

# PARENTS SCHOOL - LIFELONG LEARNING OF DIALOG BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

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## INTRODUCTION

For a long time people have been aware of the influence of unhappy childhood experiences on the development of emotional and behavioural problems, not only in childhood and adolescent term but in adulthood as well. The existence of strong and intimate bonds between parents and a child has an immediate effect in reducing the child's anxiety in new or stressful situations. It is a secure base from which a child can test out new ways of exploring and learning. Children tend to copy other people's behaviour, and most likely to model themselves on those individuals with whom they have the closest relationships. It is important to note that parents teach children to behave in particular ways both by what they tell them to do and by a child observing parents' own ways of behaving. Parents are also extremely influential because they are a source of necessary life experiences and they let a child meet consequences of free choice within safety boundaries. They provide a communication network by which a child can set its standards, establish its norms, develop its expectations and let his ideas grow. The relationship between parents and child continue to be important not only right through childhood, but into adult life as well. If it were the truth than the investment in a parents' interpersonal competence would be the easiest and most effective prevention of mental health problems and relationship breakdown during a person's life cycle. Even the treatment of mental illness is easier when members of family can communicate in supportive way with a low level of critic remarks and emotional expression.

## LIFELONG LEARNING AND PREVENTION

The European Union adopted The Lisbon strategy in March 2000. All the time there had been proponents of what had been called "permanent education", that was, the concept that education should be a lifelong process for all of us to assist in coping with the continual technological and cultural changes that we faced in our society. The central importance was given to employment, social cohesion and growth. The part of this process would be the lifelong learning for mental health and development of interpersonal competence within family and social context.

According to Luciano L'Abate (1990) the term prevention in the mental health field describes a variety of individual, group, family, and societal forces and approaches that attempt to reduce emotional dysfunction and disorder by improving interpersonal competence and functioning of people as individuals in social settings, as partners in intimate (close and prolonged) relationships, and as parents.

Chronological age, intelligence, and education cannot be equated with competence in intimate relationships. It depends on personal experience and ability of learning from experience.

It is commonly believed that the skills necessary to be a parent in a family are given automatically. Most of us watch our parents, peers, and these close to us. Have we been taught enough to meet new and different challenges, demands, and role requirements in our own personal and family life course in changeable cultural and social context? Are we sure to be free of unwilling patterns of behaviour we might have learnt in our family of origin, mostly through nonverbal modeling rather than through words? The fact, that this learning is automatic, that is, without our conscious awareness and concern, makes it very difficult to improve when needed.

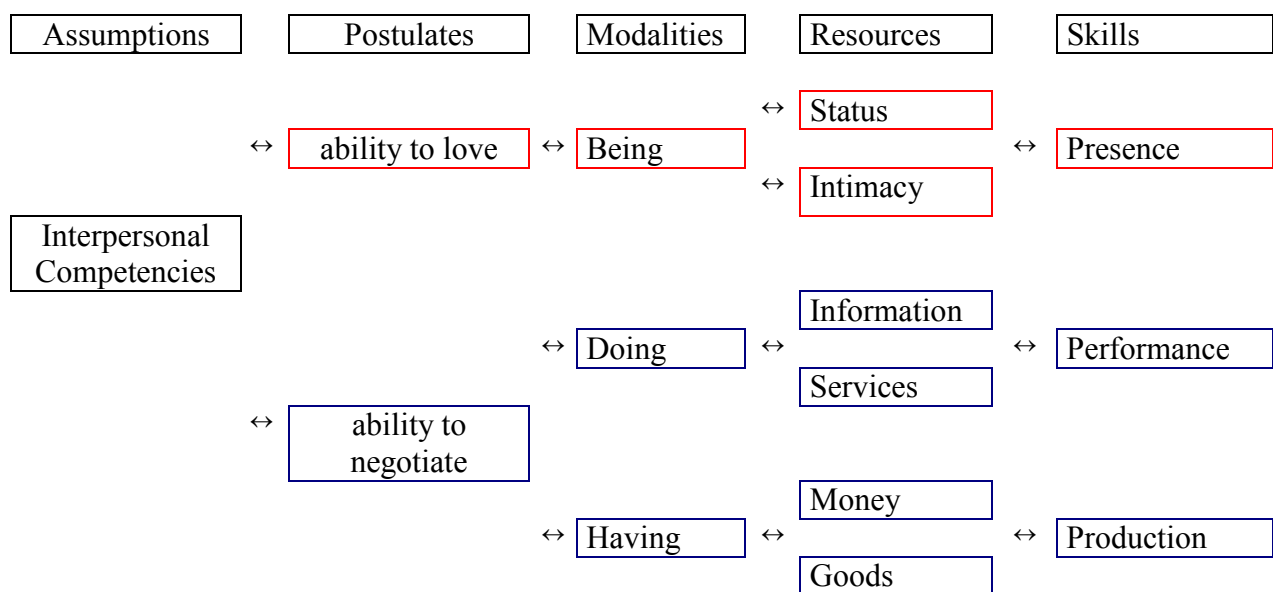
It is worth to assume that no parent wakes up in the morning with intentions to make the child's life miserable. All parents want their children to be secure and happy. Parents are

