

## THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A GUIDANCE COUNSELING PROGRAM AIMING TO SUPPORT *54-66 MONTHS OLD CHILDREN'S* DEVELOPMENT LEVEL AND READINESS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to develop and implement a guidance-counseling program in line with the objectives of the pre-school education program developed by the National Ministry of Education in order to support **54-66 months old children's** development areas and readiness for primary school. Prior to the implementation of the guidance counseling program, specific development areas of the children were investigated through the "Ankara Developmental Screening Inventory", their personal social development was explored using the "School Social Behavior Scales", their visual perception levels were revealed by means of the "Frostig Visual Perception Test" and their school readiness level were investigated through the "Marmara Primary School Readiness Scale". As a result of the data collection, the guidance counseling program supported by some educational materials aiming to improve their fine and gross motor skills as well as their visual perception development was implemented by the children's classroom teachers and student teachers teaching **54-66-month-old children. At the end of the study, it was found that the** guidance counseling program developed for the study improved the children's overall development and accelerated the primary school readiness level of the children starting school when they were 66 months old in line with the 4+4+4 education system.

**Key Words:** Guidance and counseling program, pre-school, school readiness,

### INTRODUCTION

Pre-school years refer to a period of rapid development in the physical, mental and psychological characteristics of the children. This period underlies the other periods of their lives. Although the general developmental characteristics of each age group are common, it should be kept in mind that each child has unique developmental characteristics (Aral, Canyaşar, Kandır, 2002). In this period, children's physical, cognitive, social, psychomotor and language development are substantially completed. In order to ensure that the children exhibit the desired behavioral characteristics, their developmental characteristics should be known very well (Alisinoğlu and Kesicioğlu, 2010). It should also be considered that pre-school children have recently started the school and have been trying to adapt to the environment; thus, necessary support must be

provided by their families and teachers so that they can handle this period successfully (Tan, 1992). The development of the children who are not supported during this period can be regarded as insufficient. In several studies, it was highlighted that pre-school education is vital in terms of the development of the child (Uğur, 1998; Dinç, 2002; Balat Uyanık, Şimşek, Akman, 2008; Akgün, 2010). Not leaving education to chance in this very critical period and implementing a consciously planned pre-school education program will facilitate their transition to primary school and to life in more general terms. Therefore, activities preparing children to school and supporting their development not only enrich their own worlds but also help them easily adapt to primary school that is the next level (Polat, 2010).

It is normal that children encounter various problems in this period in which their lives rapidly change. The importance and the place of the psychological support provided to the children so that they can cope with these problems cannot be denied as it is the indispensable part of the education (Benedict, Horner, Squires, 2007; Carter, Van Norman, Tredwell 2011; Lavigne et al. 1996). These psychological support services can only be possible with the help of guidance and counseling services provided in the educational contexts.

The guidance counseling programs, which are designed in line with the developmental understanding, are maintained within different levels of educational system of the National Education Ministry. Similarly, such programs are planned in line with the developmental understanding for the pre-school level. In pre-school period, special focus should be placed on the activities aiming to meet children's needs for self-acceptance, self-development, creation of the concept of "I", satisfying their curiosity and releasing their imagination and desires. The fact that development is a continuous process requires the continuity of the guidance services. Thus, it would be fair to suggest that the psychological counseling and guidance programs developed for pre-school children should take children's developmental stages into consideration. In other words, activities intended to support pre-school education and the psychological counseling and guidance programs for these children should be designed and implemented taking the developmental understanding into account (TTBK, 2012).

In this study, a model including four developmental modules applied to classes with 54-66-month-old pre-school children (i.e., fine motor, gross motor, socio-emotional and cognitive development) is proposed directly related to the pre-school education curriculum, implemented and evaluated in order to assess the effectiveness of the psychological counseling and guidance program prepared to be implemented during pre-school education.

