



The family as a key context for positive youth development. Legal, organizational, and psychological opportunities for integrating the family into the network of support and development of adolescents¹

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Abstract: This article presents the importance of the family as a context for adolescent development. The concept of positive youth development was presented, which emphasizes strengthening adolescents' strengths, resources and potential, as opposed to theories focusing on the deficits and difficulties of adolescence. The idea is to propose creative forms of spending free time as a way to "break away" from various risky behaviors typical of the turbulent times of adolescence. The basis is the assumption that everyone regardless of previous functioning and experience, has the potential to develop and self-realization. To achieve this, it is necessary to believe in the teenager's abilities and to be surrounded by appropriate mentors who show development paths and create a support network. Among them, teachers, trainers, educators and extended family play an important role, but the primary role can and should be played by parents. The article presents the practical use of the theory of positive youth development in the Polish educational system – both legal possibilities and limitations that require research and development of interdisciplinary cooperation.

Keywords: positive youth development, support network, family, adaptation to adulthood, adolescence

1. The concept of positive youth development

The theory of positive youth development arises from the need to support the development of teenagers growing up in difficult care and educational conditions and at risk of social maladjustment. In contrast to traditional concepts, it places emphasis not so much on reducing deficits, but on strengthening the positive sides of teenagers: their potential and key development areas for adaptation to adulthood (Barłóg, 2023; Benson et al. 2006). The concepts of positive youth development are complemented by the theory of psychological resilience, which tries to explain the phenomenon of good functioning in adulthood despite unfavorable educational conditions at earlier stages of development (Barłóg, 2023; Ogińska-Bulik, Juczyński, 2011; Kaczmarek, 2011; Ostaszewski, 2014). The theory of positive

youth development identifies five key indicators, the development of which promotes proper adaptation to adulthood and seems to be highly related to the phenomenon of psychological resilience. The indicators described are (Barłóg, 2023; Bowers, Kiely, Brittan, Lerner, Lerner, 2010; Lerner et al. 2005; Phelps, Zimmerman, Waren, Jelicic, von Eye, Lerner, 2009; Ostaszewski, 2014): competence; confidence; connection; character; caring.

The theory of positive youth development indicates that strengthening the above competence areas is also a way to reduce deficits (Benson et al. 2006). Transmitting appropriate patterns and teaching socially acceptable behavior translates into reducing the frequency of socially inappropriate behavior. In this way, in addition to the negation of inappropriate attitudes, there is an "offer" of positively spending free time. It is worth noting that communication based on the child's positives and strengths helps reduce several

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basic variables that constitute barriers to psychological help. Recognizing a teenager's strengths can help reduce the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy that accompanies people who help others (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2006; Gamian-Wilk, Madeja-Bień, Domagała-Jędrzejewska, 2018). If you assume that a teenager will end up with many difficulties anyway (just like his or her parents), you start to adopt the attitude: "it's a waste of time to devote to him/her, and it's better to focus on children who want to learn and develop." Recognizing the strengths of teenagers who cause difficulties may be a kind of Rosenthal effect; by noticing the child's potential, mentors can start to develop this talent and the motivation to help becomes greater (Turska, 2018). Moreover, communication focused on positive aspects of functioning supports building the child's self-esteem. In turn, labels focused on reducing deficits, such as "study", "be polite", "get yourself together", lower this self-esteem. At the same time, this type of communication may increase reactance, i.e. resistance to change – "no one will tell me what to do" – so I end up doing what I want, often in spite of adults (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 2006; Bakiera, 2013; Gurba, 2013). For a preventive program based on the theory of positive youth development to be effective, it is important to rely on a few key principles. The foundation is the belief that every individual has the potential to function positively and develop, regardless of their past and experiences. The described potential is developed with the support of mentors (e.g. parents, teachers, trainers). These mentors, through good relationships with the child, create environmental conditions based on proper communication, which creates a sense of community, which is one of the main sources for the positive development of young people. It is also important to strengthen the adolescent's own activity and recognize that he/she is the main subject of his/her own development (Benson et al., 2006). By functioning in a team where there is a sense of community and good relationships (e.g. a sports team), a child learns social competences, what should be done among coaches and peers, and what behavior is unacceptable. Building correct social attitudes can therefore take place in a positive atmosphere in which the child wants to participate, and not by focusing on deficits, orders and prohibitions (Barłóg, 2023).

