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Influence of single-parent families on children's development

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1. Family as a specific social group

Changes in political, economical and cultural life occurring during the recent years exposed the inner life of a family to serious difficulties. Roles, functions and family structure being so far compulsory have changed. Numerous families have been affected with unemployment and financial problems connected with it. Family as such ceased to ensure the feeling of security its members' need. All these factors caused various conflicts in families, which led to destabilization of family life. Relationships between family members have weakened. Financial, not emotional values have begun to matter.

Family is defined as a group, a social formation and consists of a certain number of individuals remaining in defined positions and roles in relation to one another and this group has its own system of values and norms regulating the behaviour of individuals in all matters important. Parents and children act in determined roles and take defined positions in the inner family structure. Inner structure comes into existence gradually, as a result of reciprocal interactions between family members and it is frequently transformed. It is then referred to as stages of family life: from childless marriage, through having adolescent children at different ages, up to advanced in years parents feeling bereft (Kawula, Bągiel, Janke, 2000).

Family is a weighty component of educational environment as it affects each person for the longest time, sometimes all his or her life. During childhood family influences an individual's life the most as all actions of other institutions are restricted and also because parents are the ones particularly responsible for providing care and upbringing for a child. Their actions are oriented towards a determined aim which means implementing fundamental functions expected from them by the society. Functions of family are all actions without which the society cannot exist and which satisfy its members mental, emotional, and social needs (Pielkova, 1988).

Family is one of the most important social micro-structures providing support in difficult situations, but simultaneously constantly actualizing in everyday life (Żurek, 2005). Family, although functioning within wider communities, is a separate unit, different from any other type of groups or institutions. What makes it particularly different from other groups, is the ability to develop a sphere within itself that is impossible to observe and inaccessible from outside; it is a sphere of private, intimate life, a sphere of satisfying needs that any other institution or group would not be able to satisfy. Also unique and peculiar family lifestyle, along with specific atmosphere of marital and parental relations differentiating one family from another, cannot be observed in extra-family patterns (Adamski, 2002).

2. Types of single-parent families

Not all families have a complete structure. There are various types of single-parent families. Some of them came into being as a result of divorce, others were broken up by death of one of the parents, and finally some parents never entered into marriage. At times, after the divorce children maintain a good relation with the other parent, but sometimes they are deprived of this connection or it has a negative character. Some single parents live nearby their relatives and benefit from the help of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Others live far away from their closest and need to depend mostly on themselves. Single parents' children have the same needs as children from complete families. However, the way these needs are satisfied is different: everyday childcare, obligations and responsibilities lie with one, not both parents. Furthermore, this parent, no matter if widowed, divorced, or never got married, feels emotionally wounded. Suffering parents try to take care of their suffering children and hope to convince them that their life will be better. Children, on the other hand, instead of only dealing with natural challenges of childhood and adolescence, are forced to face lots of concerns and problems which should have never become a part of their world (Campbell, Chapman, 2005).

It is very important for children's development so that they were able to develop in a stable environment, in which they can count on their parents' and other important adults' support. It is also significant for a child to have someone who will appreciate their achievements, for example school successes. In the situation when parents separate or divorce, children do not have such a psychical comfort. To help a child survive such adverse time, it is crucial to provide them with essential support. That is why parents should set their own problems aside, act together and show the child that in his or her matters they are unanimous (Charlish, 2003). The most frequent case is playing the divorce case through a child. There is also a question what is a better solution: divorce or maintaining a conflict situation in which parents do not separate, but do not also communicate directly with each other, only through a child. And this latter situation is much more traumatic for

a child than the one in which a married couple separate (Terakowska, Bomba, 2003). It can be concluded, based on studies conducted in different countries, that parents' separation influences children in a double negative way: short- and long-term consequences should be mentioned. For instance, it was proved that children from broken families are more exposed to mental health problems. It should be emphasized that parents' separation exposes children to various types of risks and it needs to be stated that with some of these risks children are able to deal, but others turn out to be beyond their capabilities. As a matter of fact, parents are the most obligated (although not always the best-prepared) to help their children in overcoming these difficulties. To a considerable degree, it concerns the first days after the separation when both mother and father attempt to build their own new lives (Charlish, 2003). Parents know their children best and they know the most suitable way to help them pull themselves together in the current situation.

