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## Children's Mental Resilience – What Do Parents and Teachers Know About It?

### KEYWORDS

mental resilience,  
childhood,  
knowledge about  
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### ABSTRACT

Children's development and achievements are of great interest to their adult significant others, notably parents and teachers. The aim of the presented research was to investigate what parents and teachers of preschool children know (and fail to know) about the children's psychological resiliency – defined via the protective factors of initiative, self-control and attachment, as well as risk factors in the form of behavioral concerns.

The research was conducted among the parents and teachers of 335 preschool children aged 2-6 years. The study used the observational Devereux Early Assessment Scale, suitable for children aged 2 years 0 months – 5 years 11 months. The scale consists of 37 items and is filled in by the children's parents and preschool teachers.

Significant differences were obtained in how parents and teachers

assess children's protective factors and behavioral concerns. Mothers provided the highest scores of children's initiative, as compared to fathers and teachers. Fathers had higher expectations of a child's self-control than mothers and teachers. Attachment was scored higher by parents than teachers, who, on the other hand, reported more behavioral concerns in children than their parents. Moreover, teachers had a tendency to stereotypically perceive boys as demonstrating more behavioral concerns than girls – which was not observed in parents.

The results indicate that the knowledge and perception of children's resiliency demonstrated by their teachers, mothers and fathers significantly varies, suggesting that these observers apply different judgment standards, and/or that children demonstrate different levels of protective factors and behavioral concerns at home vs. at preschool, due to the social-psychological factors.

All children need resilience, not just children who are at-risk. Sometimes a tragedy, a natural disaster, a death in the family, a divorce, an illness, etc. comes up unexpectedly, which is when a child really needs to have strong protective factors and coping skills already in place.

(LeBuffe, Naglieri 1999, p. 14).

## Introduction

### Mental Resilience

Children's developmental outcome is a vital interest for adults: parents, kindergarten and school teachers. Apart from cognitive development, increasingly more attention is being paid to social and emotional competences. Among a child's personal resources there is a special position for mental resilience, which is needed to cope with failure, frustration or everyday stress situations involving their peers. Mental resilience can be defined as the ability to achieve a positive developmental outcome despite adverse life circumstances, the ability to adapt to extremely unfavorable situations or to recover after dramatic, disastrous experiences (Garmezy 1971; Luthar 1991; Masten 2001; Olsson et al. 2003; Rutter 1979; Werner, Smith 1992; 2001). A broader meaning of resilience includes the child undertaking developmental tasks, coping with everyday stress and adapting to life challenges (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Dörner, Rönnau 2007/2012; Wustmann 2004).

The results of over 50 years of worldwide research on mental resilience led to the identification of factors which play a protective role for a child's mental health. These

factors include: sociability as a temperamental trait, good cognitive functioning, high motivation in life and educational plans and goals, positive self-esteem, optimism in life, good self-control and social competences (Constantine, Bernard, Diaz 1999; Fergus, Zimmerman 2005; Garmezy 1983; Masten 2001; Werner, Smith 2001). The promotion programs for strengthening resilience includes games and activities aimed at improving the perception of self and others (strengths and weaknesses), self-efficacy (initiative, decision making), coping with stress and relaxing, problem solving (creativity and ingenuity), and social skills (contact making, asking for help) (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Dörner, Rönnau 2007/2012; Sikorska, Sajdera, Paluch-Chrabąszcz 2017).

### Parents' knowledge about their children's development

When analyzing parents' knowledge about their child's development from a normative standpoint vs. an individual developmental outcome, three aspects need to be taken into consideration. First – which developmental domain(s) are better understood and considered more important by adults, second – to what extent is this knowledge objective (rather than warped due to the parents' tendency to overestimate their children's achievements), and third – whether parents or teachers are better suited to assess children's traits and abilities.

Intensive research on parents' beliefs and knowledge about children's development, conducted during the 1990s, was focused mostly on cognitive achievements. Intercultural comparisons pointed out that English-American parents valued cognitive abilities of their children higher than other skills, regardless of whether these skills were reflected in school grades. In contrast, Asian and Latin-American parents considered children's motivation and social skills to be just as important as cognitive abilities (Okagaki, Sternberg 1993). Identification of differences in parents' beliefs and expectations is crucial, as these expectations lead to a multitude of various approaches to raise children, including the values and life goals taught to them (Oliva, Palacios 1992). The research indicates that mothers have a better knowledge about younger children's behavior (i. e. before 4 years of age) than about the behavior of older children (Oliva, Palacios 1992).

