

Value of parenting is measured by love and support

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Abstract

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Inntroduction

Almost in all cultures and communities primary child development, as well as its social environment, is formed by the family. Family has a powerful influence on the child, its behaviour, attitude and character as a whole. This is especially evident in early childhood, when children generally meet a narrow circle of individuals.

Without love and support, chances that the child develops as a rational, happy, efficient and hard-working adult, able to build a positive self-image and identity, are seriously violated.

After studying childrearing practice in a large number of social communities and cultures Robert LeVine (1974:56) concluded that all societies have three major objectives which families strive to, when child rearing and care of their future is concerned:

- Survival: securing conditions for physical survival and health of a child
- Economic security: encouraging and developing child's abilities that will enable economic independence in adulthood
- Self-realization: encouraging and developing child's abilities to adopt cultural values of the surroundings that family belongs to (moral, religion, customs, success, prestige, feeling of own satisfaction).

Objectives mentioned above are present more or less in all societies, but there are significant social and cultural differences in defining specific objectives according to the methods of their achievement. There are a lot of factors that influence realization of family's objectives. They can be considered from the wider social aspect as per influence of factors established in social demands, as well as those that depend upon family, their internal cohesion, their basic functionality and adaptability.

Facing many challenges and demands of contemporary society, the role of today's parents is becoming more demanding. Challenges in child development, especially those that relate to child's behaviour, emotional problems or severe psychological difficulties all contribute to the introduction of a new concept of responsible parenting. This concept raises new demands for parents and partially changes the role of parents today. Hence, achievement of above mentioned family objectives is occurring in a new, more challenging context.

Parents and adults generally, believe that they know best what is good for the child, and what is not. Very seldom do we ask children for their opinion on issues that concern them. However, children know very well what their priorities are in the family setting, and what kind of parental care and attention they wish to have.

In terms of national policy making related to children, as well as any other important decision-making related to children, children's opinions rarely receive due attention. In addition, there are limited scientific studies researching attitudes and opinions of children about specific issues.

This article will reveal research findings of a study conducted in Bosnia & Herzegovina. The findings presented are just a small part of a comprehensive research that was conducted as a part of author's PhD dissertation.

The total sample of research included 881 (eight hundred eighty one) children, aged from 13 to 18. Experimental group in the research consisted of 455 children living without one or both biological parents (53% of the total sample). Control group consisted out of 426 children who live in complete families (or 47% of the entire sample). Among population of children without one or both biological parents, almost half live in institutions, while other half in some form of family provided care. Control group consisted out of respondents in primary schools and high schools from the same geographical areas where respondents from experimental group live.

For this research, a scale for assessment of children's attitudes about values of parenthood was created, that served to determine their general position towards values of parenthood. We also wanted to find out what specifically children value as important aspects of parenting.

Research started with a broad hypothesis that children aged 13 to 18 have a generally negative attitude towards values of parenting – more precisely, to the role of

parental care and guardianship. Later presented findings have completely confuted this hypothesis.

We were especially interested in determining whether there were differences in attitudes about values of parenthood among children that live with their families, with biological parents and children without parental care¹. For this reason, our second hypothesis was:

Children that live with their parents generally have a more positive common attitude towards values of parenting in comparison to children that live without parental care. Later presented findings will show that this hypothesis was confirmed.

Research findings

Distribution of attitudes about values of parenthood

Analysed data of this research study was measured by examining statistical significance of deviations among segments of crossed variables, latent structures of attitudes towards values of parenting, mean values and deviations from those values, as well as applying measures that indicate degree of correlation among variables. The analysis provided the basis for deriving research findings, which can be summarized in a few following segments:

• Parents are important

More than 80% of children expressed that they completely or partially agree with following statements:

- -Every child deserves to develop in a natural family
- -Parents are important primarily because they provide their children with love and support
- -It is the best for a child to grow up in its natural family
- -No one can provide feeling of security to a child as its natural family
- -Only parents can duly help their child become good members of the society
- -Only with natural parents child can have a comfortable and carefree life

Totality of the responses to numerous statements about values of various aspects of development with parents show that children aged 13 to 18, in the framework of observed sample, highly appreciate the role of parents. More precisely, they consider development in natural, biological family to be very significant and irreplaceable.

