Family Influence on Leisure Time of Schoolchildren

Jelena PETROVIĆ¹,
Dragana DIMITRIJEVIĆ²

¹ PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Pedagogy, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Serbia, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4515-9598>,
jelena.petrovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

² MA, doctoral student, teaching assistant, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Serbia,
gc.dragana.dimitrijevic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Abstract: Education for leisure time makes a great challenge for educators in contemporary society because wrong choices and passive attitude in leisure time can have negative impact on the development of a child. Family is an important factor in education for leisure time, but educators have to account for how much family should and can influence children's choices. Educators pay special attention to unstructured leisure time activities because those activities mostly depend on children's choices, and are not dependent place or on regular schedule. The main aim of this paper is to find out whether families influence children choices, and if they do, whether the influence is stronger in structured or unstructured leisure time activities. The research encompassed a sample of 189 elementary school students (4th and 7th grade) from rural and urban surrounding. The third variable was parents' employment, since we assumed that unemployed parents had better control and more influence over their children's free time. The data was gathered through a specially constructed Likert-type questioner. Results showed that students recognised family's influence, especially regarding unstructured leisure time activities and, as expected, families have stronger influence on younger children's choices. There were slight, but statistically not significant differences within researched population regarding social surrounding and parents' employment. These results can help further development of leisure time education within family, and are very encouraging for two reasons. First, it is unstructured activities that are more prone to negative influences, and they need more educational attention, so families in our research proved to make greater influence where it is more needed. And the second comes from the conclusion that families generally fulfil their role in leisure time education regardless of social circumstances.

Keywords: *leisure time; family; education; structured and unstructured leisure time activities; schoolchildren.*

How to cite: Petrović, J., & Dimitrijević, D. (2020). Family Influence on Leisure Time of Schoolchildren. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(4), 172-188.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.4/340>

1. Introduction

Leisure time as a phenomenon has been present for a long time in scientific circles and studied by many social and humanistic sciences because it proved to have a great impact on the personality development as well as on social development. Educational sciences usually study the educational function of free time and analyze the possibilities of free time activities to influence development, broaden educational potentials, develop beneficial and healthy habits and build leisure time culture. Analyzing different definitions and approaches to this phenomenon, Dimitrijević and Petrović (2018) point out that it is important to emphasize that children's leisure time is the time left after finishing all their work, school, family and social obligations and time which they can organize at their own discretion, and in the way it suits them personally. This approach limits the possibilities of educators to make direct impact on children's leisure time and makes the process of education for leisure time more demanding. On the other hand, free choice in leisure time activities ensures that children enjoy them more and can have more positive educational impact on various aspects of personality, and an important role in prevention and compensation of negative behaviors.

Characteristics of free time indicate that children can spend it in different places independently, alone or in the company of friends or parents; in realization of constructive activities, or in aimless or passive behaviors, even in activities that have negative consequences on their development, health or life in general. How children and young people spend their free time affects all aspects of their life. Family characteristics, lifestyle, peer affiliation, personality characteristics, school environment are the factors influencing their choices of leisure activities. Due to all these factors, and the unquestionable dominance of the media in society and the life of every individual from an early age, the educators face the challenge of how to help today's youth organize their free time. Dimitrijević and Petrović (2018) argue that the excessive focus young people have on entertainment and socializing, demands greater educational attention and intervention. We should motivate children and youth to engage in organized activities, raise their awareness of potential positive and negative effects of unorganized leisure, and provide them with opportunities, ideas and support for practicing activities beneficial for them.

Educators recognize the family as one of the major factors in building leisure time culture and as a main ally in helping children choose wisely when it comes to leisure time. As a result, many free time phenomena

have been widely studied in recent years. Organizing and spending children's free time (Brdar & Lončarević, 2004; Eccles et al., 2003; Petrović et al., 2018), family free time as a special form of leisure (Berc & Blažeka Kokorić, 2012; Zabriskie & McCormik, 2001) and, the different influences of family on the involvement of students in certain leisure activities (Arbunić, 2004; Mahoney & Stattin, 2010; Posner & Vandell, 1990). We decided to start with a question whether families have such a projected impact and in what kind of activities is their influence greater. We studied children's perceptions of the influences that the family has on their choice of leisure activities in the realm of both: structured and unstructured leisure activities.

