

# Perceptions of parenthood: Parents' vision of an ideal childhood versus reality

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## Abstract

Parents create visions of a perfect childhood for their children. At the same time, parenthood is a process shaped in response to conditions and demands of the environment; fulfilling this vision depends crucially on the environmental, cultural or social conditions in which the family lives. The authors used Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs as a theoretical framework to illustrate Polish parents' opinions on the components of an "ideal childhood" and the possibilities of realising such a vision. This paper presents the results of interviews with 31 Polish working parents, each of whom had at least one child aged six or younger. Their opinions on perfect childhood lead to the supplementing of Maslow's theory with a Pyramid of Needs in a Perfect Childhood. Confronting parents' expectations with their reality showed their beliefs and hopes concerning the chances for the comprehensive development of their children but also revealed financial problems, as well as difficulties related to child care and medical health care.

KEYWORDS: parenthood, childhood, Maslow's pyramid of needs

## Introduction

The transition to parenthood is considered to be one of the most significant changes in a person's life. It relates to benefits, new possibilities, realised dreams but also difficulties such as stress, fatigue or decrease in well-being (Hildingsson & Thomas 2014; Holmes, Sasaki, & Hazen 2013). According to a life-span model of motivation, demands, possibilities, and challenges emerging with parenthood channel the type of goals that parents set to themselves and to a newly-born child (Salmela-Aro 2012). Thus, parenthood might be considered to be a source of motivation for parents' self-development, and it can be perceived as a process of acquiring the skills necessary to satisfy children's needs (physical, social and psychological) (Sousa e Silva & Carneiro 2014). Therefore, parenthood itself might become an ultimate goal for some parents (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller 2010).

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Maslow (1943) emphasised a strong relationship between the satisfaction of needs in childhood and forming the character of an adult. He also offered one of the best-known and still valid approaches explaining the person's striving for goals through satisfying needs (e.g. Chalmers 2013; Datta 2010; Peterson et al. 2014). According to Maslow, a person constitutes an integral whole and has an innate ability to aim for higher levels of health, creativity, and self-actualisation (Maslow 1954). He distinguished five basic needs: physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualisation.

These basic human needs are organised in the form of a hierarchy of relative dominance: after one need is satisfied, another emerges. Maslow emphasised that the structure of the needs is not strict; the hierarchy might be reversed, for example, in the case of born creators or artists for whom the drive to create is more important than any other determinants (Maslow 1970). He suggested that physiological needs prevail and emphasised that self-actualisation refers only to older, more mature people. It does not appear in young people because they have not yet established their identity or autonomy (ibid.). Maslow also asserted that cognitive needs, such as the need for knowledge and understanding (developed in late infancy and early childhood), aesthetic needs, the need for order, symmetry, finishing activities, constitute a prerequisite to the satisfaction of basic needs. Satisfying basic needs may result in optimism, interest in the future, changes in dreams and fantasies (ibid.).

Given Maslow's theory, we may assume that parents who developed their sense of self-actualisation and use their own resources and skills more efficiently create 'visions' of perfect childhood for their children, including their own goals, hopes, dreams and expectations (Peterson et al. 2014). They often feel motivated to satisfy their children's needs according to this vision and to turn their idea of 'perfect childhood' into reality. As parenthood is a process shaped in response to conditions and demands of the environment in which a child is born, i.e. social, economic and religious factors (Sousa e Silva & Carneiro 2014), the fulfilment of this vision depends crucially on environmental conditions. Maslow emphasised that human motivation relates closely to the environment of the person (1970). Thus, culture, environment, situation or other people determine the probability of making the vision of perfect childhood real. We believe that Maslow's theory of needs is a useful tool to describe the construct of an ideal childhood. We also assume that this vision is one of core innate drives motivating parents to provide their children with everything they can. Therefore, this paper is aimed to illustrate what Polish parents understand to be an *ideal childhood* and to what extent it is possible for them to realise such a vision. We focused on the analysis of the components of the ideal childhood construct formed by parents and their daily efforts to provide the best for their child(ren).

## Methods

This study consisted of 31 informants who had at least one child aged six years or younger and had never worked abroad. We studied three occupational groups due to the different flexibility of their working systems: nurses (shift work), administrative workers (fixed hours), and academics (flexible hours).

The informants were 27 to 46 years old and had from one to three children, aged from less than a year to 18 years old (Table 1). At the time of the study, all respondents were employed and worked from 30 to 60 hours a week (41 hours on average). All respondents lived in Central Poland.

We conducted 13 interviews between April and September 2014. Due to the availability of respondents, we conducted individual and group interviews. We organised six individual interviews lasting from 30 minutes to over an hour. Group interviews involved from three to six people and lasted from approximately 50 minutes to 2.5 hours. All but one

*Table 1: Respondents' sociodemographic characteristics*

Occupational group	Name (interview no)	Family situation	Age	Number of children (age in years)	Average working hours per week	
Administrative workers (3 interviews)	Alice* (1)	married	34	2 (2,8)	40	
	Adam (2)	married	37	1 (4)	40	
	Amelia (2)	married	35	2 (4,4)	40	
	Anna (2)	married	37	2 (2,8)	40	
	Alan (3)	married	37	1 (2)	40	
	Anita (3)	married	36	2 (4,6)	40	
	Adela (3)	living with her partner, not married	32	3 (6,10,12)	40	
	Agnes (3)	married	35	1 (4)	40	
	Agatha (3)	married	31	2 (3,5)	30	
	Andrew (3)	married	40	2 (2,10)	40	
	Academics (6 interviews)	Daria (4)	married	37	2 (5,9)	30
		Dorian (5)	married	39	3 (5,6,8)	30-60
		Diana (6)	married	27	1 (<1)	40
Dorothea (7)		married	33	1 (1)	40	
Dominic (7)		married	39	1 (6)	40	
David (7)		married, one child from previous relationship	36	2 (1,8)	40	
Donald (7)		married	35	1 (<1)	50	
Dona (7)		married	36	2 (4,7)	40	
Deborah (8)		married	35	1 (4)	35	
Daniela (9)		married	40	2 (2,10)	50	
Dalia (9)		divorced, single mother	38	1 (6)	50	
Nurses (4 interviews)		Margaret (10)	married	40	2 (6,14)	36-48
		Marlene (10)	married, two children from previous relationship	38	3 (3,11,16)	40
	Martha (10)	married	37	1 (6)	40	
	Monica (10)	separated, single mother	40	2 (6,16)	36-48	
	Maria (10)	married	46	1 (6)	40	
	Maya (11)	married	37	1 (5)	38	
	Matilda (11)	married	33	1 (6)	48	
	Miranda (12)	married	43	3 (5,16,18)	48	
	Magdalene (13)	married, her husband works abroad	41	2 (5,5)	40	
	Melissa (13)	married	39	2 (5,15)	35	

