On Giving Meaning to Family Life: An Educational Essay

ABSTRACT
The author addresses cognitively important issues concerning values and activities conducive to their development in the family, which is the basic factor in shaping the personality of a child. We are living in the times of globalization, when the importance of family and values passed on by it are being underestimated in various ways. Globalization has caused an enormous confusion of values. The old, traditional values are often outdated, while the new, incomprehensible ones, interfere with the process of upbringing. Additionally, relativism dominating the society has become the basis for blurring the boundaries between what is moral and what is immoral. The aim of this article is to draw attention to the special role of values in the process of upbringing and to stimulate actions supporting the family through education and prevention. The above considerations lead to the conclusion that the family is an important value in the life of a child. It constitutes their most important environment for development and upbringing. Nevertheless, it requires help and support from the state. But above all, we cannot just be passive witnesses of our children’s development these days.

Keywords:
family, education, prevention, happiness, values, upbringing.

INTRODUCTION

The issues discussed in the article concern the question of values and their importance in the family life. There is no doubt that a family is the basic environment in which the child’s personality is formed. Therefore, having in mind the process of

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upbringing, we cannot forget about the important role of parents and their participation in this process. We live in times of intensive socio-cultural and economic transformations. Not only are the conditions in which families live changing, but also the family model itself and the roles played by its individual members are being transformed. Traditional values and rules of conduct are shifting. Values play different roles in human functioning, often giving direction to human life. Moreover, it should be emphasized that values still play an important role in the upbringing of children. For parents, they are often a point of reference and a signpost in their educational activities. We live in times when parents are faced with a number of problems that are new to them and that they cannot solve. Traditional values and rules of conduct are no longer relevant. Parents are often faced with the crisis of traditional patterns of upbringing, conflicts of values, situations in which they have to make choices.

I realize that the considerations presented in the following text are not exhaustive and are only an attempt to signal some issues related to the role of values in the family and the need for parents to take a new approach in many educational issues. Nowadays upbringing is becoming a matter of knowledge, skills and experience. It is necessary to understand the child and the reality in which he or she lives, as well as the set of factors in this reality that influence his or her personality. Only then upbringing will properly guide the child in the surrounding reality, indicate the values, give the right direction to his or her life activities and organize the influences coming from outside. Let’s consider, then, what parents should do in difficult situations when different values and rules of conduct clash.

**ON HAPPINESS AND THE DIFFICULT WAY TO MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY**

When considering the upbringing of a child, values are an important matter. There are different ways to interpret the types of values and their importance in human life. There is no doubt that the most important desire and value for parents is the happiness of their own child. In this moment, we are going to attempt to answer the questions of what “happiness” is, what it means, and how to achieve it in our times. These questions are explored by representatives of various scientific disciplines: philosophers, theologians, psychologists, sociologists, educators, anthropologists, psychiatrists, and even historians, poets, and writers. There are a variety of definitions and studies of happiness and ways of interpreting it. Psychologists create a discourse on happiness as a matter of personality. They pay attention to individual needs, hereditary predispositions, preferences, choices, and personal
value systems. They analyze the relationship between the sense of meaning in life, the ability to experience happiness, and various components of human personality and temperament, as well as factors that determine objective living conditions (Argyle, 2004; Czapiński, 1994; Seligman, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2011). Biologists focus on neurophysiological processes, philosophers consider happiness in the context of morality, calling it eudaimonia (Tatarkiewicz, 1979; Wojtyła, 1986). Anthropological sciences are concerned with the cultural context of happiness and well-being (Pieper, 2000; Wikan, 2012). Pedagogy, on the other hand, pays attention to raising a happy person (Majewska-Opiełka, 2006; Korczak, 2012; Smolińska-Theiss, 2013) and creating conditions for the best possible development of an individual. History explores various happy and unhappy periods for mankind. In turn, sociologists consider happiness in the context of social conditions (Glatzer, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994; James & Prout, 1990).

