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Parental Love - Irreplaceable for Children's Well-Being

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Abstract - Child rearing has become challenging during past years and great expectations are placed for parenthood. Although the public upbringing has become professionalized and the day-care and school services are available in today's society, parents have the main responsibility for rearing children. How and into what should children be raised? In this article, good parenthood is paralleled with parental love. As a result, two valuable and demanding underlying contents of parental love are discussed in this article: setting up safe boundaries and constructing good self-esteem as the core of good parenthood and parental love. The perspective in this article is fundamentally positive: parental love appreciates and cares about the child and does not abandon the child even when his/her behavior causes disappointments and trouble.

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Parental Love - Irreplaceable for Children's Well-Being

Kaarina Määttä ^α & Satu Uusiautti ^σ

Abstract - Child rearing has become challenging during past years and great expectations are placed for parenthood. Although the public upbringing has become professionalized and the day-care and school services are available in today's society, parents have the main responsibility for rearing children. How and into what should children be raised? In this article, good parenthood is paralleled with parental love. As a result, two valuable and demanding underlying contents of parental love are discussed in this article: setting up safe boundaries and constructing good self-esteem as the core of good parenthood and parental love. The perspective in this article is fundamentally positive: parental love appreciates and cares about the child and does not abandon the child even when his/her behavior causes disappointments and trouble.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Child rearing has become more and more challenging during the past few years and increasingly greater expectations are leveled at educators and parents. There has been a dramatic decrease in the traditional families while the proportion of single-parent families has increased (e.g. Sheridan & Burt, 2009). As the worldwide statistic show, number of working mothers of young children has risen over the past few decades, so has the use of child care (Ebbeck & Hoi Yin, 2009).

Not only the basic structure but also child care has changed dramatically. In developed countries such as Finland (the authors' home country), both parents of the vast majority of families with children under school age are in full-time employment. Most mothers of small children also work full-time. Under these circumstances, a reliable, safe and reasonably priced day-care system is of vital importance. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2006.) Finland uses the Nordic Welfare state principles and methods which are based on the state's responsibility for its citizens. Thus, welfare services, such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), are arranged and funded

by central and local government. All children below school age are entitled to receive municipal day-care. (Heinämäki, 2008.) The above-mentioned services are important as female labor force participation in Finland is 72 % of women (15-64 years), 18.2% of whom are in part-time employment. Furthermore, labor force participation rate of women with a child(ren) under 6 years was 49.6 %, of whom 8% work part-time. (OECD, 2006.)

Along with the changes in working life, the role of day-care centers and schools in rearing has strengthened. The rearing task has become professionalized (Bimbi, 1992) and from the parents' point of view, parenthood can be considered shared with the public rearing institution (Björnberg, 1992).

Professionals define what is good child rearing and what kind of rearing should be implemented inside citizens' homes. Yet, parents have the main responsibility for rearing their children—even though today's common discourse reveal how parents seem to carry unreasonable load of guilt and consider themselves insufficient in their rearing and parenting task. In Finland, work was valued as the most important thing in life—over family life and free time—in the 1970s. After the middle of the 1980s, the appreciations have started to change considerably in the opposite direction (Maljojoki, 1989). The value of upbringing is unquestionable; actually, it seems that the modern children would need parental love and the safety provided at home maybe more than ever before. Still, it is worth remembering that as mothers work increasingly outside home (Aryee, Shirinivas, & Hoon Tan, 2005), men have started to use more and more time with home craft and childcare during the past decades (Barnett, 2004). These decisions concerning work-family balance are not just about making compromises (e.g. Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010) but, for example, positive paternal involvement influences positively the multiple domains of children's lives from birth through adolescence (Hawkins, Brown, Osterle, Arthus, Abbot, & Catalano, 2008). All in all, children's well-being and health are developed within the context of the family (Ambert, 1994; Arendell, 1997; Sheridan & Burt, 2009).

The social nets around families have become scarcer. For example, migration from countryside to cities is one reason for the disappearance of support nets. Previously, grandparents and relatives gave the

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advice and instructions needed, and participated in rearing jointly and severally. Today, professional educators have replaced them. (Cutting, 1998.) Although professional educators do offer their support for parents, the transition of the responsibility of rearing partly outside home increases parents' insecurity every now and then: according to Bimbi (1992), parents seemingly consider themselves incompetent compared with professional educators.

According to Huttunen's (1984) perception, parents have knowledge about rearing but when applying it they experience insecurity and need support, backing up and understanding in their parenthood. Furthermore, Puroila (1996) points out that parents get plenty of information about their children and the factors related to their development. This information increases parents' awareness of their own rights. On the other hand, the received information may be inconsistent and cause uncertainty among parents. Dencik (1989) referred to double-tendency which is considered typical of modern parenthood. On the one hand, it means a strong engagement to children and on the other hand giving up the rearing task. Parents are more sensitive than before and more willing to realize children's needs. However, parents are uncertain of how they should fulfill their rearing task.

