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# The safety of childhood as a fundamental issue of developing preschool education

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## Abstract

**Context and relevance.** At the beginning of the 21st century, preschool childhood is increasingly exposed

to global civilizational influences, threatening its transformation into the initial stage of organized education and upbringing of a child with a predetermined set of competencies that allow them to take a worthy place in the technological chain of training a human machine completely immersed in its functions (educational, industrial, family, etc.). The presented provisions actualize the problem of childhood safety, which has growing theoretical and practical significance. **Objective.** To update the understanding of safety and the value of preschool childhood as a cultural phenomenon and a fundamental issue in developing preschool education, especially in light of the exacerbation of global problems faced by humanity at the beginning of the third millennium. **Hypothesis.** Reflection on the genesis of scientific knowledge about the amplification of child development, introduced into circulation by the theory of activity of A.V. Zaporozhets and the position of L.S. Vygotsky on the zones of child development, will allow us to develop theoretical foundations for the development of ideas about modern preschool childhood as a cultural phenomenon and its safety.

**Methods and materials.** Achievement of the goal and verification of the realism of the working hypothesis were accomplished through a combination of theoretical research methods: analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction. **Results.** The conducted research allows us to state that the avalanche-like growth of scientific and technological achievements, leading to an increase in the density of events in preschool childhood, actualizes the problem of safety of the child's physical and mental development. **Conclusions.** Scientific reflection on the research problem allowed us to formulate a number of theoretical provisions that make it possible to resist the transformation of preschool education into a sphere of satisfying the requests of collective adults for the intensification of a child's development (often achieved through the conversion of means and methods of school education and upbringing), by creating an educational environment in preschool educational organizations and in the family that is safe for the child's physical and mental development. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of using the materials of the article in the development of conceptual provisions of preschool education.

**Keywords:** childhood as a phenomenon of culture, amplification of development, zones of child's development, safety of preschool childhood

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# Безопасность детства как фундаментальная проблема развивающего дошкольного образования

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## Резюме

**Контекст и актуальность.** В начале XXI века дошкольное детство все больше подвергается глобальным цивилизационным воздействиям, угрожающим ее трансформации до начальной ступени организованного обучения и воспитания ребенка с заранее заданным набором компетенций, позволяющих занять достойное место в технологической цепочке создания человекомашины, целиком погруженной в свои функции (образовательные, производственные, семейные и т. п.). Представленные положения актуализируют проблему безопасности детства, обладающую растущей теоретической и практической значимостью. **Цель статьи.** Актуализация проблемы безопасности и ценности дошкольного детства как феномена культуры и фундаментальной проблемы развивающего дошкольного образования в период обострения глобальных проблем человечества в начале третьего тысячелетия. **Гипотеза.** Рефлексия генезиса научных знаний об амплификации развития ребенка, введенного в обиход в теории деятельности А.В. Запорожцем, и положения Л.С. Выготского о зонах развития ребенка, позволит выработать теоретические основания разработки представлений о современном дошкольном детстве как феномене культуры и его безопасности. **Методы и материалы.** Достижение цели и проверка реалистичности гипотезы достигались совокупностью теоретических методов исследования: анализа, синтеза, индукции, дедукции. **Результаты.** Проведенное исследование позволяет констатировать что лавинообразное нарастание достижений научно-технического прогресса, приводящее к увеличению плотности событийности дошкольного детства, актуализирует проблему безопасности физического и психического развития ребенка. **Выводы.** Научная рефлексия проблемы исследования актуализировала ряд теоретических положений, позволяющих противостоять превращению дошкольного образования в сферу удовлетворения запросов коллективного взрослого на интенсификацию развития ребенка посредством конверсии средств и методов школьного обучения и воспитания за счет создания безопасной для физического и психического развития образовательной среды в дошкольных образовательных организациях и семье. Практическая значимость исследования состоит в возможности применения материалов статьи при разработке концептуальных положений дошкольного образования.

