

# Professional assistance of parents expecting their first child

PhD Theses

**Zsuzsanna Soós Kiss**

School of PhD Studies of Semmelweis University  
PhD School of Pathology



Tutor: Dr. Mária Barna professor, C.Sc., PhD.,

Official reviewers: Dr. Hedvig Bodánszky privat docent, C.Sc., PhD.,  
Dr. György Garamvölgyi general director, C.Sc., PhD.,

President of the Examining Committee: Dr. Iván Forgács  
university professor,  
Prof. Emeritus,

Members of the Examining Committee: Dr. Katalin Barabás  
university professor, C.Sc., PhD.,  
Dr. György Harmat,  
general director C.Sc., PhD.,

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**Theses of PhD Dissertation**

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Written by: **Zsuzsanna Soós Kiss**

Tutor: **Dr. Mária Barna professor, C.Sc., PhD.,**

**School of PhD Studies of Semmelweis University**

PhD School of Pathology

(Chairman: Prof. László Kopper, M.D., PhD., D.Sc.)

17th Research in Public Health and Health Science Program

(Program coordinator: Prof. Péter Sótónyi, M.D., PhD., D.Sc.)

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## Summary

Expecting and the birth of the first child and partners becoming parents and family will always be a topical issue for society, the social system and competent experts.

With the birth of the first child, the family has to establish a new “family pattern”, and at the same time must become able to fulfill the role of parent and caretaker.

Apart from the natural socialization process, conscious preparation must also play a role in the process.

The obligatory services provided by legal provisions, which aim to facilitate the preparation for parenthood serve to guarantee that the parents will be prepared. The professional assistance systems operating outside the framework of such services provide alternatives, enabling parents to choose between them according to their demands, ambitions, needs and possibilities.

The aim of my research -of nearly 10 years now- is to create a new program for preparing those concerned for the changes in family life, for parenthood, as well as for taking care of and nurturing the baby. The program has a multidisciplinary approach, and builds on the active participation of the attendants, and their working as a pair. The speciality of the program is that it undertakes to prepare the parents without the presence of an expert.

My research shows that the preparation book, based on the principles of programmed education, as well as my self-made questionnaires and reply letters provide the mothers and fathers expecting their first children with a new possibility of preparation. At the same time my thesis is a professional and methodological recommendation to the experts engaged in providing professional support to parents expecting their first children.

## **1. Introduction**

The conception, the expectation, the arrival and the upbringing of the first child is of exceptional importance in the life of the parents and that of the whole family.

Investigating the issue is worthwhile for several reasons:

1. Demographic and family statistics data have proved increasingly unfavorable in Hungary for the past 25 years:

- the absolute decrease of the population began in 1981.  
Considering the data for the past six years, the yearly decrease has been 37,656 on average.
- the number of marriages is decreasing, while the number of divorces is outstandingly high with one divorce for two marriages on average.
- the number of live births is decreasing, 148.673 for the year 1980, 125.679 for the year 1990, 97.597 for the year 2000, 97.047 for the year 2001, 96.804 for the year 2002 while it was only 94.647 for 2003. There was a slight increase in 2004 with 95,137, in 2005 with 97.496.
- The population growth indicator is a negative number, which implies decrease. It ranged between -1,9 and -4.7 for 1000 people from 1990 to 2005.
- The number of children born in marriages is decreasing.
- The average age at the first marriage is growing from 26.9 for women and 29.3 for men, consequently, it is also higher at the birth of the first child.

2. The time of pregnancy, birth and early infancy is a period of exceptional importance in the history of a family. The family structure undergoes structural and functional changes. Every family needs to work out the new “family structure” as well as define the new aims, values, rules, expectations, and routines. At the same time, the relationship between the couple should be catered for and modified so that the couple can cope with the task of looking after and raising the infant. Families tend to be increasingly nuclear.

3. The period in question is of exceptional importance, concerning the somatic, psychological and social development of the child, as well as his prospects and later life.

4. Besides the traditional care for expecting mothers, new, alternative parent-training programs were initiated in the '80s in Hungary. From 1993 on social workers, from 1997 on professionals working in child protection or those doing voluntary work joined these programs. My own contribution to parent-educating programs dates back to the late '90s. My research is based on actual parental needs, the needs of the parents expecting their firstborn.

## **2. Objectives**

My ambition is to fill the gap in the training of parents expecting their first child in Hungary. On the one hand, my target population is parents expecting their first child, on the other, I propose the implementation of a parent-training program worked out based on my research. My objectives are the following:

1. My primary objective was to work out a special, model program for parents expecting their first child. The program:

- motivates parents to deliberately prepare for parenthood together,
- promotes:
  - awareness concerning the relationship between the couple, family life and infant-care
  - improvement of the relationship, mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other.

