

HOW PRESCHOOL CHILDREN SPEND THEIR FREE TIME

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Abstract: *The research aimed to analyze how preschool children spend their free time. Three research objectives were outlined: identifying parents' perceptions of preschoolers' free time, analyzing the locations where preschool children spend their free time, and identifying leisure activities for preschoolers, including analyzing the gender perspective in choosing leisure options. The participant group comprised 130 subjects, parents of preschool children, who responded to a questionnaire. The most selected leisure options for children were as follows: "playgrounds equipped for children" ($M=3.69$; $SD=.703$), "parks" in general ($M=3.55$; $SD=1.086$), and "puppet theaters/places where children's shows are held" ($M=2.90$ $SD=.939$). Preferred free-time activities with parents include: "playing various games with the child" ($M=4.30$; $SD=.920$), "going outside to play with other children" ($M=4.18$; $SD=.952$), and "taking walks or going out in nature" ($M=4.11$ $SD=.990$). Outdoor activities are favored by preschool children, regardless of gender, while indoor activities complement these.*

Key words: *preschoolers; leisure activities; indoor and outdoor activities.*

Introduction

Preschool children's free time refers to the time remaining after they return from kindergarten, excluding time for sleep, meals, and hygiene. Free time is recognized as providing children with relaxation, social interaction, self-development (Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023), and cognitive performance improvement (Zhang et al., 2020). It is also a wonderful opportunity for learning. H.A. Raynor et al. (2009) discussed specific "patterns of children's leisure time," which include recommendations for children and their families and factors contributing to enhancing preschool-aged children's leisure time. Insufficient quality free time spent between parent and child can be associated with lower

levels of development, which is why promoting parental opportunities to engage in quality free time with their children should be a priority (Waters, Salinas-Miranda, & Kirby, 2023).

Background

Increasingly, the term „intensive parenting" is being discussed in Western cultures. This form of parenting aims to control children's leisure experiences, shifting the focus from free play to various adult-organized activities, citing urban risks that need to be controlled through protective measures (Silonsaari, Simula, & Brömmelstroet, 2024). Parents perceive the quality of life in relation to the level of activation of leisure activities, diversity, intensity, and the pleasure children derive from participation (Badia et al., 2013; Raz-Silbiger et al., 2015).

It is essential for parents and their children to decide together on the types of activities to undertake (sports, watching children's TV programs, indoor games, cultural and artistic activities, computer games, etc.) (Havigerová, Šnoblová, & Truhlářová, 2015). Key factors influencing children's outdoor experiences include pavement smoothness, integration of natural elements, specific characteristics like play facilities, rest areas, or access to commercial facilities (Wang et al., 2024).

Spaces for preschool children's leisure should become true „child-friendly urban communities" (Wang et al., 2024). Children use outdoor spaces for play, physical exercise, learning, and fun (Mani & Woolley, 2024), all of which significantly impact their mental and overall health (Andrusaityte et al., 2020). Trees, shrubs, flowers, and plants in children's play landscapes stimulate their physical activity (Boldemann et al., 2011; Mani & Woolley, 2024). Outdoor play environments equipped with nature's elements, such as trees, ditches, stones, grass, and flowers, encourage longer engagement in observation-based play (Squires et al., 2024). Another study examined the impact of urban residential environments on perceived child safety, identifying the richness of natural materials as the most important feature, followed by space size. However, dense vegetation negatively impacted safety perceptions, as the visual stimulation provided by environmental features influenced perceived personal safety (Gao, Zhu, & Cheng, 2024). Urban planning, policies, and decision-making processes should prioritize the proximity of green spaces, their frequency of use, and the importance of informal natural recreation areas in the future (Watson et al., 2023).

Outdoor play, whether in equipped or unequipped spaces, is a leisure activity children can undertake under parental or other adult supervision, such as grandparents. It is a good alternative to screen-based activities (Jongenelis et al., 2024). Screen time increases with age, and patterns

begin in the preschool years (Mota et al., 2019). Despite the known harmful effects of excessive screen exposure for preschoolers, many parents do not regulate their children's screen time (He et al., 2005). Additionally, factors such as the child's and mother's age and birth order among siblings significantly influence screen time duration (Walaa et al., 2023). Preschoolers' physical activity has also been studied, showing lower activity levels on weekends than weekdays, with boys being more active than girls (Nilsen et al., 2019). Indoor recreation rooms and playgrounds increase the likelihood of preschoolers being active (Barbosa et al., 2016).

