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PARENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSENCE IN UPBRINGING CHILDREN: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Extensive socio-cultural transformation currently taking place in Poland, related to the dynamics of globalization processes and the development of the modern society, generates changes in the demographic structure of the country, including the steadily increasing number of single-parent families, in which one of the parents brings up children on his or her own. According to the data in the National Census (Szałtys (ed.), 2014), the number of single-parent families with dependent children under 24 years of age in Poland in 2011 was 1,288,000 (in 2002, there were 1,125,500 such families). Among these, families with single mothers constituted almost 89% (1,144,000), while families with single fathers only 11% (144,000).

Apart from the categories of incomplete families existing to date, in which incompleteness is permanent due to the death of a parent, biological incompleteness (the situation when one of the parents leaves the other to bring up the child on his or her own practically from when the child is born), divorce or legal separation, there are more and more families in which one of the parents is temporarily absent, as he or she is living away from their place of residence for financial reasons.

Literature on the subject less frequently addresses the category of psychological absence of the parents, who are in the family physically, but are *away* emotionally and spiritually, and live *apart* (Wolicki, 1989, p. 183). In the case of psychological absence, the child, in spite of having adequate material conditions provided and their biological needs satisfied, experiences a strong deficiency of his or her parents' emotional involvement in his or her matters. Child's drama usually takes place behind the closed door, in silence and loneliness (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 104), causing many unpleasant emotional states and often triggering behavioural and functioning disorders. A special type of parents' psychological absence is a deficiency in their assistance in upbringing, which combines physical and psychological absence, and

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consists in a lack of permanent personal contact between the parents and the child (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 147).

Due to the lack of relevant research, it is problematic to assess the scale of the phenomenon. In contrast to actual absence of parents at home, absence in the psychological sense is much more difficult to observe, as – from an external point of view – the family keeps up misleading appearances of normal functioning (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 104). It can be presumed, however, that in the conditions of postmodernity, which favours disorganisation of the traditional forms of social life, and affects marriage and family in particular, parents' psychological absence occurs even more frequently than their physical absence.

The issue signalled here is an interesting object of research from the intersection of pedagogy of family and social pedagogy, connected with the necessity for the systematic studies into and analysis of the environmental conditions which accompany the process of upbringing and socialization in the face of permanent changes in the social reality. The object of detailed analyses, of both theoretical and empirical nature, conducted in the present article is the phenomenon of parents' psychological absence in the upbringing of the child, taking into consideration its causes, essence, consequences and pedagogical implications.

THE AETIOLOGY OF THE PHENOMENON OF PARENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSENCE

Psychological absence occurs when parents are unable to establish positive emotional relationships with their children, specific for their role (Goleń, 2002, p. 209). All children's material needs are satisfied, they have all sorts of material possessions; what they lack, however, is parental love, joint emotional experiencing and psychological interactions. According to H. Cudak, the children who experience parents' psychological absence "in reality have everything, but they do not have anything" (2007, p. 20). The parents who are physically at home, but psychologically absent, minimise their contacts with the child, *overlook* him or her, they do not devote as much time and attention to the child as he or she needs. When the child attempts to establish contact with them, they are brusque, unapproachable, cold; they disregard his or her problems (Tokarska, 2010, p. 17).

In the eyes of the environment, the family of parents who are emotionally *away* is often no different from others, and its external image is frequently held up as a model. In this type of *polished family*, under a socially desirable layer there is a hidden emotional emptiness of internal relationships (Bajkowski, 2003, p. 436).

The focus of the researchers who study parents' psychological absence is usually on fathers physically present in the family, but *away in their heart and spirit*. The father's absence is a pedagogical problem of the modern family which shows an increasing trend and results in shaping of *a society without the father*. The research conducted in

this area indicates that it is the relationships between the children and the father that are more often distorted than those between the children and the mother, and that fathers find it more difficult to establish proper relationships with the child due to the lack of ability to communicate, avoidance, unwillingness, and, in extreme cases, due to isolating the father (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 195).

