

Competent (And/Or Responsible) Parenting as a Prerequisite for a Complete Child Development

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Abstract

The issue of parental pedagogical competence is becoming more pronounced particularly if it is understood in the context of raising children for a competent and responsible behaviour. Parenting involves undertaking various activities aimed at taking care of the child, encouraging his/her development, and simultaneously developing interpersonal relations. In their parenting, parents seek to fulfil various personal and social expectations, so the key issue is how parents perceive their own pedagogical competence. In order to study how parents (self-)assess their pedagogical competence, a research was conducted on a sample of 90 parents of children of early and pre-school age. Factor analysis identified four factors: lack of knowledge and of confidence in child-rearing, blaming somebody else, and uncertainty in the ability to influence the child, which explain the pedagogical incompetence, and confidence factor in child-rearing which indicates parental pedagogical competence. The T-test was performed and at the significance level of $p < 0.05$ no significant difference was found in self-assessed parental competence with respect to the gender and age of the child. It is reasonable to argue that parents need occasional or more permanent support and help in the acquisition of knowledge of parenting, which can and should be primarily provided by the educators in institutions.

Keywords: Child development, competence, educators, programs, parenting

Introduction

The concepts of parental *pedagogical competence* and *responsible parenthood* cannot be equated, but it is necessary to understand their close connection and the fact that pedagogical competence includes and implies responsible parental behaviour. Parental pedagogical competence is understood as the experience of an individual as "a person who has control

over their parenting and the relationship with the child and feels good as a parent" (Milanović et al., 2000: 123). Responsible is considered a person who "conscientiously and responsibly carries out their duties; who has a duty to do a job, a task, and assumes responsibility for the results" (Anić, 2007: 310).

The concept of responsibility is often mentioned in speech, especially in the scientific discourse of ethics, psychology, pedagogy, etc. and various definitions are offered. Explaining the concept of responsibility Vučković (2000) states that in contemporary ethical considerations, the notion of responsibility has replaced the former concept of duty. "The notion of responsibility, though not unknown in ethics and though Aristotle already knew that a person is responsible for the deeds he did freely, and yet only in our century has it become the centre of ethical debates and has increasingly been emerging as one of the basic ethical concepts" (Vučković, 2000: 18).

In this paper, the parental competence and responsibility are approached from a pedagogical perspective, which focuses on teaching children competent and responsible behaviour towards themselves, others, and the world around them (Glasser, 2000), where the responsibility is understood as one of the components of competence (knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes), i.e. as a competence of value. It is likely, which was confirmed by researches (Gustović-Ercegovac, 1992; Ljubetić, 2007; Mandarić Vukušić, 2016) that the responsible parental behaviour is an integral part of parental pedagogical competence. In other words, a parent who fosters responsibility as a value, also has the attitude that responsible behaviour is important, has sufficient knowledge and information on the role of responsibility in the life of the individual and the community, and very likely knows how to develop responsible behaviour (skills).

Contemporary society is burdened with changes in all aspects of human living, and in particular in those concerning the family and its functioning, and parenting. Parenting is at the same time a process, relationship and role, and implies undertaking various activities aimed in particular at taking care of the child and encouraging his/her development, and developing and improving interpersonal relations (Ljubetić, 2007; Maleš and Kušević, 2011; McClain, 2013; Stacey, 2013). Parents are constantly facing new challenges, one of which is how to raise a child for a responsible behaviour and competent performance in all spheres of life, both in the current moment and in the future as well. The roots of children's responsible behaviour lie in the family child-rearing during the child's early and pre-school age, especially in a family environment. Responsible behaviour towards oneself, others and the world around oneself ("personal and social responsibility", according to Juul, 2008; Juul and Jensen, 2010) are key points of child-rearing that (at least to some extent) guarantee a quality

