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What do Parents of Homeschoolers Do to Improve the Well-being of their Children (Based on SDT-approach)

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This paper focuses on the practices that parents of homeschoolers use to support their children's well-being during the learning process. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), practices related to satisfying basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, affiliation) and supporting intrinsic motivation can be considered as practices to improve the level of well-being. We used the database that was created by analyses of 39 interviews with homeschoolers' parents. The authors conclude that parents consider autonomy and intrinsic motivation to be the main focus of their attention. Parents also pay attention to satisfying the other two basic psychological needs: competence and affiliation.

Keywords: home-schooling, student well-being, parents, well-being support practices, qualitative research, self-determination theory.

Как родители, выбравшие семейную форму обучения, заботятся о благополучии своих детей

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В статье описаны практики поддержки благополучия, которые используют родители, выбравшие семейную форму образования для своих детей. В соответствии с теорией самодетерминации к таким практикам отнесены те, которые связаны с удовлетворением базовых психологических потребностей

в автономии, компетентности, причастности и поддержкой внутренней мотивации. Для выявления и анализа практик были использованы 39 интервью родителей о том, как они организуют обучение своих детей. Авторы делают вывод, что для родителей наиболее важной является поддержка автономии и внутренней мотивация детей, именно это становится предметом их заботы при организации обучения. Родители уделяют внимание и удовлетворению двух других базовых психологических потребностей: компетентности и причастности.

Ключевые слова: семейное образование, школа, благополучие учеников, практики поддержания благополучия, качественное исследование, теория самодетерминации.

Introduction

Student well-being in educational settings is a significant concern for contemporary educators [6] both in Russia [3; 10; 11] and internationally [17; 24]. The idea that the educational process is as meaningful as its outcomes is a product of the so-called "therapeutic turn" [18]. Given that negative experiences can adversely affect mental health, it is reasonable to establish a therapeutic organizational environment proactively [26]. Research indicates that psychological well-being during childhood is associated with future well-being [20], future wealth and success [15], and that employees who are satisfied with their lives tend to be more productive [12].

This suggests that parents are also concerned about their children's well-being within educational contexts. The experiences of parents of homeschooled children [4; 8] warrant investigation, as they may be particularly attuned to issues regarding their children's well-being. Among the reasons parents opt for homeschooling are the flexibility of scheduling, the ability to tailor learning to individual characteristics, the reduction of psychological and social risks, and the enhancement of family dynamics [1]. Some of these motivations can be framed as concerns for well-being [5].

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a framework for understanding how to support student well-being. According to this theory, well-being is influenced by the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [23].

The need for autonomy pertains to the desire to self-manage one's life. Actions that promote autonomy include adults explaining their decisions, allowing children to express objections [21], and fostering self-awareness, among others [22]. Conversely, manipulative practices (e.g., presenting choices when none genuinely exist) undermine the need for autonomy [16].

The need for competence involves possessing the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate life's challenges. Competence is fostered through a clearly structured learning process, a visual system for monitoring progress [25], opportunities for success, chances to experiment, and positive attitudes towards mistakes [19].

The need for belonging encompasses the desire to care for others and to receive care in return. To fulfill this need, it is essential to establish a welcoming and accepting social environment, as well as to ensure the sensitivity and availability of adults [19; 25].

A central concept of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is intrinsic motivation, defined as the desire to engage in activities out of interest, for the pleasure they provide, or because they align with personal goals and values. Strategies to sustain intrinsic motivation include leveraging students' interests and allowing them to influence the learning process [21].

SDT shares several intersections with cultural-historical theory. The concept of basic psychological needs is grounded in the understanding that development occurs through interaction with others (the need for belonging), facilitated by a more experienced individual who provides accessible cultural tools to address specific situations (the need for competence). At the core of Self-Determination Theory is the principle of active, independent initiative (the need for autonomy and intrinsic motivation), which aligns closely with Vygotsky's ideas. However, SDT offers a significant enhancement by asserting that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs not only serves as the foundation for harmonious development but also acts as a prerequisite for individual flourishing [23].

It is important to note that this study is part of a larger project aimed at investigating well-being practices in educational settings. In this study, the authors seek to explore practices employed within alternative education systems, while subsequent studies will concentrate on practices utilized in traditional schools.

Methods and data

The study utilized the database from the project "Choice of Alternative Education in Russia: Motives and Social Characteristics of Families" [5], which comprises 3,451 quotations extracted from 39 interviews with parents of homeschoolers, categorized thematically (see Table 1). Quotes from each thematic category were selected sequentially for coding, and each quote was subsequently re-coded according to four thematic categories: autonomy, competence, belonging, and intrinsic motivation.

