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## Parental Internet Forums as a Space for Discussing Children's Speech Development

Rodzicielskie fora internetowe jako przestrzeń  
do dyskusji o rozwoju mowy dziecka

### KEYWORDS    ABSTRACT

parenting forums,  
pedagogical culture,  
child's speech  
development, speech  
therapy, discussion  
groups

Parents, as the first educators and teachers of the child, are obliged to delve into the basics of pedagogical theory and practice, which also includes the proper development of the child's speech. Today, due to the increasing digitalization of the world, the Internet is one of the most popular sources of communication and learning. Parental online forums are becoming a special place for parents in which they may discuss various topics and share information about their own parenting experiences, including speech therapy content. The article will present studies on the analysis of parental online forums in the field of discussion about child speech development. This area, so rich in research information, has become the basis for understanding the ways parents communicate, transmit information, ask questions and give answers; their positive or negative impact on the dissemination of speech therapy knowledge; as well as the culture of expression and compliance with the rules of netiquette of users posting their texts on parental online forums. The collected research material concerning discussions based on speech therapy knowledge on parental Internet forums is presented in the form of quoted real statements of users, without any stylistic or linguistic corrections.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

fora rodzicielskie,  
kultura  
pedagogiczna,  
rozwój mowy  
dziecka, logopedia,  
grupy dyskusyjne

Rodzice jako pierwsi wychowawcy i nauczyciele dziecka są zobowiązani do zagłębiania się w podstawy teorii i praktyki pedagogicznej, do której należy również prawidłowy rozwój mowy dziecka. Współcześnie ze względu na postępującą cyfryzację świata Internet stanowi jedno z popularniejszych źródeł porozumiewania się i zdobywania wiedzy. Takim szczególnym miejscem dla rodziców stają się rodzicielskie fora internetowe, które stanowią prężnie działającą przestrzeń do dyskusji między rodzicami przekazującymi sobie informacje o własnych doświadczeniach rodzicielskich, w tym treści z zakresu logopedii. W artykule zostały przedstawione badania dotyczące analizy rodzicielskich forów internetowych z zakresie dyskusji o rozwoju mowy dziecka. Obszar ten tak bogaty w informacje badawcze stał się podstawą do poznania sposobów komunikowania się rodziców, przekazywania informacji, zadawania pytań i udzielania odpowiedzi, ich korzystnego bądź niekorzystnego wpływu na rozpowszechnianie wiedzy logopedycznej, jak również pozwolił poznać kulturę wypowiedzi i przestrzegania zasad netykiety użytkowników korzystających z rodzicielskich forów internetowych. Zgromadzony materiał badawczy, dotyczący dyskusji opierających się na wiedzy logopedycznej na rodzicielskich forach internetowych, przedstawiony został w formie cytowanych rzeczywistych wypowiedzi użytkowników, niepoddanych żadnej obróbce stylistycznej ani językowej.

### Internet Forum as a Space for Parents' Discussions

Having the right pedagogical knowledge and using it skilfully is one of the elements that define the functions of the modern family. Their level and quality is a decisive factor influencing the effectiveness of the upbringing process and its effects on all family members (Błasiak, 2010, p. 73). It is important for parents to raise the level of their own pedagogical culture because, as Zofia Frączek notes (2013):

The pedagogical culture of parents depends on their general culture and on the degree to which they are aware of their own role as teachers. It is, therefore, important to raise not only the parents' pedagogical culture, which will help them to better understand their parenting, but also to raise their general culture and show the importance of family education for society as a whole (p. 190).

Among the sources of pedagogical knowledge used by parents in recent times, the Internet has been added, which appears to be one of the main and most frequently used sources for acquiring news about the upbringing and education of children (Śnieżyński, 2019, p. 90). In the Internet there are many more or less reliable websites and portals

dedicated to parents with content on child development and upbringing. These include tutorials, articles, graphics or videos the aim of which is to improve the pedagogical knowledge of the parents who use them. More recently, online forums have also started to specialise in parenting topics and are thus becoming another source of parents' pedagogical knowledge. It is now such an attractive and popular space for the exchange of experiences, advice and parenting information that it seems to be pushing out other sources of knowledge. Agnieszka Szewczyk (2011, p. 175) points out that as many as 55% of people surveyed use Internet forums which are created similar to a bulletin board where announcements, questions or requests are posted, which other users can read and respond to. Thanks to such forums, as Leszek Olszański (2006, p. 229) points out, users have the opportunity to become actively involved in creating a space for discussion, exchanging opinions, views, experiences or memories, and opinions on a particular topic, or responding to another user's statement.

