

## **Jónína Saemundsdóttir and Sólveig Karvelsdóttir**

### **Parents' need for advice**

#### **Cooperation between preschool teachers and parents**

Parents of young children in Iceland have expressed their need for advice in their parental role, especially regarding discipline. Their opinion is that preschool teachers are the ones who should give this advice while children attend preschool. The purpose of this study was to examine if advice to parents is a part of the job of preschool teachers in Iceland and if so to what extent and what kind of advice is given. To answer these questions 13 preschool teachers were interviewed and based on the analysis of the interviews a questionnaire was made and sent to two samples of preschool teachers. The results of the research indicate that advice to parents is a part of the job of preschool teachers and the demand for advice seems to be increasing. The kind of advice, parents most often seek concerns discipline, practical advice and developmental issues. In this paper some of the results from the interviews and questionnaires are presented.

#### *Introduction*

There have been rapid changes in Icelandic society during the last two decades. Among changes that affect children and their upbringing is the fact that most parents work full time outside the home. The consequences are that a great majority of young children, 1-5 years old, attend preschool and this has been increasing during the last years. Parents have long working hours which means that their young children have to spend long hours at preschool. According to Statistics Iceland, 81% of young children (age 1-5 years) attended preschool in the year 2007 compared to 68% in the year 2000. Almost all children (91-95%) at the age of 2-5 years of age attended preschool in 2007. That year more than 86% of the children spent at least 7 hours a day at preschool compared to 43,7% in the year 1998 (Statistics Iceland, 2008). Whether or not the long hours away from parents and family affect the children and in what way is not clear. However, public discussion regarding discipline problems of children has been common in recent years.

Home-school cooperation is an important factor in the well being of children and in their achievement. It is not just the children who benefit from good home-school relations but also the teachers and the parents. Home-school cooperation can support parents and help them become more confident in their parenting skills. It can also empower them to help their children in many ways (Epstein, 2001; Berger, 2004; Olsen and Fuller, 2008). In a study by Bryndís Gardarsdóttir and Jóhanna Einarsdóttir (2006) of preschool teachers in Iceland the majority of participants said that their reason for cooperating with parents was to ensure the welfare and the security of the child. About 50% of them felt that parents' lack of interest was an obstacle to the cooperation and 60% mentioned parental lack of time as an obstacle.

According to a recent study by Birna María Svanbjörnsdóttir (2007) of parents of 4-12 year old children in Akureyri, almost 70% of the parents wanted support in their parenting role. This study is consistent with an extensive study by psychologist Gyða Haraldsdóttir of parents of young children in all districts of the country where a great majority of parents (83%) felt that they had much need for advice regarding discipline of their children. Most of them also felt that there was not enough access to such advice. A majority (70%) of the parents voiced the opinion that preschools should give advice to parents once the children had started preschool (Gyða Haraldsdóttir, 2005). According to Sigrún Júlíusdóttir (2001) parents need advice for setting limits to their children's behavior. They need advice about what are normal or common problems at certain ages and developmental periods. She trusts preschool teachers to support young parents in that respect.

Laws, regulations and the national curriculum for preschools do not state that advice to parents is a part of preschool teachers' job descriptions or duties (Pre-schools Act no. 78/1994). However, it is the preschool director's duty to "encourage cooperation between homes and preschools" and among the objectives of parental cooperation is to "provide parents with information on their child's development and its situation at the preschool" and also to "create a forum for discussion and exchange of views on children's education" (National Curriculum Guide for Pre-schools: Iceland, 1999:35).

According to Nordahl (2007) the professional teacher should support and encourage parents in the upbringing of their children. In the literature about home-school relations one can frequently see that empowering parents is considered important and benefits the children (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995; Nanna K. Christiansen, 2006; Whalley, 1997 and 2007). Parents need advice and support in order to empower them (Nordahl and Skilbrei, 2002) but the question is how it should be done and what kind of training preschool teachers need to be qualified to empower parents (Scheung Chan, 2004). In giving advice to parents it is

important that the teachers know their limits and don't attempt to give advice regarding matters that they can not handle (McConkey, 1985). Many things need to be considered when giving guidance and advice to parents and if it is commonly accepted as a part of the preschool teacher's work, as seems to be the case according to the literature, it should be covered in their education and general training.

