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## **From Subjectivity to Sexuality of Intellectually Disabled Person**

When rising an issue of sexuality of intellectually disabled persons, one should concentrate on basics of subjectivity of a person. The recent times can be described as a specific Babel Tower - place where concepts of a human nature and truth about human being are mixed. The concepts connected with freedom, laws of nature, human rights are mixed up with various degenerations, together with refusal of fundamental rights of those who are the weakest. The basic right is a right to life, life in full dignity. 'This dignity of intellectually disabled person, based on a solid foundation of its nature as a human being, desired by God, is not depreciated even by serious disability and is not limited by difficulties of this person, which can occurs in communication with other people. This dignity cannot be renounced or lost; no one can be deprived of it, because it is constant till last moments of person's life.'<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing the fundamental right to life of disabled person, other rights credited to every person, independently of it's mental or physical conditions, should be also recognized. With reference to intellectually disabled persons, the objective treating of this group dominates. This enables to refuse them the right to have needs due to every adult person. Numerous differences in approach toward this issue occur in relation with different world outlook, from positivistic outlook, through liberal, to Christian approach.

Next factor which influence the shape of sexuality is variety of substantive approaches. Several intellectual orientations can be distinguished here. The first one has de-sexual character and is strictly connected with restrictive approach. It is deemed, that mental disability determines the weakening of psychosexual development. Therefore, every symptom of sexual interest or behavior must be extinguished, after it occurs, one should punish person for that or scare it (e.g. masturbation cause coming off of genitals, kisses lead to pregnancy, and caressing intimate places cause their decay).<sup>2</sup>

Next orientation has a tolerant character (resulting from moral relativism). It is claimed that sexual sphere of persons with intellectual disability is the only available one,

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<sup>1</sup> Conclusions from international congres, organised by Pontifical Council for the Family, 2 - 4.12.1999, Vatican, <http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka>.

<sup>2</sup> Loebel W., Nowak-Lipińska K., *Między zagrożeniem a wyzwaniem. Paradygmat zignorowany w wychowaniu osób niepełnosprawnych*, [in:] Edukacja i Dialog 1997, nr 7.

because these persons are deprived from perception of intellectual, esthetical and emotional character. Therefore, we must take advantage of all medical – technical achievements, or employ persons who will help to achieve sexual sensations. An example is Dutch Association for Alternative Contacts.<sup>3</sup> Next trend has a moderate character, a humanistic approach. Sexuality is widely understood, the attention is drawn to sphere of mental experiences. Therefore, the ability to start a family and having one's own children by intellectually disabled persons is possible. However the possibility of homosexual relationships is also allowed. Persons, despite of their level of disability has an opportunity for realization of their own sexuality. In this spirit many persons start families (often families which need support). Next orientation is sublimation – sexual one, which assume that sexual behaviors are the form of giving vent to pent-up frustrations connected with negative experiences or emotional deprivation. Getting married is not a necessity here. The attention is rather paid to spiritual sphere, growing up in God's gifts.

Starting from restrictive, through procreation approach, to aspect of living this sphere as an element of enriching emotional and spiritual life, we can perceive various approaches toward satisfying or extinguishing the sexual sphere at mentally disabled persons. This approach is narrowing down that issue. Every human being has attributed particular sexuality to oneself, which determines further development as a man or a woman. The consequence of it, is discovering oneself, as well as other person in aspect of emotional and sexual life. This discovering happens through upbringing, but upbringing which is responsible, fulfilled with fragility and warmth, and which leads to emotional maturity, living one's own sexuality. The way leading toward this, is both: understanding and experiencing one's own sexuality, as well as perceiving other person's same aspects. This kind of upbringing is something more than handbook or training film including guidelines 'what and how' one should do. That upbringing should be understood as a constant assistance given to intellectually disabled person, in process of living one's own sexuality, understanding one's own need, creating bonds of emotions based on mutual trust.

Every child is a good observer of everything what happens around it. It is possible, that a child with intellectual disability is not always able to estimate some actions objectively, but surely - allocates emotional sphere to them. A child sees and perceives relations between mother and father. Sexual education is not conducted anonymously, it is always linked up with certain patterns. The way father treats mother is a pattern for a boy, and the pattern of

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<sup>3</sup> Talko L., *Dwa tysiące kontaktów*, [in:] *Gazeta Wyborcza – Magazyn* 2000, nr 9 (365).

femininity for a girl is her own mother or grandmother. Disabled person will treat these patterns as applicable ones. If these patterns are fulfilled with love and respect, we don't have to worry about sphere of sexuality in adult life of these persons. They will discover and cultivate the features subscribed to their sexuality.

