The development of children's independent living skills in day care centres: analysis of social workers' experiences

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Abstract. The aim of the research is to reveal the realities of the development of children's independent living skills in day care centres based on the experiences of social workers. Qualitative research was chosen for the study by using the method of semi-structured interview. Nine employees, who work in children's day care centres in different Lithuanian regions, participated in the study. The study revealed that in preparing children in children's day care centres for independent life, their skills of communication, cooperation, planning and organising activities, as well as self-awareness, self-confidence, self-control, and taking care of their health are developed. In developing children's communication skills, social workers teach children to make contact, politely keep the conversation going, show attention and empathy to the interlocutor, not to violate other people's rights, to constructively solve conflicts and any arising problems, as well as to resist social pressure. When developing cooperation skills, social workers focus on listening to others' opinions, tolerance for different opinions and not belittling them, taking responsibility for a common goal, making decisions by consensus, providing support, and asking for help when needed. In developing skills of planning and organising activities, social workers teach children to set real goals, plan activities to achieve these goals, responsibly perform planned activities/tasks, be attentive and focused while performing tasks, and be persistent and not give up in the face of difficulties. Social workers teach children to recognise their feelings and be able to express them appropriately, and to know their strengths and build on them. **Keywords:** children, day care centres, empowerment, social worker.

1 Introduction

Goals set for today's education are related to the development of a harmonious, independent, active personality with positive life values, who is capable of successfully engaging in a constantly changing society. These goals are actualised by organising educational activities in children's day care centres. The development and possession of independent living skills promote the child's self-confidence, rational thinking and interaction with the social environment [1]. Moreover, independent living skills encourage children to independently solve emerging problems, actively participate in community activities, and pursue their goals and dreams [2]. Independent living skills are skills that enable a person to take care of oneself,

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one's health, household, safety, and well-being [3]. Life skills are the ability to have a self-adjusting and positive personality that can make a person able to solve daily needs and problems effectively [4]. According to Faisal et al. [5], life skills are very important interactions possessed by someone who has knowledge and skills so that they can live independently. Life skills are abilities that are possessed and needed by humans as a basis for living independently in society [6].

Life skills are defined as functional skills that individuals develop in one context and then transfer to another, such as the home, the community, or the workplace [7]. Life skills include teamwork, goal setting, social skills, problem solving, emotional skills, leadership, time management, and communication skills [8]. Cronin et al. [9] note that recent research suggests that the development of life skills has a positive effect on young people's health, education, family life, and employment prospects. Thus, it is important that young people develop these life skills before adulthood.

Day care centres are most often attended by children from families at social risk, where there are no appropriate conditions for the development of children's independent living skills. Therefore, day care centres are a means of ensuring the positive socialisation of a child, developing their independent living skills, and providing support and assistance to their family. The Catalogue of Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (2006) [10] indicates that the goal of day care centres is to develop social and life skills of a child and their family members. Rakan, Ayman [11] claim that day care centres play an important role in children's lives and provide an opportunity to participate in various activities beneficial to personal and social well-being. The authors emphasise the main goals of the centres: to provide social and recreational services, to adapt the environment to promote the physical, social, emotional, intellectual and leadership roles of children and adolescents, which will help the child to participate in the life of society and self-development. Children's day care centres work not only with children but also with the parents of children attending them, providing them with the necessary psychosocial and educational assistance in order to support and develop their social and life skills, and to create appropriate conditions in the family for the child's development and positive socialisation.

One of the most important tasks for social workers in day care centres is to prepare children for independent living, because children attending such centres often lack the aforementioned skills. Even though day care centres have been operating in Lithuania since 1996, there is still a lack of scientific research in this area. The analysis of scientific research revealed that they are dominated by the significance of socio-educational assistance provided in day care centres to children and their families [12, 13], the possibilities for developing children's social skills [14, 15, 16], and the implementation of children's rights [17]. However, there is a lack of scientific research analysing real, practical experiences of children's life skills development in day care centres. The aim of the research is to reveal the realities of the development of children's independent living skills in day care centres based on the experiences of social workers.

