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Building physical and emotional safety during early adolescence

Budowanie poczucia bezpieczeństwa fizycznego i emocjonalnego w okresie wczesnej adolescencji

Abstrakt:

Istotnym punktem metodyki prowadzenia zajęć edukacyjnych jest bezpieczeństwo uczestników, tak fizyczne, jak i emocjonalne. Zadaniem nauczyciela prowadzącego zajęcia jest budowanie zaufania, więzi emocjonalnej, a także umiejętne nauczanie wyznaczania własnych granic. Dziecko, które żyje w poczuciu bezpieczeństwa emocjonalnego i fizycznego chętniej eksperymentuje, doświadcza i tworzy relacje z innymi, co w późniejszym etapie jego życia może zaowocować lepszymi jakościowo kontaktami społecznymi. Takie dziecko, stając się dorosłym, który będzie umiał stawiać granice, nie podejmie działań, które nie są dla niego dobre i bezpieczne oraz takich, które prowadzą do pomniejszenia jego społecznej roli. Wprowadzenie podczas zajęć edukacyjnych – szczególnie w okresie wczesnej adolescencji – aktywności, które dają poczucie bezpieczeństwa powinno stać się priorytetem w relacji nauczyciel – uczeń. Wykorzystywanie w edukacji metod kreatywnych opartych na aktywności fizycznej staje się narzędziem do wspierania rozwoju uczniów oraz budowania poczucia bezpieczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo emocjonalne, bezpieczeństwo fizyczne, rozwój dzieci i młodzieży, wczesna adolescencja

Abstract:

An important point in the methodology of conducting educational classes is the safety of participants, both physical and emotional. The task of the teacher who conducts the classes is to build trust,

emotional bond, as well as skilful teaching children to set their own boundaries. A child who lives with a sense of emotional and physical safety is more likely to experiment, experience and form relationships with others, which at later stages of his or her lives may result in better quality of social contacts. Such a child will become an adult who will be able to set boundaries, will not take actions that are good and safe for them and those that lead to the reduction of their social role. The introduction of the activities which provide students with the sense of safety, especially during early adolescence, should be a priority for the teacher-student relationships. The use of creative methods based on physical activity in education becomes a tool to support the development of students and build a sense of security.

Keywords: emotional safety, physical safety, development of children and adolescents, early adolescence

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of turbulent changes, which may lead to conflicts, problems and identity disorders. During this period of life, a very important role is played by teachers, whose competences and behaviour can help children and young people overcome the problems of these difficult transitions. Teachers and students have the same needs in terms of the sense of safety and respecting their own autonomy. Meeting both needs requires the commitment of the teacher and students. This commitment will result in a teacher-student relationship based on respect, trust, and sense of safety and satisfaction for both of them during the achievement of a specific educational goal. Realization of this assumption in school as an educational and teaching institution becomes a challenge for the teacher. In order to cope with such tasks, teachers should use creative methods to teach students based on physical activity, which allow for their development in the mental, social and biological spheres. In the biological sphere, such work will help students become healthy, physically fit and resistant to the negative impact of the environment and improve body function. Introduction of methods based on physical activity to classes has a beneficial effect on many characteristics, not only physical, but also on the proper development of a number of metabolic and hormonal processes. In the mental and social spheres, students acquire the traits they will need in their adult lives, such as emotional balance, mental strength, resistance to stressful situations or the ability to adapt to changing conditions (Pękała, Banaszekiewicz, 2002). The sense of safety in education is characterized by full independence of students in solving tasks and problems, forming good relations with others or showing interest, empathy and respect for adults and peers. The use of methodological assumptions based on psychophysical safety in the period of early adolescence is likely to have a positive effect on the support of proper development of children and adolescents.

1. Adolescence

Adolescence is a period between 10 and 20 years of age, marked by the transition from childhood to adulthood. This is a period of intensive biological, psychological and social changes. Two phases of development are observed: early adolescence (from 10 to 16

years) and late adolescence (from 16 to 20 years old). From a psychological perspective, the changes concern emotional and cognitive processes (Obuchowska, 2005).

