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Family counseling - a preventive intervention

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Message of the paper: issues of most concern for contemporary family policy

- educating, guiding and supporting parents *in general*;
- guarding the changed social *upbringing conditions*;
- giving priority to general, *early preventive parent focused counseling* services; thus
- *reducing* tardy, often overdue, *problem focused* interventions



Content of lecture

- I Knowledgebase about childrens needs, parent-child relationship, counseling and family life education
- II Contemporary individualism: a threat for parenting- a challenge for professionals
- III Defination of family counseling- a tool for a preventive encounter
- IV Indications from research – evidence based programmes
- V Future challenges



I Knowledgebase: childrens primary needs and parent- child relationship

First theories about childrens matural needs

- *deeper understanding of childrens primary needs*
- mental health clinics focusing on mother-child relationship
- family therapy ideology as a *wholistic, systemic view*
- childs *symtomatic disturbances* treated in a family context
- towards an interactional family/groupwork approach
- expanding individualism-less collectivism:diagnostic culture
- childrens attachment-and behavioral disturbances
- current social development-environmental risk factors.

(Winnicott,1945,1957,1964, 1965; Bowlby 1965, 1980)



II Contemporary individualism: a threat for the parenting role and a challenge for professionals



Increased individualism- some features entailing parent support

- live alone,
- postponing/ not having children
- difficulties in co-habiting
- divorce: a mature cooperation vs. harsh battles between parents
- loss of coherence in family and social relationships
- confusion, insecurity and narcissistic behaviour (selfie, selfitis)
- new, rapid media development

(Sennett, 1992, 2006, 2012; Bauman, 1997, 200, 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; SJ 2008, 2013)



Communication studies /family research: worries about parents

- a connection between Individualism, being narcissistic and use of the new medias as Facebook and Twitter
- curating own image, checking on how others respond to it
- a weak or corroded inner core
- seeking approval of identity and personal habit from strangers
- exaggerated fancy, ambiguous quality of the digital culture
- deprived attention span: threatening parent-child devotedness and deeper bonds.
- parental *avoidance*- child's *insecure avoidant behaviour*
- a correlation: weakened parental/family relationships and adult childrens psycho-social problems, rejection and cut off contacts.

(Panek, 2010; Foley, 2010, Birditt, 2014)



III Family counseling- a tool for a preventive encounter



***Family counseling* – different types and approaches**

- a branch of family psychotherapy aimed at therapeutic work nurturing change and development in intimate relationships
- *direct guidance* and *continous support* (individual or groups)
- psycho-social *or family life education* (couples, families or groups)
- *general parental education* (public or private organisations, public institutions, welfare services, clinics, schools, radio/TV)



Expanding general interest – stronger need for family counseling

- general public seeks knowledge from research-motivated for education
- positive influence from media/ the Web, social debate
- scientific knowledge mediated to the general public
- professional discourse
- early screening, better diagnostic techniques

- specialized assistance available-early intervention in publ. services
- contemporary childrens´ fragility due to outer or inner environmental risk factors
- Parents´ inadequate awareness

The spectrum of potential *risk groups* is escalating

- The definition of *riskgroups*: based on social research on underprivileged, marginalized groups in relation to income, work and other psycho-social deficiencies threatening parents and childrens security and quality of life (Cynthia Jeans, 2014; Sigrún Harðardóttir, 2014)
- findings from *research of life-course events* such as marriage, first pregnancy and a first born child highlight the need for family-life education
- for *most parents* this event is a stressful experience
- educational and counseling programmes built on this knowledge diminish the likelihood of divorce and later crises


(Cowan & Cowan ,1992, 2002; Gottman& Gottman 200, 2012)



IV Indications from research–scientific evidence of „what works“

Some important points from expert knowledge

- the general approach is to be prioritized.
- the focus in most western countries, is still to a (too) great extent focused on children and parents already in trouble.
- in most Nordic countries there has been an increasing emphasis – at least in the scientific debate- on the *general* approach: mediating knowledge to all parental groups.
- *primary preventive operations* are not only educational but bring insight and consciousness-raising about childrens developmental needs.
- numerous experimental projects together with training, educational and interventional programmes for parents and for children, are now gaining evidence about what works



Aspects of evidence based programs

- translated & standardised for use in many countries and culture.
- most combine direct education, training **and** personal counseling
- many are developed on the basis of CBT (cognitive behavioral theory)
- some build on lengthy personal therapeutic processes combined with training and follow up
- some are of the *general* type
- many are mainly directed to already insured, *special* groups of parents and children.



Examples of evidence based counseling and treatment programs

(1) PMT (Parent Management Training)

(2) The Webster-Stratton *to-step parent training program* and *Incredible Years Parent Training for Children with Developmental Delay*

(3) The English Mellow parenting-special program aimed at helping dysfunctional, psychiatrically sick mothers

(4) The Marte-Meo-model-a clinical early prevention program for parents, infants and young-used in welfare services and clinical settings supporting, educating and training *both parents* in interaction with their child.

(5) The McDonough's *Interaction Guidance* program aimed at parents and children with severe social problems and behavioral disturbances

(6) MST, Multiple system therapy, programme is probably the best known and appreciated in the field of welfare services. It addresses the different systems in an adolescent's life, being an intensive, family-focused and community-based treatment program for chronic and violent youth

(Hanson, Hednbro, Lundblad, Sundelin, Wirtberg, 2001).

(7) The Gottman & Gottman and Cowan & Cowan: programs including education, training, group work and parental personal counseling for becoming parents.



Iceland – good experiences from

- *The New baby* (Nýja barnið) program developed in Akureyri family services at the private clinical (early prevention)
- *Center for parents and children*, (Miðstöð foreldra og barna) with fokus on attachment-work with parents (early prevention)
- Several programmes developed within *Landspítali: The Family bridge*; the MFB (Carrying, Birth, Baby).



V Future challenges

- Main focus in the family programmes *that work* still focused on „repairing“
- Nordic projects *Early intervention* (2012); *Robuste Samliv i Norden* (2013)

Experts conclude

- we need to *focus on the general public* as a primary action seeing *parents at large* as the *target group* for change when *the goal is protecting children and securing their well-being*.
- the practical implications are inaugurating general programs in the school- and in community sector with increased number and quality of different professional counselors
- such devotation would gradually diminish the expansion of parents and children in need of special services, preventing considerable cost and pain for individuals and be facilitating for future generations.



Progressive family policy :
parents in general is the target group

preventing harm

creating *secure* and *happy* childhood

Childhood lives in the Generations