DO PARENTS READ CHAPTERS FOR PARENTS OF TODDLERS AND WHY NOT?

Abstract: The aim of the qualitative study presented in this paper was to explore the contribution of handbooks (chapters) for parents of toddlers which are divided into three main topics. It was important to find out what parents of toddlers in Serbia think about the chapters, what they like and don't like and what suggestions they made in broadening the communication process with the research team. All of them found the chapters useful, and some were impressed with the 3 Ts: Tune In, Talk More, Take Turns. The parents' answers encouraged the research team to stay persistent in spreading the idea of Living Democracy in general and its concepts among parents of toddlers. Happy and satisfied parents who are able to find constructive answers to the situations they experience every day in bringing up toddlers are very important for the wellbeing of all the participants in the relationship.

Key words: handbooks (chapters), parents, toddlers, Living Democracy
Introduction

The website *Living Democracy* is a unique educational resource, available in multiple languages, which aims to promote democracy and human rights without additional costs to the user. The educational materials are prepared by educators from different countries and approved by the national authorities and the Council of Europe. The website [www.living-democracy.com](http://www.living-democracy.com) provides resources for teachers, students, principals and parents. Communication, the way people talk and listen to one another is a fundamental requirement for democratic action. Communicative competence is practiced in daily life and can be learned by children and adolescents of every age. Knowing one’s feelings, needs, interests and opinions, and being able to express them in a clear and fair way, as well as listening to others attentively without prejudice while considering different perspectives, may prevent each human being from engaging in violent and aggressive interactions (*Living Democracy*, 2016; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). These competences must be acquired as basic preconditions for living in a democratic society.

Helpful suggestions to parents on how to effectively communicate with their children about different issues and concerns are based on examples and situations gleaned from everyday life with toddlers, youngsters and teenagers, in order to further their democratic competences (Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toddlers</th>
<th>Eating Habits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Throwing a Tantrum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tidying Up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children 4-12</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Homework</td>
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<td>Aggressive Behaviour</td>
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<td>Body and Sexuality</td>
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<td>Teenagers 13-19</td>
<td>Using Media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sex and Love</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Drugs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Job orientation</td>
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</table>

Each and every parent can, by free will, immerse in and emerge from the chapters regarding their child’s age and specific issues he/she is confronted with.

Parents of school age children have more opportunities to read the chapters since the formal education part of life begins at primary school and teachers are familiar with them and usually recommend to parents one or more chapters or

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2 Link: [https://www.living-democracy.com/parents/](https://www.living-democracy.com/parents/)
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other publications (Gollob, & Lazić, 2021a, 2021b). On the other hand, parents of toddlers and children up to school age are in a different situation. At preschool, implementation of the Council of Europe chapters and recommendations is not seen as obligatory. At the same time, parents today ask for answers and suggestions for problem situations they experience with their children (Pećnik, Radočaj, Tokić, 2011).

When parents communicate with their children, they may learn whether their youngsters’ interests, needs, feelings and opinions are respected and whether they feel understood, accepted and valued as persons (Brown, 2017). Only self-confident and strong children can develop into responsible and politically mature citizens.

This article is, in a way, a contribution to improvement of visibility of the chapters for parents of toddlers. The selection of real-life situations was made after consultation with parents from different countries and backgrounds. Because of this, topics such as Eating Habits; Throwing a Tantrum and Tidying Up were chosen as the most challenging for parents of children who are up to 3 years old. Authors offer some points they found interesting from each chapter, wishing to be more familiar to readers, preschool teachers and parents. Each chapter has its own internet and pdf version. In the internet version parents can be interactive and analyse the situations in order to get some valuable hints related to the presented topics. Common to all the chapters is the recommendation to parents to be aware that toddlers’ behaviour is never meant to annoy them. The main suggestion is to take nothing personally.

3 Parents of toddlers’ chapters: https://www.living-democracy.com/parents/#pills-contact
### Table 2  Overview of all the chapters for parents of toddlers

| Eating Habits | Quote from the internet site:  
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
|               | “Your son Sam is 1.5 years old. Now he wants to eat on his own.  
|               | But instead of using his spoon and fork properly, Sam plays  
|               | with the food and fails to put the food into his mouth. Food  
|               | is everywhere: on his clothes, hair and on the floor around the  
|               | table. You get angry because you think about the mess and what  
|               | it will take to clean up the kitchen.”  
|               | Every parent is familiar with such situations from daily life with  
|               | the little ones. How can he/she react adequately to avoid con-  
|               | flicts and bad emotions in such situations? Tune In, Take More  
|               | and Take Turns are very valuable hints about communicating  
|               | with babies and toddlers. Besides that, parents are advised that  
|               | at this age children are not conscious of their needs and wishes  
|               | and are not able to communicate them. They can only express  
|               | they are not hungry, but they are very interested in the envi-  
|               | ronment and want to play with interesting things from there.  
| Throwing a Tantrum | Quote from the internet site:  
|               | “You are grocery shopping with your 2-year-old daughter Celina  
|               | who discovers a lot of interesting things like chocolate, plas-  
|               | tic bowls and magazines. She wants you to put these items into  
|               | the cart and buy them. But you don’t need these products and  
|               | tell her to leave them alone. Celina then wants you to buy three  
|               | boxes of her favourite cookies. You are telling her: “No Celina,  
|               | we have some of those cookies at home already. Please put them  
|               | back on the shelf!” But Celina doesn’t obey and insists that you  
|               | buy her these cookies. She begins to throw a tantrum, and it  
|               | doesn’t seem that she will calm down anytime soon.”  
|               | In internet and pdf version it offers 4 different parents’ react-  
|               | tions to the same situation and possible consequences of each  
|               | one. In other words, there is an explanation to why it would be  
|               | advisable not to react in a certain way. Internet version is more  
|               | interactive with parents and they can get answers by clicking on  
|               | some options.  
|               | Open communication and I messages are in the core of this  
|               | chapter, as much as the hints related to parents’ experience of  
|               | tantrum and feelings about their own child(ren). |
**Tidying Up**

