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## THE IMAGE OF A LONELY CHILD IN A MODERN FAMILY

“Having loved ones and feeling lonely  
is the worst kind of loneliness, because it kills hope in a person,  
weakens motivation, and distorts mentally”  
H. Izdebska (1980)

### INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of globalization, experiencing its effects on almost all levels of life. We take advantage of its benefits in the sphere of culture, economy and science. It also brings many difficulties and with it anxieties and they affect both individuals and modern Polish families. These situations result from unfavourable conditions and dangers inherent in the social and local environment, as well as in the functioning and structure of the family. Post-industrial processes, social changes and numerous economic, economic and political transformations have an impact on the existence and axiological spheres of family life. These phenomena shape new values and formulate new ideas, views and attitudes of individuals and social groups.

The family as an educational institution and social group, although it is part of the social structure, does not keep up with the dynamic changes functioning in wider social systems. Thus, there is a natural discrepancy between new social goals, norms of behaviour, social values created by contemporary reality and the system of views, ideas and values inherent in the family environment (Kwak, 2015, pp. 16-18). Contemporary extra-family conditions have a negative

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impact on the performance of parental functions in many elements of family life. It created many more social and individual problems, such as: unemployment, threat to the sense of security, intensification of all addictions, including alcoholism, increased crime and aggression. Especially in conditions of tensions caused by material difficulties, the socialization function of the family is inevitably subject to deforming limitations (Krasiejko, 2019, p. 14).

In today's reality, which is constantly changing and transforming, the constant pursuit of material goods and social position is very evident. Parents do not have time for other people in their family. In the first place, they care about providing their children with the best possible material conditions, while paying too little attention to satisfying their psychological needs. (Felchner). In these families, a lifestyle is often created in which customary norms promoted by the mass media depreciate the universal values in family upbringing. Emotional bonding, truth, goodness, beauty give way to hedonistic values such as wealth, position, false belief that happiness depends on what is nowadays called success (Cudak, 2012, p. 8). As a result, there is an increasing atomization and atomization of family members (Tyszka, 2000, p. 11), which results in the domination of the interests, aspirations and aspirations of the individual over the goals and values of the family. Although the family physically stays together, psychologically its members feel a certain isolation, indifference to common values and ideas. A young person growing up in such an atmosphere cannot keep up with the accepted lifestyle. For him, home does not provide family warmth, intimacy, and protection from all the dangers of the non-family environment (Gawęcka, 2004, p. 12). The effect of these dynamic changes is human loneliness and solitude. It is experienced by more and more people regardless of age or occupation.

### 1. SOLITUDE AND LONELINESS

In the definitional sense, "loneliness" is often identified with solitude, however, in the literature "loneliness" and "solitude" are understood as two separate states, where each of them encompasses the whole specificity of this phenomenon. It is a complex problem, depending on both internal – psycho-existential factors (e.g. human sensitivity and the recognized system of values), and external, socio-cultural factors. Regardless of the differences or similarities, the discussed phenomena often "go hand in hand". Although it is sometimes difficult to find the border between them, they are not synonymous terms

(Dyczewski, 2006, p. 114). When defining these terms the authors distinguished between loneliness and solitude, pointing out the possibility of the occurrence of positive aspects. As Tarnogórski wrote “[...] solitude is a desirable state in human life, while loneliness plays a negative and disintegrating role” (Tarnogórski, 1988, p. 5). The only similarity between loneliness and solitude is that they occur regardless of age. Solitude, according to him, is “[...] a state chosen consciously. It does not exclude the opening to another world, on the contrary, it favors it” (Ibid., p. 7). Thus in this sense solitude becomes a search for oneself, the ability to concentrate on one’s inner world and to become indifferent to the world. Solitude gives man the necessary distance, courage, readiness to give up and a sense of inner self-sufficiency. Indeed, in this understanding this state can have a positive dimension. If it is chosen, desired or short-lived (Pawłowska, Jundził, 2000, p. 21); however, if it lasts too long – it usually leads to loneliness. Loneliness as a value often appears in philosophers’ reflections. As a philosophical category it serves to describe human existence. This approach takes into account the role of solitude in the development of humanity and in increasing human self-awareness (Gorecki, 2001, p. 78).

