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Possibilities for Supporting Children’s Speech Development in Large Families – Challenges and Opportunities

**Możliwości wsparcia rozwoju mowy dziecka w rodzinie wielodzietnej –
szanse i wyzwania**

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Abstract

Introduction. The family is the foundation of any society, as it performs key educational, emotional, and social functions. Despite modern-day changes in its structure, it remains the main environment in which individuals develop their cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. Large families provide a unique environment for speech development, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Some of the challenges for large families are related to the organization of time and financial resources within the household.

Aim. The purpose of this article is to identify the opportunities available to parents in large families who want to support their children’s speech development, as well as indicate what difficulties and challenges they face in the process of raising multiple children. Providing the described knowledge to parents is also an important aspect.

Methods and materials. The study used an analysis of the available literature on the subject, as well as the researcher’s own observations gathered during her work and private life in a large family. Daily work in the office, at the university, and at home provided an im-

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pulse for the author to begin her research in the described subject area.

Conclusion. A conscious approach on the part of parents in large families, as well as joint support from siblings, can be effective in building children's language development. Also worth noting here is the role of specialists who can help with the various difficulties presented by children in large families. The cooperation of many such specialists can bring the intended results, but the challenge for parents consists in organizing the time and financial resources necessary for the relevant activities.

Keywords: family, large family, speech development in children, support, development support

Abstrakt

Wstęp. Rodzina to fundament każdego społeczeństwa, pełniący kluczowe funkcje wychowawcze, emocjonalne i społeczne. Mimo współczesnych zmian w jej strukturze, pozostaje ona głównym środowiskiem, w którym jednostka rozwija swoje kompetencje poznawcze, społeczne i emocjonalne. Rodziny wielodzietne stanowią unikalne środowisko dla rozwoju mowy, oferując zarówno szanse, jak i wyzwania. Wyzwaniem dla opisywanej grupy z pewnością jest organizacja zasobami czasowymi i finansowymi w gospodarstwie domowym.

Cel. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wskazanie możliwości, jakie posiadają rodzice w rodzinach wielodzietnych, chcąc wspierać rozwój mowy swoich dzieci, a także wskazanie, jakie trudności i wyzwania im towarzyszą w procesie wychowywania większej liczby dzieci. Ważnym aspektem jest również przekazywanie opisywanej wiedzy dla rodziców. Istotna jest tu również wiedza rodziców na opisywany temat.

Metody i materiały. W pracy wykorzystano analizę dostępnej literatury przedmiotu oraz obserwacje podczas pracy zawodowej i życia prywatnego w rodzinie wielodzietnej autorki artykułu. Codzienna praca w gabinecie, na uczelni oraz w domu skłoniła badaczkę do rozpoczęcia badań w opisywanej tematyce.

Wnioski. Świadome podejście rodziców w rodzinach wielodzietnych oraz wspólne wsparcie rodzeństwa mogą skutecznie budować rozwój językowy dzieci. Warto również tutaj pamiętać o roli specjalistów, którzy mogą pomóc w przypadku różnych trudności prezentowanych przez dzieci w opisywanych rodzinach. Współpraca wielu z nich może przynieść zamierzone efekty, jednak wyzwaniem dla rodziców z pewnością jest pogodzenie zasobów czasowych i finansowych w wyżej opisywanych działaniach.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, rodzina wielodzietna, rozwój mowy dziecka, wsparcie, wsparcie rozwoju

Introduction

The family is one of the most important social institutions, playing a key role in shaping the individual and maintaining cultural and social continuity. It is also the primary environment in which a person learns social norms, values, and behaviors, and develops a sense of identity. Within the family, a person experiences the first social interactions and acquires basic communication skills. As Margaret Mead (1970) points out, the family is the first social circle in which individuals shape their perception of the world and of themselves. Today, however, we are witnessing dynamic changes in the structure of the family, resulting from globalization, urbanization, and changing social values. Modern families are increasingly different from traditional models. Such phenomena as the growing number of single-parent households, civil unions, and childless marriages, attest to the ongoing evolution of this institution. A family in which three or more dependent children are raised is classified as a large family. Such families play a special role in society, contributing to demographic growth, and sustaining family values (Kośny, 2021).

Speech development is a key component of children's overall cognitive, emotional, and social development. Large families, while offering a rich environment for social interaction, present both children and parents with specific challenges in the process of fostering language competence. They are also characterized by a large number of daily language interactions. Children have the opportunity to spend time with siblings whose speech development is at various levels, which can promote learning through observation and imitation. On the other hand, however, the parents' time constraints and the children's different needs may pose challenges to providing individual support in learning to speak. Under such conditions, it becomes particularly important for the parents to take a conscious approach to their child's language development (Cieszyńska & Korendo, 2008). The subsequent part of the article will characterize large families from several perspectives; the author will present the challenges faced by the parents, as well as examples of good practices that they can apply when supporting this process.

