

Anna Mirny

What are the educational needs of preschool children in Russia?

A summary of expert interviews with Russian child specialists

What do child experts express to be the most important educational needs of children in Russia's fast-changing society? As the adults may themselves struggle with the changes, TV can provide guidelines for preschoolers to develop, for example, tolerance, ethic norms, and a healthy lifestyle.

In preparation for its 2005/06 season, the Russian co-production of *Sesame Street*, *Ulitsa Sezam*¹, initiated a study to update its understanding of the developmental needs of Russian children. The study was based on interviewing child specialists in different regions of Russia, asking them about the kinds of messages a good educational programme should bring today. We conducted 14 individual and 5 focus-group interviews gaining insights from 72 experts. Among our participants were teachers, developmental psychologists, administrators, pediatricians, library and museum employees and other specialists working with preschool children in the cities of Moscow, Novgorod Veliky and Samara. The responses of experts indicated that the educational needs of children should be considered in light of the critical changes happening in Russian society. The specialists consistently replied to our question about children with a referral to the current problems

of adults. The picture emerging from the interviews was not only about children needing help in one or another developmental domain, but mostly about adults being unable to help them in these areas.

The educational needs of children stem directly from the changes in society

Summarising our interviews with specialists, the educational needs of children stem directly from the changes experienced by the whole country, particularly such as increasing social diversity, the rise of individualism, change of values, the limited access to cultural institutions and the increasingly unsafe environment.

Social diversity

Since most Russian educators and parents were born to a Soviet state, the teachers and parents today are faced with an immense challenge. They are confronted with the struggle of bringing children up in a new society that adults have just learnt to navigate themselves, and in which many of their own experiences of growing up are irrelevant. One of the most striking changes following the break-up of the Soviet Union and introduction of the market economy has been the emergence

of economic layers in Russian society. The teachers and parents themselves grew up under the slogans of social equality, supported by realities of almost equally poor financial opportunities for all Soviet families. Today, however, Russian people experience rapidly growing financial stratification with many levels of economic inequality.

Therefore, it is not surprising that an educational need most often mentioned by specialists in the interviews was the development of tolerance to different levels of financial status. Children react to their friends having better or worse toys and clothes, to beggars and orphans on the streets. But, what makes this problem more difficult is that the child's teacher, who was raised under different conditions, is often incompetent at teaching children how to deal with this. In Russia, lessons of how to be tolerant to people with different incomes are needed by both children and adults. A very similar situation is found with regard to other social diversity. With the collapse of the Soviet regime, people have begun to appreciate the freedom to engage in different ways of life. The actualisation of different ethnic and religious identities, migration, greater exposure of people with disabilities, public emergence of homosexuality, and increased personal creativity has resulted in the great variety of lifestyles. In the context of

the society being increasingly less uniformed, the need to develop tolerance to any otherness is absolutely crucial for Russian children today.

Change of values

Many of the education specialists suggested that modern Russian parents are lost in the process of raising their children. With the old Soviet ideology and morality discarded, they are not sure what basic ethical lessons to teach their children. One of the specialists explained in the interview: "People today know they should not hurt others or steal, yet, for instance, if before everyone knew that it's not good to read a letter addressed to someone else, now people are not sure; maybe these days it has become OK?"

Religion is still relatively weak as a moral guide and the spirit of general relativism present in society makes people lost in ethical norms. The specialists working with children all noted that modern preschoolers are much less polite, less respectful towards adults, less caring, and more aggressive and possessive than their peers were 10 years ago. An educational need stemming from these observations is clear – children need to be taught the basic ethic norms, meanings of good and bad, and to learn respect and etiquette.

The rise of individualism

The establishment of capitalism in Russian society is quite naturally being accompanied by the rise of individualism. The common gatherings and celebrations that used to be so characteristic of the hearty Russian culture are becoming rare, and adults spend less leisure time with their friends and family and more time alone pursuing their own goals.

In this context it is not surprising that when specialists in education were asked to characterise today's preschoolers, many of them answered that compared to previous generations, modern young children were much

more self-centred and determined about their own interests. They play less with their peers and are less inclined to help the others. The teachers also noted that Russian children today spend much more time alone, in front of TV and computers.

The child of collectivism is giving way to a child-individualist. Some of the educators suggested that common games among children are becoming less popular following the similar tendencies in adult society. The specialists in education are quite worried about the influence of these trends on children and stated that kids need to be more engaged in common activities, do more things together, and see other people working or playing together and helping each other.

The child of collectivism is giving way to a child-individualist

Limited access to cultural institutions

The institutions of cultural entertainment such as theatres, museums, art galleries, musical concerts, etc., are getting more expensive and have become unaffordable for many poor families. The teachers were saying: "In my class I have some children, who don't go to theatre because they have nothing appropriate to wear, and others don't have money to buy tickets." The limited access to cultural institutions has consequently created the need to incorporate art and culture in TV programmes and other media.

The unsafe world

The increasingly unsafe environment is one of the most serious societal problems affecting children in Russia. With crime and terrorism on the rise, children need to learn how to live in a society that hardly guarantees them any safety. Educators, psychologists and pediatricians have all suggested that children need to be aware of the more dangerous world around

them. The problems of public health also have a significant negative effect on children. The rise of asthma and allergic diseases related to the polluted environment, the unceasing Russian problems of alcoholism and tobacco smoking, HIV and drug abuse all find their ways to children. Explaining the risks of alcoholism, smoking and drug abuse from the very young age, propagating the healthy lifestyle and developing personal responsibility for the choices one makes regarding his/her health were also mentioned as the most urgent educational needs for Russian children today.

The educational needs formulated by child experts laid ground for the curriculum and production of the 4th season of *Ulitsa Sezam*. Particularly, the season was focussed on helping children develop tolerance to diversity (e. g., it had special segments on orphans, disabled children and migrants), build social skills (like caring, sharing and working together), develop safety awareness and promote healthy lifestyles. Special attention was paid to arts and creativity development. ■

NOTES

¹ *Ulitsa Sezam* is an educational children's programme which had been a favourite preschool TV show in Russia beginning in 1996.

THE AUTHOR

Anna Mirny, Ed. D., is a Harvard-trained educational psychologist whose research explores schooling as a social context for child development from the cross-cultural perspective. Since 2004, Dr. Mirny serves as an educational consultant for *Sesame Street* in Russia.

