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## Family Determinants of Risk Behaviors of Foster Care Alumni

**Abstract:** The article is theoretical and research-oriented, aiming to demonstrate the connections between family condition and the engagement of children and adolescents in problematic behaviors (Jessor's concept). The purpose of the considerations undertaken is to characterize, based on research findings, the risk factors that promote risky behaviors within the families of origin of foster care institution wards, which may contribute to their demoralization. The characterization of familial determinants of risky behaviors stems from conclusions drawn from original qualitative research employing the biographical method, as well as a meta-analysis of other available research reports on the subject. This characterization may facilitate the diagnosis and understanding of the etiology of risky behaviors among children and adolescents from disadvantaged groups, and support the design of preventive and educational interventions tailored to the needs of this group of recipients – the wards of foster care institutions. **Key words:** Adolescents, family, child care home, wards of institutional foster care, risk factors, risky behaviors, prevention.

### Introduction. The Syndrome of Risky (Problematic) Behaviors – a Multifaceted and Complex Phenomenon

The issue of risky behaviors is interdisciplinary and is addressed by researchers representing various fields. Psychologists study the psychological, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms leading to risky behaviors and develop interventions aimed

at preventing them. Pedagogues analyze the influences of upbringing, education, and the school and family environments on youth's risky behaviors, and they develop preventive and educational strategies. Sociologists, in turn, examine the impact of social factors, such as family structure, peer groups, media, and the social environment, on engaging in problematic behaviors. Representatives of medical sciences (psychiatry, public health) study the physical and psychological effects of risky behaviors and develop intervention and prevention programs in the field of public health. An interdisciplinary approach to studying risky behaviors in youth allows for a better understanding of this complex phenomenon and the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies (cf. Bobrowski 2006; Grzelak 2006; Siudem 2013; Jędrzejko et al. 2013; Michel 2013; Wróblewska 2014; Bernasiewicz 2017; Sęk 2020; Pyżalski 2024).

Despite the broad interest in the discussed topic, it should be noted that it remains largely unexplored due to its multifaceted and complex nature, requiring further reflection and in-depth verification. This aspect may be particularly significant for designing preventive and educational interventions dedicated to children and youth from disadvantaged environments or groups at risk of demoralization, including, according to researchers' assessments, wards of foster care institutions (Martin et al. 2022).

Ch. E. Irwin (1990, pp. 1–14) defines risky behaviors as activities undertaken voluntarily, while also pointing out their uncertain consequences and negative health effects. Ostaszewski defines them as anti-normative behaviors, contrary to societal and legal expectations and order, emphasizing that besides posing a health risk, they also threaten individual and societal development (Ostaszewski 2005, pp. 112–113). The repertoire of risky behaviors, dynamically expanding due to civilization's development and social changes, commonly includes: tobacco use, alcohol consumption, drug use, synthetic drugs, and other psychoactive substances, violence, aggression, vandalism, running away from home, school dropout, early sexual activity, gambling, underage prostitution, while it is emphasized that this is not an exhaustive list (Bozzini et al. 2021, pp. 210–221; Vannucci et al. 2020, pp. 258–274).

According to Zajęzkowski, the occurrence of risky behaviors is facilitated by mutual interactions among three groups of variables: “initial and fundamental,” “socio-psychological,” and “social behavior.” The first group, which will be particularly addressed in the further part of the article, consists of two factors: the socio-demographic structure, which includes elements such as family structure, parents' education, their professions, and religious beliefs, and socialization, namely the family climate, specifically: the ideology embraced by parents (traditional vs. innovative beliefs of the mother and father, parental religiosity, tolerance vs. intolerance towards manifestations of deviation), peer group influence, and mass media influence. The second main group, as indicated by the mentioned author, consists of “socio-psychological variables.” It comprises two systems: the personality system, which, as emphasized by Zajęzkowski, includes low

educational achievements, a high value on independence, lack or low expectations regarding personal achievements, intensified criticism of social reality, low self-esteem, isolation, and social alienation, a sense of external control, high tolerance for deviant behaviors, a tendency to attribute constructive rather than destructive values to deviant behaviors. According to Zajęczkowski, “individuals acquire these characteristics over the course of life, and the greater their concentration over time, the more they form a cohesive syndrome, the greater the tendency toward deviant functioning” (Zajęczkowski 2000, p. 21). The mentioned author further points out the perception of the environment system, which has the most constant connection to behavior. “In the case of the ‘environment perception system,’ the inclination towards risky behaviors arises from parents’ low inclination to provide support and control, weak peer control, low consistency between parents’ and peers’ expectations, a low level of parental disapproval of risky behaviors, and high peer approval of engaging in risky behaviors. [...] The last third group of “social behavior” variables forms the behavior system, consisting of the structure of antisocial behaviors and conventional behaviors” (Zajęczkowski 2000, pp. 20–23).

