

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD INDEPENDENCE IN SELF-CARE AND DOING CHORES

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Abstract The child's independence is the goal of educational action, as it is a quality that parents want their child to develop. Its development begins in early childhood, and parents play an important role. Consequently, in our paper we focused on parents' perceptions of their child's independence in self-care activities and doing chores. The research, in which 101 parents participated, was conducted with a questionnaire. The findings suggest that, while parents generally rate their children as highly independent, children are more independent in some activities than in others. In general, parents assessed children as more independent in self-care activities than in doing chores. Furthermore, we found that there are significant differences in parents' assessment of child's independence in dressing, bathing, and brushing the teeth between different age groups of children. Our paper contributes to understanding children's independence and provides insight into areas where children need adult support.

Keywords:

independence,
self-care,
chores,
early childhood,
parents'
perceptions

1 Introduction

In a postmodern society the only constant is change, which is why individuals are required to be creative, flexible, and original. Never before have individuals been subjected to so many rights and responsibilities imposed by society. Managing them leads individuals to become skilled in dealing with different patterns of behaviour, social roles in institutions and social spheres. All this contributes to visible changes in the way people live and think, in their identities and subjective structures, and in their attitudes and social relations. The turn from the domination of predefined identities to more plural and temporary lifestyles requires individuals to not only give an extra amount of effort but to prove themselves on a daily basis (Ule Nastran, 2000). This implies the need to empower individuals to take an active part in society, starting in early childhood. Hmelak and Lepičnik Vodopivec (2017) point out that the early childhood period is crucial for children's cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, physical, and motor development (Chau, 2022).

During this period, the family plays an important role (Bezenšek, 2001), as it represents the social entity in which the child is educated, socialised, and thus shapes his or her personality (Mandic, 2012). Upbringing can be understood as the deliberate and conscious development of a child's abilities, with an emphasis on interaction and having an active role. By doing this the child becomes accustomed to having an active attitude in life. The aim of upbringing is to introduce values and encourage moral judgement and action. Upbringing is achieved through the content, the means by which the content is communicated, and the attitudes that are established in the process. It is crucial to emphasize that upbringing is influenced by the society in which it occurs. Closely linked to society is also socialisation, understood as the spontaneous process of internalising the values, rules, attitudes and patterns of behaviour that define a particular society. It is important to stress that values are socially determined, and therefore, in the context of upbringing, values are understood as debatable rather than absolutely valid and objective categorical entities (Peček Čuk & Lesar, 2011).

Consequently, the values that parents want to instil in their children may differ at both the societal and the individual level. Parents want to instil a different spectrum of values in their children, with independence and obedience seen as the two opposing poles. But values such as independence, hard work, responsibility, respect,

and good behaviour have been shown to be qualities that parents want to instil in their children, regardless of culture and social background (Xiao, 1999).

As a result, it is not surprising that children's independence as a goal of educational action often appears in theoretical debates, as Lesar and Smrtnik Vitulić (2013) also note. Independence is one of the most important qualities that we want a child to develop in the early childhood period (Ule, 2013), and it is therefore central to the early childhood's practice (Cameron, 2007). As more independent children have better self-confidence, self-esteem and motivation, independence can be seen as an imperative of modern education (Cerino, 2021), which justifies the relevance of the topic. Add to this the lack of research in this area and the focus of research on the development of independence in children with disabilities, and the need for further research is justified.

Our paper aims to address this gap by focusing on preschool children's independence from the parents' perspective, as the family environment plays an important role in the development of children's independence (Mandic, 2012; Rusmiati et al., 2019). In the theoretical part, we discuss the concept of independence, its development in preschool children and the factors closely related to its development. The empirical part presents parents' views on their children's independence skills, such as self-care skills and doing chores.

