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Self-Regulation of Behaviour in Children and Adolescents in the Natural and Institutional Environment

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to present the results of research aimed at comparing the level of self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment. Institutionalisation occurs over a period of time in children and adolescents living in institutions. We can frequently observe the symptoms of institutionalisation in these groups of children and adolescents, which is a major obstacle to their functional self-regulation of behaviour and to their return to the natural social environment. The research sample was comprised of 2,776 children and adolescents from the natural and institutional environment in the Czech Republic (children and adolescents living in total institutions such as correctional institutions for children and minors and children´s homes). The Self-regulation Questionnaire (SRQ) used in the study contained 12 items aimed at 3 areas of self-regulation of behaviour: Affect, Awareness and Empowerment. The results have shown that the level of self-regulation of behaviour is lower among children in the institutional environment. We recorded the most significant differences between children from the institutional and natural environment in the area of Affect (i.e. the regulation of emotions). It means that children and adolescents from institutional environments have more trouble controlling their emotions than children from a natural environment. We also found that the level of self-regulation of behaviour is dependent on the perceived level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents. A higher level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents indicates a lower level of self-regulation of their behaviour. We also found that differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour, are not significant in either type of environment. It means that the perceived degree of problematic behaviour is reflected in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in a similar way in the natural and institutional environment.

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Keywords: Self-regulation, behaviour, children from the natural and institutional environment

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1. Theoretical background

Institutional deprivation (greenhouse effect), is the result of the long-term placement of a child in foster care facilities. Some authors see it as a specific form of psychological deprivation (Kovařík, 2008; Langmeier, & Krejčířová, 2006). It is a secondary deprivation in which there is a strengthening of unwanted ties to the institutional environment and a weakening of the ability to compete in an independent life outside the facility. There is thus an adaptation to artificial institutional conditions, which is accompanied by a decreasing capability of adaptation to a non-institutional life. At the same time, a stereotypical environment from which it is not possible to escape reduces the capacity of tolerance and increases mental vulnerability as well as risky and impulsive behaviour (Helus, 2004).

One of the significant factors in preventing the risky behaviour of an individual is self-regulation of their behaviour.

There are numerous approaches to explain self-regulation, but many researchers agree that self-regulation refers to multi-component, iterative, self-steering processes that target one's own cognitions, feelings, and actions, as well as features of the environment for modulation in the service of one's own goals (Boekaerts, & Cascallar, 2006).

Self-regulation is usually divided into three main components: standards, monitoring, and strength. However, recent research has also shown a fourth component, motivation (Baumeister, & Vohs, 2007).

We perceive self-regulation in agreement with Mareš´s concept (Mareš 2010) as a continuous characteristic which a person might possess. The control mechanisms of behaviour include: 1. Regulation of attention; 2. Regulation of motivation; 3. Regulation of emotions; 4. Coping with failure.

All of these dimensions are considered part of the process of self-regulation. The inability to control one´s behaviour may contribute significantly to risky behaviour, e.g. if an individual is incapable of controlling his/her own needs, they tend to become addicted more easily. Alcoholism, crime, drug addiction, gambling, educational underachievement and many other social problems are associated with a lack of discipline and self-control (Baumeister, & Heatherton, 1996) and poor self-regulation (John Robins, & Pervin, 2008).

Kuhl (2006) distinguishes between two forms of voluntary behaviour. Self-control, as a form of control of voluntary behaviour, is based on the principle of suppressing the processes that could lead to accepting the competing impulses to act. The purpose of self-control is to set up such a process of voluntary behaviour that could minimize this risk. It is a form of conscious control of one's own behaviour. In contrast, self-regulation, as a higher form of control of voluntary behaviour, involves an unrealized (implicit) process, which is based on the principle of integration of processes and mechanisms that help maintain the chosen intent in mind. In the process of self-regulation one focuses on all their feelings, needs, emotions and looking for ways to fill them in accordance with their intent. For this it is necessary to know both, the external objectives, what they require and their own motives, thinking and behaviour (self-awareness) and be able to reflect them.

Individuals who use self-regulatory strategies pursue their own goals by activating a self-rewarding system. In contrast, individuals who control themselves pursue goals set from the outside, which may not be consistent with their personal beliefs, and therefore they use a system of penalties. The process of self-regulation is associated with positive emotions. Both processes are indeed governed by the individual but only the process of self-regulation is associated with intrinsic motivation (Boekaerts, 2002).

