

Agata Ruźniak-Lubocka
University of Gdansk, Institute of Psychology
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0197-6254>

Maria Kaźmierczak
University of Gdansk, Institute of Psychology
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7323-2580>

Maternal emotions during child's transition to the preschool

Abstract

A child's transition to preschool is an important stage in family life. This is the time when the child becomes a member of a larger community than the family. The aim of the study was to analyze what emotions mothers feel about their child going to preschool. One thousand and forty mothers of at least one child in preschool age (between 2 to 4,5 years old) participated in the study. The surveyed women completed a questionnaire on the intensity of emotions related to the transition of a child to pre-kindergarten. The results indicate that the lack of prior experience with daycare is associated with greater anxiety, sadness and regret felt by mothers. Thus the process of adaptation before the child enters pre-kindergarten should involve parents.

Keywords: preschool, childcare, motherhood, emotions.

Transition to the preschool is a milestone in child's life that changes family dynamics and is related to the emotions experienced both by the child and the parents (McClelland, 1995). It is considered an important event during the first years of a child's life (McCubbins, 2004). Taking the perspective of family psychology, it should be emphasized that parents typically try to prepare their children for this new stage in life (Kreider, 2002; Janicka and Liberska, 2014).

As Majorczyk (2018) mentions, parents should first prepare for adaptation to preschool. This will allow them to get involved in the process of their child's

adaptation by for example: showing the building, organizing g meetings with teachers, participating in picnics organized by the institution, reading thematic books, talking to the child, role-playing and preparing a layette, i.e. shoes or outfits needed for the preschool (Kreider, 2002; McClelland, 1995; McCubbins, 2004; Miller, 2015).

(Rautamies *et al.*, 2019) have concluded that parents of children who attend preschool experience both negative and positive emotions, such as worry, anxiety, relief, pleasure, joy or feelings of satisfaction (Rautamies *et al.*, 2019). McClelland (1995) notice that process of transition to the pre-school might bring parents joy, excitement or pride when they notice the child socializing and getting independent (McClelland, 1995).

Malsh and colleagues (2016) asked parents what they felt about the fact that their child would now be able to cope with preschool on their own. The study indicated that parents usually worried whether children were able to take care of themselves. Parents were worried whether the child will miss them very much during a few hours' stay in preschool (Malsh *et al.*, 2016). Parental regret, anxiety and sadness might occur after a child's starts attending preschool but typically attenuate as the child is getting older (Segrin *et al.* 2013).

In this study, we analyzed emotions experienced by mothers of children whose children were to start attending preschool. Based on the reports from the above studies, in this paper we have identified six emotions that might be experienced by mothers of children transitioning to preschool. We asked about the intensity of: sadness, anxiety, joy, pride, excitement and regret due to their child's will soon go to the preschool. For the purposes of the analyzes, we created two indicators: pleasant emotions (joy, pride and excitement) and unpleasant emotions (sadness, anxiety and regret). We took under consideration the impact of their previous experiences with daycare, the number of children in the family and psychological factors on emotions felt by mothers. Preschool might be continuation of daycare in the nursery. In Poland, if both parents return to work, most often children start attending the daycare nursery around the age of one and usually attend it until the age of 3 (Głogosz, 2021). After this time, children most often start preschool. For children who have not attended daycare before, it is the first place where they meet the rules of group work, spend several hours with their peers and also they are cared by other person than their parents (Miśkowiec, 2012; Sikorska, 2005).

Research has shown that mothers who are more confident about their child's transition to preschool, have had earlier experiences with their child attending daycare. Such experiences have been related with higher eagerness to cooperate with the facility and higher awareness of the ways the child behaves under the

professional care and among peers. For these mothers and their children this crucial transition was the next step in daycare (Barblett, Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon, Maloney, 2011; Poteat, Snow, Ironsmith and Bjorkman, 1992). Additionally, during the transition to preschool parents of only children experienced stronger anxiety than parents with older children attending preschool who felt joy and curiosity related to their child being cared after by others (Benigno, and Ellis, 2004; Osmanowski and Cardona, 2016).

