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Fulfilling a parental role as a learning space for adults

Pełnienie roli rodzica jako przestrzeń uczenia się dorosłych

Streszczenie: W treści artykułu rodzinę potraktowałam jako przestrzeń uczenia się dorosłych, a pełnienie roli rodzica jako szansę na ich rozwój. Przyjmując to założenie, wyodrębniłam najistotniejsze, moim zdaniem, płaszczyzny warunkujące zmiany o charakterze rozwojowym zachodzące dzięki pełnieniu roli rodzica. Należą do nich:

- dobre relacje między małżonkami/partnerami/rodzicami dziecka;
- miłość i akceptacja dziecka takim jakie ono jest;
- dawanie dziecku przestrzeni do rozwoju;
- więź emocjonalna między członkami rodziny;
- porozumienie i czas, który członkowie rodziny poświęcają sobie w taki sposób, aby poświęcenie nie było utratą, lecz zasobem.

Tłem, podstawą i spoiwem owych płaszczyzn są wartości, które przenikają wszystkie działania rodzicielskie, wyznaczają cele, chronią przed zagrożeniami płynącymi ze świata zewnętrznego i w sytuacjach kryzysów wewnątrzrodzinnych.

Wychowywanie dziecka to wypełnianie powyższych płaszczyzn, dzięki któremu rodzice zyskują możliwość nabycia m.in. następujących kompetencji:

- rodzice zwiększają swoją uważność na drugiego człowieka, na respektowanie jego potrzeb, co sprzyja rozwojowi ich altruizmu i dojrzałości, umożliwia bardziej wartościowe funkcjonowanie w świecie zewnętrznym;

- rodzice w procesie akceptowania dziecka takim jakim ono jest napotykać na różne bariery, często tkwiące w nich samych lub w doświadczeniach wyniesionych z rodzin generacyjnych. Podjęcie trudu pokonywania tych barier jest dla nich zadaniem rozwojowym, wpływającym również korzystnie na relacje z ich rodzicami. Dostrzeganie i akceptowanie ograniczeń dziecka otwiera możliwość zaakceptowania również własnych ograniczeń oraz dania sobie prawa do nich;

– rodzice uczą się lub doskonalą swoją umiejętność szanowania cudzej autonomii i respektowania granic, jakie wyznacza drugi człowiek. Kochając poszukują porozumienia, które wymaga empatii i umiejętności składających się na inteligencję emocjonalną.

Chociaż dorosły człowiek funkcjonuje w wielu rolach, a każda czegoś go uczy, to uważam, że niektóre ze wskazanych przeze mnie zmian najszybciej, najskuteczniej wywołuje pełnienie roli rodzica.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzice, zmiany rozwojowe, kompetencje rodzicielskie, wychowanie.

Summary: Being a parent is a duty, a challenge, but also a chance for developmental changes. The role can be treated as an inspiration and opportunity for oneself to build one's own resources enriching a parent as an adult. The article attempts to isolate the factors which are the most significant for the development of adult family members. According to the author they are: good relations between child's parents, loving and accepting the child for who it is, giving the child space for development, emotional tie between family members, agreement and time that family members dedicate to each other in such a way that it is not a loss but a value for them.

Keywords: parents, developmental change, parenthood as a chance, agreement, acceptance, family bonds.

Introduction

Family, regarding its meaning and complexity, constitutes the subject of research in various sciences. It may also be, and in fact it is, an area of exploration for andragogy, either in structural and functional approach or situational, institutional and developmental approaches. In developmental approach the family is treated “[...] as a sort of area of interaction, which takes defined forms, depending on life cycles of its members. Roles fulfilled by individual members change along with their age and the family composition, their structure and changing roles in the family of origin and the family of procreation” (Kawula, 2005, p. 23). As proposed by Józef Kargul, treating the family as a learning space for adults seems to be particularly interesting. In family life there are stages indicated by everyday incidents and also new incidents, frequently bearing hallmarks of crisis, which may constitute an opportunity for learning, reflection and developmental changes (Kargul, 2001). Contemporary psychologists (Braun-Gałkowska, 1992; Rostowska, 2007; Świętochowski, 2010 and others) more and more frequently emphasise the significance of systemic approach towards the family, in which the family is treated as a system, an integral unity, where all elements influence

each other and depend on each other. A change within one subsystem (e.g. a marriage) causes not only changes in the system itself, but also influences all the other systems, and as a consequence, the unity of the family as a system. The structure and hierarchy of family subsystems are significant factors determining the proper functioning of the family. Building proper relations in the family system “[...] allows to set and preserve proper limits between subsystems, which consequently facilitates building the authority by parents, necessary in the educational process. Proper functioning of the marriage subsystem determines health of the whole family system and enables creating conditions favourable for multidirectional development of individual family members” (Mazurek, 2014, p. 330).

