Newly emerging needs of children in Romania

- EXPLORATORY STUDY -

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1. Introduction

This document is meant for the specialists who work with children and youth, as well as for all the persons involved in their education or whose actions impact children one way or another. You are invited to explore together the issue of “newly emerging needs” of the children who live in the Romania of 2009, to see what define today’s children and, following the perusal of this document, to find together the most appropriate intervention measures for the negative tendencies and for the problems that these children encounter.

1.1 Methodology

The research was carried out between the 1st of March and the 1st of September 2009 and used various analysis instruments, from the quality tools like focus groups, direct interviews, to the quantitative tools like online questionnaires and data analysis.

The starting point of the study was the project launch seminar, which was attended by 30 specialists and which hosted the initial talks about the newly emerging needs of the children in Romanian.

The study of the newly emerging needs of the children and youth in Romania represents a challenge for any specialist or researcher as well as for any organisation or institution involved in developing the children and youth in Romania. Nonetheless, it is something new and interesting especially among the persons who are directly involved, namely the children and youth, but also for the parents, educators, specialists, the media, and the civil society.

By conducting this research, which focuses on the predictable factors that can lead to negative changes of attitude and behaviour among Romania’s children and youth, we wish to develop the professionals’ capacity to improve the quality of programmes addressing the current emerging needs of children and youth.

The study of the newly emerging needs of children and youth in Romania encompassed two main components. The first component was to carry out a qualitative research, and the second component was to carry out a quantitative research, which enabled the assessment of the phenomenon regarding the newly emerging needs of the children and youth in Romania.

The difficulty of the study lay in the sensitive character of the topic it addresses, as well as the various aspects related to age, beside the cultural, social, psychological, biological, environmental, and educational aspects of the children and youth in Romania.
The qualitative study was conducted between March 2009 - June 2009 and consisted in carrying out focus groups that allowed the description and analysis of the perspective of the directly involved actors, namely the children and youth in Romania, regarding their emerging needs. This stage was necessary because such a social and psychological aspect that favours or disfavours the development of children and youth has never been studied in Romania thus far and also because of the need to base the subsequent quantitative study on solid ground.

Thus, 14 focus groups were organised, involving 299 children and teenagers coming from both urban and rural environments, covering 7 districts and the city of Bucharest, from 6 development regions of the country (North-East, South-East, South, South-West, West, and Bucharest-Ilfov), but also structured interviews with 24 specialists (12 teachers, 10 representatives of non-governmental organisations running programmes for children and youth, 1 sociologist and 1 trainer), with the purpose of discovering their subjective understanding of the issue, but also to discover new aspects regarding the emerging needs that they encountered. This part of the study was fundamental, perhaps preparatory for carrying out the quantitative research, which allowed for assessments regarding various aspects of the needs of children and youth, but also with regard to the perception of this phenomenon.

Using the focus group and the structured interview as investigation methods and techniques, we started from the assumption that people manifest certain attitudes and behaviours depending on what they think about the problems that they encounter and that the main objective for such a study would be securing relevant social data. Knowledge of this information is very important both for assessing the emerging needs of children and youth, as well as for understanding the mechanisms of preventing such a phenomenon.

The focus group represents a form of qualitative research by means of which a group of persons is interrogated with regards to their attitudes towards a certain concept. The questions are raised in an interactive framework, in which the participants are free to talk to other group members. Within the focus group, it is important to receive feedback regarding the respective concept. In order to get this feedback at the focus groups and interviews organised within the schools and non-governmental organisations working with children and youth, we elaborated a set of questions, as a starting point in the debates involving both children and teenagers but also specialists who are directly involved in working with children. The questions meant to obtain answers related to: “the biggest problems that children and teenagers face these days?”, “what do they need from parents, school, society, media?”, “what things they dislike most in the behaviour of the colleagues or children and youth around them?”, “what do they wish for in the future / professional aspirations?”, and, last but not least, “what are the specific problems from the perspective of the differences between their generation and the children of previous/future generations?”.

In order to make sure that the sample included children and teenagers from all social environments and categories, in view of ensuring the representation of the studied phenomenon, we organised the focus groups and interviews throughout the country, both in the urban areas and in the rural areas (2 in the rural area, 2 in towns with 50,000 inhabitants or less, 10 in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, including
Bucharest), in order to underline the significance of what emerging needs means for each child or teenager involved in the study, but also in order to meet specialists, institutions and organisations in which these children develop educationally and grow. Thus, we could outline the differences in mentality, culture, as well as material and social gaps that could influence or not the development of this phenomenon.

The quantitative research was carried out between July - August 2009 and consisted of an online questionnaire answered by specialists working with children and youth. It allowed for the assessment of the phenomenon of children and youth’s emerging needs from the perspective of the adults, who could confirm or infirm the existence of these new needs.

We used the online questionnaire as a means of carrying out the quantitative study, considering this work instrument as being the most “public” form of professional analysis with regard to psychosocial aspects relevant for the community, but also hoping to reach as many persons as possible both from rural or urban areas and from the entire country and from all types of institutions/organisations working directly or indirectly with children and youth.

A number of 275 persons working with children and youth in the rural environment, in Bucharest, and in cities with more than/less than 200,000 inhabitants answered the questionnaire. These persons activate in schools, non-governmental organisations, public institutions, and companies.

Following the literature regarding the concept of newly emerging needs, we choose the methodology of the psycho-sociologic study carried out among children, youth, and specialists, so that the explanation of the phenomenon should lead to the empirical results analysed in this report. All these enabled us to conduct an exhaustive study of the phenomenon in view of discovering the changes of attitude and behaviour among children and youth, in order to reach the most appropriate solutions for their newly emerging needs.

1.2 The starting point: The international study „Newly Emerging Needs of Children, an Exploration”

The exploratory study “Newly emerging needs of children in Romania,” conducted during March 1st - September 1st, 2009, is part of the project “Innovative approach in professionalizing the work with children,” run in parallel by the Civil Society Development Foundation in Romania and by Children of Slovakia Foundation in Slovakia, with the support of International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), the Netherlands.

The idea of this project was born following a strong collaboration with ICDI. The Dutch organisation has been CSDF’s partner within a long-term project that was carried out from the beginning of 2005, funded through the MATRA programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Children and Youth as Builders of Civil Society”, which focused on training and support for NGO’s and education institutions in view of developing life skills among children and youth.
We considered the innovative study elaborated by our colleagues at ICDI - "Newly Emerging Needs of Children, an Exploration" (applied in 4 countries on different continents), as being very useful and necessary for Romania in the context of social, economic, political, and technological changes that have been affecting current families and generations of children.

The starting point of the study - The Netherlands:

After becoming aware of some special, seemingly unrelated events occurring in the life of children and youth, which could not be corroborated with characteristic aspects, the authors - founding members of ICDI - started an exploratory study that resulted in a book with this topic: Nico van Oudenhoven, Rekha Wazir - “Newly Emerging Needs of Children, an Exploration" (Garant, Antwerp, 2006). The events that drew the authors' attention varied from reported cases of children with more than two parents or open access to information and experiences meant for adults, to the growing vulnerability of children to diseases that had been only associated with adults in the past. The growing frequency of these events alarmed the authors, who started to question their effects upon the children’s lives: what are the newly emerging needs of children as a result of all these experiences?

The newly emerging needs are the concept that the authors use to describe this group interconnected by new challenges, problems and opportunities confronting the children. In the exploratory study, they offer a “working” definition of newly emerging needs, they explain where and how they can be identified and what is “new” about them, following up with an investigation of newly emerging needs that characterize the children and youth in India, Kenya, the Netherlands, and Nicaragua. Afterwards, the explore seven topics which the results of the investigation were grouped in: the changing concept of childhood; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the uneven rise of ‘girl power'; the bypassing of traditional mediators; the fusion of reality, virtuality and the impossible in the imagination and lives of children; easy access through media, communications and mobility to new terrains; and the pressures generated by the globalisation of lifestyles. The Romanian study will outline, perhaps, other trends and priority topics.

1.3 Working concepts

DEFINITION: The emerging needs of children and youth represent those needs that are determined by a series of relevant challenges, opportunities, events, problems, and threats to the general development of children and youth and that generate or can generate a series of effects with a major impact upon them. The specificity of these needs is that they were not met in previous generations of children or youth or, if they were met before, they are now on the rise.

The results of the exploration are very different from one country to another, depending on each country’s realities, and consequently the methodology of addressing them is different.