2 Research methodology

Method of data collection. To conduct the study, a qualitative type of research was chosen. The study was conducted using the method of a semi-structured interview, which enabled us to move closer to the perception of human experiences, the identification of meanings, the definition of situations, and the interpretation of reality [18]. The research was much broader, covering several topics of questions. This article deals with only one topic of questions related to the development of children's independent living skills in day care centres. In order to reveal the development of children in day care centres, during the interview, the social workers were given the following questions: What independent living skills do social

workers develop in children in daycare centres? How do social workers develop children's independent living skills?

The sample of the research. Targeted selection of the study participants was used in the study. The participants of the study were selected according to the following criteria: 1) social workers who work at CDCs, and 2) at least 3 years of work experience at a CDC with children. The study was conducted in 2024. Nine social workers who work in children's day care centres in different Lithuanian regions participated in the study. The participants of the study relied on their reminiscences and ponderings while reflecting on their experiences. All the interviews were conducted remotely and recorded.

Method of data analysis. The obtained data were analysed using the content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis was carried out in accordance with inductive, study data based, and category-composed logic. Creswell (2014) [18] emphasises that content analysis is a valid method for making specific inferences from the analysed text and allows one to draw reliable conclusions objectively and systematically. When performing a qualitative content analysis, this consistency was adhered to multiple readings of the transcribed interview texts and the reflection on them, data encoding while singling out semantic units in the text, grouping codes into subcategories, the formation of categories from subcategories, the integration of categories/subcategories into the context of the phenomenon under analysis, and the interpretation of study data [18].

The study data were analysed by the two researchers. According to Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas [19], if only one researcher analyses the findings, it is difficult to ensure the validity and reliability of the results. Before analysing the data, the researchers agreed on the parameters of data analysis. Primary data analysis was performed by every researcher individually, by encoding data and uniting them into primary subcategories and categories. After that, the researchers compared the initial subcategories and categories, and discussed and completed their formation through consensus.

Ethics of the research. The study was based on respect for personal privacy, benevolence, and the attitude of not harming a research participant, and confidentiality [20]. The participants of the study participated voluntarily. They were introduced to the purpose, the method of study data collection, and the study procedure, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. The study participants participated in the study on a voluntary basis and agreed that their interviews would be recorded. They were briefed on the purpose of the study, the method of data collection for the study, and the study procedure; their anonymity and confidentiality, as well as an opportunity to withdraw from the study, were ensured. The study participants were assigned a code by using a letter (A, B, C and so on).

3 Results of the research and discussion

The study aimed to identify which children's independent living skills are developed in day care centres, and how. It has been established that day care centres develop children's communication, cooperation, ability to plan and organise activities, self-awareness, self-control, self-confidence, and healthcare skills, because, according to social workers, children lack the aforementioned skills (Table 1).

Table 1. Skills developed at day care centres

Categories	Subcategories
Communication	Making contact
	Polite conversation maintenance
	Empathy
	Non-violation of another person's rights
	Problem solving

	Constructive resolution of conflicts
	Resistance to social pressure
Cooperation	Listening to others' opinions
	Tolerance for different opinions and not belittling them
	Taking responsibility for achieving a common goal
	Making decisions by consensus
	Provision of support and asking for help when needed
Ability to plan and organise activities	Goal setting
	Planning activities
	Responsible performance of planned activities/tasks
Self-awareness	Knowing and building on one's strengths
	Knowing one's feelings and being able to express them appropriately
Self-control	Developing responsibility and a sense of duty
	Following the rules of politeness
	Resisting the negative influence of others
	Proper method of calming down
Self-confidence	Confidence in one's own strengths
	Independent decision-making
	Implementation of set goals/activities
	Overcoming emerging difficulties
Healthcare	Physical activity
	Emotional health
	Prevention of bad habits and risky behaviour
	Personal hygiene