In contemporary world a new category of single-parent families appeared, namely, families with temporary absence of one or both parents. In sociological literature a sailor's family was numerously described as an example of a family with father's temporary absence. Whereas, currently, as a result of unemployment and low earnings, commercial departures of one or both parents are much more common than they used to be (Stolińska-Pobralaska, 2010). Such families constitute a new category. Childcare situation of the above-mentioned category depends on the following factors: who leaves, for how long and where. The person leaving may be a father, mother, both parents, or mother with children. In the situation of family with temporary absence of a parent, we can enumerate stages of developing a childcare situation. The first stage is connected with getting convinced of the decision to leave, which is usually motivated by unemployment, economic difficulties, lack of a flat or willingness to enrich oneself, to raise one's standard of life. At this stage there are conversations which concern looking for the possibilities of the departure, hope that it will be better, easier is awakened. Next stage is a parent's departure, waiting for first messages, getting accustomed to the new situation, discovering lacks resulting from the absence, and hope for fulfilling promises. Then, as the absence time gets longer, anxiety arises which, if the parent is in Europe, may be disrupted by a short visit. In the situation when mother or father leaves the country, parent's absence causes loneliness, lack of feeling of security, and loosening the relationship with the spouse and children (Stolińska-Pobralaska, 2011). It may also happen that the person staying at home, for example mother, grows to be more independent and self-sufficient. All means provided by the spouse facilitate maintaining the family and allow to buy new, so far unavailable objects for children. When parent's departure lasts for a longer time, family and marital relationships undergo loosening. Each meeting taking place is a 'festive,' solemn one and lasts for a short time. The absent person ceases

to understand the problems of other family members. Longer absence lasting few years may even lead to breakdown of the marriage and decay of family life. The situation when both parents are absent is especially difficult. Children are very often entrusted to grandparents' or aunts' care who tend to be over-protective or indulgent or children start earning their own living when they get older (Kukołowicz, 2005).

The review of researches conducted so far indicates that among single-parent families, the family of a widowed parent creates the best conditions for a child's development. Parent's death is a deep, traumatic experience for the whole family. However, emotional bonds in these families are most frequently defined as good or very good. The child grows up in the atmosphere of positive memories about the deceased parent, and he or she often experienced a kind relation with him or her. Children from widowed families experience fewer school difficulties and cause less childcare trouble than children from other types of single-parent families (Dyczewski, 1994). When family breakdown is caused by the death of one parent and children realize that he or she will never return, they mourn over the loss and transfer their feelings to the parent who is still alive, to regain the former feeling of security owing to it. When the parent who stayed at home is too abandoned to his or her grief and in this way neglects children who need his or her support and consolation, then children may experience the feeling of rejection. It leads to resentments and grudges that may harm family relationships. In the first years of a child's life losing mother is much more dangerous and traumatic than losing father. Taking care of a small child needs to be then entrusted to someone from the family or a paid domestic help. Their childcare methods may be different from the ones applied by mother and, apart from that, they do not provide the child with so much tenderness and care that he or she used to get from their mother. When children are older, losing father is more serious than losing mother, especially for boys. Mothers need not only to run the household, but also their jobs and, that is why, they may not have enough time or energy to look after the children as much as they need. In consequence, children feel neglected and embittered. For older boys, father's death means that they do not have such identification source as their peers, and they may be additionally outraged by female rules at home. When children lose both parents, the results are doubly serious. Regardless of the fact that there are radical changes in their lifestyle, they must also adjust to another, often unknown person's care (Hurlock, 1985). Parent's death is an extremely strong experience for a child. It changes his or her life, divides it into 'before' and 'after' the death. In everything that comes afterwards, the reality of death and loss is present.