Examples of newly emerging needs:
In view of understanding the concept of newly emerging needs better, van Oudenhoven and Wazir present a short selection of such needs, exemplifying with cases from throughout the world extracted from various reports and discussions on the selected countries:
Macedonia and other countries of former Yugoslavia: in 1991 children find themselves overnight with a new nationality and with a different, externally imposed attitude towards their former compatriots.

Canada: a five-year-old boy is the first child in the country to have three legal parents: his two lesbian carers, of which one is his biological mother, and the sperm donor (CBC 2007).

Philippines: children use cell phones to gamble, date, and misinform their parents (Pertierra 2005).

Afghanistan: a ten-year-old boy executes the assassin of his father (Leidsch Dagblad 2000).

China: teenager kills mother as she presses him too much on homework (Van Luyn 2000).

Netherlands: pedophiles seek to found a political party to legalize sex between children and adults (NRC Handelsblad 2006).

Philippines: children use cell phones to gamble, date, and misinform their parents (Pertierra 2005).

Afghanistan: a ten-year-old boy executes the assassin of his father (Leidsch Dagblad 2000).

China: teenager kills mother as she presses him too much on homework (Van Luyn 2000).

Japan: bullying in schools leads to high numbers of suicide (Stegewerns 2006).

Tanzania: for the Pare, an ethnic group that has lived by agriculture, the changing economy is changing childhood. Parents no longer see their children as an investment, but as expensive commodities as they now require love, time to play, rest and an education (Curtis 2002).

Zambia: street children, almost unknown twenty years ago, are now showing up in great numbers in the country (United Nations 2003).

Environmental contaminants pose a serious hazard to children’s health world-wide and are held responsible for the rise in acute respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, malaria, asthma, allergies, Attention Deficit Disorder, autism, early onset of puberty and cancers (Gordon 2003).

Netherlands: ten-year-old children show signs of ‘burn out’ (Leidsch Dagblad 2004a)

Germany: parents give children pills to enhance their performance (Brabants Dagblad 1984).

Surinam, United States and other countries hold beauty contests for pre-school age, and even younger, children.

Trinidad & Tobago: fathers are disappearing as positive role models (Pantin 2004).

United Kingdom: Boy of 11 becomes the nation’s youngest father (The Philippine Star 1997).

Vietnam: since the end of the war, some 150,000 children of parents exposed to Agent Orange have been born with multiple, hitherto unknown, physical and mental deformities (Fawthrop 2004).

UK: an online message board www.findaparentorchild.com is set up where adopted children can seek out their birth families and vice versa.

Approximately 40 per cent of 9 to 19-year-olds who use the Internet at least once a week claim they have used a different identity, according to a recent survey. The same survey reveals that parents substantially underestimate children’s negative experiences online (Livingstone and Bober 2004).

India: children as young as three have to take an entrance exam to get admission to the neighborhood preschool (Balduff 2004).

Poland: a four year old boy leads a gang that robbed and threatened other children (Leidsch Dagblad 2006b)

Governments are failing child migrants and asylum seekers almost everywhere: Moroccan child migrants to Spain are abused by authorities on both sides (Miller 2003); Australia locks them up in detention centres behind barbed wire for an average
of 20 months till their cases are heard (Fickling 2004); and African teenagers seeking asylum in the UK are trafficked for sex to countries like Italy (BBC 2001).

- **Diabesity**: a combination of Type 2 diabetes and obesity may become the new childhood epidemic, not just in the United States but also in countries like India and China that are more associated with starvation and inadequate diets (BBC 2004b).
- **Netherlands**: medical researchers notice a rapid increase in the number of children with permanent hearing loss and in need of a hearing aid; they call them the ‘iPod’ generation (Leidsch Dagblad 2006).
- **China**: Beijing opens its first official clinic for teenagers and young adults addicted to the Internet (TOI 2005).
- A new video recorder has come on the market that can be used by 8-year-olds (Setoodeh 2005).
- **Israel**: parents win the right to use the frozen sperm of their dead son to inseminate a woman he never met (BBC News 2007).

This selection, like the longer list from which it has been extracted, covers a wide range of information that touches almost every dimension of life. At first glance, the entries appear to be a collection of small, random events or diverse and rare exotics that could easily be ignored. However, a more systematic trawl through this information reveals a collection of rich and disturbing pickings that our colleagues from ICDI explored in the book *Newly Emerging Needs of Children, an Exploration*. When we started this research in Romania, we were aware that our realities and, subsequently, our results would be different from the issues outlined in other countries or that they would be present in a different degree in Romania.

### 1.4 Romania – statistical data

The total population of Romania was in 2008 (according to the National Institute of Statistics) approximately 21,537,563 inhabitants, of whom: children under 19 years old - 4,764,975, of whom in the urban areas 2,423,850 and in the rural areas 2,341,125, a significant drop from 1990 (see the graph).

![Repertitia populatiei pe varste comparativ 1990 - 2008](image)

In 1995, a negative natural growth was recorded, a phenomenon which occurred because of a decrease of the birth rate, while the death rate remained constant. At the same time, the number of children per family was also low, namely 1.8 children per family.
The family is the most important social group educating the children because it represents the main environment in which the child makes the first language and behavioural steps, the parents being the children’s first role models.

Between 2001-2006, a slight ascending trend was recorded in the number of marriages, while the divorce rate stayed constant. Comparatively speaking, the number of marriages in June 2009 was 3.097 lower than in the same month of 2008, while 37 more divorces were granted in the courts of law in June 2009 than in June 2008.

According to the results of the 2002 population census, the single parent families represented 13.4% of the total number of families, with a different percentage depending on the area of residence, namely 7.7% in the urban areas and 5.7% in the rural areas.

Following the reformation of the child protection system, the number of institutionalised children dropped, while the number of children placed in foster families is constantly rising. The best news is that the number of children abandoned in hospitals is dropping every year.

Romania was ranked 25th of the 29 countries investigated with regard to the situation of children, according to a report developed by the British organisation Child Poverty Action Group. All EU countries, as well as Norway and Iceland, were taken into account. The study used 43 indicators that affect the children up to 19 years of age - from health to material situation, education and behaviour, or what they think about their lives. Romania got a score of 27 points for children’s health, 19 for children’s perceptions regarding their lives, 5 for children’s relations, 24 for behaviour and risks, and 27 for education. There was insufficient data for awarding points for home, environment, and material resources. The best score is 1 point.

Belonging to the rural areas is associated with major disadvantages: currently only 24.54% of the pupils in the rural environment will go to high school.

The vulnerable groups continue to be quite disadvantaged educationally. Approximately 80% of the children who are out of school are Roma, of whom 38% are functionally illiterate. The proportion of Roma children in primary schools is 64%, compared to 98.9% - the national average.

There is no statistical data regarding children with special needs, the groups in penitentiaries or other vulnerable groups, but the assessments made by NGO working with these groups are outlining major and chronic discrepancies.

The education of children and youth in Romania, both at home and in school, is not adapted as to make them more motivated, independent, and proactive. The youth, but especially children, are taught to leave decisions to the parents, teachers, and the government. The current curriculum is perceived by all involved actors (pupils, teachers, parents) as being overloaded and not very relevant for the life as an adult and for the labour market.
Too much information is offered, to the detriment of developing skills needed for solving problems. School prepares children and teenagers neither for life in a competitive world, nor for being creative or freethinking\(^1\). Children and teenagers do not receive the necessary tools for facing problems and they are not trained to succeed on their own.

The newest available data already signal worrying tendencies in the economy and the social environment that implicitly reflect themselves in the situation of children.

In 2008, 126,000 children in Romania had **both parents working abroad**, while 350,000 were left at home with one parent\(^2\). The authors of the study, UNICEF and Alternative Sociale association, note that Romania is facing a very serious situation in this respect. Thus, they noticed that the underage children who are home alone will quickly become victims of depression and will lose interest in school.

The website of UNICEF Romania also mentions the alarming trend of **growing violence in schools**, whereby aggressors are both children and teachers. According to the same source, 11% of schoolchildren are victims of **sexual abuse** and **drug consumption in schools**.

The ever growing access to computers and the internet generates a new type of problems that affect children’s life. A statistics carried out by the web page dedicated to children www.sigur.info was showing that between May and July 2009 over 250 calls and complaints regarding problems facing the children and teenagers in the virtual environment were recorded. Over 75% of calls were valid, the most frequent problems being **online harassment and abuse** in all its forms - **verbal abuse**, **slander**, and **personal data theft**.

According to the complaints, verbal abuse and slander occur mostly among teenagers (14-17 years old) through instant messaging software and e-mail, and the majority of abuse victims are girls. The main causes are related to various personal conflicts between the teenagers involved, such as failed relationships or revenge. As for data theft, it happens by means of taking personal photos or data - for instance, the phone numbers - from social networks and posting them on other sites, in defamatory contexts, without the data owners’ approval.

