

# The phenomenon of child heroism as counteraction to extremism in safe childhood developments

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**Abstract.** The article is focused on the analysis of the phenomenon of child heroism in history and today as a primary prevention of countering extremism in a child and adolescent environment in the context of security. The paper presents the results of a study of the ideas of pre-school children about heroism and the hero. Problems are identified with examples of real heroes in the preschoolers' minds, recommendations for the use of the educational potential of heroism still poorly used in educational institutions are proposed. At the same time, it is it which can resist the negative forms of attitudes towards violence and aggressive behaviour. The heroic deeds of our today's children are considered; the large number of them makes it possible for us to assert that heroism is not only a phenomenon of the past but is typical of the children of contemporary Russia. The work substantiates the psychological and social meanings of a child's feat in a special paradoxical property, the strength of a child, bodily, psychological, spiritual as his/her own resource of vitality, the ability to cope with psycho-traumatic, stressful negative attacks from the outside and the ability to provide protection to himself/herself and those who need it to a certain extent. In the safe childhood development concept, the concept of 'child strength' refers to the category of fundamental concepts that characterise the degree of readiness of children of different ages to overcome extremal situations, including an adequate response to external threats, including in the moral sphere. The overall result of the safe development of childhood is a psychologically, spiritually and morally healthy person capable of resistance and self-defence against all sort of threats.

**Keywords:** childhood development security, extremism, childhood heroism, child's power

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## 1 Introduction

The heroic behaviour of children in extreme situations has not been widely reflected in the literature. Most authors consider heroic behaviour in relation to adults [1-4], explore the differences between heroism and altruism [5]. Children in emergency situations are mainly described during world wars [6-8], the behaviour of modern children during emergency and extreme situations is described in the context of possible threats to childhood safety, without mentioning heroism [9, 10]. An alternative view of child heroes as an exclusively propaganda material, that they are trying to revive today, was proposed by Maslinskaya S.G. [11]. Fanaticism as a misunderstood heroism is reflected in [12].

In this paper, for the first time, heroic behaviour is considered as an alternative to extremism, examples of the actions of children-heroes are given, and an analysis of the ideas of contemporary pre-schoolers about heroes is given.

## 2 Material and methods

To study child heroes, we analysed media materials about children's heroism, the annual almanac *Hot Heart*, which recorded the acts of heroism of Russian children (from 2014 to 2020), awarded government awards. We examined 548 real heroic deeds performed by children aged four to seventeen (434 boys and 114 girls).

To analyse the ideas of older pre-school children, we conducted a survey on the topic of heroism.

## 3 Results

The general increase in extremeness in the world requires the creation of psychological, physical, spiritual and moral attitudes in children to reflect existing and potential threats of a natural, technogenic, anthropogenic and psychosocial and other nature, which implies special forms of personal, and sometimes heroic behaviour.

Age-specific teenage maximalism, the strive for experimenting, testing the strength of one's own body, the opportunity to test will and endurance – there are psychological settings for finding extreme experiences and actions in a child.

The need to overcome such an extremist orientation is sometimes conceived by adolescents, which may be associated with a personal-semantic and value-based reorientation of a teenage child: from external demonstrative forms of their own negative activity to an internal assessment of their motives and actions. Then there is an opportunity to turn inward, to the creation of one's own personality, by using the energy directed outward to destruction. In addition, a decrease in the degree of radical extremism can contribute to a 'shift' to extreme sports, that involve risk, as a way of bodily and personal self-improvement ('superman's ideal'). However, the superman's living on the edge cannot always improve the spiritual and moral spheres of the personality of a growing person and prepare the subject for addressing the problems of development and behavior in difficult life circumstances.

The etymology of the terms 'extreme, extremism and extremeness' itself reveals the semantic unity of opposites, going back to the Latin *Extremus* – extreme, which means, firstly, having reached the highest point, ultimate; and secondly, out of the ordinary, extraordinary. The broad context of the concept of 'extremism, extremeness' makes it possible to go beyond its widespread interpretation and see the possibilities of counteracting such a negative phenomenon of life in a children's environment and ensuring the safe development of childhood.

