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Some aspects of developmentally (non-) stimulating interactions of parents with preschool children – implications of basic determinants of parental behaviour

Abstract: In everyday life, children encounter different parental behaviours, both stimulating and non-stimulating. At an early age, parental encouragement and supportive behaviours are crucial for children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, and their absence, neglect or undesirable attitudes towards the children have negative consequences. The aim of this research was to gain insight into certain aspects of the interactions between parents and preschool children (4–6 years), in relation to some basic determinants of parental behaviour. The research covered selected forms of stimulating parental behaviours (reading with children, playing together, singing rhymes, etc.) as well as non-stimulating ones (yelling at and hitting the child). The results show that there was a statistically significant difference in the practice of (non-) stimulating interactions between parents and children based on the gender of the parent and certain contextual factors. Parents with lower levels of education, with lower socio-economic status and from suburban areas were less engaged in stimulating activities with their children (reading to children, drawing with children, singing rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, etc.) that contribute to the development of graphomotor, cognitive and socio-emotional skills.

Keywords: preschool children, child development and learning, stimulating and non-stimulating interactions, parenting**,** home learning environment.

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Introduction

The true measure of child poverty and advantage is the quality of parenting a child receives, not just the money available to a household.

(Heckman 2011, p. 83)

The research (Shonkof and Philips 2000, p. 188) shows that the most intense period of nerve cell development and synaptogenesis in the brain occurs in the first four years of life. During this time, parents are the first teachers to their children, and each time they encourage them to learn something new, they help them build new connections in their brains. This is why parents and teachers are referred to as "dendrite growers", because as "gardeners", they prepare the environment for their children's growth (Tate 2011, p. 2).

Parents have not only the first but also the longest lasting impact on children (Wheeler and Connor 2009, p. 12). They have the closest on-going relationship, which is immediate and permeates all aspects of daily life. In a family environment, learning is spontaneous and based on children's initiative and natural curiosity, which is revealed through asking questions and taking the initiative to explore and try out new things. Parents can best understand children's interests, answer their questions, engage in play and turn any situation into an opportunity for learning and development. With appropriate communication and interaction, emotional stability, consistent guidance and adequate encouragement, parents can significantly advance their children's development and learning (Daly 2008, p. 171). Therefore, parenting is seen as the most demanding and responsible role in a person's life, accompanied at the same time by high social expectations and an emphasis on *good enough* (Houghughi and Speight 1998, p. 294), *supportive* (Oven 2013, p. 12) and *responsible parenting* (Ljubetić 2012, p. 114). According to Houghughi and Speight (1998, p. 294), the core activities that constitute *good enough parenting* can be classified into three categories: *care, control* and *development*. *Care* refers to all activities that tend to satisfy the basic physical needs (need for food, sleep, physical contact, etc.) and socio-emotional needs of the child (security, love, stable and positive interactions through which the child can recognise his or her value

and that of others). *Control* refers to directing children's behaviour by setting and maintaining boundaries[1] in a constructive way. *Development* includes all parenting activities aimed at playing together and socialising, encouraging children's development and learning and realising their full potentials. All of the above is further defined in the literature by the term *parenting capacity* (Cleaver et al. 1999, p. 18), which is considered to be a key dimension in promoting child protection and well-being. In this sense, the most important determinants of parenting capacity are (1) meeting the basic existential needs of the child, (2) ensuring the child's safety, (3) providing emotional warmth, (4) providing incentives and stimulating conditions for learning and development (5) guiding and setting boundaries and (6) stability (ibid.).

The term parenting refers to everything that parents do together with their children, and it includes the tasks, behaviour and quality of the relationship (Quinton 2004, p. 27). Parental behaviour towards children and the quality of their relationship at an early age is a major determinant of the child's health and future developmental outcomes (Oldershaw 2002, p. 2). In the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979, p. 173), children's development and learning are influenced by interactions with parents and others, and parenting behaviour is determined by multiple factors in a wider and narrower environment. Some parenting behaviours can be bad for children (shouting, physical punishment and neglect) while others are stimulating (responsiveness, playing games and reading picture books). The reason why some parents are caring and supportive whereas others are restrictive and uninterested is related to the *parenting ecology* (Quinton 2004, p. 27). In this contextual understanding of parenting, based on Bronfenbrenner's theory, it is emphasised that parental behaviour is shaped by multiple influences, including individual parental characteristics, child characteristics, material family conditions, quality of relationships with the spouse, relatives and friends and all contextual sources of stress or support that parents receive. Building on Bronfenbrenner's environmental approach, Belsky (1984, p. 91) identified three basic determinants of parental behaviour: (a) parents' personality and personal resources (gender, age, personality traits, their parents' behaviour towards them, satisfaction with marriage), (b) the child's characteristics (gender, age, temperament and abilities) and (c) contextual sources of stress and support (socio-economic status, family structure such as the number of family members, number of children or order of birth of children and different sources of stress or support).

Based on the above, the main goal of this paper is to gain insight into the selected aspects of interactions between parents and children of preschool age (4–6 years), which refer to two components of *parenting capacity* (Cleaver et al. 1999, p. 18) related to the *basic determinants of parental behaviour* (Belsky 1984, p. 91). The two selected components of parenting capacity include (a) *providing incentives*

[1] Setting and maintaining boundaries refers to encouraging the child to exercise control over his or her behaviour. Good control refers to setting reasonable boundaries through which the child learns to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not, and it is conducted in a consistent and warm-hearted manner. Poor control means unreasonable limits or those that are implemented inconsistently with punishment or other practices that have a negative effect on child development.

and stimulating conditions for learning and development and (b) *guiding and setting boundaries*. For the analysis of the basic determinants of parental behaviour, the following were observed: (a) *some determinants of parents' personal resources* (gender), (b) *some characteristics of the child* (gender) and (c) *contextual factors* (socio-economic status: parents' educational level, material family status, place of residence; family structure: number of children in the family and order of birth of children).

