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THE RESEARCH OF MOTHER'S SIGNIFICANCE IN CHILD'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE ONTOGENESIS*

SUMMARY. The article researches psychological defense ontogenesis of a child in terms of personal relationships with a mother. The objective of the research is to find out and describe the formation of defense mechanisms with children of 4-12 years old. The research verifies a number of the hypotheses about the connection between mother's and child's systems of psychological defense, about the peculiarities of threatening situations and child defense system in different age groups. The article provides the results of the psychological defense research in different age groups: 4-6 years old, 7-9 years old, 10-12 years old. The research has revealed that such characteristics as the stress perception intensity and additional defense demand correlate with the age. Moreover, it has been discovered that threatening situations relevance, that initiates the development of psychological defense, also depends on the age group of a child. On the whole, child's psychological defense system is formed similarly to his/her mother's. And it tends to weaken as the child grows older. The research has also proved the connection between mother's and child's reaction to frustration. It should be also mentioned that the formation of a child system of psychological defense strongly depends on the maturity of his/her mother's defense system.

KEY WORDS. Psychological defense, ontogenesis, stress resistance, personal relationships, self-regulation.

During recent decades physical, psychological and reproductive health of the Russian people has been getting worse, the number of children and teenagers has decreased as well as the number of healthy citizens on the whole [1]. Upbringing of a well-adapted, stress-resistant and emotionally-stable child has become vital for parents. It makes the research of psychological defense ontogenesis highly relevant. The **problem** is that efficient work with psychological defense is hampered by the fragmentary and incomplete understanding of its ontogenesis. The contemporary understanding of psychological defense ontogenesis differs a lot from the original one coined by A. Freud who believed that psychological defense is innate. So, following A. Freud's research [2], psychological defense ontogenesis is connected

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with the processes of social learning and interpersonal context. On the one hand, it is common knowledge that early relationships with a mother play crucial role in a child's upbringing (M. Klein's object relations theory, M. Marler's, D.V. Vinnikott's, R. Shpitz's researches, J. Bolby's affection theory and others). On the other hand, it is not quite clear in what way these relationships are connected to psychological defense. And what are the ways to encourage forming of a valid constructive system of a child psychological defense. Our research is based on such an understanding of the personal life support system performance that considers psychological defense to present some level of stress response [3], [4], [5], providing an adaptive function meant to support harmonious relations between a person and an environment [6]. *The following points should be cleared out:* what are the ways that connect mother's and child's systems of psychological defense, what peculiarities of mother's defense are key to form child's psychological defense mechanisms system (PDM), what are the peculiarities of psychological defense development on the different levels of ontogenesis taking into consideration relationships with the mother and relevant age-related threats.

We define psychological defense as *an implicit scheme of response to basic difficulties that was initially used to deal with a prototype situation and later on was subconsciously transferred to the similar situations in ontogenesis* [7]. Psychological defense is considered to be a reflection of interpersonal defense in the family, where mother, being both a source of primary threats and of primary defense methods, plays leading role in upbringing [8].

Having undertaken the theoretical analysis we have found out 2 main mother-child information channels: *direct mother's defense* in which child participates – spontaneous, sometimes unconscious patterns and *conscious mother's methods of defense that she teaches her child* – verbal, reflexive and discussed. As the result the child has at least two constructs formed: *direct behavioral defense* in the situation of a threat and *expected methods of defense*, encouraged behavior in this or that situation, connected with mother's instructions. They can be perceived noncritically and introjected from a mother as well as be changed by a child's own opinion and conclusions.

There are 4 elements in the structure of psychological defense: 1) the subject of defense; 2) the threat; 3) the damage; 4) the method of defense [7]. These elements consistently and interdependently develop in ontogenesis. Every age has its own peculiar *social situation of development* that realizes some *social task* that a child tries to solve. A part of new environmental requirements is perceived as a **threat**. Threats do not emerge (are not perceived) until adequate targets in child's psychic are being shaped. The subject of psychological defense is I-conception and identity, while its objects are certain constructs like: self-esteem, self-respect, confidence, selfness, individuality, motivational formations (desires, likes, tastes), cognitive structures (worldview, opinion, knowledge), behavioral displays (habits, skills, communication style, behavior or activity).

