

PARENTALITY. PARENTIFICATION. PARENTING. PARENT. THE 4 P IN RELATION TO THE EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

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Abstract

The concepts underlying this paper have in common the noun “parent”. Drawing on this basis, we present the intra-family ways of interaction, the needs of children and the necessary parenting abilities and skills for the formation of a strong winner-type child with a high self-esteem, or a loser-type child. This paper presents the two facets of the same coin, a shining one offered to children by parents with parenting skills, and the other shadowed by parentification. We also approach the importance of forming parenting skills in children development, as opposed to their absence and the parentification of children.

Keywords: *Parentality, parentification, parent, empathy, emotional needs.*

The process through which the physical, emotional, intellectual and social development of children is encouraged and supported from birth until adulthood is often called *parenting* in the literature in the field (Davies 2000: 245).

Parenting can be used in social services for families and children with a therapeutic or interventionist goal, for educational purposes or in order to prevent child neglect.

As a process, *parenting* involves raising and educating activities for children that go beyond biological relations. Parenting is basically intended on ensuring security and the development of the physical, intellectual and emotional needs of children. The persons involved in the parenting process can be, depending on the organization and structure of the origin family, the biological parent, the placement parent/caretaker, grandparent, the single parent, the custodial parent, the adopting parent, the step parent, the spiritual parent, in other words, the person(s) who takes on and exercises parenting roles. We will simply call them parents.

In this paper we account for the way in which parents can take on parenting and the way they succeed in meeting the emotional needs of children or not.

We chose the question *What is more difficult, being a parent or being a child?* as our starting point for the three dimensions of the paper. The first part

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focuses on the parent who is concerned with the emotional needs of children. The second part focuses on the parent who is the slave of the child, the parent who ignores himself/herself and forgets about his/her own emotional needs, and the last part focuses on the parent-child, the child who finds himself/herself in difficult emotional circumstances.

The parent involved in the parenting process

We often hear parents telling their children things like ‘Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you’, and we also often see parents who are angry, upset, loud if someone disrespected their children or behaved inadequately. The same parents forget that they come across family situations when they react by showing disrespect or by behaving inadequately towards their own child and by violating the very same rule – do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Rules apply differently to these parents, they feel offended if their child is not respected by others, and there is no offence at all whether they treat their own children respectfully or not. Such situations naturally generate the question

What is more difficult, being a parent or being a child?

In the age of mass media and the internet, children face a great deal of information that is not filtered by adults, and adults are bombarded with information about how to be highly effective as parents, how to educate their children so that they always be the best, how to overcome various situations by using tricks, arrangements, but many of these rather induce a state of agitation, unrest and tension at the level of the parental relation.

When playing their parental roles, parents vary from “good enough” to “too bad”. They fluctuate on this scale depending on their childhood caretaking and help experience. As a parent, it is difficult to offer your children what you did not enjoy, and this is the reason why it is necessary that parents create an environment for their children where they should feel accepted and taken care of (Killén 2003: 30).

The ability parents need to have in order to identify the unspoken needs of children is *empathy*, a significant variable of the parent-child relation. According to the various studies in the field, there is a *positive relation* between empathy and the great number of behaviors displayed in the parent-child relation. On analyzing these studies, Wiehe (2003) believes that these *empathic behaviors* include being understood, being capable of comforting, being helpful and cooperative, being appreciative of the good deeds of others, being flexible and showing flexibility towards the needs of others.

Empathy is learned and acquired through emphatic affection during the first months of living. Just like articulate speech, it develops through the imitation and internalization of the behaviors of the caretaker. Empathy together with

attachment is a fundamental element of the effect of the domestic working model particular to every family regarding the perpetuation through generations of parental models. The basis of empathy is made up of three elements: (1) the ability to differentiate, identify and name the thoughts and feelings of the other, (2) the mental ability to take on a different role, and (3) the ability to react depending on the feelings of the other (Weihe 2003).

