

# SHOULD I SEND MY CHILD TO KINDERGARTEN, AND SHOULD I PAY THE TEACHER? PARENTING, GENDER, AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN INTERNET FORUMS. *Summary*

**Yulia Gradskova**

Scholars have paid comparatively little attention to the institution of preschool education. There is a little research on the connections between ideas about its goals and forms on the one hand and notions of gender equality and inequality on the other hand. At the same time, over the past fifty or one hundred years, institutionalized care for preschool-age children and preschool educational establishments have become widespread in most industrialized countries. Their various forms have sparked no small amount of public discussion. These discussions have centered on issues such as child welfare, the goals of educational policy, governmental oversight of childhood education, and the gender aspects of family policy.

It is often argued that historical differences in interpretations of the goals pursued by preschool education and child rearing have led to the emergence of two approaches. In one group of countries—France, Belgium, and Spain—the system of preschool education is primarily focused on the maintenance of social mobility and social justice. In the second group of countries—Northern Europe, as well as the United Kingdom and Germany during the past decade—the system of preschool education is focused on maintaining gender equality within the family.

In the countries commonly referred to as Eastern Europe, this subject has been researched to a lesser degree than in the Western part of the continent, by virtue of historical circumstances (in particular, a politics of memory that has emphasized the forcible collectivization of children by communist regimes). Those studying post-socialist institutions of preschool education have traditionally focused on the role of the kindergarten in securing opportunities for women to work outside the home. However, little attention has been paid to the gender regime within the kindergarten, to regional and ethnic differences in preschool educational practices, and to the role of preschool educational institutions in securing or counteracting social and gender equality and fostering or suppressing a civic political culture amongst children. The impact of the kindergarten on the life of the family and the child within the family has been insufficiently researched.

My article focuses on the gender aspects of interaction between parents and the institution of preschool education, as well as communication among parents about these interactions, as represented in the online forums *materinstvo.ru*, *mamka.ru*, and *nanya.ru*. The use of online sources allows me to maintain a fairly wide geographical scope while preserving the individual style of accounts published online. I was specifically interested in using these forums to investigate constructions of femininity within the context of parenting and interaction with preschool educational institutions.

In my analysis of these Internet forums, I draw on work by Norman Denzin, who has insisted on the need for an attentive reading of cybertexts and cautions us against interpreting such texts as the conscious utterances of a subject. I thus view messages on these forums as discursive practices: the participants reproduce the discursive constructions of the forums. On the other hand, following Michel de Certeau, I regard participation in the forums as a practice of everyday resistance—a manifestation of ingenuity and persistence in claiming “one’s own” place within the space of a dominant social discourse.

The first part of the article briefly describes the forums and discusses the methods I use to analyze them. I also clarify the discursive context in which this virtual exchange of opinions takes place. In the main part of the article I deal with two aspects of parenting and the practices of preschool institutions that are discussed in the forums: the need for kindergartens and the dangers inherent in them, and economic aspects of the relationship between parents and the kindergarten.

## **INTERNET FORUMS AND THE DISCURSIVE CONTEXT OF PARENTING**

The forums are located on web sites that publish pedagogical advice for future mothers and parents, as well as commercial content about medical and psychological services and products for children. In addition, certain sites publish alerts about children in need of expensive medical treatment and appeals to help these children. All the forums are open-access. Forum users more often than not propose discussion topics themselves, but in certain cases they are prompted by a publication on the site or a survey among participants. Forum users appear to be exclusively female. My analysis focuses on the texts of messages, but I also consider visual information such as the photographs, drawings, and flags used as avatars by participants.

The forums are a unique way to exchange opinions virtually, and they also make it possible for participants in Russia to interact with Russian speakers in post-Soviet and other foreign countries. Such Internet forums can be studied as a source of information about the creation of networks that help people with the practical task of mothering.

The participants most often address one another as “girls.” This form of address generates a certain atmosphere of sisterhood, demonstrating the unity of all mothers as they confront state institutions. Many of the messages posted on the forums use emotionally colored turns of phrase. This enables users to approximate the cyber-message to an ordinary, informal conversation (for example, in the kitchen), and it also imparts a “feminine” style to the cybertext.

