

## Communication of Preschool Teachers with Parents and Children During the Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of the communication relations of preschool teachers with parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical part presents the importance of cooperative relations between preschool teachers and parents, the increasing use of ICT and the ways in which preschool teachers communicate with parents and children during distance education. The empirical part presents the results of a survey conducted on a sample of 100 preschool education professionals from all over Slovenia. The research approach was descriptive and causal-non-experimental methods of pedagogical research were applied. The data collection was carried out through an anonymous survey questionnaire and analysed with descriptive statistics using the SPSS program. The key findings of the research showed that most respondents attribute significant importance to communication and cooperation with parents. However, there are also some for whom these relationships are not necessary. Preschool teachers most often communicated with children once or twice a month. At the same time, they point out that this way of interaction with children is inadequate and incomparable to live interaction. An interesting conclusion is that preschool teachers continue to communicate with parents in similar ways as before the pandemic, with increased communication via phone conversations, e-mail and the kindergarten's website. The pandemic has changed the way of pedagogical communication to a way of reducing the personal approach, which can be problematic in the process of raising and educating preschool children.

**Keywords:** pandemic, communication, preschool teachers, ICT, distance education

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## Introduction

One of the essential elements of cooperation in kindergarten is the cooperation between preschool teachers and parents. This includes all the impressions created and words expressed. The cooperative relationship between parents and preschool teachers begins with the first welcoming gesture when a parent enters kindergarten for the first time (Graham-Clay, 2005). The preservation of established relationships continues through common values, visions, scenarios, strategies, management, networking, collaborative projects, and open responsibility. This creates greater connection, better confidentiality, higher self-esteem, greater respect and better understanding within the relationship (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2012).

## Theoretical basis

Curriculum for kindergartens (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 1999, 13) emphasizes that: "Cooperation between kindergarten and parents is an important aspect of the quality of preschool education, as it is precisely this cooperation that contributes a lot to the appropriate complementarity of family and institutional education". It involves sharing responsibilities and acting for the well-being of the child. It also includes information on the child's progress, problem-solving, arranging and co-decision-making (Željeznov Seničar, 2012).

Cooperation between preschool teachers and parents is becoming increasingly important. However, these relationships are not always the same. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2012) divided them into four groups: individual and group, and formal and informal cooperation. The first division is based on how many people are involved in the relationship. As the name implies, individual cooperation is a conversation between a preschool teacher and the parent, while in the group form the preschool teacher cooperates with the group of parents. Formal forms of cooperation with parents include the participation of parents in the council of the institution and the council of parents, parent-teacher meetings, office hours and written communication. At the same time, informal forms include informal gatherings and various conversations that take place either over the phone or online (ibid.). At the same time, the use of information technology is gaining importance as it facilitates the maintenance of relationships (Čadež, 2014).

Active cooperation between the preschool teacher and the parent is mandatory and necessary, as family upbringing and kindergarten education are intertwined and complementary. Both contribute to the child's development and aim for the same goals. However, for cooperation to be appropriate, respect and trust between the preschool teacher

and parent are required (Željeznov Seničar, 2012). Children quickly feel whether preschool teachers and parents collaborate well (or poorly) and respond accordingly. Therefore, it is essential to nurture and develop an appropriate and positive relationship (Kalin et al., 2009).

The common goals and tasks of adults in raising their children involve cooperation between parents and preschool teachers and between parents and other kindergarten professionals. The types of these relationships are different, but they are intertwined. Through them, both parents (through kindergarten professionals) and preschool teachers (through parents) can understand the child and help him in his or her development and the challenges he or she faces (Kodrič, 2012).

### ***Communication Relationships***

Cooperation and communication are interconnected and complementary. Any successful cooperation relies also on appropriate communication. It is a process in which both parents and preschool teachers receive and transmit various messages. In this way, they establish and maintain contacts, discuss, consult, communicate, and, last but not least, ask questions (Tracey, 2021). They also share their wishes, emotions, and feelings (Ule, 2009).

Lepičnik Vodopivec (2012) emphasizes that it is important in communication that the preschool teacher listens with interest and concentration to the interlocutor and expresses this through non-verbal communication. When starting a conversation about the child, it is important that the preschool teacher knows how to distinguish between information and educational counselling. When preschool teachers inform parents, they have the main say, but when it comes to educational counselling, parents primarily have priority. It is important for the preschool teacher to be able to listen, participate, think and to be able to clearly and accurately define their opinions and views to parents. They must ensure that they form equal relationships and do not discriminate between parents according to their affiliation (Žavski, 2017).

