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Interaction styles in child–guardian relationships in kinship and non-kinship guardian families

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Abstract

Family is traditionally recognized as the most effective environment for personal development in childhood. However, presently, the number of children without parental care is increasing worldwide. Two common forms of child custody are kinship and non-kinship guardian care. A comfortable atmosphere and positive relationships between guardians and children are essential conditions for stability and effective parenting. Therefore, styles of interaction between the guardian and the child, alongside relations between other members of such families, come to the fore. The study explores the hypothesis that interaction styles differ in kinship and non-kinship guardian families. To test the hypothesis, we interviewed pairs of school-age children and their guardians in kinship care families (grandmothers as guardians, n = 56) and non-kinship families (n = 103). The control group consisted of 42 families of birthparents and their children. The interview was designed to include variables from the Parental Attitude Research Instrument (for adults), the Parent-Child Relationships Inventory (for children) and scales from the Family APGAR. Factor analysis identified five parameters of parenting styles and three characteristics of adults' behavior as assessed by the children. A positive interest in the child's life was rated significantly lower in all guardian families compared to the control group, but was also scored significantly higher by the children from kinship guardian families. Kinship care families had higher rates of excessively infantilizing care than non-kinship guardian families and the control group. Interaction between children and adults in guardian families is more prone to conflict than in birth families. Practical implications of this study will require identifying targets for psychological support in non-kinship and kinship care families.

Keywords: guardian family, kinship care, parenting style, family relation, child's emotional well-being

Стили межличностного взаимодействия детей и опекунов в семьях кровной и некровной опеки

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Аннотация

Семья традиционно признается лучшей средой для развития личности в детском возрасте. Однако в настоящее время во всем мире растет число детей, оставшихся без попечения родителей. Кровная и некровная опека являются распространенными формами замещающих семей. Комфортная атмосфера и позитивные взаимоотношения между опекунами и детьми являются необходимым условием стабильности и эффективного воспитания. Поэтому стили взаимоотношений между опекунами и детьми имеют большое значение в приемных семьях, наряду с взаимоотношениями между другими членами таких семей. Нами была выдвинута гипотеза о том, что стили межличностного взаимодействия различаются в семьях кровной и некровной опеки. Для проверки гипотезы были опрошены пары — дети школьного возраста и их опекуны в семьях кровной опеки (в качестве опекунов выступили бабушки, $n = 56$) и в семьях некровной опеки ($n = 103$). Контрольную группу составили 42 семьи, состоящие из родителей и их детей. В интервью были включены показатели Опросника родительского отношения PARY (для взрослых) и Опросника «Детско-родительские отношения» (для детей), а также шкалы «Семейного АПГАРа». Факторный анализ позволил выявить пять параметров стилей родительского воспитания и три характеристики поведения взрослых, оцениваемые детьми. Положительный интерес к жизни ребенка был оценен значительно ниже во всех опекунских семьях по сравнению с контрольной группой, но также был значительно выше у детей из семей кровной опеки. В семьях кровной опеки выявлены более высокие показатели чрезмерно инфантилизирующего ухода, чем в семьях некровной опеки, а также в контрольной группе. Взаимодействие между детьми и взрослыми в опекунских семьях чаще чревато конфликтами, чем в родных семьях. Практическое применение результатов настоящего исследования предполагает конкретизацию задач психологической поддержки в семьях кровной и некровной опеки.

Ключевые слова: опекунская семья, кровная опека, стиль воспитания, семейные отношения, эмоциональное благополучие ребенка

Introduction

According to official statistics, in 2005–2017 the number of orphans and children without parental care in Russia decreased by a factor of 3.7.

This trend resulted from the state policy for deinstitutionalisation and the priority for children's family placement. Family is recognised as the most effective environment for personal development in childhood; however, a comfortable atmosphere

and positive relationships between guardians and children are essential conditions for stability and effective parenting. Therefore, styles of interaction between the guardian and the child, alongside relationships between other members of such families, come to the fore.