Since it is not officially stated whether advice to parents is a part of the Icelandic preschool teacher's job description we set off with the following research questions:

1. Is giving advice to parents a part of the job of preschool teachers in Iceland?
2. If so, to what extent?
3. What kind of advice do they give?

### *Method*

Data was gathered during the year 2006. Semi structured interviews were taken with 13 preschool teachers, each working at different preschools in Reykjavik. Each interview lasted about one hour. The issue was parent- teacher cooperation with special focus on advice to parents. After analyzing and coding the interviews a questionnaire based on the results of the interviews was developed and sent to two samples of preschool teachers. One sample consisted of preschool teachers in every 10th preschool in Reykjavik. The other sample consisted of preschool teachers working in preschools outside the Reykjavik area. In the latter sample 1-2 preschools were selected from every regional area in Iceland. The questionnaires consisted of 37 questions. Answers were received from 130 participants, 62 from Reykjavik and the rest from areas outside of Reykjavik.

### *Findings*

A great majority of preschool teachers (97%) find that giving advice to parents is a normal part of their job and almost 60% say that giving advice to parents has increased. The remaining 40% either feel that advice is similar to what it has been or they don't have a comparison. The following quotations from interviews give an example:

*"I never expected it . . . but today I feel much more as an advisor . . . where you have needed to obtain knowledge beyond the preschool . . . and search for advice from others because one doesn't have the resources".*

*"These young mothers need so much support and advice".*

A significant difference (cross tabulations and Chi-square) was found between the capital city Reykjavik and outside the Reykjavik area. Surprisingly preschool teachers outside Reykjavik are significantly more likely to feel that demand for advice has increased in recent years. One possible explanation is that the increase in advice to parents has started earlier in Reykjavik than in areas outside Reykjavik.

The interviews showed that there were three main types of advice that parents wanted from preschool teachers. These were the same types of advice that preschool teachers offered unprompted to the parents. These main areas of advice are 1) practical advice regarding upbringing such as diet, sleeping habits, dressing and hygiene, 2) advice regarding development and developmental problems, and last but not least 3) advice regarding discipline.

In the questionnaire preschool teachers were asked how common it was that parents asked for each type of advice and also how frequently they themselves had the initiative to give such advice. The results can be seen in figures 1 and 2.