3. The impact of single-parent families upon children's development

Family constitutes a very complicated unit and its influence on developing a child's personality may be diverse depending on the family's inner structure, family's influence on the child's mentality. Composition of each family plays a very important role. Complete, nuclear family, consisting of parents and siblings, is the best for a child in respect of development. All positive and negative feelings, repelling a child from parents or drawing him or her to them, are felt before the child starts to grasp the meaning of words. That is why mental atmosphere is particularly important for a child's harmonious development. Children in single-parent families develop worse not only because of frequently deteriorated financial conditions, but also under the influence of mental depressions, neuroses and so on often accompanying such situations. The lack of one parent constitutes a drawback which may, however, be compensated by other factors like: good atmosphere, affectionate relations, proper childcare and educational influence (Czeredrecka, 1988).

All types of single-parent families, although their situations are diverse, show considerable similarity in the way of functioning and are significantly different from complete families. In case of parents who were never married and bring up children alone, emotional relationship between a child and his or her second parent most frequently does not come into being. Specific nature of this group of families is creating, from the moment the child is born, such a life pattern that does not provide a space for the second parent, most frequently a father. It seems to be a strongly negative factor influencing a child's development: in a direct way – child is deprived of the father's person, and in an indirect way – mother has a negative image of a man and she transfers it to her child (Dyczewski, 1994).

Situation tends to be different in families after the divorce. It is most often regarded by children and parent taking care of them as liberation from the shackles and ending the long period of torment and ordeal connected with divorce procedure and rows accompanying it. By the court decision looking after the children is entrusted most frequently to the mother (Terakowska, Bomba, 2003). There is a strong conviction that cooperation of at least two adults in the process of proper childcare is necessary. A person supporting mother in her childcare efforts may be any male family member (grandfather, uncle, or someone else), but some people claim that the best in this role is the child's own father, mother's ex-husband. It is also remarked that such a situation is hugely difficult for the child as he or she is suspended between the two, often hostile towards each other, homes: mother's and father's. The child needs to work out the system of conduct in this arrangement – he or she either chooses one of the houses for the 'family home' or shares his or her life between two different 'family homes.' Such a solution of the problem raises concerns and does not seem to be perfect for either of the sides. Situational crisis connected with divorce causes unfavourable

changes in the state of health of all family members, particularly children – these are delays in mental-physical development as well as speech development with children, mental disorders, occurrence of functional disorders (e.g. stuttering), and addictions. Moreover, in the population of divorcees a higher incidence rate was recorded – it even doubled during the first year after the divorce (Dyczewski, 1994). Children from broken families are much more exposed to drug addiction, premature pregnancy, dropping out of school, and suicide attempts. A good family home should prepare a child to deal with all those challenges. Children who grow up deprived of rules and restrictions at home will break the rules and ignore the restrictions binding in the society. If they are deprived of customs, habits and family celebrations, they will enter their adult life without pleasant memories, good habits, and positive values, which will be necessary to survive in the society (Eyre, 1996).

Divorce is not something felicitous or pleasant for a child. Its results may vary for different children in all sorts of families. Children's age is a factor of considerable meaning. Ten years old is a very unfavourable time for divorce. A typical ten-year-old loves not only his or her mother and father, he or she loves the whole family. They enjoy spending time with the family, doing something together. Children at this age often claim that their families are 'the best in the world,' even if there is evidence to prove something on the contrary. They do not feel this typical for teenagers need to become independent and loosen the family relationship. Therefore, parents' divorce for a ten-year-old may be a huge tremor, astonishment and the reason for embitterment. On the other hand, a typical eleven-year-old tends to be more rebellious in relation to his or her family, but still with an enthusiastic attitude towards spending time together, trips, and journeys. Former infinite admiration and worship towards parents is out of the question. It could seem at times that if there was enough food in the house, the eleven-year-old would be able to do without his or her parents. Twelve-year-old children get more and more self-sufficient. They accept the reality as it is. Friends become as important as family, if not more. That is why it is considered that a twelve-year-old is able to accept his or her parents' divorce easier than a child at any other age. Thirteen-year-olds try to isolate themselves from their families. They spend as little time as possible with their family. They prefer being alone and often close themselves in their rooms. Boys and girls do not want to confide to anyone with their problems. It could be assumed that parents' divorce will not make any bigger impression on a thirteen-year-old, but it is the other way round. On the contrary, children at this age may really suffer from this reason. Even more than expected because they will not be able to share their feelings, sadness and despair with anyone. Parents' divorce may be a traumatic experience, deeply hidden pain. However, a rebellious, vigorous, impulsive fourteen-year-old thinks that parents are his or her biggest

