

## GLOBAL ATTACHMENT NETWORK OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN CHILDREN'S HOMES

© Attila ZSUBRITS & © Andrea SZIKRA  
(University of West Hungary)

[Zsubrits.Attila@bpk.nyme.hu](mailto:Zsubrits.Attila@bpk.nyme.hu) & [szikra.andrea@bpk.nyme.hu](mailto:szikra.andrea@bpk.nyme.hu)

*The experience of attachment in the family affects our entire life, influences the development of our social competence as well as our personality. There can be major changes in the formation of interpersonal relationships due to the lack of a family, or a different social environment supplementing or sometimes totally substituting the family. Children have poorer, more insecure attachments in such an environment, and children's homes belong to this category. This study attempts, with the help of related writings and empirical research data, to present some of the major influences in the social life of young people who live in such homes, and to analyze their global personal attachment system.*

**Keywords:** care in children's homes, attachment, family relations, children's global social networks, social competence

The experience of attachment in the family affects our entire life, influences the development of our social competence as well as our personality. There can be major changes in the formation of interpersonal relationships due to the lack of a family, or a different social environment supplementing or sometimes totally substituting the family. Children have poorer, more insecure attachments in such an environment, and children's homes belong to this category. This study attempts, with the help of related writings and empirical research data, to present some of the major influences in the social life of young people who live in such homes, and to analyze their global personal attachment system.

### Care in children's homes

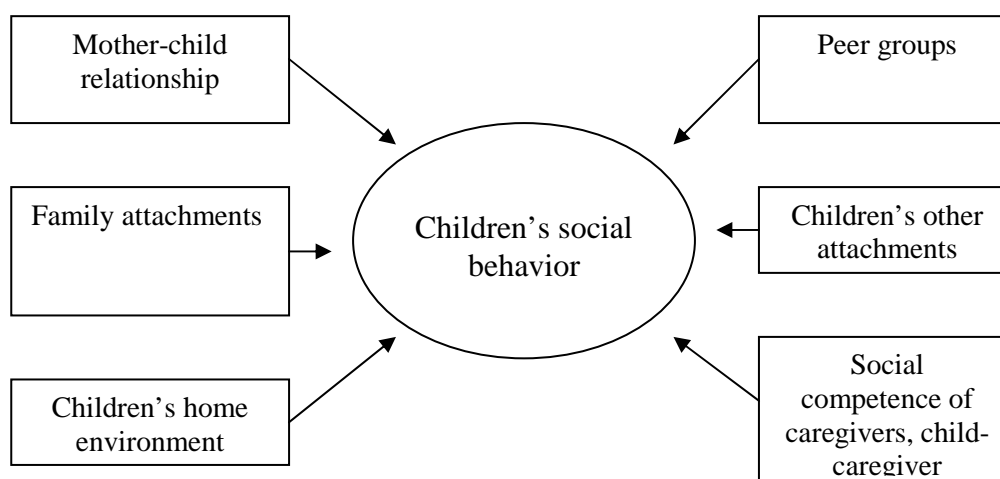
The gradual establishment of the system of child care institutions can be traced in the history of economically developed countries. As András Domszky wrote, '...by the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of interconnected events of social change, childcare in Hungary also reached the point of having an institutionalized social function...' (Domszky, 1994:14.). By 1990 we became full-right members of the European Council, an organization dealing with human affairs, which expressed an exemplary recommendation on the substitutive care of children. Substitutive childcare forms 'primarily aim at enabling the child to return to his or her biological family within a reasonable time, or if this is not possible, to get to another suitable and permanent environment' (Szöllösi, 1996:13.). According to *Act*

XXXI on childcare and guardianship issued in 1997, the most important measures are: taking into care, taking into a family, finding a temporary place, temporary and permanent education, post care, reform school education and patroning supervision, and adoption. Children in state homes are taken care of by the receptive families of the adoptive parents as well as the different boarding schools. Children's homes in our country: infant care, special children's homes and post care homes. These institutions take care of those in need from birth until the age of 24.

