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## **Correlation between parents – children relationship and empathy levels in 14–16 years old adolescences**

Korelacja pomiędzy relacjami rodziców z dziećmi i poziomami empatii  
u młodocianych w wieku 14–16 lat

### **Abstract**

The research aims to explore the correlation between the parents-children relationships and empathy levels in the adolescence period. In the theoretical part, definitions, implemented research methods and results of previous research were analysed and evaluated. Study objectives were the theoretical analysis of the current understanding of the empathy issues and parents – children relationships, as well as empirical exploration of links between empathy and parenting styles. Based on the previous research, we hypothesized that there is a link between parents-children relationships and empathy levels in the adolescence period. 90 adolescents and their parents participated in the study; the median age for the group of adolescents was  $Me = 15$  years, for the group of parents  $Me = 37$ . Implemented study methods: *Parental Attitude Questionnaire*<sup>1</sup> and *Empathy Capacity Diagnostics* test<sup>2</sup>. A computer program SPSS 20.0 was implemented for data processing.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Varga & V. Stolin, *Parental Attitude Questionnaire*, [in:] E. Rogov, *Nastolnaja kniga praktičeskogo psihologa*, Kn. 1. “VLADOS”, Moskwa, pp. 328–333.

<sup>2</sup> See: V. Bojko, *Energija emocij v obsčhenii: vzgljad na sebja i drugih*, “Smisl”, Moskwa 1996.

According to the obtained data, a significant proportion of adolescents (58.0%) have low levels of empathy. The results of this research revealed two weak positive correlations between parents-children relationships and empathy levels in the adolescence period: a correlation between the level of Acceptance and the level of a Rational empathy channel ( $r = 0.237$ ,  $n = 90$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a correlation between the level of a Socially desirable behaviour and the level of an Identification channel ( $r = 0.270$ ,  $n = 90$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The hypothesis of the study was partially confirmed.

**Keywords:** empathy, parents-children relationships, channels of empathy, socially desirable behaviour, acceptance.

### Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problematykę korelacji między relacjami rodziców z dziećmi a poziomem empatii u młodocianych. W części teoretycznej analizie i ocenie poddano definicje, zastosowane metody badawcze i wyniki wcześniejszych badań. Celem badań była teoretyczna analiza obecnego rozumienia problemów empatii i relacji rodziców z dziećmi, jak również empiryczne badanie związków między empatią a postawami rodzicielskimi. Na podstawie wcześniejszych badań postawiono hipotezę, że istnieje związek między relacjami rodziców z dziećmi a poziomami empatii u młodocianych. W badaniu udział wzięło 90 młodocianych i ich rodzice; mediana wieku w grupie młodocianych wynosiła  $Me = 15$  lat, a w grupie rodziców  $Me = 37$  lat. Zastosowane metody badawcze: Kwestionariusz postawy rodzicielskiej<sup>3</sup> i Kwestionariusz zdolności do empatii<sup>4</sup>. Do przetwarzania danych użyto programu komputerowego SPSS 20.0.

Zebrane dane wskazują, że znacząca część młodocianych (58,0%) ma niski poziom empatii. Wyniki badania ujawniły dwie słabe pozytywne korelacje między relacjami rodziców z dziećmi i poziomami empatii u młodocianych: korelacja między poziomem Akceptacji i poziomem Kanału racjonalnej empatii ( $r = 0,237$ ,  $n = 90$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ) oraz korelacja między poziomem Zachowań prospołecznych i Kanałem identyfikacji ( $r = 0,270$ ,  $n = 90$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ). Hipoteza badań została częściowo potwierdzona.

**Słowa kluczowe:** empatia, relacje rodziców z dziećmi, kanały empatii, zachowania prospołeczne, akceptacja.

### Introduction

Due to increasing hostility and intolerance in contemporary Europe, the return to traditional family values has recently become more pronounced. It is also emphasized, that it is the parental attitude towards children that shapes the basic principles of their social behaviour and development. Constantly emerging clashes of ethnic groups in Europe, involving also adolescents, indicates hostility towards other cultures and a lack of tolerance, which is based on the capacity for

<sup>3</sup> A. Varga & V. Stolin, *Parental Attitude Questionnaire*, [w:] E. Rogov, *Nastolnaja kniga praktičeskogo psihologa*, Kn. 1. „VLADOS”, Moskwa, s. 328–333.

