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## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE BRINGING UP CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

### KOMUNIKACJA MIĘDZY MĘŻEM I ŻONĄ A WYCHOWYWANIE DZIECI Z AUTYZMEM

**Streszczenie:** Celem badań była próba udzielenia odpowiedzi na pytania: Jaka jest jakość komunikacji małżonków wychowujących dzieci z autyzmem? Czy pary wychowujące dzieci z autyzmem różnią się pod tym względem od małżeństw z dzieckiem zdrowym, a jeśli tak, to czego dotyczą różnice? Czy istnieje związek między jakością komunikacji między rodzicami wychowującymi dziecko z autyzmem, a ich satysfakcją ze związku? Do analiz statystycznych zakwalifikowano wyniki uzyskane przez 50 małżeństw z dzieckiem zdrowym i 53 małżeństwa z dzieckiem z diagnozą autyzmu. W rodzinach z autyzmem jakość komunikacji małżonków była gorsza niż w rodzinach z dzieckiem zdrowym, niemniej deklarowały to wyłącznie kobiety. Różnice dotyczyły przede wszystkim komunikowania wsparcia i – w dalszej kolejności – zaangażowania. W rodzinach z autyzmem stwierdzono również związek między jakością komunikacji rodziców a satysfakcją ze związku. Uzyskane wyniki pozwalają na sformułowanie postulatów praktycznych, dotyczących wspierania par małżeńskich wychowujących dzieci z zaburzeniami spektrum autyzmu.

**Abstrakt:** Research described herein is an attempt to answer the following question: What's communication quality between husband and wife who bring up autistic children? Do couples who rear children with autism differ in this respect from the ones who bring up healthy children and – if so – what's the nature of such differences? Is there any relationship that links quality of communication between parents bringing up an autistic child and satisfaction they derive from their wedlock? For statistical analyses were qualified data and information given by 50 married couples with healthy children and 53 couples with autistic children. Among families rearing children with autism quality of conjugal communication was worse than the one among families with healthy children nevertheless only women declared such a state of affairs. First of all, differences concerned declaring support and – later – involvement. Among families with autistic children a connection concerning communication between parents and satisfaction they derive from their marriage has been found, too. Basing on results obtained some practical suggestions that concern supporting married couples who bring up children with autism spectrum disorder can be pointed out.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja małżeńska, rodzicielstwo, autyzm

**Key words:** conjugal communication, parenthood, autism

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## INTRODUCTION

According to various estimations in our times about 1% of children are diagnosed as the ones with autism spectrum disorder (Baxter et al, 2015; Schendel et al, 2012). Autism is a developmental disorder of neurobiological origin and its crucial symptoms last for a human's whole life (Zimmerman, 2008). Pursuant to the DSM-V classification abnormalities have their origins in the following two areas: social communication and limited interests as well as repeated behaviour patterns. The child can also demonstrate: attention deficit hyperactivity, a low threshold of frustration tolerance disorder and both aggressive and self-aggressive behaviours (Maskey et al, 2013). Thus, care of a child suffering from autism usually means to their parents responsibility exceeding the average burden and involves serious stress (Tehee, Honan & Hevey, 2009; Duarte, Bordin & Yazigi, 2005; Sharpley, Bitsika & Efremidis, 1997; Dąbrowska & Pisula, 2010; Seymour et al, 2013). Research has suggested that high quality and stability of marriage are significant resources parents of children with autism can have at their disposal (Simantov & Kaniel 2010; Kersh et al, 2006). And its determinant in turn is – among others – communication between husband and wife. J. Feeney (1994) has proved that in many cases quality of conjugal relationship depends on frequency of effective communication. J. Gottman (1994) emphasizes that in order to maintain good relations between husband and wife a communication ratio defined as a number of positive messages compared with the negative ones should be at least five positive interactions to each negative one.

Communication is usually grasped as a process of transferring information and mutual understanding that has a creative nature and occurs among people (Keyton, 2011). J. Ramisch and E. Onaga (2014) analysed strategies used for maintaining and enhancing conjugal relationships between parents rearing children with autism. Communication with the spouse has turned out to be essential "cement" that joins together people united in matrimony. Long-lasting married couples openly discussed about their children, emotions and worries. They talked over and jointly took key decisions. Constructive communication allows alleviating tensions and combining career with family obligations contributing this way to better satisfaction from the matrimony (Carroll et al, 2013). It can be assumed that such an attitude

is of special importance to parents bringing up autistic children where on the one hand care of the children requires a lot of effort and on the other at least one of the parents has to work to provide for their family and take care of the children's future.

