



# Parenthood as a disappearing determinant of adulthood<sup>1,2</sup>

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**Abstract:** The article is of an analytical nature. It was developed based on scientific, familiological, mainly pedagogical, sociological and psychological literature. The aim of the article is to analyse the concept of parenthood /parenting in the context of social changes and transformations in the understanding of parenthood/parenting by young adults. The main research problem of the theoretical analyses undertaken here is to answer the question of whether parenthood is a disappearing determinant of adulthood. The article presents demographic and social problems related to the decreasing number of children being born and of working-age people planning procreation. It presents changes in the way of thinking about family and parenthood that have occurred in Poland over the last century, and especially the last 30 years. It shows the dissemination of new family forms (DINKS) and voluntary childlessness, postponement of adulthood, delayed adulthood, and prolonged cohabitation with parents (referred to as “boomeranging”). The reader may become acquainted with the issue of the readiness of young adults for parenthood and parenting. The basic determinants of adulthood, including parenthood, are described here. Despite the changes mentioned, parenthood and parenting still retains an important place in the development of young adults. It can also be described as an important attribute of adulthood. However, it may only be concluded that parenthood has ceased to be an obligatory determinant of adulthood. The theoretical considerations presented here may provide inspiration for undertaking research among young adults. The problems presented also encourage educational reflection – how to support young people in their preparation for adulthood, including parenthood and parenting.

**Keywords:** parenting, parenthood, family, readiness for parenting, young adults

## Introduction

The number of births in Poland, especially since 1990, has been falling sharply and does not guarantee rudimentary replacement fertility rate. The introduction of the Family 500 plus program (PL: Rodzina 500 plus) improved the fertility rate briefly. In 2017 there were roughly 145 children per 100 women aged 15-49, which means that the fertility rate was 1.45 (*Postawy prokreacyjne kobiet*, 2023, p. 1; Szaltys, 2023, p. 10). However, the uncertainty associated with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic contributed to a further decline of the fertility rate to 1.33 in 2021 (*ibidem*, p. 1). The percentage of women planning to have offspring is also decreasing and intentions to procreate in the near future are most often declared by

women aged 30-34 (31%), and slightly less frequently – by women aged 25-29 (27%) (*Postawy prokreacyjne kobiet*, 2023, p. 1; cf. also: *Bariery zamierzeń prokreacyjnych*, 2023; Szaltys, 2023).

Demographic changes directly and indirectly indicate the spread of alternative forms of marital and family life, including cohabitation, monoparentality, living apart together (LAT)<sup>3</sup>, as well as voluntary childlessness (Garncarek, 2014, p. 98; cf. also: Matysiak, 2014). A new form of family life has appeared – the dual-income couple with no kids (DINKS)<sup>4</sup> (Liberka, Matuszewska, 2014, p. 124; cf. also: Brągiel, Górnicka, 2020, p. 66-68; Ostrowska, 2020; Tomaszewska, 2017). Postponed

1 Article in polish language: [https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/59P\\_Lisi.pdf](https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/59P_Lisi.pdf)

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3 LAT-Living Apart Together.

4 DINKS-Double Income, No Kids.

adulthood is becoming common, i.e. a phenomenon of young adults not accomplishing developmental tasks (Brzezińska, 2016, p. 24-26; Brzezińska, 2017, p. 26-29, 60-61; Daszykowska-Tobiasz, 2023). There also appears the problem of prolonged cohabitation with parents—so-called boomeranging (or Boomerang Generation)—i.e. young adults aged 25-34 living with their parents in their family home (Barszcz, 2019; Bieńko, Kwak, Rosochacka-Gmitrzak, 2017).

Demographic analyses in European countries, including Poland, show a change in behaviours related to starting a family: the importance of cohabitation is increasing, the age at which women give birth to their first child is going up, the number of extra-marital births is increasing, the willingness to marry is declining, the number of children in individual families is decreasing and the problem of childlessness is noticeable (Matysiak, 2014; *Bariery zamierzeń prokreacyjnych*, 2023, *Postawy prokreacyjne kobiet*, 2023; Szałtys, 2023). Transformations in the intimate and emotional sphere of family life are also noted. These changes result from the “fragility of relationships” (Slany, 2020, p. 21-22). The decreasing number of marriages and the increase in cohabiting relationships is considered to be a manifestation of the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and attention is also drawn to the weakened obligatoriness of the norms regulating the behaviour of individuals in the parenthood sphere (Taranowicz, 2022, p. 8).