The Situation of Large Families in Poland: Definitions, Functions, and Challenges

The concept of a family can be considered from several research perspectives, including those within sociology, psychology, and economics. The sociological perspective assumes that the family is a social group that consists of people linked by ties of marriage, kinship, or adoption, living together in a common household. It is the basic

element of social structure, shaping the relationships between individuals (Parsons, 1956). In psychological terms, a family is an emotional system in which individuals interact with one another, influencing the emotional, psychological, and social development of its members (Bowen, 1978). Economically, on the other hand, the family is a unit of production and consumption that provides material support to its members and enables the transfer of resources between generations (Becker, 1981).

It should be noted that the family performs a number of functions that are crucial to society. Primary among them is the procreative function, which ensures the biological continuity of society by providing offspring. The educational function, in turn, shapes an individual's personality and allows the transmission of cultural values and norms. Meanwhile, the economic function provides material security to family members. Satisfying psychological needs such as love, acceptance, and support, is made possible by the emotional function. The function of guardianship, on the other hand, guarantees care for those who are otherwise unable to function independently, such as children or the elderly (Ochojska *et al.*, 2015).

The structure of the family plays a key role, representing a set of patterns of interaction between its members. For example, the greater the number of people in a family, the more complex are the relationships formed within it. Also important in this structure is the position of the individual members, which defines their place in the social hierarchy and their associated roles. Many of these roles are the result of biological differences, for example, fathers are assigned to different tasks than mothers. There are also roles that we assume ourselves by belonging to various associations or clubs. Additionally, we perform many roles unintentionally, which can lead to exhaustion and relationship disorders (Ochojska *et al.*, 2015).

Referring to the concept of large families from the above perspectives, we may note that in sociology, as well as in social psychology, the large family is considered in terms of the structure, as well as the relationships and bonds between parents and children. By contrast, pedagogy—combining sociological and psychological approaches—considers the extended family as a socio-educational system, which makes it possible to show the internal mechanisms of the family's functioning as well as the relationship between the family and other groups and educational institutions (Forma, 2010, as cited in Bieńko, 2021; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2002; Nowak, 2006; Żeglicka, 1998).

Analyses of research into the environmental determinants of having multiple children reveal two principal directions. On the one hand, it is noted that the lower the educational level of the parents, the higher the fertility rate (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 1997). However, chief among the reasons for having a large family is the woman's desire to have many children, which often correlates with her higher education (Bieńko, 2021; Ochojska *et al.*, 2015). Mothers often choose to give up full-time employment in order to care for their children (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 1992; Forma, 2013; Jędrzejczak,

2013; Szostek, 2015; Zralek, 2001). In the context of research on the status of women in families with multiple children, both issues concerning situations in which mothers do not take up professional employment (Bukojemska, 2012) and the fulfillment of family roles by mothers who work outside the home are discussed (Achremowicz *et al.*, 2022; Bednarz-Luczevska, 2013; Krause, 2023).

It should also be noted that the quality of life in large families is significantly influenced by the number of members, which determines the material and housing conditions of the family. Taking into account the economic aspect, social policy recognizes large families as those with a minimum of three children. The appearance of a third child in a family significantly affects the deterioration of its material situation compared to families with fewer children (Graniewska, 2004). Parents with custody of several children face numerous challenges and constraints that undoubtedly affect the development of their members, especially children. Among them we may list the following:

- *Limited individual attention*: related to the fact that parents often have limited time to work with each child individually, which may result in overlooking subtle developmental problems, including language difficulties. The difficulties associated with the fact that when both parents work professionally, they have less time to stimulate their children's development (Hoff, 2006) should be highlighted here;
- *Age differences between the siblings*: older children may use more advanced language that younger children are not always able to understand. On the other hand, there may be simplified forms of language that the younger child is eager to imitate (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2002);
- *Mutual assistance by siblings*: may stimulate speech development through language play, but may also take care of some communication needs on behalf of the younger children, which in turn limits their independent verbal expression;
- *Financial constraints*: the more family members reside in a given household, the smaller the amount of financial resources allocated to it. Families with multiple children often face financial difficulties as a result of greater expenditures on the children's needs, which leads to the risk of social exclusion, among other issues (Szarfenberg *et al.*, 2010);
- *Emotional and educational burden*: on the parents of large families, who often feel overburdened with responsibilities, which affects their mental health and the quality of the family relationships (Kacprowska, 2024);
- *Problems with housing*: large families are more likely to face problems related to insufficient housing, which affects their quality of life (GUS, 2022);
- *Lack of social support*: large families may experience stigmatization or lack of understanding from those around them, leading to social isolation (Ochojska *et al.*, 2015). In many situations, large families face difficulties accessing

