

Being a «good enough» mum and dad. Courses of family education in Early Childhood Education Services

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Introduction

Multiple social and cultural changes that have taken place in the last decade have inevitably generated great changes in the functions and essential characteristics of a family which is always in more and more need of an external support, given that it isn't always possible for it to find all the necessary resources within itself in order to respond to its parental role in an adequate way. We know well though, as demonstrated in detailed researches by Pourtois and Desmet, how fundamental is the parents' educational behaviour and how it inevitably marks, sometimes even in an indelible way, the children's life pathways, as regards both the development of their psycho-social identity and their success, firstly academic and later professional. It is also necessary not to abandon parents to themselves but support them in the most critical phases of a "mission" that is so demanding and fundamental, not only for their private lives but for all the society. More and more frequently, fortunately, the educational institutions pay much attention to doing their best to support parenthood through initiatives capable of offering parents a place of contact with each other and a place where they can share, re-elaborate and compare their educational practices with other parents. Therefore, the family education is particularly important in order to provide a balanced upbringing.

Its objective is to enhance the parents' basic skills, given that the same topics dealt with in the groups get identified during the first meeting on the basis of needs and necessities of all the participants themselves. Consequently, dealing with family education means «helping parents to reinforce their own educational skills and their potentials while helping

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them at the same time to give a direction of sense and a significance to their daily actions orientating their experience into an assignment which contributes to creating of a sense of identity and continuity [...] for different members of every single family» (Milani, 2001, p. 19).

Being a «good enough» mum and dad in Early Childhood Education Services

The 1995 “Bruno Ciari” Study Centre, commissioned by the councils of Empoli and Valdelsa areas, has managed and continues to manage different training events for parents who have children aged from nursery age to 14-year old age. The proposal of family education by the “Bruno Ciari” Study Centre is founded on the belief that there doesn’t exist only one way to be a «good enough» parent but that each individual has to find his or her own path and personally look for the answers to their own questions, having as an objective, as rightly confirmed by Cambi

to understand their own children, to comprehend (without censuring) their personality and be present during its development, in spite of the burden (unceasingly and inevitably) of tensions or conflicts, scraps and misunderstandings. It is staying closely to the children, guiding them “reasonably well”, or rather, how much it is required and how much it is necessary without being too controlling or invasive, without becoming intrusive. It is being ready to help but also to set free and doing it without anxiety, without overprotection, without abandon. The balance is difficult but it is to be lived in the first person and implemented day by day. In fact, the recipes don’t exist...» (2003, p. 9).

Due to this, indeed, the family education courses don’t strive to impart pre-confectioned educational rules nor to adopt academic ways of teaching, yet their objective is to supply modes of reflection and mediation starting from value and educational systems already put in action in order to enable to be, through an active and gratifying work based on its own trust and value, in favour of taking on new educational attitudes too. One of the objectives of the family educational courses is promoting reflexivity and, in fact, only with reflexivity it is possible to construct growth and awareness. As rightly confirmed by Orlando Cain:

the reflexivity makes us think about our own behaviour, scrutinise our attitudes, comprehend other people’s reasoning, improve ourselves, choose amongst various social models the one that corresponds best to our family ideals discovering gaffes and tricks in order to understand what is good for us and our own children (2001, p. 98).

The initiative is based on the participation of small groups of parents (15 to 20 people) who are considered the central characters and who, with the co-ordination of an external “expert”, discuss and exchange ideas thus acquiring new skills. Parents can freely take part and the covered topics are connected with their personal experiences of living with a child, both in the family and within a married couple.

The main objective of the family education courses is to break the family detachment whilst leaving parents free to tell their experiences in an intentionally created place for doing so. In fact, from listening and from consolation, parents discover that their problems are as common as the other parents’, they listen to the solutions already found by the others, discuss about their own educational methods and pursue the research of their own solutions. The context of a small group encourages the emphatic sharing and helps to overcome inhibitions and fears of judgement. With regards to this, above all, he or she who “animates” the group is also fundamental and is defined by Catarsi as a “professional without a white coat”, or rather, the animator of family education whose priority task is to make him or herself a “communication facilitator” capable of engaging in a close emotional relationship with parents. The animator hasn’t got the solutions to the family problems but he or she encourages the exchange of experience between parents, observes and comprehends and is capable of waiting, supporting and making them feel important and competent.

The experience of family education which is featured in the article was aimed at parents with children from 0 to 6 years of age and was carried out by the “Bruno Ciari” Study Centre in the councils in Empoli and Valdelsa areas, on account of the councils themselves. The courses proposed to parents, articulated in six weekly meetings, took place in the evenings (9.15 pm - 11.15 pm) during February and March, in the different early infancy institutions of the ten councils.

This experience, actually carried out in the infancy institutions, unlike some others involving parents with older children, was surely helped by the fact that parents in the nurseries are considered important members and parts of the organisation and therefore are more flexible and ready to be involved in any activity proposed by the educators. In fact, in all the groups, many of the participating parents already knew each other and this helped to create an opening atmosphere without tension and diffidence which is usually present in some of them during the first meeting because they don’t know what to expect from the course.