One social problem that is becoming important nowadays is the child penalty, i.e. the impact of parenthood on the professional situation of women (Pałka, 2024, p. 1). Women’s professional activity decreases after the birth of their first child, and the decrease in professional activity related to parenting is one of the main determinants of parents’ income inequality on the labour market (ibidem, p. 8).

On the one hand, the importance of starting a family and of parenthood as a necessary stage of adult life in society is waning, on the other hand, the presence of a child in the lives of people and families forms a guarantee of survival and development (Cieslińska, 2014, p. 282). Nowadays, the child becomes a “sophisticated project” (Bieńko, 2020), the implementation of which requires multiple investments and full parental involvement, with

an absence of clear guidelines on what the goal of this project is and how it should be implemented (Taranowicz, 2022, p. 10).

## **1. Parenting, parenthood**

Two terms referring to fulfilling the role of a parent are generally distinguished: parenting means accepting and performing the role of a parent and carrying out tasks related to parenthood, ensuring that the child’s needs are met and enabling them to develop and raise a child, while parenthood means having children, becoming a parent, including by accident, in a nonvoluntary manner (Kwak, 2008, p. 19).

Numerous changes are observed in modern families, including those referring to functions, roles, structure, lifestyle, and the durability of interpersonal relationships, which are the subject of research, analysis and scientific reflection, especially in social sciences (Opozda, 2023, p. 123). Despite these changes, parenting still retains constant and inalienable attributes, such as: ability to raise, educate, and provide care for the child, i.e. to create optimal, adequate and possible conditions for its development. Another undeniable attribute of parenthood and parenting is the inalienability of the bond that the parent builds with the child, the continuity, irreversibility and permanence of being a parent (Opozda, 2017, p. 21).

From a psychological perspective, parenting can be understood as a “big challenge”, being capable of uniting a married couple, strengthening their sense of community or, on the other hand, undermining a marriage. Parenthood means transition to a new stage of the relationship, transformation of a system focused on the needs of adults to one focused on the child, whereby it confers a “certificate” of adulthood. Parents who were treated fairly, valued and loved as children are likely to treat their children as such (Plopa, 2011). In turn, abnormal relationships between the child’s parents, their immaturity and inability to meet their own needs and those of the child, their inability to understand and regulate their own emotions and lack of assistance in dealing with the child’s emotions, aggressive communication and creation of a hostile atmosphere forms an

environment conducive to disturbing the image of family relationships (Lisiecka-Bednarczyk, 2023). Parents who have experienced rejection, alienation, conflict or hostility will, consciously or not, repeat child-raising patterns or consciously change them, “work through these patterns” so that their children could not have a similar fate (Plopa, 2011, cf. also: Lisiecka-Bednarczyk, 2023).

Parenthood and parenting, as a subjective, interdependent and lifelong process and a multi-level field of activity based on interpersonal relationships, regardless of whether a family is a valuable or dysfunctional environment, affects the child and the parent (Błasiak, 2019, p. 10, 94; Brągiel, Matyjas, Segiet, 2021, p. 71-83; Matyjas, 2023; Opozda, 2017, p. 22; Plopa, 2011).

Parenthood is associated with the stress experienced, the intensity of which is determined by factors such as: 1) the degree to which a person wants to be a parent, 2) previous experience in being a parent, 3) transparency of the requirements for the parenting role, 4) the amount and quality of support available in the early stages thereof (Plopa, 2011, p. 21). Parenthood and parenting also includes positive, special experiences, giving many parents a sense of meaning, purpose, fulfilment and commitment, increasing the value of their lives and being a source of positive, deep feelings, stimulating development. The challenge of parenthood is to simultaneously care for the quality of the relationship and the development of the child, child’s development and the parent’s self-development, balancing between a generational family and a family of procreation, as well as between family and work (Plopa, 2011) or combining parenting with studying (Mleczko, Pustułka, Sarnowska, Buler, 2019).

