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## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE CHANGES IN CHILDREN AFTER PARTICIPATING IN ACTING GAMES/SCENES

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**Abstract.** *The article focuses on the psychological and cognitive changes in children following participation in acting games and scenes. The aim of the study is to examine the impact of involvement in theater groups on the psychological state and cognitive functions of children, particularly in the context of a post-pandemic society. General scientific methods of cognition were employed in the research: analysis, synthesis, comparison, systematization, and generalization. The study's results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly worsened the mental health and cognitive functions of children in the United States, with one in five children aged 3 to 17 likely to be diagnosed with mental disorders. Suicidal tendencies among youth have risen by over 40% in the past decade. The nationwide burden of mental disorders among children reaches 13%, with only about 20% receiving professional help. These data highlight the urgent need to increase access to specialized mental health services and adapt the education system to support children with mental health disorders in a post-pandemic society. Theater groups have proven effective in promoting children's psychological and cognitive development. Empirical data show their positive impact on reducing symptoms of depression, improving communication skills, and boosting self-esteem. Participation in theatrical performances and role-playing teaches children effective communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. They also stimulate creativity, the ability to quickly adapt to changes, and enhance emotional expression. Thus, theater groups play a crucial role in the comprehensive development of a child's personality, supporting their psychological health and social skills. The practical significance of the research lies in confirming the need to integrate theater activities into educational and therapeutic programs to support children's mental health.*

**Keywords:** *theater groups, mental health, cognitive development, post-pandemic society, children.*

### Introduction

The relevance of studying psychological and cognitive changes in children following participation in acting games and scenes is a significant issue in the context of modern educational and psychotherapeutic practice. With the rise in mental disorders among children, caused by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation, and increased screen time, finding effective methods of psychological rehabilitation and cognitive development becomes especially pertinent. Dramatic games, using techniques of role-playing and stage performance, offer an innovative approach to developing children's emotional intelligence and social skills.

The issue of psychological and cognitive changes in children after participating in acting games or scenes has been well-researched in international scientific literature. The presented list of sources covers studies examining the impact of theatrical activities on children's development, mental stability, and cognitive abilities.

Significant contributions to the development of this topic have been made by authors such as S. Dalila and W. Handayani-grum [4], who, in their research, consider theater training from the perspective of child developmental psychology.



Their study emphasizes that participation in theatrical games contributes to the improvement of children's emotional and cognitive development, allowing them to better express their emotions and interact with others.

M.R. Gross [6], in his work, also explores how theater education impacts adolescent development. He highlights that acting training can enhance social cognition and emotional control, which are key aspects of development during adolescence. Similar topics have been studied by L. Jiang, F. Alizadeh, and W. Cui [7], who conducted a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of dramatic interventions in improving children's mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings confirm that theatrical practices can be an effective tool for improving mental health and overall well-being.

The research also utilized expert literature, including publications from institutions such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality [1], the American Psychological Association [2], and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [3], which highlight contemporary aspects of children's mental health and development.

Despite the sufficient amount of literature on this topic, there is a lack of systematic material on the subject of research. Therefore, using various scientific methods, information was analyzed, grouped, and systematized to present it in light of the research topic.

### **Purpose of the article**

The aim of the article is to assess the impact of acting activities on children's psychological well-being and cognitive abilities, which may contribute to the development of more effective educational strategies and therapeutic interventions in the future.

### **Research results**

#### ***Psychological and cognitive issues of children in the USA***

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on children, causing serious problems in their mental health and cognitive development. School closures, social isolation, the transition to online learning, and increased time spent on the internet created an environment where children were deprived of normal social interaction and educational processes. As a result, many children developed anxiety disorders, depression, attention and memory difficulties, as well as problems with motivation for learning.

Gross M. R., in his study, notes that the biggest issue for children was isolation from peers. Active social interaction is critically important for a child's development, especially during adolescence, when personality and social skills are being formed. The lack of opportunities to communicate with friends and participate in group activities has negatively impacted adolescents' mental health, which, in turn, affects their ability to concentrate on studies and achieve success in school [7].

This issue is also supported by statistics: according to the American Psychological Association, approximately 20 million children in the United States could be diagnosed with mental disorders, representing nearly one in five children aged 3 to 17 [2]. This is reinforced by nationwide trends showing an increase in emergency department visits with a primary diagnosis related to mental health, where



from 2016 to 2019, there was a rise from 784.1 to 869.3 per 100,000 population [3, 2].

Around 15% of adolescents experience severe depression, and 37% report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Nearly 20% of teenagers have seriously considered suicide [9]. Suicidal tendencies among high school students have increased by over 40% during the decade leading up to 2019, making mental health one of the leading causes of mortality and disability in this age group [9].

Globally, nearly 15% of youth aged 10 to 19 suffer from mental disorders, accounting for 13% of the total disease burden in this age group [9].