According to T. Olearczyk "the father, as someone who matters in the family, disappeared as the pattern of paid work away from home was established, women took up paid employment and thus achieved economic independence and social dominance" (2007, p. 195). Among the reasons for the father's psychological absence in the family, M. Braun-Gałkowska finds the traditional, fixed division of roles in the family, in which the mother takes care of the children and the father earns money; mistakes in interactions between the parents and in the spouses' communication (2001, p. 202-203).

M. Wolicki distinguishes between several types of the father's psychological absence in the family (1989, p. 183). Passive presence can be the effect of the father's egoism and his indifference to his children and their problems. He is neither too weak nor too autocratic, but satisfied *simply with the fact that he is there*. His withdrawal can also result from his inability to perform the role of the father due to being unaware of his duties. Such fathers often escape from the reality of the family life into other occupations or dreams. Many fathers, driven by noble intentions, attempt to make friends with their child, assuming the role of a friend instead of that of a parent.

Another type is a *weak* father, disdained by the wife and children, openly or in secret. His weakness can result from the character leading to addictions, or from a weak personality (Wolicki, 1989, p. 183). The father's weakness can also be the effect of being too immature to perform the role of a parent. Psychology describes Peter Pan syndrome, in which a man never matures in psychological, but mainly emotional terms and does not assume the role of a husband, father or caregiver (Braun-Gałkowska, 2001, p. 203).

A category strictly related to psychological absence is the parents' lack of assistance in upbringing. Literature does not find an unambiguous definition of this term. It does describe, however, the principle of pedagogical presence, also known as "obligatory and continuous assistance", which was formulated by Rev. Jan Bosko in the years 1877-1886 and constitutes a practical interpretation of his system of prevention. In the light of today's humanistic psychology, educational presence is described as "contact which serves to help" (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 148). U. Tokarska defines pedagogical presence as "the carer's personal co-presence with the charge in which the former kindly stimulates the latter and directs him or her towards personal maturity. (…) The presence is permanent, guarding and pertains to all places" (2010, p. 16). Parents are present in upbringing the child through their personality, as well as adequate social, moral, cultural and religious attitudes. Parents' assistance in upbringing plays a special role in the period of ad-

olescence, when young people experience numerous difficulties related to physical and emotional development.

On the basis of the abovementioned considerations it can be concluded that a lack of educational presence, also described as "pseudopresence" (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 159) is characterised by parents' non-involvement in the child's life, a lack of interest in him or her and not showing respect to him or her as a person (Tokarska, 2010, p. 16).

Pedagogical presence comprises both physical and psychological presence. For that reason, aetiology of parents' educational deficit is related to the causes of real and psychological absence. Among these, those which need to be stressed include the lack of parents' general and pedagogical education, inability to inspire trust or to be an authority figure for one's children, as well as their educator. The lack of assistance in upbringing prevents parents from performing the main tasks of educational presence: to instruct and to give a good example, according to the principle "*verba movent, exempla trahunt*" (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 148).

The lack of parents in a child's life can result from their actual absence at home and, more and more often, of their own choice. In that second case, parents are physically present in the family, but *excluded* from it in psychological terms. In turn, parents who are absent in upbringing leave their child *to his or her own devices*, without their own personal example, help, support or instruction. However, irrespective of the cause, parents' lack of presence and involvement causes a clear disturbance in the educational process (Wilk, 2003, p. 61) and entails a number of difficulties in the proper course of children's and young people's comprehensive development.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSENCE

For every child, the period of childhood should be mainly associated with the warm feelings of family home, play and joy derived from all sorts of contacts. In the case of the phenomenon of parents' psychological absence, in spite of their theoretical presence at home, the time of carefree play is filled with a feeling of being lonely, lost, or even abandoned (Bajkowski, 2003, p. 438). Such seemingly complete families are full of emotional coldness, which is painfully felt by the child and deeply hurts his or her psyche (Wilk, 2003, p. 62), leaving scars that remain for life. The presentation of selected developmental and educational consequences stresses the role played by the psychological presence of both parents, as well as by the ability to pedagogically watch over the child on the way to his or her full development and upbringing.

