

INFLUENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF THE CHILD'S DISABILITY ON THE QUALITY OF FAMILY RELATIONS

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on depicting relationships – from behavioral patterns, interaction and communication, to personality factors - within families in which a child with disability is present. Following complex analyses involving three cases of families with disabled children and three cases of families with typical children (no disabilities), the comparative results show that some particularities regarding communication, behavior and schizothyme/cyclothyme personality factor exist within families with disabled children. These case studies have enabled us to better understand the ways in which family members represent each others' place and roles, differently in families with disabled children compared to typical families.*

Keywords: *family relationships; families with disabled children; child with disability;*

1. Introduction

In families where there is a disabled child, often times, parental roles suffer changes. In this special situation, the parents are involved in many and various activities and have numerous additional tasks, in order to offer the child everything, he or she needs. Generally, the mother tends to focus only on the complex needs of the child, to feel responsible at a too high degree, so that she begins to neglect herself and the other members of the family. This is one of the contexts in which conflicts between parents arise, since the mother feels that she bears all the responsibilities, and the father, on the other hand, believes he is the one doing all the tough work, by trying to ensure all the financial resources for the family. Because of this discrepancy between the perspectives of the two regarding the situation (the mother feels alone and misunderstood, the father feels he is the one managing the entire situation and, in his turn, that he is not being adequately valued), corroborated with the presence of a deficit in communication, conflicts emerge between the two parents and thus, definitive ruptures may appear in the family relation. Parents are confronted with a multitude of problems and are forced to make compromises in the relationship between themselves and the social and institutional environment, to develop real strategies for integrating their disabled child into daily life without it affecting their family, social or professional life.

2. The coordinates of the research

The research questions - in order to reach the objective of analyzing the influence of the child's disability on the quality of family relations - are the following:

1. Does the presence of the child's disability influence family relations?
2. What is the communication between family members like?
3. How do they spend their time together?
4. Are there differences between the activities that take place in a family with a child with S.E.N. and a family with a typical child?

2.1. The research objective

The present research aimed at analysing the influence of the presence of the child's disability (DSA) on the quality of family relations.

The quality of family relations may be analysed through the following measurable aspects:

- Communication relations between partners (frequency and depth ~content~ of the communication, resolution of conflict situations through communication).
- The communication relation between family members.
- The activities that the family members perform with the child.

2.2. The research design

We opted for a design of the *case study* type, for reasons pertaining to the nature of the investigated subject (it is a theme with a high degree of intimacy, which requires greater focalization of the research attention on in-depth aspects) and the research possibilities (the investigation of a larger number of cases was not possible, at this time).

Given the case study type design, the starting point was not an aprioristic hypothesis (formulated before the field experience), but rather the previously mentioned objective. In the present research, the subject lot is made up of 6 families.

There are 3 families in which there is a child with special educational needs and 3 families with typical children. The subjects were chosen so as to have similar ages, between 6 years and 8 months and 8 years in the case of children, and their parents are aged between 29 and 34, with the same familial composition.

The data was collected throughout 6 months, with periodic meetings, both with the children and their parents. Meetings took place both in the family environment, individually with each parent, then with both parents, and with the child, as well as within the centre in which the children with S.E.N. undergo therapy.

The data was collected through several methods: anamnesis, in which socio-demographic data was collected, interviews performed individually with each parent, but also with both parents, which helped to collect information regarding the communication between parents, the communication between parents and child, the quality of the communication, the activities they perform together, the specificity of each family.

2.3. Research methods and instruments

The case study method entails a detailed approach to the subject, in order to understand the components and attitudes that it manifests. The case study, being a synthetic method, is constituted with the help of several research instruments, such as: observations, interviews, tests, activity products analysis, autobiography, document study. The purpose of this method is to capture the specificity of the person and it entails a strong documentation on the case, collecting data from as many sources as possible.

The research instruments used in the present research are:

- an anamnesis guide,
- two interview guides,
- the "Family drawing" projective test
- The Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF).

The first interview guide is addressed to parents of children with special educational needs and is made up of 21 items, and the second is addressed to parents of typical children and is made up of 24 items. The items focus on the quality of life in the two types of families, if any modifications have arisen and how their life is unfolding, the communication relations between partners, the communication relations between parents and children, the activities they perform together and also the resolution of conflicts through communication.

