THE OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION SKILLS AT CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY CARE HOMES

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Abstract.*The purpose of the article is to reveal the opportunities to develop communication and cooperation skills in children living at children's community care homes (further on CCCHs) based on the experience of social workers working at CCCHs. Problematic question: What are real opportunities for children to develop communication and cooperation skills while living at CCCHs? Nine social workers, who work at CCCHs in seven different locations in Lithuania, participated in the research. The study revealed that, while living at CCCHS, the opportunities to develop communication and cooperation skills change in the positive direction. At CCCHs, a positive family environment, in which closer and warmer relationships form, is created, more time is devoted to mutual communication. Children develop communication and cooperation skills while creating home rules, negotiating and obliging themselves to stick to the set order, learning to create and maintain harmonious mutual realtionships, empasising attentiveness, politeness, empathy, as well as learning to resolve problems and conflicts in a constructive manner, conculting and agreeing regarding the ways to spend their leisure time. In addition, children, while expanding their social ties in their community, learn to coexist with others, as well as to develop social resilience while learning to resist the pressure of others, not to give in to bad influences, to trust their own strength and to take decisions independently.*
Keywords: *children, communication and cooperation skills, community care homes, social worker.*

Introduction

The rapid changes in society and the increasing pace of life present today's people with more and more complex life challenges, requiring the ability to adapt in the process of change and to function effectively in a specific social context, in real life. Life experience shows that those who are able to navigate social situations and participate effectively in social interactions, and who are able to express themselves in the context of a collaborative culture are more likely to join the ranks of the successful. Communication and cooperation are an integral part of our lives. Through communication and cooperation, we exchange information, learn a lot, get to know ourselves and others better, develop ourselves and meet our social needs. Thus, communication and cooperation are an integral part of human existence and underpin almost all human activity. O. Renn (2020) points

out that communication and cooperation provide opportunities to achieve goals effectively, to learn from others, not to get lost in difficult situations, and to learn leadership and initiative in the implementation of various ideas. Effective communication can create a better atmosphere that facilitates communication and cooperation (Husain, 2013). S. Reeves, M. Zwarenstein, S. Espin, and S. Lewin (2011) note that communication and cooperation skills are crucial to guarantee social well-being.

The research (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2015; Sala Roca, 2019) shows that children in children's care homes lack independent living skills, including communication and cooperation. R. Raudeliūnaitė and R. Paigozina (2009) point out that children in children's care homes lack a certain amount of social discernment, their communication, activity and cooperation skills are poorer. V. Gudžinskienė, R. Raudeliūnaitė and R. Uscila (2017) also point out that children in children's care homes lack communication skills: they have difficulty establishing a contact, communicating politely, being careful and attentive to others, resolving conflicts constructively, and they lack personal skills, especially self-control, responsibility, and self-confidence. They need the assistance of a social worker, support when developing their communication and cooperation skills.

One of the priority objectives of the EU, including Lithuania, in the transformation of childcare from institutional care to family and community-based services is to prepare children left without parental care for independent living. One form of community-based service provision is a community children's care homes (CCCHs) for up to 8 children. CCCHs are set up in separate premises (e.g. house, apartment) in the community and operate according to the family-like environment model (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2014). "The Description of Community Children's Homes" approved by Order No A1-24 of 13 January 2021 of the Minister of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, states that one of the important objectives of the CCCHs is to ensure that the child is prepared to live independently in the family and in society (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2021). Communication and cooperation skills are an integral part of independent living. Properly developed communication and cooperation skills would enable children from CCCHs to integrate more successfully into society. Therefore, it is appropriate to investigate the possibilities of developing communication and cooperation skills in CCCHs.

Having performed the analysis of the studies analysing the process of the transformation of institutional care in Lithuania since 2014, it can be established that there is a lack of research on communication and cooperation skills of children living in CCCHs. The studies that have been conducted assess the situation of child care transformation in Lithuania, the motivation and readiness of social workers for this process (Gvaldaitė & Šimkonytė, 2016; Genienė & Šumskienė, 2016; Griciūtė & Senkevičiūtė-Doviltė, 2018), and the challenges to

the professionalism of social workers in the course of the systemic transformation of child care (Kiaunytė & Lygnugarienė, 2019). R.Raudeliūnaitė and V.Gudžinskienė (2016, 2018), V. Gudžinskienė et al. (2017) analysed the trends in the preparation of children for independent living and the development of their social skills in the CCCHs. In the context of these studies, the relevance of the development of communication and cooperation skills in the preparation of children living in CCCHs for independent living is underlined.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the possibilities of developing communication and cooperation skills in children living in CCCHs, based on the experience of social workers working in CCCHs.

