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**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' READINESS TO ORGANISE
PARENT/PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP-BASED LEISURE
ACTIVITIES**

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Abstract

Leisure as a kind of activity that has a pronounced physiological, psychological and social aspect can help children reach their full potential. Creating a shared social experience during the course of children's development provides opportunities to manage the scope, intensity and depth of leisure activities organised by pre-school in partnership with families and to consistently explore and analyse educators' readiness to support and encourage such partnership. The research questions concern morphological components of comprehensive analysis of early childhood educators' readiness to organise parent/professional partnership-based leisure activities. The purpose of the study was to develop and test an appropriate comprehensive analysis model. An experimental research was conducted in a Chelyabinsk private pre-school educational establishment — the kindergarten No. 152 run by JSC Russian Railways — using a range of interconnected and complementary tools such as surveys, interviews and observation. As a result, we developed and tested a model to investigate the readiness to organise parent/professional partnership-based leisure activities for pre-school children. The model comprises 15 components and allows for obtaining comprehensive information about the parties' readiness to engage in joint leisure activities. The study not only generated a model to investigate readiness to implement joint activities, but also demonstrated the model application in a particular pre-school setting.

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Keywords: A model of joint leisure, joint leisure, pre-school setting, parents, pre-school children.



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1. Introduction

Leisure is seen as an organised activity that aims, ultimately, at capturing and accumulating positive emotional experiences. Therefore, children's leisure activities as a matter of public concern require particular care and attention. The issues of effective parent involvement and parent-educator communication in early childhood settings are directly relevant to the provision and management of pre-school children's leisure activities, since appropriate planning is possible only when taking into account families' individual needs. Given the hectic pace of today's lifestyle as well as parents' over-packed schedule and inability to maintain a meaningful connection with children, leisure seems to be the most productive and rewarding scheme of parent/professional partnership in early childhood education.

Leisure is a fertile ground for children to have their basic human needs met (Dudina & Dolgova, 2016a; Dudina & Dolgova, 2016b; Rubtsov, 2017). During leisure time, it is far easier for little ones to gain appreciation and respect from others. Even some personality shortcomings can be overcome through leisure activities (Batenova, 2017; Denham et al., 2012). Leisure time plays a significant role in shaping a child's character, specifically such traits as proactivity, self-efficacy, tenacity, integrity, authenticity, etc. Leisure activities may become an important factor in children's intellectual and physical development (Dolgova et al., 2016; Font et al., 2016). Favourite leisure time activities support emotional health, help in relieving stress and minor anxiety; and to top it all, leisure and recreation is seen as an effective way to prevent mental retardation. Leisure activities are all the more beneficial, as, owing to their pronounced physiological, psychological and social aspects, they can help children reach their full potential (João et al., 2016; Kajonius & Carlander, 2017; Plötner et al., 2015).

2. Problem Statement

Creating a shared social experience during the course of children's development provides opportunities to manage the scope, intensity and depth of leisure activities organised by pre-school in partnership with families and to consistently explore and analyse educators' readiness to support and encourage such partnership.

3. Research Questions

The research questions concern morphological components of comprehensive analysis of early childhood educators' readiness to organise parent/professional partnership-based leisure activities.

The research questions also address academic discussions found in psychological and educational literature (Rahamim et al., 2016; Sokol & Serper, 2017; Torres et al., 2015) regarding the need to improve the management of joint parent/professional leisure activities for pre-school children.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to develop and test a comprehensive analysis model for early childhood educators' readiness to organise joint parent/professional leisure activities.

5. Research Methods

An experimental research was conducted in a Chelyabinsk private pre-school educational establishment — the kindergarten No. 152 run by JSC Russian Railways. Educators were divided into two groups — the control and experimental one. Educators in the experimental group worked together with parents and children to introduce leisure activities starting from the children’s first day of attendance. After all, the sooner efforts are made to create educational environment supportive of children’s leisure, the better outcomes are likely to be achieved in the process.

