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## PARENTAL ATTITUDES AMONG MEMBERS OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH COMMUNITY

**Summary:** This article presents the results of the empirical verification of the hypothesis that spouses belonging to the Domestic Church community have more proper parental attitudes than spouses who do not belong to any religious community. The basis for this hypothesis was the previous research, according to which the relationship of these spouses with their children is based on proper closeness and communication. The research carried out here, in which the Parental Attitudes Scale, by M. Plopa, was used, proved that the parental attitudes of the spouses belonging to the Domestic Church community are characterized by the greatest consistency and autonomy, as well as appropriate protection and demands, and showed no differences in the acceptance dimension. They also showed that these behaviors contradict the trends revealed in Plopa's study, as they correlate positively with their age, male gender, marital seniority, age and the number of children, and negatively with education. One of the reasons for the results obtained seems to be the membership of the House Church community and participation in religious formation, which obliges these parents to 'work' on their interactions with their children.

**Keywords:** Family, Parental Attitudes, Religious Community.

The primary existential environment of the human is the family, while the parent-child relationship is one of its major descriptive characteristics. Hence, it is understandable that the quality of such interactions has become the subject of extensive studies in the social sciences, including psychology.

This study aims to contribute to this current research and examine the parental attitudes of spouses belonging to the community of the Domestic Church, as defined by M. Plopa.

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## 1. Theoretical introduction

Paraphrasing V. Satri (2000), it may be said that the family is where “the human is made” since it is the natural space where one is born and a new generation is formed. This process involves a series of parent-child interactions and constitutes a kind of balancing act between upbringing and control strategies since, on the one hand, the parents are supposed to ensure closeness, warmth, support and acceptance to the child and, on the other, inculcate the right patterns of social functioning.

In family life, these strategies are reflected in the physical and verbal approach to the child, whereby its positive manifestations include taking the child in the arms, hugging, kissing, smiling, caressing, playing, and verbal expressions of love, praise and compliments. In contrast, an absence of physical and verbal closeness (expressed through rejection, hostility, aggression, spiteful remarks, ridicule, indifference, neglect, or physical punishment) represents negative aspects. This negative parental approach to children is particularly dangerous, as it perpetuates egocentrism, emotional instability, role-related insecurity, inferior bonding with the parents, “problematic” behaviors towards others, encourages premature sexual activity and early poor-quality marriage, which thus often ends in divorce (Belsky, Steinberg, Draper, 1991, p. 662).

Nevertheless, regardless of whether parents follow the path of positive or negative approach to the child, it can be described as parenting style<sup>1</sup> or parental attitude.<sup>2</sup> J. Rembowski defines the latter as “the overall form of the parents’ (father’s, mother’s) attitude towards the children, towards the issues of upbringing, etc., which developed as they performed parental functions” (Rembowski, 1972, p. 55). The definition suggests that there are more or less as many parental attitudes as there are parents, and this profusion is reflected in the multiplicity of scholarly approaches. Still, according to M. Plopa (2005, p. 266–276), all scientific paradigms of parental attitudes may be divided into descriptive and factor-oriented typologies, where the former includes models by, for example, L.E. Longstreth, L. Kanner, P.S. Slater and M. Ziemka, while the concepts advanced by A. Roe, E.S. Schaefer, W.C. Becker and M. Plopa are examples of the latter.

L.E. Longstreth is one of the authors of descriptive typologies, in which various parenting behaviors are classified using superordinate concepts. His model of parental attitudes relied on the observation of mothers’ interactions with their children. In effect, the author distinguished four patterns: protection, restriction, hostility and acceleration/encouragement (Plopa, 2005, p. 268).

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed information on parenting styles may be found in: Smykowski Błażej, 2005, p. 246–248.

<sup>2</sup> Attitudes are discussed in detail in: Wojciszke Bogdan, 2000, p. 79–106.

