Factors in Stakeholder Cooperation that Enable the Effective Development of Social Skills in Children in Care

Vida Gudžinskienė
Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work
Faculty of Human and Social Studies, Mykolas Romeris University
Ateities g. 20, LT-08303, Vilnius, Lithuania
E-mail address: vida.gudzinskiene@mruni.eu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0232-9099

Rita Raudeliūnaitė
Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work
Faculty of Human and Social Studies, Mykolas Romeris University
Ateities g. 20, LT-08303, Vilnius, Lithuania
E-mail address: ritara@mruni.eu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0430-2025

Justinas Sadauskas
Institute of Educational Sciences and Social Work
Faculty of Human and Social Studies, Mykolas Romeris University
Ateities g. 20, LT-08303, Vilnius, Lithuania
E-mail address: justas_sad@mruni.eu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1009-9193

ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim is to identify the factors of stakeholder cooperation that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care, based on the experience of social workers at the family homes.

Methods. A qualitative research design was chosen for the study, employing a semi-structured interview method. The data obtained were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Results. The study highlighted that the stability of the family home team is crucial for developing social skills, as frequent staff changes hinder trust-based relationships and consistency in their development. The study revealed the importance of close cooperation between family homes and schools: regularly discussing the social skills children possess and lack, strategies for developing them, and sharing responsibilities, successes and challenges. It is also important for family homes to collaborate with the local community to create favourable conditions for children to engage in socially beneficial, educational activities, enabling them to apply and develop their social skills in various interactions and environments.

Conclusions. The study revealed that the factors contributing to the effective development of social skills in children in care are close cooperation within the family home team, its cooperation with the schools attended by the children in care, and with the local community. Effective social skills development requires consistency, unity and a proactive attitude from all stakeholders.

Keywords: children in care, cooperation, family homes, social skills development

Introduction

Social skills are a prerequisite for a fulfilling social life and successful socialisation: they enable a person to achieve personal independence, solve various life problems and adapt to the social environment (Choiri, 2024). Their development is particularly important for children in care, most of whom grew up in families exposed to social risk factors, in which insufficient attention was paid to the development of their social skills (Chodura et al., 2021). From an ecological systems perspective, cooperation among all stakeholders is crucial for improving the social skills of children in care (Fernandez, 2019). The importance of creating and strengthening social support networks is emphasised, so that the child can receive educational assistance and support from the family, school and community (Lai, 2024). The development of social skills in children in care is not the task of a single social workers in family homes (Brend et al., 2025). It takes place in the daily life of the family home and requires harmonious teamwork among the members of the family home team, as well as their purposeful cooperation with the schools attended by the children and with the local community. Although it is recognised that cooperation among all stakeholders is important in developing children's social skills, there is a lack of research analysing the realities of cooperation among all stakeholders, revealing the factors of cooperation that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care. The research question is: how does cooperation between all stakeholders manifest itself in a way that enables the effective development of social skills in children in care? The study aims to reveal the factors of cooperation among stakeholders that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care, based on the experience of social workers in family

homes. An analysis of cooperation between all stakeholders (family homes, schools, the community) in developing the social skills of children in care is important for highlighting the factors of cooperation that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care, and to improve cooperation in developing children's social skills in family homes based on research-based knowledge.

Social Skills Development in Children in Care and Stakeholder Cooperation

Recently, within the context of sustainable development, emphasis has been placed on the importance of sustainable education in helping learners acquire the knowledge, skills and values that enable them to thrive and learn amidst constant change, to solve complex problems, and to act responsibly in the present and the future. In implementing the vision of holistic education, inner harmony of the personality and the establishment and maintenance of harmonious relationships with others are important (Leicht & Heiss, 2018). It is therefore no coincidence that the area of education – the development of social skills – is becoming increasingly relevant and is being strengthened. Social skills, as a prerequisite for a fulfilling social life, are essential for achieving personal independence, the ability to solve various life problems, to adapt to the social environment, to influence it or even to change it (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998). Social skills enable a person to recognise and manage emotions, be empathetic, build positive relationships, make responsible decisions and overcome challenges (Weissberg et al., 2015). Social skills are a prerequisite for successful socialisation, a condition for harmonious coexistence with others, and an opportunity to function effectively in a social environment (Salavera et al., 2022).