Another behaviour strategy based on proactive attitude and responsibility, courage and determination, which could be called ‘positive extreme’, is typical of children capable of moral decentration, altruism and conducive behaviour in its pro-social manifestations, the embodiment of which are the phenomena of child heroism and child heroic conduct [13, 14]. It is the image of a hero-peer for a modern child that can become the *primary prevention* of ‘black’ extremism in his/her mind.

The *educational potential of heroism* and self-sacrificing attitude in the history of the people, especially children’s heroism, can remove the halo of the attractiveness of a ‘tough guy’ who destroys everything in his/her path and aggressively tramples down moral laws.

The geography of residence of children-heroes, information about which is presented in the almanac *Hot Heart* covers all federal districts of Russia and most regions. A special questionnaire consisting of several blocks has been developed. I. Personal data – WHO? II. Brief description of the emergency situation – WHAT? III. Nature of the actions of the child in danger – HOW? IV. Qualities of the child manifested under adversity (cognitive, psycho-physical, strong-willed, spiritual and moral) – WHY?; V. Attitude towards one’s actions as a feat – IN THE NAME OF WHAT? A few examples. *A four-year-old girl walks a few kilometers to get her grandmother to the doctor at a winter night. A 12-year-old boy at a summer camp plunges into the cold and dirty water after the basement floods to save boxes of canned food and other food for all the squads. An eleven-year-old boy saves by catching a two-year-old girl who fell out of a window on the 4th floor on the fly. A nine-year-old resident of Makhachkala covered her five-year-old brother with herself during the shelling of militants, was seriously wounded, survived, and was awarded a government award, and so on.*

There are children who, on a daily basis, have to overcome difficult straits and hardships, those are children with disabilities or children with disabilities, which does not prevent them from achieving high results in sports, education and culture. Children overcome not only difficult circumstances, they find themselves above their own fears, helplessness, illness and vulnerability, they perform real feats, not due to but despite circumstances, for example, health status, being on the verge of human capacity. 15-year-old Nikita P. saved his friend, despite the fact that Nikita only has one arm. 12-year-old Artem Sh. pulled his younger brother and sister out of the fire, while professional firefighters could not cope with it because there was a gas cylinder on their way. Or when a nine-year-old girl pulls out two drowning boys on thin ice, while adults stand helplessly on the shore. According to experts, children can do the impossible, we can say, thanks to the special and yet unknown, unexplored internal child’s power.

The historical and cultural analysis of heroism needs to understand the origins of this phenomenon in ontogeny [15]. Who is the hero for a small child, a preschooler? The study *Ideas of Heroism among Preschoolers* was devoted to clarifying this issue.

Among the Moscow region’s children of the senior preschool age (6-7 years old), a survey on the topic of heroism was conducted. The children were given two questions, ‘Who is a hero?’ and ‘Who is your hero?’ The survey was conducted individually with each child.

90% of preschoolers could formulate understanding ‘Who is a hero’, for most of them (70%), a hero is someone who saves people, the city, the world. It is necessary to save from ‘bandits, villains, monsters’, among natural disasters ‘from thunderstorms, from hail, pull out of a pit’. A small percentage of children define heroism through the concept of ‘help’; for them, a hero is ‘one who does good deeds and helps people in trouble, in danger’.

For many children, the subjective question ‘Who is *your* hero?’ turned out to be more difficult. ‘I don’t know’ was answered by 20% of the children surveyed. 45% consider their dad as heroes (‘Dad is a hero. It was necessary to get a cat from a tree, and dad got it’), 20% of children call their older brother (‘Brother Yegor, when we were fighting, I almost fell, and he caught me’), 5% call mother (‘If it hurts, I cry, and my mother always sympathises with

me’). Some called themselves a hero (‘I can run fast and lift a ton’ or a friend in the group (only 10%).

In the descriptions of ‘one’s hero’, heroic deeds are often not mentioned, for example, there are such answers as ‘my mother can be called a hero because she is good, she is good at deliciously cooking’.