Parents' psychological absence is strictly related to the disorder of the emotional function of the family. The lack of emotional contact, bonds or interest in the child's matters results in an emotional coldness in the relations between the parents and the

children; what is more, psychological *distance* between them also increases. Children who come from two-parent families, but lack emotional bonds, often experience a sense of loneliness, also known as emotional, spiritual or unrevealed orphanhood (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 103).

I. Wagner defines spiritual orphanhood as "a child's objective psychosocial state comprising three interrelated structural elements: a sense of a lack of emotional acceptance in the family, a sense of not being understood by the parents, a sense of loneliness in the family" (1997, p. 35). The family home does not provide the child with the necessary warmth, intimacy and protection from external stressors (Cudak, 2007, p. 20). A symptom of spiritual orphanhood is a child's emotional reaction to the unsatisfied needs for love and for being psychologically understood by the family (Maciarz, 1991, p. 242-243). A visible sign of this phenomenon is also a lack of mutual dialogue between the parents and the child. The upbringing process is mostly based on restrictions, orders, as well as parents' wishes and instructions directed at the child (Cudak, 2007, p. 20).

The family's emotional instability, its internal chaos consisting in changeability and unpredictability of emotional reactions, shallowness of feelings and their egocentric nature may contribute to causing a psychological state known as *becoming lost in orphanhood* in the child. Children who are brought up in such families most often lack the experience of symbiosis with the mother, and in the place of a bond based on trust there is an unstable bond of anxiety-ambivalent type. Cooperation with adults is usually forced, not ensuing from the child's internal need, and therefore it does not provide a proper foundation of stabilising emotional bonds. A consequence of such a state could be the child's emotional disability, or a lack of trust in the feelings of other people as well as their own, which contributes to his or her emotional deliberation (Obuchowska, 1998, p. 4-5).

Parents who are psychologically absent avoid contacts with their own child, sometimes compensating them with excessive freedom, satisfying the child's demands or overlooking his or her problems (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 104). However, a deficit in emotional contacts with the parents not only hurts, but also seriously disturbs the child's psyche. It could even distort his or her personality, as these contacts are a condition for satisfying many other needs, such as the need for security, the need to draw attention to oneself, the need to belong, the need for recognition and for significance (Tucholska and Tucholska, 2008, p. 399). Unfortunately, it is becoming more and more common that children who find it difficult to establish contact with the parents, who experience a sense of being lost and lonely and search for love and an aim in their lives, become an easy target for sects. These offer an illusion of love, a sense of belonging, a community, and they fill in the parents' absence or the educational void existing in the family with their presence (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 104).

Moreover, the parents who display an attitude of avoiding contacts with their child, expose him or her to a number of difficulties in establishing permanent emotional bonds. As a consequence, this may lead to emotional instability, distrust,

changeability in making plans, fearfulness, an antagonistic attitude towards the society and its institutions, or conflicts with the parents and the school (Goleń, 2002, p. 225). In extreme cases, such problems may occur as personality disorders or a rebellion against the world of adults or social environment and moral order, leading to pathological forms of behaviour, aggression and crime (Wolicki, 1995, p. 183).

In the case of *polished families*, who find their external image more significant than the satisfaction from mutual contacts, any attempt to reveal one's emotions is interpreted by other members of the family as a sign of weakness. Recurring situations of this kind teach the child to hide his or her feelings and to be mistrustful in social contacts. Adopting such a defective manner of functioning, children often face numerous difficulties in establishing contacts, also within their peer groups. A failure in this area is interpreted as a confirmation of negative self-assessment, which causes emotional tension to build up. In turn, the fear of being rejected leads the child to abandon the attempts to establish contacts, or results in consolidating the inability to do so (Bajkowski, 2003, p. 434-436).