Family functioning is defined as fostering the physical and psychological development of all family members (Smilkstein 1978). According to the APGAR model, family functionality comprises five components: Adaptability, Partnership, Growth, Affection, and Resolve. Members of functional families have stable, positive relationships; do not tend to form internal coalitions; and are satisfied with being together, while simultaneously maintaining a degree of privacy. These families have clear boundaries, a robust communicative structure for conflict resolution, and provide spontaneity, empathy, and emotional support. The styles of interaction between parents and children depend on the family functioning. According to E. S. Schaefer, a parenting style has two dimensions: the affective dimension (cold/warm) and the control dimension (autonomous/controlling) (Schaefer 1959). Parental control is about expecting a child to obey rules, to perform duties; it is an attempt to influence a child's activities. The opposite pole is psychological autonomy. A number of studies argue that child–parent relationships in functional families are characterized by emotional warmth combined with adequate control (Matejevic, Jovanovic, Lazarevic 2014; Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, Hülsenbeck 2000). Research on the Russian sample shows that children and adolescents are concerned about the manifestation of control on the part of their parents (Kaptsova 2002), but not on the part of their grandmothers. Effective functioning of the guardian family is essential for successful child placement (Krieger 2017).

Guardianship services note that guardians are unable to fully replace the birth family, even though they are the closest to being able to satisfy the child's need for parents and family relations. Guardian families are characterized by a specific intra-family interaction. Various studies show that guardians often have difficulties accepting foster children (Vagapova, Markelova 2018) and establishing emotional contact with them (Kalacheva 2012; Morozova 2014). Guardians often prefer a controlling parenting strategy and actively intervene in children's lives (Kalacheva 2012). Child-guardian relationships are often marked by tensions, conflicts (Morozova 2014), and emotional dependence (Vagapova, Markelova 2018).

The interaction styles of child–guardian relationships have an impact on the emotional state of the

child (Morozova 2014), the quality of the emerging attachment (Sinclair, Wilson, Gibbs 2000) as well as the child's discipline (McFarlane, Bellissimo, Norman 1995) by reinforcing either adaptive or problematic behaviors (Vanderfaellie, van Holen, Vanschoonlandt et al. 2013). Negative interaction styles have a greater impact on behavioral problems than the absence of a positive relationship (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaellie, van Holen, Maeyer 2012). When guardians tolerate a child's inappropriate behavior or, on the contrary, are excessively strict in enforcing rules, the child is likely to demonstrate behavioral problems (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot et al. 2007). According to Fuentes et al., excessive authoritarianism, criticism, and rejection on the part of guardians are responsible for numerous behavioral problems in children (Fuentes, Salas, Bernedo, García-Martín 2014). The negative role of parental criticism/rejection is also noted by (Salas, García-Martín, Fuentes, Bernedo 2015). On the other hand, children adapt more effectively to the guardian family if they receive authoritative parenting, if limits are set and the basis for them is explained. Children from such family settings have shown to have fewer behavioral problems (Lipscombe, Farmer, Moyers 2003). Warmth and a positive interaction style are also associated with fewer behavioral problems (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaellie, van Holen, de Maeyer 2012). Characteristics of interaction styles include parental patience, consistency, tolerance, understanding, and flexibility (Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, Cox 2007), empathy (Geiger, Piel, Lietz, Julien-Chinn, 2016), as well as the consistency of the guardian's behavior and the clarity of parenting messages (Brown, Skrodzki, Gerrits et al. 2015).

The correlation between the interaction styles in guardian families and well-being of children is typically discussed in studies of non-kinship families, however, kin guardianship is also common. Continued family residence (Hedin 2014), contacts with relatives (Hegar 1999; Berrick, Barth, Needell 1994), high probability of contact and subsequent reunion with biological parents (Berrick, Barth, Needell 1994; Courtney 1995), retaining and building of family identity (Messing 2006; Nixon 2007), better life prospects (Smith 2007), and psychological well-being (Winokur, Holtan, Batchelder 2018) of children are the positive effects of kinship care, particularly, when meaningful relationships are formed with guardians prior to placement (Messing 2006; Downie, Hay, Horner et al. 2010). Despite its obvious advantages, kinship care also has its downsides.

