



## Research Article

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# Influence of Parenting Style on Stressful States in Preschool Children Who Have Experienced a Traumatic Event

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## Abstract

*Children are one of the most vulnerable groups of the population that is particularly affected by traumatic events. In many of them, traumatic events significantly disrupt their life, bring severe losses, damage their health, and increase the likelihood of them developing stressful states. The goal of the present study is to analyze the effect of parenting style on stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event. The article determines the specific characteristics of having experienced a traumatic event and the indicators of a stressful state in preschool children based on a theoretical analysis of scientific literature. The article presents the results of an empirical study determining the relationship between parenting styles and the manifestations of stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event. In the conducted study, a preschool child's anxiety and the style of parenting are revealed to be factors in the emergence of stressful states in preschoolers. In the future perspective, these findings substantiate the development of a psychological support program for preventing and fighting stressful states in children of preschool age.*

**Keywords:** *stressful event; anxiety; parent-child relationship*

## 1. Introduction

In the most general sense, the term stress is used to signify human states characterized by increased tension and emerging in response to various extreme influences (stressors). According to modern ideas (Buss et al., 2015) stress transforms into a psychological trauma when the impact of a stressor results in a disturbance in a person's mental sphere accompanied by somatic process disorders (Guterman et al., 2016; Garber, Flynn, 2011). In this case, the stressor is presented by a stressful event characterized by abruptness, destructive force, and high intensity (Berryhill et al., 2016). Such an event is often associated with a fact or a threat of death, severe bodily injury, or violence and provides

a person with completely new information that has to be integrated into the previous life experience. A traumatic event can take the form of either personal experience, becoming a witness to such an event, or receiving news of severe physical injury or death of a loved one (Lange, Callinan, Smith, 2019).

In children, a stressful state emerges as a delayed and/or prolonged response to a traumatic stressful event or situation (short-term or long-term) of an extremely threatening or catastrophic nature. Moreover, children's reactions last for longer periods compared to those of adults.

## 2. Literature Review

According to researchers in the field (Greeson et al., 2014; Isaev, 2004), children who have gone through a traumatic event struggle to understand what had happened to them. This fact is primarily associated with their age characteristics and their lack of social, physiological, and psychological maturity. As a child is unable to properly process the meaning of what is happening to them, they simply remember the event and their experiences at the moment (the frantic creak of brakes, the sounds of a crash, and the sight of flames are engraved into their memory).

Depending on the age of a preschooler, researchers (Singh & Batta, 2019; Markovskaya, 2007) indicate the following specific characteristics of having experienced a traumatic event. The older a child is, the more painful their experience of a traumatic event and the more pronounced the manifestations of such traumatization.

Children at the age of 3 to 4.5 years old are already able to remember and describe traumatic events to adults in a certain form. They recall visual impressions, sounds, smells, physical sensations, and emotions. If the surrounding environment presents them with something reminding them of their experience or a child hears disturbing sounds, smells, or anything that can cause the same physical sensations or similar feelings, they can react in the same way as they reacted to the traumatic event. The fear of separation from the adult protector is more pronounced. A child cries, protests, or grasps the clothes of an adult with their hands not only when their mother (grandmother, father) leaves them alone in the kindergarten but also when the teacher leaves the room or switches to work with other children or even to a conversation with an adult who is a stranger to the child. The skills of controlling urination and defecation are difficult to master for a traumatized child. They are often afraid to sleep during the day as they believe something can happen to them as they fall asleep and they will not be able to defend themselves (the reason for such fears is that children of this age start having nightmares based on their experience that they perceive as real events (if able to remember these dreams); however, even if a child cannot remember the plot of the dream once they are awake, the sensation of fear persists).

Children at the age of 4.5 to 6.5 years old can not only feel and recall traumatic events but also comprehend and experience them deeply. A stressful state can already be diagnosed in them.