In the context of the adults’ new habits copied by children, one of the most worrying aspects is obesity in children. According to the World Health Organisation, Romania is ranked third in Europe from the point of view of obese children.

Inactivity, incomplete nourishment, based on fast food, but also too much time spent in front of the TV or the computer are the main causes of infantile obesity.

\(^1\) **ROMÂNIA EDUCAȚIEI, ROMÂNIA CERCETĂRII (ROMANIA OF EDUCATION, ROMANIA OF RESEARCH)** - The report of the Presidential Committee for analysis and elaborating education and research policies, Bucharest, July 6, 2007.

\(^2\) National analysis of the phenomenon of home alone children whose parents left the country to work abroad, UNICEF Romania and Alternative Sociale Iași association, 2008.
This would be the general outline of the context on which our research is based.

1.4 Romania - special events that worry us

It is enough to scan the media (written press, radio, TV) in any given week to make a list of pieces of news and articles about events involving children, children’s education, or information meant for children. What do they tell us, between the lines?

In 2008, blogger Constantin Cocioaba (www.ecostin.com) was making, in a blog entry inspired by the suicide of a 12-year old emo girl, a brief summary of events of the previous few days:

- In Sibiu, Teenager Rapes, Cuts to Pieces, Chucks 5-Year Old Girl in River.
- In Arad, 13-Year Old Boy Fatally Stabs 16-Year Old Friend.
- 11-Year Old Kills 3-Year Old Girl in order to see what death is about. On Easter day!
- In Suceava, 7-Year Old Girl is Raped, Killed by Young Man and then thrown in a stream.
- In Gorj, 17-Year Old Rapes, Burgles, Kills 78-Year Old Woman.
- In Iasi, Teenage Girl Threatens with Suicide, Disappears. She is 17 years old.
- In Focsani, Small Girl, Found Dead in Landfill

We collected a series of similar incidents during this year’s research as well. The “collection” raises a series of questions: are these cases isolated, promoted by the media in order to increase ratings, and they can be overlooked, or do they require a complex approach? Are the negative events involving children and youth telling us more than they did in the past or are they just covered more by the media? Are our children and youth more violent? Is it possible that, by covering these incidents excessively, a culture of violence is created, in which we become accustomed to seeing such news? What are the solutions for decreasing the number of violent incidents involving children? Beside the extreme cases covered by the media, what are the specific trends of the current generation of children? What are the reasons behind the children’s noticeable behaviour?

These are a few of the questions that we asked ourselves while exploring the newly emerging needs of children in Romania of the year 2009. Some of them will be answered in the following pages. Others will remain unexplored and we will need to find their answers in the future, in collaboration with the professionals working with children and youth. This study means to offer a starting point and a space for reflection regarding the complexity of approaching all the problems that pertain to children living in today’s Romania.
2. The results of the study

2.1. Preliminary conclusions following the interviews and focus group meetings

Following the interviews with the specialists and the focus groups meetings with the children, a number of new trends were extracted, summarized, and then introduced in the online questionnaire in order for the respondents to prioritize, validate, and add other trends.

We would like to underline the act that, during the interviews and focus group meetings, positive trends were outlined as well. However, the aim of our research is to draw the attention towards the negative trends, which have the potential of generalizing or aggravating, and that can be remedied by means of taking note of them in time and developing appropriate intervention mechanisms.

The first remarks of the research, sprung from the opinions expressed by specialists and children, were that:

- Material wishes are proportional with the size of the town in which the child lives: unlike children from small towns and rural areas who mention more finding a well-paid job and having a happy family, the bigger the city, the more material wishes are expressed.

  Asked what their professional aspirations are, children and teenagers give different answers, but in big cities the answers vary around: “I wish to have money, a new PC, more free time, a bigger house, bigger grades in school,” or “Peace, good health, more entertainment venues, longer holidays, lenient teachers” (teenagers, 16 years old, Bucharest), whereas in smaller towns and villages, answers focus more on career and family oriented ideals: “I wish to become a police officer, because I like to do justice and today we need the police more than ever,” “I wish to do my part as well and help my parents and siblings as they work for me,” “I wish to have a successful career and besides that to have time to help the ones around me, to work as a volunteer at children’s orphanages and in nursing homes” (teenagers, 16 years old, Pucioasa). As for the biggest problems that they face, a teenager in Resita responds, “The obsession for certain things that we cannot have.”

- They spend more time in front of the computer in the big cities. Children in rural areas still prefer playing with other children and outdoor activities. However, the computer is becoming more and more accessible and used in the rural areas, although the internet access is still limited. Children become familiar with the computer at younger and younger ages. Real communication is more and more replaced with messenger communication, especially in the big cities.

  “They are gossiping about one another on messenger and they don’t talk to each other face to face,” according to a teacher in Bucharest.

- Children are confused because of the big volume of information that they need to process and lack the necessary skills for filtering information and making decisions. At the same time, the traditional teaching methods used in school have become less and less attractive each year. Children do not have alternatives for finding the information that interests them via the internet and other educative materials.

  A respondent who works in an NGO that runs projects in high schools tells us that there are bigger and bigger differences from previous generations: “There’s a mess in their heads, you see them in Brownian motion, they lack a system of values, they lack a purpose in life. They spend their days on messenger and if you put them face-to-face they do not communicate. If they play football, they run after the ball,
instead of building together a strategy in order to position themselves in accordance with their strengths.”

A teacher from Costesti village, Arges county, says: “The teacher shouldn’t be the one awarding grades, but a friend, a partner. They do not know exactly what they want and it’s good for them to be guided: ‘Decide upon a purpose, like I want to become this or that,’ even if this might change in time. We, the teachers, hold the key, there are many subjects that can be discussed with children, according to their problems and aspirations, as to model them, but we need appropriate methods to approach them.”

- Physical and verbal violence is on the rise. The children and teenagers’ self-esteem is, in many cases, either low or exacerbated. Children grow up faster and some of them are apathetic, sad, blasé, e.g. the “emo” trend. Children themselves say that their entourage is a negative influence, while psychoactive substance abuse is bigger and starts at younger ages.

With regard to what bothers them about the colleagues their age, many respondents mention violence: “The fact that they think they’re someone they’re not, they’re violent, they’re noisy during classes, they litter, they chew gum in a weird way, thinking they’re cool” (teenager, 15 years old, Calarasi). “They’re all gonna be drug addicts,” a group of 12-year old in Calarasi said, asked what they imagine the future generations will be.

A project coordinator working in a youth NGO says: “If two are fighting, the others will amplify the scandal, they don’t intervene, they film the fight on their mobiles and they place bets. They are a generation based on violence and conflicts, which is also reflected by the violence against animals.”

- Parents are either overworking or leaving the country for work, or they abandon their children in front of the TV or the computer, feeling that they are safe there. Communication is limited to “Do you need money?” and they are not ready to give advice to children because they are not aware of their new needs and lifestyles. They mainly fulfill the children’s material wishes, ignoring their actual needs.

“I have some problems with my friends whose parents are abroad and who are looked after their old grandparents,” says a 12-year old in Siriu, Buzau county. A Cluj school principal tells us: “Since parents went for work abroad, we have more and more undisciplined children, who do whatever they want because their grandparents are more lenient and they cannot control them.”

- Eating habits have changed. The apparition of fast food restaurants, different alimentation and a sedentary lifestyle are leading to obesity and other problems.

„Parents are getting their children, even from strollers, used to Pepsi, Prigat, Finetti and chips”, says the chairman of an NGO that promotes mountain tourism and the environment protection.

- Children do not know who to look up to, their values and models change. The youth lacks real role models. Children tend to choose role models promoted by the media, whose values are more often than not contradicting or very different from the values promoted by parents, educators, and books.

A member of the Council of Romanian Youth states: “The media shows the videos taken by children and youth, we hear a lot about “the porno student,” “the porno midget,” “sexy Braileanca,” etc., and they search for such videos and models on the internet.”

This list is not complete. It was followed by a detailed analysis of the statements made by the interviewed specialists and children. After listing the new trends outlined I the quality stage (interviews, focus group meetings and press monitoring), we proceeded to centralize then and group them in three areas: trends in the area of health, trends in the social area and trends in the personal development area.

The answers to the online questionnaire thus offer an importance-based prioritization and various detailed answers regarding new trends and concrete examples of new trends,
problems, situations in which children and youth are involved. The specialists’ answers also confirm the hypotheses regarding the causes and possible intervention measures.