Parents with insufficient empathy do not thoroughly perceive the needs of the child, his/her intentions or feelings, and they face an aggressive reaction in conflict situations, because they believe their children's behavior is an offence to the parent's authority. Instead, empathic parents believe that their children's behavior is exploratory, intended to widen knowledge, a challenge for them and their children as well, a way of learning.

A good *empathic ability* makes the parent engage in the child's game, joy, sadness and discoveries. In fact, there is a communion with the child that can keep the parent away from abuse and neglect. This emphatic relation allows the parent to get to know his/her child beyond words. As he/she is attentive to the child's needs, the emphatic parent who is involved in parenting identifies the optimal way of interacting with his/her own child, thus meeting the child's needs and using the knowledge inherited from his/her family of origin.

The parent with a good emphatic ability easily offers the child the four As (attention, acceptance, approval, affection; Băran-Pescaru 2004: 148), important conversations, praises, a guide for the child to know and express his/her feelings, a guide to identify and understand the feelings of others, a framework for the settlement of goals and finding together solutions to current problems, etc. Why should a parent offer all this to his/her child? In the following pages we attempt to argue for the reasons why they are important for the formation and development of the parental relation.

Attention – Children need their parents' *attention*, they look for it, value it, and the child repeats any behavior that draws attention. The attention the child enjoys is related to the time parents and children spend together – a gift the modern parent offers the child by his/her presence, a positive, pleasant, affectionate eye contact, as well as *important conversations*, sharing thoughts and feelings – irrespective of the child's age, but in correlation with the child's level of understanding. According to Chapman and Campbell (2001: 56-69), *the time spent with the child* is one of the languages of love the parent can use in the parental relation. Through this language of love the parent sends the child the following message: 'You are important. I enjoy being with you'. This makes the child feel loved, accepted, valued. According to Ana Freud (2002: 66), the manner a child experiences the time spent with his/her parent does not depend on the time proper, objectively measured by the adult with a calendar or watch, but by the inner subjective relations formed by the child.

The parent who reacts by offering negative attention during the time spent with his/her child, focusing only on mistakes (*don't do that ... , that's not nice ...*,

you've forgotten that ...), the parent who uses negative eye contact when he/she admonishes the child or when he/she gives precise instructions, the parent who limits conversations to reproaches only will discover that his/her children use these aspects in the parental relation and transform it into a tense and difficult relation. These children are uncertain when exploring, they are unhappy and sometimes they misbehave in order to draw attention.

Acceptance. Parents must teach their children when a certain behavior is suitable, remarkable or exceptional in a particular situation, when their attitude is positive. Children must know that these situations are accepted, valued and praised by their parents. When a parent uses *praises*, he/she will refer to a certain aspect and will not generalize. He/she will praise the result, the process that led to that outcome, the child's attitude or the employed strategy. The child expects effective feedback from his/her parents rather than shallow praises. To praise is to use encouraging guiding words for the child. Studies in positive psychology emphasize that offering a correct constructive feedback and the support and encouragement of the parent for the child help the latter control ordinary or difficult situations in life, and thus increase the child's self-esteem (Briers 2009: 129-130).

Frequent random *praises* are risky because in time the child perceives them as dishonesty, lack of acceptance of his/her results and performance. There is another important aspect about using praises: the phrasing of the message for the child. It is not advisable to use messages like 'it's ok, but ...', messages that hide the positive effect of praises and turn it into corrections and critics.

Approval – for what they are, for what they do good help the child grow up and have a high self-esteem, develop a unique personal style. Just as acceptance and attention, approval must be a part of the daily repertoire of parents. Children correlate approval with unconditional love. To love unconditionally is to love irrespective of who he/she is, whether he/she deserves it or has done something in return for love.

Parental messages such as *I love you if you behave or if you clean up your room*, or *I will play with you if ...* are extremely aggressive forms of manipulation to a child and they involve conditioning (Minulescu, 2006: 108).

