

Current Issues in the Development of Personal Autonomy Among Preschool Children

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Abstract

The development of personal autonomy represents one of the essential objectives of early childhood education, contributing to the formation of children's independence, responsibility, and self-confidence. During the preschool period, children gradually acquire skills that enable them to perform daily activities independently and to actively participate in educational and social activities. Specialized literature highlights that the development of personal autonomy is influenced by a series of educational and social factors that may either facilitate or, on the contrary, limit the formation of autonomous behaviors.

The purpose of this article is to identify and analyze the main current issues regarding the development of personal autonomy in preschool children, as highlighted in the works of several authors in the field of developmental psychology and early childhood pedagogy. The research is based on the analysis of specialized literature and the interpretation of theoretical perspectives proposed by different authors concerning the factors that influence the development of children's independence.

The results of the analysis indicate that the development of personal autonomy in preschool children may be affected by several current issues, including parental overprotection, excessive use of digital technology, reduced time allocated to free play, and insufficient organisation of child-centred educational activities. In addition, the lack of effective collaboration between families and early childhood education institutions may influence the formation of autonomous behaviors.

Identifying these issues enables the development of appropriate educational strategies to foster independence and responsibility in children from the preschool period.

Keywords: personal autonomy, preschool education, child development, independence, early childhood education.

Introduction

Early childhood education represents one of the most important stages in the development of a child's personality, as during this period the foundations of cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral development are formed. The experiences that children have in the early years of life significantly influence how they relate to themselves, others, and the tasks they must perform across different educational and social contexts (Creţu, 2016). From this perspective, preschool education does not only aim at the accumulation of knowledge or the formation of basic skills, but also at the development of essential life competencies, among which personal autonomy occupies an important place.

Personal autonomy refers to the child's ability to act independently, to perform activities appropriate to their age without constant assistance from adults, to make simple decisions, and to assume responsibility for their own activities and behaviors (Piaget, 1972). During the preschool period, autonomy manifests itself in multiple areas, such as self-care, organizing personal belongings, participating in group activities, expressing opinions, choosing learning materials, or solving simple tasks without the constant intervention of adults.

In specialized literature, personal autonomy is considered an important component of the child's harmonious development. It contributes to the development of self-confidence, personal initiative, and the child's ability to adapt to new environments and demands (Verza & Verza, 2017). Children who are encouraged to take on responsibilities and actively participate in educational and social activities develop self-organisation skills, perseverance, and greater control over their behaviour more easily.

However, the development of personal autonomy in preschool children currently faces several challenges. Changes in family life, the accelerated pace of daily life, the frequent use of digital technology, and certain educational practices that are insufficiently child-centered influence the opportunities for developing independence. Therefore, analyzing the current issues highlighted in specialized literature becomes necessary both from a theoretical and practical perspective.

The purpose of this article is to identify and analyze the main current issues regarding the development of personal autonomy in preschool children, as reflected in the works of several authors in the field of developmental psychology and early childhood pedagogy. The analysis of these issues may contribute to a better understanding of the difficulties encountered in the formation of autonomous behaviors and to the formulation of appropriate educational directions.

Materials and Methods

The present paper is based on a theoretical research approach conducted through the analysis of specialized literature in the fields of pedagogy, developmental psychology, and early childhood education. The choice of this type of research is determined by the need to identify and analyze the main current issues highlighted in specialized literature regarding the development of personal autonomy in preschool children. The study aims to examine the perspectives of various authors on the factors influencing the development of children's independence and the difficulties encountered in this educational process.

Within the research, representative works addressing the development of personal autonomy in children were selected. These works examine the role of the family environment and the educational environment in the formation of autonomous behaviors, as well as the impact of social changes on the educational process during the preschool period. The consulted literature includes foundational works in developmental psychology and early childhood pedagogy, theoretical studies, and educational analyses that highlight how personal autonomy gradually develops through educational experiences, social interactions, and children's involvement in practical activities.

The documentary analysis aimed to identify the main theoretical perspectives and the issues highlighted by different authors regarding the development of personal autonomy in preschool children. In this regard, fundamental works and representative studies were consulted, emphasizing the importance of children's active participation in educational and social experiences, the role of adults in encouraging independence, and the impact of the

contemporary context on the formation of autonomous behaviors (Piaget, 1972; Crețu, 2016; Verza & Verza, 2017; Ionescu et al., 2009). These works provide important theoretical references for understanding the development of personal autonomy and for identifying the factors that may positively or negatively influence this process.