\*Names were changed to protect the respondents' anonymity

interview took place on the premises of the authors' institution and one interview took place in a hospital where some of the interviewed nurses worked. All interviews were conducted by authors and other psychologists from the project team of the Polish-Norwegian project entitled Enhancing the effectiveness of work-life balance initiatives use – EFFECT. Before each interview, respondents were informed of the project aims, procedures, and the manner of storing and using the obtained data. Respondents could participate in the study provided they agreed to the research conditions and signed an informed consent.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the research questions referred to work, family and housing situations, work-home and home-work interference, benefits offered and used, sharing duties between partners, the vision of perfect childhood, definitions of work-life balance and barriers to achieving it.

After each interview, respondents filled in short questionnaires including basic information such as age, gender, job tenure, education, etc. All respondents received financial compensation for the time devoted to the interviews, amounting to 100 zlotys (approximately 25 euros).

To analyse the data, we used the elements of thematic analysis, which are a qualitative analytic method widely used in psychology (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Transcribing and then verifying interviews was performed by the psychologists who conducted the meetings. Thus, each transcription was developed by two researchers who independently listened to the recordings.

Via data exploration, we established a database of quotations divided into categories corresponding to nine project research areas. The categories analysed in this study included: childhood (C), living conditions (LC), and parenthood (P). A ten-person project team was divided into five groups, and each of them individually attributed quotations from two to three interviews to the three categories.

We then extracted data for further analysis. We analysed the statements that constituted the answers to the following questions: 'What is life in Poland like?', 'What is a good childhood?', 'Is it difficult to be a parent in Poland?' By that means, we indicated the vision of ideal childhood as well as the parents' perception of reality.

The data were coded. For each of the three selected categories, we created a bank of quotations, all of which were analysed in detail. This analysis aimed at reducing sentences to smaller pieces that took the form of thoughts, beliefs, desires or emotions. These were grouped and given codes.

During the analysis, we organised and interpreted the data to find a model or scientific theory to organise and interpret the codes. Maslow's theory of needs was chosen as the framework for data analyses. We then assigned C codes to the groups of needs (five basic needs and prerequisite cognitive needs) to create a Pyramid of Needs in Perfect Childhood (PNPC) (Figure 1).

We used LC and P codes to compare the PNPC with the perception of the reality of Polish parents. We also referred the results to the Polish Central Statistical Office, Public Opinion Research Centre, and Eurostat data to provide an objective background to the respondent's opinions.

## The findings

We generated ten codes to describe C, four codes to describe LC and five codes to describe P (Table 2).

Table 2: Codes and number of parents giving answers referring to these codes in the categories: childhood (C), living conditions (LC), and parenthood (P)

Category	Codes	Number (%) of people
CHILDHOOD (C)	C1. Parental love for a child	12 (39%)
	C2. Attention and time devoted to children	16 (52%)
	C3. Education, fun, comprehensive development	13 (42%)
	C4. Sense of security, calm	15 (48%)
	C5. Child's health	2 (6%)
	C6. Contact with family and peers	19 (61%)
	C7. Acceptance, parents' and peers' respect for a child	7 (22%)
	C8. Instilling rules and standards in children	8 (26%)
	C9. Providing for children	7 (22%)
	C10. Child's potential and spontaneity	4 (13%)
LIVING CONDITIONS (LC)	LC1. Influence of work	12 (39%)
	LC2. Living standard	12 (39%)
	LC3. Comparison to other countries	7 (23%)
	LC4. Gender equality/ stereotypes	13 (42%)
PARENTHOOD (P)	P1. Childcare	31 (100%)
	P2. Family budget	14 (45%)
	P3. Work demands	24 (77%)
	P4. Personal situation	5 (16%)
	P5. Government's help	15 (48%)
	P6. Other	4 (13%)

Having attributed each C code to a particular need, we created a PNPC (Figure 1).

## Parents' vision of ideal childhood

### **Physiological needs – codes C5 and C9**

One in three respondents (28%) indicated these needs to be a guarantee of a happy childhood. The studied parents recognised children's basic needs, such as food, warmth, clothes, shelter, or a child's own space in the house, and they talked a lot about possibilities and barriers (mainly financial) related to the realisation of these needs. Andrew, an administrative worker and a father of two, said: 'Their own space, it's something really important in life, I can say from my own personal experience. I didn't have it, and I missed it.'

Amelia and Anna, both mothers of two, used such terms as *prosaic* or *obvious* to describe these needs. Amelia stated: 'We're not talking about such trivial, I don't know, maybe not trivial things... food, right?', and Anna added: 'Clothes, for a child to be warm.' Parents understood they had to realise such basic needs for any higher needs to emerge.

