

# VALIDATING A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PARENTAL COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

*In Romania there are only a few parental education programs being carried out, but most of them are not properly/scientifically measured in terms of efficiency. For this reason, the purpose of the research was the implementation and scientific validation of a training program for developing the parental competence. The parental competence was defined as a system of knowledge, skills, capabilities, abilities and habits that would allow the parent to successfully fulfill the parental responsibilities and also prevent/deal with crisis situations in a manner that would contribute to the child's development (Glăveanu, 2009). The above-mentioned term became widely spread in Romania after 2010, when the Integrated National Strategy for Creating and Developing Parental Competence was published. The Strategy is supported by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports and its deadline is in the summer of 2012.*

*The 298 parents who participated in the research were selected based on the criteria of average and low parental competence and their children had educational and social adaptation difficulties. The methods used during the research were the formative experiment and the questionnaire-based investigation. The participants were evaluated before and after the training with the Parental Competence Questionnaire (PCQ, developed by the author of the study). The PCQ had five dimensions comprised of a total of 81 items: knowing the specificities of the child between 6 and 11 years of age ( $\alpha=0.69$ ), affective support and stress management ( $\alpha=0.74$ ), disciplining ( $\alpha=0.82$ ), time management ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) and crisis management ( $\alpha=0.77$ ). Each of the PCQ dimensions (which were built in accordance to the conceptualized structure of the parental competence) had a training module dedicated to it.*

*PCQ was validated with the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ, built by Buri in 1991); significant correlations for the two questionnaires occurred (between 0.5 and 0.9).*

*The statistical results obtained by using PCQ six months after the training (Independent-Samples T Test=61.43;  $df=298$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) showed significant differences between the experimental group ( $M=315.81$ ) and the control group ( $M=243.22$ ); the PCQ results of the experimental group were also compared (Paired-Samples T Test=58.39;  $df=141$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and showed statistically significant differences between the pre-training results (time 1=just before training,  $M=221.31$ ) and the post-training ones (time 2=graduating training+6 months,  $M=315.81$ ). Similarly, the scores of the control group at the two chosen moments (time 1:  $M=221.57$  and time 2:  $M=243.22$ ) indicated a timed evolution, but statistically insignificant of the parental competence (Paired-Samples T Test=34.19;  $df=155$ ,  $p=0.07$ ). These results proved the certain and significant influence that the*

*training had over the development of the parental competence, in comparison to the case of the spontaneous growth – thus being confirmed the hypothesis of the study.*

*As a conclusion, the results proved the internal validation of the training program (according to Vaughn's criteria, 2005). It is yet to be proven the external validation regarding the impact of the training program on the child's overall development (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Vaughn, 2005) and this will be done by applying the training program on an expanded/national level.*

**Key words:** *adult education, child development, parental competence, parental training, training validation.*

## Introduction

The study of the parent-child relation has been for long a subject of interest for scholars in various social sciences (psychology, pedagogy, sociology etc). This fact has determined a diversity of scientific approaches of the above mentioned relation which can be grouped as follows: some are theoretical and descriptive and issues and have resulted into behavioral typologies of parents and children, others focus on providing science-based guidance for parents in order to efficiently deal with the inherent difficulties of the relation (Law Nolte & Harris, 1998; Spock, 2000;) and, finally, others are centered on the development of parental self management over the educational process (Briers, 2008) and of programs that are tailored on clearly identified dysfunctions (Boyd Webb, 1991; Landreth & Bratton, 2006; Salome, 1989; Schneider & Craig, 1997; Voeller, 2004).

### *Problem of Research*

In order to achieve a more authentic image of the parent-child relation in the nowadays Romanian society, a specially designed study was conducted. It began with the identification and description of the educational strategies used by parents.

The research was based on a series of empirical data (derived from the author's experience as a school psychological and educational counselor) and also on the conclusions of other scientific studies and researches. The evaluation of the collected data allowed the concept of *parental competence* to be identified and defined and a multi-factorial model of it to be structured.

The parental competence was defined as a system of knowledge, skills, capabilities, abilities and habits that allow the parent to successfully fulfill the parental responsibilities and also to prevent/deal with crisis situations in a manner that contributes to the child's development. (Glăveanu, 2009) Afterwards it became widely spread in Romania and in 2010 it was include 2010 in the Integrated National Strategy for Creating and Developing Parental Competence, supported by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports.