In early adolescence, biological changes that occur in the body of a young person have an effect on emotional processes. Consequently, young people tend to feel anxiety and loss, which affects the perception and acceptance of their own body. Furthermore, the adolescent experiences extreme emotions. The emotional lability is also observed, characterized by frequent intense and sudden changes in feeling of various emotions (Bardziejewska, 2005). An increased importance of the peer group is also observed in early adolescence, allowing young people to develop their self-esteem and social competences. This situation is conducive to establishing a sense of safety, acceptance and belonging to a group. In this period, young people experience their first love, sexual experiences, and strengthen their friendship relations (Piotrowski, Ziółkowska, Wojciechowska, 2015). An important developmental point is the identity crisis, which occurs through overtaking the behaviours of others or opposing the social roles assigned to them. Adolescent experiences a negativism manifested by the rejection of all contents proposed by adults, including parents and other important people they treat as an authority (Obuchowska, 2005). Early adolescence is also characterized by a transition from concrete to formal thinking, which means that young people develop the ability to analyse and search for solutions to a given situation. With these changes, adolescents are more willing to discuss various topics with adults, such as religion, politics or the rules used at home. It should be stressed that during this period of life, young people need the support of adults by setting specific boundaries, understanding their defiance against the authority, the possibility of making mistakes, determining how independent they are and what is the responsibility for their own behaviour. These problems concern the development of young person's autonomy. It should be emphasized that the decisions are first made with parents and then the independent activity is gradually developed by them. The above mentioned situation supports building positive relations with parents, self-esteem and sense of identity and agency. Furthermore, the above activities create a safe environment for development (Piotrowski, Ziółkowska, Wojciechowska, 2015).

In late adolescence, young people become increasingly independent and emotionally balanced. They can control and regulate their emotions. During this period, adolescents establish pre-intimate relationships, which prepare them to develop more intimate relations. Furthermore, there may be a strong need for creating a close relationship with another person (feeling loved and having someone close). The excessive focus on finding a partner is usually caused by the unsatisfied safety needs resulting from the relationship with parents during childhood. This may limit young people in performing the roles of partners in a relationship and lead to their failure to search for the development of their own abilities and autonomy (Piotrowski, Wojciechowska, Ziółkowska, 2015). Furthermore, in late adolescence, cognitive processes are related to formal thinking and cognitive idealism appears. To assess other people's behaviour, young people attempt to explain their behaviour in a logical way, seeking a correspondence between thinking and action (ibid., p. 19). Relationships with

parents change and transform from those based on authority to those based more on partnership. However, it is still important that parents support adolescents in their taking actions and making decisions with consideration for their abilities and resources (ibid., p. 22).

It is worth noting that every teenager is characterized by individuality. This means that the transformations and the pace of adolescence observed during the adolescence period should be approached from an individual point of view. The developmental changes characteristic of this period of life do not necessarily occur at the same time and in every young person (Matczak, 2004). Building the sense of both physical and emotional safety should be started already in the period of early adolescence and even earlier. Parents play an important role here, since they are the first to observe and control the development of their children, followed by early childhood and school education teachers. It is their support, building confidence, respect, controlling the educational process, and setting the boundaries that have an effect on the child's life with or without the sense of safety.

2. Effect of the sense of safety on child development

When asking the question of the child's emotional fears or sense of insecurity during physical education classes or recreational and sport activities, it should be noted that not all (fears) have their source in external determinants. In physical education classes, the rules concerning the location and organization of the classes are stipulated in the documents concerning the nursery school, school and teachers. The relationship between the children and their peers or teachers is also important for the child. It is often subjectively much more important than the aforementioned legal and organizational principles. The child must have a sense of acceptance in the environment and in relation to what he or she is doing. This atmosphere of acceptance in classes allows them to open to new proposals and tasks, to show their talents outside, and to be fully themselves. A child who is not accepted by a group or their teachers often withdraws from physical activity. Such children suffer during situations in which their physicality (body and movement) is not accepted, which cannot be surprising since human is a psychophysical unity (Demel, 1989; Węclawik, 1993; Grabowski, 1999). According to the idea of psychophysical unity, what threatens our corporeality gives rise to negative emotional experiences. Furthermore, anything that destroys a human emotionally will have a negative impact on his or her somatic health and functioning over time. This is more often the case with emotionally sensitive children, but also with children who may experience difficult moments of life at a given moment, e.g. in the family environment. A special level of empathy and pedagogical discretion is required from the teacher.

