

The Family as an Agent in Children's Upbringing and Changes to the Conditions under which it Operates

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In developed societies, parents have the primary responsibility for their children's upbringing. This responsibility is the result of the historical and socio-cultural development of the family and society, and is embodied in legal and moral standards, traditions and other factors that go towards shaping conditions for the life of Man. This study is concerned with a number of changes that have accompanied family life in Czech society from the second half of the twentieth century onwards and that are becoming significant factors influencing trends in upbringing in the family environment.

Key words: *the function of the family in upbringing and socialisation; conditions of family life; socio-historic changes; new trends in family upbringing*

General starting points

Opinions on family upbringing, its importance, focus and its means of action have developed along with society, and have always been connected to a large degree with the overall orientation of the system of upbringing and education in any particular period in the life of society. If we compare, for example, certain views of family upbringing in this country in the nineteen fifties with those of the present day, we discover significant differences even in this relatively short period of time. At the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, one of the intentions of the socialist way of life was the engagement in employment of both parents and the idea that parents should leave a large part of the responsibility for the upbringing of their children to specialised institutions and take advantage of the time this gave them to educate themselves and devote themselves to public politics and hobby activities. A large number of institutions providing an upbringing for children and young people outside school hours were established during this period – after-school care centres, school clubs, schools providing all-day care, boarding schools, Young Pioneers centres, people's schools of art, cultural and civic centres, children's libraries and reading rooms,

children's cinemas and theatres, sports organisations and other facilities. This network of institutions was also expected to fulfil some of the tasks involved in family upbringing. To put it in different words, family upbringing was undervalued, and accompanied by an irregular system of leisure time activities. Evidence of this can also be found in the quantity of specialised papers and books of the time that considered one or other area of upbringing. The consequence of these efforts may be the impression (and this was the case among a certain section of the public) that families were less responsible for their children's upbringing.

The tendencies towards limiting the formative influence of the family were not merely the consequence of political and social changes in a certain part of Europe following the Second World War, but generally express themselves in those stages in the life of every society in which differentiation and individuality in family upbringing are seen as undesirable factors, particularly when confronted with plans for integration and uniformity within society as a whole. Examples illustrating the given features can be found not merely in modern history. Some of Plato's views supporting the formation and existence of a strong state may serve us here.¹ The given examples from the history of family upbringing have no other aim than to show the connection between society and the life of the family, which is also reflected in the attitudes to family upbringing held by society or particular social groups. If we returned to the second half of the last century and studied the indicated development of attitudes to family upbringing in Czechoslovakia, we would find that the official and, essentially, condescending viewpoint of family upbringing begins to change slowly at the beginning of the nineteen sixties. At this time, the experts draw ever-increasing attention to the fact that the family plays an irreplaceable role in bringing up children, as do schools and other educational institutions. The importance of this was expressed, in part, in the Act on the Family of 1963. And that was not all. For example, in many places around the world, including this country, efforts were also made to imitate, at least in part, the conditions of family life in certain institutions in which children are placed on a permanent basis or where they live long-term outside their original family. Examples of efforts of this kind can be found in the transformation of children's homes into children's homes of the family type with stable groups of "siblings" and carers or SOS villages with mothers or married couples looking after a permanent group of children of

¹ Plato (427–348 B.C.), in his writing *Republic*, considers, for example, in his thoughts on the proper form of a municipality, that the state should have complete control not merely of children's upbringing, but also of a number of other aspects of family life. See Platón (1921): *Ústava*. Praha: J. Laichter, pp. 187–189.

different ages and sexes in independent apartments or family houses. Society also began providing suitable married couples and families with far greater opportunities for the adoptive or foster care of children in substitute families. These facts, testifying to a gradual appreciation of the importance of family upbringing, may, however, on the basis of this brief outline, give the impression of fashions accompanying increased interest from the experts in family upbringing. We are of the belief that, under the social conditions in this country, a certain “renaissance” in the importance of family upbringing is no short-term affair, but may also be a more profound and qualified assessment of the causes of certain unfavourable phenomena in the behaviour of particular groups of children and young people. Increased interest in family upbringing can, in any case, be illustrated by the increased attention that began to be devoted to preparing adolescents for the tasks involved in marriage and parenthood in the period from the nineteen sixties to the nineteen eighties. The practical consequences of interest in matters relating to family upbringing can only be expected to be seen, as is always the case in the area of upbringing and education, after several decades have passed.

In developed societies, the family bears the principal responsibility for children’s upbringing. This responsibility is the result of historical and cultural traditions in the life of society and is embedded in its legal standards. The family bears the overall long-term consequences of its children’s upbringing. Schools and other formative institutions are always responsible for just a certain area of children’s upbringing, and even in these cases their partial responsibility is not entirely autonomous. Parents, for example, play a role in selecting educational institutions for their children, influence their relationship towards education in general, in certain cases pay school fees, have a significant influence on their children’s choice of occupation, and so on. Parents are gradually taking an ever-increasing interest in the quality and results of the educational and formative work of schools and formative non-school institutions.