In order to be able to outline a broader context for the intensity of mothers emotions we also included their general life satisfaction (Antaramian, *et al.*; Cohn *et al.*, 2009). Previous research showed that mothers who were more satisfied with their lives rated daytime care higher (Ruźniak-Lubocka and Sawicki, 2021). People satisfied with their lives evaluate the reality around them as better than those dissatisfied with their lives (Antaramian, Huebner and Valois, 2008; Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels and Conway, 2009). Parental stress related to childcare was also included in the study. Stress associated with child care increases feelings of anger among parents. Reconciling childcare with other responsibilities, such as work, housekeeping or functioning in other areas of social life may generate fatigue, irritation and overload (Ross and Van Willigen, 1996; Okimoto and Heilman, 2012; Reich *et al.*, 2005). . Thus it is worth to explore whether or to what extent the emotions experienced in connection with the child's going to preschool are related to the parental stress and life satisfaction as well.

1. The present study

In the following study, we posed the following research question: What emotions dominate in mothers in connection with the child's transition to kindergarten and what factors may their intensity depend on? Based on research reports Barblett *et al.* (2011) we expected that mothers of children who did not attend nursery would experience greater anxiety about their child's transition to preschool than mothers of children who have attended daycare before (H1). W Benigno and Ellis (2004) and Osmanowski and Cardona (2016) we expected that mothers of only children and children with younger siblings would experience a higher intensity of unpleasant emotions due to their child's transition to preschool than parents whose second or subsequent child goes to preschool (H2). Additionally, based on research reports Reich *et al.*, (2005) we predicted that mothers who were more satisfied with life in general and who experienced less parental stress would declare more positive and less negative emotions related to child's transition to preschool (H3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In the study participated 1,126 parents of children in preschool age. These people participated in the study as volunteers. All of the participants replied anonymously. After verifying the original data, it was decided to exclude from the analyzes men who constituted only 2.2% of the respondents, as well as other people with missing data.

The final group of respondents whose answers were analyzed in this study consisted of 1040 mothers (Mage = 32.12 years; SDage = 3.94; Rangeage = 21–55 years), whose only or one of several children was to go to preschool for the first time. All women lived in Poland, and most of them in large cities (79.6%). Most of the mothers surveyed had higher education (86.8%), were in a formal relationship (85.5%) and raised their children together with their father (95.9%).

2.2. Materials and procedure

The questionnaire was completed online via interankiety.pl in the period July – August 2021, i.e. just before September 1, which also the beginning of attending preschool for most 3 years old children in Poland. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Gdańsk.

The aim of the study was to reach two groups of mothers. Those who used care in kindergarten and those who did not have such experience. The respondents answered 24 closed questions. Among them there were questions about sociodemographic data, individual item used to measure a specific variable, an adapted tool, as well as questions created by the authors on the basis of data collected from the literature on the subject.

2.3. Measurement

Satisfaction with life. It is one question: “How much do you enjoy your life?” (Atroszko *et al.*, 2017). It was derived from WHOQOL-BREF (Skevington, Lotfy, and O’Connell 2004). The responses were provided on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *not at all* to (9) *an extreme amount*.

Stress related to caring for a child. It is a scale adapted to Polish conditions on the basis of the Mother’s Role Stress Scale (Kaźmierczak, 2015; Reich *et al.*, 2005). The scale consists of four statements and is used to measure the stress experienced

in taking on parental roles. Answers are given on a 5-point Likert ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*.

The questions are: “1. My child is a big source of stress in my life”, “2. Having a baby means that I have little time and freedom in my life”, “3. It is difficult for me to reconcile various duties because I have a child”, “4. I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility that comes with being a parent”.

For the purposes of the analysis, an additional factor was created – parental stress, which was the average of the answers given to the four questions described. The reliability of factor for four measurement items was $\alpha = 0.85$

My child is going to preschool. These are questions regarding the perceived perception of emotions associated with going to preschool. In this study, parents were asked to what extent they feel: *anxiety, regret, sadness, happiness, pride* and *excitement* in connection with their child's transition to preschool. Answers are given on 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) = *strongly disagree* to (7) = *strongly agree*.

Two additional indicators were created during the analyzes. *Pleasant emotions* – average of ratings for emotions such as *happiness, pride, and excitement* and *unpleasant emotions* – average of ratings for emotions such as *anxiety, sadness, and regret*.

