Empowerment factors of children in day care centres

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Abstract. The aim of the research is to reveal the empowerment factors of children in day care centres based on the experiences of social workers. A semi-structured interview was chosen for the research, and the qualitative content analysis method was selected for research data analysis. Eleven social workers from children's day care centres in different Lithuanian regions participated in the study. The research found that a positive attitude from social workers towards children is an important factor in child empowerment. It involves knowing the child's strengths and relying on them, and seeing opportunities in difficulties. The involvement of children in decision-making is an important factor in their empowerment. A favourable environment in the day care centre, by creating harmonious relationships between day care centre employees and children, between children and between the day care centre employees, as well as cooperating with children's parents/guardians, is crucial for empowering children. In developing children's independence, social workers develop skills in communication and cooperation, constructive conflict resolution, resistance to negative influences, self-control, health-consciousness, activity planning and organising, self-confidence, as well as patience in achieving goals, and not giving up when faced with difficulties and responsibilities. **Keywords:** children, day care centres, empowerment, social worker.

1 Introduction

The topic of empowerment is of interest to scientists from various fields. Scientific discourse takes place on a range of aspects, and the following demonstrates the scientific relevance and practical importance of the phenomenon of empowerment [1]. When examining the processes of modern social work and searching for effective strategies, the concept of empowerment and its practical application are relevant [2]. Empowering social services as a phenomenon is a projection into ensuring social well-being [3]. The empowerment paradigm provides theoretical foundations when providing social services. Empowerment is understood as the increase of a person's capabilities and strengths, which aims to form the involvement of service recipients to act independently according to each person's individual capabilities, and to be dependent on employees as little as possible, forming self-confidence,

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increasing motivation to achieve positive changes, and improving quality of life [4]. P.K. Kam [4] notes that the goal of empowerment when providing social services is not one-dimensional, but encompasses three levels. The first is the personal level that is associated with the empowerment of a person when developing their competencies and effectiveness of managing their environment, and gaining self-determination and autonomy. The second level is interpersonal empowerment, which helps individuals develop competencies that increase their ability to exert interpersonal influence, perform valuable social roles, and reduce negative stereotypes towards them in their relationships with others. The third level is structural empowerment, which helps service users realise that they can act together to solve structural problems, strive to overcome social inequality and injustice, influence structural changes, and change social policy. Empowerment, according to P.K. Kam [4], draws social workers' attention to the relationship between service users, society and politics. Therefore, empowerment not only focuses on increasing the individual competencies of service users but also changes unequal power relations in society and increases the sense of power of service users to influence the process of political decision-making. It should be noted that social workers, while helping service users to develop skills, must also pay attention to the relationship of power and dependence. It is impossible to empower service users if they are dependent on social workers, while service-providing institutions and workers believe that they have more advantages and resources than service users. Changing the unequal power dynamic between social workers and service users is important in the practice of empowerment. As empowerment is an ongoing process, social workers must believe that service users have the opportunity and potential to engage in this process [4]. Therefore, empowerment must be a central and mandatory element of the mission of social service organisations [5].

Day care centres are institutions that care about the quality of life of children and provide them with socio-educational services. The purpose of day care centres, through providing socio-educational services to empower children, is to expand their abilities and develop their social skills so that they become more independent and can more easily participate in society. Day care centres are most often attended by children from families experiencing social risk, where favourable conditions for children's empowerment are not ensured. The analysis of scientific sources revealed that special attention should be paid to the empowerment of children experiencing various social risk factors. The topic of empowerment in Lithuania has been analysed from various aspects. L. Gvaldaitė [2] highlighted the specificity of the empowerment process and the possibilities of its application when working with individuals and communities. R. Motiečienė [6] described how empowering social services are conceptualised in social work with families. J. Ruškus et al. [5] examined the concepts of power and empowerment and their expression in the professional context of social services and social work. D. Dvarionas et al. [3] presented a model of empowering social services, and I. Liepinskaitė and R. Motiečienė [7] revealed how family empowerment takes place in children's day care centres. Accordingly, the analysis of scientific sources revealed that there is a lack of research analysing the role of day care centres in empowering children. Such a research situation presupposes the problematic question of the study: How are children empowered in children's day care centres? The aim of the research is to reveal the empowerment factors of children in day care centres based on the experiences of social workers.

2 Research methodology

Method of data collection. Qualitative research was chosen. According to V. Žydžiūnaitė and S. Sabaliauskas [8], qualitative research is not focused on facts or statistical figures, but on the experiences of individuals. The study was conducted by using the method of a semi-

structured interview, which enables one to move closer to the perception of human experiences, the identification of meanings, the definition of situations, and the interpretation of reality [9]. The research was much broader, covering several topics of questions. This article deals with only one question topic related to the empowerment factors for children in day care centres. In order to reveal the empowerment factors of children in day care centres, during the interview, the social workers were given the following questions: What factors help social workers empower children in day care centres? How do these factors help social workers empower children in day care centres?