2. Theoretical framework

The characteristics of modern society and the modern family today, accompanied by increasing availability of various activities and media content, indicate the need to develop awareness of parents about the importance of organizing leisure time of children. Previous researches have confirmed that a large share of children's free time is dedicated to media content and has the basic function of entertainment (Brdar & Lončarević, 2004; Ilišin, 2007), while the second place take sports and constructive activities (Petrović et al., 2018; Posner & Vandal, 1999). Although some leisure activities have proved to have positive influence and support academic success (Pešić et al., 2012; Fletcher et al., 2003), some of them encourage the occurrence of risky and delinquent behavior (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Petrović & Zotović, 2010; Hopf et al., 2008). All these findings aimed the researchers' attention towards developing a culture of leisure time use (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Mikanović & Panzalović, 2014) through selecting content and form of organization activities available to children considering their age and possibilities.

Regarding content and organization, leisure activities can be divided into two large groups: structured and unstructured activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Bartco & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). *Structured activities* are usually organized by an adult leader and have an order of participation, the rules of leadership and guidance by an adult leader (Fletcher et al., 2003). Those activities are practiced on regular basis, and although based on a free choice, once they are chosen, they indicate the commitment and obligation to attend them. This indicates social acceptability and educational justification of those types of activities. Those are activities fall into three categories: school clubs, sports teams and extracurricular activities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008) such as reading clubs,

photography clubs, football or basketball teams, foreign language classes, music lessons and so on. They have positive effects on individual development as opposed to unstructured activities that are prevalingly relaxing and spontaneous (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Unstructured leisure time activities are unsupervised, usually practiced spontaneously and without rules. Those activities don't require special time or place and usually don't depend on other members of the group, so they are suitable for practicing when alone or at home. Researchers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Mahoney & Stattin, 2010) defined the most common among them as reading, walking, recreational sports activities as running, occasional visits to the swimming pools, playing sport games with friends, practicing yoga; socializing with friends at home or on public places as cafes, playing social or board games, playing with toys for younger children; involving in various media content such as television, film, internet, social networks; short excursions and camping. Unstructured activities are more prone to negative influences, and they need more educational attention. But on the other hand, they make space for creativity, individual expression and fulfillment of needs for rest, entertainment, close social contact with friends or family.

In a balanced and organized leisure time both types of activity should have their place. Bartko and Eccles (2003) found that unstructured activities showed a great irregularity of representation in schoolchildren, they seemed to vary from completely consuming the child's free time to complete absence of such activities in some children. Family is very important factor in building this balance, and educators should turn their counselling efforts towards helping parents find the right measure between encouraging children enroll clubs, teams or classes and encourage them to find their own way of rest, entertainment and growth.

2.1. Family as a factor of organization children's leisure

Family is an important factor in education, and educators often study different possibilities and degrees of family influences, with the intention of strengthening and supporting families in their roles, and helping them overcome difficulties. As we stated before, family influence is especially important in designing the leisure time activities. First and direct influence on children's leisure is made through organizing family leisure time. Family leisure time is time that all members of family spend together in activities that they have chosen together and that help them develop mutual connection, better communication and cohesion (Zabriskie & McCornick, 2001). Family leisure time consumes a part of children's free time and when

well organised helps children enjoy free time inside family. As expected, families with younger children have greater amount of family leisure time, but family leisure time has educative function as well. It offers a positive model for spending time and encourages the children to choose similar activities for their own leisure time.

The other way of family influence is direct parental involvement in choosing activities (Mikanović & Jevtić, 2015) and it can vary in the degree or method. Degree of involvement often depends on family structure (Posner & Vandell, 1990, p. 890), the dominant parent's education style (Matejević et al., 2014, p. 291); father involvement in leisure activities (Yeung et al., 2001, p. 148), and so on. Most often used methods are permissive methods which include conversation, encouragement, motivation, explanation, and interpretation (Čatić & Pavlović, 2008), and all of them are considered to be very important factors of influence. Finally, families have a monitoring role and a role in reducing the potentially negative influences that some leisure activities can have.