The reliability of factor *pleasant emotions* was $\alpha = 0.74$ and reliability of factor *unpleasant emotions* was $\alpha = 0.79$.

Statistical analyzes were conducted using IBM SPSS (version 27). The distributions of the dependent variables differ statistically significantly from the normal distribution ($p < 0.05$ using the *Kolmogorov Smirnov test*). The techniques and statistical tests used included descriptive statistics, *the Mann-Whitney U test, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test*, and correlations.

3. Results

Information about the demographic characteristics of children of mothers participating in the study are presented in Table 1. Children whose mothers questioned were aged 24–54 months ($M_{age} = 36.1$ months; $SD_{age} = 5.27$). Among them, 34 (3.3%) had diagnosed disability or chronic disease.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of children of mothers participating in the study

Variable	Total (N=1040) [n%]
Child's gender	
Girls	485 [46.6]
Boys	555 [53.4]
Child's siblings	
None	427 [41.1]
Younger siblings	345 [33.2]
Older siblings	232 [22.3]
Older and younger siblings	36 [3.5]
Previous daycare experience	
No	541 [52.0]
Ye	499 [48.0]
Preschool type	
Public	704 [67.7]
Nonpublic	333 [32.0]
Others	3 [0.3]

3.1. Previous experience with daycare and maternal emotions during child's transition to preschool

For the purposes of the analyzes the two study groups were created: 1) a group of mothers whose children attended the nursery and 2) a group of mothers, whose children did not attend the nursery. Then, correlations between the variables in two groups of children were conducted and the relationships between the emotions associated with going to preschool experienced by mothers from both groups were verified.

Between the two groups, statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) was demonstrated in the intensity of such emotions as *anxiety*, *sadness*, *pride*, *regret*, as well as two created indicators, i.e. *pleasant emotions* and *unpleasant emotions*. All results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Maternal emotions during the child's transition to the preschool depending on previous experience with daycare

	Mothers without previous experience with preschool (n=541)		Mothers with previous experience with preschool (n=499)		Z Mann-Whitney	p value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Satisfaction with life	7.14	1.58	7.45	1.47	3.09	0.002

Excitement	6.68	2.06	6.66	2.00	0.53	0.596
Anxiety	6.43	2.55	4.62	2.78	10.23	<0.001
Happiness	6.95	2.07	6.28	1.96	2.46	0.014
Sadness	3.66	2.52	2.32	2.03	9.78	<0.001
Pride	6.30	2.77	6.91	2.76	3.85	<0.001
Regret	2.92	2.45	2.04	1.97	6.63	<0.001
Unpleasant emotions	4.33	2.12	2.96	1.87	10.79	<0.001
Pleasant emotions	6.64	1.91	6.94	1.82	2.66	0.008
Parental stress	3.12	1.06	2.99	1.10	1.99	0.047

3.2. Number of children and maternal emotions during child's transition to preschool

Among the respondents, two other groups were also created to test the Hypothesis 2: Mothers of only children and children with younger siblings would experience a higher intensity of unpleasant emotions due to their child's transition to preschool than parents whose second or subsequent child goes to preschool. Group of mothers of singles in toddler age and mothers of toddlers with younger siblings ($n = 772$) and group of mothers with children in toddler age who have older siblings and toddlers who have both younger and older siblings ($n = 268$). The differences in the intensity of emotions related to the fact that a child goes to preschool between mothers who have children of different ages and in various numbers are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The number of children and their age versus mothers' emotions related to child transition to preschool

	Mothers with one child and younger siblings ($n = 772$)		Mothers with more than one child and older siblings ($n = 268$)		<i>Z</i> Mann-Whitney	<i>P</i> value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Satisfaction with life	7.27	1.50	7.36	1.61	1.32	0.187
Excitement	6.75	2.00	6.44	2.11	2.11	0.035
Anxiety	5.92	2.50	4.53	2.72	6.95	<0.001
Happiness	7.05	1.98	7.28	2.14	1.86	0.063
Sadness	3.20	2.49	2.50	2.02	4.07	<0.001
Pride	6.60	2.76	6.57	2.84	0.10	0.918
Regret	2.58	2.32	2.26	2.11	2.80	0.029
Unpleasant emotions	3.90	2.14	3.10	1.91	5.60	<0.001
Pleasant emotions	6.81	1.83	6.77	1.96	0.19	0.848
Parental stress	3.05	1.08	3.07	1.07	0.18	0.86

Mothers who had one child and younger siblings reported higher levels of anxiety ($Z = 6.95$; $p < 0.001$) and sadness ($Z = 4.07$; $p < 0.001$) compared to mothers who had more than one child and older children.

