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**THE IMAGE OF ADULTHOOD IN CHILDREN OF SENIOR  
PRESCHOOLAGE**

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*Abstract*

The study presented in this article is devoted to the analysis of ideas about adulthood in children of preschool age. This study is part of a project analyzing the impact of social change on the notion of senior preschoolers about the world. The project was started in 1992, and by now seven assessments have already been performed. The timing of each assessment was associated with certain significant changes in the situation in Russia. In each assessment, the model and structure of the study are similar. An individual interview is conducted with children of 6 years attending kindergartens in the city of Moscow: the children are asked about what is happening in the country and the world, how they perceive these events, how they live now and how they anticipate their life in the future. Samples of children are formed at each stage according to the same principles, which enables to conduct a comparative analysis of the changes in the world views of children that take place over the years. It should be noted that these samples are not representative in the strong sense of the word; therefore, statistical procedures are not used in analyzing the results. The main method of analysis is a qualitative analysis of the responses of children, which enables tracing changes in their image of the world over 25 years.

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**Keywords:** Senior preschool age, attitudes, social changes, image of adulthood.



## **1. Introduction**

Children's concept about adulthood and the image of an adult that they have are very important from the point of view of their development. As Elkonin (1992) noted, "the image of adulthood, the image of a perfect (ideal) adult is the only way and support for children to envisage their future" (p. 9). Adult life has always attracted children; in adult life there was always something that was not available to children. But now, as Polivanova (2016) writes, many attractive aspects of adult life have become available to children without adult participation.

According to scientific research, the criteria for entry into the period of adulthood are certain achievements of a person, namely mastering the knowledge, culture, norms and values inherent to adult humanity, and readiness to labor activity (Ilyin, 2012).

Notions about adulthood of the younger generation of our country are more often studied in adolescents and young men and women (Polivanova, 2000; Gioeva, 2015; Nikolaeva, 2014). The results generally show that the majority of respondents have a positive attitude towards adulthood, that the main criteria for reaching adulthood include the presence of certain business and moral and personal qualities. In 2016, a group of researchers led by Polivanova studied attitudes toward adulthood in Moscow fifth-graders. The model of this study repeated the one that was used in the study of children of the same age in 1967. Adulthood indicators were analyzed and compared. The authors came to the conclusion that the realities of modern life provide the fifth-graders with less opportunity to develop a sense of adulthood in the traditional sense than they did 50 years ago. In addition, for modern children of this age, adulthood is not attractive, and they do not seek to grow up as quickly as possible (Polivanova, Bocharov, & Nisskaya, 2017).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Is it possible to reveal ideas about adulthood in children of senior preschool age, and to determine the criteria using which they distinguish an adult from a child?

## **3. Research Questions**

1. What are the criteria for adulthood, according to six year old children?
2. Do senior preschool children want to become adults?
3. What are the advantages of being an adult, according to children?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to reveal the attitudes about adulthood in children of senior preschool age.

## **5. Research Methods**

The study involved senior preschoolers, namely children of six years of age, attending kindergartens in Moscow. It was important for us to learn about the life of children, how they perceive what is happening around them, uttered by the children themselves, but not by the adults caring for them. The choice of

children of senior preschool age as respondents was due to the fact that they already have a certain life experience, have developed a full speech, and can coherently talk about what they know and think. At the same time, they are sincere and frank, and are not subject to the factor of social desirability. At each stage of the study, the patterns of conversation with the children were similar. It contained general questions which were repeated in each assessment stage of the study, as well as issues related to current events. In general, the interview contained about 50 questions aimed at studying the ideas of children about what is happening in the country, and in what way it is discussed at home. The children were asked about their dreams, desires and fears, about their favorite books, films and cartoons, about their future profession, about love, marriage, etc. When studying children's notions about adulthood, they were asked the following questions: When does a person become an adult? How are adults different from children? Do you want to become an adult? Why do you want to become an adult? The conversation with each child took about 60 minutes.

The conversation was recorded on a digital voice recorder, then decrypted and analyzed. A thesaurus of children's statements was compiled for each topic of conversation, and then a qualitative analysis of the results was performed.

## 6. Findings

Answers to the question "When does a person become an adult?" were analyzed from the point of view of the criteria presented by children as indicators of adulthood. It turned out that the most important criterion for preschoolers is to achieve a certain chronological age. But the age of attaining adulthood varies widely. Someone thinks that adulthood occurs after the age of 5 years: "Well ... after five" or "When he grows up, he will be older than six years old, six, seven, eight...". Someone thinks that it is after 18, for example: "My mum said that he becomes an adult after 18 years of age"; or: "I know that a child is under 18 years old". But the majority of six-year-olds believe that a person's adulthood can only be considered "when he will be, for example, 20 or 30" or "When he, probably, is 26-27-40-43" or "When he becomes 50 years old, probably". And, even, "... well, when he turns one hundred years old".

According to senior preschoolers, another important criterion for adulthood is graduation from the institute/university and the onset of labor activity. These events in a person's life are related to the passage of certain stages: "He finishes the school, the college, then he starts working, working, and becomes an adult" or "He becomes an adult, when he finishes learning; first he goes to school, then goes to the institute, then he is at work, and then he has grown up".

