

## **ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENERATIONS – DATA FROM AN INVESTIGATION IN SUCEAVA COUNTY**

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### **Abstract**

*Our work is based on a common sense observation of the relational difficulties between parents and teenagers, trying to place emphasis on their perspective on the family environment. The psycho-social investigation followed the analysis of student opinion regarding the quality of the family environment as a whole, as well as on the following levels: the frequency and quality of communication, manifestation of affection, mutual gratification and encouragement, giving the right to an opinion and the exercising of autonomy. A deeper knowledge of the problems which could influence adolescent behaviour could serve as a starting point for practical attempts at educational counselling.*

**Key words:** *adolescence, family climate, relational between parents and teenagers*

### **Theoretical framework of researched problem**

Family is the first socializing group for a child. J.S Bruner considered human behaviour a consequence of the type of childhood they had; family is a kind of “emotions cooperative” (A.Berge), capable of “sweetening” for each of its members life's tougher blows. Taking into account that the teenage years are extremely important in the shaping of one's personality, parents pay especial attention to it.

The changes taking place in early adolescence (10-14 years) are rapid and take place not only on a physical and intellectual scale, but on a social and emotional one as well. A teenager's emotions can be intense,, balancing between affection and quick outbursts of dissatisfaction or anger. These aspects require patience and understanding from the family. In a period with so many changes, it is difficult to avoid parent-child conflicts and misunderstandings. However, most teenagers don't distance themselves from their family's values. They continue to depend on their families for guidance and emotional support. The major influence of their group of friends and the search for role-models s accompanied by the realisation that their parents aren't perfect.

The middle adolescence (14-17 years) is dominated by the balance of a rudimentary sense of self and certain unrealistic standards, set too high, dissatisfaction regarding their parents' interventions and the desire for independence. Pre-adolescence is the age of social grace when the child lives in a much deeper symbiosis with the group. Friendship and physical

appearance become so important, that there is a risk of neglect of school and after-curricular activities. The youngster does not enjoy the, sometimes exaggerated, tutelage of his parents, which is why he avoids accompanying them, preferring mostly to be around children of his own age. He manifests a pronounced behavioural independence. At the same time there is also the need for self-determination: the pre-teen sets his own goals, takes decisions, organizes his actions depending on them (Florea, N.-A., Surlea, C.-F., 2008. p.14). Taking into account these tendencies, the parents are tempted to reproach them, which leads to the child's estrangement, during a period when he most needs understanding and guidance. (Petrea, I., 2007, p.216).

Children are more predisposed to survive adolescence if the relationship with their parents is a warm and friendly one, based on love, stable and predictable. According to a study conducted by Romania's Save the Children organization, teenagers enjoying a tight relationship with their parents tend to “have positive relationships with other teenagers and adults, to trust their parents and to want to maintain that feeling, to respond to others with empathy and respect; to have confidence in themselves and a high self-esteem; to cooperate better with others; to listen to and take into account the advice of their parents.” (2012).

Most researchers admit that, as society evolves, parent-children interactions are becoming more and more defined through an emotional dimension and the interest of parents in education is growing. (Stănciulescu, E., 1997, pp.51-52). Analysing contemporary transformations of parent-children interactions, Elisabeta Stănciulescu (1997, p.54) remarks that we are witnessing a psychological dimension of family interactions, and not a sentimental one: contemporary parents, especially those belonging to the middle and upper class involve themselves intellectually and emotionally in raising and educating their children on a much larger scale than their predecessors. Larisa Cuznetov (2014) defines parental competence as the parents' emotional attitude towards their child, which can manifest itself in three stages: “in the style of communication between adult and child; the tendency and orientation of the adult towards becoming acquainted with their child's personality; in the capacity and desire of understanding their child.” (Cuznetov, L., 2014).

A relationship based on respect, trust and warmth, built by the family ever since the birth of the child will become an anchor for said child during his journey to adolescence. In specialised literature we often find the phrase “educational climate” “educational style” or “family atmosphere” to describe the nature and characteristics of family interactions within which the process of education is formed. If different families transmit different values, attitudes and knowledge, they do it relying on different styles, methods and techniques. The manner in which the child is raised influences his relationship with society, his psychosocial development and behavioural problems (Shaffer, S.M., Gordon, L.P., 2006, p.30). Teenagers from families with an authoritarian style have average results in school, do not have behavioural problems, but have lower social aptitudes, faulty self-esteem and might experience considerable depressive episodes. Teenagers growing in a permissive atmosphere have poorer school results, but possess a higher self-esteem, good social aptitudes and a lower risk of depression. A democratic atmosphere in which parents maintain a balance between control and care seems to determine good results in all aspects.