Referring to the interactive model by Jessor, it is worth dedicating some attention to the purpose and functions that, according to the authors’ concept, these forms of activity fulfill for young people. According to the authors, they have developmental value and can serve to satisfy important needs for young people. This role is also emphasized by Gaś, indicating that problematic and risky behaviors are characterized by an instrumental nature, enabling the satisfaction of needs impossible to satisfy in another form, reducing anxiety associated with adult demands, helping to “cope” with school failures, expressing solidarity with peers, identification with the group, satisfying the need for belonging, allowing the demonstration of significant attributes of youth identity (cf. Gaś 1995; Gasiul 2024). This may justify their “attractiveness and accessibility” for disadvantaged youth from neglected environments, often the backgrounds of wards of care institutions. According to the Jessors, the authors of the theory of problematic behaviors, incidental, individual cases of engaging in risky behaviors are quite common and characteristic of the adolescent stage. Therefore, in the literature on the subject, attention is drawn to the syndrome of risky behaviors, which can no longer be treated in normative terms. Individual behavior is not sufficient to determine the occurrence of risky behaviors, but engaging in one of the aforementioned behaviors increases the likelihood of subsequent or other similar actions harmful to the health and development of young individuals. K. Ostaszewski observes that all risky behaviors of youth are associated with negative consequences and a certain risk for proper development. These behaviors can hinder functioning in social roles, manifest conflicts with the law, disrupt personal development, and shape one’s own identity (Ostaszewski 2014, p. 31).

According to Stochmiałek, what contributes to the engagement in risky behaviors by children and youth, simultaneously inhibiting and sometimes even

preventing the development and upbringing of the younger generation, are two main tendencies – the influences of numerous and conflicting axiological systems and the presence of extensive areas of social poverty. The combination of both factors forms a “risk environment” (Stochmiałek 1998, p. 33). Referring to the widely accepted typology, three levels of risk can be identified: a low-risk group, including individuals who do not engage in risky behaviors, in other words, those who are still before initiation; an elevated-risk group, consisting of individuals who have engaged in at least one risky behavior, i.e., they are post-initiation, and in their case, numerous risk factors can be observed (experimenters); and a high-risk group, including individuals with deeply ingrained risky behaviors who experience serious negative consequences (health and social) of their risky behaviors (cf. Szymańska 2012). It is undeniable that, due to early childhood socialization experiences, wards of foster care institutions are particularly predisposed to engaging in risky behaviors, thereby forming a high-risk group. The consequences of engaging in problematic behaviors can further reinforce the already challenging initial situation of this group (cf. Bunio-Mroczek 2012; Jędrzejko 2013; Michel 2013; Bernasiewicz 2017).

## Methods. Outline of the Methodology of Own Research

The exploration of the significant social issue of risky behaviors undertaken by adolescents, especially the analysis of individual and family biographical experiences, led to verifications that, considering the interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon, adopted a characteristic dimension for a qualitative research approach.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate the family risk factors from the subjective perspective of wards of institutional foster care, the biographical method of empirical verification was employed. In presenting the characteristics, excerpts from narratives drawn from narrative interviews conducted with women and men, former, independent, and of legal age at the time of the research, who were once wards of foster care institutions, were utilized. In 2014, using the biographical method, I initiated

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical verifications corresponding to the content presented in this article include, among others, the research reports by Mielczarek (2020), which aimed to explain the moral functioning of foster care institution wards. The methodology of the study involved document analysis, interviews, observations, and individual case studies. The research was interpretative, utilizing custom interview and observation questionnaires (Mielczarek 2020). Similarly, Golczyńska-Grondas, using a qualitative research strategy, analyzed the identity of adults who grew up in foster care institutions, successfully examining their life experiences (Golczyńska-Grondas 2013). The paper “Kompetencje społeczne wychowanków placówek opiekuńczo-wychowawczych” [Social Competence of Wards of Foster Care Institutions] by Ewa Gawlik, in turn, analyzes the level of social competencies among foster care institution wards. The study indicates significant problems in establishing and maintaining social relationships, which can influence the engagement in risky behaviors (Gawlik 2015).

