

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Ways preschool children aged 4-5 years old express their desire to excel

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#### Introduction

Competition is a very common phenomenon in every area of our lives and almost in every context. At work, at home, at school, in sports activities undoubtedly hundreds competitive behaviors occur (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). The operational definitions of competitive behavior consider a behavior that is characterized from the impulse to do something better than another.

Alfie Kohn (1986) in his book "No Contest" indicated that competition is a human trait. From birth to death people compete to excel of others in work environments, in education, at home and in their leisure time. This can be eventually attributed to their will in overcoming the fundamental insecurities for their abilities and to compensate their low self-esteem. According to Kohn (1986) competition may prevent the improvement of performance and may decrease productivity.

Greenberg (1932) defines competition as a human tendency that consist of the desire to excel, from the impulse to do something better than our opponents. According to Kohn (1986) competition prevents the improvement of performance and decreases productivity. Creates stress which affects the good performance and focus on others defeat rather than to good performance. Also, competition has negative psychological consequences because, undermining the sense of self-esteem, enhances insecurity, creates undue anxiety, envy, humiliation, shame and enhances and encourages the belief that we are benefited by acting only against others.

In competitive situations, some people avoid to work hard, that in case of defeat, they claim that it happens because of the lack of effort rather than lack of

#### Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the ways in which preschool children express competitive behaviors and their desire to excel. In this study 195 preschool children (aged 4-5 years old) took part. The methodology was based on a phenomenological approach and data were collected through observational procedures. The observation included 165 hours during a 10 weeks period in 11 classes. The qualitative analysis of data showed that preschool children may express their desire to excel i) verbally (words and phrases) and ii) physically (movements and gestures). More specifically, they express competitive behaviors mainly: i) by making comparisons, ii) disagreeing with each other iii) intervening during the talk of another child iv) taking the place of another child, v) grabbing objects that another child possesses and vi) pulling, pushing and kicking other children to take their places or their objects. In conclusion, the results of this study show that children in the preschool age demonstrate a variety of antagonistic behavior both verbally and physically.

Keywords: *competition, preschool children, kindergarten, verbal competition, physical competition, qualitative research*

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ability. Also, sometimes in competitive situations people diminish the importance of the target, so in case they lose, they can simply claim that they are not interested in it (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009).

Studies show that competition makes its appearance in the early years of a man's life. Specifically, children from early age express a desire to excel, a desire to be the best, as shown by Greenberg's research (1932) that set children between 2 and 6 years of age in competitive situations and observed the appearance of competition. More specifically, he asked the children to build something using wooden blocks in order to see who can make the best construction. The results showed that children between 2 and 3 years of age did not respond to the call to make the best construction but from the age of 4 years old and up it increased their level of arousal and promoted competition among children in order to become winners. Among children of this age systematic comparisons of their structures were observed, competitive behaviors such as grabbing the wooden bricks from their opponents, self-praise and sustained efforts to win. So according to this research, competition makes its appearance usually at the age of 4 years old and at the age of 6 years old is fully developed. This research showed that at the age of 6 years old, 90% of children have expressed competitive behaviors at some point or situation.

Similar results were presented from Leuba (1933) in a study where children between 2 and 6 years of age were asked to put pegs on a board, first individually and then in pairs. The results showed that competition was no-existent at the age of 2 years old. At the age between 3 and 4 years competitive behaviors among children started to appear. They used expressions like "I'm going to beat!" but they did make efforts to become better than the other and they placed fewer pegs on the board when they worked in pairs than when they worked individually. When children worked in pairs competitive behaviors appeared. Results showed that children older than 5 years old develop an understanding that only one can be the winner in a similar situation.

Sheridan and Williams (2006) observed that competition exists in preschool years and appears daily in kindergarten. Who would come first in the playground or who will be the lucky or who will manage to sit in kindergarten teacher's lap during the narration of the story or even finishing a game or an activity exclaiming "I won!" or making the question "Who won?" are some situations proving that preschool children compete. The appearance of competitive behavior in kindergarten children and in 1<sup>st</sup> graders has been studied by Benenson, Nicholson, Wait, Roy and Simpson (2001). They observed that boys expressed competitive behaviors more often in groups of four than in groups of two compared with girls. Moreover, another research conducted with children between 5 and 8 years showed that boys were more competitive than girls in individualistic and conflictual settings (McClintock & Moskowitz, 1976).

Moely, Skarin and Weil (1979) studied gender differences in competitive and cooperative behaviors at preschool age and between 7 and 9 years of age, during board game. The results of this research showed that boys exhibit a general tendency to compete, while girls showed a tendency to vary their behaviors according both game instructions and gender of a game partner. McClintock, Moskowitz and McClintock (1977) in their research showed that older preschool children tend to

compete more than younger ones. Furthermore, another research showed that the level of competitive behavior increased as a function of age, older children show greater competitiveness than younger children (Madsen, 1971; Toda, Shinotsuka, McClintock, & Steck, 1978).

