

# **The Impact of Puppet Theatre Among Preschoolers Socio-Emotional Abilities Development**

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

preschoolers; socio-emotional abilities; puppet theatre; educational intervention program.

In general, undesirable behaviors of people and particularly of children occur due to a lack of socioemotional skills and competences. The training and development of these skills begins in the family environment, the first environment with which the preschooler came into contact.

However, preschool is the period of accelerated development on all levels: physical, cognitive and socioemotional. These periods develop the basic skills (cognitive, emotional and social) so necessary for adaptation to adult life.

From the moment when children are received in kindergarten, the teacher must model their teaching discourse and behavior, in order to establish a network of appropriate and secure social relationships, in which each participant (child) to feel valued and confident, to express his inner experiences: thoughts, emotions, desires, motivations and so on.

The aim of this study was to implement and test the effectiveness of an educational intervention program based on puppet theatre in order to develop emotional abilities (recognition of personal and other people's emotions) and social abilities (social interaction, problem solving, respect for rules and tolerance).

The results showed that puppet theatre contributes statistically significantly to the development of socio-emotional abilities in preschoolers, and after calculating the effect size, a strong effect was demonstrated for emotional expressiveness, regulation of socio-emotional response, empathy, self-image and cooperation, and in terms of social interaction the proposed intervention program had a medium effect.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schl $\u00fcs$ selworte:

Vorschulkinder; sozio-emotionale F $\u00e4$ higkeiten; Puppentheater; p $\u00e4$ dagogisches Interventionsprogramm.

Unerw $\u00fc$ nschtes Verhalten von Menschen im Allgemeinen und Kindern im Besonderen entsteht durch einen Mangel an sozio-emotionalen F $\u00e4$ higkeiten und Kompetenzen. Die Bildung und Entwicklung dieser F $\u00e4$ higkeiten beginnt im famili $\u00e4$ ren Umfeld, dem ersten Umfeld, mit dem der Mensch in Kontakt kommt.

Die Vorschule ist jedoch die Zeit der beschleunigten Entwicklung auf allen Ebenen: k $\u00f6$ rperlich, kognitiv und sozio-emotional. Es ist die Phase der Entwicklung grundlegender F $\u00e4$ higkeiten (kognitiv, emotional und sozial), die f $\u00fcr$  die Anpassung an das Erwachsenenalter so notwendig sind.

Von dem Moment an, in dem Kinder im Kindergarten aufgenommen werden, muss die Erzieherin ihren Unterrichtsdiskurs und ihr Verhalten modellieren, um ein Netzwerk angemessener und sicherer sozialer Beziehungen aufzubauen, in denen sich jeder Teilnehmer (Kind) wertgesch $\u00e4$ tzt und sicher f $\u00fch$ lt, um seine inneren Erfahrungen auszudr $\u00fc$ cken: Gedanken, Emotionen, W $\u00fc$ nsche, Motivationen. und so weiter.

Das Ziel dieser Studie war es, ein auf Puppentheater basierendes p $\u00e4$ dagogisches Interventionsprogramm zu implementieren und dessen Wirksamkeit zu testen, um emotionale (Erkennen sowohl pers $\u00f6$ nlicher als auch anderer Emotionen) und soziale F $\u00e4$ higkeiten (soziale Beziehungen, Probleml $\u00f6$ sung, Einhaltung von Regeln, Toleranz und so weiter) zu entwickeln.

Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass Puppentheater statistisch signifikant zur Entwicklung sozio-emotionaler F $\u00e4$ higkeiten bei Vorschulkindern beitr $\u00e4$ gt, und nach Berechnung der Effektgr $\u00f6$ \u00dfe wurde ein starker Effekt f $\u00fcr$  emotionale Ausdrucksf $\u00e4$ higkeit, Regulation sozio-emotionaler Reaktionen, Empathie, Selbstbild und Kooperation nachgewiesen, und in Bezug auf die soziale Interaktion hatte das vorgeschlagene Interventionsprogramm eine mittlere Wirkung.

## 1. Introduction

Preschool age represents the period when children need us, adults, to teach them how to relate to each other, how to solve different social situations they encounter, how to express and live their emotions healthy. They imitate and observe our behaviors, as

well as those of our colleagues, so everyone's actions must be of quality, to guide them to an optimal social and emotional development, to a formation of self-confidence.

Optimal emotional development is one of the essential components of adaptation. It is necessary for maintaining mental health and influences the development and maintenance of social relationships. In the case of adults, emotional development is often treated under the term "emotional intelligence", while in the case of children, the literature uses the term "emotional competence".