- informal support networks, such as help from relatives or friends. They often experience a sense of social isolation due to insufficient time to establish relationships and a lack of understanding from those around them (Kotowska, 2019);
- *Inadequate institutional support*: despite the fact that there are support programs such as 800+, many large families experience a lack of sufficient help from institutions. They often perceive a scarcity of local initiatives that could support them in their daily struggles, such as childcare and organizing leisure time;
 - *Lack of understanding of the needs of large families*: the needs of large families, such as access to more living space, flexible working hours for parents or support for children's education, are often overlooked by the public and policy makers. This state of affairs leads to a sense of marginalization and underrepresentation of these families (Szlendak, 2010);
 - *Low social activity of large families*: related to the fact that they often have limited opportunities to participate in social life due to the time burden of childcare and insufficient financial resources. This causes their further exclusion and difficulties in establishing supportive relationships.

Describing the above challenges faced by members of large families, it is important to mention the phenomenon known as the *mental load of mothers* and their *invisible work*, referring to the daily management of domestic, family, and emotional responsibilities that often rest on the shoulders of women. This is especially true in the context of caring for children, managing the home, and maintaining social relationships, which can lead to chronic stress and burnout. Women often act as *managers of the household*, taking care of meal planning, children's schedules, and remembering important dates, such as doctor's appointments and birthdays of family members (Daminger, 2019). Studies show that even in families where the partners claim to share the responsibilities equally, women do most of the invisible work, such as managing the family members' emotions and planning activities (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Mental strain can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed or mentally and physically exhausted, along with well-being problems.

According to the American Psychological Association (2019), chronic stress resulting from unequal sharing of family responsibilities can increase the risk of anxiety disorders and depression. In families with multiple children, certainly mothers perform the described *invisible work* to an even greater extent than do mothers who have fewer children. The social pressure to be the *perfect mother* makes women feel they must meet unrealistic standards. Research by Kathleen Gerson (2011) shows that although perceptions of family roles are changing, traditional gender roles continue to influence the expectations for women. It would be appropriate to consider applying possible solutions to such situations, which would include joint planning and sharing of responsibilities

in the family, raising awareness of the mental strain and its consequences, and adjusting family policies to the situation.

It should be noted that the lack of social support for large families not only makes it difficult for them to cope with daily challenges, but can also lead to their marginalization. Increasing public awareness of their needs and developing both institutional and informal support systems could significantly improve their situation.

Ways in Which Parents Can Support Their Child's Speech Development in Light of the Subject Literature

The development of a child's speech is a complex process that involves parents, but also specialists. Their role is extremely important, especially in the first years of life, when the child's brain is most malleable and receptive to linguistic stimuli. The present paper will outline the key aspects in which parents can support speech development in their children, based on the available scientific literature.

In order to take care of correct pronunciation in children and prevent the occurrence of speech defects, preventative measures should be implemented from an early age (Wołoskiuk, 2015). The most beneficial form of such measures is the use of primary prevention, aimed principally at creating conditions for the correct development of language and counteracting the formation of language delays and disorders (Ochman, 2021). For this reason, it is important to use various methods and strategies to promote language development in the youngest children.

Natalia Bednarska (2020) writes about the invaluable role that human interaction plays in stimulating children's language development. The desire to interact with others is an immensely powerful motivator for language learning. Neither television, nor tablets, nor even the most sophisticated educational toys are able to stimulate language development in the same way that human interaction does. Michael Tomasello (2003) also stresses that a child's speech develops through shared engagement and imitation of adults. Daily conversation, answering the child's questions and naming objects and activities create a rich linguistic environment. We also need to note the importance of addressing children in a natural and clear way, the so-called *word bath*. This term emphasizes the importance of telling the child about the immediate environment and surrounding the child with words. It is crucial to engage children and encourage them to make contact, as well as arrange a variety of communicative situations. Telling the children about current events and creating simple messages stimulates their interest in speech and develops cognitive curiosity (Wołoskiuk, 2015).

However, Ewa Gacka (2016) stresses that word baths may not be sufficient. A key element of effective communication is the bilateral nature of the relationship. This means

that the child should fully participate in the dialogue, acting as both the sender and receiver of the message. In this regard, it is worth following the principle that “we communicate with the child, not just talk to the child” (Gilkerson *et al.*, 2018, as cited in Gacka, 2016, p. 280).¹ The role of specialists cannot be overlooked here, in providing support for the parents when they become concerned about their child’s development.