The development of social skills is attracting increasing attention from researchers due to its role in promoting pupils' personal development, academic success and positive relationships. Social development entails various dimensions of children's and adolescents' social and emotional well-being and is widely recognised by researchers to be at the core of human development and growth (Israelashvili et al., 2020). By developing social skills, an individual cultivates social and emotional intelligence to understand and manage emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and behave adaptively (Green et al., 2021). The development of social skills is associated with greater academic engagement among children and young people, better behaviour, greater attachment to school and improved academic achievement. Furthermore, the development of social skills is one of the key preventive measures for reducing the impact of risk factors on children and young people. It is precisely the development of social and emotional skills that is essential to prevent behaviours such as substance abuse, bullying, suicidal behaviour, and others (Israelashvili, et al. 2020). Social skills are important for the development and mainte-

nance of healthy relationships, the ability to cope with difficulties, and the maintenance of overall health and well-being (Green et al., 2021).

Research shows that children lacking social skills are more likely to experience academic failure, have many behavioural problems, are reluctant to participate in school activities, have weak and poor relationships with teachers and peers, and find it difficult to make responsible decisions (Ağirkan & Haspolat, 2025), and demonstrate lower levels of cooperation, self-control, empathy and emotional expression (Rupp et al., 2018).

It should be noted that it is important to develop social skills from early childhood, paying particular attention to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as their social skills are poorer. For children in care, the development of social skills is important because the majority of them grew up in families experiencing social risk factors, and in their biological families, insufficient attention was paid to the development of social skills and favourable conditions were not created for them to develop (Moretti et al., 2024). Most children in care have experienced various shocks, traumas or losses that harm their emotional state and their relationship with themselves and others (Leve et al., 2012).

It is no coincidence that researchers analysing the social and educational situation of children in care emphasise the importance of social skills development as a key factor in children's independence and social inclusion. The importance of developing the social skills of children in care is also highlighted in the documents regulating child care. It should be noted that since 2014, fundamental changes have taken place in the field of child care in Lithuania. Institutional children's care homes are being restructured. In their place, family homes are being established based on a family-like environment model, housing no more than 8 children in care (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2014). Family homes are established within the community. The Description of Family Home activities (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2021) emphasises that it is important to help children in care prepare for independent living and to develop their social skills. When developing social skills, it is important to help children in care to recognise their emotions, manage them, and cultivate sensitivity and empathy towards others (Luke & Banerjee, 2012), to form and develop constructive relationships, and to learn to work and cooperate in various groups; learn to analyse various situations, make responsible decisions, recognise dangerous situations, acquire knowledge on how to behave in them, set goals and strive to achieve them (Cameron et al., 2015). It is emphasised that it is important to provide every child with the opportunity to develop social skills consistently, taking into account the specificities of their development, their existing experience, and individual needs, and to encourage the child's constructive interaction with peers and adults in various educational and social situations (Oberle et al., 2016). Furthermore, when developing the social skills of children in care, it is important to encourage the involvement of all those involved in their education, their purposeful interaction, cooperation, and the sharing of educational experiences. Thus, when developing children's social skills, it is important to build relationships based

on partnership and cooperation between parents/carers, schools and the community, so that the development of social skills is integrated into various ecological contexts and common practices are established that can be applied across all environments of children's development (Oberle, et al. 2016).

The development of social skills requires a systematic educational strategy focused on the child and their immediate environment. The interaction between the child and their environment influences their current and future social functioning. An effectively functioning social system is united by a common goal shared by its components and their synergistic interaction in pursuit of that common goal (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Social and emotional skills are fostered most effectively when families, schools and communities act in a coherent, mutually reinforcing way (Weissberg et al., 2015). Cooperation between carers, teachers and community members supports children's social development (McCormick et al., 2026). Cooperation becomes effective when it is based on shared goals, regular communication and mutual trust (Scholar et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2021).

Research Methodology

Research Methods

A qualitative research design was chosen for the study. Research data were collected using a semi-structured interview method. The interviews were conducted in accordance with a pre-prepared semi-structured interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide outlined the key topics for discussion with the research participants and the most important questions for each topic. This article examines only one topic from the interview guide, relating to the factors of stakeholder collaboration that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care within family homes. The questions under this topic are as follows: With whom and how should one cooperate in order to effectively develop the social skills of children in care? What must be present in the cooperation to enable the effective development of children's social skills?

Selection of Research Participants and Organisation of the Study

Research participants were selected using a targeted sampling method. The study participants were selected according to the following criteria: a) social workers employed in family care homes; b) those with at least two years' practical experience in developing the social skills of children in care. The researchers approached care centres, requesting the opportunity to conduct the study and to contact potential study participants, specifically social workers with experience in developing children's social

skills according to their established selection criteria. Interviews with social workers were conducted between February and April 2025. Thirteen social workers who met the researchers' criteria and worked in family homes across different regions of Lithuania participated in the study. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, when new participants no longer provided new insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). All interviews were conducted remotely and recorded using the Microsoft Teams application.