The forums make it possible to study the most widespread types of discourse on parenting and preschool institutions. They show, in particular, that the idea of hands-on parenting and the concept of quality time spent with children are becoming more pervasive among Russian speakers.

A few words are in order about the general political and discursive context within which communication on the forums is effected. Over the past fifteen or twenty years, family and social policies in Russia have been embedded in a new familialism: women have been advised to “return to the home,” to devote more time to family and children, while the husband is increasingly viewed as the principal breadwinner in the family. Thus, the work performed by women outside the home—especially during the 1990s, an important period of socialization for those women who are now the mothers of preschool-age children—was represented in publications by psychologists and educators, as well as by the mass media, as ancillary, while care of children and the family has been portrayed as women’s primary function. At the same time, the system of preschool institutions in Russia suffered a fairly serious collapse after 1991 (between 1990 and 2002, the number of such institutions dropped by 45.3 percent); the number of nurseries in particular has dropped. The lack of slots in kindergartens has been felt with particular acuity since the beginning of the past decade in small towns and rural areas: 43.8 percent of children in small towns and 27.5 percent of children in large cities no longer attended preschools because of a lack of places for them.

In recent years, the attitude of the state and the mass media to kindergartens has begun to change. However, achieving gender equality has not become a priority. On the contrary, official discourse is more and more often filled with talk of a demographic crisis. Moreover, women are frequently presented as being indirectly to blame for existing problems since they postpone having children, limit themselves to having one child, or refuse to have children at all. In addition, women’s reproductive freedom has been questioned by a growing movement that calls for limitations, or even a ban, on the use of contraceptives and abortions. At the same time, mass propaganda of the two- or three-child family is conducted as part of the new pro-natalist policy.

During this period, the problems of “childcare,” “education,” and “child psychology” have been more and more widely discussed in the mass media, especially in glossy magazines. These media reports are usually primarily addressed to women, as future mothers or mothers of preschoolers. Much of this material is likewise published on web sites, including the sites that host the forums discussed in the paper.

### **KINDERGARTEN: THREAT, OPPORTUNITY, OR NECESSITY?**

Among parents surveyed by Vladimir Sobkin and Ekaterina Marich, only eight percent wanted to rear their preschool-age children exclusively at home. The most important arguments for sending children to kindergarten were interaction with age mates and preparation for entering school. Parents writing in the forums I analyze

generally concur with this. However, it is worth examining how parents present their reasons for sending their children to kindergarten.

Discussions on the forums focus on the issue of the age at which communication with other children is particularly important for a child. In the majority of cases, the implicit norm is that until the child reaches the age of three, the mother should stay at home with it, while the father should support them financially. In this context, mothers who send their children to kindergarten before the age of three are forced to provide justifications for their actions. On the contrary, mothers who remain at home with their children until they reach the age of three expect to be identified as caring.

Other posts show that many mothers regard kindergarten as a dangerous place for children, primarily because of the risk of infection. Aside from the danger of getting ill, kindergarten is presented on the forums as a place where children do not receive enough attention from adults; therefore their aggressive impulses are manifested to the fullest, and they can pose a threat to each other's health. However, many forum participants expect that their children will learn communication skills in kindergarten and that they will learn to defend themselves and acquire the ability to stand up for their own interests, including physically. Thus, like the army, kindergarten is supposed to prepare tender youngsters for survival in the harsh conditions of a society where cruelty and competition are the norm. For many forum users, school is the principal and frightening prototype of this society: many parents dread the day when their children begin to go to school.

The cyberspace of the forums is thus a promising source for research on popular notions of childhood and norms of "good parenting." Because most forum participants are mothers, their interpretations of parenting are bound up with notions of femininity and the role of women in the family. Although the majority of female participants in these cyber-conversations present themselves as "caring mothers" (referring to the relevant normative stereotype), the everyday practices of mothering they write about frequently contradict the established rules and can thus be described using de Certeau's categories of resistance.

