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The Needs of Children Whose Fathers Have Been in Prison

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Abstract: Growing up in a dysfunctional family in which one of the parents has been imprisoned has negative effects on a child's development. This article presents the stories of five teenage boys, pupils of the Salesian Youth Centre, whose parents were sentenced to imprisonment. The author presents their childhood memories of when their fathers were convicted, the situations they experienced as a result and the emotions that accompanied them in these situations. On the basis of interviews with the boys, the author also indicates which of their development needs were not fully met, mentioning safety, acceptance, support and contact.

Summing up, the author discusses elements of the educational system used in the Salesian Youth Centre, pointing to ways in which the educators' actions can impact and help meet the needs of children from dysfunctional families, including children of prisoners.

Keywords: convicted, child, youth Centre, preventive system, needs, dysfunctional family

Potrzeby dzieci, których ojcowie odbywali karę pozbawienia wolności

Streszczenie: Wychowywanie się w rodzinie dysfunkcyjnej oraz osadzenie jednego z rodziców powoduje u dzieci negatywne konsekwencje rozwojowe. W niniejszym artykule autorka opisała historie pięciu kilkunastoletnich chłopaków, wychowanków Salezjańskiego Ośrodka Wychowawczego, których rodzice zostali skazani na karę pozbawienia wolności. Przedstawiła ich wspomnienia z okresu, gdy ojciec został skazany, sytuacje, których w związku z tym doświadczali oraz uczucia, które im towarzyszyły. Na pod-

stawie wywiadów przeprowadzonych z chłopcami wskazała, jakie ich potrzeby rozwojowe nie zostały w pełni zaspokojone, wymieniając wśród nich bezpieczeństwo, akceptację, wsparcie i kontakt. Opisane w podsumowaniu założenia prewencyjnego systemu wychowawczego stosowanego w Salezjańskim Ośrodku Wychowawczym stanowią wskazanie, w jaki sposób pracujący tam wychowawcy starają się pomóc zaspokoić potrzeby dzieci z rodzin dysfunkcyjnych, w tym dzieci osadzonych.

Słowa kluczowe: potrzeby, rodzina dysfunkcyjna, skazany, system prewencyjny, ośrodek wychowawczy, dziecko

Introduction

The family is a social group, that affects a child the most. The child learns from the closest members of their family how to behave, adopts those behavior patterns and gradually distinguishes between the ways of proper or improper emotional expression, as well as reactions, especially in difficult situations. The intensity of family influence is so powerful due to emotional bonds connecting individual members, the importance of mutual relations, duration of those bonds and frequency of contacts.

According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the author identifies a series of eight stages that a healthy developing individual should pass through from infancy to late adulthood. Four of them are connected with childhood, one with adolescence and three with adulthood (1997). The implementation of the development activities at specific stages of development and successful transition through so-called development crisis are influenced by widely understood conditions of development. In reference to the period of childhood and adolescence, the key factor in dealing with the challenges arising from the development crisis is the quality of the relationship between a child and a parent/ guardian. Physical and emotional presence of a parent, adequate response to the needs of a child and providing them with a sense of security enable the acquisition of new competences and the beginning of a new stage of development¹.

The boys, whose stories will be described later in the paper, had very little chance that their need for development would be met properly. They were brought

¹ A detailed description of the development stages can be found, among others, in: H. Bee, D. Boyd, *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka*, Poznań 2004; A. I. Brzezińska (red.) *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka*, Gdańsk 2005; B. Harwas-Napierała - J. Trempała (red.) *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka. Charakterystyka okresów życia człowieka. Tom 2*, Warszawa 2007; H. R. Schaffer, *Psychologia rozwojowa. Podstawowe pojęcia*, Kraków 2010; J. Trempała (red.) *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka*, Warszawa 2011.

up by dysfunctional families² where neglect, addictions, violence, theft or other pathological behaviour patterns of at least one parent were very common.

There was a lack of support and help in building confidence in themselves as well as routines and predictability that influence the sense of security. Instead of support and safety they experienced fear, anxiety, humiliation, ridicule, shame and pain. The family's financial situation and living conditions were often compromised.

Their situation was changed when their parents were imprisoned. However, their needs that are presented in the article remain unmet.

1. The study procedure

This paper was based on the interviews with the pupils of The Salesian Youth Centre and the analysis of their records. Each of the study participants agreed to the conversation and had been informed before about the concept of the study³. The nature of the interview was the conversation. The boys had the opportunity to discuss their experience in connection with their parent imprisonment and situations, events or emotions accompanying them at that time.

