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The Role of Grandfathers and Grandmothers in Families with Disabled Children¹

The relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are of special nature and they play a significant role in the lives of both. Grandparents are the ones who give children unconditional acceptance and love. Grandchildren appreciate their grandparents especially for their interest, care and the fact that they dedicate them all their time. In grandchildren's perception, grandparents are those family members they can always rely on in difficult moments and who create an atmosphere of mutual understanding, warmth and safety. Grandparents, in turn, see in grandchildren continuation of their own existence, continuation of family and, very often, perceive them as the only ones who offer them disinterested love. Grandchildren are for their grandparents a source of joy and happiness and a kind of reward for the effort of bringing up their own children. Therefore, they introduce their grandchildren to the world around them and explain its mysteries with great involvement and patience.

Grandparents assume their roles gradually. A grandmother takes on her role earlier, making use of her experience as a mother. Typical features of grandmother's role are as follows: consideration, constant readiness to help, cheerfulness, goodness and friendliness. Grandmother's presence increases a feeling of security in family members, is conducive to the atmosphere of peace and joy. It is grandmother that passes on family traditions and maintains the cult of family. She teaches grandchildren the importance of work and thrift and the necessity to abide by moral and ethical principles; she passes on the knowledge of the role of a woman in family and society (B. Małecka 1997). Thanks to grandmother's presence and help it is much easier to organize free time, plan holidays, prepare family celebrations or religious festivals.

Grandfather's role is different. In his relationships with grandchildren doing different things together plays an important role. During this time, grandfather passes on his knowledge of family and country history. Usually, his stories concern events in which he participated

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himself. Grandfather's behaviour constitutes a source of information on how to behave in different everyday situations. A strong, long-lasting emotional relationship with grandfather is especially important as regards boy's psychic development. It facilitates the development in grandson of the concept of the world, family and one's own future social roles of husband and father (M. Chmielewska 2002).

The observations presented above refer to the relationships between grandparents and normally developing grandchildren. The situation of grandparents who have disabled grandchildren is much more complicated.

Grandparents who learn that their grandchild has been diagnosed with a disability and their development will not be correct experience a great emotional shock. It happens so because grandparents create an image of their unborn grandchild and they have certain plans and hopes related to this image. Following a diagnosis of disability in their grandchild, they have to give up their dreams. They have to go a long and painful way, at the beginning of which is the terrifying awareness that their dream of having a healthy grandchild has not come true and at the end is the acceptance of disability and of the grandchild the way they are. This way is described in literature as "the period of mourning" (S. Stengel-Rutkowski, S. Anderlik 2004). Characteristic feelings during this period are: pain, pity, despair, fear, helplessness, feeling of loss, lack of hope. It must be mentioned that grandparents' emotional problems are different from parents' problems. Grandparents suffer because of both the tragedy that affected their grandchild and the tragedy of their child (D. Marsh 1992). Parents, in turn, despair not only because of their child's disability but they are worried whether their parents and in-laws will accept the grandchild.

Only after getting over this period of mourning, can grandparents start to efficiently help their children and grandchildren. The breakthrough is the acceptance of the child the way they are, not the way they were supposed to be. It is well illustrated by the statement of one of grandmothers: "*And although the sorrow was gone and then returned and I never felt that I had got rid of it forever, I finally understood that you do not have to be 'perfect' to be a worthy person and that every child can be taught something*" (J. Lavin 2001, p. 43). The acceptance of the grandchild is a breakthrough moment because grandparents stop concentrating exclusively on the grandchild's difficulties and limitations and start to notice their potentials and achievements.

L. Coutts- Clarke (2002) examined 70 grandparents and 115 parents of disabled children with such disabilities as: epilepsy, Down's syndrome, intellectual deficiency, speech disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, vision and hearing impairments. In 46% of

the children examined two, three or even four disabilities were observed. The average age of the subjects was 7 years and 9 months. The author concluded that grandparents eagerly help parents in looking after a disabled grandchild and assist them in their upbringing. Grandparents often assume the role of caring parents. They hug grandchildren, take care of them (for example, they feed, bathe and dress them), look after them and help if there is such a need. In addition, they teach the grandchild how to do different activities, give advice, praise, give presents, read fairy tales and stories. Doing so, they satisfy the grandchild's basic needs: of love and safety. They shape in them the belief in their own potential and trust towards the world and other people.