<sup>4</sup> Zob.: V. Bojko, *Energija emocij v obsčhenii: vzgljad na sebja i drugih*, „Smisl”, Moskwa 1996.

empathy. Empathy promotes interpersonal relationships and stabilizes them, allows supporting others in daily routine as well as in difficult extreme circumstances. Most researchers focusing on adolescents distinguish cognitive and emotional levels of empathy development<sup>5</sup>. Cognitive empathy is described as an ability of an adolescent to think from a perspective of other people. Emotional empathy is an ability to recognize and respond accordingly to feelings and emotional states of others. Empathy develops in the process of observing parents' behaviour and as a result of parents – children relationships. According to Crone & Dahl<sup>6</sup>, the two forms of empathy are already established by the age of 15. An integrative approach<sup>7</sup> allows identifying not only forms of empathy, but also the importance of individual components in the structure of adolescents' empathy. Ananieva<sup>8</sup> points out the underdeveloped state of an intuitive component of empathy in adolescents, which is related to the age peculiarities. Children find it difficult to predict behaviours of other people due to their limited experience in social interactions. Insufficiently developed ability to identify with others, revealed in adolescents, resulted in a limited self-disclosure and the lack of the ability to see or experience something from someone else's point of view in the communication process. The level of development of patterns promoting or hindering the manifestation of empathy in adolescents is largely associated with the parents-children relationships experience. In this study, empathy in adolescents is examined within the integrative approach.

In recent years, research focuses on cultural differences in parental attitudes towards a child. At the same time, it has been revealed that in different cultures the same styles of an attitude to children may have different consequences for their development<sup>9</sup>. Most researchers consider parenting styles within the concept proposed by Baumrind<sup>10</sup>, which describes four main patterns of family interactions: authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, permissive parenting, and neglectful parenting. It was revealed that the authoritative parenting style affects the development of empathy as well as behaviour of an adolescent<sup>11</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> W. Icles, *Empathic Accuracy*, "Journal of Personality" 1993, vol. 61, no. 4; D. Richardson, G. Hammock & S. Smoth, *Empathy as a Cognitive Inhibitor of Interpersonal Agression*, "Agressive Behavior" 1994, vol. 20, no. 4; A. Mehrabian & N. Epstein, *Measure of Emotional Empathy*, "Journal of Personality" 1972, no. 40.

<sup>6</sup> E. Crone & R. Dahl, *Understanding adolescence as a period of social affective engagement and goal flexibility*, "Nature Reviews Neuroscience", 1 September 2012.

<sup>7</sup> V. Bojko, *Energija emocij...*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> N. Ananjeva, *Razvitiye empaticheskikh sposobnostei u podrostkov*, source: <http://www.scienceforum.ru/2016/pdf/25887.pdf> [access: 20.05.2016].

<sup>9</sup> N. Hill, *The relationship between family environment and parenting style: A preliminary study of African American families*, "Journal of Black Psychology" 1995, no. 21, pp. 408–423.

<sup>10</sup> D. Baumrind, *Parenting styles and adolescent development*, [in:] J. Brooks-Gunn, R. Lerner, A.C. Peterson (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Adolescence*, Garland, New York 1991, pp. 746–758.

