

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF PRESCHOOLERS IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND ATTACHMENT TO THE MOTHER

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: To explore, both theoretically and empirically, the sovereignty of a preschooler's psychological space in the context of his/her psychological health. This paper reflects the idea that the psychological health of preschool children is a reflection of their qualitative interaction with their mothers and depends on the ability of a mother to respect the psychological space of her child.

Methodology: The leading method to study this problem was to establish the ties between the sovereignty of the preschooler's psychological space, attachment to his/her mother and the preservation of his/her psychological health, which provided a comprehensive view of the peculiarities inherent in the qualitative relationship between mother and child. The main research methods were the questionnaire "Sovereignty of psychological space" by [S.K.Nartova-Bochaver \(2014a\)](#), the projective method "Children's attachment to the mothers based on game samples" by [E. V. Skulacheva \(2012\)](#), and the parent's survey.

Main Findings: Relying on the evidence from the study of the children's attachment to their mothers, and indicators of sovereignty of the child's psychological space and the survey of parents, we found that the effectiveness of the mother-child interaction is determined by the type of attachment that may lead to deprivation, integrity or hypertrophy of psychological boundaries.

Applications of this study: The presented research revealed the main attributes of the psychological health of preschool children and the importance of qualitative attachment and preservation of the psychological boundaries of a child. The research results make it possible to provide effective psychological assistance to families with children.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This paper is the first to have revealed that the psychological health of preschool children is determined by the type of their attachment to their mothers and the extent to which the boundaries of their psychological space remain integral and preserved.

Keywords: Attachment to the Mother, Personal Sovereignty, Psychological Space, Preschooler, Psychological Health.

INTRODUCTION

A modern child lives in situations that do not always contribute to the preservation of psychological stability and dynamism of positive personal development. Natural and social instability, separation of a child from nature with its firm norms of harmony make "psychological health" a significant concept for modern practical psychology ([Shuvalov, 2008](#)).

As a complex psychological formation, the term "preschooler's psychological health" may be defined by two aspects, developmental psychology, and health psychology, that represent the core categories for the prospective development of psychology as an academic and practical discipline ([Shuvalov, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c](#)).

In our opinion, it is important to pay attention not only to the theoretical comprehension of the problem of the psychological health of a child but also to the description of indicators for its definition and development ([Levkova et al., 2018](#)). Our suggestion is to keep in mind that the psychological health of preschool children is subject to a variety of factors: heredity, the nature of parent-child relationships, the degree of parental competence and maturity, psychological and pedagogical literacy of adults surrounding children, etc. ([Chigisheva, 2018](#)). The reality that a psychologist inevitably faces in preschool educational institutions is a pronounced "adaptive level" of the psychological health of preschool children. Attributes of this level of psychological health in preschoolers are the implicit signs of disadaptation (difficulties with sleep, insecurity, unwillingness to attend kindergarten, high levels of anxiety, the manifestation of conformality, etc.) ([Shuvalov, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c](#)).

The psychological health of preschool children is highly dependent on the quality of interaction with the significant loved ones. And here the degree of personal maturity of parents, primarily the child's mother, comes to the fore. The preserved personal identity of a mother largely predetermines the preservation of boundaries of the psychological space of a child and, as a consequence, the psychological health of the child ([Shuvalov, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c](#)).

Preservation of the child's psychological space creates a feeling that the living space is secure and reinforces the child's protection against the emerging dangers and destructive influence of the others ([Vodinchar&Orlik, 2016](#)). The environment at home and the psychological climate in the family become an eco-psychological resource for personal development.

The sovereignty of psychological space reflects the indicator of the psychological well-being of preschoolers, and therefore, psychological health is determined by fostering trust and acceptance, which determine the quality of children-parent interactions ([Schipanova, 2015](#)). As pointed out in the studies by [Weinstein N., Deci E.L., Ryan R.M. \(2013\)](#), and [Schwartz B. \(2004\)](#) it is the passive behavior in the context of the fragility of personal psychological boundaries that causes non-adaptive forms of action, even at the neuropsychological level. And here we are talking about the passive behavior, non-adaptive forms of coping behavior of adults from the close circle.