Researchers indicate the following indicators of a stressful state in preschool children (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Indicators of a stressful state in preschool children

| No. | Indicator  | Source                  |
|-----|--|-------------------------|
| 1   | Excessive alertness, anxiety. Even in a peaceful, secure situation, a child continues to be tense and is constantly afraid of something. Teachers often interpret such behavior as a feature of a child's psyche (nervousness) and tell parents that their child is vulnerable and it is necessary to strengthen their nerves.   | Connor et al. (2015)    |
| 2   | A pronounced fear of separation from parents (sticking to a significant adult). A child cries, does not want to stay in the kindergarten, and is difficult to get interested in playing with other children. Even if attracted by some kind of toy or activity, they can abandon an activity interesting to them or even a fun game and run to a window or a door to look for their parents. | Masten & Narayan (2012) |
| 3   | Pronounced fear when encountering a stimulus reminding of the experienced trauma (a sudden sound, television broadcast, even a drawing in a book). The stimulus can appear neutral at first glance.  | D'Andrea et al. (2012)  |
| 4   | Difficulties in falling asleep. A child is afraid to go to sleep and convinces the teacher or parents that a monster is hiding under their bed. Similar fears occasionally appear in non-traumatized children as well, but in children in a stressful state, they are continuous and accompanied by nightmares.  | Jordans et al. (2016)   |

| No. | Indicator   | Source                              |
|-----|---|-------------------------------------|
| 5   | Nightmares and night terrors (fears). Nightmares are vivid dreams reflecting the elements of the traumatic event experienced by a child. Once awake, a child recalls these nightmares well, continues to suffer from them, and retells their plots to an adult or peers. The plots of nightmares have a strong tendency of being recurring. Unlike nightmares, night terrors are not remembered by a child. A child can scream while asleep, throw themselves, and even cry. However, once awake, they cannot explain what frightened them. | Tol et al. (2013)                   |
| 6   | Frequent screams and tantrums that seem to arise without any external reasons. However, upon thorough analysis, it turns out that a certain sound, word, or even smell brought the child back to the sensations they had once experienced and provoked a reaction.  | Perry et al. (2010)                 |
| 7   | Increased aggression or excessive passivity. In traumatized children, the basic needs for safety, security, and self-respect are not fulfilled. Moreover, older preschool children who have seen the helplessness of their parents in difficult life circumstances experience a crisis of confidence in the ability of adults to protect them. For this reason, they are coming up with their own defense strategies of attacking first or hiding.  | Sharkey et al. (2012)               |
| 8   | Recurring games (intrusive game plots). Children at the age of 5-6 years old start recreating their trauma in game scenarios.   | Briggs-Gowan, Ford, et al. (2010)   |
| 9   | Anxiety for the future, a sense of defenselessness. A child constantly requires explanations about why what had happened happened and whether it can repeat in the future.  | Pratchett & Yehuda (2011)           |
| 10  | A tendency towards regressive behavior. Older preschoolers start behaving like small children. Enuresis, encopresis, and a habit of sucking a finger may reappear in them and the children may even lose the developed speech skills.   | Arseneault et al. (2011)            |
| 11  | Problems with attention focus and restlessness. This type of behavior is sometimes wrongfully interpreted as a symptom of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Therefore, diagnosing a psychologically traumatized child with ADHD requires thorough testing as it can be easily confused with the manifestations of psychological trauma.  | Briggs-Gowan, Carter, et al. (2010) |
| 12  | The appearance of complaints about the child's well-being which are not confirmed by analyzes and medical examinations. However, such complaints must not be considered simulating. A traumatized child can indeed experience the pain they complain of.  | Dvir et al. (2014)                  |

The goal of the study is to analyze the impact of parenting style on the stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event.

The study objectives include:

- determining the specific characteristics of having experienced a traumatic event and the indicators of a stressful state in preschool-aged children based on a theoretical analysis of scientific literature;
- conducting an empirical study to determine the relationship between parenting style and the manifestation of stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event.

