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## **Attitude of Children’s Parents, Teachers, and Headmasters towards the Admission of Two-Year-Olds to Kindergartens in the Czech Republic**

### **Abstract**

The amended Czech Education Act enables the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens. Certain conditions for the admission of a two-year-old child were stipulated and must be fulfilled. The research has focused on whether two-year-olds are currently already admitted in kindergartens and whether kindergartens have already created required conditions for their admission. Respondents were headmasters of kindergartens. The research has also focused on the attitude of kindergarten teachers towards the admission of two-year-olds, the attitude of parents of children attending kindergartens towards the placement of two-year-olds in kindergartens and the attitude of parents of two-year-olds who are not yet placed in kindergartens. The text presents the results obtained from all groups of respondents.

**Keywords:** kindergartens, two-year-olds, admission, conditions, parents

### **Introduction**

After the amendment of the Act No. 178/2016 Coll., of 20 April 2016, amending the so-called Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll.,<sup>1</sup> it was expected that with postponed effect as of 2020 the pre-school education would be organized for children from two to generally six years. Before the above amendment, the wording of the Education Act stated that kindergartens admit children “gener-

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<sup>1</sup> Amendment of the Act No. 178/2016 Coll., of 20 April 2016, amending the so-called Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll., <https://www.epravo.cz/top/zakony/sbirka-zakonu/zakon-ze-dne-20-dubna-2016-kterym-se-meni-zakon-c-5612004-sb-o-predskolnim-zakladnim-strednim-vyssim-odbornem-a-jinem-vzdelavani-skolsky-zakon-ve-zneni-pozdejsich-predpisu-a-zakon-c-2001990-sb-o-prestupcich-ve-zneni-pozdejsich-predpisu-21111.html> (access 15 May 2018).

ally” from three years of age. The term “generally” allowed, in exceptional cases, to admit to pre-school education a child younger than three years.

In relation to the claim to admit two-year-olds to kindergartens, *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro předškolní vzdělávání* (General Educational Programme for Pre-School Education)<sup>2</sup> requires the facilities to ensure optimal safety, hygiene, psychosocial, material and personal conditions, regimen including board, education organization and contents thereof, financing and cooperation of all persons involved in the education of a two-year-old in a kindergarten. The modification of the above-required conditions for the education of two-year-olds is fully within the competence of a facility headmaster and is required as of 1 September 2020. The initial material condition is the definition of regional catchment areas by city and municipal councils, and creating sufficient capacity in kindergartens for two-year-olds, i.e. the so-called places.

Until the child is five years old, the pre-school education is and remains voluntary and it is entirely the responsibility of child’s parents whether they decide to place their child in a kindergarten or in another facility, for how long and for what period.

### Current situation

The term “generally” used in the Education Act already allows admitting to pre-school education a child younger than three years. According to MŠMT,<sup>3</sup> kindergartens are currently attended by nearly half of all children younger than three years, in particular due to their capacity.<sup>4</sup> The enactment of the obligation to admit to kindergarten classes those two-year-olds whose parents ask for it would give particularly mothers a legal option to return to work after parental leave sooner than after the child’s third birthday. The created capacity should be sufficient. The sources state that some parents of two-year-olds in the Czech Republic, particularly mothers, would like to work part-time and for that time place their children in kindergartens or in other facilities, such as children groups.<sup>5</sup>

In April 2017, there was a public hearing in the Senate of the Czech Republic called “A two-year-old does not belong to kindergartens, rather to mother’s

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MŠMT). *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro předškolní vzdělávání*. (General Educational Programme for Pre-School Education), <http://www.nuv.cz/t/rvp-pro-vseobecne-vzdelavani> (access 15 May 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dvoulete-deti-materska-skolka-povinnost-prijimat-senat-dvoulete-deti-nepatri-do\\_1802061845\\_haf](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dvoulete-deti-materska-skolka-povinnost-prijimat-senat-dvoulete-deti-nepatri-do_1802061845_haf) (access 15 May 2018)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