Development of children's communication skills. The study found that social workers in day care centres pay attention to developing children's communication skills. Social workers who participated in the study indicated that children lack the skills to establish and maintain polite contact. The study data show that children who lack polite communication skills do not know how to properly start a conversation, use swear words when communicating with others, do not know how to ask, speak in a raised tone, interrupt other speakers, and do not know how to politely address others, control themselves, or remain polite in conflict situations. The following is illustrated by the statements of the study participants: "there are children who have not developed polite communication in the family and they do not know how to properly start a conversation or maintain it" (D), "my experience shows that some children lack basic knowledge of how to start and maintain a conversation" (G), "some children have a big problem with swearing, and it is also difficult for them to speak one after another without interrupting others, and to listen to others" (A), "when they need something, they often shout instead of calmly saying what they want" (I). Accordingly, social workers working in day care centres focus on developing children's skills in establishing contact and maintaining polite conversation. Study participants noted: "in everyday situations, we teach children to properly intervene in a conversation, having waited for the speaker to finish their thought, to listen to the other person, and to politely ask for help" (B), "we play situational games, during which we learn to establish contact with each other, listen to each other, and speak politely to each other" (H), "we discuss everyday situations of polite and impolite communication with children, we look for ways to communicate properly, and I also talk to children individually when discussing problematic communication situations" (C), "together with children, we create rules for polite communication, and we include those communication points that are relevant to our group, such as speaking one at a time, listening to others, speaking in a calm tone, and not

interrupting the speaker" (E). Thus, in various day care centre activities and everyday situations, social workers teach children to properly initiate a conversation, speak calmly, patiently listen to others, ask politely, and when faced with rudeness, talk individually with the child. It is worth noting that there are rules and agreements that are used and created together with children to develop the skills of establishing and maintaining positive contact, and important components of the mentioned rules and agreements are respect, politeness, and responsibility. Based on the experiences of social workers, we pointed out that the components mentioned in the rules included listening to each other, not belittling each other's thoughts and actions, fulfilling the obligations assumed, not insulting each other, supporting and helping each other, etc. The development of communication skills is important for the child's socialisation, as communication skills enable children to establish and maintain positive relationships with others [21].

Participants of the study noted that they help children develop empathy skills, because children lack them. According to the study participants, "children find it difficult to recognise another person's emotional states, so they act insensitively towards another person, so I pay attention to developing empathy. We talk to children about how we feel in certain situations, we analyse practical examples, and we discuss how to respond appropriately to another person's emotional state" (A), "by playing various situational games, we learn to be empathetic, and we also teach children to be empathetic through our own empathetic behaviour, and children learn to be empathetic by communicating with each other and with others" (G). The study revealed that workers help children develop empathy by discussing empathetic and non-empathetic behaviour with children in everyday situations, teaching them to talk about their own and others' feelings, and naming them. The development of empathy also involves role-playing, the discussion of problem situations, and the application of empathy in communication with each other and with other individuals, as well as the social worker's example of empathetic behaviour. The ability to notice and empathise with another person's situation, one's emotional state, and the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes are important components of empathy [8, 22, 23]. Main and Kho [23] emphasise that the development of empathy is an essential factor in positive social adaptation.

Non-violation of other people's rights is another component of appropriate communication that became evident in the study, and which is given attention in children's day care centres. The study participants stated: "children tend to call each other names, make fun of each other, and when satisfying their own needs, they do not take the rights and needs of others into account; so, we make efforts to develop children's communication skills by emphasising the rights of others" (D), "children tend to make inappropriate "jokes", i.e., mock and speak in a humiliating manner, without realising that they are violating the rights of others to dignity; thus, we have many conversations about respecting the rights of others when communicating, we discuss situations immediately when they occur, and we encourage respectful communication" (G). The study showed that social workers make efforts to ensure the rights of each child by creating a favourable emotional environment together with children, in which everyone feels dignified. While developing social skills, Merrell and Gimpel [24] emphasise the importance of a favourable environment in which each person can feel physically and psychologically safe.