2. My second objective was to realize the program in practice, and analyze and interpret the results afterwards.

3. My third objective was to put forward my propositions on the implementation of a program based on the results of my research.

I intended to answer the following questions:

1. Are parents expecting their first child aware of the available training programs, or the importance of being prepared?

2. How well prepared are they for parenthood four months before the expected time of birth?

3. How do their skills change as a result of exposure to the model?

4. To what extent can this change be attributed to the model program?

5. Can fathers be involved in the training? Do parents actually prepare together in that case?

6. What personal opinion do they form of the training program?

### **3. Sample and method**

The research was carried out between 01.01.2003 and 03.31.2005 in family homes in two villages, Zsámbék and Tök. I got in personal contact with 96 families meeting the criteria. The criteria for participation in the program were the following:

- parents expecting their first child,
- parents expected their first child together (in marriage or cohabitation),
- at the time of the research they did not participate in other parent training programs,
- when the mother entered for the program, the pregnancy was in its 20<sup>th</sup>, maximum 24<sup>th</sup> week,
- both the mother and the father were motivated in participation.

Sociological characteristics of the participants reflected general tendencies characteristic of the country: older age at the arrival of the first child (26.5 years for mother, 30.1 years for fathers on average; the oldest mother was 37, the oldest father was 54 years old), high number of couples living in cohabitation (27%), a short history of the couple (the relationship dated back to 0-1 year at 40% of the participant). Concerning education (62% had secondary or higher education) and family home (76% started their own family life in their own housing), the situation was better than the average.

#### Description of the study

##### *20<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

Couples meeting the criteria receive an “information leaflet for parents” about the program, for which they can volunteer after they fill in a form, in which they declare that they volunteer, and they receive a code number.

##### *24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

The start of the study: measurement, giving out questionnaires A, B/1. and C (compiled for the study). Afterwards, the couples are randomly organized into the experimental and control groups. The members of the experimental group receive a programmed booklet to assist their preparation for the arrival of the child.

##### *26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

Every couple receives a “feedback letter” with the results of the first study.

##### *24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> / 32<sup>th</sup>-34<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

The members of the experimental group prepare with the help of the programmed book in their own homes. The members of the control group receive traditional professional help.

*32<sup>nd</sup>-34<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

Final study: measurement with A, B/1., B/2., C and D questionnaires compiled for the investigation.

*34<sup>th</sup>-36<sup>th</sup> weeks of pregnancy:*

Every couple participating in the program receives a “feedback letter” with the results of the investigation, and a card proving participation in the program.

### Methods

1. *Review of the literature:* I studied the literature on family changes after the birth of the first child, and on the system and methods of professional help in Hungary.
2. *Model-experiment:* I carried out a model-experiment in order to train parents expecting their first child.

The methodological elements of the model are the following:

- *training book:* the first edition of the book (Becoming or Wanting to Become Parents?) focused on infant-care skills, while the second edition (Being or Becoming Parents?) focused on the process of the formation of the family. Concerning didactics, the training was based on programmed education (individual study, covering separate units, individual pacing, providing feedback, learning about the results immediately), as well as the principles of systematic family-care.
- *questionnaires:* self-compiled, containing open and yes/no questions on five separate fields: the sociological characteristics of the participants (general questionnaire), knowledge about relationship and family (questionnaire A), infant-care knowledge (questionnaire B/1. and B/2.); parental satisfaction (questionnaire C); self-report on the training program (questionnaire D).
- *“feedback letters” and card:* didactically on the basis of systematic approach, on Rogers “approach of reflection”, were aimed at reassuring parents.

The methodology of the training program is fully based on parental participation, which is why the model was named Active Preparation for Parenthood Model (APP).

### *3. Survey method, analysis and assessment of results*

The survey method was used to gather data concerning the applicability and effectiveness of the model. The questionnaires were given out in, anonymously, weeks 24<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup>/34<sup>th</sup> of the pregnancy. The data was processed with content analysis and mathematical, statistical methods (distribution, average, dispersion, range, t- and Chi<sup>2</sup>-tests). Significant difference meant  $p < 0.05$ .

## **4. Results**

1. The fact that 46 couples out of the 96 that we had personal contact with dropped out of the program reflects that parents expecting their first child are not sufficiently motivated to prepare for the arrival of their offspring. 36 couples refused participation,  $\frac{3}{4}$  argued that they could not spare the time. Concerning the effectiveness of the model, it is worth noting that 83.3% of the 60 couples that volunteered successfully concluded the program.