Another role played by grandparents in the relationships with a disabled grandchild is that of wise companions. Grandparents and grandchildren do a number of things together: they prepare meals, tidy, work in the garden, celebrate family events, play, watch television, go for walks, do the shopping, go to church, take care of pets. These activities create numerous opportunities to have conversations. Their subjects usually concern what the grandfather (grandmother) or grandchild has been doing recently and what each of them is going to do in the nearest future. Some of these conversations concern the family and country history (L. Coutts-Clarke 2002). Acting as wise companions, grandparents satisfy their grandchildren's needs, such as: curiosity, eagerness to play, explore and experiment, which strengthens their being active in different fields (A. Brzezińska 2001).

Grandparents can be excellent teachers to their grandchildren. A grandmother and grandfather usually have much more patience than parents and they can be persuaded to tell long stories, read books, play games. They can repeat the same stories many times and each time these are fascinating and arousing imagination of their grandchildren. Grandparents find time not only to tell stories or fairy tales but also to do DIY together with grandchildren, make ornaments for Christmas tree, bake cakes, work in the garden and do many other activities. Grandparents, as partners in different forms of activity, teach their grandchildren many practical skills and principles of behavior needed in everyday life. They show their grandchildren how a given task should be done, wait until it is repeated and are really happy when it is performed correctly. If the grandchild faces difficulty, then grandparents patiently give instructions and praise them for any little progress. Generally speaking, activities done together with grandparents enrich grandchildren with experiences stimulating their psychic development.

In their relationships with grandchildren, grandparents apply the so called "circumstance teaching strategies" (S. Szuman 1985). They make use of every single opportunity to inform

the grandchild about something, help to understand what has been ununderstandable, teach them something on a particular example. Sometimes, grandparents make use of more elaborated teaching strategies, a good example of which are the so-called “grandmother’s ways” helping to learn poems by heart (E. Gruszczyk – Kolaczyńska, E. Zielińska 2005).

Another extremely important kind of help offered by grandparents to their disabled grandchildren and their families is emotional support. Grandparents are loving persons with whom one can discuss any topic openly, who can listen, understand and offer encouragement. The essence of the support offered by grandparents is being together, developing emotional bonds, sharing feelings and experiences. What grandparents actually do is less important than their spiritual presence. For example, many parents feel relief being aware that grandparents pray for them and their children (M. Baranowski, G. Schilmoeller 1999). Grandmothers, and also grandfathers, can offer emotional support because they have the so-called practical wisdom. They can distinguish important matters from less important ones, make right choices, approach the inevitable with calm. “This practical wisdom of grandparents is a valuable gift for every family and each of its members but in the case of a family experiencing difficulties connected with the child’s disability, it is simply invaluable” (E. Muszyńska 1998, p. 2).

Emotional support is especially needed by those mothers who concentrate solely on the negative aspects of the child’s functioning and focus primarily on the deficits. A mother who is focused on what the child cannot do needs somebody who would show her the so-called “strong points” of the child. It can be a grandmother or grandfather who can notice the child’s strengths and achievements, even the smallest ones. It is possible because grandparents, having come to terms after a period of mourning, give the grandchild their unconditional acceptance and create an environment in which the child can exhibit their full potential.

