

## PARENTS ATTITUDE TO AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR OF THE CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY

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**Abstract.** *The development of pre-school children is very intensive and distinguishes itself by development periods with the expression of the features that are peculiar to them and which their parents are not always able to recognize and react appropriately and be in keeping with needs of the children. Therefore, a danger arises for a child to suffer non-adequate reaction, even aggression from his parents. The research aims to uncover parents' attitude to pre-school children aggressive behavior in a family. 180 parents of 2-6 year old children attending Lithuania Raseiniai town pre-school training institutions participated in the research. The research revealed that parents unduly understand and interpret behavior that is typical for pre-school age children regarding it as aggressive. An inappropriate interpretation of child's behavior induces parents to take up inadequate measures for correcting such behavior. More than one third of parents state that physical punishment can sometimes be effective means to educate children.*

**Keywords:** *aggressive behavior, pre-school children, children, family.*

### Introduction

There is a prevailing opinion in our society that we should not pay too much attention to small children behavioral problems, erroneously thinking that children “outgrow” these problems (Nasvytienė, 2005). Aggressive child behavior in pre-school age is expressed quite often and it is connected to peculiarities of child development (Tremblay et al., 2008). The problem is that parents do not usually know stages of child development and which behavior is acceptable at a certain stage of development and which one is not. They do not know how to react to one or another behavioral act of a child and what need that specific behavior reflects. Therefore, requirements and goals set by parents are often out of keeping to capabilities of child's development and burden parents and children relationship and can become a cause for aggression towards children (Žukauskienė, 2012).

More often than not parents apply physical punishment to aggressive child's behavior than to other behavioral problems (Hastings, Rubin, 1999; Evans et al., 2012). Strict upbringing based on constant control and application of physical punishment causes further problems of child behavior, encourages aggressive acts and increases bigger chances of asocial behavior appearance in the future (Alink et al., 2011; Hamama, Azari, 2012). Children that are aggressive in the early childhood often experience learning problems at school and tend to offend more often (Tremblay et al., 2004; Meadan, Monda-Amaya, 2008; Slemming et al., 2010). On the other hand, methods that are well assorted help to reduce the possibility of aggressive behavior, encourage social skills of children, cooperation and versatile development (Coplan et al., 2002; Rubin et al., 2003).

What type of upbringing parents choose depends on their attitude that is mostly determined by existing cultural and communal values as well as social and legal politics prevailing in the country (Halpenny, 2010). Although improvement of the state in the area of child rights implementation has been obvious in the last decades, after a change of legal status of a child and the State's attitude towards a child, parents' educative attitudes have changed very little (Kairienė, 2013). Children upbringing in a family is often grounded in personal experience, traditions of application of physical punishment that has been delivered from generation to generation without knowing and searching for alternative means of child's upbringing (Stonkuvienė, 2008).

Psycho-social, cognitive and physical development of pre-school children is very fast and dynamic. Thus it is very important to spot emergent problems as early as possible and solve them. Holding an opinion that upbringing of a child is first and foremost a right and duty of parents that raise children, it is important to figure out their attitude to aggressive behavior of a child, which determines how they are going to react to aggressive behavior of a child.

**Object of the research** – attitude of parents towards pre-school children aggressive behavior in a family.

**Hypothesis of the research** – parents credit behavior that is typical of pre-school age children to aggressive behavior.

**Aim of the research** – reveal parents' attitude towards aggressive pre-school children behavior in a family.

**Goals of the research:**

1. disclose how parents understand pre-school children behavior;
2. define what are the factors and causes that in parents' opinion stimulate aggressive behavior of pre-school children;
3. disclose parent's attitude towards effectiveness of physical punishment.

**Methods of the research:** theoretical – analysis of scientific literature; empirical – survey of parents of pre-school children; statistical.