It is essential to provide children with effective learner personality services developed considering the specific characteristics of their age group in order that a child can acquire the skills of independence, learn social roles, develop positive attitudes towards the learning environment and the learning process in general as well as interpersonal, cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills (Kuzgun, 2006; Kepçeoğlu, 2010; Aydın, 2007). As the psychological counseling and guidance program developed with this study is designed in such a way to support 54-66-month-old children's skills, such as their interpersonal relationship skills, social skills, skills of recognizing and controlling their feelings, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, attention, and visual perception skills; this program meets the need to prepare these students for school, to help discover their abilities and to further develop these abilities. Additionally, it is expected that this program will accelerate the process of getting prepared to school for 66-month-old children as required by the 4+4+4 education system.

In the literature reviewed in our country, no studies dealing with an application-based model proposal for the psychological counseling and guidance program for the pre-school level have been carried out. Thus, the present study has a potential to be a unique study with its contribution to activities about pre-school psychological counseling and guidance. It would be true to state that there is a need for new sources providing pre-school guidance teachers newly appointed to their schools with an understanding of the new educational programs. By means of the data collected in this study, it is hoped that such needs of the guidance teachers in the national context will be met. Moreover, thanks to the data to be obtained regarding the program implemented in the present study, it would be true to state that this study might have an influential and potential role in shaping the teacher education programs heavily focused in recent projects carried out by the National Education Ministry.

The purpose of the study is to develop a guidance program model aiming to support the effectiveness of the "Pre-school Guidance Program" piloted in cities and educational institutions determined by the General Directorate for Special Education Guidance and Counseling Services and the General Directorate for Basic Education in the years 2012-2013 in accordance with the decree (No: 159, Date: 14.09.2012) of the Head Council of Education and Morality. Therefore, the following research questions to which this study seeks answers have been formulated:

1. Are there any differences in 54-66-month-old children's fine and gross motor skills as well as their social, emotional and cognitive abilities following the applied guidance program?
2. Are there any differences in 60-66-month-old children's levels of school readiness following the applied guidance program?

## METHOD

### Research design

The present study is an experimental research study in which the one group pretest-posttest model was used among other models used in experimental research studies. In this model, a randomly selected group is given the treatment that is the independent variable, and the assessment is carried out both before and after the experiment. If the posttest scores are found to be higher than the pretest scores, the reason of this difference can be attributed to the effect of the independent variable. As the guidance program developed for this study was implemented in the M.U. Prof.Dr. Ayla Oktay Pre-school Practice Unit, all the 54-66-month-old children in the unit took part in the study. Thus, a control group was not necessary in the study.

### Participants

The current research study was conducted in the M.U. Prof.Dr. Ayla Oktay pre-school practice unit and 43 54-66-month-old children participated in the study. These children can be grouped into two as 54-60-month-old and 60-66-month-old children. In the 54-60-month-old group, there were 26 children, 13 of whom were girls while the remaining were boys. On the other hand, 17 children were categorized in the 60-66-month-old group. While 8 of these children were girls, 9 of them were boys. A sampling method was not used as all the children at the unit were reached. The assessment instruments used to collect data were filled out by classroom teachers.

### Data collection instruments and data collection

The data of the present study was collected via "Ankara Developmental Screening Inventory" (ADSI), "Frostig Visual Perception Test", "School Social Behavior Scales" and "Marmara Primary School Readiness Test".

*Ankara Developmental Screening Inventory:* This inventory assesses 0-6-year-old children's developmental levels and skills in line with the information obtained from their mothers. This inventory can also be responded by people such as fathers, caregivers and teachers who closely follow the developmental process of the child and know him/her well.

The inventory including 154 items is designed for specific age groups and responded as "yes", "no" or "I do not know". The questions in the inventory were formulated in such a way that they represent interrelated areas such as language-cognitive, fine motor and gross motor skills as well as social skills-self-care (Savaşır, Sezgin and Erol, 1994).