Research sample. The targeted selection of study participants was used for 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. All interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams software, and the interviews were recorded. Collection of the research data was stopped in compliance with the data saturation principle. Eleven social workers who work in children's day care centres in different Lithuanian regions participated in the study.

Ethics of the research. The study was based on respect for personal privacy, benevolence, the attitude of not harming a research participant, and confidentiality [10]. The study subjects participated in the study on a voluntary basis and agreed to their interview being recorded. They were introduced to the purpose, the method of study data collection, and the procedure of the study; anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. When analysing the results of the study, the characteristics of study participants are presented generally while ensuring that personal information allowing one to recognise a particular participant of the study is not presented, with the confidentiality of the participants and non-disclosure of personal identity information guaranteed; the names of the study participants were encoded using the letters 'A, B, C', and so on.

Method of data analysis. Qualitative content analysis of the study was carried out in accordance with inductive, data-based and category-composed logic. According to Creswell [9], content analysis is a technique which, having examined the specificities of the text, allows one to objectively and systematically draw reliable conclusions. The qualitative content analysis was performed regarding the following sequence: repeated reading of the content of transcript interview texts, distinction of meaning elements in the text analysed, grouping of the distinguished meaning elements into sub-categories and categories, integration of the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed, and a description of their analysis [9].

The research data were analysed by two researchers. Before beginning data analysis, the researchers agreed on the parameters for data analysis. The primary data analysis was performed by the researchers individually, encoding data and forming primary subcategories and categories. After that, the researchers compared the primarily distinguished subcategories and categories, and discussed and finally formed them by common agreement. According to Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas [8], if only one researcher analyses the findings, it is difficult to ensure the validity and reliability of the results.

3 Results of the research and discussion

The study identified factors that help social workers empower children in day care centres: positive attitude towards the child, involvement of the child in decision-making, creation and maintenance of a favourable environment in the day care centre, and the development of skills that increase the child's independence (Table 1).

Table 1. Empowerment factors of children in day care centres

Categories	Subcategories

Positive attitude towards the child	Knowledge of the child's strengths and building on them
	Seeing opportunities in emerging difficulties
Involvement of the child in decision-making	The opportunity for the child to express their opinion when decisions that concern them are made
	Taking the child's opinion into account when making decisions
	Participation of children in making decisions related to daily activities and tasks
	Auxiliary rather than substitute support for the child in making decisions
Creation and maintenance of a favourable environment in the day care centre	Creation and maintenance of positive relationships between day care centre employees and children
	Creation and maintenance of positive relationships between children attending day care centres
	Creation and maintenance of positive relationships between day care centre employees
	Cooperation with the child's parents/guardians
Development of skills that increase the child's independence	Development of communication and cooperation skills
	Development of constructive conflict resolution skills
	Development of resistance to negative influences
	Development of self-control skills
	Development of health care skills
	Development of activity planning and organisational skills
	Development of self-confidence
	Development of patience in achieving goals and not giving up when faced with difficulties
	Development of responsibility

The study determined that one factor in empowering a child is the positive attitude of social workers towards that child. The positive attitude towards a child is expressed in knowing the child's strengths and building on them, as well as seeing opportunities in the difficulties that arise. The following is illustrated by the statements of the study participants: *"I try to rely on the child's strengths. I teach the child to open up their strengths to themselves and others, and to value and rely on them. For example, I have a child who is good at drawing, so I create conditions for that child to realise and develop that skill in various activities of the centre; having discussed this child's strengths with parents, we encouraged them to attend an art studio" (J), "when a child faces difficulties, it is important to encourage the child by asking what might be done in that situation and how, so that the difficulties do not block the child, but encourage them to look for solutions" (A).* Thus, by revealing the child's strengths and building on them, the child is not only empowered at that moment, but the boundaries of their opportunities are also expanded, opening them up to participation and self-realisation. Moreover, with the help of an adult to see and appreciate their abilities, the child begins to appreciate their strengths and themselves more. When a child encounters difficulties, adult support, talking with the child about the difficulties they are facing, and linking their strengths to the possibilities of overcoming these difficulties are truly important. The importance of revealing the child's strengths and adult support is also emphasised by M. Karklytė-Palevičienė [11]. She discusses how important it is to help the child recognise and develop their strengths and provide them with adult support in order to overcome the difficulties they are facing and expand the boundaries of their capabilities. J. Piaget's [12] research also shows that the child discovers and learns by observing, experimenting and

creating, and the role of the adult is to assist the child in this process by providing support and pointing them in the right direction. In addition, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) emphasises the importance of identifying strengths in order to better understand the child's needs and provide appropriate adult support [13].

