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## Children's Responsibility for Their Elderly Parents

**Abstract:** Due to physical disabilities and changes in the mental sphere, elderly people cannot always cope with a rapidly growing technology and progressive commercialization. The caring for their elderly parents belongs to the fundamental duties of adult children. One has to prepare for this task throughout the entire life. Including such ideas as care, solicitude and gratitude in the educational process and developing them is helpful in this regard. The first of these ideas has been deepened by Professor Tadeusz Kotarbiński in the analyses of the concept of 'trustworthy protector'. Ethics of solicitude and gratitude is gaining more and more recognition among many contemporary thinkers. In the middle adulthood, when children take on the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents, these ideas will have an opportunity of a complete externalization and implementation.

**Key words:** elderly parents, care, solicitude, gratitude.

The issue of why children tend to leave home later is the subject of extensive discussion nowadays. It seems that the debate too often misses a completely different problem, i.e. the need to raise children in such a way that they do not forget that in the future, after they move out, their parents will need help. Especially then, due to old age, physical disabilities, rapidly changing social situation and modern technology, they will need special assistance. Zygmunt Markocki [2012, p. 8] reminds that growing old is taking place on biological, psychological and social levels. Attention should be paid to these levels when parents reach the elderly age. What are the reasons that children do not remember about caring for their elderly parents? Are difficult economic and social conditions the only reason? Certainly one of the reasons of failing to care for the parents is also the

spirit of consumerism and commercialization of the society. The first determines that more and more people are trying hard to possess more or to reach new levels in their professional careers. It is obvious that in the world of consumption the measure of a man becomes the situation in which what you have, not the one you should be taking care of, decides upon your prestige. The commercialization process has led to a change of perspective on moral values. Lesław Hostyński [2011, p. 70] notes that values such as love, attachment and respect are treated in a commercial and secondary way. However, this author also adds, 'there are strong tendencies of treating, especially love, as unrealized value that can have a real impact on our individual lives'. This work will focus on the education of children in the perspective of their caring for their parents who will reach the elderly age in the future. We will not deal with issues such as the definition of old age or defining the point in time when it starts.

### **1. Situation of Parents in the Period of Middle Adulthood**

One of the key issues in this paper is the question of when to tell children about the obligations they incur towards elderly parents. Let us exclude the extreme position. Surely it is not a time when parents are at such old age that they cannot cope with their physical and mental impairments. Specifically, they are no longer physically able to go to see their doctor or to do the shopping. By the concept of mental impairment I do not mean only the things related to modern technology. The latter forces nearly everyone to acquire computer skills to pay rent for an apartment or compulsory insurance. Not everyone is good at it.

According to psychologists, the need to give care to elderly parents by their adult children occurs during middle adulthood. During middle adulthood people face two serious problems. The first one is related to slow moving away by the children from their family home. Although in recent years the time has considerably extended, the children finally begin to leave the family homes. The emptiness is not going to last long. So far all the effort was involved in the care of their children, soon they will need the strength for helping with their grandchildren. This is a very serious role which must be learned; and above all, they will need to find time to handle this task. Emphasizing the lack of time is extremely important in this context. In the transition period, both the children who have just left home as well as their parents do not have much free time. The economic situation in our country makes everyone work much longer.

Another challenge people in middle adulthood have to face is taking care of their ageing parents. A. Brzezińska, K. Appelt and B. Ziółkowska [2010, p. 285] state that at the time we have to cope with:

1. Recognition and reconciliation with the deteriorating health of parents and the fact that in the course of time they will become more physically weak. The loss

of psychic powers was mentioned before. It seems that it would be better to talk about a certain helplessness. Modern technologies force to have efficient minds, to possess the knowledge of technical jargon and the ability to move around in the virtual world. Without these abilities one can very often have a problem with paying for electricity or scheduling a visit at the doctor's. Parents at the elderly age can also find it difficult to cope with the insistent advertising, find themselves in a wide network of shops and services.

2. Guaranteeing material help to parents, taking care of them, and sometimes nurturing throughout the day. It is true that older parents often do not have sufficient finances to ensure their existence. At the same time, they help their children who are already adult. This situation cannot be the norm. It should be the opposite.
3. Coping with the loss of their parents. Trauma that can occur then usually leads to mental breakdown, loss of the sense of future life or filling time in a sensible way, time that was so far saved up for taking care of the elderly parents.

The above statements treat the issue of the situation of the parents in the old age in a general way. They also face serious challenges. They also, as far as their health permits, need to utilize their free time. Universities of the third age have become very popular recently. They are being established and developing dynamically in large and small towns. From my own personal experience I can say that elderly people cope quite well in this type of universities. Specifically, participants are eager students during computer or foreign language classes.