*Frostig Visual Perception Test:* This test was developed by Marianne Frostig in 1963 in order to identify the visual perception levels of 4-6 year-old children. It assesses five perceptual skills, such as hand-eye coordination, figure-ground separation, shape constancy, perception of space and location in addition to location relationships. "Frostig Visual Perception Test" is a performance test and can be conducted to a group. Having no time limits, the test takes around 40 or 50 minutes (Wiederholt, 1971). The fact that the test was frequently conducted in studies carried out in different cultures lent wings to researchers about the validity of the test although the reliability and validity of it have not been studied in Turkey yet. Sökmen (1995) examined

the reliability of the test for children at the age of 5. All the continuity coefficients of the general and sub-areas of the test were found to be significant at the level of .01.

The standard scoring criteria for each sub-area of the test are available. The raw scores children obtain from each sub-area has an equivalence as standard score (Tuğrul, Erkan, Aral and Etikan, 2002).

*Marmara Primary School Readiness Test (MPRT):* The test was developed by Ozgul Polat Unutkan in 2003 as a part of her PhD thesis. The scale was designed and standardized specifically for Turkish children so as to reveal to what extent 60-78-month-old children are ready for the primary school in terms of basic skills and each developmental area included in the scale. The Scale includes two forms that are the Application form and the Development form. The item total, item remaining and discriminant analysis of the scale yielded significant results at the level of  $p < .001$ . The confirmatory factor analysis and the validity analysis of the scale were carried out using the data collected from 1002 children. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  value of the Development form was found to be .982 while the Cronbach  $\alpha$  value of the Application Form was found to be .930. The Application form is comprised of 5 parts as mathematics, science, sound, drawing and the labyrinth and 74 questions. The questions were prepared in line with application areas needed by the children for the preparation for the primary school. The responses given by the children were scored as (1) if they were correct and (0) if they were incorrect. On the other hand, the Development form includes 4 sub-scales that are mind and language development, socio-emotional development, physical development, and self-care skills as well as 175 items. Each item designed to be filled by teachers or parents has four possible responses related to the frequency of the behavior displayed by the child: always (3 points), often (2 points), sometimes (1 point) and never (0 point). The socio-emotional development sub-scale is comprised of 40 items and the maximum score obtained from this scale is 120. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  value of the socio-emotional development sub-scale was found to be .942 (Unutkan Polat, 2003).

*School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS):* School Social Behavior Scales were developed by Kenneth W. Merrell in 1993 and translated into Turkish by Yuksel (2009). Aiming to evaluate the levels of social skills of pre-school and primary school children, the scales designed in line with the five-point Likert model is comprised of 65 items. As a result of the linguistic equivalence analysis, each item was found to be significantly related to one another at the level of  $p < .001$ . The item total, item remaining and discriminant analysis of the scale revealed significant results at the level of  $p < .001$ . The confirmatory factor analysis and the validity analysis of the scale were done using the data collected from 467 students and teachers. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  value for both sub-scales was found to be .98. School Social Behavior Scales is comprised of two sub-scales that are social competence and negative social behavior. The Social Competence sub-scale includes three sub-dimensions, such as interpersonal relationship, self-control skill and academic skills while the Anti Social Behaviors sub-scale has three subdimensions that are assailant-angry, antisocial-aggressive and destructive-demanding.

### Data Analysis

In order to assess the four sub-modules of the program developed for this study, the test and the assessment instruments were administered both before and after the treatment.

Children's cognitive skills, fine and gross motor skills were assessed by means of the "Ankara Developmental Screening Inventory" administered to all 54-66-month-old children while their visual-motor skills were assessed using "Frostig Visual Perception Test". Their social and emotional skills were assessed via the "School Social Behavior Scales". On the other hand, the "Marmara Primary School Readiness Test" was applied so that the school readiness level of 60-66-month-old children could be revealed. As the Marmara Primary School Readiness Test was applied to 17 children ( $n < 30$ ), the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test which is among non-parametric statistical methods was applied while the results of other tests were calculated by means of the dependent samples t-test because they were administered to 43 participants.

### Treatment

In this study, the materials aiming to achieve the activities of the sub-modules of the psychological counseling and guidance program were prepared and developed by the project coordinator and the project researchers. The project team aimed to create materials that can support the titles of the four sub-modules. Therefore, materials supporting the objectives and outcomes in the existing pre-school program were investigated, and the project team paid attention to the preparation of activities and materials for this study in accordance with this program.