a project focusing on the world of young girls, wards of care and educational institutions, who experienced pregnancy and (premature) maternal responsibilities. My goal was to describe the experiences related to adolescent motherhood within the framework of the foster care system. Since then, I have continued conversations with former, independent wards of foster care institutions, expanding the sample to include men and women who did not have children during adolescence. The selection of the research sample, understood as “a set of carefully selected cases, materials, or events that make up the empirical examples corpus allowing for the most fruitful exploration of the investigated phenomenon” (Flick 2010, pp. 58–59), is justified by cognitive reasons. In the case of the results characterized here, purposive sampling was carried out. The study included women and men who had stayed in foster care institutions for more than two years due to their parents being limited or deprived of parental authority. At the time of the study, at least seven years had passed since they left the institution. Participants agreed to take part in the study, and the researcher’s contact with the participants was deep enough, and both parties trusted each other sufficiently, allowing for sincere and reliable information to be obtained. A total of 24 individuals participated in the study. The technique employed during the implementation of the presented empirical verifications was a partially structured in-depth open interview (cf. Bauman 2001). Its use enabled a thorough insight into the issue intriguing the researcher: the childhood and youth period of care leavers, with a focus on the characteristics of the family environment (narratives of care leavers will be presented below). It is worth noting at this point (although it is not the main focus of the considerations in this article) that the studied group, as they themselves indicated, engaged in numerous risky behaviors during adolescence. These behaviors included neglecting school duties, not fulfilling the obligation to study, running away from home, early sexual activity and its consequences, regular (over)use of alcohol, using psychoactive substances, drugs (marijuana), aggressive behaviors, violence, minor crimes, hooliganism, vandalism, which could lead to serious negative consequences and confirm the hypothesis of the demoralization risk for wards of foster care institutions (cf. Bunio-Mroczek 2012; Jędrzejko 2013; Dzielska, Kowalewska 2014; Michel 2016; Bernasiewicz 2017). The data analysis method involved content analysis, which entails systematically describing and interpreting the content of narratives, coding data according to predetermined categories or themes, analyzing the co-occurrence of categories and their context, and interpreting the results in the research context (Konecki 2000, pp. 123–128).

## Results. Family Conditions and the Engagement in Risky Behaviors in Light of Research

In the family, both factors that increase the risk of undesirable behaviors and those that protect against them can be identified. Referring to the results of research by many authors (represented in the summary of this paper) and my own empirical verifications of the characteristics of foster care families, factors favoring the adoption of risky behaviors include family dysfunctionality, especially the failure to fulfill or inappropriate fulfillment of parenting functions, neglectful parenting, lack of supervision, control problems, and difficulties in providing proper care. An exemplification of this is provided in the following narrative:

[Ola<sup>2</sup>] Arek is the first. Then there's Dawid, then there's me and then the rest. There's Małgosia. So: Arek, Dawid, me, Staszek, Alicja, Samira, Konrad, and now Kacper. [...] And now the last one, now with a new husband. The last one is with Piotr. The last one [...] in 2011 he was born, a year after, less than a year after my son. [...] It's chaos, because there were a lot of us [...] it's already a lot, no one paid attention to us. You could say I did. Because when I was older, I used to go outside with the younger kids, yes? Be it during vacations or winter or something, I would take them sledding because my mom was at work, my dad was at work, and I always took them because I was the oldest girl. I always took the kids outside, because Dawid, Arek [Ola's brothers] did not, because it was embarrassing to go out with younger siblings. That's what they thought. I always went outside with them. Well, that's where no one paid much attention to us. Because there was a lot of people in the family, it's not surprising to me. But no one paid much attention to us.

Improper parental control in families of wards of foster care institutions is confirmed by, among other things, Iga's narrative. Iga and her sister engaged in risky behaviors, including those of a sexual nature, resulting in pregnancy before reaching adulthood in both cases. Iga's sister became a mother of two children before turning eighteen. Both girls fulfilled the responsibilities arising from (premature) motherhood in the conditions of institutional foster care, and after leaving the institution, they did not return to their family of origin.