The study showed that children attending day care centres lack problem-solving skills; thus, social workers make efforts to develop them. According to the study participants: "it is very difficult for children to make decisions when faced with a problem, so in a problematic situation, we involve children by asking them to make suggestions, evaluate them using arguments, and make a decision" (B), "it is difficult for children to make decisions individually, so we learn to make them in groups, and in this way, children are more courageous in making suggestions" (F). Therefore, social workers in day care centres pay due attention to the development of problem-solving skills, which are important for

independent living. The development of problem-solving skills is important for the child's independence. By developing problem-solving skills in real situations, children can apply them more easily and flexibly in new situations [25].

Having analysed the study data, it was revealed that day care centres focus on the development of conflict resolution skills, because children lack them. The study showed that social workers teach children to analyse conflict situations: they encourage them to understand the causes of the conflict, look for possible solutions to the conflict, and reach an agreement. According to the participants of the study: "in the case of a conflict, we look into why it arose and talk about the necessity to politely express our needs or position on the issue in dispute and find solutions together" (C), "every time a conflict arises, we talk to children about how the conflict could have been avoided, and we model possible solutions to the conflict" (E), "even though children learn to peacefully agree when a conflict arises, they have difficulty doing so; thus, we use a group to find a solution" (F). The ability to resolve conflicts is the basis for harmonious relationships. Van Dijk [26] indicates that for constructive conflict resolution, it is important to teach children to manage their emotions, as well as develop self-control and introspection skills.

The study revealed that children in day care centres develop social resilience: they learn to resist social pressure, not to give in to the bad influence of others, to trust in their own strengths, and to make decisions independently. Participants of the study noted: "our children lack social resilience and quickly succumb to the negative influence of others, so we have to talk a lot with children both individually and in a group about them giving in to the influence of others" (I), "we teach children to say "no" firmly, and to represent themselves and their needs, by modelling and performing various interactive tasks, and talking about the consequences of recklessly giving in to the negative influence of friends" (F), "by emphasising children's strengths, their advantages, and not their shortcomings, we strengthen their self-confidence, and teach them to make decisions independently" (D). The effective provision of feedback and the self-confidence of a person improve problem-solving and decision-making, as well as social resilience [27].

Development of children's cooperation skills. The study showed that it is not easy for children attending day care centres to cooperate. They find it difficult to listen to the opinions of others, and to accept them tolerantly without belittling them, to accept responsibility for achieving a common goal, to make decisions by consensus, to provide support, and to ask for help when needed. Therefore, in developing children's cooperation skills, social workers teach the above-mentioned things, which are important for creating a cooperative atmosphere in the group. According to the study participants, "while working in a group, I noticed that there is a lack of cooperative relationships, because they don't allow everyone to express their opinions, and demand that their opinion be accepted as the only correct one, so we teach children to speak one by one, listen to others, and respectfully accept different opinions" (F), "it is difficult for children to make a unanimous decision in a group, so we purposefully give tasks where they have to make group decisions" (I), "children tend to talk a lot, but when they need to take responsibility for achieving a common goal, they shy away from it" (A), "we teach children to provide help to each other and ask for it when it is difficult to cope with tasks" (E). The study also showed that social workers discuss the results of joint activities with children, assess how well everyone was able to cooperate, celebrate successes, and discuss difficulties and obstacles: "there are discussions after work, everyone talks about how they did" (F), "if something doesn't work out, we talk about how it could be done differently, what the strengths of the cooperation groups are, what is missing in them" (A). Therefore, the study showed that social workers develop children's cooperation skills by involving them in group activities. Cooperation requires positive interdependence and individual responsibility, encouraging interaction, the analysis of ongoing collaborative processes and the provision of further opportunities for their improvement, as well as

communication, leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills [28]. Group activity requires students to interact, negotiate, cooperate, and sometimes lead. Gudžinskienė [22] notes that such experiences offer a practical way of developing many life skills.