Seeking to achieve the set objectives, we used a range of interconnected and complementary tools such as questionnaire-based surveys, interviews and observation. Educators of each group exposed participants to a variety of joint inter-family experiences with 25 families involved (inter-family competitions, exhibitions, celebrations, sports events, Sunday volunteer sessions, collaborative meetings, theme activities, etc.).

6. Findings

1. *The study of functions and objectives of joint leisure activities* organised by pre-school in partnership with families resulted in a detailed identification of the named aspects. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 01. The functions and objectives of joint leisure activities

	Functions	Objectives
1	Educational function	Building general learning skills, development of mental processes
2	Entertaining function	Creating a friendly and conducive environment
3	Communication function	Bringing participants together, establishing emotional connections
4	Relaxation function	Releasing emotional tension
5	Developing function	Holistic development of a child’s personality
6	Didactic function	Behavioural interventions in game scenarios simulating real-world settings

2. *The study of early childhood educators’ competence in organising joint leisure activities* led to the determination of the following all-important goals:

- enhancing educators’ theoretical and practical knowledge of collaborative teaching and of the principles and new approaches to engaging parents in children’s leisure activities;
- providing educators with opportunities to develop practical skills in the planning, designing, implementation and management of leisure activities such as celebrations, exhibitions, meetings, etc.;
- creating a stimulating, multi-sensory environment conducive to children’s leisure experiences.

3. *The study of educators’ readiness to organise joint parent/professional leisure activities* identified six main behavioural indicators:

- readiness to involve parents;
- readiness to plan leisure activities;
- readiness to organise events;
- readiness to structure parents' and children's time and tasks;
- readiness to create a stimulating, multi-sensory environment;
- readiness to track progress and schedule future work.

The educators' readiness to organise joint leisure activities was categorized in the following three levels:

High level — ability to plan and structure leisure activities; ability to involve parents; ability to organise events; ability to create a stimulating, multi-sensory environment; general cultural competence; agile, non-bureaucratic approach to working with families; commitment to on-going dialogue with parents.

Moderate level — ability to develop a plan of joint leisure activities; ability to structure parents' time and tasks; attentive attitude to parents; arranging open days for parents (mostly during holidays and weekends); conducting a variety of outreach activities for families; searching for ways to organise these activities more effectively.

Low level — superficial and perfunctory attitude to work; low motivation; failure to listen to and understand parents' comments or concerns; inconsistent and limited use of only traditional models of working with families; ineffective use of outreach activities for families; relying on information boards rather than on direct communication with parents.

4. *The study of the challenges educators face when organising joint activities* showed that professionals recognize the importance of pre-school children's exposure to leisure activities as a necessary condition for building stronger relationships with families, but there are a number of problems associated with providing these services:

- the lack of time to develop relationships with parents;
- unwillingness to arrange leisure activities for children, as the respective management work takes a lot of time and effort;
- the lack of special training necessary to effectively organise joint leisure activities.

5. *The study of the reasons why parents may be unwilling to participate in joint leisure activities* demonstrated that:

- due to railway timetable constraints, some parents cannot attend activities that take place at weekends or in the evening;
- some parents see no point in joint activities, because they consider quality time spent with the child in the evening and at weekends (along with occasional visits to close relatives and experiences in commercial play centres) sufficient for meaningful leisure;
- some parents are reluctant to accept the importance of joint leisure activities for pre-school life.

6. *The analysis of the distribution of parents by age* showed that 52% of parents in the control group (CG) were still in their 20s, 46% were in the age category of 30–35 and 2% were older than 35 years, whereas in the experimental group (EG) 58% of parents were in their 20s, 40% were aged 30–35 years and 2% were above 35 years of age.

7. *The analysis of the distribution of parents by family type (two-parent or single-parent)* showed that the great majority of families both in the control (92%) and the experimental group (98%) were a part of a couple household.