problem, they are old-fashioned, bizarre and intolerant. Boys and girls at this age usually have good friends with whom they can share all worries and problems. Therefore, it is easier for them to accept parents' divorce (Ilg, Ames, Baker, 1998). The moment when parents separate, children should have a chance to understand the whole situation. Trying to keep such a situation a secret or pretending for the sake of children that nothing happened is a very frequent mistake made by adults. That is why, when parents make a decision to separate, they should explain it to their child in a credible and, to the extent possible, suitable for his or her age way. It should be done in such a way so as the child could understand what is happening and why (Milska-Wrzosińska, 2005).

Another type of single-parent families are the ones in which parent's absence is caused by his or her death. Death changes individuals and whole families for ever. The life of children, parents and the whole family will never be the same again. That does not mean that they will never feel joy, pleasure or merriment again. Numerous factors influence the results of this situation. How a child copes with the loss depends on his or her capability of events assimilation. The environment in which a child lives also has some influence, if and what support it offers, what possibilities of expressing feelings it provides. Adults' attitude towards the loss is not without importance, either. The child needs love and attention from adults to mature by experiencing the feeling of sadness. It is fundamental to talk about it when the child experiences a death of a beloved person. Avoiding the subject may condemn the child to struggle with the sadness alone. Parents share with children their first challenges, taking first steps or losing milk teeth. They also share their children's first surprises, pleasures, and many other experiences. However, if the problem of death in the family appears, parents sometimes leave the children alone with this experience. It may result in children's isolating themselves from some family members in their environment and tendency to reject some feelings. Not all children want to talk about sad events. Children require the feeling of security to come out with their feelings. Because of deep sadness in the family, everything becomes different and unknown out of the blue and unexpectedly so, in the eyes of the child, it becomes dangerous (Keirse, 2005).

Children experience the death of a close person similarly do adults. They feel sad and cry although do not often express these emotions. They are frightened of the future as they do not know what it will look like after the death of the close one. They are afraid of changes. Similarly do adults, they feel anger, loneliness and anxiety. The difference between children and adults concerns the fact that children up to certain age, do not possess the ability to comprehend events or express feelings like adults do. That is why children experience grief and sadness adequately to their age. Feelings connected with death of a close person are the same, but the form of expression may be different. Behaviours of people at the

time of mourning may be compared to fingerprints: recognizable, however, different for each person. Adults are in a better situation than children as they are mature and formed in every way, while for children the loss may shutter their normal development, may block them. Children are in a much worse position as their thinking has not developed to the level of an adult person. At certain age they do not even comprehend the notion of death, they do not understand its irreversibility. They expected the deceased person to return (Keirse, 2005). The average course of reaction to death, determined by the stages of development, appears as follows:

- 1) in the first months of life – children weep when they lack the care and protection, providing it soothes the pain quickly;
- 2) from four, five months to two years old – children begin to show their dissatisfaction when mother, father or another known person is not around. They sense that something is wrong. When parents are overwhelmed by sorrow, they treat children in a different way. They use a different tone of voice. They have less time and patience and devote less attention to children, are not willing to have fun. Small children sense such minimal changes very quickly. If parents lost the joy, feel sad, the child's world is not the same, it is not secure and comfortable anymore. The child gets anxious, there are sleep and nutrition disorders, and different than usual reactions to everyday situations;
- 3) up to five years old – children react similarly to their parents. However, they are not mature enough to comprehend that death is irreversible, to understand its consequences. Despite being capable of feeling regret, children at this age lack the ability to express their feelings and memories in precise words. At the beginning they do not comprehend everything, but ask various questions. Then, they show a kind of fear, next retardation in development, like for example clinging to someone's skirt, trying to get attention to themselves. They keep asking why the deceased left, when he or she is coming back or what is doing now. Children rebel because they feel abandoned;
- 4) from five to eight years old – children at this age are susceptible to various suggestions because they understand but are not able to apply this understanding in life. Negation happens to be the first defensive action. They make the impression as if nothing happened. They hide their emotions so as not to seem immature. They often cry in concealment. Although internally moved by the loss, they do not express it through their behaviour. Children need explicit approval and support so that they would be encouraged enough to show their grief, discontent and sadness. When they do not do it, they often create an idealized and fantastic inner world. The deceased person becomes an ideal. In that way they keep this person alive, at least in their thoughts, nobody living can be compared to him or her. A feeling of guilt resulting from aggressive intentions children may have had towards the person or fear of being different

from friends may also appear. The fear of someone else from the family dying may come up as well (Stolińska-Pobralaska, 2012);

- 5) from eight to twelve years old – children at this age already know what death is, they know that everybody dies and that death is irreversible. A question that usually appears at this age is: ‘Why did this particular person die?’ Children at that time are not so dependent on adults, but their independence is still very fragile. Death of one of the parents induce their childlike feelings, but they also show a tendency towards hiding them and raising a ‘barrier’ of independence. Rebellion, which is expressed in general irritation and annoyance, is the more noticeable, the more children want to make an impression of being strong. At this age children tend to deny their own helplessness and pain. They start to worry about others ‘forcibly’ or behave in a dominative way, controlling the environment. It is also an attempt to deal with their own helplessness;
- 6) young people at puberty - they show diverse behaviours of adults, but they experience typical adolescent problems: reluctance to communicate with adults, exaggerated anxiety for acceptance of their reactions in the environment, and also other developmental problems appearing as well at the time of mourning: dependence and distance, identity, strong emotions, and sexuality. Sometimes adolescence matters characteristic for this stage may influence the process of mourning and leave it unfinished. What makes mourning particularly difficult is the feeling of guilt mixed with normal, at this age, rebellion and outdistancing from one’s own family (Keirse, 2005).

Nowadays, a long stay abroad, even several years’ does not seem anything unusual. In the course of the last twenty years lots of people departed individually or with their families, there were returns, repeated departures – our society became more mobile. These migrations serve some people well, but for others each change feels like a painful loss. It applies to children as well. Some of them adjust easily, absorb cultural diversities and return to Poland full of new resources and ideas; others suffer, long for the country and people and they plague, sometimes for a long time, the feeling of having no place in the world (Milska-Wrzońska, 2005). However, when one or both parents leave, the situation looks completely different. Lack of one parent in immediate environment leads to lack of appropriate behaviour patterns, personal patterns, patterns of performing family and extra-family roles. Children originating from single-parent families, more frequently than others, implement their roles in a partial and defective way, they have worse orientation in social roles, what may be expressed by their lower commitment in the family and home matters and may influence the range of their commitment and capabilities of functional adjustment in extra-family environments (e.g. at school, groups of people at the same age, youth organizations) (Kukołowicz, 2005). On the other hand, the parent who stays at home does not have as much

time to spend it with his or her children. Such a situation is often the reason for numerous conflicts between the parent and children and it causes an increase in their disobedience, insubordination and unruliness. According to teachers' opinions, almost 30% of children from families in which the mother is absent, cause problems at school: behave improperly during lessons, do not do homework, come late for lessons, feign illnesses, skip lessons without any justification. 35% of students experience educational difficulties, sometimes they even repeat a class. Parents' personal patterns, their presence, attitudes, behaviours play an important role in socialization and educational process. Father's role as a personal pattern is extremely important in learning, especially for boys. Growing up in a complete family and having both personal patterns of parents, children can acquire foundations for their future social roles like: the role of woman and man, wife and husband, mother and father. The presence of both patterns facilitates assimilation of behaviours suitable for each sex because parents, through their presence, provide the child with patterns of behaviour. Being in immediate contact with both parents is indispensable for children (Świdarska, 2011). Single mother will not substitute for father. Even in conducive conditions parental roles are not exchangeable. Family model without a father-figure (a long-term father's absence) usually has a negative impact on both proper development of child and mother's psyche. The significance of father in the life and development of children was proved by means of results of studies conducted on families in which fathers were absent from 9 months up to 2 years. Boys from those families chose less mature forms of play than children at the same age and did not have enough abilities as regards proper adjustment to groups of children at the same age; girls also showed much less independence (Kukołowicz, 2005).