Devjak and Berčnik (2018) found that parents attribute significant importance to open communication with preschool teachers. They want to be informed about their child's problems and the overall condition of the child. The authors emphasize that this can be achieved through appropriate interpersonal relationships, but preschool teachers must pay attention to appropriate professionalism and expertise. Regardless of whether it is a matter of content or level, it is important to maintain both properly and thus maintain an appropriate relationship (Žavski, 2017).

Communication between preschool teachers and parents is becoming more important year after year. The reason for this can be attributed to the increasing involvement of parents in the process of upbringing and education (Čadež, 2014). This involvement also brings with it some advantages, such as getting to know, cooperating, sharing opinions, expressing feelings and making professional contacts (Paladin, 2011), as well as disadvantages, including misunderstandings, misuse of forms of verbal communication, inappropriate forms of cooperation, incorrect establishment of communication relationships, and inflexibility in accepting information received (Šrot, 2013). Regardless of the above, Čadež (2014) emphasizes that it is necessary to constantly strive to maintain and nurture communication and cooperation between preschool teachers and parents and vice versa.

### ***Information and Communication Technology in Education***

Information and communication technology (ICT) nowadays enables distance education (search for resources and literature in electronic form, distance communication, writing and submitting reports, etc.), remote work (archiving, processing, and transfer of information, communication with business partners), various remote services (e-government, e-commerce), and the virtual environment through which we can establish distance contacts, regardless of time and geographic distance (Drobnjak & Jereb, 2007).

ICT has become a priority for accessibility in both schools and kindergartens. We often communicate in this way because it is easier and faster. ICT is also becoming an increasingly important element for all participants in education, as it is increasingly used as a tool at work (Brečko & Vehovar, 2008).

Skubic Ermenec et al. (2020) emphasize that digital technology has great potential to improve educational and didactic practices, but it is crucial to consider the following conditions: digital technology cannot replace the teacher in any way; the introduction of digital technology must necessarily be associated with educational and socialization goals; the investments in digital technology must be understood as an aid to professionals and we must be aware that digital technology has disadvantages and advantages.

Due to the rapid development of ICT, which is still affected by the improvement and upgrading of computer equipment and programs, work in kindergartens has become easier and faster. Preschool teachers can communicate faster and easier with parents, write lesson plans, adapt to the individual needs of children, transfer and develop children's knowledge and skills more efficiently, and, last but not least, archive data related to their work and the functioning of kindergarten in general (Suryani, 2010). This can be achieved through

modern technology, including desktop and tablet computers and smartphones, as Pucelj (2006) points out. It is a technology that is available to preschool teachers at all times in their work.

### ***Communication in Distance Education***

Distance communication is an increasingly used technique due to the fast-paced lifestyle. Using technology, parents can communicate with kindergartens and preschool teachers more easily and quickly. Phones in classrooms, voice messages, video technology, websites, and online communication platforms are always available to parents, allowing them to remotely connect with kindergarten staff and professionals, including preschool teachers (Graham-Clay, 2005).

However, a major change occurred at the end of 2019, when a new coronavirus, known as SARS-CoV-2, appeared (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravlje, 2021). The emergence of the coronavirus not only made everyday life more difficult but also reflected in the economic, social, economic and political spheres. There have been several waves of the new coronavirus disease. The first two waves (spring and autumn 2020) required the adoption of important measures and adjustments in many areas (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravlje, 2020). One of the many areas where changes occurred was kindergartens. Due to their closure, all work, including communication, was transferred to remote means. In such a situation, digital technologies have become particularly important for the successful organization of preschool education in the family and appropriate communication between kindergartens and parents (Pavlenko & Pavlenko, 2020).

According to Baša and Hmelak (2022), the way of communication during distance education varied from kindergarten to kindergarten. Some used Zoom, e-assistance, and email, while others used the phone. Preschool teachers provided parents with various information and examples of activities that they could carry out with their children at home. Both preschool teachers and parents were forced to accept the situation and to adapt to the best of their abilities. The following sections present how they responded to the use of ICT as a way of communication and cooperation, and how often and through which forms they established them.