The core of self-regulation is seen in metacognitive knowledge (including the monitoring process), which can ultimately be regarded as an indication of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 2001). This knowledge will be considered tacit (silent), which manifests itself in human behaviour and allows an individual to achieve the goals that he/she personally values and even though they may not realize this disposition it may be made explicit and developed further through self-reflection.

The regulation of one's own behaviour is a kind of personal navigation. Personal Navigation according to Sternberg, & Swerling (1998) refers to a person's control of his or her voyage through life and includes the objectives, plans and beliefs (including knowledge of where a person wants to head and the belief that they can get there), as well as ways how to cope with various life events that occur during one's life (including personal crises).

If a person does not use mechanisms to cope with life events they are likely to fail to control their own behaviour.

Heatherton, & Baumeister (1996) or Seyette (2004) provide an explanation into the complexity that is self-regulation failure. The two main causes of self-regulation failure included under-regulation and misregulation (Baumeister, & Heatherton 1996). Under-regulation occurs when a person does not develop any self-control and misregulation occurs in the case, when a person develops self-control (self-control is exerted), but it is misguided or counterproductive. Underregulation refers to a failure to control oneself whereas misregulation deals with having

control in a manner that does not bring about the desired goal (Sayette, 2004; Baumeister, & Heatherton, 1996).

Especially in an environment where children are vulnerable to risky behaviour (e.g. they do not live in the natural family environment) the process of self-regulated behaviour may not be automatic, although they may be aware of their problematic behaviour (display self-knowledge). Children living in total institutions may also belong to this group. The rehabilitative prognosis is rather pessimistic for most of these children due to the social environment they grew up in. We can frequently observe symptoms of institutionalisation in these groups of children and minors (Goffman, 2007). The inability to regulate one's behaviour (cognition, emotion, attention) may significantly contribute to risky behaviour.

2. Methodology of research

The main objective of this research was to compare the level of self-regulation of behaviour among children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment. A secondary aim was to determine to what extent the level of self-regulation of the behaviour in children and adolescents is associated with behavioural problems in these children and whether the problematic behaviour is reflected in the level of self-regulation of behaviour differently in the natural and institutional environment.

The research sample consisted of 2,776 children and adolescents from the Zlín Region of the Czech Republic from the natural and institutional environment. Children and adolescents from the natural environment were selected based on a stratified random sample (using a random number generator) from schools in the Zlín Region of the Czech Republic so that it included all types of education were represented (primary schools, gymnasiums, secondary schools with a school leaving examination and secondary schools without a school leaving examination). The sample included a total of 25 schools (10 primary schools, 5 gymnasiums, 5 secondary schools with a school leaving examination and 5 secondary schools without a school leaving examination). Children and adolescents from the institutional environment were chosen through an exhaustive selection process, i.e. clients from all institutional care facilities in the Zlín Region of the Czech Republic (correctional institutions for children and minors and children´s homes) aged 11-19 years were approached. The average age of all respondents amounted to M = 14.42 years (SD = 3.012).

The Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ) was used for the purposes of the research. This questionnaire was adapted to the Czech environment (Hrbáčková, & Vávrová, 2014). It contains 12 items that measure the degree of self-regulation of children and adolescents in three areas: *Affect* (4 items) *Awareness* (4 items), and *Empowerment* (4 items). The first factor *(Affect)* focuses on the experiences of feeling and emotion, and it represents the impulse to manage one's own behaviour. The second factor *(Awareness)* refers to the knowledge of self and strategies of regulation of one´s own behaviour. The third factor *(Empowerment)* deals more directly with the regulation of behaviour manifestations. The questionnaire covers the hierarchy of the processes of self-regulation of behaviour, ranging from regulation of emotions *("feeling")*, knowledge of self and strategies of own behaviour *("knowing")* to the actual control of one´s own behaviour *("doing")*. Participants responded to each item with a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (false) to 5 (True). The levels of self-regulation were evaluated by the average score, the higher the value of the average score (on a scale from 1 to 5), the higher the level of the self-regulation of behaviour.

Apart from the factual issues, the questionnaire also included questions focused on finding problems in behaviour ("Do you think those around you perceive your behaviour as..."). The answers reflected the perceived level of problems from the perspective of the children and adolescents themselves. In the research group 1,749 children labeled their behaviour as non-problematic, 922 as slightly problematic and 105 children labeled their behaviour as problematic.