Parenting Internet forums exist as separate entities in the Internet, as part of other sites, and as part of social networks. They are a space to get information from experts, to read articles, and, above all, to exchange experiences and to talk with other parents, but also, instead of being an additional source of information, they become the only source for expanding knowledge on parenting (Bereźnicka, 2016, p. 277). Some users, mainly mothers, can spend long hours talking and exchanging insights and information in thousands of contributions, as if their only occupation is to answer questions and comment on posts, neglecting the time that should be devoted to the child (Bereźnicka, 2012, p. 127). Looking for answers to their questions online, forum users can ask questions and choose (from many comments) those answers that will confirm their beliefs and thoughts which are often incompatible with scientific knowledge. It is, therefore, necessary to develop in oneself the ability to consciously navigate in the "information smog", i.e. "a dense fog of scattered, fragmented, disordered information, which becomes troublesome when it is mixed in a way that makes it practically impossible to separate valuable messages from inaccurate, rambling or even totally untrue records" (Tadeusiewicz, 1999, p. 99–100). One of the main dangers is the occurrence of the confirmation bias, which is quite common in online forums. Katarzyna Grunt-Mejer (2017, pp. 106–107) emphasises that this is a phenomenon of affirming one's own beliefs and rejecting alternatives on the basis of one's own emotional involvement in the issue raised and one's own moral basis.

## Methodological Premises of the Author's Own Research

The aim of the author's research was to find out how the discussion about the child's speech development is carried out in the parents' Internet forums. This is an

extremely important area of research, as it often, as the first source of information, has a direct impact on gaining knowledge about the child's development, his/her communicative abilities, possible difficulties and speech disorders. The research problem was: How does the discussion about the child's speech development proceed in parental Internet forums? The research material was collected using the method of a diagnostic survey, which "encompasses all types of social phenomena of relevance to upbringing, as well as states of social awareness, opinions and views of specific communities, the growth of the phenomena under study, their tendencies and intensification" (Pilch & Bauman 2001, pp. 79–80). The applied research technique, i. e. the internal analysis of documents, is a way of learning, understanding, clarifying the content and extracting the most important thoughts and threads connecting the given elements, which form the basis of the research issues (Łobocki, 2000, p. 222). The tool used was a self-constructed questionnaire for document analysis.

The research group consisted of parents using parenting forums. The analysis focused on the range of posts concerning only speech therapy issues, the way in which conversation about speech development took place between users, the compatibility of the content with contemporary knowledge of speech development and disorders, the sense of parental responsibility for the correct development of speech and the upbringing of children, and the way in which parenting forum users adhered to the rules of netiquette. The research material was collected on five discussion groups on the publicly accessible Facebook portal, the names of which were replaced by letter designations (Polish abbreviations) for the purpose of analysing the statements: Mums to Moms (MM); Mom and Child – Pregnancy, Motherhood (MDCM); Pregnancy – Questions and Answers (CPO); Mom Knows! (MTW); Mums have kids (MD). The initials indicating the author of the post have also been used, and the statements quoted include an authentic transcription of them

## Analysis of the Research Material. Fragment of the Research

Posts on speech therapy content were of great interest to parents, and some users willingly and repeatedly joined the discussion, becoming regular commenters. The types of responses and comments from parents that appeared most frequently and were characteristic of all posts on speech therapy content made in the online forums analysed, were grouped into the following categories:

- reliable answers to questions and requests for advice,
- description of one's own experience and cases,
- recommendations/non-recommendations of products and ways of acting,

- advice, encouragement to do something,
- supporting or humiliating comments,
- disrespectful comments, encouraging people to ignore symptoms or doubts,
- humiliating and insulting answers,
- calming or soothing comments.