The main method used in this research was documentary analysis. This method allows the systematic examination and interpretation of theoretical sources relevant to the research topic and makes it possible to synthesize the ideas formulated by different authors. Through documentary analysis, the central concepts related to personal autonomy were identified, as well as the main difficulties highlighted in specialized literature regarding the development of children's independence during the preschool period.

Furthermore, documentary analysis enabled comparison of the perspectives of different authors on the role of the family and the educational environment in the development of personal autonomy. In this context, both the factors that may facilitate the development of autonomous behaviors and the conditions that may limit the manifestation of children's initiative and responsibility were identified. This approach made it possible to outline a theoretical framework reflecting the complexity of the process of developing personal autonomy.

In addition, the analysis considered curricular and pedagogical guidelines related to the organisation of activities in early childhood education to highlight the extent to which the educational environment can facilitate or limit the development of autonomous behaviours. Pedagogical recommendations regarding the organization of practical activities, the role of play in early childhood education, and the ways in which educators can encourage children's active participation in the learning process were also examined.

The analysis also focused on the relationship between the family environment and early childhood education institutions, based on the idea that the development of personal autonomy cannot be explained solely by a single factor. Specialized literature emphasizes that the formation of autonomous behaviors results from the interaction between the family environment, educational experiences, and the social context in which the child develops. In this regard, collaboration between families and early childhood education institutions is considered an important element in supporting the development of personal autonomy.

The interpretation of the data obtained through documentary analysis was carried out by organizing the information into thematic categories corresponding to the main issues identified by authors in specialized literature. These categories included parental overprotection, excessive use of digital technology, the reduction of time allocated to free play, the insufficient organization of child-centered educational activities, and limited collaboration between families and preschool institutions. Organizing the information into these categories allowed a comparative analysis and highlighted how different authors interpret the current difficulties related to the development of personal autonomy in preschool children.

This methodological approach facilitated a coherent and systematic presentation of the current issues identified in specialized literature, contributing to a better understanding of the factors that may influence the development of personal autonomy in preschool children.

In addition, the analysis considered the relevance, recency, and scientific credibility of the selected sources. Both classical theoretical works and recent international reports in early childhood education were included to provide a comprehensive perspective on the development of personal autonomy in preschool children. This approach allowed the identification of both traditional pedagogical perspectives and contemporary educational

challenges associated with social transformations, digitalization, and changing educational practices in early childhood education.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of specialized literature highlights that the development of personal autonomy in preschool children is influenced by a complex interaction of educational, social, and familial factors, as emphasized in research on early childhood education (Berk, 2013; Crețu, 2016). Numerous studies in the field of developmental psychology and early childhood education emphasize that autonomy develops gradually through children's active participation in everyday experiences and educational activities. From this perspective, the preschool period represents a crucial stage in which children begin to develop independence, initiative, and responsibility.

The concept of personal autonomy refers to the child's ability to perform age-appropriate tasks independently, make simple decisions, organize activities, and assume responsibilities within social and educational contexts. Researchers emphasize that autonomy is not developed spontaneously but rather through direct experiences that allow children to explore their environment, experiment with different actions, and gradually gain confidence in their own abilities.

However, specialized literature also identifies several challenges that may affect the development of autonomous behaviors in preschool children. These challenges are associated with both transformations within family environments and changes in contemporary educational contexts.

Parental Overprotection as an Obstacle to the Development of Autonomy

One of the most frequently discussed issues in the literature concerns parental overprotection. According to Verza and Verza (2017), excessive parental involvement in children's daily activities may limit opportunities for children to develop initiative and independence. In their attempt to protect children or simplify tasks for them, parents often perform activities on their behalf that could otherwise be completed independently.

Such situations commonly occur in everyday routines such as dressing, organizing personal belongings, or completing simple household tasks. When adults constantly intervene and replace children's actions, children lose the opportunity to learn through direct experience and develop problem-solving skills. As Piaget (1972) suggests, children's development is strongly connected to active interaction with their environment, and limiting these opportunities may slow the development of autonomy.

