

Participating in our children's education in order to grow with them

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Within Pistoia's childcare services relations with the families have always been central to our educational programme, enabling crèches and nursery schools to realize their full educational potential. In fact the various services offer children a great opportunity to expand their resourcefulness while at the same time being places where parents can meet and become acquainted, whereby growing in their educational responsibilities.

Since the 1960s involving the families has been a decisive choice which has accompanied the history of the services offered and which has conditioned financial and professional resources. But today, in the light of the social and demographic changes which characterize our times, it is even more important.

Childcare services today have to face up to the challenges of our times: the family has different kinds of parents who are more alone, closed within their own private world, only willing to accept what is useful for them; there are ever more only-children who have been planned, desired. Children of affluence and rationality who therefore become objects of investment, of attention, but also of excessive expectations. The changes in the organization of family life, together with ever-increasing work and personal commitments of the family members, has led to a tendency to entrust one's children to childcare services, but alas, without constant and active participation neither in the daily life of the crèche or nursery school, nor in programming educational paths. Obviously the attention which parents give to the children entrusted to the childcare services continues to be high, but it is their very lifestyle which leads to emotional behaviour and sporadic contact with the personnel and

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the institution. It is this phenomenon which leads away from seeing the childcare service as a collective asset for families and the community, whereas if they were considered as friendly communities, they could become places which defend from the dangers of isolation and individualism; they could become strong points, physical and cultural reference points which consolidate the social structure.

The opportunity for families to participate in the life of the educational services, where they can build a network of relations and support, guarantees that very well-being and protection which was once to be found within the neighbourhood and the extended family and which is lacking in today's society.

By virtue of these considerations a particular effort is being made at the moment to encourage participation within the childcare services of the city of Pistoia. There has even been the will to create new meeting places, alongside the traditional services, where parents can stay with their children and have experiences useful to them as adults.

Encouraging participation

With reference to traditional services, I would first of all like to emphasize how participation has its origins in a pedagogical culture which has always considered them as places of educational coresponsibility which is maintained and re-established in daily relations. Therefore family participation in the daily life of a childcare centre is the result of a process which evolves in time and which demands perseverance and commitment; it cannot simply be a customary ritual, nor an appendage to the educational programme.

Participation is the direct expression of a context which is able to create dialogue, listening, a welcoming atmosphere, interdependence among all its protagonists and is closely tied to the enthusiasm of all its participants and especially to teachers' motivation.

Hence, in order to be able to count on constructive relations between families and the life of the educational community, it is necessary to employ organisational strategies and professional expertise. This means that teachers must be aware of their educational role and be able to communicate and be hospitable. It entails having ecologically orientated abilities to share with both the children and the parents. All this demands training time, specific opportunities for professional growth, the possibility to work in networks and to have external guides.

We must emphasize the fact that at the moment we are undergoing a great generational turnover amongst childcare service staff and this calls for investment in training new teachers who have to tackle their profession in particularly difficult times. Yesterday's teachers became good teachers because they trained; they were able to discuss problems and methods and were motivated by this. And now there should be the opportunity to repeat this experience with a particular focus on relations with the families. In fact teachers are generally more confident in their ability to build relations with children, whereas relations with the parents are more difficult. Feedback from the teachers regarding their work highlights a very difficult situation as regards relations with the families. Due to this, requests for training in this sphere are high: today's teachers want more information and more practical knowledge with specific abilities.

In Pistoia an effort has been made to give attention to certain aspects of the childcare services which have a direct influence on relations with the families: such as keeping a record of the work done with the children in order to inform the parents; such as making the available space welcoming and encouraging a sense of belonging to the service; such as organising opportunities to share experiences and convivial occasions; such as supporting relations amongst adults.

Participation must be made desirable to the eyes of the parents, in that the families must understand how it will benefit their personal growth and enhance their ability to establish a good relationship with their child. The starting point is familiarity with the service which enables the parents to feel close to the daily experiences in the crèche or nursery school. The teachers must make a constant effort to create a serene social atmosphere which facilitates discussion, sharing, listening. This involves knowing how to listen to the parents, offering opportunities to communicate with each other, appreciating the identity and the story behind each child and each family. It means responding to parents' requests for more personal contact, creating opportunities to involve them in the children's activities, sharing ideas on how to use the various areas. It means making available material and documents that return the children's experiences to their parents. In this way the families can enter into the life of the centre no longer simply as users but as partners in that they can share, negotiate and appreciate each other. We can say that relations with the families creates an enriching context from which everyone benefits. On one hand it increases the professional competence of the teachers because talking to the families stimulates them to reflect upon their own practical educational experience, on the other hand it gives parents a greater awareness

of their role. In fact it can help parents to go beyond their own child's experience and share values and form alliances.