Interviews were conducted by a psychologist who works with the boys studied. She knows them well and conducts systematic therapeutic meetings with them. One of the educators who served as the deputy director of the Centre and whom the pupils confide in was also present during the study. He is in good relations with his pupils, spends a lot of time with them, organizes numerous activities, recreational trips and helps them in daily duties. His presence provided additional support during the process of the study. He took notes, which helped the psychologist who conducted the study to focus on the boys and follow their statements⁴.

The selection of participant was deliberate. The management of the centre together with the psychologist decided who can participate in the interview on presented topic. The boys were chosen on the basis of therapeutic purpose, in which discussing past events will convince them that childhood experiences do not have to have a negative impact on their future and they can largely decide what they lives will be like.

² Cf. A. Olejarczyk, *Trudności w realizacji zadań rozwojowych u dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym z rodzin dysfunkcyjnych*, w: *Rodzina wobec zagrożeń*, red. M. Duda, Kraków 2008, p. 55-64.

³ Parents / legal guardians of the children also agreed to their children's participation in the study.

⁴ The author of the text did not participate in the interview. She does not work in the Salesian Youth Centre with the surveyed boys, therefore she is a stranger to them. Her presence would have a negative impact on their sense of security during the interview. Trust to the interviewers and their selection is very important during such difficult discussion topics.

The interview questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first, introductory part consisted of the discussions about boys' interests and their stay in the centre. In the second part the participants were asked to answer the questions about the time their fathers were imprisoned. The questions from the third part focused on the positive memories of their childhood and allowed them to create a constructive conclusions about their future.

A very important part of the study was its completion. Its purpose was to allow the participants to look at their difficult situations and experience from a different perspective. During this part the psychologist emphasized that each of them has a impact on their behaviour. Despite difficult experiences, their lives can be happy. They know how certain behaviors can affect others and what effects they have. Moreover, the decisions they make now, the skills they acquire, and the behaviors they train during psycho-educational workshops have a great impact on the shape of their future.

2. Interviews with pupils

Eric's story

The first of the boys, whose story is described, is 17-year-old Erik. He comes from a big city. Despite Eric's young age, he suffered a lot in his life. He was brought up in the atmosphere of fear for his, his mother's and his sister's lives. He witnessed his alcoholic father abusing mother and sister, physically and mentally. He was also a victim of a mental and physical abuse for many years. He started running away from home because he was afraid. He was not able to stop the furious attacks. After many years of abusing his family, Eric's father was sent to correctional facility.

Eric has been in SOW⁵ (The Salesian Youth Centre) for two years. He is happy to talk to a psychologist. He answers the questions in great detail, speaks a lot in an extremely mature way. It is notable he feels safe in this relationship. The manner in which he presents his difficult past experience indicates the end of that period. This is the result of professional help he received and his own personal improvement. He knows that he started a new better life without fear. He is also aware of the extent of his personal influence on events in life and that his future depends largely on him.

While talking about himself and his stay in the Centre, Eric points out that he likes football, music and books the most. His favourite activities also include: sports, theatre and therapeutic classes. He declares that he likes everything in SOW. He enjoys talking to the headmaster, therapists, other pupils and classes he attends.

⁵ SOW short for The Salesian Youth Centre . It will be used interchangeably with the full name of the Centre.

To the question: „What did you learn in the Centre? He answers: „Empathy, patience, talking about my problems and strong will. However, I think I learned how to trust adults the best”. When asked what he misses the most, he indicates his mother and sister, because he is close to them.

Eric is very open about the experiences of his father’s stay in the correctional facility. „I was only 14 then. My mother told me about that. My first reaction was happiness, because I didn’t like him. I felt good, that he is no longer with us but I was also scared that my mother, sister and I wouldn’t manage alone. My father was in the correctional facility twice”.

When asked about the time when his father was imprisoned, Eric replies: „My mother took care of me but I caused problems. I did drugs, drank and it was the worst time of my life”. While talking to the psychologist, the boy specifies that he could visit his father, but he never did that due to lack of fondness towards his father. He had a grudge against his father because of the way he treated his family and the abuse they suffered.

Eric points out that his friends knew about his father’s imprisonment. „Some didn’t say anything, others were moved. They thought it was impressive and I gained their respect. Some friends encouraged me to send something to my father but I refused. However, they didn’t know what had happened at home”. Eric kept all his suffering to himself and did not mention anything about his previous experiences and his fear. He could not predict his friends’ reaction. He was afraid of being perceived as weak and being laughed at.