A lot of research compared the knowledge about children's development between parents and teachers. For example, a study on the communication competence demonstrated that mothers rated their children's communication abilities significantly higher than teachers (Kielar-Turska 1995). The explanation of this outcome was that teachers compared a given child's communication skills with average skills in the appropriate age group, and then based their rating on deviations from the average. In contrast, mothers based their ratings on expectations regarding their child, leading to an overestimation of abilities.

Some consistent effects were observed in adults' evaluations of children's development: 1) mothers estimate developmental achievements of an average/random child more reliably than of their own child, 2) teachers estimate average cognitive skills of 'children in general' more reliably than of a particular child (Miller 1991; Davis 1992; see: Kielar-Turska 1993), 3) teachers' ratings in case of 'children in general' as well as in the case of particular children are more precise than mothers' ratings.

### Teachers' knowledge about child development

The current knowledge of developmental psychology, together with the ability to apply it in practice, is considered a very important aspect of teachers' work. Kawecki (2013) draws attention to the fact that today's teachers are increasingly confronted with students with various developmental or social difficulties and deficits. Combining pedagogical and psychological competences facilitates the prevention of problem behaviors, enabling a full use of the student's potential. Early detection of difficulties, which may, for example, result from a child's insufficient school maturity, helps to prevent the occurrence of serious disorders in the future (Knap-Stefaniuk 2017). Conversely, early identification of gifted children will help to manage their education process properly (Szada-Borzyszkowska 2008). On the other hand, insufficient knowledge about child development makes it difficult to formulate conclusions and opinions about a given child's situation, to analyze and solve educational problems, or to use the available literature (Knap-Stefaniuk 2017).

The study by Stawinoga (2015) shows that Polish teachers derive their knowledge about a child's development primarily from the observation of their behavior. When assessing the developmental properties of a six-year-old child, teachers focus on his or her general physical fitness, the level of self-maintenance activities, the increasing ability to use voluntary attention, speech development, and the ability to cooperate. They tend to ignore other aspects, such as children's ability to perceive causal relations, the capability to assertively express refusal, signal needs, show responses adequate to situations; spontaneity, the ability to handle social situations, increasing emotional stability, or cognitive curiosity and independence. These are the factors inextricably linked to mental resilience, including all its dimensions taken into account in our study: initiative, self-control, attachment, and problem behaviors. Meanwhile, not only cognitive but also emotional and social development is important for effective teaching (Daniels, Shumow 2003), which is a fact increasingly noticed by both educators and parents (Rahmawati, Tairas, Nawangsari 2018).

The research reports on the differences in parents' and teachers' perceptions of children are inconsistent. Some results show that parents and educators assess the child's resources in a similar way, while others show that parents see their children

more optimistically. While teachers often see the causes of a pupil's difficulties as permanent, individual characteristics, parents tend to explain their successes by attributing failure to transient factors (Kärkkäinen 2011). Although educators may see a child more adequately and accurately than parents in assessing his or her skills, such a perception of pupils carries the risk of excessively pessimistic, deterministic and stereotypical thinking about them (Buchanan et al., 1990; Katz, 1997). It should also be remembered that the teacher's opinion has a very strong influence on the child's self-esteem and beliefs about their skills (Spinath, Spinath 2005), and a good relationship between the teacher and the child positively influences the student's expectations about learning, adaptation to school, and their independence (Birch, Ladd 1997; Daniels, Kalkman, McCombs 2001; Pianta, Sternberg 1992). Therefore, it is all the more important for teachers to express their opinion about the child's abilities and traits in a positive way, to be able to identify, name and develop their strengths, and to introduce prevention of potential problem behavior as early as possible.

Our main research question in the presented study was: what is the knowledge of parents and teachers of preschool children about their mental resilience? *Resilience* was defined as a set of protective factors – initiative, self-control, attachment, in the absence of risk factors in the form of disturbing behaviors. The more specific research questions were as follows:

1. Does the mother, father and teacher's knowledge of the child's mental resilience resources, both overall and in the form of individual components, differ significantly?
2. Are girls assessed differently than boys by adults?