Developmental importance of quality interaction between parents and children

The quality of interaction with parents during the first years of life plays a key role in shaping children's perceptive, cognitive and linguistic abilities, and it influences their socio-emotional development and mental health in adulthood (Winter 2010, p. 7). The early responsive relationships that are formed with parents and other people in the environment are important for brain development. Tate (2011, p. 40) points out that the need for human interaction is so significant that it is considered as one of the basic needs for the brain. This refers to two-way communication, which is important for creating new connections in the brain, and in which the child does not take a passive role but rather participates actively in the exchange, sending and receiving messages in an appropriate and stimulating communication environment.

Supportive and caring parent–child interaction influences the development of linguistic, cognitive and social competence in early childhood. Parental responsiveness, positive emotional tone, appropriate instruction and support and shared engagement in specific contents are associated with positive developmental outcomes in the linguistic and cognitive domains (Dodici et al. 2003, p. 124). In addition, positive emotional statements, praise, smiling, caring touch and embrace without shouting or negative statements are associated with positive developmental outcomes in children (ibid., p. 126).

Paterson (2011, p. 19) argues that mutual and reciprocal interaction between children and parents is the most important element in a child's developmental process. This process is like "serving and returning" a tennis ball. When children seek interaction through facial expressions, crying, gesturing or using words and parents respond positively by gesturing, they return "the ball" in an appropriate and positive way, affirming the child and his or her expression, and an interaction conducive to brain development is established. However, in the absence of such an answer or if it is inappropriate, the brain does not receive adequate stimulation, which can negatively affect the further socio-emotional development of the child.[2]

[2] In this connection, it is important to mention the "frozen face" experiment designed by the American developmental psychologist Edward Tronick. The experiment points to the importance of responsive mother–child communication but also to the risk of non-responsive communication if it occurs continuously and over a long period of time. Also, the experiment shows how vulnerable children are in the event of a lack of emotional response by those whom they are in close relationships with. In just a few minutes after the mother's responsive reaction is missing, the child's behaviour takes on a dimension of negative emotionality.

Alternating and reciprocal role-taking significantly determines the quality of communication and affects the development of the child. A responsive mother who responds appropriately and positively to the child's need for communication creates a stimulating communication environment, which is crucial for early language development (but also significant for socio-emotional development). Neglected children—those who are rarely talked to—are less likely to develop language skills and to establish social interactions with people in the environment than children living in a supportive communication environment. Hence, we see that the development of social interaction and the development of communication have a dialectical connection and condition each other (Bratanić 1993, p. 95). Communication in a warm emotional atmosphere with a responsive dialogue, spontaneous playing with children, reading, talking and singing can significantly stimulate the development of children's social interaction and communication.

Developmentally (non-) stimulating interactions between parents and children at an early age

The contemporary role of parents is increasingly focused on engaging more in child upbringing and creating a stimulating home learning environment in which the child's intellectual needs will be met and his or her curiosity for reading and research will be developed (Ljubetic 2011, p. 89). The quality of the home environment is crucial for child development and learning, and it is considered more important than the parents' occupation, education or monthly income. In other words, *it is more important what parents do with their children than who they are* (Wheeler and Connor 2009, p. 9). Desforge (2003, p. 28) emphasises that what parents do with their children at home has a significant positive effect on the children's achievement and adjustment, even if all other positive factors are absent. Although low socio-economic status and lower levels of parents' education are risk factors for children's achievement, they can be overcome by parental engagement and active involvement in the upbringing of the child.

Each child has the right to have a parent who provides supportive and responsible parenting. Encouraging and responsible parenting of a young child consists of different joint activities involving the parent and the child that contribute to the quality of the mutual relationship and promote the development of the child's cognitive, socio-emotional and/or graphomotor abilities (Pećnik 2013, p. 12). Stimulating parenting is based on developmental and stimulating interactions between parents and children in the home environment. Wheeler and Connor (2009, p. 49) cite activities that "stretch" the child's brain and create a stimulating home environment for his or her development and learning: reading with and to children, going on visits, creating opportunities for playing with friends, playing with letters and numbers, going to the library, singing rhymes, drawing and painting. Roberts (2009, p. 11) also mentions this activities that promote early childhood development and learning, but he adds some more, such as: playing with the child but having the child lead the game, telling the stories, visiting friends and attending cultural

manifestations, playing with "dirty" materials (mud, sand, etc.), solving simple problems and encouraging new ideas.

Children who are talked to, sung to and played with and encouraged to explore and think in their everyday home environment have a considerable intellectual and social advantage, better language skills and a higher level of self-confidence, than children whose parents didn't expose them to those experiences (Wheeler and Connor 2009, p. 9). In particular, reading activities with and for children stand out as a significant contributor to their cognitive development. Preschool children who are less encouraged by the home learning environment and have fewer opportunities to read are at greater risk of having reading problems than children who have lived in a richer environment with more stimuli to develop this skill. Therefore, the home environment is crucial to the early development of literacy, emphasising the importance of early demonstration of the value of reading within the family, reading to children and creating opportunities for them to read on their own, responding to their reading interests, enriching the environment with a variety of reading materials (picture books, books and other media) and creating opportunities for joint conversations with children (Evangelou et al. 2008, p. 8). Numerous scientific studies (Stričević 2006, p. 2) have shown that reading to children beginning at an early age is just as important for their development as providing for their basic needs (food, health, love, safety, etc.). Children who were read to by their parents between their first and third years and talked to about the contents of picture books had better language competencies between the ages of two and seven and better reading comprehension at the age of seven than children whose parents read to them less often (Crain-Toreson and Dale 1992, according to Fekonja Peklaj and Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 59). These children also start to speak earlier, have richer vocabularies, use much more complex expressions and learn to read earlier than their counterparts (Bus et al. 1995; Hewison and Tizard 1980, according to Fekonja Peklaj and Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 59).