Subject to being considerate and respectful of the child's psychological boundaries (according to the child's age), the child not only learns to be considerate and respectful of other people's boundaries but also gains experience in building own boundaries. Such children easily adapt to changing conditions, more flexible when choosing responses to difficult life situations. [S.K. Nartova-Bochaver\(2008\)](#) defines this phenomenon as the birth of a child's subjectivity at the border with the world. An important characteristic of a preschooler's psychological health is the preservation and plasticity of personal boundaries, which gives the child autonomy, sovereignty of own "Self", a sense of security and self-confidence, and openness in relationships ([Levkova, 2018](#)). These are the characteristics that reflect the indicators of the sovereignty of a person's psychological space (according to [S.K. Nartova-Bochaver \(2014a, 2014b\)](#)).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sovereignty of the psychological space of preschool children develops in the process of qualitative interaction with a child, primarily, by a mother. One of the signs of qualitative interaction is a qualitative attachment of a child to a mother. As the famous American researcher [J. Bowlby \(2014\)](#) noted, the child's attachment to a mother is not considered as an innate characteristic. Adequate attachment of a child to a mother is the mainline for the formation of the sovereignty of preschooler's psychological space, and, hence, preservation of the child's psychological health. Through qualitative interaction with a mother, a child gains constructive experience of engaging with the world which fosters the child's emotional stability, socialization and development of the Self-concept. The strength and quality of attachment depend on how strong the mother's identity is.

A sense of security, according to [J. Bowlby\(1958\)](#), which is a result of qualitative attachment, helps preschoolers to find their boundaries for qualitative communication with other people. Maintained boundaries capacitate a preschooler and an adult for productive behaviour, adequate perception of the world, and self-acceptance, allowing following a path of self-fulfilment ([Deci & Ryan, 1986](#); [Osin, Malyutina&Kosheleva, 2016](#)). Boundaries are regulated, defined and developed throughout life while going through the age-specific stages of development. At preschool age, the integrity of psychological boundaries is a key indicator of the maintenance and development of the psychological health of a preschooler.

The quality and strength of a child's attachment to a mother are predicated upon the quality of perception of the child's psychological space by a mother, as well as her own identity ([Nartova-Bochaver, 2008](#)).

Scenarios for the development of qualitative attachment may range from a qualitative definition and sense of own boundaries by a child and a mother to the lacking close emotional bond between a child and a mother. As a result of the latter, preschoolers are exposed to the risk of incurring traumatic experiences that may "break the bond" between the loved ones, and further a later age, lead to an attempt to completely break off the relationship. The experience of a preschooler's hyper-attachment to a mother may be equally traumatic, in which case the child's boundaries are simply erased and the child is "absorbed" by the mother's space ([Bowlby, 1959](#)). A conclusion to be drawn from this thesis is that the quality of interaction with the mother determines the fundamental basis for the development of such characteristics in the preschooler as adequate perception of self (or low self-esteem), a sense of security (or anxiety), psychological comfort (or a state of disadaptation), a sense of self-significance (or learned helplessness) ([Bowlby &Ainsworth, 2008](#)).

The meaningful idea behind our research is that preschool age is the time when significant spheres of life are developing; through which preschoolers learn to define their own personal boundaries and to respect the psychological boundaries of others. Since the personal psychological space of a preschooler and preservation of its boundaries are coherent with the state of preschooler's psychological health, traumatising of the psychological space boundaries may cause various forms of psychological deformations, thereby deforming the child's psychological health ([Nartova-Bochaver, 2018](#)).