confronted with daily situations and concrete problems that require specific solutions. They are not helped by cliché advice such as “Give a child more love”, “Show of him more attention”, “Offer her more time”. Most parents love their children very much and do their best for them. Unfortunately declaration of love is not enough for developing a close and intimate relationship between a parent and a child.

## DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY OF INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE

Luciano L’Abate (1990) presents the developmental theory of interpersonal competence as theoretical framework for prevention activities. The family remains the primary setting basic to the development of social competencies. The interpersonal competence is the outcome of both the ability to love and the ability to negotiate between individuals within couples, and within families. It is assumed that most interpersonal behaviour, especially in a family, can be reduced to these two abilities. They are considered to be two fundamental abilities necessary for personal and interpersonal competence.

It can be illustrated by a diagram.



The ability to love is based on two resources to be shared and not to be negotiated. These two resources are (a) status (importance) and (b) intimacy. We cannot offer for sale or bargain for either of these two resources. If they become commodities traded in the market of the family, they lose their inherent qualities of being freely given and freely shared, as is required for unconditional love. Both resources constitute the developmental bases for family relations.

Defining love as the attribution of importance to self and other, there are at least four ways of showing and expressing it.

- seeing the good in self and others – we stress the good and minimize the bad
- caring for self and others physically, practically, and financially to show commitment and to ensure well-being of self and loved ones
- forgiving errors in self and loved ones – a process of acceptance and tolerance of self and loved ones that acknowledges the essentially imperfect nature of human being. It allows us to avoid trying to be perfect or expecting loved ones to be perfect.
- maintaining intimacy, defined as the sharing of hurts and fears of being hurt.

Intimacy is defined as the ability to share past and present hurts and fears of being hurt, the essence of being emotionally available. Intimacy means acknowledging our vulnerability, and neediness. The disclosure of these feelings can mainly take place within a context of equality

and reciprocity: "I need to be close to you when you are hurt, and I want you to be available to me when I am hurt". We need unconditional love and an attribution of importance (status) to become intimate with someone. This is the state of Being. One does not negotiate how much one loves or how important other family members are. Presence, in the sense of emotional availability to oneself and to significant others, can only be shared.

Rationally constituted schemes are bases for the negotiation and problem solving with issues concerning Doing, meaning the combination of services and information, and Having, meaning the combination of goods and money.

In everyday life we exchange services and information with other people. This is the modality of Doing, shown by the skills of performance. Exchange of money and goods represents the modality of Having, shown by the skills of production. Both performance and production are the areas of power and control. In relationship we have to negotiate how to meet our different needs within limited resources of time and goods. This is the area of making decisions and solving problems.

In functional families, the ability to love by Being available remains separate from the ability of negotiate about Doing services and Having goods. In dysfunctional families they are confused. When so called "prove of love" is demanded and expectations of importance are executed and misused by emotional blackmail. In that case love is no longer expressed unconditionally and becomes conditional. Consequently, Doing, Having, or both of times become substitute expression of Being ("If you loved me you would do..."; "If you loved me you would buy me....")

In our society, it is easier to learn how to Do and how to Have than how to Be. We are trained to Do in order to Have. Very few families are able to share and teach their offspring how to Be together unconditionally, without demands for perfection, performance, production, or problem solving. Yet, the modality of Being is much more important for sharing stressful events than the two modalities of Doing and Having. Being is crucial to dealing with most stresses as soon as they happen, but Doing and Having are important in dealing realistically with practical issues in the aftermath of a stressful event. If a family cannot share Being together, it will have even more difficulty negotiating issues of power and problem solving together.