In terms of the number of attitudes, a similar typology was developed by L. Kanner, according to whom the following types of parental attitudes may be identified: acceptance and love, overt rejection, perfectionism and overprotectiveness. The attitude of acceptance and love is most conducive to the development of the child (who is at the center of parental interest) so that they relate to their offspring with tenderness, patience and understanding. Its opposite is the attitude of rejection: neglecting the child, avoiding contact with him or her, and being coarse and harsh, which consequently inhibits the development of higher feelings in the child, nurtures aggressiveness, and even delinquency and severe social maladjustment. The perfectionist attitude does not benefit the child either, as placing excessive demands, disapproval or censure for trivial reasons instils anxiety, guilt, frustration, obsession and lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, overprotectiveness, in the shape of excessive indulgence or overwhelming authority, translates into spoiling the child and fulfilling their every whim; control, suppression of independence and excessive restrictions result in the child's lack of initiative, inadequacy in life and delayed maturity (Przetacznik-Gierowska, Włodarski, 1998, p. 132–133).

A slightly different typology of parental attitudes was devised by P.S. Slater. Specifically, all modalities of parental approaches to children were divided into such attitude pairs as indulgence – strictness, tolerance – intolerance, warmth – coldness and dependency – separation. When these dimensions are inscribed into a circle divided into quarters, one obtains the following patterns of parental attitudes: indulgence and tolerance, warmth and dependence, strictness and intolerance, as well as coldness and separation (Plopa, 2005, p. 268).

Drawing indirectly on P.S. Slater's circular model, a major typology in Polish science was presented in M. Ziemska (1979, p. 182–186). Drawing from a critical analysis of other authors as well as her clinical experience, the researcher created a typology of desirable and undesirable parental attitudes, which demonstrated usefulness in therapy and diagnosis since, in addition to the typology, Ziemska also developed a research tool to measure such attitudes. The author defined four opposing pairs of attitudes: acceptance – rejection, cooperation – avoidance, reasonable freedom – excessive protection and recognition of rights – excessive demands. Interestingly, the correct attitudes are not mutually exclusive but complementary, which means that they should co-occur in the parental relationships of every mother and father, albeit with varying intensity.

A manifestation of an accepting attitude is acknowledging the child as they are with his or her physical, mental and psychological traits. Here, any interaction with the child is a pleasure and a joy to the parents, and their feelings towards the child are overt. The child is often praised, and any reprimand concerns the

behavior, not the person. In this approach, the parents try to determine the needs of the child and satisfy them, which makes the child feel secure and content with his or her own existence. Conversely, the absence of such feelings is a sign of a dismissive attitude on the part of the parents. The child is rejected and treated in a dictatorial manner while their person and behavior are disapproved of and criticized; emotional distance is observed, negative feelings predominate over positive ones, harsh punishments are applied, and the needs of the child are not a matter of interest. Ultimately, the child is treated as a burden whose care should be entrusted to an institution.

In contrast, a cooperative attitude implies a positive involvement in the child's "world" in their play and work, corresponding to the developmental stage. Consequently, it is the parents who largely initiate reciprocal interaction in the early years of the child's life, but the responsibility in that respect shifts gradually to the child as they grow up. This is because parents who demonstrate such an attitude always find pleasure in interacting with their child, from joint activities to the exchange of ideas and opinions. Its opposite is an avoidant attitude, whose primary characteristics include lack of pleasure in being with the child, avoiding or limiting one's contact with the child, emotional distance and neglecting the child in various respects: their emotional needs, care, security; also, the child is faced with demands. This type of behavior is often masked by gift-giving and apparent liberalism.

The next set of attitudes involves the opposition between acknowledging the child's rights and making excessive demands on the child. In the first case, parents attribute the child a proper role in the family, one which matches their developmental stage; this dimension subsequently expands as the child grows older. Respecting the child's individuality, parents allow and even encourage the child to take increasing responsibility for their own behavior, which they correct by way of explanation, persuasion and suggestion rather than by imposing, coercing, or dictating patterns of conduct. An altogether different behavior is demonstrated by parents whose attitude revolves around excessive demands. At its core, there is an envisioned pattern that the child must live up to, regardless of their individual characteristics, abilities and developmental stage. In everyday life, this means exorbitant demands placed on the child, exaggerated focus on achievement, rigid imposition of authority, imperiousness, restrictions on personal liberty and even punishment for its manifestations. The child is also expected to display skills and behaviors which are not age-appropriate, i.e. from a higher developmental stage.