Among families with autistic children mutual communication is of great importance from the point of view of functioning of the whole family, because disorders regarding this aspect are typical of the spectrum of autism. Difficulties in mutual communication among persons with autism result from many reasons, the most important of them are (Grand, 2012):

- inability to recognise and correctly interpret facial expression,
- difficulties in understanding words forming a sentence while keeping the ability to understand isolated words,
- problems to process adequately multisensory integration (e.g. processing and integrating such stimuli like sound and smell or vision and touch) due to sensory integration dysfunction,
- inability to understand metaphors, elliptical statements or euphemisms.

Problems listed above cause that you can effectively communicate to autistic persons very precise, unmistakable, direct and complete information. In the process of communication a meaning sequence is transmitted in form of symbols, means of conveying sense. It happens thanks to the process of coding which is always potentially ambiguous. Analogically, decoding process i.e. converting signals into information understandable to its recipient is always put at a risk of ambiguity (Keyton, 2011). Since every person, especially the one suffering from autism, may have problems with clarity of transmitting information it is of great importance that parents who teach their children communication with other people would be good practitioners in this field. Parents who communicate well with each other are of help to one another as well as constitute a communication model for their children.

## METHOD

The following questions reflect research issues:

- What is communication quality between parents bringing up a child with autism? To what extent do they express support, involvement and depreciation?
- Do married couples rearing autistic children differ in this respect from the ones who have healthy children and – if so – what are the differences?
- Is there any relationship that links quality of communication between parents bringing up an autistic child and satisfaction they derive from their marriage?

The respondents of this study were people who had been living within two provinces located in eastern Poland (Podkarpackie and Lubelskie Provinces). Every single time married couples were surveyed. Pollsters reached parents who had brought up at least one child diagnosed as an autistic one through specialised educational institutions as well as centres and associations rendering therapy services to our respondents' children. In turn, parents rearing healthy children were reached through public kindergartens and schools. Every single time before we started the research, pollsters had first asked management of a given institution enabling us to meet our potential respondents and next a married couple itself for their permission to conduct the poll. The polls were confidential. After incomplete or incorrectly filled up sets of questionnaires had been rejected (several dozen cases among both parents with disabled children and couples rearing healthy ones), data and information given by 50 married couples with healthy children (i.e. 100 persons) and 53 couples (106 persons) rearing children with autism were qualified for statistical analyses.

The following research tools were used:

1. Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (the CCQ) by M. Plopa and M. Kaźmierczak – this tool serves to examine communication behaviours towards the spouse. The questionnaire consists of two forms: the purpose of the first of them is to appraise one of the spouses' own behaviour, the other one is used for appraising behaviour of the other spouse. Each form contains 30 items, both of them serve to examine three main aspects of conjugal communication: *support* (appreciating the spouse's efforts, interest in his or her problems

and readiness to solve them jointly); *involvement* (showing feelings to each other and talking about them, aiming for a compromise and harmony) and *depreciation* (criticism, unpleasant comments, controlling the spouse and aggression towards him or her). The surveyed person takes a stance on each of statements basing on a scale of 1 to 5. Detailed description of psychometric features of the tool: accuracy of the aspects (from 0.77 to 0.93), power of discriminatory position (0.25 up to 0.81) and theoretical correctness of the questionnaire was presented in the M. Plopa's publication (2008).

2. Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (the WMCQ-2) by M. Plopa and J. Rostowski is a tool used for evaluating a marital satisfaction degree. It includes the following aspects: *intimacy* (i.e. close relationship between a married couple, belief that both spouses love each other); *self-realisation* (marriage as a relationship enabling each partner to realise themselves and – in consequence – an important part of satisfying life); *resemblance* (an extent of unanimity among husband and wife relating to important aims in their marriage and family life, e.g. leisure, developing their matrimony, family tradition, rearing children, family life organisation) and *disappointment* (belief that living in the matrimony restricts to a certain degree the sense of independence and autonomy or the spouse is trying to renege on and escape from the relationship and does not want to take responsibility for it). Detailed description of psychometric features of the tool: accuracy of the aspects (from 0.80 to 0.90), power of discriminatory position (0.38 up to 0.75) and theoretical correctness of the questionnaire was presented in the M. Plopa's publication (2008). In this paper only overall result based on WCMQ-2 questionnaire was used, we acted this way in order to select two groups of parents: couples feeling higher and lower satisfaction derived from their wedlock. Results related to individual aspects will be published separately.
3. A self-prepared questionnaire containing questions about parent's sex, age of autistic child and how does the couple appraise its financial and occupational situation.

## RESULTS

Table 1 contains data on how long the surveyed couples had been married. Table 2 shows information on how many children they had had.

