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Influence of the Parenting Style on Young Schoolchildren's Sociability

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Abstract: *The current paper aims to assess whether the parenting style adopted by parents influences their children's level of sociableness. For research purposes, 52 children of the 4th grade from a Romanian school in Constanţa and 104 parents have undergone two psychological tests. The research methods chosen were the well-known parental style questionnaire "Do you know your parental style?" by Goyetche (2022) and the questionnaire "The sociability test" by Roşca & Tudoran (2005) and Martin (2005). The results show that the democratic parental style is associated with a higher degree of sociability among 4th grade pupils (p<0,001). The parenting style that most supports the development of young schoolchildren's sociability is the democratic one, followed by the permissive one. The authoritarian parenting style scored the lowest in our findings, leading to the conclusion that this style may hinder children's emotional development in the long term.*

Keywords: *parental style; sociability; classroom environment; children; young pupils.*

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Introduction

While the relationship between parents and children is present in all cultures, the patterns involved in the establishment and management of this relationship may vary, according to behavioural patterns that are socially and culturally determined. It is important to remember that one of the tasks carried out by parents is to teach their children how to socialize and how to build healthy relationships with other people. However, the biological event of becoming a parent does not always guarantee that the parent will successfully carry out his/her role as an educator and a role model for the child. In fact, many parents need training in order to build and strengthen their own social skills as a first step. Only afterwards will they be able to teach their children how to communicate with other persons and relate to them. As UNICEF (2023) materials and others researchers (Constantinescu, 2009, Gidu et al., 2021) show, the period of early childhood plays a crucial influence in the further development of the child at various levels. Not only the children's cognitive development is at stake, but also their social and emotional well-being in the long term (Constantinescu, 2009, Neumann (Constantinescu, 2018).

A report published by the NGO World Vision Romania in 2017 showed worrying findings about physical abuses on children in the contemporary Romanian society. The report, titled *Why do we hit the children?* ("De ce lovim copiii?", Romanian in original) revealed that every hour two children are victims of a form of physical abuse. However, this result is based on the cases reported to the authorities, while it may be reasonable to assume that the amount of violence against children is considerably higher. The National Authority for the Protection of the Child reported that 86% of the cases of physical abuse take place precisely within the child's family (Vişoiu, 2017).

The difficulty to assess domestic violence against children also lies in the different understandings parents have about violence and their role in relation to their children. In the study mentioned above, about 60% of the respondent parents did not consider the occasionally hitting the child represented a form of violence. (Vişoiu, 2017). Such beliefs may stem from the cultural tacit acceptance of violence when it is thought to contribute to the improvement of the child. The vast majority (82%) of the parents interviewed agreed to an old Romanian saying, "Dirty laundry is washed within the family", which led the author to draw the conclusion that parents tend to keep silent about their educational practices at home. The lack of

communication with persons outside the family also considerably limits their chances of improving their parental style (Vişoiu, 2017).

The topic of violence against children in Romania represents the focus of another vast comparative study, conducted by the Romanian branch of the NGO "Save the children" between 2013 and 2021. 76% of the parents participating in the study agreed to the assertion that "A good child always obeys the parents", which indicated a higher valorization of obedience in 2021 compared to 2013. A slight increase was also observed in the parents' attitudes about the importance of punishments for educating the children. 19% expressed partial agreement, limited to exceptional situations, while 18% agreed partially in 2013. The use of beatings as a way of correcting the children's behaviour was reported by 28% of the parents, with 10% more than in 2013 (Alexandrescu, 2021). Still, a different general picture seemed to emerge from the children's answers, who indicated a more common use of physical punishments than the parents were ready to confess. 46% of the children stated that they had been slapped (or hit with the bare hand) by their parents, 15% declared to have been beaten with a belt and 13% - with a stick (Alexandrescu, 2021). The findings of both research projects thus reveal that parents tend to be reluctant to disclose how often they use physical punishments in order to 'discipline' the children.

It is easy to see that such behaviour stems from a misconception of the importance of the parental style adopted for the children's physical and emotional well-being. Both studies draw attention to the consequences that physical punishments may have for the emotional development of the children and their self-esteem and behaviour as adults. However, parents often tend to neglect the long-term effects of their parental style in favour of an immediate response: the obedience obtained from the child, who is thus reduced to a passive role and whose autonomy, desires and needs are often glossed over.