For the word “happiness” to make sense, it is necessary to give it a specific content. In the Universal Dictionary of Polish Language three meanings of the word “happiness” are provided: – ‘auspicious fate, success in some undertakings, life situations, etc.; good fortune, success’; – ‘a feeling of contentment, intoxication, joy; happiness; also: all that causes this state’; – ‘a coincidence, a set of auspicious circumstances, a fortunate conjunction of fate, auspicious chance, chance’ (Uniwersalny słownik..., 2003, pp. 1502–1503).

When making an insight into the past, the understanding of happiness often meant an abundance of material and spiritual goods and a favourable confluence of events. St. Thomas Aquinas put it in one sentence: “We all understand happiness as attainment of the perfect good, but it remains unknown what the essence of it might be” (Summa Theologiae, 2d. 38, 1, 2, St. Thomas, 1963). The literature on the subject usually distinguishes four approaches to defining the essence of happiness, two of which are prevalent in everyday speech and the other two in philosophy. Thus, happy is the one who:

− is favoured by fate, fortune – in this sense, the concept has an instrumental, objective character, and defines happiness as a positive confluence of events or auspicious conditions of life,
− has experienced the greatest joy – in this sense, in turn, we are dealing with happiness of a subjective nature, meaning subjectively understood positive, particularly joyful and profound experiences,
− possesses the highest goods – here, the philosophical concept of happiness has an objective character and means a certain perfect state combining all goods,
I should point out that the above definitions by Władysław Tatarkiewicz concern human happiness only during their earthly life and do not concern the problem of faith and contact with God. The philosopher states further that

for happiness some need less, others more, and the happiness of the one who is content with little is neither smaller happiness, nor less of happiness, than the happiness of the one who demands a lot from life (Tatarkiewicz, 1979, p. 45).

The important conclusion is that happiness is an ambiguous concept, and that there is no uniform model of a happy life for everyone. Aristotle already noted this when he wrote that there are three kinds of goods: external (objective) goods, bodily goods, and spiritual (subjective) goods. The prerequisite for happiness is the possession of all these goods (Aristotle, 1982). There is no doubt that however the term “happiness” is interpreted, it is “a state of well-being worth striving for” (White, 2008, p. 13).

The concept of happiness is evolving and changing, as we can see in its present meaning. Today, for a person living in the age of consumerism, it is usually associated with an individual feeling of satisfaction with life. Happiness is nowadays defined as “a permanent state of supreme contentment, favourable fate (good luck), pleasure in dealing with someone or something, positive emotional states (euphoria) or a slight alcoholic daze” (Czapiński, 1994, p. 11). It should also be noted that happiness is an individual category and dynamic in time. This is due to the constant changeability of human desires, which undergo constant development. Our actions are continuously activated by new, emerging human needs. The strive for feeling happiness and satisfaction with life motivates a person to undertake activity, struggle with difficult everyday situations, fostering success in life, which makes a person happy. The aforementioned dilemmas concern diverse human communities, including the family. For parents, happiness of the child should mean “[…] everything that is not neutral and indifferent, but is valuable, important and momentous, and thus constitutes the goal of human aspirations. It is also important in itself” (Furmanek, 1995, p. 10).

If happiness of the child is the desire of the parent, then the good of the family should be protected and perpetuated (Rostowska, 2006). A human being, as homo families, still wants to live in a family understood classically, or in various forms that are a mosaic or hybrid of its shapes. The family is treated as a system of reference in difficult situations. Everything that is important is located in the closest
environment, especially in this area, which is saturated with the sense of bonding and close emotional contacts of a subjective character. This creates potentially favourable conditions for improving parent-child relations and strengthening emotional bonds within the family (Świątkiewicz, 2005). The literature on the subject points to many new changes taking place in the modern family. As a result of the blurring of boundaries between the cause and the effect of a given state of affairs, a clearer view of important issues concerning the family and its value for a human being is being lost. I think that some longer reflection on this issue is worthwhile.

**SELECTED CHANGES IN FAMILY FUNCTIONING AND PROCESSES UNDERLYING THEM**

Contemporary research shows the dynamic transformation of the family, both as a reference group and as an institution performing significant functions. The family, despite struggling with difficult life situations, has not lost its prominent place in society, trying to actively participate in shaping family and public life.

