

POLISH JOURNAL *of* EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

ISSN 2657-3528

2024, Vol. VI (LXXVI)

DOI: 10.2478/poljes-2024-0004

Family as a Value in the Lives of Six-year-old Children

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ABSTRACT

Values play a key role in people's lives, influencing their choices, goals and objectives, shaping their identity. Values are also responsible for the durability of relationships. The period of middle childhood is the time when the formation of morality begins, and intense changes in the social and emotional areas take place. Therefore, learning more about what is close to the children at this stage of development is worthwhile. In order to find out which values are important to six-year-old children, a study was conducted with the participation of 105 children attending selected Białystok preschools and preschool units at primary schools. The method used in the study consisted in the analysis of work products, and the tool was analysis of drawings. The obtained data made it possible to answer the posed research problem: Do the six-year-old children under study consider the family an important value in their lives? and Are there differences between girls and boys in their perception of the family as an important value in their lives? The study shows that the most important value for the participating children is family. Drawings of family, parents, grandmother, grandparents, siblings accounted for more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the works made by the children taking part in the study. In contrast, perceptions of the family as an important value in children's lives differ by gender. Girls were more likely than boys to point to the family as the most important value for them. Finding out what is important for six-year-old children makes it possible to adjust the process of education and upbringing in such a way that it supports the development of the child, according to the child's sphere of immediate development.

KEYWORDS: values, family, middle childhood, a child's drawing

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Introduction

Values are an essential part of everyone's life. They determine individual choices, define priorities, help set goals, and shape an individual's identity. They help build relationships with others, affect the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the subjective perception of what constitutes success and happiness. In the educational context, values are of particular importance for the proper functioning of educational processes (Remiszewska, 2024).

Definition of values and their classification

The issue of values can be considered against the background of several scientific disciplines, and encompasses a variety of research approaches, including philosophical, sociological and psychological. For the purposes of this discussion, the definition formulated by Jan Szczepański (1972) was adopted; hence, values are any material or ideal object, idea or institution, real or imaginary object, in relation to which individuals or collectivities adopt an attitude of respect. A human being assigns to them an important role in their life and feels compelled to pursue them (Szczepański, 1972). In the above definition, the motivational function should be emphasized, as it plays a significant role in the choice of values preferred by the individual and enables the learning of values relevant to children in middle childhood (applies to children aged 3 to 6).

An important role in the development of axiology was played by the typology of values proposed by Max Scheler; it became the basis for building original classifications of values developed by numerous social scientists. One of the authors who presented Max Scheler's expanded typology of values was Leon Dyczewski (2001). The author assumed the object to which these values are directed as a criterion for dividing values into different groups (Dakowicz, 2006). The classification developed by Leon Dyczewski consists of eight groups of values: hedonistic, vital, material, sociocentric, aesthetic, ethical, cognitive and religious (Dyczewski, 2001). Hedonistic values refer to what enhances the achievement of pleasure and comfort in life. The decision criterion becomes the desire to experience pleasure. A person who is guided primarily by these values makes decisions and acts in a way that will result in satisfaction and contentment. Vital values focus on caring for physical health and a nice appearance. Anything that helps improve fitness, increase vitality and maintain an attractive appearance is considered worth the effort and commitment of the individual. Material values are associated with the pursuit of prosperity and a comfortable life; they focus on various economic goods. A person guided by these values focuses their efforts on raising the

standard of living and accumulating material possessions, with any loss seen as undesirable and negative. Sociocentric values focus on aspects of life such as the nation, state, family, friends and social involvement. Everything is valued that expresses the collective will and the collective effort of individuals. This promotes the building of ties between individuals and the formation of social structures. Aesthetic values include such aspects as love of beauty, harmony and order. Both material and non-material objects are valued that evoke a sense of awe, provide deep aesthetic experiences and arouse emotional elation. Ethical values refer to what supports human life and development, and their primary object is goodness. A person guided by these values strives to achieve goodness by practising such attitudes as justice, forgiveness, hospitality, mercy, helpfulness, tolerance or generosity. Cognitive values involve the pursuit of knowledge and the discovery of the truth about oneself and the surrounding world. An individual guided by these values is constantly expanding their cognitive horizons, which allows them to better understand reality, themselves and the world. Religious values are based on belief in the existence of God and supernatural reality. The object of these values is God, eternal life and spiritual connection with supernatural beings. A person guided by these values strives to achieve unity with God and to live in accordance with the principles of faith that lead to salvation and eternal life (Dyczewski, 2001). Hedonistic, vital and material values, related to the human body, the sphere of feeling, desire and the affirmation of existence, focus on the satisfaction of immediate needs and desires. They are referred to as instrumental values, because their achievement brings temporary satisfaction without providing a long-term sense of happiness or meaning in life. Spiritual values, on the other hand, including aesthetic, ethical, cognitive and religious values, play a significant role in the formation of an individual's personality. They are achieved within the person themselves, unnoticed by those around. These values offer the individual inner joy and satisfaction that are not attainable by other means (Dyczewski, 2001).