The final set of attitudes extends from reasonable freedom to overprotectiveness. The former is a kind of balance between concern for the child's health and safety and consenting to their increasing physical and mental

detachment, in line with the needs arising at particular developmental ages. These sound boundaries of protectiveness are also reflected in having trust in the offspring and directing them only to the extent that this is necessary and indispensable. Otherwise, the attitude gravitates towards excessive protectiveness, which sets out with the notion that the child is a model of perfection, resulting in an uncritical attitude. In effect, the child lives a sheltered life, as the parents remove all obstacles the child may face and solve all difficulties for them, limit freedom, often isolate the child socially from peers, and make them dependent while living in fear for their health and safety. Simultaneously, parents tolerate the child's fancies and misbehaviors, cater to the child's whims, and overprotect the child from allegations, accusations and criticism; in short, they allow the child to control them and the family.

At this point, it may be worthwhile to discuss certain examples of factor typologies developed following factor analysis of empirical data. The first noteworthy typology was developed by A. Roe, whose circular model relied on the division of parental behavior into cold and warm attitudes. A cold attitude goes hand in hand with avoiding contact with the child, which is expressed through neglect or pushing them away. A warm attitude, on the other hand, is demonstrated through acceptance, either loving (full emotional involvement) or incidental (sporadic). According to the author, both attitudes – coldness and warmth – can also be associated with emotional focus on the child. The former involves excessive demands and the latter excessive protection. This results in six types of attitudes: neglectful avoidance, rejecting avoidance, over-demanding orientation, acceptance, loving acceptance and overprotective orientation (Ziemska, 1979, p. 170–171).

A fairly elaborate circular model of parental attitudes was advanced by E.S. Schaefer. Setting out with the basic dimensions, such as love – hostility and autonomy – power, he integrated analyses of maternal behavior and concluded that one could speak of 18 forms of parental behaviors, e.g. autonomy – rejection, dominance – submission, hostility – love, extraversion-introversion etc. Further analyses of intercorrelations of specific attitudes showed that three general attitudes could be distinguished: control over the child, acceptance and rejection (Przetacznik-Gierowska, Włodarski, 1998, p. 133–134).

The next typology is the result of an analysis conducted by W.C. Becker and his colleagues (Plopa, 2005, p. 271–273). In the initial phase, he arrived at five factors: 1) affection – hostility, 2) freedom – restriction, 3) fearful upbringing – peaceful upbringing, 4) distressed – calm approach to the child's gender-related behavior, and 5) high – low degree of physical punishment. According to Becker, these attitudes are common to mothers and fathers, whereby the latter two reflect the first three to some extent, and the punishing attitude does not

necessarily goes hand-in-hand with being restrictive. However, co-occurrence is seen with the first, third and last factors, as well as with the second and the fourth, which means that loving parents approach their children with tenderness and calm and do not resort to physical punishment, in contrast to hostile parents, whose treatment of their children is marked by anxiety and distress, often involving physical punishment. In effect, these five dimensions can be reduced to two: warmth – hostility and freedom – restriction.

In subsequent studies, Becker sought to define independent factors, which ultimately allowed three dimensions to be identified: warmth – hostility, calm – anxious treatment and restriction. If these dimensions are construed as axes intersecting in space, one obtains eight small cubes contained in one large cube, which corresponds to eight types of parental attitudes.

M. Plopa is the author of the most recent factor typology of parental attitudes developed in Poland; on this basis, the author developed an operational variant known as the Parental Attitude Scale. Relying on long-standing work with families and factor analysis of his own research, Plopa distinguished five parental attitudes: acceptance – rejection, demands, autonomy, inconsistency and protection (Plopa, 2008, p. 72–76).

The attitude of acceptance means that parents unconditionally accept their child, who feels safe and loved. Their relationship with their child promotes an unconstrained exchange of feelings and thoughts, open communication of their needs, and teaches trust in people and the world. In the course of growing up, the reciprocity of the parent-child interaction also increases, and the mutuality of sharing and the space of learning from each other becomes more profound. This is due to the fact that the parents are sensitive and responsive to the child's needs, concerns and aspirations at every point in the child's life, and they find each interaction with the child to be a source of satisfaction, joy and pleasure. As a result, the child knows that irrespective of the circumstances, he or she can count on the support of parents who treat them with dignity and respect. If, on the other hand, parents do not feel such satisfaction from their relationship with their child—which is cold and lacks closeness – the attitude of rejection is in evidence. In this case, the parents fail to note the child's needs and problems and do not recognize their subjectivity; instead, they treat the child instrumentally and confine themselves to satisfying their material needs.