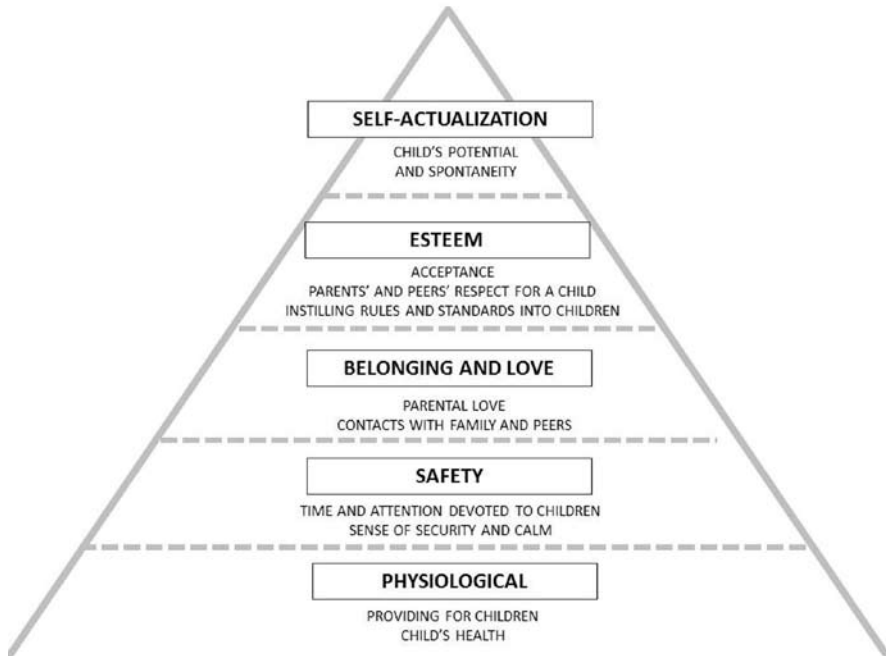


Figure 1: Pyramid of needs in perfect childhood

Another way to realise these needs was to take care of children's health. The interviewed parents emphasised that only when a child was healthy could any other needs be developed and satisfied. They considered children's health to be a foundation for their development.

### **Safety needs – codes C2 and C4**

The sense of security was one of the conditions of good childhood most frequently discussed by the interviewed parents, as all of them indicated this group of needs as crucial for their children to experience a good childhood. Parents focused both on psychological and physical safety. In their opinions, the constant presence of both parents in a child's life and calm atmosphere at home could satisfy these needs. Dominic expressed it saying:

The sense of safety is very important, ... [for a child] to have two parents. Because if there's only one, then the sense of safety is threatened, or when parents argue, and they might separate, these are stressful situations.

### **Belonging and love needs – codes C1 and C6**

Belonging and love needs were the second to be mentioned as the most important for good childhood by all respondents. The studied parents emphasised that the absence of one parent in child's life threatens his or her happy childhood, regardless of the reasons for such absence, be they conflicts among spouses, divorce or work duties. David described it:

It's a question whether it's a balance when one parent is always at work, and the other stays with the child all the time. It shouldn't be a mean but [both] – one and the other parent.

Discussing love and belonging needs, parents focused on an emotional aspect related to the presence of both parents, not only on the time they spend at home. Magdalene, a mother of five-year-old twins, said that parents should 'devote a lot of time to the child' and that this contact with both parents should be 'as long as possible during the day.'

Contact with peers was another condition considered to be necessary for children's good childhood, their adaptation to function in the society in the future, self-reliance or source of joy of being with peers. Dorothea, one of the academics, said: 'Even a really loving mum, grandma or nanny won't give what playing with peers in kindergarten will.'

### **Esteem needs – codes C7 and C8**

First, parents realised that children need to feel accepted, but at the same time, they need to know the boundaries and understand what is required from them. Matilda expressed it: '[A child] needs to have some rules, limits – he or she cannot be permitted everything.' Daria added: '[A child] needs to see that it's worth moving, achieving something to earn something.'

Even though our respondents' children were very young, the parents believed that happy childhood and good development required respecting children's autonomy and their own preferences and opinions, even if sometimes they did not correspond to their parents' needs and preferences. Dorothea described her little child's need for being alone:

There are such moments when my child has enough of me [laughter], I mean, he wants to be alone for a while ... when I come back home from work ... he keeps hugging me, he cuddles me and he's happy that I'm back but after a few hours he leaves. Even though he's only 1.5 years old, he goes to another room, he lies down, plays with something on his own and he doesn't need contact with me at all for these few minutes, 5-10 minutes.

The interviewed parents claimed it was also necessary to consider the children's pace of development and their readiness for some changes such as being sent to kindergarten or nursery and being separated from parents. Especially parents of more than one child recognised differences between their children as regards their different levels of self-reliance and readiness for such change. Dona, a mother of a seven-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl, described it, saying:

From my experience of having two children, I know that the child's character really influences how ready he or she is to be separated from parents and to play with peers. My son went to nursery at the age of 2 ... and he wasn't really ready to go to nursery, it was hard for him ... But my daughter went to nursery when she was 1.5 years old, and she never cried, she was looking forward to going to this nursery.

Even in the case of such young children, parents were aware of the significance of developing children's belief in their own abilities, even if it sometimes required allowing children to make mistakes or 'get their fingers burnt' due to bad decisions. Alice said:

The most loving grandma, the greatest mum will give a lot, of course, a lot of love, a child won't bruise his or her knees, won't hurt his or her head, won't get so many bruises as when he or she goes to kindergarten, nursery, etc. But he or she needs to do it one day anyway, to learn.

### ***Self-actualisation needs – code C10***

Even though Maslow noted that self-actualisation needs refer to older people (1970), some of the interviewed parents talked about children's spontaneous activity, which was considered essential for their proper development and discovering the world. Parents noticed that children did not always need additional activities or special toys to learn and develop well. When describing what children needed in order to have a happy childhood, Dorian replied: 'A lot of freedom, and not training for a child to become a genius.'