Crucial to the comprehensive development of the individual is the balancing of instrumental and spiritual values. Hence, it matters for a human being to have the opportunity to experience each type of value. Higher values are derived from lower—instrumental values. Thus, lofty ideals cannot be achieved without first satisfying basic needs (Perz, 2020).

Definitions of the family and its functions

Deliberations about the family and its functions date back to antiquity, thus becoming a natural and common creation and the most widespread, and oldest, form of social life. Aristotle recognized the family as the foundation of social life. In his view,

the family is the place where virtues are formed. Having it is one of the prerequisites that determine a happy life (Szczap, 2013). Compared to any other collectivity, state, institution or organization, the family always remains the primary community that has the most significant meaning for humans (Dyczewski, 2003).

The Dictionary of the Polish Language provides a definition of the family, which in its narrowest scope includes spouses along with their children, while more generally, a family is made up of persons related by consanguinity and affinity (2005). A broader view of the family was presented by Jadwiga Izdebska, who defines the family as

“a small social group, primary, natural, most important, irreplaceable by other social groups; it is the spiritual union of a small group of people united by the relationship of marriage and consanguinity. Members of this family social group have common goals and objectives, established moral and social norms, they are connected by direct interactions, the possibility of daily contacts, and at the same time they have a sense of the distinctiveness of their group in relation to other groups. In this small social group, emotional and social relations are relatively stable, characterized by spontaneity, based on mutual help and care” (Izdebska, 2015, p. 101).

The view of the family, and how it is defined, has been changing over the years. As Wioletta Danilewicz notes, the family has undergone several transformations regarding the functions that it performs, beginning with the Judeo-Christian family, which functioned as part of a broad social arrangement, characterized by sharing the household, economic community, division of labour and reproduction, with the goal of sustaining the society. With economic, cultural or social changes, a weakening of the traditional view of the family in favour of modernism has been observed. It has been noticed that the family, compared to other social groups, is distinguished by the emotional ties formed between its members, a sense of community and togetherness or consanguinity. Another transformation involved the influence of mass culture, which promoted models of life focused on individualism and self-realization, leading to a weakening of family ties. The labour market of the time, characterized by increasing demands for availability and flexibility, had the effect of limiting the amount of time that individuals could spend interacting with their loved ones. This contributed to the weakening of the role of the family in its traditional view, leading, on the one hand, to a reduction in the traditional structures of family life and, on the other hand, providing an opportunity to redefine relationships within the family. Contributing factors include the progressive move toward equality and partnerships between partners and between parents in raising children, the growing number of educated people (including women), and increased foreign migration enabling new lifestyles to be observed (Danilewicz, 2020).

Social and moral development of the child in middle childhood

When considering issues related to children's choices, their motivation and justification of the choices, attention must be paid to their overall development, both in the cognitive, social, emotional and moral spheres. From early childhood, children are subjected to external influences, hence the family, peer and cultural environment plays an important role in forming views on things that are important to them. Through observation and imitation, they assimilate the norms, as well as rules of their environment. As they gain new experiences, they begin to see the complexity of human relationships, including the prevailing ethical principles, which contributes to the formation of their own beliefs. The child learns about the consequences of their actions, which leads to the development of skills related to feeling pleasant and less pleasant emotions, important in the process of internalizing social norms. As the child grows, their motivation to follow the rules changes and transforms from external to internal due to the child's understanding and acceptance of the prevailing rules as an integral part of their own identity. This transition is crucial for the formation of attitudes toward values.

The Dictionary of the Polish Language defines morality as a set of judgments, norms and principles defining the range of views and behaviour considered appropriate, and as the totality of behaviour and attitudes of an individual or group, evaluated according to some socially functioning system of moral judgments and norms (2005). Morality develops through the clash between an individual's internal beliefs and external social influences. The middle childhood period is a key stage in this process, as children begin to perceive and incorporate social rules into their own structures (Piaget, 2006). Children learn to evaluate their own and other people's behaviour thanks to the conscience that is being formed at this stage. Initially, children are guided by the rules imposed by their parents and authority figures, but as they mature, their own "inner voice" becomes more dominant in regulating behaviour (Kielar-Turska, 2011; Schaffer, 2006).