Lucyna Bakiera (2023, p. 15) emphasises the value of the intrapsychic dimension of parenting, the experience of oneself as the author of care and up-

bringing, which plays a regulatory function in relation to the actions taken towards the child. She deepens the description of parenting from an interpersonal perspective — the relationship between the parents and the child, complementing the interpersonal aspect. The intrapsychic dimension of parenthood and parenting becomes interesting and important also in the perspective of socio-cultural changes affecting the experience of parenthood (ibidem, p. 20). This intrapsychic dimension of parenthood and parenting can be found in such categories as “compassion towards oneself” (Żmuda, 2024), “self-compassion” (Rojewska, 2023) or “self-creation of parenthood” (Wąsiński, 2018).

## 2. Changes in the way of thinking about parenthood and parenting

Nowadays, various scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines examine the topic of parenthood and parenting. Currently, generational differences in understanding, and even defining family, parenthood and childhood are noticeable (Brągiel, Górnicka, 2020; Ostrowska, 2020; Tchorzewski 2020). Nowadays, people who have experienced childhood, parenthood and parenting in different ways happen to live in one and the same family<sup>5</sup>.

Changes in the way of thinking about parenthood and parenting are revealed in the analyses of research covering young people from the last 30 years. Anna Kwak (2008-2009), while analysing research from the turn of this century, stresses the importance of life goals based on traditional values for the young people of that time. The most important values for the young generation were: a successful family life, an interesting job, as well as love and friendship. Most of them predicted that in 10-15 years they would live

5 In 2023, the book “*Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*” by Joanna Kuciel-Frydyszak (2023) gained immense popularity in Poland. The author, basing on archival sources from the beginning of the 20th century, presents the situation of countryside women and children, marked by hard work, poverty, war and violence. The publication enables us to understand the experience of many families in Poland, triggering a wave of discussion about epigenetics and hereditary trauma. It was only in the 20th century that childhood and parenthood gained a new dimension, in connection with the spread of education, and ensuring a prosperous and happy future through good education became an important educational goal. There has also occurred a shift in the role of the child in the family – from an economic value to an emotional one (Błasiak, 2017, 33-34). It was only in the 20th century that the ideas of children’s empowerment and rights began to be widely promoted (Kwak, Mościskier, 2002, Frączek, 2020).

formal marriages (allowing it to be preceded by an informal relationship) and have children – most frequently two (*ibidem*, p. 59-63).

The research carried out in 2003 by Iwona Przybył (2003) demonstrated that the status of a woman was determined in terms of family life, as well as motherhood and marriage were the main way of the woman's identification with her own gender. A woman pursuing a professional career, not looking after her house and family, was negatively identified as an "spinster", "deprived of the warmth of household", deserving of pity. A woman who decided to raise a child on her own was generally considered a "loser" or a "dissolute young lady with a child". Childbearing was expected of all married women, and infertility was treated as a "tragedy, failure, crisis". The lack of a child, an "expression of marital love", was perceived as proof of a love that was "incomplete, fruitless, unstable" and devoid of strong foundations. Motherhood was "the order, the duty of the spouses", and the society was looking for the means and ways thanks to which this "predetermined order" could be maintained (*ibidem*, p. 51).

Research from 2007 on a sample of 2351 people aged 18 to 26 demonstrated that the basic and desired form of family life for young people was a marriage with at least one child (Biernat, Dyczewski, Sobierajski, Szulich-Kałuża, 2007). It was believed that marriage and family are of communal and institutional nature at the same time, as separate, but closely related and relatively permanent institutions. Three quarters of the respondents (75.1%) believed that marriage has and will have great importance in the future (*ibidem*, p. 139). People who valued marriage highly, when asked "What will be important to you in 25 years' time?" most often chose the answers: "I and my children get along well" (61.05%), "I have children" (54.4%), "I am married" (53.2%) (*ibidem*, p. 139). Among the reasons for entering into marriage, they most often pointed to: love for their partner – 68.9%, the desire to have children together – 52.1%, obtaining a sense of security – 34.6% (*ibidem*, p. 141). The young people being respondents to the survey valued having children very highly and most often preferred two children in their own family, followed by three and more children (more often than one child). Almost 88%

of the respondents clearly stated that they wanted to have children, and only 2.2% definitely did not want to. 10% of the young people did not yet know whether they wanted to have children in the future (*ibidem*, p. 145-149).

