

EVALUATION OF THE CHILDREN'S DAY CENTRE'S ACTIVITIES FROM THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE: SATISFACTION, CHANGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract. This article presents the results of a survey of visitors to children's day centre, part of the Panevėžys City Social Services Centre, revealing children's views on the centre's activities and the quality of the services provided. The aim of the study is to assess children's satisfaction with the activities of the day centre and to identify positive changes in their daily lives, relationships and personal development. The questionnaire survey showed that the majority of children have a positive opinion of the centre's environment, the work of its staff and the activities offered. The survey data shows that attending the day centre promotes children's friendliness, independence and self-confidence and improves their relationships with their families and peers. Although there are a few areas for improvement, such as increasing the variety of activities or renovating the premises, the overall conclusion confirms that day center is an important social service institution that contributes to the emotional well-being and social integration of children.

Keywords: children's day centres; quality of social services; children's attitudes; social adaptation; emotional well-being

INTRODUCTION

In Lithuania, the social services system is constantly being improved to ensure every child's right to a safe, nurturing and supportive environment. One of the most important links in this system is children's day centres – social service institutions that provide comprehensive assistance to children from socially at-risk or socially excluded families. These centres not only provide social assistance, but also help to develop children's independence, social skills and emotional literacy, and promote their integration into society.

The quality and effectiveness of children's day centres are important social policy issues, as they determine the satisfaction of service recipients, increased social inclusion and the strengthening of family functions. According to Žalimienė (2018), the quality of social services must be assessed comprehensively, analysing not only the service provision processes, but also the experiences of recipients and their attitudes towards the assistance received. This view is supported by other authors (Guogis, 2014; Mickevičiūtė, 2017), who emphasise that social services are inseparable from human dignity, participation in society and emotional well-being.

An analysis of the experience of other countries shows that the activities of children's day centres in most European countries are based on the principles of community and prevention. In Scandinavian countries (especially Sweden and Norway), day centres are considered a form of early intervention that helps prevent social exclusion and behavioural problems among children (Lundberg, 2019). The United Kingdom applies the so-called community-based approach model, where children's day centres work closely with schools, psychologists and family support services (Department for Education, 2020). Meanwhile, in Germany, a lot of attention is paid to involving children in decision-making and developing social skills through informal educational activities (Köhler, 2018). These examples show that effective models of children's day centres are based on a holistic approach that combines social, educational and community support.

Previous studies in Lithuania show that the activities of children's day centres have a positive effect on children's social skills, self-confidence and ability to establish and maintain relationships (Bieliauskaitė, 2020; Šinkūnienė, 2021). Such centres become not only a safe place after school, but also a significant source of emotional support, helping children to overcome social difficulties. However, the quality of services may vary between centres due to limited financial, organisational or human resources, so it is necessary to analyse the experiences of specific institutions and the impact of their services on their visitors.

In analysing the activities of children's day centres, this article draws on various sources of information – scientific works (Žalimienė, Guogis, Mickevičiūtė, Bieliauskaitė, Lundberg, Köhler), the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania, methodological documents on ensuring the quality of social services, and empirical data obtained from the Panevėžys City Children's Day Centre. This analysis allows us to assess the role of children's day centres in the social services system and their importance for children's well-being and social integration in both a national and international context.

Despite the growing attention to children's day centres as an important part of the social services system in Lithuania, there is still a lack of research focusing on the evaluation of these services from the children's own perspective. Most studies tend to assess service quality from institutional or professional viewpoints, while the subjective experiences, satisfaction and perceived changes of children as direct service recipients remain insufficiently explored.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by analysing children's evaluations of a children's day centre, focusing on their satisfaction with the activities provided, perceived changes in their daily lives and opportunities for service improvement.

The aim of the study is to evaluate children's satisfaction with the activities of a children's day centre, to identify perceived changes in their personal, social and school-related experiences, and to reveal possible directions for improving the centre's activities.

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) to assess children's satisfaction with the services and activities provided by the children's day centre;
- 2) to identify changes perceived by children in their family life, school environment and personal development after attending the centre;
- 3) to determine the main shortcomings of the centre's activities as identified by children and to outline opportunities for improvement.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN'S DAY CENTRES

Concept and functions of children's day centres. Children's day centres are community social service institutions designed to promote children's activities, social skills development and social integration. These centres are usually focused on children from socially disadvantaged families who need additional social, emotional or educational support. According to the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (2006), day centres are classified as general social services and operate as a form of social support aimed at ensuring the functioning of individuals and families and preventing social exclusion.