While Holyst (2002, p. 356) treats loneliness as a human emotional state resulting from the lack of relations with other people, which can be very acutely felt. The weakening of the emotional bond with one or more people causes a decrease in the sense of meaning of life. This term, according to the author, has an exclusively negative character and mainly boils down to the lack of psychological bond or physical absence of close people. Thus, loneliness is a subjective-psychic state. It is a state of mind, felt only by a given person and affecting his emotions (Synak, 2002, p.12) It should be emphasized that loneliness is a difficult phenomenon to define, because it is conditioned by the individual’s predispositions and can take different forms (Nowaczyk, 2009, p. 212).

Among researchers of the phenomenon of loneliness, there is a consensus that it has become, as Professor Cacioppo directly stated, “a disease of our times” (Czarnecka-Walicka, 2016, p.14) a disease of civilization, the scale of which is reaching pandemic proportions. In the eighties of the last century, on the pages of his books, Toffler wrote directly about the “epidemic of loneliness” (Toffler, 1986) indicating that “[...] The ailment of loneliness is by no means new, but loneliness today is such a common feeling that – paradoxically – it is experienced collectively [...]” (Ibid., p. 415). It should be emphasized that it bothers not only people who are really lonely, abandoned by their loved ones, but also those living in families. Children, the young and the old suffer from it. The times we live in – their dizzying pace, the development

of civilization and technology, the complex social structure, competition in gaining positions, goods, promotes loneliness (Stochmiątek, 2005, p. 5).

The definitions and classifications presented refer largely to adults. Does this mean that the phenomenon does not concern children? The problem of the feeling of loneliness in a child in a family has been the area of multifaceted research and increasingly taken up by pedagogues. This feeling is also referred to as “spiritual orphanhood” or “emotional orphanhood.” Its main determinant is the fact that the child experiences emotional repulsion (Maciarz, 1991, p. 89). However, as Łopatkowa noticed, there is a qualitative difference between the notions of loneliness and solitude of a child and an adult. The latter, in her opinion, “[...] having his own inner world, can take refuge in it, can draw content for life from it, isolating himself from people. This solitude is not burdened with existential emptiness, that is, it does not exceed the limits of psychological endurance. The child, on the other hand, does not yet possess this inner world (infant) or possesses it to a limited degree (older child) and is so closely connected with the external world that the separation of these two worlds brings with it a catastrophe of personal development. So if the inner world is absent, one cannot take refuge in it or contact it. What remains is the lack of contact with oneself and with people – that is loneliness [...]” (Łopatkowa, 1989, p. 4). In other words: loneliness is always loneliness for a child. Such a state is never a choice, because it is contrary to the nature of the child’s period of development (Gawęcka, 2004, p. 18). The child is dependent on adults – it needs their help, advice and attention. Therefore, loneliness is a consequence of destructive phenomena in the family, the causes of which can be found in the lack of emotional bonds between parents and the child, in the lack of time for the child, in arguments, parental divorce, in family pathology or in autocratic style of upbringing (Pawłowska, Jundziłł, 2000, p. 19). According to the already mentioned author, M. Łopatkowa, the child’s loneliness includes shorter, longer and permanent states, in which the child feels lonely. Undoubtedly, all of them lead to significant damage to the child’s development and belong to unpleasant experiences that should be alleviated and eliminated by adults, because most often they cause them. As she rightly believes, [...] to have more joy in adult years one should have less sadness in childhood [...]. (Łopatkowa, 1989, p. 6).

All researchers dealing with this issue, unanimously claim, with which we should undoubtedly agree, that loneliness is a difficult, unpleasant psychological state. On one hand we are afraid of rejection, and on the other – we feel a strong fear of closeness, which can mean enslavement for us, dependence

on others, etc. (Sendyk, 2011, p. 142). In fact, how we develop patterns of entering into close emotional relationships depends largely on the bonding styles in which we grew up in early childhood. In the literature on the subject of children's loneliness, particular attention is paid to the analysis of those experiences that are determinants of the acquisition of social skills and, consequently, of the formation of a self-image (Wasilewska, 2010, p. 53-56). Today's parents are often absent in their children's lives, not giving them sufficient support, not fully satisfying such important needs for their proper development as psychological security, and affiliative needs such as the need for belonging and love. Condemned to play alone, they are not able to enter into relationships, do not make friends and this causes them to be on the sidelines at school and it is much more difficult for them to enter into and cooperate with a group. It may turn out that the world of relations with peers has been so disturbed that later attempts at its repair have no chance of success and thus push the child into the role of an observer – not a participant in the life of the class. It may also lead to an increase in the feeling of loneliness, which is a painful discomfort and experience resulting from the lack of bonds and constant contact with a person significant for the child (Steuden, Zdunek, 2001, p. 531).