In surveys on the most important values of Polish society conducted by Public Opinion Research Center, both in 2005 and 2010, family, work and material status remain at the forefront (CBOS, 2010). Family happiness occupied the highest position in the hierarchy of values declared by Poles, both in 2005 and 2010 (CBOS, 2010, p. 6). It is worth emphasizing that Poles believe that meaning to human life is given above all by such factors as: family happiness, children, material conditions, job that one likes, a group of friends, love, and peaceful life (CBOS, 2006). Data provided by the European Survey of Values (EVS) from 2008 indicate that 55% of Polish men and 61% of Polish women consider having a child as a crucial condition of a successful marriage (Konieczna-Sałamatin, 2012, pp. 55–61). In turn, according to a survey conducted by Krystyna Ostrowska in April 2010 on a sample of 1,068 people and presented in the book *Emocjonalny portret Polaków* [Emotional Portrait of Poles], 60.1% of the respondents declared that they often or very often experience the feeling of happiness, and only 1.2% claim that they never experience this emotion. The analysis of the survey results also indicated that people experiencing feeling of happiness simultaneously experience other emotions: a sense of satisfaction, delight, optimism, friendship, joy, and confidence. Pursuant to that, Ostrowska concludes that the outlined type of happiness is typical for individualistic culture (Ostrowska, 2012). It should be mentioned that in 2020, Barbara Badora published a report from studies on the values preferred by Poles in the times of pandemic, which shows that health became the most important for
Poles, followed by family, work and material success, whereas well-being of the family, prosperity of the family and happiness of the family came next (CBOS, 2020). I think that health listed in the first place by Poles highlights the importance of this value in the context of insecurity in the time of pandemic.

Today’s parents are faced with the difficult task of adapting their own efforts to the changing and unpredictable conditions in which their children are growing up. Raising a child and creating the conditions for the child to be happy in the family should not be a minor issue, especially from the perspective of living in a society of recurring changes, which education must constantly follow. The main disturbing symptoms of the ongoing process of change in contemporary culture, which is evident in the West and is also taking place in the Central and Eastern Europe, include the following:

- social differentiation, meaning separation of various spheres of social life, such as family, economy, work, culture, science, politics, or religion, which interact in a normative and behavioural sense and become independent of each other;
- deinstitutionalization, i.e., the world of institutions is accused of impersonality. There are no mechanisms of social control. There is an increasing claim of autonomy towards institutions, guardians of values and norms in favour of their selective choice and adjustment to individual life projects;
- cultural pluralism, defined as the organizing principle of modern society, the supreme value and determinant of modernity. A human being encounters in their life different life style choices, values and assessments of behaviour. There is no single truth, no reliable guidance, the whole reality acquires a problematic and chaotic character, almost unlimited space of freedom, a person loses certainty and a sense of security. “Radical pluralism, tolerant of conflicting values and norms, giving the impression that everything is allowed, is a kind of sign of our times” (Mariański, 1995, p. 31);
- structural individualism, which is a carrier of privatization of individual decisions, which entails uncertainty, ambivalence and risk, chaos and randomness. A human being strives to endow his or her life with meaning, formulates and chooses moral values on his or her own, and evaluates the correctness of his or her behaviour. Patterns of life do not have to be continued, but are created according to their own direction, “under compulsion” to choose without support in the certainty of permanent values. The highest value is self-fulfilment (Mariański, 1995).
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With such an image of society, the main problem is to find an axiological foundation that would support and help modern parents. The background of social and cultural changes outlined in this way influences the process of upbringing and leaves its mark on the biography of parents and their children. The world in which parents grew up has changed, compared to the world in which their children are growing up. These changes permeate the family home as well as the human psyche. On the one hand, parents wish to create new opportunities and conditions for their children’s development, while on the other hand, their actions often lead to destructive consequences and situations that make the family dysfunctional (Kawula, 2005; Szlendak, 2010). For many parents, raising a child is about providing them with good material living conditions and education. Thus, when reality contradicts their expectations, they are inclined to look for reasons in the external environment, but not in their own behaviour. Among the significant threats to the family are actions aimed at weakening the family. The importance of universally accepted and recognized values concerning family life is being weakened. The rank of upbringing and the importance of parental authority and its role in the development of children is being lowered. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the activities of the media which use social manipulation. For example, it takes place in the context of disregard for another human being, condoning the lack of care and responsibility for another person, often preferring an attitude of cynicism (Harwas-Napierała, 2009). This leads to, among other things, disintegration of intra-family socialization, weakening of community bonds, which causes atomization of the family, the declining authority of parents and grandparents, the change in the conditions of socialization in the family in connection with women taking up professional work, the decline in the role of the father, the reduction of fertility, the increase in the number of conflicts and divorces, establishing reconstructed families and the intensification of the tendency to choose alternative forms of family life (Szlendak, 2010; Kawula, 2005; Tyszka, 2002).

