

**ECCE 2018**  
**VII International Conference Early Childhood Care and**  
**Education**

**DESTRUCTIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN PARENTS AND**  
**TODDLERS IN WELL-FUNCTIONING FAMILIES**

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*Abstract*

It is common knowledge that parents have great influence upon the development of children at an early age. The parents become their children's helpers in self-knowledge and understanding the world of objects and human relations. At the same time, the interaction between the parents and the children, even in well-functioning families, can take a destructive character and negatively affect the development of the children.

While studying the interaction between parents and toddlers, we will view it as a system of consistently interrelated components – mutual knowledge, mutual understanding, relationships, mutual actions and mutual influence.

To demonstrate the influence of destructive interaction upon the development of toddlers, we used the method of case study. For two years, we observed the interaction between Sasha (a girl from a two-parent, well-to-do and pedagogically well-functioning family) and her mother. In the course of our study, we revealed problems at the level of mutual knowledge. The interaction between Sasha and her mother was destructive, because the mother could not understand and accept the change in her child taking place in accordance with the norms of age-related development. This led to disruption in the interaction at all subsequent stages. Destructive interaction was the main cause of the girl's neurotic disorder.

In order to prevent the development of destructive interaction between the parents and their children, it is necessary to carry out education and counseling of the parents attracting psychologists, pedagogues and medical workers to this process.

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**Keywords:** Early age, destructive interaction, family.



## 1. Introduction

Heightened interest in various aspects of education and upbringing of toddlers in the family has been persistently high in our country over the past 25 years or more. This situation has been facilitated by the transition from the social to the family form of upbringing of the kids of this age. Practically all crèches that helped the parents in their care of babies and toddlers aged 2-36 months were closed in the early 1990s, and one of the parents was granted the right to a parental leave to care for the child during the first three years of their life.

The high level of the parents' influence upon the process of the toddler's development is substantiated by the special social situation in which the parent turns into the child's helper in self-knowledge and understanding the world of objects and human relations. This idea is expressed in the works by L.S. Vygotskiy, A.V. Zaporozhets, A.N. Leont'ev, M.I. Lisina, A.V. Petrovskiy, D.B. El'konin and some other authors. In this connection, it is the interaction between the parents and the toddlers that becomes the decisive developmental factor at this age. At the same time, the educational effort of the parents is not always rewarding.

Modern psychology treats the role of the family in the development of the child's personality from two different positions: as a factor of positive influence (E.Arutyunyats, M.I. Lisina, M.Kechki, etc.), and as a factor of destructive influence (A.I.Zakharov, V.N.Garbuzov, E.D.Eydemiller, V.V.Yustitskis, etc.) (Barsukova, 2017). As a rule, the authors describe the negative influence of dysfunctional (asocial, criminal, conflict-ridden and one-parent) families upon the child's development. Thus, doctor of psychology V.V.Sobol'nikov points out that "... the ruining environment of a destructive family enhances the personal and behavioral violations of the family members, and their behavioral patterns cannot facilitate the formation of holistic personality of the child and their life perception and, as a consequence, give birth to the state of deprivation regarded as utterly unfavorable for successful socialization and development of the person" (Sobol'nikov, 2016, p. 22). Negative influence embraces the emotional, motivational, value-based and normative spheres of the person and leads to various deviations.

Psycho-pedagogical research provides a relatively complete description of the typical features of interaction between preschoolers and their parents (L.I.Bozhovich, L.S.Vygotskiy, V.N.Druzhinin, M.I. Lisina, V.S.Mukhina, L.F.Obukhova, etc.) and reveals the theoretical foundations of early childhood pedagogy (V. N. Belkina, L. S. Vygotskiy, L. N. Galiguzova, L. V. Moiseeva, V. S. Mukhina, D. I. Fel'dshteyn, etc.). A number of works devoted to various aspects of interaction between parents and toddlers have been published (Yu.A. Verkhoturova, G.A. Mishina, L.G. Pavlova, E.O. Smirnova, E.A. Strebeleva), but we have not found any special investigations dealing with the study of characteristics of destructive interaction between parents and toddlers in well-functioning families.

## 2. Problem Statement

The specificity of toddlerhood consists in the fact that the interaction between parents and toddlers may become destructive even in well-functioning families. This is connected, to a large degree, with the parents' lack of knowledge or understanding of the typical features of development of the children of this age. As a consequence, the parents involuntarily infringe on the needs and interests of their children and use the methods of education inadmissible for this age. As a rule, they mistake the natural activity and

inquisitiveness of the child in cognizing the world of objects for bad behavior, their clumsy actions towards other children and pets – for manifestations of cruelty, and their striving for freedom and independence – for stubbornness. In this connection, destructive actions of even loving parents can have a negative influence upon the child's process of development; and if practiced regularly, they might lead to developmental delays and neurotic disorders. The problem also consists in the fact that the given negative manifestations are diagnosed, as a rule, at the preschool age only.