Quote from the internet site:

“You have enjoyed playing with your 1-year-old son Marc. Together you have built big houses and castles with toy blocks. Then you pushed toy cars around these buildings, causing many of them to collapse. Marc has also taken various books from the shelf. Now the building blocks, books, toy cars and many more things are spread all over the floor and the furniture of the room. When it is time to clean up, you want your toddler to tidy up the room together with you. But Marc shows no interest; he is tired, angry and hungry and starts to throw toys around.”

In the analysis part of the chapter, parents should answer some questions related to the tidying up issue, in order to find out how they would deal with their child's reaction, does this situation lead to conflict and how this situation would end.

In the hints part a special attention is given to destructive messages which are seen as messages which provoke negative feelings and reactions in children. They are listed in groups named Commanding, ordering; Scolding, admonishing, threatening; Moralising; Giving advice and comparing.

**Methodology**

The aim of the qualitative study presented in this paper was to explore the contribution of the chapters for parents of toddlers, divided into three main topics. In other words, it aims to find out what parents of toddlers in Serbia think about the chapters, what they liked and didn't like and what suggestions they have in expanding the communication process with the research team. This study consisted of three main phases:

- Parents were required to read all 3 chapters for parents of toddlers and to think about them;
- From that point, they answered the questions for qualitative research. For this part of the study, the research team from Serbia created an online questionnaire which was posted on Facebook and shared by e-mail;
- The research team collected the data and interpreted them.

Because of the complexity of the parents’ role in this research, it is understandable that a small number of participants took part in it. 14 parents of toddlers made a significant contribution to comprehensive understanding of the chapters and their influence.
The questionnaire structure:

The questionnaire consisted of 7 questions. Seven were open type and the respondents were able to write their answers. One question was combined. The structure of the questionnaire looked like this:

- Questions 1 to 3 focused on the chapters (Eating Habit; Throwing a Tantrum; Tidying Up) and parents were required to write what they liked in each of them.

- The fourth question was combined. The respondents were able to choose between yes and no or to write their own answers.

- The fifth question referred to the topic(s) they didn’t like in each of the three chapters.

- The last two questions were outside the framework of the chapters, and focused on the biggest daily life temptations in bringing up toddlers (question No. 6) and productive, in order to offer to parents of toddlers one or more ways to achieve more (question No. 7).

Results

Results are presented in a table, following the questions in the questionnaire (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Eating Habits</td>
<td>Parents emphasized useful and digest context; three Ts examples and analysis; understanding the topic and parents’ situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A more personal view in some answers showed that they liked it because everything is presented from the position of understanding the parents and it is emphasized what they should refer to;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confirmation that parents shouldn’t force toddlers to eat if they don’t want to; It is good that we, parents, are encouraged to understand that a toddler does not do anything on purpose but they follow their natural process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter Throwing a Tantrum

Parents said it was well defined and practical; it shows different ways of solving throwing a tantrum situation, explains what is happening in a child’s head at that moment and encourages parents to understand the issue and how to react; they liked the explanations, advice and suggestions about acting when a child is throwing a tantrum.

More personal answers showed they liked explanations of the emotional overwhelm of a child; I'm very pleased that my chosen answer is written for a father; I like the chapter because I can find ways to calm down and keep going (on the one hand) and to see there are successful ways of solving situations without necessarily feeling bad (me or my child).

Chapter Tidying Up

Parents said they liked the advice about assertive communication; clear instructions; illustrations; dynamical way of presentation. They found it very useful because it is very difficult for them to say NO and consequently can't set a limit in communication.

More personal answers were: I like the simple way of explaining how to help children acquire good habits in order to make and maintain clean space; how to improve hygiene; I like the training part with all our answers and connecting them to the message they send; I like introspection after those answers without valuation.

Possibilities of chapters’ use

All their answers were gathered in categories: Yes; Very useful for everyone; Absolutely.

Emphasize anything you do not agree with in any of the chapters

According to previous answers there were no expectations they would have or any complaints, and the answers confirmed that. The parents noted it was very difficult to overcome the situations and stay calm. Some of them said they were more emotional than aware of the situation and did not feel good because of it. One parent said that he/she was not sure if he/she was able to be aware of the situation in which there are a lot of triggers for not so good reactions.
What are your biggest everyday life temptations in bringing up toddlers?

