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Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Children Through Carrying Out Musical Activities in the Daily Routine

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☞ In the context of kindergarten, the daily routine includes various activities aimed at the holistic development of children. Carrying out musical activities in the daily routine plays an important role in encouraging social and emotional learning. For the present research, which included preschool children, we developed a plan for implementing elements of the children's daily routine enriched with musical activities, monitored the effect of this routine on social and emotional skills, and verified the realisation of the planned musical goals. The results of the research confirmed the effect of implementing musical activities regarding (1) self-awareness and self-management – children more often recognised their own emotions, they became aware of their emotions and regulated them, they expressed a feeling of joy, respected the agreed rules, understood what is right or wrong and asked for help if they needed it; and (2) social skills for establishing relationships and social awareness – children more often encouraged other children in the group to participate in activities, they successfully participated in common activities, shared things with other children, and recognised and empathised with the emotions of other children. Most of the children were also successful in achieving the planned musical goals.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, kindergarten, daily routine, musical activities, preschool children

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Spodbujanje socialnega in čustvenega učenja predšolskih otrok z izvajanjem glasbenih dejavnosti v dnevni rutini

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☞ V vrtcu dnevna rutina vključuje različne dejavnosti, ki so namenjene celostnemu razvoju otrok. Izvajanje glasbenih dejavnosti kot del dnevne rutine ima pomembno vlogo pri spodbujanju socialnega in čustvenega učenja. V raziskavi, v katero smo vključili predšolske otroke, smo oblikovali načrt izvedbe elementov dnevne rutine, obogatene z glasbenimi dejavnostmi, spremljali učinek izvajanja dnevne rutine na razvoj socialnih in čustvenih veščin ter preverili uresničevanje načrtovanih glasbenih ciljev. Izsledki raziskave so potrdili učinek izvajanja glasbenih dejavnosti na področju 1) samozavedanja in samokontrole – otroci so pogosteje prepoznavali lastna čustva, jih ozaveščali in uravnavali, izražali veselje, spoštovali dogovorjena pravila, razumeli, kaj je prav in kaj narobe, ter prosili za pomoč, če so jo potrebovali, in na področju 2) socialnih veščin za vzpostavljanje odnosov in socialnega samozavedanja – otroci so pogosteje spodbujali k dejavnostim druge otroke v skupini, se uspešno vključevali v skupno delo, delili stvari z drugimi otroki ter prepoznavali čustva drugih otrok in se vanje vživljali. Večina otrok je bilo uspešna tudi pri doseganju načrtovanih glasbenih ciljev.

Ključne besede: socialno in čustveno učenje, vrtec, dnevna rutina, glasbene dejavnosti, predšolski otroci

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which children (and adults) acquire knowledge, develop skills, recognise and manage emotions, show empathy towards others, establish and maintain relationships within society, and make responsible decisions (Denham, 2006; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Ritblatt et al., 2013). With the establishment of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Clark, 2019), the main aim of which is to promote and implement SEL as an integral part of teaching, the social and emotional part of children's personalities has gained prominence. Numerous authors (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006; Weissberg et al., 2015; Weissberg, 2019) suggest that the development of social, emotional, behavioural and character skills is essential for success at school, in the workplace, in relationships, in society and in life in general. On the other hand, maladjustment in the social and emotional sphere hinders the way a child functions in various circumstances and periods of their life (Campbell et al., 2016). Kroflič and Smrtnik Vitulić (2015, p. 55) confirm that: "Children's social competence also includes effective emotional regulation. Emotionally well-regulated people are capable of managing their emotions in a flexible and socially acceptable way."

The use of creative media to enhance social and emotional competence is especially suitable for younger children, with this kind of learning being conducted experientially and through play. Artistic expression has a positive impact on children's communication skills (Duh, 2016) and creative expression often helps people find socially accepted ways of expressing and regulating emotions such as anger, disappointment, love, etc. (Malchiodi, 2018).