Therefore, according to Izdebska (2005, p. 77), loneliness can last throughout childhood and is never a choice made by children. It is the result and consequence of various situations, external conditions in the face of which the child is helpless and always causes permanent, negative effects in the child itself, in its development, in its contacts with others. Therefore, the author takes the theory of childhood, the theory of needs, the theory of children's rights, the assumptions of humanistic pedagogy and the philosophy of dialogue as the theoretical basis for her research on children's loneliness. Due to the limited framework of this study, the authors will only refer to the theory of childhood.

## 2. MODERN CHILDHOOD

The modern perception of childhood has been formed as a result of many years of development of community views. Nowadays, children in civilised countries have a completely different position than in years gone by, with this position being particularly strengthened by legislation. This is the result of a long, gradual formation of civil rights, scientific cognition and a complete political and cultural transformation. However, this process did not develop without obstacles. It should be mentioned here that in the formation of so-called modern

society, views on the child and childhood often lagged behind the development of knowledge in other fields of human cognition. This was due to natural reasons, namely that children do not represent their interests independently, but this happens through adult representatives. Therefore, views on child development were and are clearly marked by the broader cultural, historical and social context of a community's life. As Smolinska-Theiss wrote: "A particular child belongs to a particular culture and a particular time, is a child of war, times of crisis, consumption" (Smolińska-Theiss, 2010, p. 25). Consequently, in different societies we encounter different views on the child in a specific age range, and these differences do not lie in the biological conditions of development, but precisely in its socio-cultural understanding and patterns. In the humanities and social sciences, childhood is not understood solely as an ontogenic period of human development as an organism, although developmental psychology is closest to such an understanding. From the modern point of view, childhood is a product of the community, which decides on its appearance, shapes it in aspects of the material and social environment and the very development of the individual, his hopes and expectations. According to this way of understanding, childhood is a sociological idea created for children by adults according to their ideas and the conditions in which they live. Thus, according to most authors, childhood is not a completely natural or fully universal feature of human societies, but manifests itself as a specific component of a particular society. It was eventually accepted that childhood cannot be detached from social and cultural variables such as social stratum, gender or ethnicity (Jarosz, 2017, p. 60). Over time, the catalogue of modifying factors began to grow.

Referring to the theory of childhood in the light of Polish research, it can be assumed that childhood is not only a passing phase of development, but also the world of a child, its experiences, activity, the source of which is the family, school, peer groups, the Church, everyday life, contacts with culture, meeting another person ( Szczepska-Pustkowska, 1997, p. 69). The diversity of the presented terms indicates the complexity of this condition, its importance, as well as the interest of many researchers of various scientific disciplines in the issue. They all unanimously emphasise that every child, even in early childhood, already has an individual biography. How children feel, think and what they think about themselves depends on their degree of understanding, processing and acceptance of their cultural, social and material experiences to date. The child's self-concept, his or her emerging personality, is what largely influences the child's opportunities for further development and even his or her life-wide outlook. Children can be perceived differently – as individuals

or as a social group, yet it remains undeniable that in their own way they remain a distinctly specific phenomenon of modern society (Honore, 2011).

It is hard not to notice that nowadays the whole child population is undergoing a process of distinct changes. These are determined by social, but mainly material media. Rapid transformations and developments in the way of social existence mean that a few years change the cultural and macro-social habits of the contemporary generation of children. Games, communication, leisure activities and the relationship of the youngest to adults are changing. The physical appearance of children has also changed – they are taller, mature faster and their typical problems have changed. They suffer from different diseases than a few years ago (malnutrition versus obesity, allergies). They have different perspectives. The idea of a good life, generally accepted and passed on from childhood, has also changed. The structure of prestigious professions is evolving, which can already be seen in children's games.