Subsequently, an excessively demanding attitude is founded on the failure to understand the needs of the child, particularly their need for independence, autonomy and self-determination. Here, parents consider themselves to be the absolute authority who are due absolute obedience; their orders, commands and prohibitions are to be executed and complied with immediately and perfectly. Any deviation from these rules is met with instantaneous and disproportionate

punishment. A similar situation occurs when the child's behavior and achievements deviate from the parents' expectations, which in any case exceed the child's developmental abilities.

The core of another attitude is autonomy which, correspondingly to the age, allows the child to have their own sphere of privacy and seek their own path in life, thus learning to be independent. At the same time, the child knows that they can turn to their parents for help and advice at any time, as this exchange of views will prioritize respect for differences and search for factual arguments instead of forcing one to adhere to the parents' solutions. This domain of freedom expands as the child grows older, also applying to interactions with the opposite sex.

The fourth facet of parenting involves an inconsistent attitude, in which much depends on the parents' current state of mind, whose source often lies in situations outside the family. This results in fluctuating behaviors towards the child, from acceptance and closeness to nervousness and excessive restriction of the child's freedom, including the threat of punishment. On the one hand, this lack of stability causes the child to shut themselves off from the parent, rebel and disregard his or her authority; on the other, the child tends to seek emotional support in relationships outside the family.

Finally, Plopa identifies the overprotective attitude, which essentially consists of the parents' belief that the child will never be able to function without their support and help. Consequently, the boundaries of care and concern for the child are overstepped, and any "healthy" manifestations of autonomy, freedom and independence on the child's part are perceived as threatening and worrisome. At the same time, such parents are surprised that the child responds to their care with defiance, emotional detachment and a growing number of conflicts. Still, they remain unaware that they actually contribute to such a response in the first place.

The above typology by M. Plopa will provide the basis for an analysis of the parental attitudes of couples belonging to the Domestic Church community, in line with the hypothesis that they demonstrate more correct behaviors towards their children than spouses who do not belong to any religious community.

The community of the Domestic Church is the family branch of the Light-Life Movement; its members go through a formation process by fulfilling the so-called "promises", which include daily personal prayer (Tent of Meeting), marital and family prayer, regular encounters with the Word of God, monthly marital dialogue, the Rule of Life (which defining the scope of systematic internal work on oneself, one's marriage and family) and participation in formational retreats (at least once a year). These commitments constitute a program of marital spirituality, which is intended to help the spouses achieve

sanctity, and unity and bring up their children in the Christian spirit (*Domowy Kościół. Gałąź rodzinna Ruchu Światło-Życie Archidiecezji Warmińskiej*, 2022).

In the pursuit of the latter goal, the commitment to marital dialogue, in which the couple discuss “personal life” (evaluation of their own conduct), “you and I” (evaluation of marital unity), “we and our children” (evaluation of parental attitudes), “we and others” (evaluation of the family’s interaction with the outside world), “we and our God” (evaluation of the relationship with God) are likely to be particularly helpful (Opalach, 2006, p. 28–29).

The above characterization shows that spouses belonging to the Domestic Church are obliged to “work” on their parental attitudes as part of religious formation, which in turn warrants the hypothesis that their parental relationships are better than in the case of parents not involved in any religious community.

The validity of such a hypothesis is supported by the abundant and extensive literature on the psychology of religion, which indicates that a relationship with God affects the functioning of all spheres of life (Prężyna, 1981, p. 76–77); this is corroborated by the research to date. Pertinent studies show that religiousness has a positive influence on the formation of strong family bonds, especially in the mother-child arrangement (Pearce, Axinn, 1998, p. 826), and that the child-rearing practices of parents whose religiousness is average are based on religious principles (Shor, 1998, p. 407).

These findings coincide with Polish studies, which demonstrate that parents guided by religious values in their lives display parenting attitudes which are consistent and approved by the child, as well as rely on warmth and closeness (Jagiello, 1987, p. 237–238) and correct communication (Tatała, 2002, p. 189).

