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### **Emotional relations in the families rearing children with cerebral palsy**

Among various family environment factors conditioning the development of a child, a significant importance is assigned to mutual relations between the parents and the child; these relations are frequently perceived through the perspective of the parental attitudes and the child's attitude towards his/her parents. Irrespective of the social status of a family, its structure, the child development study or any the factors, the models of parents – child interactions are the main stabilising or destabilising factor for the development of child's basic psychological structure<sup>1</sup>.

As Rembowski<sup>2</sup> suggests the relationship constitutes a wider term than attitudes; it refers to a mutual interaction including the attitude of e.g. the mother towards her child, or the attitude of the child towards his / her mother. The parental attitude is defined by him as a “complex form of parental relation (regarding separately the relation of the father and the mother) towards children and the issues connected with bringing them up etc., formed during the process of playing the parental function”<sup>3</sup>. The attitudes presented by parents towards their children, as mentioned by numerous writers, are characterised by a relatively stable emotional attitude and are manifested by the ways parents relate to their children, resulting finally in the occurrence of specific attitudes presented by the child. These attitudes are significantly important since the parental attitude towards the child constitutes not only an integral element of each educational influence, but also accompanies all activities connected with the child welfare; it is also manifested by various forms of relation between the parents and the child.

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<sup>1</sup> Demo D., Parent-child relations: Assessing recent changes, “Journal of Marriage and the Family”, 54, 1992, 104-117.

<sup>2</sup> Rembowski J., Rodzina w świetle psychologii, Warszawa 1986. Rembowski J., Więzy uczuciowe w rodzinie. Studium psychologiczne, Warszawa 1972, s. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ślenzak J., Uczeń z odchyleniami w stanie zdrowia i rozwoju, Warszawa 1984.

Many writers, Borzyszkowska, Gałkowski, Muszyńska, Twardowski, emphasise the role of appropriate parental attitudes for the child development process, and in the case of disabled children, also their role for the appropriate facilitating process. The authors also underline that the bringing-up process in the case of a disabled child may cause some disturbances in the relations among the family members and may also result in the creation of inappropriate parental attitudes.

Among the researches described in the Polish literature, it is worth mentioning the research presented by Ślenzak<sup>4</sup>, which was dedicated to the emotional and social development process; the research was conducted on 50 children with ICP, in the age of 3 – 13 years. Among the factors significantly influencing the emotional and social functions, the author mentions the emotional bond between the mother and the child, parental attitudes, fulfilling by the family the child's needs, as well as the shared participation of the parents in the facilitating process. The author also presents the research on the relation between the level of social maturity presented by the group of 40 children with ICP, in the age of 4 – 8 years, and the attitudes presented by their mothers. The results of this research showed the existing relation between the level of social maturity and the typical parental attitudes presented by the mothers; these results also proved that the correct attitudes accompany more often the high level of social maturity presented by the children<sup>5</sup>.

The appropriate relations existing between the parents and the child create an appropriate environment for the correct psychological and social development of the child; however, despite being so important, these relations constitute only one of the elements of the complex parental attitudes.

### **Research methodology**

The goal of the conducted research was to define how the children with ICP perceive the emotional attitudes presented by the parents and other family members towards them, and what kind of feelings these children show towards their family members. The research was conducted on the group of 60 children with ICP, in the age of 7 – 11 years, with the normal IQ level and in three capital centres. To attain

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<sup>4</sup> Ślenzak J., *Przystosowanie społeczne dzieci {w:} Mózgowe porażenie dziecięce*, red. R. Michałowicz, Warszawa 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Rembowski J., *Metoda projekcyjna w psychologii dzieci i młodzieży*, Warszawa 1986.

empirical targets Family Relations Test by J. Anthony and E. Bene was employed. This method is called a projection technique; it is applied for the examination of emotional attitudes of children towards their parents and other family members, as well as for the examination of the children's perception of the attitudes presented by these persons towards them. The research applied the methodology version applied for older children with the proved positive or negative attitudes in reference to the family members. The results of the research applying FRT shows the picture of emotional relations which is formed by the child's perception based on his / her experience gained from the existing relations with his / her family members. These results allow to capture the child's preferences towards particular family members, as well as to reveal the source of potential anxiety. The above research methodology was developed in the form of a game and due to this it is well perceived by the children of an early school age.

One of the examined families was without a mother and five families were without a father, hence the number of mothers and fathers amounted to 59 and 55 respectively. The total number of siblings amounted to 92, and the number of grand-mothers and grand-fathers amounted to 18 and 7 respectively.