Having these findings as a starting point, the current research focuses on a small group of children enrolled in the 4th grade at a middle school in the town of Constanța, Romania. The main aim was to investigate whether the parenting style adopted by their parents influenced the children's development of social skills and their behaviour at school. We also intended to assess whether the authoritarian parenting style, that still seems to be common in the Romanian society, may lead to any positive results in the children's behaviour.

Theoretical framework

The concept of parental (or parenting) style has been proposed by Baumrind (1971), who identified four prototypical parental styles, which will be briefly examined below.

The authoritarian (disciplinarian) parental style involves a very high level of expectations, while the emotional support is low. Such style is usually linked to a poor development of the children's behaviour (Daniel et al., 1999; Lavric & Naterer, 2020). For authoritarian parents, traditions and order have a high value and they tend to view obedience and conformism as positive qualities, required from adults and from their children as well. When the children's actions contradict the parents' idea of 'proper behaviour', the young ones are severely punished (Barakat & Clark, 1999). Such parents establish too many 'limits' and expect from their children to accept their decisions unconditionally. At the same time, they do not take into account children's opinions or desires. Such rigid behaviour affects the child's capacity to take decisions, as personal independence is deterred, and the individual's development is not supported. Consequently, the child may experience feelings of frustration and rage and he or she becomes dependent and disheartened. Such negative emotional environment may affect the child's self-image in the long term.

In contrast to the first type of parents, *democratic (authoritative) parents* set limits and standards in order to assure the children's development. They use their power in guiding and monitoring the children's activities and behaviour. However, the control upon the child is maintained in a reasonable manner, using strategies in order to promote the child's independence. Communicative strategies are used by democratic parents for negotiations and suggestions, without forcing the child's cooperation. The child is given variants to choose from and he or she is encouraged to make choices and take decisions alone, while being responsible for the decision taken (Barakat & Clark, 1999; Porter, 1997; Balson, 1994; Miller, 1990). This is considered to be a healthy microsystem formed by parents and children, producing a positive emotional environment and leading to the child's valorization and self-respect (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). Due to the fact that it assures a balance between control and independence, this parental style is viewed as a climate which supports the development of a child who is competent, socially responsible, self-assured and independent (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993).

The *permissive (indulgent) parent* is a passive one and offers all the power to the child, so that the child always wins in "win-lose" situations (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992, Wong, Konishi, Kong, 2021). In any case, the child feels unsatisfied and uncomfortable in the absence of

parental control. For this reason, he or she spends a great amount of energy in order to maintain the parents under control and, at the same time, to determine them to begin exerting their control upon him or her. This microsystem parents – child does not foster the latter, because it lacks affective support and mutual exchanges. An indifferent parent denies the children the emotional support they need. Similar to the first parental style, this style also develops a negative emotional environment, where the children's psychological needs are not taken into account. Such children are unable to resist frustrations, they experience difficulties in taking responsibility upon their actions, they are imature and emotionally dependent.

In the case of the *neglectful (uninvolved) parental style*, both dimensions of control and emotional warmth are lacking. The parent is not at all involved in the relationship with the child, neither from an emotional and cognitive perspective, or from a behavioural or attitudinal perspective. The uninvolved parent avoids taking responsibility for the child and, implicitly, for the role of a parent as well. Regarding the child's development, some consequences of this parental style resemble those triggered by the authoritarian style. The child may manifest anxiety, even depression, caused by the lack of security. Moreover, his or her self-esteem may be seriously damaged. (Wong et al., 2021, Lavrič & Naterer, 2020).

The parenting styles presented above are based on two key elements: sensitivity, relating to warmth and emotional support, and harshness, relating to the requirements and the controlling behavior of parents towards their children (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Both elements influence the development of the child's personality and his/her ability to relate to other children and later even with adults. If the parents are not fully aware of the possible consequences of their parenting style, they might later experience surprise and frustration, noting a gap between their parenting efforts and expectations on the one hand and the child's results at school and his/her manner of relating to others, including the parents themselves.

