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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN AS THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO SCHOOL EDUCATION

Summary. *This article addresses an issue that practicing educators are well aware of but which is rarely discussed in academic discourse: why one child adapts easily to the school environment, while another, who is just as well-prepared, struggles from the very first weeks. The author examines the social skills of 5–6-year-old children as an independent and equally important dimension of school readiness alongside cognitive preparation. The article reports findings from a qualitative longitudinal observational study (n = 28; two groups of 14 children aged 5-6; November 2021 – January 2022) conducted in a preschool setting in Lviv, Ukraine. The article describes pedagogical work with a group of older preschoolers: which difficulties in social interaction were most common, which pedagogical approaches proved effective, and what dynamics were observed in the children's behavior and emotional reactions from September to May. The influence of the family environment and the child's prior social experience on the pace of adaptation within the group is examined*

separately. The theoretical framework of the article is based on scientific research in the field of social-emotional learning, particularly on meta-analytic data confirming the long-term impact of preschool socialization on subsequent academic success.

Key words: *social skills, preschool education, school adaptation, role-playing, fairy tale therapy, empathy, school readiness, social-emotional learning.*

Introduction. In the public consciousness, a child's readiness for school is usually associated with the ability to count, read, and write. These skills are indeed important and easy to assess. However, educational practice regularly reveals situations where a child who is well-prepared academically experiences serious difficulties in the first months of school: they cannot wait their turn to answer, react painfully to the teacher's comments, and struggle to get along with classmates. Conversely, a child who knew little but was able to negotiate and get along with others enters the school environment without significant difficulties. This pattern reflects the real significance of the social-emotional dimension of school readiness, which is often overlooked in the practice of preparing children for school [1; 2].

The age of 5–6 is a sensitive period for the development of basic social competencies. It is precisely at this time that a child begins to realize that another person may think and feel differently; that rules are a prerequisite for joint activity; and that it is possible to negotiate and compromise without feeling like a loser. These discoveries occur primarily through play-based interaction with peers, rather than in sessions with adults [3; 4].

A preschool setting is an environment where a child first finds themselves among socially equal partners. Parents may make concessions, a younger sibling gets used to obeying, but twenty peers in a group have their own needs and interests, and this must be accounted for every day. This experience is an

important pedagogical resource, the utilization of which requires the teacher's focused effort [3].

The purpose of this article is to substantiate, based on theoretical analysis and personal pedagogical experience, the importance of social skills for a preschooler's successful adaptation to school and to describe approaches that have proven effective in practical work with a group of 5–6-year-old children. To achieve this aim, the following tasks have been identified: to elucidate the content of social skills as a component of school readiness; to analyze the role of group interaction in the development of communication skills; to describe pedagogical approaches to fostering cooperation and empathy; to determine the influence of the social environment on child development; and to outline the long-term consequences of preschool socialization.

Literature Review. The issue of preschoolers' social development occupies a prominent place in pedagogy and child psychology. Burns et al. demonstrated that children's development occurs through collaboration with peers and more experienced partners: joint activity in early educational settings creates conditions under which children achieve more than they could independently [4]. E. Erikson, in describing a stage-based model of psychosocial development, defined the preschool age as the stage of initiative, when, through play and social roles, a child develops the basic ability to actively participate in community life [5].

In Ukrainian scholarship, significant attention is devoted to the social-emotional development of preschoolers. O. L. Kononko views social competence as an independent and equally important dimension of a child's personal growth, rather than as a derivative of cognitive achievements [6]. T. O. Pirozhenko and her colleagues investigated the structure of school readiness and convincingly demonstrated that communicative-linguistic and social-emotional components play no less important a role in it than the cognitive component [1; 2]. The research team also developed and tested a diagnostic tool for assessing the level

of a preschooler's socio-psychological maturity, which allows for the construction of an individual developmental trajectory [8]. N. V. Gavrysh investigated the role of literary texts and fairy tales in the development of speech and the emotional sphere, demonstrating that through identification with a character, a child gains the opportunity to safely make sense of complex emotional states [9].