Research question: What are real opportunities for children to develop communication and cooperation skills while living in a CCCHs?

Research methodology

Research methods. In order to reveal the opportunities for developing communication and cooperation skills for children living in CCCHs, based on the experiences of social workers, a qualitative study was chosen. The method of a semi-structured interview was used in the study. What children's communication and cooperation skills have favourable opportunities to develop in CCCHs? How are children's communication and collaboration skills developed in CCCHs?

The obtained data were analysed by using the content analysis method. The qualitative content analysis was performed in the following sequence: the repeated reading of the content of transcribed interview texts, the distinction of meaningful elements in the text analysed, the grouping of the distinguished meaningful elements into categories and sub-categories, integration of the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed and the description of their analysis (Žydžiūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017). J.W. Creswell (2014) emphasises that content analysis is a valid method for making specific inferences from the analysed text.

The sample of the research. A criteria-based sample was used in the study. The participantes of research were chosen according to the following criteria: 1) social workers who have a degree in the area of social work; 2) social workers working in CCCHs, 3) social workers with at least 3 years of work experience in CCCHs. The study was conducted in the May- June of 2021. Nine social workers, who work at CCCHs in seven different locations in Lithuania, participated in the research.

Ethics of the research. The study was based on the respect for personal privacy, benevolence and attitude not to harm a researchee, confidentiality and anonymity (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). The participants of the study participated voluntarily. They were briefed on the purpose and the use of the study, the method of study data collection and the procedure of the study,

anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. Study participants were assigned a code by using the letter 'A, B, C ' and so on.

Resarch results

The role of the social worker, his/her ability to establish and maintain good relations with children, to understand their emotions, behaviour, needs, differences and to earn their trust and respect are crucial for the creation of a favourable environment for communication and cooperation in the CCCHs. The social workers, who took part in the study, acknowledged that in order that a CCCHs would be dominated by an environment, which is favourable for communication and cooperation, tolerance among community members, a positive attitude towards interaction, caring for each other, positive self-esteem, mastery of communication skills, individual efforts of each member, and community cohesion through democratic decision-making and responsibility are necessary. The participants of the study noted that the children in care come from families at social risk, where the conditions for their development are unfavourable, the children lack communication and cooperation skills, therefore, it is not easy to build a cooperative community, and they pay a lot of attention to the development of communication and cooperation skills in the children. The researchers (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä, & Karki, 2019; Shinina & Mitina, 2019) argue that children growing up in families with disadvantaged conditions for their development lack both personal and social skills, therefore, attention needs to be paid to their development in a care home. Positive interdependence, individual responsibility, stimulating interactions, the analysis of the processes taking place in the cooperation and the anticipation of further opportunities for their improvement, as well as skills in communication, leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution are important for cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Butera & Buchs, 2019).

The analysis of the research data found that opportunities are provided for CCCHs children to develop their communication and cooperation skills. Having analysed the research data, 9 categories, which are associated with opportunities for developing communication and cooperation skills in CCCHs, were identified: children engage in the creation of rules in the CCCHs that assist in building supportive relationships and a culture of cooperation, children agree and commit to maintaining order, build and maintain harmonious interrelationships, a supportive family environment enables children to build and maintain close interrelationships, children learn to resolve conflicts, they plan and organise thoughtful leisure activities, learn to get along with others, life in the community expands social ties, children develop social resilience (Table 1).

Table 1 **Favourable opportunities for developing communication and cooperation skills CCCHs** *(made by Authors)*

Categories	Subcategories
The development of the CCCHs rules	Individual suggestions from children
	Consideration of suggestions and presentation of arguments
	Agreement regarding future rules and their drafting
Agreements and obligations regarding maintenance of order	Maintenance of order in rooms
	Maintenance of order in common spaces
Building and maintaining harmonious relationships in the CCCHs	Courteous communication
	Attentiveness
	Empathy
	Observing and recognising effective and ineffective ways of communicating
Family environment favourable for close relationships	Closer and warmer relationships
	More time is spent for mutual communication
Learning to resolve conflicts	Conflict analysis
	Finding possible solutions
	Learning to negotiate properly
Planning and organising thoughtful leisure time	Negotiating and agreeing on ways to spend leisure time
	Conversations and discussions on various issues
	Celebrating children's birthdays and public holidays
Learning to get along with others	Learning to accept another person
	Non-infringement of the rights of others
	Taking into account the needs of others
Expansion of social relationships while living in the community	Learning to get along with neighbours
	Engagement in the community
Developing social resilience	Learning to resist pressure from others
	Resisting to bad influences
	Self-confidence
	Making decisions independent of other people

