

## THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN FAMILY. ARE THE YOUNG PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THIS RESPONSABILITY?

Mihaela BRÂNZĂ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>„Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

**Abstract:** *Contemporary Christian family is confronted with many challenges. The beginning of a marriage is blessed by the Church. Both spouses are expected to do their best in creating a happy family. The perfect marriage is possible only within Jesus Christ Who is the head of the Church. The groom and the bride are asked to constantly increase the love “capital” that they receive when they are wedded in a parish church. There are many struggles to carry in order to live your Christian faith to the full in today’s world. Parents are called to get involved in a parochial community where they can find activities appropriate for their family. Children live a different childhood nowadays because of the constant attraction that digital media exerts. Mum and dad need to be cautious and vigilant all the time. The dialogue within the family is the most important aspect. It has to be developed day by day. When children come into the world the adults must be prepared. Reading about children’s development has become mandatory. A loving parent will perceive easily the perils outside the house. A Christian family promotes a type of teaching that is not in accordance with the postmodern society. Its principles may seem rigid to the outsiders but in fact they increase the capacity of the person to love God and the others. And this represents the goal of a fulfilled existence within the Church of Jesus Christ as known within Orthodoxy.*

**Keywords:** Christian family, parish, vigilance, digital media, dialogue, love capital, love capacity, perfect marriage.

### The Contemporary Society-a Melting Pot for Undecided Young People

Parents have the responsibility to offer their children a loving family setting. Mum and dad are both called to assure their offsprings the best educational atmosphere. Nowadays young people express high expectations when they decide to create a family. It has become obvious to everyone that this particular important decision is at present delayed intentionally. Families are commonly formed after the groom and the bride are over the age of 30. A specific range of reasons are employed to justify the delay. One of them is the necessity to finish school which often includes doctoral studies. Another one is the desire to have their own home, either a flat or a house. Bringing children into the world is not considered a priority. Some of the new families have included children on their list of future accomplishments, but a great many others refuse to consider such a possibility. The need for this postponement derives from a careless lack of real commitment.

Autonomy is considered a quality of the postmodern individual. Even engaged in a relationship young people tend to preserve a tendency

to neutral decision-making. The partner is not perceived as an important stakeholder within the daily course of the other counterpart's living. The friendship that develops between the future spouses before the wedding has therefore different and unexpected characteristics. The variate consequences of this change can be seen within the today's family. The structure itself is quite fragile. The two persons that united their fate are no longer able to overcome the inherent obstacles that the family life involves. Divorce is a terrible choice. It is already in the statistics that the separation takes place when the children are between the ages of three and six<sup>1</sup>. When confronted with harsh moments the couple needs to take out their ability to sit down peacefully and think things out in order to identify the most appropriate solutions. These discussions are considered essential in keeping a marriage going. But their basis is consolidated during the period prior to the wedding when the two learn to trust each other. It is extremely important that they use this special period to form their capacity to scrutinize issues together as a couple that intends to create a family. Trust determines undoubtedly a long-time commitment in a marriage that allows the two to invest a great deal of emotions which have the power to increase year by year their relational capital<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Christian Identity as a Basis for a Happy Childhood**

Children are happy when their parents love each other. There is no other reason on the earth that boosts more a child's development. Psychologists say that when asked children coming from well consolidated families tell stories that are full of joy<sup>3</sup>. These children are able to invent characters that express lots of solidarity. At the same time, their stories comprise details of an impressive insight that show concord with the reality. On the contrary, children raised in destabilizing families such as the ones confronted with alcohol addiction tell stories that mostly reflect their negative emotions: sadness, anxiety, fear and so on. These children's fictions offer mainly details from the surroundings. They usually describe external aspects. This particular example reveals