Educational process continues throughout the life of man. In changing times we are facing various tasks. Some of them pass with the childhood period. For sure we will have to learn throughout the whole life. It does not mean that we will be obliged to regularly go to school and do homework assignments. With the passing years more serious responsibilities will appear and the scope of personal responsibility will increase. What should be done to make the care for the aging parents become a normative part of human life? Let us put forward a thesis that the issue should be tackled already in the school. Children should be prepared to be responsible for the care of elderly parents from the time when they begin to understand how much they owe. It is much more simple in the case of multi-generational families. They consist of two or more families [Adamski 2006, p. 308]. A few generations live under one roof and the obligation to take care of elderly parents naturally rests on the younger generation. It should be kept in mind, however, that such families are less numerous nowadays, even in rural areas, where the structure of society is dynamically changing. Our speech will focus on reviewing some basic concepts that may be helpful in the educational process to sensitize students to the obligation to cover parents in old age with care.

## 2. Way of Teaching about Parents in Need of Help at the Elderly Age

Poor attention of children for the elderly also stems from the inadequacy of our language, which we use in the educational process. Such concepts as responsibility, obligation or duty should be considered as helpful, but the most important ones. Speaking about the responsibility has two drawbacks. On the one hand it is a good starting point to describe the moral problems arising from the development of our civilization [Ciążela 2006, p. 29]. Responsibility, however, requires freedom. In view of the fact that the parents have become so old that they require care, we practically do not have any choice. We are obliged to take care of them. The concept of responsibility is associated more with the area of law, rather than education. Speaking of the duties is not too happy either. There has been a lively discussion lately on the issue of the scope of this concept and it is not clear. Speaking of the duties also requires some space of freedom, it includes the predictability and regularity of situations [Soniewicka 2013, p. 128]. Duties, as noted by Janusz A. Majcherek [2011, pp. 184–185], should not be fulfilled ‘against the wishes of the one to whom they are addressed’. In other words, adds the author, ‘you cannot make a good deed to someone who does not desire it, just as you cannot make someone happy by force, that is, doing something he considers his unhappiness’. Let us sum up then that given the fact that the need to take care of the elderly arises there is a situation where, contrary to the wishes of all people involved, it will have to be done.

The terms that should be considered appropriate are as follows ‘care’, ‘solicitude’ and ‘gratitude’. It is a common and well sounding statement that elderly parents need care. The reflection on this subject cannot miss the idea of a trustworthy protector developed by Tadeusz Kotarbiński [1967, p. 68] who wrote that the ‘protector can be treated as trustworthy only when one can rightly trust to his care, that he will not fail, that he will do everything in his might, that he will stand his ground in danger and all will be a support in difficult circumstances’. A trustworthy person has many features that correspond well with the care of elderly parents. He is conscientious, reliable, honest, direct, straightforward and unpretentious. According to Kotarbiński a trustworthy man is sympathetic to the people he cares for. The renowned philosopher and ethicist adds such features as goodness of heart, sensitivity to the needs of others and willingness to help. In addition to this, to deserve the name of a trustworthy man one has to be persistent, have the ability to master over oneself and give maximum effort. Courage, the ability to bear witness to the truth even at the cost of certain difficulties and annoyances are also necessary [Kotarbiński 1967, pp. 69–70]. It seems that one cannot give all the qualities required of children to take care of elderly parents more accurately. One has to be able to tell them the truth, sometimes bitter, spend their precious time and be a sensitive person.

The idea of a trustworthy protector is not devalued even in the situation that it is sometimes poorly received in present times. In the political conformism a trustworthy person is the one who unwittingly subjected to a leader or mindlessly votes against their conscience. In the professional life being trustworthy is sometimes misunderstood as a mindless exercise of illogical commands from the employer. A trustworthy person can make a career, achieve the desired promotion, gain acceptance and recognition in the group more quickly. This is probably the only argument against the idea of a trustworthy protector. Recognized Polish ethics, Maria Ossowska [2000, pp. 180–181], and many others, reserves the concept of 'protection' not only for the education of children, but also care for adults. She writes that care should always be addressed to those who need it, and therefore also for adults. With our reality in mind, let us think first about a babysitter. In the case of elderly people we will signal the existence of social welfare houses. The idea of a trustworthy protector is also supported by the attractiveness of the very term itself. It can inspire to search its deepest meaning.

Ethics of care has enjoyed a high reputation among humanists for a long time. It can be successfully adopted by pedagogues. Let us focus on those who need care and those who provide it. First of all, we care for other people. Typically, these are people who cannot move in the surrounding reality, are in a difficult situation, are neglected, require constant care. From the youngest years the care of children is provided by parents and immediate family members. Putting care in the centre of education it is not difficult to imagine that when the children, then young people, grow up, they will understand the need to pay special attention to elderly parents. The emphasis therefore moves to individuals who provide care. Ethicists developing the ethics of care consider the issue in a broader perspective. People are concerned not only about the immediate family, but also about animals. Among the supporters of this particular trend in ethics it is believed that the ethics of care allows to express the feeling of love, trust and relationships with other people more clearly. The emotional side of the issue opens for researchers. It creates a space for mutual understanding of people involved in caring for those in need of care [Zaorski-Sikora 2007, pp. 114–115]. This is particularly necessary when addressing the issue of the relationship between children and the elderly. The latter often have strained the sense of trust in others. We remember that the public opinion research shows that the Poles still place the greatest trust in the closest members of their own family. Usually people we care spend some time alone. We need to know when and how much we can trust the elderly people, allow them space to decide for themselves and to make their own decisions. Critics of this trend in ethics note that it embeds too much focus on the person for whom the care is provided. This may lead them to excessive enslavement.