In the society of rapid change, the future of the next generation is likely to differ from the present. Thus, it may not be appropriate to demand a child to follow behavior models that lose their significance in future. Parents have to give up the rearing model they have gotten from their own parents and solve the challenges of rearing by themselves. (Björnberg, 1992.) The fast speed of change causes uncertainty about the norms and what kind of rearing is the best for children (Lahikainen & Strandell, 1987).

Nowadays, the science of education is studied more than ever and parents are increasingly aware of the significance of their rearing task. Still, they are more and more in doubt about it as the behavioral problems of the young increases. (Määttä, 2007.) Continuously increasing knowledge about the needs of child development and the importance of right rearing methods means simultaneously an increase in the parents' responsibility and tasks (Beck-Gernheim, 1992).

Related issues, such as economic aspects, time-management, the division of domestic labor, the professionalization of upbringing, have been discussed to a great extent (e.g. Clark, 2000; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Frone, 2003). Yet, the fundamental question—namely the one concerning parental love and the meaning of positive mental growing environment—is worth contemplating as well.

In this article, we concentrate on analyzing the core of good parenthood. What is the goal of

upbringing and parents' task when the responsibility of rearing is shared with many educational institutions and professionals? Parenthood is not a profession but based on parental love. What does parental love mean fundamentally? At their best, upbringing and parental love offer a positive environment that enhances children's strengths. According to Sheridan and Burt (2009), understanding the qualities of families and their environments that might explain why some children and families fare better than others is important. We will study the concept and purpose of parental love.

Our survey is based on the existing literature and the most recent studies as well as our extensive research on love and its various forms (Määttä, 2007; 2010; 2011abc; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011; Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010, 2011). As researchers, our own idea of human being is based on positive psychology: with a positive approach we put the focus on how to support the development of human strengths in early childhood. We also try to strengthen the role of parenthood and its primary importance for a growing human being. Parenthood cannot disappear from the core of children's life.

II. THE PURPOSE OF PARENTAL LOVE : HOW SHOULD BE CHILDREN RAISED?

We start by dissecting what human characteristics are the most important for children's well-being and favorable development. Healthy self-confidence and self-esteem, balanced emotional life, judgment and responsibility, the ability to control one's own behavior, empathy as well as the ability to respect and appreciate other people could represent such features (Määttä, 2007). Therefore, those exact features could be the emphases of rearing.

According to broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004), the positive emotions, such as joy, interest, contentment, and love, broadens an individual's thought-action repertoire: joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore, contentment sparks the urge to savor and integrate, and love sparks a recurring cycle of each these urges within safe, close relationships. Positive emotions solve problems concerning personal growth and development.

Berscheid (2006) claims that understanding human behavior has suffered because of forgetting the fact that people live in a net of human relationships for their entire life and that most of the behavior takes place in the context of human relationships. When studying successful behavior, it is important to examine how the environmental factors and the people's mutual relationships affect the development of self-concept (Magnusson & Mahoney, 2006;

Caprara & Cervone, 2006). Environmental factors also shape the repertoire of savoring responses that children acquire over time, through family dynamics, social and peer relations, and cultural influences (Bryant, Chadwick, & Kluwe, 2011).

Therefore, it seems that these abilities develop in interaction with other people. Children's bases and well-being thus are the responsibility of those people who live with and close to children, such as parents, other immediate caregivers, teachers, and friends (Ambert, 1994; Arendell, 1997). Children's development is greatly affected by their growing surroundings (juvenile culture, media, as well as the societal values and ideals) as it has been noted that childhood may be the optimal time to promote healthy attitudes, behavior, adjustment, and prevention of problems by, for example, recognizing the children's strengths and building on those strengths (Brown Kirschman, Johnson, Bender, & Roberts, 2009).

Next, we will discuss two valuable and demanding contents of rearing that can be seen lying behind the previously mentioned features that enhance children's well-being and favorable development: setting up safe boundaries and constructing good self-esteem. Children need the experiences of success, appreciation and encouragement, but equally important is that they have distinct and safe limits. (e.g. Rantala & Määttä, 2011.)

III. THE METHODS OF PARENTAL LOVE : ENCOURAGEMENT AND LIMITATIONS

Family boundaries mean that the family provides consistent supervision for the child and maintains reasonable guidelines for behavior that the child can understand and achieve (see Search Institute, 2010). Beneficial development is secured by establishing boundaries that are preserved with love instead of discipline, ignorance, underestimation, mocking, or malignancy. What the rules are is entirely up to parents and other adults in the household; and furthermore, parents also have to make rules how themselves will behave—consistency is needed in maintenance of boundaries (Greenberg, 2003).

