



OPINIONS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN ABOUT SELF CARE

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Abstract:

Self-care skills are one of the independent life skills, the foundations of which are laid during the preschool period, and which should be acquired by children at an early age. It is important for children to use their self-care skills in order to get involved and gain acceptance into society. Today, the importance given to the constructivist approach, that children are active in the learning process and that new information is built into previous learning, has also become apparent in preschool period. Thus, it has become important for children to express their opinions about their own life skills. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the opinions of preschool children about self-care skills, part of the independent life skills of children. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used in the study. The universe of the study consisted of children aged 5-6 years old, who were in independent preschools in the city center of Malatya Province; the sample of the study consisted of 60 children who were selected from the universe using the random sampling method. The data were collected in two ways: visually and in written form. The data were analyzed by using the methods of descriptive analysis and content analysis; NVivo software was also used. As a result, more than half of the children were found to pay attention to not eating junk food; to realizing the importance of washing their hands; to showing concern about gathering their toys in terms of neatness; the children were also found to have difficulties tightening or loosening their shoelaces. Also, they were careful about selecting a safe seat on the school bus.

Keywords: preschool period, child, self-care

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1. Introduction

Newborns are helpless and in need of care when they open their eyes to the world. In the first years of life, individuals are completely dependent on others (generally mothers) who provide them with primary care. This natural dependence continues until children acquire their self-care skills. Children discover and learn their inherent skills, and they begin acquiring their self-care skills in the course of time. Children's self-care skills, which are acquired during the transition from infancy to early childhood, may be identified as eating (nutrition), maintaining good hygiene, behaving in a way that protects them from accidents and dangers, dressing-undressing, and the ability to maintain order by themselves. Children who acquire self-care skills learn how to maintain daily life without needing help, and they take the first steps towards becoming independent.

Eating (good nutrition) is one of the most important self-care skills that children should acquire, because the foundations of life long eating habits are laid during the preschool period (Eugster, 2007). Acquiring healthy eating habits as a self-care skill is important for the healthy growth and development of children. The attitudes and behaviors of families play a key role for preschool children in the development of healthy eating habits. During this period, factors such as allowing children to choose what they eat, feeding children healthy food in consideration of their growth and hunger, and not being too persistent or forceful are important in helping children develop healthy eating habits (Tayfur, 2007). Moreover, dinner table discipline, in other words eating regularly and at certain times together as a family, affects the eating habits of children, and serves as an example for them (Holtmeier, 1995).

An important independent life skill of children is maintaining good hygiene. Having good hygiene is one of the self-care skills in which parents spend the most time, and in which they have the highest level of difficulty helping their children acquire (Yavuzer, 2004). Experts have reached a consensus about the fact that the ideal time to start toilet training is at age 2 or later. Putting pressure on children about good hygiene rules and treating them indifferently may hamper the development of maintaining good hygiene (Christopher, 2001; Largo et al., 1996). Education about good hygiene is one of the topics that families should focus on in their daily lives. Haarer (1961) suggested that mothers achieve success in teaching their children about good hygiene only when they are patient, when they act consistently, and ensure that good hygiene habits be performed regularly and at the same time of day (e.g. children learn to wash their hands before and after eating, and to brush their teeth before going to bed and after getting up in the morning). These routines in daily life play an important role for children in developing good hygiene. Another self-care skill acquired by children in their developmental process is the ability to dress themselves. Children experiment by trying on their clothes from an early age. Learning how to dress is more difficult for

children than being able to undress, and this skill develops later (Varol, 2005). Parents often do not allow their children to dress themselves, mostly because of having limited time, and because they are impatient. Even though parents are well meaning, this makes gaining experiences about dressing skills difficult for children (Grässer and Hovermann, 2013). It is important for parents to allow their children to select what to wear, to give them enough time to dress themselves, and to show patience, in order to help children acquire this skill (Müller and Heinze, 2008). Children should be given adequate opportunity to try and learn how to dress themselves in their daily lives, in order to acquire dressing-undressing skills (Pauen, 2011).