Research Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntariness, the right to withdraw from the study, and anonymity (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study was approved by the Ethics Commission (21 February 2025, No. 10-79 (2.25 E-403)) of the Faculty of Human and Social Studies at Mykolas Romeris University. Research participants took part voluntarily. All research participants signed an informed consent form. Research participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how the research data would be used, and were assured of confidentiality. Research participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer a question posed by the researcher. In accordance with research ethics principles, the interviews were coded (S1, S2, S3, etc.) and anonymised by removing information that could identify the children in the care of the research participants, the research participants themselves, or the institutions where the research participants work. The information obtained during the study is securely stored and accessible only to the researchers.

Analysis of Research Data

The content analysis method was used to analyse the research data. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research data, it is recommended to apply researcher triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the research data were analysed by a group of three researchers. All three researchers shared interim insights at each stage of data analysis (reduction, coding, sub-categorisation and categorisation), planned further analytical steps and sought consensus. The validity of the research results was also ensured by constantly asking whether an authentic picture of the area of analysis was being presented, i.e. the factors of cooperation influencing the development of social skills in children in care, and whether the results and conclusions were meaningful to the participants, as well as a detailed and comprehensive description and interpretation of the data.

The data analysis identified three categories reflecting the factors of cooperation among the parties involved, which enable the effective development of the social skills of children in care: teamwork within family homes, cooperation between family home teams and class tutors, teachers and cooperation between family homes and the local community. The research data obtained are interpreted on the basis of sources from the scientific literature.

Analysis of the Research Results and Discussion

Cooperation within the Family Home Team in Developing Children's Social Skills

The study revealed that one of the factors in cooperation that enables the successful development of social skills in children in care is the involvement of all team members. Study participants noted: "Teamwork can help bring about positive changes by sharing what is going well, how to approach the child, what we are doing and how, what works and what doesn't, and what new things we are trying" (S11). "In teamwork, we focus on establishing and maintaining a connection with the child, because that is the only way the child's trust in us grows" (S3). This shows that only a team that cooperates closely, supports one another and shares both successes and failures can hope to achieve the set goal of developing children's social skills. Thus, collective responsibility comes to the fore, as it is only by working together that team members can effectively develop a child's social skills. Harmonious teamwork, manifested through joint efforts, mutual trust and consistent action, enables the strengthening of the bond with the child and the gaining of their trust. According to Joseph Durlak et al. (2011), the successful integration of social skills development into daily life and educational activities is only achieved when all team members are involved. Every team member is a contributor to the success of social skills development, so all team members must understand the importance of social skills development, demonstrate appropriate social behaviour in various situations through their own example, and have high expectations of every child.

Furthermore, the study highlighted that the administration's involvement in demonstrating trust and support for the team also contributes to the effective development of social skills among children in care. This is illustrated by the statements of the study participants:

> It is very important that the management trusts us, is open to discussing various situations, supports our decisions, and, when a complex or 'extreme situation' arises, does not limit itself to looking for someone to blame, shifting the responsibility solely onto the staff member, claiming that you couldn't handle the situation or manage to navigate it. If the management supports us, you feel able to make decisions independently, because the manager trusts your professionalism and, at the same time, doesn't leave you on your own when you need that help (S4).

> I feel supported when my manager says, 'Let's see what we can do together in this situation, what solutions there are. I am certain that in difficult situations I won't be left on my own; we will look for solutions together. If we cannot speak openly with management representatives, if we have to hide something from them, if we have to think about how to present everything as it should be, then in the end you are left on your own, because you have to do everything in such a way that it suits administration and all the supervisory bodies, so that everything meets the formal requirements, then you are left alone facing the child, facing the administration (S13).

This shows that an administrative approach based on trust in staff, respect for staff autonomy and shared responsibility fosters an environment favourable to the development of children's social skills. Consolidated action between the administration and staff allows staff to feel secure, to discuss various situations openly, and provides the certainty that in difficult situations they will not be left alone and will tackle emerging difficulties together. If staff are unable to speak openly with administration and feel compelled to conceal the real situation and the challenges arising in daily practice from management in order to avoid accusations or the unilateral shifting of responsibility, there is a risk of staff feeling isolated and powerless. Research by other scholars (Hultman & Wissö, 2023) also indicates that social workers require the support and trust of the organisation and management when fostering children's social skills. It is noted that management's trust in the employee's professionalism and recognition that their chosen strategy can have a positive impact on the child in care. Furthermore, an organisational culture based on open dialogue with administration fosters staff self-confidence and freedom in choosing professional strategies, as well as enables them to receive management support in complex situations. Helen Scholar et al. (2025) note that a manager is responsible not only for performing administrative functions, but also for fostering a culture of collaboration and helping a group of staff become a team with a shared identity, purpose and commitment to their work. Florin Lazăr et al. (2025) note that organisational and managerial support for teams should be treated as a priority rather than an optional extra.