<sup>11</sup> K. Aunola, H. Stattin & J.E. Nurmi, *Parenting styles and adolescent achievement strategies*, "Journal of Adolescents" 2000, no. 22, pp. 205–222.

because children have the opportunity to learn how to manifest empathy from their parents<sup>12</sup>. The permissive (liberal) parenting style results in a weak development of cognitive and emotional empathy in adolescents. According to Eisenberg et al.<sup>13</sup>, adolescents from families where parents demonstrate the elements of empathy towards them have less problems in relationships with other people and better control over their behaviour. Schaffer<sup>14</sup>, revealed that the cause of an anti-social behaviour among adolescents can be related to authoritarian, permissive and freestyle parenting styles, and lack of understanding and empathy in parents – children relationships. Kohut<sup>15</sup> linked the cause of narcissism in adolescents with a *chronic frustration*, which occurs in the absence of parental love and empathy. Campbell et al.<sup>16</sup> noted that narcissism leads to problems in interpersonal relationships due to the lack of empathy; a narcissistic person does not understand other people, as they do not understand their problems in a community. There are links to model proposed by Steinberg & Silk<sup>17</sup>, highlighting the three main aspects of parents – children relationships: harmonious (support), autonomous (autonomy granting), and conflicting (hostility). It was revealed<sup>18</sup> that only in families with high parental support levels do adolescents have lower levels of aggressiveness and delinquent behaviour<sup>19</sup>. In the current study, parental attitude is considered as a systematic formation, which includes parents' feelings and actions towards their children.

## Method

The study aims to empirically explore the links between parental attitudes towards their children and empathy levels in 14–16 years old adolescents.

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<sup>12</sup> F. Pezzella, *Authoritarian parenting: A race socialization protective factor that deters African American adolescents from delinquency and violence*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database 2010 (UMI No. 3398173).

<sup>13</sup> N. Eisenberg, Q. Zhou, T. Spinrad, C. Valiente, R. Fabes & J. Liew, *Relations among positive parenting, children's effortful control, and externalizing problems: A three-wave longitudinal study*, "Child Development" 2005, no. 76, pp. 1055–1071.

<sup>14</sup> M. Schaffer, *The role of empathy and parenting style in the development of antisocial behaviours*, "Crime and Delinquency" 2008, vol. 20, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kohut, *The restoration of the self*, International Universities Press, New York 1977.

<sup>16</sup> W. Campbell, C. Foster & E. Finkel, *Does self-love lead to love for others? A story of narcissistic game playing*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 2002, vol. 83(2), pp. 340–354.

<sup>17</sup> L. Steinberg & J. Silk, *Parenting adolescents*, [in:] M.H. Bornstein, B. Webber (eds.), *Handbook of parenting*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 2002, pp. 103–133.

<sup>18</sup> G. Barnes, J. Hoffman, J. Welte, M. Farrell & B. Dintcheff, *Effects of Parental Monitoring and Peer Deviance on Substance Use and Delinquency*, "Journal of Marriage and Family" 2006, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 1084–1104.

<sup>19</sup> W. Meeus, S. Branje & G. Overbeek, *Parents and partners in crime: a six-year longitudinal study on changes in supportive relationships and delinquency in adolescence and young adulthood*, "Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry" 2004, vol. 45, no. 7, pp. 1288–1298.

The main hypothesis: there is a link between parental attitudes towards their children and empathy levels in adolescents. Participants: 90 adolescents and their parents. The median age for the group of adolescents was  $Me = 15$  years, for the group of parents  $Me = 37$ . All participants – Russian-speaking citizens of Latvia. Participation in the study was voluntary.

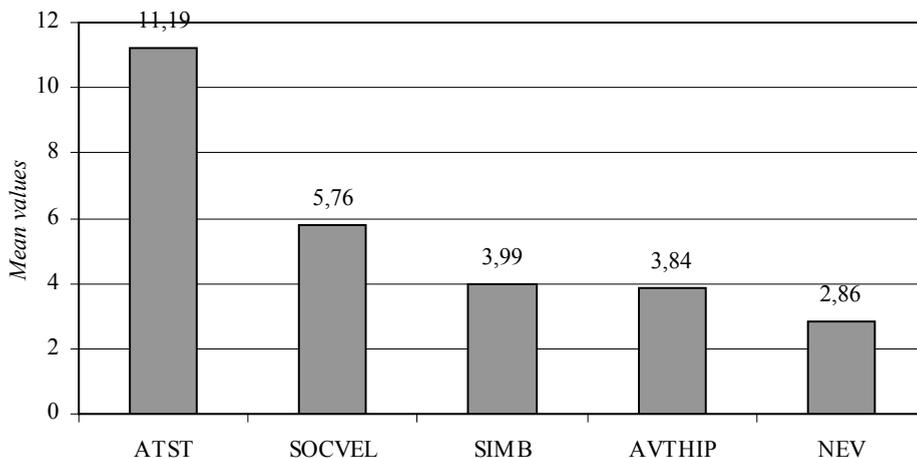
Study methods. Instruments:

- *Parental Attitude Questionnaire* by Varga and Stolin<sup>20</sup>;
- *Empathy Capacity Diagnostics* by Boyko<sup>21</sup>.

Data processing was implemented by a computer program SPSS ver. 20. The mathematical apparatus for empirical data processing was chosen according to the research hypothesis. The empirical data compliance with the normal distribution was verified to select statistical criteria for data processing. The empirical division of most variables do not match the normal distribution, therefore, a nonparametric statistics method, Spearman's correlation coefficient, was used for further research.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of average values of the variables revealed the trends of the sample. Figure 1 shows the average values for the *Parental Attitude Questionnaire* scales<sup>22</sup>.



**Fig. 1.** Average values for the *Parental Attitude Questionnaire* scales (ATST – Acceptance, SOCVEL – Socially Desirable Behaviour, SIMB – Symbiosis, AVTHIP – Authoritarian Hyper-socialization, NEV – Little Loser). Source: Author's research.

**Ryc. 1.** Średnie wartości skal Kwestionariusza postawy rodzicielskiej (ATST – Akceptacja, SOCVEL – Postawy prospołeczne, SIMB – Symbioza, AVTHIP – Autorytarna Hipesocjalizacja, NEV – Mały przegrany). Źródło: Badania własne.

<sup>20</sup> A. Varga & V. Stolin, *Parental Attitude...*, op. cit., pp. 328–333.

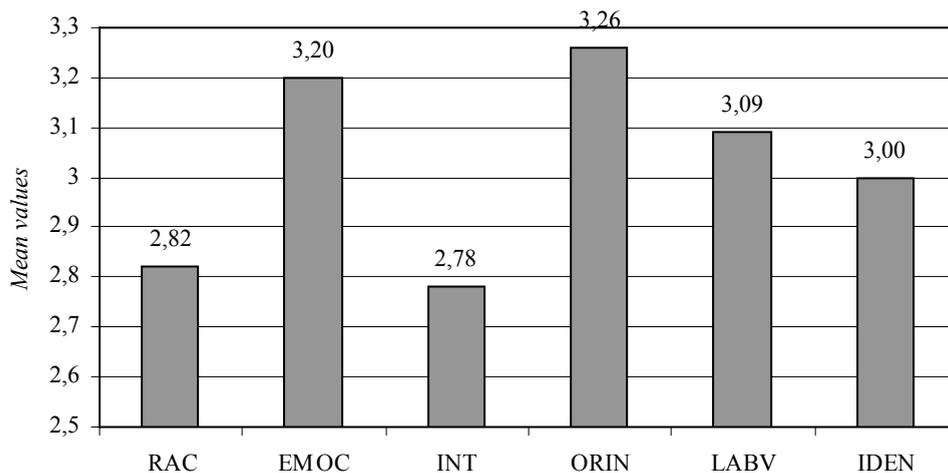
<sup>21</sup> V. Boyko, *Energija emocij...*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> A. Varga & V. Stolin, *Parental Attitude...*, op. cit., pp. 328–333.

It was found that in the group of parents the most common parental attitude is the acceptance of their children in the way they are: parents accept them and are interested in their plans and intentions (ATST, 79.0%). Parents also demonstrate a socially desired style of relationships (SOCVEL), encouraging independence and initiative of adolescents and showing empathy in relationships.