In kinship care, the guardian is simultaneously forced to play the role of parent and their original

role within the family structure (Bogomyagkova 2015). Such confusion generates a potential for conflict between children and guardians (Ziminski 2007). In addition, kin guardians are influenced by the real or symbolic loss of loved ones (the child's parents), which contributes to the distortion of a child's image and subsequently changes the interaction pattern (Oleynik 2007; Osipova 2013). There are reasons to believe that kin guardians may actually face more problems than non-kin guardians (Harris, Skyles 2008; Tuzova 2017), however, they do not tend to report about children's behavioral problems or seek psychological/psychiatric help (O'Brien 2012). Guardians' life partners are even less able to provide a safe and stimulating home environment. They primarily see their responsibilities in meeting the child's household needs (Gaudin, Sutphen 1993). Grandparent guardians frequently become subjected to stress and depression (Dunne, Kettler 2008; Farmer, Selwyn, Meakings 2013) and being elderly, have more health problems (Harris, Skyles 2008; Tuzova 2017). Willingness of the guardian to adopt new roles, developed parenting skills, and regular support from other family members are protective factors which predetermine the capabilities of the guardian to create the conditions for psychological comfort (Denby, Testa, Alford et al. 2017). The feasibility of placing a child under kinship care should be evaluated in each case independently (Brown, Sen 2014). Another important factor to consider is the age difference between kinship and non-kinship guardians as a possible trigger of generation gap issues between the guardian and the child.

Presumably, child-guardian relationships determining the well-being of the child depend, largely, on the family structure and differ in kinship and non-kinship guardian families. The goal of the present study was to identify interaction patterns and functioning in kinship and non-kinship guardian families and compare interaction patterns and functioning in kinship care families and other guardian families.

Materials and Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 201 child-mother/guardian pairs, including 159 female guardians of school-age children (aged 7-17) from Nizhny Novgorod and Saint Petersburg. The study involved 103 non-kin guardians and 56 grandmothers acting as guardians. The inclusion criteria for the guardian family samples were a legal status of a guardian, voluntary consent from the guardian and the child to participate in the study, the child's awareness of the guardianship, and mental wellbeing of both the child and the guardian. The control sample comprised 42 mothers and their children (see Table 1).

In both guardian samples, approximately 80% of the guardians received financial support. The grandmothers were significantly older and less often had a spouse than the other guardians. In most cases, the biological parents were not involved in the children's lives. The reasons for guardianship differed for kinship and non-kinship guardians. With non-kinship guardians, the main reason for the children's placement was termination of parental rights. In kinship guardian families, the two key reasons were termination of parental rights and the death of a parent, typically, the guardian's child.

Measurements

The full version of the interview included 72 questions for guardians and 55 questions for children. It was successfully tested in a pilot study of 29 guardians (Korjova, Volkova, Miklyaeva et al. 2018). The present article compares the child's and the guardian's assessment of family functioning, guardians' parental attitudes, and children's perception of parenting practices.

Family functioning was independently assessed by guardians and children using the Family APGAR (Smilkstein 1978) adapted to Russian by Solokhina to include the 5-point Likert scales (Solokhina, Shevchenko 2008). The validity of the APGAR has

Table 1. Participants' demographic data/sample description

Sample	Women's age, years	Marital status, %		Child's age, years	Child's gender, %		Experience in caregiving, years
		married	not married		male	female	
Non-kinship guardians	48.47 ± 8.27	67.00	33.00	12.05 ± 2.69	57.30	42.70	6.20 ± 4.24
Kinship guardians	61.40 ± 7.03	56.30	45.70	12.20 ± 2.62	68.70	31.30	5.87 ± 3.93
Control	39.81 ± 5.65	50.00	50.00	11.31 ± 2.26	40.50	59.50	-

been demonstrated in a survey of adults (Smilkstein, Ashworth, Montano 1982) and children (Austin, Huberty 1989). The total score ranged from 5 to 25 and was interpreted as an index of family functioning. The survey returned two separate scores—for guardians and for children.

Guardians' attitudes to parenting were measured with Schaefer's valid and reliable Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI) (Schaefer, Bell 1958) adapted to Russian by T. Nescheret and T. Arkhireeva (Arkhireeva 2002). A shortened version of PARI was chosen as the most convenient format for interviews. The questionnaire assesses parenting attitudes on a 4-level scale. Children's perception of parenting practices was measured with the shortened version of Analysis of Family Relationships (Eidemiller 1996). Children evaluated parenting styles, family roles, parental influences, and mechanisms of family integration with 5-point Likert scales. Comparative analysis (non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test), exploratory factor analysis, and multiple regression analysis were performed with Statistica 10.0 for Windows.

Procedure

The data were collected in two structured interviews: with the guardian and the child separately.

