



# **Parent - Child Separation: Sensitizing and Educating Parents in Collaborating with Specialists**

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# Child-Parent Separation in Bulgaria

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- Child protection system's initiated
- Initiated by parents: voluntary, long-term
- Initiated by children



# The Harm

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- Immediate risk due to lack of parent's protection
- Long-term effect: mental health problems: anxiety, low self esteem, compromised learning and cognitive development and social-emotional development
- Institutionalization as the extreme separation: early childhood, brain development (Nelson, 2007).

# Parent-Child Separation – a Legacy from the Communist Years

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- Before 1944 - 20 institutions-an orphanage and one for children in acute medical condition
- During 1944-1989 - 287 institutions with 35000 children of whom orphans - 2%
- After 1989 – institutionalization has been regulated as the last resort for children at risk



# Pattern of Institutionalization

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## **Until 2000**

Parents could contract children's placement with the director of the institution.

Parents would lose contact with their children because the relationships with the child were not encouraged and hindered. Children were placed far away from their parents, visitations were limited.

**After 2001** (when the child protection system was built)  
separation was regulated after CPD's assessment and through the court


De-institutionalization programs include: re-integration; prevention; kinship care; adoption.



# Reasons for Institutionalization

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- poverty
- anomie - disruptions of relationships
- learned helplessness – attitudes toward the state
- individual differences - childhood experience shapes parenting style and explains parent's placing their children in long-term institutional care (Markova, 2010).



A study on Psychological Characteristics of Parents who  
Voluntarily Separate from their Children through Placing them in  
Long-term Institutional/Residential Care

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- Study hypothesis: Long-term parent-child separation through institutionalization can be explained through traumatic early childhood experience of the parent.

# Object relations theory and the theory of mentalization

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- Parenting is shaped by the early experience of the child with her/his own parents (Blatt, 1974; Fonagy et al, 1993).
- Mentalization is the capacity of a person to “read” the behaviour of other people as motivated by their own mental states. Mentalization is developed during the first 4 years within a secure attachment relationship when the children’s mental states are being reflected upon and understood by their own parents (Fonagy et al, 2002).





# Study methodology

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Long-term separation through institutionalization can be explained through lower capacity to understand the child's and your own mental state

Comparison of how parents understand their parents' behavior :

- DCG: mothers who use day care (N = 29)
- WCG: mothers who use weekly care (N = 34)
- ICG: mothers who use institutional care (N=30)

All mothers lived on poverty level

Children were from 2 months old to 8 years of age

# Study instruments – mental representations

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- Mental Representation Instrument  
(MRY;Blatt,Wein,et.al.,1979)

## Examples

- My mother does not help...she would not give me anything
- My father - he is a tall guy, hansom...but he does not deserve to be my father
- My mother was a working woman. She was very nervous but had a good reason for this. I still love her

# Results

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- Mothers whose children live in institutions have lower capacity to mentalize.
- Fifty percent of the mothers whose children live in institutions have been institutionalized: (50% (ICG), vs.8% (WCG), vs. 5% (DCG))
- Intergenerational transmission of institutionalization (Markova, 2010; Markova et al 2008)

# A program for mothers whose children live in institutions

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- Setting the stage – training of child protection department staff on institutionalization and its harm to reduce the child protection system-initiated separation and placement of children at risk in institutions.
- Hiring 18 mothers of institutionalized children as consultants for developing a program to prevent separation and reuniting parents and children



# Levels of intervention

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- The group work level:
- The mothers are presented with information regarding the influence of the communist state in parent-child separation.
- Mothers tell their stories in the group.
- The group mentalize the experience of the parents and the child.



# Levels of intervention

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- The casework level: Child Protection Department is provided with supervision to mentalize their clients who they tend to blame.
- Community work level: a parent from the group starts prevent separation through identifying families at risk and refer them to the Child Protection Department for obtaining support. 30 separations have been prevented. (Markova, 2011).

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