Researchers (including Bednarska, 2014; Cieszyńska-Rożek, 2014; Michalak-Widera, 2008) point out that attention should be paid to the pervasive influence of multimedia on children. Parents should be aware of what positive and negative situations their offspring can experience in the media space. Caregivers need to control the time and content of digital media so that the negative effects are minimized. The use of digital resources is not unequivocally bad, of course. Skillful use of them can have a positive impact on development. There are many valuable apps or online content that can be used when stimulating development and learning in children.

Toys designed for preschool children can also effectively support their speech development. Interactive books equipped with a talking pen (such as *Albik* or the *Carolina* series) are an interesting option. Such toys can significantly enrich a child’s vocabulary. However, it is worth remembering that apps and interactive toys should only have a supporting function. While they may provide some facilitation, in the long run their impact on a child’s development may not be as beneficial as it may at first seem (Bednarska, 2020). What should be emphasized here is the irreplaceable role of parents and caregivers in accompanying children during such games.

It is also worth mentioning that reading to children is one of the most important and effective ways of supporting their language development. Regular reading influences the development of vocabulary, narrative skills, and language comprehension. While reading together, children have the opportunity to learn unfamiliar words and language structures. Studies show that children who are regularly read to have richer vocabularies than their peers who do not have this opportunity (Bus *et al.*, 1995). Parents can additionally explain more difficult words, further enhancing the effect, or encourage the child to tell a story based on the illustrations, or predict what is likely to happen next.

Zofia Dysarz (2003) points out the key role that parents’ sensitivity to their children’s linguistic behavior plays in the process of stimulating speech. When the youngest engage in linguistic activity, they expect a response, which in turn leads to new verbal responses. These interactions can contribute to increased phonological awareness, which will result in more proficient language use in the future. A factor that is no less important in affecting the development of a child’s speech in the family is the educational atmosphere. Acceptance and the creation of optimum conditions of care promotes more frequent

¹ Author’s own translation.

verbal interactions at home. Children who feel comfortable and safe in their environment are more likely to share their experiences and engage in dialogue (Dołęga, 2003).

Danuta Emiluta-Roza (2006) underscores that parents should seek methodological support in available guidebooks and popular science publications. If possible, it is also advisable to consult a professional speech therapist, who will select appropriate exercises and offer the parents practical tips for daily practice. We should also mention here the current widespread availability of professional and reliable knowledge on the Internet, which is a remarkable convenience in the modern world. Free content on various social networks is offered by many specialists in various fields. This is often very valuable content, substantive and reliable.

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Child Language Development

One of the most important aspects of supporting and diagnosing a child's development is undoubtedly an interdisciplinary approach to these complex processes. All aspects of a child's functioning are extremely important. Both physical and psychological development will significantly affect the child's speech development. The cooperation of parents with various specialists is expected to result in the optimal development of the child, so children should undergo numerous examinations and consultations starting from the time of their birth. Both in the process of prevention and diagnosis itself, parents and caregivers must ensure that the child has access to specialists such as a dentist, physiotherapist, osteopath, ENT specialist, or even an orthodontist. Specialized cooperation is important in the process of prevention as well as therapy for the child.

Related to the approach described above is the key role of biomechanics and biochemistry in the development of speech organs and motor skills in children. Biomechanics affects both physiology and motor coordination, both of which are necessary for the proper functioning of the articulation system. Biomechanical conditions, such as muscle tone, joint flexibility, and muscle strength, are crucial in the process of learning to speak. Proper coordination of the muscles of the tongue, lips, mandible, and soft palate enables accurate articulation of sounds. Biomechanical disorders, such as muscle hypotonia or body asymmetries, can lead to difficulties in acquiring articulation skills, among other problems. Early diagnosis and physiotherapy are key to preventing permanent deficits (Błaszczuk, 2024). Hence the need for physiotherapy consultation for the young child. Exercises of gross and fine motor skills should also be included in speech therapy.