2.2. Quantitative results of the online questionnaire

The online questionnaire as addressed to the persons who are directly involved in the education of children and youth: teachers, NGO project coordinators and volunteers, social workers, psychologists and, last but not least, parents. [The questionnaire] was forwarded online to discussion lists meant for teachers and NGO’s (especially NGO’s working with children and youth) and it was posted on the “NGO News” portal www.stiriong.ro.

2.2.1. Data about respondents

275 specialists answered the questionnaire.

Profession-wise, the most numerous respondents of the online questionnaire were teachers (34%), followed by psychologists (20%) and NGO specialists working with children and youth (12%).

Graph 2. What is your profession?

Most respondents work in education institutions (kindergartens, schools, high schools, universities): 45% of them. 37% work in an NGO, 11% in public institutions, and 7% in companies.
Graph 3. What type of institution/organization do you work in?

As for the type of township where the respondents work, only 5% work in the rural areas. The majority of respondents (27%) works in Bucharest, 25% work in cities with 200,000 inhabitants or more (except Bucharest), and 43% in urban areas with less than 200,000 inhabitants.

Graph 4. In what type of township do you work?

The respondents’ ages: Most of them are aged between 25-34 years old – 37%. Approximately 30% are aged between 35-44, 23% are more than 44 years old, ad 10% are younger than 24.
Graph 5. Your age

The percentage of female respondents was 85%, while 15% were men.

Graph 6. Your gender

As we can notice, approximately 90% of the questionnaire respondents consider that the new generations of children are more exposed to problems, needs and challenges, compared to previous generations, while only 9% of respondents consider that this exposure is insignificant. Being aware that several changes occurred in the life environment of current generations of children is a starting point for the people who work in the field of services meant primarily for children, in order to contribute to raising the awareness of other specialists in the field and to elaborate strategies of intervention that can have a curative or preemptive purpose.
Graph 7. Do you consider that the current generation of children in Romania is more exposed to problems, needs, and challenges, compared to previous generations?

2.2.2. Negative trends concerning children’s health

With regard to negative trends concerning the health status of the current generation of children, the following trends were considered as most important, from the seven listed by us following the qualitative research:

1. Physical activities replaced by the virtual environment (computer, TV): 75.56% of respondents;
2. Drug, alcohol, tobacco consumption on the rise: 65.33%
3. Tendency of obesity caused by unhealthy nutrition: 45.78%
4. Mental and emotional fragility: 43.11%

The specialists who answered our questionnaire considered that migration towards the virtual space is the element that is most impacting upon the contemporary child’s health. Beside the aspects relating to the quality and significance of the contents of the virtual world, allocating lengthy periods of time for watching TV or interacting with the computer results in a proportional decrease of the activities that traditionally involved physical exercise or playing which involves physical exercise.

The next most impacting factor upon the child’s health is the consumption, by more and more and younger and younger persons, of psychoactive substances (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, etc.). This is conditioned by a cultural model and by the easy access to such substances, especially in the urban areas. It is important to note that there are still reminiscences of the attractive cigarette commercials and that most food shops in our countries have cigarettes and alcohol exposed in areas of great visibility, usually next to the cashier.
The third trend underlined by our respondents focuses on the tendency towards obesity, caused by an **unhealthy nutrition**. The fast food and the ready-to-cook trends lead to the apparition of food products that are real caloric bombs that reach primarily sedentary children. Equally relevant is the fact that the tradition of eating has changed, so that we can easily eat now in the car, in front of the computer, while watching TV, and the energetic input of these products, as we have shown before, is much more than the energy output of the child.

Another trend prioritized by the respondents of our questionnaire is the child’s **emotional fragilization** and a rise in its predisposition towards mental problems. We can say that many of these problematic aspects are caused by the altered communication between the parents and the child, by the contradictory manner in which the child is addressed certain demands or is asked to carry out tasks that are afterwards cancelled. Another cause could be the child’s access to the problems between the parents, witnessing discussions and arguments, different signals received from the mother and from the father caused by differences of opinion between the two, and last but not least the emotional involvement of the child in the case of serious conflicts between the parents, when they ask the child to choose to be on the side of the mother or of the father.

**2.2.3. Negative trends concerning the social environment**

From the point of view of the social sphere, the negative trends have been ranked as follows:

1. The deterioration of inter-human/interpersonal communication and replacing it with internet communication: 55.56%
2. Insufficient time spent by parents with the children (including the parents who work abroad): 53.33%
3. Increasing aggressiveness (physical, verbal abuse, etc.): 51.56%
4. Adopting (non)values and models promoted by the media: 50.67%

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**Graph 9. What are, in your opinion, the three most important current negative trends in the children’s social sphere?**
The elements in the social sphere that are considered to impact the most the process of the child’s development are prioritized by the specialists in the field as follows: the first place is occupied by the deterioration of inter-human/interpersonal communication and replacing it with internet communication. Changing the way in which people interact by replacing direct human contact with online or cell phone contact causes the deprivation of a series of behavioral models, of the possibility to adjust and conform behaviors to the social context in which the child lives. “Distance” communication deprives the child of the possibility of receiving or offering feedback. The communication is often “fractured”, “suspended”, therefore not finalized, and it lacks an appropriate expression of emotional experiences.

In the hierarchy made by the specialists, the second place is occupied by the time that parents spend interacting, caring, or educating children. The results of the questionnaire indicate that over 50% of respondents consider that children spend too little time with their children, that a big number of parents left their children in a semi-abandonment state, sometimes delegating other people from the family or adjacent to the family to fulfill some of their parental tasks.

Another aspect that is considered to be extremely important for our respondents is the one related to the increased aggressiveness, regardless of its forms. The sources of aggressiveness start from family models, but we can also find them in the media, to which the child has direct access, including the cartoons. We noticed, in some TV programs meant for children, the use of aggressive language, but also the promotion of aggressive behaviors, to the detriment of behaviors that imply cooperation, negotiation, or conflict management.

Also, over 50% of respondents consider that another important negative trend is adopting (non)values and models promoted by the media. From the ubiquitous celebrities to the lyrics of the songs that are popular among children and teenagers, it is easy to grasp most of the messages, which also unquestionably reach the children, and sometimes we are at a loss as to how to counteract against these negative messages with transmitting and inspiring authentic values.

Starting from the answers above, we can only note the act that the specialists consider the media as playing an extremely important role in promoting a series of models that are most often non-values, and here we mean not only in children’s programs and the kind of “heroes” that they promote, but also the general audience TV programs. In this respect, we frequently have to deal with paradoxical situations, in which we note that some TV stations do not have a coherent policy of programs and they do not have a clearly defined target audience. Thus, at many such TV stations, we find shows about how toxic and how disastrous a certain subculture is for us (the term should be perceived sociologically speaking, and not as devaluing), followed, immediately a few hours afterwards, by a super-show with a superstar who, irony of ironies, represents the “elite” of the subculture criticized before.

Also indirectly, the media promote the idea that “everything is possible, everything has a price, everything can be obtained.” Unfortunately, a simple piece of news, which may even be presented as a negative example, can inspire some to think “Hm…I could do that too,” or “I should do that too.” More specifically, we are referring to news about people who “buy” (regardless of how and with what currency) grades as exams, motivated absences, access to medical services, jobs, high school or university graduation diplomas, driving licenses, public positions, and so on and so forth.

2.2.4. Negative trends concerning the children’s personal development

Respondents prioritized the negative trends in the field of children’s personal development as follows:
1. They stopped considering that professional and material accomplishments are obtained through study and work: 68.89%
2. Their wishes focus on the material and entertainment possibilities; they are superficial: 55.56%
3. They create an alternative reality by means of spending time online and in front of the TV on a daily basis: 47.11%
4. They do not know how to choose because of an increasing volume of information and because of the lack of adequate school and career counseling: 38.67%.

The majority of the respondents, approximately 70%, consider that for the Romanian youngsters and children, **professional and material accomplishment is based on something else than education or work.**

In a society in which it is no longer visible that people who study, who have experience in a field, who work and have obvious qualities are accomplishing themselves professionally and materially, in which the persons who get at the top of the pyramid often do not show any obvious qualities, children lose confidence in the method of accomplishment through learning. Changing social values by means of conscious or unconscious promotion of certain success models determined a reaction of attributing pseudo-qualities to the newly promoted models. For the children, it is toxic that the new type of media-made celebrity becomes the “focus of attention” because of eccentric behaviors, relations with dubious people or being the main actors of public scandals. Another role-model has become “the trickster”, “the intrepid”, “the smarty-pants” who can easily obtain financial resources by means of small speculations or fraud, who will “deceive” the suckers, thus raising enough money to have fun, not thinking that one has to work in order to get financial benefits. As long as from such speculation, from money received by parents or relatives left for work abroad, youngster get revenues that are as big as the educators’ salaries or than income of people who work at least 40 hours a week, teenagers will naturally ask their educators: “Why study?” and they also often give the answer: “To get to be like you?” The model of easily obtained social status promoted by the phenomenon of emigration or by Romanian “role models” is not perceived realistically by the child or teenager. He notices that his parents, his friend’s parents, or even some of the kids...
who used to be partners in leisure can obtain revenues “even if they didn’t get to school” and not having real jobs. So there is an easier way to get where the people around got.