Development of children's planning and organising skills. The study identified that children learn planning and organising skills by getting involved in planning and organising various activities in day care centres, and doing homework. Social workers teach children to plan work and leisure activities: "we encourage children to share ideas, we teach them to set goals, plan activities, distribute tasks, complete them to the end, and not to give up when faced with difficulties, because children are not very good at doing that" (G), "our children are enthusiastic about taking on new activities, but they lack the patience and responsibility to complete a task to the end, so we make efforts to develop children's responsibility by completing tasks to the end, focusing on the task at hand, and only then taking on another one" (H). By being involved in planning and organising various activities, children develop problem-solving, relationship-building, and organisational skills. Salazar et al. [29] claim that children should be involved in planning, organising, implementing, and discussing various events. The following provides children with the opportunity to be heard and listened to, to take the initiative, and to develop communication, cooperation and leadership skills.

Development of children's self-awareness skills. Personal skills are the basis for being able to live independently. The study identified that children attending day care centres lack self-awareness, self-control, and self-confidence skills; thus, attention is paid to their development. Social workers develop self-awareness skills by helping children to recognise their strengths and build on them. They also teach children to recognise their feelings and express them appropriately. Children are taught the aforementioned skills by being involved in various activities, in which they can better understand their capabilities and realise themselves: "we learn to introduce ourselves and express our strengths" (C), "we talk about what I am doing well, and where I still need to try more" (F), "children participate in various activities, and we encourage them to try something new" (D), "by reflecting on their experiences, children are taught to say how they feel, and we also teach children to express their feelings appropriately" (B). Self-awareness is one of the skills that is important for every person to develop. Self-awareness helps recognise one's strengths, the areas for improvement, and helps one build an adequate relationship with oneself.

Development of children's self-control skills. The study revealed that children in day care centres lack self-control skills, especially responsibility and a sense of duty, resistance to the negative influence of others, as well as proper ways of calming down. Children develop self-control skills by making rules and following them, completing tasks and obligations on time, analysing and modelling various situations, as well as during individual and group conversations. The workers stated: "we train children to be responsible, dutiful, and complete their homework to the end; when a child misbehaves, we talk about what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, how important it is, and how to control oneself, and how important it is not to give in to the negative influence of others" (F), "we teach children how to properly calm down, and we apply calming techniques" (E). Therefore, social workers develop children's self-regulation skills in various daily activities, paying special attention to feedback on the child's expression of self-control skills and helping the child develop those skills. Hautakangas et al. [30] state that the teacher's support is a crucial element in growing self-regulation skills. It is important that the teacher, together with the child, reflects on the strategies and gives the child regular feedback that can lead to self-regulation.

Development of children's self-confidence skills. The study showed that children attending day care centres lack self-confidence skills. As a result, it is difficult for them to make independent decisions, achieve their goals, and overcome emerging difficulties, which are very important for independent living. Children gain self-confidence when even the smallest success and progress of the child is celebrated, their efforts are appreciated, their

strengths are emphasised, and trust and faith in the child are shown. Participants of the study noted: "children begin to have more self-confidence when others praise them… children are more courageous in pursuing goals when you encourage, support or motivate them to overcome emerging difficulties" (I), "we encourage children when they encounter difficulties, and we encourage them to try again" (B), "when others trust a child and show it, one becomes more self-confident and more persistent in pursuing the goals" (A). Mulyasari et al. [4] also emphasised a person's internal strengths in the development of self-reliance skills. Self-reliance is not just a desired value but also a principle that must be applied in the educational process to create individuals who can stand independently and make positive contributions to their lives and society [4].

