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**DEVELOPMENT OF PARENTING SKILLS BY IMPLEMENTING**  
***STRONG FAMILIES PROGRAM***

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**Abstract**

To be a parent is a challenge that involves creativity, warmth and abilities. If you develop skills through experience, both with their parents and those of friends, through efforts to improve communication, disciplining children etc., then creativity and warmth are difficult to learn. Our article reflects the results obtained during an experiment after the implementation of the Program "Strong Families" which is a parent educational program in family or in group. This program is based on social learning, which states that parents are the first and most important model for children. Firstly, the program aims to familiarize the parent with child needs and his behavior, and in the second part is intended acquisition by the parents of parental knowledge and gaining skills of efficient parenting. Methods used in our research were experiment, questionnaire, interview and data analyses through SPSS. Subjects were randomly selected and distributed in an experimental and a control group. Intervention in the experimental group lasted 10 weeks, each meeting lasting over an hour. Parents were applied a questionnaire for the initial assessment which followed several dimensions of parenting skills: harsh penalties, inefficient discipline and efficient discipline. In the initial phase there were no significant differences between the two groups, but after the implementation of program "Strong Families" significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of efficient use of disciplinary methods were found. So, the "Strong Families" Program helps parents to learn effective skills for disciplinary actions and improve their relationship with children.

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**1. Introduction**



The harmonious development of the child's personality and his growth as an adult depends extensively on how he was elevated by parents, family, school and other environmental factors. The education of children is not a spontaneous and random action; parenthood is a mixture of joy and struggle for everyone and no one can claim to hold all the answers to the problems of raising a child. Every parent has his identity and uniqueness, as every family is unique; positive parenting skills are not innate they are learned. The parents-children relations are healthy when they are oriented in order to take care and not to control or manipulate. A child learns by and through interaction with others (adults, peers, etc.). Currently many parenting styles were developed which rely on how parents want to educate their children. Thus, quite frequently we can remark the consequences of a permissive attitude of some parents: they find beneficial for a child to develop in his own rhythm. A child who grows up without rules does not have references, a child who gets everything he wants without making any effort will be disgruntled and with no motivation. On the other hand there are authoritarian parents who decide instead of the child, require obedience of rules and define firmly the space and its manifestation.

Mistakes made in meeting child's needs can hinder its development. The consequences are dramatic for the individual and for society. Intolerable tensions between the individual and his home environment are the results of suffering and dangers experienced by the child. Instead of a joyful and collaborative attitude, the young child's attitude will be a fight, an attack or a waiver. Both aggressiveness and child overprotection are errors in its treatment. Everlasting misfits who cannot find a place in relationship with others, nor at work, are the result of the effects of these inadequate practices of growth. 'Social reactions of those rejected in childhood are anger, fear, hatred, lack of interest, and empathy for others, failure to have satisfactory mutual relationship. Parental hostility has a dangerous injury to the further development of the child, especially in terms of the ability to provide as an adult a unselfish, generous love to others, for their own children.' (Constantinescu, 2008, p.124)

Our study aim parent education as a form of parent intervention for their children's education. For making it possible we implemented a program called Strong Families, a program of parent education within the family or the group. This form of parent education, of adults in general, consists of a set of educational and support measures that helps parents to understand their needs (physical, social, emotional, psychological), to gain knowledge and acceptance of children's needs and to build bridges between parents and children. Parenting involves initiating and building capacities, skills and parenting behaviours already on existing ones. Every educational awareness action, learning, training or clarification act relative to values, attitudes and practices of parental education can be regarded as parent training.

Also, parenting is a long process whose methods and strategies depend on different stages of life cycle. Its goal is not to change values in which family operates, but to develop to all community members' parenting skills and abilities and knowledge, self confidence and to improve their capacities to care and support their children. It is also a form of human interaction based on the exchange of ideas, experiences and parental models. Parent education is more than a school. Boutin & Daring (1994) believe that parents grow together and learn to discover themselves as people who can change the relationship with their children.