56% of the respondents perceive the current generation of children as being primarily interested in material things and entertainment and as being superficial. We live in a time when anything is possible, in which children start to use the internet at ever younger ages, to have access to all kinds of information, to try psychoactive substances, to have sexual experiences, to go on trips abroad and even on different continents. These children wish to experience more and more novel things and grow up more quickly. Besides the big quantity of information and experiments, they need to be encouraged to discover their talents, to have aspirations, to think about the future in a constructive and realistic manner.

On the third place is the opinion according to which children create an alternative reality by means of spending time online and in front of the TV daily, according to 47.11% of respondents. The modern family, involved in the whirlwind of professional activities, tends to interact less with the child. The child’s ways to spend free time migrated towards the virtual zone. Most parents consider that it is safer for the child “to spend time at home” instead of being exposed to the “dangers” of the outside world. The tendency towards “life with the computer” appears early in life, as parents are delighted that their child is so precocious as to be able to use the computer. As time goes by, the virtual space will offer new challenges to the child, offering him free access to a set of extremely varied resources, which are however also not controlled from the point of view of information, value, or education. The online communication alternatives facilitate the start of “another type of building relations”, which exclude the direct contact and, implicitly, the social learning of ways in which one can carry out an activity of communication with another person in an adequate, co-relational manner.

Life in the virtual space also leads to sedentary behaviors that directly affect the physical and psychological health of the child or teenager. This enables the installation of obesity, certain states of tiredness, the incapacity to adapt and to develop social relations, emotional blankness, and a decrease in the capacity to evaluate the: personal needs and resources, risks and behavior in case of risk, etc.

38.67% of the respondents of our questionnaire consider that teenagers and children do not know to make choices because of the increasing volume of information and lack of adequate school and professional counseling. In this information era, children need not only information, but also to be taught how to prioritize, to select, to discover the useful information and to make decisions based on their personal interests and inclinations, and consequently to be evaluated differently, depending on the personal skills and inclinations. Unfortunately, most of the time that the child spends in school, he is trained, and not educated. Educators often accuse the overcrowded curricula, the lack of time to go through the contents, the big number of pupils in a classroom, etc., but there is, in many situations, a series of problems arising from the very training of the teachers.

During the psycho-pedagogical training, school and professional orientation is superficially covered and even ignored, and some psychologists/school counselor lack certain skills or the wish to involve in the orientation process, which is actually in their job description. Often, the task of [school] and professional orientation is assumed by the parents, “who know best what’s good for the child” or to the group of friends. Thus, most often the criteria of school orientation are rather emotional or defined by others and do not imply a complex process of making decisions involving the main beneficiary of the training process, who should be able to collect, operate, select, and prioritize the set of information related to his domains of interest, correlating them with his skill potential.

The educational contents must be correlated with the needs for development of those life skills that are necessary in society. Informing the life skills development process, either in the urban or in the rural area, must take into account the specific development needs of the target group
(for instance: in the rural areas, most children do not know how to use a digital camera; in the urban areas more and more children do not have healthy eating habits, etc.)
3. Important aspects regarding the newly emerging needs of children in Romania

After listing the trends above, after their prioritization by respondents and after direct observation and press monitoring regarding the different specifics of the current generation of children compared to previous generation, we will now proceed to analyze in more detail several “domains” in which we notice major changes and from which we can extract important emerging needs of the current generation of children.

These are:
3.1 Real vs Virtual
3.2 Everything precocious
3.3 Contemporary models and values

These domains, described below, are specific to Romania of 2009. The list remains open and can be completed with other relevant domains, but the three domains that we will describe contain many of the most important negative trends or aspects that influence our children.

3.1 Real vs. Virtual

20 years ago, we had only one TV station and children were waiting breathlessly for the cartoons. Sometimes, an episode lasted less than 10 minutes, and that was all for the day. Obviously, most TV sets at the time were in black and white.

15 years ago, HC2000 computers appeared, a huge qualitative step from the computers with games that were loading from tapes to a computer with monochrome screen with green background and something new: a floppy disk included in the keyboard.

12 years ago, the first cell phones appeared on the Romanian market, with two networks to choose from: Dialog and Connex. Internet cafes started to appear in the same period.

10 years ago, the first digital cameras appear on the market.

Today… we have smartphones and iPhones, [wireless] hot spots in cities, in cafes, hotels, and restaurants, where you can connect your laptop to the internet for free, mini-laptops, telephone, PSP,…

Technology is helping us to have access to the internet non-stop, even when we travel, to be able to communicate with anyone, anytime, to send a photo and a few words from a mountaintop to our friends. Unlimited, universal, internet communication becomes more and more available. We become more and more transparent, making profiles on Hi5, Facebook, Flickr, Skype, Yahoo Messenger,
Twitter, Neogen, and dozens of other online services that facilitate our communication with acquaintances or strangers. We keep an online diary (blog), we share photos with our friends, we post statuses that inform all our friends, like a text message, of how we feel, where we are and with whom, what we do. Or we become more and more mysterious, creating virtual identities for ourselves, hiding behind certain profiles and pseudonyms.

The evolution of technology in the last few years has specific effects with ascending trends, of which we mention: an increasing number of internet users, a decreasing age of children using the computer and the internet, an increasing number of hours spent in the “virtual space”, diversifying communication methods and increasing online communication – to the detriment of real communication, an increasing number of persons who communicate frequently with people who live at great distances or that they do not know personally, the apparition of alternative identities used internet communication, less time spent socializing in the real world and with outdoor activities, because of online communication and network games, etc.

A article published in August 2009 on baniinostri.ro portal quoted Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Telecoms, who stated, “More than 70% of the youth use the modern internet capacities. We called them the digital natives, including here the persons who were born in this era and who started to use the computer immediately as they became active consumers on the European markets.” In the European Commission report on EU competition in the field of digital telecommunication, it is foreseen that this generation will dictate the future rules of the game on the European markets.

Children have access to information, they have specialized TV stations for cartoons, music, sport, history, geography, zoology, virtual encyclopedias, and ways to get informed about lifestyles all around the world. They have the possibility to learn using more and more advanced systems, to keep acquainted with the progresses of science and technology.

And still... Has the growing importance of the internet and the virtual world negative effects upon our children? In what percentages are the internet and the TV used as learning and entertainment tools? In what percentage are they used to view videos with “manele” [music trend belonging to a subculture generally viewed as toxic – translator’s note] or films that are not suitable for their age? How many children are using the internet in order to upload or view videos in which their colleagues or even teachers are in inappropriate and embarrassing situations?

What happens when...
- Children prefer to play on the computer instead of real, physical games?
- Children communicate online more and more, to the detriment of real communication?
- Children spend to much time in front of the computer or TV, creating for themselves an alternative reality, based on the information that they have access to and that they prefer?
- Children prefer to stay indoors, as the virtual environment is more tempting than socializing and sports activities?
- Children have access to information, websites and films that are not suitable for their age?

The survey „Copiii și internetul” (Children and the Internet), conducted in February 2009 by children’s radio station Itsy Bitsy FM and Intuitex on 3,559 parents reveals, among other things, the following:
- „63.5% of the children under 14 years of age sit in front of the computer daily, 59% access the internet daily, and 30.5% spend more than six hours a week on the internet"
- "over 43% access the internet for games, over 19% in order to chat, and only 23% in order to look for information for school"
- "38.7% of children under 3 years old access the internet daily"

However, only 4.8% of the parents consider that the internet is a safe environment for their children.

UNICEF monitored the TV stations in January 2009 with regard to scenes of violence, registering very big values in the case of cartoons TV stations. The research “Representation of TV Violence and the Child Protection” focused on monitoring 11 TV stations: TVR 1, Pro TV, Acasă, Antena 1, Antena 3, Realitatea TV, Prima TV, OTV, Cartoon Network, Jetix and Minimax: first ranked was Jetix, with 37 scenes of violence per hour, followed by Cartoon Network. “In the society of TV screens and computer monitors, children are mainly formed in a universe of TV reality and virtual communication, which become their actual reality. A consequence of this historic change of paradigm consists in the risk of losing the awareness of the difference between good and evil,” stated PhD. Ioan Dragan, manager of the Research Center for Media and New Communication Technologies Studies of the University of Bucharest, who is the coordinator of this research.