Among foreign studies, the meta-analysis by J. Durlak and colleagues [10], published in the journal Child Development, holds a significant place. The authors synthesized the results of 213 social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and found that participants demonstrated academic performance 11 percentage points higher than their peers who did not participate in such programs. The observed reduction in aggressive behavior and improvement in attitudes toward learning persisted several months after the program's completion, indicating the durability of the acquired skills.

In her study [11], S. Denham found that social-emotional competence, as measured in a five-year-old child, is a significant predictor of their academic success and social adjustment in elementary school. This association persists even after controlling for intelligence and family socioeconomic status, indicating the independent contribution of social-emotional development to the child's future achievements.

Scientific research in this field focuses primarily on general patterns and large samples. Less attention is paid to how a specific educator's pedagogical work with a specific group of children is linked to changes in their social behavior over the course of a year. It is precisely this level of description that forms the basis of this article.

Materials and Methods. This study employed a qualitative longitudinal observational design. The sample comprised 28 preschool-aged children (n = 28; 14 boys, 14 girls; age range 5-6 years), divided into two groups of 14. Of these, 18 children had prior experience attending an early childhood setting, while 10

had no previous peer interaction experience. Data were collected from November 2021 to January 2022 across three assessment points: baseline (November 2021), midpoint (December 2021), and endpoint (January 2022). Observations were conducted 2–3 times per week, with each session lasting 30–40 minutes, yielding systematic weekly records throughout the study period. Four situational contexts were observed: free play, structured activities, conflict episodes, and daily routines. Data were recorded in a pedagogical journal and supplemented by conversations with children and parents, analysis of children's responses in social interaction situations, and follow-up feedback from receiving elementary school teachers. The theoretical framework draws on structural-functional analysis of the pedagogical process and the principles of person-centered early childhood education. Observations continued informally throughout the academic year (September 2021 – May 2022), providing additional context for the interpretation of findings.

Results and Discussion.

3.1. Social Skills as a Component of a Child's School Readiness. School readiness encompasses at least four interrelated components: intellectual, motivational, volitional, and social. The social component is often overlooked when preparing a child for school, although without its development, the other components are realized only partially. Classroom learning is primarily a group activity: the child receives a task, performs it alongside others, and interacts with the teacher in a situation of public assessment. All of this places demands on social skills that must be developed in advance [1; 3].

The social component of school readiness includes several groups of skills. The first group covers communication skills: the ability to clearly express one's own needs, listen to the interlocutor, and ask for help in an appropriate manner. The second group concerns cooperation: the willingness to work together with others, distribute roles and responsibilities, and take responsibility for the joint outcome. The third group is related to regulating one's own emotions: the

ability not to give in to the first impulse, to respond appropriately to comments, and to cope with disappointment due to failure. The fourth group encompasses empathic skills: the ability to understand that another person may feel differently and to take this into account in joint activities. Without a basic level of development of these skills, a child finds themselves in a situation of constant discomfort in the classroom, even with good cognitive preparation [6; 11].

In children aged 5–6, these skills are in the active development stage, and certain difficulties in this process are inevitable. Pedagogical observations of a group of older preschoolers allow us to identify several problems that arise regularly. Conflicts most often arise during the distribution of roles in role-playing games: every child strives to take the central role and is reluctant to accept secondary characters. Along with this, there is an impulsive reaction to failure or rejection: pushing, shouting, crying, and only then realizing what has happened. Some children exhibit the opposite pattern: excessive shyness and prolonged avoidance of active participation in group games. Such children play alongside others, but not together. This parallel play is normal for early preschool age, but by age 5–6, it indicates difficulties requiring pedagogical attention [3].

