

RESEARCH INTO THE EMPATHETIC SKILLS OF PARENTS OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In this research, the empathetic skills of parents of pre-school children has been studied. The study involved 200 participants: 100 mothers and 100 fathers whose children attended kindergarten. The data has been collected by means of a Personal Information Form and the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B, and analysed by applying t-test, One-Way Variance Analysis, and the Tukey Test. The results indicate that the gender of the child, the duration of attendance to kindergarten or father's education level do not have an impact on the empathetic skills of parents ($P>.05$). Mothers' education level, on the other hand, leads to a meaningful difference in the empathetic skills points of parents at the rates of .01 and .05.

Key words: Mother, father, empathy

ÇOCUKLARI ANAOKULUNA DEVAM EDEN ANNE-BABALARIN EMPATİK BECERİLERİ ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

ÖZET

Bu araştırmada, çocukları anaokuluna devam eden anne-babaların empatik becerileri incelenmiştir. Araştırmada çocukları anaokuluna devam eden 100 anne ve 100 baba olmak üzere 200 kişi ile çalışılmıştır. Araştırmada verileri elde etmek için Kişisel Bilgi Formu ve Empatik Beceri Ölçeği-B Formu kullanılmıştır. Verilerin analizinde t-testi, Tek Yönlü Varyans Analizi ve Tukey Testi uygulanmıştır. Yapılan analizler sonucunda, çocuğun cinsiyetinin, anaokuluna devam süresinin ve baba öğrenim düzeyinin anne ve babaların empatik becerileri üzerinde etkili olmadığı saptanmıştır ($P>.05$). Ancak, anne öğrenim düzeyinin anne ve babaların empatik beceri puanları üzerinde .01 ve .05 düzeylerinde anlamlı bir farklılığa neden olduğu belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Anne, baba, empati

INTRODUCTION

The bases of communication are formed in the family. The communication and interaction of parents and other individuals in the family are important on the child's side. Therefore, parents should set up a healthy way of

communication with their children beginning from the birth. In the triangle of the mother, the father and the child, conveying emotions and thoughts and establishing a successful dialogue facilitate family individuals' understanding each other (Cüceloğlu 1993, Yavuzer 2002).

Empathy is one of the important elements of communication and empathetic communication among the individuals in a family is a desirable situation. The concept of empathy has been studied in many different ways in terms of psychology and sociology. Rogers has conducted some studies on the concept. According to his understanding of empathy, in the foundation of the notion lay one's putting himself or herself in the other's position and viewing the situation from that person's point of view; understanding and sensing the other person's emotions and thoughts correctly; and the process of his or her communicating the situation to that person (Dökmen 1990, 2004).

Empathy is one of the conditions of finding acceptance in the family and the society. It is important to realise the needs and emotions of other individuals in the group as well as one's own needs and emotions. The individuals who can empathise can interpret the events in their surroundings better, can understand others' problems and can solve the problems in a relationship more easily. Such peculiarities of individuals will facilitate their acceptance by their social environment. The individuals who can think in an empathetic manner live through fewer troubles in their relations as they are aware of their own feelings and can express their emotions (Yavuzer 2002; Kalkınç 2003; Dökmen 2004).

It is particularly important to establish empathetic communication in the family. Parents can make their children feel that they understand and think highly of them; and they can convey the message that they have confidence in their children. Establishing empathetic relations can help bringing up healthier individuals. Maternal empathy involves instinctive intuition and enables a mother to understand what her child wants to do. A similar situation is also valid for the father. The power of instinctive intuition existing in men enables a father to react in an

empathic manner to other children as well as to his own (Geçtan 1984).

It is essential that family individuals understand each other particularly when they experience negative feelings. Understanding the feelings of the person experiencing hardship by the other individuals in the family and their acting accordingly both relieve the person and also prevent a possible communication conflict. It is important that parents express their own feelings when they state what they want, or they do not want, their children to do. This method increases the probability of observing the desired behaviour in the child. Similarly, when the liked behaviour is expressed, it is strengthened. The behavioural problems of children whose emotions are understood by their parents are lessened (Yavuzer 2002, Kalkınç 2003, Dökmen 2004).