In October 2008, CNA [the national regulator for the audiovisual sector in Romania - translator’s note] conducted a complex study: “Measuring the degree of violence in the audiovisual programs”. From the chapter written by PhD Anca Velicu on cartoons, we extract the following data regarding the types of violence and their percentage on cartoon networks.

Graph 11. Forms of manifestation of physical violence on cartoon networks (percentages from the total number of acts of physical violence)

Thus, a more attentive look shows us that for instance the physical violence in cartoons has many forms: fight, abuse, injury with heavy objects, injury with fire weapons, injury without weapons, taking someone hostage, explosions, slapping, attempted homicide. The most frequent form is the fight (29% of all acts of physical violence), followed by abuse (21%) and injury with heavy objects (10%).

As for verbal violence, we attach a graph from the same research made on Cartoon Network, Jetix, and Minimax. Yelling and raising the voice are most frequent, occupying 42% of all forms of verbal violence, followed by arguments (16%), insults (11%), ridiculing (10%), labeling, and so on.
Graph 12. Forms of verbal violence on cartoon networks  
(percentages of the total number of acts of verbal violence)

By monitoring the forms of psychological violence, CNA indicated that a big percentage is covered by threats: 59%, followed by humiliation (14%) and harassment (15).

Graph 13. Forms of psychological violence on cartoon networks  
(percentage of all acts of psychological violence)

The children that we interviewed outlined the act that the younger generations are more violent because of the violent computer games and the cartoons that they watch.

Computer games develop a series of skills in children, like logical thinking, decision making, strategy making, rapid reactions, etc. However, some children give up interacting with other children, playing in front of the house or in nature, sports and socializing. Online communication has advantages and disadvantages. It is easy, cheap, handy. But the messages that are transmitted are faulted. Written communication is not necessarily interaction, it is more impersonal. It is more difficult to transmit emotions and feelings. It is based on information.
Virtual interaction is thus easier but less personal, it does not help knowing more about oneself and communication with other members of the group. Reactions in real situations, finding real solutions to possible conflicts arising with the person with whom one communicates are not to be found in virtual communication.

Also, virtual pace creates its own culture, which can be easily exemplified with specific language elements that have become common knowledge, like "asl pls", "lol" or shortening Romanian words that become unrecognizable for an "outsider". Will we get to use the same language in the future?

Or… shall we raise the alarm?

More and more children refuse to go on summer camps they cannot take their Play Station or if there is no internet available. The dependence to technology makes them more vulnerable, less prepared for acing real situations. The alternative reality, the computer games, the role models from cartoons and action films or other models promoted by the media, the front page news that children have access to, create in children certain perceptions and opinions that are far from reality. If they were to live without technology suddenly, they would feel helpless.

When was the last time that you say children playing in front of the house? City children spend less and less time outdoors or in nature. Some children cannot tell the difference between a duck and a goose because they only see them in zoology manuals. Some children believe that the purple Milka cow is for real and that this is its natural color. It’s real: today’s children are growing away from nature and from childhood games.

And when they have contact with nature or the classical universe of games, they do it in an inadequate manner. The lack of the model of “playing” and “reacting to the environment” generates either violent reactions, or blockage because of lacking a scale of evaluating the environment situations.

Another interesting fact is that the small child perceived the hero to be rather a robotized version than a human or at least a person with humanizing qualities. The tendency is to shift the features of the characters in children’s fiction into a world that is as technical as possible, lacking emotional responses that are adequate to the situation. We can thus notice, in many current fictional productions, serious inadequacies to situations, extremely violent reactions both verbally and behaviorally, and clear and often irrevocable manifestations of hostility. It is extremely rare to find contents dealing with unconditional acceptance, accepting the differences or even forgiveness, but these productions promote individualism, climates of extreme competition, etc.

Another very important aspect in the problematic of the influence of virtual space upon the child’s life and development is represented by the fake identity or a wishful identity, contradicting the individual potential or capacities, which causes serious cognitive dissonance, delaying the formation or altering the capacity for realistic self-perception. By using online communication, children and teenagers create false identities for themselves, starting for pretending to be of another age of another gender and getting in contact with adults looking for partners (including sexual partners), so children will reach social maturity much sooner than normal.

How far will things go? For kids who spend a lot of time in the virtual world, isn’t there a risk that the real world will be perceived as hostile and incapacitating, compared to the internet and game world?

The answer lies in each and everyone of you, readers of this study, who maybe noticed that: there are children who, upon waking up, turn on the TV or the computer, there are children
who get mobile phones from kindergarten or at least in first grade, there are children who remain blocked in the virtual world, there are children who have another life and another world than the one that we believe to be... real?

3.2 Everything precocious

The society that we live in is aggressively bombarding us with information, invading almost any life space of the child, from family to play or school, and the messages do not only form the child educationally but rather in the sense of becoming a precocious consumer.

Marketing policies are the ones that create or invent needs, generate new trends, which result in behavioral changes at the level of the “targeted” groups.

Another element that determines the precocious apparition of certain needs is caused by the powerful influence of the people of the same or close age to change the behavior. This is why we should no longer be surprised to notice that, as soon as they learn to read and write, many children become more and more interested in online communication, leading to early subscriptions to social networks and online games or competitions. Many parents declare themselves surprised by messages they “discover” when the “monitor discreetly” the activities of primary schoolchildren. They will frequently ask themselves if the sexuality of some messages is adequate for their age and they are even more shocked to find out that some colleagues or friends of their son or daughter are already sexually active.

Although many parents are in denial, precocious sexuality and starting sexual life starts much earlier than in previous generations, because of peer pressure or of the constant bombardment of sexually charged messages delivered by the media. The moment of starting one’s sexual life is often extremely precocious, with negative consequences anatomically, physiologically, but also psychologically, in the absence of a development of decision-making capacities.

Observation studies carried out by doctors and psychologists reveal that the start of puberty now happens at 9-9.5 years of age and not at 11-12 years old, as was the case until the end of last century. A newspaper article published in Adevarul, quoted by 9am.ro portal, reads, “Girls who win beauty pageants at 13 or 14 and boys of the same age who look like 18 year-olds show that children grow up much more quickly than before. Actually, all around the world, the start of puberty age has dropped significantly. If 30 years ago in Romania it was considered that puberty was between 12-16 years of age, now puberty starts at 9-10 years old.”

Already, we notice more and more cases of premature pregnancies or child fathers.

It would be interesting for you to count how many sexually-charged messages you notice in any given day. You can start from the first newsstand in the morning, the billboards, song lyrics, the clothes that passers-by wear, then the news, TV programs, films, etc. and then to think that whatever you saw, a child could see as well. Remember then that the main features of childhood are curiosity and the wish to explore/experiment.

But the domain of “everything precocious” does not limit itself to sexuality. It also includes the behaviors concerning the consumption of psychoactive substances, in which we include even alcohol and tobacco. It is “super-cool” to get drunk! You’re “tough” if you smoke! You’re part of the “game” if you snort and, when you’re a teenager, you inject! For many pubescent children, they feel like they have grown up if they are able to smoke, drink beer, to try even more, and the ones who do not follow this trend will be isolated from the groups of girls or boys. The risk of exclusion creates however a very big pressure and determines the child to follow the trend, adopting the “consumer” behavior in order to be adopted by the group. The model of the “older friend” is in many cases more influential than parental or school
education, because the price of the risk seems smaller than the risk of consuming various psychoactive substances. We do not wish to detail here the medical, sociological, or psychological aspects implied by the consumption of these substances, we would only like to point out that the age when kids start using them is much lower than in previous generations. This happens also because alcohol and tobacco are readily available, both price-wise and from the point of view of proximity of the shops to home and even school. ANA [most likely National Anti-Drug Agency – translator’s note] research entitled “Scientific components of drug consumption in the Romanian society” (2008) mentions the ease with which illegal drugs can be procured by high school students, the excessive consumption of prescription drugs, and other aspects that showcase the early debut of psychoactive substance abuse.