The principles presented show that it is crucial to build a relationship with a teenager. The child observes and adopts behaviors, in other words, they are modeled by significant people close to us (Bandura, 2007). It is true that this person does not always have to be a parent, it may be a teacher, an extended family member, or an extra-curricular activity coach. However, the family is the primary educational environment in which basic development needs are met. The family creates conditions for gaining experience and transmits patterns, both unconsciously, by modeling behavior, and consciously in the upbringing process (Bakiera, 2016, 2019; Bowlby, 1971; Przetacznik-Gierowska, Tyszkowa, 2011, Wałęcka-Matyja, 2014). For the development of the child, proper parental attitudes and stable behavioral patterns are essential, as children not only imitate the behavior of other household members, but interpret a variety of behaviors, events and messages (Bakiera, 2019; Bakiera, Doiczman-Loboda, 2018; Plopa, 2011; Posłuszna-Owczar, 2012; Rostowska, Spryszyńska, 2014; Ryś, 2004; Wałęcka-Matyja, 2014). Family functioning shows a relationship with all key psychosocial spheres. The sense of being loved by parents is linked with adolescents' social functioning (Plopa, 2011), self-identity construction (Gurba, 2013; Oleszkowicz, Senejko, 2011), temperament expression and personality development (Michalek, Rostowska, 2014; Pervin, 2002), as well as the level of self-esteem in various areas of functioning (Cierpka, Wierzbicka, 2013) and mental resilience (Ryś, 2016, 2020; Ryś, Trzęsowska-Greszta, 2018). The quality of family functioning is also linked to readiness to carry out developmental tasks in adulthood, including taking up parenthood (Kalus, Szymańska, 2019). On the other hand, adolescents who have a sense of rejection by their parents are observed to have high mood lability and an inability to forgive associated with aggressiveness (Plopa, 2011).

The family is therefore one of the key contexts for the positive development of young people, where relationships with the immediate environment, positive attitudes towards oneself and attitudes towards other people should be modeled. Through a properly functioning family system, in which there is appropriately balanced cohesion (balance between own

needs and those of individual household members) and flexibility (ability to respond to various challenges), a child can acquire life competences and morally solve the dilemmas facing him (Barlóg, 2023; Olson, Gorall, 2003; Margasiński, 2009). The family is therefore one of the key contexts for the development of all five indicators of adaptation to adulthood (five CS – Barlóg, 2023; Lerner et al., 2005; Ostaszewski, 2014).

2. Family as a basic microsystem

The family is the basic microsystem, i.e. the closest environmental system, which, together with other closest systems (school, peers), constitutes the context of individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Czub, Matejczuk, 2015; Ettekal, Mahoney, 2017; Vasta, Haith, Miller, 2004). Throughout life, a person acquires new skills thanks to the help and support of more experienced people. At the first stages of development, people supporting development are usually parents, grandparents or siblings, then teachers (Bee, 2004; Vasta, Haith, Miller, 2004), and in adolescence, in addition to family members, peers become particularly important (Obuchowska, 2009). These people and the relationships between them constitute different contexts of development that are important for the development of children and adolescents, but also determine its course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Przetacznik-Gierowska, Makiello-Jarza, 1985; Przetacznik-Gierowska, Tyszkowa, 2011). The mentioned microsystems are complemented by the following levels: mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem. The mesosystem means the relationships between individual microsystems (i.e. communication in the teenager's support network), while the exosystem and macrosystem refer to the broader social context, the legal and political system (exosystem) and to the values and norms transmitted in society from generation to generation (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vasta, Haith, Miller, 2004).

When building preventive programs (e.g. at school), it is important not only to focus on one's own task (e.g. role of the school), but also to recognize the need for interdisciplinary cooperation

and build a support network (Przeperski, 2017). Extra-curricular activities are only a part of a teenager's life, and the family is the primary context, so when working with a teenager, it is also crucial to strengthen parental competences, and thus a broader perspective of working with a young person. Working with a parent (just like with a teenager) should be based on the parent's strengths and teaching how to spend free time together with the teenager. The most effective preventive programs are those that not only develop the teenager's potential, but also improve the functioning of individual microsystems: family or school (Durlak et al., 2007; Ward, Zabriskie, 2011).

3. Family in the network of support and development of a teenager

Increasingly, aid activities are carried out in the context of systemic work. For example, such a support network is organized in the context of work with the family with care and educational difficulties, with whom a family assistant cooperates. He establishes contact with the teenager, but also coordinates the process of cooperation of individual microsystems. The family assistant is in contact with the family, school teachers, and specialists working with the child (e.g. after-school teachers). At the same time, it organizes contact and psychological, legal and medical support (Ustawa z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 r. o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej, 2011).

A similar role is played by the family foster care coordinator, who cooperates with the foster family taking care of the children. He stays in contact with the child, foster parents, and the school, and helps organize psychological, legal and medical support. At the same time, it helps foster parents in contact with the child's biological family (Act of 9 June 2011 on Family Support and Foster Care System). The given examples of a family assistant or a family foster care coordinator concern extreme situations when the child has been taken away from the biological family, whether there is a risk of the child being taken away and a social welfare specialist works with the family. However, prevention at earlier stages is important.