The respondents filled out the questionnaires using the "paper - pencil" method. The data was processed through the SPSS programme version 21. The T-test for independence, One-Way ANOVA, Correlation analysis, Two-Way between-groups ANOVA and post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD and LSD test were applied. We also tested the prerequisites for using the selected test, i.e. we verified the normality and homoscedasticity (Levene´s test). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all 12 items reached .814, demonstrating a good internal consistency. All reliability coefficients were within an acceptable range with the exception of the Empowerment variable (r_c = .526). This may have occurred because of the small number of items in the scale (4 items).

3. Data analysis

The level of self-regulation of behaviour among children and adolescents (Tab. 1) in the natural environment achieved an average score of M = 3.443 (SD = .549), while among children and adolescents in the institutional environment it reaches a score of M = 3.335 (SD = .605). The overall level of the self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents is lower in children living in an institutional environment (p = .033). Children and adolescents, regardless of the type of environment in which they live, have the lowest level in the area Affect, i.e. the regulation of emotions. Children and adolescents from the natural environment in the area Affect achieve an average score of M = 3.389 (SD = .923), children and adolescents from the institutional environment reach the score M = 3.135 (SD = .965). The highest rate of self-regulation is shown in children and adolescents in the area of Empowerment, while in the natural environment children and adolescents reach an average score of M = 3.536 (SD = .638), in the institutional environment they reach similar values M = 3.528 (SD = .709). In the area of Awareness children and adolescents from the natural environment achieve an average score of M = 3.404 (SD = .744), and children and adolescents from the institutional environment achieve a score of M = 3.135 (SD = .965). In the area of Empowerment and Awareness, there are not significant differences among children and adolescents from the institutional and natural environments (p > .05). We recorded the most significant differences between children from the institutionalized and natural environment in the area of Affect (p = .003). The regulation of emotion is significantly lower among children and young people from the institutional environment than in children and adolescents from the natural environment.

Table 1. Comparison of the level of self-regulation of behaviour among children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment.

	The natural environment		**The institutional environment**	
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Affect	3.389	.923	3.135**	.965
Awareness	3.404	.744	3.343	.763
Empowerment	3.536	.638	3.528	.709
Sef-Regulation	3.443	.549	3.335*	.605

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

We found that the level of self-regulation is significantly associated with perceived behavioural problems of children and adolescents (Tab. 2). For children and adolescents in the natural environment, it is clear that behavioural problems are related to all areas of self-regulation. The higher the level of problematic behaviour, the lower the level of self-regulation (p = .001), i.e. the lower the level of Affect (p = .001), the lower the level of Awareness (p = .001) and the lower the level of Empowerment (p = .004). With children from the institutional environment, the correlation with the overall level of the self-perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents is evident (p = .008). The higher level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the institutional environment indicates the lower level of regulation of Affect (i.e. in the regulation of emotion, p = .008). For children and adolescents in the institutional environment, we found no association between behavioural problems and the level of self-regulation in the area of Awareness (p = .060) and Empowerment (p = .611).

Table 2. The correlation of the level of self-regulation of behaviour and the perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment.

	Affect	**Awareness**	**Empowerment**	**Self-Regulation**
Problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the natural environment	-.167*	-.188*	-.056*	-.208*

Problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the institutional environment	-.237*	.176	.046	-.236*

∗ the correlation is significant at the .001 level of significance

The correlation of the self-regulation of behaviour with the perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents is evident both in the natural and institutional environment. Therefore, we wondered if it is possible to find the possibility of an interaction effect (i.e. if the perceived level of problematic behaviour influences the level of the self-regulation of behaviour depending on whether children live in a natural or institutional environment).

Table 3. Differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour

		Mean	**SD**
The natural environment	Non-problematic	3.529	.613
	Slightly problematic	3.274	.638
	Problematic	3.050	.809
Institutional environment	Non-problematic	3.562	.549
	Slightly problematic	3.261	.674
	Problematic	3.078	.682

The analysis showed that the interaction effect between the type of environment and the perceived degree of problematic behaviour was not statistically significant F (2, 2746) = .071, p = .931. There was a statistically significant main effect for the perceived degree of problematic behaviour F (2, 2746) = 14.163, p = .001, however the effect size was small (η^2_p = .01) The post-hoc comparison that indicated the mean score for the group of children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic (M = 3.539, SD = .612) was significantly different from the group of children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as a slightly problematic (M = 3.273, SD = .641) and problematic (M = 3.056, SD = .812). The main effect for the type of environment, F (1, 2746) = .05, p = .822, did not reach statistical significance.