Such parent-child relationships are also observed with spouses belonging to the community of the Domestic Church. In fact, it follows from empirical data that the couples, especially those who meet the monthly commitment to marital dialogue—compared with members of the Domestic Church who do not use this “tool” regularly and the Catholic couples who do not belong to any religious community—demonstrate the most appropriate parental attitudes based on sound closeness (Opalach, 2006, p. 134–135) and good communication skills (Opalach, 2003, p. 217–218). Thus, it may be said that, for the spouses within the Domestic Church, a close relationship with God and attention to family relationships are two priorities that function in positive feedback to each other. The need to actualize them is so strong that the recent events of the COVID-19 epidemic and the lockdown have not had an adverse effect; on the contrary, their dependence and importance became even more conspicuous (Opalach, 2021, p. 404).

The above empirical data substantiates the hypothesis that couples belonging to the Domestic Church may be expected to have a better parental relationship than spouses who are not involved in any religious community.



## 2. Research strategy and discussion of results

The above hypothesis was verified using the Parental Attitude Scale by M. Plopa, an operationalization of the typology of such attitudes developed by that author. The scale comprises five dimensions, as described above; the autonomy scale in male attitudes showed the lowest internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), whereas the highest was determined in the scale of the demand in the attitudes of women ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Furthermore, analyses of the validity of individual factors showed that no items in the scale significantly discriminated against one gender (Plopa, 2008, p. 78–85). It was found in the course of normalization that its results correlate with the age and education of the respondents, their length of marriage and the age and number of children (Plopa, 2008, p. 123–131).

The scale consists of 50 statements, with ten items for each attitude, which means that raw scores range from 10 to 50 points. These are subsequently converted into a sten score, in line with the table of norms, where particular attention is paid to interpreting scores that go beyond moderate, i.e. over 5–6 sten, in either direction.

The study was conducted in November and December 2021 with a group of 40 married couples belonging to the Domestic Church, hereafter abbreviated as DC, and 40 married couples who do not belong to any religious community, hereafter abbreviated as non-DC. The latter were Catholic couples residing in or originating from Olsztyn and the surrounding area.

The characteristics concerning the ages of the parents and the children, as well as the number of children in the study groups, are shown below in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1. Age of spouses, children and their number in the study groups

Characteristics	DC	non-DC
Average mother age	46.2	47.4
Average father age	44.1	44.
Average age of children	16.2	14.4
Average number of children	2.4	2.1

Tab. 1 shows that compared with non-DC couples, the spouses belonging to the Domestic Church were slightly older and had more older children.

The educational backgrounds of the parents are presented below in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2. Educational background of the spouses

Educational background	DC				non-DC			
	Mothers		Fathers		Mothers		Fathers	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Higher	20	50	22	55	35	87.5	19	47.5
Post-secondary college	8	20	2	5	4	10	0	0
Secondary	10	25	12	30	1	2.5	19	47.5
Vocational	2	5	4	10	0	0	2	5
Primary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

N – numerical strength, % – percentage equivalent of N

It follows from the data in Tab. 2 that the number of spouses with university-level and secondary education is higher in the non-DC group, while the DC group is more homogeneous in terms of the mother's and father's education.

The results of the current research are presented below in Tab. 3.

Tab. 3. Parental attitudes of DC and non-DC spouses

Attitude scale	Mothers				Fathers			
	DC		non-DC		DC		non-DC	
	RS	Sten	RS	Sten	RS	Sten	RS	Sten
Acceptance-rejection	43.00	7	41.45	7	40.93	7	40.60	7
Autonomy	37.30	6	37.90	6	40.60	7	35.90	5
Protection	25.30	4	30.00	5	24.00	4	29.00	5
Demands	26.35	5	30.78	6	26.18	5	28.20	5
Inconsistency	24.05	5	26.75	6	20.75	4	24.20	5

RS – raw score, Sten – sten score

The obtained data show that all surveyed parents adopt similar and positive parental attitudes. Furthermore, it also warrants positive verification of the hypothesis that parents from the community of the Domestic Church display more advantageous parental attitudes than parents from outside the community. Indeed, the figures in Tab. 3 demonstrate that although all parents love their children equally, parents from the DC group give them more autonomy, protect them adequately and make appropriate demands, while being more consistent as well. It would seem that such a profile of parental attitudes may be attributed to participating in the Domestic Church formation.

