

## Child's Vision of Family

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**Abstract:** The study presents the results of investigation of how junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families perceive family. 95 junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families, pupils of 2nd-4th grades of Russian secondary schools were examined. The investigation technique was free association experiment. It was found that, with age, children from two-parent families had fewer associations with “family”, while children from single-parent families, on the contrary, had more associations with “family”. There were also qualitative differences in the associations given by children. With age, children described the relations between family members differently, from “friendship” to “love”, ceased to mention “self” among family members, increasingly used generalized categories (“kin”, “relatives”). The impact of two-parent or single-parent family is that children from two-parent families used mostly to just name family members, while children from single-parent families mostly responded with concepts describing relations and union between family members.

**Key words:** Perception, family, single-parent family, two-parent family, junior schoolchildren

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of family and how it is perceived by children has been essential for over a number of years. Family and its impact on children have been studied by both foreign (Bowen, 1978; Winnicott, 1992; Satir and Baldwin, 1983, etc.) and domestic researchers (Liders, 2006; Obukhova, 2000; Eidemiller, 2002, etc.).

Today there is a crisis of family which was pointed out by many researchers: sociologists, psychologists, teachers and other professionals. Just a few decades ago the most common was nuclear family which created distinct and clear boundaries, standards of behavior that provided social control, the feeling of security, experience of family life. In present-day families parents have more freedom not to stay in an unhappy marriage, “merge” children of different marriages, etc. The very concept of “family” is becoming more and more vague. Now it includes all the diversity of “unions” in which children are jointly raised: mother and father, mother and grandmother, partners living together, etc. (Golubeva, 2015).

There have also been recent studies concerned with various aspects of family and its impact on children (Roberts *et al.*, 2014; Roskam *et al.*, 2015; Cock and Shevlin, 2014). Yet there have not been enough modern studies concerned with children's perception of family.

Known studies include research by Krupnik (2014) and Berezina (2014) and some others. These studies often investigate the perceptions not of one's actual family but of future or desired family and employ not verbal but pictorial techniques.

Of particular interest are studies that look into how children are affected if they are raised in single-parent or two-parent family. These include, for example, studies of Egorova and Zvereva (2009), Kovalenok (2011), Dianova and Tlemeshok (2015) and others. This factor is given consideration in our research as well.

Thus, the purpose of our research was to study the perception of family in junior schoolchildren of different ages raised in single-parent and two-parent families.

### The goals of our research were as follows:

- Identify quantitative (how many categories have been mentioned in the questionnaire) and qualitative (the meaning of those categories, their frequency and the order in which they appear in the questionnaire) characteristics of the perception of family in junior schoolchildren across the entire sample
- Identify quantitative characteristics of the perception of family in junior schoolchildren of different ages raised in single-parent and two-parent families

- Deliver comparative analysis of the quantitative characteristics of perception of family in junior school children of different ages raised in single-parent and two-parent families
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The overall hypothesis of our research was as follows: Junior schoolchildren of different ages from single-parent and two-parent families have different perception of family.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Junior schoolchildren aged 7-10 years from secondary schools of Taganrog, Rostov Oblast, Russia were studied. A total of 95 children were studied, including:

- About 20 pupils of the 2nd grade, including 16 children from two-parent families and 4 from single-parent families
- About 39 pupils of the 3rd grade, including 30 children from two-parent families and 9 from single-parent families
- About 36 pupils of the 4th grade, including 30 children from two-parent families and 6 from single-parent families

The research technique was free association experiment, in which subjects were asked to give any associations with the word “family”.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Results for the entire sample:** In total, all studied children gave 622 responses mentioning 116 individual categories which junior schoolchildren associate with the concept of “family”. On average, each pupil mentioned 6.6 categories. The least number of categories in a questionnaire was 1, the most was 17.

The most commonly mentioned categories, their frequency *f* and the order in which they occurred in the questionnaire (median *Me*) are summarized in Table 1.

Thus, junior schoolchildren primarily think of family using concepts that denote family members (“mom”, “dad”, “grandmother”, “grandfather”, “brother”, “sister”). By this age children actively use generalized categories: “parents”, “relatives”, “kin” which is a sign of developed verbal reasoning.