Affection – building a relationship with children is founded not only on words, but especially on the way they are uttered, on hugs, physical caresses and the expression of emotions.

The *physical tender caress* is the easiest love language to use by the parents, because they do not need special occasions or justifications to have physical contact with their children (Chapman and Campbell 2001: 30). The moments when physical closeness, *embraces* have a strong emotional effect occur when the child is sick, physically or emotionally wounded, tired, when he/she goes through a sad or joyous time. An empathic parent recognizes these moments and reacts to his/her child's emotional needs with caresses and takes into account the child's specific age needs.

According to Goleman (2001: 232), family life is the first school a child goes to in order to acquire emotional knowledge: *Within this intimate environment we learn what to feel about us and what others' reaction to our feelings will be; how to think these feelings through and the possible reactions to it. These emotional courses are not taught only by the parents' words and deeds towards their children, but also by the models offered by the parents for the control of one's own feelings and for the display of emotions. Some parents are very talented emotional teachers, others are terrible at it.*

What a child learns together with the parent is the correct recognition and identification of emotions and feelings. The recognition of various emotions increases a child's chances to understand and control his/her emotions, on the one hand, and to understand others' emotions, on the other hand. In the parental relation, the exercise of the empathic ability is essential to the control of emotions. Considered to be a positive social ability, *empathy* allows a better emotional adaptation of the child and a higher success of his/her way of relating with others.

When a parent does not succeed in displaying empathy through a certain emotional diversity towards the child – joy, tears, the need to hug – the child starts to avoid expressing himself/herself and even to stop feeling those feelings, and that unexercised range of emotions is gradually forgotten out of the intimate relations repertoire (Goleman 2001: 130).

The success in raising children depends on the love relations between parent and child. Nothing works properly if a child's need for love is not satisfied. Only a child who feels truly loved and surrounded by affection can develop to the best of his/her potential.

Every child has a special way of perceiving love and there are five ways in which a child and later an adult understand and experience love. According to Chapman and Campbell, the *languages of love* are physical caresses, encouraging words, the time spent with someone, gifts and favors (2001: 15-19).

These languages of love are employed in different manners by parents depending on their emphatic abilities. The way a parent and his/her child interact building the parental relation is a way of identifying a parent's response to what is believed to be the challenge by the child and the child's reaction to the way the parent makes the demands.

One may say that the parental relation is the result of the “dance” between challenge and reaction in which the partners are the parent and the child. The partners are the only ones who can tell the degree of difficulty of learning to dance and practice the steps. The professionals only offer a dance lesson.

The slavery of modern parents

There are current extensive debates about the *slavery of modern parents*. This slavery is determined by the fact that the parent (1) does not make the difference between a child's needs and whims, (2) does activities instead of the child, when

the child can do them by himself/herself, (3) struggles to please the child, but the child does not appreciate the effort, (4) satisfies all the requests of the child, even if he/she changes his/her options frequently, (5) allows the child to talk and behave in a disrespectful manner, (6) repeats a task frequently without getting the desired result, (7) has difficulties in letting the child in a different person's care, (8) does not have activities the he/she enjoyed and spends all his/her time with the child, (9) is unable to think about anything else but the child, (10) tends to offer too much, (11) allows the child to control his/her life, (12) expects too much from the child, and (13) feels responsible for the things the child does (Langis 2010: 38-44).

The acceptance of a relation of subordination can be understood as another facet of hyper-protection, a parental model inherited by the parent from his/her family of origin. The universe of hyper-protection involves the permanent intervention of adults and determines the almost total dependence of the child by the parent, on the one hand, and the parents' tendency to never part with the child, on the other hand.

An exaggerated care can be seen in the parents' tendency to constantly put themselves between the child and the environment, to have him/her enjoy inappropriate attention and care, to always put him/her in the spotlight, to value him/her, to offer various privileges, to protect him/her from any risk neglecting the fact that a child needs to have a healthy opinion about himself/herself and a feeling of personal worth.