A favourable home environment encourages emotional competence and cognitive regulation in children, as opposed to an unfavourable environment, which causes children to exhibit poor memory and concentration, poor motivation and difficulties in planning and solving problems (Čudina Obradović and Obradović 2006, p. 382). Therefore, the implications of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Konvencija...1989) on parenting are focused on parental responsibilities in the upbringing of children. A parenting task is considered to be the application of those forms of leadership that take into account the needs of both – the parents and their child, without impairing the child's physical and psychological integrity (Daly 2008, p. 36). This includes non-violent child upbringing and positive discipline. It should be noted that electing not to employ corporal punishment does not mean adopting a permissive parenting style, manifested by the absence of prohibitions, supervision and control; rather, parents are assertive and establish reasonable boundaries that are implemented in a consistent and warm-hearted manner. Children do not become badly behaved because of the absence of corporal punishment but because of the inconsistent and permissive behaviour of parents towards children. Longitudinal research (McCord 1997, according to Daly 2008,

p. 47) links corporal punishment to socially maladaptive children's behaviours, such as aggression, delinquency and antisocial behaviour. Physical punishment can be effective in achieving short-term obedience in children, but in the long run it results in many socio-emotional problems. The research indicates that the parenting style and disciplinary strategies used by parents influence children's social competence (Katz and Mcclellan 1999, p. 26). Meanwhile, good parenting (by which we mean the authoritative parenting style) develops the child's social skills (Čudina Obradović and Obradović 2006, p. 277). A rigid (authoritarian) parenting style that has low levels of warmth and high levels of control with inadequate parental actions (frequent shouting, commands, and (corporal) punishments) leads to lower levels of self-esteem and underdeveloped social competence in children. This means that parents who apply corporal punishment create a risky environment for their child's socio-emotional development and his or her ability to cope peers.

Based on this theoretical insight, we can conclude that interactions between parents and children of preschool age are the most important determinant of the children's future learning and development. However, parenting behaviour towards children is determined by many factors, which significantly impact the quality and type of interactions parents have with their children. Accordingly, we set out the following research problem below.

Methodology

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study was to gain insight into some aspects of the interactions between parents and their preschool children (4–6 years) regarding *the basic determinants of parenting behaviour*: (a) some determinants of parents' personal resources (gender), (b) some characteristics of the child (gender) and (c) contextual factors (socio-economic status: educational level of parents, material status of the family, place of residence; family structure: number of children in the family and order of birth of the children). The study covered two *components of parenting capacity*: (a) providing incentives and stimulating conditions for learning and development and (b) guiding and setting boundaries, exploring some forms of stimulating parental interactions (reading with children, playing together, singing rhymes, etc.) as well as the non-stimulating ones (yelling at or hitting the child). Hence, three research questions were posed:

– How frequent are the examined stimulating and non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children?
– Is there a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of particular developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children and the selected basic determinants of parenting behaviour?

– Is there a statistically significant difference in the frequency of particular developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children in relation to the selected basic determinants of parenting behaviour?

Sample

The survey included 310 parents of preschool children. Data were collected in 14 kindergartens in the Canton of Sarajevo, 10 in the city centre (distributed in different municipalities) and four in the wider city area (in different municipalities). In the case of boys, 29 fathers and 123 mothers completed the questionnaires, and in the case of girls, 29 fathers and 122 mothers did so. Seven parents did not enter information about their own or their child's gender. Parents' ages ranged from 25 to 53 years (M = 35.37; SD = 5.04) while the children were 4 to 6 years of age (M = 5.23; SD = 0.94. In terms of birth order, the largest number of participants were parents of first-born children (47.74%), followed by those of second-born children (31.94%), and third-born children (6.45%). In terms of the number of children in the family, most parents had two children (54.84%), followed by those with one child (26.13%) and three children (11.61%). Regarding the socio-economic status of the family, most parents reported good material status (61.61%), followed by medium material status (29.68%), very good status (6.45%) and poor material status (1.61%). None of the survey participants reported a very poor status, while two (0.65%) did not provide information on their family's material status.

In terms of educational status, the highest number of parents had secondary education (42.90%) followed by higher education (42.58%), master/doctorate education (10.97%) and elementary school education (3.55%). In the inner part of the city, there were more parents with a master's degree/doctorate (100% of this sub-sample) as well as with a university degree (87.1% of this sub-sample). Most of the parents with secondary school education were in the inner part of the city (55.63%), whereas for the primary school level, the highest number of parents was in suburban settlements (90% of this sub-sample).

In terms of the employment status, most of the parents were employed (68.39% of the sample), while a minority were unemployed (31.62%). Far more employed parents (91.61%) than unemployed parents (8.39%) had children who attended the whole-day kindergarten programme. Of the children who attended the compulsory preschool programme, the largest number of parents were the unemployed ones (53.38%) vs. the employed ones (44.62%). In all municipalities in the city centre, there were more employed parents (84.6% of this sub-sample) than unemployed parents (15,4%), while this ratio was reversed in suburban settlements (only 29.07% of this sub-sample was employed vs. 70,93% of unemployed).