In regard to the type of activity, structured or unstructured, the research by Mahoney and Stattin (2010, p. 119) indicates that parents have higher influence on structured activities, similarly Raboteg-Šarić et al. (2002) found the domination of unorganized leisure activities based on fun when parents showed less control. Both mentioned researches comprehensively examine the influence of parents through parental control, trust that parents allow their children to decide for themselves which activities they will engage in, and the support of parents for the activities that their children engage in. The results of the research showed a statistically significant difference in parental control in relation to the degree of structured activities, where it was found that low control by parents is present in respondents who are involved in unstructured activities.

The family influence is declining as children grow older and it tends to be replaced by peer influence. Still, some researchers (Arnon et al., 2008, p. 389) found that in adolescence family is still one of the most important factors in organization of free time young people. Family influence depends on many other factors such as family structure (Posner & Vandell, 1999, p. 870), life habits, value aspirations but also the stages of the life cycle in which the family is. The children's free time culture is also influenced by the time that parents spend with them, which is directly related to the employment of parents (Renk et al., 2003, p. 310).

Also, it was determined that there is a mismatch between parents' and students' perceptions about the representation of certain types of activities that children carry out in their free time, which indicates

insufficient awareness of parents with the way their children spend their free time (Arbunić, 2004, p. 227). Recent research indicates differences between parents and children in knowledge about drug and children's drug use. The same research comes to date that family structure is an important factor, as well as that family living environment doesn't influence family knowing about their children's activities in drug use (Costin & Roman, 2020).

3. Methodology

The main aim of this paper is to find out whether families influence children's choices, and in which type of activity, structured or unstructured, they have stronger influence. We assumed that parents have greater influence on choosing structured activities since previous research (Mahoney & Stattin, 2010) confirmed such hypothesis. Unstructured activities are more prone to negative influences and the difference in frequency of activities in this group goes from overuse to complete neglect (Bartko & Eccles, 2003, p. 236), so we believe the parents' role in choosing unstructured activities is very significant. For that reason, we investigate parents' influence in both groups of activity. Finally, we investigate the role of factors such as the children's age, parents' employment and social surrounding in family's impact on leisure time.

3.1. Characteristics of the sample

The research encompassed a sample of 189 elementary school students from the area of the town of Leskovac in the Republic of Serbia. The sample was divided into the subgroups regarding the age of students (4th and 7th grade) and the environment where they live (rural and urban surrounding). The participants' parents had been informed on the purpose of the research and gave their informed consent for their children to participate in the study. There were not any ethical issues concerning this study. The questioners were filled out anonymously.

According to the results of previous researches (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001), we assumed that parents will have greater influences on younger children and concerning living environment (Mikanović & Panzalović, 2014), we assumed the parents in rural environment will have greater influence on their children. The third variable was parents' employment, since previous research confirmed the difference in parents' involvement when they are employed (Bianchi, 2000; Renk et al., 2003; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). According to this, we assumed that unemployed parents had better control and more influence over their children's free time.

3.2. Data processing

The data was gathered through specially constructed 5-point Likert-type scale with two subscales, consisting of 17 items. Data processing was performed by SPSS 20. As part of the quantitative analysis, the basic descriptive statistics were calculated, and for the purpose of analyzing the difference in subgroups t-test and ANOVA test was used. In order to ensure the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha test was applied. The alpha coefficient value was over 0,700 ($\alpha = .719$), indicating that the scale used was reliable and that data could be used for scientific purposes.