Reliable answers to questions and requests for advice usually take several forms. You will notice statements that address the question in great detail, explaining the phenomenon step by step, dispelling doubts and pointing out the right way to proceed. These are usually statements by people who want to educate other parents, support them and motivate them to act. An example of such an answer would be the one highlighted in the thread from the forum MM (24.08.2022):

*Dear Mums, I have a question – well, my 15-year-old daughter doesn't pronounce "r". Do you think there is a chance that, if she hasn't been taught since she was a toddler to pronounce this letter, she will learn it at this age? If so, what do you recommend that has helped your children apart from the speech therapist of course. Thank you for your advice.*

*J.M.: I would encourage you to see a speech therapist and get therapy. Speech defects can be corrected successfully at any age. Only a specialist will assess what the problem is, make the correct diagnosis and plan the appropriate therapy. Greetings!*

*M.T.: Take it easy. Water in a cup, a straw, and blowing. Fun exercise and fun in one. With us there was no problem with "r" but playing like that earlier and normal speech to the child, and not some softened words.*

Such comments can also be seen in the very popular posts referring to autism spectrum disorders, as evidenced by a selection of statements from the following set of posts from the MM and MTW forums (1.05, 3.05 and 11.04.2022):

*Hi. My son will be 2 years old in September; he says absolutely nothing, he only shouts to himself when he runs, he is not interested in anything, he doesn't look at me when I call him, toys don't exist for him; he has his own world. He walks and lies on the floor with a nappy.. I am afraid that he may have autism.*

*E.R.: No. He may have delayed speech development, for various reasons. Also because of parents. He may have mutism, selective mutism, aphasia. In any case, if he does not speak yet, even the simplest sentences, this is an indication for a consultation with a speech therapist and a hearing test. This is for the beginning.*

*J.M.: No, but the lack of speech has to be consulted with a speech therapist because there may be many reasons.*

The authors of these comments want to direct the parent on what they should do; they want to reassure or comfort the parents. The answers are reliable, without unnecessary moralising or criticising. These are very content-related comments that

address the problem in an appropriate way and can successfully end a given topic of conversation.

Another very common type of comments posted on parenting Internet forums are descriptions of one's own experience and cases related to child development. On the one hand, these statements show other parents' experiences and ways of dealing with the problem, and, on the other hand, they are descriptions of their own experiences, which did not always follow the well-known rules of therapeutic interventions or developmental norms. Examples of such comments are the replies to the post (27.11.2022) from the MM forum:

*Dear mothers, my daughter is 6 months old. She sucks her finger (thumb) and doesn't want a dummy even though I've given her one. Do you have any ideas of how can I help her stop this? I'm afraid that the later it gets, the harder it will be to get rid of this habit. Any ideas on how and when should I intervene? Now or later? Please give me some advice.*

*M.M.: It will not go away without effort. My daughter started sucking her thumb when she was 5 months old. She is now 14 months old and still has her thumb in her mouth. After trying to give her different dummies, the thumb won.... I also thought it was a fetal habit and once she started talking it would go away on its own. I was naive.*

*Ł.P.-M.: We had the same problem which we consulted with a neurologist and a dentist. The recommendation, for the time being, was to stimulate the gums and palate by massaging them with a sonic toothbrush, and to keep trying to replace the thumb with a dummy. Buy several, maybe a certain shape will suit your baby. With a baby, unfortunately, there are not many options for remedying this.*

Another example of a story about one's own experiences, which are not always correct, is the discussion under a post from the MM forum (27.05.2022):

*Dear mums, I need your opinion. I have a daughter of 2.5 years. She is healthy; she has practically never been ill; she is very skilled in movement and manual skills. She understands a lot of things, although she has shown more than once that if she doesn't feel like it she won't do anything and pretends not to hear. The problem is that she doesn't speak. In her own way, she speaks a lot: gagagaga, yum yum, dadadada, iiiiiiiii, mmmmmm. We have been to a speech therapist and she has referred us to a psychiatrist for a diagnosis saying that she sees very high intelligence, no delay, and the baby probably just doesn't feel like talking. Unfortunately, the nearest psychiatrist is 100 km from us and the cost per visit is about PLN 450. I am one of those people who let the child develop at her own pace, without stress and being told that something is wrong with her. The environment puts pressure on us because, how come, she is 2.5 years old and doesn't speak. What do you guys think about this? Are there any mums here who don't put pressure on their child to reach "norms" when general development is going ahead? I am talking about healthy children of course.*