A number of general conclusions may be made from the position of the family in respect of other agents acting on their children:

- a) parents are the most important people involved in bringing up their children; anyone else can merely supplement what the parents have achieved in terms of upbringing.
- b) the time devoted by parents to their children’s upbringing is not a value that will have a positive effect in and of itself. The action of this value depends on many factors of a cultural, moral and educational nature.
- c) parents are responsible not merely for their children’s upbringing in the family environment, but for their upbringing in general.

- d) the most important precondition to successful family upbringing is a good joint way of life for both parents and children alike.
- e) a good upbringing is comprised essentially of the organisation of valuable opportunities for children to establish contact with others, have experiences and engage in activities, and the responsibility for this organisation is carried, first and foremost, by their parents.
- f) indirect upbringing is generally more important than direct upbringing in the case of the family and other institutions providing free-time care. Providing an indirect upbringing means creating favourable conditions for children, i.e. the kind of conditions in which the experience obtained makes it possible to shape the characteristics of a moral, diligent and capable person.² Even at the present time, the given conclusions cannot be considered a matter of course or generally accepted norms in this country. In the approaches taken by parents to their children's upbringing, there are still trends originating from the historical contexts surviving from the past mentioned above, while new phenomena arising from the transformations that the life of our society has undergone are appearing alongside them.

Tendencies in the transformation of the contemporary family

The mutual interconnections of the existential links between family and society lead every society to attempt to achieve a certain level of cohesion between the interests of the family and those of society. Many researchers believe that European society, and with it the family, is passing from the industrial age to a post-industrial age in which traditional family bonds are losing their original importance. The post-industrial society (and family) is also characterised by a number of other features. For example, the most important legacy that parents can give their children is no longer considered property or social position, but education. The values most respected in this society are individual freedom, freedom of choice, personal development and self-realisation. Certain family competencies being gradually taken over by the state, state organisations and non-state institutions is also characteristic of a post-industrial society.³

² Author's note: in drawing up conclusions a–f, free use was made of the conclusions of Wolfgang Brezinka published in his monograph *Familie ist Zukunft*. See Brezinka, W. (1989): *Familie ist Zukunft*. Bonn: Bouvier.

³ Attention is drawn to certain of these changes and other changes with educational contexts by the authors already mentioned and others including, for example

The following trends have been appearing in advanced European countries in connection with family life in recent decades⁴:

- There has been an increase in the number of households headed by a single adult (usually the mother) and the number of people living on their own.

The Czech Republic is seeing a continual fall in the proportion of family households (according to the Czech Statistical Office, a family household is considered a heterosexual couple, no matter whether married or not, with or without children). In the middle of the last century, such households accounted for three quarters of all Czech households; today they account for just 55 %. There has, in contrast, been an extremely dynamic growth in the proportion of households comprised of a single person – from 16 % to 30 % in the same period. The proportion of households comprised of incomplete families (one parent with at least one child) has almost doubled from 8 % to 14 %.

- The number of young people living independently is on the increase.

Young men, either single or divorced, live alone most frequently in the Czech Republic. Only 16 % of women living independently are younger than 35 (the figure for men is 31 %). Young women living without a partner often have children (a child) and are less likely to comprise a household of one person living alone. The Czech statistics also record households in which children (a child) live with just one parent as an incomplete family. Around 15 % of the population of the Czech Republic lives in incomplete families. The head of these families is a woman in 85 % of cases, most usually a divorced woman. It is more common for incomplete families than for others to live with another family in a single apartment, predominantly with parents.

In this regard, Možný notes a specific intergenerational solidarity between parents, or sometimes just divorced mothers, and their divorced daughters, along with the existence of a strengthening subculture of families run by women for a second or third generation. Daughters growing up in families of this kind become socialised for this type of parenthood and are more likely to establish such families themselves. Mothers help daughters who have become single mothers with joint housing and housekeeping in the face of economic difficulties and,

Matoušek, O. – Kroftová, A. (1989): *Mládež a delikvence*. Praha: Portál; Možný, I. (2004): Česká rodina pozdní modernity: Nová podoba starého partnera a rivala školy. *Pedagogika*, 54, no. 4, pp. 309–325; De Singly, F. (1998): *Sociologie současné rodiny*. Praha: Portál.

⁴ In order to provide a more comprehensive picture, we attach factual data based on the findings of the Czech Statistical Office as part of the characteristics of individual trends.

frequently, problems with housing. Unsystematic observations by Možný indicate that the number of such families is on the increase.

- The increasing number of unmarried people living without children and the decline in the marriage rate.

This trend is also associated with the change in political and economic conditions since the beginning of the nineteen nineties. The opening up of society and the economy sharply increased the value of the lost opportunities that are inherent to early parenthood. People had new opportunities for travel and were able to go into business. University education became more widely available. The range of consumer opportunities grew, and consumer aspirations began to significantly exceed the actual possibilities open to the young. Young people began to put off marriage and parenthood, and the age at which women became mothers for the first time and the age of first marriages began to approach the historically usual age in the Czech Lands. The marriage rate among the unmarried fell sharply following the change to the political regime. In 1990, it amounted to 91 % among men, falling to 65 % in 2001. Among women, it fell from 96 % to 72 % in the same period.

