

BABEȘ–BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES
DOCTORAL SCHOOL *OF EDUCATION, REFLECTION, AND*
DEVELOPMENT

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Summary

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Cluj-Napoca

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**Shaping and developing preschoolers' personal and social autonomy as a
premise for school adaptation**

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Accommodation is defined as the preliminary phase in the process of social integration. This stage involves the individual's adjustment to the unique characteristics, standards, and expectations associated with the new role or status they are about to assume within the social system.

Adaptation is an essential characteristic of living beings that enables them to effectively adjust their functions and structures in response to changes in the environment.

Biological adaptation is defined as the process by which living organisms gradually modify their morphological structure and physiological functions to correspond to the specific conditions of the environment in which they live.

Psychological adaptation is defined as the process of balancing assimilation and accommodation mechanisms, which manifests itself in the continuous interaction between the individual and their environment.

School adaptation is a specific dimension of social adaptation, which expresses the degree of alignment between the requirements and demands of the educational process and the child's individual and age-related characteristics.

Social adaptation is defined as the behavioral and attitudinal integration of the individual within the norms and values promoted at the level of the social group.

School readiness is defined as a set of qualities present in the sensory-motor, cognitive, affective-motivational, and volitional domains that facilitate the fulfillment of school requirements and the successful performance of activities by the child.

Assimilation is defined as the process by which elements from the external environment are integrated into the individual's internal structure.

Autonomy is defined as an extremely useful social skill representing the individual's independence within interpersonal relationships.

Personal autonomy is defined as the degree to which a child is capable of performing activities related to their own person independently. These activities were previously carried out only with the assistance of an adult.

Social autonomy is defined as the child's capacity to function independently and proficiently in diverse social scenarios, unencumbered by the need for constant adult supervision. This encompasses a range of competencies, including social interaction skills, the capacity to internalize and adhere to established rules, behavioral self-control, responsibility, initiative, and the ability to make sound decisions.

Scaffolding is defined as a form of temporary support provided by a more competent person (usually an adult) to assist a child in performing a task that the child is unable to complete independently. This support is gradually withdrawn as the child demonstrates increased capability for independent functioning.

Social integration is defined as the set of ways in which an individual interacts with social norms, values, institutions, and groups, seeking to strike a balance between personal needs and societal demands.

The transition from preschool to school is defined as the shift from play-based learning to a more structured academic environment, serving as a stage in preparing the child for future educational experiences.

I. INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is a pivotal concept in contemporary educational discourse and in the curricular and legislative documents that govern early childhood education. It has been associated with a number of factors, including responsibility, personal development, social interaction, and the child's preparation for integration into school and social life. In this context, the cultivation of autonomous behaviors from an early age, specifically during the preschool period, is a fundamental prerequisite for children to successfully adapt to the demands of the school environment.

This doctoral thesis is grounded in the need to explore the concept of autonomy in preschool-aged children and the importance of operationalizing its forms of manifestation, particularly personal autonomy and social autonomy. Given the limited number of studies conducted in Romania on this topic, as well as the observed low level of autonomous behaviors in educational contexts, the present research sought to identify concrete methods for fostering and developing preschoolers' personal and social autonomy and to analyze its relationship with adaptation to the school environment.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

The doctoral thesis, entitled *Shaping and developing preschoolers' personal and social autonomy as a premise for school adaptation*, addresses the issue of autonomy in preschool-aged children and highlights its role in the process of adapting to the school environment.

The work is structured into two complementary parts: The theoretical foundation and the research methodology are two fundamental components of the study.

The theoretical foundation comprises three chapters that highlight the main conceptual, theoretical, and methodological frameworks related to early childhood education, preschoolers' personal and social autonomy, and their school adaptation.

The first chapter, entitled *Early Childhood Education – preschool level*, presents the concept of early childhood education, its objectives, and the particularities of early childhood education in Romania and in the European context. It also analyzes aspects related to the transition from kindergarten to school, school readiness, and the elements of continuity and discontinuity between preschool and primary education.