The method of interview was chosen because it facilitates a better interpersonal contact of an interviewer with the guardians and children. Since an interview creates an atmosphere of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee, it reduces the effect of social desirability which is very common in studies involving guardian families (O'Brien, 2012). Another reason was that filling out a long questionnaire could be problematic for some participants (especially elderly guardians and young children). Instead, the interviewer read the questions and completed the answer sheet. The interview took about one hour for the guardian and 40 minutes for the child.

Results

The comparative analysis revealed that in non-kinship guardian families the index of family functioning was higher than in other types of families. For interaction styles, significant differences were found between guardian and biological families. In the guardians' responses, positive interest in the child's life was significantly lower. Kinship guardians are characterized by greater infantilizing overprotection. In the children's responses, positive interest was rated higher for all guardian families (see Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of family functioning and interaction styles

Characteristics		Kinship guardian families	Non-kinship guardian families	Birth families	Kruskall-Wallis test
Child's assessments	Positive interest	0.09	0.13	-0.47	8.32*
	Excessive control	-0.04	-0.10	0.33	-
	Inconsistency	-0.06	0.18	-0.39	8.71**
	Family APGAR	20.86	21.85	19.47	11.80**
Guardian' (or mother's) assessments	Socialising influence	0.17	-0.02	-0.18	-
	Limited communication	0.11	-0.05	-0.02	-
	Positive interest	-0.17	-0.08	0.43	10.29**
	Infantilizing overprotection	0.24	-0.10	-0.06	6.14*
	Speeding up child's development	0.28	-0.19	0.12	-
	Family APGAR	19.94	22.01	19.93	16.88***

Note: *— $p < 0.05$; **— $p < 0.01$; ***— $p < 0.001$

Three factors were identified for kinship guardian families. The structure was different in the sample of non-kinship families: guardians' and children's assessments of family functioning became part of different factors. Similar factor structure was identified in the control sample of birth families, except for factor 3 (see Table 3).

Predictors of children's assessment of family functioning were estimated through regression analysis. For all samples, positive interest of the guardian in the child's life (as assessed by the child) was a significant predictor. For kinship guardian families, other predictors were excessive parental control and the guardian's tendency to limit communication (see Table 4).

Table 3. Factor loadings in guardian and birth families

Characteristics		Kinship guardian families			Non-kinship guardian families			Kinship families		
		F 1	F 2	F 3	F 4	F 5	F 6	F 7	F 8	F 9
Child's assessments	Positive interest	-0.80	0.02	0.01	0.85	0.04	0.15	-0.90	0.00	-0.13
	Excessive control	0.07	-0.09	0.80	-0.15	-0.19	0.70	0.17	0.13	-0.74
	Inconsistency	0.14	-0.30	-0.39	-0.11	0.64	0.23	0.37	0.72	-0.22
	Family APGAR	-0.57	-0.51	-0.33	0.84	0.02	-0.08	-0.88	-0.03	0.16
Guardian's (mother's) assessments	Socializing influence	0.08	0.59	0.01	0.34	0.03	0.63	0.37	-0.58	-0.12
	Limited communication	0.08	-0.81	0.05	-0.37	-0.18	0.05	-0.30	0.22	0.00
	Positive interest in the child's life	-0.76	0.03	0.06	0.01	0.81	-0.21	0.04	0.05	0.72
	Infantilizing overprotection	-0.20	0.18	0.22	0.10	0.22	0.52	0.47	0.01	0.47
	Speeding up child's development	0.03	0.13	0.58	-0.16	0.12	-0.48	0.07	-0.86	0.00
	Family APGAR	-0.57	0.47	-0.38	0.37	0.62	0.03	0.26	-0.22	0.48
Prp.Totl		0.19	0.16	0.14	0.19	0.16	0.15	0.23	0.17	0.16

Note: F1—family welfare, F2—limited communication, F3—guardian's excessive attention to child's development, F4—child's welfare, F5—guardian's welfare, F6—overprotection, F7—child's welfare, F8—child's psychological autonomy, F9—guardian's welfare

Table 4. Regression model of family functioning as assessed by children

Samples	Predictors	B	SE	β	R ² adj.	t
Kinship guardian families	(Intercept)	22.55	2.40			9.39***
	Positive interest (as assessed by the child)	1.65	0.45	0.53	0.36	3.64***
	Excessive control (as assessed by the child)	-1.15	0.37	-0.44	0.36	-3.12**
	Limited communication	1.08	0.40	0.39	0.36	2.68*
Non-kinship guardian families	(Intercept)	22.22	2.67			8.34***
	Positive interest (as assessed by the child)	2.07	0.30	0.65	0.37	6.98***
Birth families	(Intercept)	19.67	4.26			4.61***
	Positive interest (as assessed by the child)	2.36	0.56	0.71	0.52	4.19***