### **3. Research Questions**

In this regard, it is necessary to study the structure of interaction between parents and children, to characterize the peculiarities of interaction between parents and toddlers, and to demonstrate the impact of destructive interaction between parents and toddlers by the example of a concrete case.

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

The purpose of our research consists in revealing the characteristics of interaction between parents and toddlers in well-functioning families.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. The structure of interaction between parents and children.**

The notion of “interaction” is widely used in philosophical, sociological, psychological and pedagogical investigations (Startsev, 2007). In the field of interpersonal relations, interaction is looked upon as a system of selective ties of the given person with other persons (A.N. Leont'ev, B.G. Anan'ev, A.A. Bodalev, etc.). Interaction is a precisely determined behavior or a set of behaviors which can be observed and, consequently, measured (Mukhamedrakhimov, 1999).

Regarding the structure of interaction, we will draw on the position of N.N. Obozov, who singles out its three most important components – affective, cognitive and behavioral. The cognitive component is considered by the author as realization of an object by the subject and includes mutual knowledge and mutual understanding. The affective component reveals everything connected with the state of the personality and is demonstrated via the formation of relationships. The behavioral component embraces actions and activity outcomes, and therefore can be revealed through the description of mutual actions and mutual influence (Startsev, 2007). Thus, while studying the interaction between parents and toddlers, we will view it as a system of consistently interrelated components – mutual knowledge, mutual understanding, relationships, mutual actions and mutual influence.

#### **5.2. The characteristics of interaction between parents and toddlers in well-functioning families.**

The process of mutual knowledge of mother and child begins long before the child's birth and continues all through their life. In toddlerhood, the interaction between the child and the adult is mediated by an object and the child's activity with it. In this context, the child studies the adult's actions, tries to imitate them and involves the adult in their activity. They are primarily interested in the qualities that allow the adult to perform certain actions with the object. The toddler gradually loses interest in the toys which

do not reflect the object world of the adults, and masters activity with real objects (dishes, home appliances, computer, cellular phone, etc.).

Proper attention to the child's needs and interests and systematic observation of their achievements are the necessary conditions of constructive interaction. The knowledge in the sphere of physiology, psychology and early childhood pedagogy, as well as pedagogical diagnostics, makes up the needed theoretical foundation. And, taking into account unevenness of development of different children, only the child himself can be a standard of comparison. The parents' observation of their child can be hampered if the child orients himself towards the stereotypes that have formed in the given society. For example, "one mustn't play with food" and "bad behavior incurs punishment". And "bad" behavior may include all kinds of the child's activity aimed at cognizing the surrounding world (put the serial on the table, took the telephone, spilled water, broke a cup, ran to the side, squeezed out toothpaste, etc.) and the child's demonstration of behavioral models of adults (washed the floor, switched on the washing machine, washed the clothes). As a result, the parents characterize their little "explorer" as "bad" and "intolerable", and look at the passive children sitting in their mothers' laps with envy. Such negative perception of the child's personality may irreparably harm the developing personality. Idealization of the child's personality by the parents is another extreme. Many parents are apt to overestimate the level of development of their child, ascribe non-existent properties to them and may overlook the emerging problems.

The depth and versatility of mutual knowledge determine the success of mutual understanding. Toddlers are characterized by egocentrism; they are unable to accept another person's point of view yet and persist in fulfillment of their wishes. And if their activity is limited by their parents, they express a violent protest by way of screaming and destructive actions. It is only at the age of 2.5 years that toddlers develop the elements of empathy. They are incapable of sympathy, compassion or commiseration; that is why they can hit or bite anyone and involuntarily harm an animal. In spite of the barriers mentioned above, the toddler actively masters the techniques of attracting and keeping the attention of adults. They study the adults' response to their actions and try to correct their mistakes on their own. The child can express the feelings of attachment and liking; they can demonstrate displeasure and suggest a way out of a predicament, and the need "to be understood" becomes one of the most important conditions of active speech development.