Compared to foster homes of earlier times, children's homes try to provide an environment closer to that of a family, which corresponds better to the developmental and special educational needs of the children, thus more effectively preparing them for a life of their own. Children's homes are basically supposed to supplement the family. This milieu is different from the traditional family (cannot replace it), nevertheless it fills the functions of a family and if needed, it even supplements them. Based on a methodological letter on *The functional rules and expectations of children's homes* (Domszky, 1999), in favorable conditions, the children's new home and building fits into the structure of the receptive settlement. This way, avoiding social discrimination, children who have been removed from their family can maintain the relationship with their family members and relatives. In a small community the different interventions are based on closer interpersonal relations. Caregivers, however, are not primarily mother, father or grandparent models but professionals fulfilling professional expectations at work. They work with their personalities, provide the model of an adult while doing correction-therapy activity as caregivers and educators for children of different age and sex whose family-supplementing care they have been charged with.

Primary attachment, summarizing the characteristics of attraction to significant persons, the understanding of peer groups as well as the formational and developmental rules of global companionship structure, and the analysis of emotions toward the caregivers all help in giving a better picture about the social network of children living in these homes.

*Factors affecting the social behavior of those living in children's homes:*



## The significance of early attachment and attachment disorders

Newborns have inherited attachment abilities. Professionals argue that the experience of the prenatal period greatly determine the formation of primary attachment (Hidas & Raffai & Vollner, 2002). According to the definition of Bowlby (1969), attachment means the need to be near another person and the will to maintain the connection with them. The most important function of the emotional affection for the primary caregiver is obtaining the satisfaction of survival needs, fighting distress, and providing the conditions necessary for successfully exploring the environment. However, attraction to another person can also be fed by needs such as the feeling of joy, security and connection (Dornes, 2002).

Infants can have secure or insecure attachment, thus there are categories of anxious avoidants or anxious resistants (Ainsworth & Blehar & Waters & Wall, 1978), and attachment in a disorganized manner (Main & Solomon, 1990). Strengthening of the emotional attachment is influenced by childcare habits (Cole & Cole, 1998), the child's temperament, character traits and his or her position among brothers and sisters (Zsolnai, 2001).

The strength of attachment security definitely affects later social status. For example, a study in Hungary found that those children in kindergarten who have secure attachments, are more popular in the group and have more friends, whereas their mates with lower attachment rates are less popular (Inántszy & Máth, 2004). Some other studies also mention that there is a strong correlation between family attachment and social status at school.

An incorrect mother-child relationship can have serious consequences. Spitz called the phenomenon when in extreme cases a small child is neglected, does not enjoy the care of one special person, thus having a different development of personality, a kind of 'hospitalism'. Erikson (2002) thinks that the mother's sensitive, adequate behavior allows the infant to feel a basic security, while in very unfavorable conditions the lack of trust can lead to severe psychopathological symptoms later in life.

An overall definition and systematization of attachment disorders in all age groups is not available yet. *Diagnostic Criteria of DSM-IV* (1995) clinical diagnostics system of criteria, based on developmentally non-adequate behavior repeatedly noticeable in social interactions, distinguishes two subcategories of reactive attachment disorder under the age of 5: inhibited and disinhibited type. According to Judit Gervai (1997) there are three types of attachment anomaly: nonattachment, indiscriminate attachment and role reversal. In the first category attachment does not happen even to strong stressors, the child is reserved, too inhibited, does not approach the familiar person. The most important feature of indiscriminate behavior is the lack of selectivity, making friends even with strangers. The third type of disorder happens in families where roles are reversed and the young have to perform the duties of adults. In the etymology of attachment disorder we can find terms such as incorrect parental care (neglect, child abuse, lack of sensitivity), parental pathology, personality and developmental differences of the child (temperament, certain features, prematurity) and insufficient family environment (early deprivation, adoption, institutionalization) (Zilberstein, 2006).