A hero for a preschooler is often a general positive characteristic, a person endowed with kindness and care, so the two answers rarely coincide in meaning. It can be concluded that children of senior preschool age have a generalised idea of the hero as a ‘rescuer’, ‘helper’, at the same time, ‘one’s’ hero is basically ‘linked’ to specific ‘non-heroic’ actions in a familiar situation. Features of the manifestation of heroism are determined through a series of everyday life events.

Among the threats, from which the hero ‘rescues’, the first place was taken by a generalised negative image, such as ‘bandit’, ‘villain’. This situation can presumably be explained by the presence in children of a sense of danger and increased anxiety, which, in their opinion, comes from a ‘bad’ person, whom it is necessary to shield from. At the same time, natural disasters, wars and other extreme situations are almost not taken into account by preschoolers, probably due to their absence in their own experience.

Thus, in modern preschoolers aged 6-7, when the basic moral concepts and civic position are shaped, understanding and evaluating a real hero are associated with the characteristics of close adults (primarily their family members), who are endowed with positive qualities, such as strength, courage and care. The personification of the hero as a defender of the weak, as a warrior or rescuer, is not expressed in the minds of children. At the same time, the image of the *antihero* is presented clearly and unambiguously in the children’s mind, it is ‘a bandit, a villain and a monster’. On the one hand, children have a general idea of heroism, on the other hand, they do not have specific any heroes but are replaced by close and dear people, which probably indicates the absence of proper memorable examples in both the preschool educational institution and family education that have an emotionally positive meaning.

Ideas about heroism in general and pointing to specific heroes cause difficulties for children, which, in our opinion, indicates the lack of fixation in the education on heroic images and the predominance of negative information in vivid episodes with negative characters that prevail in the media.

## 4 Discussion

An analysis of the descriptions of children’s heroism, according to the opinions of others, relatives and teachers, reveals the fact that such children are distinguished by their willingness to help in everyday life, as well as modesty when they talk about their deed at school and write in newspapers. The heroic behaviour of children can be considered as an educational potential and models of nationhood in childhood. Children, who come to the aid of others in a complex environment act as role models for their peers; however, a heroic deed is a certain motive for other children, the strive to do good for people, and therefore not to do evil; and this is the primary prevention of violence, cruelty and extremism.

Intolerance to violence and various forms of extremism can be achieved in the education by information counteraction to glorification and romanticisation in the children’s environment of various criminal images, and especially extremists. The educational potential of the classical children’s literature, cinema and gaming infrastructure should become an alternative to the negative scenarios of the educational strategy. New forms of children’s heroism, built on the feats of young enthusiasts, should occupy the right place in shaping the civic position of the new generations of Russia.

We can distinguish the following distinctive features of *extremism* as an *activity*, in the dichotomy of evil and good in children:

**Table 1.** Comparison of the heroic behaviour and extremism

<b>‘Extreme for the sake of evil’</b>	<b>‘Extreme for the sake of good’</b>
psychological fixation on extreme forms	for the sake of rescue, help in extreme situations
going beyond everyday life	being in a critical situation
self-centeredness, egocentrism	decentralisation on the condition of others
‘escape from the norm’	confirmation of the standard of compassion, help
self-affirmation motivation in any way	altruistic motivation for the sake of another
result: recognition of one’s own superiority	unwillingness to be famous.

## 5 Conclusion

Genuine heroism as adequate action in an extreme situation for the sake of saving others is available to children. This is evidenced by a large number of examples of the resilience and heroism of children of the past (children-heroes of the Great Patriotic War, beleaguered Leningrad, children who survived the occupation and forced labour for the Nazis, children are home front workers, young Timurovites helping families of soldiers etc.; there are millions of them!), as well as children-heroes of today.

An analysis of the behaviour of children in dangerous (extreme) situations shows that the child has an individual resource in ensuring his/her own safety as an adequate potential for protection and resistance to both external and internal destructive effects.

It is in preschool age that the primary prevention of forms of violence and extremism takes place, while the models of heroic behaviour fixed in education (in the images of fairy tales, cartoons, television programmes, etc.) are of great importance.

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