The role of the biochemistry of the child's organism, which has a significant impact on speech development, should also be emphasized here, since biochemical processes

affect the functioning of the nervous, muscular, and endocrine systems, which together enable the development of language skills. A proper diet, rich in omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins and micronutrients such as zinc and iron, is crucial for the development of the brain structures responsible for speech. Speech acquisition and development will also depend on the biochemical balance of neurotransmitters or hormone levels and oxidative stress experienced by the child, as well as energy metabolism. Deficits in these components can even lead to delays in speech development (Rodwell *et al.*, 2018). An important concept here is *kryptopyrroluria*, a biochemical-enzymatic disorder of the metabolism of heme that is genetically determined and often familial (Strienz, 2012). This disorder is associated with a very wide spectrum of symptoms, physical and psychological ailments, and sometimes with characteristics that are widely recognized as character traits, which certainly affect many children, including speech therapy patients (a topic that is increasingly discussed within the worldwide community of speech therapists).

Diagnostic medical examinations, to which we should regularly subject ourselves and our children, are both especially important and extremely expensive. It should be noted here that not all of these tests are reimbursed by the National Health Service, and diagnosing several children in a family multiplies the cost for the parents. Without obtaining data on the development of children, speech therapists and psychologists cannot effectively diagnose and adjust therapeutic measures for specific patients.

Strategies for Parents to Supports Children's Speech Development in Large Families

Large families face the challenge of supporting normal speech development in children in conditions of intense social interaction and limited time and financial resources. Despite the difficulties in these families, certain strategies can be used in order to support speech development in their youngest members. Regular conversation with children in various everyday situations supports the development of their vocabulary and narrative skills. In large families, it is important that each child has time to talk individually with a parent. Daily conversations with the child, even brief ones, are essential. Such individual interactions promote speech development by adapting communication to the child's age and needs. Parents should strive to speak clearly, adapting their vocabulary and grammar to the child's age (Hoff, 2006).

As previously mentioned, reading books to children and telling stories enriches the children's vocabulary and introduces them to various language structures. Among other things, parents can encourage older children to read to their younger siblings, which supports the development of all children (Morris *et al.*, 2007). Providing children

with access to books, magazines, educational materials, and engaging them together in conversations about a variety of topics promotes speech development (Rogoff, 2003). Subsequently, implementing various forms of play, such as guessing games, rhymes, songs, and board games supports the development of language and communication skills. These are particularly effective in large families, where children learn from one another (Brzezińska *et al.*, 2008). In large families, older siblings can act as language role models for younger children, teaching them new words and language structures through daily interaction and playing together (Brody, 1998).

Encouraging children to speak and express their thoughts and feelings without pressure for linguistic perfection promotes their confidence and speech development. Parents can avoid criticizing the children's mistakes but rather model correct language forms (Piaget, 2001). It is also particularly important to take care of children's development through proper stimulation of their physiology. Sleep, correct body posture during various daily activities and proper nutrition have a very significant impact on the correct development of children's speech. For example, the parents' knowledge regarding nutrition and expanding the diet of infants and the subsequent diet of older children makes it possible to properly stimulate their articulatory apparatus; this is also related to the parents' own eating habits. This is a broad topic that requires many more empirical studies and is also related to the functioning of large families.

In the event of delays or difficulties in speech development, it is worth consulting a speech therapist. Early intervention is key to minimizing difficulties in the future (Kurcz, 2000). With the birth of each successive child in a large family, the parents will already have much more experience, which they can use to make new decisions about stimulating their children's development. Certain resources, such as educational aids, clothing, or household items can be reused by subsequent children, which greatly facilitates the functioning of the family.

Summary

The role of parents in the development of their child's speech is invaluable. Through daily conversations, playing together, reading books, and providing emotional support, they can create optimal conditions for the child's language development. However, a balanced approach that takes into account both the child's language needs and his or her individual rate of development is key. Also, a large family can introduce daily rituals for these practices. For example, a parent reads a book to younger children while older siblings describe pictures or create alternative endings. Such activities promote speech development in both younger and older children.

The above behaviors of parents aimed at stimulating language development in children undoubtedly require a great deal of time and financial resources. This is a particular challenge for caregivers of multiple children. While they want to provide proper conditions for the development of their children, parents are often unable to meet these requirements. Usually both parents have to work to earn money for basic necessities, thus they have less time to give attention to each child individually. Parents also often have limited funds for toys, teaching aids, as well as visits to specialists, which unfortunately are largely not refunded by the National Health Service. However, by taking advantage of alternate childcare, both institutional and informal, parents may certainly be able to ensure the proper development of each child. In addition to the problems raised here, it is also important to enable parents to improve their competence and knowledge of how to stimulate proper development of speech in their children, so that they can make the right decisions related to their development. Activities raising the level of behaviors related to preventing speech disorders in children certainly rest heavily on state institutions.

There are no doubt many aspects of the topic addressed here, which opens new opportunities to design empirical research in this area. Subsequently, the implementation of various solutions developed on the basis of the research results would make it possible to provide significant support to large families.

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