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*This article is based on a verbal presentation given to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the article below, which has been checked and approved by Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger .*

# How to enable children and adolescents to acquire key competences for the world of the 21st century?

by *Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger*

## SUMMARY

*The theme 'How to let children and adolescents acquire key competences for the world of the 21st century' is addressed in three ways:*

- 1. Through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in this case considering the needs of children and adolescents;*
- 2. An ecological approach to the core family, having a place within other nested structures;*
- 3. Outlining some of the main challenges faced by families today.*

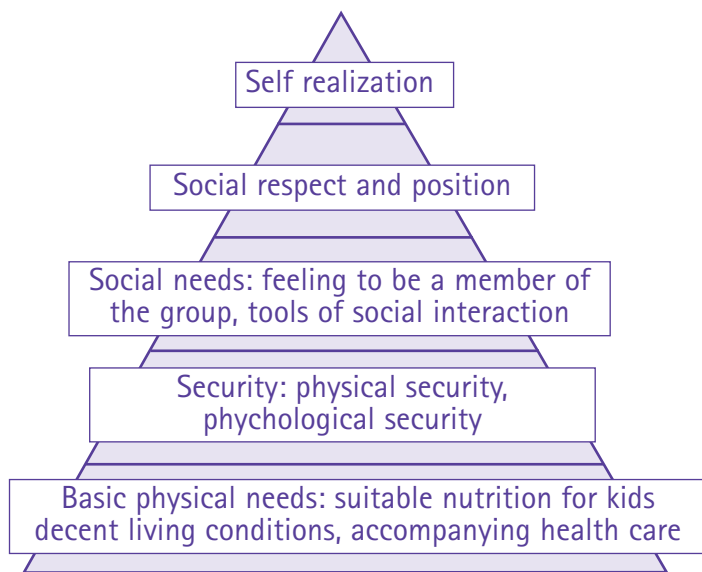
*When my second child was born in 1998 I began to reflect intensively on the quality of childhood in our society. This focus led me to found the organisation ARGE-Erziehungsberatung, a team of psychotherapists, medical doctors, psychologists, educators and trainers who share a deep concern that families, and especially parents, can no longer cope with the dramatic socio-cultural changes that have occurred during the past twenty years and with the pressures that these changes have placed on them and on the family. As a consequence of these pressures on the family we see increasing rates of:*

- psychoneurotic behaviour*
- anxiety disorders*
- attention deficit disorder*
- juvenile depression*

*among children and adolescents.*

## 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the Quality of Childhood

Firstly, I will consider the question of what is needed to provide a high quality of childhood through the lens of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:



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### *Basic physical needs:*

These include suitable nutrition for children and decent living conditions (including a warm, dry home, enough space and light, as well as the means and conditions for creating a sanitary environment). In addition, state provision of a set of joined-up healthcare measures is essential, providing support and close monitoring of each child's development, from birth onwards. In Europe in countries such as Austria we consider that the basic physical needs of children are, on the whole, being met, although there is a growing cohort of families drifting towards poverty (mainly single parent families). However, not all European countries are meeting children's basic physical needs as yet. For example, this situation applies to some of the new member states, such as Romania.

### *Security*

By security we mean the security of being able to meet all the basic physical needs of the family members on a long-term basis (which has to do also with the "wellbeing" of the

state) as well as psychological security. An important aspect of this level of need is crucial to the quality of childhood, namely the level of commitment that parents feel towards their children. What is important is that parents convey the message of "I want YOU" to their children, thus providing a secure shelter for each child. Parents need a lot of reinforcement and guidance with regard to how to look after their children. For example, encouraging mothers to breastfeed in order to provide a space for the early process of bonding. Unfortunately in Austria the number of mothers who breastfeed for a period of 6 months (as recommended by the WHO) is steadily decreasing.

### *Social needs and social behaviour*

By social needs we mean the ability to feel a member of a group and being socially connected. These are basic human needs. It is worth reflecting on the quality of early learning centres, pre-primary school and on parenting – what and how are they teaching or conveying in terms of social interaction and behaviour? What are the basic social needs of children of the 21st century and how should these be met by society and families, in order to provide a high quality of childhood? There are many adverse influences today on children's social development. In the area of meeting children's social needs in a healthy way there is a real need for parent education and parent counselling.

