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## “Important Persons” in Upbringing

### Introduction

Upbringing can be understood in terms of the influence of one human being on another. This does not imply every influence in everyday life. It only refers to the long-term and positive influences that support the individual as he/she grows up and undergoes the process of self-actualization. Of course, there are many such influences and the young person can often choose those that they feel are most useful for them. Sometimes the young person is a victim of violence from his or her parents (or other persons) and cannot make the choice of avoiding it. In this case, personal development is endangered and the young person can become destructive. However, usually in normal situation we can recognize one (or more) persons who had the biggest positive impact on us. We can say that this person (or persons) becomes a part of our personality through our own choice. These dear men and women can be described as “important persons”.

In this research, we try to investigate who are the important persons in the lives of young people who are students of the Philosophical Faculty. Most of them are successful young men and women who finished secondary school with the best grades and are now successful students at the university level. We wish to know who their important persons are, what personal characteristics those persons have, what their social backgrounds are, and what kinds of method they used in the process of the upbringing of the young people in question.

### Methodology

We asked the students to bring to mind one person who was important in their process of growing up and to describe the personality of this person. We asked them to describe too some event from which we could see how this person treated them. We only collected descriptions from students who were willing to provide this information. In total, 88 students gave us descriptions for this case study. All descriptions were analyzed according to the following research questions:

1. Who are their important persons?
2. What characteristics do they have?
3. What upbringing methods did they use?
4. What is the teachers' role in upbringing?

The results will be shown by table and graphic presentation. We shall cite typical descriptions of persons and their characteristics and treatments.

### Results and interpretation

#### Who are the important persons?

The important persons, as defined by the students, were grouped into five categories (Table 1). Mostly they are mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, fathers, brothers and

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sisters. Mothers are the most frequently cited as important persons in upbringing, but high scores are also accorded to grandmothers and grandfathers. Primary and secondary school teachers were recognized as important persons (12,5%) and secondary school teachers more often than primary school teachers. The role of same age persons is relevant too. We can see that friends have a similar degree of influence to that of teachers. If we add brothers, sisters and cousins, then every fifth important person is a same age person (21%) what is information about their influence in process of education. However, they are usually the older brothers and sisters, and we can conclude that upbringing essentially implies the influence of older people on younger ones.

Family	f <sup>2</sup>	Relatives	f	Friends	f	Teachers	f	Others	f
Mother	18	Grandmother	9	Friend (girl)	8	Croatian language	2	Friend's mother	2
Father	6	Grandfather	7	Friend (boy)	1	Class-master	2	Governess	2
Brother	4	Aunt	6			History	1	Trainer	2
Sister	3	Uncle	4			Sport	1	Godmother	1
		Cousin	3			Philosophy	1		
		Great-grandmother	1			Mathematics	1		
						Biology	1		
						Chemistry	1		
						Latin	1		

Table 1: Important persons

The share of particular categories can be seen in Figure 1. It is important to note that family and relatives form the largest percentage (69%) of the total number of important persons. Teachers constitute 12,5%, and friends 10%. Between "others", we have friends, mothers, governesses and godmothers. All of them are part of the family circle. Only sports trainers fall outside family and school factors.

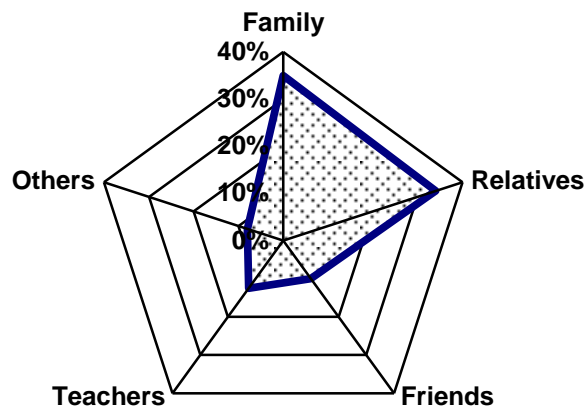


Figure 1: The share of particular categories of "important persons"

#### Personal characteristics of important persons

The respondents described the personal characteristics of their important persons. The categories for grouping the results were taken according to the theoretical orientation that we explained in "Didactic"<sup>3</sup>. We distinguish six aspects of the person: cognitive, affective, motoric,

<sup>3</sup> Bognar, L./Matijević, M. (2002) Didaktika, Školska knjiga, Zagreb.