The empirical results were analysed using tests of differences involving statistical procedures regarding the sample sizes.

### **Research results**

The results proved that the perception of relations with the mother is significantly better than the one with existing in reference to other members of the family. The largest number of positive statements made by the children referred to mothers (37.8%), then to siblings (22.9%), and finally to fathers (16.7%). This apparently more positive evaluation of the mothers was further confirmed by the significantly fewer number of negative statements ( $p < 0.001$ ) which is illustrated in Table 1. The children also show positive feelings towards their fathers although the difference between mean values referring to the positive and negative responses is not to the same degree significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The children show positive feelings towards their grand-mothers three times as frequently as negative feelings. There is also no explicit attitude presented by the children towards their grand-parents with the same number of positive and negative responses (11 responses respectively). The relation between the positive and the negative feelings presented by the children towards their brothers and sisters, with a slight advantage of negative statements

(264 positive statements and 274 negative), proves the existence of an ambivalent attitude also towards the siblings.

Tab.1. A comparison of positive and negative statements of the child towards family members

| Subjects | Responses from a child to family members |                      |              |              |                    |
|----------|--|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
|          | N  | Responses            | M            | SD           | Significance level |
| Mothers  | 50                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 7.37<br>1.97 | 3.70<br>2.49 | p<0.001            |
| Fathers  | 55                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 3.51<br>2.29 | 2.83<br>2.26 | P<0.05             |
| Myself   | 60                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 1.05<br>0.95 | 1.31<br>1.28 | n.s.               |
| "Mr.     | 60                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 1.93<br>7.75 | 2.24<br>4.79 | p<0.001            |

A quite significantly large number of positive opinions (116) made by the children is placed outside the family, by assigning it to "Mr.Nobody"; this may be regarded as a symptom of a weaker emotional bond connecting the children, with the exception of the mothers, with other members of the family. At the same time, however, the examined children express the largest number of negative opinions was expressed about an indifferent person from outside the family (the difference between the mean positive and negative opinions is statistically very significant,  $p<0.001$ .) which balances the entire situation described above.

Similarly in the perception of the children, the members of the family reciprocate the feelings bestowed on them by the children, which was proved by the distribution of selections. The largest number of positive statements about the children was made by their mothers (44.4%), then by siblings (23.1%) and by fathers (16.6%). The grand-mothers bestow on the children more positive emotions (6.3%) than grand-fathers (0.8%); the grand-mothers participate more actively in the family life, whereas grand-fathers participate to a lesser degree in the process of creating the emotional atmosphere in the families of the examined children. The analysis of the negative statements shows that the largest number of such statements is received by the children from their brothers and sisters (25.6%) and fathers (17.6%) and finally from the mothers 12.6%). The significant difference between the number of positive and negative statements made by mothers becomes more apparent ( $p<0.001$ );

no significant difference is observed, however, between the number of these statements directed to the child by his / her father.

Tab.2. A comparison of positive and negative statements of family members towards the child

| Subjects | Responses from family members to a child |                      |              |              |                    |
|----------|--|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
|          | N  | Responses            | M            | SD           | Significance level |
| Mothers  | 59                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 7.76<br>2.02 | 3.19<br>2.35 | P<0.001            |
| Fathers  | 55                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 3.11<br>3.02 | 3.25<br>2.76 | n.s.               |
| Myself   | 60                                       | Positive<br>Negative | -            | -            | -                  |
| "Mr.     | 60                                       | Positive<br>Negative | 1.37<br>6.35 | 1.78<br>4.38 | p<0.001            |

A person from outside the family, "Mr. Nobody" receives from the family members significantly more statements with the negative content than with the positive one ( $p<0.001$ ). This may prove in the examined families the existence of a generally appropriate emotional atmosphere. The relations existing between the children and their parents do not prove positive, which is presented in Table 3 and 4.

Tab.3. A comparison of the emotional attitude of children with CP to mothers and fathers

| Group   | Responses from a child to mothers and fathers |          |      |                    |          |      |                    |
|---------|---|----------|------|--------------------|----------|------|--------------------|
|         | N   | Positive |      |                    | Negative |      |                    |
|         |   | M        | SD   | Significance level | M        | SD   | Significance level |
| Mothers | 59  | 7.37     | 3.70 | n<0.001            | 1.97     | 2.49 | n.s.               |
| Fathers | 55  | 3.51     | 2.83 |                    | 2.29     | 2.26 |                    |

The examined children bestow on their fathers more positive than negative feelings, however, they bestow significantly more positive feelings on their mothers ( $p<0.001$ ). This situation may result from the tendency to balance the emotional attitudes, since the children perceive the relations with their fathers much less positive than with their mothers ( $p<0.001$ ), which is presented in Table 4.

