

## Tendencies Influencing the Educational Environment of a Child in the Contemporary Czech Family

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*The paper explores the changes, problems and factors influencing the family upbringing of schoolchildren in the conditions of living in the Czech society. In terms of the effect of the family environment, there are influences and factors determined by the demographical-psychological, material-economical and cultural-pedagogical components of family life. The outlined division above is one of the possible approaches to the systematisation of the influences of family environment that also determine close ties between its individual aspects.*

*Key words: family environment; child of school age; education-socialisation standards; educational constellations; research finding*

### Background

In developed societies, the family bears the primary responsibility for children's education. This responsibility stems from the historical and cultural life traditions of the society and is rooted in its legal standards. Schools and other educational institutions are always responsible for only a part of a child's education and not even this partial responsibility is up to their full autonomy. For instance, parents take part in the choice of educational institution for their child, influence the child's relationship with education in general, pay tuition when necessary, and play an important role in the child's choice of profession, etc. Home upbringing as opposed to school education is highly individual both in its own conditions as well as in the use of methods, means and forms of education while its natural central point is the way of life in the family. The school has at its disposal trained teachers, child care workers, specially adapted programmes and organisation of the process of education. Despite the family not meeting these criteria at the same level, it has other advantages and its influence on the child is certainly dominant, including the fact that it is the family

(and even the society) that bears the positive and negative consequences of children's education.

We will now focus in more detail on the factors in the family environment that form its educational framework. With some simplification, we grouped the related aspects of the family environment into three parts. In terms of the effect of the family environment, there are influences and factors determined by the demographical-psychological, material-economical and cultural-pedagogical components of family life. We do not believe that the order of importance that may be attributed to the group of family environment factors by their impact on children's education can be generally and clearly determined. Sources on education and psychology generally hold to be of greatest importance the non-material factors of family environment that form the foundation of the emotional and cultural family climate. A differentiated and analytical consideration of the impact of individual factors stemming from these aspects of family environment has a decisive influence only during pedagogical and psychological diagnosis of specific cases. However, the material-economical conditions of the life of a particular family must not be underestimated either. In our view, the demographical-psychological conditions of the family environment comprise mainly two areas:

- \* natural structure of a family and aspects determined by the influence of the father, mother, sibling and grandparent
- \* internal stability of a family as the basis for the emotional atmosphere of the family environment and the prerequisite for natural development of all dimensions of family life.

The material-economical factors of the family environment can be divided into several groups. These are mainly:

- \* employment of both father and mother and the influence of this on the children
- \* fitting the family and its activities into the economical macrosystem of the society
- \* individual consumption of the family as part of the family lifestyle and issues connected with this
- \* the influence of technology on the life of a family and some other issues, e.g. material conditions for children's hobbies, for their school preparation, etc.

The cultural-pedagogical aspect of family environment reflects, apart from the factors already mentioned, the following:

- \* value orientation and education of parents,

- \* the degree of pedagogisation of the family environment visible in e.g. the readiness of a family to raise children, in purposeful use of educational means in accordance with private and social intentions and in some other conditions that influence the children's formation of attitudes towards people, education, work, culture, politics and life in general.<sup>1</sup>

The borders between these groups of influences of the family environment cannot be clearly defined just as the list of the related groups of factors is not final. The outlined division above is one of the possible approaches to the systematisation of the influences of family environment that also determine close ties between its individual aspects.