Ivo Možný calls for caution in interpreting these trends, and believes that the marriage rate, for example, can be expected to increase somewhat, as indicated by the gently rising marriage rate in the age group of 25–30 year-olds since 2001. Research into people's attitudes has repeatedly shown that the majority of the youngest generation consider living within marriage to be the most appropriate kind of family. Life within marriage can be expected to be part of people's experience of life for more than two thirds, perhaps even four fifths, of today's young generation. This trend will, however, be countered by another trend for increasing unmarried cohabitation and a gradual change in its character.

- Changes in reproductive behaviour, the fall to the birth rate.

The birth rate in the Czech Republic initially fell sharply following the change of regime. It has now been more or less stable since the middle of the nineteen nineties, with around 90,000 children born a year instead of the usual 140,000. Czech families are now tending to choose a reproductive strategy focusing on one rather than two children, as was the case for western European families a generation earlier, and the number of families with more children is falling. According to Možný, the final fertility rate among the women of this generation is highly unlikely to be significantly higher than 1.2 children per woman. A clear warning can be seen here when comparing this figure with the "replacement fertility rate", i.e. a situation in which at least the same number of potential mothers are produced in the next generation, which amounts to 2.1

children per woman. The fact that education has a pronounced (negative) influence on the fertility rate among Czech women is significant for the future Czech population. For a number of generations now, the rule has been that the more educated a woman is, the more likely she is to have fewer children. Since the beginning of the nineteen nineties, Czech women have been putting off the birth of their first child, with the average age at which women become mothers for the first time rising by 2.5 years in the first ten years after the revolution. In 2001, the figure was 25.3, and it is continuing to rise. Ever-increasing numbers of young couples and young women no longer associate parenthood with marriage. Another significant change is the sharp increase in the proportion of children born outside marriage. In 2003, a quarter of all children were born to unmarried mothers. The proportion of children born to unmarried mothers is heavily dependent on their education, and this dependence strengthened throughout the nineteen nineties. 70 % of children of mothers with just primary education in the Czech Republic are born out of wedlock. The proportion of children born outside marriage falls regularly with each additional level of education achieved. Just 11 % of the children of mothers with a university education are born outside wedlock.

- The long-term fall in family stability.

A number of the significant bonds with which society held the family together as an intergenerational community or married couple have weakened with the onset of the modern age. According to Možný, the family has lost the connection of responsibility for the family assets, and the emphasis has begun to shift from economic capital to cultural capital, and this has taken over the role of the principal tool in status heredity. Marriage has gradually lost its sanctity and has been transformed into a civil contract. The two-generational non-local nuclear family has begun to break down ever more frequently to end in divorce and reorganise itself in repeated marriage. In connection with the divorce situation in the Czech Republic, it has been stated that 45 % of marriages entered into in the present day will end in divorce. To this oft-quoted figure, Možný adds that the chance of a stable family is not, however, so small as this forty-five percent probability of marital breakdown that can be inferred from the current divorce rate would suggest. A not inconsiderable proportion of those who get divorced, also remarry. Almost a third of marriages in this country are not the first marriage for at least one of those involved. Another significant fact is associated with this – in the years 1990–2000, more than 340,000 children lost one of their parents (generally their father) as a result of divorce. In view of the relatively large

probability of remarriage, however, the majority of these children grow up with their mother and a stepfather.⁵

A detailed look at the development of these trends in the Czech Republic (with comparison with trends in other European countries) is offered by the studies by I. Možný (2004) and L. Rabušic (2001).⁶ Up-to-date statistical data on individual years is published periodically by the Czech Statistical Office.

Conclusion

The majority of the trends mentioned also have an immediate effect on psychological and educational aspects of the family environment. From the viewpoint of the healthy development of the child, the natural structure of the family (consisting of the action of a mother, father, siblings and grandparents) and the internal (emotional) stability of the family are considered important educational and socialisation factors. The question remains as to what impact on the life of the family and society will be made by the more frequent occurrence of families with a single child, the family upbringing of stepchildren, the higher age of parents, etc. Specialists and psychologists are already considering the psychological aspects arising from these specific family constellations (see, for example, Sobotková, 2001; Matoušek – Kroftová, 1998).⁷ Adequate and systematic attention has yet to be devoted by educationalists to educational issues arising from these trends in family life in the Czech Republic, either in relation to the needs of children or in relation to their parents.

⁵ See Možný, I. (2004): *Česká rodina pozdní modernity: Nová podoba starého partnera a rivala školy*. *Pedagogika*, 54, 2004, no. 4, pp. 309–325.

⁶ Rabušic, L. (2001): *Kde všechny ty děti jsou?* Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství.

⁷ Matoušek, O. – Kroftová, A. (1998): *Mládež a delikvence*. Praha: Portál; Sobotková, I. (2001): *Psychologie rodiny*. Praha: Portál.