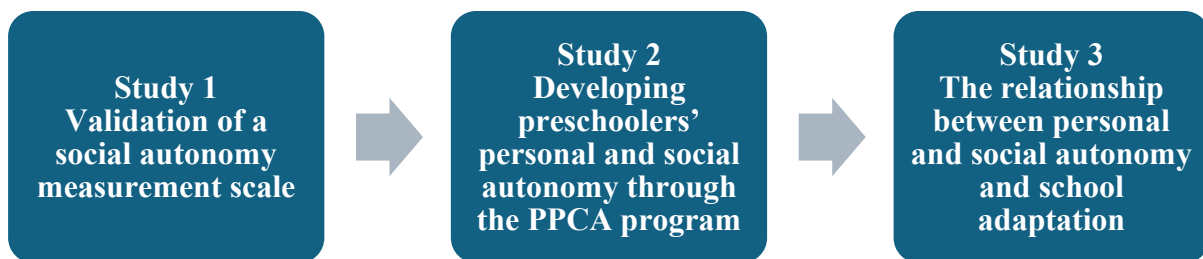
The second chapter, *The development of personal and social autonomy during the preschool period*, addresses the conceptual boundaries of autonomy, the dimensions of personal and social autonomy, behaviors associated with preschool-aged children's autonomy,

and the role of the main educational environments, namely the family and kindergarten, in the development of autonomous behaviors. It also presents relevant theories on the development of children's autonomy and the implications of the digital perspective for the new conceptualization of autonomy.

Chapter three, *Children's adaptation to the school environment*, analyzes the concept of school adaptation, the internal and external factors involved in school adaptation and maladjustment, the stages of adaptation to the school environment, and the profile of the school-adapted child. The chapter highlights the role of personal and social autonomy as a determining factor in children's effective integration into the school environment.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to the research approach and presents the empirical research entitled *Studies on shaping and developing preschoolers' personal and social Autonomy through specific intervention programs. The influence of personal and social autonomy on school adaptation.*

This research comprises three interrelated studies that address children's autonomy in early childhood education and their adaptation to the school environment in a progressive and integrated manner. Each study contributes to shaping an overall understanding of the analyzed phenomenon by investigating distinct yet interdependent dimensions.



The following sections present the general structure of the research, including its purpose, objectives, research questions, hypotheses, and the variables investigated across the three studies.

The general purpose and objectives of the research

The purpose of this research is to analyze preschoolers' personal and social autonomy following the implementation of the PPCA program and to examine its influence on their adaptation to the school environment.

The general objectives of the research were operationalized within each study:

STUDY 1

- Development and validation of an instrument for measuring the social autonomy of children aged 5-7.

STUDY 2

- To examine the influence of the PPCA program on the formation, development, and long-term maintenance of preschoolers' personal and social autonomy.

STUDY 3:

- To determine the extent to which students' personal and social autonomy influences their school adaptation.

Research questions:

Each study addresses the following research questions:

STUDY 1:

- What are the most relevant dimensions for constructing an instrument to measure the social autonomy of children aged 5-7?
- What are the levels of reliability and validity of the instrument developed to measure the social autonomy of children aged 5-7?

STUDY 2:

- To what extent do teachers' and parents' perceptions of preschoolers' level of personal and social autonomy differ before and after the implementation of the PPCA experimental program?
- What is the impact of the PPCA program on preschoolers' level of personal and social autonomy?
- To what extent is the level of personal and social autonomy acquired by children through the PPCA program maintained four months after the completion of the experimental intervention?

STUDY 3:

- To what extent does students' level of personal and social autonomy correlate with their school adaptation?
- To what extent do personal and social autonomy serve as predictors of students' school adaptation?

Research Hypotheses and Variables

General research hypothesis:

The implementation of the PPCA experimental program will contribute to shaping, developing, and maintaining children's personal and social autonomy over time, thereby significantly influencing their school adaptation.

Secondary research hypotheses:

The secondary hypotheses are derived from the general hypothesis and are distributed across each study:

STUDY 1

S1_Hypothesis 1: The research instrument developed to measure social autonomy demonstrates a high level of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70.

S1_Hypothesis 2: Significant agreement exists between the theoretical dimensions and the allocation of items based on expert evaluations, supporting the content validity of the instrument.