[Iga] [...] there, there was this locker room and there was a janitor and, for example, at that janitor's place we used to sit (during truancy). She knew that we should be in class. [...]. Later we would go to our friends, for example, when their mothers were

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<sup>2</sup> Before being placed in a care and educational institution, Ola engaged in numerous risky behaviors: she did not fulfill the obligation to attend school, resulting in frequent unjustified absences from classes, used psychoactive substances, and engaged in hooliganistic activities.

at work. We hanged out there. Now that I think about it, it all seems strange. But later it was also the case that, for example, mom drank, then we stayed at home. She was drunk anyway, she didn't know what was going on, so we could stay at home. Although when she was sober, she would even walk us to school [...] but that period, when we went to elementary school [...] she was drunk almost every day. She had a period of two weeks when she stopped drinking for two weeks, and then it went on for up to two months that she drank.

Another significant risk factor present in families of origin of wards of foster care institutions, contributing to engaging in risky behaviors, is the unmet primary needs within the family.

[Iga<sup>3</sup>] Well... as you know, she (mom) often drank, so there was no lunch, she didn't prepare us for school. Well, that's what it was... With Mirka, we had to take care of ourselves more, do laundry, do everything. We sometimes slept there at grandma's, but things didn't look too good here.

[Renata<sup>4</sup>] How was the care there?... When they were sober, truth be told, let's say in a month there was a week, a week and a half, two at max, when they were sober, well then it was pretty much OK... And yes, it was me who had to take care of everything, drop off, pick kids up from school, make something to eat...

As the presented results indicate, the lack of satisfaction of basic needs justifies the motives for engaging in escapism through problematic behaviors. These behaviors offer a potential escape from family or school-related issues, from emptiness, boredom, monotony, loneliness, and fear (Zajęcka 2014, p. 318).

The narratives of the wards suggest that the risk factors for engaging in risky behaviors within the family environment include: rejecting and harsh parenting, inconsistent discipline, and emotional distance among family members. All these factors, as confirmed by narratives, were significant elements in the biographies of individuals raised in care facilities.

[Renata] Dad was always a bit like, how should I put it... mother would immediately yell about everything, everything was wrong, nothing was done right. And father was able to approach everything as if more calmly, right? He would sit down with you, talk, explain what was wrong, right? And mother immediately took to cables, fists and that sort of thing.

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<sup>3</sup> Iga neglected her obligation to attend school, smoked cigarettes, and engaged in risky behaviors in the realm of sexuality. Her sexual activity resulted in teenage pregnancy.

<sup>4</sup> Renata came to the facility while pregnant. Prior to her placement in the facility, she failed to fulfill her compulsory education, abused alcohol and other psychoactive substances, committed thefts, used violence against peers and the elderly, and engaged in sexual activity with multiple partners.

[Robert<sup>5</sup>] Mom was very busy. After the divorce, she worked even more, and I did what I wanted. We had poor rapport. I, at the time, thought that she was picking on me, that she was doing me a favor, I wanted to hang out with my buddies, have money, I wasn't interested in school at the time. I wanted to be independent.

[Asia<sup>6</sup>] I had little contact with my dad, he broke down after all this, it's like he was there but he wasn't [...].

[Renata] *Relations with mother were bad, basically there was no relationship. No one, except grandma, cared about us.*

Significant risk factors for engaging in problematic behaviors also include a disrupted family structure (family breakdown, the absence of one parent, divorce, separation, the death of a parent, economic migration), as indicated by the following narratives.

[Julita<sup>7</sup>] Mom never lived with dad, they were never married, we only went there for vacations...

[Asia] Mom died when I was 14 years old. I was left with my dad, who couldn't handle it at all. It was very hard for me, I had no siblings, I was alone, right? And on top of all this, father started drinking.

[Ola] Well, and then when they were still living at (name of the street), mom had already started dating Piotr, I think. My dad lived with my mom because they were still together. But later she started it with Piotr [...]. She was already, it seems to me, seeing Piotr, because a few times she came with him near the school. Just a colleague, yeah, right. They met at work. Well, and because of this, there were even more brawls and, in the end, even before the divorce, mom moved out to (the name of the street)...