The assessment instruments determined by the project coordinators and the researchers in order to assess the effectiveness of the ten-week program to be implemented within the scope of the study were administered to 54-66-month-old children before the program was initiated and after it was completed.

### Development of the Educational Materials

In this study, the major aim was to create effective materials that could attract children's attention, facilitate remembering and save time in the educational context. The cognitive area designed on the Wireless Graphic Tablet and the study pages addressing to children's attention and fine motor skills were transferred to the computer having a tactile screen, and they were organized using the Photoshop CS6 program. The works produced by the children on the tactile tablets were transferred to the computer and the prints of their works were archived in the portfolios prepared for each child for later assessment. Besides, thanks to the cardboard study pages with tactile surfaces which were prepared by means of the cutting and swelling machines, activities supporting children's hand-eye coordination could be created.

Materials pertaining to the social and emotional development of the children were prepared using the stories selected from the training set including four books aiming to support pre-school children's personality development (Yüksel,2012a,b,c,d) as well as the study pages aiming to analyze the problem situations in these stories. Games boosting children's social and emotional skills were recorded by a video camera. Following the activities, the recordings were watched with children so that a discussion about their behavior during the activities could be made. By this means, the researchers aimed to develop children's reasoning skills.

When it comes to the development of the children's gross motor skills; climbing, balancing and the coordination materials available in the gym of the Prof.Dr. Ayla Oktay Pre-school Practice Unit were used.

The program including activities designed in accordance with the National Education Ministry's Pre-school Program also has the goal to identify the children with developmental delays. As a result of the data collected in the preliminary assessment procedure, it was realized that the modules to be implemented offered development opportunities to children in need of support and reinforcement opportunities to children who are do not need support. Rather than supporting the areas every single child needs to develop and meeting the needs of every individual child by using the modules separately, the aim of the program is to implement all the activities of the program to all the children in a holistic manner. By involving student teachers and classroom teachers in the implementation stage, the researchers aimed to ensure that the children taking part in this study would benefit completely from the activities prepared for this study.

1. Fine Motor Development Module: This is the module containing all the activities supporting children's visual-motor skills ranging from simple hand-eye coordination to complicated fine-motor behaviors. Clay, scissors and sand pool activities, activities supporting children's dressing skills in addition to the drawing and painting activities developed by the researchers were included in this module.

2. Gross Motor Development Module: This is the module including activities related to movement and strength, balance and coordination activities that are all related to the general concept of movement. This module also contains materials aiming to boost children's balance, flexibility, speed, agility, strength and coordination skills as well as games developed by the researchers using these materials.

3. Social-Emotional Development: This is the module including activities supporting social skills which are the foundation of the interpersonal relationships and emotional skills which are vital in the personality development of pre-school children; furthermore, values education and activities supporting the solution of behavioral problems are included in this module. The titles focused in these modules can be listed as follows: the skill of initiating and maintaining relationships, self-confidence, friendship relationships, sharing, anger management, coping with the anger of the interlocutor, working in a group, dealing with sadness, the feeling of happiness, self-control and developing empathy.

4. Cognitive Development Module: In this module, activities specifically supporting the visual perception, attention and the organizational skills of the children were included. Frostig visual perception program, various box games and the group games developed by the researchers were also benefited in this module.

## FINDINGS

Findings of the study are given below in the order of the research questions. The first research question was "Are there any differences in 54-66-month-old children's fine and gross motor skills as well as their social, emotional and cognitive abilities following the applied guidance program?"

Tables 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the results of the dependent group t-test explaining the answer to this research question.