The objective of the research: to find out and describe the formation of defense mechanisms with children of 4-12 years old.

The research verifies a number of the **hypotheses:**

At different ages the defense development is initiated by specific types of threats. Every age has its specific threats.

The defense is realized in the child's inner world in the way similar to mother's method of interpersonal defense.

The prevalent direction of mother's reaction to frustration is connected to the prevalent direction of child's reaction to frustration.

The maturity degree of mother's PDM system is connected to the development of PDM system of a child.

The research setup.

Subjects – 240 people: 120 mothers, 120 children of 4-12 years old.

Methods of data acquisition: structured clinical interview. "S. Rosenzweig's Frustration Reaction Test" (N.V. Tarabrina's modification). Method "Life Stile Index" (E.S. Romanova and L.R. Grebennikova's adaptation) – for mother; picture-drawing method "Man in the Rain", I.M. Nicholskaya's "Method of Serial Drawings and Stories" [9], "S. Rosenzweig's Frustration Reaction Test" for kids (L.Y. Yasukova's adaptation), projective game "Complete the story" – for children.

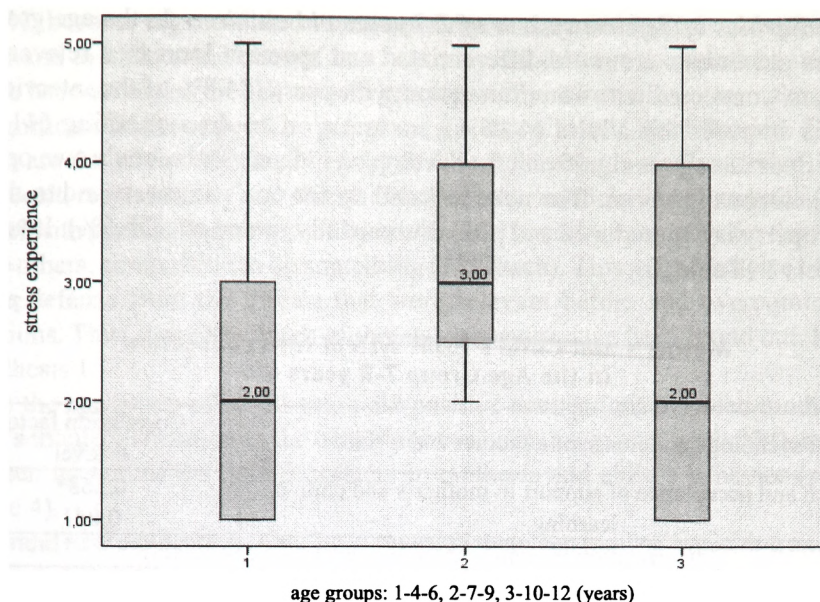
Methods of data processing and analysis: content analysis, descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis of variance, Spearman's correlation analysis, discriminant analysis, expert evaluation method. Using Kruskal–Wallis non-parametric criterion age-related differences were evaluated according to two parameters: demands for additional defense ($p = 0,012$) and stress perception intensity ($p < 0,001$).

Results.

Stress perception intensity (pic. 1) is the highest in the primary school age ($p < 0,001$). It is shown through high vulnerability to the relevant threats, stress is perceived as something very frightening, unpleasant and total in child's life. It might be connected with entering primary school and emerging necessity to adapt to changes in all fields of life.

Peculiarities of defense system of 4-6 years old children. Considering relevance of threats in the age group of 4-6 years, the source of most threats for a preschooler, and consequently the source of the defense mechanisms development, is his social relations. The biggest threat is "being offended by peers" (87.7% of the interviewed). The need for independence is met by the threat of bans imposed by adults (50.9%) and compulsion to do something (36.8%), the need for achievement is met with the relevant threats of failure and loss of leadership (71.9%), inefficient performance (38.6%), encroachment on "my" property that makes it necessary to stand up for one's interests (71.9%). Thus, the specific character of the threats has been discovered that supports hypothesis 1.

