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Upbringing towards forgiveness in the family environment

Abstract: The present article discusses the question of upbringing towards forgiveness in family environment. The analysis of psychological and pedagogical literature leads to the conclusion that the willingness and ability to forgive can be shaped in the process of upbringing. The family environment is especially competent in this respect, as this is where the child spends the period of his or her greatest susceptibility to educational influence. The value of forgiveness in human life ensues from the fact that it is a constructive way of dealing with the experience of harm or psychological and emotional damage. It opens up the possibility of fixing the relationships with other people. Being aware of this fact, the parents should feel motivated to shape in their children such features and competences that will positively influence their willingness and ability to forgive. It concerns above all teaching the proper concept of forgiving, raising awareness of the fact that every person needs forgiveness, encouraging children to speak about their feelings and emotions.

Key-words: forgiveness, upbringing, family

Forgiveness is closely connected to the experience of harm. We could say forgiveness cannot happen unless one has experienced harm. It is a negative phenomenon in the relationship with other people, one which causes suffering, the feeling of helplessness and injustice. Harm destroys the fundamental order in the image of the world and of the self. Forgiveness is seen as a constructive way of dealing with the feeling of harm. H. Arendt (2000) claims that forgiveness is one of the most original ideas in the Western civilisation, as it serves to change the meaning

of deeds committed in the past and it is obvious that it has personal, interpersonal and social meaning at the same time.

A human is a social being. A person is born weak and defenceless, with his or her life and development depending on adults, usually parents. The basis of good relationships in the family is a close and mature bond between the parents, which largely depends on their individual maturity of personality. J. Rembowski [1986] stresses that family bonds have biological, formal, legal and psychological bases and the combination of these endows the family members with the awareness of a bond of understanding they have with one another, unity and identity distinct from that of other groups. Every family has an individual lifestyle, or its own way of cooperating, spending free time, celebrating, expressing emotions, responding to crises and resolving conflicts. In spite of its unity, a family is usually open to other groups and people.

The analysis of psychological literature and observation of human relationships leads to the conclusion that the ability to forgive undergoes shaping and development. It happens above all in the process of upbringing in the family because, as it is the first and most natural educational environment, it exerts great influence on a person.

1. Forgiveness as a value in the process of upbringing in the family.

One of the basic tasks of a family is raising children. In realising that task, parents become educators. The interaction between the educator and the child is oriented towards an aim that the educator perceives as significant and important. An example of such an aim could be acquiring new behaviours by the child, as well as specific attitudes, values and social norms. There is a close connection between upbringing and values, as the aims of upbringing are derived from the consciously chosen values and norms [Nowak 1999]. M. Braun-Gałkowska believes that the essence of upbringing is to help one's charge in development, which happens through the realization of values. The author states: "In upbringing, the point of departure is the truth about moral values which the educator recognizes and which he or she tries to present to the child in his or her care. By learning about that truth, the child accepts it as his or her own and begins to consciously realize it in his or her life, thus becoming a better person. In other words, he or she is developing and growing" [Braun-Gałkowska 1994, p. 12]. One of the values significant in human life is forgiveness. It is a value both in the objective and subjective sense. It is deeply rooted in Christian culture and, for that reason, it is widely recognized, especially in the Western culture.

It seems that one cannot be happy without relationships with other people. Unfortunately, what is a source of happiness for somebody can at the same time be a source of serious harm and deep wounds. The parents are unable to provide their children with a complete protection from the experience of harm. However,

they can attempt to teach them how to deal with this phenomenon in a wise and successful way; that is, they can tell them that revenge does not solve the problem, although it might give one some transient relief. They can show through their own behaviour that forgiveness is possible, that it has a value, it does not mean renouncing one's rights, that it is a manifestation of maturity and strength of character. It brings benefits to the person who forgives. Among others, those benefits are:

- freeing oneself from constantly returning to the past;
- regaining a considerable part of one's psychological energy, which can be devoted to the matters concerning the present and the future;
- improving the relationships with other people, opening oneself to others, to their needs and experiences;
- ridding oneself of the feeling of being hurt, a victim, somebody worse;
- conviction about one's ability to constructively deal with a difficult situation of experiencing harm;
- taking responsibility for the shape of one's life;
- regaining the feeling of the sense of life.