### *Research Focus*

Some specificities of the nowadays society (like the extended working time of parents, mass-media influence, drugs etc.) create premises for school failure and occurrence of adaptation deficiencies for the juveniles; in these conditions, parents meet ever growing difficulties in efficiently interacting with children, and the existence of various training courses for parents becomes a necessity. In Romania there is but a small number of such programs and the existent ones are focused on counseling and/or applying of some participative techniques, however lacking an accurate assessment of the programs and their results.

As a consequence, an implementation of *the training method* was tried (as it was defined in 1991 by Goldstein as a process that determined an individual to methodically acquire attitudes, concepts, knowledge, rules or skills that generated an improvement of performance), this action being seen as a tool for the improvement of the parental competence. In order for the training program to prove successful, it was built according to the model drafted by Vaughn (2005). This model had the advantage to be relatively simple, clear and comprehensive enough and included six stages: 1) the identification of training needs; 2) the definition of the objectives of the training; 3) the establishment of certain criteria for measuring the efficiency of the program; 4) the

elaboration of a draft for the training; 5) the actual implementation of the training; 6) the assessment of the results.

This development procedure was used as it was specific to adult professional education and it was extended and adapted for the family counseling area, in order to ensure an algorithmic assessment of the development of the parental competence.

## Methodology of Research

### *General Background of Research*

Starting from the practical needs that were identified, the aim of the research was to define and to study the main coordinates for developing the parental competence for the Romanian individuals and families.

The goal/general objective of the paper was the design, implementation, evaluation and validation of a training program for the development of the parental competence.

The particular/specific objective was to prove the internal validation for the above mentioned training program.

In order to reach the aforementioned research frame, the following assessment/hypothesis of the study was drawn: *“The parental competence includes a series of spontaneously achieved mechanisms, but a dedicated training program will significantly develop this ability”*.

The training program comprised five different modules – “Knowing the specificities of the child between 6 and 11 years of age”, “Disciplining” (consisting of two sub-modules – “The art of effective communication to the child” and “Positive disciplining methods”), “Affective support and stress management”, “Time management” and “Crisis management”. These were built starting from the practical needs that we had identified by devising and applying the Parental Competence Questionnaire – PCQ. Each of the training modules had a corresponding dimension in the structure of the questionnaire and, furthermore, in the structure of the parental competence.

### *Sample of Research*

The study initially involved 535 parents of children from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, who were subjected to the PCQ. 298 of them (276 women and 22 men, age  $M=38.25$ ;  $SD=11.48$ ) were then selected to participate in the next step, based on the criteria of *average and low parental competence and having children with educational and social adaptation difficulties*.

### *Instruments and Procedures*

The main method that was used during the research was *the experiment*. The participants were divided into an experimental group (142 parents who followed the above-mentioned training; they were tested before the training and after 6 months from participating in the program) and a control group (156 parents who were tested at an interval of six months). The two groups comprised parents whose children attended different schools, in order to reduce the risk of contact between the two groups and the subsequent influence over the assessment of the results of the training.

The *Parental Competence Questionnaire* was developed starting from empirical and qualitative studies; it was not founded on a certain typology of parents, but it was meant to offer a holistic/integrate vision over the parental model and it consequently included conceptual sequences from different authors (Spock, Law Nolte & Harris etc.). The PCQ has 81 items distributed into the following five dimensions:

1. *Knowing the specificities of the child between 6 and 11 years of age* (17 items,  $\alpha=0.69$ ) – is about the parent’s ability of becoming aware of the child’s level of development (dependent on the child’s age), therefore being able to explain and understand the child’s reactions and needs and to provide adequate answers.
2. *Affective support and stress management* (17 items,  $\alpha=0.74$ ) – is about the parent’s

capacity of knowing and applying efficient methods for both preventing an up rush of the familial stress and coping with it; this capacity is about managing the familial tensional situations and also, about providing some affective assistance that helps the child to manage and overcome negative emotions.

3. *Disciplining* (19 items,  $\alpha=0.82$ ) – reflects the parental capacity of being assertive in relation to the child and of adequately managing the reward-punition system in order to permit and stimulate the development of all the components of a well-balanced personality.
4. *Time management* (14 items,  $\alpha=0.77$ ) – reveals, on one hand, the parent's ability of defining the amount of time spent with the child (as well as its quality) and, on the other hand, the parental capacity of guiding the child's own time by creating situations that are stimulative for the development of critical and creative thinking, aesthetic sense etc. and, also, that sustain the child's social insertion.
5. *Crisis management* (14 items,  $\alpha=0.77$ ) – reflects the parental capacity of being a good leader, of finding solutions to the child's problems together with the child, consequently overcoming the educational, personal etc. crises and stimulating the development of critical (rational) thinking and problem-solving capacity (Glăveanu, 2011).