Table 1: The results of the dependent group t-test applied to find the ADSI pretest-posttest scores

		N	X	ss	sd	t	p
Language Cognitive	Pretest	43	56,37	2,59	42	-5,73	,000
	Posttest	43	58,56	2,32			
Fine Motor	Pretest	43	22,53	1,91	42	-5,66	,000
	Posttest	43	23,77	1,67			
Gross Motor	Pretest	43	23,77	0,43	42	-2,86	,000
	Posttest	43	23,93	0,26			
Social	Pretest	43	37,16	1,54	42	-5,86	,000
Self-care	Posttest	43	38,47	1,10			
General	Pretest	43	1,40	5,90	42	-6,60	,000
Total	Posttest	43	1,45	4,60			

As a result of the dependent group t-test applied to compare all the sub-tests of the ADSI, it was found that the pretests and posttest scores were different from each other.

It was revealed that the posttest scores of the Language-Cognitive area ( $\bar{X}=58,56$ ) were higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=56,37$ ) ( $\mathbb{D}_{001:42} = -5,73$ ). The posttest scores of the fine motor area ( $\bar{X}=23,77$ ) were higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=22,53$ ) ( $\mathbb{D}_{001:42} = -5,66$ ). The posttest scores of the gross motor area ( $\bar{X}=23,93$ ) were higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=23,77$ ) ( $\mathbb{D}_{001:42} = -2,86$ ). Finally, the posttest scores of the social-self-care area ( $\bar{X}=38,47$ ) were higher than pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=37,16$ ) ( $\mathbb{D}_{001:42} = -5,86$ ).

As a result of the t-test applied to compare the total scores of the ADSI, it was realized that the pretest and posttest scores were different from each other ( $\mathbb{D}_{001:42} = -6,60$ ). More specifically, the posttest scores ( $\bar{X}=1,45$ ) were higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=1,40$ ). As a result of the implementation of the guidance program developed for the study, all the scores of the sub-dimension in the ADSI and the general development total scores of the children significantly increased.

Table 2: Results of the t-test applied for the scores of the pretest-posttest of the Frostig Visual Perception Test

	N	X	ss	sd	t	p
Pretest	43	24,93	12,07	42	-7,15	,000
Posttest	43	34,02	12,38			

As a result of the dependent group t-test applied for the scores of the pretest-posttest of the Frostig Visual Perception Test, it was found that the pretest and the posttest scores were different from each other ( $t_{001:42} = -7,15$ ). Namely, posttest scores ( $\bar{X}=34,02$ ) were found to be higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=24,93$ ). This means that children's visual perception scores of the children significantly increased at the end of the implementation of the guidance program.

Table 3: Results of the t-test applied for the scores of the pretest-posttest of the Social Behavior Scale

	N	X	ss	sd	t	p
Pretest	43	1,68	35,22	42	-4,62	,000
Posttest	43	2,24	62,52			

As a result of the dependent group t-test applied to compare the scores of the Social Behavior Scales, it was found that the pretest and posttest scores were different from each other ( $t_{001:42} = -4,62$ ). The posttest scores ( $\bar{X}=2,24$ ) were found to be higher than the pretest scores ( $\bar{X}=1,68$ ). In other words, children's social behavior scores significantly increased at the end of the guidance program implemented in the study.

The second research question of the study was "Are there any differences in 60-66-month-old children's levels of school readiness following the applied guidance program?" Table 4 provides an answer to this research question by showing the results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test.

Table 4: Results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test applied for the scores of the pretest-posttest of the Marmara primary school readiness scale development form

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	z	p
Negative Ranks	0 <sup>a</sup>	0,00	0,00	-3,62	,001
Positive Ranks	17 <sup>b</sup>	9,00	153,00		
Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>				
Total	17				

As can be realized in Table 4, there are statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest scores of the Marmara Primary School Readiness Scale Development Form ( $z=-3,62$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). The findings indicate that the implemented guidance program resulted in significant differences in the posttest applications and caused significant differences in terms of primary school readiness.

## DISCUSSION

Considering the data analyzed in this study, it was observed that the activities implemented to 54-66-month-old pre-school children throughout 10 weeks to support their fine and gross motor skills, social-emotional skills and cognitive skills were influential on the development of the children.

