation to be expressed only in CDC, it is important to cooperate with the family and endeavour that, in a family environment, the child's right to participation would be recognised and favourable conditions would be create for its realisation, because otherwise the continuity of the right to participation will not be guaranteed. K. Herbots and J. Put point out differences in approach among the adults and its fragmentation, and the lack of their cooperation as significant barriers to the realisation of the child's right to participation (Herbots & Put, 2015).

Conclusions

The study established the importance of the realisation of the right to participation for a child, employees, the quality of the provided socio-educational services and the continuity of the implementation of the right to participation when cooperating with the child's family.

The child's involvement in the realisation of his/her right to participation strengthens his/her dignity, self-esteem, self-confidence; his/her self-feeling and self-realisation improve. In addition, a child develops problem-solving, communication and cooperation, activity planning and organisational skills, responsibility and independence when taking and realising his/her decisions.

The realisation of the right to participation is useful to the employees of CDC as well, because they get to know a child and his/her situation better, and can respond better to the child's needs, the relationship with a child, which is based on cooperation, is created.

The realisation of the right to participation is also important for the quality of socio-educational services provided in CDC, because, when implementing it activities respond to children's needs, children have an opportunity to exert influence on the planning and organisation of the activities of CDC, a favourable socio-educational environment is created in CDC.

The study highlighted that the cooperation with the child's family ensures the continuity of the implementation of the child's right to participation in a family environment, because parents understand better the importance of this right for the child's well-being and search for various opportunities to involve their child in the participation process.

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