Storytelling with parents is another favorite activity, providing early exposure to print materials. Early exposure to print is linked to language competencies such as oral language and reading comprehension (Zivan & Horowitz-Kraus, 2020).

From a gender perspective, girls attend artistic activities more frequently than boys, who prefer sports activities. Boys are significantly more likely to enjoy computer games, construction games, and military games, while girls more often prefer board games, playing "family," and role-playing various professions (Sobkin & Skobeltsina, 2014).

Methodology

The primary objective of the research was to analyze how preschool children spend their leisure time. Three secondary objectives were outlined: (1) identifying parents' perceptions of their preschool children's leisure time, (2) analyzing the places where preschool children spend their leisure time, and (3) identifying leisure activities for preschool children, including a gender-based perspective on leisure choices.

The survey method was employed, with the research instrument being a questionnaire specifically developed and validated for this study (Cronbach's Alpha value of .893, indicating high consistency). Data collection occurred between April and May 2024. Consent was obtained prior to the use of the research instruments, with participants being informed about the study's purpose, methods, instruments, associated risks, and their rights as participants. Confidentiality of data was assured. On average, participants took 15–20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire comprised four dimensions: information about the child's life, information on leisure opportunities, information about the child's leisure time, and demographic details. Questions included dichotomous choices, multiple-choice options, and Likert-scale items.

The participant group consisted of 130 parents of preschool children, 91.5% (119 participants) of whom were female, and 8.5% (11 participants) were male. The average age of participants was 35.87

years. In terms of age distribution, most participants were between 31–40 years old (85 participants, 65.4%), followed by 24 participants (18.5%) aged 41–50 years, 20 participants (15.4%) aged 21–30 years, and 1 participant (0.8%) over 50 years old. Most participants were married (90.8%, 118 participants), with 6.9% (9 participants) in common-law relationships and 2.3% (3 participants) divorced.

Regarding family income, the majority (52 families, 40%) reported income exceeding 8001 RON (approximately €1600/month). Other income brackets included 17 families (13.1%) earning between 4001–5000 RON (€800–1000/month), 12 families (9.2%) earning between 6001–7000 RON (€1200–1400/month), 16 families (12.3%) earning between 5001–6000 RON (€1000–1200/month) or 7001–8000 RON (€1400–1600/month), and 11 families (8.5%) earning between 3001–4000 RON (€600–800/month). Four families (3.1%) reported incomes below 3000 RON (€600/month), and two participants (1.5%) refused to disclose their income.

Most parents (46.9%, 61 participants) reported having one child, 42.3% (55 participants) had two children, 9.2% (12 participants) had three children, and 1.5% (2 participants) had more than three children. Among the children, 79 (60.8%) were girls, and 51 (39.2%) were boys. Most children (58.5%, 76 participants) were the first-born, followed by 36.2% (47 participants) who were the second-born, 3.8% (5 participants) who were the third-born, and 1.5% (2 participants) who were fourth-born. Most parents (78.5%, 102 participants) reported that their children attended full-day kindergartens (8 hours/day), while 21.5% (28 participants) reported attendance at part-day kindergartens (4 hours/day).

Results

We will start with the first objective: identifying parents’ perceptions of preschoolers' free time. When we say "free time for preschool children," most parents—63.1% (82 respondents)—understand it as "a 5-6 hour period after the child comes home from kindergarten," while 16.2% (21 respondents) state that free time refers to "a few hours daily and on weekends." Only 10 respondents (7.7%) see free time as occurring "only on weekends," while 3 respondents (2.3%) view it as happening "only during vacations".

No.	Correlation	Correlation Value	Significance Level
1	Perceived free time period by parents and the number of hours spent in kindergarten	.244**	p=0.01

2	Between the perceived free time period by parents and parent-child free time on weekends	.618**	p=0.01
3	Between the perceived free time period by parents and parent-child free time during a weekday	.296**	p=0.01