Table 1. Data on marriage duration of the surveyed couples

Couples	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	SD
with healthy children	1	29	12.32	6.994
with one or more autistic children	3	37	14.32	7.170

The shortest marriage duration among parents with healthy children was 1 year and among the ones rearing children with autism – 3 years, the longest one – respectively – twenty nine and thirty seven years. The mean results obtained in both groups were similar to one another (12 years among parents with children with autism and 14 years among parents rearing healthy children).

Tabela 2. Number of children within the surveyed families

Couples	One		Two		Three		Four and more	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with healthy children	11	22.0	27	54.0	7	14.0	5	10.0
with one or more autistic children	12	22.6	27	50.9	7	13.2	7	13.2

As you can see, in both groups of surveyed families, couples with 2 children constituted more than half respondents. In general, percentage of families with a definite number of children was similar within both groups.

Within the group with healthy children there were more couples where both spouses who worked professionally; percentage of these couples was 74% whereas within the group with children with autism this percentage was only 47.2%. Compared with the parents rearing autistic children, both women and men bringing up healthy children appraised financial situations of their families as better ones. Appropriate data are presented in tables 4 and 5.

Table 3. Occupational situation of the surveyed couples

Couples	Both husband and wife work		Only husband works		Only wife works		Both husband and wife do not work	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with healthy children	37	74.0	12	24.0	1	2.0	0	0.0
with one or more autistic children	25	47.2	22	41.5	4	7.5	2	3.8

Table 4. Subjective appraisal of the family's financial situation (replies given by men)

Couples	Bad		Average		Good		Very good	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with healthy children	0	0.0	17	34.0	30	60.0	3	6.0
with one or more autistic children	2	3.8	32	60.4	17	32.1	1	1.9

Table 5. Subjective appraisal of the family's financial situation (replies given by women)

Couple	Bad		Average		Good		Very good	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
with healthy children	0	0.0	15	30.0	30	60.0	5	10.0
with one or more autistic children	2	3.8	29	54.7	20	37.7	2	3.8

Table 6. Results obtained from the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on replies given by women bringing up at least one healthy and one autistic child (appraisal of own communication behaviours)

CCQ scale	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Support	at least one healthy child	40.44	5.610	2.005	0.048
	at least one autistic child	38.06	6.401		
Involvement	at least one healthy child	31.00	4.920	-0.142	ins.
	at least one autistic child	31.17	6.983		
Depreciation	at least one healthy child	23.96	6.047	0.740	ins.
	at least one autistic child	23.04	6.569		

In tables 6 and 7 below results obtained from the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on the women's replies.

Mothers bringing up both healthy and disabled children were asked to appraise their own communication behaviours; an average score obtained from mothers with healthy children in the *Support* scale was found to be considerably higher than mothers rearing at least one autistic child. In other words, mothers of autistic children declared lower level of support they communicated to their husbands. Taking into account sten scores, a mean score obtained from mothers of healthy children was rated within the range of 5 (which indicates an average tendency to support their husbands); a mean score obtained from mothers rearing at least one autistic child was, in turn, rated within the range of “four” (which is interpreted as a low tendency to provide support).

Table 7. Results obtained from the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on replies given by women bringing up at least one healthy and one autistic child (appraisal of communication behaviours of the spouse)

CCQ scale	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Support	at least one healthy child	39.06	6.018	3.057	0.003
	at least one autistic child	34.34	9.381		
Involvement	at least one healthy child	30.70	5.441	2.276	0.025
	at least one autistic child	27.64	8.019		
Depreciation	at least one healthy child	21.84	7.383	-1.498	ins.
	at least one autistic child	24.32	9.254		

As for appraisal of communication behaviours of husbands, women with at least one autistic child, by comparison with the ones bringing up healthy children, declared considerably lower level of support and involvement from the spouse’s side. A little closer communication they perceived to be depreciative, however, this difference is insignificant from statistical point of view.

No statistically significant differences in appraising own communication behaviours of fathers bringing up both healthy and autistic children were found. As to *Support* and *Involvement* scales a mean score obtained in both groups and related to sten scores was “five”, in case of *Depreciation* scale it was “five” (fathers of



healthy children) and “six” (fathers of children with autism). These scores can be treated as average ones. No considerable differences among groups of men as far as appraisal of communication behaviours of wives was concerned, were found.