There are, however, such disturbances in the child's development which, despite the friendly environment, deprive children from feeling safe and comfortable and experiencing positive emotions during physical activity. Some problems are related to the development

and sensory integration and/or the secondary consequences of primitive (non-suppressed) reflexes (Hannaford, 1998; Przyrowski, 2012).

The integration and correct function of all the senses is the basis for motor learning and collecting experiences, that is, learning in general. The first system that responds to motor stimuli is the vestibular system and its functioning determines the development of the sense of balance. Balance is a motor property that a child learns by challenging the vestibular system. It is enough to change the head position by 1 degree in order to stimulate this system. All stimuli from this system must be integrated during the movement with the information received from other senses. In particular, the visual information has to be identical with that from the vestibular system. The two senses are correlated in 90%. In practice, if they do not confirm the information transmitted to the CNS, a child's insecurity and clumsiness can be observed. The child is characterized by poorer coordination compared to their peers. The child's movements and reactions are slower because the brain has to analyse for a longer time which answer to choose. Such a child has a poor balance, which paradoxically manifests itself in their need for being in constant motion because holding the body in one position for a long time becomes impossible. However, staying still is a manifestation of great balance. The child's motor behaviours differ from their peers and this often leads to criticising or ridiculing the child. If the motor problems occur frequently, the child starts to withdraw from playing games. The child loses self-confidence since they learnt that although he or she makes their best, they do not achieve the goal. They exercise slowly and clumsily. They do not feel confident in situations where they need to take a movement action. They are afraid of failure and would prefer to stop attending physical activity classes. Such a child does not feel safe in his/her functioning because of the processes that occur in their non-integrated senses, and the child does not have a real influence on such phenomena. The great role of the physical education teacher should be emphasized as they should notice the real cause of the child's problems with physical activity and approach them with understanding and empathy, and teach his or her peers the support and cooperation.

A similar situation of movement uncertainty that has a negative effect on the child's emotional development occurs in the case of the unsuppressed primitive reflexes. The development of reflexes is sequential and occurs according to biological law, i.e. one after another while the reflexes are suppressed at a specific time, giving rise to the development of the next reflex. In the long term, the reflexes stimulate the child's motor development provided that they are properly suppressed. Adequate reflex force supports the proper development of motor, perceptual and emotional functions. If, on the other hand, a reflex appears with a delay and lower force, it leads to the creation of developmental disturbances. In a nursery school or primary school, children may experience the prolonged effects of unsuppressed primitive reflexes (Mazur, 1998; Podemski, Wendera, 2001; Prusiński, 2003). For example, the Moro reflex will be discussed below, with the consequences of failure to suppress it at the right time, which is, according to J. Czochońska (1995), in the 5-6 months of

life. The Moro reflex is an involuntary reaction to a threat. It acts as the earliest possible form of fight-or-flight response.

According to Sally Goodard (2004), the Moro reflex has a general effect on a child's emotional development and personality development. In children with the Moro reflex, adrenaline and cortisol, i.e. stress hormones, are produced in excess. Excessive consumption of cortisol and adrenaline by the body depletes their reserves and reduces the resistance to diseases and allergies. Since the child with the persistent Moro reflex responds to almost all stimuli, any situation can initiate this reaction. For example, this could be sudden movements, sounds, changes in position, changes in light, temperature or another person's touch etc. that the child is not expecting. What is the physiological response of the body? This is activation of a fight-or-flight response that provides immediate information to the sympathetic nervous system, leading to: release of adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones), acceleration of breathing, hyperventilation and the acceleration of the heart rate, increased blood pressure, skin redness, and bursts of anger or crying. If the reflex is not suppressed in good time, the child lives with it like in a trap. It is forced to repeat and to reinforce these defence reactions although they do not need them for anything. As a result of such exercises, the above reactions are transformed into persistent forms.