(co)existence, the development of the individual and the community, respect for human values and the rights of individuals in a society, tolerance, understanding and accepting diversity, and the like. Competent and responsible adults, especially parents, are likely to find effective strategies for teaching their children responsible behaviour not only by leading them (teaching them), but also by providing them with an appropriate model of responsible behaviour. A competent and responsible parent successfully meets his/her own needs, but not at the expense of the other parent and / or child, assumes responsibility for their own parenting and constantly questions and self-assesses his/her parental performance trying to determine whether it leads him/her to the desired goal, without endangering the child in the process (Ljubetić 2011; 2012). Quality parental self-assessment is the basis for continuous work on oneself and improving parental personality and parental performance (Delač Hrupelj et al., 2000; Janičić-Holzer, 2007; Ljubetić, 2012). Competent and responsible parents build and foster care-demanding parenting style (Dacey and Kenny, 1994) believing that it will achieve the best educational results. Modern parenting is full of challenges possibly because the focus has been transferred from the parental rights to the children's rights (Maleš and Kušević, 2011), and it is why the responsible behaviour (of children and adults) needs to be observed in that context. Researches show that in addition to the parents feeling confident of the decisive influence on their child and sensitivity to parenting, parental responsibility is one of the fundamental components of pedagogically competent parenting (Ljubetić, 2007; Mandarić Vukušić, 2016). Parents as the child's primary educators are responsible not only for taking care of the child and encouraging his/her development, but also for using all personal capacities and social potentials in order to achieve quality development of their child (Milanović et al., 2000). Parental pedagogical competence implies a relationship between the parent and the child on whose quality depends the satisfaction and confidence of parents as well as the success of the child (Jurčević Lozančić and Kunert, 2015). Lack of knowledge, lack of confidence, unsatisfactory relationship with the child and, as its natural consequence, the burden of parenting (Ljubetić, 2007), are the characteristics of the parental pedagogical incompetence that can greatly endanger the full and complete child development. For these reasons it is necessary to increase parental competence; the need to educate parents (Stričević, 2011; Petani and Kristić, 2012; Mandarić Vukušić, 2016), arises from the social and economic changes that are altering family and environment, and from the legal framework that emphasizes the importance, rights and responsibilities of parents, in particular personal responsibility of parents for the child and the family. Professional staff in kindergartens are the first who need to: a) notice parental need for additional education in parenting, b) devise prevention and

compensatory programs in parenting, c) implement one-time and continuous programs in line with parents' needs, and d) monitor and evaluate the implementation of programs and their effects directly on parents and indirectly on their children.

Research methodology

Research problem

Pedagogical competence and responsibility towards oneself and others emerge as a possible response to the challenges that modern times pose to individuals. This is why parents need to teach their children responsibility, which they can do best by setting their own example. In this study, it was presumed that the competent parent is the one who feels secure in his/her role as a parent and who assumes responsibility for the relationship with his/her child. Therefore, the research problem is to determine the perception of parental educational competence in parenting using self-assessment.

Research aim

With regard to the defined problem, the aim of the research is to determine the extent to which parents feel competent in their parental role.

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis (H_{main}) of this research is that parents assess themselves as pedagogically competent in parenting. Two sub-hypotheses were formulated:

H1 - there is no statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental pedagogical competence with regard to the gender of the child, and

H2 - there is no statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental pedagogical competence with regard to the age of the child.

Research instrument and data analysis procedure

For this research, a questionnaire was used which consists of two parts: (1) general information about the respondents (gender, age, occupation, number of children, gender of children, age of children, leisure and support of the extended family) and (2) a questionnaire by Gustović Ercegovac (1992) concerning parents' self-assessment of their competence for the parental role. The instrument consists of twenty variables presented as statements, and the respondent circles one of the five possible answers on an agree-disagree scale from completely correct to completely wrong. Completely correct is marked with number 1, and completely wrong with number 5.

A descriptive and inferential data analyses were conducted. Descriptive analysis included frequency, percentage, mean value, and deviation from the mean. Inferential analysis included factor analysis and t-test. The results are shown in tables and are interpreted.

Research sample and procedure

Ninety parents of early and pre-school aged children who at the time of the survey (May and September 2016) attended kindergartens in the city of Kaštela participated in this study. In the total sample, there were 86.7% women and 13.3% men. Participants were aged 30-39 (74.4%), 40 years and over (17.8%), and 20-29 (7.8%). A total of 80% of them were employed, while 20% were unemployed. The structure of the sample with respect to the number of children in the family was as follows: parents with two children (52.2%), three or more children (37.8%) and one child (10%). With respect to the gender of children, 60% of survey participants have male and 40% female children.

Results and interpretation

The structure of the field of parental pedagogical (in)competence

To understand the field of parental pedagogical (in)competence on this sample of respondents, factor analysis (Table 1) was conducted.

Table 1. Factor analysis of items and Cronbach's alpha coefficients

| Item number and content | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | \mathcal{L} |
|--|------|------|---|---|---------------|
| Factor 1. Lack of knowledge and lack of confidence in child-rearing | | | | | 0.81 |
| 15. I need more knowledge to treat my child more properly. | 0.81 | | | | |
| 16. I am thinking about what will later turn out to be a mistake in child-rearing. | 0.75 | | | | |
| 19. I always think I could have acted differently. | 0.70 | | | | |
| 13. I am often not sure that I am properly raising my child. | 0.69 | | | | |
| 5. I think I do not have enough knowledge to approach my child. | 0.62 | | | | |
| 2. If I had been better raised, I would have known more how to treat my children. | 0.46 | | | | |
| Factor 2. Confidence in child-rearing | | | | | 0.76 |
| 20. I am convinced that all my actions are for the good of my child. | | 0.75 | | | |
| 1. I feel confident when I'm being a parent. | | 0.70 | | | |
| 4. I know by instinct what the child needs. | | 0.68 | | | |
| 14. When I see that I did something wrong towards my child, it really hurts me. | | 0.62 | | | |
| 8. I am convinced that I treat my child well. | | 0.60 | | | |
| 12. Raising a child is a burden for me. | | 0.47 | | | |
| 3. I often feel that my child has a better relationship with | | 0.43 | | | |