*A.S.: My son didn't start talking until he was 3.5 years old; he didn't need to, he got everything he needed without having to say it, but once he started talking, his mouth is never closed – until now. He graduated from university; he's a nice guy; your daughter also needs*

*time before she starts, read to her a lot, tell her stories and everything will work out, she will grow up to be a smart woman.*

*M.K.: My daughter turned 5 on 25 May and she started talking in February, just before her 5th birthday. I haven't been to a speech therapist even once because I think that she would speak when the time comes, and that's what happened; now she talks non-stop.*

Descriptions of people's own cases are the most common forms of expression on parental Internet forums. However, these comments are not always in line with current scientific knowledge and may cause the authors of the postings to wrongly disregard their own concerns, thereby unknowingly contributing to the exacerbation of developmental difficulties in their children.

Internet parenting forums are very much a space for support, comfort and reassurance for the frightened and uncertain parent, with the idea that no one understands a mother like another mother. The posts are often full of fear, uncertainty and helplessness, and many parents want to comfort the anxious mother and respond to her doubts, as can be seen, for example, in the discussion on the MM forum (20.06.2022):

*Are there any Mums of children here who have started to say their first words late? My daughter is 10 months old, she only says no, 'ba' (when something drops) sometimes 'dziadzia' (unconsciously), and when she cries her mum will come out. She reacts to her name, applauds, holds out her hands when she wants to be picked up, plays 'akuku', gives kisses, crawls, stands up everywhere, walks supported by the furniture. But with this speech it is poor. I am terribly worried. Did your children start to speak late?*

*S.K.: Dear Lord, each child develops in a different way, so I have the impression that you Press on your child to speak as soon as possible... If she wants, she will learn, even at the age of 5; be patient.*

*K.B.: It is very good that the mother is vigilant. Later the parents are surprised that the child has a speech delay, or perhaps autism. Watch her but don't panic, give her time – ok, but also act yourself. Above all, talk, talk to the child, tell stories, sing, name things, imitate, show, read.*

Such words of comfort can reassure, show support and allow one to express one's impotence, as it is not wrong to show ignorance, but it is important for other parents to support and wisely educate the insecure parent.

In opposition to the above comments, which are comforting and supportive, there are responses that are ironic, humiliating, mocking and even insulting to other users. Unfortunately, this kind of commenting is very common in all kinds of forums, including parenting forums. The following examples from the MM forum can testify to this (13.03.2022):

*Mums, do your 5 month old babies "talk", i. e. do they respond to your conversations? My baby used to babble a lot in the second month, but now, when I talk to him, he just looks at*

*me with his mouth open and makes sounds when he is nervous. He chokes on saliva a lot, practically all the time, as if he cannot swallow it; his frenulum was cut at 3 months. Do you think this is a problem? I don't want to go to the doctors every now and then as we have already visited a lot of them.*

*A.W.: In the second month of live babies do not babble but coo; babbling comes later. A 5-month-old baby won't reply to you, this is obvious.*

*E.M.: This is the third time I've read this post because each time I thought I was reading it wrong. You require a 5-MONTH old baby to respond to your talks? Really? How? [...] Mothers, I beg you, what else will come up with?*

*K.C.: In the 2nd month of life babies coo, not babble.*

*A.J.: I think you should go to the doctor's if such questions appear in your mind.*

Another example of mocking parents concerned about their children's development is the discussion under a post from the MM forum (26.09.2022):

*My son, 12 months old, shows neither with his finger nor with his hand. He does 'bye bye', he passes a toy. Speaks poorly. Utters sequences of 'mummy, daddy' but does not say it with understanding. He doesn't say anything resembling words, but just babbles in his own way. Is this a cause for concern or should I give him time.*

Among 284 comments under this post there are the following ones:

*K.B.: Tragedy. People try to find disorders in babies by force now. Each baby develops at his/her own pace.*