3.3. Stress related to caring for a child and maternal emotions during child's transition to preschool

In the study we also controlled additional variables such as parental stress and parental satisfaction with life. The correlations between these variables and the pleasant and unpleasant emotions experienced by mothers in connection with the child's transition to the preschool are presented in Table S1 (Supplementary materials).

4. Discussion

Being a parent is a rollercoaster of emotions. In this study, we wanted to understand how strong are the emotions that can accompany mothers when they are adapting their children to the preschool. Woman who did not have previous experiences with daycare felt more unpleasant emotions, like anxiety, sadness and regret higher than the women who already knew what daycare looks like. Likewise mothers who had one or more children, but none of the children was more than three years old, also felt more unpleasant emotions because their child goes to preschool than mothers who already had older children.

Those who already had experience with preschool, at the time when a three-year-old child was to go to preschool, did not feel such high anxiety and sadness and regret as mothers, whose did not have such experience before. A common feature of all women in these groups is the lack of prior experience with how preschool works. Earlier experience with preschool reduces anxiety in parents, they are more trusting and open to cooperation with teachers (Barblett, *et al.*, 2011; Beningo and Ellis, 2004; Kreider, 2002; Paltoglou *et al.*, 2019; Osmanowski and Cardona, 2016).

Additional variables such as parental stress and parental satisfaction with life have been shown to be related to mother's emotions. Women who experienced stronger parental stress were also less satisfied with life and felt more unpleasant emotions related to child's transition to the preschool. A parent who wants to tame a child with a new situation must have the mental resources to be able to do it himself. The relationship between parental stress and parental satisfaction indicates the essence of parental emotions in important moments in

the family's life (Skevington *et al.*, 2004; Thomasgard and Metz, 1993; Hildingsson and Thomas, 2014; Antaramian *et al.*, 2008).

The results suggest that attention should be turned to the importance of the role of adaptation before the child enters such an institution. Adaptation serves to familiarize with the place and people who will work with the child. It is mainly prepared for children, but it is worth emphasizing that it is also important for parents (Cubbins, 2004; Miller, 2015). Parents are the carrier of the child's emotions and it is very important that they can participate in the adaptation together with the child so that they can lower the child's anxiety and dispel their own doubts. New place, rules, schedule, new classrooms, teachers etc. These are a lot of new areas that should be talked about in advance with child's future teacher (McCubbins, 2004). Whether it is an adaptation to nursery, preschool or school, the triad of child-parents-teachers should always be involved in this process.

5. Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, our sample was mostly made of women. Therefore, in the final analysis we had to omit men due to their small number. The participation of men in research is extremely important, indicating the fact of active men participation in the process of raising children. Another limitation is the online format of the research procedure. This made it possible to reach a very large number of respondents, but the negative effect was low group representativeness (e.g., the majority of the study group has a similar, high socio-economic status).

No open questions in relation to the emotions felt were included and mothers were not given the opportunity to describe or explain why they feel particular emotions. On the other hand, thanks to a short tool, short and easy to understand names of emotions, we managed to collect more answers. This allowed for a greater chance of generalizing the results.

Data wpłynięcia: 2023-01-31;

Data uzyskania pozytywnych recenzji: 2024-12-12;

Data przesłania do druku: 2024-12-18.