Information regarding the sample and research procedure was derived from the project's internal report. Initially, interviews were conducted with 40 families; however, one interview was excluded due to its focus on the education system of another country. Five families have resided outside the Russian Federation for an extended period, yet their children continue to study under the Russian Federation program. Meanwhile, 34 families are situated in Russian settlements of varying population sizes (see Table 2).

The report highlights the diverse educational backgrounds and approaches of parents involved in homeschooling. While specific data on parents' education levels were not provided, many indicated they possess higher education, often in pedagogical or psychological fields, and some pursued this education specifically to better support their children's learning.

Parents frequently engage in ongoing training and self-education, reflecting a commitment to enhancing their teaching skills. Many work freelance or in creative roles, allowing them the flexibility to supervise their children's education at home.

The sample includes families with varied experiences in public schooling; 20 families reported at least one child who had attended public school, while 19 families chose homeschooling from the outset. In some cases, families have a mix of homeschoolers and children attending traditional schools based on individual preferences.

The interviews primarily focused on children of school age, resulting in insights about 66 children — 31 girls and 35 boys—spanning both primary (2nd—4th grade) and secondary (5th-7th grade) education levels.

Homeschooling methods varied widely, including direct parental instruction, tutoring, online schooling, family schools, and alternative education programs. This variety illustrates the flexible and personalized nature of homeschooling practices among these families.

Results

The coding resulted in the identification of 1591 meaningful units (Table 3)

Table 1

Structure of the database used in the study

Category	Number of meaningful units
Results, meaning for the future	536
Organizational issues	452
Adapted to individual traits	375
Student-Teacher relationships	320
Possibility to choose the learning activities	310
Peer-relationships	306
Support interest and desire to learn	289
Sense of pleasure, psychological comfort	249
Development of students' abilities	237
Academic results	208
Safety, health, other	169
Overall	3451

Table 2

Population of families' living place

Population of living place	Number of families
City with a population of one million	15
City with population from 100 thousand to 1 million	10
City with population less than 100 thousand	3
Village, settlement	6
Residents from other countries whose children are studying at Russian school on distant or part-time education program	5
Overall	39

Table 3

Dictionary of codes and distribution of semantic units

Category	Key words	Example	Meaningful units	
			N	%
Intrinsic motivation	Supporting the desire to learn, interest	What is the point of his learning if he does not see the purpose of his learning? It is better when it is for his own benefit and interest	460	28,9
Competence	Developing the child's skills, abilities, talents.	*It is important to understand how you can get knowledge effectively and what to do with it afterwards.*	411	25,8
Relatedness	Maintaining good relations of the child with family, teachers, or peers.	*We have the most wonderful teacher there. My daughter was inspired, she adored her.*	396	24,9
Autonomy	Supporting the child's desires, decisions, ideas, and developing awareness.	*Also the ability to hear and understand yourself, what you want, that's also important*	324	20,4
Overall			1591	100

Autonomy support

Respondents emphasized the importance of considering the child's opinions and interests.

"We [make decisions based] on the children's needs, not on what we want to see in our children. We look at what interests there are, strengths, what [the son] is striving for". This approach aims to teach children self-understanding: *"When I finished school, I didn't know what to do because it was always [decided] by somebody else. It took a lot of effort to realize what I wanted. [Now I want] the child [to be] an individual who can make such a decision by himself".*

According to respondents, an excessive level of autonomy places undue strain on the child. *He does not have enough responsibility; he often forgets that some consequences can be bad. It is too early to let it go at all".* However, it is essential to explain these limitations: *"We limit you a little bit because we love you. We want [you] to be mentally and physically healthy".*

Respondents attempt to allow their children to choose certain activities, such as hobbies, clubs, and extracurricular programs. *"We don't force anyone to go anywhere; he/she can choose and go to some club. In [studies], they force themselves and get tired of it".* Conversely, some parents prioritize their children's desires above all else: *"...Only without coercion can a child study. [Otherwise]...there will be no benefit".* Others express skepticism regarding this approach, arguing that it fails to foster responsibility, perseverance, and resilience. *"[Left school because there was] such freedom—freedom when children feel that the whole world is around them and everything is as they want; the subordination of children to adults was broken. Wanting is blown out of proportion, and boundaries aren't built. This is not exactly what one would like to receive in an educational institution".*

Some parents pay lip service to the concept of autonomy while still expecting obedience from their children. They invoke the child's autonomy to mitigate conflict and circumvent resistance. *"Sometimes it is necessary to lead children to the realization that they need it themselves, to somehow present that they need it, not me. Maybe by some kind of trickery".* *"If parents and teachers could find ways to impose requirements without the child realizing they are being forced... it would be ideal"*