1.1 Independence of the child

In general, the term independence refers to various aspects of human functioning whereby an individual is not dependent on (the help of) others, either physically or mentally (Raeff, 2006). At the societal level, independence is described as freedom from external constraints and freedom to act and think (Cameron, 2007). It is important to add to this definition that, as Rose (1999) notes, since the individual is a member of society, independence to act and think only exists while at the same time being governed by a network of socially valid rules and norms. Although we are social creatures, it is important to develop a sense of ourselves as individuals, where independence plays an important role. As a result, independence can be criticised for promoting individualism. Yet, if we place independence in a social context, we can see the value of both thinking about ourselves and others and the importance of developing independence.

The development of independence, which starts in early childhood, is closely linked to the development of abilities, skills, and the acquisition of new knowledge (Giesinger, 2019). The process towards independence presupposes a child's own activity, which is very important for his/her development, self-esteem, and future life. It is an educationally triggered activity and depends on the environment, the family, parents, early childhood teachers, and teachers (Peček Čuk and Lesar, 2011).

The desire for independence first appears in children as early as the second year of life, thanks to their developing mental and motor skills. The period coincides with the emergence of stubbornness, which is thought to be an indicator of a child's tendency towards independence. This is also evidenced in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which places the development of independence as a central developmental task at the centre of the second phase (which occurs sometime between the ages of 2 and 3). This is a period that is designed for children to practice their own choice, will and autonomy (Santrock, 2018). As a result, children during this period need a lot of support and coaching to develop their independence (Nurani & Pratiwi, 2020).

There are two aspects of independence, both in early childhood and in later life, namely 1) independence in self-care (eating, dressing, hygiene, using toilet) and 2) independence in decision-making, whereby the child should be given opportunities to shape, make decisions and participate in various activities (Sears and Sears, 2004; Žnidaršič and Beguš, 2013).

1.1.1 Promoting children's independence through self-care skill training

Self-care is a frequently discussed topic in the literature when addressing preschool education, children with special needs, and various medical conditions that make it difficult for patients to care for themselves. It is defined as the practice of performing daily duties to prepare oneself for participation in activities (including dressing, eating, brushing teeth, etc.) (Cempron, 2021; Nurani & Pratiwi, 2020) or as the practice of undertaking tasks for oneself within a set time frame in the pursuit of preserving one's health and wellbeing (Ageborg et al., 2005). In the early childhood period, self-care skills mainly relate to the capacity to meet one's own basic needs without the assistance of an adult (Sezici & Akkaya, 2020).

Writing, cutting, gripping small items, and fastening clothing all require the use of fine motor skills, which entail eye-hand coordination and control of the little muscles in the body (Bhatia et al., 2015). The acquisition of motor skills is essential not only for a child's independence but also for their quality of life and social acceptance (Sezici & Akkaya, 2020). The lack of (fine) motor skills might prohibit children from performing basic self-care tasks like feeding, dressing and undressing and can have a negative impact on school performance (Feder & Majnemer, 2007). Furthermore, fine motor skills are a strong predictor of later academic achievement (Grissmer et al., 2010).

Self-care skills are in various cultural contexts viewed as a crucial component of early development and school preparation. Regardless of gender or preschool entrance age, age-appropriate self-care skills from two to three years old serve as a strong predictor of assertiveness and collaboration skills at the end of the preschool years (Zhu et al., 2021). They are a crucial element in a child's socialization process (Cempron, 2021). Furthermore, children with less developed self-care abilities may encounter many unfavourable circumstances and may struggle to build self-esteem (Bender, 1996). Teaching basic self-care skills is found to be associated with increased independence and parents' satisfaction (Boutain et al., 2020). It can play a crucial role in establishing a predictable framework for behaviour guidance and a comforting emotional climate in everyday family life (Fiese et al., 2006). Research shows that it can also positively impact child cooperation and positive parent-child interactions (Sytsma et al., 2001). Moreover, early childhood period has been identified as a critical time in the development of eating behaviours and food preferences (Powell et al., 2018) as well as eating disorders (Bryant-Waugh et al., 2010; Jacobi et al., 2004). To sum up, self-care skills can significantly influence the development of children in variety of domains.