**Ключевые слова:** детство как феномен культуры, амплификация развития, зоны развития ребенка, безопасность дошкольного детства

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## Introduction

Today, there's not a single authoritative psychological or pedagogical school of thought that doesn't recognize the uniqueness and intrinsic value of preschool childhood as an autonomous stage of human development, associated with the formation of a child's consciousness through the first tentative attempts to establish cause-and-effect relationships in the subject-based cognition of the surrounding reality, the understanding of one's actions, emotions, and thoughts, the first generalizations about oneself and the world around oneself, and the playful modelling of reality. This emphasis is

placed on the highly eventful nature of childhood, which is associated with the creative reproduction of phylogensis in the first seven years of a child's life (Zinchenko, 2018, p. 20).

Against this backdrop, educators and parents, captivated by fashionable social trends concerning children's unique abilities and concerned for their future, explicitly transform their lives into an endless pursuit of rapidly passing time, intensifying child development through various forms of imitation of historically established human activities. In these activities, living movement, feeling, words, and thoughts are not born in the child but are hastily and mechanically assimilated. Wishing the

best for their children, adults replace the process of active appropriation of objective forms (images) of culture with a mechanical (stimulus-reactive) transfer of its values from one mind to another (Zinchenko, 2018, p. 22). The maximum that a child can achieve with such care from an adult is "...an artificial or, what is the same, a 'disabled' intellect..." (Zinchenko, 2018, p. 159) that dismembers and crushes the world in his consciousness into small fragments, wherein he memorizes the technique of movement rather than constructing a living movement in the conditions of correlating his physicality with a given cultural model, memorizes a socially approved way of expressing feelings rather than experiencing them in various situations of communication with another person, and replenishes his memory with new words without understanding their meaning.

**Results of scientific reflection.** In their extreme forms, preschool educational institutions resemble factories for the pedagogical design of future first-graders, with a set of required qualities and personality traits that determine their readiness for school. However, this ignores the fact that the density of events in preschool childhood significantly exceeds that of the cultural and historical development of humanity, thanks to the child's ability to experience wonder, to stop the passage of time, to live simultaneously in the past, present, and future, in real and imagined reality, in which the habitual, retrospective mode of recollection is combined with prospective modeling aimed at the future, allowing children to experience, within the relatively short period of preschool childhood, the centuries-long journey of the development of *Homo sapiens*.

In this cultural tradition, childlike genius is manifested, allowing one to transform fiction into reality and reality into fiction, the past into the future, and the future into the past, and to take a polycentric position in play activities. Excessive and intrusive adult concern for the child's future distorts their present with an increased intensity of development and, as a consequence, blurs the line between stimulus-response learning and development, reduces the uniqueness of early childhood to the rapid acquisition of cultural products, and leaves children defenseless against the challenges of the rapidly accelerating twenty-first century, where interaction and communication—as participation, empathy, mutual penetration of worlds, and engagement with cultural values—becomes an unaffordable luxury. As a result, the process of facilitating the formation of an organic unity of past, present, and future, of the real and the imagined in the child's consciousness, is replaced by living in the rush of the rapidly slipping present. The process of the child actively apprehending cultural values is substituted with training in socially approved forms of behavior and activity. The pedagogy of cooperation between adult and child degenerates into the use of educational means, forms, and methods inappropriate to the child's age and abilities (Rodin et al., 2022, p. 29), thereby causing irreparable harm to the child.

Against this background, the generalized image of a preschool-aged child as a microcosm, created by A.V. Zaporozhets and his students, becomes relevant. In this microcosm, the entire real world and all great cultural-historical epochs are contained in an embryonic state and are revealed as children's consciousness expands; consciousness itself then becomes a universal form of mental reflection of the past, present, and probable future. Developing ideas about personality as the highest form of sociality and the drama of a possible human being, A.V. Zaporozhets proposed creating conditions for the fullest realization of children's potential abilities to independently form knowledge about themselves and the surrounding world through active engagement with cultural values at each stage of preschool childhood, subtly connecting these with L.S. Vygotsky's concepts of a child's zones of actual and proximal development. This theory is called the amplification of development.

The need to introduce this concept into the vocabulary of child psychology and preschool pedagogy was linked to the development of the age-related aspect of A.N. Leontiev's activity-based paradigm, in particular, the fullest realization of the potential of the entire ensemble of children's activities in early and preschool age.