Table 1: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family, for the entire sample

Concept [Me]	Frequency (f)	Order of occurrence
Love/be loved/beloved	60	2.0
Mom/mother	40	2.5
Dad/father	40	3.0
Friendship/united/friends	35	3.0
Grandmother(s)	29	4.0
Happy	28	3.0
Grandfather(s)	27	5.0
Joy	26	3.0
Brother(s)	21	5.0
Kin/kindred	21	1.0
Sister(s)	20	5.0
Assistance/help	14	6.5
Parents	14	2.0
Kindness/kind/good	13	3.0
Relatives	10	2.5

Regarding those categories that were not mentioned among the 15 most common and denoting family members, the following was noted.

First, there were categories denoting children themselves: “child(ren)” (*f* = 6), “son” (*f* = 4), “daughter” (*f* = 3). Apparently, children initially get the idea of relatives in terms of how they relate to them (“mom”, “dad”, etc.) which corresponds with J. Piaget’s idea that egocentrism is typical for child mind. Children tend to see everything from their own point of view, because children don’t know others may have their own, different views. But in junior school age egocentrism is replaced by decentration. Decentration means children can adopt other people’s point of view and see themselves from the point of view of other people. Decentration is evidenced by words such as “son”, “daughter” appearing in child speech. Children begin to have the understanding of themselves from the point of view of other relatives.

Second, there were categories denoting “distant relatives” or “non-relatives”: “uncle(s)” (*f* = 4), “aunt(s)” (*f* = 4), “god-parent(s)” (*f* = 3), “cousin(s)” (*f* = 1). One response showed the broadest understanding of family in the meaning “kin”: “family is also relatives who have died” (*f* = 1).

Sometimes children include pets as family: “animals” (*f* = 2), “cat” (*f* = 1), “dog” (*f* = 2). This is easily explained by the fact that pets help children overcome their fears, hurt feelings, diffidence, i.e., pets perform one of family functions the function of psychotherapy. For example, one response in our study had such phrase: “Even my dog supports me”.

Also it can be noted that for junior schoolchildren family means not just its members. In this age children also notice the relations (“love”, “friendship”) and interaction (“help”) between family members. Indeed, family as a certain social community acts primarily as a specific system for communication and interaction

between its members. There were categories other than the 15 most common that denoted relationships between family members: “respect” (f = 4), “mutual understanding” (f = 2), “trust” (f = 1), “harmony” (f = 1), “pride” (f = 1), etc. The group of categories denoting family interaction was further expanded by: “support” (f = 7), “protection” (f = 2), “caress” (f = 2), etc. There were also negative ones among them, such as: “quarrel” (f = 2), “argument” (f = 1), “bawl” (f = 1) which apparently, reflected the experiences of child-parent or interfamilial relations of children who so responded.

Along with the understanding of family members, description of relations and interactions between them, the concept of family for junior schoolchildren is also closely related to categories denoting emotional state. The most common of such categories were “happiness” and “joy”. Also this category group included “fun” (f = 4) and metaphoric expressions such as “warmth” (f = 2) and “light in soul” (f = 2).

Thus, for the majority of junior schoolchildren studied by us, the concept of family is associated with family members, the specifics of relations and interactions between family members and the emotional state caused by it.

Investigation of the numerosity of categories associated with the concept of family in junior schoolchildren of different ages from two-parent and single-parent families.

The number of categories associated with the concept of family in responses of junior schoolchildren of different ages from two-parent and single-parent families was investigated.

The number of categories with which a child responds makes it possible to judge about his or her mental activity in doing the association test. The level of such activity may be indicative of the extent of child’s available knowledge on the subject of test and the degree of his or her involvement in the test.

Our study found that on average, children of different ages responded with almost the same number of categories associated with the concept of family. Responses of pupils of the 2nd grade averaged categories, 3rd grade-6.7 categories, 4th grade-same 6.5 categories (Table 2).

It was noted that children from two-parent families averaged more ideas of the concept of family, responding with 6.9 categories associated with the concept. Children from single-parent families fell behind children from two-parent families in this indicator, responding with 5.1 categories.