1.1.2 Promoting children's independence by involving them in daily chores

Children's independence can also be encouraged by involving them in daily activities and chores, such as cleaning the house, preparing meals, shopping, and taking care of a pet. The advantages of doing domestic chores, however, appear to extend beyond managing daily life. Young children have a natural tendency to be helpers, and chores can serve as a natural method to foster this propensity (Rende, 2021).

Throughout the development, properly involving youth in household duties enhances their social, cognitive, and physical development (Rende, 2021). Tepper et al. (2022) believe that, as performing chores requires people to plan, self-regulate, transition between jobs, and remember instructions, it is possible that doing chores may also have a positive impact on executive functioning. In a longitudinal cohort study White et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between doing chores at the beginning of the elementary school and later development in self-competence, prosocial behaviours, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, age-appropriate chores have been shown to improve emotions of autonomy (Weisner, 2001) and are linked to enhanced prosocial behaviours and increased life satisfaction (White et al., 2019). Helping with washing and other chores, such as cleaning up toys, provides opportunities to engage toddlers and children in modest physical activity at home while reducing the present trend toward an abundance of pure sedentary behaviour (Rende, 2021). Moreover, the frequency of chores in kindergarten is positively correlated with a child's sense of social, intellectual, and life satisfaction abilities in the third grade, independent of sex, family income, and parent education (White et al., 2019). As children get older, working with family members on domestic activities can also predict advanced social abilities, such as an increased frequency of expanding on the ideas of others and the ability to contribute successfully to collective decision-making (Rende, 2021).

Together, these studies indicate that exposing preschool children to as many opportunities for developing their independence as possible is a good idea that can benefit them in many domains of their development.

1.2 Role of the adults in supporting the development of children's independence

Having discussed how engaging preschool children in self-care activities and chores can have a positive impact on their development, it is now necessary to emphasise the important role of adults in this process. The encouragement of preschool children to develop independence is a responsibility shared by all adults who interact with them. Parents and early childhood teachers play a particularly important role in the development of children's independence.

Early childhood teachers are essential in developing and enforcing routines of self-care activities and chores in group settings. As a result, it is not surprising that the time children spend in kindergarten has an impact on their motor and self-care abilities (Sezici & Akkaya, 2020). However, there seems to be a difficulty with how teachers in formal early childhood education find a balance between the child's independence and need for direction (Lindahl & Folkesson, 2012).

Although formal preschool education is crucial for developing motor skills and new behaviours, skills that contribute to child's independence can be further enhanced at home with individualized care and attention (Sezici & Akkaya, 2020). For instance, eating habits can also emerge via a child's interactions with their environment, some of which involve their parents or caregivers (Piazza et al., 2003). Research shows that children who eat with their families spend more time using forks and spoons appropriately and progress more quickly in learning how to take care of themselves (Oğuz & Derin, 2013). Moreover, when caregivers interact with toddlers in settings other than play, such as dressing, their language exchanges differed in terms of speech rate and lexical variety (Ageborg et al., 2005; Hoff, 2008). One of the variables that influences a child's independence is also the parenting style used by the parents (Margaretha et al., 2018). Research suggests that self-care skills might be learnt from an early age with the development of fundamental abilities including motor and linguistic skills and can be strongly impacted by caregivers' judgments of an infant's early self-care ability (Casper & Smith, 2004). Routines involving dressing, eating, and changing diapers account for 14% of the observed combined attention between parents and children. Joint attention has a socio-cultural function in providing children with pleasant reciprocal connections and shared meaning experiences with adults in addition to supporting the development of communication (Smith, 1999). These studies clearly indicate that parental everyday practices represent a contributory environmental factor in the development of child's independence.