The study showed that involving a child in the process of decision-making is another factor in their empowerment. According to the study participants, when involving children in decision-making, it is important to provide the child with the opportunity not only to express their opinion when decisions that affect them are made but also to take their opinion into account when making a decision. It is also important to involve the child in decision-making when organising various daily activities, and if necessary, to provide the child with auxiliary rather than substitute support in making decisions. As noted by the study participants, *"before planning or organising activities in the day care centre, I ask children to express their opinion, because they will participate in these activities" (G), "the child's opinion is important to me, and I encourage each child to express their opinion on one or another issue under discussion, so the child sees that their opinion is important and they are encouraged to express it" (B), "I involve children in decision-making using my patience, because it takes a lot of time to get such an opinion and point of view from a child. I catch myself thinking that it's much faster and easier to offer the child an option and have them agree with it, but I consciously avoid doing this. I do not make decisions for the child, but help them find it by encouraging them to see the situation from different angles and the possible consequences of their decisions" (H).* Thus, listening to the child's opinion and taking it into account when making decisions empowers the child to fully participate in the process of decision-making, the significance of which is also emphasised by other authors. The child's participation in the decision-making process is only meaningful if the child is listened to and given the opportunity to boldly express their views and opinions [14]. Moreover, children are more open and express their opinions when adults show that their opinions are important to them and make decisions in cooperation with children [15]. It is important that when a child encounters difficulties, they are provided with support in expressing their attitude, opinion, and making a decision [16]. The authors point out that adults must find appropriate ways and means for the child to reveal themselves by responding to their individual needs and providing auxiliary support, rather than deciding for them. Auxiliary support in decision-making is not focused on defeating the child by making decisions for them, but on empowering the child and promoting their independence.

It was identified that creating and maintaining a favourable environment in the day care centre is essential for empowering the child. A supportive, child-empowering environment is associated with harmonious relationships between day care centre employees and children, as well as between the children themselves, and smooth cooperation with the child's parents/guardians. The study participants noted that, *"I put a lot of effort into creating a good relationship with all children, because only by having a good relationship with the child can I involve them in activities" (C), "for a child to feel good and be active, it is important to create good relationships both between employees and children and between the children themselves" (A), "it is very important that there is no tension between day care centre employees and the child's parents, as this affects the emotional environment and the relationship with the child, so we are looking for connections and activities with parents to create and maintain good relationships" (E).* The creation and maintenance of favourable relationships is an important factor in empowering the child to be active in various activities, express and realise themselves, reveal their possibilities by expanding their boundaries, get to know themselves and their needs better, and develop life skills.

Other authors also emphasise that the development of favourable, cooperative relationships between an adult and a child is a principal dimension of child empowerment. Cooperative relationships between an adult and a child demonstrate that both the child and

the adult have significant roles, which can contribute in their own way to the development of cooperative relationships [17]. "The collaboration dimension in the empowerment model emphasises the relational understanding of autonomy, where the child's sense of self-worth promotes assertiveness and active involvement" ([17], p. 9). A sense of belonging and supportive relationships promote intrinsic motivation, self-realisation, and personal growth [18]. A child's development is greatly influenced by close and supportive relationships with others, who help develop their abilities and life skills [19].

The study showed that another factor in child empowerment is the development of skills that increase the child's independence. Social workers develop children's communication and cooperation skills. When nurturing the aforementioned skills in children, social workers pay special attention to polite communication, which a significant number of children lack. The study participants noted that, *"children communicate rudely, they use swear words, shout, interrupt each other while talking, and call each other names" (I).* Therefore, during various day care centre activities and in other environments, social workers teach children to speak calmly, listen to each other, ask politely, and address each other by name. In addition, specialists who encounter manifestations of rudeness talk individually with the child. Participants of the study pointed out that: *"one of the ways to develop children's communication skills is real everyday situations, discussing them, and learning politeness in them" (D), "I teach communication skills and, by modelling various situations, we discuss examples of polite communication, how they are important for our good relationships and how rude communication repels us, making us feel uncomfortable, and harming our relationships" (J).* Other studies also revealed that social workers, seeking to develop children's independence skills, apply various methods, such as individual and group conversations and practical tasks [20]. The significance of effective communication between social workers and children is emphasised. Social workers use a variety of methods when communicating with children and young people, including direct speech, listening, writing, body language, and specialised tools or techniques [21]. The development of these skills helps children develop communication and cooperation abilities, promoting polite behaviour and independence.