The family structure, the type, or nature of bonds, as exemplified by the narratives provided, significantly influence adolescents' engagement in risky behaviors. The addiction to alcohol and drugs by fathers, mothers, and other significant close individuals, which is also characteristic of the families of foster care facility wards, will also contribute to the engagement of children and adolescents in problematic behaviors.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert was placed in a care and educational institution based on his mother's request. He engaged in theft, skipped school, ran away from home, smoked marijuana, and was involved in its distribution.

<sup>6</sup> Asia came to the facility after the death of her mother. The reason for the placement in the care and educational institution was Asia's father's addiction to alcohol. The girl engaged in numerous risky behaviors: she did not go to school, smoked cigarettes and committed acts of vandalism.

<sup>7</sup> Julita became pregnant in her teens. Previously, she did not fulfill her compulsory education, and stayed in numerous institutions from which she escaped.

[Daria<sup>8</sup>] Dad would shout, parents would argue, I would go crying to my aunt's. Sometimes I was away from home for three days at a time, but they knew I was at my aunt's. Dad drank, both of them scabbled, dad would throw his flip-flops, hit. Grandfather and neighbors called the police because of the noise. Dad sometimes used violence against us ... you know, that's how it was in those days.

The family history, previously mentioned parenting styles, as well as the parents' drug use – recognized as one of the most common risk factors for substance use by adolescents – are frequently described determinants of risky behaviors. As indicated in the above narratives, these factors are embedded in the socialization experiences of foster care facility wards.

An important group of factors are those related to the adolescent's social environment. Difficult material and housing conditions or a significant decrease in material standards often become reasons for engaging in risky behaviors as a way to satisfy needs. In the case of some families of foster care facility wards, we can also speak of the demoralization of family members (in extreme cases leading to imprisonment). It happens that one parent (less frequently both) is involved in criminal activities, resulting in imprisonment or suspended sentences. This fact is confirmed by the narratives of Ola and Daria:

[Ola] Because my dad was in jail. He was in jail for not paying for child support. For almost two years I think if I remember correctly.

[Daria] (Dad) First worked normally, then stayed in detention and then in prison.

[Ola] All in all, it was OK in the beginning. No, it was fine in the beginning. In the beginning it was fine when we moved here, but then they started to argue, right? Later, they would argue all the time. It's been the norm going back and forth. At once, from morning to evening they argued, about practically everything.

Parents who are excessively strict or excessively indulgent impact children growing up in characterized families, influencing their future functioning, thus becoming another significant risk factor. It is also important to note the often-present negative parenting influences in the families of individuals who have been raised in care and educational institutions.

[Renata] I remember one situation when I went to school, first grade, and I did not attend kindergarten or reception. When I went to school the children already knew how to read and write and I knew nothing. And my mother was cruel to me. She chastised me because I drew a zero crookedly. And I got hit in the head then. I had

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<sup>8</sup> Daria was placed in the care facility due to teenage pregnancy. Apart from early sexual activity, she did not engage in other risky behaviors.

to bounce around the table to understand... and that's what my mother's teaching was all about.

[Asia] No, no, total laid-backness, as if there was no father, no control or requirements, no rules, just dog days...

The lack of motivation for learning, increased school failures, discontinuation of education, lack of aspirations and educational plans, typical for children raised in dysfunctional environments, are also indicated as a significant risk factor for engaging in behaviors that contribute to negative consequences in various areas of an individual's life, fostering demoralization.

[Kasia<sup>9</sup>] At home, we were not rushed into learning. I don't remember anything like that. We did all things ourselves [...] My mother also has a middle school education... No! No! There was no middle school then! Well, primary education then, sorry. Because it was eight classes. Yes, yes, it was primary. Dad had a vocational education, as a painter I think [...].

[Renata] Parents did not motivate us to learn.

[Mirka<sup>10</sup>] Because I didn't go to school at all for three years... It was fifth grade when I stopped going.

[Pola<sup>11</sup>] I wasn't particularly ambitious, which was due to... well due to such neglect too... I didn't have good role models or anything. I had a loathing for math, or I was afraid of these lessons, simply afraid that I would be such a dunce, that everyone knows something there, and I know absolutely nothing. School was completely like fire for me. [...] I started truancy early, I was eleven when I stopped going to school... I dropped out for three years ... and then it became increasingly difficult to return, because of the backlog and in general I was a dunce [laughs].

It is important to note that the relationship between risky behaviors and the education of parents is significant. Parents' education not only influences the aspirations and educational plans of their children (a protective factor) but also determines the parenting methods employed.