In the development of A.V. Zaporozhets's ideas on the amplification of development at the beginning of the twenty-first century, several important points can be identified.

*The first proposition* is the relevance of contemporary realities associated with the emergence of new forms of activity (digital technologies, virtual communications, hybrid educational environments), which necessitates the adoption of the following axioms:

1) the expansion of the ontogenetic boundaries of the concept of developmental amplification to all periods of human life;

2) the multi-meaningful nature of developmental amplification through pedagogical means, methods, forms of teaching and education, and pedagogically unformed models of historically established and emerging types of human lifestyles across eras and cultures (Kudryavtsev, 2022).

*The second point* is determined by the challenges of uncertainty, complexity, and diversity of the modern world, which requires considering the amplification of development within the evolutionary logic of construction, as well as other unattainable spaces of human development in a situation of uncertainty in a changing world, and its relativistic perception, which allows the child to break through the barriers of traditional thinking in the process of understanding the rapidly changing world and themselves in it through established joyful and carnival forms of action and play for the sake of play (Asmolov, 2015), conditional reality and clowning in the understanding of M.M. Bakhtin, which gives the child the opportunity to confuse, parody, exaggerate life, to speak in a parodied manner, "... not to be literal, not to

be oneself, the right to depict life as a comedy and people as actors, the right to remove masks from others..." (Bakhtin, 1975).

*The third point reflects the development of L.S. Vygotsky's ideas about the zones of a child's development as a complex, structured phenomenon, carried out by V.K. Zaretsky (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 243) and according to which:*

1) any aspect (vector) of a child's cognitive and personal development can be considered through the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD);

2) the expansion of the ZPD in the course of a child's development occurs in cooperation with adults and peers and, therefore, depends on the quality of their joint, shared activity;

3) the multi-vector nature of the zones of actual and proximal development, the magnitude of which is determined by the regularities of psychogenesis and psychological-pedagogical influences.

4) the presence of at least three zones of child development: the zone of actual development, the zone of immediate development, and the zone of currently inaccessible development. The latter is characterized as a zone in which the child cannot consciously, "with intelligence," or without imitating, interact with adults (according to Vygotsky, 1984; Zaretsky, 2007, 2016, 2024; Zinchenko, 2000, 2016; Rubtsov, 2016; Elkonin, 2016). This occurs when the possibility of the child performing collective activities and communication is determined by adults as a potential ability (italics added by us), reflecting the potency of initiating mental processes that then become the child's internal possession (Leont'ev, 2001; Vygotsky, 2005, p. 11).

The intersection of L.S. Vygotsky's ideas on the multi-vector and hierarchical nature of developmental zones with A.V. Zaporozhets's propositions on the amplification, intensification, and simplification of development highlights bifurcation points in the development of the child as a highly complex, structured psychological system.

These propositions on the zones of child development are closely linked not only to L.S. Vygotsky's ideas on self-development according to one's own internal laws, as opposed to the child's transformation into a socially determined reality, but also to concerns about protecting the child's health, physical, and mental development — that is, the need to protect the child's psyche from the perspective of their personal age. Each era has its own universal structure of experiences, its own drama. Ignoring this is detrimental to the child's personality. In his outlines of his theory of age, L.S. Vygotsky insisted on practical actions to "protect the child's development" (Yaroshevsky, 2020, p. 271). It can be said without any exaggeration that absolutely all practical measures for the protection of a child's development, his upbringing and education, as they relate to the characteristics of a given age, necessarily require developmental diagnostics. The application of developmental diagnostics to

solving countless and infinitely diverse practical problems is determined in each specific case by the scientific development of developmental diagnostics itself and the demands placed on it in solving each specific practical problem" (Vygotsky, 1984a, p. 268). According to M.G. Yaroshevsky, this same light illuminates his concept of experience, which became his final word in the search for an integrated framework imbued with the drama of the organization and history of the individual (Yaroshevsky, 2020, p. 271).