Using Spearman's correlation analysis we researched the frequency of the psychological defense (denial, suppression, regression, compensation, projection, substitution, intellectualization) in every age group. We compared frequency of the defense display in a mother's behavior with that of a child. While the defense frequency in mother's teaching was compared to the frequency of their display in the projective game (as the result of the teaching). To increase the reliability of the results, the correlation is given with Bengamini-Khokhberg's corrected value [10].



Picture 1. Age Differences in Stress Perception

The connection between mother's and child's PDM system when a child is 4-6 years old is not well-defined. A child copies suppression ($p=0.021$) and substitution ($p=0.001$) from the direct defense behavior of his/her mother. Observing mother's behavior is also important for a child in order to form a negotiating skill ($p=0.026$). The mother using intellectualization while teaching her child to cope with the difficulties is connected with the child using it as an expected defense mechanism in the projective game ($p=0.048$). This verifies hypothesis 2 for the age group 4-6 years old (Table 1).

Table 1

Mother's and Child's PDM system Interconnection in the Age Group 4-6 years old

Psychological defense of a mother and a child	Correlation factor P-level
Suppression in mother's and child's behavior	0.306* 0.021
Substitution in mother's and child's behavior	0.431** 0.001
Negotiating skill in mother's and child's behavior	0.295* 0.026
Intellectualization in teaching for mother and child	0.263* 0.048
*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (bi-lateral)	
**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (bi-lateral)	

Peculiarities of defense system of 7-9 years old children. In the age group of 7-9 years old threats are more differentiated and specific. Increased relevance of the threats, connected with communication with peers (54.8% of the interviewed) and bans imposed by adults (48.8%), compulsion to do something (41.9%), characterizes this age as significant for developing independence, one's own opinion and spontaneous behavior. The need to stand up for one's interests and to defend one's property is a bit reduced and probably partially rooted out (35.5%). It verifies hypothesis 1 (Table 2).

Table 2

**Mother's and Child's PDM system Interconnection
in the Age Group 7-9 years old**

Psychological defense of a mother and a child	Correlation factor P-level
Search and acceptance of support in mother's and child's learning	0.368* 0.041
*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (bi-lateral)	

The connection between mother's and child's psychological defense frequency in this age group is revealed by an example of support that a mother uses while teaching a child and the child's projective game. It proves hypothesis 2. The more mother uses the strategy of social support search while teaching her child to cope with difficulties, the more obvious this strategy becomes in a child as an expected one, acquired as the result of learning ($p=0.041$) (Table 3).

Table 3

**The Connection of the Frustration Response Direction for Mother
and Child of 7-9 Years Old**

Frustration response direction for mother and child	Correlation factor P-level
Intropunitive type of a mother – intropunitive type of a child	0.638** 0.000
Extrapunitive type of a mother – extrapunitive type of a child	0.460** 0.009
**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (bi-lateral)	

In the age group of 7-9 years old intropunitive type of mother's response correlates positively with the same type of the response in a child ($p<0.001$), as well as extrapunitive type of mother's response correlates positively with the same type of the response in a child ($p=0.009$). In this age group the peculiarities of the common defense style, either predominantly intropunitive (feeling one's own responsibility for the situation) for both a mother and a child, or extrapunitive (shifting responsibility to the others), are similar, which proves hypothesis 3.

Peculiarities of defense system of 10-12 years old children. In this age group the threats of the search of one's place in a group (71.9% of the interviewed) and criticism

(68.8%) become urgent. These situations threaten the need to find one's place in the world and to understand oneself in a new way. At this age the relations with peers start to be re-arranged, the self-esteem gets especially vulnerable. It can make criticism by significant adults or peers be perceived as a threat to self-identification. The other threats are almost equal: jealousy, envy (40.6%), failure and loss of leadership, injustice and deceit, responsibility and shame (34.4% each), inefficient performance (31.3%), quarrel with parents, bans imposed by adults (28.1% each), sympathy for the suffering of the others, compulsion to do something (25% each). This might indicate efficiency of the defense from the threats that were relevant before and overcoming these situations. Thus, age differences of threats' relevance have been found out. It proves hypothesis 1.

In the age group of 10-12 years old positive connections between mother's and child's intellectualization in the behavior have been discovered ($p=0.034$), as well as between tension of the defense system in mother's and child's behavior ($p=0.009$) (Table 4).

