

# ADVERSE CARE. THE THEORIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OVERPROTECTION BASED ON THE PSYCHOANALYTIC IDEA FROM MOMISM TO INTERACTIONAL SYNCHRONY

© Zoltán Domokos CSOMORTÁNI  
(University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary)

[zcsomortani@yahoo.com](mailto:zcsomortani@yahoo.com)

Received: 31.07.2012; Accepted: 24.04.2013; Published online: 27.05.2013

*Reviewing the scientific literature of the past fifty years we can recognize that there are more and more articles and studies dealing with the subject of psychological overprotection. Besides the positive impacts of the extended and interdisciplinary interest (clinical psychology, paediatrics, rehabilitation medicine, sociology, etc.) it becomes clear that the parallel definitions of the term and the deficient communication between the different scientific areas lead to definitional problems what set back the future investigations and impugn the validity of the solutions. This lecture is a part of a longer project in which I'll try to find a more efficient definition and operationalization for the term of parental/educator/helper overprotection. This study shows the evolution of the psychological overprotection term from the use and research of momism concept. In the next step will be shown the definitions of overprotection used by psychoanalytic studies (e.g. parent complex, extended incest, alternative explanation of Oedipus complex). In addition to definitions psychoanalytic theorists gave a detailed description about child, parental and cultural background of overprotection, the long term impacts of the phenomena, the possibilities of the therapy, and the extension of the term to the whole educational and mental hygienic areas. In the last part of the lecture will be shown the relation of the attachment term to the overprotection, and proven that the detachment processes are integral parts of attachment ones. The last conclusion of this study is that for investigate the phenomena of overprotection we have to take notice of attachment-detachment process dynamics, the so-called interpersonal synchrony of the parent/child, helper/helpee dyad.*

**Keywords:** parental overprotection, psychoanalytic theories, attachment, attachment-detachment processes, interactional synchrony.

Investigating the studies of parent-child relational disorders we can find that the phenomena of parental overprotection is one of the commonest parent-child relational disorders (Thomasgard & Metz, 1993). The research of the phenomena isn't free of difficulties because the investigators from different disciplines are dealing with mostly the impacts of it and they didn't pay too much attention to more precise definitions and operationalization. The parental overprotection notion used by the wide-spread questionnaire studies in this area are full of contradictions, because of this the comparability and generalisability of the results, the reliability of metaanalysis became doubtful (Livianos-Aldana & Rojo-Moreno, 1999). In studies there are more interchangeably used synonym notions for the phenomena: overprotection, overindulgence, pampering, spoiling, overrestrictiveness/overpermissiveness, fondling, oversolicitude, domineering, over-regulation, babying /infantilizing, cotton wool child. The use of partly overlapping notions makes more difficult the accurate investigation of the area.

The relevance of parental overprotection phenomenon is shown by clinical experiences and the solutions of scientific studies. In her study Sanders (2006) suggests that both decreasing parental requirements and the parental overprotection may be regarded as forms of discrimination which in a longer period may lead to feelings of inadequacy in the child through the internalisation processes. This suggestion is similar to Adler's earlier statement that the overprotectedness and the handicap have common aspects: while the handicapped person is protected by his or her social environment, the overprotected child become handicapped from the reason of his or her relatives' excessive protection (Adler, 1969).

This study would be an initiative to differentiate properly the parental overprotection notion, to synchronyze the interdisciplinary ideas, to place more precise the phenomena in the parent-child relational system. Next pages will introduce the arising of parental overprotection notion (Wylie, 1955; Strecker, 1946; Sebald, 1976), the details of the ideas with psychoanalytic origins (Adler, 1958, 1969; Rüedi, 1995; Brezsnýánszki, 1998; Jung, 1989; Kast, 1994; Fromm, 1950, 1974) on the one hand, and I'll try to emphasize that the attachment processes are inseparable from the detachment phenomenas (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1971; Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975), and that in attachment-detachment unit we could define more precise the effects of parental overprotection by the notion of interactional synchrony (Rutter, 1980; Parker, 1983; Bíró, 2003) on the other hand.

### The discovery of overprotection phenomena and the first steps to define it – the momism

First efforts to define and to describe in details of the overprotection phenomena took place in United States, by the notion of momism. Although the overprotection phenomena was explored in Europe too at the beginning of the XXth century by psychoanalytic theorists (e.g. Adler, 1958), they didn't consider the subject worthy for an independent monography because of this at first we'll show the american efforts and in the next chapter we'll be dealing with psychoanalytic results.

At first Wylie (1955) introduced the notion of „momism” for describing maternal overprotection in 1942 in the first edition of his book *Generation of Vipers*. He defined the mom who appeared in description as one who save her son from every situation which may direct him to maturity. Before this Strecker, the leader of psychiatry faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, also wrote about the phenomena of “protective mom” (Strecker, 1946). He suggests that mothers’ excessive presence in their children’s lives is the result of the USA social system in 1940s which supported intensely the self-sacrificing attitude of the mothers.

Along his research he investigated men who were rejected from the military service due to psychiatric reasons, and subjects who showed increased emotional stress-symptoms in the period of the Second World War. He found that in the background of the most cases was the mother who triggered the symptoms by missing the elementary parental duty to promote the emotional and physical development and the detachment of her child (Strecker, 1946).

Strecker’s important observation was that the “excessive protection” isn’t typical just for mothers it could be found in any educational situations. He described the relational problems of affected mothers, the increased protection provoked by the chronically ill children, as well as the protective processes promoted by the social environment. Although his description based on a large sample the results were supported by anecdotes and subjective data (Strecker, 1946).