According to Nicholls (1989) children's motivation to participate in an activity depends on their perceptions of ability and moreover on their judgment criteria of ability and how they perceive success or failure. Children after the age of 11 have developed two ways to estimate their ability, the one called ego-orientation, according to this children assess their ability according to the ability of others and it has as a result, children easily stop their efforts when they realize that they cannot overpass their peers. The other called task-orientation and according to this children assess their ability according to the attempt that themselves do and it has as a result, children have high motivation for a long time.

Child's participation in an activity depends on how he/she feels able to succeed or fail on it. However it takes time to understand that the result of an action is basically due to our ability and it's not totally accidental. Nicholls and Miller (1985) conducted a study, in order to study whether children could differentiate the concepts fortune (luck) and capacity (ability). The results showed that children begin to differentiate the concepts of luck and ability from the age of 6 years old and at the age of 13 years old they have completely differentiated these concepts.

Also, one should understand that a goal is difficult when few people are able to achieve it. Nicholls and Miller (1983) studied at what age children can understand that a target is more difficult and requires more effort when few people have succeeded it. They found that children at the age of 6 years old start to understand that the most capable is someone who has achieved something that few people can achieve. Moreover, one should understand that capable is someone when she/he achieves a goal with less effort than his/her peers. Nicholls and Miller (1984) in a research found that young children believe that a person is more capable when he/she tries more than his/her peers. Children begin to understand all the above from the age of 6 years old and at the age of 10 years old they understand them fully. As a result, the children around the age of 10 years old reduce their effort when they feel, that they are not able to succeed something. They assess their ability according to ego-orientation (Miller, 1985).

Research with adolescents has showed that competition leads to less motivation for learning during physical education, increasing stress and reducing students' self-confidence (Papaioannou & Kouli, 1999). So it is important to be able to acknowledge how the competition is been expressed in the early years and how it affects the motivation and/or the development of children. Although competition is a very common phenomenon, it is really contradictory the fact that there are only a few references in the literature especially concerning the early years of life. So far, no study has examined or described possible competitive behaviors during kindergarten. So, the aim of this preliminary study was to examine through observation all possible ways in which preschool children express competitive behavior that show their desire to excel in the classroom of a kindergarten during the school program. It was hypothesized that preschool children will express competitive behavior with a variety of ways during the entire school program.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 195 children (96 girls and 99 boys) with a mean age of 4 years and 7 months, coming from 5 different kindergartens (11 kindergarten classes). All children were coming from one city of Central Greece. The sample was selected by the researchers deliberately from the same area so that it would be easier to conduct observations. The study had permission from the Pedagogical Institute of Greece and written consent from parents according to the standards of the Ethics Committee of the University of Thessaly.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

The methodology was based on the phenomenological approach, which focuses on descriptions of human experience, to what people experience and how they experience (Patton, 1990). Data were collected through observation, using the method of anecdotal recording observation (Darst, Zakrajsek, & Mancini, 1989). Since there was no permission for videotaping the observer wrote down whatever she heard or saw related with the behavior she was studying. On the other hand, not using videotaping may be an advantage in this study, since children's behavior would not be affected by the presence of a camera.

The observation took place from 14 September 2011 to 25 November 2011. Before the investigation one of the researchers visited each classroom two times to become familiar with the environment, so children accustomed her presence in the classroom. Kindergarten teachers confirmed that children were not affected by researcher's presence in the classroom, and that they were reacting and interacting the same way as they normally do with their teachers.

After getting this confirmation from the teachers, one of the researchers organized and visited ten times each classroom (once a week in each classroom) and in each visit she was observing preschool children for one and a half hours in the classroom, during organized and free activities and during breakfast time, writing down children's behaviors which express desire to excel (the total sum of the observations were 165 hours). The observer was sitting in a place in the classroom from which she could see all the children and the whole classroom and retained stable in this position during the observation.

The observer wrote down in detail exactly what she heard and saw (all possible or "suspected" behaviors that could express competition), using paper and pencil. More specifically, the researcher recorded the activity in which the children participated the time who expressed competitive behavior and the dialogue that developed between them and their movements. These records were analyzed afterwards from the research team in order to determine whether it can be evaluated and characterized as competitive or not. All the classrooms were relatively small, so that the observer could hear what children were talking about although that sometimes it was difficult when children spoke quietly.

## Results and Discussion

This study attempted to examine the manifestation of possible competitive behaviors in preschool children during regular school program. Data analysis was carried out according to thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The data were identified, evaluated and characterized as “competitive behaviors” or not and categorized into two main categories: i) verbal expressions (words and phrases) showing an intention to excel and ii) actions or physical behaviors (movements and gestures).

The results showed that preschool children express a variety of competitive behaviors during organized and/or free activities and during breakfast time. Qualitative analysis of the data showed that preschool children express competitive behaviors, verbally and physically. More specifically they express verbal competitive behaviors by making comparisons, such as: i) comparing different objects according to their size but also compare the qualities and the characteristics of objects ii) comparing themselves to others based on their physical characteristics but also according to their abilities and possibilities, iii) comparing their assignments and accomplishments (e.g. drawings or constructions) during and at the end of construction, iv) disagreeing with each other for different issues, and v) interrupting the talk of another child. Furthermore, they express physically antagonistic behaviors, such as: i) grabbing objects that another child possesses, ii) pulling, pushing or kicking other children to take their places or their objects and iii) taking the place of another child.