Effective upbringing and socialisation of a child in a family assumes the existence of a certain standard content framework for these activities. These norms are not yet fixed in academic sources on education and psychology. They often take the shape of specific educational requirements organisationally subordinate to the traditional system of components of education. When raising children, the family must take to developing them in rational, physical, work, aesthetic, ... areas that take a specific shape in the different stages of the child's development. Z. Helus approached the definition of the standards of family education in a non-traditional way when he compiled a set of tasks that have a decisive importance for the healthy development of a child and his or her successful socialisation. He called these "Ten basic family functions". We only include a brief overview of these requirements without additional comments by the author:

1. The family satisfies the primary needs of a child in the early stages of life. This means satisfying biopsychological needs (food, drink, comfort, movement, etc.) as well as early psychological needs of safety, regularity, love and an appropriate amount and intensity of stimulation.
2. The family satisfies the very important need for organic belonging of a child: need for home, need to "have one's own person" (mother, father) and identify with him or her.
3. Since the earliest age, the family provides the child with action space, i.e. space for his or her active expression, self-realisation and cooperation with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Střelec, S. (2011). Rodina jako výchovný činitel. In S. Střelec (ed.) *Studie z teorie a metodiky výchovy II*. Brno: Masaryk University, pp. 121–122.

4. The family gradually brings the child towards a relationship with family property – household equipment, appliances, tools and objects.
5. The family strongly determines the earliest experience of oneself as a boy or girl. It enriches this self-concept with gender content and meaning.
6. The family provides the child with immediate models and examples.
7. The family initiates, reinforces and further develops a sense of duty, responsibility, considerateness and respect in the child as something self-evident, something that is an integral part of life.
8. The family grants the child opportunities to enter into inter-generational relationships and thus gain access to a deeper understanding of people of a different age, nature or position.
9. It is by means of parents, grandparents, older siblings, relatives and friends that the family gives the child an idea of the broader surroundings, the society and the world.
10. To both children and adults, the family is an environment where they can confide in others, expect to be heard or given advice and help.<sup>2</sup>

A set of these tasks creates a general idea of a family that, in relation to a child, is dubbed a functional one. During diagnostic classification of families into degrees of functionality, however, there are other criteria that matter. For instance, one of the possibilities that has recently become a part of the standard social-paediatric family diagnostics in the Czech Republic is the definition of four degrees of its functionality according to J. Dunovský as follows:

- functional family – cohesive, able to provide good development and prosperity to the child
- problematic family – with occurrences of faults in some of the functions that do not seriously endanger the family system and the child's development within it. The family is able to address these issues on its own or with the help of others
- dysfunctional family – with more serious faults of some or all functions of a family that pose an immediate danger to the family as a whole and especially to child development; this family needs continuous specialist help
- non-functional family – with faults of such severe extent and intensity that the family fails to fulfil its basic purpose. It is a serious harm to a child or it is even a risk to his or her existence; a solution is placing the child in foster care.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Helus, Z. (2007). *Sociální psychologie pro pedagogy*. Praha: Grada, pp. 149–151.

<sup>3</sup> Dunovský, J. et al. (1999). *Sociální pediatrie*. Praha: Grada, p. 45.

## Educational constellations in the family environment

Many scholars believe that the European society as well as the family are undergoing a transition from the industrial period to the post-industrial – neoliberal one in which the traditional family ties lose their meaning. There are new aspects to family life. For instance, the most important parental legacy is often no longer considered to be wealth or social position but education. The highest values in this society are individual freedom, availability of choice, personal development and self-realisation. Another characteristic point of a post-industrial (neoliberal) society is the gradual adopting of some family competencies by the state, its organisations or non-government institutions – “the state quietly becomes a massive foster family of all citizens”.<sup>4</sup>

In connection with family life in developed European countries there have been the following trends in the past decades:

- \* decrease in number of marriages and birth rate
- \* increase in the age at which people enter into their first marriage
- \* increased number of single-parent families
- \* increase in the number of households made up of one person
- \* increase in the number of people who have children together without being officially married
- \* increasing number of people living together unmarried and without children
- \* constantly increasing divorce rate
- \* decreasing number of people who re-marry after divorce...