As indicated by Žalimienė (2018), children's day centres perform several key functions: social, educational, preventive and compensatory. The social function is related to helping children meet their basic needs – security, belonging and communication. The educational function is realised through various educational and creative activities that help to shape values and strengthen independence and responsibility. The preventive function helps to prevent problems related to children's behaviour, addictions and social exclusion. The compensatory function is important in that it helps children learn social models that are often lacking in the family environment. According to Mickevičiūtė (2017), children's day centres also perform a community-building function, as their activities are based on the participation of the local community, volunteering and the strengthening of social ties. In this way, day centres become not only a place for children to spend their time, but also a space for social partnership, where various social actors – families, the education system, non-governmental organisations and municipalities – come together.

Internationally, the concept of children's day centres is also linked to the principles of social protection and early intervention. In Scandinavian countries, day centres operate as early intervention institutions that help prevent the institutionalisation of children (Lundberg, 2019). In the United Kingdom and Germany, the emphasis is on a community-based model, where social services are provided inseparably from education and psychological support systems (Köhler, 2018; Department for Education, 2020). Such practices show that children's day centres are becoming an important link between social support, education and family strengthening policy areas.

The concept of social service quality and evaluation principles. The quality of social services is one of the most important indicators for assessing whether a service achieves its objectives and meets the needs of its recipients. According to Žalimienė (2018), quality in the context of social services is defined as "the totality of suitability and effectiveness," which reflects how well the service meets user expectations and established standards. She emphasises that quality cannot be assessed solely from an administrative or technical point of view – it is necessary to include the human aspect, i.e. the subjective satisfaction of service recipients, their emotional well-being and changes in their quality of life.

Quality in social services is based on several key principles:

1. Accessibility – services must be easily accessible to everyone who needs them.
2. Continuity – assistance must be consistent and focused on long-term impact.
3. Professionalism – services must be provided by competent specialists with knowledge of child development, social work and psychology.
4. Individuality – assistance must be tailored to the needs of each child and family.
5. Empowerment – children and their families must be active participants in the service process (Guogis, 2014; Mickevičiūtė, 2017).

The quality of social services in Lithuania is regulated by the Social Care Standards (2016) and the Social Services Quality Assurance Methodology (2020). These emphasise that services should be focused not only on problem solving, but also on strengthening the individual's abilities and social integration. The quality of children's day centres is determined by factors such as the professionalism of specialists and their ability to work in a team, the variety of methods (individual work, group activities, creative activities), the safety and comfort of the physical environment, cooperation with families and schools, and the involvement of service users in decision-making.

Experience in other countries shows that the assessment of the quality of social services is based on a community approach. In Sweden, quality is measured not by quantitative indicators, but by the growth of children's emotional well-being, independence and self-confidence (Lundberg, 2019). In the United Kingdom, quality is linked to a child-centred

approach, where the child is considered an active creator of the service rather than a passive recipient (Department for Education, 2020). Such models are increasingly being applied in the practice of social services in Lithuania.

The importance of children's day centres for children's well-being and social integration. Children's day centres are important for children's well-being because they provide a safe, purposeful and emotionally rich environment. Participation in the centre's activities strengthens children's self-esteem and helps to develop a sense of cooperation, responsibility and self-confidence. Empirical studies show that attending a day centre has a positive impact not only on children's behaviour and learning outcomes, but also on their relationships within the family and community (Bieliauskaitė, 2020; Šinkūnienė, 2021).

Children's day centres help to establish positive social relationships – children learn to work in a group, resolve conflicts and express their emotions constructively. This experience is particularly important for those who face a lack of emotional security or social difficulties at home. In this way, the centres contribute to the social integration of children and perform a social rehabilitation function.

In addition, these centres strengthen the social capital of families – parents receive counselling, psychological assistance and training in positive parenting skills, which helps to restore or strengthen family functionality. As noted in the report of the Association of Children's Day Centres (2021), the most successful results are achieved when the work is carried out in a comprehensive manner – with the child, the family and the community.

It is also important to emphasise the broader significance of these institutions for society. Day centres reduce social inequality by providing children with equal opportunities to learn, develop and spend their free time in a meaningful way, regardless of their family's social situation. They also contribute to community cohesion by involving volunteers, teachers, social workers and local residents in the process of promoting children's well-being.