The problem of amplifying development in joint shared subject activity becomes relevant in the era of post-industrial society, where soulless materialism, under the slogans of humanism, has taken the place of the enlightened philosopher, declaring technical progress as a condition for human well-being and an inexhaustible source of unexpected and incomprehensible phenomena. Robotics, IT technologies, and artificial intelligence act as additional factors and, at the same time, as a problem for expanding the adequate actions, tools, and forms of a child's cultural development activities.

The need to process a large amount of information in the form of bright, constantly changing visual images, without time to comprehend them, leads to a rupture in the child's thought connections. Their consciousness, overloaded with the flow of information, becomes incapable of dissecting and understanding the multidimensionality of existence. The child's life unfolds under the illusion of absolute knowledge and participation, a sense of involvement in the flow of life, which in reality is only an imitation, preventing the formation of a clear picture of the world in their mind, measured by well-defined cultural markers of good and evil, reality and fiction. At the same time, the process of exteriorization does not occur; it is incorporated into the child's consciousness as separate elements. Everything happens here and now, under the weak control of human consciousness, which is consequently replaced by biased images. As a result, following nature, the child gradually integrates into the technical environment, the function of which is to assign preschool educational institutions to artificially isolated territories. Even now, the child is distanced from universal computerization in order to protect their human abilities from technization, which carries the risk of transforming education and upbringing into a process of turning the child into a social object, a human tool — a function consisting of a body capable of performing actions necessary for its existence, and a special organ, consciousness, controlling the body, whose task is to ensure the body's behavior is adequate to the conditions of life.

F.I. Girenok is more radical. He argues that in the modern post-industrial world there is no place for childhood, with its all-encompassing naivety, vividness, and concreteness of living in the present, in which the child's mind is not yet separated from feeling and its inability to articulate thoughts, and which cannot be fully understood without experiencing the drama of the formation

of his consciousness and personality. To the meaningless events of the world, approaching the speed of light, deprived of the possibility of contemplation — in which nothing can be seen, understood, or extracted—he contrasts the integrity of the child's naive, all-encompassing worldview with the piercing lines from A.P. Platonov's story "The Cow." Here are those words: "The students were assigned to write an essay about their lives. Vasya wrote in his notebook: 'We had a cow. When she was alive, my mother, father, and I drank her milk. Then she gave birth to a calf, and he too. There were three of us, and he was the fourth, and there was enough for everyone. The cow also plowed and hauled loads. Then her son was sold. The cow began to suffer but soon died; she was hit by a train. And she, too, was eaten because she was beef. The cow gave us everything: her milk, her son, her meat, her skin, her entrails, and her bones; she was kind. I remember our cow and will never forget her.' (Girenok, 2021; Platonov, 1983).

This all-encompassing acceptance of the child as a manifestation of the naive universal human principle is lacking in timely preschool and early education, a world whose creation begins with the infant's acquisition of the experience of separating merged sensations, followed by their division against the backdrop of care for the child and stimulation of their activity in relation to the surrounding environment by an adult. Then comes the development of the ability to think in early childhood using abstractions or symbols in combined activities, thrice mediated by the adult — the mediator of culture, sign, and tool. Next — the emergence and development of extra-sensory thinking and the ability to think in ideal images and operate with 'pure' signs and other symbolic means in preschool age during joint multi-age activities of the child with the collective other (Rodin, 2023).

Actively exploring the surrounding world of objects and itself within it, the child seems to be divided. On the one hand, it organically exists within a sensory-given, humanized environment, a world of things with established human modes of activity. On the other hand, it exists within a system of forms of social expression of this sensory-given world, a socially conscious and spiritually assimilated world, through the comprehension of the meaning of activity in words. A child's physical action cannot be understood as an act of cognitive activity (its motives, goals, degree of awareness) outside of its symbolic expression (Rodin, 2023). Drawing on the words of M.M. Bakhtin, we aim to construct '...his important testimony, explanations, confessions, admissions, and further develop his possible or actual inner speech...' (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 292). By revealing and self-identifying in words, the child's initiative develops into objective action and a meaningful, humanly significant deed. Here we are talking about words that are born in the process of word creation between a child and a collective adult, who is faced with the need to constantly reflect on what is happening with the student and, in accordance

with this understanding, facilitate his movement in the active comprehension of universal human culture (Ilyenkov, 2019; Rodin, 2023).