**People in the research and selection of the research.** The scope of the research has been set by Paniotto formula (Kardelis, 2002). 180 parents of 2-6 year old children attending Lithuania Raseiniai town pre-school training institutions participated in the research. According to the 2012 data of Raseiniai municipality 335 parents let their children go to Raseiniai pre-school training institutions' kindergartens and pre-school educational groups (children age 2-6 years). On purpose to get necessary number of respondents' answers there have been dispensed 220 questionnaires and 180 of those returned. Therefore, relying on recommended size of scope we can state that the scope of research error is smaller than 5 percent.

**Methods and means of the research.** In pursuit to research parents' attitude towards their pre-school children aggressive behavior in their family a quantitative research was done. For disclosing of topic survey method was chosen as a means of gathering data. Anonymous survey type was selected. The

respondents were presented with closed type questions.

**Course of the research.** The survey was carried out in September of 2013. 220 questionnaires were distributed to parents that raise 2-6 year old children. Some of them were filled in on the spot, others were returned to educators of the groups. There have been 180 questionnaires returned.

**Ethics of the research.** The research was executed following ethical principle: the survey was done after permission from administration of pre-school institutions was received. Before questionnaires were distributed the respondents were explained the aim and procedures of the research. The respondents participated in the survey voluntarily. Anonymity was guaranteed.

## Results

### The parents understanding of pre-school children behavior

The way parents understand and interpret child's behavior results in their reaction and behavior with their child. Therefore, it is important to figure out how parents recognize behavior of pre-school children. Parents were asked *what kind of child's behavior they would call aggressive*. Parents' answers were the following. Parents consider such behavior as aggressive; when *a child punches, beats another kid pursuing to get a desired toy* (58.9 percent). Psychologists (Nasvytienė, 2005; Žukauskienė, 2012) state that instrumental aggression is common among pre-school children. It is expressed by pursuit to get some kind of object, to achieve their aim even by unacceptable means. When such actions are performed by a pre-school child we could not state unambiguously that such actions are aggressive, because there are not enough features characteristic of aggressive behavior: deliberation, when it is meant to harm somebody on purpose (Berkowitz, 1989; Wahl, Metzner, 2010). In this case, feature for consciousness means that actions are intentional and their effects as well as consequences are well understood. A child can take away a toy from another kid, push him aside or even hit him, but he does that trying to get a toy or remove an obstacle, not to hurt or offend another person (Žukauskienė, 2012). Strong frustration, anger or fear often causes aggressive behavior in children. This kind of behavior cannot be considered intentional, deliberate or attributed to impulsive actions (Tremblay, 2004). Ability to understand consequences and understand feelings of another person is formed at the end of six years. Therefore, the criteria of intention to harm trying to evaluate pre-school age children actions should not be considered as essential (Alink et al., 2006) and actions themselves, even though directed at another person – partner in games should be estimated as common behavior for such age group, determined by child development peculiarities. However, discussed behavior is directed at another person and can cause pain or injuries and therefore, behavior when *a child punches, beats another kid pursuing to get a desired toy* could be considered as an expression of instrumental aggression. However, reaction to it has to be adequate, taking into account peculiarities common for such child age

development stage.

Aggressive child behavior was also named by parents such behavior when *a child fights, kicks and bites when he is told to do something he does not want* (56.1 percent), *when a child falls on the ground, hits his head to the floor till he gets the object he desires* (12.8 percent). Due to egocentric type of thinking common to pre-school age children a child sees an adult as entirely supervising person that gives too strict requirements and often limits child's behavior due to reasons he hardly understands or cannot even explain (Žukauskienė, 2012). Therefore, such behavior of a child can be explained as a form objection, resistance to actions that seem to be unacceptable for him that are expressed by physical actions due to lack of verbal development (Alink et al., 2006). It is also believable that resistance of a child is connected to insufficient attention from parents and efforts to figure out why certain behavior is expected from a child.