## Method

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Jagiellonian University Institute of Applied Psychology. The study was conducted upon informed consent of parents and teachers. Care was taken to ensure confidentiality and personal data protection. Parents and teachers filled out the observation scales individually and returned them in sealed envelopes.

Measures using the DECA observational scale were obtained from 335 kindergarten children (aged 2-6 years,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), including 146 girls and 189 boys. The DECA scale was filled out by mothers, fathers and teachers of each child. Mothers ( $N = 309$ ), aged 23-47 ( $M = 34.7$ ,  $SD = 4.4$ ), had various levels of education (one with elementary education [1], 19 with vocational education [2], 75 with secondary education [3] and 215 with higher education[4]). Fathers ( $N = 304$ ), aged 24-54 ( $M = 36.5$ ,  $SD = 4.7$ ), included three with elementary education, 43 vocational,

93 secondary and 165 higher education. The observational scales for 318 children were also filled out by their kindergarten teachers, aged 30-54, with 5-28 years of work experience. Children and teachers were sampled from nine educational institutions in Krakow and neighboring towns. It should be noted that observational scales were not obtained from all children's mothers, fathers and teachers (there was about 10% of missing data). The analyses were conducted in the cases in which at least two of the three adults correctly filled out the DECA scale for an individual child.

The study was conducted using the DECA scale (The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment), which is appropriate for children aged 2;0 to 5;11 years. The scale consists of 37 items to be scored by parents or teachers. The scores reflect the frequency of a child's selected behavior during the last four weeks, on a five-point scale: 'never-rarely-sometimes-often-very often'. The scale measures resilience in four areas: Initiative, Self-Control, Attachment and Behavioral concerns. Internal reliability for the Total Protective Factors index (a general measure of resilience based on the first three subscales) is  $\alpha = 0.91$  for parents and  $\alpha = 0.94$  for teachers. For the remaining subscale, Cronbach's alpha is  $\alpha = 0.80$  for parents and  $\alpha = 0.84$  for teachers.

DECA is considered a useful screening tool, aimed at measuring children's protective factors at home and at school; moreover, it can be used to support parents and teachers in improving children's resilience, and finally it can be used in early diagnosis of children demonstrating behavioral concerns before they develop into disorders. DECA was used in the research on at-risk groups, particularly in the American Head Start project (Ogg, Brinkman, Dedrick, Carlson 2010), research on mental health (LeBuffe, Shapiro 2004), school readiness (Ansari, Winsler 2014) as well as early self-regulation and its relevant behavioral issues (Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, Searle, Sawyer, Lynch 2015).

## Results

The analyses were conducted using a within-subject general linear model (GLM)<sup>1</sup> and multiple comparisons were conducted with the Bonferroni correction. The analysis consisted of comparing the scores made by fathers, mothers and teachers on the Initiative, Self-Control, Attachment and Behavioral Concerns scales.

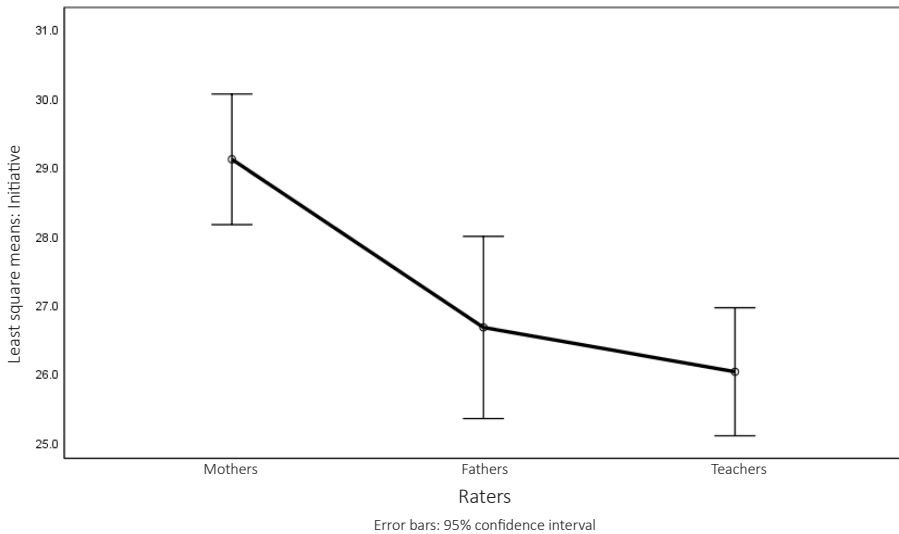
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<sup>1</sup> Due to a lack of sphericity (Mauchly's W tests at  $p < 0.05$ ), the analyses were conducted using the Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon correction.