arms". The representatives of the following parties were invited to the Senate: the Ministry of Education which enforced the change; operators and founders of children groups; the Union of Employers' Associations (Unie zaměstnavatel-ských svazů) and the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic as founders of kindergartens. The hearing was also attended by headmasters of kindergartens that already admit two-year-olds. According to some opposition opinions and supporters of the abolition of admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens, e.g. the Union of Employers' Associations, children groups and micro-nurseries can provide the required care for two-year-olds if requested by their parents. They are established and function in some companies and, according to these opponents, they generally offer more individual care than kindergartens. However, these are rather rare and mostly corporate. It means they will only admit children of their employees. A petition supported by around 15,000 citizens also demanded the abolition of the option to admit two-year-olds to kindergartens as of 2020. Kindergartens are being criticized as not being ready for care and education of two-year-olds and not established or even equipped for that purpose. Regardless of the warning that the education of workers in children groups and micro-nurseries is much narrower than the education of kindergarten teachers, and is also unsuitable in terms of content, it was highlighted that there are no educated teachers for the education of two-year-olds, and any teachers' existing experience with education of two-year-olds was disregarded. The senators supported the abolition of the obligation of kindergartens to admit two-year-olds as of 2020.

However, some opposite opinions are also presented. The organization Czech Women's Lobby, which defends women's rights, does not agree with the proposal to abolish the option of parents to claim the place for their two-year-old in a kindergarten and the obligation of kindergartens to admit two-year-olds as of 2020. They argue that the number of places in kindergartens for children under three years of age is very low and the state does not give any option for mothers of two-year-olds or their children to choose their way of life. The organization recalled the 2014 research of the Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs, according to which nearly half of mothers want to work even when their children are between two and three years of age. They also stated other facts concerning the parental role of two-year-olds' parents, which may be related to their placement in kindergartens. The Czech Women's Lobby also criticized the above public hearing, which took place in the Senate. According to their statement, the discussion was not balanced in terms of opinions. Only parties who agree with the abolition of admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens were invited and there were mainly men with negative opinion on the placement of two-year-olds in kindergartens. This opinion, however, was not supported by proper expertise or data.

It should be mentioned that two-year-olds are often admitted to the so-called forest kindergartens. However, the personal conditions of forest kindergartens vary from these of regular kindergartens. In forest kindergartens, groups of children of mixed age average at 15 children, with at least two adults taking care of them. A regular kindergarten, however, currently allows up to 24 to 28 children at the same time for several hours under the supervision of only one teacher. On the other hand, due to the personal characteristics of a two-year-old, the material, safety, hygiene and psychosocial conditions, regimen including feeding and organization of children's life in forest kindergartens are questionable.

The Senate is now waiting for the steps of the Chamber of Deputies. It may be problematic that the proposal to abolish the admission of two-year-olds in kindergartens is linked with the proposal according to which, as of September 2017, each child has to undergo a pre-school education in the last year before the entry into compulsory education, which is most commonly fulfilled by attending kindergarten. This is another individual pedagogical problem in the current Czech pre-school education.

## Methodology

A survey was carried out to discover how the enactment of admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens influences the opinions of selected groups of respondents on this fact.

Groups of respondents affected by the subject were approached to map the situation. In each group a different research method was used.

## Results

A. Kindergarten headmasters were interviewed to verify the fact that even two-year-olds are admitted to kindergartens and to discover the current conditions for such procedure.

Responses were obtained from:

- four headmasters of private kindergartens with alternate educational programme;
- two headmasters of private kindergartens for children with special educational needs;
- twenty headmasters of kindergartens established by municipalities and towns with regular educational programme.

The file examined was an available file. The selection of headmasters was performed by the "snowball" system with each approached headmaster con-

tacting another headmaster to participate in the survey. All respondents are headmasters (not head teachers) of kindergartens in the Moravian-Silesian Region. No criteria for the size, placement etc. of their kindergartens were defined.

The headmasters were asked the following questions:

1. Do you currently admit two-year-olds children?

Headmasters' statements *in vivo* are listed below. They were categorized as follows:

— Yes, but due to the lack of capacity, we rarely admit children under three years (8).<sup>6</sup>

— Yes, we do, we have lowered class sizes (12).

— Yes, we already have one section for two- and three-year-olds with two teachers (2).

— Yes, we already admit children from two years of age (kindergarten for children with special educational needs) (2).

The responses of approached kindergarten headmasters show that two-year-olds are already admitted to twenty-four kindergartens, although under different organizational conditions.