In the scientific outlook of [Venger A.L., Slobodchiko V.I., El'koninD.B.\(1990\)](#), it is in the process of development that a child constructs relationships with others, comprehends own place in the system of social relations, and therefore obtains

the potential not so much for adjusting and adapting to the requirements of adults, as for developing own self. Symbiotic connections between a child and the close circle complicate the process of the child's development, and with the seeming benefits of hyper protection over the child, it becomes obvious that in such relations it is difficult for a child to realize own boundaries, and even more so to outline those for others.

According to [L.I. Bozhovich\(1995\)](#), a special significance in the development of a preschooler's personality is the striving for self-affirmation and the desire to be accepted by parents and teachers. The development of a preschooler's personality is subject to social-historical laws, i.e. the development takes place through the assimilation of activity forms and methods which have evolved throughout history. In preschool age, the child gains the first experience of adjusting their own behaviour, as well as adjustment of interactions in response to the reaction of the social environment ([Bozhovich, 1995](#)). The boundaries of the body, territory, and habits get outlined by the preschooler when interacting with the surrounding close people. A special role in this process belongs to a mother because it is her preserved identity and integrity of her own boundaries that helps a child to create and realize own boundaries. The period from the age of 3 is important for the formation of psychological boundaries when the capacity for the establishment of new social ties gets expanded. In preschool childhood, a child's dominant orientation towards own self is manifested, which is expressed in a rigid fixing of psychological boundaries, towards others, manifested in the plasticity of boundaries, and from others, manifested in the deprivation of personal boundaries.

Thus, important manifestations of preschooler's psychological health are an expression of own importance, sense of self-confidence, acquisition of physical and psychological autonomy, feeling of psychological well-being and general trust to the world ([Slobodchikov&Shuvalov, 2001](#)), and these are the indicators of preservation of personal boundaries of psychological space.

The personal psychological space and its perception by a child make it possible to feel the boundaries of the physical body, territorial boundaries, autonomy of personal belongings, autonomy of habits, autonomy of social contacts, and ultimately result in an ability to perceive oneself as a part of the surrounding world, to develop social and psychological ties. Exploring the world through the prism of preservation of psychological space, a preschooler may perceive the surrounding world as being alien, dangerous or close, significant, and therefore, in preschool age, a basic model of social activity is formed, which can be either constructive or destructive ([Tokarskaya&Lavrova, 2018](#)).

It should be taken into account that the personal psychological space is where its size, number of dimensions, preservation (stability – mobility of boundaries) are defined ([Nartova-Bochaver, 2018](#)). In our study, the core idea is that the preservation of personal psychological space reflects the psychological health of a preschooler and depends on the child's qualitative attachment to his/her mother.

Violation of the boundaries of psychological space in preschool children may lead to some forms of behavioural and mental disorders ([Skinner &Cleese, 1994](#)). A sense of security, which is formed in conditions of adequate attachment to a mother, determines the possibility of gaining experience in establishing adequate boundaries of the personality. Having received the necessary support and care from the mother, the child slowly understands their own boundaries, limits, and further, when widening the perception of the world becomes capable to determine all other boundaries. But if a mother does not show support and care for a child, the limits and boundaries of the child will be vague, indistinct and unstable.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

All the above has allowed us to determine the object of this research, which is the psychological health of a person. The subject of this research is the sovereignty of the psychological space of a preschooler.

The purpose of the research is: to study theoretically and empirically the sovereignty of the psychological space of a preschooler in the context of psychological health.

The main objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To Study the major needs of mothers having pre-school children with regard to the upbringing and development of a preschooler,
2. To Explore the levels of maintained sovereignty of psychological space boundaries in preschool children, representation of types of attachment of preschool children to their mothers,
3. To Reveal the ties between the preservation of psychological boundaries of preschooler's psychological space, types of attachment to the mother and preservation of psychological health of children.

We have assumed that there are distinctions in the sovereignty of the psychological space of a preschooler depending on different levels of attachment to a mother which largely impacts the preservation of psychological health.