The success of mutual understanding in this regard is determined by the position which the parents take in their interaction with the child. In terms of space, they should avoid taking the position "above the child" but rather be on the same level offering them models of activity and supporting their initiative. The adult's domineering may be the cause of the child's rejection of interaction. The parents should be able to see the situation with the "eyes of their toddler", to understand and accept their point of view, to put themselves in the place of the child and to reason from their point of view. Accepting the child, the parents acknowledge their right to individuality and difference from others irrespective of the outcomes achieved.

Relationships can be looked upon as the mutual readiness of both parties for emotions and actions of a certain type. The relations are based on the mutual attachment of the children and their parents which begins to form itself in the period of infancy. Accepting the child, showing their love and care, the parents facilitate the development of the feeling of security, which allows the children to actively explore the surrounding world. In case of excessive demand and care, children may develop lack of self-confidence;

they become incapable of carrying out independent activity. But the most harmful is the salient rejection of the child by the parents, demonstration of neglect and avoidance of contact with the child.

According to A.V. Petrovskiy, four types of family relations can be singled out: dictate, care, “non-interference” and cooperation, but it is only cooperation that allows solving the problems of child education to the full. Cooperation between the child and the adult even in toddlerhood presupposes the involvement of the child in feasible labor, provision of support and acceptance of their help, non-usage of overindulgence, self-sacrifice and consumerism in relation to the child. Concern about the child and their well-being should be accompanied by reasonable strictness which the parents would consider just if they were in their place (Petrovskiy, 1996).

The relationships between the participants of cooperation are closely connected with their behavior and reflect the character of mutual activity.

The works of E.O. Smirnova and E.A. Strebeleva prove that it is only the cooperation between the close adult and the toddler that can become the basis of mutual object-oriented activity and allows the parent to pass to the child social experience and form the child’s motivation to acquire it. In the process of cooperation, what is important for the parent is not only the action oriented towards an object and performed together with the child, but also the translation of the methods of cognition of the surrounding world to the child via these actions (Mishina, 1998). In the process of cooperation, the toddler receives the adult’s attention, kindness and co-participation in practical activity at the same time. And the adult becomes both kind of role model and chief evaluator of the child’s success.

Alongside the leading role of cooperation, the parents can use such interaction strategies as rivalry (for example, who will be the fastest to do something) and one-way intervention while learning new skills (for example, monitoring the movements of the child’s hand with the hand of the parent).

Destructive strategies of interaction between parents and toddlers are represented by counteraction, passive acceptance and avoidance of interaction.

The psychological theories of personality and activity (A.A. Bodalev, L.I. Bozhovich, A.V. Zaporozhets, I.S. Kon, A.N. Leont’ev, etc.) highlight the fact that the child develops only in the process of activity. Accordingly, any actions of the parents which limit the object-oriented developing environment and deprive the child of the chances to manipulate objects can be regarded as destructive. The uncontrolled use of “screen time” may be especially harmful for the toddler. Modern researchers report that the substitution of direct communication between the child and the adult with screen-based entertainment on electronic gadgets limits the toddler’s activity, causes speech underdevelopment and leads to the emergence of neurotic disorders.

The mechanisms of imitation and suggestion lie at the basis of interaction between parents and children. The depth of the change of one partner under the influence of the other one depends on the degree of inclusion of these mechanisms. The imitating ability of toddlers is very high; therefore the parents are advised to refrain from all forms of behavior and actions which they would not like to see in their child in the future.

Mutual enrichment of the emotional, activity-based and social spheres of the participants of the process is most salient in the course of interaction between the parents and their toddlers. Toddlerhood is exceptionally sensitive for the child’s emotional sphere development, because the perception of the

surrounding world at this age has a direct emotional character (Maksimova, 2007). In this context, if the parents are too restrained and emotionless in the course of interaction with toddlers, such interaction may be regarded as destructive.

### **5.3. Concrete case study.**

We have used the method of concrete case observation in order to demonstrate the impact of destructive interaction on the development of toddlers.

For two years we observed the interaction between Sasha (a girl from a two-parent, well-to-do and pedagogically literate family) and her mother. When observation started, the mother was 25, had higher pedagogical education, and before the maternity leave had worked as a shop consultant; the father was 27, had higher education, and was engaged in store management. The relations between the parents in the family may be characterized as cooperation.

The interaction between Sasha and her mother during the first year of life was emotion-ridden and based on trust. The girl developed slightly ahead of developmental norm, and her mother was very happy about it.