Social relations influence the continuous structuring of identity. The self-image and self-awareness of the child and, especially, his moral awareness are strongly outlined. The child is open to learning rules and rules of behavior, becomes receptive to family or kindergarten habits and this leads to discipline of socially desirable behaviors. The degree of autonomy of the child increases through the acquisition of basic skills, hygiene, clothing, etc.

In recent years, so educational policies in the United States, so in other states have reflected an increased interest in investing in the development of socio-emotional skills as a means of promoting well-being, adaptation and academic achievement among children (Humphrey et al., 2011).

## 2. Theoretical foundation

Socio-emotional development aims at the beginning of the preschooler's social life, his capacity to establish and maintain interactions with adults and children, to perceive and express their emotions, to understand and respond to the emotions of others, and to develop the self-concept. In close correlation with the concept of self, the child's self-image develops, which decisively influences the learning process. Until recently, the success of adapting to environmental requirements has been associated with the level of development of intellectual abilities separating rationality from emotions. Although skills are very important, emotions are a source of information that is essential for survival.

### 2.1. Emotional abilities at preschool age

Emotional skills is defined as the capacity to recognize and interpret one's own emotions and those of others, and the capacity to manage appropriate emotionally charged situations (Stefan & Kallay, 2010).

The main emotional skills described in the literature are: experiencing and expressing emotions, understanding and recognizing emotions, and emotional regulation.

Table 1. Description of emotional abilities (Ștefan & Kallay, 2010, p. 18)

Types of emotional abilities	Examples of behavior
Experiencing and expressing emotions	1) awareness of one's own emotional feelings; 2) adequate transmission of emotionally charged messages; 3) manifestation of empathy.
Understanding and recognizing emotions	1) identification of emotions based on nonverbal cues; 2) naming emotions ("I'm sad", "I'm happy") 3) understanding the causes and consequences of emotions.
Emotional regulation	1) use age-appropriate emotional regulation strategies.

During the preschool period, the child names and recognizes his or her own and others' emotions, allowing him or her to respond appropriately to his or her own emotional feelings and those of others around him or her. By age 3, the child names and recognizes emotions such as joy, sadness, anger and fear, reaching at age between 5-6 where the child has a wider range of emotional labels (shame, guilt or embarrassment).

Also, during this period, the language of emotions is rapidly gaining in accuracy, clarity and complexity, and reporting on the possible causes of people's feelings is becoming more common. By being able to talk about emotions, preschoolers can have a more objective view of emotions, try to understand their own emotions, and listen to what others have to say about their emotions. The language of emotions has significant implications for the child's emotional development.

Preschoolers begin to associate different feelings with typical situations such as, for example, acknowledging that losing something dear or not being able, for various reasons, to achieve your goals can make you sad (Sacaliuc, 2019). So, they realize the association between emotions, between thoughts and expectations about events.

At preschool age, understanding that emotions can also be invoked through thoughts about past events leads to noticing the connections between feelings and thoughts. It is very interesting that preschoolers tend to understand much better the causes of negative emotions than positive ones (Banciu, 2017).

However, preschoolers' understanding of emotions is limited. They have difficulty in understanding how emotions can be based on false beliefs. Haheu-Munteanu & Bruja (2020) claims that at the age of 4-5, when they begin to distinguish between reality and appearance, preschoolers begin to understand the way they express their emotions influences by the dynamics of relationships with others. They understand that a person does not show his true feelings in order to protect another person, thus starting to use the rules of emotional expression.

Moreover, emotions understanding involves the initial assessment of the emotional message conveyed by the other, the accurate interpretation, the understanding of the message through the constraints imposed by the rules of the social context. At this age the child acquires an essential skill for further development, namely emotional self-regulation (control of their own emotions and desires). This involves the ability to initiate, inhibit, or modulate physiological processes, cognitions, and emotions-related behaviors so as to achieve individual goals (Haheu-Munteanu & Bruja, 2020).

Developing children's emotional abilities is important for the following reason:

a) help to build and maintain relationships with others.

Ex: The child's successful interaction with other people depends on his ability to understand what is happening, as well as his ability to react appropriately to it.

b) help the children to adjust to kindergarten and school.

Ex: Children whose understandings of emotions and how they are expressed will be able to empathize with and support other children. Then, children who understand the emotions of others are privileged by their peers as better and more fun play partners, are able to use their expressiveness for social purposes, respond to the emotions appropriate to their peers during play, and adapt more easily to the preschool environment.

c) Because it prevents the occurrence of emotional and behavioral problems.