Social and emotional learning and music

Engaging in artistic activities, especially music, is associated with positive development in children on several levels (Habe, 2020). Research demonstrates the impact of young children's musical engagement on well-being, self-confidence and the development of social skills (Ilari, 2016, 2018; Saarikallio, 2019) and confirms the link between music education and the social and emotional competences of preschool children (Boucher et al., 2021; Kirby et al., 2022). There is extensive evidence of the key role of music in regulating emotions and moods (Saarikallio, 2011; Brown & Sax, 2013; Randall et al., 2014; Campayo-Muñoz & Cabedo-Mas, 2017; Williams & Berthelsen, 2019), and in encouraging positive affective states (North et al., 2004) and prosocial behaviour (Schellenberg et al., 2015; Hallam, 2015; Ilari et al., 2020; Zadnik & Smrekar, 2024). Boone and

Cunningham (2001) found that children between the ages of 4 and 5 are able to express, through movement, certain emotions that they perceive through music, such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear. Váradi (2022) believes that music education in a group setting helps develop acceptance of and interactions with others, and that the social experience surplus of joint activities also has a positive influence on empathy. Küpana (2015) and Pellitteri (2006) mention five ways in which music education and SEL complement each other, namely that music can be used for relaxation, for encouraging creativity and the imagination, as an emotional stimulus and aesthetic experience, as a form of self-expression, and as a form of group experience. SEL includes the following areas of social and emotional skills (CASEL, 2013), which can be developed through various musical activities:

- *Self-awareness*: emotional learning competence includes recognising emotions, accurate self-perception, self-efficacy, self-confidence and recognising strengths. An example in music: a child is disappointed for not having sung a song correctly; they are aware of this feeling and put it into words.
- *Self-management*: this component includes control of stress, stress management, self-motivation, self-discipline, setting goals and organisational skills. An example in music: a child experiences a sense of dread when they assume the role of a soloist in a choir; they use various breathing and relaxation techniques to ensure a successful performance.
- *Relationship skills*: this component includes communication, social engagement, relationship building, teamwork, listening, collaborating and offering help. An example in music: a child encourages their friends and peers to join a choir.
- *Social awareness*: social learning skills include the ability to recognise other points of view, empathy, respect for diversity, respect for others, and understanding social and ethical norms. An example in music: a child playing in an orchestra offers to help a friend who has problems with their playing technique.
- *Responsible decision making*: this component includes recognising a problem, analysing the situation, solving the problem, evaluation and reflection, as well as personal, moral and ethical responsibility. An example in music: a child prepares for a performance; in order to be successful, they decide to devote more time to rehearsing before the performance.

Daily routine and music

A daily routine is a series of activities that are repeated every day in the same order. A routine provides structure, stability and predictability, which is especially important for children, as it helps them feel secure and know what to expect. Hohmann and Weikart (2005) advocate a planned and consistent daily routine that should support active learning. Bregar Golobič (2004) believes that the individual experiences their daily routine as something spontaneous, authentic and natural. As Wildenger et al. (2008) explain, the daily routine is crucial for young children in establishing a sense of security, trust and independence. Lepičnik Vodopivec and Hmelak (2020) believe that elements of the daily routine – such as children's arrival at and departure from kindergarten, care for hygiene, food, transitions between activities, rest, tidying up and arranging the classroom – offer children a consistent schedule of events that they can rely on and comprehend.

Elements of the daily routine can be enriched with a variety of musical activities, such as singing, playing musical instruments, engaging in musical didactic games, creating music, listening to music and expression through movement. Hudoklin (2023) states that music is intrinsically inviting and serves as a motivational tool for many children due to its very 'nature': it can have a calming effect, remind children of a certain task, announce the beginning or end of morning circle time, signal a calm transition to another activity or a change of corner, calm children before rest time, or wake them up as they arrive in the morning, inviting them into the playroom.

The connection between musical activities and elements of the daily routine is that music not only makes routine activities more interesting, but also encourages development in various aspects of the child's personality (Hallam, 2015). Jacobi (2012) suggests the following musical activities with which we can profoundly affect the development of social and emotional competence: free improvisation, which allows children to express their own emotions without formal conditions; participation in a choir or orchestra, which encourages respect and taking into account the opinions of others, as well as the responsibility for reaching group goals; and listening to music and linking it to emotions, which encourages emotional awareness and facilitates the development of a vocabulary for expressing emotions.