According to Goodard (2004), this causes problems related to the vestibular system, such as cardiovascular disease or problems with maintaining balance and coordination, particularly noticeable during ball games. Typical is the reaction of fear to touch. There are problems with the oculomotor system, vision and perception, e.g. the effect of the lack of visual selection - the child is unable to ignore visual stimuli within the field of vision. Eyes react to the outline and neglect details. Furthermore, the pupil's insufficient reaction to light, sensitivity to light, and problems with looking at black on white paper are also observed. The child gets tired easily with bright light, which leads to difficulties in writing and reading. The problems with perception of auditory sensations caused by oversensitivity to certain sounds are also possible. These children develop allergies and reduced immunity, manifested by asthma, eczema or prolonged nasal and throat infections and adverse reactions to drugs. These children show low stamina. They are characterized by reluctance to changes or surprise and low adaptability. Sometimes they seem to experience permanent anxiety. According to experts, the secondary psychological symptoms of the above condition persistent for longer time include: continuous anxiety (unrelated to reality), exaggerated reactions to stimuli which are inadequate to situations, mood changes - emotional lability. Since the body responds with a defensive position, all the muscles become tense and ready for another stimulus, which causes emotional exhaustion. This often leads to overload and inflammations in the musculoskeletal system (Sadowska, 2001).

The child experiences difficulties with accepting criticism because it is difficult for him or her to make changes. They also cannot make decisions and feel low self-esteem. Very often they have a sense of danger and dependence on others. The child's need to control what is happening is developed because it is the best form of self-protection for him or her. When they control the situation, there is less chance that they are surprised by anything. Bouts of high activity are followed by exhaustion, repeated many times over the day, which

makes the child look tired or sleepy and unable to concentrate until he or she finds a safe place. The greatest help for them is to create a safe environment. This is especially difficult during physical education classes, as children need to keep noise at a minimum level: both the teacher and children should not speak too loudly. Movement has to be minimized so that the eyesight can focus on what is important. The classroom layout should be arranged so that the child sits in the least noisy part of the classroom. This is possible in the classroom, but not in the gymnasium. Teachers should not emphasize the child's problems, because the child with the Moro reflex still feels different and has difficulties with adapting to the group during physical activity - they do not feel safe in such groups. This often leads to the total withdrawal from physical education classes. Attempts should be made to ensure that teachers are aware of what the child is experiencing and understand the reasons for his or her behaviour. It is by skilful using movement stimulation that a lot can be done to strengthen the child's self-confidence but without emphasizing his or her otherness.

Thinking about these problems, Sally Goddard (2004) developed a method for the therapy of unsuppressed primitive reflexes. The therapy brings the child to a point in the development where he or she regains the sense of safety that comes from his or her internal self-confidence, from the motor to emotional and social dimensions. The child becomes open and engaged, willing to learn and experience new feelings and thus develops intellectually and establishes positive social relationships.

As demonstrated in the examples above, an internal sense of emotional safety during actions they take is extremely important for the child's development and education. It is critical that parents and teachers understand that the child's fears, their clumsiness and emotional state may be due to physical and developmental reasons. The more subtle the disturbances in sensory integration or the suppression of congenital reflexes, the more difficult they are to notice. Furthermore, it is more difficult for adults to react properly to these disturbances and to provide effective support. Such tasks can be performed by teachers who are well-prepared in terms of auxology with the emphasis on developmental problems.

3. Safety in teacher-student relations

Safe teacher-student relations can be achieved if activities are implemented in three areas: psychosocial, ethical, and institutional (Fig. 1).