The analysis of the experiences of the social workers working in the CCCHs, who participated in the study, revealed that favourable prerequisites for the development of communication and cooperation skills are created through the creation of CCCHs rules, which enable the development of harmonious relationships, together with the children. The study found that children provide their own suggestions when creating CCCHs rules. The participants of the study noted, "to make life in the CCCHs smoother, we created rules together with the children. The children presented suggestions" (D), "the children suggested the rules we will live by" (I). The study showed that when creating the rules of the CCCHs not only do children make suggestions, but the discussion of their suggestions, the presentation of their arguments and agreeing on the future rules and their preparation also take place. This is witnessed by the statements of the

participants in the study: „we discussed the proposed rules intensively, everyone argued why their proposed rule was important" (A), „we had a lot of discussions on the rules, I wanted the children not only to propose the rules, but also to discuss them, to debate them, to consult regarding them" (G), „when the arguments regarding the rules were over, we debated and decided on what rules would apply at our home" (C).

When creating rules children learn to express their thoughts clearly and in a reasonable manner, to listen to each other, not to reduce the significance of the thoughts of others, they learn to make decisions and to take on responsibility. It should be noted that respect, courtesy and responsibility were the most important components of the rules. Based on the experience of the social workers, it should be noted that the components, which were mentioned in the rules, encompassed listening to one another, the avoidance of the reduction of the significance of the thoughts and deeds of others, the fulfillment of undertaken obligations, not insulting each other, supporting and helping each other, etc.

Agreements and obligations on maintaining order in the CCCHs also provide children with favourable opportunities to develop communication and cooperation skills. The participants in the study noted that there were discussions with the children about keeping order in the rooms and common spaces: „we discussed with the children, in advance, their commitments about keeping order in the rotoms" (B), „we communicate and cooperate regularly to keep order in the common spaces: the children undertake obligations, try to fulfill them, help each other, advise and remind" (E). R.Meyer, M.Cancian and S.T.Cook (2017) also highlight the importance of mutual agreements in order to maintain harmonious relationships when living together.

The study established that CCCHs try to build and maintain harmonious relationships. Children learn polite communication, attentiveness and empathy. According to the participants in the study, "the enemy of good relationships is rudeness. We try to communicate politely with children ourselves and encourage children to communicate politely, that they would not swear or insult others, or interrupt each other when speaking" (H), "we teach children to show attention to each other" (F), "children are taught to be empathic, to be compassionate, to help each other" (A). The ability to notice and empathise with another person's situation and emotional state, and the ability to look at a situation through another person's eyes is noted by V. Gudžinskienė (2011). A.Main and C.Kho (2020) emphasise that developing empathy is a key factor for positive social adjustment. The study also showed that, in the CCCHs, social workers encourage children to notice and recognise effective and ineffective ways of communication in real situations. The participants in the study indicated that, in real-life situations, during individual and group conversations, children are taught to identify the expressions of appropriate and inappropriate communication.

The study showed that the family environment created by the CCCHs, in which close relationships are inevitable, sets up conditions for communication and cooperation. The analysis of the experiences of the participants in the study showed that CCCHs are characterised by closer and warmer relationships and more time spent on communication. As the participants of the study noted, "when there are few children living in the CCCHs, then there are closer relationships among the children, and we have closer relationships with the children" (C), "the children communicate in a nicer and more intimate way" (G), "we interact with the children more often, we can pay more attention to each child, we have more individual conversations and we talk to all the children, we discuss, we talk about the day, we plan what we are going to do" (D).

Having analysed the experiences of the participants, it has been established that children also develop communication and cooperation skills while learning to resolve conflicts. The study shows that social workers teach children to analyse conflict situations: they encourage them to explain the origins of the conflict, to look for possible solutions, and to reach agreements. The participants of the study stated, "when a conflict arises, we explain why it has arisen and talk that the first thing to do is to have a polite conversation, to find out what one and the other wants, to express his own position" (I), "whenever a conflict arises, we talk to children about how the conflict could have been avoided, we simulate possible solutions" (B), and "even though the children learn to come to an agreement peacefully in the event of a conflict, they have difficulty doing that" (F). The ability to resolve conflicts is the basis for harmonious relationships. S.J.Ferrar, D.M. Stack, K.S. Baldassarre, A. Orsini & L.A. Serbin (2021) point out that the behaviour of different individuals in the same family was very similar during conflicts, i.e. many family members behaved similarly in conflict situations. Therefore, in the CCCHs, it is appropriate to pay special attention to constructive conflict resolution when children are growing up in a family environment, as children growing up in the same CCCHS environment are likely to behave similarly in conflict situations as well. S. Van Dijk (2021) points out it is important to teach children how to manage their emotions, to develop self-control and introspection skills for constructive conflict resolution.