## INITIATIVE

Significant differences between fathers', mothers' and teachers' ratings of Initiative were found ( $F(1.834; 522.789) = 13.341; p < 0.001$ ). Multiple comparisons indicated that Initiative was scored higher by Mothers ( $M = 29.1; SE = 0.48$ ) than by Fathers ( $M = 26.7; SE = 0.67; p < 0.001$ ) and Teachers ( $M = 26; SE = 0.47; p < 0.001$ ). Fathers and Teachers did not differ in their ratings ( $p = 1.0$  with Bonferroni correction). The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Initiative grades by mothers, fathers and teachers. Error bars indicate 95% CIs



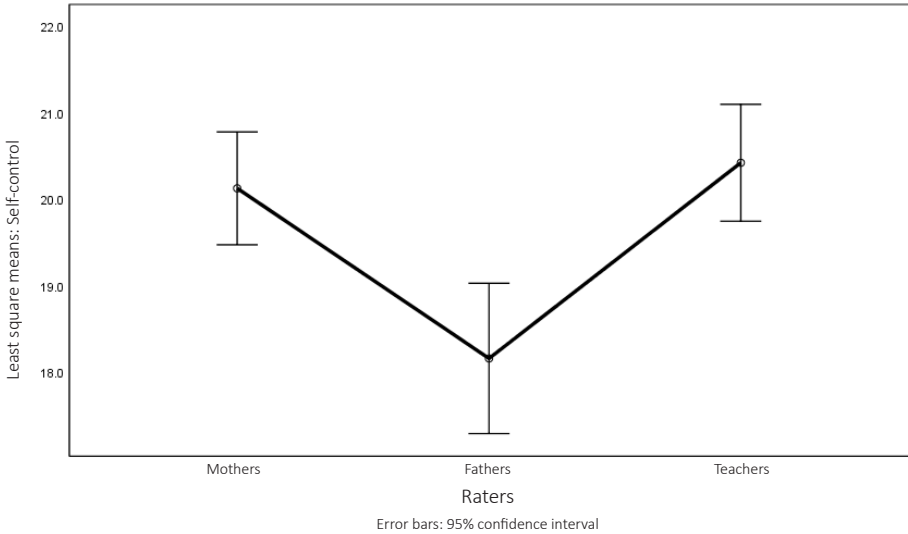
The obtained differences may stem from different situational contexts in which observations were made. Mothers usually observe their children at home, in everyday situations and during play, when children may have the most opportunity to show initiative. Teachers see their pupils in a different context, during class and organized activities which require adhering to a set of rules and following the teacher's requests, which may decrease initiative attempts. The result obtained by fathers may be explained by the fact that fathers usually have less contact with children in general, or perhaps by children acting with less liberty due to the father's perceived authority. It is also possible that fathers do not encourage showing initiative as often as mothers do.

## SELF-CONTROL

Significant differences between fathers', mothers' and teachers' ratings of self-control were found ( $F(1.829; 517.657) = 16.004; p < 0.001$ ). Multiple comparisons

demonstrated that Self-control was rated by Fathers ( $M = 18.2$ ;  $SE = 0.44$ ) significantly lower than by Mothers ( $M = 20.1$ ;  $SE = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and Teachers ( $M = 20.4$ ;  $SE = 0.34$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). There were no differences in grades between Mothers and Teachers ( $p = 1.0$  with Bonferroni correction). The results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Self-control grades by mothers, fathers and teachers. Error bars indicate 95% CIs