Parallel to the attachment ability of infants, attachment ability is a necessary component of correct mother care as well. It is often seen that women raised in foster homes are unable to provide the conditions necessary

for the early care of their children. It seems they are unable to get rid of their personal childhood memories, foster home experience effectively. Thus taking care of their own child is a much bigger challenge. They become parents immaturely, without a stable relationship, they more often tend to leave their children who then also end up in state homes (Vajda & Kósa, 2005). They are more likely to behave intolerantly, lack cooperation, and be oversensitive. There are also research data proving that infants separated from their parents at an early point are unable to establish strong relationships even if they are permanently or temporarily taken care of by foster parents.

If leaving the family is unavoidable, it must be considered that separating an infant after the age of 1 results in less trauma. On the other hand it is important to ensure the possibility of attachment to a new person. Healthy development of the personality is only made probable if it happens before the age of 3 (Ranschburg, 1998).

### Family relations

In the family naturally the mother-child relationship is the strongest, however as years go by, other people also become important. The infant-father relationship, beside the function of caretaking, allows playing together, which means an experience of joy and excitement. Their playful interactions are more rare and intensive and are different from games played with the mother. The child's sex, age and some other factors influence the further development of their relationship.

After the parents, brothers and sisters are the most important companions in a child's life. The strength of attachment between them is affected by the emotional atmosphere of the relationship, personal characteristics and the connection to the parents (Feuer, 1988). Each child has, based on their position among brothers and sisters, a unique sociopsychological situation resulting in different development (Adler, 1990). According to certain studies, firstborn sons are more sociable but more aggressive and later have more behavior disorders than their younger siblings (Vajda & Kósa, 2005). Firstborn daughters, on the other hand, are more obedient, more socially responsible than those born later but younger sisters are better accepted among mates than firstborns or only children. An elder brother or sister is a playmate who, besides helping the young experience competition and cooperation, provides an important model while constantly mediating the norms of the peer group.

Grandparents can provide major help in all socialization and education fields. Children most often explain their attraction to their parents by the fact that they provide care, love, help in need and they can be trusted. But they expect the grandparents to spoil them and be permissive.

Maintaining their relationship with parents, relatives, brothers and sisters is legitimate for children living in children's homes. At the same time, being separated from the family can have negative consequences and it can definitely change the characteristics of relationship with family members: their number, content, and thus the direction of the whole evolution of personality. For example, it can have severe consequences if the child's frames of attitude, its content toward the biological parents, foster parents or

foster home caregivers, are not completely clarified. The family can keep the child in insecurity or push them into hopelessness if, after a separation that was supposed to be final, they try to approach the child again or keep changing the distance in an irregular manner. The caregivers, however, should also become conscious of the fact that the children they are taking care of are not their own.

Children coming from disintegrated families have a special system of relations as they belong to different micro-communities at the same time. The appearance of completely new persons, like step brothers and step sisters through the new relationship of the mother or father, can transform the family's relationship network, which was believed to be unchangeable. The absence of some family member, parents who are bringing up a child alone, can also produce different system of conditions for attachment.

It is often true for young people growing up in state homes that their attachment to family and the organization of the home is ambivalent, which causes major emotional tension (Berczik, 1998). The fact that models brought from the family are basically different and even resist educational intentions transmitting more advantageous values, can lead to conflicts.

### Children's social networks

There are 4 hierarchical levels of children's social networks: interaction level, dyadic relationship level, group level and formal network level (Furman, 1989). Closer relations between persons develop from different interactions. There is always a lot of interaction experience behind the forming child-caregiver relationship, mutual friendships or rejection and discrimination from a community. The analysis of different formations such as the community of a family, peer groups or groups within the institution, allows the understanding of group behavior, while the whole relationship network can organize all our attachments.