'Family gives a sense of safety to a child, implements the idea of right and evil, shows the worth of existence in world, shows the happiness to it, which is the source of given and received love...This is the anthropological «code» of a family. Therefore, family cannot renounce the responsibility and shouldn't allow anybody else – educator, public officer, employers of health service and social service – to take its place in a process of upbringing of disabled child.'<sup>4</sup> Full, sincere and easy to understand information on a subject of maturing and sexuality should be obtainable, not only as a sole information (as a curiosity), but as a part of a bond between children, young people and persons to which they have trust, and which they know well.

Why parent has to take care of upbringing of intellectually disabled child? There are several reasons. The first one was previously explained – family as a natural upbringing environment. The second reason is a good parent's knowledge of one's own child. Parent knows, what, when and in which way should be passed on to a child, better than anyone else. Possibly there would be a need to contact somebody more experienced (psychologist, sexologist, maybe with more experienced parent). At certain moment experts becomes a peculiar intermediary in this delicate issue - intimate life. 'The intermediary should distinguish oneself with kindness and delicacy in every sphere of sexual matters. There is so much suffering here, disappointment and dissonances, especially at young people. Too rigorous bans and punishments can lead to a feeling of guilt, anxiety, inhibitions, secret satisfaction of sexual needs, erotic dreams. The mystery of a human being and it's body needs lot of respect. The intermediary don't have to know everything. Everyone should have one's own, untouched, uncontrolled private area. The principle stays the same: create a bond based on trust, in which word is not limited in any way, in which fear is gradually disappearing. Creation of that bond needs a lot of time.'<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to find responsible intermediaries. It can be a parent, as well as other friendly person, teacher or therapist. There is a danger, that parent will try to burden one's own child with his unrealized ambitions, convictions or his taboo or liberated attitude. The similar problem can occur with guardians. They can transfer their own experiences to a child.

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<sup>4</sup> Conclusions from international congress, organised by Pontifical Council for the Family.

<sup>5</sup> Vanier J., *Wychowanie uczuciowe i seksualne*, [in:] Światło i Cienie 2001, nr 2.

'Performing certain power and applying bans in sphere of sexuality seems to be very difficult. Every tutor, intermediary has own difficulties and anxieties in this sphere, every each of them leads one's own fight... It is so difficult to keep objectivity in sphere of sexuality. It is so easy to allocate somebody else's one's own fight and anxiety. If somebody desire to live as a person - 'liberated from superstitions' in this sphere, it is probable that he/she will encourage others to accept similar attitude, not to help them in development, but to justify oneself and prove that he is right. If somebody don't want to set one's sexuality in order, he/she cannot act in truth before other persons' sexuality. The lack of confidence in one's own development in this sphere diminishes trust in others' development.'<sup>6</sup> This happens always. Every each of us has experienced and verified that. The difference is that intellectually disabled persons has worse ability to independently verify observed contents or patterns. These persons generally has no intellectual abilities to draw own conclusions, so that these persons are able to make conscious and responsible decision (for oneself and partner).

Often, the sphere of sexual education is shifted to contemporary media, mainly TV, internet or magazines. Nowadays, sex is an everywhere-topic, it is showed everywhere. Human's sexuality became a product, which is well-sold in various forms. Person with intellectual disability is under strong influence of these media, uses them without criticism. We can surely say, that this form of education often serves as a mean of exciting libido, seeing sexual act, not as an expression of love, but as a violence, often as various deviations. Often, what is seen, is often repeated without criticism by intellectually disabled persons. Without any help of relatives, intermediary, without conversation and explanation they cannot manage with the problem. Furthermore, they are often wounded, they feel and know that they are different. 'Mass media can contribute to disabled child's development in a very positive way, making it's formation easier and incorporate into family life, afterwards into social life. However, this influence mainly depends on how these media are used in certain family. If there is no habit of program selection in family, these programs can have a negative influence on every family member, mostly on disabled child'.<sup>7</sup>

In process of education of intellectually disabled child one should make a basic assumption - the aim is not to prevent sexual activity and protect pupils from it, but to teach them how to use this sphere, as a sphere which gives ability to experience happiness and satisfaction in social meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> Vanier J., *Wychowanie uczuciowe i seksualne*, [in:] Światło i Cienie 2001, nr 2.

<sup>7</sup> Conclusions from international congress, organised by Pontifical Council for the Family.