Parental support and control represent two vital components for children and teenagers' growth and development. (Baumrind, 1971). research suggest that generally teenagers believe parents must ask obedience from them due to their legitimate authority and they must listen to their parents (Smetana, 2011). In their interactions with their children, parents can use a series of techniques that could include either risk factors or protective factors for their resilient development (Marici, M.,2015). A qualitative analysis coordinated by (2015) summarises several parental practices associated with a risk of deviance during adolescence, the risk of consumption of dangerous substances, anxiety, low self-control and belonging to anti-social groups. These parental practices involve setting up rules (lack of limits, permissive rules) monitoring (lack of adult supervision, low supervision) discipline ( lack of discipline low or punitive discipline), low involvement or over-involvement, faulty interactions (hostility, abuse, mistreatment).

### **Purpose of study and subject batch**

The psychosocial research has followed the evaluation of students' opinions regarding their family climate, with the problem of the intergenerational conflict and advancing solutions for optimizing family relationships. The study was undergone by students from both urban areas (52,8%), as well as rural ones (47,2%), in a balanced proportion of boys (53,2%) and girls (46,8%). the study involved a batch of 900 students from grades six to ten (44,6% middle school students 55,4% high school students). The average age was 15.2 years. Most responders opted for participation in a counselling program regarding teenage family communication.

### **Objectives**

Evaluation of the quality of the family environment, globally as well as on the following sections: frequency and quality of communication, expression of affection, mutual gratification and encouragement, awarding the right to an opinion and the exercising of autonomy;

Acknowledgement of certain differences between boys and girls regarding the quality of the family environment, on the aforementioned sections;

Evaluating the impact of students' home environment over the appreciation of the quality of the family climate;

Identifying possible differences between middle schoolers and high schoolers regarding the family climate;

Identifying aspects from the relationship between teenagers and their parents which are appreciated by the two, as well as those in need of improvement.

### **Results and discussions**

3.1. Evaluation of the quality of family environment, globally as well as on the following sections: frequency and quality of communication, expression of affection, mutual gratification and encouragement, awarding the right to an opinion and the exercising of autonomy;

According to our data, 31,8% of our students declare their relationship with their parents to be excellent. Despite their age difference, parents and students are close and their “mutual” experience are plenty. They feel they are able to manifest their autonomy and independence, being at the same time deeply tied to their parents, not out of duty, but due to their affection. What's significant is the fact that the parents are considered the best advisors and the children believe they are given the right to decide their road in life, being certain of their parents' support.

50,8% of students see the family climate as being more often an amiable one. They can sometimes feel that their parents don't understand them, although this could be an idea introduced by their peers. 15,7% of students declare the relationship with their parents is good, but periods of calm alternate with times of conflict. Only a negligible percentage of those questioned (1,9%), declare that the relationship with their parents is significantly affected and they are convinced they aren't being understood. The idea of a conflict between generations can be exemplified in their case, and the affirmation of their autonomy inevitably leads to rebellious behaviour.