Excessive Use of Digital Technology

Another important issue highlighted in recent literature is the increasing exposure of young children to digital technologies. Several studies indicate that excessive screen time may reduce children's participation in active learning experiences and social interactions essential to the development of autonomy (Ionescu et al., 2009). In early childhood, learning occurs mainly through direct interaction with the surrounding environment, exploration, and participation in practical activities. When a large amount of time is spent in front of digital devices, children may have fewer opportunities to engage in experiences that support the development of initiative and independence.

Digital environments may provide educational benefits when used appropriately; however, excessive reliance on digital devices may reduce opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and interaction with peers. Recent studies emphasize that the increasing presence of digital technologies in children's daily lives may limit experiential learning and affect the development of social and cognitive competencies (OECD, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Moreover, prolonged exposure to digital media may also influence children's attention span and reduce their motivation to participate in activities that require sustained effort or active involvement.

In addition, replacing traditional play activities with screen-based entertainment may limit children's opportunities to practice decision-making, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills. These abilities are essential components of personal autonomy and are typically developed through active participation in social and educational activities. For this reason, specialists emphasize the importance of maintaining a balanced use of technology in early childhood and ensuring that digital tools complement, rather than replace, experiential learning and play-based educational activities.

Reduction of Time Dedicated to Free Play

The reduction of time dedicated to free play represents another significant challenge in the development of children's autonomy. According to Crețu (2016), play represents the fundamental activity of preschool children and provides an essential context for the development of initiative, creativity, and responsibility.

Through play, children experiment with different roles, negotiate rules, interact with peers, and solve various problems independently. These experiences contribute significantly to the development of decision-making skills and self-regulation abilities. More recent research also highlights the importance of play-based learning environments in supporting the development of autonomy and creativity (Whitebread, 2019; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020).

However, in many contemporary educational contexts, the time allocated for free play is gradually decreasing due to structured activities and increased academic expectations. As a result, children may have fewer opportunities to engage in exploratory and autonomous learning experiences.

Insufficient Organization of Child-Centered Educational Activities

Another issue frequently mentioned in specialized literature concerns the insufficient implementation of child-centered educational practices. According to Piaget (1972), learning occurs through active exploration and interaction with the environment. Therefore, educational environments should provide opportunities for children to experiment, make choices, and participate actively in learning activities.

In practice, however, certain educational contexts remain strongly adult-directed, limiting children's participation in decision-making processes. When activities are excessively structured and directed by educators, children may adopt passive roles rather than actively engaging in learning. Contemporary studies emphasize that educational environments that support playful learning and exploration contribute significantly to the development of autonomy and independent thinking (Zosh et al., 2023).

Lack of Coherence between Family and Preschool

The development of personal autonomy is also influenced by the relationship between the family and early childhood education institutions. Research indicates that inconsistencies between educational practices at home and those implemented in preschool may create confusion for children and limit the development of autonomous behaviors (Crețu, 2016; Verza & Verza, 2017).

For example, when children are encouraged to organize their materials and complete tasks independently in preschool but are constantly assisted by parents at home, they may receive contradictory messages regarding their abilities and responsibilities. For this reason, effective communication and collaboration between parents and educators are essential to supporting children's independence.

In addition to the aspects discussed above, recent research emphasizes that the development of autonomy in early childhood is strongly influenced by the quality of the educational environment and by the pedagogical strategies adopted by educators. Learning contexts that encourage exploration, experimentation, and decision-making provide children with opportunities to gradually develop independence and responsibility. When children are allowed to actively participate in organizing activities, selecting materials, or solving simple problems, they begin to understand their own capabilities and develop confidence in their abilities.

Educational environments that promote autonomy-supportive practices play a particularly important role in this process. Such environments are characterized by flexibility, encouragement of initiative, and the creation of opportunities for children to express their ideas and preferences. Studies in early childhood education show that when children are encouraged to participate actively in learning activities, they demonstrate higher levels of motivation, curiosity, and persistence in completing tasks (Whitebread, 2019). These behaviors are closely connected to the development of autonomous learning skills that are essential for later educational success.

Another important factor influencing the development of personal autonomy is the social interaction within the preschool environment. Through collaboration with peers and participation in group activities, children learn to negotiate rules, solve conflicts, and assume responsibilities within a social context. These experiences contribute not only to the development of autonomy but also to the formation of social competence and emotional regulation. Research indicates that cooperative learning environments and play-based educational activities significantly enhance children's ability to act independently while also respecting the needs and perspectives of others (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020).