4. Results

4.1. Parents influence on the choice of structured activities

In order to investigate the family's influence on choosing structured activities, we included two aspects of organized activities, extracurricular activities, and structured activities outside school. First, we singled out the generalized statement in which students have the most positive value, that is, *I accept the advice of my parents about the activities that I should do in my free time* (Mean = 3.95; Sd = 1.188). This statement does not include individual activities, so the obtained data indicate that students see the positive influence of parents in the form of counseling on the choice of activities they should implement in their free time. Another important aspect of this statement is that in addition to students recognizing the influence of parents, they also accept it. Also, the obtained data in items dedicated to sibling influence (Mean = 2.84; Sd = 1.429), indicate that children have more positive attitudes about the influence of their parents than the influence of siblings on the choice of activities they will engage in.

The different influences of the family on the choice of extracurricular activities were studied through statements that represent positive influences through arranging, encouraging and accepting advice. The most positively evaluated by the students is the statement *In the family we talk and agree on extracurricular activities that I want to do in my free time* (Mean = 3.74; Sd = 1.239). The most negatively evaluated statement concerning the choice of extracurricular activities was observed in regard of attending school competitions, *On the advice of parents, I go to competitions in various subjects in the school* (Mean = 2.70; Sd = 1.403).

Regarding the influence of family on the choice of structured activities outside school that children will engage in their free time, the largest percentage of respondents (about 65%) recognized the influence of

parents by encouragement, while about 55% of respondents disagree with the statement that they involve in some activity only to make parents happy. The most important fact is that students did not recognize negative influence of parents showed through preventing them to involve in the activities they want to. These data show that the largest percentage of children realize the activities they want without prohibition and prevention by their parents.

We also single out the attitudes of the respondents within the statement, *My family is not interested in organized activities in which I am involved in my free time* (Mean = 1.94) because it summarizes all previously established attitudes students and indicates that students feel that their family is interested in the activities in which they are involved. This information is especially important because although children may in some cases not see the influence of parents on the choice of specific activities, the fact that they see the parental interest is very important.

To determine whether students' attitudes about parental influence differed concerning their age, a t-test was used. Statistical analysis of data showed that only within the statement *Members of my family encourage me to get involved in the work of sections and cultural activities organized by the school* ($p=0.042$; $p < 0.05$) there is a statistically significant difference in students' attitudes about the influence of parents on the choice of structured activities. The Mean values show that fourth-grade students (Mean=3.77) have more positive attitudes about encouraging families to get involved in cultural activities, compared to seventh-grade students (Mean=3.39). In the other examined claims, no statistically significant difference was found regarding the age of the respondents. Obviously the influence of family in the researched age groups is the same, regardless of their age.

Similarly, there was no statistical difference between families living in rural or urban surrounding, since both showed similar influence. The analysis showed a statistically significant difference in the answers of the respondents only in two instances. In urban environment children recognized stronger influence of the family in choosing extracurricular activities, while in rural environment children confirmed stronger influence of family in encouraging them to participate in school competitions ($p=0.041$; $p < 0.05$). The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of family influence on choosing structured activities in relation to urban and rural surroundings

	Surrounding	N	M	Sd	t-test	df	p
In my family, we talk and agree on extracurricular activities that I want to do in my free time.	Rural	81	3,30	1,279	4,330	157,642	0,000
	Urban	108	4,06	1,105			
On the advice of my parents, I go to competitions in various subjects.	Rural	81	2,94	1,426	2,053	187	0,041
	Urban	108	2,52	1,364			

Regarding the difference in the family influence considering parental employment, statistical analysis showed that none of the examined claims had a statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$). Although we assumed that unemployed parents, mother or father, will contribute more to the choice of constructive activities that children will implement in their free time, the obtained data showed a different result.

4.2. Parents influence on the choice of unstructured activities

The analysis of students' attitudes about the influence of the family on the choice of unstructured activities have shown that: *parents are interested in the way children spend their free time* (Mean=3.97; Sd=1.132), and *in the contents of free time activities of their children* (M=3.69; Sd=1.322). The students most positively evaluated the statements showing that parents are encouraging them *to go out with my friends, ride a bike, go for walks, to the pool* (Mean=4.20; Sd=1.03), and *to read books* (Mean=3.79; Sd=1.367). Slightly weaker influence was noted in *motivating children to attend cultural and public events* (Mean=3.29; Sd=1.408).