At home, we need to fulfill at least four different and sometimes nonoverlapping roles: (a) caretaker, (b) provider, (c) partner, and (d) parent. Responsibilities in the caretaking role are of two kinds. One kind encompasses to nurturing qualities that deal with love and being present and available emotionally. The other kind encompasses to instrumental qualities relating to the physical and material well-being of the home, such as cooking, cleaning, purchasing, and repairing. The role of provider deals with economic aspects of family life. Salary, income, credit, mortgages, and the like are aspects of this role. Both a caretaker's and a provider's roles depend a great deal on what kind of people we are.

Both abilities to love and to negotiate are necessary. The fourth role of a parent, is probably one of the most difficult and demanding in our lives. Often this is the role for which we have received little if any training expect through what we learned automatically as children by watching our parents. Most of us perpetuate their errors and may forget their assets because the task requirements today are different from those of a previous generation. Being able to love and negotiate becomes crucial at this stage.

## PARENTS SCHOOL

Parents School is an educational training for parents to develop their communication skills in dialog with their children (Faber & Mazlish 1993 ;Sakowska 1999). The classes are run in a

form of workshops. Active participation of students- role playing, reminiscences of the childhood, self- thought, sharing a experiences, training new methods of communication are seem to be much more efficient forms than lectures or presentations. The basic agenda of “Parents’ School” consists of series of 6-7 weekly 5 hours’ workshops (altogether 30-35 hours). A group consists of 10-15 parents or carers.

During the whole training parents are taught how to love their children by confirming their importance and building intimate relationship. It is possible when children are allowed to feel all their feelings and to find acceptable ways of coping with them. Haim Ginott says that when a child is in the midst of strong emotions, it cannot listen to anyone. It cannot accept advice or consolation or constructive criticism. It wants parents to understand what is going on inside itself at that particular moment. Further more, it wants to be understood without having to disclose fully what it is experiencing. It is a game in which a child reveals only a little of what it feels needing to have us guess the rest. Instead of denying child’s feelings parent can accept them. There are some examples: “It is hard to be apart when you are so used to being together”, “You seem very disappointed”, “That must have upset you”, “You were angry at the boys who did it”, “It must have hurt your feelings terribly”, ”You must be worrying a lot about failing”. Additionally parents are able to accept the existence of ambivalent feelings in themselves and in their children and to verbalise them in a dialog.

Parents are trained to praise by description of a realistic picture of a child’s actual achievement, efforts and accomplishments instead of using generalised judgements about his or her character and personality. Parents should praise describing what they see, expressing what they feel and giving positive meaning to child’s efforts and actions. This is the main source of child’s self-confidence. A child’s uniqueness is valued without comparison to other children. Even a very clever child is not always sure of being winner.

There is another parental task to encourage their children to be independent and responsible by allowing children a voice, and whenever indicated, a choice, in matters that affect them. Allowing being independent doesn’t mean allowing doing everything, but it certainly means dropping overprotection, “letting a child live”. Parents should repeat: “do it yourself“, “stand on your feet”, “decide yourself”. They should not do it because they don’t care but because this is what love is all about.

When feelings are accepted it is easier to set up limits on child’s behaviour. Feelings have to be identified and expressed. Acts may have to be limited and restricted. Parents are supposed to tell children clearly what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, and what the consequences of their act would be, and what substitute will be accepted instead of punishment. If parents try to remind how they used to feel when they were punished as kids, parents will immediately understand that punishment brings revolt, rave, hatred, desire for revenge, resistance, feeling of guilt, shame, humiliation, loneliness, lack of understanding etc.

To survive as parents they have to accept the fact that children can make them angry. Parents are entitled to express what they feel even anger without attacking a child’s personality and character. A parent can express feelings using “I” statement “I feel very, very angry”.

Parents are trained in problem and conflict solving. Conflicts are unavoidable part of family life. Being day by day together inevitably leads to them. There is “a generation gap” between parents and a child. The clash may occur because of difference of interests or needs but also because of contradictory principles. When the situation of conflict is created family members can always try to negotiate, meaning to reconsider their interests. There are certainly some family situations, which make parents use they parental powers (e.g. protection of life or health). A child needs to realise that there are rules which mustn’t be broken.

Linking a child with certain roles and releasing it- this is a very common situation when parents notice child's misbehaviour because they are hurt. In hope of a change they keep saying: once again: "You haven't done your homework, you are so lazy, you never do anything properly". Doing it they unconsciously program their children. The words reach their subconsciousness and they act as planted seeds, which are going to grow and shape kid's future mentality. This picture will be strengthened when a child grows up. So if parents keep repeating "you are a thief" or "you are a liar"- there is a great possibility that in future our child will start stealing and cheating. That's why parents should concentrate on positive facts. If parents let a child understand that they appreciate its endeavour, noble intentions then its good deeds will dominate the negative behaviour.