## **Methodology**

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of the paper was to explore the communication relations of kindergarten teachers with parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we were interested in how preschool teachers assessed the importance of communication and cooperation with parents; how often they communicated with parents or children and what forms of communication and cooperation preschool teachers used during the pandemic compared to the time before the pandemic. We were also interested in which ways of communication they saw as advantages and which as disadvantages.

### ***Research Method***

In this study, a quantitative research approach and descriptive and causal-non-experimental methods of pedagogical research were applied. The instrument used was a survey questionnaire, which was designed specifically for the needs of this research.

### ***Sample***

The study included 100 educational professionals employed in public kindergartens in Slovenia. The sample consisted of preschool and assistant preschool teachers—hereinafter referred to as preschool teachers. The largest share of respondents (31.0%) were aged up to 30 years, 28.0% were between 31 and 40 years, 24.0% between 41 and 50, and the smallest share (17.0%) were aged 51 or older.

### ***Data Collection and Processing***

The collection of data was carried out through an anonymous survey questionnaire that was transferred to an online form using the 1ka.si platform. We then sent the link to the questionnaires to public kindergartens throughout Slovenia.

The questionnaires received were reviewed, and invalid ones were eliminated. The valid collected data were quantitatively processed and analysed with descriptive statistics using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) program. We then recorded the analysis of individual questions according to the variables. The dependent relationships between variables were tested using the  $\chi^2$  test. All data are presented in tables with the indication of absolute (f) and percentage frequencies (f %).

## Results and Interpretation

Below we present the results of the research which relate to the communication and cooperative relations between preschool teachers, parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, among other things, education was carried out remotely. In the first part, we present the opinions of teachers regarding the importance of communication and cooperation with parents; in the second part, the frequency of communication between preschool teachers and children; in the third part, the forms of cooperation of teachers with parents; and in the last part, we present the opinions of teachers regarding the advantages and disadvantages of distance education.

### ***Teachers' Opinions on the Importance of Communication and Cooperation with Parents***

Initially, we were interested in the opinion of teachers on the importance of communication and cooperation with parents. An important task is to actively involve parents in everyday activities and accept them as equally important partners, while at the same time they must also consider their wishes, ideas and the social environment (Žavski, 2017).

**Table 1**

*The importance of communication and cooperation with parents*

	%
Very unimportant	15.0
Not important	2.0
Neither unimportant nor important	43.0
Important	5.0
Very important	35.0
Total	100.0

For slightly less than half (43.0%) of the respondents, communication and cooperation with parents are neither unimportant nor important. A little more than a third of respondents (35.0%) answered that communication and cooperation with parents are very important. However, it is interesting to note that almost a fifth (17.0%) of the preschool teachers still believe that communication and cooperation with parents are unimportant.

### ***Communication with Children During Distance Learning***

Distance education during the pandemic disrupted direct contacts between preschool teachers and children. Nevertheless, preschool teachers established contacts with children by phone, Zoom, e-assistant or e-mail (Baša & Hmelak, 2022). We were interested in how often these methods of communication were used.

**Table 2***Frequency of Communication with Children During Distance Learning*

	f	%
Five times a week	5	8.6
Four times a week	1	1.7
Three times a week	2	3.4
Two times a week	6	10.3
Once a week	8	13.8
Once every two weeks	17	29.3
Once a month	12	20.7
Once every two months	7	12.1
Total	58	100.0

From Table 2 above, we can see that the majority of preschool teachers (29.3%) who answered this question spoke to or communicated with children once every two weeks during distance learning. They are followed by preschool teachers who communicated once a month (20.7%); approximately a tenth of them communicated once a week (13.8%) or twice a week (10.3%). Only a few of the respondents contacted children more frequently.

***Forms of Cooperation with Parents Before and During the Pandemic***

In order to better understand the cooperation and communication between preschool teachers and parents during the pandemic, we initially examined the frequency of ways of cooperation before the pandemic and compared it with the results of the period during the pandemic.