The first problems in the interaction between mother and Sasha emerged when the girl was one year old. "My daughter has become so naughty!" the mother exclaimed in a talk with a friend. When asked about the causes of such negative attitude to her daughter, the mother explained that the girl "keeps getting everywhere, grasps things without asking permission, and is completely out of control". Five months later, the mother consulted a child neurologist. She was worried about the fact that Sasha began to pull her hair hard and hit her head against the wall several times. Diagnostic procedures did not reveal any deviations in the toddler's health, but the child was prescribed some sedatives. The situation became better for some time, but two months later the problem reappeared with renewed force. The girl was taken to hospital together with her mother and placed in the rehabilitation department, where the specialists could observe the interaction between the mother and her child. The mother demanded absolute obedience from her child. During walks, she always took the child by her hand and insisted on the girl's going in the "right" direction. The girl began to scream and fight back; and the mother used a stricter tone of voice, took the girl in her arms and placed her in the pram. Sasha bent her body and screamed, but after a short while calmed down and began to watch what was going on around her.

In the dining-room, the child was also often heard to cry. All attempts of the girl to touch food or take the spoon were cut short rather strictly. The mother explained to the daughter that she might make a mess of her beautiful new dress. If the girl kept insisting, the mother took her in her arms and quickly carried her to the ward. Five minutes later, Sasha came back to the dining-room blubbered and sobbing, but obediently opened her mouth and swallowed the cereal. The mother was asked to take the "Test-questionnaire of Parental Attitude" by A. Ya. Varga and V. V. Stolin. In three scales ("acceptance-rejection", "cooperation" and "symbiosis"), the indicators were within the average range; the indicators in the scales "authoritative hyper-socialization" and "little loser" were above the average values. Further investigation corroborated these observations – in relation to her child, the mother uses authoritarianism; she demands from her daughter obedience and discipline, tries to impose her own will, and disregards her

daughter's point of view. The mother does not trust her child, is vexed with her incompetence and tries to control her actions.

Visiting classes in sand therapy together with the daughter was a real shock to the mother. During her interaction with the psychologist, Sasha buried the toy symbolizing her mother deep in the sand. The mother was utterly upset and expressed readiness to try to change the situation.

Sasha and her mom passed through all stages of interaction development from the very start. Having studied the developmental peculiarities of toddlers, the mother changed her attitude towards her daughter's behavior, stopped scolding and punishing her, and tried to demonstrate the models of correct actions with objects instead. During interaction, she always tried to be on the same level with the daughter, look her in the eyes, and tried to follow the strategy of cooperation.

On the psychologist's advice, both Sasha and her mother began to mix with two-year-old Kate and her mother. Watching their games, emotionally ridden with role-playing activity, Sasha's mother mastered the techniques of attracting and keeping the child's attention and learned to act taking into account her daughter's needs and interests. Acting with love and in the interests of her child, she managed to build up the relationship of cooperation. The signs of neurotic disorders vanished after three weeks without medicamentous intervention never to appear again.

## **6. Findings**

The interaction between Sasha and her mother was destructive, because the mother could not understand and accept the change in her child taking place in accordance with the norms of age-related development. Her attitude to her daughter was marked with authoritarianism. She kept making decisions instead of the daughter disregarding her opinion, and often resorted to demands, prohibitions and punishment. And the mother relied on the notorious stereotype that children "should obey their parents" and that "they should be punished for bad behavior". Destructive interaction became the main cause of neurotic disorder in the girl, because after removal of negative influences, disorder symptoms never appeared again.

## **7. Conclusion**

The features of destructive interaction between parents and children may be seen even in well-functioning families caring for a toddler. These features are reflected in all components of interaction – mutual knowledge, mutual understanding, relationships, mutual actions and mutual influence.

The following characteristics are typical of destructive interaction between parents and toddlers:

- parents' neglect of the child's needs and interests, use of negative stereotypes in upbringing and negative attitude to the child's personality due to "bad" behavior;
- ignorance about the nature and typical development of a toddler, use of domineering position;
- avoidance of the cooperation strategy, exercising increased demand and excessive care;
- curbing the child's initiative and independence in activity, use of authoritarianism, incorrect choice of interaction strategy (priority of rivalry, counteraction, passive acceptance and avoidance of interaction over cooperation), and overindulgence (absolute lack of assistance and control over the toddler on the part of the parents, absence of any family norms and rules);

- ample use of punishment, limitation of the freedom of action and movement, substitution of emotional-personal and role-playing communication between the child and the close adult with screen-based entertainment on electronic gadgets, compulsion in all its manifestations, and simplification of the object-spatial environment;

- emotional restraint of the parents, and demonstration of negative forms of behavior by the parents.

In order to prevent the development of destructive interaction between the parents and their children, it is necessary to carry out education and counseling of the parents attracting psychologists, pedagogues and medical workers to this process.

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