## Conclusion

We and our children happen to live in an era of radical civilizational changes that provoke a rethinking of the fundamental ideas of existence and reason for humans, as posed by I. Kant regarding the potential of human reason—not as a fully formed, knowing reason *per se*, but as a reason that develops throughout life, a reason that not only comprehends the meanings of culture but also generates them. This requires a focused slowing down of thought from multiple perspectives, framing questions that drive the researcher's mind to uncover the phenomenon of childhood in the development of human culture, its vulnerability to the forces of technocratic civilization, and the necessity of preserving its cultural creative essence.

The first perspective is based on L.S. Vygotsky's brilliant idea of the multivector and hierarchical zones of development, along with A.V. Zaporozhets' propositions on amplification, intensification, and simplification of development, which capture the bifurcation points of a child's psychogenesis as a complexly structured psychological system.

The second is that a slow, thoughtful reflection on the genesis of scientific knowledge about the amplification of child development, introduced into circulation by A.V. Zaporozhets's theory of activity and L.S. Vygotsky's position on the zones of child development, allows us to uncover this secret and to develop theoretical concepts of preschool childhood as a cultural phenomenon that sets the vector of knowledge about the development of a child's thought, grounding in his developing consciousness the civilizational changes of the 21st century. In this regard, the task of an adult is not to interfere with this process by intensifying the development of the child's consciousness, but from the first days of his life to accompany the process of cognizing the dynamic, dialectically contradictory relationships "person — person," "person — society," "person — nature," "person — civilization," and "person — culture."

The third perspective suggests that the concept of a child's developmental zones is closely linked not only to L.S. Vygotsky's ideas on self-development according to one's own internal laws, as opposed to the transformation of the child into a socially determined reality, but also to concerns about protecting their physical and mental development. Ignoring these concepts is detrimental to the development of the individual, whose destiny is shaped in childhood. In this context, ensuring childhood safety is a necessary condition for successful upbringing and personal development.

The fourth perspective reveals the phenomenon of childhood, with the all-encompassing trust acquired

by the child practically from the first days of life in interactions with adults and which determines the emergence of distinctively human feelings and experiences, without which it is impossible to imagine the future of humanity. Childhood and culture are semantic synonyms, filling the space between the individual and the surrounding objective environment, in which "... various forms of semiotic-symbolic, objective, verbal, and, in the broad sense, mental activity are formed..." (Zinchenko, 2016, p. 224). A consumerist attitude towards childhood and its spontaneity, against the backdrop of technocratic determinism – in the form of the intensification and simplification of child development – threatens to replace culture with the environment, turning a person into a function.

The fifth perspective emphasizes that the ongoing changes in the world pose a challenge to preschool education in ensuring the safety of early childhood, a cultural phenomenon. It is directly connected to the transformation of human nature. Pedagogical influences on the child must be responsible, based on knowledge of general patterns of the child's growth and development in a constantly changing environment, grounded in an interdisciplinary synthesis of achievements in biology, psychology, and pedagogy, minimizing didactic risks, and ensuring sustainable, enriched mental development of the child as a guaran-

tee of further cultural development and the preservation of rational life on Earth.

The sixth approach requires proposing, as a supertask, the pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy of studying phenomena of amplification and zones of proximal development as a model of human development. The intermediate result of addressing this problem is revealing the child's transition from one type of independent regulation to another, more advanced and adequate one in relation to constantly changing life conditions. The main goal is, based on the biological and psychological laws of human development, to foster the child's attachment to universal values such as kindness, beauty, humanism, reason, love, aspiration for perfection, and full health.

**Limitations.** The framework of this study is limited to the reflection of the genesis of L.S. Vygotsky's ideas on zones of proximal development and A.V. Zaporozhets' ideas on the amplification of child development. The focus of the analysis is on the theoretical foundations that allow for the discussion of the necessity to ensure the safety of early childhood. This is viewed as a phenomenon of culture and a guarantee for solving fundamental problems of humanity, at the center of which is the change in the nature of man himself and his future.

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