| others than with me. | | | | | |
|--|--|--|------|------|------|
| Factor 3. Blaming someone else | | | | | 0.55 |
| 10. My child is more demanding than other children. | | | 0.72 | | |
| 6. The most important thing is what we have inherited in the genes. | | | 0.61 | | |
| 7. I often leave to my spouse a problem with the child. | | | 0.60 | | |
| Factor 4. Lack of confidence regarding the ability to influence | | | | 0.64 | 0.63 |
| 18. In addition to so many other influences (school, TV, peers), my influence on the child is small. | | | | 0.59 | |
| 9. I'm not sure I can influence my child. | | | | 0.49 | |
| 11. Whatever I do, my child reacts more or less the same. | | | | 0.48 | |
| 17. My influence is decisive for the development of my child. | | | | | |

* Variables 3, 12, 17 have been turned because of the negative coefficients. The answers ranged from 1 to 5 where 1 meant total agreement with each statement, and number 5 complete disagreement.

The conducted analysis (Table 2) extracted four factors: lack of knowledge and lack of confidence in child-rearing (0.81), confidence in child-rearing (0.76), blaming someone else (0.55), and lack of confidence regarding the ability to influence (0.63). Having implemented the statistical analysis, it was found that item 17 negatively correlated with item from the same factor (*f4*) and, because of a higher coefficient of reliability of this factor (*f4*) it was excluded from further analysis.

By examining the contents of variables that shape factors it is clear that the field of parental pedagogical (in)competence in this sample is described by the factors: (1) lack of knowledge and lack of confidence in educational performance, (2) blaming someone else, and (3) lack of confidence regarding the ability to influence the child on one hand, which are the components of parental pedagogical incompetence, while on the other hand, a feeling of parents' confidence in educational performance, as a result of the content of the variables, marks pedagogically competent parents. The results are in line with the results of previous studies (Bašić, 1993; Ljubetić, 2012).

A competent parent is also responsible for selecting their own educational activities (“I am convinced that I treat my child well”; “When I see that I did something towards my child, it really hurts me”), is confident in their parental performance (“I am convinced that all my actions are for the good of my child.”; “I feel confident when I'm being a parent”), sensitive to the needs of the child (“I know by instinct what the child needs”), has a good relationship with the child (“I often feel that my child has a better relationship with me than with others”) and does not feel that parenting is a burden but rather a challenge (“Raising a child is not a burden for me”).

A parent who "feels" his/her child, builds a quality relationship with him/her, reflects on his/her parenting and responsibly choose child-rearing methods, is the best model for shaping the responsible behaviour of the child, and acquiring and developing vitally important competences.

Research hypotheses

Wishing to determine the (non)existence of statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental pedagogical competence with regard to the gender of the child and to test the first hypothesis, the t-test (Table 2) was performed.

Table 2. Results of t-test to test the difference in parental competence with regard to the gender of the child

| Factors | Child Gender | N | M | Sd | t | df | p |
|---|--------------|----|------|------|------|----|------|
| f1 lack of knowledge and lack of confidence | girl | 36 | 3.60 | 0.86 | 0.22 | 88 | 0.83 |
| | boy | 54 | 3.56 | 0.89 | | | |
| f2 confidence | girl | 36 | 1.73 | 0.74 | 0.37 | 88 | 0.71 |
| | boy | 54 | 1.67 | 0.58 | | | |
| f3 blaming someone else | girl | 36 | 3.72 | 0.94 | 1.19 | 88 | 0.24 |
| | boy | 54 | 3.94 | 0.81 | | | |
| f4 lack of confidence in the influence | girl | 36 | 3.82 | 0.98 | 1.69 | 88 | 0.1 |
| | boy | 54 | 4.15 | 0.83 | | | |

A review of the results (Table 2) has shown that there is no statistically significant difference at a significance level of $p < 0.05$, within the results of the t-test which confirms H1, which states: *There is no statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental competence with regard to the gender of the child.* It is possible to conclude that the parents feel equally competent for raising male and female children.