In the formation of the global social network the following major turning points can be distinguished: the time of entering nursery, kindergarten, school, and the period of adolescence when parallel to the change of parent-child relations there is a gradual expansion of the attachment network, as different persons appear in the child's life who become more and more important.

Children get into contact with their peers early. The first signs of interest can be seen at nursery age where the first competing reactions are followed by the need to approach each other (Vajda, 1999). Some children become more popular as early as this time, they have more mates to play with. During education in early age parents are replaced by caregivers and the children's quality of emotional relationship with them depends on family experience. Children in kindergarten learn about the advantages of being together with their peers, the joy of common play, social consequences of their behavior and the affects of different group situations. They also collect important experience about the sympathy growing between two persons, and during school years they will also learn about true friendship based on reciprocity and responsibility. The spectacular development of pupils' social competence is in close relation with the development of emotional life, self,

the maturing of mental functions on the one hand, and the influence of different social formations at and outside of school. During the period that is also called 'changing sides' they start spending more and more time with people outside the family. Their behavior with adults is different from the way they behave with children. Using the terms of Piaget (1993), they are led by 'double morals': they regard adults with absolute respect, keeping the norms they communicate, while on the other hand they follow their own rules. Children of the same age appear as equals within their peer groups, the peers representing the frame of reference for regulating their behavior. Until the age of puberty young people usually make friends with members of the same sex, although sometimes there are friendships between boys and girls as well. Boys and girls oppose each other at times. Girls are generally in closer contact with only 2-3 persons, while boys have less intensive but more extensive relations. Boys, on the other hand, more often allow new members to join their community. Reciprocity is more important for girls. Boy groups more often have a special leader, while girls are typically all initiative and direct the group's life together (Vajda, 1999).

Attachment to peer groups takes place primarily during puberty, very often leading to heated conflicts. Family values can collide with the expectations of the young people's subculture during this period (Vikár, 1999). Frequent change of staff, insecure family relations, disorders in the evolution of personality of the individual and affects of the peer groups can amplify identity crisis. Childhood loneliness, rejection is frequent and it can induce chronic processes. Children having marginal positions in a group may end up fleeing or even joining deviant groups. In the case of children living in children's homes we can often find anger, the desire to take revenge on the parents, the lack of love or the feeling of discontent behind the desire to belong to deviant groups.

The different subcultures also influence the social organizations of adolescents and young adults. Layers within society result in unique attachment networks: contact is created between groups of similar social-economical status. Children's homes are favorable to associations where children are in danger and need protection. Free time gatherings outside the home also often have this direction. Institutes, however, should support the most advantageous social integration possible, rather than segregation, which is partly realizable by allowing the children to meet outside communities with a favorable influence.

The most important attachment of young adulthood is the relationship based on love, which is often followed by the wish to have an own family. The experience of relationships from earlier life and social perceptual processes related to the actual partner are decisive in the formation of intimate relations (Urbán, 1996). Later the existing relationships stabilize but their intensity changes. The most important attachments of active adulthood are related to family, profession and friendship. Mutual sympathy, trust, the adult's intention to socialize, the motivation to provide care, prosocial behavior, as well as respect and affection on the children's side are all present in the relation of young people and their caregivers. In children's homes it is vital to establish a loving and accepting atmosphere. Children and adults mutually form each other through their personality. Educational relations between children and caregivers (Kron, 1997) gradually grow in the

direction of intimacy that exceeds usual roles. Mentoring systems of children's homes, which simultaneously consider spontaneous and conscious elements in the formation of children-adult attachments based on trust and emotions (Major & Mészáros, 2007), can help one-to-one relationships survive. *Mária Herczog* (2001) underlines that the interests of children needing supplementary–substitutive care are best met if participants of the childcare system do not try to expropriate children but, according to their professional rights, they take steps in protecting them and their family as well as in promoting the children's healthy development.