Instrument

The scale for assessing the diversity and frequency of developmentally (non-) stimulating interactions between parents and children of preschool age was constructed for the research purposes based on a theoretical analysis of recent literature. The scale consisted of 14 statements using a five-point Likert-type scale, where the parents were asked about the frequency of particular examined forms of interactions in the previous seven-day period (an answer of "1" means meant "not once in 7 days", and "5meant 2–3 times a day"). Its reliability, expressed by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was $\alpha = 0.826$, which supports its high reliability and internal consistency. Two questions called for a response to be recoded, as their content was defined differently from the rest. These claims were: "Hit the child when he/she disobeyed you" and, "Yelled at the child when he/she didn't act according to your expectations".

Procedure

The participants were involved in the research anonymously and voluntarily. The study was conducted using the group testing method, on kindergarten/school premises, at the time when parents brought their children to kindergarten/school. The testing was conducted by the researcher and lasted for 20 minutes.

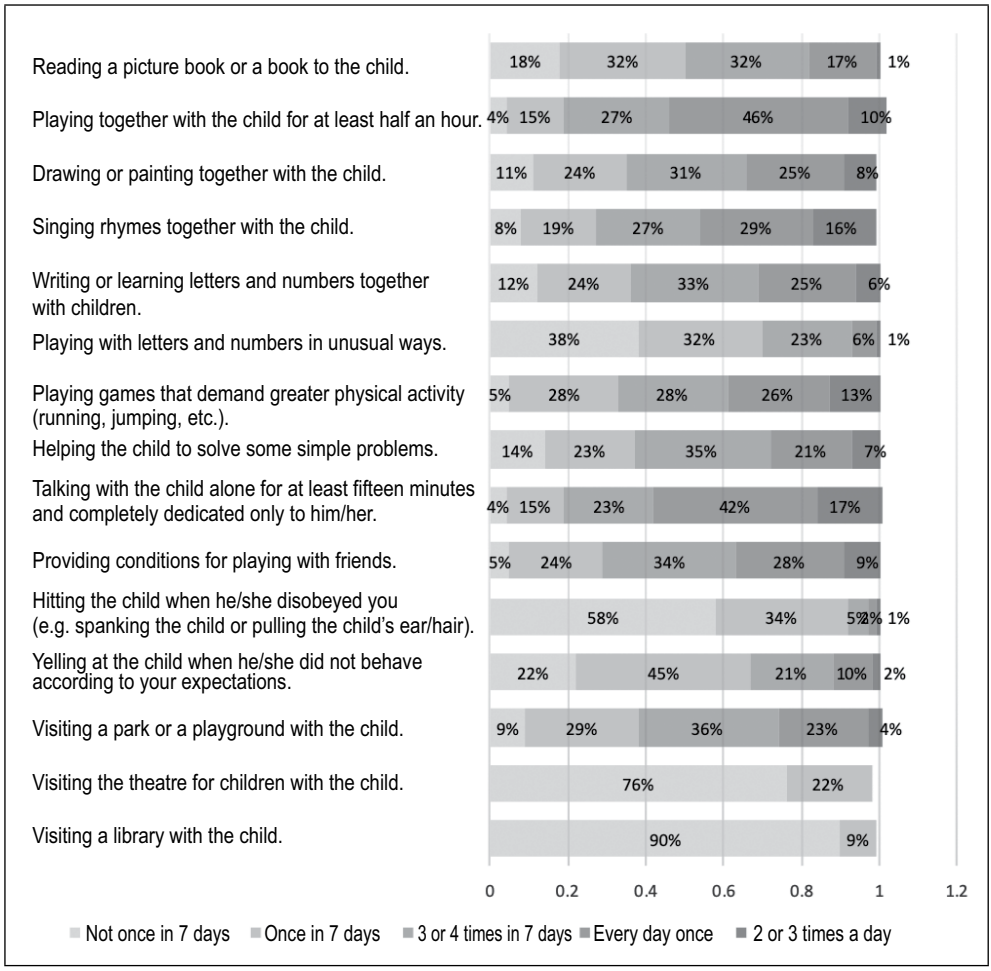
Data analysis

This was an empirical non-experimental correlation-type study. The internal consistency of the scale was verified using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Spearman's correlation coefficient (rs) and the Mann–Whitney U test were used in the data analysis. Data processing was performed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) programme.

Results of the research and interpretation

Frequency of the examined stimulating and non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children

In order to assess the diversity and frequency of developmentally (non-) stimulating interactions between parents and children of preschool age, we provided parents with a scale to indicate whether or not each individual claim that related to specific stimulating or non-stimulating interactions with children referred to them. The graphical representation (*Graph 1*) shows the diversity and frequency of developmentally stimulating interactions between parents and children in the seven-day period preceding the survey.



Graph 1: The percentage of responses on the Scale of assessment of the diversity and frequency of developmentally (non-) stimulating interactions between parents and children (N=310)

Based on the above, it can be concluded that most children are exposed to stimulating forms of interaction with their parents on a weekly basis. It is interesting to note that the most common stimulating activity between parents and children is play, and almost half of the parents (46%) reported that they play with their children every day. Meanwhile, reading to children usually occurs as an activity once in seven days. Only one-third of the parents said they read to children every day, and almost one-fifth said they do not do so not even once in seven days. Reading to children is just one of the activities that creates a stimulating environment for early literacy, but it is considered the central one (Bus et al. 1995, according to Fekonja Peklaj and Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 58). The frequency and quality of reading to children are strong predictors of literacy development, language development and reading comprehension (Bus et al. 1995, DeBaryshe 1995, Reese and Cox 1999, Stadler and

McEvoy 2003, according to Fekonja Peklaj and Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 58). The data point to the need for systematic and public encouragement[3] of parents to read to their children and to familiarise themselves with the importance of reading for children at an early age, which should include preschool institutions, health centres, libraries, the media, etc.