Similar research was carried out by Iwona Taranowicz (2015) among 45 second-year students of social work at the University of Wrocław. When defining family, young women stated that it simply consists of specific people, "a woman and a man or parents and children: a woman and a man or parents of the same sex, parents with or without children" (*ibidem*, p. 76). It was also pointed out, although much less frequently, that it is a set of people, a group, sometimes they gave some kind of definitions, e.g. "a family is a primary group, it is a woman and a man living together in a relationship, formal or not, having children or not" (*ibidem*, p. 76). The women defined family as a community, drew attention to a specific type of bond, holistically and emotionally binding its members into a network of interdependencies, it should give a sense of security and support, a place providing an emotional anchorage. The students surveyed did not identify family with entering into marriage. There was a departure from the requirement to formalise the relationship, as well as acceptance for same-sex relationships. Even having a child was not assessed as a necessary condition for the existence of a family. Among 45 students surveyed, 33 declared their willingness to start a family and marry, 4 declared that they did not plan either marriage or family, 7 were going to start a family, but did not intend to formalise a relationship, one person was already in a relationship, had a child and was planning a wedding (*ibidem*, p. 79). Among the respondents, there was a prevailing belief about the importance of the durability of marriage and the opinion that the decision to break up is made too quickly, without trying to maintain the relationship. People who plan to get married, mainly due to religion, considered divorce to be a manifestation of recklessness, lack of responsibility and efforts to maintain a relationship. Two beliefs existed side by side, recognising family, and above all marriage, as a possible but not an indispensable life choice, consciously rejecting motherhood and recognising the breakdown of

a relationship when it ceases to be satisfying, and a belief being closer to the traditional understanding of family as an inseparable relationship based on marriage (*ibidem*, p. 80-82, 87).

The emergence of capitalist society, with all its ramifications, is an important factor determining procreative behaviour, also amongst contemporary Poles (Garncarek 2014, p. 106). Problems co-occurring with the free market economy, such as: inflation, unemployment, difficulties with institutional child care, shortage of admissions in nurseries and kindergartens, difficulties in buying one's own apartment, extended period of education, undertaking paid work by women, rise of individualism, striving for self-fulfilment in the workplace, emphasis on the quality of life and the quality of free time, as well as secularisation and liberalisation of norms are considered to be the main factors responsible for changes in the process of family formation – they do not contribute to making decisions about having children and they contribute to postponing motherhood (Mynarska, 2011, p. 227-228). The key factors responsible for postponing parenthood are aspects related to professional work and the desire to achieve stability on the labour market before deciding to become a parent. In addition, the lack of appropriate mental maturity prevents the formation of procreative intentions, while the lack of employment, housing or insufficient financial resources hinders the fulfilment of these intentions. Insufficient material resources are the reason for postponing parenthood, but not for resigning from it (*ibidem*, p. 238).

As Anna Mitręga and Małgorzata Biedroń (2014, p. 65) write, “until relatively recently, pedagogical sciences dealt with single-parent families in contexts resembling pathologies, and the term ‘single mother’ bore clearly stigmatising connotations, signifying helplessness and potential deviations of family life.” The research conducted by Mitręga and Biedroń answers the question about factors which make families with one parent fulfil the tasks resulting from social and educational function, and which may threaten their effective implementation. Most of the single parents participating in it were able to perform their functions, fitted into the socio-cultural environment and were able to handle the tasks (*ibidem*).

Nowadays, parenthood is presented in terms of procreative freedom, democratisation of family life, shaping a close relationship with the child, taking care of its health, proper development, ensuring a good start in adulthood, but also in the context of “parenting marketing”, i.e. the commercialisation of parenthood, parenting and childhood and the globalisation of the market of products for children and parents (Bieńko, 2020).

In order to understand transitions in the context of parenthood and parenting, it is important to emphasise the changes in the scope of parental roles. Currently, there is a noticeable shift in the parental subsystem (from dependence and subordination towards democratisation, partnership, equality) and a new model of maternity and paternity: the mother-wife has become the outright independent partner of the husband in all spheres of marriage and family life, and the father-husband has ceased to be “head” of the family (Matyjas, 2023, p. 32, 35). The democratisation of the family, legal changes and the advancement of medicine have an impact on procreation by allowing parents (especially the mother and not social pressure or external orders) to make decisions / conscious choices regarding having (or not having) a child, the control of procreation (Bragiel, Matyjas, Segiet, 2021, p. 98) and even the control of the conceived child's life. The democratisation of marital relations, the humanisation of family relations may also promote the democratisation, humanisation and empowerment of the child as well as the upbringing based on dialogue, authenticity, commitment, building bonds and cooperation (Błasiak, Dybowska, 2020; Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2017).