Is, therefore, fulfilling a parental role a chance for development of an adult? Do, due to experiencing a role of a parent, adult family members have opportunity to go through developmental changes? What determines developmental changes of parents? It can be stated that mainly children and their needs determine them. However, to make these changes happen and contribute parents’ development, such factors as love, trust and courage are necessary. “It can be stated, that a child birth is a forecast of enormous changes in the life of a married couple. Every year of a child’s life means enormous changes in the life of the family. Parents and their child always have opposing needs. However, the immensity of the parents “unconditional love towards their child creates space for its development. On the other hand, the immensity of the child’s unconditional love towards its parents gives them the courage to create this space” (Całuińska, Malinowski, 2013, p. 10). In this regard, the family can be considered to be a space and opportunity for intergenerational learning, which also makes it possible to study the family on the basis of andragogic research.

When an adult gets to know that he or she is going to be a parent, the person is accompanied by different emotions: joy, fear, nascent feeling of responsibility, awareness of saying goodbye to one’s own childhood and the lack of responsibility, feeling of the lack of competence. Prospective parents rarely perceive this change as a chance for their own development. Being a parent is more frequently associated with responsibility for child’s development, forming its personality, creating conditions for its multidirectional development. This moment is sometimes perceived as the loss of chances for professional development, wealthy life, having fun and being careless. Young people often think that nobody prepared them to be parents, that school subject ‘Education for family life’ gave them nothing. However, they do not appreciate what they learned from their procreational family life in

relation to being a parent. Sometimes they consciously reject it. They are afraid and they ask questions: will I be able to be a good father, will I be able to be a good mother. Nobody taught me how to be a good parent. The uncertainty is related to the change widely known to be significant. These questions and doubts, however, can be evaluated positively, because they are the beginning of responsibility and duty, they constitute an attempt to recognize one's own emotions, a proof of reflection and self-awareness. Thus, to some extent, they are emerging maturity to fulfil the role of a parent.

Young parents often bring up their first child 'by the book'. They try to get the knowledge about childcare and being a good parent from books. Searching for knowledge is valuable, however, trusting yourself, close people and your child constitutes necessary supplementation of this knowledge.

Family was examined on the ground of various sciences and abundant literature of this subject indicates essential elements of its functioning, including a family structure, its functions and tasks, parental attitudes, emotional atmosphere in the family. Mostly, family is treated as a space for child's development, as an educational environment. Less attention is paid to parents and their chances for development created by starting a family. While analysing family as a space for education of its adult members, especially parents, I indicated the most important in my opinion areas determining developmental changes. They are:

- a) good relations between spouses/partners/child's parents;
- b) loving and accepting a child for who it is;
- c) giving the child space for development;
- d) emotional relation between family members;
- e) understanding and time devoted by family members to each other,

when this devotion does not constitute a loss but a value.

The background, base and binder for these areas are values, which characterize all parental activities, set goals, protect against the outside world dangers and crises within the family.

Good relations between the child's parents

Fulfilling a parental role brings a new quality into life of a married couple, requires acquiring new abilities and increased focus on another person, who constitutes a value due to his or her existence and co-existence. Learning this carefulness, respecting needs of the loved ones facilitates the limitation of egoism and develops altruism. Undoubtedly, it is a chance for devel-

opment of maturity and redefining the important life issues worth devoting one's energy. It directs parents' attention to internal issues. It enables more valuable functioning in the external world and constitutes a protection against its dangers.

