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## **Preschool attendance of very young children: Parents' choice and outcome satisfaction**

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### **Abstract**

This empirical study focused on parents who enrolled their two-year old children in preschools in the Czech Republic. Recent provision of the Ministry of Education recommended that preschools accept children who are as young as two years, in response to increased demands of mothers who want to re-enter the employment after maternity leave. The purpose of the study was to examine the reasons of parents to place their children in preschools as well as their satisfaction of the developmental progress of their children in this institution. A representative sample of parents who enrolled their children in preschool from age two was surveyed (N=520). Surprisingly, caring for the child while at work was not the most important reason. They rated it 3.66 on a five-point scale. Other reasons were rated higher: getting the child accustomed to interaction within groups of same-age children (M=4.01), acquiring cognitive skills and knowledge (M=3.89), and getting accustomed to a routine other than that found at home (M=3.75). When asked to assess the developmental progress of their children due to preschool attendance on a 3-point scale, the parents noted progress in communication ability (M=2.35), social skills (M=2.37) as well as overall progress (M=2.62). Concerning demographic characteristics, the estimate of the child's overall progress in preschool was significantly related to the mother's level of education and her marital status.

**Keywords:** preschool choice, enrolment, parental satisfaction, child's developmental progress

### **1 Introduction**

In the Czech Republic, preschool attendance is generally offered to children aged three through to five or six years. (Primary school starts at age six or seven.) The service is offered by public, private and church preschool facilities. Preschools are whole-day institutions, though parents can place children on a part-time basis, especially in the first few months of attendance.

Preschool approach integrates care and education and emphasises children's learning through play, exploration, and experimentation. The activities range from teacher structured to non-structured, the former one usually prevailing. The recent provision of the Ministry of Education recommended that preschools also accept children who are as young as two years. This provision came in response to increased demands of mothers who want to re-enter the workforce after their maternity leave. Parents had an option to place children in preschool at age two in the past also, but the growing number of mothers, who return to their workplace, has changed the education and care demands over the last few years. There has been a growth in the number of two years old children in preschools in recent years. In the 2014/2015 school year, there were 43 321 two years old children (or 9.1 % of all children) in preschools, while in 2015/2016 there was an increase to 11.5 % of all children (MŠMT, 2016). It is assumed that this trend will continue at least for next several years (in the Czech Republic, parents can place two years old children in nurseries or child centres, which provide care rather than both care and education, as preschools do. While preschools are supervised by the Ministry of Education, pre-preschool facilities are regulated by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.)

The demand of families affected the preschool policy of the Ministry of Education and it issued provisions to preschool facilities as regards acceptance of two years old children. The ministry also published recommendations about appropriate teachers' practices with two-year old children and requirements, such as child safety, hygiene, provision of food and personnel qualifications that preschools must meet to ensure high-quality service for two years old children (MŠMT, 2017).

Preschool attendance in the early years of life has both professional advocates and opponents. However, the recent investigation of the EPPE (Effective Provision of Preschool Education) project documented the early start of preschool attendance is related to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability. Children with limited preschool attendance have poorer cognitive attainment, sociability and concentration when they entered primary school (Sylva et al, 2003). Many years of research document the positive effect of high-quality early care and education on children's success in school and beyond, especially in language skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Harris et al., 2007; Nores & Barnett, 2010; Yoshikawa et al. 2013). However, early enrolment in preschools brings many questions that are the focus of professional disputes both abroad and in the Czech Republic (Belsky et al., 2007; Barnett, 2011; Hašková, Saxonberg, & Mudrák, 2012). More studies are needed to clarify not only the efficient provision of early education and care but

also the expectation of parents who enrol their children in the preschool facility. This is linked to a question: What were the parents' reasons to enrol their children in preschool as early as at age two and how did they perceive the impact of this facility on their child's ability and skill development? Of course, a parents' decision depends on early care and education options in their community and family, preschool affordability and cost. Some preschools have waiting lists for enrolment, some parents choose family members to take care of the child (typically, grandparents). Enrolment of a child in preschool at age two is an essential act of the parents with important consequences to the child's development. Parents must judge their decision carefully, decide between pros and cons of their decisions and consider a number of aspects, some of them beyond the sphere of the quality of preschool services. These might be the cost of attendance, the distance of the facility, or operating hours.

