DIFFICULTIES OF EXERCISING EDUCATIVE ROLES IN SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

Alina COSTIN, Ph.D.
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad
Faculty of Science of Education, Psychology and Social Work
alinatcostin@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The number of single-parent families has significantly increased in the recent years. The difficulties they are confronted with are an alarm for pedagogues, sociologists and psychologists. The article analyses the difficulties of exercising educative roles in single-parent families. A focus made among single parents highlights a series of aspects that require a solution, considering the consequences a divorce can have on the child`s evolution.*

Keywords: *single-parent family, the family`s educational function, difficulties of parenting*

Introduction

Family is the fundamental unit of a society and its problems were a central objective of reflection and analysis of human spirituality from times immemorial. Various sciences focus their attention on it for over a century: legal sciences (family law), economy (family budgets), demography (marital status, fertility), and psychiatry (with emphasis on family as therapeutic enhancer of mental diseases).

Today, the term "family" is used with various meanings, according to the context and it is almost impossible to find a universally accepted definition of the notion that would clear out all questions related to this topic. A widely accepted definition is the one given by Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke (1971): „family is a group of people connected by marriage or blood ties, by adoption documents that build a home; they interact and communicate with each other in their various social roles: of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother or sister who create and maintain a common culture." Another definition was formulated by Ann Hartman and Joan Laird in 1983. It says that family is: „a group of people united by marriage, filiation or kindred that are characterized by the same interests and mutual help."

A complex definition is given also by Murdock (1949): family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, of which at least two have socially acknowledged (approved) sexual relations and one or more children of their own or adopted whom they raise and care for.

It may be observed that the changes that occur in the family structure at present are in full resonance with the socio-economic, technical and cultural process and under these circumstances the family is subjected to further restructures.

In recent years, more and more families are made of one parent and a child or children. They are called single-parent families and because of their social vulnerability they benefit from a monthly allowance of support provided by the Emergency Ordinance on complementary family allowance and support allowance for single-parent families, art. 5-6. According to this ordinance, single-parent family consists of a single parent and the children placed in his/her care. *"By single person should be understood the person placed in one of the following situations: single (not married), widow, divorced, whose wife or husband is declared missing by a court order, whose wife or husband is arrested for a period of over 30 days or is doing time and therefore cannot support the children, is underage and in one of the above mentioned situations; was named legal guardian or was entrusted to foster one or more children, except professional foster parents".*

If we refer to real single-parent families we consider the particular situation of parental families where the child lives with one parent but away from the other.

The educational function of a family

The universal significance of family, as the core of each social system, is supported by its specific functions „which cannot be transferred to any other social unit": reproductive, educationally-socializing, economic, emotionally-therapeutic and supportive (Stănoiu 1983).

Discussing issues related to couple, Iolanda Mitrofan (1989) states the living history of humanity under all its aspects – biological, psychological, socio-cultural, economic and political are closely linked to the coexistence of man and woman one by, with and for each other as well as of their descendants. Family is a fundamental microsystem within the social microsystem. Family provides its members their basic needs (food, clothing), wielding its survival and security function; it provides social and emotional development for its members, teaches them socially accepted rules of behaviour, support in stressful times, the development of personality, education, social connections, independence etc.

The family environment facilitates communication among its members because it is a matrix for parents and children. It also should be capable of providing them emotional and financial support; social relations outside family, responsible relations with the community, the ability to support themselves but also accept the help of the others, flexibility in assigning roles and functions and mutual respect.

Sociologists share different views on the role of family, though few of these are generally accepted.

According to Filipescu I. the "basic" functions of family are: the reproductive, economic and educational function.

Family is the most important "transmission belt" of all cultural norms from one generation to the other (R. K. Merton, 1949). Most studies include the assumption that parents have an important educational role. It is also proven by the universal and invariable definition of a parent and a child: being a parent means transmitting, acting

as a go-between them and the society; parents have the power to transmit information and being a child means receiving the message conveyed by the parents (Stănciulescu, E., 2002).

In other words, the educational function of a family consist of all pieces of information, skills, values, traditions, norms and responsibilities that parents have to convey to their children. This function that refers to the parents` responsibility towards their children is regulated by the Family Code, art. 101. Thus, parents „have to raise the child, caring for its health and physical development, its education, learning and professional training according to its personality and according to the goals of the state so as to make it useful for the community. The Constitution of Romania, art 29, paragraph 6 states that „parents or tutors have the right to provide according to their own beliefs, the education of children under their guidance". We can certainly say that family is a system of personalities placed in mutual interdependence. Intense communicational and emotional exchanges take place inside the system. It is also a process that unfolds perceptions, assessments, interpersonal valuing, and marital, parental and filial processes.

Sharing responsibilities inside the family – a cause of problems

It is not easy to play a proper marital role. Problems occur even in couples whose personalities are compatible. Sometimes they don`t share the same concepts, aspirations, needs and urges.