S1_Hypothesis 3: The instrument for measuring social autonomy demonstrates significant convergent validity, as it correlates positively with other validated instruments measuring related constructs, such as personal autonomy.

STUDY 2

S2_Hypothesis 4: Differences are expected between teachers' and parents' perceptions of children's levels of personal and social autonomy before and after the implementation of the PPCA experimental program.

S2_Hypothesis 5: The implementation of the PPCA program will significantly enhance preschoolers' personal and social autonomy.

S2_Hypothesis 6: The level of personal and social autonomy developed through the PPCA program will be maintained over the medium term, four months after the completion of the intervention.

STUDY 3

S3_Hypothesis 7: Students' levels of personal and social autonomy are significantly correlated with their school adaptation.

S3_Hypothesis 8: Personal and social autonomy are significant predictors of students' school adaptation.

Research variables

The variables vary across the three studies.

Independent variables:

- The structure of the instrument for measuring preschoolers' social autonomy, including dimensions and items;
- The PPCA experimental intervention program, aimed at supporting behaviors associated with children's personal and social autonomy in preschool and home settings.

Dependent variables:

- Validity and reliability of the instrument for measuring social autonomy
- Level of personal autonomy
- Level of social autonomy
- Level of school adaptation

III. Overview of the studies included in the empirical research

STUDY 1

The aim of this study was to develop and validate a research instrument for measuring the social autonomy of children aged 5-7 years. The study employed both quantitative methods, namely a questionnaire-based survey, and qualitative methods, including focus groups and document analysis. The instruments used included the focus group protocol, the *Screening of Personal Autonomy Skills* (SCAP), a standardized instrument integrated into the PEDa Platform and developed by Cognitrom, and the *Screening of Social Autonomy Skills* (SAAS).

After completing the specific stages involved in the development of the research instrument, a pilot study was conducted with 29 preschoolers to test the proposed hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1, concerning the reliability of the instrument, was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70 for both the parent-rated social autonomy assessment (0.86) and the teacher-rated assessment (0.82). Furthermore, all items exceeded the minimum accepted threshold of 0.30 for the item-total correlation, indicating that each item contributed positively to the internal consistency of the scale.

Hypothesis 2, concerning content validity, was confirmed, as most items were assessed by the experts as clear, relevant, and consistent with the proposed theoretical dimensions. The suggestions provided led to minor adjustments, which were incorporated into the final version of the instrument, thereby supporting its suitability in terms of conceptual coherence and applicability in educational contexts.

Hypothesis 3, concerning convergent validity, was confirmed by the significant positive correlations between the two versions of the SAAS, which measured social autonomy,

and the SCAP, which was used to assess personal autonomy. These results support the convergent validity of the instrument.

Consequently, the results highlighted the validity and reliability of the 21-item SAAS, confirming its suitability for assessing the social autonomy of children aged 5 to 7 years. Three essential components were examined during the psychometric evaluation process: content validity, convergent construct validity, and reliability. Content validity was analyzed through expert consultation and a focus group with preschool teachers, focusing on the clarity, relevance, and conceptual coherence of the items. Convergent construct validity was tested by comparing the scores obtained with the SAAS to those generated by a similar, scientifically validated instrument. Reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, calculated for each dimension of the instrument, in order to establish the internal consistency of the items.

STUDY 2

The second study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the experimental program Step by Step Toward Autonomy (PPCA) in fostering, developing, and maintaining preschoolers' personal and social autonomy. The study employed mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, including focus groups, questionnaire-based surveys, and a pedagogical experiment, supported by a data triangulation strategy. The instruments used were the focus group protocol, the Personal Autonomy Skills Screening (SCAP), and the Social Autonomy Skills Screening (SAAS).

The research design included a pre-experimental stage (T1), an experimental stage, a post-experimental stage (T2), and a retest stage (T3). Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The initial sample consisted of 175 preschoolers aged 5 to 6 years, divided into an experimental group and a control group. Children's levels of personal and social autonomy were assessed by teachers and parents during the T1 and T2 stages of the study.

In the retest stage (T3), the sample consisted of 80 children. The number of participants was smaller than in the previous stages because not all children initially included in the study had started school, and, for some of them, it was not possible to maintain contact. At this stage, children's levels of personal and social autonomy were assessed by teachers and parents.