In the scientific research of the subject was a significant step when Sebald an American sociologist published his book: *Momism: Silent Disease of America* (Sebald, 1976). Based on his findings he suggested that with the spread of nuclear families children were trapped in a small, relatively isolated family unit, with as good as exclusive personal relationship with their mothers who liberated from the traditional, time consuming activities spent most their time with satisfying their children’s needs. He supposed that the contemporary mother use her child to complement the meaninglessness of her life. She creates a relatively stable pseudo identity so that she use the existence of her child as an alibi of elaborating her own anxieties (Sebald, 1976).

He thought that the momism is more common in the middle class because the Women’s Emancipation Movement here made mostly unsure the traditional woman identity, and the fathers’ secession from the parenting process here was the most significant. The smaller size of the families, the conditional maternal love, the high performance orientation and the control need ensuing this, the higher rates of divorce, the weakening of the detachment rites also characterize mostly the middle class and these circumstances enhance the possibility of the maternal overprotection (Sebald, 1976).

He suggested that the overprotection is more dangerous in boys because the weak or absent father model and the strong mother model weaken principally their identity. He described as the sequels of momism the anxious self-condemnation in cases of social expectations, persistent endeavouring to safety, dependency in endurers. He thought that the psychic symptoms may range from relatively mild neurosis to psychosis. He enumerates four key-vulnerabilities of the endurers of momism: self-doubt, sense of guilt, anxiety and disorientation. He suggests that they are also characterized by indecisiveness, chronic feelings of exclusion, frequently increasing anxiety, irresponsible actions, extreme narcissism and immature ego-excentrism (Sebald, 1976).

Beyond the wide range social factors he found the origins of momism in mother imitating her mother's behaviour and in the compensation of her childhood victimisation. In his opinion the momism could be interpreted as a reaction to childhood emotional deprivation that latter become a compliment of a relationship with an unattainable husband so as a sequel the maternity could be represented as a noble sacrifice, a safe island in an incidentally desolate existence (Sebald, 1976).

He drew the conclusion in his work that the therapy of momism would be if mothers could chose free the maternal identity, they should have a developed, stable self so they wouldn't have to satisfy their needs with parasitic relationships. Fathers who marry the "mom" could play a monitoring and compensatory role against their wives' overprotecting tendencies but in the interest of this they also have to take a greater part in their children's life (Sebald, 1976).

He gained data mostly from the observation of momism victims in teaching situation, and from interviews with them. He based his results on scientific literature wich supposed relation between parental characteristics and some psychosocial disorder in childhood (Sebald, 1976).

Erikson (1965) in his book *Childhood and society* wrote with harsh criticism about the terms "mom" and "momism" used for describing the parental overprotection. He made some indirect reference to Wylie's (1955) and Strecker's (1946) "mom" notion and answered with scepticism to their suppositions. He said that momism is too simplistic psychiatric explanation for a complex psychological problem. He suggested that the American culture generally support more the autonomy of children then their pampering (Erikson, 1965).

### Psychodynamically based overprotection ideas

The European born, psychoanalytically qualified Erikson's dismissive opinion against overprotection shows well that the theorists from the Old Continent who were mostly also psychoanalysts didn't favour too much attention to the subject. Nevertheless there weren't published monographs about overprotection, in the developmental and developmental psychopathology works of the mainstream psychoanalytic theorists seldom could be found observations about the phenomena. In the next part will be disclosed these results through definitions of overprotection, which sometimes bear the specific characteristics of the given school, family-social background, the consent of children, the sequels on children's life, and therapeutic possibilities.

## Definitions

The origins of the parental overprotection notion could be traced back to psychodynamic approach. Originally it named the phenomena when the involved parents try to protect their children from the everyday threats, suspenses of the life. In the psychoanalytic literature could be distinguished well two description of the overprotection: a more severe, controlling one, and a more emotional, indulgent one. According to the first ideas the phenomena is based on the reaction formation defence mechanism evolved to cover the hostile feelings of the parent against the child which are unbearable for him or her, and unshoulderable in front of the society, with this object the parent turn it to excessive tenderness and love (Bruno, 1991).

The different schools use different terms to describe the phenomena of overprotection. Kast the representative of the Jungian approach explains the emergence of overprotection with the positive mother and father complex when the parent-child dyad can't exceed the interpersonal fusion. The complex in Jungian terms is a kind of inferiority, an unintegrated, unassimilated part of the self which generates stress in the person, hold up the further development but it could urge a greater effort and searching new copings at the same time (Kast, 1994).

Fromm defines the parental overprotection as the symbolic extension of the psychoanalytic incest term. He suggests that the essence of incest term means not just the sexual desire for a family member but it means the persons desire to remain child beyond the convenient date, to attach childishly to the figures who defend him/her, among whom mother is the first and the most influential one (Fromm, 1950).

In Adler's opinion the Oedipal complex occurs only in child who wish to have his/her mother's total attention and wish to exclude everybody else from this. He suggests that this desire isn't sexual as explained it Freud (1949), the child wants to enslave his/her mother. It occurs in child who is overprotected by his/her mother, whom solidarity don't extend to the social environment. Consequently in Adler's opinion the Oedipus complex isn't universal just the consequence of improper parenting (Adler, 1958).

Rüedi who was also individual psychologist thought that overprotection is an indulgent form of parenting, what could be follow up from windup of the symbiotic tie with the mother, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the life. The meaning of overprotection in his definition is a perpetual care which arose from the imaginary dangers (Rüedi, 1995).

Despite of the wobbliness of definitions the authors agree that the overprotection is one of the most important factors of neurotic development.

## Familial/parental and social background

After the definitional attempts will be showed how the analytic authors how characterize the familial and social background of overprotection. They suggest that the overprotective parents through a "benign misunderstanding" take over such duties from their children what they should fulfil on their own. Therefore the children are bereaved from the possibilities where they should experience feelings of competency and usefulness (Brezsnyánszki, 1998).