The obtained results differ from those obtained in the study by Ljubetić (2007) where a statistically significant difference between mothers and fathers was revealed in relation to the gender of their children, because mothers assessed they were more burdened by parenting when it came to their daughters than sons. The author explains these results by the differences in the traditional child-rearing by gender. According to traditional beliefs, female children are under greater "danger" than male, thus it is necessary to protect female children. On the other hand, the same study revealed there was no statistical difference between fathers in assessing their pedagogical competence with respect to the gender of children. Therefore, Ljubetić

(2007) concludes that fathers raise children, and mothers raise sons and daughters.

It is possible that, as it has been nearly 10 years since the previous research, the perception of parenting has changed and traditional child-rearing by gender is no longer viable, but it is also possible that the differences in parents' responses in the recent research can be attributed to an unbalanced sample of parents by gender.

In addition, the study was undertaken to establish the (non)existence of statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental pedagogical competences with regard to the age of the child. Therefore, the t-test was performed (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of t-test to test the difference in parental competence with regard to the age of the child

| Factors | Child Age | N | M | Sd | t | df | p |
|---|-----------|----|------|------|------|----|------|
| f1 lack of knowledge and lack of confidence | 3-5 | 53 | 3.61 | 0.81 | 0.45 | 88 | 0.66 |
| | 6-7 | 37 | 3.52 | 0.97 | | | |
| f2 confidence | 3-5 | 53 | 1.70 | 0.63 | 0.15 | 88 | 0.89 |
| | 6-7 | 37 | 1.68 | 0.68 | | | |
| f3 blaming someone else | 3-5 | 53 | 3.72 | 0.86 | 1.75 | 88 | 0.08 |
| | 6-7 | 37 | 4.05 | 0.85 | | | |
| f4 lack of confidence in the influence | 3-5 | 53 | 4.05 | 0.83 | 0.4 | 88 | 0.69 |
| | 6-7 | 37 | 3.97 | 1.01 | | | |

The T-test showed that at a significance level of $p < 0.05$ there was no statistically significant difference within the obtained results (Table 3) with regard to the age of the child, which confirms H2 which states: *There is no statistically significant difference in self-assessed parental pedagogical competence with regard to the age of the child.*

This result was somewhat surprising if one takes into account the fact that parents show less confidence in raising older children as parental responsibility increases with the age of the child. Lacković-Grgin (2011) states that a sense of competence and satisfaction with parenting may vary in relation to the developmental characteristics of children, so that young children especially those with a "difficult temperament" increase parental stress. A study by Ljubetić (2007) reveals that mothers of five-year and seven-year old children feel more confident in their parental performance than the mothers of six year-olds. Ljubetić (2007) explains this result by the fact that at that age children are about to start school, so she believes that mothers question their parental achievements more intensively in this period.

On the other hand, fathers also find the child's sixth year of age challenging which also represents a burden to them which the author (Ljubetić, 2007) explains by fathers' lack of knowledge on parenting.

The analysis of the research results, done with the aim of testing the main hypothesis (H_{main}) which states: *Parents assess themselves as pedagogically competent in parenting*, reveals that it is only partially confirmed as evidenced by four extracted factors: factors of pedagogical incompetence (lack of knowledge and lack of confidence in child-rearing activities, blaming someone else, and lack of confidence in the possibility of influencing the child) and factor of pedagogical competences (confidence of parents in child-rearing activities).

It is clear that parents in the sample occasionally or permanently feel incompetent in their parental performance, and the source of that feeling lies in their lack of knowledge (of the child, his/her needs, development, behaviour, playing, learning, etc.) which makes parents feel insecure, which is further supported by a sense of doubt and lack of confidence in the possibility of influencing their own child. It is highly likely that parents mitigate these unpleasant feelings by blaming others ("If I had been better raised, I would have known more how to treat my children", "My child is more demanding than other children", "The most important thing is what we have inherited in the genes" and similar). The results are consistent with earlier studies (Gustović Ercegovac, 1992; Bašić, 1993; Furnham and Weir, 1996; Rogers and Matthews, 2004; Ljubetić, 2007; Mandarić Vukušić, 2016).

Conclusion

Recent research has confirmed a series of past ones, which make it obvious that parents need additional knowledge *of* and *in* parenting that would empower them in their parental roles and provide them with more confidence in their parental performance. A competent parent is confident in his/her parental performance, but at the same time is responsible for the selection of educational methods, and such a parent is precisely what is needed for a complete and healthy development of the child. We believe that parents, if they had more parental knowledge and skills would do their parental role better and make fewer pedagogical errors regarding the child. Therefore, educators at institutions of early and pre-school education (pre-school teachers and professional staff of all profiles) should be the first to offer parents the opportunity of acquiring knowledge (and skill) in parenting to raise their pedagogical competence and act in a more responsible manner in their parental role.

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