References

- Antaramian, S. P., Huebner, E. S., and Valois, R. F. (2008). 'Adolescent life satisfaction'. *Applied Psychology*, 57, pp. 112–126.
- Atroszko *et al.*, (2017). 'Further validation of single-item self-report measure of satisfaction with life' in M. McGreevy and R. Rita (eds.), *CER Comparative European Research 2017*, 1st ed., pp. 107–110. London, Sciemcee.
- Benigno, J. P., and Ellis, S. (2004). 'Two is greater than three: Effects of older siblings on parental support of preschoolers' counting in middle-income families'. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19(1), pp. 4–20.
- Cohn, M.A. *et al.* (2009) 'Happiness unpacked: Positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience', *Emotion*, 9(3), pp. 361–368. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015952>.
- Głogosz, D. (2021). 'Forms of care for children up to the age of three—solutions preferred by parents (empirical research results)'. *Problemy Polityki Społecznej. Social Policy Issues*, 53(2), pp. 96–112.
- Hildingsson, I., and Thomas, J. (2014). 'Parental stress in mothers and fathers one year after birth'. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 32(1), pp. 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2013.840882>.
- Janicka, I., and Liberska, H. (2014). *Psychologia rodziny*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Kaźmierczak, M. (2015). *Oblicza empatii w procesie adaptacji do rodzicielstwa*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Kreider, H. (2002) *Getting parents "ready" for kindergarten: The role of early childhood education*. Harvard Family Research Project.
- McClelland, J. (1995). Sending children to kindergarten: A phenomenological study of mothers' experiences. *Family Relations*, pp. 177–183.
- McCubbins, J. L. (2004). *Transition into kindergarten: A collaboration of family and educational perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech).
- Majorczyk, M. (2018). 'O dziecku na starcie edukacji przedszkolnej, czyli o osiągnięciach rozwojowych z wczesnego dzieciństwa'. *Blżej Przedszkola*, 6, pp. 1–17.
- Miller, C. C. (2015). *Why what you learned in preschool is crucial at work*. The New York Times.
- Miśkowicz, E. (2012). Kształtowanie umiejętności kontaktów społecznych dziecka w rodzinie i przedszkolu. *Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce*, (25/3), pp. 23–32.
- Okimoto, T. G., and Heilman, M. E. (2012). 'The "bad parent" assumption: How gender stereotypes affect reactions to working mothers'. *Journal of Social Issues*, 68(4), pp. 704–724.
- Osmanowski, M., and Cardona, A. (2016). 'Is less more? Number of siblings and frequency of maternal activities with preschool children'. *Marriage and Family Review*, 52(8), pp. 742–763.
- Paltoglou, A. E., Morys-Carter, W. L., and Davies, E. L. (2019). 'From anxiety to confidence: Exploring the measurement of statistics confidence and its relationship with experience, knowledge and competence within psychology undergraduate students'. *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, 18(2), pp. 165–178.

- Poteat, G. M., Snow, C. W., Ironsmith, M., and Bjorkman, S. (1992). 'Influence of day care experiences and demographic variables on social behavior in kindergarten'. *American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 62(1), pp. 137–141.
- Rautamies, E. et al. (2019). 'Parental agency and related emotions in the educational partnership'. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(6), pp. 896–908.
- Sikorska, I. (2005). 'Różnorodność kontekstów społecznego rozwoju dziecka'. *Psychologia Rozwojowa*, 10, pp. 31–41.
- Segrin, C., Woszidlo, A., Givertz, M., and Montgomery, N. (2013). 'Parent and child traits associated with overparenting'. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 32(6), pp. 569–595.
- Reich, W. A., Silbert-Mazzarella, B. A., Spence, J. A., and Siegel, H. I. (2005). 'Self-structure and post-partum dejection in first-time mothers'. *The Journal of psychology*, 139(5), pp. 426–438.
- Ruźniak-Lubocka, A., and Sawicki, A. (2021). 'Mothers' Satisfaction with Childcare Services'. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 24(1), pp. 85–103. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18290/rpsych2115>.
- Skevington, S. M., Lotfy, M., and O'Connell, K. A. (2004). The World Health Organization's WHO-QOL-BREF quality of life assessment: psychometric properties and results of the international field trial. A report from the WHOQOL group. *Quality of life Research*, 13(2), pp. 299–310.
- Thomasgard, M., and Metz, W. P. (1993). 'Parental overprotection revisited'. *Child psychiatry and human development*, 24(2), pp. 67–80.