### *Social respect and position*

This need is to do with feeling an important member of society, of the groups that the child belongs to. Ideally the child knows their own value and experiences social acceptance and respect, and treats others with respect. Once again the globalised society in which we live brings with it many challenges. Parents wishing to prepare their children well need completely new tools to educate and support their children's needs and development on this level.

### *Self Realization / Self Fulfilment*

This need can only be met when all the other needs have been adequately met. Without the first layer, securing the basic physical needs, the development of the second layer is heavily handicapped, and without the second level of "security" the development of the third level of "social needs and social behavior" will not work too well either. In this model, self realization is represented by the tip of the pyramid, and is, so to say, the icing on the cake. I am pointing this out because self realization is, of course, crucial to realizing a happy life script. However we notice that in many modern families there is a tendency to over-stress self-realization. In many cases meeting children's basic physical and social needs and providing the necessary guidance is being pushed into the background, giving way to a shifting of focus towards a so-called self realization. For example, we see in a materially well-off society, such as in Austria, that many children do not have meals with their parents but tend to feed themselves with junk food, creating a large group of overweight children (17% of children in Austria are classed as being overweight). Currently

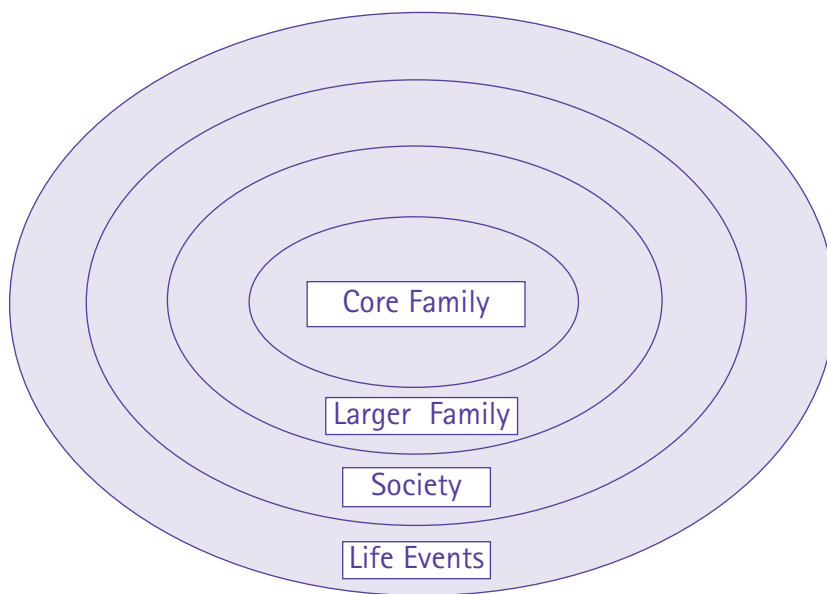
ARGE-Erziehungsberatung is working on a project on this theme with the general hospital in Vienna. In Austria we are now faced with children of 12 and 13 years old who weigh 170 kg. They refuse to go to school and they don't go out any more. They spend their time playing games on the computer and on the internet.

Sometimes "self realization" takes the form of binge drinking, in other words, drinking a lot of alcohol in a short period of time, so that the person quickly gets drunk and in the worst case ends up in hospital with alcohol poisoning.

An even bigger problem, from my point of view, is that "self realization" in many cases is not focussed on developing the best in a person, and on following that target with strength and tenacity, but means choosing the most comfortable way of living, with children and adolescents often refusing to take on social responsibility.

## 2. The Ecological Approach: the Core Family within the Matrix of Society

ARGE-Erziehungsberatung has developed the following diagram for depicting the various structures in which modern families function:



### *Development of the modern family*

During the past 30-50 years we have seen a dramatic change in the structure of the family: from a multi-personal and multifunctional top-down social construction to a system of inter-connective relations between a small core family and society. These huge changes leave many parents feeling unprepared and that they do not have the solutions to hand to meet the challenges with which they are faced.