The time when his father was in correctional facility was very difficult and financially challenging for Eric and his family. Despite his grandmother’s help they were very often short of food. Eric rarely stayed at home. He was using drugs more and more. He mentions that he missed „the comfort of living” and the possibility to return home for a hot meal. He was too ashamed to invite his friends home due to poor conditions.

Eric started borrowing money which he spent on alcohol and drugs. He fell into debts his mother had to pay back. His social maladjustment started to deteriorate. He was caught stealing more and more often. Firstly, it was food for his mother, sister and himself. Later, he did that „for adrenaline” as he point out, to prove himself and others how resourceful he is. It was obvious he was looking for recognition and acceptance. He was trying to show that despite his personal situation, there is something he can do better than others. He did not care about himself at that time. His clothes were dirty and he was drunk most of the time. His situation started to become critical. „I remember older friend who took care of me. I told him about my father and he showed me „the street style”. He taught me how to steal more efficiently. I was selling psychoactive substances for him and he paid me money. He designated me with various tasks”.

Boy's life changed when he was directed to SOW. His perception of himself and his abilities changed. He understood that his future can be different from his previous difficult life.

When asked at the end of the interview what he would like to pass to the boys with similar experience he replies: „I wish they helped their parents, who stayed home with them and caused no trouble. I hope everything works out and they can be happy”.

Paul's story

Paul is 18-year-old citizen of one of the big Polish cities. He has been in SOW for 2 years. He mentions that he loves playing football and watching films the most. He is happy with the centre. He is fond of everything and grateful he can live in this place. He emphasizes that he finally „has learned life” but the only thing he misses are cigarettes.

The boy witnessed very difficult situations, which influenced his life significantly. Negative habits related to the drug abuse were passed in his family from generation to generation. When Paul was 10 his father was sentenced to imprisonment due to robberies he committed. About his father's imprisonment he learned from his uncle. After some time, his mother was also directed to correctional facility due to the drug abuse and thefts. It was a very traumatic experience for Paul. He mentions that his mother did not want to leave the house, therefore the police had to escort her out by force. The boy stood watching and crying hard. His mother was sentenced for 2 years. His grandmother, who was addicted to alcohol, got custody of the boy and his younger brother. She tried to provide the best life standards she could afford and compensate the lack of parents for the boys. However, her illness and alcoholism deepened the fear, injustice and loneliness in the boys. Paul started to play truant, manifested aggressive behavior and abused drugs.

The boy hid the information about his parents from his friends. He did not tell anyone, however he felt that „someone knows something”. He was afraid of being laughed at and insulted. He was also ashamed.

When asked about the contact with his parents, Paul replies that he visited his father in the facility very often. He traveled with his uncle and brother. They saw each other in the visiting room and chatted. „I never visited my mother, but I don't know why”- he adds.

At that difficult time when his parents were imprisoned, the enjoyed spending time and „hanging out in the neighborhood” with friends. He could forget about his home and family. He missed his parents and felt angry that they were absent.

When asked what he would like to pass to the boys with similar experience he replies: „I wish they didn't give up, it's not the end of the world. I wish them all the best”.

Thomas's story

Thomas is another pupil in SOW. He is 17. He is from a big city in the centre of Poland. He has been in the facility for almost 2 years. Before he was directed to the Centre he had lived with his mother, stepfather, sister and brother. When asked about his interests, Thomas indicates football and his passion of pigeon breeding. In SOW he is very fond of the adults, mainly their attitude toward the pupils. It is different from the one he had experienced. It is full of compassion and he feels „he is not treated as a delinquent”. He misses his family and he is very happy he can stay in the facility. Thomas indicates that he learned his peace and patience while living in SOW. It is much easier for him to control his aggressive behaviour and he trusts adults a little more.

When he was 11 his father was sent to correctional facility for abusing his family physically and mentally, driving under influence and numerous thefts. It was a very hard situation for Thomas to accept and was connected with a great amount of grief and suffering. „Two days before my father was taken to the correctional facility, my mother had threw him out of the house. Later, she told me dad was going to prison. I was furious. I was crying for four hours. I started damaging my room. Only my uncle could calm me down”. Thomas remembers a lot of anger and sorrow at that time. He could not understand his fathers absence and the reason he was sent to that facility. He considered it unfair and unjust for his father as he had done nothing illegal.

While his father was serving a sentence, his mother took care of Thomas and his siblings. The boy recalls that it was a very difficult time. His mother was worried about the financial stability and proper care of her children , while being a single parent now.