Brand new connections have been revealed: between mother's teaching and child's behavior. Substitution, compensation, yearning for reconciliation, used by a mother to teach her child to cope with difficulties, positively influence the child who starts using these defense methods in his behavior. Thus, hypothesis 2 has been verified.

Table 4

**Mother's and Child's PDM system Interconnection
in the Age Group 10-12 years old**

Psychological defense of a mother and a child	Correlation factor P-level
Intellectualization in mother's and child's behavior	0.375* 0.034
Substitution in mother's teaching and child's behavior	0.373* 0.035
PDM system tension in mother's and child's behavior	0.455** 0.009
Compensation in mother's teaching and child's behavior	0.394* 0.026
Reconciliation in mother's teaching and child's behavior	0.427* 0.015
*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (bi-lateral)	
**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (bi-lateral)	

In the age group of 10-12 years old positive correlation of mother's impunitive type response with the same type response in a child has been found out ($p=0.033$). It partially proves hypothesis 3. The relevance of the previous patterns has been lost, at the age of 10-12 years old a child becomes able to adopt ignoring as a way to respond to a threat. The revealed connection supports hypothesis 3 for the age group under consideration (Table 5).

Table 5

**The Connection of the Frustration Response Direction
for Mother and Child of 10-12 Years Old**

Frustration response direction for mother and child	Correlation factor P-level
Impunitive type of a mother – impunitive type of a child	0.377* 0.033
*Correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (bi-lateral)	

In the age group of 4-6 years old we have found out that differences in PDM system tension in behavior ($p=0.023$), in other words in abundance of defense strategies used by a child depend on the maturity of a mother. The more mature the mother's defense system is, the more number of defense the child uses. The intensive use of psychological defense in childhood may have a constructive significance as far as it alleviates psychosomatic level of response, switching on mental functions to resist threats. As far as more advanced levels of response (coping behavior and superior personal resources) are inaccessible for a child at this age, PDM system tension is optimal to resist difficulties. The maturity of mother's PDM system defines optimal functioning of child's PDM system at preschool age.

In the age group of 7-9 years old we have found out differences in the projection using frequency in the behavior ($p=0.034$) that depend on mother's PDM maturity. The more mature mother's PDM system is, the more frequently a child of 7-9 years old uses projection. Using of this defense mechanism is probably connected with the specific vulnerability to stress that children have at this age according to the research of the general peculiarities of the defense system. With the help of projection a child copes with poor progress at school easier, projecting a part of the feeling of failure on the external objects, and thus, providing some stability of identity and self-esteem.

In the age group of 10-12 years old differences that depend on mother's PDM maturity haven't been found. Thus, hypothesis 4 has been proved only concerning age groups 3a 4-6 and 7-9 years old.

Conclusions.

The hypotheses of the defense development in ontogenesis in the context of interpersonal interaction with a mother have been verified. The general pattern of PDM system development of a child has been discovered: *stress becomes most intensive* at the age of 7-9, that might be connected with entering school and changing of the social situation of the child development.

Different *types of threats* initiate the development of child's psychological defense in different age groups. Threat perception by a child evolves from generalization to differentiation and meets the basic social tasks of the age.

Every age group has its own pattern of PDM system development and a definite *degree of isomorphism* of mother's and child's psychological defense. At the early stage of ontogenesis direct defense behavior of a mother is of primary importance. Psychological defense of a child is formed by copying and reproducing it. A mother

consciously teaches her child some defense that the latter masters on a speculative level, and the probability of its actualization in behavior demands some special effort. A child becomes most perceptive for *conscious teaching* by the age of 10-12. It is connected with the peculiarities of intellectual development, self-consciousness and reflection of this age group.

The prevailing type of frustration response in a child is similar to the mother's. In the age group of 7-9 years old, mother's and child's direction of frustration response is isomorphic on *intropunitive* (introjective) and *extrapunitive* (projective) directions of frustration response. At the age of 10-12 this connection gets outdated and is replaced by *impunitive* (ignoring) response. In general, sensitivity of a child changes, isomorphism of mother's and child's PDM systems weakens.

The results of the research are valuable for practical psychologists who work with children. They are easily applied while consulting, carrying out training and educational programs, giving practical advice for raising stress-resistant children with efficient life support system.

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