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<sup>9</sup> Kasia exhibited violent behavior towards peers and older individuals, ran away from home, skipped school, and associated with a negative peer group. She also escaped several times from various facilities.

<sup>10</sup> Iga's sister, risky behaviors undertaken by the female wards include: truancy, vandalism, engaging in adolescent sexual activity, alcohol use, running away from home, and escaping from facilities.

<sup>11</sup> Pola engaged in truancy, smoked cigarettes, and resided in multiple care facilities. During an escape from one of these facilities, she became pregnant by a care leaver. Pola's mother also spent her childhood in a care and education facility. Both her mother and grandmother struggled with alcohol addiction and exhibited parenting inadequacies.

## Discussion

Contemporary reports on the discussed issues point to the presence of approximately 30 types of risk factors and about 20 types of protective factors, which are divided into groups. The most frequently mentioned are the five primary groups, distinguishing: individual factors, peer factors, family factors, school factors, and factors related to the broader social context (Jędrzejko, Janusz, Walancik 2013, p. 114; Szymańska 2012, p. 18). It is worth noting that in the discussed case, significant risk factors can also be challenging and critical situations – often part of the everyday life of wards of foster care institutions (referring to traumatic experiences related to growing up in a dysfunctional family environment, as well as experiences related to being placed in a care and educational institution and leaving it) (Skowrońska-Pućka 2021, p. 189–205).

It seems that the influence of the family on shaping the behaviors of its members is beyond doubt. The family is where a child learns socially accepted norms and values, both desirable and undesirable, opposing societal requirements, behaviors, and ways of satisfying their needs. Jan Żebrowski observes that “a person’s biography begins with the family. [...] Family life begins before other environments appear in a person’s life” (Żebrowski 2001, p. 16). What is extremely important from the perspective of risky behaviors is the fact, worth emphasizing, that “regardless of how the family functions, whether it is a healthy and morally valuable environment or exhibits clear signs of pathology – in each case, it shapes the personality of children and youth, social attitudes, and determines the course of their destiny” (Izdebska 1993, p. 699 cited in: Żebrowski 2001, p. 16). In the case of wards of foster care and institutions, the process of identity formation, as indicated above, occurs in unfavorable educational conditions, hindering, and even preventing a positive self-perception. This can “generate numerous tensions and frustrations and reinforce the belief that one is different (in a worse sense) because they lack the appropriate social and cultural capital” (Chmiel 2013, p. 86). Disturbances in the functioning of the family educational environment are particularly dangerous for the upbringing of children, their psychosomatic development, and education since they can become a significant, sometimes decisive determinant of disorders in this area, leading to the risk of demoralization (Winiarski 2001, p. 53; Bunio-Mroczek 2012; Michel 2016; Bernasiewicz 2017).

The narratives presented and international research reports indicate that there are many dimensions of parent-child relationships that can influence adolescents’ engagement in risky behaviors and, consequently, affect the health and life course of teenagers. Important factors, as indicated by K. Newman, L. Harrison, C. Dashiff, S. Davies, include parental warmth vs. coldness, acceptance vs. rejection, structure vs. chaos, autonomy vs. control, involvement vs. detachment or neglect,

severity vs. permissiveness, consistent vs. inconsistent discipline, and connection vs. distance. Specific parental behaviors that have been found to impact youth, their health, and engagement in risky behaviors include the type of discipline (consistent vs. inconsistent), the level of parental involvement, communication type, and parenting style (Newman et al. 2008, p. 143).

The presented research results, as well as other researchers interested in foster care issues (cf. Andrzejewski 2012; Golczyńska-Grondas 2013; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016; Kolankiewicz, Poncyliusz 2016) point out that the families of wards of foster care institutions are often dysfunctional families, characterized by the accumulation of factors unfavorable for the development and even life of a child. These factors may contribute to engaging in risky behaviors, indicating the risk of demoralization. This, in turn, may be a direct reason for separating the child from the family and placing them in a substitute educational environment. Quantitative empirical verifications have also shown a connection between the level of parental monitoring, control, appropriate care, and communication, and the engagement in problematic, risky behaviors (in the case of the mentioned research, also risky behaviors of a sexual nature) (Huebner, Howell 2003, pp. 71–80).