Parents consider child behavior aggressive when *a child hustles while playing, grabs another kid by his arm, tries to knock him out* (36.7 percent), *a child takes away toys from other children* (1.7 percent). However, such kind of play should not be perceived as aggression, because it is a common feature for such age stage development (Tannock, 2008; Carson, 2011; Tremblay, 2012; Žukauskienė, 2012). Cognitive abilities and motor skills of pre-school age children are still limited and not properly developed. Therefore, small children are rather rough while manipulating objects or communicating with other people (Mesman et al., 2008). Likewise, small children usually try to explore their environment trying to find out more about qualities and functions of things (Reinberger, 2008). Exploration and play can include such behavior of children as pushing around, shaking or even fighting (Mesman et al., 2008).

Parents often consider the following actions as aggressive behavior when: *a child buzzes cries and demands parents' attention* (7.8 percent). Attention that parents show to their kid is a need that the kid tries to satisfy by any means. If parents do not set enough time for communication with their child, it can encourage aggressive behavior in children (Wahl, Metzner, 2012). Child moves to new age stages are connected with sharp contradictions between previous relationships with the people roundabout and a child's grown out physical as well as psychological possibilities (Žukauskienė, 2012). Such specific child behavior expressed between gaps of age crises stages is not meant for anybody in particular, but is used as a means to deliver a certain message for another person, for example mother by trying to gain her attention. As behavior it is not directed at a person (Mesman et al., 2008), for example preteens expression of anger having fallen on the floor. Such behavior is quite frequent during early childhood. Therefore, it is important to distinguish behavior that is common and acceptable for certain age stage from aggressive one that is directed at a specific person with intention to harm him.

Comparing received data according to whether parents correctly recognize child's behavior as aggressive (*a child punches, beats another kid pursuing to*

*get a desired toy*) and incorrectly recognize child's behavior that is common for that specific age stage development regarding it as aggressive (*a child fights, kicks and bites when he is told to do something he does not want; a child falls on the ground, hits his head to the floor till he gets the object he desires; a child hustles while playing, grabs another kid by his arm, tries to knock him out; a child takes away toys from other children; a child buzzes cries and demands parents' attention*), we can state that parents incorrectly understand pre-school child behavior that is common for such age stage crediting it to aggression ( $\chi^2=14,438$ ;  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ).

In attempt to find out how parents understand a child's aggressive behavior respondents were asked *which sex of children commonly behaves aggressively*. More than two thirds parents think that aggressive behavior of a child is not dependent on sex (69.4 percent), quarter of them state that boys tend to behave aggressively more (25 percent) and 1.1 percent consider girls to be more aggressive.

Scientists that studied aggression in terms of sex have an opinion that aggressive behavior differences between girls and boys show in the second-third years. Boys become more aggressive than girls (Reinberger, 2008; Lussier et al., 2012; Butovskaya et al., 2013). Boys tend to fight, kick and bite more than girls in pre-school age. Boys' aggression can partly be explained by differences in speaking skills – girls usually have better developed verbal skills. It creates possibilities to use verbal communication instead physical aggression (Alink et al., 2006). As children grow expression of physical aggression based on sex reduces. However, even then boys more often participate in aggressive events and these differences stay stable throughout childhood and adolescence (Tremblay, 2012).

This differently graded aggressive behavior of girls and boys can be explained by a prevailing attitude in society that boys have to be stronger, know how to defend themselves, resist and therefore such behavior of theirs is not considered as unacceptable. Parents tolerate aggressive behavior of boys considering it as acceptable. In the meantime, aggressive behavior of girls is less tolerated.

### **The factors and causes stimulate aggressive behavior of pre-school children**

It was further pursued to find out under what specific circumstance aggressive child behavior is expressed at home. Analyzing reasons for aggressive child behavior answers of respondents could be divided into two groups. The first one is connected with emotional needs of a child: almost one third (29.9 percent) of parents indicated that a child behaves aggressively when he lacks attention from parents. About one fifth (19.2 percent) of parents state that a child behaves aggressively when he does not feel secure and 15.5 percent of parents indicated that a child behaves aggressively when his wishes are ignored. According to the data of the research we can state that child's aggressive behavior is conditioned by unsatisfied emotional needs or insufficient gratification of them.