When it comes to the developmentally non-stimulating actions of parents towards children, a significant percentage of parents (42%) reported that they apply corporal punishment. In comparison, shouting at children was a much more common form of unwanted interaction, practiced to a greater or lesser extent by 78% of the parents. Parents who attempt to establish control and discipline of their children by shouting and corporal punishment do not provide a stimulating environment for growing up or respect the basic rights that belong to every child under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Konvencija 1989). Based on the above, we emphasise the importance of publicly promoting the non-violent upbringing of children and popularising the idea of positive parenting through parent support programmes, to which each parent is entitled (Durrant 2007, p. 3).

Connection between the frequency of developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children and the selected contextual factors

In the following, we examine the association of stimulating and non-stimulating parenting behaviours with two contextual factors: parents' educational level and material family status. As these are the ordinal variables, we used Spearman's correlation coefficient (r_s). The data are presented in *Table 1*.

Positive correlations indicate that a higher score on a particular claim is accompanied by a higher parental educational level (i.e. the material status of the family). Based on the above table, it can be concluded that parents were more likely to read books or picture books to their children if they had a higher educational level ($r_s = 0.308$, $p < 0.001$) and higher material status ($r_s = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$). Parents with a higher educational level were more likely to play with their children ($r = 0.162$, $p < 0.01$). Parents with better material status were more likely to draw or colour with their children ($r_s = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$). Parents who sang songs more often with their children also had a higher educational level ($r_s = 0.123$, $p < 0.05$) and better material status ($r_s = 0.152$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore,

[3] Influenced by the knowledge of the importance of reading to a child at a young age, programmes are being developed to encourage reading from birth. In America, a programme called 'Born to Read' has been launched to raise awareness of the importance of reading for parents of young children. This programme also includes kindergartens, health centres, libraries, media, etc. In the UK and Scandinavia, and even in Croatia, parents receive library cards for children and information about the importance of reading to children from a young age when they are in maternity wards. A group of Ohio pediatricians received the World Reading Incentive Award in 2003. Each time a child came for an examination, paediatricians informed the parents of the importance of reading to children. Thus, by the age of five, children could receive ten picture books (ten mandatory examinations). Owning ten books of your own is considered the minimum that should be provided for every child (Stricevic, 2006).

parents who wrote and learned letters with their children more often also had a higher educational level (r_s = 0.161, p <0.01) and better material status (r_s = 0.157, p <0.01). Conversely, parents who hit children more often when they disobeyed them had a lower educational level (r_s = -0.223, p <0.001) and a lower material status (r_s = -0.158, p <0.01). Similarly, parents who yelled at the children were more likely to have a lower educational level (r_s = -0.136, p <0.05) and lower material status (r_s = -0.207, p <0.001). Parents with higher educational levels visited the park/playground with their children more frequently (r_s = 0.204, p <0.001) as well as the children's theatre (r_s = 0.174, p <0.01). Parents with a better material status also took their children to the theatre for children more often (r_s = 0.181, p <0.01). All the correlations are statistically significant. These results add to the growing evidence showing that parental educational capacities reflect on their children's lives within the family (Milanović et al. 2000).

(Non-) stimulating parental behaviours	**Educational level**	**Material status**
Reading a picture book or a book to the child.	0,308***	0,237***
Playing together with the child for at least half an hour.	0,162**	0,093
Drawing or painting together with the child.	0,048	0,138*
Singing rhymes together with the child.	0,123*	0,152**
Writing or learning letters and numbers together with children.	0,161**	0,157**
Playing with letters and numbers in unusual ways (cutting letters/numbers out of paper, putting words/sentences together on a magnet board, etc.)	0,105	0,053
Playing games that demand greater physical activity (running, jumping, etc.).	0,039	0,029
Helping the child to solve some simple problems or tasks (puzzles/riddles, etc.).	0,097	0,106
Talking with the child alone for at least fifteen minutes and completely dedicated only to him/her.	0,010	0,044
Providing conditions for playing with friends.	-0,099	-0,009
Hitting the child when he/she disobeyed you (e.g. spanking the child or pulling the child's ear/hair).	-0,223***	-0,158**
Yelling at the child when he/she did not behave according to your expectations.	-0,136*	-0,207***
Visiting a park or a playground with the child.	0,204***	0,081
Visiting the theatre for children with the child.	0,174**	0181**
Visiting a library with the child.	0,070	0,042

*Table 1: Correlations of educational level and material status with (non-) stimulating parental behaviours (N=310) Legend: * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001*

Examining the differences in the frequency of particular developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children in relation to the selected contextual factors

In the following, we will examine the differences in the frequency of particular developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children in relation to the selected contextual factors: place of residence (suburban or urban) and family structure (number of children in the family and birth order). In order to check for differences in (non-) stimulating parenting behaviours, taking into consideration the area of the city, the areas were divided into narrower urban (four municipalities) and suburban areas. The Mann–Whitney U test was applied because participants' responses to the corresponding scale statements were not distributed according to the normal curve (*Table 2*).