• Parents are not only important for providing security needs

¹ Children without parental care according to the Article 13 of Law on Basis for Social Protection, Protection of Civilian Victims of War and Protection of Families with Children in B&H include: child without both parents, child of unknown parents, abandoned child, child of parents deprived of parental rights and child of parents who are prevented in performing parental duties.

Confirmation for above statement is found in research results, as almost 80% children partially or entirely rejected following statements:

- Parents are important only while you use their help and connections: when securing your schooling, summer vacation, apartment, jobs, etc.
- Parents are important primarily because they provide security for children (food, clothes, spending money, etc)
- Children can receive care from guardians, foster parents and care-givers equally as good as from biological parents

These data show that children do not prioritize the role of parents as exclusively providers in a material sense and that they consider the role of biological parents to be irreplaceable.

• **Children are aware that growing up without parents can have a negative impact**

Respondent children have a high level of awareness that growing up without parents (see footnote 1) can have a negative impact on psychosocial development of children, or that it can develop psychological traits in children which will make it harder to establish attitudes towards life.

Respondents gave positive answers to statements below, in following percentages:

- Children that develop without parents cannot be optimists in life, 59% of affirmative responses
- Children that develop without parents do not have sufficient self-esteem (belief in themselves), 34% of affirmative responses
- Children with parents have a greater confidence in people than children that did not have parental care, 21% of affirmative responses

• **Children are aware that developing without parental care can have a positive impact**

It is interesting that one of the findings shows that significant percentage of respondent children believe that developing without parental care (see footnote 1) has positive aspects, primarily in relation to adequate preparation for facing to life problems. Confirmation of this finding is in following data:

- 46% respondent children think that children without parental care have a more realistic outlook on life;
- 34,8% children believe that children without parental care respect their teachers more than children with parents;
- 30% children think that children without parental care are more friendly than children with parents;
- still 28% believe that children without parental care are less frequently problematic than other children, while

- 27% think that adopted children and children in institutional placement are better prepared for adulthood than children living with parents.

- **Children want to play an active role in their families**

As it is known, the willing component of attitude includes the tendency to undertake certain activities, to do something about the event that we have an attitude towards.

Data gathered during this research study clearly indicates that overwhelming percentage of children and young people are willing to engage themselves for the benefit of their family or the institution they live in. In response to the statement 'how willing are you to engage yourself for the benefit of your family, or the institution you live in', 85% of children expressed partial or complete willingness for engagement.

Research finding about distinctive willingness to engage oneself, or have a more active role in the family, is further confirmed by findings that 55% of children state that their families or institutions they live in are in the first place (of importance), while 39,5% children stated that family and their friends/peers are equally important. Only 5,2% respondents stated that their peers/friends are ranked in the first place.

This finding is especially interesting considering theoretical analysis which claims that children, especially in early youth, are under significant influence of peers and peer groups they belong to, and that influence of the family in this period significantly weakness.

Child Development with or without parents and distribution of attitudes about values of parenting

Specific focus of interest in this study on children's attitudes about values of parenting was to determine differences in attitudes according to the social status label of development with or without parents. Therefore, we wanted to determine if the children that develop without parents (*see footnote 1*) have a more positive or negative general attitude towards the values of parenting in comparison to children that develop in their biological family.

With complete respect towards particularities of each family and differences among foster or adopted families, or differences in the life of children living with relatives or specific trait of each institution, it was necessary to group child development settings in four roughly defined categories to enable easier data analysis. Four categories are as follows:

- a) family with both biological parents,
- b) family with either only biological mother or only biological father,
- c) foster, adopted or related family;
- d) child-care institutions.

Keeping in mind size of the sample (881 children), as well as representativeness of the sample as explained previously, we consider the research findings extremely important. Research findings are grouped in a several areas, as follows:

When developing with biological parents, children have a more positive view of the role of parenting.