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Bacus, *The Child Between the Ages of 3 and 6 The Physical, Mental, Emotional, Cognitive and Social Development*, translation by Traiana Necşa, Bucharest, Teora, 2008, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Cătălin Glava, *The Family. A Social-Pedagogical Perspective*, in the vol. *The Contemporary Family: Challenges, Principles, Values*, Cluj-Napoca, Renaşterea, 2020, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Tamara FlorenskaiA, *The Pedagogy of Trust*, in the vol. *The Family Life*, translation by Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas, Bucharest, Sophia, Alexandria, Cartea Ortodoxă, 2009, p. 114.

once more that the family is “the main love structure” of the society<sup>4</sup>. Within this framework where unconditioned but firmly affection is expressed children develop in time their ability to appreciate and trust others. The wise Christian family uses childhood to infuse their children with the habits that are connected to its religion. The goal is to build a Christian identity.

Saint John Chrysostom says that a child should be thought to protect its senses from bad influences<sup>5</sup>. The first to be taken into consideration is the tongue that permits us to speak. The Christian parents are therefore under the obligation to teach their kids a way to talk that is in accordance with the virtues that the Church cultivates. Parents converse with their infants since birth and even sooner, while the child is a fetus within its mum’s womb. As the studies prove, the fetus has the ability to learn because immediately after birth it recognizes the voices of the parents<sup>6</sup>. The human voice is the main stimulus that attracts the baby’s attention and it helps the development of the auditory system. The newborn uses the hearing to learn sounds and later on words. The eyes of the child are a little bit blurry and unstable at the beginning. They focus on the human face which seems extremely interesting to them. Also, the smell and the touch provide babies with more quality information to analyze. All these senses need to be surrounded by an invisible palladium consolidated in time by careful parenthood. In order to make sure that the baby walks on an appropriate developmental track mum and dad must live the same life with their child. This means that time is needed to be spent together constantly. Both parents should dedicate themselves to all aspects comprised in a child’s upbringing.

Protecting your senses from negative stimuli is a main teaching within the Orthodoxy. This is what each Christian must learn from an early age. Parents are obviously responsible for such an important endeavor. One of the most important acquisition during the preschool period is inhibition or self-control. Children acquire self-control with the help of the adults. Consequently, they are asked to practice it every day before being able to pass it to the child. Being aware as a parent that your personality flaws can deter your own child’s healthy development is

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<sup>4</sup> Teofil Tia, *The Family: a “University” of Love – Landmarks in the Itinerary Towards the Psycho-Emotional Absolute (of the Professor Giacomo Dacquino)*, in the vol. *The Contemporary Family: Challenges, Principles, Values*, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea, 2020, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *About Raising Children*, Bacău, Bunavestire, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Tinca Crețu, *Developmental Psychology*, Iași, Polirom, 2016, p. 91.

the point to start babies' education. Controlling your reactions in various situations should be embedded while you are a child. Adulthood makes self-change a little bit difficult. Nevertheless, mum and dad are the only ones to create the difference trying first to surpass their faults. So, there is no point in giving up the struggle. Preschoolers should be protected from any situation or thing that can increase their sensuality<sup>7</sup>. Eating too much, for instance, is a gate that slowly and certainly allows laziness and flabbiness to enter the child's soul. A preschool child that restrains from eating too much or avoids food which the parents consider unhealthy is proved by scientists to live a better mature life<sup>8</sup>. They are learning step by step from the adults to control their attention to things and people.

### **Essential Parental Prerequisites for a Child's Healthy Development**

Vigilance and prudence are required at the same time these days. Parents need to be extremely attentive to themselves. Children copy instantly their behavior and vocabulary. Also, the body language is an essential element in inducing certain reactions in children. Delay of gratification, volunteer attention, cognitive control, self-discipline are names describing the ability to control your behavior. Children's opposition to unacceptable demeanor depends enormously on the educational consistency of the parents, especially in the first seven years of childhood. In order to gain self-control in the preschool period, attachment to both parents should be developed prior to and after the birth of the child. Babies need to be permanently cuddled. They like human happy faces that talk directly to them. Neuroscientists affirm that hearing the spoken language while watching the face together with the smell of the parents who are touching it affectionately is registered in the speaking area of the baby's brain<sup>9</sup>. Playing with the child from the beginning has manifold consequences over development. When the affection of the adults is considerably interrupted due to considerations such as work, illness, divorce the child becomes anxious and insecure. The attachment relationship built earlier is now affected and the child