The empirical data analysis shows that 18.0% of parents in the sample have a symbiotic relationship with their children, which can both promote and hinder the development of a certain kind of empathy in adolescents. 12.0% of parents demonstrate a high degree of authoritarianism, demanding unconditional obedience and discipline, constantly monitoring and punishing manifestations of children desires and requests. These parents are not inclined to demonstrate empathy in their relationship with children. 4.0% of parents tend to infantilize their children, do not trust them, try to patronize and protect them from difficulties, and control their actions, treating them as not being able to adapt to life conditions. These parents do not have high levels of capacity for empathy themselves and, therefore, are not able to foster its development in adolescents.

Figure 2 shows the average values of the *Empathy Capacity Diagnostics* test scales.



**Fig. 2.** Average values of *Empathy Capacity Diagnostics* test scales (RAC – Rational Channel of Empathy, EMOC – Emotional Channel of Empathy, INT – Intuitive Channel of Empathy, ORIN – Attitudes toward Empathy, LABV – Penetrating Power, IDEN – Identification). Source: Author's research.

**Ryc. 2.** Średnie wartości skal *Kwestionariusza zdolności do empatii* (RAC – Racjonalny kanał empatii, EMOC – Emocjonalny kanał empatii, INT – Intuicyjny kanał empatii, ORIN – Postawy wobec empatii, LABV – Siła przenikania, IDEN – Identyfikacja). Źródło: Badania własne.

The empirical data analysis revealed that 55.0% of the adolescents in the sample tended to express empathy, understand other peoples emotions and establish communicative connections with other people (ORIN). 40.0% of adoles-

cents demonstrated high levels of the emotional empathy channel (EMOC), which is expected for the age group being studied. 38.0% of adolescents had high levels of the ability to identify with others (IDEN) that allows them to empathize through putting oneself in the other person shoes, that results in mobility and flexibility of their own emotional states.

The implemented correlation analysis revealed two weak statistically significant positive correlations between the variables being investigated (Tab. 1).

**Table 1. Correlation table**

Variables		Spearman's rho (r)	Sig.
ATST	RAC	0.237	0.024
SOCVEL	IDEN	0.270	0.01

Source: Author's research.

**Tabela 1. Tabela korelacji**

Zmienne		Rho Spearmana (r)	Sig.
ATST	RAC	0,237	0,024
SOCVEL	IDEN	0,270	0,01

Źródło: Badania własne.

The data revealed that the higher the degree of parental acceptance, the more developed was the rational channel of empathy in adolescents. The rational channel of empathy improves the ability to perceive and understand emotional states and behaviours of another people on the basis of the relationships experienced in one's own family. It was also found that the higher the degree of cooperation between parents and children, the greater was the ability for identification in adolescents, which is an important condition for empathy development.

## Conclusion

1. Psychometric characteristic of the questionnaires implemented in this study have been found acceptable in the current version: Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.7.
2. The hypothesis of the study has been partially confirmed.
3. Most parents in the sample are inclined to accept their adolescents, support, help, and interact with them.
4. Half of the adolescents in the sample tended to express empathy and maintain communication with other people.

5. The most developed empathy channels among adolescents in the sample are emotional empathy and the ability to identify with others.
6. The revealed statistically significant links between the variables confirm that socially desirable parental attitude contributes to the rational empathy channel development and ability for identification in adolescents.
7. The obtained results can be explained by the development patterns of certain empathy components in adolescents<sup>23</sup>.
8. The results of this study comply with other research findings demonstrating that parental attitude toward a child enables them to learn how to manifest empathy<sup>24</sup>.
9. The current research results can help psychologists in training programme development aimed at parental skills improvement.

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<sup>23</sup> N. Ananjeva, *Razvitije empatičeskih sposobnosti...*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> K. Aunola, H. Stattin & J.E. Nurmi, J.E., *Parenting styles...*, op. cit., pp. 205–222; F. Pezzella, *Authoritarian parenting...*, op. cit.

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