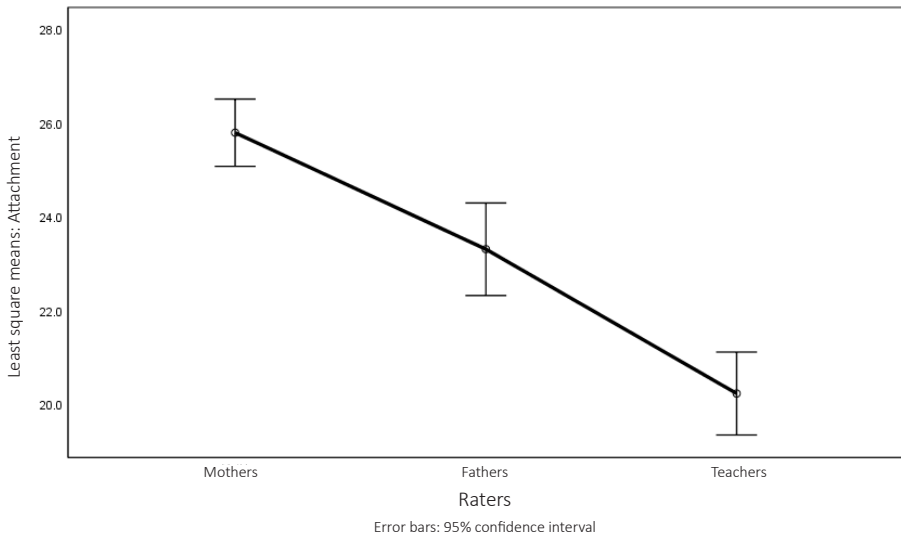
The obtained result indicates that fathers have higher requirements regarding children’s self-control than mothers and teachers. This may be explained by teachers having experience with many children, making them able to accept some lack of self-control as typical of a given developmental stage.

### ATTACHMENT

The data indicated the presence of significant differences between fathers’, mothers’ and teachers’ grades of Attachment ( $F(1.815; 555.540) = 52.434$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Multiple comparisons showed that Attachment was graded the highest by Mothers ( $M = 25.8$ ;  $SE = 0.37$ ), slightly lower by Fathers ( $M = 23.3$ ;  $SE = 0.5$ ) and the lowest by Teachers ( $M = 20.2$ ;  $SE = 0.45$ ). All differences were significant with  $p < 0.001$ . The results are presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Attachment grades by mothers, fathers and teachers. Error bars indicate 95% CIs

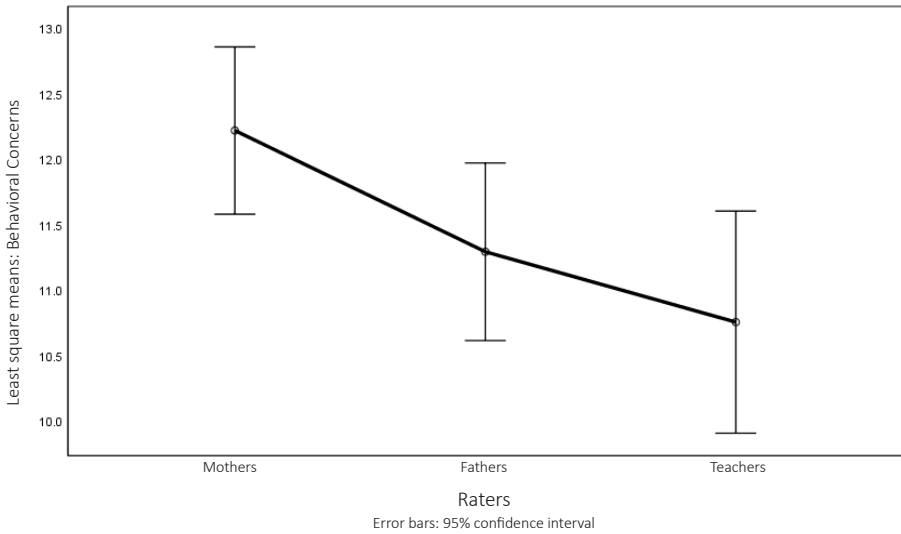


The obtained results indicate the expected rule that children are more attached to parents than to teachers. It is parents who should create a safe bond with the children during their development.