Social Readiness for School

Communication Skills	Cooperation	Emotional Regulation	Empathy
Express needs	Teamwork	Impulse control	Understanding others
Listening	Role distribution	Response to feedback	Considering emotions
Asking for help	Responsibility	Coping with failure	Interaction

Fig. 1. Structure of the Social Component of School Readiness

Educational observations conducted at the beginning of the school year showed that about a quarter of the children in the group exhibited pronounced signs of difficulty adapting. Some cried when parting with their parents and did not want to stay at the facility; others, from the very first day, got into conflicts with their peers or, conversely, kept to themselves. Most of them had no

experience of regular interaction with peers prior to entering the facility. These findings are consistent with studies indicating a link between prior social experience and the nature of adaptation [1; 11].

3.2. The Role of Group Interaction in the Development of Communication Skills. A peer group in a childcare facility is an environment that cannot be replaced by home education or individual lessons. Here, the child interacts with socially equal partners: there are no hierarchies, no automatic authority. The needs and desires of each participant in the interaction are equal, so they literally have to negotiate. This situation provides a productive environment for the development of communication skills [4; 6].

Observations of the group over the course of a year show that children change more during free play than during organized activities. During a lesson, a child mostly responds to the teacher. In play, they negotiate with an equal: they stand their ground, compromise, and seek a solution. These situations are different every time, and it is through them that communication skills gradually develop.

An example of such development is an observation recorded in the teacher's journal. At the beginning of the school year, two boys in the group regularly fought over a toy car: one would grab it, the other would scream, and both would turn to the teacher. A few months later, the same pair of children independently reached an agreement: one plays for five minutes, then they switch. Neither of them realized this as a mastered skill, yet the very fact that they reached an agreement without adult assistance indicates a qualitative change in their social development.

An important factor is the diversity of temperaments and personalities within the group. An active child and a quiet child, when paired together during a game or a shared task, gain an experience that cannot be replicated in a homogeneous environment. The first learns to restrain themselves and wait; the second gradually finds the courage to express their opinion. In these situations,

the teacher acts as an observer and, if necessary, helps children find the words to describe what they are experiencing, without resolving the conflict for them [6].

For shy or socially immature children, parallel play is an important intermediate step before full inclusion in group interaction. By observing others, such a child gradually learns the game strategies and community rules, and this process requires time and respect from the teacher [3].

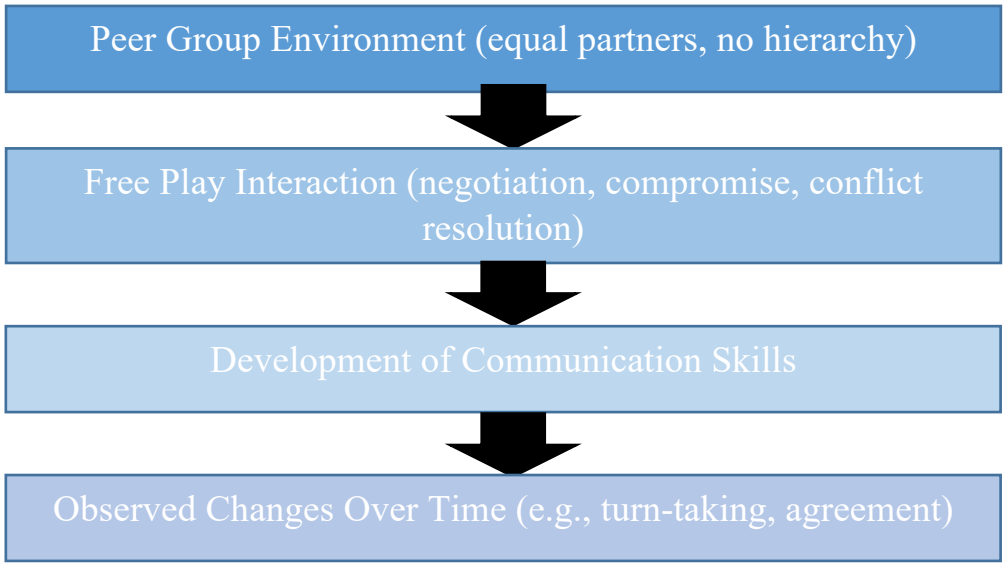

Fig. 2. Peer Interaction as a Context for the Development of Social Skill

3.3. Pedagogical Approaches to Fostering Cooperation and Empathy. Experience with children aged 5–6 shows that results depend on how different methods are combined and function together as a unified system in supporting social development.