The degree of autonomy granted to children within the same family can vary significantly; parents may adapt their educational approaches for one child while demanding obedience from another. *"I can step back from my principles; [my son] can be allowed not to do something, and I can stop pushing immediately. With my daughter, I sometimes have to give ultimatums.*

Intrinsic motivation support

Intrinsic motivation is a critical component of the learning process for respondents, who desire that their children engage in studies consciously and with genuine interest. *"I do not want my child to say 'I don't want to study, I don't want to learn, what the hell is it worth, stupid lessons'. At school age, a child should be taught to love learning in general... because one is learning all life. If the child does not lose this passion, if he/she understands that it is interesting — this is the most important thing".* To support this motivation, parents elucidate the significance of learning, demonstrate how knowledge can be beneficial in daily life, and select textbooks that present material in a lively and engaging manner.

Parents often employ trial-and-error methods to create situations in which their children can achieve success. It is imperative for them that learning time is utilized productively and that their children feel comfortable during this process. However, they contend that simplification of educational content is not always necessary; rather, they believe that sometimes children may be unable to realize their potential in school due to the material being overly simplistic. *"He knew much more about some subjects than he could be given. He just sat and counted crows".*

When children cannot find subjects within the school curriculum that align with their interests—such as coding, chess, sports, or arts—parents strive to provide opportunities for engagement in these activities. *"If you become interested, then go ahead, try yourself. It is not necessary for the child to be torn between learning and interesting activities. There is a lot of interesting things behind the main curriculum. If you are interested, go on, and immerse yourself in doing it".*

Many parents hold the belief that children naturally enjoy learning. Even when faced with boredom, children are generally able to overcome such feelings, and persistent reluctance or resistance to learning may indicate underlying issues. These issues could include excessive workload, insufficient time for personal interests or rest, neglect of the child's preferences, or distracting factors such as overcrowded classrooms, noise, or negative interactions with teachers or peers.

Concurrently, parents acknowledge that not all educational activities can rely solely on intrinsic motivation. *"He finished seventh grade in March and immediately started eighth grade, because he is motivated to finish this school as soon as possible so that we do not bother him with it anymore. This is because he is interested in completely different things. And [school] is just an obligation for him".* Respondents recognize that motivation to learn does not manifest instantaneously; to sustain this motivation, it is crucial for children to experience success in specific areas, understand the relevance of activities, and have the autonomy to select pursuits based on their interests. Even when a child enjoys an activity and demonstrates proficiency, parents may still need to supervise the routine practice of skills, such as consistent practice of a musical instrument or solving chess problems.

Satisfying the need for competence

Parents place significant emphasis on the development of competencies in their children. They believe that homeschooling facilitates a more efficient allocation of time dedicated to studies. Many parents express the view that educational institutions should adequately prepare their children for future life; however, they perceive that contemporary schools are not entirely fulfilling this role. *"I think it's unlikely that the curriculum has changed very much, while the world is changing rapidly and what it will require of our children when they become adults is very difficult to say".* Among the essential skills identified by parents are the development of social-emotional competencies (such as the absence of fear in making mistakes, effective communication skills, and emotional awareness), critical thinking, information technology (IT) literacy, financial literacy, and the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, some parents highlight the importance of spiritual development—such as faith in God (*"I would like them to rely on God"*) or karma (*"It is more*

important that the child understands why this situation has come to you by fate") — and the instillation of specific values (*"To be grateful, to be able to notice good things"*), alongside sex education and relationship-building skills.

Parents regard the ability to learn, set goals, plan one's work, comprehend personal aspirations, and leverage individual strengths as crucial components of success. *"Some freedom in choosing an educational path is necessary. Maybe it will help [my son] with his choice of profession, he will understand his strengths, where it will be good, interesting and useful for society to work"*

They tend to offer their children a broader range of subject areas, particularly when a child exhibits exceptional talents in activities such as professional chess playing, music, programming, drawing, or sports. *"He is the chess champion of Tatarstan, so he is serious about it"*, *"[The child] is on a course where... they are just learning how to create [online] games".*

While parents acknowledge the importance of the standard curriculum, they strive to organize educational experiences in a manner that allows sufficient time for mastering the school curriculum while simultaneously pursuing their children's interests. *"Quality education can be given in much less time".* Parents also indicate that homeschooling provides them with greater opportunities to monitor their child's progress, tailor learning to their child's unique characteristics, and achieve improved outcomes. *"In the lesson, what the whole class did... — one threw erasers, others fought, these are this, these are that".* *"[My daughter] was not asked for two months; then it turned out that she did not understand. [At home], in 15 minutes, it became evident that she did".*