The issue of childhood was recognised over 100 years ago by the proponents of the New Education, who put the child and its development at the centre of their interests. In 1900, Ellen Key's (1849-1926) book "The Century of the Child" was published, which became the symbol of the New Education. In her book, The Swedish social activist set out her dreams for the 20th century – "the century of the happy child" with good care and individualised upbringing. She was an advocate of upbringing at home and in a free, natural way (without training or formalism) for the development of the child's unique personality and respect for its culture of feelings. In her opinion, to bring up "a child means to hold his soul in your arms, to take his steps on a narrow path. It means never exposing oneself to the danger of seeing in a child's eyes a coldness that tells us without words [...] that it considers us inconsistent" (Key, 1928, p. 78). The author repeatedly stressed that only in a family that surrounds the child with true love is it able to develop properly. Unfortunately, the beginning of the 21st century, instead of a happy childhood, shows seemingly happy children. How current are the views of Smolińska-Theiss, who wrote in the 1990s that two opposing processes dominate contemporary childhood. One of them aims at restoring the lost childhood to the youngest at all costs, while the other one expropriates the youngest generation from this space (Smolińska-Theiss, 1992, p. 89). The reasons are found in the expansion of commercialised Western culture and the questionable attempt to dominate the child by adults and social institutions. A phenomenon is observed which some specialists call the 'institutionalisation' of childhood (Jarosz, 2017, p. 58). By this term is meant the ever-increasing share of institutional education,

which refers to the upbringing and education of children where the lower age limit of children is decreasing and at the same time the upper limit is increasing. For the youngest children, in addition to traditional institutions such as nurseries and kindergartens, private childminders are employed. This means that the upbringing of young children is removed from the family and takes place alongside it.

### 3. CHILDHOOD AND DISTURBED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family relationships and their quality are extremely important for the functioning of individual family members throughout their lives. They play a key role in shaping the well-being of the individual throughout his or her life. The breakdown of family ties can occur as a result of various situations such as the death of a parent, divorce, poverty, alcoholism or violence.

When the relations between the members are permanently disturbed and affect the psychological and physical well-being of both parents and children we can speak of a dysfunctional family (Maciejewska, Bury, 2008, p. 31), in which the youngest members suffer the most. Children growing up like this are innocent, they have no control over the toxic environment they are growing up in. They are hurt by adults on different levels: physical, emotional, psychological, sexual. For such children, everyday life is one of uncertainty, chaos and instability.

Children from dysfunctional homes do not receive the attention and support they need at key developmental stages. Instead, they focus on the inappropriate behaviour of their parents. Very often they cannot show their feelings, especially anger, sadness, fear. Young people, especially in adolescence, ask themselves the difficult existential question “who am I” “what am I striving for” and have to define their own psychological and social identity, as well as establish their own system of values and life aspirations. Children who have the love and support of those closest to them follow the right path and become fully-fledged citizens, honest and good people with a clearly defined and internalised system of values. Unfortunately, many young people get lost in the hustle and bustle of everyday life and become distrustful and aggressive towards the world and people. In the current educational situation it is in vain to look for effective factors of social order. The only tangible consequence of this state of affairs is that people’s sense of security is shaken. This feeling, especially with regard to children and young people, is becoming increasingly unstable.

In particular, the end of the second decade of the 21st century has rapidly and significantly disrupted the daily lives of children and families throughout the world. Such disruption and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic poses, in particular, serious risks associated with an increase in dysfunctional behaviour within the family. The lack of contact with family doctors and paediatricians, as well as educators and school psychologists, has created the possibility for carers to conceal problems concerning home life, which is all the more problematic given the rising rates of domestic violence during the pandemic period. Children have often had to become silent hostages to the situation between their parents, relying only on themselves.

Day by day, many families have changed from happy to dysfunctional, not fulfilling their educational functions properly. Living in such a community leads to the development of specific child behaviour in relations with household members. It may be expressed, among others, by weakening of the emotional bond between family members, loss of the sense of belonging and elimination of the emotional sphere (Mariański, Zaręba, 2021, p. 7-8). Against this background, there is a shortage of psychological contact between children and their parents. Therefore, there is a justified fear that the young generation will be “kidnapped” by those who propose, and even impose, a dangerous lifestyle surrounded by alcohol, drugs and stimulants, which will allow them to forget the loneliness they experience at home. Today’s reality has led to an increase in the number of children experiencing acute loneliness among those formally closest to them. It is not a question of the physical abandonment of the child, but of a lack of psychological connection. Parents are often absent from their children’s experiences, without giving them sufficient support – which creates uncertainty, mistrust and fear, and leads to a kind of loss for the child. The changing reality in the vast majority of homes, where relationships have been disturbed, is increasingly becoming a source of loneliness for the child, which wreaks havoc on the child’s psyche and has a negative impact on the child’s ability to establish and maintain satisfying relationships with others. The child feels that he/she is unloved or unwanted by parents. They repeatedly look for ways how to win parental love, how to make their parents interested in them. This is enough drama for them. The lack of understanding of the child by the parents, proper parental love, educational care in the family, cooperation and help of the father or mother in various family situations, at school and in the local environment causes a feeling of loneliness of the child in their own family. These children feel psychologically isolated among those closest to them, rejected by their parents, left alone with their own life and educational problems. Most often they do not feel parental love, happiness. They often cannot count on their