The psychoanalytic authors tried to answer the question what is the trigger of the overprotective parental behaviour. Some of them suggest that the take-off of overprotection is a weak, tyrannizing, controlling parent who declare that he/she make everything for the good of his/her child, but intrinsically they are overcontrolling because of their insecurity (Jung, 1989).

They describe the overprotecting mother's personality as dependent, unable to detach, so she can't encourage the detachment processes in her children (Kast, 1994). She handle her children as a part of her self therefore she is susceptible to use them in behalf of her own ambitions, identity, self-justification. Because the mother's and the child's self are not differentiated suitably from the mother's respect, she regards every detachment attempts of her child as an assault against her self. So from the mother's respect the child has the role to maintain the mother's idealized self-image ("I'm good because I live for my children") (Adler, 1958).

They represent the autonomy efforts of the child as guilty, dangerous things through saying complex sentences like "you must not go", "you are not allowed to grow up and live your own life", "you are not allowed to be yourself" etc. The mother in positive mother complex produce such an affluence, plenty and partaken feelings which in the long run as a destructive illusion make more difficult the give up of these and the independent life (Kast, 1994). The overprotective mother isn't able to broaden the relationship formed with her child to the father and other people so the child should have difficulties further to adapt himself as an emancipated member to the community of fellow-beings (Adler, 1958). If the child experiences just the unconditional maternal love without the conditional paternal one his/her psychic development should be interfered. Without the union of the two parental pole the child should become neurotic (Fromm, 1950).

The dynamics developed between the two parent may be the further motive power of the parental overprotection. Parents who can't experience their relationship as a communion are liable to use their children as a hostage in their personal conflicts. They tie their children to themselves for self-justification, compete with spoiling for children's love, make their children adjudicators in their arguments. From selfishness they develop such roles for them which contradict to the children's developmental interests (e. g. infantilisation) (Adler, 1958; Rüedi, 1995).

Apropos of the societal background of parental overprotection the authors attract attention to overprotection of educators: misunderstanding the idea of liberty they give rights to their children forgetting their responsibilities and duties, they satisfy the children's needs so that the community, societal needs remain unsatisfied. They indicate as further problems the changing family structure, the spread of one parent families, parent's acutely increasing spare time and expending to overprotective parenting in place of more optimal togetherness possibilities (these findings are mostly the same as the American descriptions presented above) (Brezsnyánszki, 1998).

### The child's reactions to overprotection and his/her role in its maintenance

Through the abnormally tight relationship the child concludes that he/she could expropriate his/her mother so he/she regards his/her father and siblings as rivals in getting the mother's love. Such a child aspires forever to remain in relation to his/her mother, he/she suffers when can't feel the closeness of the mother. He/she would like his/her mother to valet him/her, to focus every thought and attention to him/her. To reach it he/she finds the proper instruments, he/she focus every abilities to keep his/her mother around him/her. He/she become his/her mother favourite child, his/her fears intensify, because with complaining he/she could restore the symbiotic relation with his/her mother. He/she cry of every little annoyance, get ill to be cared, go ballistic, he/she would be disobey, defiant to get attention. The conduct problem would be the outcome of the fight for his/her mother attention so the child's "goals of misbehavior" develop. The child learn fast to attract attention to him/her (Adler, 1958).

The child's abilities who spend too much time in symbiotic relation with his/her mother don't develop properly, the disabilities arisen from this and escalated manipulatively the child use to send his/her mother into his/her service, that leads to further disabilities in the child. If somebody try to dislodge the child from the treadmill of his/her disabilities he/she reacts with defiance and rebellion. So in overly child-centered families the possibility that the child may manipulate his/her parents increases (Breznyánszki, 1998).

Because of the parents' permanent support and the lack of real problem situations the ambitions of the child grow enormous, gets unreal measure that is supported not by abilities but overprotection (Kast, 1994). He/she has grandiose, unreal fantasies. He/she often contest, compete for attention. He/she expect the admiration of his/her milieu whilst he/she take the release from critic for granted, he/she tolerate with difficulty the critic (Rüedi, 1995). The everyday setback may also discourage him/her so his/her depressive symptoms may intensify to autoaggression (narcissistic vulnerability) (Kast, 1994).

The overprotected child is unprepared for the life problems, he/she can't concentrate, if he/she begin something he/she can't finish it (Adler, 1969). He/she is passive, incapable of living without parents, isn't persevering and can't get motivated, his/her interest is fugitive, he/she can't protract his/her needs (Rüedi, 1995). He/she is a one-sided receiver type person, he/she always wait to take care of him/her.

The paternal characteristics as discipline, independence, ability of self-supporting lack from him/her. In social environment he/she is looking for a mother who can take care of him/her supervise him/her (Fromm, 1950).

The main problem of the personality characterised by mother complex is the detachment, the acceptance of the loss. He/she is unable to decide, can't accept the rejection, the stress of the negative choice, the aggressive part of his/her self (Kast, 1994). He/she is coward, irresponsible, uninterested in life problems or they fill him/her with anxiety and if he/she can he/she avoid them. He/she is overly cautious, always hesitate, if he/she find a problem he/she get paralysed (Adler, 1969).

The too much attention paid in child, the spoiling leads to the extreme, unreal, and as a consequence vulnerable identity, and underdeveloped social identity. The child tied to his/her mother isn't able to enter to anybody's feelings, to attend to community interests, and in some cases to places them in front of his/her ones (Adler, 1969).