## **2 Problem statement**

In this study, we concentrated on two demographic characteristics, i.e., the parents' level of education and marital status, that we consider essential to understand the parents' decision to enrol their child in preschool at the age of two. In addition, we examined the parents' satisfaction with the developmental progress of their children in preschool and inspected how this satisfaction is associated with the parents' level of education and marital status.

## **3 Research Questions**

The study sought answers to three questions:

1. What are the parents' reasons to enrol their children in preschool as early as at age two?
2. How are the parents satisfied with children's developmental progress as caused by preschool attendance?
3. What were the parents' reasons to enrol their children in preschool and their satisfaction with its impact as associated with two demographic characteristics, parents' level of education and marital status?

## **4 Purpose of the Study**

The study concentrates on reasons of parents of 2-years old children to enrol their children to preschool and on their satisfaction with children's progress in this facility.

## 5 Research Methods

### 5.1 The Sample

The data of the study originated from the representative sample of Czech families who enrolled their child in a preschool facility at the age two (N = 520). The respondents were mothers (79.7 %) or fathers (20.4 %). The largest age group were from 31 to 40 years, followed by 21 to 30 years. The majority of respondents in the sample live with a husband/wife (42.3 %), followed by living with a partner (40.8 %), or living alone (16.9 %). The majority of respondents have one child (50.2 %) or two children (37.3 %). Most of the respondents completed upper secondary education of ISCED 344 (46.5 %), followed by university education (34.8 %), and followed by upper secondary education of ISCED 352-353 (15.2 %). See Table 1 for complete description of the sample.

Tab. 1: The structure of the sample

Characteristics	Categories	%
Respondent's gender	Female	79.6
	Male	20.4
Respondent's age	≤ 20	6.0
	21-30	36.9
	31-40	38.3
	≥41	18.8
Number of children	1	50.2
	2	37.3
	3	10.4
	4	1.9
	5	0.2
Respondent's education	Primary - ISCED 1	3.5
	Upper secondary - ISCED 352-353	15.2
	upper secondary - ISCED 344	46.5
	University - ISCED 6-8	34.8
Partner's education	Primary ISCED 1	3.8
	Upper secondary - ISCED 352-353	11.9
	Upper secondary - ISCED 344	41.5
	University - ISCED 6-8	29.8
Respondent's marital status	Married	42.3
	Lives with a partner	40.8
	Single	16.9

## 5.2 Data collection

The data were collected through individual structured interviews with one of the children's parents. The interview took place either in a preschool facility or at parents' home. The respondents' privacy was protected by assigning numbers to interview protocols. An interview scheme was established as based on the authors' experiences in early childhood care and education, previous research as well as on the analyses of the relevant literature.

The interview concentrated on questions about the reasons of a preschool choice for the respondents' children from age two as well as on their satisfaction with the particular preschool attended by the child. Altogether, seven reasons of preschool choice were offered to be rated, which had been previously identified as relevant in the Czech context: taking care of the child while the parent is at work, enabling interaction with peers, making new friends, to be with other adults (teachers, teacher aides, cook etc.), expanding knowledge and skills, learning new routines and because the parent was unable to deal with the child. An example of item: *My child attends preschool so that she becomes accustomed to interaction with same-age children* (1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree). Additional items were open-ended questions and offered to present other reasons of choice than those presented by the authors.

The respondents rated their satisfaction of the child's developmental progress due to preschool attendance in three large areas: communication ability (vocabulary extension, speech fluency, sentence complexity), social skills (inclination to play with peers, courage to address other children), and overall developmental progress. An example of an item: *I consider the developmental progress of my child in communication skills to be:* (1 weak – 3 excellent).

Demographics included the respondents' gender, age, marital status, number of children, and education level of both the respondent and the respondent's spouse/partner.