Therefore, children's day centres should be considered not only as social assistance institutions, but also as spaces for education and socialisation, where children's identity, self-esteem, empathy and ability to be part of the community are nurtured. The quality of social services in this area has a direct impact on the quality of life of children, so it is necessary to consistently evaluate and strengthen the activities of these centres at both local and national levels.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The aim of the study was to investigate the satisfaction of visitors to the Children's Day Centre of the Panevėžys Social Services Centre with the services they receive. To achieve the aim of the study, a descriptive study type was chosen, and primary data was collected using a survey method based on a questionnaire prepared by the authors of this study. Twenty-four children attending the Children's Day Centre of the Panevėžys Social Services Centre participated in the study. Although the sample size is relatively small, it includes all children attending the centre during the research period, which allows the collected data to reflect the actual experiences of the centre's service users. Research period: December 2023. Children's perception and ability to respond can vary greatly depending on their age group, so the questionnaire used language and terminology that was understandable to children, and the questions were formulated in a concise, specific and clear manner. Before starting the survey, the children were given information about the purpose of the study and the likely use of the results, and it was explained to them why the information they provided was very important. The survey was conducted in person. A paper version of the questionnaire was distributed to each visitor individually. Maintaining confidentiality is an important aspect of research, especially when it comes to respondents' personal data. The researchers decided not to collect data on the age and gender of respondents in order to ensure their privacy and reduce the risk of personal information being identifiable. This methodological decision was made intentionally in order to protect the privacy of the respondents and to encourage more open and honest responses. A social worker participated in the study.

The majority of respondents (37.5%) have been attending the day centre for 1 to 2 years or more than 2 years. A smaller proportion of respondents (8.3%) have been attending the centre for a shorter period of time, i.e. less than 1 or 2 years. This information provides insights into how long clients use the services of the children's day centre and allows us to understand client behaviour and needs. A large proportion of respondents have been attending the centre for a long time, which may indicate that the centre is popular and may have a good reputation in the community. It also shows that there is a demand for long-term childcare services that can meet parents' needs for a longer period of time. When asked, *"Do you like this day centre?"*, four-fifths of respondents confirmed that they were satisfied with the centre. 20.8% of respondents indicated that they did not know whether they liked this day centre. It is likely that these respondents may be neutral or have been attending the centre for too short a period of time to make a final assessment. Respondents were also offered the option of answering "I don't like it". None of the respondents chose this option. Although this fact gives the centre a good rating, it may also mean that respondents are more inclined to express their opinion positively or perhaps did not want to choose a negative answer at all. It is difficult to assess or understand whether there are potential problems or dissatisfied customers. However, based on the data provided, it can be assumed that the centre is popular and that most clients are satisfied with the services provided. This can be a great sign for the centre and means that it has a good reputation and provides valuable services to its clients.

The data obtained during the study shows that most respondents use the centre very actively, visiting it every day or several times a week. However, some visitors to the day centre sometimes skip visits to . Poor attendance may be seasonal or temporary. For example, during the holiday period or during holidays, when most families are on holiday or busy with other matters, the number of children visiting the day centre may decrease. Poor attendance may also be related

to insufficient advertising or dissemination of information about the day centre's activities, services and benefits. If the day centre's services do not meet the needs of clients or are not interesting or tailored enough, this may reduce attendance. It is important to continuously update and improve services in order to meet customer expectations. It is important to continuously monitor and update services to meet the changing needs of the community. In order to improve attendance at the day centre, it is necessary to identify the reasons and look for solutions. This may include improving advertising and marketing strategies, improving service quality, collaborating with the local community, etc. It is important to understand that poor attendance may be a temporary phenomenon that can be changed by taking appropriate measures. Therefore, respondents were asked the question: *Why do you sometimes not come to the day centre?* The results are presented in Figure 1.

