

“LIFE ACCORDING
TO DOCTOR KOMAROVSKII”:
HOW ADVICE ON
CARING FOR CHILDREN
CONSTRUCTS PARENTING.
Summary

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This article analyzes how popular Ukrainian pediatrician Evgenii Komarovskii’s advice constructs parenting and the care of children. From the outset, in defining a theoretical framework of this study I differentiate between the two principal meanings of the concept of “being a parent.” An *institutional* parenthood is a normative regulation of parents’ rights and responsibilities and the expectations concerning their roles and functions. Parenting, on the other hand, has to do with *behavior*, as it describes parental practices of caring for children and raising them in a given society (Rich 1976). For the purposes of this article, I interpret “parenting” as an institutionalized activity, which in contemporary society draws on specialized knowledge about children and their development and a number of care-giving skills and also presupposes an expert-led style of child rearing (Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013). This take on the concept highlights the role of expert knowledge, and particularly of pediatricians’ advice on caring for children, in constructing parenting. Methodologically, this article is a case study based primarily on Komarovskii’s books *Zdorov’e rebenka i zdavyi smysl ego rodstvennikov* [*A Child’s Health and the Common Sense of His Relatives*] ([2000] 2012) and *Nachalo zhizni vashego rebenka* [*Your Child’s Early Days*] (1996), some of his TV shows, texts of his interviews with Ukrainian and Russian media, some of Doctor Komarovskii’s publications on his website, and his responses to letters from parents.

The first part of my article examines the prevailing governmental and socio-pedagogic discourses on parental responsibility (or lack thereof) in Ukraine and on parental competence as its constituent element. I also consider Doctor Komarovskii’s views on parental responsibility as an alternative to mainstream views. In the next part of the article I establish exactly how the texts under scrutiny construe the care of the child and the roles of the mother and the father. Lastly, I characterize Komarovskii’s role in the discursive actualization of parenting and caring for children as significant sociopolitical issues.

PARENTAL COMPETENCE AS THE BASIS OF PARENTAL COMFORT AND AUTONOMOUS DECISION MAKING

Over the last ten years the issues of conscious (responsible, competent, or effective) parenting (Leshchenko 2010; Trubavina 2013), the culture of mothering (Maksymovs'ka 2008), and the culture of parenting (Abramova 2011) have been hot topics in Ukrainian and Russian socio-pedagogic discourse. The concepts of responsible and conscious parenting presuppose a practical realization of parenting knowledge and skills (Leshchenko 2010; Zvierieva, Veretenko, and Shevchenko 2006), as well as parents' eagerness to gain new knowledge, skills, and capabilities in order to perfect the process of child rearing (Bartkiv 2010). Notably, the issue of responsible parenting is less relevant to parents than to the state (which appeals to the demographic problem of depopulation and parents' civic duty). Parents are objectified as a demographic resource intended to perform the task of the country's demographic development (Bunina 2005; Maksymovs'ka 2008) and to meet the demands that the state places on its citizens regarding responsible carrying out of their parenting duties (Bunina 2005; Leshchenko 2010; Shevchenko 2006).

A key feature of the institution of parenthood in contemporary society (in Ukraine as elsewhere) is the notion that parents must be taught how to be parents (Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013; Lee 2014). For instance, one of the goals of the 2007 Ukrainian State Family Support Program (*Derzhavna prohrama pidtrymky sim'i na period do 2010 roku*) was to create a system of focused preparation of future parents for family life and to increase the level of citizens' psychological and pedagogical "culture." The emphasis on the systemic nature of this preparation and on the delivery of respective services to families wishing to prepare for future parenthood is at the core of the next State Targeted Social Program of Family Support (*Derzhavna tsil'ova sotsial'na prohrama pidtrymky sim'i do 2016 roku*), adopted in 2013.

How does Doctor Komarovskii's advice fit in with the state's and socio-pedagogical discourses of responsible parenting? Just as the governmental and socio-pedagogical discourses consider parental competence a prerequisite for responsible parenting, so does Komarovskii believe that parents ought to be taught to be parents. He suggests starting this instruction with school-age children. At the same time, Komarovskii's statements are no moral abstractions; rather, the doctor insists on educating parents out of pragmatic considerations. Parental education should grant them peace of mind, confidence in their own abilities, and financial savings (Komarovskii [2000] 2012:13, 55–56). Komarovskii also views parental competence as the basis for parental autonomy in decision making and in communicating with pediatricians. Moreover, parental competence should help overcome the hegemony of expert medical knowledge in a climate of commercialized post-Soviet medicine and institutional mistrust (Aronson 2006).