The research was held at the Child Development Center of Kindergarten N 3 in Birobidzhan, the municipal state-funded preschool educational institution Kindergarten N 44 "Fairy Tale" in Birobidzhan, as well as in the municipal public preschool educational institution Kindergarten N 4 in Obluchye, and in the municipal state preschool educational

institution Kindergarten N 3 in Leninskoe of the Jewish Autonomous Region. The time span of research was from April to August 2019.

A pilot study involved parents (mothers) with children who applied for psychological help to the consulting and methodological center for assisting families raising children aged 0-18, including those with disabilities and health limitations. There were 574 preschoolers and as many parents (mothers). The number of respondents in the experimental group of examinees participating in the research was 368 preschool children aged 5-7 years, as well as 368 parents (mothers). The respondents for the experimental group were chosen according to the criterion of request for psychological assistance: all the subjects of the experimental group claimed the problem of violation of parent-child relationships.

The methods used in the study were the survey of parents aimed at studying difficulties in the development and upbringing of preschool children.

[S.K. Nartova-Bochaver's "Sovereignty of psychological space" questionnaire \(2014a\)](#), by which the main characteristics of psychological space sovereignty have been studied indirectly, i.e. psychological space sovereignty (PSS), physical body sovereignty (PBS), territorial sovereignty (TS), belongings sovereignty (BS), habits sovereignty (HS), social connections sovereignty (SCS), value sovereignty (VS).

"Children's attachment to the mothers based on the game samples" by [E. V. Skulacheva \(2012\)](#), where different types of attachment of a child to the mother were studied as an indicator of the psychological health of preschool children.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the pilot survey of parents on the problems they experience in the process of development and upbringing of their children helped us to identify the difficulties and an experimental group for more in-depth study. Having analyzed the most frequent requests for psychological assistance from parents having preschool children, we saw a range of actual difficulties in the upbringing of preschool children. The most significant parental requests for psychological assistance are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Parent Survey Results

Difficulties in development and upbringing of preschoolers	Occurrence rate, %
Disobedience of a child	87.3
Misunderstanding of a child by a mother	74.6
Difficulties in choosing the upbringing and development strategy (a general disorder of parent-child relationship)	72.9
Inability to define the rules of interaction with a child	67.8
Increased anxiety of children	64.2
Difficulties with training a child's memory	43.7
Concern that a child is not in contact with peers	31.2

Source: the authors

As we can see from the survey results, the most common answer to the question of what is in the children's behavior and emotional responses that they are concerned about was a child's disobedience. In the further conversation, it was revealed that parents describe the desired behavior of a child as absolutely contradicting to psychological attributes of this age, which leads to the idea of psychological ignorance of the examinees with regard to the age-specific peculiarities of the preschool period. When analyzing the answers provided by parents, we also paid attention to the fact that in the requests the parents' keenness may be traced to fulfill their personal aspirations and possibilities they failed to realize.

The second most frequent answer was "I don't understand why he (she) behaves this way", which also indicates the psychological and pedagogical incompetence of parents.

72.9% of respondents note that they "do not know what to do with him (her)" when speaking about the child's behavior and emotional responses. 67.8% of answers are related to the inability to preserve their psychological boundaries and the boundaries of their child in the process of communication with the child. Close to this category are the answers related to the inability to define the rules of interaction with the child (67.8%).

A special emphasis should be given to such categories as the increased anxiety of children (64.2%) and concerns that the child does not have contacts with peers (31.2%). These are the indicators of psychological health problems and, accordingly, require assistance from a child psychologist.

The survey of parents has shown that there are disturbing boundaries for both mother and child, increased anxiety and psychological and pedagogical incompetence, which is the main cause of psychological health disorders in preschool children. Difficulties with the child's memory development (43.7%), as parents' request, according to the mother's statements, reflect the difficulty in remembering the information that the parents tell the child.

The results obtained in the survey based on the technique "Sovereignty of psychological space" (adapted version) (Nartova-Bochaver, 2014a, 2014b) are presented below (See Table 2).