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social, biological, and self-actualizational. In Figure 2 we can see that our students recognized five of these aspects as being important for upbringing. Particularly they stress personality features that we can recognize as being levels of self-actualization. Mostly they talk about good, positive, and dear persons, about being witty, patient and careful, and being persons of trust who are steady, calm, sincere, modest and honest.

*My friend is a merry and good person who is always there when I need something.*

*She is the type of person who, if life overwhelms her, stands up and continues braver and more persistently.*

*My class-mistress from primary school was a very good person; she loved us.*

*She never capitulates, always accepts difficulties with a smile and believes that things will get better.*

Among the social characteristics cited, the most important are friendly relationships and nonviolent communication. They are especially appreciative if older people are ready to talk with them as equals, and they respect them as equal collocutors.

*Even though she can treat me like a child, she always talked with me seriously, listened to me, and played with me. Today I can talk with her about anything, like with a friend.*

*The talks with my grandfather were always special. Always we had some secrets. I learned to protect the secrets and that it is important to get a friend.*

Affective characteristics are important too. There are descriptions of cheerful persons, with lots of understanding, love and heartiness, of people who are ready to listen and who have compassion with children's issues, and of optimistic persons with feelings for the problems of others.

*For her, listening to me about my problems is never a problem.*

*Always I get the same love from my aunt as she gives to her own children, sometimes through laughter, play and joy, sometimes through hugs and consolation when I need it.*

*What is best is the fact that nothing I say to her will be on the "notice-board".*

*In the space where she was you can feel optimism and happiness.*

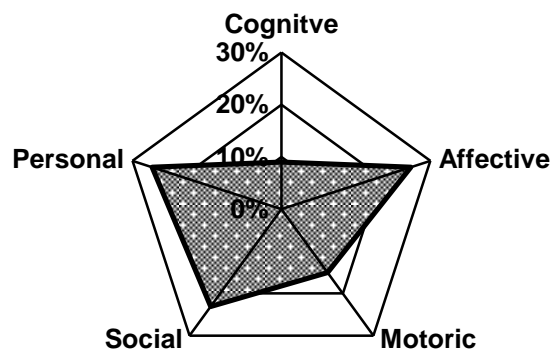


Figure 2: Frequency of categories of personal characteristics of important persons

Motic characteristics such as willingness to help, persistence, diligence and concern, are valued. For our respondents, it was particularly important that their important persons involved the children in their everyday activities and that they worked together patiently and carefully.

*Grandfather was a joiner and he often made casks. He always involved me in everything he did. He was very patient. I never saw him that he was nervous.*

*Grandfather was with us the whole day. We went with him to the field. We even milked the cows with him.*

*I think that everyone would like to have my cousin in the family, because he is always there in the right place and at the right time.*

Cognitive characteristics are given the least importance. However, respondents value a person who is clever, wise, intelligent, and who has wide interests. They described many modest but wise people who, by virtue of their knowledge, had a big influence on the children.

Cognitive	f	Affective	f	Motoric	f	Social	f	Personal	f
Clever	6	Cheerful	9	Ready to help	11	Good friend	7	Good, positive person	9
Wise	4	Understanding	9	Persistent	6	He/she talks on equal level	7	Humorous, witty	5
Reasonable	2	Optimistic person	7	Diligent	3	Righteous	7	Patient	5
Intelligent	1	Love and heartiness	4	Ready to do something	3	Communicative	6	Careful	4
Rational	1	Joyful	4	Worried	2	Open	3	Dear person	4
Wide interests	1	Smiling	3	Nothing is too hard for her	2	Tolerant	3	Person of trust	3
Positive thinking	1	Sensitive	3	Capable	2	Protective relations	2	Steady and calm	3
		Ready to listen	2		1	Liberal	1	Sincere	3
		Happy	2			Responsible	1	Modest	2
		Imaginative	2			Trustful	1	Realistic	2
		Tender	2			Pleasant tone of speech	1	Brave	2
		Gentle	1			Unselfish	1	Self-confident	1
						Everything solved by talking	1	Honest	1
						Ready to talk	1	Emancipated	1
						Always has nice word	1	Professional	1
								Strict	1

Table 2: Characteristics of important persons

Cognitive characteristics are given the least importance. However, respondents value a person who is clever, wise, intelligent, and who has wide interests. They described many modest but wise people who, by virtue of their knowledge, had a big influence on the children.