The study hypothesis states that parenting style presents a factor in the emergence of stressful states in preschoolers at the age of 4-6 years old.

The structure of the article comprises an introduction including a review of literature on the problem under examination, the methods and methodology of the study, the results of the study, their discussion, and a conclusion.

### 3. Methods

The initial theoretical and methodological basis of our study of preschool children's stressful states is formed by the approach according to which the factors of the emergence of stressful states in preschool children are associated among other things with the experience of a traumatic event. Considering this, we will further be defining the development of stressful states in preschoolers in accordance with the following criteria: the level of their psychic tension and the level of anxiety.

In conducting the experimental study, we proceeded from the assumption that at the preschool age, stressful states are also determined by certain socio-psychological factors, specifically the characteristics of parenting style.

Based on the signified theoretical and methodological foundations, we conducted an

experimental study based on three kindergartens in the city of Karaganda (Kazakhstan).

The study sample included 93 preschool children (4-6 years old) who had experienced a traumatic event, as well as their parents (93 people).

The goals of the ascertaining stage of the empirical study included the following:

1. To determine the level and specific characteristics of the manifestation of stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event;
2. To study the psychological factors of the development of stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event;
3. To identify the relationship between parenting style and the manifestation of stressful states in preschool children who have experienced a traumatic event.

To meet the established goal and objectives of the empirical study, we deployed a set of psychodiagnostic methods: the Psychological Stress Measure questionnaire (PSM-25) (Vodopianova & Starchenkova, 2017, pp. 24-26), (adapted for children at the age of 4-6 years old), the Anxiety Test (R. Temml, M. Dorky, and V. Amen) (Golovei & Rybalko, 2008, pp. 271-280), and the "Parent-child relationships" questionnaire (Varga and Stolin, 1998; Lidars, 2015, pp. 142-146).

At the first stage of the study, we used the PSM-25 to diagnose stressful states in the study participants. Further analysis involved the integral indicator of psychic tension (IIPT) the value of which indicates the level of psychological stress in the examined preschoolers.

Anxiety level presents an important indicator of the presence of stressful states in an individual. Therefore, the second stage of the study involved deploying the Anxiety Test to determine the level of anxiety present in the studied preschoolers.

Further on, we tested the preschoolers' parents to determine the specific characteristics of their parent-child relationships and their influence on the level of the preschoolers' stressful state (Yeo, Teo, 2013). We proceeded from the assumption that the parents' negative attitude towards their children causes tension in their relationships and negatively affects the emotional state of preschoolers, which can determine the emergence of stressful states (Ostberg, Hagekull, 2000; Pereira et al., 2012).

Our study used the parental attitudes questionnaire created by A.Ia. Varga and V.V. Stolin (1998). The questionnaire focuses on identifying the type of parental attitude towards children following five generalized scales: "acceptance/rejection", "cooperation", "symbiosis", "control/authoritarian hypersocialization", and "attitude towards failure/the little loser".

Our choice of the methods used in the present study was determined by the following criteria: the validity of the method and its adaptation to the conditions of the study; the simplicity of its implementation and the assessment of the study results; the possibility of using the method in the professional practice of a psychologist.

The specific characteristics of the relationship between the studied phenomena were discovered by identifying the significance of correlations between them. To carry out calculations for the specific methods, we used nonparametric mathematical statistics methods. In particular, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22 statistical package.

In selecting the study methods, we followed the idea that in a situation of negative interpersonal interaction, specifically with their parents, preschoolers experience the negative emotions of fear and anxiety which, along with the experience of a traumatic event, entail the emergence and consolidation of stressful states in them, the problem of overcoming which is highly relevant.