One generation ago many functions were fulfilled within the family, for example:

- Healthcare
- Education
- The father was the head of the household.

The role a parent played 30 or 50 years ago has completely changed since then, because the relationships of the parent to the above mentioned environments has changed profoundly. Many functions, formerly managed within the family, have been outsourced, making the modern family much more dependent on society than 50 years ago.

What we call the core family has undergone a serious process of shrinking over the last decades. Many families have only one child, and faced by that fact a very special psychological situation of connection for both parents and child occurs. Within the core family, there is to be seen, from a psychological point of view, a polarization of communication, because most families are nowadays so small that they are not able to offer sufficient communication options with other close family members. Being the one and only option puts a certain pressure on the few family members. Parents tend to project their life goals onto their only child and are quickly disappointed when the child does not always stay on track.

On the other hand, many young adults do not manage to leave the Core Family and remain living with their parent(s), even when they are well into their twenties or thirties. This is known as the "full nest syndrome". The parent still provides the basic needs of the 'child' and their salary is considered as 'pocket money'. When the parent(s) try to push the child out of the nest the 'child' sometimes registers for a new course of study, so that he/she remains dependent.

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*Families are challenged to find new forms of authority, structures, and forms of decision-making – fit for the demands of the modern world.*

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One generation ago the father was the unquestioned head of the household, representing the authority of the state in the 'Core Family' and there was one key rule: that of obedience. Things from the point of view of the individual citizen may not have been good, necessarily, but they were clear. It made sense to educate your child according to the codes of obedience and the rules of your and their specific positions in society. We are all happy that society and families have evolved since then. There has been a wide movement of democratisation in all the European countries over the last 20 years. A democratic society needs citizens who have incorporated democratic procedures, democratic ways of decision-making and of communication. The old style of education (which was suitable for earlier generations) does not fit anymore. There are many other qualities and competencies needed in a democratic society other than obedience. For success in an interconnected global society struggling for democratic values the citizen of the near future, represented

by the children of today, needs many social competences, in addition to knowledge and knowledge management skills. We all know through our own experience as well as through scientific research, that the key competences of social intelligence have to be acquired during childhood, thus making educating children to acquire social competences the responsibility of parents and teachers. But how do I go about helping my child develop into a well-connected team player? How to foster his/her self esteem? How exactly can I train with my single child to be cooperative? In this area the old educational models do not offer any solutions to modern parents. Families must find their way towards new forms of authority, structures, decision making and so on.

### *Changes in the Larger Family*

If you look at the above diagram you will see the first circle around the core family. This environment I call the 'Larger Family', meaning, for example, the grandparents and siblings of the parents of the core family.

Many modern parents have fewer brothers and sisters. In this way fewer role models of other parents or adults are available. In addition to this grandparents frequently do not live close to their children and grandchildren, and are therefore not available to be called upon to baby-sit or in other ways participate in the life of the core family on a daily basis. The bonds between generations have become looser and looser over the past decades. The organisational set-up of the Core Family is weakened due to such demographic changes.

### *Changes in Society*

The second circle is called 'Society', by which I mean all the other environments around the Core Family, including the media.

### *Life Events*

The last circle is called 'Life Events'. By this I mean the events that have the power to change the course of our lives, for instance the winning of the lottery, the death of a parent, divorce, unemployment, imprisonment, and so on.

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### *How and where do we teach our children the following competences?*

- *To be a team player*
  - *To develop self esteem*
  - *To have the ability to cooperate with others*
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### *The impact of the media on children and families:*

When I was a child I only watched children's television programmes for an hour on a Wednesday afternoon. Today, the situation is completely different: 24 hours per day 7 days a week there are programmes on television. For the parents it is a challenge to handle the television consumption of their children:

- How do I limit my child's television consumption?
- How do I ensure that my child only watches suitable programmes?
- What is the impact on the social-psychological development of my child?

