

# FORMS OF EVERYDAY LEARNING OF PARENTHOOD BY PHYSICALLY DISABLED PARENTS IN POLAND. STUDY REPORT

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study is the attempt to present the empirical aspects of the issue of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled adult parents. The author describes the methodological principles and the organization of her own research. The article discusses the results of the ethnographic research concerning everyday learning of parenthood by 17 parents with physical disability (9 women, 8 men) and describes the process of analysing verbal data with the use of coding and categorization techniques according to Gibbs, which constitutes the answer to the specified research questions. The main research question was: What are the forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled parents in Poland? The analyses suggest that parents with physical disabilities every day gain parental experience in the various manner in 4 forms as: situational learning, performed self-learning, learning by the dialogue and non-verbal learning.

**Keywords:** parenthood, everyday life, learning, physically disabled people.

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## INTRODUCTION

Stelter and Bakiera (2014) highlight that „parenthood occupies a specific place among other family roles as being a mother or a father brings significant values and experiences to the human's life. A baby gives a sense of satisfaction and initiates love bonds by the very fact of being born into the family. Parents become more and more engaged in life and start to see its meaning” (Bakiera, Stelter, 2014, 131). According to Tyszkowa (2014), „every family member, depending on their current stage of life and their individual values, fulfils different family roles and at the same time interacts in various ways and occupies an individual position in the system of personal relationships” (Tyszkowa, 2014, 135). Therefore, it may be stated that a family is an environment whose members, including primarily the parents, learn and gain experience every single day.

Jurgiel-Aleksander (2017) stresses that „an experience of being a parent is one of those which gives adults an opportunity to learn” (Jurgiel – Aleksander, 2017, 75). Przybylska and Wajsprych (2018) in their analysis of the concept of a family as an environment of everyday learning emphasize that its uniqueness in this aspect arises from an intense and strong relationship that connects its members in both the emotional and social spheres (Przybylska, Wajsprych, 2018). Moreover, the authors indicate that learning in the family is possible thanks to the "interpersonal communication during which individuals learn to fulfil the social roles, to follow standards of behaviour, interpretation patterns and experience symbolisation as well as to build emotional relations with other family members and the social world" (Przybylska, Wajsprych, 2018, 36).

According to Przybylska and Wajsprych (2018), the analysis of Polish specialised literature enables us to observe that “the current exploration of the processes of learning in the family focuses mainly around decisive events, such as marriage, child birth or divorce. The knowledge on learning by the members of the family in their direct contacts and a complex network of social relations is considerably smaller” (Przybylska,

Wajsprych, 2018, 100). Therefore, I would like to highlight the significance and need for research that would allow people to get to know and understand the aspect of everyday learning by the adult members of the family. Learning the ways of how physically disabled parents obtain knowledge and skills in everyday social situations in relations with their closest relatives is, in my perspective, cognitively valuable and worth of deeper exploration.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The presented report is a part of the ethnographic research conducted with the participation of 17 adults (including 9 women and 8 men) with physical disability who play the roles of parents (and whose disability started before the birth of the child). The research was conducted in years 2016-2019 during the implementation of the research project as a part of the doctoral dissertation entitled “Everyday learning of parenthood by people with physical disability. Ethnographic research” (Karpińska, 2019, 106). The data come from the unpublished doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Beata Borowska-Beszta, PhD, Professor at the University of Nicholas Copernicus, which was defended at the Faculty of Education, Nicholas Copernicus University in Toruń in 2019 (Karpińska, 2019).

The aim of the research was to get to know and understand the specific nature of everyday learning of parenthood by 17 physically disabled parents in Poland. This report includes methodological assumptions as well as the analysis of verbal data that constitutes the answer to the following research question: What are the forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled parents in Poland? (Karpińska, 2019).

## METHOD

The studies were based on interpretive paradigm. They were complemented with the use of qualitative strategy described in methodological publications by, among others: Borowska – Baszta (2005), Flick (2010), Kubinowski (2010), Jemielniak (2012), Denzin and Lincoln (2009). The research method with the use of which I have

conducted the project was based on ethnography analysed by, among others: Hammersley and Atkinson (1989), Bauman (2003), Borowska – Beszta (2005, 2013), Angrosino (2010), Kostera and Krzyworzeka (2012), Juszczyk (2013). While collecting data I used the technique of ethnographic interview according to Spradley (1979) in Borowska – Beszta (2005). The obtained verbal data were analysed with the use of the techniques of coding and categorisation according to Gibbs (2010). The aim of this study was to identify and understand the phenomena of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled adult parents and to answer the following research question: What are the forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled parents in Poland? (Karpińska, 2019).

