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**CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAMILY PARTICIPATION
TO SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION
IN PRESCHOOLERS' ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION**

***Annotation.** This qualitative study explores the pivotal role of family participation in fostering sustainable education within the context of preschool environmental education. By employing a participatory action research approach, the study investigates how active engagement from families influences children's understanding of environmental concepts and sustainable practices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observational studies involving parents, across diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The findings reveal that family participation enhances children's environmental awareness, promotes positive attitudes towards sustainability, and strengthens the home-school connection. Additionally, the study identifies key strategies for effective family involvement, such as collaborative projects, workshops, and communication channels that facilitate shared learning experiences. Overall, the research underscores the importance of integrating family participation into preschool environmental education as a means to cultivate a generation of environmentally conscious individuals committed to sustainability. The study concludes with recommendations for educators and policymakers to develop frameworks that encourage and support family engagement in early childhood environmental initiatives.*

Key words: *family participation, environment, preschool, sustainable.*

Анотація. *Це якісне дослідження вивчає ключову роль участі сім'ї у сприянні сталому розвитку освіти в контексті екологічної освіти у дошкільних закладах. У цьому дослідженні, що використовує підхід, заснований на участі у дослідницької діяльності, вивчається, як активне залучення сімей впливає розуміння дітьми екологічних концепцій та стійких практик. Дані були зібрані за допомогою поглиблених інтерв'ю, фокус-груп та спостережень за батьками з різних соціально-економічних верств населення. Результати показують, що участь сім'ї підвищує екологічну поінформованість дітей, сприяє формуванню позитивного ставлення до сталого розвитку та зміцнює зв'язок між будинком та школою. Крім того, у дослідженні визначено ключові стратегії ефективного залучення сім'ї, такі як спільні проекти, семінари та канали комунікації, що сприяють обміну досвідом навчання. В цілому дослідження підкреслює важливість залучення сім'ї в екологічну освіту в дошкільному віці як засоби виховання покоління екологічно свідомих людей, відданих принципам сталого розвитку. Дослідження завершується рекомендаціями для педагогів та політиків щодо розробки рамок, які заохочують та підтримують участь сім'ї в екологічних ініціативах у ранньому дитинстві.*

Ключові слова: *участь сім'ї, довкілля, дошкільна освіта, сталий розвиток.*

Introduction. Environmental problems, one of the greatest global threats of the twenty-first century, are not only an ecological crisis but also an educational crisis. Issues such as climate change, the decrease in biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources necessitate a radical change in individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards the environment.

The most critical period in which the foundations of this change will be laid is the preschool period.

The first years of life are considered a window through which an individual's value judgments, attitudes, and basic habits towards nature, the environment, and other living beings are shaped. A child, as a social being, cannot be considered independently from their family (microsystem). As Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasized in his Ecological Systems Theory, a child's development is directly influenced by the interaction between their immediate environment, the family, and the school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [4]. It is impossible for a child of a parent who does not conserve water at home, separate waste, or engage with nature to benefit from and internalize environmental education provided at school. It is emphasized that environmental education should definitely be given in early childhood, and it is stated that environmental education given in this period positively supports attitudes and awareness towards the environment (Bakar, 2019) [9]; (Buldur, 2018) [9]; (Gültekin & Buldur, 2022) [11]. From another perspective, environmental education can also be defined as educational efforts undertaken to increase individuals' knowledge and awareness levels about the environment in which they live (Gülay and Önder, 2011) [3].

The main objective of this study is to discuss the inadequacy of teacher-centered approaches in preschool environmental education and to examine the indispensable role of the family in the educational process in light of literature and field data.

In this context, a case study conducted with 29 preschool parents analyzed the families' approaches to environmental education, the methods they use, their self-perception levels, and their expectations from the school.

Environmental Education in Early Childhood and Its Importance.