2. Application of the model-program 4 months prior to the expected time of birth:

- Satisfaction was generally high as regards the time necessary to accept (96%), to get to know each other (95%), to prepare for parenthood (88%) and to adapt (78%).

- Most parents were able to handle conflicts adequately (88%), to account for baby-care (80.5%), or define family trees (79%). Knowledge about sex after giving birth was somewhat less common.

- Parental opinions reflecting a clear concept of the new family and parenthood with 54-73% and 46-62% of parental opinions reflected an average satisfaction level of 3,8-4,2 and 3.9 and 4.2, respectively (out of maximum 5 points).

- 35 qualities characteristic of “good parents” were listed by the parents. The first 10 considered the most important were: family- and child-centeredness and love; caring-protective; responsible-committed; patient-relaxed-calm; consistent; devoted-selfless-generous-helpful-reliable; dependable; considerate-understanding; good-hearted - kind - benevolent - mother-type; is prepared/experienced in nurturance.

- Clear understanding of family structures was characteristic regarding less important concepts, such as holidays, relationship with the parents of both, expectations toward each other. More significant structures concerning everyday life (rules; agreements; the division of labor; aims; routines) were somewhat less clearly understood.

- Parents felt the most confident in their understanding of values, holidays, aims, cooperation with their own parents and parental expectations of all the concepts in the most important structures of parenthood. The understanding of rules, routines, child-rearing principles, agreements or that of the cooperation with their partner's parents was less common.

- As far as parental preparedness was concerned, parents perceived better preparedness in their relationships, emotions or physical features than in childcare skills or financial means.

- The perception of "good parents" concerning "yourself/your partner, the two of you together" showed a frequency of 92% and a high degree of satisfaction (4.47-4.69-4.69 out of 5 points maximum).

3. 1.5-2 months before the expected time of giving birth, after the application of the model program:

- The results improved with regard to skills and satisfaction in every field targeted in the study.

- At the time of the second study, parents listed 38 qualities characteristic of "good parents". The 3 most important parental qualities were listed as child- and family-centeredness, love; caring-protective parental attitude; and patient, supplemented with considerate-understanding.

- Understanding of new family structures significantly improved in every field. Significantly more participants reported clearer understanding in the fields of aims, rules, values and distribution of labor (28%, 24%, 22%, 18%, respectively). The understanding of values and aims moved to the top, while the rest of the list remained the same as in the first study. Most of the parents felt that the understanding of the rules, agreements, routines and the division of labor is somewhat less clearly understood.

- There was significant improvement in every field in the understanding of structures of parenthood (32% in child-rearing principles, 29% in rules and 26% in parental expectations and values). The top of the list of the most clearly understood concepts included values, aims, parental expectations and child-rearing principles.

- The perception of preparedness also showed improvement. Similarly to the first study, parents considered themselves the best prepared in the fields of emotions and physical features, and the least prepared in the field of financial means.

- The initially high degree of satisfaction regarding the term of “good parent” further increased. The average score allocated to “good parents” together was the highest, followed by the score given to partner and yourself as “good parent”.

- In the case of the experimental group, satisfaction increased less or even decreased in certain cases compared to the control group, although they gained better insight into parenting.

4. The positive influence of the model on preparedness was reflected in the higher rate of correct answers and better understanding, as well as a higher degree of satisfaction.

- As far as infant-care skills are concerned, the performance of the experimental group and that of the control group was nearly the same at the time of the first study (80%, 80.75% - “mediocre” performance) for both groups. At the time of the second study, members of the control group achieved “good” performance (85%), while the members of the experimental group achieved “outstanding” performance with a 13% improvement on questionnaire B/1. At the time of the second study, members of the control group achieved “mediocre” (77.5%), while members of the experimental group achieved “outstanding” (92%) on the new questionnaire B/2.

- To assess the change in knowledge in the control group (for the comparison of the average of the results of the first and the second results) one-sample t-test was used (the value /1.92/ is smaller than the value in in the t-distribution table at 24 degrees of freedom with  $p < 0.05$  level of significance /2.064/), the result of which can not be considered significant. We can not be 95% sure that better performance in the case of the control group can be attributed to the model (questionnaire, feedback letters).

- In the case of the experimental group, the difference in their performance proved to be significant on the basis of the one-sample t-test (with a result of 3.35, bigger than the value in the table /2.064/). It can be stated with a certainty of 95% that the program led to an actual improvement in the knowledge of child-care in the case of the experimental group, and that their improved performance was attributable to the program.