Although the tightness of parent-child relation that don't follow from age or ability levels of the child existing beyond the proper date means for the child safety, protection, irresponsibility, the avoidance of anxiety attached to independence, the satisfaction of unconditional love but in other hand it costs too much because the child's personality can't fulfil, the mental and social abilities don't reach the expected levels. His/her sense of reality is too subjective, he/she doesn't adjudicate the emotions and ideas by their goodness or badness, truth or falsity but from their familiarity or unfamiliarity. The person who has overprotective background lives in continuous insecurity when he/she has to move away from his/her prime dependencies, his/her emotional life remains under the guidance of the primary group. The incestuously oriented person who is stuck in his/her primary group is able to be close just to the very familiar persons, can be close emotionally to his/her family but not to strangers, he/she can liaise with difficulties (Fromm, 1950). He/she put his/her intensive attachment into his/her new family if he/she can start a family at all (Jung, 1989).

### The long-term consequences of the overprotection

The parental overprotection could result not just in age-relevant symptoms but in long-term problems, self-exciting symptom behaviors too. The problems of the child tied to mother intensify with the weaken of the symbiosis, the broaden of the socialisation process, the entering of the wider family, the school and peer community. The first problems occur in school because here they don't get "fair enough" attention. The lifestyle missed at home unobserved emerges in the school unavoidably (Adler, 1969).

With the occurrence of the school problems and the obligate weakening of the overprotective mother-child relation a parental control strengthening process starts up. The child begins to hate his/her mother because he/she feels himself/herself deluded: "My mother pay much more less attention to me moreover she remarks my faults too." This disapproval is enhanced further by the cumulative supervision of the mother anxious from these problems that inhibits the development of child's responsibility even more (Adler, 1969).

The personality vulnerable by unprocessed mother complex fall easily into a positive feedback chain, which may end in occurring of depressive symptoms. The unreal love and acceptance needs of the undifferentiated self can't be satisfied in the wider social environment so the person to attain his/her love needs change to achievement. The excessive correspondence to the outer world doesn't lead unconditional to the needed acceptance and appreciation got by his/her mother evidently. The anger occurring from his frustrations he/she couldn't show to his/her environment because the persons offering the already accessible love may also turn away from him/her. He/she can't produce the wonderful feeling gone through in the oneness with his/her mother hence he/she blame himself/herself for this. The unreal fantasies, ambition, guilty feelings and the autoaggression at last lead to developing depression. So the unconditional plenty made by his/her mother awake unreal expectations in child for the surrounding world, the feeling of undoubted reason of existence and from this eminence, the delightful state of

fusion, the developing of an independent personality is a too big sacrifice (Kast, 1994).

### Analytic answers to treat overprotection

Although they notes that the therapy of overprotection and its effects is difficult the psychoanalytic authors are optimistic regarding to possibilities. They suggest possibilities in one hand in psychoeducation of the mothers and on the other hand in furtherance of the fighting back children's inferiority feelings, their integration in the community, accustoming them to challenges and responsibilities (Adler, 1969). They thought that the main duty of the education is the reducing of dependency from the childhood environment in the person growing up into adulthood (Jung, 1989).

Because they thought that the parentig is a learnable function so they suggest that the key of reducing of the overprotection is in reducing the parents overprotecting strategies: must be stoped the process in which the child put in his/her own service the parent, have to give the chance to the child to live trough the success of his/her own achievement despite of the success of the manipulation, let them experience their own power and abilities. The parent's and child's image about their relation in which the parties live in symbiosys, the child is passive, manipulator, unable to serve his/her life duties, has no motivation to fulfil them, the parent is active, worried, is under the necessity of taking over the child's duties, must be changed so that the child should play a role more adequate to his/her age and real abilities in his/her environment, the parent should be more interested in transmitting optimally the life duties to the child despite of taking over them, projecting the right amount of trust in his/her child (Rüedi, 1995).

### The generalization of the phenomena

The psychoanalytic theorists generalized the discussion of the subject both from the aspect of affected population and the overprotective institutes. They found similarity between the lifestyle of the handicapped and the overprotected child. While the handicapped is overprotected on account of his/her limited abilities and the insufficient size up of his/her abilities, the overprotected child with ordinary abilities become handicapped owing to overprotection. The overprotection isn't come down to the parental home but could appear in any other educational and supporting institutes too, because the overprotection is not only a parental characteristic but also an extreme kind of the educator and helper activities (Adler, 1969; Rüedi, 1995). For example József Zsolnai named the educator style underrating the abilities of children, frequently occurring in schools the "pedagogy of babble" (Zsolnai, 1995).

## Preventing of the overprotection and the protective factors of parenting

As the process of preparation to the community life is incongruent with the overprotection phenomena, from the aspect of the society putting the community in the central of the education may be the solution against the harmful effects of overprotecting attitudes (Adler, 1969). The negative effects of incestuous relationships that tie children to the family were recognized by every culture, it is shown by the universality of incest taboos, and the spread of passage rites. The community also could do against childish dependencies with reviving and affirming these rites (Fromm, 1950).

The theorists of psychoanalysis discoursed not only about the phenomena of the overprotection, its circumstances and effects but about the normative educational factors too which could protect against the overprotection. The next sections present the psychoanalytic theories about the protective functioning of family roles.

In positive mother complex the mother makes the we-feeling, the feeling of security and safety, give her child the sense to be an interesting important person, and that the life offers wonderful opportunities for him/her. If the mother is autonomous so she also got rid of her childish dependencies, later she can provide to her children the proper "extruding impulses" (Kast, 1994). In ideal cases the maternal love doesn't inhibit the child to grow up, the mother doesn't prompt her child to be helpless, she doesn't infect him/her with her worries. The mother plays an active role in the child's detachment process: she must want the child to be independent, to tear down him/her from her, his/her life to be separate. The mother prepares the child to tolerate the natural fluctuation of incorporation and separation, to bear the joy of encounter and the pain of grief. Willing of the child's separation wants an enormous selflessness from the mother. It presumes that the mother loves her child so that she wants nothing for herself. The test of the maternal love is that it abides the separation wholeheartedly and then loves along in the same way (Fromm, 1950).