The scaling of the items was done by assigning numbers from 1 to 5 to the levels to which the subjects were characterized by the listed conducts (1 – on a very small scale, 2 – on a small scale, 3 – on a moderate scale, 4 – on a large scale, 5 – on a very large scale); subsequently, the final score of the PCQ was between 81 and 405.

The questionnaire was made by using a standard based on the global score; the results were grouped into three classes that in fact represented three levels of the parental competence. Each of the dimensions of the investigated concept (and of the questionnaire) had a certain degree of autonomy which allowed us to develop separate standards for each of the above-mentioned dimensions. The item analysis revealed the difficulty coefficient of the items (between 0.3 and 0.8) and their discrimination coefficient (between 0.20 and 0.60).

The exploratory analysis revealed the communality (0.51 and 0.67), the saturation (over 0.4) and the degree of sample adequacy (KMO coefficient=0.61).

The psychometric qualities of the questionnaire (fidelity and validity) were revealed as follows: for the internal consistency (estimating the fidelity derived from the intercorrelation of the items), the calculation of the Alpha-Cronbach coefficient revealed statistical acceptable values (the lowest=0.69, the highest=0.82); the content validity (the degree to which the items are representative samples of the construction) was mostly ensured by extracting behavior samples from the results of the qualitative research and by using expert analysis (eight experts evaluated the relevance of the items for the investigated construct) (Glăveanu, 2009).

PCQ was validated by applying Pearson's correlation coefficient to the scores that 160 parents obtained both at PCQ and the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ), developed by John R. Buri in 1991 starting from Baumrind's typology of parental styles (1971).

PAQ indicates the existence of three parental styles: permissive, authoritarian and democratic (or authoritative flexible), contains 30 items. The two questionnaires were proven to have a significant correlation, between 0.5 and 0.9 for level 0.01 bilateral (Glăveanu, 2011).

### *Data Analysis*

The research data were gathered by computer-assisted application (with direct recording) of the above-mentioned questionnaires and they were initially sorted and analyzed with Microsoft Office Excel 2007 and SPSS 8.0. A preliminary analysis of the data was made by using descriptive statistics. During this stage, the correctness of data recording was verified, the missing values and the extreme ones (too low or too high) were identified and the normality of the distribution was verified – all of these in order to choose the adequate statistical procedure for data processing and analysis. As a consequence of the preliminary analysis, we decided to use the statistical parametrical tests for highlighting the mean differences for dependent samples (the experimental

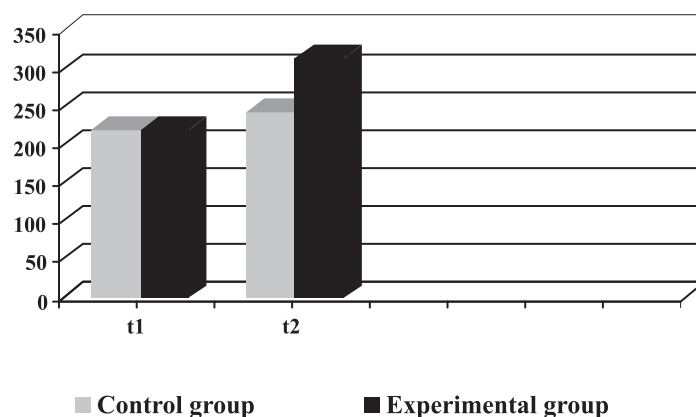
group at t1: the initial moment and t2: t1 plus six months) and independent samples (both the experimental and the control group at the t1 and t2 moments).

## Results of Research

In order to identify if the parental competence involved certain mechanisms that were spontaneously developed in time, we compared the PCQ results of the control group (N=156) in two different moments (t1 and t2=t1 + 6 months), using the statistical procedures of the t-test for dependant samples. Differences between the t1 results (M=221.57; SD=45.29) and t2 results (M=243.22; SD=86.81) were identified, this proving a timed evolution of the parental competence; nevertheless, this fact had no practical outcomes, as the differences were not statistically significant (t=34.19; df=155; p=0.07).