Exaggerated care makes a child unable to develop his/her ability to adapt in society, consider the world an unsafe place, experiment intensely the fear of being abandoned or the feeling of loss, and, paradoxically, have a loser mindset rather than a winner mentality. As he/she becomes a parent, the hyper-protected child can take on the modern parent status, a slave in the parental relation, abandoning himself/herself and forgetting about his/her own emotional needs.

The parentification of children

If for an adult the exercise of the role of a parent raises questions, generates unrest, induces stress, then we have the obvious question How difficult is it for a child to take on the role of a parent? This question can be answered by the children whose both parents left to work abroad, the children from single parent families or those raised by their grandparents and who take care of their younger brothers.

Within the family, the *parentification* process the child takes part in can have a double effect in that it can help the child pass through development stages harmoniously or, on the contrary, can force the child to skip certain stages and assume adult roles too early. When defining the *parentification* of children, the theoretic approaches focus on common elements such as the assumption of parental roles by the child, role switching and the violation of the inter-generation boundaries, as well as on differences resulting from a stress on emotions, or on

behaviors. From this perspective, we can identify two general models of parentification, *emotional parentification* and *functional parentification* (Hooper 2007: 217-219; quoted in Irimescu 2008).

Emotional parentification is generated when the child becomes the confidant of the parent, when he/she takes on the role of emotional resource for siblings and turns into the attachment person/basis, while going through the formation and emotional maturing stage.

The emotional growing up of a child is closely linked to one's image of oneself, the emotional security, the ability to adapt to pressure and change, the ability to socialize and learn, and there are many parents who do not realize that a child may be emotionally underdeveloped as well.

Functional parentification means that the child performs parental obligations such as income provider, household chores (cooking, cleaning, groceries) or a 'help person' for siblings. This has visible negative effects on the normal development of the child.

In the complex of parentification, children mirror their actions in their parents' actions and feel what parents feel, learning to react from their parents' reactions. Vincent presents parental responsibilities and classifies the behavior models and the effects of these models on the descendants, and describes: a) parents concerned excessively by the love between them, who perceive the birth of children as something that troubles the marital relation; b) indifferent, negligent, self-interested parents who live a separate life from that of their children; c) infantile parents, with a weak character, who offer their children inappropriate behavioral models, and d) conflicting parents who, through the model they offer, guide the child towards deviant behaviors (Voinea 2005: 18).

Each of these parents can involve the child into the process of parentification. One must pay attention to the fact that the passing through generations of parental attitudes and behaviors does not occur through imitation, the parental style is not genetically inherited and is not a learned fact. It is transmitted within the family, through the cultural models of child raising and education. These models can be characterized by the parental authority, the taking on/switching of roles, the ignorance of the child's feelings, but, in time, they make the difference between good enough parents and too bad parents, between parents who assume and exercise parental roles and parents who empower their children in the exercise of parental roles.

Conclusions

For a parent involved in the parenting process, the successful exercise of parental roles and the satisfaction of the emotional needs of children can be attained at various degrees depending on several factors: the parental model taken from the origin family; the emphatic ability generated and developed during the interaction

with one's parents and children; the way the parent received parental affection and manages to inspire love to his/her child; the involvement in the parental relation by offering attention, approval, praises, caresses, spare time; the way a parent prepares the formation as an individual of the child and the separation from the parents; the way in which he/she involves the child in the settlement of goals and finding of solutions to various problems. The parental relations may be provided with a system of *inputs* from the parental model from the origin family, *reactions* determined by the interaction with the child, and *outputs* consisting of the creation by the adult of his/her own parental model and the initiation of the child in the creation of his/her own model.

The active participation of adults to the parenting process helps create an environment for the children to feel accepted and cared for. Thus, when parents, the children have a greater chance of giving what they received. Through this lens, the parenting process helps both the parent-child relation and the children as future parents.

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