#### PURPOSIVE SAMPLE

I examined how 17 physically disabled parents (9 women, 8 men) at the age of 24-45 every day learn to be parents. A dominant physical dysfunction among female participants was infantile cerebral palsy (4 women, 3 of whom were moving on wheelchairs). The second dominant dysfunction was spina bifida and myelomeningocele (3 women, all of whom were moving on wheelchairs). 1 woman had congenital bone brittleness and used a wheelchair. 1 person had undergone through-knee amputations of the lower limbs and a through-elbow amputation of the right upper limb in childhood (she moved independently without the assistance of prostheses. Whereas the dominant dysfunction among the male participants was infantile cerebral palsy (4 men, 2 of whom used a wheelchair). 2 participants had had their limbs amputated in childhood (one man had had his lower limbs amputated and used a wheelchair, the second had undergone a transhumeral amputation of his upper limb). 1 participant had experienced a transportation accident as a result of which he had suffered a spinal cord injury (he used a wheelchair). 1 man had been diagnosed with Arnold-Chiari malformation (Karpińska, 2019). The selection of informants was purposeful. The personal data of the participants were encoded during the research process.

#### DATA COLLECTION

I started the project in October 2016 and finished in February 2019. The research lasted 29 month in total. I gathered the account of 17 physically disabled adult parents (9 mothers and 8 fathers), whose disability started before the birth of the child. Before I started a conversation, I had informed each participant about the aim of the study, its assumptions and the fact that their anonymity would be preserved through personal data coding. Moreover, the participants obtained information concerning the purpose of the conversation and a possibility to resign at any time of the research. 15 informants gave their written consent to take part in the study by signing the consent form. Whereas 2 participants gave their oral consent, which was registered during the study, as their conversation took place via Skype. According to Green and Bloome, an oral consent is methodically justified and hence possible. All interviews were registered on a voice recorder (Karpińska, 2019).

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The technique of data analysis that I chose to use in this research project was the technique of coding and categorisation by Gibbs (Gibbs, 2010). The analytical process started with a deep exploration of raw data (verbatim) to later confront them with the following research question: What are the forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled parents in Poland? Next, I conducted open coding (Gibbs, 2010). I specified analytical categories out of the obtained verbal data. Then I assigned analytical codes (descriptive codes, analytical codes) to the above-mentioned categories. These activities indicated the further course of the analysis and allowed me to find the answer to the raised research question.

I asked the informants about them gaining parenthood experience every day and one of the categories of raw data (verbatim) was the following category: The forms of parenthood learning, which was formed by the following analytical codes: form: situational learning; form: self-learning; form: learning by dialogue; form: non-verbal learning.

## RESULTS

### FORM: SITUATIONAL LEARNING

One of the forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled adults is situational learning. Parents learn by solving problems in situations in which they found themselves. The activities they engage in and reflection on it become a valuable source of knowledge and experience, which are used in the further life. When found in a problematic situation, parents have to act independently, which results in obtaining knowledge and skills, which they may use to solve other subsequent parental difficulties.

*"For example, there has been lately a situation in which A\*\*\* got such big spots on her arms (2.0) and :: we got very frightened, me and my wife, because we didn't know what that was and :: that was Sunday so our doctor's office was closed (3.0). We tried to help her on our own. I got that ointment that we had at home > the name associated with vitamin A< and we put it on her spots and:: waited (3.0). They got smaller and smaller after a few hours so we didn't need to go to the emergency (4.0), :: so it works out when something happens (2.0). And now I will know for the future what to do in such a situation (3.0)".*

(Male informant m2)

*"Generally it was like that :: I even on the ward that I stayed on, the ward sister was my mother's good friend so :: it was plain and clear, because I immediately woke up after this CC and they told me that my baby was hungry and they gave her to me and latched on to my breast (.), I got her, fed her and that was it (2.0). And :: later I just knew it because I learned it when I was doing it (2.0)".*