Table 2: Results of Survey based on Questionnaire "Sovereignty of Psychological Space"

Level of boundaries preservation	Sovereignty indicators						
	PSS	PBS	TS	BS	HS	SCS	VS
Preserved (adequate)	37.23	42.15	39.74	57.34	78.32	41.94	49.70
Deprived	51.58	53.09	56.43	35.39	17.43	52.17	47.33
Hypertrophied	11.19	4.76%	3.86	7.27	4.25	5.89	2.97

Source: the authors.

Whereas the main indicators of the preservation of the child's psychological boundaries are the sovereignty of the psychological space (SPS), sovereignty of the physical body (SPB), sovereignty of the territory (ST), sovereignty of things (STH), sovereignty of habits (SH), sovereignty of social connections (SSC), sovereignty of values (SV) we obtained the following results.

Preserved (adequate) level of the sovereignty of psychological space has been found in 37,23% preschoolers (137 children), this is a category of children who have the proper experience and ability to feel and maintain their personal psychological space. It follows from SPB indicators (42.15%), mothers respect the sovereignty of the child's body and also do not violate the territorial boundaries of their child (ST-39.74%), accept the child's objective world as significant for him/her (STH-57.34 %). This is possible when parents show respect for their child's space. Mothers of preschool children who have been assigned to this group have a preserved identity and authentic experience of their own being. Preschoolers of this group show self-confidence, understand their own desires and regulate their behavior according to the circumstances that is reflected in sovereignty indicators of the child's habits (SH-78.32%), independence of the child's interaction in the society (SSC-41.94%), in respect for the significant values of the child (SV-49.70%). Preschoolers of this group show self-confidence understand their own desires and regulate their behavior according to circumstances. In the face of insurmountable external circumstances, these children may experience regression as a psychological defence. Such psychological defence may echo in psychosomatic disorders.

The deprived level of the sovereignty of psychological space was shown by 51, 58% preschoolers (190 children) out of 100% (368 children). In this group, preschoolers are influenced by their parents (especially mothers), the circumstances in which they find themselves, and therefore it is difficult for them to maintain their boundaries because of their "vagueness". This phenomenon is observed in symbiotic relationships in the family SPB indicators - 53.09%, SSC-52.17%, SV - 47.3%). The major experience is determined by the feeling of sub-ordinance, estrangement, anxiety when encountering changes in circumstances and searching for familiar objects around, the feeling of being insecure that is demonstrated in terms of violation of territorial boundaries (ST - 56.43%). As a consequence of deprivation, preschoolers may experience ritualization and hyper-control over behavior increased suggestibility reflected in the choice of protective items that create a sense of comfort (STH-35.39%).

Hypertrophied level of sovereignty is characteristic of 11.19% preschoolers (41 children) out of 100 % (368 children) who may be interpreted as a desire to closing, a desire to hide from external influences (SPB-4.76%, STH-7.27%), the emergence of a sense of isolation from people (ST-3.86%). Children in this group find it difficult to contact with adults (SSC-5.89%), often these phenomena are characteristic of children in stressful conditions. The severity of the autonomy of values (2.97%), in the strengthening of the sovereignty of habits (4.25%) and their stereotypes is reflected in the behavior of the child in the form of disobedience and self-will.

Having studied the types of attachment to the mother using a technique "Children's attachment to the mothers based on the game samples" by E.V. Skulacheva(2012), we were able to see the degree of intensity of attachment demonstrated by examinees.

Table 3: Representation of Types of Preschooler's Attachment to Mother

Attachment type	Manifestation, %
Secure (safe) attachment	42.67
Secure attachment with some signs of anxious-ambivalent attachment	22.05
Avoidant attachment with some signs of anxious-ambivalent attachment	11.76
Avoidant attachment	10.29
Anxious-ambivalent attachment	7.35
Insecure attachment with some sign of avoidant attachment	5.88

Source: the authors.