Three hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis concerned the existence of differences between parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding the assessment of children's levels of personal and social autonomy before and after the implementation of the

PPCA program. The second hypothesis concerned the influence of the experimental PPCA program on increasing children's levels of personal and social autonomy, while the third hypothesis posited that the effects of the PPCA program would persist four months after its implementation.

The experimental program *Step by Step Toward Autonomy* (PPCA) was designed as an educational intervention focused on the systematic practice of children's autonomous behaviors, both in the preschool setting and within the family. The program ran for 15 weeks, during which teachers and parents observed, supported, and encouraged preschoolers' personal and social autonomy skills on a daily basis.

Following the statistical analysis of the data, **all formulated hypotheses were confirmed**. The results indicated significant differences between preschoolers in the experimental group and those in the control group in terms of their levels of personal and social autonomy, highlighting the positive impact of the PPCA program.

An important result, which had not been initially anticipated, was the alignment of parents' and teachers' assessments after the intervention. This convergence can be explained by the fact that parents involved in the program gained a better understanding of what child autonomy entails and how it manifests in concrete behaviors, such as initiative, assuming responsibilities, decision-making, self-care, and managing personal belongings.

Participation in the program thus contributed to a clearer understanding at both conceptual and practical levels. Parents acquired more precise guidelines for observing and supporting autonomous behaviors in daily life, which led to assessments more closely aligned with those of teachers, who were already familiar with these behaviors through their regular educational practice.

This convergence of perceptions highlighted greater consistency between the family and educational environments and suggested a strengthening of the partnership between family and preschool in supporting the child's development.

This finding is supported by other studies indicating that alignment between parents' and teachers' perceptions has a positive impact on children's skill development (Ng et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2025). In the present study, this alignment of perceptions can be considered to have indirectly contributed to the development of children's personal and social autonomy by creating an appropriate, consistent, and predictable framework. When significant adults in the child's life share the same expectations and employ similar strategies regarding autonomy, the child benefits from comparable opportunities to practice autonomous behaviors in different contexts. Thus, the mechanism through which the alignment of perceptions influences the

development of autonomy is not direct, but operates through the consistency of educational interventions, the continuity of support for autonomous behaviors, and the reduction of inconsistencies between the family and educational environments, factors that promote the stabilization of the child's autonomous behaviors.

Consequently, the PPCA program contributed, on the one hand, to the development of children's personal and social autonomy and, on the other hand, facilitated the alignment of perceptions among evaluators, thereby supporting its validity in the two contexts in which it was implemented: preschool and family.

The stability of the high level of personal and social autonomy observed in the experimental group four months after the implementation of the PPCA program suggests that the progress made by the children was not temporary, but sustained over time, indicating the lasting acquisition of autonomous behaviors.

Although, during the retest stage, the assessment was no longer conducted by preschool teachers but by primary school teachers, due to the children's transition to school, levels of personal and social autonomy remained stable, confirming the stability of the PPCA program's effects across different educational contexts. These results support the medium-term effectiveness of the experimental PPCA program and suggest that personal and social autonomy skills formed and developed during the preschool period can be transferred to and maintained in the school environment, contributing to children's easier adaptation to the demands of the new context (Canales et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the results showed that social autonomy scored higher than personal autonomy, regardless of the evaluator, group membership, or stage of the study. This difference can be explained by the specific nature of the activities included in the PPCA program, which fostered communication, collaboration, active participation, and interaction among children.

At the same time, the higher scores for social autonomy may indicate that, both in preschool and within the family, more opportunities were provided for practicing socially autonomous behaviors. It is also possible that these behaviors were easier for adults to observe and evaluate positively compared to manifestations of personal autonomy, which require a higher degree of self-organization and individual responsibility.