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<sup>7</sup> Saint Vladimir the metropolitan of Kiew, *About education*, the second edition, translation by Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas, Bucharest, Sophia, Făurei, Siluana, 2020, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Jo Palladino, *Parenting in the Age of Attention Snatchers. A Step-by-Step Guide to Balancing Your Child's Use of Technology*, translation by Miruna Andriescu, Iași, Polirom, 2015, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Spitzer, *The Digital Dementia How New Technologies Disturb Our Mind*, translation by Dana Verescu, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2020, p. 208.

reacts expressing a difficult behavior. In time, this transforms in discipline problems<sup>10</sup>. When parents continue to withdraw themselves from the parenting responsibilities the child will become unable to respect rules and limits. The lack of loving attention from parents is the main reason for children's fury against them. If not expressed, understood and surpassed wisely, this anger becomes one of the main grounds for adopting self-destructive behavior. Children start smoking, drinking and taking illegal drugs. And this can happen as soon as they have access to addictive substances<sup>11</sup>.

Educators from kindergartens consider difficult conduct a precise occasion to educate all enrolled preschoolers at once<sup>12</sup>. The frustration is the feeling most experienced by the little ones. The educators teach them how to deal with it and think over their reactions. This way the preschoolers adopt the same positive reaction every time when they are confronted with an unpleasant situation. The world around us provides them with daily circumstances hard to understand. The constant warm behavior of parents is necessary for such young children because they find it difficult to differentiate reality from fiction. It is a definitory characteristic of this period. Surrounded by responsible careful adults, the preschoolers start at a low pace to figure things out. Honest explanations and detailed answers to their questions orientate correctly children through this fragile portion of existence. Children, in their turn, like giving answers to adults' interrogations. As a parent you are most of the time compelled to use any opportunities that can increase your level of patience. Upbringing a child is not an easy task because it usually demands intelligence, diligence and specific knowledge. There are so many moments when adults' attitudes are crucial in educating properly a child. Lies, for instance, cultivate dishonesty and disrespect. At least one of the parents should be able and available to intervene and explain why the child must act one way or another<sup>13</sup>.

Not only behavior are parents called to delineate and adjust, but also the taste for music, books, movies and art in general. All these are nowadays part of a child's life. Advice can be offered only when the

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<sup>10</sup> Aletha Solter, *Attachment Play: How to Solve Children's Behaviour Problems With Play, Laughter and Connection*, translation by Sanda Watt, Bucharest, Herald, 2019, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Dimitri Avdeev, *Nervousness in Children and Adolescents*, the second edition, translation by Adrian și Xenia Tănăsescu-Vlas, Bucharest, Sophia, 2008, pp. 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Cindy Terebush, *Teach the Whole Preschooler: Strategies for Nurturing Developing Minds*, translation by Cristina Firoiu, Bucharest, Trei, 2020, p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Feodor Borodin, *How to Raise a Happy Child*, translation by Diana Guțu, Bucharest, Sophia, 2021, p. 119.

parents have taken the time to build their own culture. Literature and music are two domains that require continuous strain in order to cover a minimum of their length and width. A lot of free time must be dedicated from an early age to form a real interest in them. Children who have educated parents within the range of these fields benefit considerably from their significant intellectual dowry. Music and lyrics of songs influence a youngster's character<sup>14</sup>. At present, it is mandatory that parents get acquainted with all the "stuff" that is delivered to the children by the digital media. A pertinent opinion on them is impossible without a constant effort to understand and analyze why they are so interesting to the new generation.