Is ethics built on the care for the closest ones without any other defects? To the most important ones I would include the fact that usually the problem is

comparable to the mother-child relationship while care for the elderly requires different contacts. Visualizing the emotional side of the issue results in making such problems as patience, firmness and truthfulness, and self-discipline more distant. These features are necessary in caring for elderly parents. However, in the care of the elderly emotional approach, trust and permission are always needed to let them make the arbitrary decisions.

Appealing to gratitude seems helpful in making children more sensitive to the need to address their elderly parents in the future. It is true that the concept of gratitude takes sometimes a negative meaning. We live in a country where gratitude for all kinds of services settled in our society for good. Especially for older people it is hard to imagine that one should not show gratitude to their doctor, office clerk or teacher in a material way. This is not far from corruption. This does not mean that parents have no right to demand gratitude from their children. Throughout their life, they put a lot of effort to educate them, send to good schools, take care of their health. On the other hand, it would be bad if parents founded their care for children on the hope that in the future they will prove their gratitude. Education will be effective and not burdened with unfulfilled hopes, if it is based on selflessness. One should not have children, just for this one reason that in the future will provide care for their parents. It would be a gratuitous expression of egoism.

Any kind of ingratitude would be understood as treason and acts of negligence resulting from failure to meet unwritten obligations. With such an attitude one would not speak of gratitude, but of responsibilities. Positively understood gratitude is a voluntary gift. It does not flow from the obligation, but it is built on honest intentions. In relation to parents it is primarily a free gift. It follows from memory that they put indescribable effort in the future of their children. Their life was always full of sacrifice, resignation – if one can say so – from the most beautiful years of their lives. Tadeusz Gogacz [2004, p. 231] writes that gratitude ‘causes more good to the one who is grateful than benefits to whomsoever it is given’. Misunderstood gratitude – as mentioned above – is associated with qualities such as thanking, obligation, or the need for revenge. In a positive sense, it follows the favourable, positive attitude and spirit of charity.

### **3. Remarks and Summary**

In summary, one should pay attention to two things. Firstly, a person develops throughout their life, gains more experience at each stage. In the middle adulthood, responsibilities tend to change, one has to re-find the meaning of life. One of the priorities is the need to deal with elderly parents. In order to meet this challenge one must be reconciled with the fact that they will have to give up their free time, friends, cultural entertainment. From an early age children need to be reminded

that their parents will get old. Tasks such as care and concern will become a priority. One has to remember about gratitude. The effectiveness of the educational process depends on the clarity of the language with which we educate children. Professor Teresa Hejnicka-Bezwińska [2008, p. 258] reminds that language is the most effective tool. It provides the most essential knowledge necessary for life. The author speaks about the scientific and colloquial language. The other publications write about natural, artificial and mixed language [Malionowki 2010, pp. 18–20]. Let us stay with this terminology. The principles of natural language have been formed spontaneously. It is constantly changing, following social and cultural transformations. Expressiveness is one of the biggest deficiencies of natural language. While talking to children and adults one should always use a fully understood language. It does not mean that one has to use customary expressions that differ from the accepted forms. This text reminds about issues such as trustworthy protection, care and gratitude. It has been decided that these are the best concepts that sensitize the issue of responsibility for elderly parents. It is worth noting that the language is not the only form of communication. People use gestures, facial expressions, voice height or body posture to express their ideas. By means of non-verbal communication, we can also learn about gratitude, protection and care. Ida Kurcz [2008, p. 271] draws attention to the silence, which is also a form of communication. The author understands it as a lack of verbal and non-verbal communication. Silence in the relationship between children and parents has a negative connotation. There should be no such situations.

Finally, let us say yet another thing. Would it not be helpful, in the context of the present considerations, to speak of debt which children take from their parents? Naturally, the concept of debts is essentially related with economy. The importance of the problem is very well understood by everyone who has to pay bank loans. The debt can also be viewed as belonging to the moral sphere. We are indebted to teachers, authorities, generally to those whom we respect. Why, then, should we not talk about the debt to the parents? The term is clear and understandable. It makes it clear that it is not possible to fully pay the debt from the parents. We pay back bank loans because we are afraid of going to jail or even bankruptcy. Liabilities to the closest people cannot be measured by means of material resources. Nobody will sue us to court if we do not repay the debt to our elderly parents. The consequences are completely different. They have a negative educational impact on the younger generation. The size of this impact is not known.

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