When developing children's cooperation skills, social workers use group work in a collaborative manner. They teach children to plan activities, share ideas on how to perform them, distribute tasks and carry them out responsibly, and help them understand that a common goal can only be achieved when everyone responsibly and completely fulfils their obligations, as well as helps each other in the case of difficulties. The following is illustrated by the statements of the study participants: *"I involve children in planning and organising activities. Children willingly share ideas and get involved in activities, because when children's opinions and suggestions are listened to, those activities become meaningful to them" (G), "children learn to distribute tasks and share responsibilities when performing them" (E), "children not only willingly take on tasks, but also carry them out in a friendly manner, because we teach children to cooperate and help each other" (I).* The study participants also noted that after joint activities, they discuss the results with the children, evaluate how well everyone was able to cooperate, celebrate successes, and discuss difficulties and obstacles that arose and how they can be overcome: *"I practice discussions after the activities; each child says how they did, what makes them happy, and whether their expectations were met" (F)*, *"after the activities, we reflect, evaluate general and each of our own contributions to the activity; if something does not work out, we talk about how we can do it differently" (K)*. According to R.K. Olsen, "co-reflection is described as leading to an increased experience of empowerment and thus increased active participation in the collaborative process" ([17], p. 4).

The creation and maintenance of positive relationships is made possible by using the ability to properly resolve conflicts. The study showed that children have difficulty resolving

conflicts; thus, social workers teach them appropriate conflict resolution methods. When teaching children to resolve conflicts, they use and discuss real conflict situations experienced by children, and model possible forms of appropriate conflict resolution: *"children learn to resolve conflicts in an appropriate way and in real situations, and we teach children to reach an agreement and find a solution that is suitable for both parties" (C), "if children are angry or in conflict, I talk and ask them what solution they see for themselves, and how they can reach an agreement" (A), "We discuss with children the effects that inappropriate and appropriate conflict resolution has on our relationships, and we model various decision-making situations with children" (D).* Creating and maintaining positive relationships are essential factors in enabling children to develop conflict resolution skills [22]. The authors also note that ensuring social and emotional well-being requires the creation of a positive atmosphere and mutual support that allows children to develop communication, empathy, and conflict resolution skills.

The study showed that children are taught social resilience, which is important for a person's independence. Social workers noted that they develop social resilience skills by teaching children to resist the negative influence of others, and to say "No" decisively, without feeling guilty. Children are taught these skills by discussing their real experiences, performing various tasks, and playing situational games: *"we teach children to say a firm "No", without making excuses, because children often feel guilty when they disagree with someone; they start justifying themselves and explaining" (B), "we often talk to children about the importance of having their own opinion, and not giving in to the bad influence of others; we discuss various situations, what dangers lie in giving in to bad influence, and after discussing all this the children better understand the possible dangers" (G), "not only do we discuss real situations, but also model them by playing situational games and performing various tasks" (J).* However, it is worth noting that in order to develop children's resilience, it is important to focus on the efforts of various systems. Many systems contribute to resilience as children develop, and those children in turn enhance the future resilience of their communities and societies [23].

It was revealed in the study that children in day care centres develop self-control skills by creating rules and following them, learning on time, and dutifully completing various tasks. When children lack self-control skills, social workers also model various situations, talk to the child individually, and discuss situations in groups. According to the study participants: *"rules are not imposed upon children, but they create them themselves and then try harder to follow them" (K), "discussion of children's appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in everyday situations, as well as conversations about what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, how important it is, and how to control themselves" (F).* The following shows that social workers, together with children, create rules of communication that help build friendly relationships with others. It is important to cooperate with children when creating rules, as in this way, the child will not feel that adults are imposing unacceptable rules upon them.

Having analysed the study data, it was found that social workers in children's day care centres develop health care skills in children, focusing on strengthening and maintaining physical and emotional health, as well as preventing harmful habits and risky behaviour. The study data show that children's physical activity is encouraged and supported in day care centres: *"children's physical activity is included in daily activities, and children are happy to participate in them. Various active games, relay races, going for walks, children playing boxball, football and other games are included" (H).* Specialists strengthen and support children's emotional health by fostering harmonious relationships. The study participants noted: *"we try to maintain harmonious relationships with each other, we pay attention to polite communication between children, and we pay attention to bullying prevention" (A), "we teach children to relax properly, and we try out various relaxation methods" (D).* The

following shows that social workers, seeking to maintain and strengthen emotional health, pay attention to the development of social skills, because the development of social skills is one of the main factors for a person's emotional health. The ability to communicate effectively and cooperate contributes to psychological well-being, reduces social anxiety, and helps maintain emotional balance. Well-developed social skills are associated with a lower risk of depression and other mental health problems, while a lack of communication skills can lead to isolation and various health disorders [24].