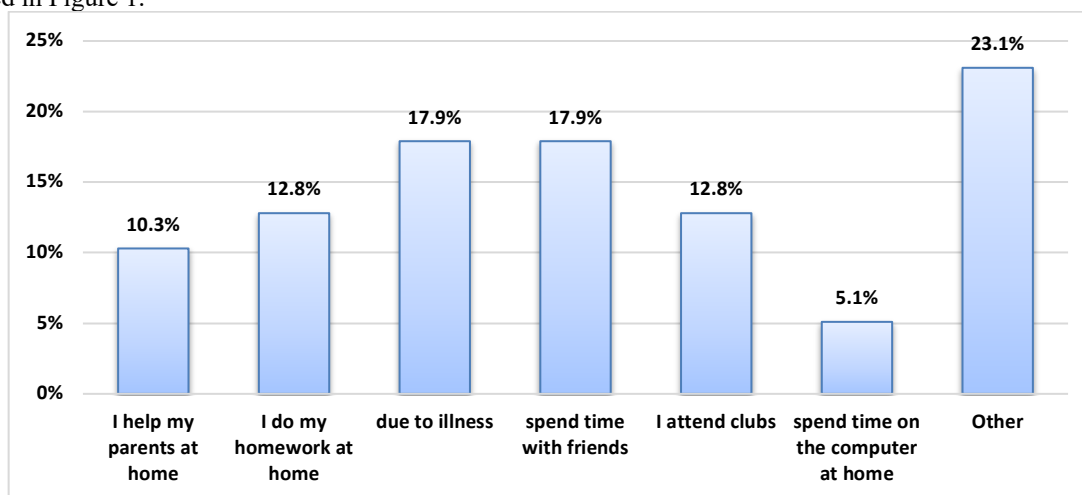


Fig. 1. Reasons why respondents sometimes do not attend the day centre

The data shows that respondents do not attend the day centre for various reasons. 10.3% of respondents indicate that they do not attend the day centre because they are helping their parents at home. This may be related to family needs or responsibilities they have at home. 12.8% of respondents are doing their homework at home at that time. This shows that these respondents devote their time to learning and preparing for lessons. 7.9% of respondents indicate that they do not come to the day centre due to illness. This is an understandable reason, as illness can prevent people from visiting public places and participating in activities. In addition, 17.9% of respondents indicate that they spend time with friends, which is why they do not come to the day centre. This may indicate that these respondents prefer to socialise with friends and spend time with them. 12.8% of respondents attend other activities and therefore do not come to the day centre. This may mean that these respondents already attend other activities or clubs that take place at the same time. 5.1% of respondents choose to use computers at home. 23.1% of respondents indicate "Other" as the reason, so this category should be examined more closely to understand what motivates respondents not to attend the day centre.

Based on the responses provided in the "Other" category, various reasons can be identified as to why respondents sometimes do not attend the day centre: due to travel or other events that take them away, some respondents want to rest after school and may therefore refuse to participate. Some respondents choose to spend time on their mobile phones rather than participating in the activities of the day centre. One of the main reasons why respondents do not come to the day centre is that they may not have enough time due to the length of their classes; for example, several respondents mentioned that they have many classes at school. Some respondents may have medical or other procedures that prevent them from attending the day centre.

The activities at the day centre are varied and reflect the different needs, hobbies and interests of the respondents. It is important that the day centre offers a variety of options so that visitors can choose what they like best and what suits their needs. There are seven main activities that respondents engage in at the centre: drawing, cutting, modelling (11.9%), preparing for lessons (11.9%), attending theatre and exhibitions (11.2%), board and computer games (9.7%), singing, dancing (9%), and trips (8.2%).

The staff of the children's day centre are a very important factor in ensuring the centre's effectiveness, safety and the quality of the services provided. The staff are responsible for the care and safety of the children on the premises of the day centre. They must ensure that children are safe, well cared for and have the opportunity to participate in safe and stimulating activities. Staff develop and organise activities, classes and events, taking into account the needs, age, skills and interests of the children. They also ensure that activities are appropriate for the children's age and development. Staff provide educational and emotional support to children, help them solve problems, encourage their development and social skills, and promote positive behaviour. Qualified and experienced staff are able to work effectively, identify and solve problems, develop innovative activities and ensure that the centre runs smoothly and efficiently.

When respondents were asked the question, *"How do you rate the work of the staff at the children's day centre?"*, it became clear that the majority of respondents (91.6%) rated the work of the staff at the children's day centre positively: 45.8% of respondents said that they rated the work of the staff very highly, while another 45.8% of respondents stated

that they rate the work of the employees as good. However, 4.2% of respondents rate the work of the employees as average or satisfactory. Not a single respondent stated that they rate the work of the employees as poor (Fig. 2).