parents, on their help or psychological support. Increased states of loneliness lead to disturbances in the child's psyche, to social and educational difficulties, to childhood crisis and lack of adaptation in peer groups. Loneliness is connected with a permanent lack of a sense of security in children, which is an important factor of correct, comprehensive, harmonious and integral development of a young person.

It is worth noting here some of the results contained in the report "Children in Pandemic," which was prepared as part of the social campaign: RadioZET# Razemzawszelepiej. ([https://prowly-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/story\\_pdfs/141891/a588c01b548179f1adc2ba1570e2d7e98f92a92cfa8fc4f5449053feb2119fa6/dzieci-w-pandemii-raport-radia-ze.pdf](https://prowly-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/story_pdfs/141891/a588c01b548179f1adc2ba1570e2d7e98f92a92cfa8fc4f5449053feb2119fa6/dzieci-w-pandemii-raport-radia-ze.pdf)). Among other things, this report shows, that during the pandemic, 75% of the surveyed children had more emotional reactions than before, such as expressions of anger, becoming offended, disobeying orders, and withdrawal into oneself. It is worrying that the above mentioned states are described as permanent. One in four of the children surveyed admitted to being often or constantly angry, one in five being constantly or frequently depressed, lonely or sad.

#### CONCLUSION

Summing up, it should be emphasised that the contemporary family, as well as school and other educational institutions face new tasks aimed at supporting the child and preventing its loneliness in the changing social situation in the country and in the world. In counteracting loneliness, it is necessary to ensure that the child feels safe at home, in kindergarten and school, to which he or she returns after a period of remote education. These tasks are faced mainly by the child's family, but also by educators, pedagogical teachers and psychologists. It is also important to cooperate with pedagogical and psychological counselling centres and other institutions established to support and help families. The scope of assistance can be very wide. It may concern the improvement of relations within the child's family, overcoming school difficulties (e.g. help in making up for deficiencies caused by distance learning), overcoming stress related to having to leave home for school or kindergarten, improving relations with peers – overcoming difficulties in establishing direct contacts and communicating with classmates caused by the isolation of the almost two years. The most important thing in these activities is the cooperation between parents, teachers and institutions supporting the child, for the benefit of the lonely child, who should be the focus of their attention.

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#### THE IMAGE OF A LONELY CHILD IN A MODERN FAMILY

##### SUMMARY

In today's reality, which is constantly changing and transforming, the constant pursuit of material goods and social position is very evident. Parents often have no time for other household members. While they are mainly concerned with providing their children with the best possible material conditions, they pay too little attention to satisfying their psychological needs. Hence, the feeling of loneliness, which in contrast to solitude, is always a difficult and unpleasant psychological state, appears more and more often among children. The paper attempts to analyse the phenomenon of children's loneliness in their parents, its sources and ways of overcoming it.

**Keywords:** loneliness; solitude; child; family.

#### OBRAZ OSAMOTNIONEGO DZIECKA WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ RODZINIE

##### STRESZCZENIE

We współczesnej rzeczywistości, ulegającej ciągłym przemianom i przeobrażeniom, w sposób bardzo jaskrawy uwidacznia się ciągła pogoń za dobrami materialnymi i pozycją społeczną. Rodzice często nie mają czasu dla pozostałych domowników. Troszcząc się głównie o zapewnienie dzieciom jak najlepszych warunków materialnych, zbyt mało uwagi przywiązują do zaspokajania ich potrzeb psychicznych. Stąd coraz częściej pojawia się wśród dzieci poczucie osamotnienia, które w przeciwieństwie do samotności jest zawsze trudnym i nieprzyjemnym stanem psychicznym. W opracowaniu podjęto próbę analizy zjawiska osamotnienia dziecka w rodzinie, jego źródeł oraz sposobów jego pokonywania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** osamotnienie; samotność; dziecko; rodzina.