Two headmasters said they currently do not admit two-year-olds to their kindergartens.

2. Have you already created conditions required for the admission of two-year-olds to kindergarten as of 2020?

The following responses were obtained.

In terms of personal conditions, the headmasters:

— formulated particularly their requirements for nursemaids:

“[...] she must be empathic, patient, be able to offer activities, develop a game, have nice vocal performance, know her place in the class [...]”

— expressed their concern about nursemaids' expertise:

“There are many retraining courses for nursemaids, the problem is they have no practice. Kindergartens will have to incorporate their nursemaids on their own.”

— specified their preferences in terms of nursemaids:

“I prefer graduates of related fields of study with practice.”

“It is a full-time job, its position in the KG has to be negotiated.”

“I also want a teaching assistant in the classroom.”

“If the personal conditions are suitable, it will allow teachers to overlap sooner in the day.”

“I recruit a nursemaid from the employment office.”

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<sup>6</sup> The figure in brackets indicates frequency.

In terms of financial cover of the recruited nursemaid's wages, the headmasters suppose they will gain it from projects, so-called Templates, and they think these will be funded normally as of 2020 as nursemaids will become integral part of pre-school education.

Material conditions for the education of two-year-olds, which are already created or are gradually being created, were characterized by the headmasters as follows:

"Aids and equipment are adapted (such as lowered open shelf system)."

"For two-year-olds, we have to change the daily routine."

In terms of organizational conditions, the headmasters said:

"We are not expecting any major changes, we will reduce the number of children by two children per class."

"One or two small children in a class, that is manageable with a second teacher, nursemaid and older children, a higher number would change everything."

However, the headmasters have also expressed their reservations and opinions:

"Two-year-olds are not ready for kindergarten. They need individual care."

MŠMT have prepared methodological materials for the placement of two-year-olds to kindergartens and provided them to pedagogical field. In this context, the headmasters said:

"Some instructions are very naive. I cannot imagine where we place baby-changing tables. And what for? There are many children in our kindergartens wearing nappies due to their handicap. We gradually guide them towards self-care, even at the cost of wet tights."

"We don't want advice in the form of methodological regulations. We will deal with it."

"It is all confused. Something is effective now, something next week and something in two years. Initially the decree was supposed to lower the number of children from September 2016, then it was not the case..."

B. A total of 32 kindergarten teachers who are currently studying the part time study programme *Preschool Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education of the University of Ostrava* were approached with the aim to find out what the attitude of teachers towards the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens is.

Item: Do you agree with the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens?

All approached and currently studying teachers would admit two-year-olds to kindergartens or already have two-year-olds in their kindergarten classes. They already have some experience with care for children, and education of

two-year-old children, and they express some objections towards their placement:

— They say the stay of two-year-olds in classes with high number (up to 28) of older children with only one teacher present for the majority of operational time, is psychologically damaging for two-year-olds.

— There are not enough funds for the smooth operation of kindergarten if two-year-olds are admitted.

— Teachers also state the impact on themselves — the admission of two-year-olds to heterogeneous classes in terms of age is extremely physically and psychologically exhausting.

Teachers' opinions showed many other problems and it would be effective to address their statements in a separate research. They are the ones who will meet two-year-olds on a daily basis, who will educate them, care for them for several hours a day, and their opinions, comments and recommendations are very valuable. In each case, it appreciated that those who expressed their opinion are positive about the option of admitting two-year-olds to kindergartens.

C. The admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens primarily affects their parents. We also gave away 160 survey tickets to parents of children in a kindergarten with regular educational programme whose headmaster was also interviewed. The aim was to find out what are their attitudes towards the placement of two-year-olds in kindergartens. A total four times of 56 tickets were completed and submitted.

The responses of parents are divided according to the age of their child, i.e. how old is the children of the parent-respondent who receives education in the kindergarten. Responses of parents were categorized and they are *in vivo*.

Item: Do you agree with the placement of two-year-olds in kindergartens?

The clearly responses showed the trend that the older their children are, the less the parents are interested in the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens, and vice versa. Parents' attitude is partly understandable. All the children concerned are still pre-school children; this group covers children from two years of age upon the entry to compulsory education and in terms of pre-school education, all parents form a common social group.