In addition, another positive aspect of the entire experience was that parents, having their children in the nursery and therefore being in close

contact with the educators, were well informed about the type of course that were about to take on, and the presence of an educator from the organisation at every meeting, represented for parents a kind of “protection” concerning the situation and at the same time it was a “guarantee” of the validity of the proposal. Right from the first meeting and during the entire experience, in more or less all the groups created, the feeling that was perceived more than any other was the warmth and the emotional closeness that was created amongst the people.

I think that the added value of such proposals is really this: to manage to create, in a modern society where time and occasions for sharing are always fewer and fewer, the contests where it is possible to offer both the possibility to return to communication and exchange ideas, without fear of being judged, and the awareness that the problems of any parent are the same as the others'. All of this can help to feel less alone and consequently, to make the difficulties more acceptable. Affirming this, these are the words of a mum who, at the end of the course, said: «the best thing for me was that at the end the children have become everybody's children! It is an experience that can rarely be lived in the daily life of the mums who meet each other at the nursery and in the gardens when one must always pretend not to have problems with her children, to be a perfect mum! There were no prejudices in this group».

Once this participating, dynamic and stimulating atmosphere was found, through which both the issues and the strategies set to resolve them come out, parents become co-conductors and active main characters, given that they are, first and above all, the ones who suggest and discuss in merit, overcoming this way the immobility of a superficial lesson whose subject could be only a passive listener.

During the first meeting, a folder was given to every parent and it included a complete calendar of meetings, some white paper and three short articles covering the topics with regards to the development and education of a child. During the course, the animator distributed various materials, used time after time, so that everyone was left with something even after this experience, in a material way too, and therefore parents had the possibility to gather them in the folder.

The animator usually introduces the argument of the evening with the reading of a story, fairy tale or poetry that opens a space of reflection, individually or in pairs, and then leads to a group discussion on their personal experiences. The conductor, using active listening and having emphatic attitude, reformulates, gives voice, all in an atmosphere of deep acknowledgement. Utilising tools such as the stories regarding

“critical” events, simulations and role plays, the animator manages to facilitate confrontation, stimulate discussion and create conditions because, through their memory, parents can relive their own childhood experiences and rediscover feelings and emotions they felt at the time, in order to recognise and give a name to their feelings and emotions that they perceive in the present towards their children. Seeing things from the child’s point of view stimulates that emphatic attitude that Bethlehem considers to be fundamental in the parent-child relationship. In fact, with regards to this, he says:

in my opinion, the parent’s most important task is to learn to use his or her intuition with certain sensibility as to how the children feel things and then to behave accordingly; in this way he or she will do what’s most useful for both as well as make their relationship deeper and more positive (1988, p. 28).

Through games and activities proposed within the group, that certain familiarity is created and it facilitates communication and mutual understanding of the various situations introduced by the participants.

In the various courses accomplished, parents did not just ask questions but they also expressed their fears: «fear of not knowing how to manage the situation», «fear of being too strict», «fear of not managing to understand what’s on their mind», «fear of making mistakes». The most dealt with topics were: rules, educational coherence, children and parents’ needs, fears, communication and listening, parents’ expectations from their children.

The end of the course always represents a very delicate moment: it’s a story that finishes, a space that closes, a habit that we miss, a bond that gets interrupted, «it is a bit like a train that starts to move and then it suddenly stops at the station», one mother witnesses.

At the completion of the course parents are asked to fill in a questionnaire, in order to collect their assessments and the thing that encourages us and pushes the local administration bodies to go ahead with the proposal of these initiatives is summed up so well in this mother’s words written in the questionnaire: «I believe that this type of initiatives for parents with children who, from the nursery pass to the primary and then to the secondary school, therefore children who grow and encounter various steps of their physical growth, are *fundamental* and *important* to be always sustained because, next to the physical growth, parents must take *care* of the psychological and emotional development of their child too».

Experience: "almost perfect dads"

In the setting of the project *Being a «good enough» mum and dad* professor Catarsi, director of the Study Centre "Bruno Ciari", has proposed the realisation of a family education course only for dads of children aged from zero to 6 years. The course, which included eight meetings, took place in the council of Capraia and witnessed the participation of 12 young fathers, coming also from the confining areas which are, in any case, part of the Empoli area. The cycle of meetings occurred in the evenings (9.15 pm to 11.15 pm) in the period between March and June and it took place in the council library.

The methodology of work utilised by the animator was the same as usual and the fathers, experiencing this for the first time, weren't aware of the fact that their active participation would be requested. In fact, thinking of going to be listening to an expert, the moment they realised that they had to put in action their own experience and therefore be involved in a discussion, many of them showed a certain embarrassment and a certain surprise. The animator re-assured them and through a co-operative game managed to meet the needs of these fathers, a bit mislaid at the beginning but gradually more and more curious and ready to "be involved in a game". The course was then characterised by an atmosphere of familiarity and empathy. The topics dealt with during various meetings were: father's parental role, relationship within a family, rules, time with children, relationship with their own parents, conflict and its management and resolution.

Conclusion

In the Italian reality, as we know, the policies in favour of families are suffering from a historical delay and its consequences can still be felt. However, fortunately for us and thanks to those who believe in the specific support policies and are working towards their realisation, our local reality is making an effort to react best, within the limits of available resources, to the social needs identifying that the family education is a fundamental answering tool. The family education meetings can't certainly resolve the problems that families encounter but they can surely help to promote the people's psychological wellness by putting them in position to manage better their relationships with children and, more generally, with the others.

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