### 3. Childlessness

The procreative function of the family has so far been understood as the assurance of societal continuity and a guarantee of satisfying their intimate needs in a socially acceptable way for the spouses. Today, the procreative function of family is no longer considered obligatory (Wałęcka-Matyja, Janicka, 2021, p. 24). Non-performance of this function (or its postponement) by married couples, accomplishing

procreative tasks outside marriage is becoming socially acceptable, and there are greater possibilities of controlling procreation, which is justified by the increase in people's sense of individualism (orientation towards education and professional success) and the high costs of raising offspring (Walęcka-Matyja, Janicka, 2021; Walęcka-Matyja, 2014).

Nowadays, procreative and parental decisions are understood as a private sphere and may be implemented without entering into marriage (Taranowicz, 2022, p. 7). In the last 30 years, the age of highest fertility of women has shifted from the age group of 20-24 to the group of 25-29, and now also to the group of 30-34 (Szaltys, 2023, p. 12; cf. also: *Bariery zamierzeń prokreacyjnych*, 2023, *Postawy prokreacyjne kobiet*, 2023). Prolonged postponement of the decision to have children also appears to be one of the possible reasons for the decrease in the average number of children in particular families or their childlessness (Mynarska, 2011, p. 227). Women's professional involvement hinders or prevents their maternity plans. Difficulties resulting from combining childcare with full workplace commitment and the fear of losing a job may cause resignation from maternity (Mitrega, Biedroń, 2014, p. 66).

Childlessness has been noticed as a social problem for a long time. It is worth starting reflections by analysing the connotations ascribed to childlessness in Poland 20 years ago. The research by Iwona Przybył (2003) demonstrated that childlessness was most often (66.7%) associated with such negative feelings as "emptiness, lack of fulfilment, suffering". Childless women were perceived by 71.1% of the respondents as unhappy, unfulfilled, suffering, with numerous insecurities ("she is unhappy, she will not attain self-fulfilment in life, she feels inferior to those who can have children, she envies them, she is a tragic case, she is stubborn and embittered"). In the study, these pejorative terms for childless women were not used by 20% of the respondents, emphasising that infertile women may have different life goals than parenthood, as well as that childlessness does not deprive them of their value. Infertile men were stigmatised by 61.5% of the respondents ("he is like a plant without a root, he is not exactly a man, he does not feel fulfilled because being a man is, among other things, being a father"),

while over 27% of the respondents expressed the opinion that an infertile man is as valuable as a man being a father. Few stated that an infertile man "is more accepted by the society as the blame is shifted and placed on the woman; he is less often unhappy because of his infertility than the woman and he is in a better situation than the woman" (ibidem, p. 54-55).

Currently, unwanted / unintended childlessness is also analysed in the context of miscarriages, infertility and its treatment, difficulties in finding a suitable partner to start a family, or adoption (Wąsiński, 2018). Demographic changes necessitate the analysis of women's reproductive plans (*Postawy prokreacyjne kobiet*, 2023) and the causes of reproductive barriers (*Bariery zamierzeń prokreacyjnych*, 2023). At the same time, new terms are used to describe childlessness, such as voluntary childlessness and childlessness by choice. Voluntary childlessness is understood as the conscious choice not to have children out of one's own free will (Garncarek, 2022, p. 118) and as one of the alternative forms of family life, it is referred to as a sign of changes in the essence and functions of the modern family (ibidem, p. 127). DINKS couples, consciously rejecting parenthood, increasingly appear in Poland (Liberska, Matuszewska, 2014, p. 124, cf. also: Brągiel, Górnicka, 2020, p. 66-68, Ostrowska, 2020, Tomaszewska, 2017). Childlessness by choice is presented by those who pursue this option as a modern lifestyle, which, unlike parenthood, does not entail financial costs, but generates savings, does not require changes in one's current life, and carries the promise of a fascinating life, focused on satisfying personal needs, aspirations and ambitions (Cieślińska, 2014, p. 282-283). Attractive life opportunities, indicated by the childless persons are: pursuing their hobbies, social activities, travel and the possibility of a consumer-oriented lifestyle. Being a matter of choice rather than necessity, voluntary childlessness is perceived as a result of post-modern tendencies (Garncarek, 2014, p. 114).

