

# PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF CHILDREN LEFT HOME AFTER THEIR PARENTS' DEPARTURE ABROAD TO WORK

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***Abstract:** Within the context of the transition period in Romania a new phenomenon was noticed, which was generated by the migration in search of a job. This phenomenon is described by the changes in the emotional and social life of the children affected by the migration of their parents. The article shows the adverse effects on child development caused by the absence of one or both parents, as well as their reaction of adaptation to the new situation. The symptoms manifested by the child trying to cope with this situation are varied (anxiety, sleep disturbances, instability, poorer school performance or school failure, depressive manifestations, altered behaviour) and they require specific therapy focused on the active involvement of the child.*

***Key words:** migration, child rights, social coping, psychosocial counselling*

## *General data about the problem of migration through work*

The period of transition in Romania gave course to the migration phenomena in search for a place to work. The departure of some family members to other work markets in other countries and living from their gained incomes has become the solution for improving life quality and a lifestyle for many Romanians. Parents who decide to go and work abroad form young families (age between 25-45 years) with two or three children, usually organized, coming from the rural and urban. The desire of a considerable income drives parents to place secondly the children, so the united

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families, organized, in which everybody properly fulfilled his role, become disorganized families, brought apart<sup>1</sup>. Studies show<sup>2</sup> that almost 800.000 children, of a total of 5 million in Romania, had been somehow affected by the migration of their parents. The children's interdiction to see their parents can lead to changes in the emotional and social life.

### ***Neglecting- the situation of children who have their parents departure to work abroad***

Studies<sup>3</sup> made on children who have parents' departure to work abroad show that, in the cases of children left home alone, the absence of parents for a long time can have negative effects upon his growth.

The absence of one or both parents can be associated with a series of problems or with not fulfilling a basic need of a child. Thus, children who have their parents' departure to work abroad and are not being cared for by an adult who can answer to his needs of growth and development are neglected children<sup>4</sup>.

The forms of neglecting children often met are:

- food neglect (abridgement of food, the absence of one or more categories of aliments essential for growth, unregulated meals etc.);
- clothes neglect (the child is dressed with improper clothes for that season, the clothes are to small or too big, dirty clothes);

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<sup>1</sup> Social Alternatives Association, Home alone- a study made in Iași on children separated by one or both parents through their departure to work abroad, Social Alternatives Association Iași, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Romania and the Social Alternatives Association, national analysis on the phenomena of left alone children after the parent's departure abroad to work, 2007, unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> The study Children's situation left without caring after migration, UNICEF Moldova and CIDDC, Moldova Republic, 2006

<sup>4</sup> Child neglect is defined in Law nr.272/2004 as being the voluntary or involuntary omission of a person who is responsible for caring, nursing and educating the child of taking any measure applied to this responsibility, fact which is life threatening, threats psyhical, mental, spiritual or socialdevelopment, body integrity, physical or psyhical health of the child.

- medical neglect (the absence of medical caring needed in case of an illness, skipping vaccines and medical inspection, not giving the medical treatment prescribed by the doctor etc.);
- education neglect (intellectual stimulation, the instability of the punish and reward system, the lack of language learning model, of cleaning, of guidance for pupil etc.);
- affectionate neglect (lack of attention, physical contacts, signs of affection and words of appreciation).

Neglecting a child brings upon him negative consequences in the social and emotional plan. Therefore, a neglect child can manifest an attitude of indifference or shyness towards things, situations or people which usually would make him curious, caught his interest and implication<sup>1</sup>. He can also show commotion of his self esteem manifested through over-appreciation, under-appreciation, has no long term aspirations (he cannot project himself into the future) or has unrealistic aspirations<sup>2</sup>.

Although, some studies<sup>3</sup> have identified positive aspects regarding the material improvement of children (improving living conditions, cell phone, computer etc.). Also, 34% of the children with both parents departure have travelled abroad; despite the 14 % of non-migrated children and 20% of the children with both parents departure have spent their summer holiday in 2006 abroad, at their parents.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Adapting reaction<sup>5</sup> - clinical manifestation***

Besides the difficulty in adapting to a new situation, to the situation in which the care, support and parental affection are not present under any certain and immediate form, the child confronts with a new situation, one of acute neglect. Faced with this new situation of general and acute neglect, the child's psychic shows a normal reaction to an event from the normal life, which is his abandon through the parents departure to work abroad, meaning that he is trying to adapt to new stressful life situations. The

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<sup>1</sup> Guide of good practices in preventing child abusion (2005), The organization „Save the children”, reedited by the Social Alternatives Association Iasi, p.70

<sup>2</sup> Lelord, François; André, Christophe (2003), *Cum să te iubești pe tine pentru a te înțelege mai bine cu ceilalți*, Editura Trei, București, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> The study Effects of migration: children left home (2007), Soros Foundation Romania, p. 25-29.