When asked about his contact with father, Thomas replies that he visited him twice. During the first visit he cried very hard and could not leave his father. Second visit was easier for Thomas to cope with despite his anger, sorrow and helplessness.

Thomas's peers did not learn about his father's situation until after almost a year. They were curious about the reason his father was sentenced. Thomas and his friends made fun of this situation because their parents were also in a correctional facility and they were wondering if their fathers could be inmates.

Thomas says that time was very difficult for him and his family. He tried talking to his mother, learn and understand why his dad was imprisoned. However, his mother did not want to speak to him and because of that he became more aggressive. They also had significant financial problems. „No one could help us. We had no food. My mother was trying to earn more money, pawned the phones and rings. There were seven of us in the family and it was hard. Sometimes our meal was only a piece of bread with sugar. Despite the poor conditions they lived in,

Thomas estimates that the time his father was imprisoned was better than the time he was home. The boy recalls the dates when his father was on leave from the facility. „It was terrible, my father abused alcohol and made a row. When he returned to facility it was calmer. But sometimes our uncle came to visit us. He called me and my brother delinquents and threatened we will end up like our father”.

The frustration caused by the lack of information about his father’s wrongdoings arises during the conversation several times. When asked what he misses the most at that time, he replies „the conversation”. He truly wanted to understand why his father is no longer with them, however he never got the answer. He started skipping school, started fights and experimented with alcohol and drugs.

At that time when his father was imprisoned, he enjoyed spending time with friends. He could forget about the situation at home.

At the end of the interview, Thomas wishes the boys with similar experience that they should never give up and support their mothers. He also wishes them everything to work out and that their fathers would change because „it’s the worst that can happen when your dad goes to prison”.

Jack’s story

Jack is 17 years old. He lived in one of the big Polish towns with his sister, mother and her partner. He has been in SOW for almost a year. He adores sport, especially football. In the Centre he loves the sense of humour of the teachers and pupils and he learned how to laugh and joke as not to offend anyone. He does not lack anything. In his opinion, the Centre helped him learn how to calm down and control himself. These abilities will be useful in his life when he returns to his hometown.

Jack was 11 when his father was sentenced for robbery and driving under influence. He learned about that from his mother. Jack recalls that time as full of sorrow. He said he „looked up to his father” and cried when he was not with them anymore. According to Jack, his mother tried to comfort him and promised that dad would be home soon. The boy could not accept his absence. He began to manifest violent and aggressive behaviour, vandalize at home and school. He was running away from home repeatedly. He started stealing, abusing alcohol and drugs.

The boy remembers visiting his father twice during his imprisonment. He spent time together with his aunt and sister in the visiting room and chatted. However, it was not enough to fill in the gap of emptiness and longing for a parent. When he recalls that time, the hardest thing for Jack was the lack of possibility of spending time with his father and talking to him when he needed that the most. It is obvious that he needed the contact, presence, building the relationship and sharing experiences of the most important moments in boy’s life.

The friends of Jack's were aware of his father's situation, however he does not remember any negative consequences he experienced. At that time, playing football and spending time with friends after school gave him a lot of pleasure.

To the question: „If you could pass anything to the boys with similar experiences as yours, what would you say? What would you wish for them?“ He replies: „I would say, you can do it and good luck“.

Charles's story

The last of the boys, whose story is presented is Charles. He is 17 and comes from a big city. Boy's father is currently serving a prison sentence. He was convicted of a first degree murder. His mother is unemployed. The conditions he grew up in are very difficult. The flat they live in is very small. It consist of only one bedroom and a kitchen. The bathroom and a toilet are located in the corridor and are shared among neighbors. Charles lives in this one-bedroom flat with his mother, sister and two of her little children.

Charles has been in SOW for two years. He loves playing football and cooking- these are two of his passions. He is very pleased with the stay in the centre. He points out that he feels good in here, lacks nothing and the teachers as well as other people are nice. He emphasizes that he has learned a lot e.g. how to respect his family, how to trust other people, how to talk, solve problems, take care of himself, his health, both physical and mental, and the importance of the order.

When asked about his father's imprisonment, Charles's longing is noticeable. He mentions the need for contact, attention and care several times. Charles's father was convicted of murder when the boy was 11. Charles mentions that his father had been imprisoned before but he did not remember that very well. He learned about this situation from his uncle during the telephone conversation. After a short time, he read in the newspaper a description of this tragic event. Karol says that he was shocked and felt very bad at that time. He hoped his dad was innocent. He did not want to believe it could be true. During telephone conversations, he tried to talk to his father about it and demanded the explanation, however his father refused to give him any information.