Psychological absence in most cases concerns fathers. Without the father, the child grows with a mutilated and untrue image of parenthood (Olearczyk, 2007, p. 194). The father who remains in the family, but is psychologically absent, is not a model to be imitated and identified with, and thus does not prepare the children for performing important social roles in their later adult life, especially in marriage and family (Wolicki, 1989, p. 183). A lack of successful identification with the parent of the same sex may cause the children to develop a low need for achievements, as well as result in their worse intellectual development; it may even be the direct cause for failure at school (Wolicki, 1995, p. 181). Problems at school appearing in the case of children who have not had them so far are often an expression of rebellion against the absent father (Romberg-Asboth, 2001, p. 59).

Apparent presence of the father has an especially negative impact on the development of the son's sexuality. A boy devoid of a masculine model of realising oneself in the family may look for it in the street, in a peer group, in the media or in pornography. Unfortunately, what he often finds are negative models of masculinity convincing him that what makes him a true man are multiple sexual intercourses, physical or verbal violence or various stimulants (Kornas-Biela, 2001, p. 172). A lack of identification with mature masculine behaviour results in the boy's heterosexual immaturity, manifesting itself in an excessive emotional attachment to the mother, and, at the same time, unresolved Oedipus complex (Wolicki, 1995, p. 186).

In the life of a daughter, the father's absence provokes a more intense search for men, especially in the period of adolescence, in order to satisfy the needs neglected by the father. Girls brought up by psychologically absent fathers are especially sensitive to manifestations of interest, kindness and tenderness from their male friends, and especially from adult men. In relation to this, they are vulnerable to entering into dependency relationships in which they will be abused. Therefore, the lack of the father has an especially destructive influence on the shaping of the feminine

identity; it causes a hunger for feelings which may lead to an early sexual initiation, promiscuity or premature parenthood (Kornas-Biela, 2001, p. 172-173).

A deficit of the father's psychological presence can also contribute to disorders in the child's religious sphere. The earthly father provides a certain model for the child on the basis of which he or she shapes in himself/herself the image of God and relationships with Him. Research shows that if the earthly father is a negative figure in the eyes of the child, then the child, looking at such a parent, cannot imagine God as a good Father in heavens. Also, all negative references in the family negatively affect the child's relationships with God, leading even to rejecting Him, or to practical and theoretical atheism (Wolicki, 1995, p. 185).

The principle of both parents' educational presence in the life of the child, and the consequences ensuing from the lack of it, constitute an issue which is much less often addressed in literature. Pedagogical assistance is identified with a prevention system which emphasises help, directing the child's development and preventing his or her offences (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 147-150).

Pedagogical absence, being a form of psychological absence, may produce many negative educational effects. It needs to be pointed out that parents' actual or psychological absence at home places the child in a situation in which he or she has to fend for himself/herself and is left without care, example, appropriate support, instructions and explanations from the parents. It makes him or her feel lost, as he/she does not know how to behave. Moreover, the child's moral fibre is not yet fully shaped, and therefore he or she finds it difficult to differentiate between the good and evil. Seeking to satisfy the need for acceptance and the need to belong, which is impossible in an *empty* home, the child can come into a conflict with the law (Tokarska, 2010, p. 16-17).

The analyses presented here do not exhaust the issue of developmental and educational consequences in children who experience parents' psychological absence. They show that the presence of both parents is indispensable for a child's harmonious development, as even in favourable conditions parental roles are not interchangeable (Kukołowicz, 2001, p. 62). Moreover, the losses related to the absence of a parent in a child's life often cannot be compensated (Mituła, 2009, p. 171). However, skilful coping with the situation of "disturbed internal homeostasis of a family" (Matyjas, 2008, p. 243) may cause the relationships within it to remain unchanged or even to consolidate.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Modern pedagogy of family stresses the principle of complementarity in relation to parental roles, which means that they complement each other in realising their relevant, but different functions. It draws attention to the impossibility of substituting one parent with the other, in spite of good intentions and best efforts, as *non-transfer-*

ability of parental roles results from the nature of femininity and masculinity (Błasiak and Dybowska, 2010, p. 105-106).