Analysis of the research data revealed that another factor in collaboration that enables the effective development of children's social skills is the establishment of consistent standards and adherence to them amongst team members. According to the study participants:

> Uniform agreements and adherence to them are very important within the team, because when they are lacking and each staff member does as they please, or fails to take responsibility for adhering to common agreements, the children see this too, and then it is difficult for them to understand what we want from them (S13).
>
> Our team is like a fist; we all convey the same message to the child. Within the team, we constantly discuss our agreements with the children: how well we're managing to stick to them, which agreements aren't working anymore, and what we then do as a team — what and how we change things, or perhaps try to discuss a new agreement with the children that would be effective and make life easier for all of us (S3);

"Communication among staff makes the children feel safe and reduces conflicts between staff members themselves, and between staff and children" (S6). Thus, adherence to consistent agreements within the team provides clarity regarding the direction and content of the team's coordinated efforts in fostering children's social skills. Consistent agreements not only ensure harmonious teamwork but also create a safe learning environment for the child, reducing mutual tensions and misunderstandings. On the one hand, strict agreements pose a risk to staff autonomy and creative decision-making when dealing with situations arising in real-time interactions with children. On the other hand, excessive flexibility or failure to adhere to agreements jeopardises harmonious communication both within the team and in relations with children. Therefore, shared team agreements should be continually reviewed and reflected upon in order to refine effective strategies for interaction that are meaningful and beneficial to all team members and children. Neil Humphrey (2013) notes that it is important for team members to agree on a shared vision for the implementation of children's social skills development and how this will be achieved, to be actively involved in developing children's social skills, to ensure that all children are included in the social skills development process, to discuss experiences of social skills development, and to identify existing and potential strengths and challenges in social skills development.

The study found that, when developing children's social skills, the objectives for developing these skills in each child must be clear to all team members. According to the study participants,

> By observing the child, interacting with them, and discussing their behaviour in different situations with colleagues, we identify which skills the child possesses and which he or she lacks; we set clear goals regarding what specifically they should learn, and then we begin working towards that (S3).

"Our aim, when looking at a child, is to identify their strengths and what they lack, and then to develop the children's social skills through various everyday activities and in other environments where the child spends time"(S11). When developing the social skills of the children in their care, team members first seek to identify which skills the children possess and which they lack. All team members observe the children in various daily activities and settings, and also interact with the child and amongst themselves to set clear goals for the development of each child's social skills, focused on maintaining and strengthening existing skills, as well as developing those that are lacking. All team members adhere to the principle that children's social skills are developed through daily activities and in various settings. Other studies also indicate that it is primarily important for educators to get to know the child and identify the existing social skills. According to Murat Ağirkan and Namik Kemal Haspolat (2025), every child has unique cognitive, emotional and social characteristics and exhibits different developmental profiles; therefore, when developing children's social skills, it is important to adopt a person-centred approach, which enables a holistic view of the child and an assessment of their

situation from various perspectives. It is noted that such an approach helps educators gain valuable insights that improve the planning, implementation and evaluation of social skills development, making this process more effective and tailored to the specific needs of the child. The desired outcomes are achieved by integrating social skills development into the home environment and the child's own life. As noted by Ağirkan and Haspolat (2025), numerous studies emphasise that, when developing children's social skills, it is important to provide them with opportunities to participate in various activities. Durlak et al. (2011) argue that social skills are only developed when a child has the opportunity to practise and test behavioural patterns in real-life situations.

The research data shows that another factor in collaboration that ensures the effective development of children's social skills is the discussion of each child's social skills development case amongst team members. Case discussions allow the situation to be viewed from different perspectives and help generate ideas for further action. According to the study participants, 'We regularly hold case discussions within the team because the more minds involved, the easier it is to find a solution" (S7);

> We try, as a team, to somehow identify what is actually happening in this specific case, why the child is not accepting help or is rejecting our efforts, how we can steer the situation in a different direction, and what would happen if we started acting differently (S3).

Regular and purposeful case discussions provide the time and space to discuss each child's situation individually and to focus on newly emerging complex situations. Discussing situations allows us to rethink daily scenarios and find new ways of working when developing a child's social skills. Other studies (Ağirkan & Haspolat, 2025) also show that discussing cases of social skills development enables educators to understand how the social skills being developed and factors in the educational environment interact uniquely in the case of different children, and helps educators tailor interventions to the specific needs of the child.