### **1.1 Social Learning Approach – Parents As Models**

The framework of child development within his family is shaped by how parental functions are performed. The achievement of these functions depends on how each family becomes a favorable context to child development. The role of the family in the child's life is crucial since it is the first group that intermediate the relation with society, it's the context where the first form of socialization is taking place, creating the first types of social relationships, experiences. "Family is the matrix which is printing in the development of a child the most important and most durable character and moral traits." (Constantinescu & Constantinescu, 2006, p. 44). Family becomes the reference system with the most impact on children, particularly in early childhood age. All this reflects the fact that the family has an educational powerful influence on cognitive and emotional development of the child. Children learn since they are very small everything they have to do to get what they want and how they can control the actions of others through observing the consequences of their behaviours, as any behaviour of a child has a specific function. We learn to do things if they are beneficial to us or if we can avoid through those behaviours some unpleasant consequences.

For children, parents are the first and most powerful role models. Our research is designed on social learning theory, theory stating that all behaviors are learned by observing and imitating others (Bandura & Walters, 1963, Bandura, 1973). Social learning theory proposed deems that people acquire behaviors such as aggressive or pro-social behaviors, by observing and imitating others. Interventions that have as starting point behaviorism theories occur over shorter periods of time compared to psychoanalytic therapeutic techniques. The advantage of this way of thinking is the emphasis on analyses of observable behavior of individuals. Researches show that modeling operates in three modes for influencing child behavior: children acquire new behaviors by seeing them on others; new behaviors are reinforced or weakened by social support provided by the environment (including continuous observation of others and their way of responding to child trying to imitate behavior, for example, the consequences received); other actions represent social cues that facilitate similar behaviors. Social learning theory has stimulated the development of the child in relation to child-raising practices. Representatives of this movement have stated that parents can be taught to be effective in raising children by certain pedagogical methods. Bandura's social learning theory defines "reciprocal determinism", highlighting the role of the child cognitive functions as a determinant of behavior. According to social learning theory from the perspective of the "Strong Families" program children are not bad (or good) by nature, but they only learn undesirable behaviors. Destructive or undesirable behaviors can be un-taught by replacing unwanted behaviors with socially acceptable answers. Most behaviors are learned through observation and experimentation. Parents serve as role models to their children and their actions provide an outline of behavior. Children tend to imitate their parents. When parents yell, threaten and/or hit to get the consent of the other, they send the message that yelling, threatening or hitting behaviors are socially acceptable. This parent-child interaction is an unpleasant cycle of escalating responses that occur between parent and child.

One of the most challenging parental tasks is to settle limits without harming the child, to educate and discipline him according to socially accepted rules without using abusive methods. The word discipline means to teach and to acquire healthy behaviors. How to express the behavior depends on the skills they have already in their repertoire of behaviors. Botis, Tărău (2004) states that discipline is a

process of learning of an appropriate behavior that requires effort and patience from both child and parent. "Make education without penalty or punishment is utopia, as there is no child who never makes mistakes. Ignoring the mistake means to encourage mistakes. So punishment is necessary and has an educational role, but not just any punishment. There are inefficient punishments that have the opposite effect to the one intended" (Moisin, 1995 p.17).

Children need discipline, rules and norms in their development process. Maslow (2008) sees discipline as a natural result of the adjustment to the world. To reach his or her full potential, one must recognize the need to undergo severe discipline of hard work. Disciplinary doesn't relate to punishment of the child, but relates in fairness and monitoring compliance with the rules. Disciplining is setting limits; limits are important as children are mostly too small to understand the rules of the world, of nature and the relationship with others. Permissiveness and discipline behold the magic formula that can give the child the feeling that he is loved, but also ensure that he knows what to expect from his parents, from the world around them. Parents, adults, professionals working in childcare need sound education, solid knowledge in the field of understanding child's needs and how to meet them in order to give them the best opportunities for their development. Parents should have an important set of skills and psychological and educational competencies to cope with both frustration and claims of the child, impose limit, and internalize the rules of conduct, and to build a harmonious personality. To prevent behavioral problems of children a range of interventions have been used. Among them, promising parenting programs are widely spread, and start from the premise that parenting practices contribute to the genesis, progression and maintenance of disruptive behaviour throughout childhood (Brady, 2006; Dishion et al., 2011).