From the time Charles's father was imprisoned, his mother takes care of the boy. They can count on grandfather's help from time to time. Charles does not hide the fact that he misses his dad, especially the care, talks and his father's attention. His life has changed completely because of this situation and it is very hard for him to accept the fact that his dad committed a murder.

Charles kept in touch with his father. He was also visiting him in the correctional facility, talking on the phone and personally in the visiting room. During those visits the boy felt great and happy that he can talk to his father and spend some time with

him. {I don;t talk to him anymore. He’s bad for me. He let me drink and do drugs and I was stupid enough to listen to him”.

Some of Charles’s friends knew his family situation. Some of them felt sorry for him and tried to comfort the boy. Others laughed at him, humiliated, picked on him, called him names and teased him. It was extremely hard for Charles, therefore he reacted with aggression and played truant.

At the end of the conversation with the psychologist, when asked what he would pass to other boys with similar experience, Charles encourages them to talk to their parents, to learn the truth. He would also feel very sorry for them and what they have to experience. He wishes them not to break down and that their dad or mom would return home very soon.

Abstract

Presented stories of the boys show how much they needed the presence of their parent. It was repeatedly indicated that they miss their parents’ attention, interests in their everyday lives and experiences, to feel security and support.

They were brought up by the families where addictions and violence were very common. That led to an increased sense of fear, anger and loneliness. Their situation was changed when their parents were imprisoned. Without fathers who abused them they finally could feel safe. However, many families suffered from lack of financial support. Unfortunately, the need for contact, attention, acceptance remained unmet as well as an emptiness after loss of their parents.

The interviewed boys were placed in The Salesian Youth Centre by a court order in connection with behavioral disorders and social maladjustment. The activity of SOW is based on the preventive system. It is characterized by the unconditional acceptance of each person, establishing a close relationship filled with dialogue, reaching the real needs of each of the pupils, staying together, providing support, assistance and giving a sense of security⁶. The goal of the educators, who fulfill the principles of the preventive system, is to establish a bond with their pupils that will help them change inappropriate behavior. Creating conditions that give a sense of security and unconditional acceptance is to enable the boys to see positive qualities in themselves, build faith in their abilities and sense of influence on their lives. The educator, who takes care of proper relations with the pupils, often becomes an example of a “good adult” who they can rely on, trust and feel safe with. „The adult”

⁶ Cf. D. Bartocha, *Salezjańskie Duszpasterstwo młodzieży: Podstawowe punkty odniesienia*, Kraków 1999, p. 17; L. Cian, *System zapobiegawczy św. Jana Bosko*, Warszawa 2001, p. 42; R. Weinshenk, *Podstawy pedagogiki księdza Bosko*, Warszawa 1996, p. 52.

is also someone who accepts a person, although they do not accept inappropriate behavior, but appreciates, remembers important events, celebrates joyful moments with their pupils and supports in difficult situations.

The stories described in this paper, as well as many other similar examples presented in the literature, indicate how great social costs are, especially those that affect the immediate family members of the convict. Experiencing pain, shame and loneliness, stigmatizing family, deterioration of material status, and interruption of family contacts are just some of the problems faced by the children of imprisoned parent⁷.

It must be indicated, that problems in those families had started long before the parents were convicted. However, it was the result of the increasing dysfunction between the members of the family. Therefore, it seems necessary to implement system solutions, which would provide the family with support when the first signals of dysfunction occur. An adequate support should be addressed to each member of the family in order to stop copying the negative pattern of behavior by younger generations. The second goal is to enable the children, exposed to negative mental and emotional consequences the most, to successfully overcome developmental crises and develop in safe conditions.

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⁷ Cf. A. Barczykowska, *Sytuacja życiowa rodzin osób pozbawionych wolności*, w: *Rodzina i praca z perspektywy wyzwań i zagrożeń*, red. L. Golińska, B. Dudek, Łódź 2008, p. 349; A. Kwieciński, *Skazani – rodzice. Sytuacja prawna osadzonych sprawujących opiekę nad dziećmi*. w: „Nowa Kodyfikacja Prawa Karnego” XXVIII (2012), p.188; A. Domżańska, *Dzieci rodziców pozbawionych wolności*, w: „Forum Pedagogiczne” 1 (2011), p. 217; P. Wolińska, *Znaczenie instytucji rodziny w życiu osób odbywających karę pozbawienia wolności w świetle stanu badań socjologicznych*, w: „Rozprawy Społeczne” 2/10 (2016), p. 64.

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