#### 4. Results

Summarized results of the study using the PSM-25 method are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Distribution of the levels of the integral indicator of psychic tension (stress level) among the preschoolers by age according to the PSM-25 method (in adaptation) (%), n=93

| Levels  | Integral indicator of psychic tension in preschoolers |      |
|---------|---|------|
|         | Girls   | Boys |
| Low     | 18  | 8    |
| Average | 28  | 37   |
| High    | 54  | 55   |

The analysis of the psychological stress indicator among the overall sample of preschoolers shows that the levels of psychic tension were high both in boys and girls (55 and 54% of the sample, respectively). Thus, every second of the studied preschool children demonstrated a manifestation of psychological stress in the form of a high level of the integral indicator of psychological tension. Generalized indicators of anxiety among the study sample are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Quantitative indicators of the preschoolers' anxiety levels, n=93

| Levels  | Anxiety level |      |
|---------|---------------|------|
|         | Girls         | Boys |
| Low     | 21            | 10   |
| Average | 39            | 68   |
| High    | 40            | 22   |

According to the obtained study results, the indicators of the average anxiety level were the highest (68%) in male preschool children. Preschool girls demonstrated a much lower average anxiety level (39%), however, the high level of anxiety significantly dominated in them (40%).

Further on, using correlation analysis, we identified the characteristics of the relationship between the stress levels (according to the integral indicators of psychic tension) and anxiety in preschoolers:  $r_s=0.571438$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, it can be stated that the manifestation of stressful states in preschoolers is characterized by a high level of anxiety accompanied by disorders in the emotional sphere.

The results of the parental attitude questionnaire by A.Ia. Varga and V.V. Stolin (1998) interpreted in our study following 10 scales are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Manifestations of parental attitude towards adolescents according to the method of A.Ia. Varga and V.V. Stolin (%), n=93

| Modality of the attitude | Average value, % | Rank |
|--------------------------|------------------|------|
| Acceptance               | 31               | 8    |
| Rejection                | 55               | 3    |
| Cooperation              | 30               | 9    |
| Social desirability      | 56               | 2    |
| Symbiosis                | 51               | 4    |
| Distance                 | 35               | 7    |
| Authoritarianism         | 60               | 1    |
| Democratism              | 25               | 10   |
| Infantilization          | 46               | 5    |
| Confidence in the child  | 40               | 6    |

Note: The sum exceeds 100% since the same parents show different attitudes towards their child in different situations. Therefore, to demonstrate the leading type of attitude, we additionally provide the ranks of the scales in the table.

Among the average indicators of the parents' attitude towards their children, the first place in the ranking is taken by "authoritarianism" (demonstrated by 60% of the studied parents), and the second place is taken by "social desirability" (56%); "rejection" was third in popularity (55%). Thus, the three leading places in the ranking of the characteristics of parental attitude towards children are occupied by negative tendencies of oppression of a child's needs and initiatives – "authoritarianism" and "hostility" and the parents' orientation on the "social desirability" of their behavior rather than on the needs and individual characteristics of children. This type of attitude possibly causes high tension and anxiety in a child associated with the expectation of punishment and abasement thus provoking a child's negative emotions and stress reactions.

The following three places in decreasing order of significance are occupied by: "symbiosis" – the 4th place in the ranking (51%), "infantilization" – the 5th rank place (46%), and "confidence in the child" – the 6th rank place (40%). We believe that these scales are also related to one another as such attitudes put a preschooler in a situation of the so-called "soft dependency" as opposed to the stricter relationship depicted by the above-mentioned scales occupying the top three rank places. However, it also primarily presents a dependence on parents since the parents do not want their child to grow up; they want to be sure that the child does everything right, control them constantly, and do not develop the qualities of an adult such as responsibility, independence, and initiative in them. Therefore, parents bring a preschooler into a state of anxiety regarding their own abilities to cope with difficult, specifically stressful life situations.

An intermediate place in the ranking is occupied by the scale of "distance" – the 7th rank place (35%) which illustrates certain indifference and disinterest regarding a child's life, interests, needs, and problems. Indifference to a child's emotional experiences and feelings can also cause them anxiety, resentment, and a desire to draw attention to themselves and prove their importance to parents which can provoke stressful situations and disorders.