Social workers analyse and discuss various life situations with children, and what dangers may arise when using psychotropic substances or behaving in a risky manner. According to the study participants: *"we talk to children about the harm of alcohol and drugs, and the dangers they pose, we explain the differences between dangerous and safe behaviours, and we discuss real situations, various examples, films, and real-life stories" (K), "we advise children that if they find themselves in a dangerous situation, they should inform their parents, teachers, or us, or ask for help from other people, contact services" (B).* The following shows that social workers apply inclusive learning strategies and methods, so that children have as many opportunities as possible to become aware of and feel the value of the skills they have developed in real life, so that they develop the ability to distinguish risky situations, assess potential dangers, and resist pressure to use psychoactive substances.

The study revealed that social workers in day care centres empower children by developing their activity planning and organisational skills. As noted by participants of the study: *"I develop children's planning and organisational skills by teaching them to plan and responsibly complete homework assignments during lesson preparation, and we also plan daily activities together" (C), "we try to ensure that each child contributes to the organised activities" (I).* The following shows that social workers develop the aforementioned skills in various daily activities of the day care centre. The empowerment paradigm emphasises that abilities can be developed by actively acting out real-life contexts and situations [5].

Social workers also develop children's patience in achieving a goal and not giving up when faced with difficulties, as well as a sense of responsibility. Study participants pointed out that: *"children lack patience in achieving results, they want quick results, so we have to work patiently with children so they understand that they should consistently achieve the set goal, and not abandon the activities they have started when faced with obstacles" (E), "children often abandon the activity they have started when faced with difficulties, so we talk to them about the fact that patience and intention are important in achieving results" (G).* The following shows that social workers use both various activities and dialogue to develop children's responsibility and patience in achieving the goal. The core of the empowerment process, the principle of its ideology, activities and methods, is dialogue [5]. Change can be achieved through equal and attentive dialogue, as individuals can develop critical consciousness through engagement and communication [5]. It is emphasised that dialogue and reflection create the prerequisites for naming personal experiences and conceptualising them. Dialogue and the activities of the people involved play a crucial role, because not only is information obtained, but the awareness of the participants is also increased [5].

The study showed that social workers in day care centres pay attention to the development of self-confidence skills. Children gain self-confidence when even the smallest successes and progress of the child are celebrated, when their efforts are evaluated, strengths are emphasised, and trust and faith in the child are shown. Participants of the study noted: *"children become more self-confident when you praise them; if something goes wrong, you encourage them" (A), "every child has strengths and I try to make the child recognise them and build on them" (D).* Motivation, the promotion of self-confidence, and self-esteem are very important in the process of empowerment [25]. The process of empowerment unfolds gradually and is closely related to psychosocial human categories, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, recognition and acknowledgement of one's strengths, and self-control [1, 25].

Therefore, when empowering children, it is crucial to pay special attention to the revelation of the child's powers, their self-realisation, positive self-assessment, and strengthening of self-esteem and self-confidence. It should be noted that the awakening of children's emotional involvement in activities by creating situations of success and a safe and favourable emotional environment for the child is of great importance.

4 Conclusions

The study identified that the empowerment of children attending day care centres is conditioned by the social workers' positive attitude towards the child, their involvement in decision-making, the creation and maintenance of a favourable psychosocial environment in the day care centre, and the development of skills that increase the child's independence.

The study revealed that the social workers' positive attitude towards the child is ensured by knowing the child's strengths and relying on them, as well as the ability to see the child's potential in any difficulties they encounter. Social workers involve children in decision-making by providing them with opportunities to express their opinions. Moreover, social workers take the child's opinion into account when making decisions in everyday activities and involve them in the process of decision-making. If a child faces difficulties when making decisions, they are provided with auxiliary rather than substitute support in making them. When empowering children, it is important to create and maintain a favourable environment in the day centre that is associated with the creation and maintenance of harmonious relationships between day centre employees and children, between children themselves, and between day centre employees, as well as smooth cooperation with the child's parents/guardians. Child empowerment is also ensured by the development of skills that increase the child's independence. Day centres develop children's communication and cooperation, constructive conflict resolution skills, resistance to negative influences, self-discipline, self-control, healthcare, skills in planning and organising activities, and self-confidence. Children's patience in achieving a goal, not giving up when faced with difficulties, and responsibility are also developed.

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