### ***Cognitive needs – code C3***

As described earlier in the text, Maslow considered cognitive needs to be a prerequisite to developing any basic needs. Over 40% of parents mentioned these needs as essential for their children's development. Here, parents' considerations mainly revolved around the need to satisfy children's need for comprehensive development, including mental and physical development but also entertainment, as well. For example, Dominic said he wanted his child 'to be able to try everything and be able, for example, to swim and ride a bike and play different games.'

In summation, parents' vision of perfect childhood is based on the possibility to satisfy various needs of children; these needs corresponded to those distinguished in the hierarchical theory of needs by Maslow.

## **Polish parents' reality – implementing the vision of perfect childhood into practice**

### ***Physiological needs – codes LC2, LC3, P1, P2, and P5***

*Child's basic needs.* In reality, it often occurred that satisfying even the essential needs of children presented a challenge for the studied parents due to low salaries in Poland, disproportionate to necessary expenses. Respondents discussed the issue of costs related to providing children for living in all interviews and in nearly all contexts of childcare. Melissa, a 39-year-old mother of two, described it saying: 'First of all, let's be honest, life is very expensive when it comes to all the products .... We don't have such high salaries to be able to afford everything.'

On numerous occasions, the studied respondents compared Polish conditions to those in other countries, especially Western countries, and they concluded that parenting was much harder in Poland. Even though the interviewed parents had no prior experience of working abroad, they referred to diverse examples of their friends or relatives living



in other countries. For example, they talked about facilities or solutions unavailable to Polish parents, such as government help for regards families' housing situations. Donald described the standard of living in Poland as 'a little below European average standards' and Dorian, who works in two research institutions, concluded that employees abroad receive salaries several times higher than Polish scientists do for the same job. Dominic, a father of a six-year-old girl, made a direct comparison between Poland and Western countries saying:

To keep the balance, for a child to have all the vitamins, minerals, everything related to her development at the same time... so she also needs some, I don't know, clothes, proper shoes, or generally – background to live. But these are compromises, and that's why I think living here, in Poland, is really hard in comparison to the West.

Agatha, a 31-year-old mother of two boys, added:

Friends of mine who went to England ... they hadn't waited even a year before they got a three-bedroom flat, having one child. Now they have a second child, and they can apply for four bedrooms .... They left with just one bag, they found jobs and the flat.

Moreover, financial insecurity resulted in parents' reluctance or hesitation to have more children. One of the administrative workers, Alice, added:

We would like to have a third [child], but we worry about financial issues. We are not afraid whether we can manage as regards educational [upbringing] issues, because with these two we already have some experience, and we can manage, and there won't be any problems with that – we worry about finances – losing a job, unstable [labour] market.

Worries related to having more children are reflected in the data of Eurostat showing that in 2013 the fertility rate in Poland was lower than the European average, and it was among the seven lowest in Europe (Poland – 1.29; EU28 – 1.55) (Eurostat 2013). Similarly, according to the report 'Low fertility rate in Poland' (Kotowska 2014), parents already having a child or two hesitated about having another child due to hard living conditions, financial insecurity, the costs of raising children and anticipated problems in achieving work-life balance. In the post-interview questionnaires, we asked respondents about their financial status during the two years preceding the study, and only seven respondents described that time as financially difficult. Another ten interviewees felt they prospered well during that time and nearly half of the respondents (N=14) claimed that for the two years preceding the study, their life was neither easy nor especially hard as regards finances. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that complaints about costs of living in Poland resulted solely from low incomes or financial difficulties. For example, Wojciszke offered the concept of 'the culture of complaining' in Poland (2004), revealing exceptional fondness of Polish people for complaints about public issues, the general situation of the country and its future and their financial situation. He suggested this culture includes some tendency to complain as a social factor aimed at establishing or

maintaining relationships. Thus, this could explain the complaints also among those prospering: both objectively, basing on their declared income and subjectively, according to their assessment of their financial situation during the two years preceding the study.

Nevertheless, the costs of living in Poland might be objectively considered to be high, and regardless of the income, average working parents cannot afford everything they want, even if this would serve to realise their children's needs. The data of Eurostat confirm such a conclusion: in 2013 the average income for 28 countries of the European Union (EU28) equalled 12,800 euros per year, whereas in Poland it was 3,800 Euro (Eurostat, 2014a). Similarly, the data of the Polish Central Statistical Office (CSO) show that in 2014 Polish workers earned 1350 zlotys (about 330 euros) per person on average whereas expenses per person in a household typically equalled 1,060 zlotys (about 260 euros), i.e. 79% of their income (CSO 2015). According to the Social Diagnosis 2013, the minimum monthly income necessary to provide for a living amounted to 1158 zlotys per person (about 280 euros) (Czapiński & Panek 2013). Previous data also revealed that 51% of Polish workers as compared to 40% in EU28 would be unable to cover for unexpected expenses (Eurostat 2014b) and 9% has fallen behind with payments (CSO 2014a). According to the European study on income and living conditions, one in three Polish employees was dissatisfied with their financial situation (CSO 2014b). Therefore, the costs of living as the main barrier to the realisation of parents' vision of perfect childhood could be explained by the negative income-to-expenses ratio.

*Child's health.* Apart from financial difficulties, the health service in Poland was one of the most frequently discussed issues in the context of problems related to being a parent in Poland. Many parents complained about the (lack of) access to doctors, long waiting times for appointments, especially as regards specialists, and on the necessity or preference to use private health care despite having insurance and paying monthly health contributions to be treated in public institutions. Many of the interviewed parents used public primary medical health care (general practitioners (GPs)), but when they needed to consult a specialist, they paid for private clinics or chose private clinics that offered their services for free on the basis of a contract with the Polish National Health Fund. Only then they believed they received the same quality of service as they would have if they paid for the appointments and examinations. Such attitudes and practices were especially common in the context of prenatal and antenatal care. Many mothers used private services and paid for gynaecologists' and obstetricians' appointments to give birth to a child in the public hospital where their doctors also worked.