### **The Unique Christian Inborn Gifts and the Digital Media-a Conflict to Surpass**

Parents should also be aware of the unique talents that a child has. Christian parents know that God sends a child into the world with a specific purpose. The birth of a child in itself is a miracle. When baptized a child receives the gifts of the Holy Ghost that makes a human being able to express unique qualities given by our Lord. Creativity of the child must be boosted with the help of the adults, especially parents and educators from kindergarten<sup>15</sup>. Creative abilities are directly connected to a vocational calling. A profession built on vocation is a fulfilling life project. It brings joy and satisfaction on a long run and it enables a Christian believer to follow God's commandments. Love is considered by the Orthodox teaching a state of the human being and not a relationship. When creativity is upheld by love then existence is subtly driven by the divine grace. Christian parents engaged in numerous good deeds for the sake of the others as God commanded reveal unintentionally their natural contribution to the prosperity of the Church in the current postmodern society. Their children are most likely to step on their footprints if their modelling influence is not steeply affected by external factors such as digital media. The easy access to other people's lives through the world of the Internet allows thoughts, optimism or negativism, anxieties and obsessions of far away persons to enter one's

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<sup>14</sup> Pavel Gumerov, *The Family – The Small Church*, translation by Mariana Cașu, Bucharest, Sophia, 2017, p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> Mihai Stoian, *Parents' Alphabet*, Bucharest, Didactică and Pedagogică, 1972, pp. 47-48.

mind<sup>16</sup>. This can dissipate within seconds your peaceful mind setting. Consequently, parents become sometimes helpless viewers of the perils that their children are exposed to when using digital technology.

We live in a curious world because of the technical progress. Children born today have great life expectations and all inevitably include the digital technology. Anyone needs to use it in order to live in this busy connected work environment. But still parents and children remain human beings who try to live in the same house with the intention to form a family. They need to surpass somehow the importance given to technology. If you excluded it for a few moments, you have parents and children talking to each other and communicating in traditional ways. One can notice easily the damage that excessive access to digital media creates. Children become less and less attentive and sometimes parents too. The dialogue among family members must be created. It does not exist out of nothing or only for the reason that they share the same living space. Prior to marriage, parents dedicate time to develop this dialogue. They learn about their personalities and their ability to get along and agree on different issues. They must be aware that they commit themselves to a life of reciprocal responsibilities. The conclusion before marriage is usually the hope that they will form together a perfect wedded couple. The Church says that the perfect marriage is the one that has Jesus Christ in its centre<sup>17</sup>. The two love one another and they love Christ as the head of the Church. The two friends that formed a marriage are bound to create a family framework where the Christian teaching leads their daily existence. God supports them all the time and they want to fulfil His will. Their goal is to raise their children under the roof of a parish church that they choose.

Paternity and maternity comprise responsibilities that can be detailed in specific tasks. The mother brings the child into the world but the father's main role is to teach the child how to live in this society<sup>18</sup>. The parental authority is a necessity within a family. Both parents' opinions on children's education should be the same<sup>19</sup>. Their constant love for the child is the element that strengthens the parental authority. In time, parents become teachers at the "school of life" for their own

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<sup>16</sup> Adrian Sorin Mihalache, *You Are What You Live Some Recent Data from the Neurosciences and the Spiritual Experiences of the Philocalia*, Bucharest, Trinitas, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolae Tănase, *The Ideal Husband, The Ideal Wife*, Sibiu, Anastasis, 2012, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Lorgus, *The Gift of the Father Book About Paternity*, translation by Diana Guțu, Galați, Egumenița, 2017, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea Stoian, *Parents' Alphabet*, p. 30.

children. The little ones need concise purposeful rules to follow for each life situation. This means that both parents, mum and dad, should be around quite a lot in order to instill these rules in their children's behavior. For instance, children should obey rules concerning the daily use of digital technology and in the same time the ones concerning exercise. Going jogging or practicing any other sport has become mandatory for a child living in the age of digital media. This fact needs to be understood and implemented by adults as soon as possible. Obesity in children at a very early age is a reality in expansion. Time lost in front of the gadgets does not come back. It is parents' choice to redirect a child's interests towards activities that improve his or her emotional and cognitive development. Volunteer attention requires effort and it is difficult to become a habit. Neurosciences affirm that all the activities that children constantly repeat have the ability to form neural pathways that consolidate related habits<sup>20</sup>. A brain developed in front of digital gadgets maintains these habits at adult stage. In other words, playing computer games since kindergarten makes you a perfect candidate for a life addicted to them. Such an individual finds it difficult to assume mature responsibilities.