Moral development is a staged process that evolves as an individual grows up. Jean Piaget's theory of children's moral development, in which changing attitudes toward rules of conduct at different stages of life plays a key role, distinguishes four stages of moral development. At the first stage, which includes children between the ages of 2 and 4, the children do not have a full understanding about the rules and prevailing principles. They do not understand why certain types of behaviour are considered bad or good. They act impulsively, without thinking about the consequences of their actions. The second stage, which lasts from the age of 5 to 7 and is called moral realism, is characterized by the fact that children perceive rules as immutable and fixed principles established by parents or teachers and follow them without ques-

tion. In their view, breaking the rules should always be punished, regardless of the intentions behind the actions. At this age, morality is understood in terms of obedience to adults. At the third stage, which is between the ages of 8 and 11, children enter a phase of moral relativism. At this stage, children begin to understand that rules are contracts created by people. As such, they can be challenged and amended with the consent of all parties. They begin to see the intentions behind individual actions, which becomes the basis for a more mature moral assessment. They stop believing in imminent justice and begin to see that punishment can be avoided if improper behaviour is not noticed by anyone. The fourth stage, which begins after the age of 12, brings with it the development of the ability to create one's own new rules (Schaffer, 2006; Vasta et al., 2004). The child's morality is constructed through their cognitive abilities, activity, inquiry, selection and interpretation of information that is being provided. Through social interactions, especially with peers, empathy, fairness and the ability to understand the perspectives of others are shaped. The middle childhood period is the time when the foundations of moral development are laid (Kielar-Turska, 2011; Matejczuk, 2014).

Functioning in the social area is closely related to emotional functioning. One of the main regulators and factors affecting the quality of human interaction is the expression of emotions (Czub, & Matejczuk, 2015). At the beginning of preschool education, children are characterized by emotional lability, their feelings are intense and often impulsive; even small stimuli can trigger strong emotional reactions. Understanding and naming one's own emotional states, desires, needs, and the experiences or needs of others is a key element in socializing a young person (Czub, Matejczuk, 2015). The change regarding the relative constancy in feeling emotions, including towards specific people, is conducive to the formation of first friendships. As children develop emotional maturity, they acquire the skills to express their emotions in socially acceptable ways. This fosters increasingly effective interpersonal communication and provides a basis for the development of empathy. (Górecka, 1992; Bee & Boyd, 2004; Dixon & Stein, 2005; Landy & Osofsky, 2009; Konderak, 2010; Kielar-Turska, 2011; Matejczuk, 2014). The expansion of the social world to include the non-family environment, the emergence of new significant people, and the increased importance of peer relationships are conducive to the improvement of the child's functioning in the broader society. One of the most significant challenges of the preschool period is the progressive development in the area of self-regulation. Maturation in this sphere involves a change in the child's actions manifested in an increased ability to direct their own behaviour, inhibition of undesirable reactions or readiness to make an effort during difficult tasks. The level of self-control in relations with parents also increases, and negotiation in conversation is introduced in place of rebellious behaviour (Czub & Matejczuk, 2015).

There are many dynamic changes in the child's development during middle childhood. They are associated with the intense growth of the body, the impact of contacts from the social environment, the significantly increased child's interest in the outside world and the development of the space for the world of fantasy and imagination. It is a time of getting to know oneself, one's emotions, needs, desires but also limitations related, among others, to social demands and rules (Brzezińska, 1984; Bee & Boyd, 2004). The various changes that occur in the cognitive, physical, social, moral and emotional spheres allow the child to better understand themselves, others and the surrounding world.

Research methodology

The objective of the conducted research was to determine whether the family is a value that is important to six-year-old children. In order to achieve this objective, a study was conducted in a group of 58 girls and 46 boys (a total of 104 six-year-olds) attending selected Białystok preschools and preschool units. The study was conducted in the 2023/2024 school year. In pursuit of the stated research objective, the following research problems were formulated:

1. Do the six-year-old children under study consider family to be an important value in their lives?
2. Are there differences between girls and boys in their perception of the family as an important value in their lives?

The study deployed the method of analyzing work products, the tool being the analysis of drawings (Łobocki, 2004). It was conducted while the children were in the facility. The children's task was to make a drawing on a theme suggested by the teacher in charge of the group: "Draw something that is very important to you." The teachers were given detailed instructions beforehand on how to implement the study. It was crucial that it should take place in an environment that was natural for the children, at the same time eliminating factors that might influence their thinking or actions. Accordingly, the researcher did not participate in the activities in person so as not to disrupt the daily rhythm of the group.