The need for using private medical healthcare before being able to use the public one was so common that Adam said: 'Unfortunately, the Polish healthcare system is full of pathology. To be treated by the public healthcare system, you need to start with the private one.' One of the interviewed nurses described her experience with the need for an endocrinologist consultation for her son; she needed to look for a private doctor because the public healthcare clinics offered an appointment in two years after the date of the request. Daniela, an academic and a mother of two, described her experience saying:

It's worse when it comes to referrals, I get referrals to specialists for children ..., but the available dates of appointments are so distant that I go privately anyway. And considering laboratory tests, I also use private services, even though I get referrals [in the public healthcare system].

Discussing the quality of health service, the interviewees gave mixed opinions. For example, Diana, a 27-year-old mother of a one-year-old girl said:

Doctors write referrals to everything; there are no problems with getting to general practitioners or to specialists. Maybe we don't just overuse it, I don't know, if... what would it look like if our child was sick, but at the moment I can't complain.

We also heard negative comments related to incorrect diagnoses, doctors' or nurses' negligence, and poor conditions in hospitals. For example, Adela described her problems with getting to the right medical health care institution when her son broke an arm:

We had spent three hours in the emergency room, when eventually he got an X-ray done and then they said that unluckily such X-ray [fracture] doesn't qualify to be treated in that hospital, so we needed to go to another. We got there at midnight.

Dominic, in turn, described the health problems his daughter had after improper care during the first days of her life:

The worst nightmare was with a child. First, she was lying in an incubator; we could see her only for two hours a day. Besides, she was lying in her own excrement, it's reprehensible, I should have written a complaint about it, but there were so many duties to take care of my wife and the child that any complaints became less important. The child was infected with Staphylococcus.

According to the Polish Public Opinion Research Center data, the majority of Polish respondents believed it was easy to get to a GP (74%) and that doctors were well-qualified (65%) and engaged (58%) (Public Opinion Research Center 2014). Only half of respondents agreed that treatment in Poland was free of charge. Most respondents (65%) also claimed it was difficult to get a reasonable date of a doctor's appointment and that patients were not treated equally (*ibid.*). According to another report (Public Opinion Research Center 2012) up to 66% of respondents paid for private doctor's appointments at least once to shorten the time of waiting for the doctor's appointment for themselves or for their children.

### ***Safety needs – codes LC1, P3, and P4***

Many parents emphasised they took the utmost care of separating work and private lives so as not to transfer negative emotions from work to home. Most of them stated that the atmosphere at work was pleasant and thus, experienced little or no occupational stress, which also enabled them to experience a pleasant atmosphere at home. Adam, an administrative worker, said:

We don't have any negative emotions; thus it's a pleasure to go to work, it's a pleasure to come back home, so there is no such impact. If there is, it's only positive.

Working hours significantly influenced the time availability of parents and their possibility to spend time with their families. Academic employees worked the most flexible hours as they could either decide on the hours of starting and finishing work (7–9 a.m. to 3–5 p.m.) or use task-based working systems. Thus, their working system facilitated the possibility of reconciling work and private lives. However, this occupational group was also most likely to work overtime, take extra work, work also at home, or travel in business. David, an academic, said: 'It happened, not once, that there were a lot of thawed samples and I needed to finish everything, sometimes up to midnight.'

Family time was sometimes limited not only due to the unfavourable working hours, but also when partners worked in different hours and, as a result, they would not see each other and spend time with their children separately. One of the administrative workers, Adela, said: 'Each of us takes care of their own issues,' which hindered their possibility to satisfy the child's need to have both parents at home. Another administrative worker, Agatha, added:

Our work also has a big impact on our family life because very often my husband and I don't see each other, it happens that, virtually, we don't see each other for two weeks.

Referring to the Eurostat data, Polish employees are among ten European countries whose citizens work the greatest number of hours per week (Eurostat 2014c). In 2014 full-time employees in Poland worked 42.4 hours per week. In comparison, Iceland was on the top of the list with 44.8 hours a week, and Lithuania was at the bottom with people working 39.5 hours a week on average. When parents work long hours, reconciliation of work and family life poses a serious challenge. One of the academics, Daria, stated: 'I think that if someone really works from the morning until 4 or 5 p.m. then it's difficult to reconcile work and family life.'

To reconcile work and house duties, our respondents also relied on the help of others, such as friends or relatives. Most of them considered grandparents to be an 'irreplaceable institution' as regards childcare. Sometimes this help was only incidental, for example when a child was ill, parents needed to work extra hours or travel in business. Sometimes this was a constant help, for example, instead of any childcare institutions. In such cases grandparents, usually, grandmothers, came to the child for a few hours when parents went to work. Therefore, one of the parents concluded that without the grandparents' help it would be impossible to reconcile work duties with having children.

To increase the time availability, parents also used legal or organisational benefits supporting the reconciliation of work-life balance (WLB benefits). The studied parents most frequently took sick leave to take care of children, leaves on demand and days off devoted to childcare (so called 'days for a mother and a child', even though they are addressed to parents of both genders). The majority of our respondents, especially women, used such benefits and usually they found no difficulties in using their rights. In

particular, academics felt relieved with their flexibility of working hours, for example, the possibility to leave work due to important private issues.

However, the CSO data showed that 40% of Polish employees had no possibility of deciding about the hour of starting or finishing work. Women were somewhat favoured in this case: 61% of women and 58% of men could count on such flexibility (CSO 2012). One in five employees enjoyed the privilege of setting the time of starting and ending their work on their own (21% of women and 21% of men). The others could use such solution only in exceptional circumstances. Moreover, only 14% of employees would have the possibility of taking a day off without using their annual leave, one in four employees could use it only in exceptional circumstances. Over 60% of employees would not have such possibility, even in crisis situations. Such results confirm flexibility at work should still be considered a privilege rather than a right.