It may be assumed that some children experience lack of their parents attention, which lets to state that a family does not perform one of the main of its' functions – communication. Communication, listening to a child is considered of the most important factors determining warm and close communication between parents and a child. Constant and proper attention of parents for a child gives a sense of security and self confidence. According to V. Ribakoviene et al. (2008) poverty of emotional tie and lack of communication can stimulate and strengthen child behavioral problems in a family. A child that does not get proper attention often tries to get it by improper behavior, because he understands that he will be noticed. Pursuit to gain parents' attention can stimulate a child to behave aggressively, especially when such behavior receives parents' reaction. So, it can be stated that aggressive behavior of a child is connected to insufficient operation on parents' side – insufficient provision of attention to a child, insecurity which is the reason why child's emotional need are not sufficiently satisfied and a child responds by aggressive behavior.

The second group of reasons for aggressive child behavior is connected to physiological needs of a child: one fifth (21 percent) of parents say indicate that a child behaves aggressively when he is not rested (did not get enough sleep), 5.2 percent, when daily routine changes and 3.4 percent of parents state that a child behaves aggressively when he is hungry. These results confirm E. R. Tremblay et al. (2008) statement that aggressive behavior during early childhood is often stimulated by failure to meet physiological needs of a child.

One more reason for aggressive child behavior that parents indicate (5.5 percent) is separation of a child with parents. Insecure affection encourages such behavior of a child. Child's affection to a person that nurtures him motivates the child to search for nearness with that person and separation causes frustration due to child's inability to be with the object of affection, which is usually one of the parents (Sarner, 2010).

While analyzing data of the research it became apparent that some reactions of parents to aggressive behavior of a child according to cause of aggressive behavior expression – when a child behave aggressively because he is not rested (did not sleep enough), parents tend to punish him ( $\chi^2=6,316$ ,  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ), tell him to sit quietly ( $\chi^2=5,687$ ,  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ), when a child behaves aggressively, because he does not feel secure, parents tend to limit pleasures ( $\chi^2=6,436$ ,  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ), tell him to sit quietly ( $\chi^2=5,520$ ,  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ), when a child behaves aggressively due to lack of attention, parents tend to put him to corner ( $\chi^2=5,498$ ,  $p<0,05$ ;  $df=1$ ). All the above mentioned reasons of aggressive child behavior are connected to failure to satisfy child's emotional and physiological needs, which is a signal of a child sent to his parents that he does not feel well. Instead of analyzing reasons for such aggressive behavior by their child in some cases parents apply punishment measure such as command to sit quietly, which for a pre-school age child is a heavy punishment. Limiting of pleasures or pedagogically unacceptable and offensive punishment towards child's dignity is

telling a child to stand in the corner.

Throughout the research we tried to define which family factors cause a child to start behaving aggressively. Analyzing the factors that condition aggressive behavior of a child pointed out by the parents we can single out those that dominate and are directly connected to aggressive actions by the parents: *aggressive behavior of parents with a child* (41.5 percent), *constant conflicts between parents* (17.3 percent), application of physical punishment (11.8 percent). Formation of aggressive child behavior is most often caused by aggressive behavior of parents directed at their child or noticed during a conflict between parents. A child watching and directly experiencing aggressive behavior intercepts such communication model. Moreover, parents' hostility towards a child expressed in aggressive behavior with a child forms the child's hostility towards surrounding people, which can also be expressed by aggressive behavior (Kairienė, 2005). There is a connection between relationship between parents and children and aggressive behavior of children. Ill relationships between children and parents are closely connected to poor self assessment of children and more often expression of aggressive behavior (Stoltz et al., 2012). Aggressive behavior of parents towards children condition not only formation of aggressive behavior by a child, but also strongly affects psychological state of the child. When a child experiences physical aggression he is crippled not only physically, but also psychologically. Children that experience aggression in a family feel insecure and unhappy (Kairienė, 2005). When aggression is present in a family functioning of that family is disconcerted, because one of the most important functions – emotional one is not secured.