Research objectives and methodology

Our research starts from the assumption that a link exists between the children's level of sociability and the parental prototype employed by their parents. More precisely, the research hypothesis is that the children whose parents adopt a democratic parental style tend to manifest a higher degree of sociability compared to children from families with different parental styles. The second objective of the study is to assess how the parental style influences the children's sociability.

The current study has been conducted on a sample of 156 subjects, including 52 schoolchildren in the 4th grade (30 girls and 22 boys) and 104 adults (the schoolchildren's parents) at the Middle School „Nicolae Tonitza" in Constanţa, Romania. The selection of the subjects has been made among the students of five different 4th grade classes and it has been based entirely on volunteer participation, both of the children and of their parents. After the children had expressed interest in participating in the research, the family of each student was contacted and informed in detail about the research, its purpose and the procedures. Since the children involved in this study were underage at the time when the research was conducted, their parents or legal tutors or caretakers expressed their agreement for their children's participation in the study. However, it is important to mention that no child participated in the study against his or her free will, but all have taken the test willingly.

All adult participants signed an informed consent form and all the ethical considerations set out in the Declaration of Helsinki were met. The investigation was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Ovidius University from Constanţa, on 26 January 2022. The study met all the ethical criteria for research with human beings (informed consent, right to information, full confidentiality, non-discrimination, free participation and the right to abandon the study at any point).

In order to reach the proposed objectives, two different research methods have been employed. First, the questionnaire "Do you know your parental style?", proposed by Goyetche (2022), has been administered to the parents. The questionnaire includes 19 items and the results allow the researchers to distinguish between three parental styles: the permissive one (19-31 points), the authoritarian one (between 32 and 44 points) and the authoritative style (more than 45 points). The second research method was the sociability test created by the Romanian researchers Roşca & Tudoran (2005) and Martin (2005), which measures the level of social expansiveness. This research method was applied to the children respondents. Here, the subjects are grouped into four categories: loners (with an index between 10 and 14), low limit expansiveness (index between 15 and 24), middle level of expansiveness (index 25-34), and high limit expansiveness (index 35-50).

The data collected have been processed with the statistical programme SPSS 16.0. Since the distribution was parametric, we decided to use the test t-Student and the Pearson correlation coefficient in order to assess the differences between the averages and the correlation degree between the variables. The significance threshold has been established at $p < 0.05$.

Results

For the statistic verification of the research hypothesis, we carried out a correlational analysis between the variables considered (the student's level of sociability and the parental style preferred by the family), in order to investigate the link between the two variables, the meaning and the degree of this association.

Table 1. *Correlation between the parental style and the child's level of sociability*

Correlations			
		Parental style	**Child sociability**
Parental style	**Pearson correlation**	1.000	.696**
	Significance (2-threshold)	.000	.000
	N	52	52

** The correlation becomes significant at the level of significance 0.001 (2-threshold).

The result obtained by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient indicates the existence of a moderate to high relation (0,696) and markedly significant from a statistical point of view between the variables considered, at ($p<0,001$). This means that the high level of sociability is associated with the authoritative style, while a lower level of sociability is linked to the permissive model of parenting style. In other words, children who are more sociable benefit from being educated according to a democratic parenting model, in contrast to the children whose parents employ different models in their education. The research hypothesis that correlates the democratic parental style and the high degree of sociability is confirmed and sustained by the statistics. This finding confirms previous research on the topic (Winsler et al., 2005; Pinquart & Gerke, 2019; Salavera et al., 2022).

Further, we investigated whether a certain parenting style influences the child's degree of sociability significantly. We used the statistic comparison of the child's sociability level in relation to the parenting style adopted in his or her family. For the purpose of the analysis, the parents have been grouped in three categories, according to the parenting style adopted with their children: the authoritarian group, the permissive group, and the authoritative group. The categorization was based on the results scored after the parents had answered to the questionnaire about their parenting style. In order to check this assumption statistically, we chose the t- test technique.