In the process of bringing a child up, parents paradoxically often focus their attention on the child itself, forgetting that it constitutes a part of the family system. It is especially visible in cases of behavioural problems with a child. The readiness to help, appearing in such cases, if it appears at all, is usually related to a child, its 'repair'. Even some psychologists and therapists act in this manner in such situations. The situation is rarely perceived as a signal that there is a problem within the family and all its members contributed to the problem. Especially for adult family members it is important information about themselves and their whole family. The effectiveness of upbringing is mostly dependant on a nurturer. The process of change should be started from parents and relations between them, and afterwards or at the same time, but never separately, changes should be introduced starting from a child. It is an enormous developmental chance for parents. The mistakes they make, related to building family relations, often derive from their family of origin. This is where they have taken their patterns from and gained experiences which now determine their parental behaviours, sometimes resulting in negative effects. Parents may change this state only by getting aware of what is happening, attempting to find the reasons of a given situation, rooted not only in the child (because it seems the easiest solution), but first of all in themselves and their generation families. This situation shouldn't be perceived as one's own mistake or fault but rather as a chance for development, making the right decision, which will change not only the child's and parents' lives, but also the lives of each of these people in relation to each other and in many other relations and systems. Gaining such awareness enables parents to acquire a new quality of their own functioning, widens horizons, creates an opportunity for improving relations with their own parents. According to H. Hendrix and H. Hunt "Harms, as an inheritance, go from generation to generation. Parents harm their children at the same development stage at which they were harmed [...]. The effective parenthood does not depend on having the right child or on favourable circumstances. It depends on the internal power of discovering and healing one's own pain" (Therein, p. 18). According to the concept of personality development by K. Obuchowski, useful for hereby reflections, only the man's activities aimed at future, including presence (current context) and using the past enable meeting the needs and targets as well as ful-

filling expectations of the environment without violating the limits of one's own autonomy (Brzezińska, 2000, p. 34).

Accepting a child for who it is

Acceptance seems to be a natural attribute, a downright instinct appearing at birth or even during conception of a child. Loving and accepting a child also constitutes 'a cultural constraint'. Fear of social ostracism results in feeling guilty, especially while a mother does not feel this power of love towards her child right after the child is born and rarely admits it. Such mothers do not know that this feeling will grow and gradually develop through the co-existence with the child. Therefore, accepting a child for who it is can be treated as a developmental exercise for parents. The love that parents feel helps them to accept their child. Complete acceptance of a child requires from parents becoming aware of barriers impeding the process, frequently lying in themselves, and taking action to overcome these barriers. This constitutes an area for their own development, develops their respect for other person, his or her difference and autonomy, and teaches humility resulting from the respect. Realizing and accepting child's limitations provides the possibility of accepting and allowing one's own limitations, which for many parents is a relieving discovery as it frees them from the necessity of meeting the expectations of the environment, which they couldn't fulfil. Being a parent and loving the child facilitates self-development. Marriage and parenthood are a chance for receiving what one gives to his/her partner and child, a chance, which when it is used, transfers itself to other relations.

Providing a child with a space for development

Parent's autonomy and child's autonomy are related to the problem of preserving limits, giving both a child and a parent the right to defining them. Being a good parent is also caring for self-development in various fields like work, being a woman, a man, a member of a given society. This is not losing oneself in any of the roles. This is preservation of harmony, which constitutes internal power, and at the same time the pattern for a child. Sacrificing other spheres of functioning for the good of a child results in danger of a symbolic 'hanging on' the child in the future, a relationship which is too tight, which does not allow autonomy and independence of a growing

up child. It encumbers the child with feeling guilty and a conviction that it has a debt which cannot be paid. An excessive symbiosis of a child and a parent results from the parent's lack of ability to differentiate oneself from the child. "A symbiotic individual characterizes with difficulty in accepting one's own autonomy and identity. Such a person defines himself through the relation with someone else, instead of noticing one's own real nature. [...] The lack of autonomy may be displayed in the sphere related to self-determination, making decisions, action and self-control" (Całuniska, Malinowski, 2013, p. 19). Such behavior of a parent may signify his or her emotional immaturity, unsolved problems, escape from reality, plans and tasks which he or she is unable or afraid to fulfil. Childcare becomes a peculiar 'windbreak' behind which a parent can hide and which can justify his failures to other people and to himself. There appears the proverbial 'sacrifice' for the child, which is not useful for anybody and for which the 'sacrificing person' is never able to gain an adequate equivalent as it basically results from egoism, fear and escape from the truth about oneself. Making such a decision at a certain stage of life limits both development of a parent and a child.

Activities of parents, who want to provide their child with the proper place in the family system, are mainly aimed at the child but they influence not only the child but also the parents. They foster the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as the development of their awareness and maturity. What should parents do then to achieve the expected effects?

1. Discover their child – that is acquire knowledge about the child's stage of development to make it possible for the child to meet its needs resulting from this stage. To listen more carefully to different ways of expressing these needs by the child and to limit external factors disturbing this process. First of all, this is constant self-development of a parent, development of his or her attentiveness towards another person, that is a child in this case. This is a constant recovering the right hierarchy to the matters which create a semblance of significance by their current intrusion.