When we analyzed the differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour in the natural environment, we found that these differences are significant in all areas of the self-regulation of behaviour (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Differences in the level of the self-regulation of behaviour, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour among children and adolescents in the natural environment

		Mean	**SD**	**SE**
Affect	Non-problematic	3.503*	.892	.022
	Slightly problematic	3.187	.916	.031
	Problematic	3.063*	.922	.018
Awareness	Non-problematic	3.539*	.805	.019
	Slightly problematic	3.266*	.848	.029
	Problematic	2.807*	.845	.016
Empowerment	Non-problematic	3.562*	.899	.022
	Slightly problematic	3.458*	.936	.018
	Problematic	3.390	.941	.118

* p < 0.01

The level of self-regulation of behaviour depends on the perception of the degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the natural environment in the area of Affect (p = .001), in the area of Awareness (p = . 001) and in the area of Empowerment (p = .015). Children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as problematic, achieve significantly lower scores in the level of self-regulation of behaviour than children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as unproblematic. In the area of Affect, the differences are evident among children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic and children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as slightly problematic (p = .001). The differences are also significant among children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as problematic and children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic (p = .001). In the area of Awareness there are significant differences between all levels of problematic behaviour (p = .001). In the area of Empowerment we recorded differences only among children and adolescents with non-problematic and slightly problematic behaviour (p = .008).

For children in the institutional environment (Tab. 5) we recorded significant differences in the level of the self-regulation of behaviour in the area of Affect, (p = .020), depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour.

Table 5. Differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents in the institutional environment, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour

		Mean	**SD**	**SE**
Affect	Non-problematic	3.507*	.724	.122
	Slightly problematic	3.021	.988	.116
	Problematic	2.853*	.965	.086
Awareness	Non-problematic	3.609	.752	.127
	Slightly problematic	3.301	.862	.102
	Problematic	3.177	.921	.223
Empowerment	Non-problematic	3.600	.953	.161
	Slightly problematic	3.681	.901	.106
	Problematic	3.382	.944	.269

* p < 0.05

We found significant differences in the area of Affect among children and adolescents with problematic and non-problematic behaviour (p = .020) and among children and adolescents with non-problematic and slightly problematic behaviour (p = .014). We did not find significant differences in the area of Affect (p = .510) in children and adolescents from institutional environments who perceived their behaviour as slightly problematic and problematic.

No significant differences were found in the area of Awareness (p = .125), and Empowerment (p = .503) depending on the perceived degree of the problematic behaviour.

4. Summary and conclusion

The realized survey shows that the overall level of the self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents is lower in children living in an institutional environment. Children and adolescents in the natural and institutional environment show the lowest level in the area of Affect. This means that regardless of the type of environment they have the highest deficit in regulating their emotions.

Vávrová (2015) reaches a similar conclusion, pointing out the problems in the regulation of emotion of children

and adolescents placed in institutional care facilities. In the area of Empowerment and Awareness, there are not significant differences among children and adolescents from the institutional and natural environments. It means that they control their behaviour and know the strategies that help them to regulate their own behaviour on a similar level. We recorded the most significant differences between children from the institutional and natural environment in the area of Affect. The regulation of emotion of children from the institutional environment is significantly lower than among children from the natural environment. From these conclusions we can indirectly infer that although children and adolescents from the institutional environment recognize their behaviour, they know the strategies that would help them to regulate their own behaviour (i.e. they know what behaviour is right) similarly like children from the natural environment, but fail to regulate their emotions. This means that they have more problems controlling their emotions than children from the natural environment.

The research results confirm that the rate of self-regulation of behaviour is to some extent linked to the perceived degree of problematic behaviour. The correlation of the self-regulation of behaviour with the perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents is evident both in the natural and institutional environment. For children and adolescents in the natural environment, it is clear that behavioural problems are related to all areas of self-regulation. The higher the level of problematic behaviour, the lower the level of Affect, Awareness and Empowerment. With children from the institutional environment, a correlation with the overall level of self-regulation and the perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents is evident. A higher level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents in the institutional environment indicates a lower level of regulation in the area of Affect. For children and adolescents in an institutional environment, we found no association between behavioural problems and the level of self-regulation in the area of Awareness and Empowerment. It means that children and adolescents from the institutional environment achieve a similar level of self-awareness, use strategies for regulating their own behaviour and controlling their behaviour to a similar extent, regardless of the perceived degree of problematic behaviour (whether they perceive their behaviour as problematic, slightly problematic or non-problematic).