Another self-care skill is safety awareness, and being able to protect oneself against risk. Children want to try and develop their skills in all areas and continuously learn new things. The skill of realizing potential dangers in their environment, and taking precautions against them, develops in children over the course of time. Therefore, it is very important in children education to make children aware of potential accident risks, and help them become sensitive to how accidents can happen (Kindersicherheitstag, 2002). According to Limbourg (1994), children learn a set of skills to protect themselves against dangers in their childhood. Acquiring these skills is necessary in order for children to be able to protect themselves against dangers. Safety awareness develops based on the ages of children. These skills are divided into three categories: (a) seeing and recognizing danger (b) forecasting risks caused by dangers and (c) preventing danger. Studies conducted about protection against dangers and safety awareness showed that children aged 5-6 can see and recognize dangers. The skill of forecasting risks caused by dangers develop until a child is at least 8 years old. Children use the skill of preventing the danger only when they turn 9 or 10 (Limbourg, 1994). An experimental study conducted by Limbourg (1996) with children between 3 and 15 found that the skills of recognizing and forecasting risks resulting from danger in the home environment, and taking precautions, develop earlier compared to the skill of recognizing dangers in other areas of life (e.g. traffic). It was emphasized that the development of these skills is not only dependent on the age of children. It was noted that the role of parental prohibition while children play at home, in the playground or in the back yard, as well as education and providing information is also very important. The study also determined that children can learn safe behaviors within their families by means of experience and education in their home environment.

The preschool period is extremely important in the life of a child. It is a time of rapid growth and development. The contributions of parental help, care and support in the first years of life are important for children during their entire lives (DKSB, 2011; Glanzmann, 2004). The rapid advancement of technology in the modern world emphasizes that children should develop new skills, and use them in their daily lives (Pekdoğan and Kanak, 2016). Problems faced during the period when children are acquiring new habits may have negative impacts later in life (Elben and Lohaus, 2003).

Therefore, crucial responsibilities and duties fall on families and preschool education institutions. The family environment, more specifically parents, provides opportunities for their children to acquire experiences appropriate to their age and development (Brunner, 1966). The role of parents, especially mothers, is important in the development of their children, in the formation of their personal characteristics, and in the acquisition of self-care skills (Petermann and Petermann, 2006; Demiriz and Dinçer, 2000). Moreover, the teaching skills of parents play an important role in ensuring that children acquire skills that are required for healthy development in the first years of their lives.

In their study, Demiriz and Dinçer (1999) found that the educational status of mothers plays an important role in the development of children's self-care skills. Because of today's changing social conditions (e.g. women have begun to work), not only families but also preschool institutions are responsible for children's education. A study conducted by Çetinkaya (2012) found that the level of self-care skills of children who begin preschool at an early age are more highly developed than those of children who start later. The examination of studies and relevant literature showed that studies addressing the opinions of preschool children are limited. Also lacking were studies which evaluated first-hand the knowledge and behaviors of children regarding self-care, one of the independent life experiences. The lack of these studies was deficient. It was thought that the present study will contribute to the literature. Therefore, the aim of this study was determined to be the examination of the self-care skills of preschool children. In accordance with this general aim, answers were sought for the following sub-aims:

1. What are the opinions of children about the points to be taken into account while eating?
2. What are the opinions of children about what good hygiene means?
3. What are the opinions of children about what can be done to keep their rooms neat and in order?
4. What are the opinions of children about difficulties faced while putting on or taking off their clothes and shoes?
5. What are the opinions of children about protection and avoiding (safety) accidents?