Method

On the basis of the theoretical starting points with which we confirm the role of music in developing social and emotional skills in preschool children, and the importance of the daily routine in the upbringing and education of preschool children, we carried out research in which we:

- planned didactic units of the daily routine enriched with musical activities,
- monitored the effect of implementing a daily routine enriched with musical activities on the development of social and emotional skills, and
- checked the achievement of the planned musical goals.

Participants

The research included 24 children aged between 5 and 6 ($M = 5.70$) who attended a kindergarten group following the state programme for preschool education (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, National Education Institute Slovenia, 1999). The sample consisted of 12 (50%) girls and 12 (50%) boys.

Research design

The research focused on elements of the daily routine, such as the children's arrival at kindergarten, preparing for mealtime, morning circle time, transitions between activities and preparing for rest time, all of which were enriched with musical didactic games and musical activities, or performing, listening to and creating music. For each element of the daily routine, we planned a didactic unit with social and emotional learning goals (developing communication skills, cooperating to achieve group goals, solving conflicts and encouraging positive relationships, recognising one's own emotions and the emotions of other children, developing skills for regulating and managing emotions, encouraging positive behaviour and positive emotions, self-consciousness and optimism) and concrete musical goals (the child listens attentively to musical content, reproduces and creates rhythmic and melodic motifs, follows the rules of musical-didactic games, sings a song independently, abides by intonation, creatively follows the song being sung, creatively expresses experiences and perceptions of music through movement, executes movements following the rhythm of the song, relaxes and calms down). The didactic units were conducted on 21 consecutive days.

Didactic units of elements of the daily routine enriched with musical activities:

- *The children's arrival at kindergarten*

Upon arrival and during departure, the teacher greets the children with the song 'Dobro jutro sonce' (Good Morning Sunshine). They then offer the child musical instruments from the table at the entrance to the playroom. The child chooses an instrument and plays it in a creative way. The musical-didactic games 'Glasbeni pozdrav' (Musical Greeting) and 'Glasbeni odmev' (Musical Echo) are performed in the group. In the latter, the children take turns choosing to be someone else's echo. Other children who have already arrived at the kindergarten are encouraged to join the activity and play together with the children entering the playroom. In response to the greeting 'Good Morning!' or 'Good Day!' the child sings or creates a melody.

- *Preparing for mealtime*

The teacher sings the folk song 'In mi smo lačni' (And We Are Hungry), announcing the new element of the daily routine. The children recognise the song and split into two groups, representing the choir and the orchestra. The choir sings the song and the orchestra accompanies them on Orff instruments. Two children designated as being on duty continue singing the song to the accompaniment of rhythm sticks and invite the other children to wash their hands and take care of hygiene. They sing and accompany the song until all of the children are at the table. During mealtime, the teacher plays soothing music as background encouragement to an unhurried eating pace.

- *Morning circle time*

The teacher plays the children a part of the soothing piece *Morning Mood* by Edvard Grieg (Peer Gynt, Op. 23), and without unnecessary haste and hurrying, encourages a calm transition to morning circle time. The teacher initiates a discussion about the sunny morning that the composer has illustrated musically. The teacher encourages the children to listen attentively and express their experiences and perceptions of the piece of music through dance. Listening to the music and dancing, the children prepare for the activities that will follow.

- *Transitions between activities, tidying up*

With a song, the teacher announces a new element of the daily routine, the transition between activities. When the children hear the lively song 'Pesem za pospravljanje' (Tidying Up Song) they begin tidying the playroom, singing

along as they do so. Once they have finished tidying up, they line up, listen to a given note and, marching along and clapping their hands, sing the song once more. In the end, the children are asked to count how many times they had to sing the song before the playroom was tidy and the result is noted on a bar chart. At the end of the week, the children and their teacher check the chart to see which day they tidied up the playroom fastest.

- *Rest time*

The child who is on duty creates a slow, quiet tune on a pentatonic metallophone. Upon hearing the instrument, the children understand that rest time is approaching and, in cooperation with the teacher, prepare the playroom. Since rest time in kindergarten is not supposed to be too rigidly regulated and enforced, the teacher may continue to play instruments (guitar, jingle bells, metallophone, etc.) during rest time. Those children who do not need to rest or who do not fall asleep during rest time have the option of playing calmly.