The level of young children's self-care skills varies worldwide (Zhu et al., 2021), which may indicate that environmental factors can have a strong impact on the development of self-care skills. Because skills that are the foundation for future learning and academic success are developed in early life, sustained economic disadvantage during this time can have long-term impacts on subsequent school performance and later status attainment (Wagmiller Jr et al., 2006). The early

cognitive and behavioural development of children was discovered to have a curvilinear relationship with socioeconomic resources (Mollborn et al., 2014). Individual socioeconomic status, rather than national socioeconomic status, predicts how important parents find their children's independence (Park & Lau, 2016). Taken together, the socioeconomic status of the family can have a substantial impact on the amount of the support children have been given on their path towards independence.

1.3 Research problem

In present times, parents and teachers are expected to contribute as much as possible to the development of adaptable, resourceful, and competent individuals. Their contributions are especially vital because of the rapid pace at which modern civilization is undergoing transformations in every aspect of daily life. These changes and aspirations are altering the landscape and nature of the future of early childhood education. Independence represents an important piece in the mosaic of skills we advocate for when discussing learning and teaching for the future. This study aims to contribute to the establishment of high-quality early childhood education in which children's development in all areas, including independence, is enriched and supported.

The main goal of this study was to determine how parents assess their children's independence. If we can get a sense of how (in)dependent children are in various domains, we can learn more about how to assist them develop those skills.

Since the development of self-care skills is crucial not only for later academic achievement (Feder & Majnemer, 2007; Grissmer et al., 2010), but also for their quality of life and social acceptance (Sezici & Akkaya, 2020), we were curious to learn how parents evaluated their children's independence in using the toilet, dressing, cleaning, and brushing their teeth. These findings are significant because they give us insight into the current state of self-care skills development in preschool children.

Because using the toilet, dressing, cleaning, and brushing the teeth are diverse skills that require various levels of motor skill development, we wanted to determine whether there were any differences in parental assessment of children's

independence between the self-care skills indicated above. We believe this is important because, based on these findings, we will be able to inform both parents and teachers on which aspects of children's self-care skills development require the most attention.

In reviewing the literature, we established that involving preschool children in chores can benefit them in many domains of their development. One of the aims of the present study was also to find out how parents rated their children's independence in housekeeping, meal preparation, grocery shopping, and pet care. We wanted to examine if parental evaluations of their children's independence differed based on the type of chore. Possible disparities in the development of independence in specific chores will shed light on which chores children require additional assistance.

Given the fact that prior research suggests that a wide range of environmental factors may influence the level of the independence in preschool children, one of the primary objectives of our study was to identify which those factors are.

2 Research methodology

2.1 Sample

The survey was conducted on a convenience sample of parents, targeting only parents of children aged 4 to 6 who are enrolled in kindergarten. 101 parents participated in the research. A more detailed description of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sociodemographic structure of the sample of parents

| Variable | Categories | N | % |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-------|
| Parents' gender | Male | 2 | 2,0 |
| | Female | 99 | 98,0 |
| Parents' age | M = 34.47, SD = 5.438 | | |
| Childs' gender | Boy | 43 | 42,6 |
| | Girl | 58 | 57,4 |
| Childs' age | 4 years | 33 | 32,7 |
| | 5 years | 58 | 57,4 |
| | 6 years | 10 | 9,9 |
| Children with special needs | Yes | 2 | 2,0 |
| | No | 99 | 98,0 |
| | Total | 101 | 100,0 |

2.2 Data collection and analysis

To obtain data, we created an online questionnaire. The link to the questionnaire was shared with parents through kindergartens. We were collecting data for three months, from June to August 2022. During this period, we were repeatedly inviting parents to participate in the research.

The data were processed and analysed using the SPSS software. Both, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to process data. Before further processing, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used, which showed that the variables deviate from the normal distribution, as a statistically significant difference $p < .05$ was shown everywhere. Consequently, we used non-parametric tests, such as Friedman, and Kruskal-Wallis H test.