On the whole, Komarovskii's advice looks squarely to the idea of happiness and enjoyment for every family member. At the same time, in a modern family parents' interests have priority over those of the child: "The principal rule of pedagogy is: a herd does not follow a kid. The kid goes wherever the wise and experienced adults

lead it."¹ The doctor also emphasizes the importance of parents' marital relations. "A happy child is one with a mother and a father who find time to love not only this child but also each other," writes Komarovskii in the introduction to his book ([2000] 2012:14). This may be seen as a shift from a child-centric family model to one prioritizing the married couple.

COMMON SENSE IN CARING FOR CHILDREN AND GENDER-BASED DIVISION OF LABOR: BETWEEN ESSENTIALISM AND EQUAL PARENTING

Common sense constitutes the basis of Komarovskii's concept of caring for children and treating their sicknesses—his best known book is entitled *A Child's Health and the Common Sense of His Relatives* (Komarovskii [2000] 2012). However, the doctor associates common sense with male qualities and sets it against the female, instinctive nature of motherly care. In his own words, Komarovskii introduces a "male," rational approach to the care of a child: "I would like to bring into the care of children some male common sense, rationality, logic, so that we would stop treating children purely on the level of instincts. I'd like us to cease putting kids first but, rather, give priority to the family as a whole."² Komarovskii is a proponent of responsible fatherhood: he sees the phenomenon of the "absent father" as the major reason for the "unhappiness" of Ukrainian women. According to Komarovskii, a father's key role in caring for children is decision making. That said, the doctor sees fathers as rather passive and infantile figures and states that only women are capable of involving men in childcare: "Only women can bring men closer to their children. Only women can make a man take interest in a child and want to do something. For this you must entice him, like a child, praise him, and keep telling him that you would not have managed without him. However, if you fool him and force to think and make decisions, we all understand that it would actually be your decision.... But if you create an illusion that he is a fully fledged pack leader, then his pack will be happy. And if it is not an illusion but a real thing, then the pack is doubly happy."³

Doctor Komarovskii's approach to caring for children also criticizes the ideology of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996), which prescribes that mothers sacrifice and expend a lot of time and energy on childcare:

We still perceive motherhood as a great exploit. And it really is one, especially if you have no brains, no skills, and no habit of using all the modern technology available. For to whom do young mothers turn for help first? To grannies of course. And grannies, they are flustered by any modern innovation, from an au-

¹ Evgenii Komarovskii, "Zakony pedagogiki." Doctor Komarovskii's official website, December 18, 2014 (<http://articles.komarovskiy.net/zakony-pedagogiki.html>).

² Ekaterina Andreiasheva, "Doktor Komarovskii: 'Nadevaem shapochku babushke, a ne rebenku.'" Blog *Litsom k detiam*, October 3, 2012 (<http://letidor.livejournal.com/239519.html>).

³ "Zachem nuzhen papa," *Shkola doktora Komarovskogo*, TV Inter, June 16, 2011 (<http://inter.ua/ru/video/program/komarovskiy/2011/06/16/dad>).

tomatic washing machine to disposable diapers. Because for them, if you do not spend all day in the kitchen and do not wash by hand, you are not a real mother, and if you brought your child ready-made food in a jar, you are definitely a criminal. What kind of soup comes from a jar?! One must go to the market, buy groceries, grind them by hand, and cook them. Only then would you be a real mother!... I often hear accusations of male chauvinism. It's the other way around: I plead with our women that they should structure their time in such a way as to leave some for themselves, their beauty, and their husband.⁴

DOCTOR KOMAROVSKII: THE CARE OF CHILDREN AS A SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUE

Since the early 2000s, family and parenthood in the independent Ukraine have become important social problems. Primarily one hears of a crisis of parenthood, and especially motherhood, as a reflection of the general crisis of family and the devaluation of family values.

Doctor Komarovskii also stresses the social significance of the issues of parenthood and childhood, and his activities go beyond giving advice concerning the care of children. Since the Maidan events in 2013–2014 and during the subsequent political crisis in Ukraine, he has been actively commenting on the hottest political issues in multiple interviews and on his personal Facebook page. The topic of childhood as a “national idea” and “the nation’s future” is central to Komarovskii’s sociopolitical stance: “We must urgently sort out our children. We need a unifying national idea. We cannot unite for a language, we cannot unite for an election, and we cannot unite for religion. Let me, as a pediatrician, propose this to you: let us unite for children.”⁵ “Our country is dying out. We must unite for children. If physicians and teachers were to be the wealthiest people in the land, if children’s hospitals, schools, and kindergartens were to have the best buildings, if Ukraine were to build not four stadiums for grown-up boys but rather spend the same amount on 40,000 stadiums for children—then we will have a real hope for the future.”⁶