8. *The analysis of the distribution of parents by number of children* showed that 63% of parents in the control group had 1 child, 32% had 2 children and 5% had 3 or more, whereas in the experimental group 74% of parents had 1 child, 24% had 2 children and 2% had 3 or more.

9. *The analysis of the distribution of families by financial situation* was carried out based on their living conditions. The survey found that 42% of families in the control group assessed their living conditions as comfortable, 50% as satisfactory and 8% as unsatisfactory (i.e. rented accommodation, communal apartment, etc.), whereas in the experimental group 62% of families described their living conditions as comfortable, 34% as satisfactory and 4% as unsatisfactory.

10. *The analysis of the distribution of parents by social status* showed that the majority of them (86%) worked for the railway (of which 63% were executives and 18% were employees), 8% were self-employed individuals and 6% served in the pre-school setting.

11. *The study of parents' needs for educational knowledge* produced the ranking summarized in Table 2.

Table 02. Parents' educational knowledge needs ranking

	Areas of educational knowledge	CG (%)	EG (%)
1	Studying the theoretical and scientific foundations of early childhood education and upbringing	28	3
2	Receiving information about the curriculum the children experience	18	16
3	Learning to use specific tools and techniques of early childhood education and upbringing	14	15
4	Arranging children's leisure activities at home and in the pre-school setting	12	12
5	Gaining insight into the role and responsibilities of educators working in the pre-school setting	10	10
6	Learning practices for interaction with pre-school children	7	7
7	Understanding key goals of early childhood education in the pre-school setting	6	8
8	Studying basic principles of education legislation	5	2

12. *The analysis of preferred leisure activities (hobbies) of families* in the control and experimental group resulted in the findings summarized in Table 3.

Table 03. Families' leisure preferences

Leisure activities	CG (%)	EG (%)
Instrumental music, dance, singing, drawing, painting classes	7	5
Visiting libraries and reading rooms	2	3
Going to movies	10	8
Going to the theatre	11	16

Spending time at one's dacha (a suburban garden plot with a summer house or a more simple dwelling on it)	2	4
Play, conversations and leisure outings with other families	15	21
Visiting clubs and other entertainment venues	14	18
Countryside recreation, retreats, wilderness hikes and outdoor excursions; visits to forests and parks, art galleries and exhibitions	8	12
Picnics, trips to lakes and seas, visiting foreign countries	6	7
Embroidery, sewing, knitting and other crafts	2	4
TV, radio, video	11	13
Reading books or other printed materials	2	2
Going to the gym, swimming pool, etc.	10	12

13. *The survey concerning parents' attitudes and opinions about family involvement in pre-school education* showed an inconsistent picture:

- 63% of parents maintain regular communication with educators; 28% of parents have irregular contacts with educators; 9% of parents do not talk to the staff at all, because their children are dropped off and collected by grandparents or babysitters;
- 36% of parents hold that leisure activities organised by pre-school in partnership with families are a necessary condition of effective parent/professional collaboration; 58% of parents treat this as an optional extra, as it takes a lot of time; 6% of parents have a negative view of joint leisure activities and their participation experiences;
- according to parents, the most effective types of parent/professional partnership are: home visits conducted by educators (6%); parent meetings (62%); joint leisure activities, celebrations and entertainment (19%); face-to-face conversations and consultations with educators (11%); other activities (workshops, discussions) (2%);
- 50% of parents frequently take part in leisure activities organised by pre-school in partnership with families; 30% join in sometimes (during the New Year's Eve or International Women's Day celebrations); 20% just provide occasional support (mainly financial).

14. *The survey of educators' self-evaluations of leisure activities organised by them in partnership with families* reported the findings summarized in Table 4.