## 6 Findings

The findings will be organised according the research questions. First, the descriptive data on parents' reasons of enrolling their children in preschools will be presented, followed by their satisfaction with the preschool's impact on the child. Both the reasons and the satisfaction will be associated with the mothers' marital status and level of education.

### 6.1 Parents' reasons to enrol the child in preschool

The parents' ratings of the reasons to enrol the child in preschool at the age of two were averaged and the means were ordered from the highest to the lowest.

Table 2 shows the details. Three findings are noteworthy. Surprisingly, care of the child during mothers' work time was not the highest preference of the parents. Parents also have other motives for their decision and that the employment reason and career building was not the highest preference. This finding somewhat disrupts the generally publicised opinion in the Czech press that the sole reason of preschool attendance of the child at age two is due to re-employment of their mothers. Nevertheless, the employment factor is present and is strong ( $M = 3.66$  on a five-point scale).

The second important finding is that there is very little difference between averages in the six highest rated reasons. In fact, the distance between the highest and the lowest rated reason is less than half a point on the five-point scale. This is a tiny difference and it indicates that the parental motives are more or less equally important. The parents value the broad education and care aims of preschools, encompassing social, communicational, and cognitive learning of children. Third, the mean scores on these six reasons are very high, ranging from 3.58 to 4.01. This might document that the parents' expectations are well thought out and are not a result of a sudden impulsive decision.

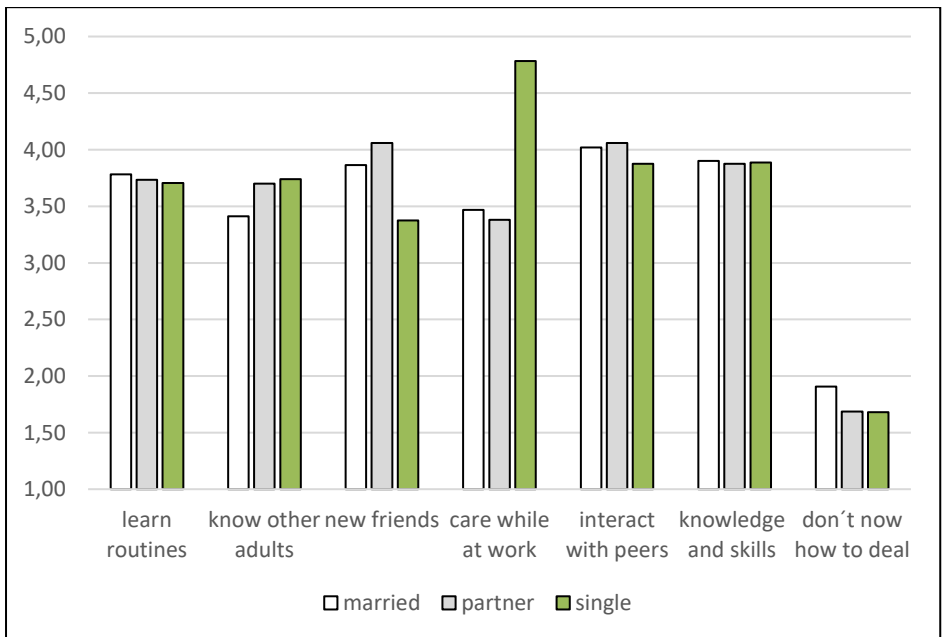
The least scored item was related to a situation that parents were unable to deal with children's behaviour and therefore they placed them in preschool ( $M = 1.78$ ). These were either parents who had a child with "problematic" behaviour, or parents who have insufficient time to take care of the child properly because they had another child or children or had a demanding job. Inspection of demographic data revealed that these were married couples rather than single mothers, and mothers with primary education only.