Interestingly, children from two-parent families, as they grow, tend to respond with fewer categories

Table 2: Number of categories associated with the concept of family in questionnaires of junior schoolchildren of different ages from single-parent and two-parent families

Variables	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade	Average
Whole sample	6.5	6.7	6.5	6.6
Children from two-parent families	7.3	7.2	6.3	6.9
Children from single-parent families	3.3	4.8	7.3	5.1

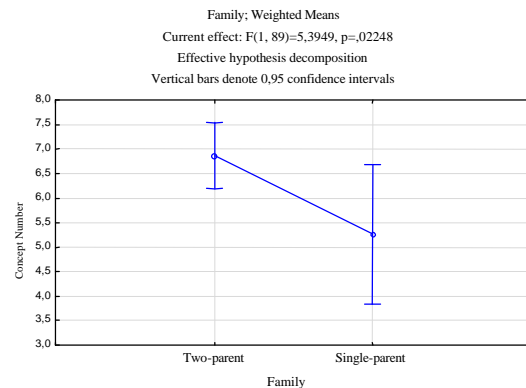


Fig. 1: ANOVA results

associated with the concept of family, while children from single-parent families, on the contrary, named more of such categories as they were older.

These trends were then statistically tested using the ANOVA method which makes it possible to investigate simultaneous impact of two factors, age and whether the family is single or two-parent in our case, on different subpopulations of test subjects. The results are summarized in Table 3 and Fig. 1.

The results of the statistical testing showed that the fluctuations in the number of categories with which children of different grades responded to association with family were insignificant ( $F_{\text{grade}} = 1.191$ ,  $p = 0.309$ ). Therefore, the number of associations with the concept of family in junior schoolchildren of different grades was stable.

The impact of the factor of two-parent or single-parent family on the number of categories in child responses was significant ( $F_{\text{family}} = 5.395$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ). Children from two-parent families gave more associations with the concept of family than children from single-parent families. Probably, this was due to the greater and more diverse and positive experience of child-parent and family relations in children from two-parent families which determined greater productivity of their associations.

Our study also found interaction between the factors of grade and family composition ( $F_{\text{grade family}} = 3.505$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ). This interaction is expressed in that, with age, children from two-parent families tend to respond with

Table 3: ANOVA results

Effect	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Grade	19.76	2	9.88	1.191	0.309
Family	44.75	1	44.75	5.395	0.022*
Form*Family	58.16	2	29.08	3.505.034*	

Values marked with “\*” are statistically significant

fewer categories associated with the concept of family, however, that does not mean they have less understanding of family. Rather, the intensity of their free, non-governed by some target quantity, associations with the topic of family falls because the focus of their interests moves from their own families to interaction with other children. Indeed, in just about a year, in middle school, close personal communication with peers will become their primary one.

While children from two-parent families with age were to respond with fewer categories associated with the concept of family, children from single-parent families had a tendency to the contrary, responding with more association categories. Our explanation is that, with age, they increasingly perceived their own dissatisfaction with child-parent relationships which triggered more active work in associations with family.

Thus, certain quantitative differences in the perception of family due to the factor of family composition and the interaction of the factors of family composition and grade were found.

Having investigated quantitative parameters of the perceptions which junior schoolchildren associate with family, their qualitative parameters were investigated.

Investigation of the distribution of categories associated with the concept of family in junior schoolchildren of different ages

The most frequent categories associated with the concept of family for three subpopulations of junior schoolchildren: pupils of 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade were identified, as summarized in Table 4-6.

The 2nd grade pupils associated the concept of family mostly with the concept of friendship. It can be speculated that friendship is the type of human relations that children of this age understand best. While this relationship type is more typical not for kinship, children of this age tend to project it on family.