The following four episodes are examples of the observed competitive behaviors. The first episode occurred between two boys during breakfast time. The two boys made comparisons of objects according to their size and disagreed with each other who would be the “winner”.

Two boys sit at the same table and eat.

Boy 1: *Let's see who has the biggest bottle!* (Note: his bottle was bigger and probably he knew that before saying this).

He puts the bottle next to the other and compares them.

Boy 2: *Look, I won you, mine is bigger!* (Note: his bottle was smaller but he doesn't admit “defeat”).

Boy 1: *Yes, but mine has designs, look...!* (Note: now he knows that objectively his bottle is bigger, however the other child does not admit it, so he is trying to “win” by setting a qualitative criterion).

Boy 2: *It's not so big, look how big it is!* (Note: pointing to the height of the bottle, with his finger).

Boy 1: *I beat you! Mine is bigger!* (Note: since the qualitative criterion was not convincing, he turned again back to the objective criterion; the height of the bottle).

The boy 2 raises his bottle and says:

Boy 2: *Look, now mine is bigger! Now, I beat you!* (Note: everybody is a “winner”).

The episode that follows took place between a boy and a girl during free play in the classroom. The two children disagree with each other in order to determine who the “winner” is.

A boy and a girl run to see who will arrive first from one side of the wall of the classroom to the other. The girl arrives first.

Boy: *I'm the first!!* (Note: although that he saw girl arriving first he does not admit “defeat”).

Girl: *I arrived first!!* (Note: girl is trying to claim her “victory”).

Boy: *No, i.....!!*

Girl: *I.....!!*

In the next episode three boys during free play, compare their toy car according to their qualities or characteristics aiming to find out which is the best.

Three boys play with their toy cars.

Boy1: *I have a car that runs 10 km!*

Boy2: *I have a car that runs 110 km!*

Boy1: *Yes, but mine does turns as well!*

Boy2: *Yes, but mine runs 110 km!*

Boy1: *Mine does turn as well!*

Boy2: *Mine does turn in the air and runs!*

Note: Boy 3 is absorbed playing with his car and does not participate in this dialogue.

And the next episode occurred between three boys during free play into the classroom.

Three boys played with blocks during the free play and decide to build each a tower, in order to see who will build the tallest. One of the boys, before using all the blocks, which he has in his possession, grabs blocks which his peers have in their possession and he used them to build his tower.

Studying dialogues and movements of children who have been recorded, such as four episodes described above, someone could recognize that children try in many cases to show that themselves and the objects that possess are superior compared to others, even if based on quantitative criteria they aren't. In the first episode the boy 1 challenges his classmate to compare their bottles of water and each boy try to prove to each other that his bottle is bigger than the other. Similarly in the third episode where the two boys try to prove each other that the toy car which each one has in his possession is better than the other by using qualitative criteria that is difficult to validate if needed. We could say that these behaviors prove children's desire to excel. Moreover, in the last episode a child is grabbing blocks which his peers have in their possession and he is using them to build his tower because he wants to win, he wants to build the taller tower than his peers.

In the first episode we observed that children created a competitive situation themselves trying to excel one from another. They try to succeed it making comparisons according to the size since their abstract thought is not yet enough developed. We could say that the size and more specifically the height can be considered as a criterion that children use in order to express their excellence compared with others. This finding is similar with results from a previous study (Tsiakara, Bonoti & Misailidi, 2009) which showed that preschool children designed the player of their favorite team in a larger size (taller) than the opponent, when researcher asked them to draw one player of their favorite team and one player of the opposing team.

Research has shown that when preschool children draw themselves and their peers in competitive situations, painting themselves as “winner” and their peers as “loser” shows that children want to excel from others (Sheridan & Williams, 2006). These findings are consistent with the results of this research, as observed in children’s dialogues that they wanted always to be winners and that the objects they possessed were better than others.

Dialogues develop spontaneously between children during the curriculum. The spontaneous way that competition begins to develop between preschool children agrees with Alfie Kohn’s argument (1986) that competition is a human characteristic and that people even since early years compete to overcome others in all areas of their life. Moreover the findings of this study suggest that competition appears spontaneously and probably cannot be predicted.

## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine and describe possible ways in which preschool children express competitive behavior that express their desire to excel. Preschool children were observed during the implementation of the curriculum in kindergarten and recorded competitive behaviors. The results of this research showed that preschool children develop competitive behaviors during organized and free activities and during breakfast time in kindergarten classrooms, which show their desire to excel from all the other children. Preschool children express competitive behaviors, which divided into two main categories, verbally and physically, which include and subcategories. Children at this age do not accept “defeat” but they want to be the “winners”. The results of the research confirmed the hypotheses that preschool children express competitive behavior with a variety of ways during the entire school program.

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