Tab. 2: Parents ratings on reasons to enrol their child in preschool at age two

<b>The reasons why my child attends preschool is:</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
to learn interaction with same-age children	500	1.00	5.00	4.01	1.20
to acquire knowledge and skills needed for higher classes of preschool	500	1.00	5.00	3.89	1.38
to make new friends	500	1.00	5.00	3.86	1.25
to learn routines other than those found at home	500	1.00	5.00	3.75	1.28
to be cared for while I am at work	500	1.00	5.00	3.66	1.61
to get accustomed to other adults	500	1.00	5.00	3.58	1.39
the child is problematic and we don't know how to deal with her	500	1.00	5.00	1.78	1.34

Parents are not a homogenous group in regard to demographic variables and their decisions concerning a child's enrolment in preschool is associated with a number of social and economic characteristics (Peyton et al., 2001; Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006; Rose & Elicker, 2008). We examined two of them, which we considered essential in the Czech context, i.e., marital status of the mother and the mother's level of education.

Fig. 1: Rating of reasons to enrol two-years old children in preschool by mothers' marital status



The mother's marital status was categorised as (a) married, (b) living with a partner, or (c) single. Figure 01 shows small differences among the three marital statuses across the seven reasons categories except two of them. In *Making new friends* there is a significant difference between the three groups ( $H(2) = 15.880$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) with a single group of mothers scoring the lowest ( $M = 3.37$ ) and the partners' group scoring the highest ( $M=4.06$ ). In *Care while at work* there was also a significant difference between the three groups ( $H(2) = 61.392$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) with the single group scoring the highest ( $M = 4.78$ ) and the partners'

group scoring the lowest ( $M = 3.38$ ). While the latter result is obvious, because single mothers have a high priority to preserve their job to ensure living for them and the child, the former result is difficult to explain. Perhaps, single mothers cling to their children very much and want to limit the social environment of the child in order to "reserve" the child for themselves. It should be noticed that single mothers scored low also on another social reason of the child's enrolment in preschool, the child's interaction with peers.

The mother's education showed strong differences in three reasons of the child's enrolment in preschool at the age of two. See Tab. 3 for details. A mother's education is strongly associated with *Care while at work* ( $H(3) = 12.247$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ), with the primary education scoring the highest ( $M = 4.44$ ). This is not a surprise because lowly educated mothers tend to have the most difficult situation to preserve a job. Further more, the mother's education is strongly associated with *Find new friends* ( $H(3) = 11.837$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), again with the primary education scoring the highest ( $M = 4.22$ ). Finally, the mother's education is strongly associated with *Learning new routines* ( $H(3) = 19.998$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), with upper secondary education of ISCED 352-353 scoring the highest ( $M = 4.22$ ), and with Interaction with peers ( $H(3) = 7.938$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ), with university education scoring the highest ( $M = 4.13$ ).

Tab. 3: Reasons to enrol two-year old children in preschool by education of mothers

Mother's education	Learn routines	Know other adults	New friends	Care while at work	Interact with peers	Knowledge and skills	Don't know how to deal
Primary	3.22	3.33	4.22	4.44	3.17	4.06	2.78
Upper secondary ISCED 352-353	4.22	3.66	3.42	3.27	4.04	3.85	1.89
Upper secondary ISCED 344	3.72	3.53	3.99	3.58	3.97	3.80	1.76
University	3.65	3.66	3.82	3.86	4.13	4.01	1.65
Sign.	<b>0.000</b>	0.428	<b>0.008</b>	<b>0.010</b>	<b>0.047</b>	0.110	0.059

Sign. = Kruskal Wallis test



## 6.2 Parents satisfaction with the child's developmental progress in preschool

The parents' decision about the enrolment of the child in preschool at the age of two is one perspective, the developmental efficiency of the preschool is another one. If parents' satisfaction with preschool developmental effect was weak, their decision would prove wrong. Parents were asked to rate how they perceive enhancement of the child on a 3-point scales in three domains, i.e. in communication skills, social skills, and overall progress. Table 4 shows the findings. The parents rated high enhancement of their children in communication skills ( $M=2.35$ ). They perceive that preschool environment promoted the children's vocabulary extension, speech fluency as well as sentence complexity. All these skills are crucial for dealing with peers and adults, as well as for learning. Parents also rated high social skills improvement ( $M = 2.37$ ). Children increased frequency of playing with peers and were not hesitant to address other children or adults. These skills are functional for life and for contact with a variety of people. This finding indicates that parents consider preschool to be an important source of social experience for the child. Parents rated the overall improvement of the child ( $M = 2.62$ ) highest. This broad category encompasses social, cognitive, linguistic and also emotional development of the child.