At the same time, the percentage of adolescents receiving mental health care has significantly increased in recent years. Younger boys are more likely to develop mental disorders than girls, but the rise in depression cases among adolescent girls has been particularly noticeable since 2009. Socioeconomic status also affects the prevalence of mental disorders: children living below the poverty line are more likely to face mental health issues [9].

Mental health problems were a leading cause of disability among youth even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and this trend has only intensified in recent years [9]. Thus, during the post-pandemic recovery period, the average rate of psychological and cognitive disorders remains quite high.

In addition to directly diagnosed cases, many other children and adolescents are at risk of developing mental disorders due to a combination of risk factors. These may include biological or genetic predispositions, unfavorable conditions in the family, school, or community, as well as peer influence. These factors increase the likelihood of mental health issues, even if a child or adolescent does not currently have a diagnosed disorder [2].

It is important to note that providing quality care to children with mental disorders is a significant challenge in the USA. There is a great need for specialists who can offer high-quality care that takes cultural specifics into account, is evidence-based, and meets the unique needs of each child. However, according to estimates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only about 20% of children who need help receive it from mental health professionals. This indicates a significant lack of access to necessary services, requiring urgent attention from both the healthcare system and society as a whole [2, 3].

### ***Importance of games and interactive interaction for improving the situation***

Despite the issues with psychological and cognitive changes in adolescents, an analysis of health and behavior statistics of children in the USA over the past few years [1-3] shows a significant number of positive indicators characterizing the psychological development of children in different age groups. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for children aged 3 to 5, parents reported high levels of attachment (97.0%), resilience (87.9%), and curiosity (93.9%) [1]. These data indicate well-developed emotional and cognitive skills at a younger age.

Continuing the analysis, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, children aged 6 to 11 show high levels of curiosity (93.0%) and persistence (84.2%), but self-control was lower, at 73.8% [1]. This may indicate initial challenges in the development of emotional regulation, which require attention in educational



and upbringing programs.

The transition to the age of 12-17 years leads to a decrease in indicators of curiosity to 86.5% and self-control to 79.8%, although the level of persistence remains stable (84.7%) [1]. These changes may be associated with the transitional period of adolescence, where young people experience increasing social and academic pressures.

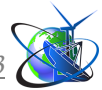
The information mentioned above indicates that the age group of 12-17 years requires additional motivation and stimulation for active interaction. This is why organizing games and interactive interactions is crucial for this age group, as it allows for engaging children in activities, thereby supporting their psychological state. Let's examine the most common games and interactions that positively impact cognitive and psychological conditions.

**Table 1 - Most common games and interactions that positively impact cognitive and psychological conditions**

Activity or method	Impact on cognitive state	Impact on psychological state
Theatrical performances	Development of empathy and expressiveness	Improvement in self-expression, reduction of shyness
Role-playing games	Enhancement of analytical skills, critical thinking	Strengthening communication abilities, self-esteem
Sports competitions	Improvement of coordination and reaction	Reduction of stress, increase in team spirit
Interactive discussions	Development of speech abilities, argumentation	Improvement in social interactions
Educational video games	Enhancement of problem-solving thinking	Reduction of anxiety, improvement in mood
Group projects	Development of critical thinking skills	Formation of responsibility, mutual support
Outdoor games	Improvement of observation and coordination	Reduction of feelings of isolation, increase in mood
Music lessons	Stimulation of memory, development of rhythm	Increase in self-esteem, social integration
Technology workshops	Skills in working with modern technologies	Increase in motivation, self-confidence
Art therapy	Improvement of attention and concentration	Development of self-awareness, reduction of stress

*Note: systematized by the author*

McDonald B., Goldstein T. R., & Kanske P. note that interactive engagement with adolescents offers numerous benefits for children, as confirmed by various studies. Specifically, regular involvement in extracurricular activities can significantly enhance children's socio-cognitive skills, such as theory of mind and empathy. Theory of mind includes the ability to understand and predict the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others, which is key to successful social interaction. Studies have shown that children who participated in games and interactive clubs, particularly drama clubs, exhibited higher theory of mind scores compared to those engaged in other arts, such as music [8]. Therefore, engaging children in active

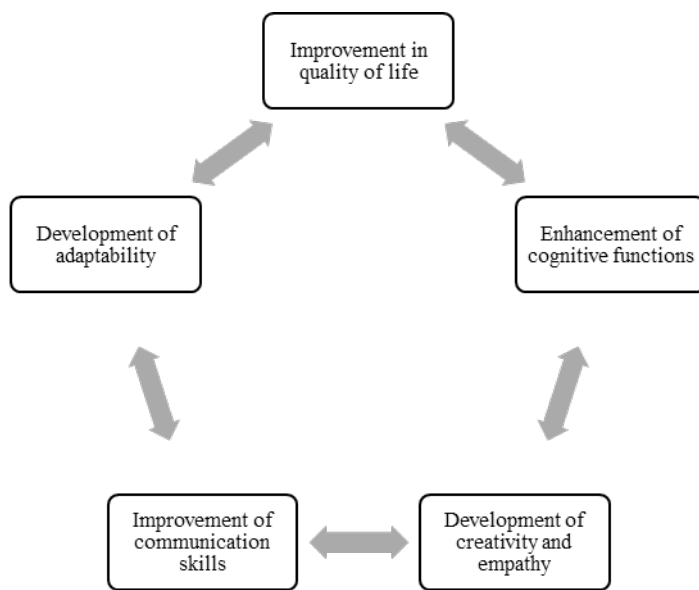


interaction not only fosters their creative abilities but also profoundly impacts their socio-cognitive development, making it a valuable tool for comprehensive education and personal development [8].