In psychology, forgiveness is usually defined as an internal process leading to the change of attitude towards the person who has done harm, from a negative to a more positive one. Such a change concerns all components of the attitude, that is its cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimension [McCullough et al. 2000]. K. Ostrowska [1997] stresses that forgiveness is not a simple reaction to the words of apology, but it is a complex psychological process which engages cognitive, emotional and action structures. The process of forgiving leads to restructuring the knowledge of oneself and other people.

When experiencing harm, a person can choose between three ways of behaviour: 1) revenge, 2) driving the unpleasant experience into the subconscious, 3) forgiveness [Kix 1994]. Experiences of many people and psychological research prove that forgiveness is the best choice. Revenge brings a short-lived relief, but does not solve the existing problem [Ide 2000]. "The longer one desires revenge, the more difficult it is to satisfy this desire, while taking revenge does not bring the expected feeling of fulfilment. Revenge is never enough. [...] Because doing harm to another person does not reduce our harm!" [Zaleski 1998, p. 137]. Driving something into the subconscious is one of the psychological mechanisms of dealing with unpleasant experiences. People tend to believe that if they stop thinking about the harm they have experienced (if they forget about it), they will free themselves from the negative emotions connected with it. Unfortunately, usually no such thing happens, while an additional negative consequence is that a person cannot understand why he or she feels constantly tense, anxious, ready to defend oneself, usually not connecting it to the harm he or she experienced and has not forgiven [Kroplewski 1997; Monbourquette 1996].

A person who cannot forgive the harm he or she has experienced meets numerous difficulties in his or her own development. The reason for that is the unforgiven harm links his or her feelings and thoughts with a specific event from the past; therefore, it acts like an anchor. It concentrates one's energy around negative emotions, which has its impact on the emotional life in general. F. Perls [1969] stresses that the condition for personal growth and development is forgiving our parents. It can be assumed that the inability to forgive – not just one's own parents, but also oneself and other people – is an obstacle to our development as persons. In order to develop, one has to be free from the unnecessary inhibitions brought about by the past and from illusions about human perfection.

The lack of forgiveness destroys the relationship not only with the person who has done harm, but also has a negative influence on the relationships with other people. Sometimes the people who have experienced harm, if they have been unable to forgive and work through that harm, begin to behave similarly to the person who harmed them. It is a kind of projected retaliation or revenge, oriented not towards the wrongdoer, but towards innocent people. Perhaps it is so because the person who harms is seen as a stronger one, and as a result, revenge on him or her is dangerous. It is easier to hurt people perceived as weaker than ourselves and dependent on us. It has to be remembered, however, that it takes place to a large extent subconsciously [Ide 2000; Mellibruda 1997].

2. Upbringing in a family and factors influencing the process of forgiving

K. Ostrowska [1997] stresses that in the upbringing process, parents should focus on shaping and reinforcing factors favouring forgiveness and on eliminating, as far as it is possible, factors which hinder it.

There are numerous factors which facilitate or hamper forgiving the harm one has experienced. They can be connected with the harmed person, the wrongdoer, the kind of relationship between them or with the nature of the harm itself. What is important here is not only what those people were doing, thinking and feeling when they were harmed, but also all that happened afterwards. Among the factors influencing the process of forgiveness, there are those directly related to it and those whose connection with forgiveness is of more distant nature. That division does not refer exclusively to the distance in terms of time, but also in terms of substance.

The following points of the article will present those factors which seem to have the most significant influence on the process of forgiveness and which are related to the person who forgives.

2.1. Proper understanding of forgiveness

Life of a great number of people could improve if they correctly understood the idea of forgiveness. For that reason, it is important that a child in the process

of his or her upbringing acquires a proper understanding of forgiveness and is able to distinguish it from what is not forgiveness. Wrong understanding of forgiveness often makes it difficult to achieve it, and sometimes even leads to its complete rejection.