2. Method

2.1 The Model of Study

The phenomenology model, one of the qualitative research models, was used in the study. Phenomenology design focuses on the cases that we are aware of, but which we do not have deep and detailed understanding of. The phenomena may appear to us in the form of events, experiences, perceptions, tendencies, concepts and conditions in the

world we live in. Phenomenon provides a basis for studies aiming to examine the phenomena that are not entirely strange to us, but which we cannot fully comprehend (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). In this approach, researchers are interested in the personal (subjective) experience of participants, and they examine the perceptions of individuals and the meanings attributed by them to events. Phenomenology is a descriptive research. Defining phenomena, not generalizing, is important in this respect (Akturan and Esen, 2008).

2.2 Universe and the Sample

The universe of the study consisted of children aged 5-6 years old, who were receiving preschool education in independent preschools in the city center of Malatya Province; the sample of the study consisted of 60 children who were selected from the universe using the random sampling method. Four preschools were selected randomly among the preschools in the city center of Malatya Province. A total of 60 children, including 15 from each preschool, were included in the study. None of the children in the sample were able to read and write yet. To eliminate the factors which negatively affect the internal validity of the study, children at preschools in similar districts in terms of socio-economic features were selected.

2.3 Data Collection Tools and the Collection of Data

A multi-method approach (mosaic approach) was used for the data collection. In this mosaic approach method, more than one data collection method is used in asking the opinions of different people, and obtaining information about the same topic (Clark and Statham, 2005). The selection of methods appropriate to the research conducted with the participation of children of preschool age is important in order to learn the true opinions of children, and to complete the study successfully. The opinions and expectations of children of preschool age can be learned by using verbal and visual methods. It is emphasized that children enjoy being a participant and are able to make accurate assessments about their own lives during this process (Şahin and Dostoğlu, 2014). Approval was obtained from the parents of the children by telephone and through face-to-face interviews, in order to increase the level of validity and reliability of the study. Those children who voluntarily agreed to participate were included in the study. The data collection methods were determined after a pilot study was conducted with the children. In the pilot study, the questions asked were "*What does good hygiene mean to you?*", "*What do you do to keep your environment (room) in order?*", and "*What do you do to protect yourself against accidents?*" It was observed that the children gave different kinds of answers; therefore, it was found that both interview techniques and asking children to draw pictures were appropriate to the characteristics of children included in the sample. Interviewing is the most suitable technique for determining the opinions and perceptions, disagreements and opinion exchanges of individuals about a

topic (Patton, 2002). In the present study, the interview questions were determined not before, but during the process of interviewing the children. During the course of the interview, different questions were asked of the children. The interview questions were addressed to each participant using the same words, and in a manner that indicated the same meaning. The interviews were carried out with the participants in an empty classroom at each preschool on different days of the week. The data collection process lasted for two weeks. In the first week, the interviews were completed. During the second week, the children were asked to answer the questions by drawing pictures about the questions that were asked to them. They were also asked to comment on the pictures they drew.

2.4 Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the study data. Descriptive analysis is an analysis method in which the data obtained are summarized and interpreted according to the previously specified themes. Direct quotations are frequently used in order to accurately reflect the opinions of the individuals who were interviewed. The data obtained are interpreted within the scope of a cause and effect relationship (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). The direct quotations were used in the present study to increase the internal reliability. During the Stage of Ensuring Reliability, three field experts examined the answers of themes obtained as a result of the research to determine if they represented these themes. The themes and the answers relating to these themes were presented to the experts, and they were asked to examine them in terms of suitability. The numbers of "agreement" and "disagreement" in comparisons were determined, and the reliability of the study was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula: $(\text{Reliability} = \text{agreement} / (\text{agreement} + \text{disagreement}) \times 100)$. In qualitative studies, the desired level of reliability is ensured when the agreement between the assessment of experts and researchers is 90% or higher (Saban, 2008). In the present study, a general agreement level at the rate of 92% was ensured within the scope of the reliability study. When the agreement level in the calculation of reliability is 70%, it is considered that the reliability percentage is ensured (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005).