Having in mind possible negative consequences of excessive use of media content in children's free time (Raboteg - Šarić, 2002; Petrović & Zotović, 2010), we examined students' attitudes about parental control over using media content. The results showed that parents control children's time spent on the Internet and social networks (Mean=3.29; Sd=1.467). In addition to parental control, we examined the direct influence of the family on playing video games. More than 55% of respondents recognized parents' dissatisfaction with the frequency of playing video games. The obtained data

indicate that parents want to reduce the frequency of media activity using resentment as a method of influence.

A t-test was used to determine the differences in the recognized influences between the parents of two age groups of the respondents, and in this case it showed statistically significant difference. The results indicate that fourth-grade students have more positive attitudes compared to seventh-grade students in: *their parents' interest in the way they spend their free time* ($p=0.000$; $p<0.01$), *interest in the contents of leisure activities* ($p=0.000$; $p<0.01$), and *parents encouraging reading activities* ($p=0.001$; $p<0.01$). The obtained data indicate that the parents of younger children are more interested in the activities in which they are involved, which could be expected considering the characteristics of their age. By analyzing the obtained data, we also noticed that fourth-grade students more positively valued their parents' influence on media use, which indicates that parents of younger children practice greater control on media content usage, and show more resentment towards video games. These results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of family influence on choosing unstructured activities in relation to children school age

	School age	N	M	Sd	t-test	df	p
My parents are interested in the way I spend my free time.	4 th grade	93	4,30	1,019	4,075	187	0,000
	7 th grade	96	3,66	1,150			
Family members resent me when I often play video games.	4 th grade	93	3,91	1,308	3,301	187	0,001
	7 th grade	96	3,30	1,241			
Family controls my time spent searching the internet and social networks.	4 th grade	93	3,70	1,389	3,957	187	0,000
	7 th grade	96	2,89	1,435			
My parents encourage me to read books.	4 th grade	93	4,13	1,236	3,476	185,069	0,001
	7 th grade	96	3,46	1,414			
My family is interested in the contents of the activities I do in my free time.	4 th grade	93	4,09	1,257	4,257	187	0,000
	7 th grade	96	3,30	1,274			

Statistical analyses of data in relation to the environment as a research variable showed that parents have similar influences on their children's free time, regardless of the environment they come from. Statistically, a significant difference was noted only within family influence by motivating children to attend cultural and public events with friends ($p=0.008$; $p<0.01$). The values of statistical parameters indicate that students

from the urban environment evaluate this type of parental influence more positively than students from the rural surrounding. For the analysis of the family influence towards parental employment, the ANOVA test was used and the obtained data showed that there were no statistically significant differences.

5. Discussions and limits

Results obtained in this research indicate that students positively value statements that confirm family influence. They confirm that parents discuss about the choice of activities with them, and encourage them to involve in structured activities. Most of the surveyed students believe that their parents do not prevent them from choosing activities they like, do not impose on them, do not consider them insufficiently mature, and are not uninterested. Our results are similar to those obtained by Raboteg - Šarić et al. (2002) on the choice of extracurricular activities that showed that higher supervision increased involvement in extracurricular activities and the research by Brdar & Lončarević (2004) that found a positive correlation of time spent with siblings and the involvement in organized sports activities. Slightly different results were noted in research (Mikanović & Panzalović, 2014) where parents did not set a positive example for their children in choosing structured cultural activities; and in the research by Arbunić (2004, p. 228) that showed that parents are not familiar with the activities of their children in free time. This difference in results within similar populations indicates that this question needs to be additionally researched and that some families still need support in dealing with structured activities of children's leisure time.

By analyzing the results concerning age and the living environment of students, we came to the data that age of the children is a significant factor for parental intervention, while type of the living environment is not. This is an expected result because parents of younger children feel more obliged to supervise, counsel and even control their children in leisure time. On the other hand, parents from both rural and urban surrounding showed equal interest and support. The only difference that occurred was expected since children in urban areas have a greater offer of extracurricular activities, while children in rural areas compensate those activities with school competitions.