The digital era opens new challenges for a parent. Brain demands from day one intense volunteer attention in order to have a successful life. This encompasses not only a decent work place but also lasting friendships, happy family relationships, social involvement as a Christian citizen and so on. At present, psychology speaks loudly about the significance of the emotional intelligence. Dialogue developed between family members is an essential prerequisite for this. Emotions are natural to people. A preschooler must be taught how to express emotions in a proper manner. There are rules within a family and a particular society for the manifestation of emotions. Parents should be able to become "emotional professors" in their family. Babies react to the adults' behavior<sup>21</sup>. If adults are affective the child relaxes and feels comfortable to interact. Otherwise, when children are often confronted with a tense unhappy mother, they learn that they are not welcome and there is no comfort in her arms. When babies live with loving adults, they gain trust in themselves. If adults are cold-hearted persons, always in a rush, being very nervous and impatient most of the time, then the child receives the message that the world is not a good place to be in. These unfortunate

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<sup>20</sup> Lucy Jo Palladino, *Parenting in the Age of Attention Snatchers...*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Goleman, *The Emotional Intelligence*, fourth edition, translation by Irina-Margareta Nistor, Bucharest, Curtea Veche, 2018, p. 311.



children manifest doubt in their own capacities to do something or distrust to enter any relationship.

Preschoolers are extremely curious and smart. They can find solutions to the problems when they are asked calmly to contribute. These little children use adults' love as "a discovery material" in their endeavors to understand the reality. In order to protect them from dangerous situations parents install limits and rules. Then they delineate tasks<sup>22</sup>. As emphasized earlier, the child enjoys the possibility to be creative. Therefore, it is important to trust your child and leave some space for his or her liberty to come out. Preschoolers learn to make decisions in these situations. On a long term, their critical judgement develops. The digital technology changes relationships among people in a family. Parents are more concerned to use it for work and amusement, that is as a relaxation tool. Children perceive it mostly as a perfect playful toy. Used in excess, the Internet access determines dependency<sup>23</sup>. Parents can notice without difficulty that their children are tired and incapable of concentrating their attention for a long time. Homework is definitely unpleasant because intellectual activities involve volunteer attention. To start learning a new lesson from a book or notebook is a drudge, especially after you stayed in front of a screen. Reading books on paper is a dislikable option for spending spare time. The quality of the learning process is diminishing when a pupil loses considerable time utilizing digital technology. Teachers are the first to observe and also point out this unfortunate change induced by digital technologies<sup>24</sup>. They are attractive to kids and young people as well. Parents should be aware that they are responsible for their children's ability to learn new things. The little children do not learn using technology. They strongly need the calm faces of the adults around them to explain why life is the way they see it. Parents may be surprised to find out that answering questions asked by their own children is an extremely difficult activity.

### **5. The Christian Family and the Child's Ability to Learn**

The dialogue developed among family members has its long-term targets. You need it when you spend free time together, but also when

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<sup>22</sup> Joanna Faber, Julie King, *How to Talk So Little Kids Will Listen A Survival Guide to Life With Children Ages 2-7*, translation by Carmen Cuculescu, Bucharest, Curtea Veche, 2019, pp. 77-78.