The study revealed that team stability, i.e. low staff turnover, is also a key factor in enhancing the effectiveness of social skills development among children in care. This is illustrated by the statements of the study participants:

> Our children have already been abandoned by their parents or carers, so their trust in adults and their attachment have already been damaged, and they approach adults with mistrust. When there is frequent staff turnover in the team, the children view new staff with suspicion; they do not know whether it is worth forming a bond with them, or whether they too will leave them soon. When there is no frequent staff turnover, the child forms a bond with the staff and feels safe because they understand they can rely on us (S10).
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> Staff turnover throws both other team members and the children off balance. If a staff member comes to work only for a short time and does not take on full responsibility, it is difficult to maintain consistency in the development of social skills within such a team; the children do not understand what is expected of them or how they should behave, and they test the new staff members and their boundaries. (S6).

The research findings indicate that frequent change of team members does not create the conditions for the formation of close relationships between staff and children, which are important for the development of children's social skills. Furthermore, an unstable team hinders the creation of trust-based relationships with both the children and other team members. Frequent staff turnover does not ensure consistency in the development of children's social skills, as a new staff member needs time to get to know the child and understand the context. On the other hand, team members need time and resources to get to know a new staff member and bring them up into the work context. Research by Jenna Bolinger et al. (2021) shows that staff stability in care settings and the maintenance of daily routines help children in care to feel safe. To ensure children's safety, we need staff members whom the children know and can rely on, both the children themselves and team members. Scholar et al. (2025) identified a link between team stability, shared work experience and staff job satisfaction. According to the subjective assessment of young people in care, it is important to them that staff do not change frequently (The Care Inquiry, 2013). With consistent staff, children tend to form closer bonds, trust and confide in them more, and share their experiences; they do not find it acceptable to have to share their traumatic life experiences over and over again. A close mutual bond is very important in developing children's social skills.

The study revealed that a key factor in team collaboration, which enables the effective development of children's social skills, is the team's internal communication mechanism, which facilitates the constant exchange of relevant information concerning the children. The study participants noted: "We have a daily handover when shifts change; we discuss what went well and what difficulties arose, what has been done, what to do next, and how it could be done" (S2); "We also have meetings with the management where we receive support or guidance. If we're doing something wrong, we always get some kind of suggestion" (S6);

> We've set up a 'Messenger' chat group within the team where we exchange relevant information. That way, you don't lose touch with the process and can stay informed about everything that's happening; you can react and think through how you'll handle the situation once you arrive at work. (S4).

Thus, staff discuss the children's situations on a daily basis, both when meeting in person and when communicating via information and communication technology. The constant exchange of information allows staff to be aware of the child's actual situation and to ensure the consistency and continuity of the child's education. Other authors also emphasise the importance of sharing information and using technology for communication (Lees, 2017).

The study showed that the effectiveness of developing social skills in children in care is also influenced by the emotional support team members provide to one another and the opportunities for professional development. According to the study participants: "We share our experiences with colleagues, for example, what they did in a particular situation, what worked, and I try to apply their experience. The support of colleagues is important, and I'm not left on my own."(S6)

> You have the opportunity to speak your mind, to talk things through with the management and receive understanding and support. You start talking and realise that your problem isn't such a big deal or as difficult as you thought. The management not only supports us but also cares about our professional growth – they find the training we need right here and now. (S12)
> Talking to colleagues and the psychologist helps you calm down and not burn out. Sometimes you work and work, putting in a lot of effort, and you don't see any changes or meaning. Then it's very important to talk and realise that you're not all-powerful, that change takes more time, and not to look for the cause only within yourself, not to burden yourself with the thought that Im doing something wrong. (S7).
> We're really glad we have peer reviews and self-help groups where we can let off steam and sort out those difficult situations. Peer reviews take place every two or three months, and we also have supervision sessions, which happen once or twice a year. We look forward to them very much, and they help a lot, because sometimes you find yourself really needing support from other colleagues and you get that support. The self-help groups are led by a psychologist and also help to solve problems. (S2).

This shows that the emotional support staff receive from colleagues, management and psychologists is important to them. Conversations with colleagues, peer supervision, self-help groups and supervision allow staff to vent their emotions, share difficulties, find solutions, and protect against loneliness in problematic situations and professional burnout. Furthermore, staff sharing their experiences contributes to their professional growth, strengthens motivation and supports professional well-being. Other researchers (Scholar et al., 2025) also note that team members' reflection, support and mutual assistance are key factors in providing staff with a sense of emotional security, enabling them to resolve emerging problems in their professional activities. In this context, peer supervision plays a significant role, where employees discuss and analyse more complex, unresolved cases amongst themselves without an external supervisor (consultant). Peer supervision is regarded as a form of peer learning and a means of preventing professional burnout, helping to create a safe and reflective space among group members when addressing emerging problems or difficulties; it is a process of peer consultation taking place within a group, during which participants discuss issues relating to professional practice (Rape Žiberna, 2022). On the other hand, peer supervision alone may not be sufficient, and supervision may be required. The supervision process is led by a professional supervisor. Supervision provides a space for reflection, helping to view professional activity comprehensively, and plays a significant role in the development of professional competencies and the prevention of professional burnout (Bara, 2021). Supervision enables a more comprehensive analysis of professional practice, encompassing the interaction between the employee as a person, their professional role, the organisation, and the service user, within the context of relationships, organisational, professional, and field dynamics (Weigand, 2018).