Researchers have noted that teenagers who were closely supervised by their parents engaged in fewer risky sexual behaviors than those who had little parental control and supervision (Taris, Semin 1998, pp. 68–81). Analyzing the relationship between maternal parenting style and the sexual behaviors of teenagers in a sample of 253 youth-mother dyads, British researchers observed that the maternal parenting style is directly linked to the delay of the first sexual experience in 15–16-year-olds. However, this was not confirmed in the case of older teenagers. The conclusions from the research by the mentioned scholars suggest that parenting styles applied only by mothers have a greater impact on the attitudes and sexual behaviors of teenagers in early adolescence compared to later years, and that parental influence diminishes in older teenagers. During childhood is extremely important, as confirmed by the narratives of foster care leavers.

These narratives clearly indicate a lack of satisfaction of basic needs, which can justify engaging in problematic behaviors as a means to escape from family, relational, or educational issues (Zajęcka 2014, p. 318). Furthermore, the lack of warmth, trust, mutual love, and care in parent-child relationships makes it difficult to internalize behavioral standards, such as self-control. These children struggle to express their emotions and lack awareness of their own and others' needs. This has implications for their limited awareness of the psychological states of others, thereby increasing the risk of developing antisocial behaviors (Opora 2016, p. 135).

“Numerous longitudinal studies indicate that children with a healthy bond with their caregivers function better in areas such as self-esteem, independence and autonomy, maintaining friendships, trust, intimacy, positive relationships with parents and others, impulse control, empathy, compassion, resilience to adverse

circumstances, academic success, and future maternal and family achievements” (Jacobson, Wille 1986, p. 338–347; Main et al. 1985, p. 66–104; Troy, Sroufe 1987, p. 166–172; Watres et al. 1979, p. 821–829 as cited in: Opora 2016, p. 134), the aforementioned characteristics are more difficult to find in the above narratives of the wards.

The family structure, type, or nature of the bond, as indicated by researchers, significantly and relatively permanently influence adolescents’ engagement in risky behaviors. According to Igra and Irwin, children raised by a single parent are more likely to use drugs (Igra, Irwin 1996 as cited in: Klonowska 2016, p. 81). Similar results were obtained by Yannis Theodorakis and colleagues, demonstrating a connection between the quality of the relationship between adolescents and parents and the future engagement of adolescents in risky behaviors. They observed that “a high level of family conflict is associated with an increased level of risky behaviors in adolescents” (Theodorakis et al. 2004, p. 851 as cited in: Klonowska 2016, p. 87), which is also confirmed by the narratives presented above.

A significant group of factors, as shown by the research and supported by other research reports are those, as noted by B. Jankowiak, associated with the adolescent’s social environment, as poverty and a deviant environment are identified as crucial risk factors (Jankowiak 2017, pp. 104–108). Difficult material and housing conditions or a significant decrease in material standards often become reasons for engaging in risky behaviors as a way to satisfy needs (cf. Kempieńska 2012, p. 21; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016). Zającka defines them as existential motives related to the sense of lack of meaning, a desire to cope with difficult economic conditions associated with social exclusion (cf. Zającka 2014).

Empirical verifications “clearly indicates a connection between family functioning and youth delinquency” (Klonowska 2016, p. 87). The characterized situation leaves its mark on the entire family system, causing the mentioned disturbances in the structure and functioning of the family. It can lead to an increase in interpersonal conflicts, which is another widely discussed risk factor in the literature on the subject (cf. Grzelak 2006), which is also evident, as indicated by the narratives of foster care institution wards, in their biographies.

In conclusion of this part of the considerations, it is worth noting that the relationship between risky behaviors and the education of parents is significant. Parents’ education not only influences the aspirations and educational plans of their children (a protective factor) but also determines the parenting methods employed. “A limited knowledge base can lead parents to use inappropriate parenting techniques, being either too aggressive or too permissive, which, instead of fostering a love for learning, may have the opposite effect. [...] Higher levels of general education enable parents to understand the complex pedagogical issues involved in the child-rearing process. It allows the use of more flexible methods of upbringing, tailored to specific upbringing situations, more loosely tied to the patterns of upbringing brought up in the home family” (Pokrzywnicka 2011, p. 46).