<sup>4</sup> Idem p.26

<sup>5</sup> It is defined in DSM IV as a state of suffering and emotional disorder which affects the functioning and social performance, apperaring in a period of adapting to an important existential change or a stressful event.

adapting reaction is a clinical manifestation supposed to come after the life event of the departure and the risk factors from the child's proximity.

The symptoms shown by the child who is trying to adapt to this situation are various (anxiety, sleeping disorder, instability, decrease in school performance or a failure, depressive manifestations, behaviour disorders: robbery, flee ...)<sup>1</sup>.

Work experience with children home alone<sup>2</sup> like psychological theories of development show that, on the base of these forms of neglect, children with departure parents to work abroad can develop the following psycho-behaviour manifestations:

- deterioration of school demeanour (decrease of school performances, absents, the risk of dropping school, conflicts with teachers and colleagues), on the base of lacking parental authority and as a consequence of lacking long term aspirations.
- feelings of abandon, uncertainty, sadness, anxiety, depressive episodes, all due to missing their parents, of the need of parental affection, appreciation from parents and of some cognitive distortions.
- indifference, stubbornness, which can lead to an aggressive behaviour, as a result of frustration and need of attention. In the hard times they face, the child interprets the absence of his parents as a manifestation of their indifference to his needs and him.
- attention disorder (decrease of concentrating capacity in fulfilling tasks and "escape from reality"), the main object of thoughts being the departure parents, their situation, when they will speak, when are they going to receive packages etc.
- lack of long term aspirations (they cannot project themselves in the future) or unrealistic aspirations, determined by cognitive distortions such as: "In order to have money you don't have to learn", "When I will grow up I will go abroad to work and for this you don't have to learn" etc. The apparition and development of these negative attitudes towards education is favoured by the models the parents show who, although they have upper studies, abroad do unqualified works.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcelli, Daniel, *Tratat de psihopatologia copilului*, Editura Fundației Generația, 2003, p. 450.

<sup>2</sup> From 2006, in Social Alternatives Association exists direct services of social and psychological assistance for children whose parents are gone abroad to work. Until december 2007, over 300 children have received services of social and psychological assistance

- disorder of self esteem :over-appreciation towards other children who do not have that much money or the same clothes, accessories they receive from abroad, or under-appreciation regarding the equal ones whose parents are present at all the important activities from their life (fests, school fests, anniversaries, parent meetings etc. ).
- a low or high tolerance of frustration in a direct relationship with the adapting capacity of the child, with his self-defense mechanisms.
- lack of motivation, sadness (indifference towards what is around), tiredness (lack of energy, will to do cognitive efforts at school, to get involved in various free time activities proper for his age), or on the base of sadness, depressive episodes, or determined by having too many adult tasks.
- difficulty in adapting. After the parent's departure, children pass through a period of adapting to a new situation, to changes in their life. In the absence of a proper preparation from the parents or by the psychological advisors, children can develop in this period of adapting an acute reaction to stress or adapting reaction.
- delinquent behaviour ( taking part in delinquent groups, aggressive behaviour, drug addiction, involvement in crimes, going in bars, game rooms etc.) is a way of supplying the needs of appreciation, attention and affection.
- suicidal demeanour. In 2006-2007 some suicidal cases have been registered<sup>1</sup> among children with parents gone abroad to work. From a psychological point of view, this type of suicide is included in the reactive exogenous suicide type.<sup>2</sup> This type of suicide requires factors and emotional-affective events with a psycho-trauma character, which appear in sudden reactions, linked to circumstantial conflicts of life that the individual neither is nor prepared to face. Children and adolescent suicidal impress through the fragility of the motivation, the fear of death specific to this age and the lack of realizing that this gesture is irreversible. To this category of age, the motivation analysis is hard, suicidal being often an act of imitation and the opposition towards a hard affective moment. Other determinant factors of suicidal <sup>3</sup> of children under 10 years, the puberty or adolescent are: fear or the feeling of abandon, fear of punishment,

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<sup>1</sup> Luca, Cătălin; Gulei, Alexandru-Stelian (coordonatori) (2007), *Metodologie - asistență socială, psihologică și juridică a copiilor rămași singuri acasă ca urmare a plecării părinților la muncă în străinătate*, Asociația Alternative Sociale, Editura Terra Nostra, Iași.