In order to identify the possible differences between the control group and the experimental one (after the latter attended the training program), we used two types of analysis: one comparing the PCQ results of the experimental group and those of the control one and the other comparing the results of the experimental group before and after attending the above-mentioned program. These evaluations were made six months after completing the training and they were statistically analyzed.

The t-test for independent samples revealed that t=61.43; df=296; p=0.001 (Levene F=19.45; p=0.13>0.05, the homogeneity condition was accepted), which showed significant differences between the control group (M=243.22; SD=86.81) and the experimental one (M=315.81; SD=79.12).



**Figure 1:** The variation of the PCQ results of the experimental and control groups at t1 and t2=t1+6 months.

Moreover, comparing the two sets of PCQ results of the experimental group and applying the t-test for dependent samples (t=58.39; df=141; p=0.001) showed significant differences between the pre-training results (M=221.31; SD=61.80) and those achieved after attending the training (M=315.81; SD=7.12).

This result proved the certain and significant influence that training had over the development of the parental competence, in comparison to the case of the spontaneous growth – *thus being confirmed the hypothesis of the study.*

## Discussion

Parental counseling and education are traditionally made by informing the parents on different aspects and also by involving them in participative techniques, with a poor accent on the valuation of the results; the latter is usually done by assessing only the level of knowledge.

The valuation and the validation are the main criteria for going past the empirical characteristics

of the briefings and lectures addressed to the parents; for instance, the two attributes are widely present in profession-related trainings and they provide the necessary scientific level for those actions. As a consequence, the “training” concept was extended to the areas of educational psychology and family counseling; this was done in accordance with the rules that were established by different authors for designing, implementing and valuating a profession-related training, which were adapted to the field of parental education.

In order to study the effect of the training program over the development of the parental competence, the program had to be related/compared to the criteria found in the specific literature. For this requirement to be complied, the models of Kirkpatrick and Vaughn were used.

According to Vaughn’s model (2005), the statistical results ensured the internal validation of the training program, as the parents from the experimental group achieved better PCQ scores after attending the training in comparison both to their pre-training scores and to those of the control group.

Although this results proved that the control group had learned the social conducts associated with the parental competence, it did not ensure by itself the transfer of the newly achieved knowledge into the real behavior towards the child.

Thenceforth, there was a need for undergoing the following stages, namely the analysis of the *behavior* (the actual changes of the conducts toward the child, determined by the training program) and the analysis of the *results* (the positive and measurable effects that the changes of the parent’s behavior have over the child). These two, together with the analysis of the reaction and the analysis of the learning level, would conclude the evaluation of the training program (in accordance with Kirkpatrick’s model, 2006). According to Vaughn’s model (2005), the analysis of the behavior and of the results would also prove the *external validation* of the training, therefore allowing it to be confidently used at a national level, in addition to *The Integrated National Strategy for Creating and Developing Parental Competence*, supported by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports and whose objectives would meet a deadline in the summer of 2012.

In regard to the representative character of the specimen, the results are debatable due to the unbalanced number of female and male subjects; as a consequence of this disproportion, there can be stated that a training model addressed rather to the *maternal* parental competence have been elaborated and validated. For this reason, a future research will include a group of parents having an approximately equal distribution in terms of gender.

In accordance with Kirkpatrick’s model, the valuation of the effects of the training program over the development of the parental competence was done six months after the experimental group had completed it. Although the aforementioned model states that significant results can be identified after three months from “graduation”, other models state that visible effects appear at least 12 months after completing the training. As a consequence, an intermediary period of six months was preferred.

This is a debatable aspect, but future researches can solve the matter.

## Conclusions

The research promoted an integrative vision. It did not deny *the native component of the parental competence and its spontaneous development* as a consequence of passing from one mental development stage to another, of learning, of adaptation (according to Piaget’s theory of mental development – Piaget, 2009) and also of the psychosocial evolution, the statistical results proving an evolution of the parental competence – although insignificant; instead, *it aimed at completing and maximizing* the effects of the spontaneous development (based on Bandura’s theory of social learning – Bandura, 2011) by resorting to *training* as a way for parents to learn and apply a best practice guide.

Evaluating the training in accordance with Vaughn’s (2005) and Kirkpatrick’s (2006) theories, the *internal validation* of a development program for the *maternal* parental competence was proven.

The analysis of the effects of attending the training over the development of the children could lead to its external validation and would allow its extension on a national level. For that reason, it will constitute the subject of another study, meant to take place in the nearest future.

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