Tab.4. A comparison of the emotional attitude of mothers and fathers to children with CP

| Group   | Responses from mothers and fathers to a child |      |      |                    |          |      |                    |
|---------|---|------|------|--------------------|----------|------|--------------------|
|         | Positive                                      |      |      |                    | Negative |      |                    |
|         | N   | M    | SD   | Significance level |          | SD   | Significance level |
| Mothers | 59  | 7.76 | 3.19 | p<0.001            | 2.02     | 2.35 | p<0.05             |
| Fathers | 55  | 3.11 | 3.25 |                    | 3.02     | 2.76 |                    |

This is further proved by the differences between the intensity of negative statements directed at the children by their mothers and fathers, where the statistic significance was observed ( $p<0.05$ ). This did not cause, however, the reflexive reaction in the children, which is manifested by the occurrence of negative feelings towards their fathers. The difference between the statements with negative content received by mothers and fathers is not statistically significant. Due to some adequacy between the children's feelings and the emotional attitudes presented to them by their parents, it may be concluded that the fathers of the examined children with ICP engage too a lesser degree in comparison with the mothers, and they preserve of a larger emotional distance.

A certain number of the positive and negative statements made is assigned by the children to themselves. The similarity between the number of the statements tinged positively and negatively (the difference not statistically significant) may point at a critical attitude of the children towards themselves, as well as at the existence of a certain anxiety.

### Summary

On the basis of the results obtained, it may be assumed that the examined children perceive very strongly the oddity in reference to their brothers and sisters, realize their unusual position within the family, and maybe they feel envious of their fully able brothers and sisters. At the same time the children have great expectations towards them and feel rejected if their siblings do not fulfil their expectations in this respect. This was also proved in the content of verbal comments made by the children during the examination conducted in a form of a game when they expressed spontaneously their opinions on the family members. From this it may be concluded that the relations with their fathers look quite interesting, although their character is rather pessimistic. The children address more positive feelings than negative ones towards their fathers, and in return receive from them more statements which are

negative in their content. The children perceive the feelings of their fathers' showed towards them as not fully reciprocal.

The collocation of the emotions expressed and received by the children from the family members, i.e. the so-called motional balance shows that the emotions presented by the children towards their family members are generally similar to those directed by them towards the children. Only in the relations with their fathers and siblings, a negative emotional balance, to some extent, can be observed; namely, the children show more positive feelings than they receive from the family members themselves. In the relation to other family members, an equivalent emotional balance is observed.

The examined children with ICP bestow the strongest positive feelings on their mothers, as well as they perceive the attitude of their mothers towards them as definitely more positive than the attitude presented by their fathers. A significant number of research conducted not only in our country prove that the children prefer the attitude represented by their mother<sup>6</sup>. It shall be assumed her that the identification model with a mother is closer to the children of a younger school age.

The results of the research showed the prevalence of the positive feelings, particularly showed by the children towards the family members. A number of statements with a negative tinge proves the existence of a realistic portrait of a family life in the perception of the examined children with infantile cerebral palsy. The families of the examined children with ICP receive the support of the specialists from three leading medical centres; however, the negative emotional balance, although not very significant, in the relations between the children and their fathers and siblings shows that not all family members take advantage of this help.

Quoting after Maciarz<sup>7</sup>, the researcher who presents the proposals referring to the support provision for the chronically ill children, the character of supportive activities offered to the families of the children with ICP shall be defined; namely, in refers to the relieve from the obligations of providing care to the children, especially with regard to their mothers, the increase in the participation of the support personnel in the care and the facilitation; it also includes the psychological support

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<sup>6</sup> Rembowski J., Postawy uczuciowe dzieci wobec dorosłych członków rodziny {w:} Rodzina i dziecko, red. M. Ziemska, Warszawa 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Maciarz A., Psychoemocjonalne i wychowawcze problemy dzieci przewlekle chorych, Kraków 2001.

provided to the parents and the siblings which allows them to preserve or to regain their emotional balance, as well as to facilitate mutual assistance among the parents and to extend this type of support with some organized forms of help for the siblings from various families, to provide the support by social and service means, as well as by to guarantee the physiotherapy support.

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