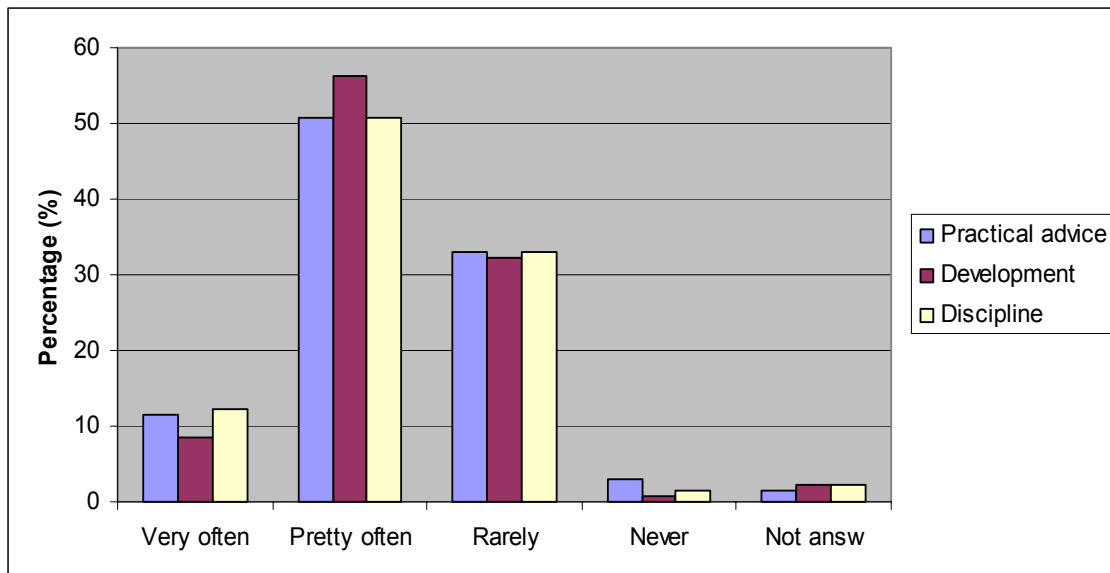


Figure 1. Types of advice parents seek

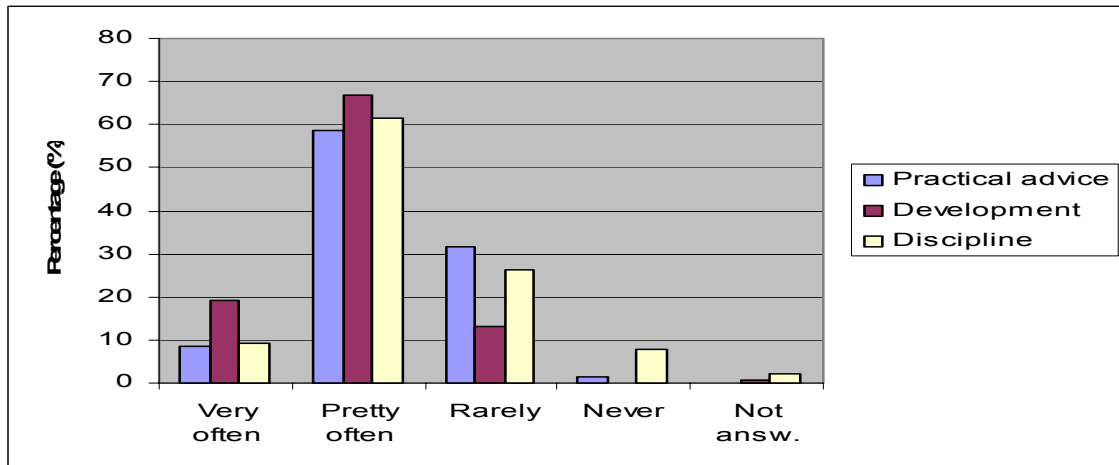


Figure 2. Types of advice preschool teachers have initiative in giving

As illustrated in the figures there is not much difference between the type of advice that parents seek and the types that preschool teachers give at their own initiative. Over 60% of the preschool teachers felt that parents often asked for all three types of advice. There is coherence between the two figures with the exception of advice regarding development. Over 85% of the participants claimed to give that kind of advice pretty often or very often.

The preschool teachers do not seem to find that advice to parents should be confined to the child and the preschool. Close to 60% feel that they should give advice to parents about personal matters as long as it regards the child, but only a minority (10%) says it often occurs. The majority (60%) of the participants seem to be conscious about setting limits in this respect; 27% are uncertain regarding the matter and 14% did not answer.

The issue of discipline appeared frequently in the interviews and answers from questionnaires show that the majority of preschool teachers (75%) believe that problems regarding discipline have become more frequent in recent years. Close to 80% believe that parents are less able than before to put limits on their children's behavior.

The following quotations give examples of the discussion:

*"I sense much more of a lack of discipline".*

*"I often sense parents' insecurity . . . how they should react to the child's behavior. Perhaps the child misbehaves . . . then some of them [the parents] seem to become almost afraid of the child."*

*"People don't seem to dare to be firm towards their children, 'it's me who decides, not you'."*

*"[Parents] just want you [the preschool teacher] to take care of the matter [discipline]. . . completely. . . give them advice that holds and works."*

Over 90% of the preschool teachers feel that parents have less time with their children than before. In interviews teachers claimed not only to give advice regarding more time spent with children but also more quality of time. The parents' lack of time is seen as a barrier in the cooperation between parents and teachers. Close to 60% of the participants state that parents seem to have too little time to cooperate or communicate with them. They often feel disappointed about this lack of time which, in their opinion, is a hindrance in many ways. One of them said: *“Usually they [the parents] don't stop much . . . I just find them rushing“*. Another said: *“Of course they [the parents] admit that they don't have time or they don't take the time [to communicate]”*. But parents differ and some show interest and take time to converse. The teachers feel that parents make more demands on the preschools and on them as professionals than they did some years ago. This is the opinion of 94% of the participants. They say that parents are, on the whole, better educated than before, more alert and they have more opinions which they express openly.