(Non-) stimulating parental behaviours	**Grouping variables (area of the city)**	**Average rank**	**U**	**P**
Reading a picture book or a book to the child.	urban	174,08	5246	0,000
	suburban	104,72		
Playing together with the child at least for half an hour.	urban	169,41	6517	0,000
	suburban	119,28		
Drawing or painting together with the child.	urban	161,40	7793	0,015
	suburban	134,68		
Singing rhymes together with the child.	urban	165,70	6980	0,000
	suburban	125,11		
Writing or learning letters and numbers together with children.	urban	165,70	7348	0,001
	suburban	128,94		
Playing with letters and numbers in unusual ways (cutting letters/ numbers of paper, putting words/sentences together on a magnet board, etc.)	urban	162,07	8160	0,028
	suburban	138,38		
Playing games that demand greater physical activity (running, jumping...).	urban	155,92	9538	0,891
	suburban	154,41		
Helping the child to solve some simple problems or tasks (solving puzzles/riddles, solving simple problem tasks).	urban	155,10	9260	0,719
	suburban	151,18		
Talking with the child alone for at least fifteen minutes and completely dedicated only to him/her.	urban	159,72	8536	0,116
	suburban	142,75		
Providing conditions for playing with friends.	urban	145,92	7718	0,012
	suburban	173,20		
Hitting the child when he/she disobeyed you (e.g. spanking the child or pulling the child's ear/hair).	urban	145,12	7306	0,000
	suburban	182,54		
Yelling at the child when he/she did not behave according to your expectations.	urban	150,33	8474	0,082
	suburban	168,97		
Visiting a park or a playground with the child.	urban	163,95	7226	0,001
	suburban	128,02		
Visiting the theatre for children with the child.	urban	157,35	8842	0,218
	suburban	147,03		
Visiting a library with the child.	urban	156,45	9420	0,558
	suburban	153,03		

Table 2: Differences in (non-) stimulating parental behaviours in relation to the city area (N=310)

Based on the above, it can be concluded that parents from urban areas were more likely to read to their children more frequently, play with them, draw/paint with them, sing rhymes with them, write and learn letters together and play with them more frequently with letters and numbers in unusual ways. On average, parents from suburban neighbourhoods were statistically significantly more likely than parents from urban municipalities to create conditions for their child to play with friends (Mann–Whitney U = 7718, p <0.05). Also, parents from the suburbs hit their children when they did not obey them statistically significantly (Mann–Whitney U = 7306, p <0.001) more frequently than urban parents. Parents from the urban municipalities were statistically significantly more likely to visit the park/playground with their children than parents from suburban neighbourhoods (Mann–Whitney U = 7226, p <0.01). Parents from suburban neighbourhoods shouted at their children more frequently than parents from urban areas, but the difference was not statistically significant (Mann–Whitney U = 8474, p >0.05).

Regarding the order of birth (*Table 3*), it can be seen that parents read more to their first-born children compared to children who were born later, and the result was statistically significant (Mann–Whitney U = 6881, p <0.01). Likewise, they were statistically significantly more likely to play with their first-born children compared to later-born children (Mann–Whitney U = 7327, p <0.05). Parents were also statistically significantly more likely to draw and colour with their first-born children (Mann Whitney U = 7103, p <0.05), sing rhymes (Mann Whitney U = 7311, p <0.05) and visit a park or playground with them (Mann Whitney U = 5955, p <0.01)

(Non-) stimulating parental behaviours	**Grouping variables (order of birth)**	**Average rank**	**U**	**P**
Reading a picture book or a book to the child.	first	145,54	6881	0,002
	second/third	117,84		
Playing together with the child for at least for half an hour.	first	143,47	7327	0,015
	second/third	121,55		
Drawing or painting together with the child.	first	142,33	7103	0,013
	second/third	119,70		
Singing rhymes together with the child.	first	141,73	7311	0,027
	second/third	121,43		
Writing or learning letters and numbers together with children.	first	137,20	8235	0,374
	second/third	129,06		
Playing with letters and numbers in unusual ways (cutting letters/ numbers out of paper, putting words/sentences together on a magnet board, etc.)	first	139,28	7934	0,156
	second/third	126,57		
Playing games that demand greater physical activity (running, jumping, etc.).	first	137,48	8196	0,341
	second/third	128,74		

Helping the child to solve some simple problems or tasks (solving puzzles/riddles, etc.).	first	132,58	8497	0,889
	second/third	131,31		
Talking with the child alone for at least fifteen minutes and completely dedicated only to him/her.	first	140,92	7551	0,053
	second/third	123,43		
Providing conditions for playing with friends.	first	136,37	7921	0,283
	second/third	126,63		
Hitting the child when he/she disobeyed you (e.g. spanking the child or pulling the child's ear/hair).	first	130,30	8309	0,399
	second/third	137,33		
Yelling at the child when he/she did not behave according to your expectations.	first	134,48	8630	0,810
	second/third	132,33		
Visiting a park or a playground with the child.	first	150,36	5955	0,000
	second/third	110,13		
Visiting the theatre for children with the child.	first	133,95	8707	0,887
	second/third	132,96		
Visiting a library with the child.	first	130,92	8399	0,253
	second/third	136,59		

Table 3: (Non-) stimulating parental behaviours with children in relation to the order of the birth (N=310)

When it comes to the number of children in the family, *Table 4* shows that parents with only one child were statistically significantly more likely to read to their children than parents with more children (Mann–Whitney U = 7149, $p < 0.05$). They also drew or coloured with them more frequently (Mann-Whitney U = 6774, $p < 0.05$) and visited a park or playground with them more frequently (Mann–Whitney U = 6192, $p < 0.01$). Similar tendencies were observed in terms of playing with the child, although the result was not statistically significant (Mann–Whitney U = 7902, $p > 0.05$). These findings, which indicate that younger children or children from families with multiple children are the recipients of fewer stimulating behaviours (reading, playing), are consistent with other studies. They point to the theory of reduced family incentives (Blake, 1981, according to Cudina Obradovic and Obradovic, 2006), which assumes that with each subsequent child parents will have less time and material resources for each individual child. As a result, encouraging treatment of an individual child will become less common in families with multiple children.