<sup>2</sup> Romanian media transmited in this period seven cases of children who comitted suicide. In the evidence left behind( good bye notes) revealed that the motive of taking his life was the fact that he could not stand anymore the affective pain caused by missing the parents

<sup>3</sup> Scripacru, Călin (2007), *Suicidul*, Editura Sedcom Libris, Iași, p. 98.

fear of school failure, the impossibility of adapting to a new and difficult life rhythm, disorders in getting attached due to separation from the mother, which have created feeling of uncertainty and anguish, a history of early affective frustrations, an unwanted and abandoned child situation, disunity between the subjective representations and the external ones provided by mass-media which play an imitation role etc.

### ***Risks that home alone children are exposed to***

Overhead with tasks: taking the responsibilities of an adult: cooking, cleaning, laundry, payment of monthly fees, caring and nursing younger brothers or sisters etc.

Vulnerability to physical, psychological, sexual abuse, exploitation through work, child traffic and prostitution<sup>1</sup>. Sexual aggressors<sup>2</sup>, recruiters or people dealers, persons who exploit children through labour choose their targets from the neglect children, unwatched.

Insufficient development of independent life abilities needed to face future difficulties as an adult: independence in taking a decision, trust in your own power, abilities of time and money management, control and expressing feelings, relations and communication etc.

Hard adoption of the ethical-moral norms: in the absence of a functional family model, of a safe and coherent environment, home alone children can adopt the affective neglect model of the original family and apply it as an adult.

Early start of sexual life: especially in puberty and adolescent they will seek the affection and appreciation they need not only in their group of friends, but also in intimate relationships<sup>3</sup>. The lack of an adequate education regarding the sexual life, the lack of attention, even tally living, high risk behaviour in contracting a sexual transmitted disease or even an unwanted pregnancy at a young age.

### ***Possible psycho-social counselling themes for children who have their parent departure to work abroad***

#### **Missing your parents**

Children who have their parent departure to work abroad miss them. The degree in which children feel this pain varies because of the age, level of comprehension, the

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<sup>1</sup> Idem p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> Pinheiro, Paulo Sérgio (2006), *World report on violence against women*, United Nation's Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Nyman, Anders; Svensson, Borje (1995), *Boys sexual abuse and treatment*, Radda Barnen, Sthockholm, p.13-17.

age when he first left, attachment between child and parent before leaving, learnt and practiced ways of emotional expression<sup>1</sup> etc. Like any other suffering, missing your parents must be comforted and the child must learn proper ways of identifying, controlling and cope with this suffering. The advisor must support the child in expressing his emotions, help him to find ways of diminishing this suffering and communicate about his feelings with his parents. Children can have difficulties in recognizing their affective emotions and the adequate way of expressing them. In counselling home alone children, exercises of self-knowing, emotional expression, playing a role, keeping a diary, can be useful techniques which could help the child to better communicate with his parents. Writing letters, making postcards, drawings, collages and sending them through mail, doing projects that encourage communication between children and parents (example: "Describe the city in which you're parents are"), exchange of photos and films showing images from the child's and parent's life are few ways of alternative communication and maintaining a bond with parents which the advisor must promote by working with the child and his family.

The advisor must encourage the child and the departure parents to maintain a strong bond, trying all the available means of communication: phone, internet (e-mail, chat, webcam, which allows visual contact) written messages, letters etc.

### *Self-esteem*

Home alone children can develop esteem disorders, as over-appreciation or under-appreciation of the person.

Over-appreciation can appear in the cases of children which receive a considerable amount of money and packages from their parents, so that, in comparison with other children of the same age, they have more money to spend, afford different articles of clothing, in style accessories etc. or leave together with the parents in holidays, abroad trips. Some children, in such situations, tend to show off their goods in front of the colleagues, friends of the same age, to manifest attitudes of superiority and bravery which could affect relationships with the others- colleagues, teachers, relatives etc.