3. Findings and Interpretation

The findings obtained from the study conducted to determine the opinions of preschool children about the self-care skills, one of the independent life skills of children, were classified according to sub-aims, and presented in this section. The opinions of participants were coded as "C" because their names were kept confidential. The themes and subthemes, frequency and percentage values related to these sub-themes obtained as a result of the data analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes generated as a result of the data analysis

Themes and subthemes	f	%
Nutrition		
Eating on time	27	30
Not avoiding certain foods	11	12.3
Avoiding unhealthy foods	14	15.5
Not eating junk food	38	42.2
Hygiene		
Washing hands	34	27.4
Washing fruits and vegetables	21	16.9
Brushing teeth	29	23.4
Taking a bath	17	13.7
Cutting nails	23	18.6
Neatness		
Putting clothes away	19	34.5
Gathering toys	36	65.5
Dressing		
Wearing clothes properly, not backwards or inside out	12	17.3
Fastening and unfastening buttons and zippers	26	37.8
Tightening or loosening shoelaces	31	44.9
Safety		
Being careful about traffic signs	31	26.9
Sitting down on the school bus in a safe seat	43	37.3
Abstaining from eating or drinking food and beverages given by strangers	23	20.2
Keeping away from materials which cause fire	18	15.6

3.1 Nutrition

The first question asked was, "What are the points you take into account while eating?" The answers of the children were categorized and four subthemes were identified as follows: eating on time (f=27), not avoiding certain foods (f=11), avoiding unhealthy foods (f=14), not eating junk food (f=38). Some of the answers given for this question were as follows: C1. *I have main meals in the morning, afternoon and evening. Sometimes I get hungry fast when I eat less. Then I eat chocolate and cake.* C3. *I like all food that my mother cooks.* C22. *I do not eat hamburger. Because its ingredients are not clean.* The examination of children's opinions about the nutrition theme showed that more than half of the participants pay attention to avoiding junk food.

3.2 Hygiene

The question, "Is it important to be clean?" was asked of the children even though their answers were predicted; all of the children gave the answer, "yes". After this answer, the question "What does being clean mean to you?" was asked of the children. Their answers were categorized into five themes: washing hands (f=34), washing fruits and vegetables (f=21), brushing teeth (f=29), taking a bath (f=17), cutting nails (f=23). More than half of the children stated that being clean means "washing hands". Some of the

answers given for this question were as follows: C32. *We wash our hands after going to the toilet.* C21. *One of my friends, Kaan ate strawberries without washing them.* C56. *My father makes me brush my teeth. However, I cannot brush my teeth by myself.* C43. *When our nails grow, germs hide around them. My mother always cuts my nails.*

An example of pictures drawn by children in answer to questions about self-care are presented below.

Picture 1: The hygiene picture of C46



The examination of Picture 1 showed that C46 drew this picture for about keeping clean. This child (C46) expressed an opinion about the fact that good hygiene means taking a bath in these words, *"I take a bath every two days. When my mother forgets my bath day, I remind her about it. I can take a bath and dry myself."* The fact that the child emphasized that taking a bath is an important aspect of good hygiene, and that water plays an essential role in this, drew the attention of the researchers.

3.3 Neatness

The next question asked of the children in a way of maintaining the dialogue was: *"So, what else do your parents want you to do?"* One of the children gave the answer: *"When I mess up my room, my mother makes me tidy up my room"*. In the course of the interview, the question *"What should we do to keep our environment (room) in order?"* was asked, and two themes were determined: putting away clothes (f=19), and gathering toys (f=36). Some of the answers given by the children were: C17. *We take the toys to the toy basket after we play house.* C51. *My sibling messes up my room. My mother makes me tidy up the room.* C28. *We should not throw our clothes on the floor when we go home.*