2.3 Measuring instrument

For the purposes of the research, we adapted the Children Participation Questionnaire by Rosenberg et al. (2010). Two sets of items from the questionnaire were relevant for us, namely activities of daily living, which in our research are understood as self-care activities, and instrumental activities of daily living, which we understand as doing chores. Parents gave their answers on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 meant "needs much assistance" and 6 "independent" – the answers related to their child's independence in self-care activities and doing chores.

3 Results

Parents rated children as most independent when it came to using cutlery when eating, followed by dressing, and using the toilet. Children were rated as less independent when bathing and least independent when brushing their teeth. We find that parents assess their children as considerably independent when it comes to self-care activities.

A Friedman test was run to determine if there were differences in parents' assessment of children's independence in different areas of self-care. Table 2 presents the results of the Friedman test.

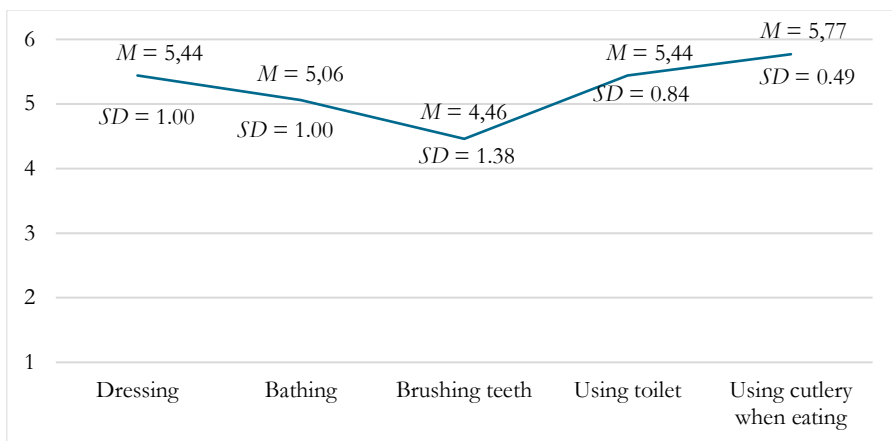


Figure 1: Parents' assessment of child's independence, expressed as the mean, in self-care activities

Table 2: Friedman test

| Variable | Mean Rank | χ^2 | df | p |
|---------------------------|-----------|----------|----|--------|
| Dressing | 3.37 | 129.24 | 4 | < .001 |
| Bathing | 2.61 | | | |
| Brushing teeth | 2.00 | | | |
| Using toilet | 3.27 | | | |
| Using cutlery when eating | 3.75 | | | |

The results of the Friedman test were statistically significant based on an alpha value of .05, $\chi^2(4) = 129.24, p < .001$, indicating statistically significant differences between the mean ranks of the following variables: dressing, bathing, brushing teeth, using the toilet, and using cutlery when eating. Pairwise comparisons with adjusted p-values showed that there were significant differences between parents' assessment of children's independence when brushing teeth compared to using the toilet, $p < .001$, when brushing teeth compared to dressing, $p < .001$, and when brushing teeth compared to using cutlery when eating, $p < .001$. For each comparison, children were less independent when brushing their teeth. There were also significant differences between parents' assessment of children's independence when bathing compared to using toilets, $p = .033$, when bathing compared to dressing, $p = .007$, and when bathing compared to using cutlery when eating, $p < .001$. In this case, for each comparison, children were identified as less independent when bathing.