Table 04. [Educators' self-evaluation of partnership with families]

Section	CG educators	EG educators
Educators' evaluation of parents' opinions	Parents are partly satisfied with the quality of activities and the level of care their child receives	Parents are partly satisfied with the quality of activities and the level of care their child receives
Educators' self-evaluation of their efforts to involve parents in the pre-school setting	Parents are infrequently invited by educators to take part in joint activities (e.g., they can assist in repair and maintenance work or be involved in decorating the space)	Parents are frequently invited by educators to take part in joint activities, but educators fail to manage the partnership effectively
Educators' self-evaluation	Educators use different tools and	Educators use different tools and

of the quality of their communication with parents	techniques to encourage family involvement and enhance parents' cognitions about preschool education. Short conversations and parent meeting are most common.	techniques to encourage family involvement and enhance parents' cognitions about preschool education. Consultations are most common.
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15. *Expert evaluations of educators' readiness to organise leisure activities in partnership with families as compared to educators' self-evaluations* are summarized in Table 5 (5 points — “high level”, 4 points — “moderate level”, 3 points — “low level”; each level is described above).

Table 05. [Educators' self-evaluations vs. summarized expert evaluations of educators' readiness to organise leisure activities in partnership with families]

Educators' readiness	CG		EG	
	Self-evaluation	Expert evaluation	Self-evaluation	Expert evaluation
To involve parents	5	4	5	4
To plan leisure activities	4	4	5	4
To organise events	4	3	5	5
To structure parents' and children's time and tasks	5	4	5	4
To create a stimulating, multi-sensory environment	4	4	4	4
To track progress and schedule future work	5	4	5	4
Average value	4.5	3.8	4.8	4.2

Table 5 shows that in the experimental group both self- and expert evaluations of educators' readiness to organise leisure activities in partnership with families are higher than those in the control group. Furthermore, educators' self-evaluations in both groups resulted in higher score than expert evaluations. Overall, across all components of the analysis, “high” level of readiness is achieved by every fourth educator, whereas “moderate” level is achieved by every second educator.

We conducted a literature review (Morrison et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2016; Ongley & Malti, 2014; Oyserman et al., 2014; Palmquist et al., 2016); explored current practices of parent/professional partnership in the pre-school institution; analysed family types, parents' socioeconomic status and educational level, expectations and challenges; identified gaps, positive outcomes, side effects, conditions and determinants of effective parent/professional partnership-based leisure activities. Building on that, we developed a comprehensive model to investigate the readiness to organise parent/professional partnership-based leisure activities for pre-school children. The model comprises 15 morphological components:

- 1 The study of functions and objectives of joint leisure activities
- 2 The study of early childhood educators' competence in implementing joint leisure activities
- 3 The study of educators' readiness to implement joint parent/professional leisure activities
- 4 The study of the challenges educators face when organising joint activities
- 5 The study of the reasons why parents may be unwilling to participate in joint leisure activities

- 6 The analysis of the distribution of parents by age
- 7 The analysis of the distribution of parents by family type (two-parent or single-parent)
- 8 The analysis of the distribution of parents by number of children
- 9 The analysis of the distribution of families by financial situation
- 10 The analysis of the distribution of parents by social status
- 11 The study of parents' needs for educational knowledge
- 12 The analysis of preferred leisureed activities (hobbies) of families
- 13 The survey concerning parents' attitudes and opinions about family involvement in pre-school education
- 14 The survey of educators' evaluation of leisure activities organised by them in partnership with families
- 15 Expert evaluations of educators' readiness to organise leisure activities in partnership with families

7. Conclusion

Pre-school is an indispensable source of support for families with young children. Still, it is every parent's right and responsibility to help nurture and educate their little ones. How well this vital task is accomplished largely depends on educators' readiness to organise pre-school children's leisure activities in collaboration with families. This collaboration should be underpinned by a comprehensive research covering a number of areas, including: current practices of parent/professional partnership, family types, socioeconomic status, educational level, expectations, challenges, gaps and positive outcomes. A possible model for such research is the one we described herein.

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