The facts described lead to further consequences. Here are some of them. Firstly, more and more diagnoses showing the difficult situation of children coming from unemployed families occur. Also, there is an increase in the so-called UPH Syndrome: unemployment, poverty, homelessness and family pathology, including infanticide (Marzec-Holka, 2004). Parenthood has become “burdensome” today, due to the new division of labour between men and women (Szlendak, 2010). Sociological studies and various general interest publications seem to indicate an overemphasis on securing the material basis of existence at the expense of limiting the educational, cultural and community-forming function. The boundary between private and public time is blurred. The effect of these changes is, on the
one hand, the ego-centralization of family members or, on the other hand, the lack of responsibility on the part of adults (infantilization) with increasing demands for mature behaviour from younger generations. It is noticed that adults are not prepared to deal with the problems of upbringing (Braun-Gałkowska, 1997). The result is a loss of clarity in family structure. De Barbaro describes such families as “entangled” ones, in which the roles played by children and adults are mixed. Their structure becomes unclear and unstable. The family affected by these phenomena does not meet the criteria of a healthy family (De Barbaro, 1997, p. 45–68). However, we can unequivocally state the multifaceted transformations of the family as a basic group of reference and in the functions it performs. The family, in the whole scheme of its life, in its characteristic worries and joys, in its conception of success and justification of injustice, in its internal politics, becomes “an individualized private existence”. At the same time, in order to fulfil the dictates of the market, to lead a consumer existence, it is subject to standardization, mechanisms of control and pressure. Family life, writes U. Beck, is becoming more and more dependent on relations, conditions, secondary instances, institutions – influencing the child’s life story and making him or her, contrary to the individual disposition and family organization of biography, the plaything of fashions, relations, conjunctures, and markets (Beck, 2004, 2012). Simplifying the problem and capturing it in a very schematic way, we can say that the family is not effectively and sufficiently cordoned off from its surroundings.

It is a directed and privacy-reaching exterior to relationships and decisions that are made elsewhere and virtually without regard to the consequences for private life: on television stations or within educational systems… (Beck, 2004, p. 372).

Simultaneously, it seems understandable that the family recognizes the need to adapt to the demands of the external reality in which it functions. As a rule, it develops its logic and traditions similar to those of the general society. K. Hurrelmann writes that “every family functions towards its members as a dynamic and relatively autonomous mediator of external reality” (1994, p. 112). Market requirements impose the necessity to function in the “world of work”, to be mobile, available. Thus, they change the internal space of family life, which seems to be actually empty (at home “there is no one”, “nothing is done”). Even the “free time” is taken outside the home (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004).

It is often repeated that the family is the first and most important environment for a child. It influences the child’s development, the child’s construction of his or her own personal and social identity. At the same time, it would be dangerous to succumb to this belief to the point of forgetting the educational tasks in relation
to early childhood. The primary mission is to create a conducive environment for the child, to provide a suitable living area for the child – not necessarily limited to the “nursery room” (Debesse, 1996). Parents have a role to play here – supporting and extending the efforts of the child so that he or she can understand the world around him or her, be able to act effectively in it, satisfy his or her needs, and meet social demands (Brzezińska, 2000a, 2000b; Brzezińska, Marchow, & Jabłoński, 2003; Brzezińska & Janiszewska-Rain, 2005).