Emilia Garncarek carried out research answering the question of why young, educated Poles do not undertake parental roles (Garncarek, 2014, 2022). The surveyed women who consciously gave up parenthood listed the following reasons for making decisions about childlessness: 1) economic: concerns about financial stability, the desire to provide themselves

and their wife/husband with the opportunity to meet various needs, the pursuit of a consumer-oriented lifestyle, 2) fear of “carrying the burden” of the responsibilities related to parenting/taking care of possible offspring by oneself, 3) personal predispositions and needs – no space for the role of a parent in their self-concept, 4) negative attitude towards children, 5) the importance of personal development, the desire to maintain an active life, the possibility of mobility or pursuing one’s own hobbies, 6) traumatic childhood experiences (alcohol abuse by parents, divorce of parents), 7) health concerns (childbirth as an act dangerous to the health of the woman or child), 8) concerns related to the loss of their current physical attractiveness, 9) belief that parenthood is an irreversible state, 10) belief that maintaining the current level of intimacy and physical closeness with a partner will be impossible when a child appears, 11) belief that refraining from bringing more people into the world is a noble deed (due to overpopulation of the world), but also that 12) the world is full of threats and it is impossible to be sure that possible offspring will have successful life (Garncarek, 2014, p. 106-108). In turn, the researcher identifies the following reasons for voluntary childlessness among men: 1) avoiding negative experiences related to parental duties, taking responsibility for a child, deterioration of partner relationships, and financial losses; 2) maintaining current (satisfactory) material well-being; 3) the opportunity for personal self-realisation, building a professional career, experiencing joy in life, and establishing/maintaining satisfactory relationships with a partner. (Garncarek, 2022, p. 127).

#### 4. Readiness for parenthood of modern young adults

Categories: moratorium, achieving adulthood, transition to adulthood, young adults or early adulthood refer to the transitional phase between youth and

adulthood, which has become significantly prolonged nowadays. (Grotowska-Leader, 2019). It is assumed that the period between 18 and 30 years of age, and even slightly later, is characterized by the main developmental task of resolving the crisis of intimacy vs. isolation<sup>6</sup>, finding one’s own place in the system of social relations – achieving the ability to enter into a close relationship and create an intimate relationship with another person, finding ways of self-realisation adequate to the living conditions and integrating experiences from various areas of one’s life (Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2023, cf. also: Lisiecka-Bednarczyk, 2023).

Social determinants / markers of adulthood, such as: 1) completing education, 2) getting the first job, 3) moving out of the family home and managing an independent household, 4) getting married or 5) having a child, is now occurring at an increasingly older age, which extends the process of becoming an adult. Today, the concept of adulthood is predominantly defined by the need of economic security and acquiring skills and competencies, mainly in the professional area. In the second place, young people enter adulthood by seeking opportunities to fulfil their need for autonomy, independence, and relationships. (Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, Kwiatkowska, 2018).

Anna I. Brzezińska (2016) defines the postponement of adulthood as a conscious strategy of young people, the consequence of refraining from making the most important choices in favor of experimenting, checking various possibilities and paths (adulthood as a challenge, part of the project of one’s own life), and the moratorium on adulthood granted by people close to them, which accompanies young people, is viewed by young adults as the exercise of their right to self-determination and free choice (ibidem, p. 24-26). In turn, adulthood is delayed by supra-individual factors, mainly economic and structural ones, limited access to resources and support networks (adulthood as a risk and avoided for as long as possible). Brzezińska indicates the lack

6 One of the stages of identity development according to Erik H. Erikson. People in the period of early adulthood (between 19/20 and 35 years of age) are considered to be individuals shaping their own living space; a positive solution to the crisis of *intimacy vs. isolation*, means the ability to enter into a close relationship and create an intimate relationship with another person, and starting a family, along with commencement of a professional career, becomes a constitutive development goal during this period (Erikson, 2002).

of support (not only financial, but also emotional and cognitive one) in the immediate environment, possible physical or health limitations and individual resources of the individual (ibidem, p. 25).