When different pieces of research on empathy are examined, it can be observed that the emphases have been placed on the level of empathetic skills of individuals, parents' communication styles and conflicts, the effects of parents' attitudes on children's empathetic skills, the child raising style of parents who can empathise, and empathy training. (Ahammer ve Murray 1979, Feshbach 1979, Koestner *et al.* 1990, Pecukonis 1990, Kalliopuska ve Titinen 1991, Trommsdorff 1991, Ceyhan 1993, Kalliopuska and Ruokonen 1993, Lipsitt 1993, Akboy ve Baysal 1994, Bernadett-Shapiro *et al.* 1996, Zubaroglu 1996, Köksal 1997, Köksal 2000, Van der Mark *et al.* 2002, Ünal 2003, Yılmaz 2003, Uçmaz-Halicioğlu 2004, Yüksel 2004). In their research aimed at determining the self-respect levels of children at the age of six and the empathetic skills of mothers, Sarıyüce and Körükçü (2004) have found that the factors such as the gender of children, the number of siblings, the birth order, or the duration of attendance to school did not cause any significant difference on the empathetic skills of mothers. It is known that the empathetic skills of parents influence children. Parents' being in an empathetic state

of communication, especially starting from the very early ages, is a key issue. Thus, this study has aimed at investigating the empathetic skills of parents of pre-school children.

METHOD

200 parents (100 mothers and 100 fathers) of six-year-old children attending preschools in Ankara province center and affiliated to the Ministry of National Education have been involved in this research whose objective is to study the empathetic skills of parents of preschool, or kindergarten, children.

A "Personal Information Form" to collect information about the child and the family has been prepared by the researchers, and the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B (ESS-Form B), developed by Dökmen (1988), has been used to determine the empathetic skill levels of parents. The Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B is a measuring instrument that has been developed based on the gradual empathy classification and that stresses on the cognitive component of empathy. The scale includes six separate psychological problems regarding the daily life. There are twelve reactions for each problem. The subjects are asked to select four of these twelve reactions. The choices of the subject are graded out of the points in the grading key. The sum of these points shows the total points received by the subject. The total points received from the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B show an individual's empathetic skill level: the higher the grade is, the higher the level of empathetic skills. One of the twelve reactions submitted under each problem is meaningless and the form of the subject who selects this choice is invalidated. Dökmen has applied the ESS-Form B on sixty freshman students of Ankara University, Faculty of Education and twenty-four psychologists working in different institutions, with the aim of testing its reliability and validity. For reliability, the ESS-Form B has been applied on sixty subjects with an interval of a fortnight and the "r" value has been found to be 0.83; i.e., $r = 0.83$

($P < .001$). In the validity study, it has been anticipated that there is a meaningful difference between the students and the psychologists in favour of the latter ($t = 8.15$, $P < .001$). In another validity study, it has been found that there is a relation between the ESS-Form B and Role Playing Test (RPT) at the level of $r = 0.78$ ($P < .001$) (Dökmen 1988, 1990).

The analyses have been made by applying the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) statistical software on the points received from the Empathetic Skills Scale - Form B and the data obtained from the Personal Information Form of 200 parents, 100 of whom were mothers and 100 fathers. In order to study the effects of two-variable factors on the average points that participating parents received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B, t-test has been used for the unrelated sampling; whereas, one factor ANOVA has been employed for the unrelated sampling to study the effects of more-than-two-variable factors. T-test for unrelated samplings is used to test whether the difference between the averages of two unrelated samplings is meaningful or not. One factor ANOVA for unrelated samplings is used to test whether the averages of two or more samplings are meaningfully different or not. Tukey test has been conducted to determine the source of significant differences (Büyüköztürk 2005).

FINDINGS

The findings of this study, which has been conducted to determine whether the gender of the child, the duration of attendance to school and the education level of parents have an impact on the empathetic skills of parents of preschool children or not, is as follows.