Instruments and procedures

The data was collected through video footage and observation sheets. The implementation of the planned elements of the daily routine enriched with musical activities was recorded three times at the beginning of the research and three times at the end. A camera on a stand was placed in the welcome area, where we monitored the arrival of children (7.00–8.00 am); in the washing area, where the children wash their hands and prepare for their meal (8.00–8.30 am); and in the playroom, where both planned and spontaneous activities take place, including eating, forming a circle during morning circle time, transitions between activities, tidying up, and preparing the area for rest time (8.30 am–1.30 pm).

On the basis of the video footage, we observed how frequently each child resorted to individual social and emotional skills at the beginning (the first three days of the research) and at the end (the last three days of the research) of the period of implementing the daily routine enriched with musical activities. The results were noted on an observation sheet, which contained 13 social and emotional skills. As a starting point in developing the observation sheet, we used some of the individual clusters of competencies for social and emotional skills as defined by the CASEL Guide (2013): self-awareness (the child expresses basic emotions and recognises his/her own emotions), self-management (the child asks for help needed, follows agreed rules, understands what is right or wrong), relationship skills (the child encourages other children in the group, successfully participates in group activities, assists a child who needs help), and

social awareness (the child shares items with other children, empathises with the emotions of others children). A four-level score was used for evaluation: never (1) – the behaviour, emotional state or action never occurs on the day of observation; rarely (2) – the behaviour, emotional state or action occurs once or twice during the course of the day of observation; often (3) – the behaviour, emotional state or action occurs three to four times during the course of the day of observation; always (4) – the behaviour, emotional state or action always occurs during the course of the day of observation. The frequency rating in the categories ‘rarely’ and ‘often’ was determined after making the recording and reviewing all of the frequencies of occurrence of social and emotional skills.

Together with a psychologist, a pedagogue and a music pedagogue, we prepared descriptions of some of the skills, which helped us monitor and evaluate these skills. The descriptions of simple emotions were based on expressions of behaviour associated with gestures, actions and facial expressions:

- expressing joy: laughs loudly, jumps, dances; facial expressions: upturned corners of the mouth, creases around the eyes and outer corners of the mouth;
- expressing sadness: lowers head, lies in the corner, cries, withdraws from the group; facial expressions: lowered corners of the mouth, lips may tremble, eyes closed;
- expressing anger: aggressive behaviour – throws things, hits, shouts; facial expressions: eyes with a bulging expression, eyebrows lowered and together, furrowed brow, pressed lips or narrowed eyes, mouth can be straight or tight or can be shaped like when shouting, nostrils flared, facial expressions can be tense or serious;
- expressing fear: stops and shakes, is quiet or behaves in an unusual way; facial expressions: eyebrows raised, straight or together, mouth and eyes open, tense, horizontal furrows on the brow, excessive caution;
- recognising own emotions: observation and, if necessary, individual discussions between the teacher and the child during or after execution of the individual element of the daily routine (questions about how the child feels and their mood);
- understanding right or wrong actions: observation and, if necessary, individual discussions between the teacher and the child about their comprehension of what is right and what is wrong.

The elements of the daily routine enriched with musical activities were carried out by the teacher who also had the role of researcher and co-author of the research. We arranged for a professional review of the footage, the

observation sheets and the chart recording the musical goals. The review of the frequency of occurrence of social and emotional skills was conducted by a psychologist, a music pedagogue and the teacher, whereas the assessment of the realisation of musical skills was conducted by a pedagogue, a music pedagogue and the teacher.

Data processing procedures

At the beginning and end of implementing the didactic units, we carried out an analysis of the frequency of occurrence of social and emotional skills with the help of the video footage and the observation sheets. An analysis monitoring the achievement of the musical goals, in which we determined whether the child had achieved the musical goals or not, was only conducted at the end of the research period. The data were analysed using the SPSS software package. We used frequency distribution, the arithmetic mean, standard deviation and the dependent samples t-test, based on which we determined whether there was a statistically significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of social and emotional skills between the initial and final stages of implementing the planned elements of the daily routine enriched with musical activities.