Development is a whole, and thus it can be pointed out that each development sub-area affects the other development area. More specifically, supporting children's fine and gross motor skills in early periods helps children to be ready for school and to develop their cognitive and social skills (Siu, Lai, Chiu & Yip, 2011; Piek, Dawson, Smith & Gasson, 2008; Burns, O'Callaghan, McDonnell, & Rogers 2004). Similarly, it was found in some other studies that children with poor motor coordination skills come across emotional difficulties and have

poor social skills; therefore, when children's motor skills are supported, their social skills improve and they feel more self-confident (Piek, Bradbury, Elsley & Tate, 2008; Piek, Baynam & Barrett, 2006; Skinner, Piek, 2001). Additionally, it was revealed that individuals who have improved cognitive skills have higher levels of social reasoning ability and positive social behavioral characteristics (Guralnick, 1997; Bellanti & Bierman, 2000).

Research studies investigating the effectiveness of the educational programs for pre-school children corroborate with the findings of the current study. For instance, Esteban, Sidera, Serrano, Amadó and Rostan (2010) carried out group activities involving story reading and the discussion of the stories with 96 39-52-month-old pre-school children attending two different schools in Spain to help them build social reasoning and understand themselves as well as others. As a result of the study, it was observed that the social reasoning skills of the children in the experimental group increased. In another study, Dibek (2012) implemented the "visual perception skills program" for ten weeks to 17 children at the age of five while no training was provided to 16 children in the control group. The study yielded the finding that visual perception, fine motor and motor coordination skills of the children in the experimental group significantly improved. On the other hand, Yüksel and Yurtsever Kılıçgün (2012) explored the effect of the "Frostig Visual Perception Education Program" on the development of pre-school children's visual perception levels. They collected data from 322 pre-school children between the ages of four and six. They had one experiment group including 161 children and a control group. They implemented the "Ankara Developmental Screening Inventory" and the "Frostig Visual Perception Program". They used the "Frostig Visual Perception Program" in the experimental group twice a week throughout five months and came to the conclusion that visual perception skills of the children in the experimental group significantly improved.

The other research question of the study was whether there any differences in 60-66-month-old children's levels of school readiness as a result of the applied guidance program. Considering the analyzed data of the study, it was realized that the differentiation of the school readiness levels of the children subjected to the ten-week program developed for this study was found to be positive.

It would be fair to claim that children's cognitive and social-emotional skills have a positive influence on their school readiness and affect their academic success in the primary school. On the other hand, it was found that pre-school children suffering from attention problems in general have difficulty in language, reading and in the mathematical field in the primary school, and thus have trouble adapting to the school environment (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1993; Hinshaw, 1992; Spira & Fischel, 2005). Besides, it was revealed that school maturity is closely related to the social competence during the pre-school period (Ziv, 2013), and that social emotional competence has an important role in children's success in the first grade of the primary school (Stan, 2012). In another study, Rhoadesa, Warrenb, Domitrovicha and Greenberg (2011) tried to identify to what extent the emotional development and attention skills of the pre-school children affect the academic success in the first grade of the primary school. They came to the conclusion that an educational program intended to support pre-school children's social-emotional development and attention is an important strategy that may have positive influence on their future academic achievements.

Furthermore, it was revealed that group activities and the educational program aiming to support children's social skills reduce the behavioral problems of the children and teenagers in their lives in and outside the school (Van Vugt, Deković, Prinzie, Stams, Asscher, 2013; Ang & Hughes, 2002; Beelman, Pfungsten & Lösel, 1994; Atılgan, 2011); similarly, the activities and program accelerate the school adaptation process of these children (Yüksel, Küçükoğlu & Ünsal, 2013; Denham, 2006, Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010; Esaspehlivan, 2006).

In conclusion, providing children either individually or in a group with an education program supporting the sub-areas of development during their pre-school education is very likely to contribute not only to the healthy process of adapting to their peers and the environment but also to their positive developmental characteristics. Moreover, developing children's social reasoning skills will positively affect their academic success in the primary school as such skills support their school readiness level. It would be fair to suggest that especially children who will have to start primary school earlier as entailed by the 4+4+4 education program should be

provided with individual and group activities related to their general development, social skills and the school maturity in the pre-school period in order to positively contribute to children's education and social lives.

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