Cooperation Between Staff at Family Homes and Class Tutors and Teachers in Developing Children's Social Skills

Analysis of the data revealed that discussions between carers and the educational institution regarding the child's existing and lacking social skills are a key factor in their cooperation when developing the children's social skills. The study participants noted: "We are in contact with class tutors, psychologists and social pedagogues. We exchange information on what skills the child has and which ones they lack, and in this way we help each other to get to know the child better (S6).

> We discuss with the school's teachers how the child is getting on, how they are settling in, how they interact, how they cooperate at school, and how they get involved in different activities. How they behave in clubs – such exchanges of information are important because children reveal different sides of themselves in different environments – they behave one way with us, another way at school, and yet another way in clubs. (S5).

Children spend a large part of their time in educational institutions; therefore, close cooperation between school teachers and the child's carers, who observe the child and interact with them in different settings, helps to assess the child's social skills in a broader context and to view the expression of their social skills from various perspectives. This helps to identify the social skills the child possesses and those they lack, and to choose the direction of development for these skills more effectively. Other studies also show that, when developing children's social skills, it is important to align the efforts of the child's carers and school teachers towards the same educational goals. The collaboration among educators and the sharing of existing and newly developed educational experiences help better assess the child's situation and develop their social skills in a more targeted manner (García-Poole et al., 2020).

The study found that, in order to ensure a more coherent development of social skills, carers and teachers discuss strategies for developing the child's social skills together. One such strategy involves agreeing on how caregivers and teachers intend to develop the child's social skills. This is illustrated by the statements of the study participants: "Once we've seen the child's actual situation, we discuss how we'll develop the child's social skills" (S6).

> We talk about what the school can offer us, what we can offer the school, what we want, what we're asking of the school, and what we as carers will do at home. For example, if the child lacks self-control skills, we discuss how teachers will help the child during lessons and breaks, and in other activities, and how we will develop these skills. (S5).

Another strategy identified by the study is agreements on maintaining regular contact. According to one study participant, "We have an agreement with the school that, unless something out of the ordinary happens, we still call each other once a week and exchange information on how the child is getting on." (S12). Another

strategy that emerged is motivating children by building on their strengths. According to the study participants:

> In our practice, we notice that both we and the teachers do not always provide the child with positive support when they are making an effort and showing progress; therefore, we agree that we will try to identify where the child is strong, what they are good at, and we will try to show this to the child and to those around them (S3)
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> It is very important for the children in care when we and the teachers see and acknowledge their efforts, the progress they are making in managing their emotions, interacting more positively with others, and completing tasks. We have agreed with the school's teaching staff to provide the child with positive feedback. We must notice and point out the progress the child is making, and celebrate the changes taking place together with the child; this really motivates children to try harder (S1).

The study thus highlighted that, when developing the social skills of children in care, it is important caregivers and teachers to agree on strategies – how to develop children's social skills, how to maintain relationships, how to motivate children. In order to effectively develop children's social skills, everyone needs to take responsibility and agree on unified strategies for action, avoiding potential fragmentation where each institution pursues only its own objectives. Other studies (Ma et al. 2023) also show that when teachers and the child's parents/carers collaborate and use additional, mutually agreed strategies to support the child's learning at school and at home, optimal conditions are created for the development of children's academic and social skills. In other words, social, emotional and academic skills are enhanced when they are mutually supported and reinforced at home and at school. According to Aileen Ma et al. (2023), the development of children's social skills becomes more effective when it is integrated into a system of partnership between school and family. It is noted that when parents/carers and educators collaborate authentically, they create opportunities to model and apply the social skills that are important for their children to develop. Teachers and other educators should regularly share information and provide opportunities for parents/carers to share their insights, concerns and hopes regarding their children (Ma et al., 2023). Communication should be child-centred, constructive, clear, specific and ongoing (Albright et al., 2011). Furthermore, the importance of a strategy based on the child's strengths has become apparent, empowering educators to focus on the strengths of the child and their environment, rather than solely on their problem. According to Zhengtao Lai (2024), a strengths-based approach recognises the importance of a person's dignity and worth, views the individual through the prism of their strengths and advantages, and is based on the belief that every person has the potential and ability to change their life. This approach facilitates positive interaction between the educator and the learner, and between the child's parents/carers and teachers, which is a key prerequisite for the development of social skills. Tyler Smith et al. (2021) emphasise that a counselling-based model of family-school collaboration promotes

shared responsibility, mutual trust and the application of consistent educational strategies at home and at school. Such cooperation creates more favourable conditions for the development of children's social skills and strengthens the bond between family and school.