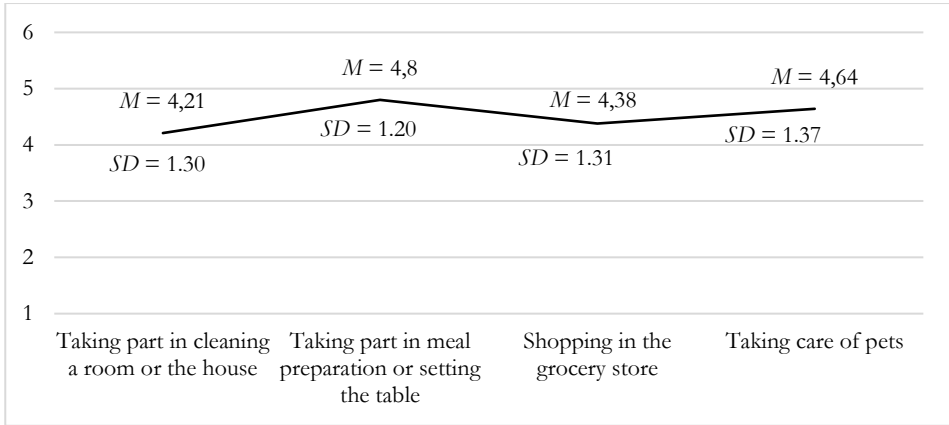


Figure 1: Parents' assessment of child's independence, expressed as the mean, in doing chores

Parents reported that children are most independent when it comes to taking part in meal preparation or setting the table, and when taking care of pets. Children are less independent when shopping at the grocery store and when taking part in cleaning a room or the house.

We were interested to find out if there were differences in parents' assessment of children's independence in different areas of doing chores mentioned above. The same procedure as for the self-care variables was applied. The results of the Friedman test were not significant based on an alpha value of .05, $\chi^2(3) = 6.73$, $p = .081$.

A Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to evaluate whether there were differences for children aged four, five, and six years in parents' assessment of their independence in all the self-care and doing chores variables mentioned above. Table 3 reports the variables for which Kruskal-Wallis H test showed statistically significant differences.

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis H test

| Variable | Age | Mean Rank | χ^2 | df | p |
|----------------|---------|-----------|----------|----|------|
| Dressing | 4 years | 40.64 | 11.52 | 2 | .003 |
| | 5 years | 54.05 | | | |
| | 6 years | 67.50 | | | |
| Bathing | 4 years | 41.38 | 11.72 | 2 | .003 |
| | 5 years | 52.34 | | | |
| | 6 years | 74.95 | | | |
| Brushing teeth | 4 years | 38.26 | 10.61 | 2 | .005 |
| | 5 years | 55.91 | | | |
| | 6 years | 64.60 | | | |

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test were statistically significant based on an alpha value of .05, $\chi^2(2) = 11.52$, $p = .003$, indicating that the mean rank of the parent's assessment of the child's independence in dressing was significantly different according to the age of the children. Pairwise comparisons with adjusted p-values showed that there were significant differences between parents' assessment of children's independence in dressing for 4-year-olds compared with 5-year-olds children, $p = .034$, and for 4-year-olds compared with 6-year-olds children, $p = .007$. When it comes to dressing, parents perceived older children as more competent for both comparisons.

Statistically significant results were also found for the variable bathing, $\chi^2(2) = 11.72$, $p = .003$. Pairwise comparisons showed that there were significant differences between parents' assessment of children's independence in bathing for 4-year-olds compared with 6-year-old children, $p = .002$, and 5-year-olds compared with 6-year-old children, $p = .05$. In both comparisons, older children were assessed as more independent.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test also showed statistically significant differences in the parent's assessment of the child's independence in brushing teeth, depending on the age of the child, $\chi^2(2) = 10.61$, $p = .005$. Pairwise comparisons showed that there were significant differences between parents' assessment of children's independence in brushing teeth for 4-year-olds compared with 5-year-old children, $p = .013$, and for 4-year-olds compared with 6-year-old children, $p = .031$. In these comparisons, parents also rated older children as more independent when brushing their teeth.

We should mention that we also used the gender of the children as an independent variable. However, parents' assessments of their child's independence in self-care and doing chores activities did not differ statistically significantly by gender, so we omit them from the detailed analysis.

4 Discussion

Our study, which evaluated parents' assessments of their children's level of independence, aimed to enhance empirical understanding about how self-reliant preschool children are and how adults may best promote their development of independence in various domains.