- On the basis of the study of the correlation between the performance of the mothers and the fathers and their education ( $\chi^2$ -test) it can be stated that there is a 10% or 20% probability of chance playing a part in the influence of education on performance. The rule of chance is higher than the usual 5% significance barrier in  $\chi^2$ -tests, thus the correlation between education and performance is not significant. Doing the  $\chi^2$ -test in

the case of the fathers in the experimental group the results showed that the fathers benefited from the program irrelevant of their education.

5. One of the main benefits of the model was that mothers and fathers took part in the training program together. The fathers in the experimental group spent the least time preparing with the help of the book on average. Fathers were more willing to study together with the mothers than alone. 19 of all the participants specifically underlined that studying together was one of the main benefits of the program.

6. Parents gave a positive evaluation (78%) of the program, while those using the programmed book evaluated the program at nearly a 100%.

Participants mentioned 162 reasons why they enjoyed taking part in the program.

The model helped future parents be better prepared for parenthood in 3 different fields and in 23 specific ways.

<b><i>I. preparation</i></b>
1. it provided training in childcare
2. it raised relevant questions
3. the questions did not come up before
4. it provided lot of new, interesting information
5. it helped study, was instructive
6. it triggered further research
7. it provided an answer to certain questions
8. it highlighted tasks to be solved
9. it helped harmonize certain matters
10. it greatly promoted preparation
<b><i>II. relationships</i></b>
1. preparation together was a success, the couple got involved and communicated with each other
2. agreement was achieved
3. they got closer
4. issues surfaced that were not discussed before
5. they grew together
6. the ideas of the partner came to light

<i>III. insight</i>
1. discovered the need to actively prepare
2. found out that there is still much to learn
3. there is need for more patience and helpfulness
4. more attention should be paid to issues
5. found out how well prepared he/she is, better self-awareness
6. found out that feelings constantly change
7. there are matters previously not considered

### **5. Suggestions for practical use**

1. With the practical implementation of the new model there is one more alternative program for parent training in Hungary.
2. The program is based on an active participation of parents, hence the suggested title: *Active Preparation for Parenthood Model (APP Model)*.
3. The implementation of the program is further justified because there has not been a program specifically targeted at parents expecting their first child.
4. The model is also unique in its kind because couples study together in a controlled way.
5. The implementation of the program is highly cost-effective: there is no need for the actual presence of a professional person, there is no need for special infrastructure, the cost of teaching aid (book, questionnaires, feedback letter, card) should be calculated.
6. The book alone can assist the preparation of the parents through controlled study.
7. I have no knowledge of the availability of a book on family structure and baby-care.
8. The whole book, its parts and individual tasks can be used as teaching aid:
  - a. Used by healthcare professionals in compulsory and alternative parent-training programs.
  - b. Social workers, professionals working in child-protection and family counseling may use it in family prevention programs.
  - c. It can be useful in education, in regular lessons or outside school activities (courses, study circles, clubs). Certain parts of the books can be used in biology, psychology, pedagogy, science, social science and ethics lessons, as well as in history lessons, where the parts on family types and family trees, or in mathematics lessons, where the parts on

calculations concerning the feeding of the baby, or in Hungarian language lessons, where the parts on early communication between parents and infant can be used.

9. The questionnaires can be used as tools to measure the preparedness of parents.

10. Changes are necessary in professional training, it is necessary to start new courses on family dynamics, problem-solving, counseling, the methodology of the training of middle-aged parents.

## **6. The thesis is based on the following research**

### My research papers in the topic

1. Soósné Kiss Zs. Szülővé lenni, vagy szülővé válni? Budapest: General Press; 1996.
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11. Soósné Kiss Zs. Die Erfahrungen der Verwendung des Modells „Vorbereitung auf aktive Elternschaft”. Pflegezeitschrift 2007; 60: (szerkesztőség által visszaigazolt 2007. évi április havi megjelenés)

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2. Soósné Kiss Zs. Védőnő hallgatók felvételre és tanulásra motiváló tényezőinek vizsgálata.  
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3. Soósné Kiss Zs. Védőnő hallgatók felvételre és tanulásra motiváló tényezőinek követéses vizsgálata.  
Egészségügyi Főiskolák Oktatóinak Tudományos Konferenciája, Budapest, 1998.
4. Soósné Kiss Zs. Az anyatejes táplálással kapcsolatos elméleti és gyakorlati ismeretek oktatásának tapasztalatai a védőnő hallgatók főiskolai képzésében.  
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