Infantile aggressiveness and criminality are becoming a growing problem. Desensitized by examples from movies, cartoons, video games, as well as a low capacity for discernment, corroborated with missing or faint ethical criteria, the incapacity to choose between good and evil, makes children want to experiment with behavior characteristic to their “super-heroes”. We often notice, in “strategy games”, a realistic graphic display of bloody violence that offer the model for “killing” and “revenge”. When we interviewed teenagers, they told us that, when they were 10-12 years old, they would spend 3 to 6 hours a day in internet cafes, playing violent games like Counter Strike. 7-year old boys are most attracted now by the same type of games or fighting games, martial arts, wrestling. When asked “What would you feel if you saw someone hit the same way as in a game?,” a seven-year old boy answered, “Nothing.” When asked “What would you do if games happened for real, in front of you?,” the answer was “Nothing. It would be cool if it were possible,” then: “Even if you saw someone cut with the sword like in the game?,” the answer came, bluntly: “Even so.” We continued the dialogue, making sure that we are speaking about the same thing and that the boy understands the meaning of the questions.

The article “Jetix, ProTV and OTV – Champions of violence on the small screen” by C. Moga, published by www.hotnews.ro in June 2009, reads, “Cartoon networks maintain their position of leader regarding the proportion of violent scenes, compared with the rest of the television stations” – these TV stations broadcast violent scenes in proportion of over 50%. Even if the parents are selective with regard to choosing the cartoons or TV shows, games, etc., children have the same “heroes” as their kindergarten or school colleagues. They tell their parents about the adventures of the violent characters even though they did not get to watch them themselves in their family. The source? Their colleagues and friends, the toys that show these characters, the trend of comics and marketing products that promote these cartoon or computer game characters.

In conclusion, maybe we could filter better the contents of children’s games and computer games. This has become a necessity because, according to a Romanian proverb, “If you seed wind, you will get a storm”, which can also be valid in the domain of child education in the family or public space.

The teachers of the general school in Siriu, Buzau county, tell us that they do not consider the current generation of children different from the previous generations, maybe just slightly more mature. They tell us that, when a child manifests a special behavior, the case is discussed in the teachers’ office and the problems are solved more quickly because teachers work together.

If in the rural environment this trend is less visible, it has become a reality in the urban environment. Adults and children from Bucharest that we interviewed told us that, because of peer pressure and the access to information, everything starts from a very early age.

Pupils themselves consider that one of the most serious problems among children is the raising drug, alcohol, and tobacco abuse that starts earlier now. Another problem ranked in the top three problems is a growing aggressiveness, and any children and teenagers that we
talked to during the focus group meetings mention "the entourage" as a negative factor, as well as, some say, the lack of "real friends."

One of the aspects that deserves our attention is a visible shift: the companies that produce/distribute certain products and services for children will target the children directly. We often see commercials or messages addressed to children, unlike the traditional "for your child." The message is transmitted directly, the child gets to choose himself, and the mediator (the parent) no longer has an active role. An article published by Ziua daily focuses on a research carried out in the United Kingdom, according to which "some children are suggested in commercials to pressure their parents (into buying the desired object) by any means, while the adults are presented as buffoons. Moreover, some commercials subliminally induce the idea among children that 'you are what you have'".

Universal access to information and news bulletins that children can watch anytime, offer them access to global events. There are the fairy tales with Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty, but also news about wars, murders, rapes, more or less unfortunate events. They can watch any TV channel, anytime. They know about the parents’ financial problems, they are left unsupervised for a large portion of the day. From the point of view of information, children mature themselves faster and they get a bigger amount of knowledge earlier and earlier in life.

Finally, we should note that the access to information and the tendency of globalization are factors of uniformity, of spreading new trends, models, and styles that are easily and quickly adopted by children and youth.

3.3 Contemporary role models and values

Besides the practical and visible aspects regarding today’s role models and values of the Romanian society, and implicitly of the children and youth, the concepts that are presented in this subchapter are simultaneously effects and causes of current behaviours, problems, and trends.

Who hasn’t heard the following phrases? “In my time, youngsters knew how to behave in society...”, “Before, work used to symbolize something for the young, it was an important value. Today, it’s hard for them to even wake up and go to work, they’re lazy and they don’t know what they want!”, “They are not properly educated in the family!”, etc.

Socrates was saying, 2400 years ago, “Youngsters aren’t what they used to be in the olden days, children do not stand up when an old man enters a room, they contradict their parents and they chat instead of working...” (Zajonc, R.Bd, 1968)³.

Theoretically speaking, the concept of value means “a way of being and of acting that a person or a community recognizes as being ideal and that makes the people, the groups or behaviours to which it is attributed, be considered good or respectable.” - Emile Durkheim on collective conscience.

Values are the expression of general principles, fundamental orientations, and, first and foremost, of certain collective preferences.

Values differ from a society to another, from a group to another, they integrate specific elements from different cultural zones. R. Parsons underlines the fact that the American

society, for instance, favours less the values associated to maintaining cultural models than the ones related to accomplishment.

On the other hand, the concept of role model refers to the attempt to understand a social phenomenon realized by means of a schematic representation, which nonetheless respects the complexity of the respective phenomenon. This representation, based on observation, is a construction that aims to explain the object, in its synchrony and diachrony. Role models are instances of imitation or comparison. They appear frequently, spontaneously, and are short-lived. Today, a model represents a style of appearance and behaviour, induced to people by means of persuasion through advertising and perceived through the (seemingly endless) willingness for imitation. The main values of Romanian children and teenagers are the ones promoted by the representatives of various subcultures. We are hereby referring to the so-called “cocalari” and “piţipoance”, “wonder children”, “golden children”, “magnificent”characters, “kings” or “princes” of these subcultures.

An interesting fact worth mentioning here is the spread and popularity of “manele”, and especially their messages. Google will give, on a simple search for the word “manele”, 2,300,000 hits. The choice is vast - we wonder? An article from September 2009 published in Gândul newspaper concludes that “Lyric-wise, the obligatory vocabulary for manele is well-known: money, enemies, hooligans, women, booze, car, heart, value. ’I leave home for nights/ Making my wife jealous/ With all the money I gave her/ I could have bought a top car/ With all the money I gave her/ I could have bought a real jeep.’”

Role models are in tight relation with people’s lifestyle, meaning the manner in which an individual or a group (models of social relations, product consumption, culture assimilation) expresses itself. It can be a visible indicator of class, of detachment of elites from the masses, of big age groups, etc. Following this scientific theory, it is not surprising that we are shocked to witness the loyal imitation of certain behaviours, be they anti-social, just because “the role model” does it.

Starting from rhetorical questions or psychological or sociological theories, we notice that the mere exposure to changes in society, family, media, and education, will increase the attraction and interest towards a certain thing, person, role model, or value. The explanation is that, in a first stage, the confrontation with a new object or situation will lead to negative feelings (fear, mistrust). After further exposure and in the absence of a threat from the respective object, people will find it attractive. The attraction increases as the object becomes familiar and proves to be successful in a short time, with minimum effort.
D&D Research and Leo Youth⁴ identified, within a 2008 research on 16 to 24-year olds in Romanian cities with 100,000 inhabitants or more, 5 types of youngsters, as follows:

29.7% of the young people are of the **“old-fashioned” type**: traditionalist, serious in most aspects of his life. He is under the powerful influence of the family, whom he obeys and respects. He admires the ones who succeeded correctly, through intelligence and work, and does not like whatever is shallow and ostentatious.

**The calculated ambitious type** makes almost 1 in 5 youngsters (19.2%). Ordinary youngsters who have already planned their future and are already working towards reaching their objectives that they have set for themselves. They are very enterprising, and they feel like they have their life in their hands. Optimistic, trusting themselves and the future in general. A calculated ambitious youngster works and supports himself, without thinking of leaving the country - e wants to finish what he started here. However, in order to attain financial independence, he sacrificed personal life and free time. Even if he accepts that he gave up fun for work, he tries to find a balance between personal and professional life. And he hopes to own a business one day.

17.2% are of the **confused pessimistic type**, with a skeptical, negativistic attitude towards school, society, and future. He does not trust his own forces and does exactly know what he wants to do in life. He finds it hard to adapt to a work place and he changed jobs in various domains, and most of them disappointed him. He is relaxed and resigned, and this also translates in his consumption behaviour: he lives off his parents, who give him money that he does not even attempt to manage. He spends it compulsively, never being able to save any, not even when he wants to buy a more expensive mobile phone, for instance. He spends his free time between his hobbies, shopping, and friends. He spends a lot of time online and he feels the need to be always up-to-date with what is going on, which makes him access news websites a lot and chat on messenger until the morning.

**Opportunists**, 15.8 of Romanian young people, are avid fans of manele, party a lot, and only wish to have fun and make money. The opportunist is so busy living his life that he does not take the time to think of a career. He is uncertain about his future and he only knows that

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he’s going to make lots of money. He still lives off his parents, who give him money that he spends immediately, mostly on entertainment and clothes.