### Changes in the characteristics of childhood affection

Attachment means a strong emotional involvement, and there are different objects of attachment (Zsolnai, 2001). We can attach to the place where we live, to communities, living organisms such as people, animals or plants, or we can be attracted to certain values, ideas and objects. We can talk about the number, content, motives, function, power and direction of human attachments and we separate improving, neutral, disadvantageous and dangerous attachments.

The formation of emotional relations is affected by physical closeness, attractive looks, similarity, individual ability and identity of attitude. In kindergarten mainly outside features and actual interests decide. Sometimes friends give presents to each other. In the case of boys, physical ability is more important such as skillfulness or courage, whereas girls rather watch the looks, beauty and tidiness. A comparative study also proved that six-year-olds describe their attachment choices much more differentially (Ferincz, 2007). On top of the reasons mentioned by the younger ones, the eldest in the kindergarten added love, protection and help. Reference to personality features was complemented by that of ability and will. The way they talked about their feelings was also more refined. For the elder children the most often mentioned motive after common play was friendship.

These tendencies get stronger later. According to research data the most often occurring attachment motives of school age children to their peers are mutual sympathy, similar interests, common experience, solidarity, providing help, protection, trust, friendship and love (Zsubrits, 2007a). Generally they attach more closely to 4-5 persons and in this respect the importance of peers immediately follows that of the parents (Zsolnai, 1987). Other studies proved that the need for emotional support is definitely the most vital for 16-17-year-olds (Vajda, 2002). An empirical study of Australian primary schools attempted to find out what characteristics children describe their best friend with (Cole & Cole, 1998). Most often they mentioned behaviors connected to care-giving (love, concern, consolation, protection) and to empathy (understanding, common experience, similar interests). Mature friendships have a lot of mutuality: mutual love, respect, recognition, help, as well as intimacy and trust. Then from adolescence intimate meetings will have new aspects.

Receiving substitutive childcare for a given time, through the many factors reinforcing each other, essentially determines social relationships and attachment characteristics. In our own research (Zsubrits, 2007b) we found

that adolescents and young adults most often considered their biological parents as the major persons with whom they regularly keep in touch outside the institute. This typically means weekly and monthly regularity. Nearly the quarter of young people, however, do not have any such permanent relationships. The study also deals with the importance of their attachment to foster parents, family members and other acquaintance such as teachers, outside guardian, caregiver, adults working in the institute and strangers.

Young people most often attach to 3-5 persons more closely, the mother taking the first place in the row in most cases. She was mentioned somewhere in the row by half of the children altogether. Other most often mentioned persons were: brothers and sisters, caregivers in the institute, friends, father and relatives. The repeated appearance of friends of the same age and love relationships on the list is not surprising either.

Regarding the intensity of attachment, the significant categories were the very strong and medium, whereas the direction of attachment was stated mutual.

Children's educators had very similar reasons of choice. The most often mentioned motives of attachment to caregivers, mother, father and grandparents were: love, trust, respect, gratitude for care and understanding. As a reason for attaching to a brother or sister, they named love, trust, respect, friendship, help, solidarity and understanding as of major importance, while in the case of making friends it was friendship, love, trust, respect, sympathy, common activities and understanding.