The family drawing is a projective test that favours the exhibition of unconscious tendencies and allows the acknowledgment of the real feelings and emotions that the child develops for his own family. The drawing, made spontaneously by a child, reveals his manner of perceiving reality and evinces his personality, his emotions, but also his thoughts and frustrations regarding his position and his role in the family. Through this drawing, we have global access to the subject's personality. The emotional reactions of the children while they do the drawing are also very important. The emergence of mood changes, such as the child's sadness, joy or anger during the drawing of a certain character is significant in establishing the relationship that the child has with the respective person.

The Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF) is a personality test that investigates 16 personality factors, such as: schizothyme/ cyclothyme, intelligence, ego strength, submission/ dominance, liveliness, superego strength, threctia/ parmia, harria/ premia, alaxia/ protensia, praxernia/ autia, shrewdness, confidence/ culpable, conservator/ liberal, adherence to the group, feeling of self and ergic tension.

Two factors were selected in the present research, the first being schizothyme/ cyclothyme, and the second being the ego strength because these factors were considered relevant, since they capture the traits of the subjects and identify the inter-individual differences. The first factor, schizothyme/ cyclothyme, includes items for identifying the level of warmth, openness, attention to others and involvement or distance and detachments of the subjects. The second factor, the ego strength, contains items for identifying the level of emotional stability or instability. The first factor comprises 10 items, and the second one comprises 13 items.

2.4. Data analysis and interpretation

In the first case, we compared family O., in which subject V. is a D.S.A. child, aged 7 years and 2 months, the mother being 29 years old and the father 31 years old, with family C., in which subject A. is a typical child, aged 7, both parents being 30 years old. Both children have the same gender, namely male.

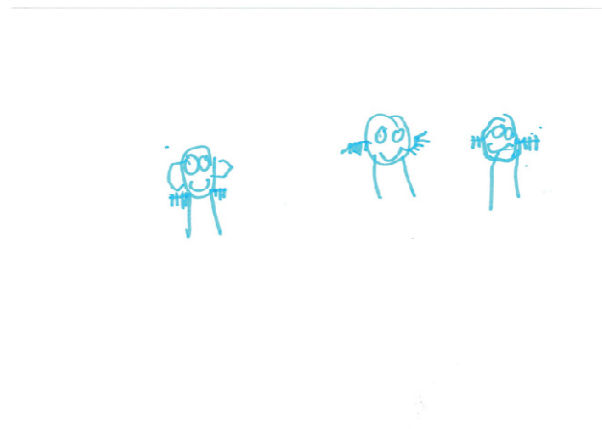


Figure 1. Family drawing made by O.V.

Subject O.V. was open when he received the task of making the family drawing. Throughout the task, he did not present states of agitation or restlessness. The family drawing made by V. is represented by 3 elements, the members of his family. He placed the two parents on the right side of the paper sheet, the mother toward the edge and the father in her proximity. We identify a distance between V. and his father, but he chose to represent him cheerful, whereas the mother is sad. In the family drawing, V. chose to represent the members of his family in the center of the paper, without other specific elements. He chose to represent the 3 elements using the same color, blue. The members of V.'s family do not have a complete body scheme. At the end of the drawing session, V. presented the members of his family to me, adding that he and his father are happy, while the mother is sad.

Following the drawing made by V., the scores obtained by the parents in the two factors are confirmed. We notice that V. is closer to his father than to his mother.



Figure 2. Family drawing made by C.A.

The subject C.A. was receptive to the task of drawing his family and throughout it, the child evinced a state of peace and delight.

In A.'s drawing, there are more specific elements, not only the 3 members of the family. A. represented the parents to his right, the first being the father, then the mother at the same distance. Even if A. spends a great deal of time without his father, he placed him in his immediate vicinity, and this can induce the fact that he misses him and wants him close to him.

The family members are represented as cheerful, and A. chose to represent his pet as well. They are close to a house, which means he is aware of the concept of home, family. A. chose to use many colours specific to each element, as we find them in nature, such as the yellow sun and the green grass. The position of the mother's feet is directed toward the father and the child, which confirms the parents' words from the interview, namely that all 3 have a very good communication relation. At the end of the drawing, A. recounted what he had drawn, presented his parents and mentioned the fact that all 2 are happy.

In the second case, we compared a family with a child with D.S.A., aged 6 years and 8 months, the mother being 29 years old and the father being 32 years old, with a family with a typical child, aged 6 years and 10 months, the mother being 31 years old, and the father being 33 years old. The child with D.S.A. is male, and the typical child is female.

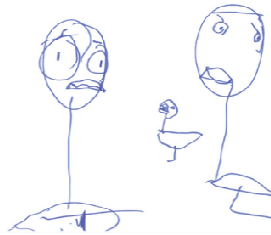


Figure 3. Family drawing made by T.A.