‘When disabled child is born, it’s sex is moved to the background. It’s surrounding has rehabilitation approach – more important than visiting a sexologist is meeting with speech therapist or masseur...If parents make child do it’s work for it in every sphere, limit it’s contact with peers, they contribute to it’s disability. This child doesn’t pass through sexual behavior training, which starts in kindergarten – boys fights with girls, falls in love, picks up, flirt. Disabled children has educational and development-stimulation toys, not these presenting sex roles: dolls, teddy bears, small cars. The same tendency occurs in clothing – parents wear their children in sporty clothes, that is non-sexual way...The particular role of a father is to give a girl a sense, that she is pretty, attractive, wonderful woman. That is even more important in case of disabled girls. These girls listens only: «You’re so brave», and barely never: «You’re beautiful!».’<sup>8</sup>

The duty of guardians is to predict things that intellectually disabled person is not able to predict. ‘Emotional and sexual upbringing of intellectually disabled children should be started very early, because one of it’s stages is discovering of one’s own body. Sexual upbringing of intellectually disabled children starts from teaching how to behave in relations with others, how to respect others, their privacy and body.’<sup>9</sup>

There should be pedagogical thought-out answer for occurring questions and behaviors, that answer should be adjusted to intellectual abilities of a child, so that it would be able to acquire obtained information or copy behavior. There should be clearly emphasized, that intellectually disabled person is able to have real emotional and sexual life within it’s capacities to create relationships with other person. These predispositions needs feedback, depending on the level of disability, level of personal development and boundaries of self-confidence. ‘It is crucial to teach these children how to control their behavior and how to make responsible choices. It is important that parents can listen to their disabled children, at the same time giving them expression of one’s own desire of friendship and love. On the other hand, it is obvious that one should make a child aware of real obstacles, that can come up from less or more serious impairment, and make family projects difficult.’<sup>10</sup> ‘Protected against, and not allowed to make serious decision, disabled child cannot learn about other’s feelings and needs. It doesn’t refer

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<sup>8</sup> *Niewidzialne lubią się kochać. O seksualności niepełnosprawnych*, Zawadzka A., rozmawia z doktor Długołęcką A. i Werenc A., *Gazeta Wyborcza*, W. O., 2008, nr 18, s. 62-3.

<sup>9</sup> Conclusions from international congress, organised by Pontifical Council for the Family.

<sup>10</sup> Conclusions from international congress, organised by Pontifical Council for the Family.

to actual social contacts with other people. It expects permanent awareness and is confused, even hurt, when it doesn't receive this.'<sup>11</sup>

'The society is not interested in creating conditions for satisfying above mentioned needs for intellectually disabled persons. The problem of sexuality and need of undertaking family and marital roles is still unsolved. The consequence of this state of affairs is, among others, refusal to accept rights of profound intellectually disabled persons' to start a family or erotic behaviors.'<sup>12</sup> Nowadays In Poland disabled persons are not perceived as sexual deviants, but we are far away of treating them equally in this sphere. There is still division between 'us' and 'them'. Us – not – disabled, who organize world, knowing who and why may need something, and 'they' who need assistance. We solve problem, without asking those who are interested about their opinion. Maybe one should reconsider, whether this social group want a full unification with us, maybe they want to be themselves in their own circle, finding their adulthood. Person can be adult in society, but society has to allow to do that.

'Diversity that comes out from disability may become an integral part of unique identity. Relatives, teachers, friends, entire society should help in that. It is not crucial to do the same things as others do by disabled person, but to do what is really good for it: to use one's own richness better, to faithfully realize one's own human and supernatural vocation... intellectually disabled persons needs – possibly more than other sick persons – our awareness and kindness, love and understanding: one should not leave them alone, to make them face a difficult task - the life.'<sup>13</sup> Among parents and guardians often arises a question: Why so often intellectually disabled person is deprived of right to have sex. I think nobody deprive them of that right, but tends to make them think for them. The problem arises in moment of bearing consequences for the decision of thinking for that person. Here we face the important dimension of adulthood, which is bearing responsibility of results of this behaviors and decisions.

Experience indicates that intellectually disabled person is not able to predict all of results of one's own decisions. When considering subjectivity and dignity of disabled person, one must have in mind, that every each of these persons is a challenge for every each of us, in every dimension of life, including sexual life.

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<sup>11</sup> Bready G., *Czynniki oddziałujące na rozwój osoby, życie seksualne i stosunki społeczne ludzi niepełnosprawnych we wczesnym okresie życia*, [in:] Światło i Cienie 2001, nr 2.

<sup>12</sup> Tylewska – Nowak B., *Dorosłość osób z głębszą niepełnosprawnością intelektualną – warto się zastanowić*, [in:] (red.), Żółkowska T., *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcja i rzeczywistość. Kontekst pedagogiki specjalnej*, Tom II, Szczecin 2007, s.346.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Paul II, *Ludzie najstarsi i najbardziej potrzebujący w życiu społeczeństwa* (Słowa skierowane do uczestników międzynarodowego sympozjum na temat 'Godności i praw osób z upośledzeniem umysłowym'), [in:] Światło i Cienie 2006, nr 2, s. 49

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