Early childhood is the period when curiosity is most intense and learning occurs most rapidly. Wilson, 1984 [7] suggested that humans have an innate inclination towards nature and other living things (biophilia). However, this inclination can be dulled if not supported. Longitudinal studies by Louv, 2010 [1] have shown that individuals who exhibit environmentally conscious behaviors in adulthood had

positive and frequent experiences with nature in their childhood. Therefore, preschool environmental education should be considered not only as the transfer of information but also as a process of connecting with nature. Children acquire their first knowledge and values about the environment from their families until the day they start school. The family is the child's first and most influential role model. According to Social Learning Theory, children imitate what their parents do more than what they say. Musser & Diamond, 1989 [8] stated that parents' attitudes towards the environment directly predict children's levels of environmental awareness. For example, a parent picking up litter from the floor and putting it in the trash can send a more powerful message to a child than hundreds of hours of didactic lectures. The literature indicates that there are various obstacles to family participation in environmental education. Haktanır et al. (2010) emphasize that families often lack sufficient knowledge about environmental issues or don't know how to approach their children. Furthermore, time constraints and the school's tendency to view families only as «people to be given tasks» also reduce participation. For effective collaboration, the school needs to involve families in the planning phase of the process and guide them

Method.

1. Research Model. This research used a qualitative research method [6].

2. Study Group. The study group consisted of 29 parents whose children attend preschool education institutions and who participated in the survey on a voluntary basis. Participants were named with the codes «V1, V2, ... V29».

3. Data Collection Tool and Analysis. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher and administered online (Google Forms). The questionnaire questions covered the frequency and methods of environmental education, expectations from the school, and children's interests. The obtained data were examined using descriptive analysis techniques, and similar statements were grouped under specific themes and interpreted.

Research Results. This section details the data obtained from 29 parents participating in the study.

1. Frequency of Family Participation in Environmental Activities (Question 1).

The frequency with which families participate in general environmental activities such as sorting waste, recycling, and water conservation with their children was examined.

Table 1

Frequency of Participation in Environmental Activities

Participation Frequency Rate	Participation Frequency Rate (%)
Frequently	34,5%
Always	24,1%
Occasionally	20,7%
Rarely	10,3%
Never Doing It	10,3%

When the data is examined, it is seen that 58,6% of the parents in total engage in environmental activities «Frequently» or «Always». This shows that more than half of the participants have incorporated environmental awareness into their daily routine.

In the qualitative data, parent coded V15 expressed this situation as «This parent frequently engages in environmental activities»; while parent coded V10 represents the 10,3% who did not participate with the statement «We never engage in environmental activities».

2. Families' Perception of Self-Efficacy in Instilling Environmental Awareness (Question 2).

Parents' self-efficacy perceptions regarding instilling environmental awareness in their children are presented in Table 2.

Table 2**Parents' Self-Efficacy Perception**

Efficacy Level Rate	%
I am competent	37,9
I am moderately competent	31,0
I am somewhat / not at all competent	7,0

93% of parents consider themselves at least «moderately» competent. A high level of competence indicates the parents' mastery of the subject. Parents coded V7, who have high self-efficacy, expressed their situation as «I consider myself very competent in instilling environmental awareness», while parents coded V12, who consider themselves incompetent, stated, «I am not competent at all», indicating that they are more open to external support (brochures/videos).

3. Reactions to Children's Environmentally Conscious Behaviors (Question 3).

Parents' reactions to their children's positive environmental behaviors were examined:

- I support: 82,8%
- I reward: 13,8%
- I accept it as normal: Very few

The fact that almost all parents exhibit a supportive or rewarding attitude is important in terms of reinforcing the behavior. For example, parent coded V15 confirmed this general trend by saying, «I generally support my child's environmentally conscious behaviors».

4. Environmental Education Methods Used.

The most frequently used methods by families in instilling environmental awareness are shown in Table 3.

Table 3**Methods Used**

Types of Method	Method Rate (%)
Occasionally Setting an Example with Daily Behaviors	37,9
Always Trying to Set an Example	31,0
Doing Activities Together	20,7
Verbal Explanation / No Method	10,4

Approximately 70% of parents use the «Modeling» method.

Parent coded V4 explained this situation with the words «I always try to set an example when instilling environmental awareness».

Parent coded V18, who adopted the more active method of «Doing activities together» (20,7%), described the process as «We mostly do activities together».

The fact that those who only prefer verbal explanation are in the minority (10,4%) shows that families attach importance to learning by doing and experiencing

5. Opinions on the Impact of School-Family Collaboration.

Families have a very high belief in the importance of school-family collaboration in environmental education:

- Very Effective: 48,3%
- Extremely Effective: 34,5%

82,8% of participants believe that collaboration is critically important.