*O.B.: I think it's time for a specialist... but not for the baby.*

*E.R.: I thought that if you decide to have a baby you need to have at least the minimum knowledge of his/her stages of development.*

Criticism and humiliation of parents can also be seen in the following post from the MM forum (25.05.2022):

*Hey, I don't know what to do with myself anymore... I've been reading a lot about autism lately because my child is developing slowly. I don't know if I have a problem myself or if there is really something wrong. Nobody sees anything worrying in my child's behaviour, i.e. the nursery ladies don't suggest anything, neither does the neurologist (but it was only one visit); we were even at a child psychiatrist and she didn't find any other disorders apart from delayed speech development. And I keep nagging myself that something is wrong. [...] It's my first child and I don't know how this will all look like.*

The post was commented as follows:

*K.W.: Turn off the Internet and play with your baby.*

*M.K.: Go to a specialist... yourself.*



M.G.: *Mum, calm down. Let your child develop. Each child is different, don't get mad. Hang out with friends, go for a drink, or to a party...*  
E.S.: *But do you want your child to be sick, or what do you mean? A normal mother is happy for her child to play alone for 10 min. He is 20 months old; you should be happy that he can put the cars in a row. Why are you trying to force illness into normal behaviour?*

The statements presented above illustrate the way in which people who ask questions on Internet forums are ridiculed. A sense of superiority of the commenter over the author of the post can be seen here, as well as a desire to criticise and point out mistakes instead of trying to help and answer the question at hand. It can also be seen that commenters use humiliating words and are inclined to reproduce such statements, setting an example for other people to continue mocking discussions. In discussions on parenting online forums, it is just as common to see comments that disregard the problems cited, suggesting to the authors of the posts that they should not bother, claiming that it is currently fashionable to search for various disorders in children; that not every child develops according to the knowledge contained in books. Examples of this type of comment are the responses to the following post from the MM forum (12.08.2022):

*Dear mothers. The child is 11 months. He waves his hands (both of them, sometimes one out of joy, for fun, sometimes when he gets angry. I have heard that these are symptoms of autism, but I don't know if it is already at such an early age? This is the first child and I don't know what the "norm" is. Can you give me some advice?*  
N.E.: *Now when the child moves, it's autism; when he does not move, it's autism.*  
D.O.: *SERIOUS! Well, yes, because an 11-month-old baby should talk about his emotional states with full sentences. I understand mum's concern about their babies, but, unfortunately, we are gradually going towards the trend of searching for anything that confirms disorders according to the Internet agenda.*

Another example of disregarding difficulties is the post (09.05.2022) from the MM forum:

*Hey, I have a question. My son started babbling when he was 8 months old. It started with dadada, then came bababa, sometimes tatata, papa, but 'mummy' is so rare that I can count it on the fingers of one hand, and a month has already passed. Tell me, is it normal that my son does not want to say 'mum' or mamama? He prefers 'Dada' and 'baba' the most...*

Parents replied as follows:

G.S.: *I'll tell you this: you'll be fed up with him saying 'mommy' all the time, and I know you won't understand it now because you're waiting for his first words, but someday you'll*

*remember it with a smile on your face when he'll be standing next to you and shouting 'mommy' 100 times in one minute.*

*Ž.S.: My son also used to say 'tata' ['dad'] all the time, and maybe once he said 'mama' by accident. So I started to tell him, come on, mummy will give you something, mummy will change your nappy, and, all the time before doing something, I said 'mummy'; and after a month he started to say 'mummy and' to this day' it is 'mummy and mummy' all the time.*

*A.Ž.: When the time is right, he will start speaking in a normal way, no stress.*

Manifestations of persuasion to disregard developmental difficulties and disorders can also be seen in the replies to following post from the MDCM forum (31.10.2022):

*Girls, does it happen that your little ones sleep with their mouths slightly open? We have a 3.5-week-old baby and, for the last few days, I have noticed that his mouth is slightly open when he sleeps and I don't know if this is normal or if I should react in any way.*

The replies of the forum users were as follows:

*W.T.: My daughter also sleeps with her mouth open, there is nothing to worry about, this is normal.*

*P.K.-P.: Rather normal. My baby also sometimes sleeps with an open mouth. It is not open wide, but it is slightly open.*

*M.K.: I've slept like this since I was a baby and I am still alive.*

The above opinions of users can have very negative effects, as they are comments made by people with no specialist knowledge, who are unfamiliar with a child's specific situation, development and difficulties he/she is experiencing. Encouraging parents to disregard difficulties puts parents off their guard, so that they may not notice that something is wrong with their child's development, and this can prolong and hinder any therapy that the child may need.