## EVALUATION

The project "Parents School- Lifelong Learning for Mental Health" founded by the European Commission in programme SOCRATES-GRUNDTVIG1 was implemented in Rzeszów (Poland) between 2002-2004. It was mainly addressed to parents of mentally ill offsprings mainly. The supportive group and the family association were established.

The preventive module of Parents School was the educational training for all parents. 182 parents took part in 12 educational groups. It was run in 2003. The course was due to build up the relationship between a parent and a child. However school teachers and social workers were interested in developing their parental and professional skills as well.

Table 1 The structure of trained population.

Participants	Number	Percentage	Only Parents	Parents and Professional Carers	Only Professional Carers
Women	105	83 %	41 %	30 %	12 %
Men	21	17 %	10 %	2 %	5 %
Together	126	100 %	51 %	32 %	17 %

Table 2 The structure of group in criterion of having children

Numbers of children	Number of parents	Percentage
without children	22	17 %
one child	29	23 %
two children	51	40 %
three children	19	15 %
four and more children	5	4 %

It seems that the group of participants is representative.

Table 3 The structure of group in criterion of the oldest child. It is a measure of parental experience.

Parental experience	Number	Percentage
without children	22	17 %
the oldest child 1-12 years old	57	45 %
the oldest child 13-18 years old	31	25 %
the oldest child over 18 years old	16	13 %

Most participants are parents with children before adolescence. It is a good prognostic for preventive aims.

### Motivation

**External motivation at work** (employment dependency) - statements: "School master's suggestion", "I have been informed about the course by the boss", in contradiction to voices like: „I have been told by friend, colleague, sister" or "I have read about it in a brochure, media advertisement etc."

**External motivation at home (marital dependency)** – statements: "Partner's incitement", „I have been told by my children's mother" and laconic expectation.

**Internal motivation „self-development"** (development of parental skills) – statements: „I would like to develop my professional skills", „I would like to help my children to go safe through adolescence", „I am aware that this kind of knowledge is never enough and it is never too late to learn more" „Curiosity".

**Internal motivation „call for help"** – statements: „Problems with childrens' behaviour at school", „Problems with a child and my own emotions", "Problems with an adolescent daughter", „Both parents we try to solve problems with children. Youngsters are resentful and overreactive. Adolescents are rebellious and impose their own philosophy of life".

Table 4 Motivation

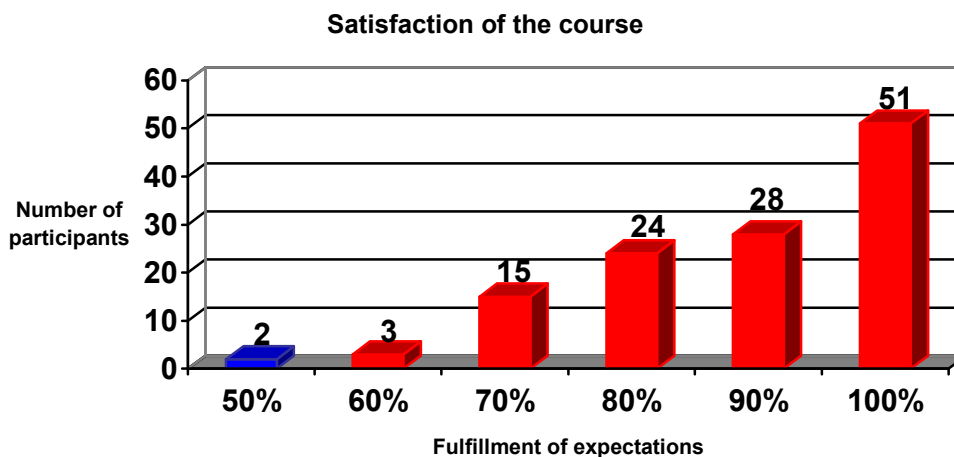
Participants	External motivation „work"	External motivation „home"	Internal motivation „lifelong learning"	Internal motivation „call for help"
Parent	0 %	6 %	24 %	27 %
Parent and Professional	4 %	0 %	29 %	2 %
Carer	2 %	0 %	15 %	1 %
All	6 %	6%	68%	30%

Most participants show clear internal motivation (88,4 %). Three parents and seven professionals (8,5%) say to have been suggested to join the course and they admit to have

problems with children or declare their need of training at the same time. It seems rational that several weeks of training is attractive mainly for internally motivated people.