Nevertheless, Komarovskii does not support a paternalist position regarding “children’s issues” and sees parents as playing first fiddle in standing up for children’s interests. For instance, in an interview with Russian mass media, while commenting on the statistics of chickenpox complications, Komarovskii asks a rhetorical question: “Would you be able to gather a Bolotnaia Square full of people rallying to ‘Protect our children from a preventable illness,’ or ‘A country with a multibillion budget can afford to vaccinate every baby’? An attitude to children—to pediatric medicine, to kindergartens, to schools—is a criterion of a nation’s maturity. When a

⁴ “Znamenitii pediater Evgenii Komarovskii: ‘Materinstvo – eto podvig, esli u vas net mozgov!’,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, November 17, 2010 (<http://www.kp.ru/daily/24592/760988/>).

⁵ Evgenii Komarovskii, interview by Aleksei Golubev, Radio Ekho Moskv, February 5, 2014 (<http://echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/1250810-echo>).

⁶ “D-r Komarovskii: Natsionalnaia ideia – eto deti,” Information agency “Kommentarii;,” July 31, 2013 (<http://comments.ua/digest/416333-dr-komarovskiy-natsionalnaya-ideya-.html>).

hundred thousand people come out to defend a certain political force but would not budge to protect their own kids—excuse me, this nation is in a disastrous state.”⁷

That said, a civic social role is to be played primarily by fathers. For example, in answering a journalist’s question about vaccinations and long lines in children’s walk-in clinics, Komarovskii speaks of fathers’ responsibility to solve this problem and adopts a specifically “male” language by drawing parallels between childcare and shopping for a car:

The situation will change when men start taking care of their offspring. When a family decides to buy a car, a man would spend half a year doing Internet research, figuring out details and conditions of purchase. When they decide to start a family, on the other hand, only in 1 percent of all cases would you see a future father looking up info on child upbringing. If your car were fueled with low-grade petrol, you would tear the gas station to bits, but when a hospital treats your baby poorly, you care not. A man has always had two major functions: to protect and to feed his family.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Expert knowledge, particularly pediatricians’ advice on childcare, is one of the leading driving forces in the discursive construction of parenting in contemporary society. The choice of this study’s subject was determined less by Doctor Evgenii Komarovskii’s popularity and more by the idiosyncratic features of his discourse on parenting and the care of children. The study analyzes four of these features. Firstly, in contrast to the governmental and socio-pedagogic discourses on parental responsibility in Ukraine, which objectify parents as a means of solving demographic and state problems, the doctor’s advice speaks of forming parental competence for parents’ own sake, not in the interests of society and the state. In particular, parental competence, that is to say, a certain amount of knowledge regarding child’s health and childcare, is viewed as the basis for parental comfort and independence in dealing with other childcare providers, as well as a means of decision making in a climate of commercialized post-Soviet medicine and the hegemony of expert medical knowledge. Secondly, Komarovskii’s practical tips constitute an example of a move away from child-centered parenting to a paradigm of upbringing based on enjoyment, emotional comfort, and happiness for all family members. The doctor emphasizes the importance of marital relations between parents, which may be seen as a symbolic shift from a child-centric family model to one giving priority to the married couple. The doctor’s advice also rejects the “ideology of intensive mothering,” which stipulates that mothers spend a lot of time and energy on childcare. Thirdly, Komarovskii addresses fathers as well as mothers, which may be interpreted as a discursive shift to the idea of “equal parenting” and active involvement of fathers in the care of children. However, the discourses

⁷ “Interv’iu glavredu ZhZh Marku Ilanskomu 31.10.2012.” Doctor Komarovskii’s official website, January 11, 2012 (<http://interview.komarovskiy.net/intervyu-marku-ilanskomu-31-10-2012.html>).

⁸ “Sovety roditeliam doktora Komarovskogo,” LiveInternet, January 2, 2014 (<http://www.live-internet.ru/users/wolfleo/post305823413>).

of motherhood and fatherhood remain essentialized in Komarovskii's advice: mothers' care for children is "instinctive," derived from feelings and emotions, whereas fathers are more likely to use "common sense" and engage in decision making and civic activity intended to protect children's interests. Fourthly, according to this position, a child is not (and must not be) a focal point of the modern parents' life; however, child-care must become the central sociopolitical issue. That said, the actualization of parenting issues in Komarovskii's rhetoric cannot be reduced to recruiting mothers and fathers to solve demographic and state problems. Rather, the doctor wishes to raise the care of children to the status of a serious sociopolitical issue and position parents as autonomous and active agents of this process.

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