Starting with the 70's, the study of adolescents was extended from clinics to school and the “identity crisis” was no longer a cliché to describe this developmental period. New studies indicated that 75% of teenagers reported a pleasant and happy relationship with their parents (Bronson, P., Merryman, A., 2011, p.151). Moreover, a study conducted by Sir M.Rutter – considered the founder of child psychiatry – revealed that 25% of teenagers in conflict with their parents were in conflict with them before reaching puberty(id). One must mention that in the parent-child relationship conflicts aren't necessarily bad in themselves. The literature admits there are negative effects on a psycho-behavioural level when conflicts are intense, long lasting and associated with increased stress and irrational beliefs concerning its resolution. (Kayser & Himle, 1994, Branje, van Doorn, van der Valk și Meeus ,2009, Marici, M.,&Turliuc, N., 2013, Barthassat, 2014). According to the data reported by the aforementioned authors, compared with teenagers using positive conflict resolution strategies (such as: understanding the perspective of others, rationally identifying a compromise), those that tend to solve the conflicts with their parents through a combination of factors involving an intense exchange of verbal abuse, fury, or loss of self-control, giving in (passive acceptance of the perspective of others) or withdrawal (avoiding conflict, without solving it) tend to report more psycho-emotional problems. Also, teenagers who tend to withdraw from conflicts with their parents report a higher level of direct or indirect aggression in their interactions, as well as deviant behaviour. Following the analysis of the results, one can remark that we are witnessing a democratization of the interactions between parents and children. Many parents realise that the authoritarian style of education predominant within childhood has multiple disadvantages and they desire a type of relationship characterized at the same time by the care given to the children as well as firmness in imposing and following certain rules. Therefore, 66% of students declare their parents to be affectionate, almost half

of them claiming these are their best friends and one in three teenagers agrees that their family offers understanding for its members. Most students declare they don't generally hesitate to discuss problems with their parents, however, one must not ignore the 26% who are reluctant to confess their troubles. Also, over 45% of students believe their opinion is not taken into consideration when family problems are discussed, and 56% think parents avoid discussing their problems with them. These aspects indicate that some parents are either excessively protective and anxious, and the teenagers don't want to worry them even more, or extremely stern and critical in imposing certain behavioural standards and less tolerant and forgiving. Still, one can claim that parents trust their children. Thus, 41,9 % of students consider that they are mostly believed to be trustworthy, only and 8% of teenagers claim their parents don't consider them responsible enough. Parents could build a tight relationship with their teenage children interacting with them in fun, positive ways.

3.2. Acknowledgement of certain differences between boys and girls regarding the quality of the family environment, on the aforementioned sections;

Applying test T on independent groups have allowed us to identify certain differences between the opinions of boys and girls regarding certain dimensions of the family climate. Thus, boys (MD=3.42) declare they spend less time with their family than girls (MD=3.66), the tendency of the age being that of seeking out people of the same age for various free time activities. Although boys distance themselves from the family more than girls during their teenage years, they declare their parents to be among their best friends (MD=3.99), in a slightly larger proportion than that of the girls (MD=3.63). We remark the differences in the matter of expressing affection, between boys (MD=3.94) and girls (MD=3.74), as well as statistically significant differences in the parents' tendency to unfavourably compare the current generation with the previous ones, girls being more often the target than boys. These data contradict educational practices marked by gender differences from specialised literature. For example, in American culture, independence, isolation and distancing from one's family, differentiating are encouraged as psychological characteristics in the development of boys (Morris-Shaffer, S., Perlman-Gordon, L., 2006, p.20). New psychological models claim that parental affection is not the enemy of normal and healthy development for future men. All these values of traditional culture that tolerates aggressive behaviour and lack of communication serve only to harm boys and society in general. Every parent and teacher has been forced to handle situations when, under cover of calm and monosyllabic answers, teenagers try to manage things on their own without adult support. In order to ensure an efficient style of communication, it is important that parents understand that, sometimes, refusal to communicate is a teenager's way of protecting themselves, and does not necessarily stem from lack of interest or emotional involvement (Morris-Shaffer,S.,Perlman-Gordon,L.,2006, p.15).

3.3.Evaluating the impact of students' home environment over the appreciation of the quality of the family climate;

Applying test T on independent batches does not indicate statistically significant differences between students living in the rural area and those with addresses in town as far as global evaluation of the quality of the family environment is concerned. However, one might remark

that the tendency of parents from rural areas (MD=3,45) to make critical comparisons between generations of youths is more frequent than for those living in urban areas. (MD=3,17). Also, parents from the rural areas discuss more often the problems they have with their children and even value their opinion in family problems. Even though demographical data show that the education level and age of the mothers is lower in the rural area, they also reveal the reduced socio-economical implication of mothers (Anghelescu, C., Iliescu, M., 2006, pp.22-24). Under these circumstances, it is possible that mothers from rural areas have ore time to give to the communication with their children, getting involving them in solving certain administrative problems. A teenager's need for communication should not rest only in discussing household matters, but should also involve chatting together, sharing experiences, opinions about what is happening to them, what they feel, or what they hear and see in their social environment.