(Female informant k7)

*"(2.0) oh for example, such a simple situation, when we went to the doctor and:: A\*\*\* was very naughty so I gave him sweets in order not to create commotion (1.0). And::: now I know that :: I can't do it because every time we were there he extorted them from me through his behaviour (1.0). I learned that :: I can't raise him by bribing."*

(Female informant k3)

*"But many things were just happening just day by day when I did something (3.0). And it is still like that, when I do something good it stays and if not I know what to change (3.0). I learned like that and I learn, not that I read something on purpose or acquired (6.0)." (Informant m7)*

One of the informants (Informant m3) highlights that he gains experience in everyday situations that he later analyses. He points out that there is a need to create a place where physically disabled parents can share their parental experience. He emphasises that it is a significant element of the functioning of the disabled adults in their roles of mother/fathers as the exchange of experiences and knowledge of how to deal with certain situations despite dysfunctions is the best way to learn parenthood.

*"(2.0) I act day by day, I learn out of new situations, I gain experience (2.0). What happens each day, the way I solve something, is the best lesson of being a dad (3.0), but sometimes it is difficult for me, a disabled person, to learn something, to do something, so I would gladly make some contact with other parents in such a situation (3.0), uhm so there would be a place where we could share our experience, talk about the way we do something despite our dysfunctions." (Male informant m3)*

### FORM: SELF-LEARNING

It can be observed from the obtained data that participants obtain knowledge also in the form of self-learning. Female informant k9 states that she has always learned everything by herself. She has shaped her skills on her own, including those related to motherhood. Whereas male informant m5 stresses that learning of parenthood involves own search for knowledge and only in that form of learning one can be sure that he/she is a good parent. Moreover, informant k4 describes the fear of the action she was to take when taking care of the baby and only thanks to her own learning and making attempts she overcame this fear and has learned care and nursing activities. What is more, female informant k1 highlights that self-learning and learning of parental roles constituted the source of satisfaction; while responding to more and more challenges made her happy and

complacent, which she would not have felt if she had learned that from books or other people.

*"I have been a self-taught person my whole life. I even helped others learn something other than others would have helped me (3.0). The biggest challenge in my life is to hang sheer curtains, ::: the rest I can handle on my own (2.0), so it is clear, I learned because I had to learn, ::: but much more from my own mistakes (3.0). I reached everything on my own (2.0), I learned everything on my own (2.0)".* (Female informant k9)

*"(1.0) I have always learned on my own (.), I pondered, did, handled something, changed (2.0). And because sometimes I had to support something in my teeth and I tried to do it, I practised and invented my own technique and changed it (2.0), but ::: it was good, I devised the system on my own (laughter) (3.0). Only thanks to the fact that ::: a man trains something, he can learn his role well (4.0)"* (Male informant m5)

*"At the beginning one is terrified, he/she supposedly decides to do something and ::: everything is planned ::: and everything (3.0), but ::: the reality is different because everything comes with time (4.0). Generally, when my daughter was born, I was frightened (3.0). Because she was so small. I couldn't imagine how I would take the child on my hands> My mobility is reduced, I have a huge problem with balance< so it was hard for me (3.0), but ::: later when we got home it all was happening gradually and it was better and better day by day (3.0). Mostly it was my husband who did most of the things (4.0), and I gradually learned myself what I was supposed to do (2.0). Day by day I did new things, but ::: as I said, I had to learn it slowly on my own because ::: I was very afraid (2.0)"* (Female informant k4)

*(4.0) I did not look for any information (3.0) on how to take care of a child (3.0). I just waited until the baby is born (4.0) and step by step I learned everything myself (4.0). The purest joy came from the fact ::: that I could do everything every day; learn something new (3.0). If I had read books and ::: had known it, I ::: would not have felt that, you know, that feeling that ::: I had done something on my own and it had been good (3.0). Nobody taught me, only myself (3.0), and ::: together with my husband we could experience*

*those ::: (2.0) wonderful moments."* (Female informant k1)

#### FORM: LEARNING BY DIALOGUE

The next form of learning of parenthood by physically disabled adults is learning by dialogue. Female informant k5, female informant k6 and female informant k2 talk about learning through conversation with their mothers/fathers, friends or siblings. The women stressed that sharing experiences and learning from the experience of others is a good form of learning to be a mother. Moreover, in their view, a dialogue with another person enables them to acquire a distance to oneself and own problems.