Subject T.A. did not present states of irritation, sadness or frustration when he received the task or throughout the performance of it.

Subject A. chose to represent both his parents and himself as birds. The only elements on the sheet of paper are the members of his family, with no other specific elements. A. placed himself close to his father, but with his back turned to him, and facing the mother, who is at a distance from himself. Subject A. chose to use a single color, blue, although he also had others at his disposal.

After finishing the drawing, A. recounted that his family is a family of geese, of which he is the gosling, the mother is screaming, and he and his father are scared. This is confirmed by the low score obtained by the mother in the ego strength factor, being a person with states of irritability and reduced tolerance to frustration.

The subject P.E. was receptive to the task assigned to her, both upon hearing it and throughout its performance, E. was cheerful, calm, with a positive attitude. There were no states of irascibility, anger or fear present.



Figure 4. Family drawing made by P.E.

Subject E. chose to place herself between her parents, all 3 holding hands. E. chose to represent herself as similar to her mother, with the same color dress and shoes, which means she identifies with her and they have a very good relation. All the family members are represented as cheerful, in the center of the page, with an equal distance between them. E. placed herself exactly in the middle, between the mother and the father, which confirms the fact that all 3 succeed in communicating very well and have a very close relation. Subject E. represented several elements. Beside the 3 family members, she integrated into the drawing a house, sun, trees, butterflies, birds and also flowers. She used many colors and managed to integrate the family in a beautiful spring scenery.

In the third case, we compared a family with a child with D.S.A. aged 8, and a younger sister aged 6, the mother being 33 years old and the father being 34 years old, with a family with a typical child, aged 7 years and 6 months and a younger sister, aged 6, the mother being 32 years old and the father being 33 years old. Both children are females.



Figure 5. Family drawing made by M.O.

When subject M.O. received the task of making the family drawing, she refused to do it, and the task was rescheduled. The second time, she refused again, and the third time, she accepted, but throughout the completion of the task, she presented an agitated behaviour, filled with anxiety, and her face mimicry transmitted anger and sadness.

Subject O. made 4 elements in the family drawing, namely the members of her family. Her parents are placed on the left side of the sheet, whereas she is in the extreme right, together with her sister. The mother is to the extreme left, then the father, who is placed close to the younger sister, then O. The subject represented the two parents in tears, whereas she and her sister are smiling. Subject O. chose to use the colour yellow for the two parents, while for herself and her younger sister, she chose to use red. O. drew her own hands yellow, while her sister's hands are red.

Subject O. chose to place the father near the younger sister, which means that O. is aware of the fact that he seeks the company of the younger daughter and spends more time with her than with O. Even though the mother is the one who spends the most time with them, since they remain in her care, O. placed her in the opposite side to her, thus we may conclude that she does not feel close to her and the communication between them is not made easily.

After finishing the drawing, O. mentioned the fact that she gave grades to each member of the family; her parents received –F, which means they do not have a strong bond and she does not feel close to any of them, and she gave A+ to her sister and her own representation, hence we may observe that, out of the entire family, the only person she appreciates and feels close to is her sister.

When subject A.I. received the task, she was delighted and throughout the completion of the drawing, she was calm, cheerful, with no states of anxiety or fear. The family drawing made by I. comprises several elements. The 4 family members placed to the left of the page are surrounded by other specific elements, such as a house, a tree, a rabbit, the sun and butterflies.



Figure 6. Family drawing made by A.I.

The subject represented the 4 family members holding hands. The first representation is of the mother, the younger sister is to her right, then I. standing by her father. I. together with her mother and her sister are wearing the same dress model, but the colours are different. All the family members are represented by I. as cheerful, and from the fact that they are holding hands we may notice that they are a nuclear family, the girls being in the middle, protected by both parents. Subject I. chose to use several colours, not just one.

After finishing the drawing, I. described every element, mentioned the fact that her family is happy and is enjoying a walk in the vicinity of the house.