Analysis of the research data revealed that discussions between carers and teachers regarding the development of children's social skills constitute a further factor in cooperation that enables the effective development of children's social skills**.** These discussions provide an opportunity to exchange experiences by discussing successes and challenges encountered when developing children's social skills. According to the study participants: "I work closely with the school, I always attend class meetings, and we have an established practice whereby class tutors invite teachers to meetings to discuss pupils' progress, their interaction with teachers and their classmates." (S12).

> Discussions with teachers about how the child behaved, what they did differently or better, and what they still find more difficult, and where the problem lies. Discussions with school specialists and teachers help everyone to see the situation more broadly and, through such cooperation, ensure the continuity of the child's social skills (S1).

The study showed that analysing the child's situation in isolation may lead to greater bias or one-sidedness. When both family home specialists and teachers share insights into a child's behaviour and how it is changing, even modest achievements and emerging difficulties become visible, and the adults can agree on how to support the child. The value of such exchange lies in its reciprocity: open and dynamic communication channels "invite and encourage parents to share questions, comments, and feedback with teachers" (Albright et al., 2011, p. 6), so that families inform educators rather than only receiving information from them. When developing the social skills of children in care, ongoing dialogue between carers and teachers is essential, as a child's behaviour and social adaptation in different environments (at home and at school) can vary significantly.

The results of the study show that, in order to effectively develop children's social skills, it is important for both staff at family homes and school teachers to adopt a proactive approach to cooperation. According to the study participants:

> Every time I'm working, I always call the children's class teachers. I ask how each of the children in my care is getting on, and what sort of help they need. The school invites us to various events held there. We see how the children interact with others at these events, what brings them joy, and how they relate to other children and adults. The school invites us, and we are happy to attend the lectures they organise on child development, upbringing, addictions and their prevention, opportunities for developing social-emotional skills, and strategies – and this is very useful for us; we can develop our own competencies (S13).
>
> Sometimes children's behaviour is inappropriate or unacceptable to those around them, but there are reasons for this, and we analyse them together with the teachers; we discuss the circumstances in which this behaviour occurs, how we react to it, and what and how we should change (S7).

When both parties are willing and adopt a proactive stance in seeking a solution to help the child, they join forces and find the best solution for the specific situation. With a synergistic relationship between the cooperating parties, the child does not find themselves in a conflicting situation; it is clear to them how they should behave. Furthermore, by witnessing constructive cooperation between school and care home staff, the child feels safer, realises that they matter to others, and that the school and carers care for them; they become more trusting of adults, open up, and are more inclined to cooperate and accept the help offered. Nerea Martinez-Yarza et al. (2024) emphasise that effective practice in the development of children's social and emotional skills depends on active and close cooperation between parents/care givers and educators. A mutual, proactive partnership helps educators and parents/care givers to consistently pursue shared goals, encompassing the development of social skills in both home and school settings. According to Smith et al. (2021), consistent, active and constructive two-way communication between teachers and parents/care givers, involving listening to one another, sharing information and discussing issues, creates the conditions for building relationships based on trust and respect and has a significant positive impact on children's social and academic achievements.

Cooperation Between Family Homes and the Local Community in Developing Children's Social Skills

In order to encourage children in care to become involved in the local community, it is important for both family homes and the local community to take a proactive approach to cooperation. In this way, it is possible to create favourable conditions that can contribute to the development of social skills through the pursuit of meaningful activities. According to one study participant:

> To make the children feel part of the community, first and foremost we ourselves seek contact with people in the local community, neighbours and organisations. At the same time, we are happy when neighbours or local organisations take an interest in us and our children and invite us to various activities they organise. When we are invited to visit or to contribute to activities organised by the community, we feel like an important part of the community (S1).

Thus, a proactive attitude towards cooperation enables children to feel accepted, to feel part of the community, to actively engage in community life, and to take on and fulfil meaningful roles within the local community. Such collaboration creates favourable conditions for children to develop social skills. Other studies (García-Poole et al., 2020) also show that involving children in various community activities plays a key role in developing their social skills, as these activities strengthen their empathy, sense of belonging to the community, and improve their social skills. It is therefore important to build supportive partnerships with the local community and the various

organisations within it. Cooperation among community members fosters mutual care, social justice and responsibility. Support networks within the local community provide greater opportunities to transition from care homes into the community environment (McCormick et al., 2026), and to learn social skills through experiencing engagement in the real world (Weissberg et al., 2015).