Role-playing. In the game, the child takes on a social role and learns to think from the character's perspective. A child playing the role of a doctor treats the "patient" with a certain degree of attentiveness, because otherwise the game does not work; a child playing the role of a teacher discovers that they must explain things in a way that the other person can understand. These small experiments in taking on other people's roles gradually develop the ability to understand another person's perspective [4; 6].

Throughout the school year, the games "Hospital," "School," "Family," "Builders," and "Store" were systematically used in group work. The fundamental pedagogical approach here was to refrain from excessive interference in the course of the game. When a conflict arose among the children over the distribution of roles, the teacher did not resolve it authoritatively but asked, "How can we make it interesting for everyone?" and waited. At first, the children could not answer. By the end of the school year, situations where children resolved role conflicts on their own before the teacher even had a chance to intervene became increasingly common.

Fairy-tale therapy. A fictional text gives a child the opportunity to experience someone else's situation through identification with the protagonist in a safe environment. Preschoolers still struggle to discuss their own feelings directly, but they do so willingly through a fairy tale [9]. During discussions of a fairy tale or cartoon, questions were posed not in the format of "who behaved badly," but rather "what might he have felt," "why did he do that," and "what would you do in his place." The children genuinely reflected on these questions, offered various explanations, and sometimes debated among themselves. A notable result was that by the end of the first semester, children began to use words denoting emotional states more frequently in everyday communication: "he was offended," "she was scared," "I'm upset." The expansion of emotional vocabulary is a direct indicator of the development of reflective and empathic abilities.

Fairy tale therapy was applied in two formats. The first, a group format, involved a joint discussion after reading or watching a story. The second format focused on individual or small-group work with children who had particular difficulties in social interaction: fairy tale situations in which the characters experienced similar challenges were discussed with them separately.

Morning Circles. This daily practice took 10–15 minutes at the start of each day. Each child could share what was important to them that day and be

heard without judgment or commentary. Over time, the children began to speak for themselves and respond to others' words: asking questions, offering support. While at the start of the school year most children responded briefly with "fine" or "I don't know" and looked away, by November they were making detailed comments and, most importantly, reacting to their peers' words: "I think so too," "Why are you sad?" This change occurred without special exercises, as a result of regular practice in a predictable, safe setting.

The method of collaborative tasks. Pairing or grouping children into trios to complete a shared task (assembling a puzzle, drawing an illustration for a fairy tale, or coming up with an ending to a story) forced them to negotiate. The key condition was that there must be a single result for everyone, which made it impossible to work in parallel. After completing the task, the teacher discussed with the children not the result, but the process: "How did you decide who would do what?" "What was difficult?" These questions prompted reflection on their interactions and reinforced the experience of cooperation [10].

Teaching independent conflict resolution. When a dispute arose in the group, the teacher resisted the initial urge to resolve the situation for the children and instead asked both participants: "What do you want? What does he want? How can we make it work for both of you?" At first, these questions caused confusion: the children were used to an adult telling them who was right. Gradually, the approach became familiar. By the end of the school year, there were instances where two children argued over a toy, and a few minutes later, one of them suggested: "Let's do this: you first, then me." Without the teacher's intervention. The ability to reach such agreements is an indicator of social maturity, which cannot be achieved through a single explanation or rule.

Encouraging prosocial behavior. The system of positive reinforcement through the "tree of good deeds" and verbal praise in front of the group served as feedback: it made social norms visible and meaningful. When a teacher acknowledges academic achievements alongside the ability to compromise or

support someone, children develop an understanding that these skills are valued. According to social learning theory [12], reinforcement is one of the key mechanisms for the acquisition of social norms in childhood.