Table 1: Correlation Values Obtained

Looking at Pearson's correlation, there is a weak positive correlation (.244**, $p=0.01$) between the perceived free time period and the number of hours spent in kindergarten (4 hours or 8 hours), which is encouraging when considering the time spent between parent and child (see Table 1). Regarding how free time spent by the parent with the child looks on a weekday, most parents—34.6% (45 respondents)—declare that they spend 3-4 hours daily with the child, and 24.6% (32 respondents) spend 4-5 hours daily. Encouragingly, 16 parents (12.3%) declare that they spend more than 5 hours daily with the child (Waters, Salinas-Miranda, Kirby, 2023), and only 1 parent (0.8%) spends less than 1 hour daily. Time spent between parent and child on a weekend day was also identified. Here, the situation is much better. Thus, most parents—32.3% (42 respondents)—declare that they spend more than 7 hours/day with the child (Waters, Salinas-Miranda, Kirby, 2023), 27.7% (36 respondents) spend between 5-7 hours/day, and 24.6% (32 respondents) spend between 3-5 hours/day. Only 10.8% (14 respondents) declare spending less than 3 hours daily with the child on weekends. Pearson's correlations were obtained: between the perceived free time period by parents and parent-child free time on weekends (high positive correlation - .618**, $p=0.01$) and between the perceived free time period by parents and parent-child free time during a weekday (weak positive correlation - .296**, $p=0.01$) (see Table 1).

We continue with the second research objective: analyzing places where preschoolers spend their free time. For this objective, several options for spending free time by preschool children were presented, ranging from parks and playgrounds to pools, skating rinks, or theaters for children, etc. The following table (Table 2) presents the average values of possibilities for spending free time by preschool children. The most favored option is "a park equipped with a children's playground" ($M=3.69$; $SD=.703$) (Blikendaal, Nauta, 2024). Not only this type of park but also "parks" in general join as possibilities for spending free time ($M=3.55$; $SD=1.086$) (Andrusaityte et al., 2020; Jongenelis et al., 2024; Gao, Zhu, Cheng, 2024; Squires et al., 2024). Interestingly, the third position is occupied by "puppet theaters/places where children's shows are held" ($M=2.90$; $SD=.939$). Complementing the previously mentioned possibilities are "places where artistic activities can be practiced—musical, dance, plastic activities, creative activities, etc."

(M=2.53; SD=1.101). Sports activities practiced in pools/swimming pools are also among the children’s preferences (M=2.40; SD=1.008), as are places for celebrating children’s birthdays (M=2.39; SD=.992). More modest values were recorded for: skating rinks (M=2.12; SD=.978), cinemas/places where films are shown (M=2.11; SD=.819), and sports clubs (M=2.00; SD=1.042).

No.	Possibilities for Spending Free Time	M	Std.dev.
1	Parks with children's playgrounds	3.69	.703
2	Parks	3.55	1.086
3	Puppet theaters/places where children’s shows are held	2.90	.939
4	Artistic activity centers (music, dance, plastic arts, creative activities)	2.55	.941
5	Pools/swimming pools	2.53	1.101
6	Places for children’s birthday celebrations	2.40	1.008
7	Skating rinks	2.39	.992
8	Cinemas/places where films are shown	2.12	.978
9	Sports clubs	2.11	.819
10	Playrooms	2.00	1.042

Table 2: Average Activity Values

While discussing the most preferred leisure options, it is also important to mention those less favored by children. The Children’s Club is the least preferred option for leisure activities among children (M=1.68; SD=0.872). A possible explanation might be the lack of information provided to parents about the institution's activities. Similarly, insufficient information could explain the low average scores for play libraries (M=1.70; SD=0.912). Children’s libraries were also not among the favorites (M=1.85; SD=0.944). Although physical activity is essential at this age, gyms or places for sports activities were not at the top of preschoolers' preferences (M=1.93; SD=0.974).

After applying ANOVA, the following was obtained: $F(6) = 4.063$, $p < 0.001$ between "cinemas" as a leisure option and "weekend leisure time allocated to the child."

No.	Leisure Activities	M	Std.dev.
1	Gyms/places for sports activities	1.93	.974
2	Children’s libraries	1.85	.944
3	Play libraries	1.70	.912
4	Children’s Club	1.68	.872

Table no. 3. Average Values of Activities

Respondents also had the option to mention other leisure activities, such as indoor games (e.g., Charades, Creative Angel), hiking/excursions

(both with 5 mentions), and attending church (2 mentions). The following correlations were observed at a significance threshold of $p < 0.01$:

- Positive moderate correlations: parks and parks with designated play areas for children (0.412**); cinemas and theaters (0.446**); cinemas and pools (0.400**); pools and gyms/places for sports activities (0.403**); pools and ice-skating rinks (0.410**).
- Strong positive correlation: sports clubs and gyms/places for sports activities (0.525**).