The detachment of the child starts a grieving process in the mother, and it's so painful that it's unbearable for an immature personality (Kast, 1991). The good relation between parents is important because the presence of the father makes gradual and so more bearable the separation for the mother and the child. The maturity for the parental role presumes the ability of standing the pain caused by the differentiation of the child. The theorists suggest that while the mother's role is to provide safety feelings, the father's is the instruction. The father gets his child how to cope with the problems confronted in the outer world, so he opens the gates of the narrow nuclear family to a wider society (Fromm, 1950).

The condition of the child's well-being in his/her family is to find his/her place, role in the family, to achieve the feelings of pertinence and value with his/her useful contribution. If his/her milieu provide him/her possibilities for these, then he/she will be ready to correspond to the requirements of the family's common good. In the long run the child doesn't provoke overprotective behavior from his parents if they don't affirm this (Brezsnyánszki, 1998).

They said about the detachment of the child that it must happen gradually but with all speed, the the new generation would take over the "weights of the past" just in necessary things (caring of the old parents, to sustain a good relation with them) (Jung, 1989).

The self complex have to detach in the “proper age” from the mother and father complex so the person should identify the developmental duties correspondent to his/her age, and should get a “fairly strong self” because he/she can cope so with the requirements of life, difficulties, and can live pleased, with the proper amount of exhilaration (Kast, 1994). The child’s birth as an independent being is a lifelong process. After the biological umbilical cord it must be cut the psychological one too to open the possibilities of new attachments and detachments (Fromm, 1950).

The child’s personality may be unfolded only if he/she choose knowingly with conscious moral decision his/her own way. The human being needs a wider community than the family to avoid the mental, emotional and moral wilt in the too close bondings (Jung, 1989). The love for sops indicates the exceeding of incest attachments and desires. Only who outgrow the incest relationships can objectively contemplate and adjudicate his/her surroundings (Fromm, 1950).

### The theories of attachment-detachment and synchrony

After the psychoanalytic ideas will be shown such notions with psychoanalytic origins as attachment, dethachment (separation-individuation), as well as the interactional synchrony. The inseparability of attachment and detachment concepts, the interlocking of them is also emphasized by Coates in her study wrote about Bowlby’s and Mahler’s oeuvre (Coates, 2004). The use of above-mentioned terms is necessary to understand more exactly and to operationalize more effectively the parental overprotection phenomena.

#### Attachment

By Ainsworth’s definition the attachment is a person’s persistent (but not irreversible by all means) relational characteristic with the consequence of pervasivity after a longer period spent together with the primary caretaker. The attachment is characteristic in every age, there are presumed a strong emotional base behind the attachment, it results accessing behavior toward a certain person. Ainsworth differentiate the attachment from the dependency used by the psychoanalysts because the latter a generalized (it doesn’t tend to a certain person), not focused reaction characteristic, while the previous makes relation between two persons (Ainsworth, 1972). (The dependency in the scientific expression means pathologic dependent behaviour so it would be important to examine the probable relation between it and the attachment deformed by the overprotection.)

#### Detachment

The detachment processes that accompany organically the attachment ones were described scientifically at first by Margaret Mahler (Mahler, Pine & Bergman 1975). The separation-individuation process in infancy and childhood deduced by her based on in vivo observations describes the persons differentiation from the outer world reality and the development of his/her relation to it, especially in point of the infant’s awareness relative to his/her own body and the primary parent figure.

She uses the separation term referring to an intrapsychic achievement when the child is able to experience the feeling of separation from his/her mother. In this regard the identity is defined as the awareness of the sense of

existence: this is not the sense of “who am I” but the sense of “I am”. Mahler accounts the process of separation-individuation the “person’s psychological birth” (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

She thought that the separation-individuation process is present lifelong but she explored it mainly from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> month to the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. This process includes the child’s achievement of independent behaviour with the presence and emotional availability of the mother. The process of separation-individuation is attached with developmental readiness of the separate functioning. The separation, the child’s emergence from the symbiotic fusion with his/her mother, as well as the individuation, the achievement of identity and the reach of the child’s individual character aren’t identical processes, and while they are interwaved they also could function separately (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

Mahler’s separation-individuation investigation provides a possible normative procession of the first three year emotional development. The separation-individuation process moves on step-by-step, that is characterized by continually ascendent child autonomy. These steps require from the parents to give up their control gradually parallel to the child’s development, according to the child’s independent functional capacity (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

Mahler hadn’t investigated the parental overprotection directly but she made more observations about the deviations of normative developmental course. She found that the immoderate environmental reaction-variations to the child’s autonomy would stuck or regress the developmental levels of motivation, temperament, and sometimes generally too. Her results showed that the permanently present, infantilizing mother who discourages the child’s motivation to reach individuation, inhibits the development of the complete development of me-others differentiation awareness (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

The difficulties of the differentiation phase appear when the child’s needs are excessively satisfied by the mother or when the mother is intrusive or smothery. In the course of Mahler’s investigations there were observed a group of mothers who couldn’t bear the child’s gradual divergence at the beginning of the separation-individuation phase. They found that the anxious mothers which symbiotic-parasitic needs attached exaggeratedly, were intrusive, shadowed their children even in the late separation-individuation process. Although the child characteristics (e. g. sex, temperament), as well as the mother-child interactional characteristics (e. g. dangerous environment) would be also real reasons of the danger of delayed or retained detachment (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

In the next part will be detailed that the maternal overprotective behavior occurring in the given subphase of separation-individuation process what kind of effect evolve in the child’s development. In the first subphase the differentiation could delay or remain immature through the exaggerate levels of satisfaction, so the infant would become too anxious because the autonomous ego-capacity is precocious or vulnerable. In the “practicing” subphase when the child practice and perfect the autonomous capacities, the otherwise typical exuberance of joy fails in children whose symbiotic relation were extremely elonged or were disturbed in case that the symbiosys with mother was excessively tight or parasitic, and weakened or got irregular in children where the mother was unpredictable or impulsive, or partly “fused” with her child, and partly rejected him/her. In the “rapprochement” subphase the more intrusive or less reliable were the mother figure, the more possible evolved “bed” introjection that were attached to the increasing child aggression. The infants developed the quasi physical antecedent forms of

defense mechanisms (e. g. displacement) through the overprotecting parenting (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975).