Parents are extremely weighty in the life of children. They establish a strong emotional relationship which appears while satisfying various needs. Mother is of paramount importance in child's life. A child who was deprived of his or her mother (regardless of the fact if she departed abroad, stays in hospital or in prison) always has the feeling of his or her life being disordered and he or she becomes lonelier and more indigent. Void and loneliness is caused by the fact that mother is the carrier of feelings and emotions in the interactions with children while father is the carrier of more rational attitudes. Experiencing emotions and feelings along with expressing them to mother is an original and most important need in the child's life. Children are not able to oppose the faith that isolate them from mother or deal with the feeling of loneliness by themselves. Father is regarded by the children as the person who loves less and does not understand more. In case of longer absence children forget what kind of person their father is. Children's perception of lack of love from their father's side are particularly unfavourable in consequences for boys who, if emotionally rejected by fathers, are cheerless,

dismal, shy, timid, and mistrustful. However, loving father's attitude is favourable to fearless behaviours and correlates with boys' social adjustment (Kukołowicz, 2005).

Wpływ rodzin niepełnych na rozwój dzieci

Streszczenie

Wychowywanie się w rodzinie niepełnej stało się bardzo powszechnym zjawiskiem we współczesnym środowisku. Dotychczasowy model rodziny oparty na sakramentalnym związku małżeńskim kobiety i mężczyzny nie jest już jedynym, występującym w naszym społeczeństwie. Równocześnie można zauważyć, że dotychczas obowiązujące zasady i formy życia rodzinnego podlegają przeobrażeniom. Obecnie rodziny są bardziej konfliktowe niż dawniej oraz bardziej podatne na rozpad. Bardzo modny stał się również wyjazd jednego z rodziców albo obojga za granicę w celu zarobienia pieniędzy oraz polepszenia warunków życia. Jednak szczególnie trudna sytuacja jest w rodzinach, w których doszło do śmierci rodzica. Nikt jednak nie zastanawia się, co dzieje się z dzieckiem, które jest świadkiem tych wydarzeń oraz jaki to ma na niego wpływ. Nie należy zostawiać go samego, lecz być przy nim w tym trudnym okresie jego życia.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina niepełna, rozwój dziecka.

Summary

Growing up in a single-parent family has become a very common phenomenon in contemporary environment. Nowadays families are more quarrelsome than they used to be and more susceptible to disintegration or breakdown. Simultaneously it may be remarked that rules and patterns of family life applicable so far are liable to transformations. The hitherto family model, based on sacramental marital union of woman and man, is no longer unique in our society. Long ago families in which a divorce occurred were not approved by the other family members or neighbours. Currently we can point out that such a family in which the married couple separated arouses less interest and curiosity. The number of couples deciding to divorce increases as well. No one, however, wonders what happens with the child who is the witness of these events and what influence they have on him or her. Also departures abroad of one or both parents to earn a living or improve the financial conditions have become very fashionable. In a situation when one parent leaves the country, his or her absence may cause loneliness of other family members and diminishing the relationship between the spouses and children. In case of both parents leaving the country, children are often left in the care of grandparents or aunts, or they are left alone if adult enough. Nevertheless, particularly difficult situation affect families experienced by the death of a parent. Death of a close person is an extremely traumatic experience for each family member, but mainly for a child it is especially painful and negative. That is why we should not leave the child alone, we should be with him or her in this difficult time of their life.

Keywords: single-parent families, children's development.

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