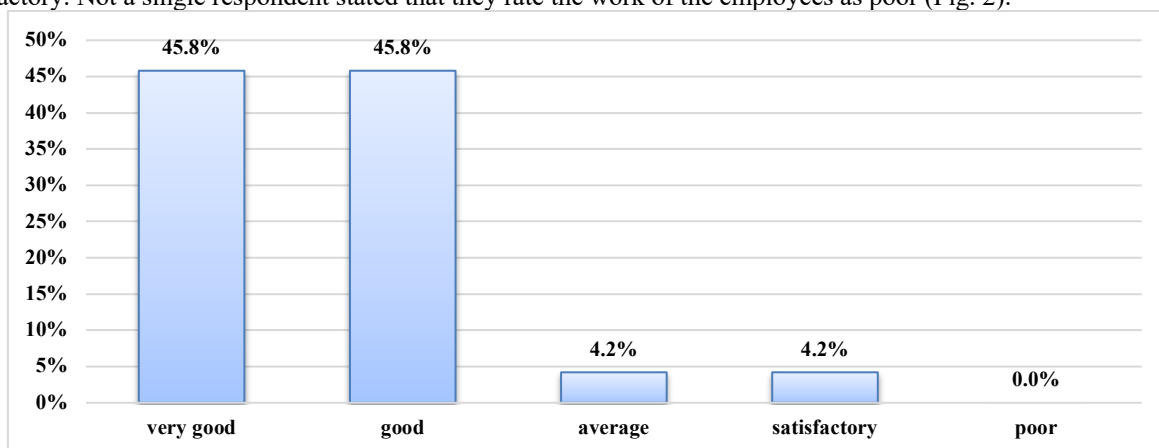


Fig. 2. Respondents' satisfaction with the work of the centre's employees

These results show that most respondents rate the work of the day centre staff positively and are satisfied with their activities. Such positive feedback shows that the staff are able to perform their duties and meet the needs and expectations of visitors. However, although no negative feedback has been noted, it is still important to observe, listen to and evaluate the opinions of visitors in order to continuously improve and enhance the services provided.

56.3% of respondents would recommend their friends to visit the centre. 18.8% of respondents say they do not know whether they would recommend their friends to visit the centre. Not a single respondent said they would not recommend their friends to visit the centre. These data show that most respondents would be willing to recommend the day centre to their friends, while some respondents are not sure whether they would do so. This may depend on their experience, opinion of the centre, their friends' needs and other factors.

Attending a children's day centre can have various positive effects and bring about certain changes for children and their families. By attending a children's day centre, children have the opportunity to interact with other children and adults, develop their social skills, learn to communicate, share and cooperate (social skills development). Activities organised at the day centre can stimulate children's creativity, encourage their learning and creativity, thus promoting their personal development (promotion of personal development). At the day centre, children can have access to a variety of learning opportunities, including games, activities, creative activities and learning programmes that can stimulate their intellectual development (learning opportunities). By attending the day centre, children can learn to plan their time, follow schedules and develop skills that may be useful in their future lives (improvement of time management skills). The children's day centre can provide a safe environment for children where they can feel safe and calm (safety and supervision). A day centre can provide parents with the support and assistance they need, allowing them to work or perform other tasks, knowing that their child is safe and well cared for. (support and assistance for parents).

All of these changes can have a long-term impact on children's development and well-being. However, it is important to remember that every child is different, so the impact may vary depending on the individual needs of the child and the environment in which they grow up. Respondents were asked about various changes that occurred after they started attending the day care centre. The question asked was: *What has changed in your family since you started attending the day care centre?* The results are presented in Figure 3.