Caring and loving parents may find placing the protecting limits as well as finding the strengths to adhere to them is difficult. Nor is it pleasing to let a child down by telling that he or she will not get what he or she wants. If children could set the limits for themselves, rearing would be easy but growth is not that simple. Children ask and they ask by their actions. Adults' task is to give answers in order to guide and protect children. (e.g. Lawrence, 2001.)

When defining safety limits, parents have to have the courage to face children's anger which is a normal reaction. Children are displeased if not allowed to go as they will and carry out their wildest plans.

However, this anger does not make it justified for parents to give up their responsibility for guiding the maturing people or mislead themselves into believing that it is right to give up caring. Children need protecting limits and caring adults who to defy and rebel against and who they can love regardless of setbacks because setting the limits creates the feeling of security and caring.

IV. THE DEPTH AND STABILITY OF PARENTAL LOVE : CHILDREN NEED TO FEEL LOVED AND CARED EVEN WHEN BEHAVING INAPPROPRIATELY

At home, children have to find out that they are loved and valuable even when their actions are harmful or cause disappointments and shame for their parents because that is the only way of strengthening their feeling of being appreciated and wanted as well as their feeling of security. They can count on parents to be there no matter what happened. (Määttä, 2007.) Still, children's inappropriate behavior cannot be accepted, it has to be intervened and the right direction has to be shown (e.g. Hoffman & Saltzen, 1967). However, since children are unready, still maturing human beings, they have to be able to trust that parents will not abandon them. Children are allowed to express their bad feelings and still parents' love holds on: children need love especially when they do not seem to deserve it. (e.g. Katz & Tello, 2003.)

Even the disappointments are important part of developing self-esteem and mental health (e.g. Desjardins, Zelenti, & Coplan, 2008). At home, children can learn in a safe environment those means which help to handle disappointments and failures. When necessary, parents can protect their children from the feelings of anxiety and guilt.

The magic word for building good self-esteem is appreciating a child. Parents' appreciative words are immemorial for many children's self-esteem: "Well done, I'm happy about you," "Thank you, you know how to do it," "It's magnificent how well you can do it." These acknowledging words should not be held back or regulated, quite the opposite: parents should look for new chances to give appreciation and positive feedback all the time. Recognition and thanks do not lose their power even when used abundantly. (see Aunola, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2000.)

Many parents would see their child as the best and most successful one bringing success and praise. However, this kind of rearing can turn against it: instead of merciless demands for performance and success, parents should emphasize humanity and goodwill in their rearing. "The best is the enemy of good" – the aspiration towards perfection prevents from noticing good results and tolerating the vices. Ultimately, the only right the parent has to the child is

the right to love, the only task is to secure the provisions for free humanity, and the only glory is the children's love. (e.g. Aunola & Nurmi, 2005.)

The starting point and goal for rearing and parental love has to be growing child's own special value. Every human being has a special value that must not be sacrificed in the name of societal effectiveness or money. Every child is important, valuable, and unique regardless of how well he or she performs at school or what kind of effort he or she is likely to do for the society. A child's value cannot be deduced from his or her personal features.

Parental love gives more comprehensive support for children that the modern school or even day-care can offer (Zakeri, Jowkar, & Razmjoe, 2010). Educational work carried out at day-care and school has to be appreciated also by providing sufficient extrinsic circumstances to carry it out. Every child has their own strengths and parents can provide children with opportunities to succeed, thank them even for the smallest step forwards, and enhance the conception of "I am able, I can, I will survive." (Harralson & Lawler, 1992.)

Humanity is manifested in rearing by respecting each and every child. Children should be appreciated so that they will be understood and approved even when weak, maladjusted, or difficult—also when they do not meet those idealistic hopes and expectations that parents, day-care, and school have set although with good intentions. There are fundamental questions also because the modern society keeps up the "I'll manage alone" –ideology, in other words, admires people who do not need others and cope by themselves. However, modern, almost narcissistic, society and people in it are extremely vulnerable. We do not seem to tolerate or handle failures and difficulties; admitting weaknesses and vulnerability are considered as giving up (Gauvain & Huard, 1999).

Children have to perceive that they are loved, cared, and accepted as they are—not just when they meet the expectations. Only then, children can mature and develop—become free and start thinking how they would like to change themselves to the directions that are possible for them.

V. PARENTS' VERSATILE ROLES

The multidimensional contents of parental love can be viewed also by all the various roles and tasks that parenthood involves. For example, Hoikkala (1993) divides parenthood into three categories: permissive, responsible, and strong parenthood. Permissive parenthood emphasizes a child's individuality and its opposite is a strict, dominating, and punishing parenthood. Responsible parenthood considers parenthood obligation to create good

growing environment for a child. The aim of this kind of parenthood is to bring up children healthy and responsible citizens who take care of themselves.