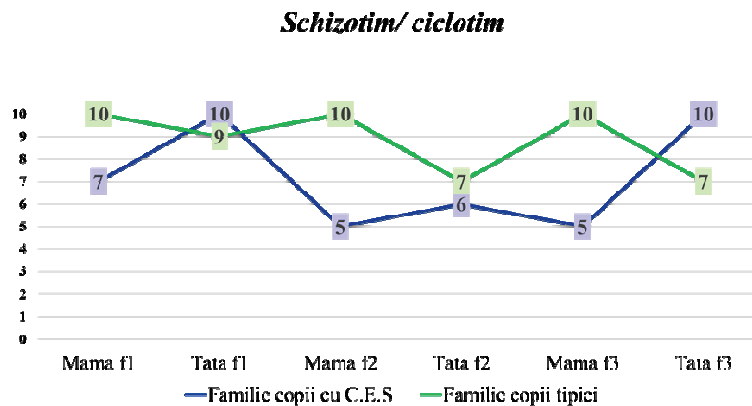


Figure 7. Scores obtained by the parents of children with D.S.A. compared to the scores of the parents of typical children in the schizothyme/cyclothyme factor

Figure 7 represents the scores obtained by all the parents involved in the present research, both of the children with D.S.A. and of the typical children. The first factor of the parents' personality that was investigated was schizothyme/ cyclothyme and refers to the warmth, the social skills or the distance and reserved attitude that they hold.

As it may be observed in this chart, the parents of typical children have higher scores than the parents of children with D.S.A. Nevertheless, the mothers of typical children are the ones who have higher scores than the fathers of typical children, whereas the mothers of children with D.S.A. have lower scores than their fathers.

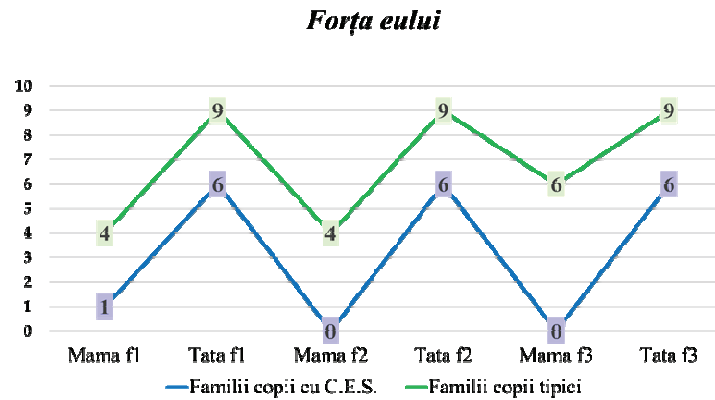


Figure 8. Scores obtained by the parents of children with D.S.A. compared to those of parents of typical children in the ego strength factor

This means that the parents of typical children and people who present a desire to establish relations with people, have highly developed social skills, are confident in their own strengths, active and communicative, mothers at a higher level than the fathers. The parents of children with D.S.A. obtained low scores, especially the mothers, which means that they are people who prefer to have a small circle of people to communicate with, do not have highly developed social skills, are secluded and distant.

Figure 8 represents the scores obtained by all the parents involved in the present research, both of the children with D.S.A. and of the typical children. The second personality factor investigated in the present research is the ego strength, which refers to emotional stability or instability, resistance to frustration, states of anxiety, concern, irritability, discomposure or anger. As observed in the above chart, the parents of typical children have a higher emotional stability than the parents of children with D.S.A. Nevertheless, there is a considerable difference between the scores obtained by the mothers of typical children compared to their fathers, and also between the scores obtained by the mothers of children with D.S.A. compared to their fathers.

Mothers, both of typical children and of children with D.S.A., present lower scores than the fathers, which means that the female gender is more prone to states of emotional instability and has difficulties in managing crisis situations, whereas males present high scores.

3. Conclusion

Following this research, with the help of the used tools, we highlighted the fact that there is a difference between the families of children with special educational needs and those of typical children, from the point of view of the communication relationship between the partners, the communication relations between the partners and the child, and also from the point of view of activities performed by the children together with their families.

With the help of the family drawing, we discovered real things, such as the way the children feel inside the family, who they feel closest to and also with which of the parents is the communication more easily performed.

In the interview, for the people who said they had a good communication relation both with the partner and with the children, it was confirmed with the help of the schizothyme/cyclothyme personality factor, but also through the family drawings made by the children.

Following the investigation of the parents' personality, through the

schizothyme/cyclothyme factor, it was noticed that mothers of children with D.S.A. present a reduced desire for contact and do not have high communication skills.

In the second factor, the ego strength, both mothers of children with D.S.A. and mothers of typical children obtained lower scores compared to the fathers.

The present study does not claim to have exhausted the multiple and complex aspects of interpersonal relations in families in which there is a child with disabilities. However, what we have tried to do is to enter this study on a trajectory of debate, so that it may participate in the social endeavour to understand the problem of the adaptation of families with SEN – with the purpose of improving the integration process.

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