The same is true with the new media: for example, videos, play stations, the internet, and chatting. Often parents are not familiar with all the intricacies of the new media, nor do they know how to guide their child in these new domains, what to allow and what to restrict or ban.

#### *The fluid structure of the modern Core Family:*

The challenge for parents becomes even greater due to the fluid structure of the modern family. The partners have the ambition to sustain a long-term relationship, but their expectations have been scaled down, because of rather high divorce rates (50% in Austria, and in the area of Mailing in Vienna it is above 80%). After a divorce the various members of the family must each find a new place in a new situation, often in patchwork families including the children of a new step parent. Lots of questions arise and problems occur when parents divorce, and when new families are formed. There is a real need for families to receive professional help provided by the state in these circumstances. Most parents find themselves in a situation of learning by doing, very often learning through trial and error. For example, as one parent pointed out: "I feel like I have to invent the wheel. At the end I might succeed, but I am afraid of what might go wrong along the way."

#### *Children want a high level of consumption:*

Another phenomenon of the modern family is the pressure put on children through advertising, peer pressure and other means which leads them to pester their parents to buy them things. Parents have to find ways of managing this challenge and often cannot cope with it. For example, in our work with dysfunctional families and with children with various psychological and behavioural disorders, what we hear is that parents thought that through buying children what they wanted that they were contributing to providing a high quality of childhood for their children.

There are many other ways in which modern society interferes with families and requires parents to find completely new ways of preparing their children for the future.

In conclusion, I want to mention the rapid change that many societies are experiencing as they become more multicultural. This development offers vast possibilities as well as many challenges. The rapid increase in the speed of life (all we have to cope with in the course of a day, for example) is another factor worth mentioning, and the consequences of this on the quality of childhood in particular have to be communicated to the wider society.

In summary, over the past 20 years there have been many changes which have influenced all levels of family life, as well as having a huge influence on the quality of childhood.



Parents and teachers have been ill prepared for these changes and challenges and need training and support to find effective ways to provide their children with a high quality of childhood and an education which will really equip them for the needs of the future.

#### Appendix A:

*ARGE-Erziehungsberatung is a counselling company concerned with the raising and education of children. The four fields in which the company is engaged are:*

- 1. The education of trainers and counsellors with a specific focus on parenting and on families*
- 2. Counselling parents and educators about raising and educating children and developing special educational projects*
- 3. Scientific research into families and parenting*
- 4. Programmes for companies and industry; example: Employee empowerment programmes, with a specific focus on meeting the needs of both families and the workplace*

**Dr. Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger** is one of the leaders in Austria in the area of counselling parents and educators about raising and educating children. She has set up a counselling company called ARGE-Erziehungsberatung with a team of 13 counsellors. She has degrees in the following areas: medicine, gynaecology, psychotherapy, mediation in the area of learning and neuro linguistic programming (NLP).

#### *Disseminating new psychological insights*

The strength of Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger is to disseminate to many groupings and organisations, and also to the general public in Austria, new psychological insights, which are based on the notion that it is our innate nature to take responsibility for our own situation and to determine for ourselves our own way in life. Her programmes encompass:

- Her column in one of the leading newspapers in Austria;
- Her frequent participation in television programmes;
- Her on-line counselling practice;
- Her programme which provides counselling to young mothers in the workplace, and the organisations that employ them, to assist them in learning to acquire a good work-life balance. The companies are very interested in this approach because so many young mothers suffer from burn-out and consequently leave the company;
- Her programme which provides counselling to schools on the basis of a dialogue between students, teachers and parents, treating each other with mutual respect, and developing together an agenda for the school.

#### *Fit for Kids / Fit for Life*

Her counselling company offers Fit for Kids / Fit for Life programmes for managers and employees of child care centres, kindergarten and schools. The basis of the training is again to help participants to learn to take responsibility for their own situations and to show respect to the children and students and their parents. (The purpose of Fit for Life is to train people in democratic values, attitudes and behaviour).

#### *Romania*

Martina Leibovici-Mühlberger also works in Romania, a country that is struggling with its transformation from an autocratic system towards a more respectful way of living together. Her project addresses this transformation process and the challenges to people in connection therewith.