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SECTION IX.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EDUCATION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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VERBAL SCAFFOLDING IN PLAY SITUATIONS FOR FOSTERING SAFE BEHAVIOR IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Fostering safe behavior in preschool children cannot be limited to communicating rules and monitoring compliance with them. A child needs not only to hear and remember a rule but also to identify the essential features of a particular situation, understand the purpose of the rule, relate it to the circumstances, choose an appropriate course of action, carry it out, or seek help when needed. Play provides favorable conditions for acquiring such experience because it allows real-life situations to be modeled safely, play scenarios and roles to be varied, ways of acting to be rehearsed, and adult assistance to be gradually reduced. In this process, verbal scaffolding in play situations is particularly important because it connects the child's perception of the situation, understanding of the rule, choice, and practical action [3; 5].

Within the scope of this study, the term «verbal scaffolding in play situations» refers to purposeful verbal interaction between an adult and a child that helps the child orient to a modeled situation, understand its essential features, verbally identify a potential danger, make sense of the rule, choose and explain an appropriate course of action, and, when necessary, report what has happened or seek help. This understanding does not reduce verbal scaffolding to the teacher's explanations. Its function is to support the child's own verbal and practical activity

and to facilitate a gradual transition from making sense of the situation together with an adult to increasingly independent choice and action.

This approach is theoretically grounded in preschool language education, particularly in the view that children's language development is shaped through communication and activity. In the works of A. Bohush and N. Havrysh, preschool children's language development is considered in relation to communication, cognition, and different types of child activity [1]. In the context of fostering safe behavior, this position is especially significant: a child's verbal response is pedagogically meaningful not in itself, but insofar as it is connected with the child's orientation to a specific situation, choice of an appropriate course of action, and practical enactment of that choice.

Verbal scaffolding should be structured in accordance with the logic through which a child acquires experience of safe behavior. At the stage of recognizing a situation, the adult directs the child's attention to an essential feature by means of a brief question, comment, or verbal prompt: «What did you notice?», «What has changed here?», «Where do you need to stop?». It is important that the question does not contain the answer. When an adult provides the appropriate safe response prematurely, the child has less opportunity to orient independently. Verbal assistance should therefore be provided at the minimum level sufficient for the child: from a pause and an open-ended question to clarification, a reminder, a choice between two accessible options, or verbalizing the action together.

Another function of verbal scaffolding is to help the child establish an understandable connection between a feature of the situation, the relevant rule, and a possible consequence. Rather than requiring the child simply to repeat the rule, the teacher should encourage the child to explain its meaning: why, in a particular situation, it is appropriate to stop, move away, wait, call an adult, or change the course of action. For younger preschool children, brief utterances combined with demonstration or joint action are sufficient. For children in the middle preschool years, questions that prompt recognition and choice become increasingly important. With appropriate support, older preschool children can compare safe and unsafe ways of acting, explain their own choices, and apply a familiar safe course of action in partially changed circumstances. At the same time, these abilities depend not only on age but also on the child's individual language abilities, prior experience, emotional state, and the nature of pedagogical support.

Particular importance should be attached to verbal actions that are directly embedded in safe behavior. These include the ability to inform an adult about a potentially unsafe condition, ask for help, warn another child involved in the play,

verbally refuse an unwanted or unsafe action, negotiate turn-taking with peers during play, clarify a rule, or communicate one's own state. In this context, seeking help should not be interpreted as a lack of independence [6]. On the contrary, the ability to recognize the limits of one's own capabilities, identify an adult who can provide help, and clearly communicate what has happened or what kind of help is needed constitutes an appropriate course of action.

Sociodramatic play creates favorable conditions for children to master such forms of verbal interaction and safe ways of acting. When taking on a role, a child coordinates their actions with those of other players, negotiates, responds to changes in the play scenario, and uses utterances appropriate to the situation. The teacher can facilitate the development of a play scenario that requires children to make a safe choice: a character becomes lost; another participant suggests a potentially unsafe action; an obstacle appears along an imaginary route; or a character needs help [2]. The adult's task is not to turn play into drill, but to sustain the play scenario and create conditions in which the necessary verbal action arises naturally and becomes a means of acquiring experience of safe behavior: asking, informing, warning, refusing, negotiating, or calling for help.

The effectiveness of verbal scaffolding is determined not by the amount of adult explanation but by its appropriateness to the situation and to the abilities of the individual child. Excessive verbal input may make it more difficult for the child to orient to the situation, particularly when verbal instructions need to be quickly connected with action [4]. Instructions should therefore be brief, unambiguous, and directly linked to the action; when necessary, they may be supplemented with a demonstration, gesture, pictogram, cards showing the sequence of actions, or joint enactment. For a child with speech and language difficulties, the amount of verbal information, the complexity of linguistic constructions, and the mode of response should be adapted without changing the substance of the safe action itself. What is pedagogically significant is not the length or elaborateness of the child's utterance, but whether the child understands the situation and can communicate about it in an accessible way and act safely.

Thus, verbal scaffolding in play situations should be regarded as a functional component of fostering safe behavior in preschool children. It provides a link between recognizing a situation, understanding a rule, making a choice, taking practical action, and reflecting on that action. The pedagogical value of such scaffolding lies in the gradual transition from explanation and joint verbalization to guiding questions, brief verbal prompts, and the child's independent verbal and practical response. A promising direction for further research is to specify ways of

providing verbal support to children with different speech and language abilities when using modeled play situations aimed at fostering safe behavior.

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