*His profession is a mail carrier but he likes archaeology.*

*My grandfather, because of his way of life, knew a lot about nature and animals, and I think that because of him I like nature too.*

*My grandfather had wide interests and not enough time to get to know everything that he wanted. During his last days, he was still learning, and he would talk to me about all the interesting things he had heard or read.*

*Grandmother spoke German and Hungarian, but when she was sixty, she wished to learn English. She always asked me how to say something in English.*

#### Upbringing methods that were used

We can sort upbringing methods into three strategies: an existential strategy (methods that respond to a child's existential needs), a strategy of socialization (methods that respond to a child's social needs), and a strategy of individuation (methods that respond to a child's needs for self-actualization)<sup>4</sup>. Methods, which use important persons, such as according to the descriptions of our respondents, we can mostly categorize under the strategies of individuation and socialization. The split between these strategies can be seen in Figure 3. Under "existential strategy" we can include all those methods that are orientated to concern about children's protection and care, activities performed in common with children, play with children, etc. Here we have descriptions of this kind:

*Were it not for my brother, I could not be here (at university) because my parents are unemployed and he pays for my studies. He supports me. He is my "parent" in all this.*

*The old woman who cared for me in the spring took me on a "spring trip", as she called it. We walked through the fields, picked flowers and she would tell a little story about each flower. In that way, she tried to make the time interesting for me. She knew how to treat me and she behaved well with me, as if we were the same age.*

*Once, when I was naughty, mother tried to beat me. I hid under the apron of my grandmother and we both got the beating. Mother was very angry and I stayed under the apron.*

The methods we identified as belonging to a strategy of socialization are conversation and giving advice. A young person gives a particularly high value to occasions when someone appreciates them as a collocutor and respects their thinking. There are friendly relations, friendship, love, and kind words.

*In spite of her difficulties, which often caused her great distress she always had a good word and advice for me. Sometime I think that she saved me when she got me up from the bottom where I was. She is a true light in my life.*

*She was patient with me when I needed something explaining, and I liked it, because today I can see that today parents are very impatient and they spend less and less time with their children, but it is the most important thing.*

*She is one of those rare persons who listens to my problems and me.*

*Often I remember her smile. She loved me very much as I loved her!*

*Always she tried to listen to all sides, and then as a neutral person to give her own opinion, although it was not always the same as mine.*

*Sometimes the silence was enough because she was always there. God is my witness how hard I was sometimes.*

*He had a relationship with me as an equal person. Often he asked me for my advice and opinion and he accepted it. It was for me something great. I then felt very important and I never felt this difference in ages between us.*

*Grandfather taught me to be unselfish. One day we played in front of the house and I wanted to go and buy ice cream. He took all the children and give ice cream to everyone, not only to me.*

*My friend and I were restless in the classroom. I remember, he (teacher) came up to me with a smile and put his right hand on my left shoulder and asked me to be quiet. It had a bigger result on me than any punishment (that I endured from other teachers).*

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<sup>4</sup> Bognar, L. (2001.) Metodika odgoja, Pedagoški fakultet, Osijek.

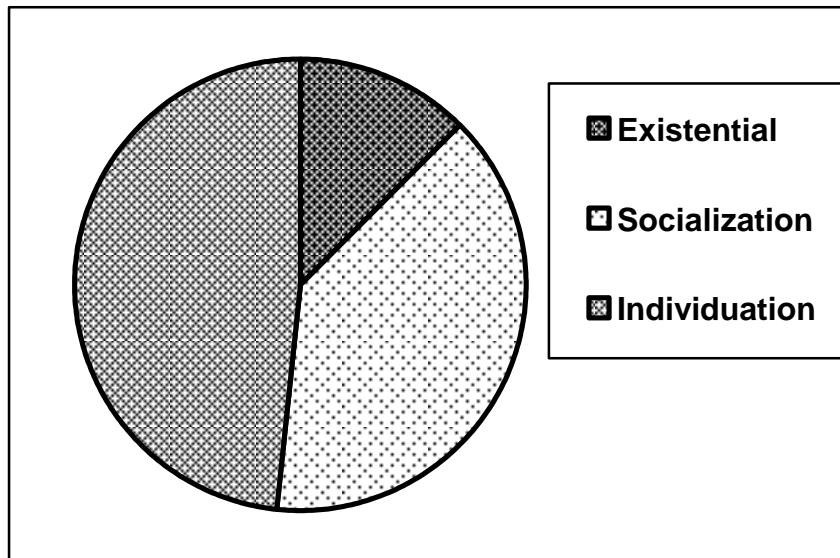


Figure 3: The share of upbringing strategies

Most of the methods, as quoted by our respondents, belong to the strategy of individuation. There are different kinds of support: teaching about values, active listening, encouragement and stimulation, understanding young people's problems, acting as a personal model, and showing confidence. There were many stories and anecdotes that told how these persons intended to give messages to children. Here are some examples for illustration:

*My father is a big support to me today too. He is proud of me, and this is very important to me.*

*When I have become depressed, she gets me back up and everything looks easy and solvable.*

Existential strategy	f	Strategy of socialization	f	Strategy of individuation	f
Taking care	6	Talking	20	Supporting	17
Helping	6	Advice	17	Teaching	14
Common activities	5	Friendly relations	11	Listening	11
Playing	2	Appreciation of collocutor	11	Encouraging, stimulating	11
Protection	2	Communication	2	Telling story with advice	8
Common work	1	Associating	2	Model, personal example	7
Organization	1	Correcting mistakes	1	Giving confidence	4
Defending	1	Loving	1	Developing self-confidence	
		Hugging	1	Personal development	4
		Saying nice words	1	Empathy	3
		Smiling	1	Explaining	3
		Drawing	1	Helping to understand something	2
		Merrymaking	1	Praising	2
		Having fun	1	Rejoicing in success	2
		Knowing more about someone	1	Being proud of me	2
		Doing the right thing	1		1
		Sadness changing to enjoyment			

Table 3: Upbringing treatments

*Because I have her for a friend, I feel that I am worthy. She makes me feel valued and important.*

*Out of everyone I knew, only she always believed in me - unconditionally.*

*The most important thing she said to me, that I shall remember forever, was: "Son, appreciate yourself more because you are worth it".*

*She always had different stories that gave advice, and she told them in such a humorous way. She was a super grandmother and when she was with us, laughter was inevitable!*

*Every time my grandfather told me an interesting story that began with: "It was once upon a time...", and at the end he added advice, which always had words about honesty, having a pure heart, goodness and love, and he would say: »Never forget it."*

*I remember a message that she sent me when I was very unhappy: "A man is never as unhappy as he thinks, and never as happy as he hopes to be. Survive the tears because the smile will come after them."*

There were only two repressive treatments that they mentioned - scolding and criticism, but they did not hold it against their important persons because it was something unusual for them. They talk, by the way, about punishment (by other teachers) and physical punishment (when mother was angry and grandmother defended them). Therefore, they, as the children, had experiences like these but neither the repressive treatment nor the persons who gave it influenced their personal development. The persons in question did not have the status of important persons.

#### Teachers as important persons

Teachers as important persons are mentioned in 11 cases (12, 5%). There are the similar number of men and women (5 men and 6 women). Four are primary school teachers and seven are secondary school teachers. In agreement with the research of others, we can conclude that school influence on education is between 8 and 14%.<sup>5</sup> Teachers considered as important persons by our respondents included class teacher, class master, teacher of Croatian language, and sports teacher from primary school; and teachers of Croatian language, history, math, Latin, biology, chemistry, and philosophy and logic from secondary school.

Respondents next drew attention to their important persons' personal characteristics:

*She was a very good person. She loved our class.*

*He was a man you could trust.*

*He always came across as a friend. He was not unapproachable or authoritarian.*

*She was really a friend and she knew how to teach us.*

*She influenced me by her professionalism.*

*He talked with us as though we were best friends. The other teachers did not like him because of that and they often treated him in an unfriendly way.*

*He had friendly relations with us, with small doses of severity and authority inspired me to study mathematics further.*

They dealt with students in a caring and friendly way, they had trust in their students and tried to develop their self-confidence, which was different from the attitude of most of the other teachers. Some of the students chose their subject of study because of these "important person" teachers.

*Every minute that I spend in talking with him is a joy for me. He supports me and encourages my persistence to study.*

*He taught us to communicate. At that time students only sat and kept silence (like the chairs). He activated us; we talked, learned and kept company with each other.*

*With all her students, she had an equal relationship; all of us were equal worthy and were rewarded for our successful work.*

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<sup>5</sup> Stoll, L./Fink, D. 2000. str. 62.