Most often the safety is viewed from the standpoint of occupational health and safety. Appropriate equipment for classrooms, medical and dental care, safety during commuting to school, ergonomics of students' sitting at desks or noise reduction. Obviously, all this is very important to the physical health of the students, but the concept of safety also covers psychological and social conditions. Safety needs are fundamental and most important for every human being. If a child does not feel safe, one cannot expect their development, proper learning or success in the education process, and even in our lives.

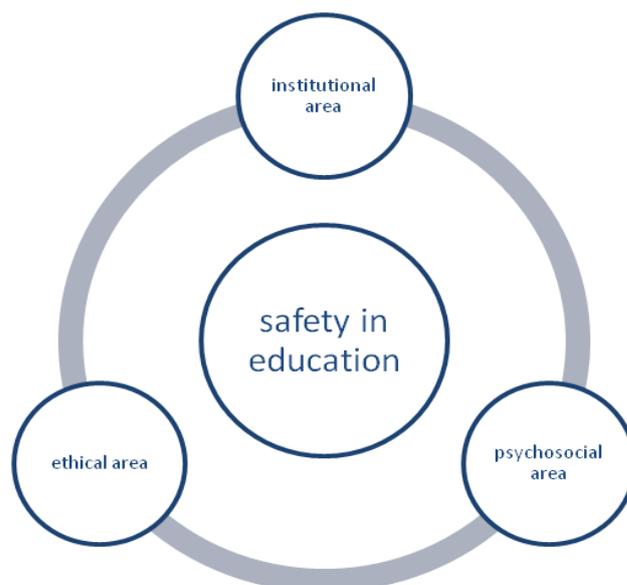


Fig. 1. Areas in which safety at school is analysed

If safety needs of students are not satisfied, the children are likely to show aggression and violence, while teachers experience increasing stress and burnout (Danielewska, 2002).

Table 1. Characteristics of school safety areas

Psychosocial area	Ethical area	Institutional area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔interpersonal relationships ➔support from the teachers, ➔students' attitudes towards school, ➔ teachers' competences (teaching, educational, communication, social, media) ➔students' competences (emotional, communication, psychosocial) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔system of values ➔Moral attitudes of teachers/educators ➔Moral attitudes of students ➔Moral attitudes of parents ➔rules and standards that regulate social relations at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔law ➔work organization ➔management styles ➔organization of teachers' professional development ➔the method in which supervision is performed ➔administrative dependency ➔location ➔number of students in classes

When a teacher first meets his or her students, they have no influence on their previous development. It is very easy for them to diagnose students' problems, but it is more difficult to stimulate their development in a class of over a dozen people. An individual program for each child would be an ideal solution, but very difficult to achieve in reality.

Such pedagogical dilemmas are addressed by ready-made therapeutic programmes for children and adolescents with greater or lesser developmental problems. Classes can be conducted for the entire class, strengthening the development of healthy students and supporting people with specific problems or deficits. The teacher's role is simply to include them into the classes in a safe way. Using methods of teaching students based on physical activity such as Educational Kinesiology, the Sherborne Developmental Movement (SDM), the Rudolf Laban Method and the Sally Goddard primitive reflexes therapy make classes interesting, whereas students have the opportunity to solve many of the problems that arise during such classes. Young people learn to cooperate with others, both in pairs and in groups. They have the opportunity to play the roles of leaders or people performing someone's instructions. Consequently, they cope better in the period of late adolescence with problems, frustrations and anger.

Regardless of the method used to support children and young people in the early adolescence period, the classes are safe if teaching methodologies are developed based on the following principles:

1. The teacher assigns open-ended tasks to students. This means that everyone interprets the task according to their own ideas and looks for their own solutions. 'Teacher should interfere only if the child's interpretation puts his or her safety at risk' (Pękała, Banaszkiwicz, 2002, p. 126).
2. A safe working environment should be ensured. The teacher should make sure that the classroom is safe for the students before each class. They should check whether the equipment in the room is well protected and whether the participants have enough space (Hill, 2013).
3. The teacher should focus and show attention to each participant. Foreign publications indicate that attention is the most rewarding of all methods and suggest that the forms should include embracing or cuddling during therapeutic and other sessions and classes (South Gloucestershire Council, 2002).
4. The teacher's communication competencies should focus on positive qualities. Every effort, engagement and willingness to act should be noticed and supported by words of praise to encourage further successes, even if the activities are not completed with the expected result. This has a positive effect on the development of students' self-esteem and shows that in order to achieve success, one should often try for several times. 'Physical activity offers excellent opportunities to use language at all levels.' (Hill, 2013, p.60). Therefore, the teacher's ability to observe the participants, read their body language, and to respond in an appropriate way is very important.
5. Correct interaction between each participant of classes (teacher, participant, observer). The development of self-confidence and emotional safety of the participants takes place only if the teacher instils appropriate attitudes and uses