The mother's role involves satisfying the child's basic life needs, giving him or her tenderness, goodness and love, which favour the development of emotionality, build trust to people and to the world in the child, shape self-esteem and the ability to love (Goleń, 2002, p. 209). The mother is the first authority figure and the source of moral conduct. She also provides the first image of femininity (Błasiak and Dybowska, 2010, p. 111-112). Motherly love is unconditional, as the mother loves the child because it is hers (Fromm, 2008, p. 49).

In turn, being a father is for a man a matter of choosing a certain lifestyle, a kind of spiritual calling. The father introduces the child into the external reality, teaches him or her how to live and cope in the world outside the family. He stimulates the child's intellectual and pragmatic development, at the same time protecting his or her freedom (Błasiak and Dybowska, 2010, p. 108). The father loves his child with conditional love; more for meeting his expectations and for being a source of joy and pride (Fromm, 2008, p. 52). Fatherly love gives the child a sense of security, introducing into his or her life the world of values and norms. The presence and attitude of the father provide the child with a foundation for experiencing his or her own gender and for preparing themselves to perform the parental role (Goleń, 2002, p. 209-210).

The mother and the father, though equal in transmitting life, perform different roles (Brągiel and Kawula, 2004, p. 128). The need for co-presence and complementarity of parents in the service to the child's welfare causes parental roles to be non-replaceable and non-transferable, and the necessity for both parents' permanent presence conditions the child's proper development and upbringing (Błasiak and Dybowska, 2010, p. 106). It needs to be stressed here that it is not only the physical presence at home, but also the psychological and emotional presence, *watching over* the child with one's spirit, manifesting itself in an adequate atmosphere of upbringing, in an attitude which is at the same time loving and demanding, as well as in support and assistance during the difficult moments in the child's life. Unfortunately, modern parents seem to forget about these fundamental principles more and more often. A certain solution to this issue could be a properly managed pedagogization of parents, aimed at improving the level of their knowledge, awareness and educational competence in terms of correct realisation of their relevant parental roles.

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PARENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ABSENCE IN UPBRINGING CHILDREN: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Keywords: psychological absence, pedagogical absence, family, parents, child

Abstract: The article addresses the issue of parents' psychological absence in upbringing children, presenting in turn the aetiology of the phenomenon, its consequences and pedagogical implications. It also analyses the category of the lack of parents' assistance in upbringing, which combines physical and psychological absence. The category of psychological absence concerns the parents who physically remain at home, but are away in emotional and spiritual terms. It occurs when parents are unable to establish positive emotional relationships with their children, specific for their role, thus causing many unpleasant emotional states and triggering behavioural and functioning disorders. Pedagogical implications stress the need, resulting from the principle of the complementarity of parental roles, for parents' co-presence and complementing one another in realising their relevant, but different functions.

NIEOBECNOŚĆ PSYCHICZNA RODZICÓW W WYCHOWANIU DZIECKA: PRZYCZYNY, NASTĘPSTWA, IMPLIKACJE PEDAGOGICZNE

Słowa kluczowe: nieobecność psychiczna, nieobecność pedagogiczna, rodzina, rodzice, dziecko

Streszczenie: Artykuł podejmuje problematykę absencji psychicznej rodziców w wychowaniu dziecka, ukazując kolejno etiologię zjawiska, jego następstwa oraz implikacje pedagogiczne. Analizie poddana została również kategoria braku asystencji wychowawczej rodziców, która łączy w sobie absencję w sensie fizycznym i psychologicznym. Kategoria nieobecności psychicznej dotyczy rodziców pozostających w domu ciałem, lecz nieobecnych emocjonalnie i duchowo. Pojawia się w przypadku braku zdolności rodziców do nawiązania pozytywnych, specyficznych dla swojej roli, relacji emocjonalnych z dzieckiem, przysparzając mu wielu przykrych stanów emocjonalnych oraz prowadząc do zaburzeń zachowania i funkcjonowania. Implikacje pedagogiczne akcentują postulat współobecności i wzajemnego uzupełniania się rodziców w realizacji właściwych sobie – lecz odmiennych – funkcji, wynikający z zasady komplementarności ról rodzicielskich.