Problems in children's emotional development can lead to behavioral difficulties in early and middle childhood ” (Botiș & Mihalca, 2007, p. 12).

## 2.2. Social abilities at preschool age

The requirements of the environment are increasingly complex so that the effective adaptation of children to them is ensured by the optimal development of emotional and social competencies.

“The degree to which children and teenagers are able to establish and maintain acceptable interpersonal relationships, gain the approval of peers, make friends, and end relationships that are harmful or negative to them, defines social competence, and predicts long-term psychological and social regulation” (Gresham, 2000, p. 52).

Ștefan and Kallay (2010) defined the social abilities as the capacity of children to form functional social relationships with other children and adults in their lives. In other words, social competencies facilitate positive interactions, respect for cultural norms, so as to allow the achievement of one's own goals and at other times the observance of needs.

The basic social skills, according to the literature, are divided into two categories: 1) interpersonal skills of relationship and problem solving and 2) intrapersonal skills.

Table 2. Description of social abilities (Ștefan & Kallay, 2010, p. 27)

Types of social abilities		Examples of abilities
<i>I. Interpersonal</i>	A. Social interaction	1) interacts with other children through age-appropriate games; 2) initiates interactions with other children; 3) share objects / toys; 4) offers and asks for help; 5) waiting his turn; 6) use polite addressing formulas.
	B. Solving social problems	1) resolve conflicts through age-appropriate strategies.
<i>II. Intrapersonal</i>		1) respect the rules; 2) tolerates frustrating situations.

Interpersonal social skills are developed and shaped in social contexts. Children’s ability to adapt is largely influenced by how they can control their own behavior. The source of behavioral self-control is the acquisition of emotional regulation skills.

Many social situations involve the child's ability to inhibit his first impulse: if a child always likes to be the first to be asked, the first in a competition, or any other activity, the appropriate reaction would be to have, to ask permission to intervene, or be. offers alternatives ("you say first and then I will say"). Thus, the correct behavior in situations that generate frustration is dependent on the extent to which the child can, in a first phase, control his first reaction and then postpone what he wanted (frustration tolerance) (Sacaliuc, 2019).

The educator-child relationship has multiple implications in terms of developing socioemotional competencies. To be positive, such a relationship must fulfil several conditions:

- to be a collaborative educator-child relationship;
- be based on trust and respect;
- to be one of maximum involvement on the part of the educator.
- cultivating perseverance in achieving the proposed goal.

### ***2.3. The relationship of stories with puppet theatre - an important element in the socioemotional abilities development***

The stories that children listen to have a major influence on the development of emotional and social abilities. Children's literature contains an inexhaustible source of beautiful examples of behaviors mirrored in small antitheses between characters, offers us the consequences of disobedience or obedience, worthiness or laziness, honor or dishonesty, truth or falsehood; presents us some positive traits of some heroes: courage, bravery, wisdom, self-control, devotion, sincere friendship, but also unworthy, reprehensible traits of some characters: cunning, stinginess, greed, cunning, arrogance, etc.

The stories presented to the preschoolers help them to understand the meaning of kindness, diligence, etc. , teaches them to hate wickedness, laziness, enmity, etc.

The emphasis on the moral qualities that the characters are endowed with gives the stories an important educational value. By listening to or watching stories, preschoolers learn to make their own decisions; to distinguish the difference between good and evil; to express their own feelings and emotions better; to develop self-confidence; to turn their attention to the positive aspects of life (beauty, joy,

love, etc.), but without excluding the negative side; to develop their emotional life.

Puppet theatre has a lot of benefits. Doing theatre is a funny, stimulating and educational activity, suitable for any age.

In kindergarten, the puppet theatre can be found in the sphere of extracurricular activities and supports, with real success, the abilities of perception, understanding, observation, perseverance, exploitation or the sense of abstraction. The emotions experienced by children in this situation are relevant. The positive heroes of the stories played by dolls become a part of the children's imagination, which then takes over, through role-plays, lines, attitudes and emotions.

The plays (watched or with the direct participation of preschoolers - as actors) support the field of notions of socialization, of interaction with other colleagues, experiencing emotions and feelings.

Through theatre, pre-schoolers learn to manage their emotions, learn new words, improve self-esteem, sense, learn to be with others.

In addition to the knowledge that children acquire by watching or playing theatre, their imagination, creativity, etc. will also be developed.

The puppet theatre is a theatre in which the actor, hidden from the eyes of the spectators, chooses a special way of presenting the audience, the life of the characters. This shape is given to her by the doll. There are a variety of dolls that can be used, many of which can be made of textiles, wooden spoons, paperboard, etc.