Therefore, the following questions arise: Will modern parents be effective in this regard? What chances does the family have to survive if it is under strong pressure to change? There also appears a question in the context of civilization changes whether we are facing “a time of hope, or a civilization of anguish”, which was also asked by Zbigniew Tyszka.

**UPBRINGING – THE ART OF MINDFULNESS AND ACCEPTANCE**

We often encounter in the literature a voice of concern about the functioning of modern parents. For many scholars it is an opportunity to recall the advantages of traditional family, for others it is a starting point for thinking about the “family of the future”. It is undeniably a fact that the modern family does not always fulfil properly its educational function, in terms of caring and developmental needs.

The above diagnosis leads to an attempt to determine what conditions are conducive to the organization of family life so that it can properly fulfil its socialization and child rearing tasks. Thus, we can distinguish three groups of factors that determine family happiness: the arrangement of social relations that ensure a fair share of social goods and privileges to all members of the family; respect for human rights; the kind of desires that people strive to satisfy. However, the attainment of these conditions depends on who we are. Therefore, upbringing will play a significant role in this regard, and the family is the primary educational environment

[…] shaping the personality of the child. The atmosphere of the family home, positive or negative feelings towards the child are felt very early, before the child begins to understand the meaning of words addressed to him or her (Pielkowa, 1980, p. 3).

The issue of parents’ understanding of the child’s happiness and the conditions for its fulfilment is the beginning of understanding what upbringing itself consists of, which is a response to the developmental needs of the child. Among the basic tasks of upbringing that parents face is the selection and proper explanation to
the child of the emerging cultural content. The act of upbringing that takes place in the process of child rearing can, therefore, be defined as the actions of the parent aimed at changing the behaviour of the child and taking place in a strictly defined situation and time. The process of upbringing is conditioned by many factors, including the social and cultural context, methods of upbringing, and the course of educational activities aimed at bringing about the desired changes in the child’s personality. The process of upbringing in the psychological perspective proposed by Antonina Gurycka, is understood as a complex, dynamic system of mutually dependent processes of giving and receiving influence, which occur between individuals (e.g., parent and child) performing diverse and specific roles. An encounter occurs in which the main goal is the development of the child’s personality (Gurycka, 1979, p. 55). The pedagogical definition, in turn, presents the process of upbringing as a dynamic and complex set of systematic direct and indirect interactions, occurring interpersonally, socially, institutionally, causing natural changes in the personality of the individual, which are accepted and promoted by society (Ferenz, 2003, p. 178).

Family life and being with emotionally close people constitute for the child the source and basis for acquiring various social and emotional experiences. Urie Bronfenbrenner even describes the family as the primary developmental context for an individual, as he writes,

it is such a context in which the child can observe and accept patterns of increasingly complex activity in cooperation with or under the direct guidance of persons who possess knowledge and skills not yet mastered by the child, with whom the child has formed positive emotional relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983).

The family can influence the child’s development either by creating the conditions for experiences and determining the nature of them or by providing the individual with models, cultural tools and ways to process experiences cognitively, emotionally and in terms of values (Harwas-Napierała, 2009).

Based on the analysis of literature on the educational impact of the family (e.g., Rostowska, 2006; Tyszka, 1991, 2002; Modrzewski, 2004, 2011), it may be assumed that a child developing in the family acquires patterns of interpreting and symbolising experience, as well as patterns of emotional attitudes and value judgements that play the role of standards in the process of evaluating the content, circumstances and the nature of individual experience. The child also learns how to perform social roles and masters social and moral rules of conduct in addition to the ways of acting, gradually internalizing them. The special role of the family
in the development of children is related to the personality of the parents, which acts in the following ways:

– as a model through the processes of imitation, and identification,
– as a standard and an important factor of consciously created situations and educational influences, and
– as a psychological context for these ideals and educational standards.