## References

- Act XXXI on childcare and guardianship issued in 1997
- ADLER, A. (1990): [Insight into Character]. Göncöl Press, Budapest.
- AINSWORTH, M. & BLEHAR, M. C. & WATERS, E. & WALL, S. (1978): Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum.
- BERCZIK K. (1998): [How Children in Childcare Homes Relate to Their Family. In: Childcare-Educational Communities]. 6. p. 2.
- BOWLBY, J. (1969): Attachment and Loss, Vol. I. Attachment, Hogarth Press, London.
- COLE, M. & COLE, S. R. (1998): [Developmental Psychology]. Osiris Press, Budapest.
- DOMSZKY A. (1994): [Introductory Thoughts for Interpreting Childcare]. In: Csóka L. & Domszky A. & Hazai V. & Herczog M.: International Childcare Practice. Pont Press, Solymár. 9-18.
- DOMSZKY A. (1999): [Methodological Letter on the Rules and Requirements of Children's Homes]. In: National Institution for the Protection of Family and Children, Budapest.
- DORNES, M. (2002): [The Competent Infant]. Pont Press, Budapest.
- Diagnostic Criteria of DSM-IV (1995). Animula, Budapest.
- ERIKSON, E. H. (2002): [Childhood and Society]. Osiris Press, Budapest.
- FERINCZ N. (2007): [Social Relations of Children in Kindergartens]. Thesis paper. NyME BEPK, Sopron.
- FEUER M. (1988): [The Significance of Brother-Sister Relations In: Family, Child, Youth] 2. pp. 30-33.
- FURMAN, W. (1989): The Development of Children's Social Networks. In: Deborah Belle (ed): Children's Social Networks and Social Supports. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 151-173.
- GERVAI J. (1997): [The Significance of Early Attachment in Childhood Development. In: Hidas Gy.: From Conception to Society]. pp. 29-38.
- HERCZOG M. (2001): [Childcare Handbook]. KJK-Kerszöv, Budapest.
- HIDAS Gy. & RAFFAI J. & VOLLNER J. (2002): [Spiritual Cord. Conversations with my Baby]. Válasz, Budapest.
- INÁNTSY, P. J. & MÁTH J. (2004): [Attachment to Parents and Social Relations in Kindergarten. In: Hungarian Journal of Psychology] 2. pp. 215-229.
- KRON, F. (1997): [Pedagogy]. Osiris, Budapest.
- MAIN, M. & SOLOMON, J. (1990): Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented during the strange situation. In: Greenberg, M. T. & Cicchetti, D. & Cummings, E. M. (eds.): Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research and intervention. University of Chicago Press, pp. 121-160.
- MAJOR Zs. B. & MÉSZÁROS K. (2007): ['Armchair or Elbow-Rest' Handbook of Practise- and Tool-Centered Education Methodology for People Working in Childcare]. Forrás Klub, Szeged.
- PIAGET, J. (1993): [Psychology of the Intellect]. Gondolat Press, Budapest.
- RANSCHBURG J. (1998): [From the Psychology of Emotion and Character]. Okker Press, Budapest.
- SZÖLLÖSI G. (1996): [Recommendations of the European Council on the Substitutive Care of Children. In: Family, Child, Youth] 1. pp. 12-15.
- URBÁN R. (1996): [Adult Attachment and Intimate Relationships. In: Hungarian Journal of Psychology] pp. 347-361.
- VAJDA Zs. (1999): [Children's Psychological Development]. Helikon Press, Budapest.

- VAJDA Zs. (2002): [Development of Social Relations and Behavior from Early Schoollyears to Adolescence. In: Mészáros A.: Socio-psychological Phenomena at School]. ELTE Eötvös Press, Budapest. pp. 147-163.
- VAJDA Zs. & KÓSA É. (2005): [Educational Psychology]. Osiris, Budapest.
- VIKÁR Gy. (1999): [Crises in Youth]. Animula Press, Budapest.
- ZILBERSTEIN, K. (2006): Clarifying Core Characteristics of Attachment Disorders: A Review of Current Research and Theory. In: American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. Vol. 76. (1) pp. 55-64.
- ZSOLNAI A. (1987): [A Possible Tool for Examining Childhood Attachment]. Acta Univ. Szeg. de A. J. nom Sectio Paed. et Psych. No. 29. Szeged, pp. 165-180.
- ZSOLNAI A. (2001): [Attachment and Education]. Eötvös József Press, Budapest.
- ZSUBRITS A. (2007a): [Motives of Childhood Affection. In: New Journal of Pedagogy] 7-8. pp. 16-23.
- ZSUBRITS A. (2007b): [Description of the Personal Attachment Network of Children Living in Homes]. XI. Apáczai-days. International Scientific Conference. Győr, 10. pp. 18-20.