The study shows that children's involvement in socially beneficial activities within the community is another factor in cooperation that contributes to the development of children's social skills. Study participants noted*:* "Children taking part in volunteer activities feel that they can help others, and their self-confidence grows. By taking part in voluntary activities, children get to know other members of the community, expand their social network and develop social skills" (S10).

> Community is very important for the children; they enjoy getting involved in local community life by doing good deeds in the neighbourhood. They are happy to take part in environmental clean-up campaigns. This is very good because they socialise and get to know other young people and adults (S2).

This shows that by getting involved in activities that benefit the community (volunteering, participating in the work of charitable organisations, community environmental campaigns, etc.), children can gain social experience and appreciate both the personal and social significance and humanity of socially beneficial activities. Doing good deeds together with other community members enables young people to establish links with other members of the local community, allows them to develop a network of social connections, and through this, gain greater self-confidence and take responsibility for the common good of the community. Esther Muddiman et al. (2019) also emphasise the importance of involving children in socially beneficial activities within the community for fostering their citizenship and social skills. The important role of parents/care givers in motivating children to engage in socially beneficial activities within the community is highlighted, as is their own active participation in such activities, thereby setting a civic example for their children (Muddiman et al., 2019). Some studies suggest that children who participated in voluntary activities during childhood are more likely to engage in voluntary activities as adults (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Research shows that children's involvement in educational activities within the community is another factor in cooperation that contributes to the effective development of social skills among children in care. Children get involved in the activities of youth organisations and take part in organised activities at libraries, community centres, and open youth and children's day centres. In this way, children have the opportunity to apply and develop their existing social skills in a variety of settings. According to the study participants:

> We have experience with youth organisations; our children attend them. They go to day centres after school. If a child has previously lived at home or in care and attended a day centre, we continue to encourage them to keep attending the centre, so they don't lose that connec-

tion with the staff and with the other children; they do their homework there, and there are various activities to keep them occupied. One of the functions of these centres is to develop children's social skills (S3).

Some of the children go to an open youth centre where various activities take place; they organise hikes, and the young people even get involved in exchange programmes. Children are taught to get to know themselves, develop interpersonal relationships and a sense of community, carry out group projects, develop teamwork and decision-making skills, and learn to plan and carry out activities responsibly. (S9);

The library hosts various afternoon events, book presentations, celebrations of major holidays, and educational workshops in which our children take part. There, the children learn how to behave appropriately, make new friends, and have the opportunity to get to know themselves and express themselves (S4).

Thus, by getting involved in educational activities organised by community organisations, children get to know themselves better, learn to communicate and cooperate within a team, and expand their network of social connections. Such activities naturally create situations for communication and cooperation, in which children have the opportunity to experience the meaning and significance of positive mutual interaction for themselves and their relationships with others. The more diverse the environments and activities in which children experience and learn to build positive relationships, the more opportunities they have to develop social skills. According to Chloe García-Poole et al. (2020), local organisations within communities can support initiatives aimed at providing children with opportunities to apply and develop social skills in various community settings. Research shows that children who participate in various educational activities within the community improve their skills in cooperation, self-control, communication and organising activities (Wang et al., 2024).

Conclusions

The study revealed factors of cooperation among the team at the family home, between the family home team and the schools attended by children in care, and between the family home and the local community, which enable the effective development of social skills in children in care. The development of social skills in children in care requires consistency, coherence and a proactive attitude from all stakeholders.

When developing children's social skills, all members of the family home team must be involved in their development process, in which each child's educational goals are clearly defined, agreements on consistent standards are in place, and these are adhered to consistently. The stability of the team is crucial, as frequent staff turnover hinders the establishment of trust-based relationships and undermines the consistency of social skills development. Regular exchange of information, targeted case discussions, and trust and support both

within the team and from the administration protect staff from isolation and professional burnout and create a supportive environment for both staff and children.

In cooperation with schools, it is essential that family home social workers and teachers regularly discuss the social skills the children possess and those they lack, agree on joint development strategies, share responsibilities, and discuss successes and emerging challenges, since children reveal different aspects of themselves in different environments.

Cooperation with the local community creates favourable conditions for children to engage in socially beneficial, educational activities, through which they learn to live and coexist within the community, internalise social values, and strengthen their ability to communicate and cooperate with others and contributes to their self-awareness and the development of their self-esteem.

This study is limited to the perspective of family home social workers about cooperation that enable the effective development of social skills in children in care. So, future qualitative research could include school and community representatives. The factors of stakeholder cooperation identified in this qualitative study could serve as a basis for future quantitative research.

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