effective teaching styles. In the Instrumental Enrichment method, Feuerstein emphasized that '(...) because of the high emotional load, sharing experiences ensures the effectiveness of the message in other adult-child interactions' (Sharron, 1994, p. 49). Therefore, interaction also means discussing experiences, activities that have been taken by both students and teachers.

6. Inspiring trust in the participants of the classes. At the beginning of her book, Veronika Sherborne emphasized that when a child discovers that he or she can trust a partner who offers them physical support 'in a way that inspires trust, they develop a sense of self-confidence and safety, not only physical but also emotional' (Sherborne, 2012, p.15).
7. Cooperation with parents. Partnership relations with parents are an invaluable source of information about the child. Teachers should meet parents on regular basis to familiarize with the child's social conditions, problems the child may be talking about at home and be involved in joint educational and recreational activities.

In the area of safety, touch is also critical. During physical education classes, using creative or sport-based methods involves activities based on touch. One of the fundamental human needs is the need for physical contact. Studies by Sylva and Lunt (1986) already demonstrated that the most important factor in reducing crying in children was the immediate reaction of the mother (usually by cuddling). It was found that early mother's reactions to the child's sensitivity and needs represent the basis for its social and emotional development during adolescence (Sylva, Lunt, 1986, p. 45). During classes in which physical contact is unavoidable, teachers have to approach the problem very seriously. As a child grows up, the touch of the other person can be perceived as socially unacceptable or childish. Hill (2013) stressed that 'giving someone the feeling of being a valuable, wanted and accepted person, in an atmosphere of comfort and safety in times of prevailing threats and misery everywhere - while at the same time sharing joy and emphasizing belonging to a group, can be perfectly strengthened by appropriate physical contact' (Hill, 2012, p.70). The formation and development of functional and cognitive patterns requires appropriate tension in the cerebral cortex, which depends on the supply of sufficient emotional stimuli. In order to ensure that children develop properly, it is not enough to provide them with food and air. As stressed by Sherborne (2012) it takes time, space and another person (a set of stimuli coming from a close or important person) to support psychomotor development. These stimuli are just a properly offered touch or a proper tone of voice. Proper touch provides a sense of safety and allows for proper development. Direct physical contact with another person represents a source of kinaesthetic sensations and stimulates the development of the nervous system through appropriate action of the receptors in the skin. Touch allows for conveying such emotions and values as trust, love, compassion, warmth, openness or sincerity, which are revealed in building good relations with others in

adulthood. Dosing the person's own strength in relation to the other person, cooperation with a partner based on touch or setting boundaries is an invaluable source of abilities that one can experience during physical activity. These abilities teach the person how to respect the feelings of others, how to develop sensitivity to their own needs and the needs of partners, and how to help one another.

Conclusion

Ensuring physical and emotional safety in the educational process is a challenge for educational institutions. The success is possible if teachers inspire trust in young people and satisfy their most important needs in early adolescence. Cooperation and good atmosphere in teacher-student relations should be based on respect, freedom of choice, responsibility for decisions made, and attention. To achieve such a goal, it is necessary to equip the teaching staff with appropriate tools to develop a safe school climate. Participation in courses and training in creative teaching methods, therapies, and classes based on physical activity can enrich teachers with prevention and educational competences and prevent professional burnout. Furthermore, this helps equip students with skills they need to cope with emotions, stress and problems - not only during adolescence, but also in adult life.

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