Providing and organising thoughtful leisure time for children is another opportunity to develop communication and cooperation skills. The study showed that, in the CCCHs, leisure activities and the organizing of celebrations are discussed and agreed upon, furthermore, various issues are discussed and debated. The participants in the study noted, "we talk a lot about thoughtful leisure activities, the children often have no experience of thoughtful leisure activities, so a great deal of discussion is necessary" (E), "children express their wishes, how they would like to spend their leisure time, how they would like to celebrate holidays, they learn to express their thoughts and opinions clearly and reasonably, to listen to each other and to make decisions together with others (H), „children

learn to cooperate in the organisation of different celebrations, they express their wishes, needs, ideas, share responsibilities, and stick to agreements" (D). Through involvement in the planning and organisation of various activities, children develop problem-solving, relationship building and organisational skills. A.M. Salazar, S.S. Spiers, & F.R. Pfister, (2021) state that children need to be involved in the planning, organising, executing and discussing various events. This provides children with an opportunity to be heard and listened to, to take initiative and to develop communication, cooperation and leadership skills.

The changed environment of the CCCHs allows social workers to expand communication and cooperation skills by teaching children how to get along with others: how to accept others, not to infringe on others' rights, and how to take into account the needs of others. According to the participants, "we teach children to understand that not only they, but other persons have needs as well, and that they need to balance their needs with the needs of others" (F), "we teach children that it is not all about their needs and rights, but also about their responsibilities ... the importance of respecting the rights of others while meeting their own needs" (A), and "we teach children that we are all different, and that they need to accept other persons around them" (G). Learning to get along with others is an important component of a favourable environment based on interoperability. S. Van Dijk (2021) also stresses the relevance of getting along with others. C.A. Wringe (2020) also raises the issue of children's rights and responsibilities, stressing that rights go hand in hand with responsibilities and obligations.

Living in a community broadens social ties and facilitates the development of both communication and cooperation skills. Having analysed the experiences of social workers, it was established that children learn to get along with their neighbours and to get involved in community life. The social workers highlighted the following: "we teach children to be friendly with their neighbours, to greet them, to speak politely, to behave respectfully" (C), "we teach children to be community-minded, we celebrate Neighbours' Day, we clean up the neighbourhood, we communicate politely" (I). N. Trocmé, T. Esposito, J. Nutton, V. Rosser, & B. Fallon (2019). also point out the importance of community to a child's well-being, stating that community ties increase a child's self-confidence and his social resilience.

The study revealed that children in the CCCHs develop social resilience: they learn to resist social pressure from others, not to succumb to the bad influence of others, to trust their own strength and to make decisions independent of other people. The participants in the study noted, "we have to talk to children a lot about their giving in to other people's influence, our children lack social resilience, they don't speak up, they don't express their opinions, their needs" (E), "we teach children to say 'no', to stand for their rights, their needs" (B), "by emphasising their strong points, their strengths and not their weaknesses, we build up children's self-confidence and teach them how to make decisions independent

of other people" (H). R. Wiczorek and J. Meyer (2019) point out that providing effective feedback and personal self-confidence improve problem-solving and decision-making and social resilience.

Conclusions

Having analysed the experience of social workers working in the CCCHs, it has been established that the children, who live in the community, are provided with favourable conditions for developing communication and cooperation skills. The study found that children develop communication and cooperation skills by creating rules for CCCHs, presenting individual proposals, expressing their arguments and discussing them, and agreeing on the rules and drafting them. Children communicate and cooperate by discussing and committing themselves to maintaining order in their living environment. The CCCHs build and maintain harmonious relationships based on polite communication, attentiveness and empathy. The family environment in the CCCHs allows for the development of closer and warmer relationships, with more time for communication and cooperation. In the CCCHs, children learn to resolve conflicts. They learn to analyse conflicts, to find possible solutions and to negotiate appropriately in conflict situations. The study showed that planning and organising thoughtful leisure time also facilitates the development of communication and cooperation skills. It also teaches children how to get along with others while accepting others, meeting their own needs without infringing on the rights of others, behaving responsibly and respecting the needs of others. Living in a CCCHs creates favourable conditions to the development of social ties within the community. Children learn to live harmoniously with their neighbours and to find ways to get involved in the community. The study reveals that children develop social resilience through interaction and cooperation. Children develop social resilience skills by learning to resist the pressure from others, not to succumb to bad influences, to trust themselves, and to make decisions independent of other people.

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