(Non-) stimulating parental behaviours	Grouping variables (number of children)	Average rank	U	P
Reading a picture book or a book to the child.	one	160,73	7149	0,038
	two or more	138,87		
Playing together with the child for at least half an hour.	one	152,44	7902	0,352
	two or more	142,81		
Drawing or painting together with the child.	one	162,83	6774	0,014
	two or more	136,72		
Singing rhymes together with the child.	one	150,94	7805	0,402
	two or more	142,72		
Writing or learning letters and numbers together with children.	one	139,71	7995	0,449
	two or more	147,74		
Playing with letters and numbers in unusual ways (cutting letters/numbers out of paper, putting words/ sentences together on a magnet board, etc.)	one	144,65	8395	0,910
	two or more	145,83		
Playing games that demand greater physical activity (running, jumping, etc.).	one	142,83	8248	0,728
	two or more	146,53		
Helping the child to solve some simple problems or tasks (puzzles/riddles, etc.).	one	138,62	7907	0,476
	two or more	146,12		
Talking with the child alone for at least fifteen minutes and completely dedicated only to him/her.	one	157,51	7411	0,096
	two or more	140,13		
Providing conditions for playing with friends.	one	144,83	8134	0,861
	two or more	142,99		
Hitting the child when he/she disobeyed you (e.g. spanking the child or pulling the child's ear/hair).	one	141,77	8162	0,591
	two or more	146,95		
Yelling at the child when he/she did not behave according to your expectations.	one	135,74	7674	0,191
	two or more	149,28		
Visiting a park or a playground with the child.	one	169,62	6192	0,001
	two or more	134,27		
Visiting the theatre for children with the child.	one	148,62	8211	0,593
	two or more	144,29		
Visiting a library with the child.	one	144,49	8382	0,799
	two or more	145,89		

Table 4: (Non-) stimulating parental behaviours with children in relation to the number of children in the family (N=310)

Differences in the frequency of developmentally stimulating and developmentally non-stimulating parental interactions with preschool children with respect to some parent and child characteristics

Considering that parenting behaviour is shaped by multiple influences, including the characteristics of children and parents, the relationship between the tested forms of interactions and the gender of parents and children was examined. *Table 5* shows that parent–child interactions were determined more by the gender of the parent than by the gender of the child. No statistically significant difference was found with respect to the gender of the child and the (non-) stimulating interactions examined. However, given the gender of the parents and the average grades obtained, it is noticeable that mothers were more engaged in all stimulating interactions, except for games that require more physical activity and attending theatre for children, where fathers achieved slightly higher average grades. Mothers also drew and painted with their children (Mann–Whitney $U = 5888$, $p < 0.05$), sang rhymes with them (Mann–Whitney $U = 5409$, $p < 0.05$) and talked to them alone for at least fifteen minutes each day statistically significantly more frequently than fathers (Mann–Whitney $U = 5250$, $p < 0.01$). Regarding non-stimulating interactions, mothers yelled at or hit their children slightly more frequently than fathers, but not to a statistically significant level. Furthermore, boys were more frequently exposed to such non-stimulating interactions than girls, with the results nearly but not quite reaching statistical significance.

		PARENTS			CHILD		
(Non-) stimulating parental behaviours	**Grouping variables (gender)**	**Average rank**	**U**	**P**	**Average rank**	**U**	**P**
Reading a picture book or a book to the child.	male	148,43	6987	0,680	151,13	1134	0,625
	female	153,48			155,87		
Playing together with the child for at least half an hour.	male	151,68	7179	0,891	149,55	1109	0,347
	female	153,32			158,48		
Drawing or painting together with the child.	male	129,80	5888	0,028	147,51	1079	0,307
	female	156,77			157,49		
Singing rhymes together with the child.	male	121,69	5409	0,002	154,86	1134	0,706
	female	159,33			151,16		
Writing or learning letters and numbers together with children.	male	138,96	6428	0,158	160,05	1084	0,215
	female	156,37			147,91		
Playing with letters and numbers in unusual ways (cutting letters/numbers out of paper, putting words/sentences together on a magnet board, etc.)	male	151,75	7183	0,899	155,67	1152	0,728
	female	153,30			152,32		
Playing games that demand greater physical activity (running, jumping, etc.).	male	170,42	6229	0,081	156,89	1133	0,555
	female	148,82			151,09		
Helping the child to solve some simple problems or tasks (puzzles/riddles, etc.).	male	151.,72	7155	0,982	148,43	1093	0,406
	female	151,45			156,51		
Talking with the child alone for at least fifteen minutes and completely dedicated only to him/her.	male	118,98	5250	0,001	150,55	1125	0,540
	female	160,57			156,45		
Providing conditions for playing with friends.	male	143,22	6680	0,426	150,24	1120	0,715
	female	152,90			153,77		
Hitting the child when he/she disobeyed you (e.g. spanking the child or pulling the child's ear/hair).	male	145,93	6840	0,431	161,05	1069	0,110
	female	154,70			146,91		
Yelling at the child when he/she did not behave according to your expectations.	male	137,26	6328	0,106	163,25	1035	0,052
	female	156,77			144,69		
Visiting a park or a playground with the child.	male	140,41	6514	0,237	145,83	1053	0,164
	female	154,80			159,26		
Visiting the theatre for children with the child.	male	154,74	7036	0,717	146,51	1063	0,080
	female	151,34			159,53		
Visiting a library with the child.	male	151,38	7161	0,757	151,38	1137	0,306
	female	153,39			156,63		