**Table 3***Use of Forms of Cooperation with Parents before and during the Pandemic*

	Before the pandemic			During the pandemic		
	Yes, often (%)	Yes, sometimes (%)	No, never (%)	Yes, often (%)	Yes, sometimes (%)	No, never (%)
Parent-teacher meetings	54.0	38.0	8.0	7.0	28.0	65.0
Office hours	77.0	13.0	9.0	23.0	47.0	30.0
Phone conversations	14.0	71.0	15.0	37.0	47.0	15.0
Communication via e-mail	37.0	44.0	19.0	67.0	27.0	6.0
Notification for parents on the bulletin board	84.0	15.0	1.0	38.0	25.0	37.0
Informing parents through the kindergarten website	51.0	37.0	12.0	52.0	39.0	8.0
Informal gatherings with parents (workshops for parents, performances for parents, picnics, etc.)	52.0	39.0	9.0	3.0	19.0	78.0



As can be seen from Table 3, in the time before the pandemic, parent-teacher meetings were used often by most (54.0%) and never by least respondents (8.0%). This changed during distance learning, as preschool teachers never used these forms of cooperation in almost two-thirds (65.0%) of cases, while others used them only sometimes (28.0%) or rarely (7.0%).

In the period before the pandemic, the majority of the respondents (78.0%) often used office hours, followed by those who used them sometimes (13.0%) or those who never (8.0%) used this form of communication. However, with the advent of the pandemic, a change in frequency occurred, as during this time preschool teachers had office hours only sometimes in nearly half (47.0%) of the cases.

Before the pandemic, telephone conversations were predominantly used only sometimes (71.0%), followed by rarely (14.0%) and never (15.0%). Due to the pandemic, this method of communication slightly increased, with most preschool teachers using it often (37.0%) or sometimes (47.0%).

E-mail communication was most commonly used sometimes (44.0%) or often (37.0%) before the pandemic. However, this changed somewhat during the pandemic, as email communication with parents became frequent for two-thirds (67.0%) of all respondents.

The bulletin board was used as a source of information and cooperation in the time before the pandemic by the majority of respondents (84.0%), as well as the method of informing parents through the kindergarten website, which was used by more than half (51%) of respondents. During the pandemic, the frequency of informing parents through the kindergarten's website did not change significantly, as approximately half (52.0%) of the respondents still used this communication method. Presumably due to less direct contact and keeping the prescribed distance due to the restriction of the spread of the virus, the use of informing parents through bulletin boards has significantly decreased. Preschool teachers used this method very differently during the pandemic. Some used them often (38.0%), while others never (37.0%) used it. The remaining preschool teachers (25.0%) used it only sometimes.

Various informal gatherings with parents, such as workshops for parents, performances, picnics, etc., were often used by preschool teachers before the pandemic in more than half (51.0%) of cases. However, the time of the pandemic and the restriction of contacts, as expected, brought changes in this way of cooperation as well. The majority of

preschool teachers (78.0%) did not carry out these informal gatherings. Those who did, carried them out rarely (19.0%) or very rarely (3.0%).

### ***Opinions of Preschool Teachers on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Learning***

We asked preschool teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of using ICT as a way of communication and cooperation during the pandemic or, more precisely, during distance education.

**Table 4**

*Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education and Learning*

	Advantage (%)	Neither advantage nor disadvantage (%)	Disadvantage (%)	Total (%)
Communication and cooperation with parents through information and communication technologies (computer and computer equipment, telephone)	19.0	62.0	19.0	100.0
Communication and cooperation with children through information and communication technologies (computer and computer equipment, telephone)	16.0	37.0	46.0	100.0
Work from a computer	18.0	50.0	32.0	100.0
Better knowledge of the use of information and communication technologies (computer and computer equipment, telephone)	58.0	36.0	6.0	100.0
Faster communication with parents due to information and communication technology (computer and computer equipment, telephone)	60.0	36.0	4.0	100.0
Scheduling work from home at will	55.0	34.0	11.0	100.0

Table 4 shows that the respondent preschool teachers attributed the most significant advantages to distance education and learning as follows: faster communication with parents due to ICT (computer and computer equipment, telephone) (60.0%); better knowledge of ICT usage (58.0%) and the ability to schedule work from home at their discretion (55.0%). They identified communication and cooperation with parents of children through ICT (computer and computer equipment, telephone) (62.0%) and work via computer (50.0%) as

neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. The surveyed preschool teachers identified communication and cooperation with children (computer and computer equipment, telephone) as the most significant disadvantage of distance education.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results of a survey involving 100 professional workers from Slovenian kindergartens, we concluded that the respondent preschool teachers think very differently about the importance of communication and cooperation with parents. Only slightly more than one third of the respondents attribute a very significant role to the aforementioned communication and cooperation, despite the fact that numerous authors (Kodrič, 2012; Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2012; Žavski, 2017; Željeznov Seničar, 2012) emphasize that cooperation and communication are crucial elements in the quality of preschool education. There are still preschool teachers who believe that such relationships are not important. What is the reason for this should be further studied.