## **KINDERGARTEN, PARENTS... AND THE SHADOW ECONOMY?**

The forums make it clear that most users from Russia have encountered huge problems as soon as they have attempted to enroll their children in a kindergarten. The main problems are financial. The sums and forms of payment for admission to municipal kindergartens differ greatly not only between different parts of Russia, but also within the same cities. The forums mention sums ranging from a hundred to several thousand dollars as the one-time fee for the admission of a child to kindergarten.

Description of this "placement" procedure and the sums asked for are frequently accompanied by emotional comments. However, the majority of female forum participants regard this "placement" as a pragmatic problem. Only a few participants point out the illegality of many of the requirements imposed by kindergartens, calling this system corrupt.

Parents are sometimes asked to transfer funds directly to the kindergarten's bank account, and later the institution's director accounts for how the money was spent at a meeting with parents. Forum participants approve of this practice. Other parents have been asked to render direct assistance by purchasing various items for the kindergarten. In several cases, this meant that the mother herself has had to begin working at the kindergarten as a teacher or minder.

Many parents writing on the forums are not confident their children are receiving sufficient care and therefore are willing to accept other requests for "help." They feel that it is important to "help out the kindergarten" not only by contributing money, but also by showing personal concern for the educational space—for example, by picking out rugs and curtains or furnishing the sleeping areas and playrooms. We can hypothesize that by furnishing or decorating the public space of the kindergarten and trying to present it as "home," mothers attempt as it were to extend the space of the private (in this case, their "own" space, "domestic" space) to the kindergarten, thus surmounting the boundaries between the private and the public. On the other hand, many parents are willing to make various "additional payments" to kindergarten personnel so that their child will get special attention. As in the case where parents affirm the necessity of "furnishing" the kindergarten, the system of individual "additional payments" to teachers and minders enables parents to divert part of the institution's power resources.

Gifts are another widely discussed topic. Notions about what constitutes an acceptable gift and how much it should cost also differ greatly depending on the region of Russia where the writers live and their social status. Some forum participants defend the practice of regularly "gifting" kindergarten teachers as the norm, and criticize parents who violate this norm.

An important intermediary in the economic relations between parents and the kindergarten is the parents' committee, whose activity is also discussed on the forums. The institution of the parents' committee was born in the Soviet period and was connected with the idea of collective education and participation of the community of parents in the education of their children. An analysis of the discussions on the forums shows that the parents' committee continues to be an important intermediary between teachers and parents. Most forum participants agree that this institution is important.

## CONCLUSIONS

Online forums are an important source for studying the gender aspects of practices in preschool education because they include individual testimonies about interaction between parents and kindergartens. Although general caveats about the use of cyber-conversations as sources in research extends to these messages, they do provide insight into many everyday practices in kindergartens, including those which cannot be studied using other sources.

The forums show that current Russian notions of "hands-on mothering" and the "welfare of the child," despite widespread criticism of state and collective preschool education, presume that children should spend a long period in kindergarten.

Preschool institutions are imagined by mothers as vital to the everyday well-being of their children: they should not only take care of children, but also foster their development, helping them form skills for interacting with age mates and familiarizing them with social norms. Although they have reservations, the mothers perceive the child-rearing and educational functions of the preschool institution as an acceptable substitute for parental care during the time when parents are at work. To a significant degree, these expectations match the current functions of preschool institutions as a whole.

Soviet discourse on the mother as the “principal parent” has remained dominant, and its assumptions are shared by a majority of forum participants. In the post-Soviet situation, the normativity of involved parenthood presumes not only that the mother is significantly involved in the rearing and education of her child at home, but also that she performs the role of an intermediary between her child and the social institution of the kindergarten. If she fails to perform this role, she experiences feelings of guilt: her working hours should be organized so as to make the good of her child the priority. The mothers themselves do not demand the same level of concern from fathers, who are absent from the forums.

Finally, it is important to point out that the forums on kindergartens can be seen as functioning as an informational resource and, simultaneously, as a source of empowerment: they strengthen the position of the individual mother in her dealings with the bureaucratic and corrupt system of education and child rearing.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Thomas Campbell*