3.4 Dressing

In the light of these answers, the next question asked was: *"What difficulties do you face while putting on or taking off your clothes and shoes?"* In accordance with the answers given to this question, three subthemes were revealed: wearing clothes properly and not backwards or inside out (f=12), fastening and unfastening buttons and zippers (f=26), and tightening or loosening shoelaces (f=31). It was found that many of the

children had difficulties tightening or loosening their shoelaces. Some of the answers given by the children for the relevant question were as follows: *C44.I cannot tighten my shoelaces. My father always buys me shoes without laces. C39.I wore my t-shirt inside out in the dark. I can wear it properly in the light. C6.I fasten the buttons of my clothes incorrectly. Then my mother corrects them.*

3.5 Safety

As one of the sub-aims of the present study, the “safety theme” question that was asked was: “What do you do to protect yourself against accidents and prevent them?” Its subthemes were as follows: being careful about traffic signs (f=31), sitting down on a seat on the school bus (f=43), abstaining from eating or drinking food and beverages given by strangers (f=23), keeping away from materials which cause fire (f=18). Some of the answers given by the children to this relevant question were as follows: *C36.If we stand on the school bus, we may fall. Also, we should not stand in the doorway. C40.My mother does not guide me across the street until the traffic light turns green. C59.The driver of our school bus also crosses the streets when the traffic light turns green. C11. I get scared when strangers look at me while I’m playing in the park. I saw in a film that strangers kidnapped a child by giving him chocolate.*

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the answers given regarding nutrition in the present study, the aim of which was to determine the opinions of preschool children about self-care, most of the children expressed a common opinion about not eating junk food, and nearly half of them expressed a common opinion about eating on time. Some of the children expressed a common opinion about not avoiding certain healthy foods and avoiding unhealthy foods. According to the answers received in the hygiene category, more than half of the children expressed a common opinion about washing hands, and nearly half of them expressed a common opinion about brushing their teeth. Some of the children expressed a common opinion about washing fruits and vegetables, taking a bath, and having their nails cut. The examination of answers received in the neatness category showed that more than half of the children expressed a common opinion about gathering toys, and that some of the children expressed a common opinion about putting their clothes away. The examination of the subthemes of the dressing theme showed that half of the children held similar opinions about tightening shoelaces, and that some of them held similar opinions about being able to distinguish the “right or wrong” sides of clothes, and about fastening and unfastening buttons and zippers. The subthemes regarding safety showed that the common opinions of children about the fact that they should sit down on a seat while riding the school bus were at a remarkably high level. This behavior was followed by being careful about traffic signs,

abstaining from eating or drinking food and beverages given by strangers, and keeping away from materials which cause fire. In accordance with the study findings, the same study may be conducted again with different samples in different areas, and by different researchers, in order to more fully generalize the findings obtained in the present study. Varied family education programs, in accordance with different approaches, can be developed and implemented to enable families to help their children reach an adequate level of self-care skills. The effect of education programs can be examined with experimental studies. It is recommended that the importance of self-care skills developed during preschool period should be highlighted when in-service training is offered to nurses, midwives and child development specialists working in health care institutions, and preschool teachers. Also, these professionals should offer guidance to parents, and provide them with relevant materials such as pamphlets and brochures when making home visits.

5. Discussion

The self-care skills are a concept that children acquire in their early childhood. This concept enables them to become independent (Demiriz and Dinçer, 2000). In studies conducted on children of preschool age, the data were obtained via parents, caretakers or teachers. However, new studies on periods within childhood regard children as an actor who directs his or her own life, and as its designer (Gerarts 2015). It is important for researchers to ensure the participation of children in these studies in order to better understand children's lives during this period, and to learn the perspective of the children (Şahin and Dostoğlu, 2014). There is literature available that emphasizes that preschool children should be included in studies, and that information should be obtained directly from them. Available literature has also determined that children like this process (Holmes 2005, Clark 2010 & Alderson, 2004).