Results

Table 1

Frequency of occurrence of social and emotional skills in the initial and final stages of the research

SEL skills ¹	Social and emotional skills	Time of observation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
self-awareness	expresses emotions of joy	beginning	3.13	0.74	-3.191	0.004
		end	3.50	0.66		
	expresses emotions of fear	beginning	2.79	0.88	3.685	0.001
		end	2.21	0.88		
	expresses emotions of anger	beginning	2.42	1.10	3.715	0.001
		end	1.92	1.02		
	expresses emotions of sadness	beginning	3.00	0.83	4.628	< 0.001
		end	2.25	1.11		
	recognises own emotions	beginning	3.17	0.92	-3.077	0.005
		end	3.46	0.78		

SEL skills ¹	Social and emotional skills	Time of observation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
self-control	asks for help when required	beginning	2.75	1.19	-2.892	0.008
		end	3.08	1.14		
	respects agreed rules	beginning	2.92	0.93	-3.412	0.002
		end	3.38	0.87		
	understands what is right and what is wrong	beginning	2.96	0.86	-4.796	< 0.001
		end	3.46	0.78		
relationship skills	encourages other children in the group	beginning	2.25	1.11	-2.46	0.022
		end	2.46	1.14		
	successfully includes themselves in group activities	beginning	2.92	0.97	-3.412	0.002
		end	3.38	0.82		
	helps another child who needs assistance	beginning	2.29	1.22	-2.005	0.057
		end	2.70	1.18		
social awareness	shares things with other children	beginning	2.67	0.83	-4.114	< 0.001
		end	3.09	0.85		
	recognises and empathises with the emotions of other children	beginning	2.33	1.00	-4.412	< 0.001
		end	2.79	1.02		

Note. ¹Social and emotional skills (CASEL, 2013)

The data related to the frequency of occurrence of social and emotional skills, collected at the beginning and end of the research, point to a positive effect of engaging in musical activities on the development of SEL skills, as there is a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in all areas. After the period of carrying out elements of the daily routine enriched with musical activities, the children more frequently recognised their own emotions and expressed joyful emotions. If they required help, this was also expressed. They respected the agreed rules and understood what is right and what is wrong. They became more skilled in communication, encouraged other children in the group, and got involved in team activities. They more often recognised and empathised with the emotions of other children, offered help and shared items with others.

Table 2
Frequency (f) and percentage (f%) of the realisation of the planned musical goals

Element of the daily routine	Children's musical goals	Yes		No	
		f	f%	f	f%
arrival	attentively listens to the song	18	75	6	25
	reproduces rhythmic motifs	20	83.3	4	16.7
	reproduces melodic motifs	18	75	6	25
	relaxed vocal creativity	19	79.2	5	20.8
	relaxed instrumental creativity	23	95.8	1	4.2
	respects the rules of musical didactic games	21	87.5	3	12.5
preparing for mealtime	sings a song on their own	17	70.8	7	29.2
	creatively accompanies the song	24	100	/	/
morning circle time	attentively listens to the music	19	79.2	5	20.8
	creatively expresses their experience and perception of the piece of music through movement	20	83.3	4	16.7
transition between activities – tidying up	sings the song in the given tone	16	66.7	8	33.3
	moves in harmony with the rhythm of the song	18	75	6	25
rest time	creates a peaceful instrumental composition	24	100	/	/
	attentively listens to the music	20	83.3	4	16.7
	relaxes and calms down while listening to music	24	100	/	/

At the end of the period of implementing the daily routine enriched with musical activities, the children had achieved most of the planned goals. All of the children participated in creatively accompanying a sung song, created peaceful instrumental compositions and relaxed when listening to music. Most of the children listened attentively to the pieces of music played, were creative in a relaxed way both instrumentally and vocally, and expressed themselves through movement in the rhythm of the music. They successfully reproduced rhythmic and melodic motifs and creatively expressed their experiences and perceptions of the music through movement. Slightly fewer children were able to follow a given tone for a song.