17.9% make up the type rebel on the block, the materialist, libertine youngster, who listens to hip-hop and always negates rules and authority. Always looking for fun and money, he makes a lifestyle of his convictions, showing it accordingly, nonchalantly, through gestures and clothing.

The forming of a moral personality is a process that is both necessary and difficult. Necessary because the life ideal, the social commitment of the individual to attain it, the relation with others - both as an object and as a subject - are put under the sign of morality.

Generally speaking, moral is the moral system of the society regarded as a whole (norms, principles, values, moral ideal). “The sphere of the concept of moral is composed, therefore, by the moral conscience and the moral relations, which consist of socially efficient facts and actions.” - The moral bases the relations among people on principles and norms, but it is not reduced to these, “it also implies their valorization, which opens the issue of lived action and experience; the man realizes the values in a certain situation in a concrete manner, starting from the vast range of his individuality” (Hună, I., 1981). Morality is what makes adjustment possible, based on values and moral principles. There is a “law of adjustment” that implies several steps:

- identity (who am I?)
- values (what for?)
- capacities (how?)
- behaviours (what?)
- environment (where? when?)

Moral education implies starting to circulate moral values taken from the society’s table of values (which are the basis of moral norms), and by their assimilation - if they are associated with positive aims and feelings - the moral behaviours are determined.

Here are a few “pairs” of possible values by means of which society and implicitly the educational system in which children and teenagers are developed and trained, distance themselves from family, which means that there is an inconsistency (in many cases) between the value of the current society and the values of the current family:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Family</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlled freedom</td>
<td>Absolute freedom (do whatever you please)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation, helping one another, leading to the idea that “everything is obtained with effort”</td>
<td>Egoism: “I deserve everything”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for work and effort</td>
<td>Lack of respect for work and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance, respect for the other, flexibility</td>
<td>Intolerance caused by egoism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy in formation</td>
<td>Dependence on family (“parents will solve anything”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the other hand it is known that, when individuals shift to another environment (other than the family) for a long time, their system of value, gained in the family, will change, more or less. D.J. Boorstein claims that the media could harm moral formation, because it leads to imitating pseudo-personalities who became role models.

How does acculturation happen with regard to values and role models? Do children and teenagers give up certain moral norms and habits in favor of the ones of the environment? This happens, of course in a particularized manner, under the pressure of the entourage. The individual gives up some prejudice, norms or life rules that are inadequate to the new situations, to the new status, and adopts the new ones. This process takes place in the conditions of adopting the respective environment, which can be a group of friends, a gang, a clan, or even new acquaintances. The research on messages addressed by commercials to children that we mentioned above, carried out in the United Kingdom and quoted by Ziua newspaper, has a clear conclusion: “the more a child spends his day watching TV or on the internet, the more materialistic he will become, destroying his physical and psychological health and his relations with the parents.” For instance, “Monica Columbeanu⁵ - a role model for success,” “Sexy Braileanca⁶ - a good example of a successful professional career in a short time, with big money” (and the examples could go on), who, even though they are not personal acquaintances of the child or teenager, they become of interest to him.

Another question that the so-called role models mentioned above make us ask ourselves is: are these role models another cause for the youngsters’ confusion regarding professional achievements? Do they still see the need for education, of studying, in view of personal development?

Psychologist Otilia Spataru Ostrotky said, in the article “Media and Education System - Interaction and Mutual Causality”: “The more shocking, even tragic, information is, the more important it is considered and the bigger an impact it has. Such images makes children overexcited, inciting them to violence and brutality. Violence in fiction will easily lead to real acts of violence. J. Cazeneuve says that the biggest evil is not the fact that scenes of violence are shown, but that a mix between fiction and real is created, making children mentally confused and unable to separate what is fiction from what is real. The true significance of indifference to violence, both as a fact and in fiction, is the devaluing of the concept of humanity.”

All the persons with whom we interact exercise certain permanent influences upon our way of thinking, of perceiving and of behaving, for instance: “I shall do what our high school teacher did... namely smacking the pupils!” This identification process manifests itself in various ways:

- the behaviour is copied
- the role model is imitated physically or verbally
- certain symbols of power representing the role model are adopted

All these lead to what is called the principle of social proof. This principle starts from a simple idea: if people hear or see that certain people have certain behaviours, this is likely to make them adopt similar behaviours. Bandura (apud Cialdini, 2004) noticed that the social proof is a powerful predictor of social (and educational) influence. E.g., every day a child was

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⁵ Monica Columbeanu is the trophy wife of an aging rich businessman. She, a fashion model, was barely legal when they got married. They have a reality show and she became a TV star. (Translator’s note)

⁶ Sexy Braileanca is the nickname of a young lady (Florina Mihaila) from the city of Braila who became famous for posing naked, appearing in X-rated films, and for talking candidly about sex on various TV chat shows. (Translator’s note)
playing happily with a dog for 20 minutes. This made 67% of a group of preschoolers, who were previously afraid of dogs, wish to play with a dog as well. Sometimes it is only sufficient to use certain key words in order to start a contagious behaviour of the social proof type. Social proof can be a strong motivating factor for children and youngsters. The call to “what everyone is doing” is an important source of influence that we can use.

Another aspect worth special attention refers to the mental ad emotional fragility. The individual can be happy or unhappy with himself. When he is not happy, one hopes that he will attempt to change this, making efforts in this respect. If the individual is a teenager or even an adult, the aspiration is natural. We should mention that the nature of the aspirational self is an indication of whether the individual knows his reality or not and, either yes or no, to what extent. William Thomas, in his book, *The Unadjusted Girl*, presented four aspirations that he considered to be common in all human beings, therefore they are the premise from where we can start: 1) the aspiration to get or gain a new experience; 2) the aspiration to be acknowledged by others; 3) the aspiration to respond to others; 4) the aspiration towards security.

Knowing the aspirational self must take into account at least two complex aspects: 1) the representation of what we think we are with regard to others or, in other words, our concept of self as our own image; 2) the interior reference model with which we compare ourselves, important being the need to surpass ourselves. Taking into account these aspects when developing children and teenagers, we can avoid tendencies towards suicide, murder, and emotional instability.

*Clujeanul* newspaper examines the “emo” phenomenon. A 21-year old emo girl speaks about what characterizes emo children and youth: “What characterizes us is the fact that we are always depressed, which also shows in our appearance, we wear a lot of black. We also apply a lot of black makeup, because it hides the circles around the eyes due to crying or exhaustion. Although we have many problems that make us depressed, we do not seek help, we do not hope to solve them.” In another article, Ildi, a 14-year old pupil, talks about her emo colleague: “She complains that she is fat and ugly, and when she is depressed she asks for sharp objects in order to cut herself. She claims that she does not cut herself because she is emo, but because she is depressed and life is not worth living.” Ildi says, adding that, in a discussion with her father, Ana revealed her suicidal tendencies. “One day she confessed that she asked her father, “What will you do to me, if I kill myself?”, to which he only replied, “Are you an idiot?”. She claims that she only listens to music about death and sadness because it is the only way to express what she feels.”

We develop in life through three essential verbs: to be, to have and to do, correlated with our genetic heritage, our education, and personal experience and effort - learning.

Although we have a certain attitude towards an aspect of life, we will not always behave accordingly. This is where the parent, the educator, the counselor, the members of the community have a primordial role, intervening systematically to form the child, s that his attitudes and behaviours should be in accordance with one another, so that the character should be as homogenous and harmonious as possible, and to give him access to the most adequate ways of evolution.

Acquiring a positive attitude towards oneself will thoroughly reflect in the relation with society, work, family, and even oneself. Because children learn especially by imitation, they will do what adults do, not what adults say, as we very well know. Sykes C. underlines this idea by means of the following rule: “Winners have a life philosophy,” and children need it to be strengthened, even in ordinary situations, in order for them not to experience the fact that “losers have their own life philosophy.”

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Children and youth need to be permanently connected to life. The adult who is already emotionally and functionally stable can constantly offer this, stressing on awareness and accountability, confirming through the way in which he solves day-to-day problems that “life is not divided into semesters and that summer is not a holiday,” and that “television is not real life” (Skces C.)

Children and teenagers who attended the focus group meetings were speaking frequently about rights equality, discrimination, about the fact that they want a fair world. Is this merely a child’s ideal? We have often got answers like “When I am old, I want to be a policeman” or “a judge.” What should we answer to children who ask us, “Why should I study? My sister went to university and she sells apples at the market,” or, “I would like that no one should accept bribes anymore and that teachers should give fair marks.”

Role models are visible. Values are inspired and developed. How will the future generations of children turn out to be? The answer lies in each and everyone of us.