Table 1 shows that the average grade that mothers with daughters received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B is $\bar{X} = 137.28$ points; that of mothers with sons is $\bar{X} = 130.84$ points; that of fathers with sons is $\bar{X} = 132.19$ points; and that of fathers with daughters is $\bar{X} = 127.26$ points. The t-test results have revealed

Empathetic Skills Scale-B Form	Gender of the Child	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Maternal Empathetic skills	Female	49	137.28	24.27	98	1.47	.144
	Male	51	130.84	19.00			
Paternal Empathetic skills	Female	49	127.26	20.48	98	1.23	.219
	Male	51	132.19	19.34			

Table 1. The averages regarding the points received from the Empathetic skills Scale-B Form, standard deviations and t-test results of the participating parents of preschool children according to the gender of their children

that the gender of children does not cause a difference in the average points received from

the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B by mothers [t(98)=1.47, p>.05] and fathers [t(98)=1.23, p>.05]. Some research results support the findings of this study. In the research where Saryüce-Körükçü (2004) examined six-year-old-children's level of self-respect and maternal empathetic skills level, it was determined that the gender of children did not cause a meaningful level of difference on mothers' empathetic skills points. Similarly, Uçmaz-Halicioğlu (2004) found that the gender of children does not lead to a difference on the empathetic skill level of the mother in her study which investigated the relation between the empathetic skill level of mothers and their attitudes towards bringing up children.

Table 2. The averages regarding the points received from the Empathetic skills Scale-B Form, standard deviations and ANOVA results of the participating parents of preschool children according to the duration of their child's attendance to school

THE DURATION OF THE CHILD'S ATTENDANCE TO PRESCHOOL	N	EMPATHETIC SKILLS SCALE-FORM B			
		Maternal Empathy $\bar{X} \pm S$	Paternal Empathy $\bar{X} \pm S$		
One year	32	128.06 ± 15.17	127.59 ± 18.73		
Two years	31	133.80 ± 13.56	128.35 ± 17.24		
Three years	37	139.29 ± 30.07	132.86 ± 23.02		
MATERNAL EMPATHETIC SKILLS ANOVA RESULTS	KT	Sd	KO	F	p
Among groups	2167.557	2	1083.778	2.325	103
Within groups	45206.443	97	466.046		
TOTAL	47374.000	99			
PATERNAL EMPATHETIC SKILLS ANOVA RESULTS	KT	Sd	KO	F	p
Among groups	568.020	2	284.010	.709	495
Within groups	38881.140	97	400.836		
TOTAL	39449.160	99			

Table 2 shows that the average grade that mothers whose children have been attending preschool for three years received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B is \bar{X} =139.29 points, that of those whose children have been attending preschool for two years is \bar{X} =133.80 points, and finally the grade of the mothers whose children have been attending kindergarten for one year is \bar{X} = 128.06 points. Furthermore, the average grade that

fathers whose children have been attending preschool for three years received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B is \bar{X} =132.86 points, that of those whose children have been attending kindergarten for two years is \bar{X} =133.80 points, and finally the grades of the fathers whose children have been attending preschool for one year is \bar{X} =127.59 points. Thus, it can be stated that the duration of children's attending the preschool did not

cause a difference on the average points that mothers [F(2-97)=2.33, p>.05] and fathers [F(2-97)=.71, p>.05] received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B.

In early education institutions, different activities are carried out in order for the families to get actively involved in the education. Some of these activities include arranging educational meetings such as seminars and conferences for parents. It is possible that the education institutions to which the parents forming the sampling of this study send their children do not organize such activities or they do not include topics such as communication skills or empathic skills in their curriculum. For this reason, it is an expected result that the duration of children's attendance to kindergarten does not cause a difference on the parental empathetic skills level. In the research where Saryüce-Körükçü (2004) examined six-year-old-children's level of self-respect and maternal empathetic skills level, it was determined that the duration of children's attending preschool did not cause a meaningful level of difference on maternal empathetic skill points.

Table 3. The averages regarding the points received from the empathetic skills Scale-B Form, standard deviations and t-test results of the participating parents of preschool children according to the education level of mothers

Empathetic Skills Scale - Form B	Education Level of the Mother	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	T	p
Maternal Empathetic skills	High School graduate	32	126.84	14.41	98	2.72	.008*
	University graduate	68	137.36	23.97			
Paternal Empathetic skills	High School graduate	32	122.87	18.14	98	2.52	.014**
	University graduate	68	133.02	20.07			

p<.01 **p<.05

When Table 3 is examined, it can be observed that the points that both university graduate

mothers and their spouses received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B (mother: \bar{X} =137.36, father: \bar{X} =133.02) are higher than the points received by high school graduate mothers and their spouses (mother: \bar{X} =126.84, father: \bar{X} =126.84). The t-test results indicate that the education level of mothers bring about a difference on the average empathetic skill points of mothers [t(98)=2.72, p<.01] and fathers [t(98)=2.52, p<.05].