I. Možný and L. Rabušic offer a detailed insight into the development of these tendencies in the Czech Republic (including a comparison with other European countries).<sup>5</sup> Current statistical data for each year is published periodically by the Czech Statistical Office. Most of the above-mentioned tendencies are also directly related to psychological and educational aspects of the family environment. Socialisation and educational factors such as natural family structure (involving the influence of the mother, father, siblings and grandparents) and internal (emotional) family stability are considered important in terms of healthy child development. The question remains how family life and society in general become influenced by a more frequent occurrence of one-child

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<sup>4</sup> Matoušek, O. – Křoftová, A. (1998). *Mládež a delikvence*. Praha: Portál, pp. 39–41.

<sup>5</sup> Možný, I. (2006). *Rodina a společnost*. Praha: Slon. Rabušic, L. (2001). *Kde všechny ty děti jsou?* Praha: Slon.

families, children without siblings, upbringing of step-children, higher age of parents, etc. Psychologists have been studying the aspects determined by these specific family circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Adequate and systematic attention of educators focused on educational questions related to these trends of family life is still fairly rare in the Czech Republic both in terms of the needs of children and of parents. The foundations for further pedagogical research may be findings obtained by some researchers that have been made public as framework characteristics. These findings are mostly related to faults in bringing up children. For instance, L. Šulová presents four categories of parents with serious shortcomings in the way they raise their child, i.e.:

- \* the parents are unable to take care of their children (separation, illness,...),
- \* the parents lack the skills to raise a child,
- \* the parents do not want to take care of their child,
- \* the parents take excessive care of the child.<sup>7</sup>

Z. Helus has also been dealing with various characteristics of the most frequent types of problematic families and has identified the following: immature family, overloaded family, ambitious family, perfectionist family, authoritarian family, spoiling family, liberal and improvising family, postponing family and dissociated family.<sup>8</sup>

Another example of a systemising approach towards families with dysfunctional properties is an outline by J. Kurčák. From his overview we include:

- asymmetrical family (father, mother and one child in alliance against another child/other children),
- generation gap (strong ties between the father and mother – the child/children are strongly marginalised),
- uncommitted family (family with relationships of indifference, without bonds and family cohesion),
- disintegrated family (chaotic relationships, conflict, absence of cohesion, hostility in the family, none of the family members feels responsibility, power distribution is scattered),
- schismatic family (two alliances, one child siding with the father, other with the mother, or father in alliance with daughter and mother with son),

<sup>6</sup> Viz například Sobotková, I. (2001). *Psychologie rodiny*. Praha: Portál.

<sup>7</sup> Šulová, L. (2004). *Raný psychický vývoj dítěte*. Praha: Karolinum.

<sup>8</sup> Helus, Z. (2007). *Sociální psychologie pro pedagogy*. Praha: Grada, pp. 153–163.

- family with unclear intergenerational boundaries (children are often manipulated into inappropriate roles, also parents sometimes stylise themselves into “friend” roles, effort to erase age differences, to stylise oneself into younger roles),
- externally integrated family (immature parents who are dependent on the social and financial support of their original families and the social services, especially young families),
- socially isolated family (excessive cohesion in the family, severed contact with the outside world for fear of risks posed by society, rejection of external intervention, hazardous climate for children),
- repressive family (anxiously neurotic family, perfectionist; family that rejects venting of negative feelings which then may transform into various somatic or psychological symptoms. Blocked up emotions become the biggest problem).<sup>9</sup>

In connection with the characteristics of organisation of parental roles, we see three fitting models of the division of roles in the family, as presented by H. Maříková:

1. The most widespread model can be characterised as follows: “most is up to the woman”. Although men do take part in taking care of the child, in this model they act as a helper to the woman (mother) instead of an equal partner. They only actively engage when necessary or when they want to; they have time. To the children, they are not seen as those who are in charge of their free time. This type of father typically holds a traditional opinion on the mother’s role (according to them care of children is mainly a mother’s task). This type of father is typically a transition between the traditional type and a so-called new father.
2. Some families still employ the sort of model of child care that can be characterised: “everything is up to the woman”. She spends most time with the children, devotes the most attention, takes care of them daily and organises their free time. The main portion of responsibility for the children’s upbringing lies with the woman. The mother finds herself in a role of the most important person in the children’s life. Men – fathers represent in this family model the traditional father who has two versions. The first type known from the past is not very involved in the family life, even though there are no objective reasons for this. The second type is a new version, i.e. new traditional fathers for whom their profession and success (they run their own business or work in