It was the attitude of immediate superiors that seemed the most important factor influencing the possibility to use different legal or organizational benefits. Immediate superiors usually make decisions on making concessions to the employees' advantage. Importantly, almost all the studied employees claimed to have superiors who never hindered their possibility of using any benefits, or they even took the initiative and, for example, offered work from home. However, even though it was rare, our respondents also offered examples of their colleagues or friends who would not have the possibility of using WLB benefits, even those guaranteed by the law such as sick leaves to take care of children or paternal leaves because this could threaten their job security. In some cases, we also heard about difficulties in returning to work after a leave for childcare. Some nurses described situations in which some of them or their colleagues needed to change the department and undertake new duties when they returned to work after parental leaves.

Sometimes colleagues and their attitudes were significant when considering the flexibility at work. Their goodwill could facilitate the reconciliation of work and family, for example when exchanging shifts between nurses. An unfavourable atmosphere with negative comments addressed to or about people using WLB benefits might discourage employees from using such benefits. Fathers, in particular, faced some negative comments about using WLB benefits. For example, one father described his experience when he heard that he had to be exhausted and loaded with work to ask for paternity leave.

There was a funny incident when I was at the professor's office to have some papers signed and [another scientist came]. She had some samples to be tested, and she said she had to 'burden me' [to get help]. And the professor interrupted her and said: 'Mr. X [our respondent] should not be burdened, he is tired enough, because he takes paternal leave or something.'

Considering working hours and the probable work-home influence resulting from them, nurses constituted an occupational group probably most exposed to fatigue and difficulty related to their working system as they usually worked 12-hour shifts, also at nights. Irritability after sleepless nights could also transfer onto families. Marlene, a mother of three, described it:

Sometimes it happens to me that I come back home nervous, and everything makes me mad, because after these 12 hours a person needs some peace and silence. In our workplace, there is always some noise, chaos, children screaming, crying and in general, chaos all the time... when we come back home after 12 hours and these innocent children misbehave at home then... we also react nervously.

Security and stability of employment also facilitated a calm atmosphere at home. Some informants stated that, considering the poor economic situation of Poland, it was hardly possible to find a stable job. This could cause stress and tension among employees, which influenced the atmosphere at home. One of the fathers explained that even when financial issues are not openly discussed at home, children can sense the parents' tension, and it also has an impact on their well-being. Dalia, an academic, with 12-years of work experience claimed there were no stable jobs. She described it saying:

I've heard from my friends that 'you just don't worry about your job.' Then I tell them that I do, because currently on the labour market you are never 100% sure.

In our study, only a few participants felt insecure at work and worried about losing their jobs; however, many of them found the issue familiar, for example, from their families' or friends' experience. Similarly, a study on psychosocial risks at work including over seven thousand Polish workers revealed that up to 65% of them were at risk of losing their jobs and for nine out of ten of them it was a source of stress (Mościcka-Teske et al. 2013).

### ***Belonging and love needs – codes LC1, LC4, P1, P5, and P2***

*Love and time spent with both parents.* Work system and working hours could also threaten the possibility of realising this need. The interviewees concluded that good organisational skills as regards time management could occur crucial in this context. Many parents tried to engage their children in the everyday life of a household to spend more time together. Dominic, a father of a six-year-old girl, said: 'If [our daughter] can go somewhere with us, to do shopping or to a cinema or anywhere, she does.'

Most respondents talked about mutual support between partners, which strengthened family bonds, increased the amount of time spent together and constituted a secure foundation for children. For example, Adam compared today's attitude towards sharing housework with the opinion of the previous generation: 'My mum still can't imagine that my wife doesn't cook meals for me. Because it's deeply embedded in her mind that it is the wife who should prepare dinner for her husband.'

The interviewees underlined that nowadays women participate in the labour market to a greater extent; thus, it is necessary for men to engage in housework and childcare. First, sharing home duties relieved parents and second, it increased the amount of time a child spent with their parents. For example, Alan, a father of a three-year-old boy described it:

And if it comes to childcare, we try to do it together, because we have this comfort that generally we come back home at similar hours... Actually, later, until the evening we can devote our time to our child, so we share it equally and that's what it looks like in my case.

Referring these results to previous findings, earlier studies indicated three principles of housework arrangement: time availability, relative resources, and gender role perspectives (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson 2000). Our results seem to confirm the time availability perspective. Deborah's view illustrates such perspective:

My husband's not home when our child gets up, so since early in the morning I take care of her, I need to bathe her, dress her up, take to a kindergarten and the same in the afternoon, I pick her up from the kindergarten. And then my husband comes at 5 p.m. ... about 6 p.m. she is bathed, and it's my husband who does it, he bathes her, takes care of her, tells her a bedtime story, prepares her to sleep.

At the same time, parents rejected the idea of a gender-determined share of housework. For example, Adam said:

Such things as, I don't know, kitchen things, cleaning... it's rather my wife, but it's not like, it's not a determined list, let's say, that my wife sits in the kitchen and I take care of manly things. It's mixed depending on the circumstances, so it's hard to say.

The PORC data show that the way women and men share responsibility for housework has changed for the last few years (Public Opinion Research Center 2006, 2013). The changes head towards doing housework together or changing in doing the housework. The comparison of data from 2006 and 2013 showed that even though women still do more housework, the disproportion between men and women constantly decreases. In particular, it happens less frequently that a woman is solely responsible for particular activities.

*Contact with peers.* Parents talked a lot about kindergartens as sources of peer contact for their children. They discussed both the difficulties related to sending children to such institutions as well as the benefits resulting from children's attendance to kindergartens. Most parents considered such institutions to be the best form of childcare for children aged 3-6 mainly due to the possibility to spend time with other children. Dominic, whose 6-year-old daughter attended kindergarten expressed it saying: 'A kindergarten is necessary because [kindergarten staff] are experts in this field and children have the company of other children.'