2.1.1. Forgiveness and reconciliation

First of all, forgiveness needs to be distinguished from reconciliation. Even if forgiveness is not followed by reconciliation, it is worth to seek it as it constitutes a value for the person who forgives. Such differentiation is necessary as those two processes are different in nature. Forgiveness is, in its essence, unconditional, while reconciliation requires fulfilling some conditions by the person who did the harm. Forgiveness is characterised by a more internal nature; in principle, it can be achieved even without the participation of the wrongdoer, while reconciliation requires interaction with that person. Reconciliation is impossible without the cooperation of both sides [Larsen 2000].

The conviction that forgiveness and reconciliation constitute an inseparable whole leads to the conclusion about the conditional nature of forgiveness. As a result, the person who wants to forgive the harm which has been done to him or her first expects the wrongdoer to fulfil specific conditions. That could mean waiting for an apology, remorse or a plea to be forgiven. If one waits for those, he or she postpones his or her forgiveness, at the same time delaying the moment of freeing oneself from the unpleasant experience of feeling harmed. Moreover, expecting that the wrongdoer will fulfil those conditions is not always justified, as some people have to forgive harm done by somebody they do not know or have no chance of meeting. Sometimes these are people who are already dead. In such a situation, the person convinced that forgiveness can only happen under certain conditions does not know what to do, whether or not he/she can forgive, as he/she was never apologized.

2.1.2. Forgiveness and forgetting

Forgiveness does not mean that one has to forget, and forgetting does not amount to forgiving. For many people, it is a sort of a test of forgiveness to see if the person who claims to have forgiven remembers the harm he or she experienced. Such conviction is totally false, as forgiveness is not identical to forgetting; what is more, it can rather be a sign of driving into the subconscious all the contents and emotions related to the harm. As it has already been stated here, such an act is not forgiveness.

It is a completely different situation when forgetting ensues as a positive result of forgiveness. Because forgiveness frees one from the pressure of returning constantly to the distress connected to the experienced harm, a large part of the psychological energy of a person can be directed after the act of forgiveness to other

areas of life, which with time results in forgetting gradually about the harm. It is not this kind of forgetting, however, which makes it impossible to retrieve the past experiences from memory [Ide 2000].

2.1.3. The meaning of forgiveness for the harmed person

Forgiveness is important not only for the wrongdoer, but also for the person who has experienced harm. Forgiveness is not "a present", a gift offered to the wrongdoer (especially as he or she is often perceived as a person unworthy such a gift, or he/she does not care about being forgiven), but it is a gift offered to oneself [Mellibruda 1995].

Some people who refuse to forgive the person who has harmed them treat it as a sort of revenge on him or her. Unfortunately, the negative consequences of such behaviour affect the harmed person as well. It is that person who above all bears the psychological costs ensuing from the unforgiven harm, such as: excessive attachment to the past, especially to its negative dimension; inability to fully engage oneself in experiencing the present and planning the future; difficulties in building relationships with other people; an ill relation to oneself – especially regarding oneself as a victim, a person who is unhappy because he or she has been harmed by somebody.

2.2. Recognition of the fact that a person is limited by evil

The factor facilitating forgiveness for the person who forgives is realizing that everybody has at some point done harm to somebody. Therefore, every person, without exceptions, needs forgiveness. Discovering this truth frees one from the illusion of one's perfection. Pope John Paul II in his Message for the 30th World Day of Peace wrote: "We all need to be forgiven by others, so we must all be ready to forgive. Asking and granting forgiveness is something profoundly worthy of man; sometimes it is the only way out of situations marked by age-old and violent hatred" [John Paul II 1997].

Properly understood upbringing should combine reasonable requirements for the child with the acceptance of the child as a person. If the child is encouraged to strive to be a better person, but at the same time knows that he or she has a right to make a mistake and to be weaker than the others sometimes, then such an attitude of the parents creates favourable conditions for developing his or her creativity and mature personality. As a result, the child is provided with the basic sense of security, which now and in the future will enable him or her to undertake difficult tasks that at times require a great deal of courage. Moreover, it has a broader meaning, as in this way the child learns that people in general have the right to make mistakes and that weakness and imperfection are inscribed in human condition.