Secure (safe) attachment (42.76%) is such interaction of a preschooler with a mother is most optimal for the formation of psychological boundaries and psychological health of preschoolers and carries a sense of security that the child feels. The mother in this diadem is emotionally accessible, responsive to the child's needs, able to interact with the child in the form of a dialogue and support the child.

A strong attachment with some signs of anxious-ambivalent attachment was shown by 22.05% of respondents. The mother in this diadem is also available to the child, can ensure the child's safety and is anxiously sensitive to the needs of her child. Sometimes it is difficult for her to allow her child to do some things autonomously, as her own sense of mistrust towards the world of her inner child Self is often manifested in a situation of threat from external circumstances.

The avoidant attachment with some signs of anxious-ambivalent attachment has been found in 11.76%. A preschooler with this type of attachment has a very high level of anxiety. It is because the mother emotionally rejects the child while trying to solve everything for the child. With this type of attachment, the preschooler experiences daily distress, as the mother fails to ensure a sense of security, does not show love and care, which is vital for the child in its development and involvement as a psychologically healthy person.

The avoidant type of attachment has been demonstrated by 10.29% of respondents. This type of attachment is characterized by the distorted ties of the preschooler with his mother, sometimes they avoid contacts. In these conditions, the child is afraid to be rejected, does not know how to behave to deserve the care of the mother, so she starts avoiding her. Preschoolers with this type of attachment appear to be confident and seem independent. But this independence only seems and does not satisfy the basic needs of the child.

Anxious-ambivalent attachment with signs of secure attachment has been revealed in 7.35%. To this group, those children were assigned who have high situational anxiety. In this group, the stronger ties between the mother and the child were observed. It is difficult for such children to adapt to the kindergarten, and their mothers note that in their absence, the child experiences unreasonable anxiety and fear. The child is not able to make any decisions on his/her own when the mother is not present. All the difficult situations (as the child sees it) should be solved by the mother. The child has no worries when the mother is around because she will tell the child how to respond to various situations.

An insecure attachment, with some signs of avoidant type, has been observed in 5.88% of respondents. The preschooler is distant from the mother and has no sense of physical and emotional connection with her. A preschooler may have a sense of own uselessness and insignificance. The child is emotionally closed, struggles to establish contact with others and to adapt to changing conditions, finds it difficult to ask for help from others, and to accept it.

CONCLUSION

While analyzing the findings from the experimental study on the degree of manifestation of sovereignty of psychological space of a preschooler depending on various types of attachment to a mother, we have found that the type of preschooler's attachment to a mother predicates the extent to which the boundaries of psychological space of a preschooler are preserved and maintained.

Preservation of the psychological boundaries of a preschooler is predicated by the preservation of a mother's identity. Disturbed psychological boundaries of a mother lead to disturbance of the psychological boundaries of a child.

Preservation of psychological health of a preschooler, integrity of personal boundaries of preschooler's psychological space is initially predetermined by the type of attachment to a mother.

Preschoolers rose in avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, insecure styles show signs of psychological health disorders: increased anxiety, lack of self-confidence, avoidance as a behavioral strategy.

A mother's interaction with a child finds reflection in the type of a child's attachment to her. The sovereignty of the psychological boundaries of a preschooler is deprived to a greater extent at an anxious-ambivalent type with some signs of avoidant attachment. When the attachment is secure, the preservation of the psychological boundaries of a child is observed.

Through interaction with a mother, a preschooler gets an experience of interaction with the surrounding world. Thus, through the experience obtained by a preschooler, an attitude to own self, other people and the world is shaped, thereby building the preschooler's self-esteem and stance on everything happening around.

LIMITATIONS

Different levels of psychological stability of the mother able to support a healthy psychological climate in the family irrespective of other factors were considered as a limiting factor in this study.

IMPLICATIONS

Research findings may be implemented in the work of preschool psychologists, researchers dealing with the family psychology issues as well as in everyday parenting practices of interaction. Further research may lie in the direction of researching the role of other relatives in preserving/distracting the Psychological health and space of preschool children.

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