Table 5. (Non-) stimulating parental behaviours with children in relation to the parent and child gender (N=310)

Conclusion

The above results clearly show large variations in the frequency of stimulating and non-stimulating interactions between parents and children of preschool age based on specific characteristics of parents and children as well as certain contextual factors. It can be concluded that parents from urban municipalities and those with a higher educational level and better material status were more likely to engage in desirable interactions with their children, thus creating a more stimulating home learning environment for child development and learning. Parents with a higher educational level and better material status were statistically significantly more likely to read books or picture books to their children, to sing rhymes with them, to write more often and to learn letters with them. In addition, parents with a higher educational level were statistically significantly more likely to play more often with their children, visit the park/playground with them and visit the theatre for children. Parents with a better material status were statistically significantly more likely to draw or paint more often with their child and take their children to the theatre for children. Parents from urban areas were more likely to read to children more often, play with them, draw/paint with them, sing songs with them, write and learn letters with them and play with letters and numbers in unusual ways. Meanwhile, parents from suburban neighbourhoods, of lower educational levels and with a poorer material status were more likely to engage in undesirable interactions (such as yelling or hitting the child) with their children. Parents who hit their children more often when they disobeyed had lower educational attainment and lower material status. Similarly, parents with lower educational attainment and a lower material status yelled at their children more frequently. Parents from suburban neighbourhoods were also statistically significantly more likely to hit their children when they not obey them. Additionally, parents were also more likely to engage in stimulating interactions with their first-born children compared to children born later, and this was also true for only children compared to children from families with multiple children. The gender of parents and children was not related to the stimulating and non-stimulating interactions examined in the study, whereas the gender of the parents significantly determined the type and frequency of the interactions. Mothers were more frequently engaged than fathers in stimulating activities with their children.

Based on the results mentioned above, and taking into account the contextual factors, two different educational approaches can be observed: on the one hand, parents living in urban areas, who have higher educational attainment and a better socio-economic status, and on the other, for parents living in suburban environments, with a lower educational level and lower socio-economic status. While some parents are focused on actively supporting and stimulating their children's development and learning, others passively follow their children's natural development. The final result of these different approaches to upbringing is a gap in developmental opportunities for children from less stimulated families, resulting in poorer child achievement. Recognising these risk factors (lower levels of education, lower socio-economic status, living in suburban municipalities) and their impact on

parenting behaviours could lead to strengthening contextual sources of parental support and empowerment (e.g. providing various forms of parenting support) in the local community.

The results could be useful for planning parenting programmes, which represent just one element in the wide range of support strategies for parents in local communities (which can be implemented through health, education, cultural and other public institutions). Parenting programmes can help parents improve their parenting and the quality of the home learning environment to improve child development and learning. The developmental gap, created very early among children of different socio-economic backgrounds, could be reduced if parents are empowered and encouraged to engage with their children in ways that contribute to their early development and learning. Such support could significantly improve parents' ability to create an optimal environment for the development of their children's potential in the family setting while ensuring that their basic developmental needs are met. Parents need to be made aware (especially parents who are at risk) that what they do with their children on a daily basis—the way they deal with them—significantly determines the children's future achievements, as stimulating activities such as reading to children, playing games and responsive and warm interactions are associated with better developmental outcomes. In order to improve children's well-being and developmental outcomes, it is necessary to provide parents with different means of support to help them engage with their children in daily activities that stimulate early development and learning.

The main limitation of this research is that the sample is unrepresentative, as only a number of parents were surveyed. However, we must point out that the construction of the sample, based on the defined variables, effectively represents the population of parents in the Canton of Sarajevo, so the results of this research could be used to plan further research or actions.

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Dženeta CAMOVIĆ (Univerza v Sarajevu, Bosna in Hercegovina)

NEKATERI VIDIKI RAZVOJNO (NE)STIMULATIVNIH INTERAKCIJ STARŠEV S PREDŠOLSKIMI OTROKI – IMPLIKACIJE TEMELJNIH DETERMINANT STARŠEVSKEGA VEDENJA

Povzetek: Otroci se v vsakdanjem življenju srečujejo z raznolikim, bolj ali manj stimulativnim vedenjem staršev. V zgodnjem obdobju sta podpora in spodbujevalno vedenje staršev ključna za otrokov kognitivni, socialni in čustveni razvoj. V kolikor to umanjka ali pa starši celo zanemarjajo otroka oz. imajo do njega neustrezen odnos, ima to negativne posledice. Namen raziskave, ki jo predstavljamo v prispevku, je bil pridobiti vpogled v nekatere vidike interakcije med starši in njihovimi predšolskimi otroki (starimi med 4 in 6 let) v povezavi z nekaterimi temeljnimi determinantami starševskega vedenja. V raziskavi smo upoštevali izbrane oblike stimulativnega (branje z otroki, igranje z njimi, petje pesmic, ipd.) ter nestimulativnega starševskega vedenja (vpitje na otroke, telesno kaznovanje). Ugotovili smo statistično pomembne razlike zlasti med spoloma staršev, ko gre za prakse (ne)stimulativnih interakcij med starši in otroki. Prav tako rezultati kažejo, da starši z nižjo stopnjo izobrazbe, nižjim socialno-ekonomskim statusom in tisti iz ruralnega okolja v manjši meri izvajajo stimulativne dejavnosti s svojimi otroki (branje, risanje, petje, igranje s črkami in števili, itd.), tj. dejavnosti, ki prispevajo k razvoju grafomotoričnih, kognitivnih ter socialno-emocionalnih spretnosti.

Ključne besede: predšolski otroci, razvoj in učenje otrok, stimulativne in nestimulativne interakcije, starševstvo, domače učno okolje.

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