*From being the average student in primary school that I was, she made me excel at chemistry and come first in competitions. She is the reason why I am here and studying chemistry. I hope that I will be at least half as good as she was.*

*I am thankful to her that she kept repeating to me that I could achieve more than I think I can. Because of that, I have tried to reach the highest level. Now I am here - at university.*

## **Discus**

Important persons, whom all of us have to a greater or lesser extent, are persons with special qualities who make a difference to our lives. Young people in the process of development have contact with many people, and particularly important are family members, friends and teachers, only some of whom stay in the memory as "important persons". In cases where these persons do not exist, or if they were persons who traumatized the young person by fear, violence, or physical and psychological threats, personal development will be disrupted; which can show in such ways as auto-destruction (from neurosis to suicidal tendencies) or in malevolence towards others (from verbal and physical aggression to serious criminal acts).<sup>6</sup> In our research, it became clear that there exist a large number of so-called "common people" who, by their human warmth, life optimism and personal wisdom, help young people grow up to be healthy and happy persons.

We can see that less significance is given to the cognitive and motoric characteristics of important persons, although these are not insignificant, but particular significance is given to authentic, self-confident and emancipated persons, who, through the power of their personalities, can support young and insecure people in the process of their development. There is also significance in the social and communicative abilities of those persons, such as their affective dimension, showing again that upbringing is not a rational process but firstly relies on emotional and communicative relationships, which depend on an educator's personal qualities.

The fact that most of the important persons in this survey come from the immediate and extended family (69%) says much about the significance of parents and their parents (grandmothers and grandfathers) in the process of upbringing. If society wishes to promote education, it has the task of connecting with this part of society, the importance of which is not sufficiently recognized. Similarly, we confirmed a delusion about the large and even decisive influence of school education. We can say that school is an important educational factor (similar to that of same-age friends) at 12,5, 5%, but it is not as important as is usually thought by those who state that schools change society. Schools need to be supplemented by family education and the school can only realize its role alongside close cooperation with the family. Our research shows that there are many people within families whose functions are manifested in highly beneficial ways. Since our research deals with successful young people, it shows how they achieved that success. If we had investigated some other population, we would have reached different findings. We believe that investigation of young people who have difficulties would find the causes of those problems within the family structure. However, this would again be proof of the vital role of families in education.

Of course, we can always ask again about the sense of the school, "which represents the biggest social performance of our culture", as Hartmut von Hentig says. "It does not devour children, but it devours childhood and youth". (1997, p. 8). Children and teenagers spend a big part of their life in school, and with very meagre results. Solutions can be sought in two directions: (1) In the schools it is possible to abandon the repressive and selective role of the school, and in the process of humanization to qualify the schools to better respond to students' needs and interests. In this view, our research can show how the teachers' role can change. (2) It is possible to investigate the possibilities of changing the intensity of schooling

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<sup>6</sup> Alice Miller gives many examples about people who did not have good and positive important persons in their childhood.



and to create other ways of giving social support to young people in the growing-up process, and to families in realizing their educational role.

## **Conclusion**

This research allows us to conclude that in the process of upbringing there exist certain persons who have determinant influences. These persons we can call "important persons". Usually, they are someone from within the immediate family, or more remote relatives, friends, and teachers. All of them have special qualities that include important affective, social, and personal characteristics. The most significant are personal characteristics: goodness, positive orientation, sense of humor and wittiness, patience, and trust. They treat young people in nonviolent ways with lots of love and understanding.

For the future of the world, it is very important that these people exist around all of us.

### Summary

This research, conducted amongst the students of the Faculty of Philosophy, provided answers to the following questions: (1) Who are the persons whom students named as “important persons”? (2) What characteristics did they have? (3) What kinds of upbringing methods did they use? (4) What role did teachers have in their education?

A large proportion of these persons (69%) were members of the family, which shows the significance of the family in education. Teachers play the role of important persons (12, 5%) a little more frequently than friends (10%) do. These data reveal the influence of the school in the educational process. Important persons are those who have special personal qualities, very important among which are personal, social and affective characteristics. These people are cheerful and optimistic persons, who are open for communication, who respect the collocutor, and who show great love and understanding. The methods they use are permissive, while repressive methods are not their way. It is again clear that only those methods oriented to human needs can have a positive influence on personal growth and development. The relatively small influence of the school in education raises the question about the length of time that children spend in school, and the illusion that the school can bring about social changes.

**Key words:** *Important persons, characteristics of important persons, upbringing methods, efficacy of upbringing, school influence.*

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