- Children that develop in their biological family, with biological mother and father, in 42,2% of cases have an extremely positive attitude towards the values of parenting, while 23,6% have a less positive attitude towards development in the family
- Children that develop in a family with either only a biological mother or only a biological father in 31,2% of cases have an extremely positive attitude about the values of parenting, while 33,0% have a less positive attitude about the value of development in the family
- Children in foster families, with guardians or in relative families, in 26,8% of cases have an extremely positive attitude about value of parenting, while 38,4% have a less positive attitude about the value of development in the family
- Children in institutional placement - only in 15,3% of cases have an extremely positive attitude about the value of parenting, while 58,8% a less positive attitude about the value of development in the family.

Distribution of data confirms the finding that family setting represents a very significant source of general attitude of children about development with biological parents (Pearson Chi-square = 77,62; df = 4; p = .000). Above mentioned data clearly indicate that children in biological families, with both parents, assign a significantly more positive value to the role of family in psychosocial child development. On the other hand, children in institutional placement have a significantly less positive attitude towards value of family care in child development.

However, it is important to emphasise that these data should not be interpreted incorrectly, that children in institutional care are not aware about the importance of family care.

Children primarily value the role of family in psychosocial development by considering the totality of its behaviour, the way that they personally participate in the family dynamic, the way they participate in realization of specific interaction and whether they have a specific influence on events important for the entire family. Children in institutional care do not have the opportunity to personally experience family care, therefore they do not have the opportunity to realize its entire value. On the other hand, children that live in incomplete families or foster/adopted families, have the opportunity to personally experience family live. Nonetheless, they have an incomplete perception of this experience, which influences their attitudes about the entire value of family care.

Value of parenting are measured with love and support

Verification of above discussed research findings is evident in the analysis of an open-end question asked to all research respondents. The question was „In your opinion which are the main difficulties and problems in development without parental care?“

The fact that 66% of the respondents gave their comment on this question indicates the level of significance respondent children assign to the role and value of parenting. The types of responses collected clearly demonstrate that the affective component of attitudes is mostly expressed in terms of values of parenting. Majority of the responses were in fact expressing emotions about what it is like living without parents and in most cases the feelings were related to the loss, as per responses below:

- ”it is hard living without a father, I've never met him”
- ”it is hard when someone asks what happened to your father”
- ”it is hard living without a mother, because I miss her”,
- ”it is hard being without parents, especially because others feel sorry for you”
- ”I would love to have parents to care for my education”

Types of responses we received lead us to the conclusion that children are not often asked how they feel in the situation of living without parental care (*see footnote 1*), or how their peers without parents feel. The responses to the question indicate that the children used the opportunity to express their feelings in writing, which would have probably been much more difficult if we asked the same question in direct verbal communication.

However, due to the nature of responses, it is very likely that the *affective component of the problem of development without parental care is so prominent that everything else is less important to the children.*

Finally, based on the analysis of received responses it is clear that children's interest for this question is much greater in children without parental care (*see footnote 1*) in comparison to children living with biological parents. This is not especially surprising, but it leads to the conclusion that development without parents brings along negative feelings, sadness, and difficulties in expressing emotions related to parenting.

Final considerations

Presented research findings can lead to several conclusions:

- ✓ Despite the fact that adults do not notice this all that much, children are aware of the values of parenting, as well of family care and attention, which they consider very important;

✓ Within family, children and young people consider safety, emotional support and love family provides to be most important, while (financial) security is less significant;

✓ Additional evidence that children perceive families seriously is evident in the fact that they can see advantages and disadvantages of development without parental care, and that they express their willingness to be active family members in preserving its values;

✓ Children can not completely perceive the role of parenting, if they don't have the opportunity to personally experience it;

Even though these conclusions are based on the research findings of the study conducted with children in Bosnia & Herzegovina, they can be relevant for other societies as well.

Having in mind the challenges of modern societies faced by families, the need for constant research studies and improvement of systems of social policies and practice, we have to pay more attention to the importance of what children think, want and consider important.

Presented findings should encourage policy and decision-makers to work daily on strengthening the family, as family evidently provides the best conditions for child development and furthermore – children consider family to be very important.

On the other hand, the findings should also encourage parents to think about the ways in which they will prioritize three family objectives which have been explained in the introduction, or at least that the method in which they realize their objectives be in tune with what children think. Children think that their families are very important, especially the love and support their parents provide them.

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