The current study found, that overall, parents' ratings of their children's independence were quite high, as seen by high mean scores across all measurements used. When evaluating the independence of children in different self-care activities, we discovered that, as anticipated, children are more independent in certain activities than in others. Compared to using the toilet, dressing, and using cutlery when eating, parents consider their children to be less independent when it comes to brushing their teeth and bathing. Furthermore, parents reported that, compared to bathing, their children encounter even more difficulties in brushing their teeth. These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies (Meland et al., 2016; Sezici & Akkaya, 2020) that suggest that pre-schoolers' levels of independence varies among specific activities. One possible explanation for this is that various self-care activities and chores demand different levels of motor development. On the other hand, parents have reported no difference in their children's levels of independence between the various types of chores. One possible explanation for this might be that parents appear to place more attention on teaching children self-care skills in the early years because they of their relatedness to developmental milestones and social expectations. Nevertheless, given these results, it's clear that additional investigation of this topic is required.

Interestingly, compared to the high values on the scales of parents' assessments of their children's independence in self-care activities, parents' ratings of their children's independence in doing chores were somewhat lower. Further research should be undertaken to investigate the explanation of this occurrence.

Since previous studies have suggested that numerous environmental factors may affect pre-schoolers' levels of independence, one of the main goals of our study was to examine the differences in the level of independence in self-care activities and in doing chores between groups of children with different characteristics. We found that there are significant differences in parents' assessment of their independence in dressing, bathing, and brushing the teeth between different age groups of children. As anticipated, parents perceive older children as more competent when it comes to some of the self-care activities (dressing, bathing, and brushing teeth). However, the observed difference in using the toilet and using the cutlery when eating between different aged children in this study was not significant. Furthermore, these differences were not found in any of the chores' subcategories. One possible explanation for these findings is that the majority of children in the age range that we included in our sample are already competent in the aforementioned self-care activities and chores.

Contrary to expectations, this study did not find significant difference between boys and girls in parents' assessments of their independence in self-care and doing chores. These results differ from previous studies which have suggested that girls tend to be more independent in self-care and doing chores (Meland et al. 2016), which might be connected to socialization into traditional gender patterns or biological differences between the genders (Schum et al., 2001). A possible explanation for these results may be that the gender disparities in 4- to 6-year-old preschool children are no longer as prominent as in younger children. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might be biased.

5 Conclusion

The current study set out to examine parental perceptions of their children's level of independence between the ages of 4 and 6. The findings of this study suggest that, while parents generally rate their children as highly independent in self-care activities and doing chores, children are more independent in some activities than in others.

The current study, however, has certain limitations. One source of weakness, which could have affected results, is sampling (unrepresentative sample). This limits the study's ability to draw broader conclusions about pre-school children in general. Furthermore, the study's findings require consideration in the cultural and

environmental contexts in which young children reside. Another potential source of bias are parents' subjective evaluations of their children's independence. Therefore, more precise criteria for assessing children's independence should be incorporated into future studies on parental assessments to ensure objectivity.

Despite its limitations, the research presented here fills a significant gap in the literature since it is one of the few studies focusing on the independence of preschool children. The importance of our research is further underlined by the realization that independence is essential for children's continuous development in all aspects of their lives. Due to this substantial impact on children's future development and achievement in a variety of spheres of endeavour, we believe this topic should be examined in greater depth.

Our study has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. More research is needed to determine the role that potential factors (such as socioeconomic status, parental education level, and parental style) have in determining pre-schoolers' level of independence. We suggest further research on how independence might be affected by the duration of the child's enrolment in kindergarten to determine the role of formal early childhood education in developing independence. Continued efforts are needed to raise awareness among parents and early childhood teachers about the importance of supporting independence skills. It is vital to provide concrete guidelines to parents on how they may contribute to the development of independence skills through simple routine activities. There must be constant work put in raising the understanding among the teachers that encouraging children's independence is equally important to their overall development and wellbeing as is academic achievement.

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