Furthermore, studies indicate that, at preschool age, the development of social autonomy tends to be more rapid than that of personal autonomy, driven by children's natural need for social connection, integration, and group belonging (Quan, 2020; Mullin, 2022). At this age, children are frequently engaged in interactions with both peers and adults, contexts

that require initiative, communication, cooperation, adherence to rules, and role assumption. Thus, the kindergarten environment provides numerous opportunities for children to make decisions, negotiate, collaborate, and adapt their behavior in relation to others. Through the repetition of these experiences, social autonomy behaviors are practiced more frequently than personal autonomy behaviors, which require a higher level of self-organization and individual control.

The PPCA experimental program was implemented differently in the two contexts: (1) in the institutional preschool setting and (2) within the family. While the preschool-based approach was consistent, systematic, and well organized, the intervention involving parents varied depending on the specific circumstances of each family.

An important aspect highlighted by the results of this study is the complementary role of collaboration between preschool and family in supporting children's autonomous behaviors. The consistency and continuity of practices carried out in preschool and at home contributed to the development and consolidation of personal and social autonomy skills, as reflected in the scores obtained following the implementation of the PPCA program.

The results obtained are consistent with the conclusions drawn by G. Farcaş (2019), who emphasizes that the development of children's autonomy requires time, availability, and active involvement from both parents and teachers, as well as the application of specific educational strategies designed to stimulate children's responsibility, cooperation, and initiative. Furthermore, similar results were reported by A. Aisyah and I. Hasiana (2024), as well as by M. I. dos Santos (2025), who highlight that programs providing resources and guidance for parents and teachers significantly contribute to developing their ability to support children's independence and autonomy.

This study confirmed the effectiveness of the experimental PPCA program in developing children's personal and social autonomy, with its positive effects persisting over the medium term, even amid changes in the educational context.

The program had a significant impact both on the formation and development of autonomous behaviors and on the alignment of parents' and teachers' perceptions, which contributed to strengthening the kindergarten–family relationship.

These results represent an important indicator of the PPCA program's effectiveness, demonstrating the potential of such educational interventions to support the development of children's autonomous behaviors.

STUDY 3

The third study aimed to investigate the relationship between children's personal and social autonomy and their adaptation to the school environment. The research employed quantitative methods, namely a questionnaire-based survey, supplemented by qualitative methods, namely interviews. The instruments used were the Personal Autonomy Skills Screening (SCAP), the Social Autonomy Skills Screening (SAAS), and the Questionnaire on Children's School Adaptation.

The research sample consisted of 80 students divided into an experimental group and a control group. Children's levels of personal and social autonomy were assessed by parents and teachers, while their degree of school adaptation was analyzed using the questionnaire designed to assess adaptation to the school environment.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, including reliability and normality tests, Spearman's correlations, and multiple linear regression analyses.

Two hypotheses were tested in this study. The first hypothesis sought to verify the existence of a significant relationship between students' levels of personal and social autonomy and their school adaptation. The second hypothesis aimed to analyze the role of personal and social autonomy, as assessed by teachers and parents, as predictors of school adaptation.

Spearman's correlation analyses revealed positive and significant relationships among all the variables investigated: personal and social autonomy as assessed by teachers and parents, as well as school adaptation. The total autonomy score derived from teachers' assessments correlated positively and strongly with both the autonomy score assessed by parents ($r_s = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) and the level of school adaptation ($r_s = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, autonomy as assessed by parents was positively associated with school adaptation, although the strength of the relationship was moderate ($r_s = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$).

The results indicated that a high level of personal and social autonomy is associated with better school adaptation. Children who exhibit autonomous behaviors are better able to adapt to the demands of the school environment, organize their learning activities, and demonstrate positive attitudes toward school.

The stronger correlations between autonomy as assessed by teachers and school adaptation suggest that manifestations of autonomy in the school context are more relevant to the process of adapting to school. In contrast, assessments made by parents primarily reflect children's behaviors in the family environment and other everyday contexts, which may explain the more moderate association with school adaptation.

Overall, the results of the correlational analyses confirmed the existence of significant relationships between personal and social autonomy and school adaptation, thus **confirming the first hypothesis**.

The second hypothesis was analyzed using multiple linear regression. Four regression models were constructed, with the types of personal and social autonomy, as assessed by teachers and parents, and group assignment, experimental or control, serving as predictor variables, and school adaptation as the criterion variable.