*"I derived many things, such experiences and I still have ::: from my mother (2.0), who had 3 children and ::: including me with such problems >, and she also struggled with some prejudices et cetera (2.0). I talk with my mother a lot about such things, so she always tells me something out of her own experience (2.0), for example when she had the same problem with me as I have now and ::: I make some conclusions and ::: try to transfer it to my daughters (4.0)." (Female informant k6)*

*"(2.0). I asked my friends who already have children how to take care of them and what it is like in general (2.0). I have also talked with more experienced people over the Internet, who told me what it was like in their cases (2.0)." (Female informant k5)*

*"(4.0) My mother helps me a lot and also my sisters; they have adult children so they went through everything on their own so I talk with them a lot."* (Female informant k2)

#### FORM: NON-VERBAL LEARNING

The collected data allowed me to distinguish a code that indicates that physically disabled parents learn to be mothers/fathers in a non-verbal form. Male informant m8 highlighted that running a blog on which he posts his child's photos allows him to observe how his child is changing, developing and therefore he analyses his parenthood, makes conclusions what is good and what should be improved. Female informant k8

talks about being with her daughters and observing them as a form of improving own parental experience.

*"I run a blog on which I post photos of my son (3.0) and my whole family (4.0). I want to show that :: even though we are disabled and :: we have a child, we live normally (2.0) and that :: disabled parents are not worse than others (4.0). That's why I show my child in different stages of development (3.0). In different situations in order to demonstrate that :: we live the way others live (3.0). It allows me to look at what it was like (1.0), observe my son and wonder if what I did (.), I did good (2.0) I learn how to be a dad through this (2.0)." (Male informant m8)*

*"I spend a lot of time with my daughters (2.0), observe them :: It allows me to see how they change (1.0), and what their needs are" (Female informant k8)*

*"(5.0) but :: I gain a lot :: when I can see what my daughters do (1.0). And when they were small, I also looked at them, when they played or something ::, I knew what to do next, it helps (Male informant m4).*

## CONCLUSION

The conducted analyses suggest that parents with physical disabilities every day gain parental experience in the following manner. Firstly, they learn from situations which they experience every day. Secondly, they look for knowledge on their own and shape their parental skills. Thirdly, they learn by dialogue – through conversation thanks to which they share their experience and derive from the experience of their parents, siblings, friends. Last but not least, they learn to be mothers/fathers in a non-verbal form. The study results, obtained with the use of the technique of coding and categorisation<sup>16</sup> in response to the research question on forms of everyday learning of parenthood by physically disabled adult parents lead to a statement that the structure of everyday learning of parenthood in the case of these 17 physically disabled adults is built by the forms of everyday gaining of skills and messages, among others. Four forms of everyday learning of parenthood emerge from the study. One of them is situational learning, appointed by 5 informants. Another form distinguished out of raw data

(verbatim) is self-learning, which was indicated by 4 informants. Yet another form of everyday learning of parenthood by the physically disabled is learning by dialogue, which is used in everyday life by 3 informants. The collected verbal data allowed me to observe that physically disabled parents learn to be mothers/fathers in a non-verbal form. 2 informants talk about observation of a child and being with them as a form of learning. Whereas 1 informant indicates that running a blog with his son's photos is a form of reflexion on his parenthood.

Parenthood constitutes a significant value in the lives of my informants, namely 17 physically disabled parents. They gain knowledge and experience on how to be a parent every day. Despite a satisfaction from their own parental competences and complacency about the fact that multiple barriers in learning to be mothers/fathers can be overcome, the parents indicate a need to share their experience with other physically disabled parents, which is echoed, for example, in the following statement: "I would gladly make some contact with other parents in such situation, so there would be a place where we could share our experience, talk about the way we do something despite our dysfunctions". Hence, it can be presumed that creating a place for sharing everyday experience for parents with physical disabilities would help them in everyday learning of parenthood.

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