The premises presented above justify the thesis that a stable, well-functioning family constitutes a value in the formation of the child’s personality structure.

At the end of the above considerations, let us try to draw some practical conclusions conducive to the happiness of a child and important in the process of upbringing. Happiness and development of a child are determined by the relations in the family and the organization of life within it. Cultivation of values and the stability are of great importance in the family. The child must know and understand what belongs to them and what they can expect from others. The child must understand their own duties and their relationship to the duties of other family members. Stability is marked by observance of the traditions and customs of the family life. Each child must play a part in the daily life of the family and it is the parents’ important task to ensure that a strong emotional bond is formed. The child’s world of social responsibilities should go hand in hand with his or her active participation in common family matters. It is also necessary for parents to create an atmosphere of friendly interest in the affairs of everyone, especially the child. The child should be convinced that he or she is an object of care and love. The parents’ culture of coexistence is not without significance, as their own coexistence is a model for their children.

**EDUCATION AND PREVENTION ASPECTS**

Leaving aside the understanding of the category of childhood, pedagogy, theoretically and practically, permanently involves itself in all social processes in which the child is an active or passive participant. Very often the issue undertaken by this discipline is the happiness and defence of the child and his or her rights. This pedagogical activity has its source in its commitment to the wronged, unhappy child, since he or she has always been and is now subject to various forms of harm and violence.

There is a need to search for possible ways of strengthening the family, the more so that, as Braun-Gałkowska (1997) says, the family is not so much a “given”
value, as an “assigned” one, requiring constant care. The literature on the subject shows the main areas in the framework of which activities helpful for the family could be carried out, which could also have preventive benefits. The first is the area where we can start actions aimed at strengthening family stability; actions that would enable, among others, families to gain skills of defending themselves against social manipulation. It is about developing in the family members the ability to think critically. A very serious challenge today is the problem of forming the personal maturity of adults. This area includes taking care of personal maturity conditioning proper performance of family roles (marital and parental), among others, through maintaining appropriate proportions between dimensions defining criteria of a healthy family (Praszkier, 1992), especially between the dimension of individualization and “entanglement in the network” of interactive relations or stability and disorganization, as well as with clarity and vagueness of boundaries between generations (Satir, 2000a, b). Another area is related to activities that help parents fulfil their functions related to child care and upbringing. It is worth noting that a large role in this respect is to be played by pro-family policy, which should, among other things, enable parents to combine family and professional life. Then there are the needs of the child. It is worthwhile for parents to use the services of institutions primarily with the developing child in mind. In other words, children benefit from some kind of institutional care and education because of the potential developmental gains that translate into the child’s educational and life course. In the area of care and education outside the family, within the services provided to families with children, the proposals should have the quality of a “good home”, should be a “welcoming inn on an important life path” (Colla-Müller, 1999). In this context, it is not important whether the place of education or care is the family, another type of institution, or an alternative form. What is important is the personal dimension of social and pedagogical skills, professional knowledge, imagination and creativity, sensitivity to children’s perspective, preparation to recognize and meet their individual developmental needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The above considerations lead to the conclusion that the family is an important value in the life of a child. It constitutes their most important environment for development and upbringing. Nevertheless, it requires help and support from the state. There is no doubt that today’s school has to turn from a teaching institution into an educational institution, open to cooperation with the local environment,
including parents. Let us not forget about other institutions complementing or supporting the functions of the family in the environment (Brągiel & Badora, 2005). In the light of the presented considerations, there is a need for a wide range of assistance for the family, including first of all adult family members, since their role in creating and maintaining the family is indisputable. They also determine the patterns of family functioning that are adopted by children growing up in the family. It is necessary to try to understand the world in which child lives and creates as well as the factors in this world that influence his or her personality (Korczak, 2012, 2017). To educate means to gradually and wisely introduce the child to the world around them, showing them values whilst giving direction to their life activities simultaneously controlling external influences. But above all, we cannot just be passive witnesses of our children’s development these days.

References


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