In most European countries, including Poland, an increase in the cohabitation of an adult child in the family home is observed (Kwak, 2017, p. 12). An analysis of the situation of Polish “boomerang adults”, i.e. young adults (aged 25-34) still living with their parents, are classified into 4 types: 1) “tenants by choice” – the effect of their own decision (for convenience or to meet affiliation needs) and a certain kind of life strategy (one that gives a sense of security, alleviating the fear of loneliness), young people work professionally, contribute to the family budget, or not, and will move out when they find a partner or experience a significant career change; 2) “hostages”, forced to live with their parents owing to socialisation, feel responsible for their parents, are “emotionally dependent” and do not try to change their conditions; 3) “those unable to pull their own weight in life”, for whom living with their parents is a way of life; they do not plan to move out, do not have goals, qualifications, willingness to work and do not want to change it – they are usually unemployed, dependent on parents and social programs, helpless and inefficient; 4) “forced residents”, their cohabitation with their parents (with whom they are not strongly connected) results from financial necessity or temporary problems in relationships (ibidem, 15-16).

Individualistic attitudes moderate the postponement of adulthood. The moratorium is not only a period of delay in adulthood, but also a stage of intensive, although often unconscious work on self-development. The time of suspending commitments, given to young people so that they can seek, discover and prepare to undertake specific tasks has now become the dominant way of entering adulthood (Bieńko, 2017, p. 39-40). The overwhelming majority of young people today declare their desire to have offspring; 8% of respondents aged 18-40 declare that they do not want to have children (*Bariery zamierzeń prokreacyjnych*, 2023, p. 2).

There is also a growing recognition of the need for inner development, gaining self-knowledge, and cultivating psychological competencies, searching for

internal autonomy, as a new quality of thinking about adulthood in terms of reflection on oneself, striving to achieve mental maturity (Wiszejko-Wierzbicka, Kwiatkowska, 2018).

## Summary and conclusions

Nowadays, demographic changes and transformations in thinking about family, parenthood and parenting are noticed, new family forms are widespread and single parenthood as well as voluntary childlessness are normalized. The lack of decisions and actions in terms of completing education, starting employment, autonomy and independence from parents, building a lasting relationship / marriage or the birth and upbringing of a child is a certain kind of suspension between youth and adulthood. Failure to take these actions, especially parenthood, may be dictated by circumstances outside the decision of the person who wants to implement them (health problems, material problems, lack of a suitable partner), but it could also be a conscious decision. Attaining these objectives does not mean maturity either. Having children alone does not guarantee a responsible fulfilment of a parental role. Parenthood (biological, foster, adoptive) may be an expression and test of personal maturity of an adult.

Despite the changes mentioned, parenthood and parenting still retains an important place in the development of young adults. Parenthood and parenting can be treated as an important attribute of adulthood, and it also becomes a specific test of maturity and responsibility. It can only be stated that parenthood has ceased to be an obligatory determinant of adulthood. Maturity and responsibility can also be implemented in other ways. It cannot be unanimously ascertained whether voluntary childlessness is underpinned by attitudes of immaturity and egocentrism or responsibility.

The theoretical considerations presented here may provide inspiration for undertaking research among young adults. The changes in thinking about family, parenthood and parenting provoke the question of how contemporary young adults perceive parenthood and parenting, what meanings they impart



to parenthood and how they perceive themselves in the role of a parent. Particularly interesting is the intrapsychic dimension of parenthood, which refers to the experience of oneself as the author of care and upbringing.

Today, many changes and transformations of parenthood and parenting are observed, which in turn cause changes and transformations in the processes of upbringing and socialisation. Therefore, it needs to be stressed that pedagogues play an important role in supporting the family, and above all parents who shape the family, educate and socialize future generations (Błasiak, 2019, p. 171). The problems

presented above encourage educational reflection, all the more so because young people notice the need for internal development, gaining knowledge about themselves and shaping parental competences. It is worth considering, especially in the context of the proposal to withdraw the subject "Family Life Education" from schools as of the next year, how to undertake the tasks of education and support for young people to take up challenges and family roles, including those related to parenthood, how to support teens and young adults as potential future parents who conduct self-creation of their own parenthood and parenting.

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