## Research Results

The examples presented above clearly illustrate the online mode of communication, the culture of expression, as well as the observance of netiquette rules by users of parenting Internet forums. The above-cited posts and comments show extremely varied styles of communication, formulation of questions and answers, which are full of different types of emotions and behaviour, ranging from reassurance, consolation, giving good sound advice, to insecurity, fear, disrespect, criticism, ridicule and humiliation. This is a very worrying and unfortunately popular phenomenon, which poses a major threat to the functioning of such discussion groups, as it gives

permission for impunity and uncontrolled outpouring of anger in a space that was intended to be a place full of support and mutual kindness. It can be concluded that such behaviour is caused by watching and imitating the general tendency to use verbal aggression online, which has been extremely prevalent in recent years on all kinds of social networks, forums, discussion groups and communication applications. One of the responsibilities of parents is to have an awareness and a sense of responsibility for increasing their knowledge about raising their child and supporting their child's speech development. Evidence of an increasing sense of responsibility for their child's speech development among parents can be seen in the very fact of using parenting forums, frequently asking questions and providing answers. Analysing the content of the posts, one can get the impression that parents are often uncertain, confused and do not know how to proceed, how to deal with difficulties arising in the upbringing and development of their children, how to solve problems that accompany their parental path, where to go to consult their doubts. However, the space provided by discussion groups is not always the right place to gain knowledge, as they often provide erroneous and unconfirmed information. Some posts show doubt about the child's diagnosis, disregarding, criticising and denying information that is in line with scientific knowledge; and there are questions about other parents' experiences, creating a statement in such a way as to find confirmation from other users that their opinion and feelings are more important than the opinion of child development specialists. Information about the development of a child's speech, based on scientific knowledge, can be rejected because of unawareness, lack of reflection, lack of willingness to self-educate and deepen the knowledge of parents who do not feel the need to rely on scientific reports, preferring to trust their own feelings and intuition and the experiences of other parents rather than specialists.

As Alina Naruszewicz-Duchlińska (2014, pp. 27–28) indicated, the Internet style of communication largely removes the obligation to observe the rules of correct spelling, grammar, use of punctuation marks, culture of expression and solidarity among representatives of a given social group.

The presented examples of posts and comments confirm these tendencies. The most frequent errors include: lack of use of Polish characters, lack or incorrect use of punctuation marks and gaps between words and characters, as well as the use of colloquial, simplified and childish speech. A specific feature of Internet communication is also the lack of non-verbal communication and the ease of expressing one's opinion online, which is open to every user and gives him/her the possibility to externalise all one's thoughts, comments, emotions, and may take the form of vulgarisms, verbal aggression, insults, non-constructive criticism or instructions. In the statements analysed, one can also notice this disturbing phenomenon which manifests itself in comments that mock, ridicule, disparage or insult the authors of the posts.

## Summary

Ongoing research into online parenting forums as a space for discussing child speech development indicates that this topic is extremely important and up-to-date, regardless of the changing social, economic and cultural conditions in Poland. Due to the current trend towards digitalisation of the world, the popularity of parenting forums will continue to grow and include more and more parents and issues discussed by their users, which is why it is so important for the addressees and recipients of content to enrich their knowledge with scientific sources, watch the rules of the culture of expression on the Internet, identify with each other, and give as much help as they themselves would like to receive. All this will have a positive effect on their own pedagogical culture and on the improvement of the quality of life of parents and children who are an important and main reason for their functioning in parental Internet forums, because – if they did not have children – they would not participate in these discussions, they would not ask questions, they would not give answers. The need to enrich their own pedagogical culture, knowledge and responsibility for upbringing their offspring should, therefore, be the most important thought accompanying them in their parental discussion activities in the online space.

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