Furthermore, contemporary studies emphasize the importance of balancing adult guidance with opportunities for independent action. Educators and parents should provide support and encouragement while allowing children to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from their experiences. Excessive control or intervention may limit children's initiative and reduce their willingness to explore new situations. In contrast, supportive adult guidance helps children gradually develop decision-making abilities and self-confidence.

Recent international reports also underline the need to adapt early childhood education systems to the challenges of modern societies, including digital transformation and changing family dynamics. Educational policies increasingly emphasize the importance of child-centered approaches that support autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking from an early age (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). Such approaches encourage educators to design

learning environments that allow children to participate actively in their own learning process and to develop independent behaviors.

Therefore, the development of personal autonomy in preschool children should be viewed as a complex educational process arising from the interplay of multiple factors, including family practices, educational environments, and broader social influences. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective educational strategies that support children's independence and responsibility from early childhood.

The main issues related to the development of personal autonomy in preschool children identified in specialized literature are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Current issues in the development of personal autonomy in preschool children

Author	Identified problem	Effects on personal autonomy
Piaget (1972)	Adult-centered learning activities	Limits independent decision-making
Ionescu & Bocoș (2009)	Increased digital technology use	Reduces experiential learning opportunities
Crețu (2016)	Decrease in free play opportunities	Limits exploration and initiative
Verza & Verza (2017)	Parental overprotection	Reduces independence and responsibility
Whitebread (2019)	Insufficient play-based learning	Limits the development of autonomy and self-regulation
Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2020)	Reduced playful learning environments	Affects creativity and problem-solving abilities
OECD (2021)	Increased exposure to digital environments	Reduces social interaction and experiential learning
UNICEF (2022)	Limited access to child-centered educational practices	Affects independence and participation
Zosh et al. (2023)	Decline of play-based pedagogy	Reduces opportunities for autonomous learning
UNESCO (2024)	Inequalities in early childhood education	Limits children's initiative and participation
European Commission (2025)	Lack of autonomy-supportive practices	Slows the development of independent learning behaviors
OECD (2026)	Challenges in digital childhood	Affects children's autonomy and social competence

The information presented in Table 1 indicates that the development of personal autonomy in preschool children is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, both educational practices and broader social transformations. Classical research emphasizes the role of parental attitudes and educational practices in shaping children's independence and initiative (Piaget, 1972; Verza & Verza, 2017). At the same time, more recent studies

highlight emerging challenges related to digitalization, reduced opportunities for play-based learning, and inequalities in access to quality early childhood education (Whitebread, 2019; OECD, 2021). Recent international reports also emphasize the importance of creating educational environments that encourage children's initiative, exploration, and active participation in learning activities. Child-centered approaches and playful learning environments support the development of autonomy, creativity, and social competence, allowing children to experiment with ideas and gradually assume responsibilities appropriate to their age (Zosh et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Furthermore, contemporary educational policies highlight the need to adapt early childhood education systems to the challenges of modern societies. Supporting children's autonomy requires the creation of inclusive educational environments that allow children to participate actively in the learning process and develop independent learning behaviors (European Commission, 2025; OECD, 2026). Overall, the literature suggests that both family and educational environments play a fundamental role in providing children with opportunities to explore, experiment, and develop responsible and autonomous behaviors from early childhood.

Conclusions

The development of personal autonomy represents a fundamental objective of preschool education, contributing to the formation of children's independence, responsibility, and self-confidence. The analysis of specialized literature presented in this study highlights that the development of autonomy in preschool children is influenced by multiple interconnected factors related to family practices, educational environments, and broader social changes.

Among the most significant issues identified in the literature are parental overprotection, excessive exposure to digital technologies, the reduction of time dedicated to free play, and the insufficient implementation of child-centered educational practices. These factors may limit children's opportunities to explore their environment, make independent decisions, and assume responsibilities appropriate to their developmental stage.

Therefore, supporting the development of personal autonomy requires creating educational contexts that encourage exploration, active participation, and cooperation between families and early childhood education institutions. Promoting child-centered approaches and play-based learning environments may significantly contribute to the development of independent behaviors and to children's successful adaptation to future educational and social contexts.

Future research may explore how educational practices and family environments can support the development of personal autonomy in preschool children. Moreover, developing educational strategies that promote child-centered learning and active participation may contribute significantly to strengthening children's independence and responsibility from early childhood.

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