<sup>23</sup> Manfred Spitzer, *Digital Dementia...*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Daniela Roman, *Learning in Generation Z*, în Elena BONCHIȘ (coord.), *Generation Z. A Psychological and Educational Perspective*, Iași, Polirom, 2021, p. 226.

you want to boost activities that support the ability of the child to learn more and more. Children are like sponges when it comes to learning. It is important to maintain this affirmation alive for this and the next generation too. Digital technology can produce in time an involution in the capacity of a person to learn. And this could become a rule. Educating a child implicates a lot of time and sacrifice. Is the new generation prepared to assume this responsibility? As a parent you need to express availability every day. A constant involvement in the children's development is on the to-do list of the responsible parents. You have to be prepared to set aside personal preoccupations, roll up your sleeves and breathe deeply. Taking care of children asks today permanent learning. Adults are practically forced to find sources of information such as books, encyclopedias, Internet web pages, friends or other close people, pedagogues, psychologists and so on. Being a postmodern Christian parent is not easy at all because technology hides away an army of smart project developers that know how to create attractive devices.

Superficiality has become a characteristic. It can be expressed in almost every aspect of life. Instead of altruism you meet self-centered individuals, focused on personal interests and incapable to spread generosity around them<sup>25</sup>. Whose fault is this? Parents struggle to do their best and still they do not succeed in getting the expected results. They realize at an old age the mistakes they did in the education of their children. They are sometimes surprised to notice that good parental intentions end up badly. Preschool period is essential. It is the time to set the basis for a fulfilled future. As mentioned earlier, the difference is made by the ability of the parents to develop a loving dialogue with their children. Opportunities for this significant task exist. Preschool children love playing. An activity that seems interesting to them develops their brain<sup>26</sup>. Parents need to be around enough time to be able to get involved in these activities. Games with them are preferred by little children. They consider adults very interesting because they can improve a game with intelligent details. Children that often play with their parents understand that they appreciate their presence. As a parent, playing with your preschool children maintains the emotional health of the entire family. You do not need to be an expert to take act of this. The cute sometimes troublesome preschooler can enlighten a bad day. Parents can find in books or on the Internet games destined to develop specific

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<sup>25</sup> Andrei Andreicuț, *The Fascinating and Immortal Love*, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea, 2011, pp. 30-32.

<sup>26</sup> Cindy Terebush, *Teach the Whole Preschooler...*, p. 83.

abilities. Communicating politely with others is something that can be learnt in a short while if you use games instead of imposed discipline. Little children understand faster the language of respect than punishment as a tool of persuasion.

Self-esteem is considered by many psychologists as a mandatory element in growing a happy preschooler. Following their advice, parents tend to cultivate only good emotions and teach children to avoid bad emotions such as shame and fault<sup>27</sup>. Other psychologists perceive this educational approach as inappropriate. Children need to know how to deal with unpleasant feelings. The practice shows that not a high level of self-esteem brings happiness, but the ability to develop warm relationships with others while you prove that you are capable of accepting and loving yourself and people around you in a healthy manner.

Are the young people of today capable of assuming such tasks? Is a Christian family capable of confronting the challenges raised by them? They seem easy to surpass at first sight. The teaching of the Church presents itself as a masterpiece of wisdom that only needs to be used by parents in their educational endeavors. And it is so. It only depends on the maturity of the future spouses how it is going to be explored for the benefit of all family members. Raising children nowadays seems more difficult than before. But if you take a good look the situation is not different. You need love expressed in a smart and loving dialogue that makes the other persons what they are. That is wonders sent by God into this world to shy away unhappiness and insecurity from your existence, though many justifications can be written down to object to this affirmation.

As said earlier, a perfect marriage is the one that considers Jesus Christ as its center. The two spouses have His crucified love as a standard. A lesser love cannot fulfill their wedding expectations. The conclusion to the question in the title is that family responsibilities can be completely assumed if you set your love level in accordance with the one indicated by His Sacrifice.

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence E. Shapiro, *How to Raise a Child with a High EQ. A Parents' Guide to Emotional Intelligence*, translation by Paul Aneci and Andra Hâncu, Iași, Polirom, 2016, p. 96.