The empathetic skill levels of both university graduate mothers and their spouses are higher than the empathetic skills levels of high school graduate parents. While there are researchers who advocate that empathy is an inborn ability, there are also plenty of others who sustain that empathetic communication skills can be developed through education (Payne *et al.* 1972, Guzzetta 1976, Fine and Therrien 1977, Cottle 1987, Bilbery 1990, Pecukonis 1990, Kalliopuska and Titinen 1991, Tanrıdağ 1992, Kalliopuska and Ruokonen 1993, Yılmaz 2003). The existing empathic ability of a person can be improved by means of various empathy training programmes. Living in a large city like Ankara, the parents in the sampling have an increased possibility of joining seminars and meetings through which they can improve themselves. Additionally, the university education they received may have affected the empathetic skill levels of university graduate mothers. The high level of empathetic skills of the spouses of university graduate mothers can be because their spouses are also open to improvement and also due to the more intense interaction between the spouses in terms of empathetic communication.

There are studies that have parallels with our research findings. Tanrıdağ (1992) has examined the empathetic aptitudes and empathetic skill levels of staff working in mental health services with respect to different variables. It has been determined that the education level of the subjects causes an important difference on empathetic skills and aptitude, and that this difference is in favour of

the master's education. As a result of the study she conducted to examine the empathetic levels of parents of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and their familial functions, Özcan (2002) proved that the education level of the mother causes an important difference on the maternal empathetic level. Ünal (2003) studied the empathetic skills levels of mothers who have children at the preschool period, and stated that the empathetic skills points of mothers who are high school or university graduates are higher than the points of primary or middle school graduate mothers. Uçmaz-Halicioğlu (2004) established that the education level of the mother leads to a meaningful difference in the empathetic skills levels of mothers, depending on her research into the relationship between mothers' empathetic skills level and their child raising attitudes. Kağıtçıbaşı (1981), too, asserted that more educated mothers tend to work on improving themselves to establish better communication with their children. Accordingly, it can be stated that the empathetic skill level of mothers who are university graduates is higher. Furthermore, as a result of the interaction between the mothers who are university graduates and have a high level of empathetic skills and their spouses, the latter's empathetic skills may be positively influenced.

Table 4. The averages regarding the points received from the empathetic skills Scale-B Form, standard deviations and t-test results of the participating parents of preschool children according to the education level of fathers.

Empathetic Skills Scale - Form B	Education Level of the Fother	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	T	p
Maternal Empathetic skills	High School graduate	34	132.29	18.86	98	.55	.552
	University graduate	66	134.87	23.36			
Paternal Empathetic skills	High School graduate	34	125.47	15.00	98	1.75	.083
	University graduate	66	132.00	21.86			

As can be seen in Table 4, when the education level of the father is considered, the average Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B grade of university-graduate fathers is \bar{X} =132.00 points; that of high-school-graduate fathers is \bar{X} =125.47 points; that of the spouses of the university-graduate fathers is \bar{X} =134.87 points; and that of the spouses of high-school-graduate fathers is \bar{X} =132.29 points. The t-test results indicated that fathers' education level did not result in a difference in the average points that mothers [t(98)=.55, p>.05] and fathers [t(98)=1.75, p>.05] received from the Empathetic Skills Scale-Form B.

Some research results support the findings of this study. As a result of their study, Yıldırım (2001) and Özcan (2002) established that the education level of the father did not cause a meaningful difference in the empathetic skill level of fathers.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATION

As a result of this study which has been carried out to determine the empathetic skills of parents of preschool children, it has been found that the gender of the child, the duration of the child's attendance to preschool or the education level of the father did not have impacts on the empathetic skills of parents; whereas, the education level of the mother did cause a statistically meaningful difference on parents' empathetic skills points.

Considering the results obtained, some recommendations can be made: Empathy training programmes, prepared with the aim of increasing the empathetic skills of mothers and fathers and based on more practice, can be put to application. Further study can be conducted to do research into the relationship between the empathetic skills of preschool children and the empathetic skills of parents. Studies, in which children and parents can be trained on empathy and then their empathy level is measured, can be planned. The empathetic skills level of parents who have children at different development levels can be studied.

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