Note: *— $p < 0.05$; **— $p < 0.01$; ***— $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Our results suggest that in guardian families, both children and guardians assessed family functioning as quite high. The index of family functioning was not lower than in the control group, and for non-kinship guardians it was significantly higher than in the control families. According to G. Smilkstein, functional family relationships ensure the welfare of family members (Smilkstein 1978). However, in non-kinship care families both children and guardians tend to report a high level of family welfare which matches the expectations of both the authorities and society. Their assessments might be biased as government child service agencies usually pay closer attention to them than to kinship guardians (Farmer, Moyers 2008).

The study identified five characteristics of the guardians' parenting styles (socialising influence, limited communication, positive interest in the child's life, infantilizing overprotection, speeding up child's development) and three dimensions of the children's perception of parenting (positive interest, excessive control, inconsistency). Assessments of the parenting style "positive interest in the child's life" in the kinship and non-kinship guardian families were significantly lower than in the control group. Also, kinship care families were characterized by significantly higher assessments of "infantilising overprotection". High rates of excessive control contradict the rejection of this style by teenagers when it comes from their

grandmothers. Nevertheless, "positive interest" is significantly higher in the samples of children from guardian families, while children from birth families provided lower assessments. The assessment of positive interest in the child's life within the control group resulted in a mismatch in the children's and adults' responses. Children raised by guardians are more sensitive to positive interest from the guardians than those from the control group to positive interest from their mothers. In the control group, children perceive positive interest from their mothers as "the natural order of things". The reason might be that in guardian families, in particular in non-kinship care, children have a more realistic assessment of the guardian's behavior based on lower expectations.

Factor structure in non-kinship care families did not differ much from the control sample. The most significant difference was that children in such families might perceive the positive interest of their guardians as unpredictable. In kinship care, guardians might be able to provide parenting comparable to that of a child's biological parents. This is due to the younger age of the guardians and their inclusion in the standard (for this stage of the life span) system of marital and parental relations (Bezgodova, Miklyaeva, Yurkova 2018). However, the ways in which the guardian expresses a positive interest in the child's life might not coincide with the child's expectations during the first period of socialization (for example, in a kinship family or in an orphanage), so that children may confuse manifestations of positive interest with inconsistency on the part of the guardian.

The most striking contradictions in the child-guardian assessments were found in the kinship guardian families. There is a direct correlation between the guardian's and the child's assessment of family functioning. It shows mutual dependence of the child's welfare and the guardian's family resources. According to the factor and regression analysis, for both non-kinship guardian families and kinship guardian families the most significant factor in well-being is the recognition of the guardian's (or mother's) positive interest in the child's life supported by different styles of family interaction. For kinship guardian families, lesser contact with the guardian and the child's recognition of parental control also became important factors. We assume that the importance of limiting contact with the grandmother guardian and reducing control over the child's welfare is associated with an attempt to reproduce a model of family interaction whereby the guardian performs the functions of a grandmother and does not occupy a central place in the child's life, but is, nevertheless, interested in his/her welfare.

Conclusion

The results of our study show that interaction styles are different in child-guardian relationships in kinship and non-kinship guardian families. Non-kinship guardian families are more similar to biological families as regards child-caregiver interaction styles. The main factor in children's welfare in this type of family is the children's recognition of the adults' positive interest in their lives. Positive interest implies psychological acceptance of a child, sincere involvement in

communication, interest in what is going on in their life. Kinship guardian families have more complex interaction patterns. Grandmothers are forced to perform two family roles at the same time which can create a disbalance in family functioning. These findings point to the need for a nuanced approach to the psychological support of guardian families (Korzhova, Bezhodova, Miklyaeva, Yurkova 2020). Presently, Russian social care system offers a support system for non-kinship guardians only. To conclude, there is an obvious need to develop a similar specialized system for grandmothers as guardians, who were found to need much bigger support.

Конфликт интересов

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии потенциального или явного конфликта интересов.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

Соответствие принципам этики

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Ethics Approval

The interview procedure and its programme were approved by Ethical Committee of Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (IRB00011060 #1, 02 July 2018).

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