

**Psychological aspects of Child Wish:  
A brief introduction**

Uschi Van den Broeck, M. A.  
Clinical Psychologist  
Leuven University Fertility Centre (LUFC), Belgium

UZ Leuven | Herestraat 49 | 3000 Leuven | www.uzleuven.be | tel +32 16 33 22 11 | UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS LEUVEN

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**Background**

**“Infertility”**

= inability to conceive after 1 year of unprotected sexual intercourse

- Stressful live event




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**Background**

- Prevalence of infertility problems:
  - Estimates: 1 in 4 to 1 in 6 couples (WHO, 2006)
  - ‘Treatment seeking behavior’ +/- 50%
- Availability of treatment for infertility increased in last decades
- 1978: ‘Louise Brown’ 1<sup>st</sup> IVF baby




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### Background

- Biopsychosocial model
  - Infertility problems have a profound impact on the biological, psychological and social aspects of the individual and the family. (Engel, 1977, 1980).
- Every aspect of psychosocial functioning of a couple is influenced by the experience of infertility
  - Shared beliefs about importance of parenthood
  - Identity of the couple
  - Decision making in treatment
  - .....



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Before beginning a Hunt,  
it is wise to ask someone what you are looking for  
before you begin looking for it.

*Winnie the Pooh*  
*Pooh's Little Instruction Book*



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**And so it begins...**

Why do we want children



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### Why do we want children?

- 'I don't know.'
- 'Legacy'
- 'Loving and caring'
- 'Family building'
- 'Something greater than ourselves'
- 'Motherhood, fatherhood'
- 'Beliefs and values'
- 'They're fun and cute.'
- 'Children are our beginning and our ending.'
- .....



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### The wish for a child

- Child wish: a complex phenomenon

'Biological parenthood'  
= valued and primary role in western society  
= 'script'  
= implicit expectation



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### The wish for a child

#### Multifactorial Motives:

- Individual
- Relational
- Transgenerational
- Sociological/ Society



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## The wish for a child

### DEMAND

- Need
- Enforced
- All-consuming
- Life has no meaning without it.

### DESIRE

- Implicit acceptance that a desire can never be fully met.
- 'It happens to you, but you do not control it.'
- Exists even if you do not want it to.
- Room for longing/missing.
- Imaginary versus real child



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## The wish for a child

- Demand: 'We need a child.'  
→ Need of the couple/person  
→ Imaginary child = real child
- Desire: 'We want a child.'  
→ longing, outside of ourselves  
→ Imaginary child ≠ real child



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## Wish for a child

Unique relationship between parents and children: 'automatic' (Van Tongeren, 1992)

- 1) Little objectivity:  
'my child is the sweetest/cutest/smarest/...'
- 2) Absence of choice:  
no control, big surprise
- 3) Relationship of 'Possession':  
"My child"
- 4) Reciprocity:  
unconditional love



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## Wish for a child

- Continuum:
  - extremely wanting to extremely not wanting children
  - Ambivalence = normal part of process of choosing to have children
- Healthy childish:
  - Ambivalence between anticipated gratification and threats
  - Noble and selfish
  - Motivation for and motivation against child wish
- No strict line between healthy or unhealthy
- Intensity of the child wish ≠ guarantee for a healthy child wish



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## Parenthood

- Developmental milestone (Erikson)
  - Psychosocial crisis
  - Growing process and personality development



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## When infertility strikes...

*A child within my mind. I see  
The eye, the hands. I see you also there.  
I see you waiting with an honest case,  
Within my mind, within my body,...*

E. Jennings



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### Infertility

- Family systems theory
- Crisis of infertility as a transition to non-parenthood.
  - Confused life tasks, uncertain roles, blurred boundaries in relationships
  - Distinction between biological condition of infertility versus the social condition



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### Infertility

- 'Boundary Ambiguity' if the child wish is threatened or remains unfulfilled
    - Transgenerational component
    - Relational component
    - Potential for psychological problems
  - Longed-for child is physically absent but emotionally present
  - Long lasting effects for couples due to idealisation of the longed-for child
  - Failure of the child to arrive may be perceived as caused by negative characteristics of themselves or partner
  - Rigid boundaries as protective mechanism may lead to social stigma and isolation
  - Too permeable boundaries may disregard personal boundaries
- DISTRESS



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*"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart."*

-Helen Keller



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**Thank you for listening.  
Any questions?**

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Hersenen 17  
B-3000 Leuven

[www.uzleuven.be](http://www.uzleuven.be)  
tel +32 16 33 22 11

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