Although our knowledge is incomplete regarding to the accurate course of separation-individuation process in subsequent ages could be found important details about the adolescent development. In this age the peer group assures the possibilities of role probing and interaction experiencing without any obligations, but if the peer group just replace the childish dependencies then the process of pubescence become a dead end. The successful adolescent transition could be completed only if the person get back to a former developmental phase so that resuscinate the infantile emotional interests and complete the detachment from the “inner objects”. This regressive task takes an important place in the progress of the individualization process (Blos, 1967).

Blos regards the adolescence as the second individualisation process. Along with the tearing of the familial dependencies the detachment from the parents befalls. If the detachment from the “infantile internalized objects” is not successful, the finding of extrafamilial loving objects probably fails, delays or become forbidden. The failures of individualization are characterized by “acting out” behaviors, learning problems, meaninglessness, giving up of the aims, mood swings, negativism (Blos, 1967).

### The attachment-detachment as a uniform process

After the short comprehension of the attachment and detachment processes let's deal with the results that underline the unity of the two processes oppositely to their separation. The observations show that the secure attachment could be related to the explorative behaviour of children and evidently supports that. The secure attachment helps the child's explorative playing in strange situation and the linking with strangers (Rutter, 1980). Ainsworth introduced the attachment-discovery term to describe the relation between the mother's secure based supervision and the infant exploring aimed roving in the world. She suggests that the attachment rather support the detachment process than forbid that (Ainsworth, 1972).

It's possible that both the attachment and detachment processes exist, they are interdependent, and the empiric exploration of the detachment is as important as attachment's. The young's detachment processes are evolving constantly along the development although according to precedent is thought that these processes are more active in early childhood and adolescence (Parker, 1983).

The detachment processes are relatively more independent agents of mother-child dyadic factors. The investigations refer to strengthening role of fathers, peers and other family members in the mother-child detachment process, and it is reached by broadening the child's socialisation. The cultural factors also advance the mother-child detachment (Parker, 1983).

In the next section would be elucidated that beside the simply existance of attachment and detachment processes would be important a third, dynamic factor in the description of the parent-child relational nature so this is the harmonization of the two processes, named synchrony.

### Behaviors regulating interpersonal synchrony

The interpersonal synchrony of parent-child dyad, so the harmonization of the parties' behaviors and interactions, in which their needs, life duties, possibilities are organised optimally, requires the sensitivity, adaptation and activity of both participants. Many observational studies were dealing with the development of parent-infant interactional synchrony. Strechler exploring the infants contribution to synchrony defined two groups of regulatory behavior:

- “alloplastic” regulation: when the social communication with the caretaker leads to changing is the child's environment;
- “autoplastic” regulation: what comes into existence when the alloplastic one doesn't work or when the infant want to control so the incoming stimuli to change the stimulus field (Stechler & Carpenter, 1967).

The alloplastic regulation shows the proper equilibrium of the autonomy occurring in the infant-caretaker system, while the autoplastic regulation refers to the unwanted state of the equilibrium and it induces occurrence of defensive strategies by the infant who searches the possibility to be an active participant of the interpersonal regulation. E. S. Wertheim suggests that the very early roots of autonomy would be found in the structural and functional synchrony of the infant-caretaker system based on reciprocity (Wertheim, 1975).

The infant search for the autonomy for own sake (primary autonomy) and apply it in the infant-caretaker system (instrumental autonomy). During the detachment the ability of interpersonal regulation develops in child. Based on the studies could be said that the fear of separation more typic in children who had experienced “excessively satisfying” mother-child relationship. Wertheim suggests that these reactions are shown by the children because of his/her deficiencies existing in interpersonal regulation and much less because of the distress experienced through mother's physical loss (Wertheim, 1975).

Ainsworth's studies point out the mothers' role in the development of the synchrony of mother-infant relationship. In these investigations the maternal behavior were measured in four scales: sensitivity – lack of sensitivity, acceptance - rejection, cooperation – communicational disorder, availability - ignoring. The detailed analysis showed that from these sensitivity was the central construct which was in high correlation with the other three. The mother characterized by sensitivity was able to see things from the point of view of her child, and she reacted fast and properly to her child's signals, and she offered an interactive role to her child. However the non-sensitive mother started and handled the interactions by her own style and needs, independently from her child's signals (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1971).

Osofsky and Connors (1979) found that the maternal anxiety and the low self-esteem prohibited seriously the mother-infant interaction. The middle class mothers were more responsive to their children behaviour, they speak more to the infant and encouraged more reciprocity. In contrast the lower social class mothers stimulated more physically the child and thought that they could less control the child's behavior.