No.	Activities	Media	Std. dev.
1	Playing various games together	4.30	.920
2	Going outside and playing with other children	4.18	.952
3	Walking, spending time in nature	4.11	.990
4	Reading stories, poems, or children’s books	4.03	1.056

Table no. 4. Parent-Child Leisure Activities

Watching TV programs had a lower average score ($M=3.15$; $SD=1.264$), which is encouraging, as preschoolers seem to prefer outdoor activities or various indoor games. Other activities such as attending theater performances, participating in sports activities, and visiting museums scored higher than computer activities ($M=2.02$; $SD=1.204$).

No.	Activities	Media	Std. dev.
1	Watching various TV programs	3.15	1.264
2	Attending cultural/artistic events	3.08	1.227
3	Participating in sports activities	3.05	1.394
4	Visiting museums/tourist attractions	2.85	1.164
5	Playing computer games	2.02	1.204

Table no. 5. Parent-Child Activities

Parents were also asked to specify other leisure activities. Only 10 respondents (7.69%) chose this option. Here, parents mentioned that preschoolers also participate in household chores (3 respondents), foreign language courses (3 respondents), visits to grandparents (3 respondents), and modeling courses (1 respondent). Parents were asked to specify with whom children engage in the above activities. Most often, parents themselves accompany their children to the following activities: various activities carried out in parks or outdoors in general (walks, outdoor games, hiking, excursions) ($M=4.20$; $SD=0.991$), various entertaining indoor activities (games) ($M=3.92$; $SD=1.376$), and reading stories ($M=3.87$; $SD=1.296$). Parents least often participate with

their children in the following activities: computer games ($M=2.34$; $SD=1.417$), sports activities/sports practice ($M=2.64$; $SD=1.364$), and activities at swimming pools ($M=2.78$; $SD=1.521$).

For the same leisure activities, children could also be accompanied by someone other than their parents. The activities in which another person accompanies the children include: various entertaining indoor activities (games) ($M=4.32$; $SD=1.521$), various activities carried out in parks or outdoors in general (walks, outdoor games, hiking, excursions) ($M=4.05$; $SD=2.340$), and reading stories ($M=4.05$; $SD=2.427$). The least frequent activities accompanied by someone other than parents are: computer activities (games) ($M=2.51$; $SD=2.036$), attending children's theater performances ($M=3.01$; $SD=1.640$), and activities at swimming pools ($M=3.15$; $SD=2.171$).

The analysis of gender perspectives in choosing leisure activities revealed that girls scored higher than boys in the following activities: "walking, spending time outdoors" (43.03%), "watching various TV programs" (34.17%), "participating in various sports activities" (36.70%), "attending various cultural-artistic events" (43.03%), and "visiting museums/tourist attractions" (31.17%). Boys scored higher than girls in the following activities: "reading stories, poems, or children's books" (47.05%) and "playing outside with other children" (52.94%). Only one activity, "playing various games together," showed nearly equal scores for both girls (49.36%) and boys (49.01%). The activity "playing computer games" was marked as "not practiced" by both girls (46.83%) and boys (49.01%).

Conclusions

The study aimed to analyze how preschool children spend their leisure time. A percentage of 12.3% of parents stated that they spend more than 5 hours daily with their child. Regarding the time spent by parents with their child during a weekday, most parents (34.6%, 45 respondents) reported spending 3-4 hours daily, while 24.6% (32 respondents) spend 4-5 hours daily. The most preferred leisure option is "park with a playground for children" ($M=3.69$; $SD=0.703$), followed by "parks in general" ($M=3.55$; $SD=1.086$), and in third place "puppet theaters/venues hosting shows for children" ($M=2.90$; $SD=0.939$).

Most often, parents themselves accompany their children to the following activities: various outdoor activities in parks (walks, outdoor games, hiking, excursions) ($M=4.20$; $SD=0.991$), various entertaining indoor activities (games) ($M=3.92$; $SD=1.376$), and reading stories ($M=3.87$; $SD=1.296$). Regarding children's activities, the highest average score was for "playing various games together" ($M=4.30$; $SD=0.920$), followed by "playing outside with other children" ($M=4.18$; $SD=0.952$) (Jongenelis et al., 2024). High averages were also noted for

the sequence of activities: "walking, spending time in nature" (M=4.11; SD=0.990) and "reading stories, poems, or children's books" (M=4.03; SD=1.056).

The possibilities and activities for preschoolers' leisure time remain dynamic and warrant further study in the future.

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