2.3. The ability to see positive features in the wrongdoer

H. Arendt (2000) stresses that respect for another person helps us to see in him or her somebody more than just a wrongdoer. What is more, the history of close and strong bonds forms the basis for overcoming the need to blame somebody and strengthens one's striving to forgiveness. The more important was the original relationship to a given person, the more the yearning for reconciliation motivates him or her to forgive. Admitting that one used to have a close bond with a given person should in itself lead to declaring that he or she was a person of great worth.

It seems that one of the most significant factors which make it difficult to see positive features in the wrongdoer is perfectionism. A perfectionist is usually characterized by non-flexible thinking, feeling and attitudes. Such a person judges himself/herself and other people as unambiguously good or evil. In the relationships with other people he or she follows the "all or nothing" principle. If perfect friendship is not possible, he or she chooses not to make friends with anybody [Minirth et al. 1998; Rudin 1992].

The source of perfectionist attitudes is improper upbringing. Expecting that a child will be perfect, best at everything and the winner in any competition leads to the strengthening of such an outlook on life and transferring it into adulthood. A perfectionist does not take reality into account and demands absolute excellence from himself/herself and the others. Perfectionists do not see perfection as something a person always strives to achieve and can at most only come close to, but as something they would like to attain as soon as possible, as in their view, only then will they be entitled to perceive themselves as valuable people. It can be assumed that perfectionism indeed hinders forgiving oneself and other people.

2.4. The ability to communicate one's emotional states to other people

In the process of forgiveness, it is necessary to face the unpleasant feelings caused by the experience of harm. The most important are fear, pain, anger, sadness and helplessness [Mellibruda 1995]. One form of facing one's feeling is verbalizing them, that is recognizing, naming and pronouncing them.

Sometimes the experience of harm is so severe that it almost literally makes it impossible to speak about it. Every attempt at expressing feelings, describing one's suffering causes one's throat to clench. Obviously, removing such a strong emotional tension requires specialist therapy. However, it is not the only difficulty related to expressing feelings. Sometimes, the fear of suffering connected with reliving negative emotions is so strong that the harmed person defends himself or herself internally from thinking or speaking about them. In such a situation hoarded emotions are left unnamed, thus unclear and unknown. The person who experiences them knows only how unpleasant they are.

Verbalising one's feelings helps to order them, to distance oneself from them, to observe them and therefore learn to control them. A person begins to control

his or her feelings and not the other way round. J. Augustyn stresses that "thanks to verbalizing emotions, the harmed person can approach them in a more rational and impartial way, and therefore more maturely and truly" [1998, p. 90]. Obviously, to communicate one's emotional states one needs the presence of another person who wants to listen and is able to do it. The problem of some people, however, is not recognizing and naming their emotions and feelings, but speaking them out, that is, admitting to experiencing them. Usually, it results from the conviction that one should not show one's feelings, as it is something embarrassing, attesting to one's weakness.

How can the ability to name one's emotions and feelings and speak about them be shaped in the process of upbringing? Through their attitude towards the child, parents can encourage him or her to speak about his or her experiences. A conversation with a child about his or her emotions and feelings is the best way to teach him or her recognizing one's psychological state. If the child has no opportunities to speak about them, he or she will not learn to name them. Therefore, parents who are ready to listen with attention, who have time for their child and are able to create a suitable atmosphere for talking about difficult matters, help the child to acquire the skills of communicating their emotional states to other people and indirectly contribute to shaping in him or her one of the predispositions towards forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an important value in human life, and therefore it is significant for the process of upbringing. To achieve full development, a person needs – not only during childhood, but during the entire life – good relationships with other people. Practical experience of many people, as well as practical experience of psychologists and educationalists indicates that no deeper relation between people is free from the need to forgive.

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