Over 80% of the preschool teachers consider themselves as specialists in education and care of young children. More than 55% feel that parents share that opinion with them, 45% said some of the parents did and only 1,5% thought parents did not see them as specialists. Statistical analysis of the results (cross-tabulation and Chi square) show that teachers with the shortest work experience (1-5 years) are less likely than those with longer experience to see themselves as specialists. They are also less likely to feel that parents consider them as specialists.

One experienced preschool teacher said: *“Of course, I have gained much experience over time. I was not at all capable [of giving advice] when I started. I attended all the courses I could, regarding this matter”*.

Increased self-confidence of preschool teachers as professionals or specialists was also a topic in the interviews. A teacher with almost 20 years of work experience said. *“When I was a student people said to me: Do you really have to go to school [to learn] to look after children. Nobody would say a thing like that today”*. The teachers who felt that the demand for advice had increased most often named two reasons for the increase; parents have more confidence in them and the teachers themselves had more self-confidence. Results are shown in figure 3.

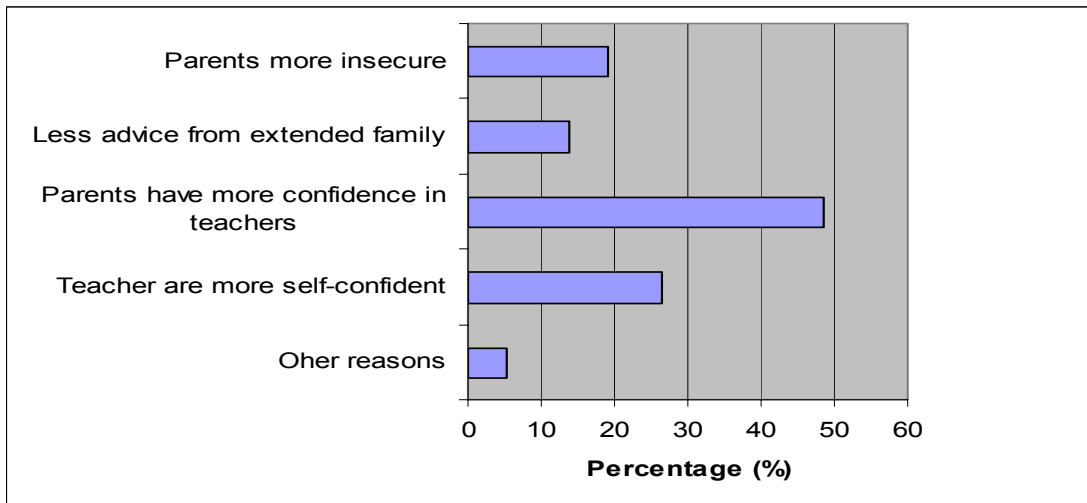


Figure 3. Reasons teachers give for increased demand for advice

### *Discussion*

This study shows clearly that giving advice to parents is a part of the work role of preschool teachers in Iceland although it is not officially stated. Parents seek advice from preschool teachers and teachers give advice at their own initiative. Most of the advice is of three main types; practical advice about child rearing, developmental advice, and advice regarding discipline.

The reasons for parents' uncertainty regarding discipline and their increased demand for advice in their upbringing is uncertain but a part of the explanation could be the length of time that most young children spend away from their parents and families and the parents' lack of time. But further research is needed. Why parents seek more advice than before of preschool teachers can at least partly be explained by increased self-confidence of preschool teachers and by parents' confidence in them as specialists.

A few years ago the education of preschool teachers was upgraded to university level which means that they now graduate with a B.Ed. degree. One could argue that this was the reason for their increased self-confidence and parents' confidence in them. However, statistics revealed that those with long work experience, who are the ones who graduated before the education was upgraded, were more likely to have confidence in themselves as specialists than those with short work experience, in spite of the latter having B.Ed. degrees. Work

experience seems to contribute more to their self-confidence as professionals than the higher educational level.

This research indicates that both preschool teachers and parents view preschool teachers as professionals in the care of young children. In accordance with the studies of Birna María Svanbjörnsdóttir (2007) and Gyða Haraldsdóttir (2005) parents need and want advice and they seem to trust the preschool teachers to give the advice needed. The question remains whether preschool teachers need special training for that kind of work.

We emphasize that these results are exclusively based on the views of a sample of preschool teachers that participated in this research. Another study on parents' experience and point of view would give a more thorough picture.

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