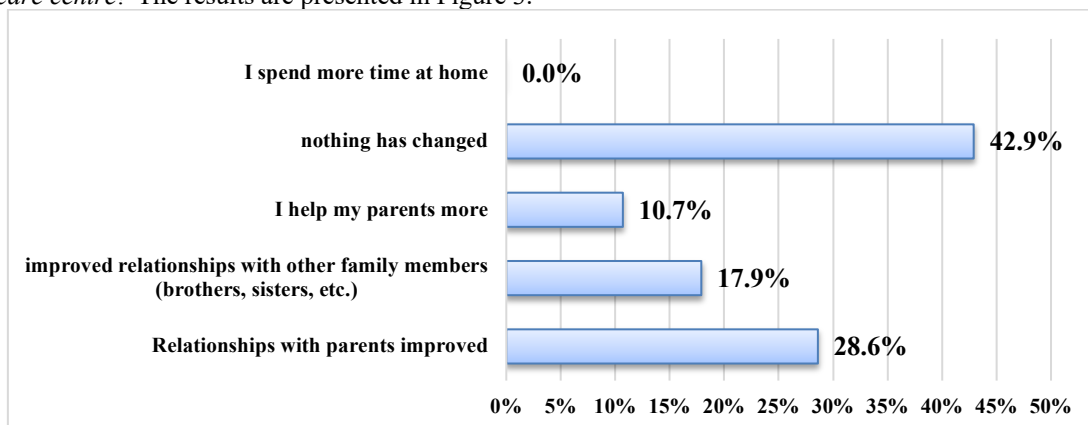


Fig. 3 Changes in respondents' families

The data shows that about a third of respondents indicate that their relationship with their parents has improved, while less than a fifth notice an improvement in their relationship with other family members. This may indicate that

attending a day care centre can have a positive effect on family relationships and communication. However, the majority of respondents indicate that their relationships have not changed, which may indicate stability or that the changes may be less noticeable or do not affect their relationships with their families. Some respondents note that they help their parents more or spend more time at home, but such responses are less common and may reflect individual experiences or situations. Positive changes in family relationships can be seen as an important aspect of the activities of the day care centre. This may indicate that the centre helps to promote communication, cooperation and shared leisure activities within the family. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how attending the day centre affects family relationships and communication, further research or observations could be carried out to obtain broad and detailed information on this topic.

Respondents were asked, *"What has changed at school since you started attending the day centre?"* Respondents have noticed various changes at school since they started attending the day centre. These include fewer absences from class, improved relationships with teachers, improved learning and improved relationships with other students in the class. 14.3% of respondents indicate that they have started missing fewer classes since they started attending the day centre. 11.4% of respondents say that their relationships with teachers have improved. 14.3% of respondents note that they have started to learn better. 17.1% of respondents indicate that their relationships with other students in the class have improved. 14.3% of respondents say that they pay more attention to preparing for lessons. Despite the fact that some respondents notice positive changes, almost a third of respondents, 28.6%, say that nothing has changed. This may indicate that for some students, attending the day centre may not have a direct or noticeable impact on their learning process or social relationships at school. The fact that some respondents notice positive changes indicates that attending the day centre may have a positive impact on their learning and social adaptation at school.

Respondents were asked: *What has changed in your personality since you started attending the day centre?* The results are presented in Figure 4.

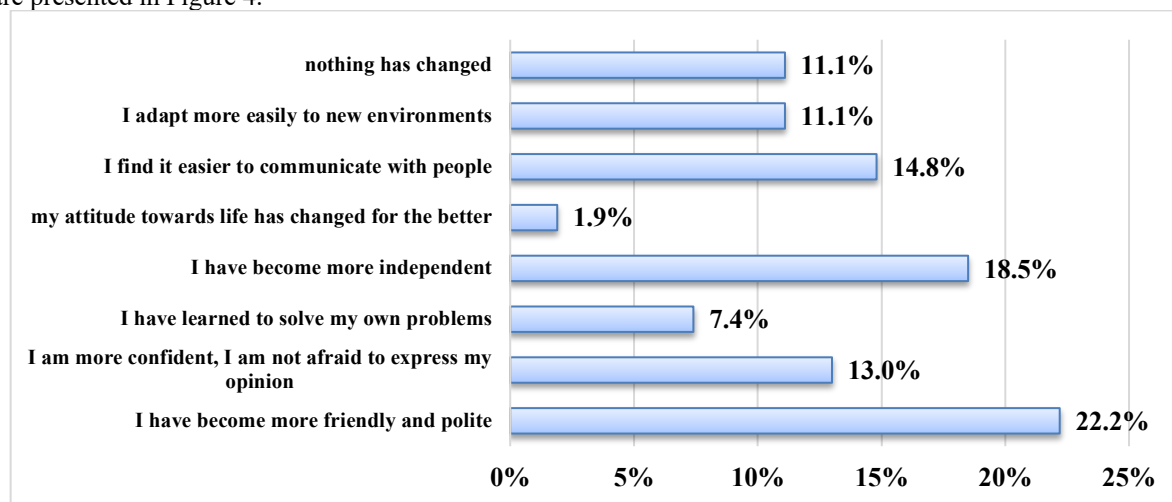


Fig. 4 Changes in the respondents' personalities

Most respondents report positive changes in their personality since they started attending the day centre. These include greater friendliness, politeness, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, independence, a positive outlook on life and easier communication with people. 22.2% of respondents report that they have become friendlier and more polite since they started attending the day centre. 13% of respondents say they are more confident and are not afraid to express their opinions. 14.8% of respondents say that they find it easier to communicate with people since they started attending the day centre. Respondents note improvements in various qualities and abilities, ranging from social communication to emotional control and independence. Positive changes in personality can have a positive impact on respondents' quality of life and communication with their environment. Some respondents (11.1 per cent) indicate that nothing has changed. This may mean that for some people, the activities of the day centre may not have a significant impact on their personality, or the changes may be less noticeable.