The end of labor activity indicates the onset of old age for children: "... when he grows wise, when he has his last birthday" or "When he also goes to the institute, then to another institute, and then to work. He finishes (work) and becomes old".

Answers to the question "How are adults different from children?" demonstrated that six-year-old children have a clear idea of the signs of adulthood. First of all, adults have physical differences, they exceed children in size, in particular, in height. For example: "Adults are big, children are small" or "Because they differ in height. Short but big person is a dwarf. But who is tall, is already an adult".

Moreover, adults are getting bigger and higher gradually, going through different stages of development (from child to teenager and then to an adult): *“If a person is tall, then he is an adult, if he is average, then he is a teenager, if he is small, then he is a child”*.

But the superiority of adults in size is not the only one. Children believe that adults also differ from children in their main activities: adults work, and children play and learn: *“Adults go to work, and children go to kindergarten and school”*. At the same time, preschoolers understand that adults often work not for their own pleasure, but in order to earn the money they spend on their children. For example: *“Because the little ones play, and the adults collect money so that they can buy toys or food for them”*.

Six-year-olds think that adults are smarter than children, they have a lot of knowledge and skills: *“They (adults) know more, they always have a lot to do. A child still does not understand anything, but an adult can already read, and he understands everything”*.

It is interesting to note that children also mentioned some personality traits that characterize both children and adults. In particular, they said that *“small ones are naughty, they are interested in everything, curious, but adults are not quite so curious”* or *“Parents have a slightly different character than children. In children, it is a little softer, and in adults it is harder”*. And, in general, according to the six-year-olds, the character is *“better in children than in adults”*.

Do children want to become adults? – The children’s answers to this question appeared to be somewhat unexpected. Only 38% of children said that they would like to grow up quickly and become adults. More than half of the six-year-olds surveyed (57%) expressed a desire to remain children. The rest had difficulty answering.

Let us analyze the reasons for the desire of children to remain children. It turns out that being a child is good, because it does not need to work, it has few worries, it can walk and play, it is loved and pampered and fed with sweets.

According to the responses of children, it can be assumed that their unwillingness to be adults is often formed based on parental statements and warnings. Parents, in conversations with children, often present the work of adults as an exhausting and unpleasant activity and emphasize the charm of childhood and attending kindergarten. (For example: *“Mom says sometimes: “Oh, I don’t want to go to work!” or “Because I don’t need to work. But mom and dad work long hours. In our kindergarten, we walk outside and sleep. But mom and dad have to stay at the computer”* or *“Being a child is great, because we go to the kindergarten, there we sleep, then take a walk, but at work you have nothing, you can only take a meal and keep working”*).

Children feel the care of their relatives about them, perhaps they hear in the family that *“all the best is for a child”*, they see that adults put children in the first place: *“And being a child is good because you are still being looked after”* or *“Because everyone loves you, your grandmothers, moms, dads....”* Thus, it is obvious that senior preschoolers have a clear idea of the advantages of the position of the modern child. Adulthood for them is largely associated with the deprivation of these benefits.

The same conclusion can be made on the basis of an analysis of the answers of six-year-olds to the question: *“Do you want to go to school?”*. It turned out that about 20% of the children surveyed did not want to go to school. The reasons for this reluctance are associated with the fear of not coping with a new, unhabituated and obviously more difficult situation: *“I want to attend the kindergarten longer... Well, at*

*school I have to do sums which I haven't even learned" or "I have to do my homework" or "Because here you can go to the kindergarten. And you can sleep. But at school you have to do your homework".*

Now we consider the reasons why children would like to grow up and their answers to the question "Why do you want to become an adult?"

Many of them want to become adults *"to command!"* and tell their children their dos and don'ts: *"And I will issue commands to children" or "Because they will all obey you."* In addition, adults can scold children, and children cannot scold and punish adults: *"Because you can scold a child when he misbehaves".*

According to children, adults themselves do not need any instructions and decide themselves what to do: *"An adult ... he is his own master" or "Then you do not have to ask anyone, do everything; play on the phone at night. My dad does it" or "And you can wear what you want, eat what you order, and not what you have to".*

Adults are independent in everyday life, they do not depend on anyone: *"I can go by bus" or "I will cut (with a knife), put the kettle on the gas, cook porridge".*

Adults can work and earn money, and do what they are interested in: *"Because I will have money, and I will be able to buy all the necessary things" or "Because I really want to go in for art. I would like to give my pictures to everyone".*

Adults can drive a car: *"Well, I think being an adult is better, because you can drive a car, ride motorcycles fast".*

And in general, adults, in the opinion of children, can lead an "adult" life, have a family and children: *"I can receive the money myself, get married, have a child, a new home for me, and plant flowers. For example, go to the grandmother" or "When I become an adult, I will be able to be with all my kids (well, I will have children), I will be able to play with them, like their mother, to feed them".*

## **7. Conclusion**

The results of a study conducted in 2016 showed that senior preschool children have a certain concept of adulthood. Children can name the criteria on the basis of which a person is considered an adult. All children point out the positive and negative aspects of both childhood and adulthood. According to six-year-olds, childhood is advantageous because of its carelessness, the ability to play to their heart's content, care from the relatives, and adulthood is beneficial due to complete independence and lack of control. But more than half of the children surveyed do not want to become adults. They are anxious about the responsibility in adulthood, duties, loss of the status of a child associated with love and care from their relatives.

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