Responsibilities are characterized by contents and how vague or clearly they are defined in different couples and in different historical periods. For example, the notion of good mother and wife in exotic cultures of Africa is slightly different from the peasant culture form Eastern Europe (Iluț, 2005). In recent years, these roles have suffered major changes. The mother played the leading part in a child`s education in the past and the father cared for money (the picture of a traditional family). In modern society, partners pretend to share these roles, according to the circumstances. The marital couple is not a mere association of two people of opposing gender but a manner of synchronizing, compatibility and interchange.

The difficulties of exercising educative roles in single parent families

The Anglo-Saxon literature uses the term single parent family from the mid-1960s, and after 10 years this term received a French correspondent: monoparental families. The ways of becoming a monoparental family, which is generally centred around the mother, are: divorce or separation, death of a spouse, unplanned births outside marriage, the decision to have children without getting married.

According to a summary made by B. Bawin-Legros (1988), studies on single parent families conclude that the probability of identifying illegitimate births, abandonment of children, retarded psycho-emotional development of children, behaviour disorders, abandonment or school failure and even crime is higher in this category of population; the causes would be that single parent families adapt with difficulty to the current consumerist cultural model, being the new victims of poverty; they tend to self-replicate (children from such families were "likely" to repeat the great experience as adults), reproducing and expanding a whole chain of social problems.

Single parenthood, especially that resulting from divorce, is correlated with a decrease in the educational activities and especially with lower adequacy and

effectiveness of educational efforts; the maternal role is characterized in terms of overload (material, emotional, relational) of a relative lack of interest or a conflict of role (dominated by the problems created by the separation and their own emotional states, mothers are less available to the child exactly at times when s/he would require greater attention and effort), while the paternal role is analysed in terms of "paternal absence," "paternal deprivation", "paternal irresponsibility" (Stănciulescu, 2002, p 141).

Louise Miron presented a clear summary of the difficulties that the parents who find themselves left on their own, the mother in most cases, encounter in raising and educating children: ".... the ability to exercise properly the task of parenting is strongly diminished in the years following the separation. Grasping her own suffering, anxious, depressed, angry, marked by feelings against her former husband in terms of separation or the previous experiences, the mother (or father entrusted with the child) finds it difficult to stay focused on the child's needs, attentive to his/her manifestations. This is especially true when children are small and overwhelmed by anxiety or despair, eager to restore the family unit, sometimes in a state of shock. Fathers experience, just like their former spouses, extra anxiety, anger, depression, feelings of rejection and incompetence, compared to the un-separated parents with small children of the same age. They are afraid to take their children with them, they feel uprooted, without direction, without a home, while mothers who have children can live an extra sense of continuity, but they also experience the loss of identity, status, and a general feeling of helplessness. We therefore have parents in great suffering who must "adapt" to identity change as well as to their emotional capacity to adapt. It results that they communicate less well with children, treating them below their true age, showing often less consistent in what they require, less caring and controlling their good behaviour in a more shallow way (1987).

The thesis of educational deficiencies is supported with arguments regarding the psycho -emotional development of children and their social integration. Children under divorce are marked by numerous psychological and relational problems. Their reaction is different depending on age, gender, the time elapsed since the rupture occurred between the parents, the quality of past and present relationship with each of them, the climate of relationships between them during the divorce and after the separation, relationships with siblings, support provided by social networks, etc.

Other problems of single parent families are linked to their financial difficulties, often considered to be the victims of the "new impoverishment", overload and the role conflict experienced by women forced to add to their daily duties of care and education those of being the main provider of income and exercise of authority. Consequently, children who live in families like these are considered "risk population", sentenced to thicken the ranks of those living in poverty, of those failing school, or of deviants and offenders (cited 2005).

The single parent family nowadays
At present, the perception of single parent families is quite different than it was in the past. It happens more often to see a mother with a child or a father who supervises children. Modern principles of conjugal life rather highlight the benefit of

separation than the child's exposure to a tense climate and conflict between two parents who have nothing in common but remain together for the sake of the child.

To what extent does a parent succeed in assuming parental responsibilities so that the child wouldn`t to feel permanently the absence of the parent who left?

Objectives

This study aims to identify the difficulties encountered by a single parent in the process of raising the child.

Methodology

To capture these difficulties we conducted a focus group attended by five mothers and two fathers with children of school age. In all cases the single parent family was the result of a separation, in no case the result of a death. The cases are somewhat similar in the fact that each of the families has an experience of 2-4 years as a single parent.

Given the method of data collection, the study is a qualitative one, so we cannot extrapolate the results on the whole population of single- parent families. However, most of the problems faced by these families are common, being differentiated only by features related to their own situation, their personality type and the conditions they live in. Sample families have been identified through personal network.

Results

The discussions led in the focus group revealed a number of difficulties of economic, social and educational nature. In my presentation I will refer to this last category of problems.