The respondents also pointed out that aggressive behavior of children can be stimulated by *strict punishments that contravene the fault* (13.9 percent), *parents' requirements that contravene child's age and development* (1.9 percent), *ignoring of child attention* (8 percent), *cajolement to a child's whims* (5.6 percent). Child aggressive behavior is expressed as a defensive reaction to undeserved punishment. When a child feels that he was punished undeservedly, he objects to that. Strict punishment that contravenes a fault causes disappointment and anger in a child (Tremblay et al., 2008). Pre-school children due to their immaturity are often not able to express their dissatisfaction in words and, therefore, it is likely that they express their negative emotions by behaving aggressively.

### **Parent's attitude towards effectiveness of physical punishment**

There is no doubt that children have to be educated in a manner that they would be able to control themselves and behave in socially acceptable ways. Only education methods are often negotiable. Physical punishment is one of the most widely spread form of violence against children presented as a means of education (Durrant, 2012; Kairienė, 2013). Pre-school age children are in the risk group of possible physical punishment. Children between 2-9 years old are

mostly punished physically (Halpenny, 2010). Application of physical punishment hurts a child physically and emotionally (Hasanvand ir kt., 2012; Žukauskienė, 2012) and often conditions aggressive behavior of children (Hasanvand et al., 2012; Wahl, Metzner, 2012). Children that were punished physically when grow up tend to be more aggressive than those that had not been punished that way (Durrant, 2012). Moreover, children that were beaten by their parents in childhood tend to beat their children more often than those who have not been beaten by their parents (Jusienė, 2006; Kairienė, 2006; Halpenny, 2010). It means that consequences of physical punishment show up not only in childhood, but also in adult's life.

We attempted to find out parents' opinion whether physical punishment is an effective way in educating children. The research revealed that a little more than half (54.4 percent) parents consider physical punishment as ineffective means of education that cripples a child both psychologically and physically. And it does not have a long lasting effect. More than a third (43.3 percent) parents think that physical punishment is sometimes effective and 0.6 percent of parents consider physical punishment to be effective, because it is the quickest way to stop undesirable behavior of a child.

We compared the results that we got with the results of the research performed in 2006 (Jusienė, 2006). The research estimated that 17.3 percent of parents consider physical punishment to be effective means of education. 20 percent state that physical punishment is ineffective means trying to educate children and 43.7 percent of parents believe that sometime physical punishment is effective. Having compared the data of both researches we see that the number of parents that believe physical punishment to be non effective has grown (54.4 and 20 percent respectively) and the number of parents that state it is an effective means has decreased (0.6 and 17.3 percent respectively). However, the number of parents stating that physical punishment is sometimes effective has remained almost the same (43.7 and 43.3 percent respectively). It is not easy for parents to educate a child, because it takes time and efforts to find other means of education. Therefore, parents often apply the same upbringing methods for their children that they experienced themselves in childhood (Jusienė, 2006; Žukauskienė, 2012; Kairienė, 2013). Pedagogical education could and should affect poor pedagogical culture of the parents. It is important for parents to understand that even sometimes applied physical punishment can be harmful for a child.

## **Conclusions**

1. The research that has been performed revealed that parents incorrectly understand behavior that is common for pre-school age stage children, considering it as aggressive. Parents incorrectly understand aggressive behavior of children in terms of sex – more than two thirds of parents think



- that aggressive behavior of a child does not depend on sex.
2. Parents indicate that aggressive child behavior is expressed when emotional and physiological needs of a child are not met. Reacting to a child's aggressive behavior in some cases parents tend to apply punishment such as ordering them to sit quietly, limiting pleasures or telling them to stand in the corner.
  3. Parents named the factors that influence aggressiveness of a child and are connected with the family itself and they are: aggressive behavior of parents with a child, conflicts between parents, strict and contravening fault punishments as well as physical punishment.
  4. Although from pedagogical point of view physical punishment is unacceptable, crippling a child physically and morally, yet more than one third of parents state that physical punishment is sometimes useful.

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