The above characterization of the family environment of care facility wards is consistent with the literature on the discussed topic (Zajączkowski 2000; Gaś 1995; Grzelak 2006; Szymańska 2012; Bunio-Mroczek 2012; Głupczyk 2020). In summary, it is worth pointing out the phenomenon of social exclusion as a source and consequence of engaging in risky behaviors for existential or prestige reasons. It reflects the way children and adolescents respond to the painfully felt meaninglessness of life or the need to cope with challenging economic conditions associated with social exclusion and marginalization. This could include a desire to stand out or gain recognition among peers (Zajęcka 2014, p. 318), as exemplified in the narratives provided.

Marginalization can be related to several dimensions of the social functioning of characterized families. The first relates to exclusion from the job market, leading to the breakdown of social ties. The second, associated with existence, denotes the lack of access to and the ability to enjoy various cultural goods, exercise rights, and fulfill needs. The last one is the ongoing process of social exclusion, manifesting itself in limitations in participating in political, economic, cultural, and ultimately social life. Often, this process is irreversible, leading to the complete deprivation of the family (Kowalska-Kantyka, Kantyka 2011, p. 85). According to the Jessor conceptualization, the problematic behaviors undertaken by adolescents may represent a response and a way of coping with the difficult everyday life that becomes part of the biographies of many care facility wards.

The factors mentioned so far characterizing families of care facility wards, as indicated by Klonowska, can contribute to both the initiation and continuation of problematic, and even criminal, behaviors (Kram et al. 2002 as cited in Klonowska 2016, p. 88). This highlights the need for monitoring and appropriate intervention, and the process of the wards' empowerment within the care facility undoubtedly provides an opportunity for this.

## **Summary. Staying in a Care Facility as an Opportunity – Prevention of Risky Behaviors and Working with the Ward's Family**

Placement in a care facility can become an opportunity to improve the overall family situation, which will inevitably impact behavior and the future of children and youth from characterized environments. As Andrzejewski observes, “placing a child in an institution is not a way to isolate them from the family but a means to rebuild proper relations within the family” (Andrzejewski 2006, p. 2). Preventive and educational work with the child during their stay in the care facility, as well as multi-disciplinary support and social work for the families of origin, could interrupt the socio-cultural reproduction indicated by many researchers (Bunio-Mroczek, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2012; Golczyńska-Grondas 2013; Kolankiewicz, Poncyliusz 2016).

Considering the above, what principles should be followed to ensure that the stay in the institution is not a missed opportunity for both the family and the child? It seems that the most important aspect is basing interventions dedicated to dysfunctional families on the principle of subsidiarity. Following Andrzejewski's guidance, it involves supporting "those who actively try to overcome their problems," providing assistance conducive to the independence of the support recipient (Andrzejewski 2006, p. 2). During the stay of the child/adolescent in the institution, social workers and caregivers should not focus solely on performing care and protective functions but should also ensure an activating nature of the assistance provided and support self-help initiatives. In being helpful, as noted by Regulska, following Rybka (2014, p. 90), "the way of helping is important – it should strengthen the activity and independence of the subject receiving help, in no case limiting their sovereignty and freedom to decide on matters directly concerning them, nor removing responsibility for shaping the conditions in which they function" (Regulska 2018, p. 261).

The characteristics of the family environment of wards of orphanages (Golczyńska-Grondas 2013; Bunio-Mroczek, Warzywoda-Kryszczyńska 2012; Skowrońska-Pućka 2016) point to areas that deserve special attention and needs that should be recognized and taught to satisfy in a socially acceptable way – if the stay in the institution is to be an opportunity to mitigate the negative consequences associated with previously undertaken risky behaviors. I consider preventive actions those that provide individuals with an opportunity for active, engaged participation in accumulating experiences that lead to an increase in the ability to cope with potentially difficult situations related to everyday life (cf. Śliwa 2015). Preventive actions should focus on shaping and developing interpersonal skills, developing skills to choose positive lifestyles, developing and maintaining positive relationships with the social group, and developing mature responsibility for educational, professional, and relational situations, primarily carried out in cooperation with the family environment (Springer, cited from: Głupczyk 2020). Identifying and maximizing the potential inherent in the wards, by creating situations facilitating their identification and multiplication, should become an essential element of daily work with the wards (cf. Konopczyński 2014). Experts in the field indicate that by reinforcing positive forces during the stay in the institution, we create an opportunity to activate significant protective factors against undertaking risky behaviors and their associated consequences. This, in turn, gives new, positive direction to the biographies of wards in the foster care system.

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