The statistical analysis has revealed significant differences between the three categories of parental styles in regard to the children's level of sociability. The values obtained are placed around the threshold $p<0,001$,

which highlights the influence of the educational model adopted by the parents upon the child's sociability. The findings obtained through statistic comparison prove that the adoption of the democratic parenting style leads to a level of child's sociability that is clearly superior to the level obtained in the context of permissive and authoritarian parenting style. In other words, the parenting style that fosters the development of sociability in children remains the democratic or authoritative style, followed by the permissive parenting style. The authoritarian parenting style scored the lowest in our research, which fully validates the research hypothesis employed in the beginning. A graphic representation of sociability levels for each parenting style examined is available in Figure 1.

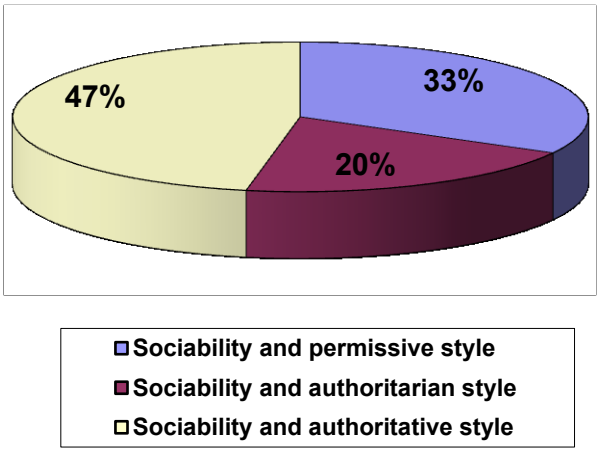


Figure 1: Sociability levels for each parenting style examined

The graphic representation above shows once again the significant difference between the authoritative/democratic parenting style and the authoritarian one, resulting in a consistent difference of the children's level of sociability. This finding provides a useful explanation for the various problems encountered in the school environment by the children raised by parents by means of the authoritarian style.

Conclusions

This study investigated whether the family plays an important role in the children's development of sociability and in their integration in the classroom group. The statistical analysis of the questionnaires completed by parents and the sociability test undertaken by schoolchildren revealed that the pupils with authoritative parents are significantly more sociable than

pupils whose parents adopt different parenting styles. Moreover, such children are able to integrate themselves in the classroom environment to a higher degree than the children from families with permissive or authoritarian parenting styles. In other words, when the family promotes a corresponding educative climate, this feature has a positive impact on the child's social skills and on his or her ability to fit in the classroom group, in relation to the peers and to the teachers.

The results confirm, once again, that the family climate has a considerable impact upon two important variables, 'sociability' and 'integration', in regard to young children's life. It is important to remember that these variables also play a role in the development of the children's personality, on their ability to establish bonds with other children and on their acceptance within a group. Further research is needed in order to assess whether the degree of sociability and integration remains the same throughout the period of adolescence and, if not, how it changes and under which circumstances. The findings obtained so far indicate that the authoritative/democratic parenting style is the most effective and also the most beneficial for the development of the young child. The children raised according to this parental style are more willing to take responsibility, more emotionally mature and less emotionally dependent, which allows them to establish healthy relationships with their mates.

Although the research has been conducted on a small sample of respondents, it already indicates a need for the parents to be informed about the consequences of the parental styles they employ towards their children. In other words, parents need to be aware of the huge impact their behaviour has on their children, starting from the first years of life. Children need to grow in a friendly and supportive environment, they need to interact with adults who are emotionally close to them and to communicate in a positive way that emphasizes values such as respect, mutual understanding and trust, instead of fear and obedience. The children raised in a family with a democratic/authoritative parenting style seem to be best able to balance the external expectations imposed upon them with their own need for independence and self-expression. The findings of the present study should be interpreted as a plead for a more systematic 'training' of parents in order to adopt a democratic parenting style and to become aware of the risks associated with the children's education in an authoritarian climate. The latter situation may lead to the children's isolation and feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem not only during the first years in school, but also until later in life.

Authors' contributions

GDV conceived the study, performed the literature search, contributed to writing the manuscript, and read and approved the final manuscript. LRM, HF performed and revised the literature search, contributed to writing the manuscript. MGC contributed to writing the manuscript, and read and approved the final manuscript. GAD, MM participated in the design of the manuscript, performed and revised the literature search, contributed to writing the manuscript. All authors had equal contribution in this paper.

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