Similarly, the Public Opinion Research Center data show that 76% of the interviewed respondents believed kindergartens were the best form of childcare for children aged five and only one in five respondents preferred children to stay at home (Public Opinion Research Center 2009). Such preference was typical for well-educated people living in cities like the parents interviewed in this study.

Unfortunately, parents noticed many difficulties with the access to kindergartens and the related costs. According to them, these problems resulted from too few kindergartens

and nurseries, and as a consequence, parents needed to enrol their children to such institutions before their children reached the kindergarten age. On the other hand, the interviews were conducted just before the introduction of school duty for six-year-olds (instead of seven-year-olds, as it was previously) and in the year preceding the study parents had the right to decide whether to send their children to school or to kindergarten. Due to this solution, parents observed some changes and fewer problems with getting into kindergartens. Agatha, a mother of two boys, one of whom already attended kindergarten, said:

Now it's improved a lot with these kindergartens because they pushed six-year-olds to schools, but my son, now a five-year-old, two years ago I enrolled him in a kindergarten, being on maternity leave for the second child and then, God, it was terrible then, with the directors, that I don't work, I take somebody's place and just terrible reproaches, problems.... As if it was worthy of some punishment that you want to enrol a child to a kindergarten.

Despite these difficulties with the access to childcare institutions, the majority of the studied parents used institutional forms of child care, and they were satisfied with the way they influenced their children. Alice's younger son went to kindergarten at an earlier age than her older daughter did, and thus, she could compare them, saying:

I can see that my younger child develops faster than the older one in that age. Even though her grandma, her beloved grandma, did everything for the girl to develop well. Maybe she used a fork better ... my younger son still uses his hands more willingly than a fork. But, on the other hand, my son has developed really well if it comes to vocabulary, he starts... he sings songs, he is developing physically. He is developing really nicely.

For some parents, public institutions were more beneficial due to lower costs, some preferred private ones due to wider offers of extra classes, specialist profiles of groups or fewer children in one group. Others have no other option apart from private institutions because their children did not get into public ones. In terms of costs of kindergartens, in her report, Sztanderska (2013) provided evidence that the government's budget expenditure on kindergartens in Poland is higher than the European average. Moreover, the share of parents using this form of institutional childcare is rather low as compared to other European countries which means that relative costs per one child are high. The Eurostat data on the popularity of kindergartens showed that in Poland 78% of children aged four attended kindergartens. Such a result was one of the lowest in the European Union and far from reaching the European standard of 95% of children attending kindergartens at this age (Eurostat 2014d).

The general conclusion of all parents whose children went to kindergartens was positive, regardless of the kindergarten being public or private. Adela, whose son went to public kindergarten, said that he only benefited from this experience, yet, the quality of childcare depends on the particular institution, not whether it was public or private. Anita, a mother of two girls, concluded:



My friend [sends children to] a private kindergarten and she is super satisfied, and generally it's great and I have two children in a public one and I am also super satisfied, and it's generally great.

Our results correspond with the previous data that show that 88% of the studied respondents believed the time spent in kindergarten served their children's development well (Public Opinion Research Center 2013b). Almost 85% noticed skills and abilities that children developed when they started attending kindergartens. Moreover, 98% of parents were satisfied with their choice to send their children to kindergarten.

### **Esteem needs – codes P1 and P4**

*Accepting but demanding parents.* Parents were not directly asked what exactly they demanded from their children, yet, we could conclude from their stories that, for example, they engaged them in doing some housework. Alice, a mother of an eight-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy, described it: 'Our daughter generally tidies her bedroom, we teach her that she needs to clean her bedroom, she's eight so it's a proper age.' Similarly, Daria, whose children were five and nine, claimed that when doing housework, children felt they were a part of the family, and they were responsible for something.

Parents realised that in some situations being demanding towards their children, regardless of the nature of these demands, was hard, and being consistent might be difficult. It happened, for example, when due to various reasons only one parent was present in a child's life or when other people, like grandparents, were involved in raising the child. Magdalene, whose husband worked abroad, described it:

I realise my boys are spoilt because they are. I've heard they are spoilt many times. But as I've said, I try to compensate for the lack of their father. So, they are spoilt. Grandparents also add to this pampering, because they are their only grandchildren.

*Recognising children's autonomy and individuality and developing sense of competence and coping.* Dalia, a mother of a six-year-old, described how she tried to encourage her daughter to help her with housework, even though sometimes it resulted in even more work for the mother:

A black sock with white clothes, but nothing will happen at all. The same with washing the dishes, I try to teach her to do the washing up, that it's... She likes it, but only her plastic plate [laughter] ... for example pouring water to a jug. 'Mum, me, me...', and sometimes there's more trouble with it than... But I've also learnt that you can't keep [saying] all the time that something will spill over.

It occurs that even partners intending to have children emphasise the role of these needs for the development of their future children. Peterson et al. (2014) investigated the hopes, dreams and expectations of pregnant women and their partners as regards their unborn children in the context of Maslow's theory of needs. The researchers included the indicators of self-esteem, such as independence, confidence, or mental strength.

## ***Self- actualisation needs – codes P1 and P4***

Parents underlined how they observed their children and tried to recognise their potential. Diana, a mother of the youngest child in our study group, described it saying:

We try to develop some predispositions we observed, for example, she likes music, so we try to play music for her. She's got toy music instruments and actually likes them. We try to read to her a lot, because she likes it. That's what we think. I hope she will benefit from it in the future, that she will be communicative sooner, that she will like watching and reading books.

Considering the studied parents' opinions, children's potential seemed to be realised through the satisfaction of cognitive needs, related to fun, education and comprehensive development. Apparently, fulfilling children's cognitive needs related to their development also satisfies their needs for self-actualisation.

## ***Cognitive needs – codes P1 and P4***

The studied parents offered many examples of how they tried to realise these needs on their own and provide children with occasions to develop and play. Dominic described how he and his wife shared their responsibility for different areas of their child's development:

I am better, for example, at physical activities, like running, riding a bike, running with her, playing football even though she's a girl, there are no reliefs. My wife has more education like pedagogy, so she works more mentally with her. Some games, playing at home.