A large proportion in the responses of pupils of the 2nd grade on the topic of family were titles of family members. Family member titles were also leading in the order in which associations appeared in questionnaires. Peculiarly, children mention themselves among family members. This might be indicative of children starting to understand themselves as full-fledged family members, or at least, if this understanding started earlier, at this age it is still underway. Admission to school contributes to it, because in school children become social subjects and

Table 4: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulation of 2nd grade pupils

Concept	f	Me
Friendship/friendly/friends	12	6
Mom/mother	11	2
Dad/father	11	2
Grandfather(s)	11	5
Grandmother(s)	10	4.5
Love/be loved/beloved	8	2.5
Brother(s)	6	5.5
Sister(s)	6	6.5
Parents	5	1
Myself	4	8

Table 5: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulation of 3rd grade pupils

Concept	F	Me
Happy	17	3
Love/be loved/beloved	15	3
Dad/father	15	4
Mom/mother	14	5
Brother(s)	10	3
Joy	9	2
Grandmother(s)	9	5
Grandfather(s)	8	5.5
Relatives	8	2
Sister	8	4

Table 6: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulation of 4th grade pupils

Concept	f	Me
Love/be loved/beloved	25	2
Mom/mother	11	2
Dad/father	11	2
Grandmother(s)	8	4.0
Friendship/friendly/friends	8	2.5
Joy	8	3.0
Relatives/dear	8	1.5
Kin	7	3.0
Grandfather(s)	6	6.0
Help	6	3.0

assume socially important responsibilities. The entire complex of child relationships with social medium is shaped and largely determined by how well he or she meets social requirements associated with the role of a pupil.

With the concept of family pupils of the 3rd grade principally associated the emotional state caused by it. The most frequent category in this subpopulation was “happy” (f = 17). In the order of appearance in questionnaires the second leading category was “joy”. We suppose these two findings to be related, because one definition of happiness is “intense joy”. Such responses of children indicate an increased role of emotional component in their perception of family which reflects child satisfaction with child-parent and intrafamilial relations.

For pupils in the 4th grade the concept of family was associated with the category of love. Love was both most frequent and held top positions in the order of appearance in questionnaires. Such perception is more adequate and

closer to what adults think that “family is based on love”. Moreover, although children of this age gave some responses denoting the titles of family members, they did this by using generalized categories such as “relatives” and “dear” more often. It was also interesting that the children of this age responded with the category of “help” more frequently. This could mean that, as children grow, their perceptions of family become more filled with “active” content.

Generally, responses of children of different ages had similar groups of responses to the topic of family: family members, relationships between them and emotional states. However, the frequencies and orders in which those responses appeared in questionnaires differed. Moreover, from one age subpopulation to another, new categories appeared and old categories disappeared. In order to verify the correctness of these assumptions, the findings were statistically tested. The most frequent categories between different subpopulations of junior schoolchildren were tabulated (Table 7).

The responses were statistically tested using Pearson’s chi-squared test which allows comparison of empirical distributions. The results of the statistical testing are summarized in Table 8.

The test showed there were statistically significant differences between all three distributions. This evidences that particular categories were mentioned by junior schoolchildren of different ages with different frequencies.

Then, the “ranks” of individual categories in child responses were compared. To this effect, the categories holding top positions in the order of appearance in the responses of junior schoolchildren of different ages were tabulated (Table 9).

The responses were statistically tested using Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient, or Spearman’s rho, which allows to find out any association between two group rankings of features, and the direction of such association. The results of the statistical testing are summarized in Table 10.

None of the results reached statistical significance. Hence, it can be concluded that the three subpopulations of junior schoolchildren of different ages differed in the ranking of categories which they associate with the concept of family.

Thus, substantive analysis of the categories which children associate with the concept of family showed that with age the frequency of use and the ranking of those categories change.

Another objective of our study was to investigate if there was any difference between how junior school children from two-parent and single-parent families perceive family. Investigation of the distribution of

Table 7: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the three subpopulations of pupils

Concept	f		
	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
Love/be loved/beloved	8	15	25
Mom/mother	11	14	11
Dad/father	11	15	11
Grandmother(s)	10	9	8
Friendship/friendly/friends	12	6	8
Joy	3	9	8
Relatives/dear	5	4	8
Kin	0	1	7
Grandfather(s)	11	8	6
Help	2	5	6
Happy	1	17	5
Brother(s)	6	10	3
Parents	1	8	2
Sister(s)	6	8	4
Myself	4	3	0

Table 8: Results of Pearson’s chi-squared test for junior schoolchildren subpopulations-pupils of different grades