### 1. Fulfillment of expectations (index in percentage)

At the end of course participants are asked to rate the level of expectations fulfillment using index in percentage. It is assumed that the index of 60% and more means satisfaction in general. Among 123 remarks only 2 participants (1,6 %) declare 50 %. The rest of them are moderate or extremely satisfied. The average is 89,8 %.



There are 126 questionnaires of participants who answered at the beginning and the end of training.

Table 5 Satisfaction in different groups

	All	Parents	Parent-professionals	Professionals
Women	90,8 %	90 %	92 %	90 %
Men	84,9 %	80 %	95 %	92 %

In general women show the higher score of expectation fulfillment than men.

### 2. Self-assessment in school marks scale.

In Poland a school marks scale is from 1 – the worst, 2- not enough, 3 – sufficient, 4 – good, 5 – very good to 6 – the excellent mark. Participants are asked to judge their own parental competence before the course and at the end.

Table 5 Quality of change in participants' own perception.

	Parents	Parent-professionals	Professionals	All
Women	<b>1,7</b> 2,9 → 4,6	<b>1,2</b> 3,6 → 4,8	<b>1,1</b> 3,6 → 4,7	<b>1,5</b> <b>3,2 → 4,7</b>
Men	<b>1,2</b> 2,9 → 4,1	<b>1</b> 4 → 5	<b>1,3</b> 3,1 → 4,4	<b>1,3</b> <b>3,0 → 4,3</b>

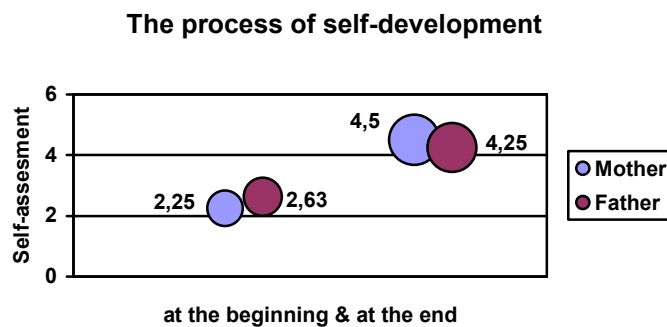
At the beginning participants believe to have sufficient competence (3,21) as parents and carers. At the end of course they feel more competent (4,60). Parental self-esteem is growing significantly to the level of “good enough or even very good parent”. Especially non-professional mothers change their self-perception in positive direction.

Four parental couples took part in the course. The number is not enough to generalise, but it is interesting to find the tendency which confirms mothers’ improvement.

Table 6 Evaluation four parental couples

	Fulfilment of expectations	Self-assesment at the beginning	Self-assesment at the end	Change
Mothers	92,5 %	2,25	4,5	2,25
Fathers	75 %	2,63	4,25	1,62

It can be illustrated by the diagram.



Fathers seem less enthusiastic about the impact of training. The cultural stereotype of masculinity supports an explanation that they are more rational and discreet in emotional judgments. Mothers are at risk to demand too much from themselves. At the beginning they believe to be “poor mothers”. The course makes them feel “good mothers”.

### 3. Intention to join the follow-up course.

Participants are asked to declare their interest in the follow-up of Parents School if it is available.

Table 7

YES	NO	?
119	3	4
95 %	2 %	3 %

In general participants are interested in the lifelong learning as parents and carers in Parents School.



#### 4. Open statements about advantages and other comments.

Opinions of participants are undivided: it was a great experience, which positively influenced the quality of their emotional contacts with children, increased the efficiency of educational work, and gave the hope of future success for those parents, who had already doubted in achieving any positive effects with their so called “difficult kids”. Participants of “Parents’ School” also claimed that except for better interpersonal contacts in their families, there were some other positive outcomes too: increase of the need of self- development and psychological education, or readiness to undertake a specialistic therapy. Those results, up to now, used to be presented only during conversations with parents or in questionnaires filled directly after classes.

Parents pointed at practical advantages such as better relations with children, increased ability of dealing with family problems together with aborting the use of violence and misuse of parents powers, accepting child’s needs and feelings, although without exaggerated care and submission.

#### CONCLUSION

It seems that investment in parents self-confidence by development of their communication skills in a dialog with children is the easiest and the most effective way to empower children for better life and to prevent emotional and behavioural disorders in adolescence and adulthood.

Primary prevention can be implemented by creating community based the education support groups which are supposed to help parents and carers not only in development of their personal life but also in initiating the implementation of positive changes within family, school and local community. The lifelong learning of parenthood is an investment for the better living nowadays and in the next generation.

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