### **1.2 Strong Families Program - Parenting Skills Program To Improve**

The Strong Families was created by Fraser et al. (2004) for the benefit of parents and especially for those whose children are unsteady or have problems to make friends and keep them. Incompetence at this level leads to social isolation, the social maladjustment, which is painful at any stage of life, but especially during childhood, when the child tries to be accepted within a group. That lack of social skills can make relationships with others more difficult and can put at risk physical health. This program helps parents learn effective discipline skills and have better relationships with their children and rely on family resources, paying attention to the cultural context of the family. This program is based on social learning principles, suggesting that parents are the first and the most important model for their children. Social learning theory argues that, if the parents use interaction patterns inefficient and coercive, children develop styles of interaction that adversely can affect social relationships with peers, teachers and others. Parenting is a challenge that involves creativity, warmth and abilities. If you develop skills through experience, both with their parents and those of friends, through efforts to improve communication, problem solving, disciplining children etc., then creativity and warmth are difficult to learn. Research findings have consistently shown that the existence of parenting skills generate positive results during child's life. The existence of parenting skills promotes socially desirable behaviors among children, improves academic achievement and reduces the risk for alcohol abuse, delinquency, and addiction to drugs, depression or other mental disorders (Patterson, Reid, & Dishon, 1992, apud Gavita et al., 2010,; Gallimore & Kurdek 1992; Fraser, 1996).

In Romania the above - mentioned program was applied as a pilot study in the beginning of 2000, by the General Department of Child Protection Bistrița ( Bercea, 2002). The research was resumed after a few years in a rural village in the county of Cluj - Napoca, with parents of preschool children ( Marușca, 2009, apud Fraser at al. , 2010). Both studies emphasized the importance of this program in improving parenting style. Our study was based on this research models developed in our country. Curriculum Strong Families helps shorting coercive interactions and provides effective techniques for building social relations and improving parenting skills, foster parents or cares that have any parental responsibilities or whoever is recognized as a parent, including grandparents. The purpose of the program Strong Families is to promote the resilience - the ability to get an advantage over repugnance - by enhancing parenting skills and improve family interactions. Also it aims to change those family processes that encourage destructive and antisocial behavior of children. It aims to provide models of parenting skills that would be build on strengths and to promote positive social behavior and to improve the resilience to stress. Organized by chapters, the program Strong Families acts on parental qualities and enhances communication, discipline methods, problem solving and other skills needed for the child growing and education. Research shows that the acquisition of these skills can improve interactions within the family, promote educational achievement and develop pro-social skills in working with children (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney, 1992; Gupta, Stinger & Meakin, 1990). Positive reinforcement process acts as a key factor both in learning and in action. In the Strong Families curriculum, positive reinforcements are re-used in several ways. Firstly, parents learn to use verbal and nonverbal rewards that reinforce positive behaviors. These awards consist of hugs, smiles, touches, communicating to children the facts that parents are proud of them/ in addition, parents are taught to use labels, privileges and other incentives for positive behavior. Secondly, parents learn to shape behaviors that provide examples of pro-social skills. Children observe these behaviors and their parents perceive rewards arising from them. Thirdly, parents are taught to label behaviors, thus they help children learn and understand when a behavior is good or bad. This separation of the behavior reduces the risk of labeling the child as "evil" and promotes the understanding that there is a relationship between how the child behaves and consequences of specific behaviors.

## **2. Experimental Research Design**

### *Research objectives:*

1. Implement the program "Strong families" through implementing trainings to improve parenting skills;
2. Involving parents during the program "Strong families" in order to get to know the child, his behavior and developing effective parenting skills.
3. The acquisition and use of positive discipline techniques by parents.