**Role of drama clubs in addressing cognitive and psychological issues of children**

Theater-based interventions in school education have proven to be promising methods for improving mental health and well-being, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Research covering these therapeutic approaches has shown a positive impact on various aspects of mental health [7].

First, there is a significant improvement in the quality of life among participants undergoing such therapy, although the level of heterogeneity among studies was high. The interventions also had a substantial impact on reducing symptoms of depression and trauma-related disorders but were less effective in reducing anxiety [7].



**Fig. 1. Positive impact on the cognitive and psychological state of children**

Second, such activities contribute to the improvement of participants' cognitive functions, communication skills, and self-esteem. However, these results were accompanied by high variability between studies, indicating the need for further research to more accurately assess effectiveness. Despite the positive impact, not all cases revealed statistically significant differences, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of theater interventions on mental health [7].

Third, through theater games, children can immerse themselves in various roles, fostering their imagination, creativity, and empathy. They gain the opportunity to express emotions, which helps them better understand and manage their emotions [4].

Fourth, drama clubs positively influence the improvement of communication skills. In a social context, participation in theatrical performances and role-playing games enhances social skills. Children learn to communicate effectively, cooperate in teams, resolve conflicts, and collectively find solutions. Such interactions enhance their ability to listen, understand different perspectives, and negotiate [4].

Fifth, children learn to be flexible and quickly adapt to changing situations.



Through games and improvisation, they stimulate their creativity, think outside the box, and learn to adapt quickly to new conditions. They acquire new skills, including public speaking, which boosts their self-confidence [4].

The use of performing arts is an innovative tool for developing cognitive abilities in children. Some concepts emphasize the therapeutic aspects of art, highlighting its ability to induce positive psychological and behavioral changes. Drama, among other forms of performing arts, is most commonly used in U.S. schools, along with other forms of dramaturgy and dance.

Drama, as a form of performing art, can be used to improve psychological skills in both children and adults. For example, drama therapy, which involves the intentional use of theater to achieve psychological changes, is an important tool in this context [5].

Other forms of drama therapy, such as psychodrama or movement drama, recognize the importance of combining health and creativity. Drama therapy allows for the symbolic expression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, contributing to the development of creativity and the ability to make important life decisions [5].

The similarity between drama and dance lies in the active participation and conscious engagement of both mind and body, which promotes psychological development. Movement, as a means of communication, can be used to express and understand bodily signals that manifest through drama or dance. Teachers and facilitators can effectively utilize these forms of art in formal educational settings, creating a space for creative problem-solving and improving relationships among participants. This, in turn, enhances the therapeutic potential of the learning and development process [5].

The significance of drama in the development of cognitive and psychological abilities has been empirically confirmed by researchers. Walker, S. R. in 2014, and Gross, M. R. in 2024, conducted experimental studies on the impact of theater on noticeable improvements in children's behavior. Children who participated in a theater program demonstrated significant improvements in behavior and emotional state. Although there were no significant changes in self-esteem and empathy, as measured by questionnaires, many participants showed a better ability to express their emotions, work in a team, and be more aware of their own feelings and those of others [7, 10].

This result indicates that participation in creative theatrical activities can contribute to the emotional and social development of children. Drama activities provide an opportunity to experiment with different roles and situations, which can help children better understand themselves and others, as well as improve their ability to cooperate and communicate. It is important to note that even in cases where changes cannot be clearly captured through standard questionnaires, the practical and emotional benefits of participating in such programs are evident [7].

### **Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant deterioration in the mental health and cognitive functions of children in the USA. One in five children aged 3 to 17 could be diagnosed with mental disorders. Suicidal tendencies have increased by more than 40% over the decade. The nationwide burden of mental disorders among



young people reaches 13%, with only about 20% receiving professional help. These data indicate an urgent need to increase access to specialized mental health services and adapt the education system to support children with mental health disorders in the post-pandemic period.

Drama clubs effectively promote the psychological and cognitive development of children, particularly in a post-pandemic society. Empirical data show the positive impact of drama activities on reducing symptoms of depression, improving communication skills, and boosting participants' self-esteem. Specifically, participation in theatrical performances and role-playing games teaches children effective communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. It also stimulates their creativity, ability to quickly adapt to change, and enhances emotional expression. Thus, drama clubs play a crucial role in the comprehensive development of a child's personality, supporting their psychological health and social skills.

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