The aims of theatre are the following:

- improving the capacity to carefully follow an accessible story in order to understand and reproduce it;
- developing the capacity to receive the oral message;
- cultivating nuanced, expressive speech and enriching vocabulary;
- formation of the aesthetic taste, the cultivation of the pleasure of participating in a theatre show;
- telling stories with the help of puppets, using dialogue;
- training in team work skills;

- cultivating perseverance in achieving the proposed goal;
- development of memory and imagination.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1 Purpose of research

The aim of this research was to implement and test the educational intervention program "We and the puppet theatre", in order to develop emotional abilities (recognition of personal and other people's emotions) and social abilities (social interaction, problem solving, respect for rules and tolerance), as a result the following objective emerge:

- Assessment of preschoolers in terms of the level of socio-emotional abilities they gain.
- Elaboration and implementation of an educational intervention program based on puppet theatre for the preschoolers socio-emotional abilities development.
- Investigate the effectiveness of the proposed intervention program on developing the socio-emotional abilities of the participants included in the study

#### 3.2. Hypothesis and research variables

This study's hypothesis is the following:

- The implementation of the educational intervention program "We and the puppet theatre" will increase the level of socio-emotional abilities of preschoolers.

*Independent variable:* the educational intervention program "We and the puppet theatre"

*Dependent variables:* preschoolers' socio-emotional abilities level

#### 3.3. Participants

The participants of this study were 24 preschoolers aged between 3 years and 2 months and 5 years and 10 months ( $M_{age} = 4$  years and 8 months), preschoolers of the combined group "Năzdrăvanii", from "Birț" Kindergarten, Borșa town, Maramureș county, Romania.

#### 3.4. Instruments

*Social-Emotional Assessment/ Evaluation Measure (SEAM<sup>TM</sup>, Jane & Waddell, 2014)*

SEAM<sup>TM</sup> is a functional and effective tool for screening behavioral and socio-emotional skills for the following age groups: 1) infants (3-18 months), 2) toddlers (18-36 months) and preschoolers (36- 63 months).

The SEAM<sup>TM</sup> questionnaire includes 41 items that reflect certain behaviors, socio-emotional skills of children grouped on 10 scales, these scales being the following: social interaction, emotional expressiveness, empathy, commitment, independence, self-image, cooperation, adaptative skills, regulation of socioemotional responses and adjusting the attention and level of activity.

This scale can be completed in pencil-paper version by teachers, psychologists, school counselors, social workers, and they will score items on a Likert scale from 1 to 4 where, "1 = never" and 4 representing "completely".

Regarding the fidelity and validity of this questionnaire, Squires, Waddell et. al. (2012) indicated a strong internal consistency and a good test-retest fidelity ( $r = .99$  for infants and toddlers and an  $r = .97$  for preschoolers).

#### 3.5. Procedure

For testing the hypothesis of this research it has been used an experimental design and the research took 6 month (October 2020 - March 2021).

The dependent variables of this research were the socio-emotional competencies (measured with the *Social-Emotional Assessment/ Evaluation Measure-SEAM<sup>TM</sup>*) and the educational intervention program represents the independent variable.

On the *pre-test* phase was took place the evaluation of socio-emotional abilities by applying the questionnaire through systematic direct observation. After gathering the results and interpreting them it was noticeable that they possess a decreased level of socio-emotional competencies and we decided to elaborate an interventional program "We and the puppet theatre" which had the goal to develop a set of activities based on puppet theatre which are going to develop the socio-emotional competencies.

The *post-testing* phase took place the following week after the program was finished consisting on reassessment by applying the same questionnaire in order to establish the effectiveness of the educational program.

The interventional program “We and the puppet theatre” contains ten activities and the main objectives are the following: development of social interaction skills, development of the ability to identify several solutions to the same problem, approach a problem from different perspectives, identifying and becoming

aware of one's emotions, expressing and labelling properly their emotions and developing the ability to regulate their emotions.