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<sup>9</sup> Kučírek, J. (2014). Sociální systém rodina: geneze patologie. In T. Raszaková (ed.) *Acta sociopatologica I*. Hradec Králové: Gaudeamus, pp. 88–111.

management positions) are primary. They compensate their lack of time with the family by providing great financial support which allows the women not to work.

3. The least common model is a partner model where the parents have a relatively equal share in taking care of children. This does not necessarily mean that both do the same thing (even though it is possible); each parent takes care of the child according to his or her own possibilities and time. In this model, men are convinced that a man should take an active part in taking care of children and in running the household and they live according to this.<sup>10</sup>

The axiological basis of family education is considered its natural foundation. An outline of the concepts of parent autonomy in relation to intergenerational value transfer (according to I. Možný) is an inspiring starting point for research into value orientation in the family environment. There are the following varieties:

1. The democratic approach is a modification of the traditional one; it also involves the duty to adhere to the parents' values; however, it also admits space for discussion about other values. Children do not have to be made to accept the value of parents; they must internalise them as their own without pressure.
2. The moderate liberal concept presumes the right of parents to aim for the child to adopt their value system; however, they support the child's free exposure to other value systems at an appropriate age.
3. In the fully liberal concept of parent autonomy it is up to the child what values he or she chooses; the parents only protect the child from influences that may limit the child's choice. This concept opens the space for dynamic development of the child's personality; on the other hand its thorough application loosens the family ties and reduces inter-generational understanding.<sup>11</sup>

### **Cooperation of parents with their children's teachers**

Moving on from these reflections related to the family microclimate, we will now address tendencies reaching beyond the family environment that influence relationships between the family and school (parents and their

<sup>10</sup> Maříková, H. (1999). *Muž v rodině: demokratizace sféry soukromé*. Praha: SÚ AV ČR, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Možný, I. (1999). *Sociologie rodiny*. Praha: Slon, p. 132.



children's teachers). In connection with this we can pose the question of what implications does a differentiated approach to the influences of the family environment have for the work of teachers. A successful solution to common as well as specific educational situations which teachers encounter during their work requires mainly knowledge of the pupil's personality. One of the ways of knowing his or her personality traits including individual peculiarities is the teacher's ability to keep track of the family environment where the pupil lives. This fact can be confirmed, among others, by experienced educators who worked for a long time in one place, whether in the country or a bigger city, and grew to know that location and its inhabitants. We can make an analogy with the effort to renew the institution of family physicians who work with intimate knowledge of the health condition of adult and child family members.

Tendencies influencing the activity of school in relation to parents and that can positively affect the relationship with teachers and children include the somewhat existential effort of Czech schools to win the favour of the pupils' parents or pupils themselves. They are directly connected with the principle of the person's (child or his or her legal guardian) free choice of educational direction according to his or her possibilities (choice of educational directions) and also with the principle of financing schools by the number of pupils enrolled.

This fact is also connected with another factor that can significantly influence the relationship of parents with the school and that is the level of awareness of parents about the educational goals of the school. Some experience from state and private schools from abroad is in this sense inspirational. This path towards pupils and especially towards their parents is being implemented on a larger scale by some Czech schools as well. Bulletins or information pamphlets, school newspapers and magazines, school open days and some other non-traditional means contribute to the promotion of the work of the school and shape its reputation. However, this is only one of the ways of increasing educational awareness that has a limited purpose and is not sufficient for a more significant shift in the relationship between the school and family. More permanent qualitative changes in this relationship are typically connected with other forms of teacher-parent cooperation. Domestic and foreign experience shows that there are increased demands from parents for specific information about the educational situation of their children. Some schools therefore provide the parents of their pupils with continual assessment reports on the development and progress of their children. Parents are invited into schools not only after the school day but are encouraged to take part in teaching and extra-curricular work with the

children. Increased attention is paid here mainly to the parents of new pupils at the school. Also school balls, gala evenings, sport days, performances and film screenings for children and parents contribute to bringing the parents, teachers and children together and influence the climate for school educational activities.<sup>12</sup>