To map the content of parents with the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens, we also interviewed eight couples of parents of two-year-olds who are not yet placed in kindergartens. One person of the couple always responded. The responses obtained are also stated below *in vivo* by one selected response and responses of other parents were assigned to it according to their content. The number of these responses is listed in brackets.

## Agreement with the placement of two-year child in kindergarten

Response	Group of parents of a child			
	5–6 years old	4–5 years old	3–4 years old	two-year-old
I do not care	17	23	0	0
I do not agree	4	4	4	0
I totally agree	5	8	23	45
I agree with reservations	11	7	13	9
I was not thinking about it	19	14	16	2
Other written comments complementing the response	It is not my problem I will not need it any more Let the experts solve it			I simply need it

The response:

- a) expresses solely their own view of the situation:  
— there should be a place when I need it, so I can use it and go to work (2);
- b) expresses a social attitude:  
— there should be a place for cases and uses when I need it, when I go to a doctor, when I need to help my parents (drive them to a doctor), when I am ill, when I have some arrangements to do, when I need to relax, when the child's sibling is ill (4);  
— there should be a place, the child will get used to other children, they are alone at home and isolated from peers (1);
- c) expresses educational attitude:  
— there should be a place, I want early cognitive development of my two-year-old by professionals; I do not know what and how to develop (1).

The following item could again be openly responded to by both groups of parents. Their overall expression was analysed, categorized and their response is spread over multiple partial responses. The first number in the brackets expresses the number of responses from parents who already have their two-year-old in a kindergarten. The second number in the brackets expresses the number of responses from one of a couple of parents who suppose they will place their two-year-old child in a kindergarten.

Item: What kindergarten conditions do you expect for your two-year-old child?

- Lower number of children in classes including two-year-olds (45) (8).
- A gentle, empathic, tolerant and helping teacher and other staff (32) (8).
- A teacher and a nursemaid (16) (1).
- Lower desks, chairs (15) (2).
- Different food and portions than for older children (9) (1).
- Kindergarten (KG) daily plan customized for two-year-olds (9) (0).

The following item was evaluated separately for each group of parents.

Item: Are you interested in the political and professional discussion concerning the two-year-olds in mass media, on the internet, etc.?

Responses from parents of children already placed in kindergartens:

- No (without further information) (19).
- Only occasionally (11).
- Yes (without further information) (5).
- Yes, sometimes (21).

Responses from one of eight couples of two-year-olds not yet placed in a KG:

- No, I do not care at all; I will care about the placement of my child, as I need it (1).
- No (without further information) (2).
- No, a lot of things will change anyway before I place my two-year-old in a KG, but I suppose there will be a place and no problems with admission (1).
- I am not interested, I know nothing about it, when I need it, I will go to the council, they should care for it (1).
- Yes, but I do not understand it at all, it keeps changing (2).
- I follow the development very closely (1).

This group of parents of two-year-olds provided mainly responses, which document that most parents are not interested in the discussion on admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens. They believe that municipal and town councils will be able to secure the place for their child when needed. The parents still believe that it is a matter of course that the state secures education and places in kindergartens, as is the case with schools.

## **Conclusion**

This research was used to gather knowledge about the current state of pedagogical practice and for its improvement (Gavora, 2000, p. 27), i.e. data on the state and functioning of the part of pre-school education, which is provided by kindergartens in the Czech Republic.

Under defined conditions, both private and public kindergartens are mostly prepared for the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens as two-year-olds have already been admitted to kindergartens, albeit in a limited extent.

The older their children are, the less the parents are interested in the admission of two-year-olds to kindergartens, and vice versa. Parents are primarily interested in their child and problems associated with them.

Responses of parents of two-year-olds who are not yet placed in kindergartens include expectations in the area of social attitude, personal-oriented educational approach of the kindergarten staff and their own perception of the situation.

Parents are able to specify conditions for the stay of two-year-olds in kindergartens.

Parents are generally not interested in professional, social or other discussions on the topic; however, they are confident that they will be interested in the conditions for the placement of a two-year-old child from their perspective at the decisive time, i.e. when they want or need to place their two-year-old (or older) child in the kindergarten.

The research survey among different groups of respondents affected by the placement of two-year-olds in kindergartens provided relevant initial information for next intense, deeper and wider research.

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