Regarding unstructured activities, results showed that students recognize the parents' interest in the type and content of unstructured activities their children choose in free time. These results are especially

important having in mind the results of research (Raboteg – Šarić et. al, 2002) which showed that when parental supervision is weak children usually spend their time in unproductive activities, based just on fun. Different researches studying various aspects of unstructured activities showed how important parental influence in this area can be, for example for engaging in physical activities (McDavid et al., 2012), for development of reading habits (Krnjajić et al., 2011, p. 272) and for preventing over-representation of the media and computer games in children's free time (Nippold et al., 2005, p. 97; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Our data indicate that we have a potential for organizing children's free time in a more constructive way. The families from our sample show readiness to apply counseling, supervision and support where they are most needed. The positive impact of the family is very important and increases opportunities to reduce possible negative consequences of unorganized leisure time. These findings make the greatest contribution of this research to the leisure time education. While previously mentioned research findings aimed at the parents' motivation and understanding the importance of dealing with children's leisure time, these results show that what educators should really focus on is supporting parents in mastering methods and techniques of leisure time management.

Variables showed the same pattern as in the group of structured activities. Families showed greatest care and involvement in the organization of leisure time of younger children, while social and living surrounding was not an important factor. The unstructured activities depend even less on living surrounding since media and social networks are equally available and the other activities such as reading, playing games and socializing with friends don't need special economic support.

Finally, we assumed that the influence of family on the organization of children's leisure time would vary in relation to parental employment. Still the results of statistical analysis showed that there were no statistically significant differences. We assumed that the involvement of parents in their children leisure time depended on parents' work obligations and engagement, and that unemployed parents would have more time and possibilities to supervise and influence their children's leisure time. Such a hypothesis was confirmed by Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) who found that parental employment significantly influenced the choice of activities and that, for example when both parents were unemployed children watched less television. Although we find these results encouraging and showing that parents are fulfilling their role regardless of workload, we would like to note that those results may be a consequence of the characteristics of the sample

because the largest percentage of our respondents came from families where both parents were employed. This can be considered as a limit of research and also can be an assumption on which some future research of this topic can be based.

This research has a great international relevance since it offers detailed data and possibilities to compare results from previous studies in other countries. It confirms the results of studies in different countries showing that most intense influence is in younger age and helps educators focus on the parents with younger children. In other cases, it changes perspective on parents' involvement in unstructured activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney & Stattin, 2010), and on the connection between parents' involvement and their employment (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Renk et al., 2003). Contrary to international authors we find the parents are genuinely involved in unstructured leisure activities of their children and we can assume that parents understand the importance of quality time invested, so they rely more on educational influence and less on simple monitoring, thus employment of both parents does not necessarily mean less influence.

6. Conclusions

We can conclude that generally, *families in our sample influence children's choices of free time activities*, and that they are not overly controlling, which indicates a good balance in educational influence on free time. The students recognize *stronger influence of the family on the choice of unstructured activities*, but the positive family influence that was recognized within structured activities is not negligible. An important fact is that *younger children leisure time is given more attention by their parents*. They are more often motivated, encouraged, and talked to about the leisure time choices than the older children. The greater interest and involvement of the family, especially parents, in the free time activities of younger children could be justified by the fact that development of children at the younger age is considered the main parental goal. Finally, *parents in rural and urban areas equally involve in children's leisure time choices and employed and unemployed parents are also equally involved in their children's leisure time*.

These results can help further development of leisure time education within family, and are very encouraging for two reasons. First, it is unstructured activities that are more prone to negative influences, and they need more educational attention, so *families in our research proved to make greater influence where it is more needed*. And the second comes from the conclusion that *families generally fulfil their role in leisure time education regardless of social circumstances*.

The parents from rural and urban areas are equally committed to supervising, counselling and encouraging their children, and finally, employed parents do not show less dedication despite the fact that they have less free time. These results are encouraging for all leisure time researchers and educators internationally and open many possibilities for researching and understanding the family role in this important realm of children's lives.

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