Grades	Sum of frequencies 1	Sum of frequencies 2	$\chi^2$	df	p-values
2 and 3	91	132	25.4	14	<0.05*
2 and 4	91	112	29.8	14	<0.01*
3 and 4	132	112	26.9	14	<0.05*

Table 9: Ranking of the most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the three subpopulations of pupils

Concept	Me		
	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
Love/be loved/beloved	2.5	3	2
Mom/mother	2	5	2
Dad/father	2	4	2
Grandmother(s)	4.5	5	4
Friendship/friendly/friends	6	1.5	2.5
Joy	5	2	3
Relatives/dear	1	2.5	1.5
Kin	-	1	3
Grandfather(s)	5	5.5	6
Help	6	5	3
Happy	3	3	4
Brother(s)	5.5	3	6
Parents	5	2	2
Sister(s)	6.5	4	3
Myself	8	4	-

Table 10: Results of Spearman’s rho test for junior schoolchildren subpopulations-pupils of different grades

Grades	$r_s$	p-values
2 and 3	-0.002	0.994
2 and 4	0.527	0.064
3 and 4	0.294	0.308

categories associated with the concept of family in junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families.

The most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in two subpopulations of junior schoolchildren: pupils from two-parent and single-parent families, were identified. They are summarized in Tables 11 and 12.

Junior schoolchildren from two-parent families associate family with categories denoting relationships between family members (such as “love”, “friendship”). Also their responses had a large proportion of categories denoting the titles of family members (such as “dad”, “mother”, etc.). Categories which express emotional state (such as “happy”, “joy”) were frequent and highly ranked as well. This range of perceptions was very consistent with the perceptions characteristic of our sample as a whole (Table 1) which is quite explainable by the fact that the majority of our sample were children from two-parent families.

The peculiarity of responses of children from single-parent families was smaller proportion of categories denoting family members as compared to the subpopulation of children from two-parent families. Of such categories, only “mother” and “dear” were among the 10 most frequent. Indeed, children from single-parent families often have narrower circle of relatives, especially when they live with one of the parents, while the other parent’s family and sometimes even the other parent choose not to have contacts with them. Such children were more frequent to respond with the category “together”. The category became more important because it got more valuable due to the stress from the break-up of close relations. Also such children were more frequent to respond with categories denoting relationships between family members, such as “(mutual) understanding” and “respect”. Maybe those aspects of relations were missing from the families of such children before they became single-parent.

In order to verify the identified differences between the subpopulations of junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families, the findings were statistically tested. The most frequent categories in the subpopulations of children from two-parent and single-parent families were tabulated (Table 13).

The responses were statistically tested using Pearson’s chi-squared test. The results of the statistical testing are summarized in Table 14.

Table 11: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulation of pupils from two-parent families

Concept	f	Me
Love/be loved/beloved	48	3
Dad/father	37	3
Mom/mother	36	2.5
Grandmother(s)	27	4
Friendship/friendly/friends	26	3.5
Grandfather(s)	25	5
Happy	23	3
Joy	20	3
Brother(s)	19	5
Sister(s)	18	5

The test showed there were statistically significant differences between the two distributions. This evidences that particular categories were mentioned by junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families with different frequencies.

Then, the “ranks” of individual categories in child responses were compared. To this effect, the categories

Table 12: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulation of pupils from single-parent families

Concept	f	Me
Love/be loved/beloved	12	1
Friendship/friendly/friends	9	3
Joy	6	2.5
Happy	5	1.5
Fun	4	3.5
(Mutual) understanding	4	7
Together	4	5
Mom/mother	4	4
Dear	4	3
Respect	4	3

Table 13: Most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulations of pupils from two-parent and single-parent families

Concept	f	
	Two-parent families	Single-parent families
Love/be loved/beloved	48	12
Dad/father	37	3
Mom/mother	36	4
Grandmother(s)	27	2
Friendship/friendly/friends	26	9
Grandfather(s)	25	2
Happy	23	5
Joy	20	6
Brother(s)	19	2
Sister(s)	18	2
Fun	2	4
Together	3	4
Dear	17	4
Respect	4	4