Parent coded V23 supported this view with the statement: «According to the family, school-family collaboration has an extremely effective impact on children's environmental awareness».

6. Frequency of Special Environmental Activities Performed at Home.

The frequency of specially planned activities, such as nature walks and gardening, outside of general habits, was examined:

- We do it occasionally: 37,9%

- We do it frequently: 31,0%
- Never / Rarely: 24,1%

Compared to general environmental behaviors (Question 1), the frequency of special activities is slightly lower.

While active parents like V18 stated «We always do special environmental activities», parent coded V10 indicated time or resource limitations by saying «We rarely do special activities».

7. Parents were asked in which areas they provided the most information and awareness to their children (Table 4).

Table 4

Areas of Contribution of Parents

Areas of parental contribution	%
Animals and Plants	37,9
Environmental Pollution Awareness	34,5
Energy and Water Conservation	24,1

Families focus on the concrete and observable «world of living things» (Animals/Plants). Parent coded V18 stated the area of contribution as «Animals and plants». It is noteworthy that more abstract topics such as energy conservation are left behind.

8. Areas Where School-Family Cooperation Needs Strengthening (Question 8).

Parents indicated in which areas the school and family should cooperate more.

Table 5

Cooperation Area Preferences

Cooperation Area	Rate (%)
Family-Child Homework	44,8
Trips and Observation Activities	27,6
Joint Projects / Seminars	27,6

The highest demand (44,8%) was for «Family-Child Homework», which brings education home. The second highest demand was for education to be taken outside the classroom. Parent coded V6 expressed this demand by stating that «School and family cooperation should be strengthened in trips and observation activities».

9. Kind of support expected from the Teachers.

The concrete expectations of families from the school in the environmental education process are as follows:

- Family-Child Activity Suggestions: 44,8%
- Small Tasks That Can Be Done at Home: 20,7%
- Brochures/Videos and Seminars: 34,4%

Almost half of the parents expect concrete activity suggestions from the teacher on «what to do». Parent coded V23 emphasized this need by saying, «I expect support from teachers in the form of family-child activity suggestions». V12, feeling inadequate, requested «informative brochures», which is a more passive form of support.

10. Children's Areas of Interest.

Children's areas of interest, which are the most strategic data to be used in environmental education, are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Children's Areas of Interest

Area of Interest	Percentage (%)
Animals	44,8
Recycling and Environmental Pollution	27,6
Natural Events	20,7

Children's interest is largely focused on animals (44.8%). Parent coded V19 stated that «Their child is most interested in the area of animals related to the environment». The presence of children interested in recycling was expressed by V13

as; «Their child is most interested in the area of recycling and environmental pollution».

Conclusions and Recommendations. This study has shown that preschool environmental education cannot be limited solely to the efforts of teachers, and that family participation is not a «preference» but a «necessity». The findings show that parents are generally willing and aware of environmental education, but expect strong guidance from the school in terms of implementation.

The frequent use of the «role modeling» method by parents supports the emphasis on social learning in the literature. However, the existence of parents who feel inadequate and do not use any method (such as V12, V16) proves that the school should exhibit a «needs-based approach» instead of «the same approach for every parent».

The most striking result is the parents' demand for «Field Trips and Observations». Families want their children to learn in nature, not within four walls, and expect the school to be an organizing force in this process.

Recommendations:

1. Nature Days: School administration and teachers should organize nature walks, forest trips, or park cleaning activities at least once a month with the participation of parents.

2. Home-Oriented «Green Tasks»: Instead of just describing what has been done in weekly newsletters, teachers should give concrete home-oriented tasks. (For example: «This week, recycle an unused item with your child and make a toy»).

3. Digital Support: For parents who feel inadequate or do not have time to read, short videos or infographics explaining environmental awareness should be prepared and shared through messaging groups.

4. Project Based on Interest: Using children's interest in animals (as seen in the findings), family-participatory projects such as «Feeding Street Animals» or «Making Bird Feeders» should be initiated.

In conclusion, for a sustainable future, it is essential that schools and families speak the same language. When the teacher is the leader in the classroom and the family is the implementer and supporter of this leadership at home, environmental awareness will become a lasting character trait in the child.

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