As far as recognising one's own family as an example of understanding between its members, there is a larger proportion of students from the urban area (MD=3,97) than those from the rural area (MD=3,71), who give a positive answer.

#### 3.4. Identifying possible differences between middle schoolers and high schoolers regarding the family climate

A statistical data analysis does not indicate statistically significant differences between middle school students and high school students as far as global evaluation of the quality of the family environment is concerned. However, there are certain differences, determined by the ages of the teenagers, in the sense that high school students are more involved in discussions concerning the problems of their parents (MD=3,22), than middle school students (MD=2,99). High school students are more favourable to the idea that their own qualities are due to the education received from their parents and that the educational model from their parents will be a staple one for them later on, unlike middle school students. Also in middle school, the students feel more significantly the pressure from their parents for them to alter their behaviour (MD=3,17), unlike high school students (MD=3.45). However, in the case of high school students, it seems parents are more tempted to make comparisons between generations (MD=3.49), than for students in middle school (MD=3.18).

#### 4.5. Identifying aspects from the relationship between teenagers and their parents which are appreciated by the two, as well as those in need of improvement.

During this study, pre-teens and teens were requested to give a piece of advice to their parents. Within this section, students "recommended" to their parents to not worry so much, to talk to them without getting angry and listen to them when there is a problem, to criticize them less, to offer them more freedom, to trust the choices they make in their social space, to spend more time with the family. At this age students aren't aware of all the material difficulties met by some families and suggest to their parents that "constant work does harm" or "the relationship between them is more important than the bills". They would like their parents to control their level of stress more and live in the parents, leaving behind habits and conventions from their childhood. Some teenagers show more empathy and would actually like their parents to share their own problems with them. Others show maturity, being aware of the educational roles of their parents and, surprisingly, advise their parents to treat them like "their child, not their friend" or "to understand that grades are not everything, but also

they shouldn't allow them too much freedom". A few students would ask their parents for more love and understanding, and for them to stop using alcohol. At the same time, students declared they appreciated the care, unconditional love, good advice, sacrifices and the fact that parents are attentive to their needs and try to fulfil their wishes.

The need for their parents to understand their desire to spend more time with their friends appears in many of the students' requests. Teenagers need groups where they can belong. They need places where they can feel at ease, next to those with similar interests. By forging ties, the parents can help the teenager to gain the feeling of belonging and, finally, to answer the question: *Who am I, who can I become?*

More than half of the respondents appreciate that communication within the family could be improved. Parents should take into account that at this age psychologists recommend taking on the role of consultant, rather than that of controlling the teenager's behaviour. Thus, it is recommended that one should offer the child a growing independence, supporting and encouraging him to make the choices that are best suited for him. Discipline must not be reduced at this age, teenagers need limits "because this is how they feel safe (...) they represent a means of showing teenagers that parents care" (Elias, M., Tobias, S.,Friedlander, 2003, p.51). Discipline is a corollary of the entire parent-child relationship and a derivative of the way the family program is implemented and the values that are emphasized.

Several parents feel that at this stage they cannot communicate the same as during childhood but it is extremely important for teenagers to know they are available to listen. However, when the child does something wrong, it's recommended that the parent show their disapproval, without insulting or humiliating the child. These types of attitudes serve only to distance children more from parents, making them at the same time uncaring of the opinions of adults. The sense of being appreciated and acknowledged is an essential part in the life of a teenager (Elias, M., Tobias, S.,Friedlander, 2003, p.51). Acknowledging abilities, analysing hobbies and offering a place to exercise the dominant intelligence(Gardner) could lead to certain situations that would fortify the self.

## **Conclusions**

Parent-child relationships shouldn't be left to chance. There are certain precise norms that stand at the foundation of this relationship: the need for love and protection leads to certain interactions which are right and balanced, as well as complementing the parents' role. Parents should have interactions with their child, forming an inseparable unit in which they can divide their roles and tasks. Almost all teenagers could go through a series of changes in behaviour and attitudes. However, when these modifications are radical (dropping grades, repeated absenteeism, significant weight alterations, tendencies of isolation, problems with rules etc), the parents should seek a school counsellor or a psychologist. The evaluation undergone by such specialists could establish whether those are symptoms of serious problems.

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