Systemic activities are key: working with the child, the parent and individual microsystems (in which the child functions) can be done faster. However, the question remains who could coordinate such a support network, where a parent who notices a problem could go to? Of course, a parent can go to a psychological and pedagogical clinic, get advice, diagnose the child, determine whether the difficulties result from on clinical or educational issues, however, psychological and pedagogical counseling centers are burdened with the number of diagnoses and the number of children in need of support, therefore it is necessary to think systematically about changes in the process of psychological assistance in the child's environment. Today, there is a lack of interdisciplinary cooperation, the parent brings opinions from the school or kindergarten, and this is usually the end of contact between specialists from various educational institutions. There are situations in which cooperation is more regular and organized, but these are cases rather than a rule organized by the Polish education system.

It is worth noting that the tasks of a psychological and pedagogical counseling center include: "implementing preventive tasks and supporting the educational function of kindergartens, schools and institutions, including supporting teachers in solving teaching and educational problems" and "organizing and providing support to kindergartens, schools and institutions in the implementation of teaching, educational and care tasks" (§2, points 3 and 4, Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 1, 2013).

Psychological and pedagogical assistance in schools is organized and provided in cooperation with (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 9, 2017):

1. parents of students;
2. psychological and pedagogical counseling centers, including specialized counseling centers, hereinafter referred to as "counseling centers";
3. teacher training institutions;
4. other kindergartens, schools and facilities;
5. non-governmental organizations and other institutions and entities acting for the benefit of the family, children and youth.

From the perspective of legal regulations, kindergartens, schools and psychological and pedagogical counseling centers are obliged to cooperate with the family in matters of child development and for interdisciplinary cooperation among themselves. However, a few questions remain:

- to what extent does the cooperation concern prevention and development of children without any care, educational and clinical difficulties? One or two workshops a year do not seem to be a good preventive measure during such a dynamic period as a teenager's rebellion (Oleszkowicz, 2006).
- if cooperation with several specialists is crucial for a teenager's development, how many of them cooperate with each other on a regular basis? Which of these institutions could coordinate the development of a teenager at risk of social exclusion? In other words, the question arises o coordinated development, similarly to medicine, the general practitioner coordinates the treatment process, supervises the effects and refers to other specialists building a support network (Barłóg, Barłóg, 2022). This is an important research question that should be asked in future research conducted among specialists cooperating on child development, so that it becomes possible to create interdisciplinary teams, as is the case with foster care or family assistantship.
- finally, the question arises about the empowerment of parents and providing them with interdisciplinary support. The parent does not have to be a specialist in psychology, pedagogy, speech therapy, or sensory integration therapy, and sometimes such extensive cooperation is necessary, which means that several times a week the parent listens to various advice, but not coordinated with each other. However, it is crucial to implement consistent care and educational methods. If a child has consistent rules in several microsystems, it is easier for him to adapt and carry out tasks, for example if there are consistent rules at home and at school. Similarly, in the case of development activities – the development by specialists of a coherent schedule and a set of tips for parents, but a set tailored to the needs of a specific child, not

universal guides, is a key task and requires building a support network. Moreover, in the process of long-term therapy, the relationship with the patient is as important as treatments, e.g. medical ones, so a support network in which specialists coherently support parents and the child is the key to building family motivation, compliance with various recommendations and instilling hope in the effectiveness of activities (Barlóg, Barlóg, 2022; Barlóg, Stradomska, 2018; Kardas, 2014; Nowina Konopka, 2016; Przeperski, 2017).

Summary

A adolescent's development takes place in several microsystems: in the family, at school, among peers and during various trainings and in free time. The article discusses the issues of interdisciplinary cooperation between specialists and the creation of a network of support and development of a teenager, where the

family is also located, because ties with the environment and the ability to build relationships are two of the five key indicators of adaptation to adulthood (Barlóg, Barlóg, 2022). Therefore, the key challenge is research conducted among specialists on the real possibilities of implementing these ideas, consistent with the developing concept of preventive activities based on the idea of positive youth development, i.e. strengthening the natural potential of a teenager, instead of focusing on his deficits. In addition to research, practical changes are also necessary, however, examining real needs and possibilities is key to implementing changes step by step, because legal provisions not only enable such activities, but even oblige specialists to carry out the described tasks. What is important is not only the reaction where clinical or educational difficulties are observed, but also conducting preventive activities in a group of all young people, which is currently implemented in Western countries (Barlóg, 2023; Mahoney, Weissberg, 2018; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, Weissberg, 2017), because prevention is better than cure.

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