Study results

The drawings of the children under study often depicted several values important to them. Sociocentric values were the most common (77.1%), while material (17.1%), hedonistic (16.2%) and religious (8.6%) values were less frequent. Sometimes the children's drawings also represented vital (5.7%), aesthetic (4.8%) and cognitive (3.8%) values. A detailed analysis showed that the children taking part in the study, among sociocentric values, most often pointed to the family as something important in their lives (76.2%).

Sociocentric values indicated by children in middle childhood do not relate to commitment to larger communities, such as the nation, the state, religious groups or political parties. For children, their immediate social environment is crucial, with the family playing the key role at this stage of development. When asked about what their drawing depicted, children often did not limit themselves to describing the content itself, but also explained the reasons for their choice, although this was not required as part of the study:

- "for me the whole family is important, because they like me" (Ada, 6 years old),
- "family is important to me, because family is the best treasure" (Alan, 6 years old),
- "family is important, because I love them" (Julia, 6 years old),
- "family, because they help me and enrolled me in gymnastics" (Julka, 6 years old),
- "for me the most important thing is family, because I love them with all my might" (Kaja, 6 years old),
- "family, because they help me" (Lilianka, 6 years old),
- "family, because they protect me from evil" (Nela, 6 years old),
- "family, because they spend time with me" (Pola, 6 years old).

In the drawings, the children depicted their immediate family: parents, siblings, one parent (usually the mum), a family with a dog or cat, as well as grandparents and peer friends. An analysis of the drawings indicates that for the children under study family is the most important value. It is in the family that they find love, acceptance and a sense of security. A strong identification with the family is the foundation of a developing society and plays a significant stabilizing role amidst the various turbulences of civilization. The family is a place of spiritual and material support, as well as acts as a transmitter and protector of enduring values that give a deep meaning to human existence (Bień, 2015).

The following are sample drawings of the children under study, showing the family as an important value for them (Drawings 1–8).



Figure 1. "The most important is my distant family"
(Alicja, 6)



Figure 2. "The most important is my family" (Maria, 6)



Figure 3. "My sister" (Ola, 6)



Figure 4. "Group mate and grandfather" (Leon, 6)



Figure 5. "Mum because she cooks food often"
(Zosia, 6)



Figure 6. "The most important is my mum and me"
(Blanka, 6)



Figure 7. "Walking with grandpa. Beautiful crocuses" (Zuzia, 6)



Figure 8. "The most important are grandmas and grandpa" (Oliwier, 6)

Source: own research.

In response to the research problem of the existing differences between girls and boys in perceiving the family as an important value in their lives, it can be noted that girls were more likely than boys to point to family as the crucial value for them. Therefore, it can be assumed that for girls, more often than for boys, sociocentric values are of key importance in their lives (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the values obtained by the boys and girls under study

Types of values	Boys under study (<i>N</i> =46)		Girls under study (<i>N</i> =58)		Significance of differences	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
Sociocentric—Family	0.64	0.49	0.88	0.33	-3.02	0.01

Source: own research. *M* – mean value; *SD* – standard deviation; *t* – value of student's *t*-test for independent samples; *p* – two-tailed statistical significance. Calculations were made with the use of IBM SPSS Statistics 29 statistical software.

Conclusion

The conducted study provided answers to the research problems posed: Do the 6-year-old children under study consider the family an important value in their lives? Are there differences between girls and boys in their perception of the family as an important value in their lives?

The children under study most often pointed to sociocentric values, depicting the family in their works, which indicates their recognition of the family as a particularly important aspect in their lives. The family plays a significant role in every child's life. In the family, children feel safe and accepted, which allows them to develop self-esteem. Relatives provide support during difficult moments, helping cope with challenges and build emotional resilience. As children mature, the values acquired at home can influence their life decisions and attitudes, making the family not only a place of support, but also a source of inspiration.

The analysis of the study found that girls are more likely than boys to attribute significant meanings to the family in their preferred values, indicating the greater importance of sociocentric values in their lives. Different perceptions of the world and values considered important between girls and boys may be due to differences in gender socialization. In the case of girls, it may be that their upbringing places more emphasis on aspects that will translate in the future into greater sensitivity to the needs of others and the ability to build and maintain social ties. These are important competencies in the context of family and social life. The key, however, is to strive for the harmonious development of each child, providing them with a chance to learn and understand what is around them.

Children's drawings, depicting what is important to the children, are a valuable source of information to adjust the processes of education and upbringing so as to support the development of the child in accordance with their sphere of immediate development (Wygotski, 2002).

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