### *Research hypotheses:*

1. If parents are motivated to participate and engage in "Strong Families" program is expected to improve their problem-solving abilities in children's behavior through using more of effective methods of discipline.
2. Following the implementation of the "Strong Families" parenting style is presumed to be improved in the experimental group, and to reduce the use of harsh and less effective disciplinary methods.

### *Research methods:*

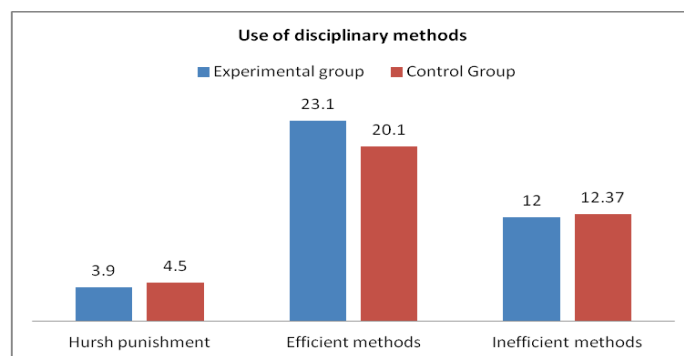
To achieve the proposed research objectives we have used as working methods: experiment, questionnaire (*Harsh punishment Scale for Parents*), interview, and SPSS Program for data analysis. Research plan was following pretest-posttest intervention type research, and the sample was randomly selected and consists of a group of 30 subjects from Pitesti and some rural communities from Arges County. The subjects were distributed by: gender - 30% men and 70% women; age - 34% - up to 35 years, 40% between 35-50 years, 26% - over 50 years. With regard to studies - 34% of respondents have secondary education and 66% - higher education; as for the environment of origin - 70% of subjects were from urban and 30% rural areas. Before the implementation of the program "Strong families" we have used the *Harsh punishment Scale for parents*, adapted by Pinderhughes et al. (2000). This helped us to find out how parents perceive and use punishment when occur behavioral challenges of children. Our study followed the working principles and specifically the curriculum of Strong Families program, but the implementation was adapted to the local context and according to the characteristics and needs of the research sample. Thus, our subjects were randomly selected and not only parents with pre-school kids like in previous researches. The subjects were individuals (parents, grand-parents or persons in charge with the education of children) who have children in primary and secondary school. The experimental group consisted of 16 parents who during interview expressed their desire to participate on a training aiming to increase their parental skills and improve the relation with their children. The control group had been formed of 14 subjects. The experimental intervention lasted 12 weeks (3 months), and consisted on a weekly one-hour meeting with parents. Parents from both groups were included in the experiment and they had to answer to an initial assessment questionnaire (*Harsh punishment Scale for parents*), covering the following dimensions of parenting skills: harsh penalties, effective disciplinary or ineffective disciplinary techniques. The independent variable in our experiment was the program "Strong Families". The dependent variable was parental skills reflected in the way disciplinary methods were used, tested by *Harsh punishment Scale for parents* which has 19 items with four response options, as following: not at all; less than once a day; about once a day; more than once per day. The responses indicate three types of parental behavior: harsh punishment (H); less effective disciplinary techniques (L); effective disciplinary techniques (M). The items of each dimension were summed up and a score for each type of punishment were indicated. At the same time the data were statistically analyzed using SPSS program.

### **3. Research Results and Discussions**

In the initial phase it was not noticed significant differences between groups for any of the dimensions measured initially. Following implementation of the Strong Families program slightly improvement occurred in parenting skills of subjects included in the experimental group. During our study it was used the *Harsh punishment*

*Scale for Parents* (2000) in order to evaluate the success of the Strong Families program implementation. It was confirmed that, after the program implementation, parents participating in the experiment group applied to a lesser extent harsh punishment (H) to discipline their children (an average of 3.9 in the experimental group compared to an average of 4.5 in the control group), also, greater use of efficient disciplinary methods (M) (an average of 23.1 in the experimental group compared to an average of 20.1 in the control group) was confirmed. The most harsh punishment methods used by parents were

screaming, threatening. As for efficient disciplinary techniques parents were taught to use praise for good behaviors, cancellations of privileges (preferred TV shows, electronic devices, dessert etc.), sending the child in his room, firm voice etc. Regarding the third dimension concerned – use of inefficient disciplinary techniques (L) – research results show only a slight difference between the two groups of parents i.e. after the intervention, the experimental group average was 12 while in the control group the average was 12.37, as presented below.