The results showed that both personal autonomy and social autonomy contributed to explaining variation in school adaptation, but only social autonomy proved to be a significant and consistent predictor across all analyzed models. Personal autonomy had predictive value only in models based on teachers' assessments, not in those based on parents' assessments. This result can be explained by the fact that the school environment offers more contexts for the manifestation of personal autonomy, whereas in the family environment, parents tend to provide additional support to children, thereby reducing opportunities for the expression of autonomy (Luft & Peroty, 2022).

Therefore, **the second hypothesis**, according to which personal and social autonomy are significant predictors of school adaptation, **was partially confirmed**.

In all the regression models analyzed, belonging to the experimental group proved to be a positive and statistically significant predictor, highlighting the direct impact of the PPCA experimental program on school adaptation. Children who participated in the program exhibited higher levels of personal and social autonomy and a greater ability to adapt to the school environment. These results suggest that structured educational interventions aimed at developing autonomy can facilitate the process of school adaptation.

The quantitative results were also supported by qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with teachers. These data highlighted that students with high levels of autonomy, particularly social autonomy, adapted more easily to the demands of the school environment, developed positive relationships with others, communicated effectively, and identified solutions more easily in problematic situations. Thus, the results support the idea that social autonomy is a stable predictor of school adaptation, while personal autonomy exerts a more limited influence.

The study's findings are also supported by recent research in the literature. X. Hu and colleagues (2025) demonstrated that parental support for autonomy development significantly contributes to children's school adaptation, particularly in the behavioral and socio-emotional domains. Moreover, G. Klemp and colleagues (2025) highlighted that satisfying the need for

autonomy is positively correlated with well-being at school and a positive perception of school activities. Other studies have shown that difficulties in adapting at the start of schooling are frequently associated with reduced levels of autonomous behaviors in the social sphere, confirming the importance of social autonomy in children's adaptation to the school environment (Vasquez et al., 2016; Teleková et al., 2023).

In addition, previous research has demonstrated that support for autonomy, particularly parental support, contributes to increased levels of school adaptation, school engagement, and resilience in children, highlighting the role of autonomy as an important factor in school adaptation (Ratelle et al., 2017; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2024).

Overall, the results of this study highlight the importance of early autonomy development, particularly social autonomy, as a relevant factor for school adaptation and for the formation of the competencies necessary for children's harmonious development. At the same time, these findings can serve as an important benchmark for the development of educational programs focused on fostering personal and social autonomy from early childhood education onward.

IV. Conclusions of the empirical research

The results obtained in the three studies partially confirmed the general research hypothesis, according to which the development of personal and social autonomy significantly contributes to children's school adaptation.

The eight secondary hypotheses formulated across the three studies were largely confirmed, with the exception of the final hypothesis in Study 3, which was only partially confirmed.

Thus, *Study 1* demonstrated the reliability and validity of the SAAS, providing a solid basis for measuring social autonomy. *Study 2* confirmed the effectiveness of the PPCA program in developing and maintaining children's levels of personal and social autonomy over time, while *Study 3* highlighted that social autonomy is a significant predictor of school adaptation, whereas personal autonomy acts as a complementary factor. Therefore, although both forms of autonomy influence the adaptation process, social autonomy proved to have a stronger and more consistent contribution to school adaptation than personal autonomy.

Viewed as a whole, this doctoral thesis highlights a direct correlation between the theoretical foundations and the research approach, showing that each theoretical chapter corresponds to an empirical study, thereby creating coherent integration between the two parts.

This integrative structure enabled the translation of theoretical foundations into real educational contexts, confirming the hypotheses formulated at the theoretical level through empirical data.

Through this research, a significant contribution has been made to the field of early childhood education by offering intervention models applicable in educational practice. Furthermore, the research demonstrated that the development of children's personal and social autonomy is an essential factor in the process of school adaptation, contributing to children's harmonious integration into the school environment and to the formation of responsible, flexible, and cooperative behaviors.

The thesis entitled *Shaping and developing preschoolers' personal and social autonomy as a premise for school adaptation* supports and argues that the formation and consolidation of preschoolers' autonomous behaviors constitute a solid foundation for children's subsequent educational development, facilitating their transition and adaptation to the school environment.

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