The most important facts that influence the quality of the relationship between the family and school typically include the child's successful progress through the school years and being admitted to a school of the next level. These practical goals are connected mainly with the attention of most parents during the school year. This phenomenon must be considered as one of the natural fundamentals for cooperation of a school with a family in the changing life conditions in our society. The task of the school is to convince children and parents that the teachers and the school care about each child, that they have a personal interest in their immediate school progress and also in developing their resources for good professional and civil functioning. Using a common means for achieving this, it focuses on fulfilling the principle of an individual approach to children which gains special meaning in the transformation context; it becomes one of the dominant principles of the process of education. However, its application is and will be influenced to a considerable extent by the general teaching conditions. The substantial ones include e.g. progressive conceptions of the education system including modern curriculums and educational standards for individual stages and types of schools, quality textbooks, appropriate number of students in classes and work groups, positive and creative atmosphere at schools, dignified existential conditions for teachers and other conditions necessary for the education of citizens prepared for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

The relationships between schools and families see a distinctive intensification of the forms of their cooperation. This trend is directly connected with the interest of the school and teachers in searching for a deeper meaning and more effective ways of educational cooperation. So far in the Czech Republic, for instance, there is an insufficiently effective system of career advice at schools. For example, academic programmes (implemented mainly at elementary schools) "owe" their

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<sup>12</sup> Střelec, S. (2005). Impulsy pro partnerskou spolupráci školy s rodinou (učitele s rodiči žáků). In *Retrospektiva a perspektivy v edukácii*. Nitra: UTVPFUKF, pp. 371–373.

<sup>13</sup> Střelec, S. (2001). Spolupráce učitele s rodiči žáků v měnící se škole a společnosti. In *Proměny školy, učitele a žáka na přelomu tisíciletí*. Brno: Konvoj, pp. 168–172.

pupils and their parents differentiated, profession-oriented programmes, specialist careers advisors and an efficient system of informal aid for those pupils and parents who show interest in cooperation in this area. It can be rightfully called one of the missed opportunities for close cooperation of schools with families. In fact, there are even opinions that the pupils' choice of profession should be moved entirely out of schools and into specialised advisory institutions. We cannot agree with this view.

The relationship with school and family (teacher and pupils' parents) is rather often (more or less rightfully) called a partnership. Where does the key point of partner cooperation between a teacher and parents of pupils lie? For instance, M. Rabušicová sees the essence of this partnership in the knowledge that a considerable part of education and upbringing takes place in the family and that parents and teachers have different yet complementary educational functions that must be in harmony in order to be performed effectively.<sup>14</sup>

The shift and changes in the motives, opinions and attitudes of teachers and parents are determined by abandoning the traditional, sometimes conservative, unnatural historical and social circumstances of the ties being formed. In general terms, they are sometimes called internal school reform. What is meant by this are the more pressing facts determined by the social-psychological, psychological-methodological and social-educational contexts rather than facts which are normative and organisationally institutional in nature, even though both are closely related. In this sense, the school is expected to make more complex and efficient use of possibilities (inspirations, experience, projects, ...) directed at more effective preparation of pupils for their professional, civil and family life.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Rabušicová, M. (1999). Možnosti spolupráce školy a rodiny. In *Partnerství rodiny a školy – současnost a perspektivy*. Ostrava: PdF OU, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Střelec, S. (1998). Rodina jako výchovné prostředí. In *Kapitoly ze sociální pedagogiky a psychologie*. Brno: Paido, pp. 63–64.