**Figure 1.** Use of disciplinary methods according to post-test results

To measure the success of the Strong Families program intervention the research data analyzed using Paired Samples t-test to show if there is any difference between the average obtained on the sample of subjects who participated in the program and the average obtained on the control sample. Research findings indicated that following the implementation of the program parents have reduced harsh punishment in child discipline ( $t = -2.955$ ;  $p = 0.043$ ;  $m = 4.5$  for pre-intervention,  $m = 3.9$  for post-intervention). Also, it was also noted that after implementation of the program, parents will often use more efficient methods of disciplining a child ( $t = 2.321$   $p = 0.045$ ; average for pre-intervention = 20.1 and average for post- intervention = 23.1). Regarding the research hypotheses that parents will reduce the use of less efficient of disciplinary method is confirmed by our results obtained in the experimental group of parents at the end of the evaluation of intervention ( $t = -0.417$ ;  $p = 0.845$ ;  $m = 12.37$  before program implementation;  $m = 12.0$  after program intervention). Also the collected results have enabled correlations between two or more variables. The correlations were significant between age and increasing of use of efficient disciplinary techniques, but no correlation were found between gender, environment (rural, urban areas), nor studies of subjects. During observations and interviews held with parents our findings shows that young parents are more likely to use inefficient disciplinary methods due to lack of time (being active at work and more focused on the career path), inexperience and poor knowledge to organize their time and spend quality time with their children and efficiently communicate with them. Research and methods used allowed calculating the correlation coefficient which measured the degree to which variables vary in the same way. If we analyze the following variables, age and use of efficient disciplinary techniques variables, our results shows that there is a significant relationship, a strong correlation, which is understandable and provides positive feedback to our research. This means that there is a strong relationship between age and efficient parental skills, which means that changes in one variable are strongly correlated with changes in the second variable. In our example,  $r_{Pearson}$  is 0.6. For

this reason, we concluded that there is a strong correlation between age and use of efficient techniques due to program implementation.

#### 4. Conclusions

Our research succeeded in meeting its objectives as it's shown in the results. Experimental group has shown improvement in managing more efficient disciplinary methods and developed of parental skills. The main aim of the study was to demonstrate that parental skills and a good relationship between parents and children are skills that can be taught and practiced and this kind of programs, like "Strong families" program, are more than welcomed. Moreover, it's crucial to motivate parents to engage in this type of programs. Our study suggests that training parents using Strong Families program offers a variety of ways that can improve both parenting skills and child behavior. Moreover, these results seem to be maintained over time. Parental training "Strong Families" can be efficient in the existence of social and economic conditions that allow family access to basic resources - sufficient food, adequate housing, safe neighborhood, availability of healthcare services, and access to education.

Encourage and support parental involvement in intervention programs is a major issue, as parental involvement is a critical element in removing the coercive cycle. Gaining new behaviors and replacing old ones is not that easy. Thus, besides the motivation to participate in the program, parents also are in need for opportunities to experience new positive behaviors. „Strong Families” program, centered on building new skills through exercises and problem-solving activities carried out in our research, gave parents a chance to accept the changes that initially they thought impossible. From a general perspective, the change process used in the study addresses less than change attitudes and is focused more on learning new skills. Changing attitudes often appear later after learning new skills and integration of new acquired skills. Certainly, to state the efficiency of the "Strong Families" program it's important to extend the research to wider and well established criteria regarding methodological requirements analysis following program implementation and statistical evaluation.

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