The mother-child interaction would be seen as a superposition of some classes of behavior: the child's attachment behaviour, the child's behaviour opposite to the attachment (especially the exploration and the play), the mother's caring behaviour and the mothers behaviour opposite to caring. These produce a dynamic balancing between the attachment and detachment

processes, and change dynamically in their intensities. It's possible that the overprotective parenting refers to a qualitative disorder in the equilibrium of behavioural systems serving the child's attachment and maternal care. The overprotective parenting comes to existence as the resultant of the child's excessive attachment needs and the excessive maternal caretaking behaviours (forced closeness, retentive behaviours).

It's likely that the maternal overprotection occurs early in the development of the child then weakens or limits the child's readiness to "sensitive responsiveness". The sensitive responsiveness term refers to that the parenting is not simply "doing something to the child" but "the process of reciproc interactions" (Rutter, 1980).

### The conditions of the optimal development

The optimal development in the early period needs "synchrony", "reciprocal interactions", "mother-child balance". Establishing this presumes from the mother to be able to discriminate the signals of the child, and to give properly differentiated answers. Furthermore it requires from the mother to initiate adequately the interactions, and the ability to rejoice in the reciprocal action with her child. The maternal overprotection is related to phasing difficulty of mother-child cooperation could be seen from that the overprotection is frequently associated by the excessive or inadequate stimulating of the child and this causes quantitative and qualitative disturbances in mother-child attachment (Parker, 1983).

The most recent meta-analytic studies referring to interactional synchrony imply that in the development of the child's secure attachment plays a crucial role the optimal (medium level) synchrony of the mother-child relationship. So the mother-child relationship is characterized by mainly not the preponderance of the "good" interactions but the ability of repairing the interactional failures (Bíró, 2003). This finding translated to the terms of attachment-detachment process synchrony means that the participants of the mother-child dyad are able to configure an attachment-detachment behaviour determined by the child developmental needs and the maternal life needs, the parties are sensitive to decoding and interpreting the attachment-detachment signals of one another, and they can develop interactions suitably to the precedings. In this regard the overprotection may be seen as a resultant of the mother's excessive effort to synchrony, as well as the child's excessive synchrony need as a consequence to the mother's previous behavior.

Investigating interactional synchrony from overprotectional aspect we should find a new research possibility in the area of mentalisation occurring in the parent-child relationship. Mentalisation is an umbrella term for mental operations which contribute to understand the person's own and others' psychic functioning - emotions, cognitions, intentions, behaviors (Hámori, 2009, 2010; Flaskay & Gyomolai, 2012). The ability of mentalisation develops as a result of social learning by experiencing the communicational and other behavioral contingencies when the person tries to understand mental states of the others (Gergely & Watson, 1996). The investigational results imply that in some psychopathologies and especially personality disorders the mentalisation, the „mindreading abilities" are injured (Hámori, 2000; Fonagy & Target, 2005; Flaskay & Gyomolai, 2012), and the mentalisation deficit is mostly attached to some disorders of the symbolic functioning (Fonagy & Target, 2005; Hámori, 2009).

Although the results of mentalisation theorists refer mainly to psychic characteristics of traumatized, neglected persons, mostly patients suffering

by borderline personality disorder (Flaskay, 2010; Gergely et al., 2011; Bateman & Peter, 2012), theorists suggest that mentalisational problems may occur in benign neuroses, too (Fonagy et al., 2006; Hámori, 2000). In our opinion (and this may be proved by the theories and clinical experiences discussed above) not only the „hard” traumas as physical and sexual abuse may lead to mentalisation distortions but „soft” traumas too („soft traumas” – Turco, 2006). The persistent and pathogenic socialisational patterns like emotional abuse, excessive psychological control and at last but not least parental overprotection may pertain to the group of „soft” traumas.

## Summary

The previous article showed the psychoanalytically based theories of a special form of parent-child relational disorders, the parental overprotection. Nevertheless the analytical interest about this subject is relatively limited and its nature is fairly eclectic, we found some important correspondences in the authors' ideas.

The theorists agree that as a consequence of parental overprotection in child may develop the failure of cognitive abilities, the underdevelopment of social skills - a general developmental regression that also manifests in distortion of motivational and temperamental characteristics -, as well as some forms of neurotic symptoms (anxiety, depression). In consequence of overprotective parenting the awareness of differentiated self do not unfold in the correct level, the person would be characterized by ineffective coping strategies in the social environment, use of defense mechanisms, their sense of reality would be egocentric and overly subjective. For the sake of the symiosis persistent beyond the reasonable time the parental overprotection become the perfect field of gaming, manipulation, vicious circle functioning (processes which strengthening concentrically the child's inabilities and the parental worries and frustrations).

The modern approach of attachment theories makes more clear that the attachment and detachment processes compose a complementary and presuming each other unit and along the development they contribute jointly to the evolution of the identity. In this regard the autonomous personality is a person who is able to attach and detach, and to harmonize, synchronize properly these two. During the parenting the process of separation-individuation means the qualitative-quantitative-dynamic development of the child's identity and the parental behaviour that isn't limited only to the infancy, it lasts until to the reaching of the quality of adult identity.

The relational-interactional finetuning between the child and the parent, the optimal level of the interactional synchrony has a pervasive effect on the development of child's personality. I hope that with the future research of the parents' overprotective behavior we should come closer to the better understanding of the phenomena and the more detailed definitions of the notions used to describe overprotection.