2. Define one's parental style by observing one's own ways of reacting to the child and related situations. Extending the awareness in this field allows to gain information about changes parents can or should make in themselves at every stage of the child's development. Every stage provides parents with new challenges, provokes to introduce modifications as the child changes. Parent's behaviours, which allow to be successful at one stage of the child's development, turn out to be insufficient at the next stage. There again temptation appears to look for the reasons of this state out-

side without starting self-development to change oneself. Overcoming this temptation is a factor triggering changes in adults fulfilling a parental role.

3. Differentiate between oneself and one's child. It is vital to remember all the time that a child is not a parent, and what is more it is not his or her possession. The agreement to acknowledge the autonomy of a child requires the resignation from appropriating. The readiness to caring for a child, resulting from its vulnerability, facilitates moving the limits beyond which a child should be free. However, it requires from parents confronting their fear about their child, maybe the fear of losing the conviction of parents' necessity to be present in the child's life. For some people it would mean endangering the sense of their value if they relate it to the necessity. The readiness of a parent to giving freedom to the child, resulting from love and parenting duty, may make the parent start self-development related to own limitations in this field.

4. "Gather information about one's own parenthood. The source of the information can be found in:

- own emotional reactions to the child;
- memories related to one's own parents from this stage of own development;
- thoughts and emotions expressed by the child;
- opinions and observations of spouses and other people;
- observation of oneself in the relation with the child.

5. Define areas where development is necessary. Points of development are the areas of conflict or discomfort in contact with the child. [...] Without self-development one cannot effectively help a child go through developmental stages at which the parent himself was blocked as a child or a teenager" (Ibidem).

Information about parenthood and defining the areas of the conflict in the contact with the child constitute a perfect opportunity to analyse one's own childhood and earlier developmental stages, experienced crises and the ways they were solved. In many cases, at some level of maturity and auto reflection, for a parent it may constitute a sort of autotherapy, which probably would not be carried out without fulfilling a parental role.

Emotional relation between family members

Every person at every stage of life experiences emotions. Family education is specific because it connects the following:

1. “influences based on reflection and those without reflection;
2. activities related to influencing and interaction;
3. natural family relations and secondary nature of relations based on marriage, consanguinity or propinquity;
4. individual nature, uniqueness and intimacy of family life and social openness and consequences of institutional character of family;
5. sense of common unity with individual interests of individual members” (Janke, 2005, p. 92).

Fulfilling a parental role may constitute a perfect opportunity for undertaking deliberate actions in order to improve educational competences, including the ones contributing to emotional intelligence. It is an example of mutual intergenerational influence. The will of being a better parent inspires to undertake the effort to be a better person. Love towards the child and existing or arising awareness of the significance of the task a parent has to fulfil and significance of the pattern for effective educational actions are important powers enforcing developmental changes in oneself. Due to this role adults often start feeling the need of change, undertake activities aimed at introducing and reinforcing it, and by enduing it with reflection they make the change a developmental one. Due to mutual interaction of all the subjects contributing to family, whose source are relations connecting its members, also constituting the power of its influence, the family becomes educational space for everybody and at every stage of their development. A definition of family which seems to be adequate to the above advisement and according to which “[...] the family should be treated as a special and unique social existence whose nature is a humanistic character determined by uniqueness of subjects appearing there. [...] Thus the family can be considered to be such a kind of social reality whose constitutive feature is a community character of life of defined set of subjects linked with varying degrees by biological, emotional, cultural and economic bonds. In these bonds one should see sources of the thinking process of imitating personal patterns, educational processes and also self-education” (Tchorzewski, 1990, p. 10). Due to these bonds intergeneration transmission, multidirectional experience, transfer of quality and value of life, sense of life and protection against loneliness are possible in the family. A strong family bond constitutes the source of family’s success, is an important factor enriching personalities of all its members and also allows to survive crisis situations for both the entire family and its individual members. A family bond is created in the process of meeting the child’s needs and its quality is related to resources of adult family members. It should be emphasised that meeting needs of the

child in the family also strengthens the bond between spouses, is a source of a bond emerging between parents and their children, which subsequently constitutes inspiration and power to make developmental changes fostering their functioning in other areas. A family which functions properly still constitutes the main space of man's life. It is also an important support "[...] in his or her personal and professional life, extremely helping and supporting, especially in unexpected circumstances which are difficult and problematic. For the entire life it also constitutes a point of reference and basic presumption of one's own identity, a proof of affiliation and orientation to self-realisation on the life path of creating it generations" (Kawula, 2006, p. 63).