Development of children's healthcare skills. Having analysed the study data, it was found that when developing children's independence, social workers also pay attention to the development of healthcare skills by encouraging their physical activity, taking care of their emotional health, preventing harmful habits and risky behaviours, and developing personal hygiene skills. According to the social workers: "we organise a lot of active games at the day care centre; sometimes we go on hikes, or play various sports games, such as basketball and football" (D). Children in day care centres develop skills in strengthening and maintaining emotional health by nurturing harmonious relationships, empathising and helping each other, and learning to resolve conflicts: "at the day care centre, we try to create a favourable atmosphere for everyone, we talk a lot, and if someone goes through a difficult moment, we support each other" (I), "if children are angry, we first talk to each child, listen to their position, learn to reconcile, express how children feel and why they feel bad, and what their needs are" (B), "we learn to resolve conflicts peacefully, without fighting, without shouting… sometimes it doesn't work out" (A), "we try various ways to calm down and get rid of tension, and we learn to see good things, and relax" (C). Other authors also note the sensitivity of the intervention, and the support and strengthening of emotional health when working with children experiencing difficulties [2, 16]. It is emphasised that the child's development should take place in an emotionally favourable and safe environment.

The study data show that when preparing children at day care centres for independent living and developing a healthy lifestyle, attention is paid to the development of personal hygiene skills. Participants of the research noted that they discuss with children how to maintain personal hygiene, and if necessary, individual conversations are held; workers emphasise and help children understand that personal hygiene is an important part of the general culture, and that it is significant both for the person and for those around them. Maintaining personal hygiene is a mandatory part of everyday life. According to the study participants: "we talk to children about the importance of cleanliness and tidiness for ourselves and others. Such conversations, examples and reflections help children understand better" (B), "we talk about personal hygiene measures; what is right and what is not" (D), "when children practice personal hygiene, we praise them, and then they want to practice hygiene even more" (F). Personal hygiene skills are significant for disease prevention and health promotion. It is very important at every stage of human development, but the development of proper hygiene skills begins in childhood [2].

4 Conclusions

The study data revealed that while preparing children for independent living, social workers in day care centres develop their communication and cooperation, planning and organising activities, self-awareness, self-confidence, self-control, and healthcare skills, because children lack them.

Special attention in day care centres is paid to the development of children's communication and cooperation skills, as they are important in developing children's

independence. Social workers develop children's skills in establishing and maintaining contact, empathy, conflict and problem-solving, as well as resistance to social pressure. Children develop communication skills in real everyday situations by communicating with each other and with other individuals, as well as through role-playing, discussing real problem situations and modelling their possible solutions during both individual and group sessions, and by practically applying them in real situations. When developing children's cooperation skills, social workers pay special attention to the skills that children lack when building cooperative relationships. Specialists focus on listening to each other's opinions, respecting and not belittling other opinions, taking responsibility for achieving a common goal, teaching them to make decisions by consensus, providing help to each other, and asking for it when needed. Children learn to cooperate by performing various daily joint activities, sharing work, helping each other, responsibly completing tasks, and discussing the results of joint activities.

Social workers develop planning and organising skills by teaching children to set realistic goals, plan, and responsibly carry out activities, perform tasks attentively, be persistent, and not give up when faced with difficulties. Children at day care centres develop self-awareness skills by recognising their strengths and learning to rely on them in various activities, and children also learn to recognise their feelings and express them appropriately. Children develop self-control skills by assuming obligations and implementing them responsibly, following the rules of politeness, learning to resist the negative influence of others, and finding appropriate ways to calm down. Children develop self-confidence skills by making independent decisions in various daily activities and situations, implementing set goals, and learning to overcome emerging difficulties in constructive ways. In day care centres, children also develop healthcare skills. When developing these skills, attention is paid to children's physical activity, emotional health, the prevention of harmful habits and risky behaviour, and personal hygiene. Developing children's independence skills in day centres helps them build self-confidence and a sense of responsibility. These skills strengthen their ability to handle everyday challenges and make sound decisions. In the long run, this contributes to better social integration and a more mature, independent life.

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