## References

- ADLER, Alfred (1958): *What Life Should Mean to You*. New York: Capricorn.
- ADLER, Alfred (1969): *The Science of Living*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- AINSWORTH, M. D. S. (1972). Attachment and dependency: A comparison. In Gewirtz, J. L. (Ed.), *Attachment and dependence* (pp. 120-132). Washington D.C.: Winston, 1972.
- AINSWORTH, M. D. S., BELL, S. M., & STAYTON, D. J. (1971). Individual differences in strange-situation behaviour of one-year olds. In Schaffer, H. R. (Ed), *The origins of human social relations* (pp. 17-57). London: Academic Press.
- BATEMAN, A., & PETER, F. (2012). *Handbook of Mentalizing in Mental Health Practice*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Pub.
- BÍRÓ E. (2003). Interakció szinkronitás az interperszonális adaptációban. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 58 (3), 341-362.
- BLOS, P. (1967). The second individuation process of adolescence. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 22, 162-186.
- BREZSNYÁNSZKI, L. (Ed.) (1998). *A bátorító nevelés alapjai* (pp. 6-7). Budapest: IF Alapítvány, Altern füzetek 10.
- BRUNO, F. J. (1991). *The Family Mental Health Encyclopedia* (p. 315). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- COATES, S. W. (2004). John Bowlby and Margaret S. Mahler: Their Lives and Theories. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 52 (2), 571-601.
- ERIKSON, E. H. (1965). *Childhood and society*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.
- FLASKAY Gábor (2010). *Pszichoanalitikus terápia a gyakorlatban*. Budapest, Medicina.
- FLASKAY Gábor, & GYOMOLAI Éva (2012). Mentalizáció a pszichoanalitikusan orientált terápiaiban. *Pszichoterápia*, 21 (1), 12-20.
- FONAGY, P., & TARGET, M. (2005). Fonagy és Target mentalizációs modellje. In Fonagy, P., & Target, M. (Eds.), *Pszichoanalitikus elméletek a fejlődési pszichopatológia tükrében* (pp. 334-348). Budapest, Gondolat.
- FONAGY, P., TARGET, M., & GERGELY Gy. (2006). Psychoanalytic perspectives on developmental psychopathology. In Cohen, D. J., & Cicchetti, D. (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology, Theory and Method* (pp. 701-749). New York: Wiley.
- FREUD, Sigmund (1949). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. London: Imago Pub.
- FROMM, Erich (1950). *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- FROMM, Erich (1974). *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Row.
- GERGELY Gy., FONAGY, P., & TARGET, M. (2011). Kötődés, mentalizáció és a borderline személyiség etiológiája. *Lélekelemzés*, 1, 11-21.
- GERGELY Gy., & WATSON, J. (1996). The social biofeedback model of parental affect-mirroring. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 77, 1181-1212.
- HÁMORI Eszter (2000). „Idegen test” a terápiás térben - a szeparációs szorongás háttere és feldolgozása rövidterápiákban. In Bokor László (Ed.): *Pszichoanalízis és analitikus pszichoterápiák: a pszichoanalízis módszertani és formai kérdései*. Budapest: Animula.
- HÁMORI Eszter (2009). Klinikai zavarok és mentalizációs deficit – A kötődésméleti perspektíva. *Orvosképzés*, 84 (3), 172-175.
- HÁMORI Eszter (2010). Klinikai zavarok és mentalizációs deficit – A kötődésméleti perspektíva II. *Orvosképzés*, 85 (4), 374-379.
- JUNG, Carl G., & ALT, Franz (1989). *Von Vater, Mutter Und Kind*. Olten U. a.: Walter.
- KAST, Verena (1991). *Loslassen Und Sich Selber Finden: Die Ablösung Von Den Kindern*. Freiburg Im Breisgau: Herder.
- KAST, Verena (1994). *Vater-Töchter, Mutter-Söhne: Wege Zur Eigenen Identität Aus Vater- Und Mutterkomplexen*. Stuttgart: Kreuz.
- LIVIANOS-ALDANA, L., & ROJO-MORENO, L. (1999). On the convergent validity of two Parental Rearing Behaviour Scales: EMBU and PBI. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*. 100 (4), 263-269.

- MAHLER, M. S., PINE, F., & BERGMAN, A. (1975). *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*. New York: Basic Books.
- OSOFSKY, J. D., & CONNORS, K. (1979). Mother-infant interaction: an integrative view of a complex system. In Osofsky, J. D. (Ed.), *Handbook of infant development* (pp. 519-548). New York: Wiley.
- PARKER, G. (1983). *Parental overprotection: a risk factor in psychosocial development*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- RÜEDI, Jürg (1995). *Einführung in Die Individualpsychologische Pädagogik: Alfred Adlers Konzept in Der Konkreten Erziehungspraxis*. Bern: Haupt.
- RUTTER, M. (1980). Attachment and the development of social relationships. In Rutter, M. (Ed.), *Developmental psychiatry* (pp. 267-279). Washington D. C.: American Psychiatric Press.
- SANDERS, K. Y. (2006). Overprotection and lowered expectations of persons with disabilities: The unforeseen consequences. *Work: Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*, 27 (2), 181-188.
- SEBALD, H. (1976). *Momism: the silent disease of America*. Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- STECHLER, G., & CARPENTER, G. (1967). A viewpoint of early affective development (Vol. 1, pp. 163-190). In Helmuth, J. (Ed.), *Exceptional infant 1: Normal infant*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- STRECKER, E. A. (1946). *Their Mothers and Sons: The psychiatrist examines an american problem*. New York: J. B. Lippincott Company.
- THOMASGARD, M., & METZ, W. P. (1993). Parental overprotection revisited. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 24 (2), 67-80.
- TURCO, R. (2006). Commentary on Khalid and Olsson's "Suicide Bombing: A Psychodynamic View". *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis & Dynamic Psychiatry*, 34 (3), 531-534.
- WERTHEIM, E. S. (1975). Person-environment interaction: The epigenesis of autonomy and competence. II Review of developmental literature (normal development). *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 48, 95-111.
- WYLIE, P. (1955). *Generation of vipers*. London: Muller.
- ZSOLNAI J. (1995). *Az Értékközvetítő és Képességfejlesztő Pedagógia*. Budapest: ÉKP Központ; Holnap; Tárogató.