Parents reported the following major problems:
- Very little time spent with the child due to busy work schedules;
- The blame that the child puts on the remaining parent;
- The inability to be with the child at certain times;
- The fatigue and stress that lead to downtime and irritability;
- The obsessive fear of not being able to raise the child well;
- Lack of financial and material support;
- Tensions and conflicts due to misunderstanding manifestations of the child;
- Frustration caused by the many duties that overwhelm them;
- The tendency to protect and compensate for the absent parent with gifts;
- Exaggerated concern for the emotional and financial welfare of the child;
- The need for relaxation/leisure for oneself;
- Difficulty in being consequent regarding constraints or punishment;
- Difficulty in being consistent so as to create a proper attitude or the development of a desirable social behaviour;
- Insufficient time to assist with homework, to discuss and communicate on various topics of interest to the child.

Parents have reported almost the same problems. According to everyone's situation some problems distinguished themselves. What particularly emerged was the importance of the support provided by grandparents or close relatives and the difficulty of educating the child who has suffered the loss of his father:

"It is very difficult especially in the first months to tell the child not to do certain things because that is the right way. In front of you there is not a student... it is your

own child who suffers enormously and you have to find the middle way, not too hard ...but not too protective either Very difficult." (-DD – teacher, divorced for 3 years, child aged 7)

"A big problem for me was to abstain myself from giving him expensive things (phone, tablet) on which I wanted to compensate for the pain caused by his mother's departure. After 10 hours of labour, dishevelled and exhausted, I had to give explanations to a child who expected a lot of answers that I....did not have." (DC- firm manager - child aged 9).

Of course, there have been signalled different patterns regarding the life of single-parent families, based on the remaining parent`s life style. Thus, due to differences in exercising the parental role between mothers and fathers, the biggest difficulty is filling the role of the parent who has left/doesn`t live with the child. The following table contains the weaknesses that exist in child raising according to the parent who the child remained with.

Table 1. Difficulties signalled by the single parent

Difficulties signalled by the single parent	
Single father	**Single mother**
Impossibility to spend more time with the child (to prepare meals for the child, help with homework, give advice in minor situation, caring for him)	Major difficulties in covering expenses
Communication difficulties (more frequent if the child is a boy) involving difficulties in playing the role of the child`s confident	Exhaustion, chronic tiredness
Impossibility to give him maternal affection, to be patient or available to understand certain things (These aspects have been mentioned by children who signal the father`s minuses)	Difficult to provide independent child (rather it is smothered affection and spoiled)
Poor responsibility taking abilities in household, housekeeping in general.	Oscillating behaviour between being authoritarian (to supply the father`s role) and overprotective

Irrespective of the remaining parent, both mention a high level of anxiety sprung from fear of not raising up the child properly. Still, this feeling is more pronounced in women. Discussions in the focus-group described a more relaxed behaviour at single fathers who are helped by a woman (grandma). They consider that a woman`s presence around a child is absolutely necessary, especially if the child is little. Single mothers are more careful with the events in a child life, with the education and therefore are overloaded with tasks which lead to emotional and physical exhaustion.

Under these circumstances, the need for single-parent family support is necessary. Currently, there is an insignificant allowance, but emotional and educational needs are not covered.

The table below gives us suggestions on support manners for single parents raising up their children.

Table 2. Support forms for single-parent families

Nr. Crt.	Support forms mentioned by single parents
1	Increasing the allowance for single-family support
2	Free access to certain services (playground, cinemas, museums)
3	Day care centres which provide educational services, leisure activities, foreign language classes.
4	Foundation of break type centres for parents
5	Counselling services for parents and

Recommendations

Considering the fact that the number of single-parent families is continuously increasing and that its effects on children are significant (deviating behaviour, depression), we consider that sustainable measures should be taken to prevent their marginalization. The complexity of the situation in which a parent and his child find themselves after a separation is acknowledged by everyone. Support centres for single-parent families should be opened. These centres should provide counselling services, mediation but also real solutions for who don`t have support from their extended family. More families facing divorce could have been saved if we had had free counselling services or they had appealed to mediation. More couples could have saved their relationship.

Social services should increase the allowance; single-parent families are the mostly at the risk of poverty.

References :

Bawin-Legros, B., (1988), *Familles, mariage, divorce Une sociologie des comportements familiaux contemporains*. Liège: P. Mardaga

Burgess, E., Locke, H.J., (1971): The Family, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company

Hartman, A., Laird, J., (1983), *Family Centered Social Work Practice*, New York et al.: The Free Press; Iluţ, P., (2005), Socio-psychological and anthropological Family, Polirom, Iasi;

Mitrofan, I., (1989), Married couple harmony and disharmony. Scientifically and Encyclopedia Publishing House, Bucharest;

Stănoiu, A., Voinea, M., (1983), Family Sociology. University of Bucharest Publishing;

Stănciulescu, E. (2002), Family Sociology of Education, Vol I, Vol II, Polirom, Iasi.