#### 4. Results

Table 3. Comparative analysis of the measured variables of the participants from pre-test and post-test

Experimental phase		Social interaction	Emotional expressivity	Social-emotional responses regulation	Empathy	Self-image	Cooperation
<b>Pre-test</b>	N	24	24	24	24	24	24
	Mean	14.16	9.91	11.16	5.50	8.66	9.25
	Median	14	10	11	6	9	9.50
	Std.	2.88	2.18	2.37	1.35	2.21	2.23
	Deviation						
	% of Total Sum	45%	41,5%	46,1%	46,5%	47,1%	48,2%
	% of Total	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
<b>Post-test</b>	N	24	24	24	24	24	24
	Mean	17.29	14	13.04	6.3	9.75	9.95
	Median	17	12	13	6	9	10
	Std.	1.75	6.2	1.33	.81	1.22	1.42
	Deviation						
	% of Total Sum	55%	58,5%	53,9%	53,5%	52,9%	51,8%
	% of Total	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%	50%
<b>Total</b>	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
	Mean	15.72	11.95	12.10	5.91	9.20	9.60
	Median	16	12	12	6	9	10
	Std.	2.84	5.04	2.12	1.18	1.85	1.88
	Deviation						
	% of Total Sum	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	% of Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Observing the first table (table 3), the participants of this research encounter difficulties at the following levels: social interaction (M=14.16), emotional expressivity (M=9.91), socio-emotional responses regulation (M=11.16) and empathy (M=5.50). Regarding the social interaction some preschoolers do not fully communicate with the other children in the kindergarten group, do not interact with each other and do not agree to share and exchange toys. Also at the level of emotional expressivity some pre-schoolers cannot succeed to identify their own emotions and are not capable to describe them to other people (teacher,

peer group, member of family). Moreover, at the level of social-emotional responses regulation and empathy some preschoolers are unable to calm down when they are upset, do not remain calm in disappointing situations (such as losing a game) and do not respond promptly to the emotional reactions of their peers.

Table 4. Paired Samples t test Results

Variables	Pre-test		Post-test		N	95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df	d
	M	SD	M	SD					
<i>Social interaction</i>	14.16	2.88	17.29	1.75	24	-4.16; -2.75	10.16*	23	.47
<i>Emotional expressivity</i>	9.91	2.18	14	6.2	24	-4.32; -2.42	7.37*	23	.65
<i>Social- emotional responses regulation</i>	11.16	2.37	13.04	1.33	24	-2.58; -1.24	5.92*	23	.81
<i>Empathy</i>	5.50	1.35	6.30	.81	24	-1.78; -.71	4.86*	23	.98
<i>Self-image</i>	8.66	2.21	9.75	1.22	24	-2.16; -.67	3.92**	23	1.22
<i>Cooperation</i>	9.25	2.23	9.95	1.42	24	-1.95; -.54	3.65*	23	1.31

\* p<.00; \*\*p<.05

After the application of the educational intervention program proposed implemented behind the needs identified in the pre-test phase, there are improvements at the following social-emotional competencies: preschoolers are able to make positive statements about themselves, to collaborate during the playtime or when they have a task to do, have acquired a secure attachment, verbalize when they need attention or help, can to identify, express and describe a variety of emotions and respond promptly to the emotional reactions of their peers.

In order to verify the impact of the activities of the educational intervention program proposed we calculated the size effect (see table 4). After the calculation, we found the following aspects: for the social interaction we obtained a  $d=.47$  which means that the program had an medium effect and for the emotional expressivity ( $d=.65$ ), social- emotional responses regulation ( $d=.81$ ), empathy ( $d=.98$ ), self-image ( $d=1.22$ ) and cooperation ( $d=1.31$ ) the program had a strong effect.

## 5. Conclusions

Preschoolers acquire knowledge, positive / negative behavior, rules of group living, socializing, by the simple fact that they attend kindergarten, which is the basis of all further development. At this age, preschoolers tend to imitate the behaviors of those around them, adults or other children, and especially of the characters in the stories, characters considered by them (sometimes even involuntarily) heroes or role models.

The development of activities in the form of theatre, a form beloved by children, leads to the development of emotional states, to the formation of a moral conduct, adequate for coexistence in society.

In carrying out this research we set out to highlight the positive impact that the use of puppet theatre has on the socio-emotional development among preschoolers.

Testing the interventional program “We and the puppet theatre”, we can confirm that this program has demonstrated its effectiveness regarding raising the level of socio-emotional abilities ( $d=.47$  for the social interaction,  $d=.65$  for the emotional expressivity,  $d=.81$  for social- emotional responses regulation,  $d=.98$  for empathy,  $d=1.22$  for self-image and  $d=1.31$  for cooperation) among preschoolers.

One of the limitations of this research could be the use of the Social-Emotional Assessment/ Evaluation Measure (SEAM, Jane & Waddell, 2014), which is not validated and adapted to the Romanian population, so that its psychometric properties remain unchanged. The second limit is the small number of participants. As the activities were carried out in only one class, there is no high degree of accuracy in generating the results obtained.

A future research direction would be to develop a study to investigate the extent to which attachment and parenting style influence the preschoolers emotional intelligence development.

## Authors note:

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