Despite its many advantages, attending a day centre may also have certain disadvantages or challenges. Day centres may have limited opening hours, which can be problematic for parents with busy schedules or transport difficulties. Large group sizes or limited staff may make it difficult to provide individual attention and supervision to each child or young person. Some day centres may have an environment or atmosphere that is not conducive to the child's well-being or does not encourage participation in activities. Some children may experience socialisation challenges, such as conflicts with peers or difficulties integrating into the group. Misunderstandings or problems with day centre staff may sometimes arise, which can affect the child's experience or their interactions with others. The activities or services offered by day centres may be limited or unsuitable for the child's needs or interests. Respondents were asked to identify the shortcomings of the day centre. Most respondents believe that the day centre they attend has no major shortcomings. This shows that they are satisfied with the services and activities provided. Some respondents note certain shortcomings, such as small premises (6.5%), inflexible working hours (12.9%) or a lack of computers (3.2%), events (6.5%) and trips (22.6%). The answers in the "Other" category mostly repeat the statements in the questionnaire and are not relevant to

the study. It is necessary to pay attention to the shortcomings indicated by the respondents and to look for ways to improve the activities and services of the day centre so that they meet the needs and expectations of the community. It is important to understand that each community and each person may have different needs and expectations. Therefore, efforts should be made to individualise services as much as possible so that they better meet the needs of specific day centre participants. It is necessary to continue efforts to ensure high quality services in day centres, to continuously evaluate their activities and to adapt to the changing needs of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

- The children's day centre ensures high quality social services, which is reflected in the children's satisfaction with the environment, activities and staff. The survey data reveals that most children have a positive opinion of the atmosphere, cosiness and safety of the day centre, and as many as 91.6% of respondents rate the work of the staff as good or very good. This shows that the centre implements the principles of social service quality – accessibility, professionalism, continuity and an individual approach to each child. These results are consistent with the theoretical view that the quality of social services should be assessed through the subjective satisfaction of service recipients and their emotional well-being.
- Attending the day centre has a significant positive impact on the development of children's social skills, emotional well-being and personal development. Children report that they have become friendlier, more polite, more confident and find it easier to communicate with their peers and adults. There has also been a decrease in truancy, an increase in attention to learning and better relationships with teachers and classmates. These changes confirm the theoretical assumption that children's day centres function as institutions with a holistic approach, combining social, educational and preventive functions, and contribute to children's social adaptation, emotional literacy and self-esteem.
- The children's day centre contributes to strengthening family relationships and reducing social exclusion. Some children report that their relationships with their parents and other family members have improved, that they help more at home and take a more responsible approach to their duties. This shows that the day centre functions not only as a place for children to spend their time, but also as a link in the chain of social support for families, strengthening their social capital. Based on the theory of early intervention and community services, such institutions help to reduce social inequality and the exclusion of families at social risk by providing children with a safe space to grow and learn and by enabling parents to receive indirect support.
- Despite the high level of satisfaction, there are clearly identified areas for improvement. Children point out some shortcomings: small premises, inflexible working hours, limited number of trips, events and certain equipment (e.g. computers). These aspects show that the centre's material resources and range of activities do not always fully meet the children's expectations. From a theoretical point of view, this reflects the notion that ensuring the quality of social services is a continuous process that requires flexibility, the application of innovative methods and the adaptation of services to the constantly changing needs of children and the community.
- Children's satisfaction with the day centre is a significant indicator of the quality and effectiveness of social services, confirming the relevance of the child-centred model. The study showed that children not only enjoy attending the centre, but would also recommend it to their peers. This suggests that the day centre operates according to the principles of a child-centred approach, where the child is considered an active participant in the service rather than a passive recipient. This practice is in line with current social policy and social service trends in Lithuania and abroad, which emphasise the orientation of services towards children's needs, participation and emotional well-being.

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