The last three places in the ranking are occupied by the following scales: "acceptance" – the 8th rank place (31%), "cooperation" – the 9th rank place (30%), and "democratism" – the 10th rank place (25%). The fact that the "authoritarianism" and "democratism" scales of parental attitude occupy extreme positions in the ranking – the 1st and 10th place, respectively – appears quite indicative in the context of the overall analysis. In our opinion, this finding can be explained by the overall predominance of authoritarian relationships between people in the Kazakh society which also applies to family relationships, particularly to relationships with children. Therefore, the study results demonstrate that the scales of positive parental attitudes toward children occupy the last place in the ranking.

The need to correct the attitude and behavior of parents in their interaction with preschool children to ensure their positive personal development and, most importantly, the prevention of the emergence and successful overcoming of stressful life situations presents an important objective of our study.

Below we present summarized data on correlations between the results obtained using the above-mentioned methods (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Coefficients of correlation between the indicators the preschoolers' stress levels (the integral indicator of psychic stress) and anxiety and the indicators of parenting styles (Spearman's r, n=93)

| Correlation of scales                                   | Spearman's r | p-value  |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Stress level – rejection-acceptance                     | -0.235452    | 0.029086 |
| Anxiety – rejection-acceptance                          | -0.252848    | 0.018834 |
| Stress level – cooperation                              | -0.280554    | 0.008885 |
| Anxiety – cooperation                                   | -0.375701    | 0.000364 |
| Rejection-acceptance – cooperation                      | 0.419768     | 0.000057 |
| Rejection-acceptance – symbiosis                        | -0.280209    | 0.008972 |
| Rejection-acceptance – authoritarian hypersocialization | -0.492393    | 0.000001 |

| Correlation of scales                                 | Spearman's r | p-value  |
|---|--------------|----------|
| Rejection-acceptance – “the little loser”             | -0.422962    | 0.000050 |
| Cooperation – authoritarian hypersocialization        | -0.493339    | 0.000001 |
| Cooperation – “the little loser”                      | -0.453758    | 0.000011 |
| “The little loser” – symbiosis                        | 0.395312     | 0.000165 |
| “The little loser” – authoritarian hypersocialization | 0.639687     | 0.000000 |
| Stress level – authoritarian hypersocialization       | 0.370309     | 0.000449 |
| Anxiety – authoritarian hypersocialization            | 0.298309     | 0.005275 |
| Stress level – “the little loser”                     | 0.312269     | 0.003422 |
| Anxiety – “the little loser”                          | 0.359044     | 0.000687 |

As a result of the analysis of patterns in the relationships characteristic of the indicators of parenting style of and the indicators of stress levels and anxiety in preschoolers, we discovered correlations allowing us to formulate the following provisions: the lower is the level of “cooperation” as a style of parental attitude demonstrated by adults, the higher are the levels of anxiety and stress observed in their children, and vice versa. The level of preschoolers’ anxiety is also significantly affected by the “authoritarian hypersocialization” and “the little loser” styles of parental attitude.

Moreover, the parents who follow “the little loser” style of parenting also tend to demonstrate the “symbiosis” and “authoritarian hypersocialization” styles in interaction with their children.

The parents who tend to demonstrate the “acceptance” style of parental attitude when interacting with their children typically also adhere to the “cooperation” style. At the same time, it is not characteristic of them to follow the “symbiosis”, “authoritarian hypersocialization”, and “the little loser” styles.

Following the “cooperation” style of parental attitude in the relationship with children is incompatible with the simultaneous use of the “authoritarian hypersocialization” and “the little loser” styles since a negative correlation was discovered between the indicators of these phenomena.