This notion is compellingly supported by the educational backgrounds of the respondents. According to Plopa (2008, p. 124–125), parents with more than secondary education display more appropriate parenting attitudes. However, it follows from Tab. 2 that the DC group comprises three times as many people without such education, although, admittedly, the number is fairly small. Nonetheless, this may indicate that the religious formation within the Domestic Church, whose indirect goals involve working on one's relationships with children, has offset the education-related trends.

This reversal of the trends described by Plopa (2008, p. 123–128) is also observed in relation to parents' gender, age, length of the marriage and the number of children they have. Plopa found that mothers score more favorably in all attitude dimensions with the exception of inconsistency and that older parents tend to be less accepting and more overprotective, which coincides with the length of the marriage. The researcher also determined that fathers with more than two children are more inconsistent as well as show a lower degree of acceptance and grant less autonomy.

Meanwhile, these results show that DC parents may be older than non-DC parents and, therefore, are also likely to have been married longer, but they are just as accepting of the children as the non-DC parents, while their protective attitude is more appropriate. In contrast, although, on average, the fathers in the DC group have more children than the non-DC fathers, they give their children more autonomy and remain more consistent. The same relationship is observed when comparing their behavior with the approach of their wives.

The results presented above seem to confirm even more strongly that the adopted hypothesis is confirmed, i.e. that parents from the Domestic Church community present more favorable parenting attitudes, the grounds for which should be seen in their participation in the community's formation process.

However, one cannot rule out that the data obtained are due to other factors, such as individual developmental history, the heritage of the family of origin, the quality of the marital relationship, previous socialization experiences, the network of social relationships, the demands of one's occupation, or the subjective characteristics of the child (Plopa, 2005, p. 247–264). The fact that parental attitudes are also determined by such factors paves the way for further scientific research.

### **Recapitulation**

The analyses presented above prove that, in the light of the Parental Attitudes Scale, by M. Plopa, spouses belonging to the Domestic Church

community present more correct parental attitudes than spouses who do not belong to any religious community. This is because their relationships with their children are more based on consistency, autonomy, proper protection and demands and do not differ in the dimension of acceptance. Belonging to a house church community and participating in religious formation seem to be most responsible for this picture of their interaction with children. This supposition is further strengthened by the fact that the results obtained correlate positively with the age of the respondents, male gender, marital seniority, age and number of children, and negatively with education, and thus are not consistent with the correlations revealed in Plopa's study.

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## Postawy rodzicielskie członków wspólnoty Domowego Kościoła

**Streszczenie:** W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki empirycznej weryfikacji hipotezy, na podstawie której przyjęto, że małżonkowie należący do wspólnoty Domowego Kościoła prezentują bardziej prawidłowe postawy rodzicielskie, niż małżonkowie nienależący do żadnej wspólnoty religijnej. Podstawą do sformułowania tej hipotezy były dotychczasowe badania. Uzyskane wyniki pozwalają stwierdzić, że relacja z tej grupy małżonków z dziećmi opiera się na właściwej bliskości i komunikacji. Przeprowadzone badania, w których zastosowano Skalę Postaw Rodzicielskich autorstwa M. Płopy, udowodniły, iż postawy rodzicielskie małżonków, należących do wspólnoty Domowego Kościoła, cechują się największą autonomią oraz właściwą ochroną wspólnoty, jaką jest rodzina, która działa konsekwentnie, ale też stawia wymagania, które uczą, jak pokonywać życiowe trudności. Pokazały one także, że zachowania te są sprzeczne z dotychczasowymi tendencjami, gdyż pozytywnie korelują z wiekiem, płcią męską, stażem małżeńskim i liczbą dzieci, a negatywnie z wykształceniem. Na uzyskane pozytywne rezultaty wydaje się zatem, że wpływ ma właśnie przynależność do wspólnoty Domowego Kościoła i uczestnictwo w formacji religijnej, które zobowiązuje tych rodziców do „pracy” nad swoimi interakcjami z dziećmi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rodzina, postawy rodzicielskie, wspólnota religijna.

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