Gifts of money or products sent by parents have more meanings: on one hand, gifts have the role of compensating the parent's guilt, being away from his children and, on the other hand, have the role of reassuring children of the parental affection.

In the process of conciliation, discussing pros and cons the children and family has after the parents leave is important.

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<sup>1</sup> The study Children's situation left without caring after migration, UNICEF Moldova and CIDDC, Moldova Republic, 2006.

A better material situation is not a negative thing, but there is the risk of developing some cognitive distortions regarding the value of money, of the role and importance education has and working to earn incomes (ex., "I don't need too many learning to succeed in life", "why learning; mom sends money and I will solve the problem with the passing of exams", "Nowadays, you cannot make it if you don't have money" etc.) The role of the advisor is to support the child in self-knowledge and in the development of a self image realistic and positive.

Under-appreciation can appear in the case of children that do not maintain constant relationships with the parents and a functional communication. These children are missing their parents, feel the need of giving and receiving affection and, in the absence of the parents, of their affection and watch, children feel abandon, inferior towards the other children, anger and disappointment towards parents. In the case of children who came from poor families, their feelings of inferiority are accentuated by the material loss. Children will encounter difficulties in identifying and recognizing these feelings and must be supported in forming a positive self image which would allow them to face the specific obstacles of the developing degree and school life. In working with children with a low level of self-esteem, self-knowledge exercises are very useful, exercises of discovering your own abilities and qualities, negative thoughts, cognitive distortions, which maintain a negative image about themselves. With the help of an advisor, children must understand that such thoughts about their own person influence their behaviour.

Children with a low self-esteem can adopt various behaviours, from excessive shyness, fear of interfering with others, inability to resolve tasks, low school performance, to attitudes of superiority, aggressive behaviours, absences, flee from home, smoking, alcohol, drugs, entering a group of friends with delinquent activities, infractions etc.

In situations in which among the factors that keep the low self-esteem are identified factors that are included in the immediate environment of the child (family, person who cares, school etc.), counsellors are recommended to approach the family members or the person who cares, form master or teacher, in order to explain to them the causes of his behaviour and advice them to adopt simulative attitudes and behaviours.

### ***Pre-delinquent and delinquent behaviours***

Developing independent life abilities and doing activities that require playing a role, social norms and positive reactions to certain situations can help children develop self-esteem, interact with others and determine them positive behaviours. Teaching a child how to control his emotions, develop his abilities in imitation, to relax, anger control can help him decrease the interior tensions and anti-social behaviour.

In some cases, leisure activities, like playing in groups, sports, outdoor trips, help the child escape from his situation and have a new and relaxing perspective on life. Sport activities, individual or in group (swimming, football etc) will help the child release the tensions, anger and frustrations through positive ways, which will contribute to the increase of self-esteem, of the feeling of belonging to a group, fulfilling the appreciation needs.

### ***Victim prevention. Prevention of child deals, sexual exploitation and labour exploitation of children***

Children who live alone or not protected by an adult regarding the risks of victimization that they are exposed if they neither do nor take certain safety measures against offenders and exploiters. Judging by the level of comprehension of the child, the advisor can use various resources and informative means (plaints, brochures, documentaries, artistic films, games, sites ) to help the children understand the risks they are exposed to (theft, robbery, children deal, work exploitation etc), knowing the profile of a possible dealer, exploiter, stages and consequences of child traffic, sexual and labour exploitation, knowing the means he can come to in case of emergency or for information (responsible institutes and emergency calls).

### ***Going on with the studies or school reintegration***

In the situation in which you realize that the child's interest for school has decreased after the parents have left, the number of school absences has raised and school performance has dropped, according to schooling level, the child's future plans, his possibilities, actual legislation, the child is advised and encouraged to continue school, settling with the advisor the advantages he can have after finishing his studies.

If the child wants to continue the studies to his parents, abroad, the advisor must analyze with the child and his family the pros and cons of this. Together they will sketch a realistic plan of the child's future.

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Order nr. 219 from 15 June 2006 regarding identification, intervention and monitoring activities of children who are not cared by parents during their absence and work abroad, published in the O.M, nr. 544 from 23 June 2006.

Web resources

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[www.antitrafic.ro](http://www.antitrafic.ro)

[www.alternativesociale.ro](http://www.alternativesociale.ro)

[www.copii.ro](http://www.copii.ro)

[www.childrights.md](http://www.childrights.md)

[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)