Satisfying the need of relatedness

Parents frequently addressed the topic of relationships in their responses, discussing dynamics within the family, as well as interactions with friends and teachers. They noted that academic pressures can sometimes lead to conflicts between children and parents; additionally, teachers may expect parents to align with them, yet not all parents are willing to prioritize this allegiance, often choosing instead to maintain their relationships with their children. *"The priority of relations has become obvious. What matters is not how much your child knows, but what kind of relationship you have with him/her. Everything else is does not matter".*

Some parents indicated that homeschooling enables children to spend more time at home, participate in family life, and acquire household skills. According to the respondents, family vacations, social gatherings, and engaging trips can facilitate children's socialization just as effectively as traditional schooling. *"Children help parents when they are at home. They know how to communicate with younger children..., they know how to cook, they know*

how to clean, they know how to do everything. They have an opportunity to live this simple, real life". "Even within the framework of our family we can solve the problem of communication, they have someone to be friends with, there is someone to communicate with on a regular basis", "She sometimes has a choice to go to an activity with her friends, and I see that she gets there more skills than at school: chatting with friends, affiliation with others".

Parents endeavor to select educators who foster respectful relationships with their children. *"After [the lesson] I would ask my child: "How do you like the teacher?' Then I would ask the teacher: 'How do you like the child?'. We have now formed such a set of teachers with whom everything has meshed".* The respondents emphasized that any breach of respectful conduct by a teacher—such as shouting or making rude remarks — is unacceptable. They strive to shield their children from such negative experiences or, if such incidents occur, to provide new, positive interactions. *"The thing I disliked most at my school was being shouted at. [Now] I can't even imagine that any of the teachers will start shouting at my child".*

Parents acknowledge the importance of friendships during childhood and adolescence. They actively influence their children's social circles, seeking environments that align with both their children's preferences and their own values. *"Sometimes peers are antisocial, [they] don't have enough moral principles. That is why you must keep an eye on your environment, it has a very big influence".*

In their view, socialization is not merely about adapting to a collective that one did not choose but rather about finding like-minded individuals who share similar values. Although a classroom may contain many students, children do not always succeed in forming friendships within that setting; they often find it easier to connect in extracurricular activities. *"At school, this society is imposed. Where they put you, you must be kind and get used to them. At homeschooling you choose with whom to communicate, with whom not to communicate".*

Interestingly, some parents perceive the high student-to-teacher ratio in classrooms as a barrier to developing friendships at school. Certain children may struggle in large groups and quickly become fatigued by social interactions. Moreover, some school events intended to promote socialization can have the opposite effect; parents have observed that these events are often organized on too large a scale, causing some children to feel overwhelmed, withdraw, and avoid interaction. *"The first of September was such a pompous event; it was done in the form of a game based on Harry Potter. They rented a huge restaurant with all sorts of quests, a huge crowd of these kids: first, second, third class — all together. My son watched all this fearfully, did not participate in anything, and relaxed only when it was all over".* Parents strive to facilitate opportunities for their children to engage with peers of the same gender.

Discussion

In the cultural-psychological approach, the adult's role is to guide the child within the zone of proximal development—both intellectually and psychologically [9]. In fulfilling this role, parents of homeschooled children support their offspring not only in mastering cognitive skills but also in fostering autonomy. They regard the promotion of autonomy as a prerequisite for future success, a notion substantiated by research [13]. Consequently, these parents consistently encourage the development of autonomy in their children.

Parents allocate both time and financial resources to ensure that their children can select activities aligned with their interests and utilize a diverse array of educational resources, including those external to traditional schooling. This trend aligns with findings from scientific research [7].

According to parents, the development of competence is crucial for future success and well-being; this perspective coincides with the academic outcomes emphasized by state curricula [14]. However, contemporary parents appear reluctant to rely solely on formal schooling. While they acknowledge the significance of school subjects, they adopt a broader view of education, striving to incorporate the development of social-emotional skills and personal characteristics. A similar inclination is observed among parents within the traditional education system [2].

Regarding relatedness, parents highlighted relationships within the family, with teachers, and with peers. It is essential for parents that all three spheres are conducive; however, their observations suggest that it is not always feasible to harmonize these relationships within the school environment. Consequently, parents endeavor to construct a relational system from various components — such as identifying a competent tutor, establishing a circle of friends with shared interests, and fostering communication within the family.

A limitation of this study is its qualitative methodology; thus, quantitative research is necessary to generalize the findings. It is important to note that the authors did not measure the actual well-being of children in families utilizing homeschooling; therefore, no conclusions regarding the effectiveness of specific practices can be drawn.

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