1. Setting the limits.
2. How to say NO and how to control myself when I am tired.
3. Is there any category for weaning off the pacifier and/or diapers?
4. Sometimes my son can be very nervous and I listen to him. Usually, it seems he is tired and needs some rest.
5. Hair washing is my nightmare and my child is rejecting almost everything (the child is 20 months old).
7. Reaction to unknown people.
8. Everything.
9. How to fall asleep.
10. Tantrums and interference of others (relatives) in bringing up the child.

Offer one or more ways for parents of toddlers to achieve more.

2. Lectures in kindergartens, media.
3. More talking regardless of the channel.
4. Very often we get information from our parents and relatives that we weren’t like that when we were toddlers and very often my wife and I ask each other what we do wrong.
5. The greatest obstacle regarding the questionnaire is that parents should read the chapters before answering the questions.
6. Maybe more parents of toddlers would read the chapters if they were presented as teasers on social networks.
7. Interactive workshops based on the chapters.
8. Parental meetings in kindergartens.
9. Personally, I find it very useful. Thank you.
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Discussion with conclusion

Parents of toddlers, even from a small study, were interested in participation and gave valuable answers regarding the chapters, information they found, possibilities of use, some aspects of chapters they do not agree with and parenthood in general. According to their impressions, they were pleasantly surprised learning that a resource like that exists and it is free of charge.

**Eating Habits:** They found 3 Ts very useful: *Tune In* or put yourself in the position of a toddler; *Talk More* or integrate your daily life with the little ones; *Take Turns* or be sure you allow for reciprocity while communicating with a toddler. **Throwing a Tantrum:** They found valuable advice concerning some specific life situations with toddlers and noticed that it was very difficult to stay calm in those situations, but it was a kind of exercise. **Tidying Up:** Parents found it very useful to write their answers in the chapter in order to find their own way to react in a specific situation. They emphasized this as an opportunity for guided analysis and acknowledgment of vulnerability as a starting point in improvement (Brown, 2019).

The main conclusion of this study is that parents, despite the differences they showed in their answers, agreed in two topics: They completely experienced parenthood dilemmas and assessed the chapters as a very good resource. The parents’ answers encouraged the research team to stay persistent in spreading the idea of *Living Democracy* in general and its concepts among parents of toddlers. Happy and satisfied parents who are able to find constructive answers to situations they experience every day in taking care of and bringing up a child of up to 3 years of age are very important for the wellbeing of all the participants in the relationship.

As a life changing experience and lifelong activity with a goal of mutual wellbeing, parenthood recognizes only long-term solutions. It means that this kind of vision does not recognise any quick and digest solutions. Every act and reaction of an adult person in adult-child relationship is important (Profaca, 2002; Siegel & Payne Bryson, 2011). A child absorbs everything. And that everything has a very important role in the adult period of a child and his/her parenthood too. Because of that, it is good to know that every relationship between parents and toddlers is based on reliance and trust. Each of them takes time to be formed, develop, maintain and spread, since they make a way of life. They are based on Bowlby’s Attachment theory, which stated that connection to a significant ‘other’ is an innate need (Stefanović-Stanojević, 2011). In other words, it means that an adult person is equally important to a newborn child, infant, toddler as the need for food and sleep. Connection to adults creates beliefs within a child that the world is a safe place and builds a capacity to take care of oneself. It colours the child’s life and gives him/her a purpose of importance and belonging. It never ends, but spreads in childhood, teenage period, adolescence, adulthood and old age.
LITERATURE

DO PARENTS READ CHAPTERS FOR PARENTS OF TODDLERS AND WHY NOT?

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ČITAJU LI RODITELJI TEMATSKE PRIRUČNIKE (POGLAVLJA) ZA RODITELJE DECE DO 3 GODINE I ZBOG ČEGA NE?

Sažetak: Cilj ove kvalitativne studije je bio da se istraži doprinos tematskih priručnika (poglavlja) za roditelje dece do 3 godine, koji su podeljeni u tri glavne teme. Bilo je veoma važno saznati šta roditelji dece ovog uzrasta iz Srbije misle o priručnicima, da li im se dopadaju i kakve sugestije daju istraživačkom timu u proširenju komunikacije sa njima. Svi roditelji su pri stavu da su tematski priručnici veoma korisni, a neki su bili impresionirani sa 3P: Promislite, Pričajte više, Preokrenite. Odgovori roditelja su ohrabrili istraživače iz tima da ostanu uporni u širenju ideje Živeti demokratiju u celosti i njene koncepte među roditeljima dece do 3 godine. Srećni i zadovoljni roditelji koji su u stanju da na konstruktivan način odgovore na situaciju koju svakodnevno iskušavaju u vaspitanju svog deteta mađeg od 3 godine su veoma važni u ostvarivanju dobrobiti svih učesnika u odnosu.

Ključne reči: tematski priručnici (poglavlja), roditelji, deca do 3 godine života, Živeti demokratiju.