How to secure children's favorable growth (Wolfrad, Hempel, & Miles, 2003)? The roles of parenthood, according to Helminen-Iso-Heiniemi (1999) are The Teacher of Life, The Expert in Human Relationships, Love Giver, Limit Setter, Caregiver (see also Hubbs-Tait, 2008; Nijhof & Engels, 2007; Verissimo et al., 2011). Parents and other adults model self-control, social skills, engagement in learning, and healthy lifestyles (see Search Institute, 2010).

On the other hand, children are our mirrors. Outstanding facilities or even the most advanced technology does not guarantee positive development nor can one raise a child like listed company according to the indexes or expectations of market economy. Every child develops at his or her own pace supported and encouraged by people he or she lives with. Nothing can replace human interaction. Lawrence notes that "love which only can exist in relationships is a social experience, does organize social experience, outstanding among these being commitments – commitments that bind a person to a course of action and connection (Lawrence, 2001, p. 61)."

Aspinwall and Staudinger (2006) point out that many of the human strengths are based on the person's relationships with others, in other words, they are relational or collective by nature: for example, possibility to understand and cope with various problematic life situations is better if one has a chance to discuss the problem at hand with a close friend, swap opinions, and reflect the issues from the new perspectives.

VI. DISCUSSION: THERE ARE NO PERFECT PARENTS - OR CHILDREN

Parents who want to raise children well do not have to be perfect people and they cannot expect children to be or become perfect either. Hardly anyone can be flawless – on the contrary: pursuing perfection prevents from noticing all the good results. Alice Miller (1984) says: "Do not hope that a child would turn into something specific, just that he or she would develop. Enjoy the child and his or her developmental phases as he or she is. Enjoy your life together instead of being constantly worried about what your children will become or not in the future." This is how a healthy self-image is created as well as self-confidence to confront difficulties and problems in life. Successful rearing does not aim at clearing the hardships and obstacles but helping children to learn to confront, tolerate, and conquering the inevitable difficulties (McCree & Halpern, 2010). Parents, caregivers, and teachers encourage and have to support the child in behaving

appropriately, undertaking challenging tasks, and performing activities to the best of her or his abilities (see also Search Institute, 2010).

When parents have faith in children's talents, it is easier for them to assure children of it as well. Certainly, just belief and trust will not be enough but rearing has to be focused action: good parents are present, give time, and make the effort to positive togetherness. They care, ask, discuss, listen, tell, explain, argue, fuss and busy themselves with children. Good parents are role models for children even in the most difficult life situations: they have to maintain the belief and pursue building better environment and more human world for children. At its best, rearing helps children to experience what life can offer. They have to be allowed to see what the better world could be and be assured that it is reachable.

Human relationships have become narrower. Even for this reason, family as a supporter of proximity and individuality within the complex modern life is significant both for children and adults. The ability to be happy of life and teaching it are important skills for a good parent. Being grateful for small mercies in everyday life is more and more important in the insecure modern life and can be the crucial factor for children when trying to handle difficulties. This kind of attitude has been described felicitously:

Within the prescriptive bounds of culture, families directly and indirectly encourage or discourage the active pursuit of positive experience in children through the ways in which they organize children's experiences. For example, whether or not parents celebrate milestones, birthdays, holidays, and accomplishments, take vacations, and pursue enjoyment at work and leisure—and the specific ways in which they do so—not only teaches children the value of appreciating and enjoying life, but also provides concrete models for savoring that children can imitate. (Bryant, Chadwick, & Kluwe, 2011, p. 118) Although the nature of the parent-child relationship changes from early childhood to adolescence, the presence of warmth and sensitivity as well as support for autonomy as parenting behaviors appears to be critical to child well-being (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Positive caring of children has positive associations with children's cognitive development and social competence during the preschool years (Peisner-Feinberg, 2004). And even furthermore: positive emotions in early life have even been claimed to be associated with longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Frieser, 2001). This concerns everyone regardless of the background (Peisner-Feinberg, 2004).

Furthermore, this complex theme can be reflected from the point of view of positively acting people. Magnusson and Mahoney (2006) are interested whether the life spans of the positively

functioning people differ from others and if they do, what are the unique structures that express the human strength and positive ways of action in their life spans, and how these structures can be recognized. The research on happiness has pointed out the tendency of same kind: in order to know why some people are happier than others, we have to understand what are the cognitive and motivational processes that maintain or even increase happiness and positive attitude (Lyubomirsky, 2001; Ojanen, 2001). Everything begins in infancy and childhood. According to Lawrence (2001), the earliest sense of a "true self" is for the infant a self "worthy of love". Through the abovementioned perception, a child finds the world interesting and enjoyable, and feels that he or she has a positive place in it.

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