Tabela 8. Results obtained from the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on replies given by mothers of autistic children declaring higher (N = 20) and lower (N = 22) satisfaction from their marriages

CCQ scale	Group	<i>M</i>	Mann-Whitney U test	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Support (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	15.41	86.0	-3.383	0.001
	higher satisfaction	28.20			
Involvement (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	18.18	147.0	-1.843	ins.
	higher satisfaction	25.15			
Depreciation (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	22.86	190.0	-0.757	ins.
	higher satisfaction	20.00			
Support (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.02	99.5	-3.040	0.002
	higher satisfaction	27.53			
Involvement (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.20	103.5	-2.939	0.003
	higher satisfaction	27.33			
Depreciation (husband's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	26.07	119.5	-2.535	0.011
	higher satisfaction	16.48			

As a next step married couples rearing at least one child with autism were divided into two groups: a group of couples declaring higher and the one declaring lower satisfaction from their marriages. The criterion was a general result obtained from WMCQ-2 gained by husband and a wife. Married couples where women and men acquired in the WMCQ-2 questionnaire a total result higher than the median (calculated for women and men separately) were recognised as the ones deriving higher satisfaction from their marriages. Analogically, married cou-

ples where women and men acquired in the WMCQ-2 questionnaire a total result lower than the median were recognised as the ones deriving lower satisfaction from their marriages. As to results obtained from the WMCQ-2 the median was 122 among women and 123 among men.

Tabela 9. Results obtained from the Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (CCQ) and based on replies given by fathers of autistic children declaring higher (N = 20) and lower (N = 22) satisfaction from their marriages

CCQ scale	Group	<i>M</i>	Mann-Whitney U test	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Support (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.05	100.0	-3.030	0.002
	higher satisfaction	27.50			
Involvement (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	17.43	130.5	-2.260	0.024
	higher satisfaction	25.98			
Depreciation (own behaviour)	lower satisfaction	26.41	112.0	-2.725	0.006
	higher satisfaction	16.10			
Support (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.43	108.5	-2.814	0.005
	higher satisfaction	27.08			
Involvement (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	16.59	112.0	-2.726	0.006
	higher satisfaction	26.90			
Depreciation (wife's behaviour)	lower satisfaction	25.39	134.5	-2.158	0.031
	higher satisfaction	17.23			

Appraising their own communication behaviours, mothers of children with autism deriving higher satisfaction from their marriages declared higher level of support. As for appraisal of husbands' communication behaviours statistically substantial differences concerned all aspects – mothers declaring

higher satisfaction from their marriages indicated that their husbands' communication behaviours had been characterised by stronger support and involvement and lower depreciation.

As to fathers of children with autism who declared various levels of satisfaction from their marriages statistically considerable differences concerned all aspects of the CCQ. Fathers declaring higher satisfaction from their marriages indicated that both their own and their wives' communication behaviours had been more supporting and less depreciative.

## DISCUSSION

Results obtained allow to formulate the following conclusions:

- 1) Within the surveyed sample quality of communication between the spouses bringing up at least one child with autism was worse than in case of married couples rearing healthy children, however, it was declared by women only. A team of K. Cyranka et al (2012) examining conjugal communication among families raising both healthy children and the ones suffering from diabetes reached similar conclusions. Mothers of healthy children felt assistance of their husbands more deeply (appraisal of husbands' communication behaviours) than mothers of diabetic children. Similarly, fathers of diabetic children appraised that they had given their wives poorer support (appraisal of own communication behaviours) than fathers of healthy children did. On the average, assessment of the partner's involvement presented by women representing the reference group was significantly higher than the one made by women rearing ill children. As to depreciation, average assessments of the partners' behaviours differed from each other, too. Women representing the reference group perceived their partners' behaviours to be depreciative to a little lesser degree than mothers of diabetic children.
- 2) Wives (mothers of children with autism) were not too much satisfied with communication with their husbands. Such a state of affairs can be related to the fact that women with autistic children do not work outside the home much more often than their husbands (and this

relates to mothers of healthy children, too; cf Cidav, Marcus & Mandell, 2012) and that's why they need more strongly an interpersonal contact that, in their lives, is focused on their children and the children's disabilities first of all. Thus, their expectations connected with their marital relationships are higher than the ones of their husbands. Financial difficulties can additionally intensify problems with communication.

- 3) A connection between quality of communication between parents bringing up children with autism and satisfaction they derive from their marriages has been found. Support received from the spouse is one of determinants of general satisfaction derived from not only the marriage but even life, too (Heckhausen, 2001). Results of research described herein prove this thesis as well. Characterised by total involvement and containing very little depreciative information conjugal communication that results in providing the spouse with support opens the doors to the satisfaction from the marriage.
- 4) Results obtained allow formulating some practical postulates, namely:
  - assistance to be given to married couples in order to improve their mutual communication is of great importance – it can take the form of e.g. training sessions to be prepared for parents rearing children with autism. It seems a vital factor is the ability to communicate the support to the spouse and get reverse information (“the feedback”) on support given or to be given by them – in other words: appreciating the spouse's efforts, expressing an interest in their problems and willingness to solve them jointly;
  - circle of persons the mother stays in touch with should be extended, e.g. through closer family integration (cf Jones & Passey, 2004) and involving friends who accept the child's disability and enable to lead a normal social life (cf Gray, 2002).

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