However, in interpreting the parents' satisfaction with the child's progress one must take into consideration that their ratings of children's progress could be biased by their own decision to enrol their children in a preschool facility. Their satisfaction with the child progress in preschool reinforces their decision to enrol the child in this facility. The correlation between overall satisfaction and three reasons to choose preschool for the child was statistically significant, i.e., *Learning routines* (0.100\*), *Making new friends* (0.145\*\*) and *Learning knowledge and skills* (0.179\*). Though the correlations are not high, they indicate associations between parents' satisfaction and perceived progress of children in these three domains.

The parent's satisfaction with the child's developmental progress due to preschool attendance is based on a subjective judgement. It is generally accepted that professional and parental definitions of quality differ. Professional assessment is objective while parents' rating is less exact because it may be contaminated with the parents' emotions to their child. Professionals rate other children while parents rate children of their own. Professionals use pre-defined discrete assessment indicators while parents look at children's progress holistically.

In spite of the assessment differences between professionals and parents, the judgement of the latter cannot be rejected as invalid. The parents' opinion is

important for their own satisfaction. If they are satisfied with the child's developmental progress, they are also satisfied with their own decision to enter the child into institutional education and care.

Parents' satisfaction was examined in relationship with two mothers' demographic characteristics. Satisfaction with the child's overall progress was significantly associated with the mothers' education ( $H(3)=15.657, p = 0.001$ ).

Tab. 4: Child's developmental progress due to preschool attendance as perceived by parents

<b>I noticed my child's progress in:</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Communication skills	488	1.00	3.00	2.35	0.65
Social skills	500	1.00	3.00	2.37	0.63
Overall progress	496	1.00	3.00	2.62	0.57

Mothers with upper secondary education of ISCED 352-353 ranked the satisfaction the highest ( $M = 2.73$ ), while primary educated mothers ranked the lowest ( $M = 2.28$ ). Satisfaction with the child's overall progress was also significantly associated with mothers' marital status ( $H(2) = 38.301, p = 0.000$ ). Married mothers ranked the satisfaction the highest ( $M = 2.75$ ) while single mothers the lowest ( $M = 2.30$ ). Poor results are consistent with similar studies abroad. Mothers education and marital status are demographic characteristics the importance of which in the parents' preschool choice has been proved in countries as diverse as Taiwan (Jang, Moore, & Lin, 2014), Italy (Scopelliti & Musati, 2013) or the United states (Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006).

## 7 Conclusion

This study focused on parents who enrolled their two years old children in preschools in the Czech Republic. The purpose of the study was to examine the reasons of parents to place their children in preschools as well as the satisfaction of the developmental progress of their children in this institution. A representative sample of parents who enrolled their children in preschool from age two was surveyed ( $N=520$ ) using individual interviews. The most important finding is that caring for the child while parents are at work was not the most important reason. They rated it 3.66 on a five-point scale. Other reasons were rated higher: getting the child accustomed to interaction within groups of same-age children, acquiring cognitive skills and knowledge, and getting accustomed to a routine other than that found at home.

Generally, the results showed parents' were satisfied with their child's developmental progress in preschool due to the impact of the preschool program. These results are consistent with other findings (e.g., Teleki & Buck-Gomez, 2002). When asked to assess the developmental progress of their children due to preschool attendance, the parents noted progress in communication ability, social skills as well as overall progress. As for concerns regarding demographic characteristics, the child's overall progress in preschool was significantly related to the mother's level of education and her marital status.

Though mothers' satisfaction was positively related to the impact of preschool, we do not know very much about the sources of this satisfaction. We need to examine what knowledge they have of the preschool programme and teachers' practices. More research is needed to ascertain how parents view the teachers' activities, their approach to children and the overall physical and emotional climate of preschool. This suggests a route of future research in Czech preschools.

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