Discussion

The results of the study confirm the effect of the implementation of a daily routine enriched with musical activities on the social and emotional development of a child's personality. The participating children made progress in recognising and regulating their own emotions; negative emotions appeared

less frequently at the end of the research than at the beginning. As claimed by Blasco-Magraner et al. (2021), music in the upbringing and education of children between the ages of 3 and 12 can contribute to the development of emotional intelligence, especially in perceiving, expressing and regulating emotions. Children who participated in musical activities were better able to recognise and express emotions and regulate their emotional states, such as aggression or anger. Winsler et al. (2011) and Küpana (2015) also confirm that music facilitates better understanding of emotions and better self-regulation, which in turn encourages intellectual, emotional and social development of the child's personality.

The children in our study also became more adept at establishing relationships with other children. Varner (2019, 2020) confirms that, by linking SEL and music, educators can influence emotional self-regulation, interaction with peers and decision-making. SEL skills can therefore be developed through actively involving children in activities such as musical creation, playing in an orchestra, participating in a choir, or listening to music for different moods. All of these activities promote cooperation, communication and positive interaction between peers. In the words of Kim (2017, p. 183): "Any musical piece is the product of someone's creative work and a means of communication with others. Musical activities involve creativity not only in the product but also in the processes of imagining, creating, performing, and responding that require critical thinking, collaboration, and communication."

In the present research, the musical activities of each element of the daily routine were carefully planned, executed and evaluated, as is confirmed by the realisation of the planned musical goals. At the end of the period of implementing the didactic units, most of the children were happy to actively participate in the musical-didactic games, singing, playing instruments, creating music, listening to music and expressing themselves through movement or in forming the daily routine. Addressi (2009) states that, through repetitive actions that are reinforced by their daily routine, children find their place in the world of relationships and perceive the general, linguistic and musical culture of the group to which they belong. The child learns to predict events, and through this also to control them. In our study, the musical aspects of the daily routine encouraged the pace and time organisation of the children's actions, while the implementation of musical activities as part of the daily routine made the transition from one activity to another easier. Barrett et al. (2022) suggest that, as part of implementing elements of their daily routine, educators should plan daily singing, playing instruments, musical games, listening to music, moving to music and creating music.

As argued by Batistič Zorec and Došler (2016), educators and teachers should flexibly plan elements of the daily routine, with an emphasis on creating opportunities for the child's cognitive, emotional and social development, as well as learning. Jackson et al. (2024) also consider ways of encouraging the cooperation of preschool educators in emotion-focused teaching. The only correct way to achieve the desired goals is through appropriate professional training and a positive attitude of the educator towards work and content through which we can develop the social and emotional competences of children.

Conclusion

Enriching elements of the daily routine with musical activities has an important role in encouraging SEL in early childhood. Although the results of the present research confirm the effect musical activities have on the social and emotional development of children, we need to bear in mind certain methodological limitations, such as the small size of the sample, the duration of the research and the fact that it did not include a control group or groups of children of various ages. These factors do, of course, limit the ability to generalise the results of the research. Additionally, it is essential to address the challenges associated with implementing musical activities in diverse preschool environments. These challenges include varying levels of resources, differences in educators' training, and cultural contexts that may influence the effectiveness of musical interventions. Discussion of these challenges can help refine practical recommendations and support adaptability across a wide range of settings.

Nevertheless, the findings encourage further research in the field of developing social and emotional competencies of preschool children within the framework of implementing elements of the daily routine. This includes studying the effects of specific musical activities (e.g., playing instruments, group singing, music creation), monitoring and evaluating their effects across different developmental stages, and examining the long-term impact of such interventions, which could provide insights into how sustained exposure to musical activities influences children's social and emotional development over time. Future studies should also explore the influence of incorporating musical activities into elements of the daily routine on children's cognitive and psychophysical development. A significant contribution would be the development of proposals for the long-term systematic inclusion of musical activities in daily routines and integrating research approaches from various disciplines, such as psychology, pedagogy and music therapy, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of musical activities on the holistic development of a child's personality.

Ethical statement

The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of research ethics. All of the participants were assured that the collected data would be used exclusively for research purposes. We prepared a memo for all of the children's parents, informing them about the purpose of the research. All of the parents gave their consent for the participation and recording of their children. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee at the University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts (Approval ref.: 038-12-147/2023/8 FFUM).

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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