When we analyzed whether the interaction of the two factors, i.e. the type of environment and the perceived degree of problematic behaviour, in connection with the level of self-regulation of behaviour may play an important role, we found that the interaction of the two factors is not significant. It can be stated that the associated effect of the combination of factors of the perceived degree of problematic behaviour and the type of environment in which children and adolescents live does not affect their level of self-regulation of behaviour. However, we can say that the perceived degree of problematic behaviour as an independent factor, affects the level of self-regulation of the behaviour of children and adolescents. The power of this factor, however, is very small. It means that the perceived degree of problematic behaviour explains 1 % of the variability in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents. In the case of the factor of the type of environment, we did not find statistically significant differences in the mean scores of the level of the self-regulation of behaviour between the natural and institutional environment, regardless of the perceived degree of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents. Differences in the level of the self-regulation of behaviour in children in the natural and institutional environment are equally significant, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour (among children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic, slightly problematic or problematic). The differences are evident among children and adolescents with varying degrees of problematic behaviour.

Children and adolescents from the natural environment who perceive their behaviour as problematic, achieve significantly lower scores in the level of self-regulation of behaviour than children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic. In the area of Affect, the differences are evident among children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic and children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as slightly problematic. The differences are also significant among children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as problematic and children and adolescents who perceive their behaviour as non-problematic. In the area of Awareness there are significant differences between all levels of problematic behaviour. In the area of Empowerment we recorded differences only among children and adolescents with non-problematic and slightly problematic behaviour.

For children in the institutional environment we recorded significant differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in the area of Affect, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour. We found significant differences among children and adolescents with non-problematic and problematic behaviour and among children

and adolescents with non-problematic and slightly problematic behaviour. No significant differences were found in the area of Awareness and Empowerment depending on the perceived degree of the problematic behaviour. We can assume that with children and adolescents from the institutional environment the perceived level of problematic behaviour does not play an important role in the extent to which they control their behaviour and to what extent they are aware of their role in regulating their behaviour.

The results have shown that the level of self-regulation of behaviour is lower among children in the institutional environment. We recorded the most significant differences between children from the institutional and natural environment in the area of Affect. It means that children and young people from institutional environments have more trouble controlling their emotions than children from a natural environment. We also found that the level of self-regulation of behaviour is dependent on the perceived level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents. A higher level of problematic behaviour of children and adolescents indicates a lower level of self-regulation of behaviour. We also found that differences in the level of self-regulation of behaviour, depending on the perceived degree of problematic behaviour, are not significant in either type of environment. It means that the perceived degree of problematic behaviour is reflected in the level of self-regulation of behaviour in a similar way in the natural and institutional environment.

We believe that these findings may help us to understand the process of the self-regulation of behaviour in children and adolescents and the manifestations of failure that are bound to this behaviour. Especially among children and adolescents in the institutional environment, we can record significant deficits in the area of the regulation of emotion. We believe that in the natural family environment children and adolescents acquire other stimuli that affect their emotional side, they have a greater opportunity to experiment with how to gradually cope with their emotions and gain greater emotional stability. As confirmed by other research, the experience of deprivation resulting from the prolonged absence of key people is reflected in changes in the perception and behaviour of the child. The characteristic feature of children and adolescents placed in institutional care facilities is emotional lability, non-differentiation of emotions, lack of volitional characteristics and behaviour disorders, etc. (Langmajer, & Krejčířová, 2006; Večerka, Holas, Štechová, & Diblíková, 2001)

The emotional distancing of the caregiver (which institutional care predicts) may cause problems in becoming independent and the awareness of self. The natural process of directing a child disrupts the spatiotemporal organization of activity in institutional and protective care and permanent supervision. The inadequate differentiation of support and care according to the needs of children affects their direction by the fact that children encounter risky manifestations of behaviour that can play a negative role in shaping the child's self-esteem and aspirations. (Běhounková, 2011; Helus, 2004)

Institutionalization does not necessarily lead to emotional problems in all cases. It always depends on the quality of the substitute relationships that the child has available (Langmeier, & Matějček, 1968). We think that supporting the development of the self-regulation of behaviour, whether in the natural or institutional environment, plays an important role in the prevention of risky behaviour of children and adolescents, and therefore we should pay it increased attention, especially in connection with problematic behaviour.

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