## BEHAVIORAL CONCERNS

There were significant differences in fathers', mothers' and teachers' grades of Behavioral Concerns ( $F(1.756; 537.454) = 5.052; p < 0.009$ ). Multiple comparisons indicated that Behavioral Concerns were graded the lowest by Teachers ( $M = 10.8; SE = 0.43$ ) and the highest by Mothers ( $M = 12.2; SE = 0.33; p = 0.007$ ). Fathers' grades ( $M = 11.3; SE = 0.35$ ) were not significantly higher than Teachers' grades ( $p = 0.939$  with correction) but were slightly lower than Mothers' grades ( $p = 0.045$  with correction). The results are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Mothers', fathers' and teachers' grades of Behavioral Concerns. Error bars indicate 95% CIs



Teachers may be more tolerant of children's difficult behavior than parents because they are aware that conflict may arise from frustration, which is common in peer groups. Mothers are much more sensitive to signs of behavioral concerns, which may stem from them expecting that their child be polite. The results may also be explained by the fact that mothers spend more individual time with their children than fathers and teachers do, which may make them more responsive both to signs of positive and problem behavior.

Further analyses (mixed GLMs based on children's gender) showed there to be no significant differences between boys and girls in ratings of Initiative ( $p = 0.065$ ) nor is the interaction between gender and rater ( $p = 0.122$ ). For Self-Control, neither gender ( $p = 0.117$ ) nor its interaction with rater ( $p = 0.137$ ) was significant. The same was true for Attachment (gender  $p = 0.292$ , Gender\*Rater  $p = 0.228$ ).

For Behavioral Concerns, however, both the child's gender ( $p = 0.01$ ) and its interaction with rater ( $p = 0.002$ ) were statistically significant. Interestingly, the difference in grades of Behavioral Concerns between boys ( $M = 12.2$ ;  $SE = 0.565$ ) and girls ( $M = 8.9$ ;  $SE = 0.63$ ) were only present when grades were made by Teachers ( $p < 0.001$ ). Mothers' grades were not significantly different for girls ( $M = 12.2$ ;  $SE = 0.49$ ) and boys ( $M = 12.3$ ,  $SE = 0.44$ ;  $p = 0.898$ ), neither were Fathers' scores (girls:  $M = 11.0$ ;  $SE = 0.52$ ; boys:  $M = 11.5$ ;  $SE = 0.46$ ;  $p = 0.479$ ).

The obtained result could indicate that teachers have a tendency to stereotypize boys as less polite than girls. Parents in the current study did not show such tendencies.

## Discussion

The results are in line with the existing research which shows that there are differences between parents and teachers in rating children's developmental achievements. Moreover, some differences in rating girls and boys were found.

The answer to the first research question allowed us to identify the differences in protective factor and risk factor ratings between parents and teachers. The high evaluation of children's initiative by mothers may be considered optimistic – it means that a child is able to freely present new ideas, make their own decisions, be active and spontaneous in a safe home environment. This manifestation of developmental possibilities in optimal conditions is visible for an attentive mother. Fathers rate initiative higher than teachers (like mothers), but not as high as mothers, which can be explained simply by them making fewer observations (i.e. spending less time with children). In contrast, kindergarten presents a bigger challenge for a child's initiative, as it is a new environment with new people, posing the risks of social evaluation and stress. In particular, a structured style of education, maintaining a constant daily order of activities and rhythm of classes can reduce the space available for children's free activity and decision making.

Initiative manifests children's self-efficacy, which is a belief in their own influence on their life; in the possibility to be in control of their own activities. Self-efficacy is a crucial aspect of human psychological functioning (Constantine et al. 1999; Fergus, Zimmerman 2005; Masten 2001).

Another protective factor is self-control, which was also differently evaluated by raters. Our results show higher demands and expectations about children's self-control presented by fathers, as compared to mothers and teachers. The first differentiating criterion between fathers and other raters is gender (all teachers were women), so it could be assumed that men's expectations about the control of one's own behavior and respect towards social rules were different than women's. The second differentiating criterion between fathers and other raters is the familiarity with the child and the amount of time spent with them (on average). It could be assumed that mothers and teachers observe children more often and longer than fathers do, in a wider variety of situations. The similarity in ratings between women (mothers and teachers) could be considered an indication that self-control is reliably estimated by them, despite different contexts. Self-control is considered a key factor for mental resilience connected with children's awareness of their own emotions and allows being in harmony with the social environment (Masten 2001; Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, Searle, Sawyer, Lynch 2015).