Emotional support offered by grandparents positively affects parents’ comfort and existence. This refers especially to fathers². Calmness, sensibility, cheerfulness significantly improve the atmosphere of family life. Parents feel more competent and relaxed. They establish contacts with children more often and are more willing to do different activities together. Their educational efforts are richer, better adapted to the child’s potential. In result, the child feels more loved and safer. The child more willingly participates in different forms

² This phenomenon has been proved empirically although its case is unclear (L. Coutts-Clarke 2002). Possibly, grandfathers undertake tasks that usually belong to fathers, but which fathers do not because of too much stress. One of such tasks is offering emotional support to mother.

of activity, which is conducive to their development. Thus, it can be said that grandparents' emotional support is beneficial to both parents and the disabled child.

Help in taking care of disabled grandchildren is a significant kind of support offered by grandparents. They often help parents in everyday house chores, such as: cooking, tidying, washing, doing shopping. They take grandchildren to nursery school or school and pick them up after classes. Grandparents who live in the vicinity take grandchildren to their homes for afternoons or weekends whereas grandparents who live far away invite grandchildren, also with their parents, for weekends, winter or summer holidays. It happens that grandparents take grandchildren to rehabilitation and therapy, stay in touch with specialists. They help parents in settling up different matters in governmental offices and institutions. They get important information necessary to arrange effective help, for example addresses of medical centers, educational institutions, organizations and associations. Sometimes, grandparents do with grandchildren rehabilitation exercises recommended by specialists and often they manage to achieve significant effects.

Material support is also of utter importance. Grandparents buy grandchildren clothes, nutritious food, medication, toys, rehabilitation aids. Sometimes they give or lend money to parents if they are in a difficult financial situation, need money for the child's operation, purchase of expensive medication or rehabilitation equipment. Material support indicates great involvement on the part of grandparents, especially if we take into account that many of them do not have any savings and live on a very low pension or disability pension.

Mutual relationships are beneficial not only to disabled grandchildren but also to grandparents. They are involved, feel needed, have an opportunity to be in touch with other people, do not feel lonely. One of grandfathers expressed it this way: *"Thanks to my grandchild we had an opportunity to learn many activities which we had never done before. Accompanying him during his visits to specialists and at therapeutic activities, we met really wonderful people. We have made friends with many of them"* (J. Lavin 2001, p. 19). Above all, however, grandparents derive joy and satisfaction observing the development of a disabled grandchild. This thesis is well illustrated by a statement made by grandmother of a four-year-old boy suffering from poor eyesight, epilepsy and autism: *"When my grandchild turned two, his body was completely limp. It seemed that he would never be able to sit on his own. Now, he not only walks but even runs up and down the stairs. No grandparent of an able child will understand the joy and pride we feel watching this extraordinary success of our grandson"* (J. Lavin 2001, p. 27). It is worth adding that contacts with a disabled grandchild may cause positive changes grandparents' system of values and their outlook on life.

Grandmother of a five-year-old boy with a complex disability expressed it this way: *“Until I had this little boy in my life, I felt sorry for people with disabilities. I was always thanking God we are lucky. Now I look at people totally differently. Kyle is such a wonderful little boy. There is something special in everything that he works so hard at doing”* (L. Coutts- Clarke 2002, p. 38).

Undoubtedly, grandparents are special persons to disabled grandchildren. As M. Baranowski (1982) emphasizes, the relationships with grandparents affect the child’s development in a different way than the relationships with other family members. Grandparents’ uniqueness results from their special ability “to be together” with the grandchild, to accompany them in the moments of sadness and happiness, to cherish them with love and understanding. This ability enables building a healing bond, whose essence lies in the fact that in the relationships with grandparents grandchildren reveal their full potential, which grandparents stimulate and develop. It is that kind of support that the grandchild receives neither from other family members nor from specialists.

It must be emphasized that grandparents help grandchildren both directly, in their dealings with them, and indirectly, by helping their parents. The support provided by grandparents enhances the functioning of parents, especially their emotional state. In result, they can better perform their parental duties. This leads to the better functioning of the child and also grandparents. These positive interactions account for the best possible functioning of the whole family. But this healing process starts with grandparents and it is them who constitute its key component. That is why it is so important not to forget about grandparents while developing programmes aimed to assist families with disabled children and to provide them with proper training and ensure their participation in support groups.

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