Healthy eating, one of the self-care skills, develops at an early age and directly affects the physical, mental, and emotional development of children (Demiriz and Dinçer, 2000). In the present study, children stated that they demonstrate the self-care behaviors such as eating on time, not avoiding certain foods, avoiding unhealthy foods, and not eating junk food. A study which examined the dietary habits according to teachers' opinions found results similar to the results of the present study. For example, half of children do not avoid certain foods, more than half sit down to meals with other family members, and 41.2% of the children always eat heartily and finish what is put on their plate (Oğuz and Öney Derin, 2013a). Another study conducted through asking for the opinions of mothers found that most of the children (63.1% female and 57.7% male) avoid certain foods. One study emphasized that parents have an important effect on the meal and food preferences of children. Parents have control over providing their children with proper nutrition, especially during the preschool period. This control is

maintained until children start elementary school. It is observed that children tend to avoid certain foods when they start school (Gibson et al. 2012). The fact that this result is different from the opinions of teachers and children can be attributed to the sensitivity of mothers. The same study found that children exhibit self-care behaviors, sit down to meals together with other family members, have three meals in a day and use fork and spoon properly (Oğuz and Önay Derin, 2013b).

The present study, which aimed at examining the self-care behaviors of preschool children, scrutinized children's behaviors about hygiene and being neat. The children identified learning to wash their hands, washing fruits and vegetables, taking a shower, cutting their nails, and putting these skills into practice, as being clean. They also identified their behaviors of gathering toys, putting away their clothes, and tidying up their rooms. In a study, mothers (83%) and their children (81%) stated that the most discussed topic at home is the neatness of children's rooms, and tidying up these rooms (Zinnecker and Silbereisen 1996). Various factors affect the development of self-care skills regarding hygiene and neatness in the preschool period. Receiving preschool education, and the duration of this preschool education, increases the level of self-care skills in children (Demiriz and Dinçer 2001, Yalçın, Başar and Çetinkaya, 2013). A study, which compared the self-care skills related to hygiene and neatness of the children of working mothers to those of children of mothers who do not work, found that the children of working mothers demonstrated a higher level of self-care skills (Demiriz and Dinçer, 2000) Another study conducted by Aytekin et al. found no difference in the self-care skills of children in terms of the educational status of parents, family type, or number of children. But the level of self-care skills of girls was found to be higher than those of boys (Aytekin, Arslan and Küçükoğlu, 2014). This can be explained by the fact that working mothers assign their children more responsibilities, and that more is expected of girls regarding keeping the house clean and in order. These children are helped in developing self-care skills such as washing hands after using the toilet, obeying hygiene rules, ensuring that their hands are clean, putting away clothes, and tidying up one's own room at early ages (Yurtsever Kılıçgün, 2013).

Themes such as wearing clothes properly and not backwards or inside out, being able to fasten and unfasten buttons and zippers, and tightening or loosening shoelaces came to the forefront in the present study. Children were found to have difficulties in tightening and loosening their shoelaces through their own reports. Studies have suggested that children's behaviors such as putting on their shoes by themselves, and selecting clothes appropriate for weather conditions, are associated with the duration of receiving preschool education and that as the duration of this education increases, fine motor skills of children also develop. Children who start receiving preschool education at an early age repeat these behaviors every day, and thus develop the skills more rapidly (Demiriz and Dinçer, 2001, Yalçın et al., 2013). The motor skills of children entering kindergarten develop over the course of this preschool period (Rezende et al,

2005). The results of the present study are in accordance with the results of previous studies, and they enabled the practice which many children express having difficulties in performing, such as tightening shoelaces, to be determined.

Children begin developing the skill of protecting oneself against danger and preventing accidents after they start acting independently. Children aged 5 and 6 can learn how to keep away from dangerous conditions through preschool education (Yalçın et al, 2013). In the present study, children expressed their opinions about traffic signs, tools, fire, and communication with strangers. They did not mention home accidents. This can be explained by the fact that children were receiving more education about the external environment than the home environment and that parents and teachers made sure their awareness was fully developed before they entered kindergartens.

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