After the onset of the coronavirus, numerous measures and adjustments were implemented to prevent the spread of the virus (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravlje, 2020). One of these was the closure of kindergartens for certain periods. Preschool teachers remained in contact with children by phone, Zoom, e-assistant or e-mail (Baša & Hmelak, 2022). Most of them communicated twice or once a month, and only a few communicated more often e.g. several times a week.

Before the pandemic, preschool teachers used both formal and informal forms of cooperation. We found that in the mentioned forms of cooperation with parents at work during the epidemic, the frequency of parental meetings, consultations, bulletin board notifications, and informal gatherings decreased during the pandemic. On the other hand, there was an increase in phone conversations, e-mail communication and informing parents via the kindergarten website, which was also expected given the Hygiene Recommendations for Kindergartens during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravlje, 2020).

The more frequent ways of communication that arose due to forced circumstances, including temporary kindergarten closures, brought some advantages and disadvantages. According to the respondents, the advantages included the possibility of faster communication, acquiring new skills due to the more frequent use of ICT and easier scheduling of work obligations due to working from home. Establishing contact with parents did not cause any significant problems for preschool teachers. However, during the closure of kindergartens, preschool teachers noticed difficulties and shortcomings in communication

and cooperation with children, as they could not establish a successful interaction by phone, Zoom, e-assistant or email from the educational point of view (Baša & Hmelak, 2022). The authors reached similar results in previous studies. Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2023) found in their research that remote communication does not enable adequate collaborative interactions, as no digital technology is as effective and successful as in-person communication. As a result, it is more difficult to build an appropriate collaborative relationship between parents and educators.

The authors Arslan et al. (2021) identify another drawback of remote communication and collaboration between educators and parents at the start of the pandemic. They see this weakness in the unpreparedness of both parents and educators for the closure of preschools and the transition to communication via ICT.

This is further reflected in the research results of Carcausto et al. (2021), who, in addition to the mentioned reasons, highlight another drawback—that some parents, especially in socially disadvantaged families, lacked both the appropriate ICT equipment to establish communication and the necessary skills to use it.

Finally, we can conclude that the time of the pandemic and the closure of kindergartens made the communication and cooperation between kindergartens, parents and children more challenging. ICT was placed at the forefront as it was often the only possible way of communication. Nevertheless, it remains that the only successful interaction between the preschool teacher and the child is the direct (live) contact and it cannot be replaced by any indirect (e.g. distance) form.

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## Komunikacija vaspitača sa roditeljima i decom tokom pandemije

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### APSTRAKT

Ovaj rad predstavlja rezultate komunikacionih odnosa vaspitača sa roditeljima i decom tokom pandemije COVID-19. Teorijski deo rada ističe značaj saradničkih odnosa između vaspitača i roditelja, sve veću upotrebu IKT-a, kao i načine na koje vaspitači komuniciraju sa roditeljima i decom tokom obrazovanja na daljinu. Empirijski deo rada predstavlja rezultate istraživanja sprovedenog na uzorku od 100 stručnjaka u oblasti predškolskog obrazovanja iz cele Slovenije. Istraživački pristup bio je deskriptivan, a primenjene su uzročno-neeksperimentalne metode pedagoškog istraživanja. Prikupljanje podataka je izvršeno putem anonimne ankete, a podaci su analizirani deskriptivnom statistikom korišćenjem programa SPSS. Ključni nalazi istraživanja pokazali su da većina ispitanika pridaje značajnu važnost komunikaciji i saradnji sa roditeljima. Međutim, postoje i neki za koje ti odnosi nisu neophodni. Vaspitači su najčešće komunicirali sa decom jednom ili dva puta mesečno. Istovremeno, vaspitači ističu da je takav način komunikacije sa decom neadekvatan i neuporediv sa direktnom interakcijom uživo. Zanimljiv zaključak je da vaspitači i dalje komuniciraju sa roditeljima na slične načine kao i pre pandemije, uz povećanu komunikaciju putem telefonskih razgovora, imejla i veb stranice vrtića. Pandemija je izmenila način pedagoške komunikacije, smanjujući lični pristup, što može predstavljati problem u procesu vaspitanja i obrazovanja predškolske dece.

**Ključne reči:** pandemija, komunikacija, vaspitači, IKT, obrazovanje na daljinu