Overall, the conducted correlation analysis allows us to conclude that the “rejection”, “authoritarian hypersocialization”, and “the little loser” styles of parental attitude correspond to high indicators of stress in children while the lower indicators of stress in preschoolers are associated with the “acceptance”, “cooperation”, and “symbiosis” parental attitude styles.

## 5. Discussion

Thus, the results of the study demonstrate that the style of parental behavior presents a factor in the emergence of stressful states in preschool children. This conclusion is consistent with the results of J.D. Ford’s study (Ford, 2013) indicating that the attitude of parents towards their children plays an important role in the emotional relationships within a family which accumulates in the styles of parenting and parental behavior, directly influences the development of the emotional and volitional sphere of children, and provokes various psychoemotional and psychosomatic disorders in them as a result of non-constructive relationships (Liang, Berger, Brand, 2019). The results of the study conducted by K. Valentino et al. (2013) also indicate that the most common source of psychological traumatization in children is the model of relationships defined by a disturbance in the parent-child relationships accompanied by hyperprotection and emotional rejection. Meanwhile, a positive parental attitude and constructive parental behavior contribute to overcoming it.

The work of K.S. Hepburn et al. (2013) supports the conclusion that family support and the parents’ calmness have a positive effect on a traumatized child. Another study (Grasso et al., 2013) demonstrates that children who are more supported by their family and whose parents are calm show lower levels of the stressful state indicators. However, if parents have experienced psychological trauma themselves and cope with its consequences poorly, their children can experience retraumatization. This effect occurs due to children being heavily guided by their parents in all spheres of life and being good at feeling their mental states. Experiencing the anxiety, fear, and confusion of their parents, children

claim the emotions of their relatives and experience them as their own.

The studies conducted by E. Alisic et al. (2012, 2016) also note the relationship between the anxiety of children and their parents, the latter affecting children's overall well-being and personal development being capable of both provoking stress reactions and contributing to their prevention in cases of positive interpersonal interaction. One of these studies (Alisic et al., 2012) demonstrates that anxious children are raised in families where at least one parent has negative emotional experiences which applies especially to mothers. Moreover, the behavior of the mothers of anxious children can be theoretically grouped into the following styles: the first ones are highly active and strong and "control" the life of their child in a family completely while the second ones, on the contrary, are rigid and passive. However, the percentage of anxious children is quite high in both groups.

A.M. Klahr and S.A. Burt (2014) believe that the leading pathogenic role of parents in their interaction with children resides in distrust of the children's abilities. Mistrust in the formation of children's new experiences, rejection of their individuality, and dissonance between upbringing and the age-related development potential and needs accompanied by conflict relationships in the family present the main psycho-traumatic factors of a child's family upbringing.

According to V. Williamson et al. (2017), there are several ways in which a family can prevent the traumatization of a child, particularly by considering the individual and age characteristics of a child while choosing optimal styles of interaction with them in various life situations. The researcher proposes to take into account that the same pathogenic situation can have different traumatic effects depending on the psychological characteristics of a child determining their susceptibility to trauma and the various views of parents and children on the pathogenic situation and their assessment of the said situation.

## 6. Conclusion

As a result of the study, we can draw the following conclusions.

The conducted analysis of psychological literature allowed us to identify the characteristics of preschoolers' experience of a traumatic event and the indicators of a stressful state in them.

The analysis of the empirical study results allowed us to state that the style of parental behavior influences the emotional well-being of preschool children and provokes the emergence and consolidation of stressful states in them under the condition of negative influences which, among other negative factors, can lead to their chronization. Moreover, the manifestation of stressful states in preschool children is characterized by a high level of anxiety accompanied by disorders in their emotional sphere.

Therefore, the results of the study support the hypothesis that parenting style presents a factor in the emergence of stressful states in preschoolers. In the future perspective, this finding shapes the recommendations for reacting to stressful events experienced by a child, as well as the creation of a psychological support program for preventing and overcoming stressful states at the preschool age.

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