Attachment, as the third protective factor, was evaluated higher by parents than by teachers. It means that a strong, safe bond primarily connects a child with their

mother, then with the father, and less with the teacher. This sequence is based on a natural developmental rule – it is the parental contact and care which is responsible for creating a safe bond in children (Ahnert 2010; Grotberg 2000). Children whose need for belonging was not fulfilled at home, sometimes transfer this need to the teacher, which can be observed in a close relationship between the child and the teacher in kindergarten.

Apart from positive personal assets, which promote coping with stress and challenges, there are risk factors connected with temperamental traits, habits or other difficulties. Our results demonstrated that teachers observed fewer behavioral concerns than mothers. The first explanation for this result could be that teachers have a better knowledge of and experience with the average preschool children's behavior. Therefore, teachers could consider a wider spectrum of children's behavior as normal than parents, who could have other (i.e. higher) expectations about "how a polite child should behave," not taking into account the current developmental stage the child is at. The second explanation of the results is that children's behavior is modified by social exposition to a new situation, new environment and mobilization in the group. Kindergarten, with its structure and rules, allows an easier orientation in social expectations and can help children in coping with stress (Fefer, Lauterbach 2017).

Regarding the second research question, we found that children's gender did not differentiate adults' ratings of initiative, self-control or attachment. However, there was a tendency for teachers to perceive boys as less polite than girls, which can be attributed to gender stereotyping. Teachers noticed more behavioral concerns in boys, such as tantrums, breaking toys, using vulgar speech or beating others. In parents' ratings, such a tendency was not observed. Our findings are in opposition to the existing research in which boys were evaluated better than girls (Kärkkäinen 2011). Such a difference could be caused by different socio-cultural backgrounds (Polish vs. Finnish studies), which could influence gender stereotypes. For example, the awareness of women's and men's stereotypical behavior has been observed in children as young as 5 years old: Polish preschoolers described men as aggressive and powerful people, whereas women were described as weak and gentle (Garbula 2009). It can be hypothesized that the awareness of one's own gender identity facilitates behavior which is typical for this gender in one's own culture (i.e. replaying gender stereotypes). Such an interpretation could be one of possible explanations for the higher number of behavioral concerns in boys. The research shows that boys are more prone than girls to developing externalization problems (opposition disorder or conduct disorder) which are easy to observe (Kristoffersen, Smith 2015).

## Summary

The obtained results support both research questions. It turned out that the evaluation of children's resilience factors differs significantly among mothers, fathers and teachers. Mothers perceive their children as showing more initiative and attachment, but also more behavioral concerns. Fathers seem to have higher expectations of their children's behavior, especially regarding self-control. They also see less initiative and attachment than mothers and teachers, but also fewer behavioral concerns. Teachers' expectations and evaluations seem to be influenced by their knowledge and understanding of developmental regularities, and by the experience which allows them to compare a child's behavior to their peers'. They see children as having fewer behavioral concerns and more self-control, but with lower initiative and attachment. These different evaluations may also stem from the differences in children's behavior at home and in kindergarten, and from the influence of social factors on behavior.

The evaluation of boys' and girls' behavior was different only for behavioral concerns, and only when evaluated by teachers. It seems that teachers may stereotype boys as less polite than girls. It may also be caused by preschool observational scales (such as DECA) being more sensitive to detecting the types of behavioral concerns presented by boys (devastation, opposition, fights) than those presented by girls.

The obtained results show the importance of social context and adults' perspectives in perceiving and evaluating preschool children's behavior. Understanding the nature and causes of these differences may facilitate better communication between parents and teachers. The results also indicate the importance of describing children's behavior in a complete way, encompassing their strengths and weaknesses. Searching for protective factors which may help offset deficits is especially important in developing and strengthening children's resilience. The obtained results may be useful in educating teachers, providing an insight into children's development, which is crucial in detecting potential difficulties or disorders. Moreover, as the results show significant differences in how one child is perceived by different adults, there is a need for teachers and parents to cooperate. Each of the significant adults observes the child in a different context and at a different time, therefore each one has important information they should share – especially when a diagnosis is to be made, or when evaluating whether a child's development fits the norm.

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