Table 14: Results of Pearson’s chi-square test for the subpopulations of pupils from two-parent and single-parent families

Sum of frequencies 1	Sum of frequencies 2	$\chi^2$	df	p-values
305	63	36.8	13	<0.01 *

Table 15: Ranking of the most frequent categories associated with the concept of family in the subpopulations of pupils from two-parent and single-parent families

Concept	Me	
	Two-parent families	Single-parent families
Love/be loved/beloved	3	1
Dad/father	3	3
Mom/mother	2.5	4
Grandmother(s)	4	6
Friendship/friendly/friends	3.5	3
Grandfather(s)	5	6
Happy	3	1.5
Joy	3	2.5
Brother(s)	5	7.5
Sister(s)	5	6
Fun	7.5	3.5
Together	2	5
Dear	1	3
Respect	2	3

holding top positions in the order of appearance in the responses of junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families were tabulated (Table 15).

The Spearman's rho test showed there was no statistically significant correlation between the two series of data ( $r_s = 0.477$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Hence, it can be concluded that the subpopulations of junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families differed in the ranking of categories which they associate with the concept of family.

### CONCLUSION

Junior schoolchildren's perceptions of family can be characterized as follows. In a free association test, children responded with an average of 6.6 categories related to the topic of family. If an individual child responds with much greater or smaller number of categories, it may indicate his or her higher or lower involvement with the test, importance of the topic of family to him or her.

For children in the junior school age, the concept of family is mostly related to the categories denoting the relationships between family members (such as "love", "friendship", etc.), as well as categories denoting the titles of family members (such as "mother", "father", etc.) and concepts reflecting the emotional component of family relations ("happy", "joy", etc.).

Our hypothesis that junior schoolchildren from two-parent and single-parent families had different perceptions of family has been generally confirmed.

Yet no impact was found of the age factor on the quantitative characteristics of the perceptions of family, specifically, on the number of words with which children responded to the topic of family in the association experiment. Supposedly, the productivity of associating on the topic of family is roughly the same throughout the entire junior school age.

Children from two-parent and single-parent families had different number of perceptions associated with the concept of family. Children from two-parent families had more of such perceptions, supposedly due to their more positive and diverse experience of child-parent and family relations. As children from two-parent families grow, their number of associations to the topic of family decreased, while in children from single-parent families, on the contrary, this number increased. It is likely that in children from two-parent families this tendency was due to the gradual change of the social situation of development and their interests shifting towards communication with peers, while in children from single-parent families due to their increased dissatisfaction with relationships in their own families.

The qualitative characteristics of children's perception of family are the substance of their associations. It was found that the substance of the most frequent associations changed between age groups. 2nd grade pupils associated the concept of family with the category of friendship which is not quite adequate with respect to non-family ties, while the perceptions of 4th grade pupils were close to those of adults and "love" was most frequently mentioned by them as the association.

For second-graders it is important to understand themselves as family members, therefore, they were quite frequent to respond with "myself" when associating with family. This was not the case for pupils of the 4th grade, hence it can be concluded that this task has advanced to the next level which assumes understanding themselves as family members in the eyes of other relatives (associations such as "son", "daughter", etc.).

Moreover, as children grow, they start to increasingly use generalized concepts to denote family members (such as "relatives", "dear", etc.) which evidences the progress of verbal-logical reasoning.

The qualitative characteristics of the perception of family also differed between the subpopulations of children from two-parent and single-parent families. When responding to the topic of family, children from two-parent families mostly named family members, whereas children from single-parent families mostly named concepts reflecting relationships between and union of family members (frequently responding with the category "together"). This could be a symptom of the narrowing circle of relatives available to children from single-parent families and the stress experienced by them due to family break-up.

Thus, junior schoolchildren already have quite diverse and complex perceptions of family which can be indicative of the particular family situations in which children grow up. During the junior school age, those perceptions undergo certain changes in substance and are affected by whether the family is two-parent or single-parent.

Our findings can augment the scientific understanding of child's vision of the outside world in general and family in particular and how children can express it verbally. The practical relevance of our study is that its findings could be used by professionals working with children to assess child's family situation from the perspective of child's own feelings.

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