3.4. The Influence of the Social Environment on Children's Behavior and Emotional Development. A child enters a childcare facility with a set of social interaction experiences already formed, shaped primarily by the conditions of family upbringing. The family's communication style, the availability of emotional contact with parents, the consistency of adult expectations, and how the family typically responds to conflict all influence how a child behaves in a group and how quickly they acquire new social skills.

Differences in children's social behavior within the group were linked to observable patterns in family communication styles. Children from households characterized by dialogue-based parenting - where decisions were explained and the child's perspective acknowledged - demonstrated more adaptive negotiation strategies with peers. In contrast, children from directive parenting environments more frequently reproduced authoritarian interaction patterns toward peers. The former is more likely to find common ground with peers and less likely to get stuck in conflict. A child from an overprotective family, where everything is decided for them in advance, often feels lost when there is no adult nearby to tell them what to do. This is not a rule without exceptions, but this pattern is observed quite consistently. Those who were rarely given explanations at home for refusals and prohibitions often replicated a similar pattern of behavior toward peers in the group.

At the same time, the family environment is significant, but not the only or decisive factor. A teacher who consistently models attentive and respectful communication, responds to children's feelings, and explains their own decisions gradually becomes a model of social behavior for the children. Provided it is consistent and predictable, the pedagogical atmosphere in the group can compensate for certain deficits in home upbringing [6].

The child's prior social experience is also a notable factor. Those who, prior to entering the institution, had regular contact with peers in clubs or other settings adapted to the group noticeably faster. The first signs of adjustment appeared in most of these children after 10–14 days: they parted more calmly from their parents and began to join in group games. Children without prior experience interacting with peers required more time; in some cases, full adaptation took up to two months. The overall average adaptation period in the group ranged from two to four weeks, which corresponds to data in the scientific literature [1; 11].

The pedagogical atmosphere in the group is a distinct and significant factor in children's social development. An environment where a child feels safe, where the teacher is equally attentive to everyone, and where a mistake does not become a cause for shame, is a necessary condition for a child to be able to take risks in a social sense at all: to try to approach someone, to propose an idea, to admit that they were wrong. Without this condition, any specific methods and techniques will have a significantly lower effect.

Table 1

Influence of the Social Environment on Children's Behavior and Emotional Development

Factor of Social Environment	Observed Behavioral Patterns in Children	Impact on Social Interaction and Adaptation	Pedagogical Implications
Family communication style (dialogue vs. directive)	Dialogue-based children express opinions calmly; directive upbringing leads to rigid statements	Better negotiation vs. higher conflict risk	Model respectful communication and encourage dialogue
Emotional contact with parents	Secure children show confidence; others may be anxious or withdrawn	Faster inclusion vs. avoidance	Ensure emotional safety and individual support

Consistency of expectations	Predictable upbringing → better rule understanding; inconsistency → confusion	Easier adaptation vs. протест behavior	Maintain clear and consistent rules
Family response to conflict	Children reproduce negotiation or aggression patterns	Constructive vs. impulsive reactions	Support conflict resolution skills
Overprotective upbringing	Dependence on adults, low autonomy	Slower adaptation	Encourage independence gradually
Lack of explanations at home	Authoritarian behavior toward peers	Low empathy, rigid interaction	Explain decisions and model alternatives
Prior peer experience	Faster engagement in group activities	Adaptation in 10–14 days vs. up to 2 months	Provide structured interaction opportunities
Pedagogical atmosphere	Children take social risks in safe environments	Active participation vs. withdrawal	Create supportive, non-judgmental climate

Source: developed by the author based on pedagogical observations

3.5. Long-term effects of socialization in early childhood. A key question in early childhood education is how preschool affects later development. Both research and practice show that the strongest effects are seen in social-emotional development.

A meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues [10], covering the results of 213 SEL programs with a total sample of over 270,000 children and adolescents, documented a lasting effect on academic achievement (an 11-point increase), prosocial behavior, anxiety levels, and attitudes toward school. Crucially, this effect persisted several months after the program ended, indicating the formation of lasting skills rather than temporary behavioral changes.

S. Denham [11] proposed and empirically confirmed a model according to which social-emotional competence, measured at age five, is a significant predictor of academic achievement. This association persists after controlling for intelligence and family socioeconomic status, indicating an independent influence of social-emotional development on the child's future achievements.

Elementary school teachers who later worked with this group describe similar patterns. The children are familiar with school routines, take part in group tasks, and rarely have serious conflicts. Many are able to resolve minor disagreements on their own, without adult help.

Table 2

Long-term Effects of Socialization in Early Childhood

Source / Evidence	Key Findings	Implications for Child Development
Durlak et al. meta-analysis (213 SEL programs)	Improvement in academic performance (+11%), prosocial behavior, reduced anxiety; effects persisted over time	Social-emotional learning leads to stable, long-term developmental outcomes
Denham's model (age 5 social-emotional competence)	Predicts academic achievement independently of IQ and socioeconomic status	Social-emotional skills function as an independent factor of future success
Teacher observations (longitudinal practice)	Children adapt to routines, participate in group work, resolve conflicts independently	Early socialization supports smoother school adjustment and autonomy

Source: developed by the author based on research and pedagogical observations

These assessments aligned with pedagogical observations conducted in the older group throughout the school year. By the end of the year, the number of conflicts among the children had noticeably decreased. The way they were resolved also changed: while in September disputes almost always ended in

shouting, tears, or physical contact, by May most situations were resolved through conversation. Someone would suggest a solution, someone would agree, and the children would return to playing.

Children's responses to others' emotions changed over time. At the beginning of the year, many reacted with indifference or irritation. By the end, they were more likely to approach a crying peer, ask what had happened, offer help, or simply stay nearby.

These changes developed gradually through everyday activities such as reading, discussion, and conversations about feelings. Progress varied: some children adapted quickly, while others needed more time and individual support. A few continued to experience difficulties by the end of the year, which highlights the need for ongoing work with both children and their parents.

3.6. Limitations. Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample was small (n = 28) and drawn from a single preschool institution in Lviv, Ukraine, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied only on naturalistic observation and practitioner notes, without independent verification from other observers. This creates a risk of subjective bias in how the data were interpreted. Third, the lack of a standardized measurement tool means that the reported changes in social behavior are based on professional judgment rather than validated metrics. Fourth, the three-month study period (November 2021 – January 2022) is relatively short and does not allow firm conclusions about long-term developmental effects. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, use validated assessment tools, and extend the observation period to confirm whether these findings remain consistent over time.

Conclusions. Social skills are an integral part of a child's readiness for school. A child who is able to listen to others, negotiate, and manage their own emotions adapts much better to the school environment than one who lacks these skills, even if they have a high level of cognitive development.

These skills develop gradually through regular educational practice. Role-play allows children to explore social roles and negotiation in a safe environment. Fairy tale therapy facilitates understanding of another person's emotional state through identification with a character. Morning circles foster the habit of expressing one's own feelings and listening to others. Tasks in small groups develop skills in responsible cooperation. Targeted training in independent conflict resolution fosters social autonomy. None of these methods is sufficient on its own, but when combined, they yield lasting results.

The family environment plays an important role in a child's social development, but it is not the only influence. Preschool settings can help balance differences in home experience, especially when children feel safe, understand daily routines, and interact in a respectful environment. In this context, the teacher acts both as a guide and as a model of behaviour.

Research, classroom observations, and feedback from elementary schools all point to a connection between social-emotional development in late preschool years and later academic and social outcomes. This suggests that these skills should be treated as seriously as academic preparation.

Prospects for further research include the development and testing of structured social-emotional learning programs for preschool institutions in Ukraine, as well as longitudinal studies of the relationship between the level of social skills in late preschool age and academic and social success in elementary school.

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