The studied parents also noticed many possibilities to develop their children's interests with extracurricular classes, specialised schools or using employer-subsidised recreation or cultural programmes funded by employers. Daniela, a mother of a ten-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy, described it:

I have filled almost 100% of my daughter's weekly time for the last few years with different activities, and I think it is good because she doesn't sit in front of a computer all the time. She reads on her own; she reads a lot, and she is familiar with the world.

Parents also appreciated the possibilities related to kindergartens and schools offering special classes or profiles including music or sports skills, in particular. One of the interviewed nurses described it:

It's getting a little easier ... there are a lot of institutions, for example, private kindergartens or nurseries, they are specialised somehow, or art or music, and you can choose. There are also some extracurricular activity centres as well.

Referring to the PORC data, for the previous decade, the amount of parents sending their children to extracurricular classes has consistently been growing. In 2004, children of 37% of the studied parents attended any extra classes whereas ten years later,

over half of the studied parents sent their children to such classes (52%) (Public Opinion Research Center 2014b). The type of additional classes has not changed; for years, the greatest amount of children have learned foreign languages or practiced sports.

## **Limitations and conclusion**

Firstly, there are a few limitations of the study. The studied parents were asked about their definition of a perfect childhood, but they were not directly asked about the possibilities to realise their vision. The respondents' aim was not to refer to Maslow's categories either. Therefore, future research might directly compare parent's vision and reality, embedding the research questions in the theory of needs.

Secondly, all the respondents came from cities in central Poland. Possibly, discussing the issues of perfect childhood and tools used to provide children with the desired reality might result in slightly different opinions among parents from more or less developed small towns, villages or different regions of Poland. Future research should, therefore, analyse any possible differences as regards the place of residence.

Thirdly, we also interviewed only one of the partners; thus, for example, opinions on sharing duties or responsibilities at home might be biased and might have been different when expressed in front of partners or at least confronted with the other partner's opinions.

Finally, in this study, we included only nurses, academics and administrative workers and all of them lived in average or high standards of living, and despite their complaints, their objective material situation was rather satisfactory. This could influence, for example relatively the high engagement of fathers in raising children; referring to the literature in the field, fathers usually engage less in family and house life in low-income households (Bryan, 2013). Therefore, future studies might include families from different socio-economic backgrounds to verify their vision of childhood and their reality as parents. Summing up the conclusions, Polish parents appear to develop vivid images of ideal childhood for their children and they know exactly what needs to happen for their children to experience happy childhood. This enabled us to develop the Pyramid of Needs in Perfect Childhood (Figure 1). According to our proposition developed on the basis of the respondents' opinions, Maslow's pyramid in the context of ideal childhood includes: physiological needs (providing for children, child's health), safety needs (attention and time devoted to children, sense of safety and calm), belonging and love (parental love, contact with family and peers), esteem needs (acceptance, parents' and peers' respect for a child, teaching a child rules and standards) and self-actualisation (supporting child's potential and spontaneity). Cognitive needs, which Maslow considered to be prerequisites for the child's development and the satisfaction of needs, refer to comprehensive development, fun and education.

All the studied parents spontaneously referred to the sense of safety, belonging and love as conditions necessary for good childhood. Thus, these two groups of needs dominated in the parents' discussions.

According to Maslow's assumption that self-actualisation refers to mature people, the studied parents referred to these needs the least frequently. They underlined

that giving the reasonable amount of freedom to a child to explore the world is essential for fulfilling self-actualisation needs when the child grows up.

Regarding Polish parents' reality, the greatest barriers to the realisation of their vision of perfect childhood included financial issues, work-related time availability, and problems with the health service.

Grandparents' help, kindergartens, flexibility at work and superiors' and colleagues' positive attitude towards the needs to reconcile work and private lives facilitated the realisation of the vision of perfect childhood. The studied parents also recognised numerous possibilities to provide their children with occasions for comprehensive development. They emphasised the role of informal support in childcare. This indicates the drawbacks of the Polish family policy that still has few practical solutions offered to working parents.

Given the above considerations, it can be concluded that the vision of perfect childhood can be realised in Poland, mostly thanks to parents' determination because the support from the government is limited and sometimes cannot be taken for granted. Our study shows that Polish parents of children aged six or less are frequently focused on financial problems related to fulfilling their children's needs. Thus, there is a need to devote more attention to such issues as unconditional love, emotional safety, esteem or self-actualisation in the public discourse on good parenting in Poland. We believe that educational programs addressed to parents and aimed at raising the awareness of the variety of methods to satisfy children's needs would help them change the way they think about realising their vision of perfect childhood.

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## **Povzetek**

Vsak starš lahko uresniči svojo vizijo idealnega otroštva na svojih otrocih, vendar je starševstvo proces, ki je odvisen od pogojev v okolju. Realizacija te vizije je odvisna predvsem od okoliščin, kulture in družbenih pogojev v katerih živi družina. Avtorice tega prispevka so se naslonile na hierarhijo potreb po Maslowu kot teoretičnemu temelju za pojasnjevanje mnenja poljskih staršev o "idealnem otroštvu" in možnosti realizacije te vizije. Prispevek predstavlja izide razgovorov z 31 poljskimi starši, ki imajo službo z najmanj enim otrokom starim do 6 let. Njihova mnenja o popolnem otroštvu so nadgradile Maslowovo teorijo s teorijo piramide potreb idealnega otroštva. Soočenje pričakovanih staršev z realnostjo je razkrilo njihova prepričanja ter upanja, povezanih z možnostmi razvoja otrok, hkrati pa je razkrilo tudi finančne težave in ovire, ki so povezane z oskrbo otrok in njihovo zdravstveno oskrbo.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** starševstvo, otroštvo, Maslowova piramida potreb

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