Agreement and time devoted by family members to each other

In my opinion, the category of agreement constitutes a good starting point for perceiving a family as a group where there is a constant process of mutual 'adjusting to each other' of its members. It is a slightly different category, though closely related, than communication widely presented in literature. Agreement can be interpreted as a desired, requiring work and effort effect of mutual relations. A family based on agreement, friendliness and love does not form spontaneously without our participation (Kozubska, 2011, p. 87–91). "We are responsible for the shape of life that we give our family. Intuition does not guarantee completion of this task. 'Good intentions' are not enough. It is not enough to love, it is necessary to be able to love and to teach all family members" (Maciaszkowa, 1980, p. 6). A contemporary family was and still remains "[...] a special place for the closest people to be together. This interaction takes place at the level of direct, spontaneous and very individual contacts between parents and children and between siblings through their constant dialogue" (Izdebska, 2005, p. 18). We can learn the dialogic form of contact mainly, and probably only by experiencing it. That is why it is so important for adult family members to be able to have this dialogue with yourself as well as with children or grandchildren. "The course of a dialogue can be very different but there always are such structural elements as speaking, silence and listening. Due to them the dialogue in educational relation fulfils three basic functions: comprehensibility, mutuality and subjectivity" (Tchorzewski, 1999, p. 25). A dialogue, apart from being understood as a construction of questions and answers (information dialogue) or as a negotiation exchange (conversation, discussion), is also interpreted as the condition for understanding (agreement – author annota-

tion) – where understanding is not reproducing already set meanings, but a constant activity, a human way of behaving (Rutkowiak, 1992). A dialogue between generations is important and valuable for all generations. It gives the feeling of closeness, protects against isolation and ensures cultural consistency. In the process of individualisation and separating a child from its family, which is a task facilitating the development of both a child and parents, a special role is assigned to the family communication. It enables the preservation of balance between a tendency to strengthening relationships and pursuing one's own individuality, fosters the construction of identity and achieving the ability to undertaking life roles. Verbal language plays the basic role in the family communication, but because of the strength of specific family ties non-verbal means of communication like gestures, mime, silence and touch are also equally meaningful. Parents constitute for their child a pattern of communication ways and solving conflicts. The will to fulfil parental role well and also noticing one's 'mirror reflection' in the child's behaviour frequently makes parents improve their competences in this field, suppressing some ways (verbal and non-verbal) of expressing one's own emotions and learning others. Due to this the parents' awareness related to the meaning of elements used in communication and facilitating the agreement becomes bigger. These elements are: the desire to understand each other between communicating people, the level of language competences, knowledge of syntax rules and other general principles of constructing logical statements, proper use of language skills, including individual features of a communication partner, his experience, a situation of the person and mutual relations between the communicating people (Grygielski, 1999, p. 68–69). Thus, a dialogue and agreement require to empathize with another person, to accept not only one's own but also the other person's learning perspective, and overall interpersonal sensitivity. The value that a family constitutes for its members and their specific emotional relations facilitate the undertaking of the effort to reach the agreement mainly by adults. Competences acquired in this field and a kind of readiness are often beneficial for professional and social functioning of adult family members.

Quoting Martin Buber "a fundamental fact of human existence is not a human himself but a human with another human being" (Kawula, 1999, p. 32). The family, because of its specific features, is a place where the range and depth of meeting with another person can be the largest, where all its members have an opportunity to experience and learn this depth of co-existence. To make it have a positive dimension, the time devoted by family members to each other is necessary. The feeling of agreement appears due

to spatial and psychic contact when family members do something together: talk, walk, play, fear something together and overcome this fear together. The time spent together is later an important memory, gives the sense of belonging and identity to all family members. It cannot be achieved in a hurry resulting in impatience, limiting the contact to an exchange of information, disappointing and bringing the feeling of the lack of acceptance. A child growing up fast makes its parents aware probably the most strongly of the significance of time spent with another person, irreversibility of moments lost forever. This belief resulting from fulfilling a parental role is extremely valuable in the dynamic contemporary world.

The above advisement treats family as an invaluable field for adult education. The described developmental changes appear due to fulfilling the role of a parent and spouse. Though an adult functions in many roles, and each of them teaches him something, some of the changes which I indicated are made the most quickly and effectively by fulfilling a parental role.

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