Family centres

We're going to talk now about services designed specifically for families which in Italy are called Child and Parent Centres or Family Centres. It is clear that these centres want to give particular attention to the forging of a relationship between educators and parents and they are an expression of a commitment to create areas and time dedicated to cultivating this relationship.

The motivation behind the realisation of this new type of centre can be found in the will to respond to widespread needs of young families. Family Centres make available resources, information, knowledge that can support and activate parents' educational sensibilities and resources. They are places where value is placed on being together.

In Italy there is a knowledge of young children's education which can be used by families. It is knowledge which has been built up in crèches and nursery schools, through daily professional educational relations and which has been enriched over the years by the continuous observation and reflection that has accompanied the time spent with the children.

Being together, encounters between parents and between children creates the possibility to observe different educational models and to get to know the stories behind different families. This experience increases opportunities to review one's own problems and behaviour and consequently increases one's ability to decide if and how to make modifications. So the aim of the Family Centres is very much inclined towards supporting parents, especially young parents, in order to help them to feel confident about their resources and their ability to spend time with their child in a correct manner. We know that if parents believe in their educational capabilities they convey a positive message to their children as they face the world outside and in their early conquests regarding social and sentimental relations. So it is simply a matter of transmitting confidence to the parents so that in turn they can pass it on to their children.

The quality of a Centre is to be found in its atmosphere, in the pleasure felt in being welcomed to a friendly place, where everyone can appreciate the value of listening and being together.

Apart from the value of a positive social experience, there is also the aim to pass on knowledge of childhood, even if implicitly. It is not a

matter of teaching how to be parents, but rather of sharing capabilities which come from expert knowledge of children and benefiting from the stimulus that can arise from the affinity between adults who are going through the same experience, albeit in personal and unique terms.

Among the childcare services established in the city of Pistoia by the municipal administration geared towards responding to new needs of the families, there is a Family Centre.

This service stems from the intent to offer different services for children and families, and not only crèches, in order to widen the range of possibilities.

This service opens up opportunities for children and parents. The children can explore and play games suitable for the various stages of their early years, as well as encounter other children of their own age. Parents can share their experiences of maternity and paternity with other parents and with the educators at the centre in order to receive support in the many uncertainties which characterize the first phase of parenthood. So the main focus is on the socialization of the parents in response to the sense of isolation which mothers in particular feel after the birth of a child.

The Centre is situated in an easily accessible building in the town centre.

The presence of this service in the city is strategically advertised so that parents are informed via information leaflets distributed in places typically frequented by young parents, although word of mouth is crucial since it is the positive testimony of those who frequent the Centre that encourages new attendance. One particularly effective formula to advertise the service was to invite particular groups, such as crèche teachers or social workers, to the Centre, in small numbers, in order to facilitate getting acquainted and to communicate joint aims. This is a good way to spread observations and positive practices in order to increase the diffusion of a child-based culture in the city and to forge precious alliances around the children.

The Family Centre is vastly acknowledged and appreciated even outside the city area, demonstrating the real need that young parents have for a point of reference which is trustworthy but not institutional, where they can meet.

The children

In the Family Centre the children also find special opportunities which they don't find at home due to the presence of different materi-

als, appropriate to this phase of development, which are organised and proposed in a suitable manner. They can explore the toys on the shelves, the tactile books or move around in safe and stimulating surroundings. The objects made available are carefully chosen and particular attention is given to the quality of the material and to its perceptual characteristics. There isn't an overabundance of toys, but rather a careful selection of objects that can also make the parents reflect upon what is useful and interesting for small children. Commercial toys and plastic are not appreciated but well-chosen recycled materials are preferred along with traditional toys like balls, musical boxes, dolls, books with special qualities regarding size, colours, and material characteristics. Within this context it is easy to understand why it is the very characteristics of the objects that favour exploratory and cognitive capabilities of the children and why the manner in which the adult proposes the objects or toys to the child influences the quality of the game.

But in this Centre what makes the experience so special is encountering other children. When together, the children observe each other, they swap things, they make new discoveries. From the interest which they show in each other it is clear that right from their first months meeting other children is an important stimulus for their cognitive and social development.

The area

The layout of the area is very important to guaranteeing a sense of well-being for the children and the adults.

It was necessary to create an atmosphere which was not institutional and anonymous, but warm, welcoming, pleasant and informal, with simple but comfortable and attractive furnishings. It is a place that invites you to stop and which generates positive encounters between children and between children and adults.

In some ways it is similar to a home, having furniture suitable for adults such as settees, armchairs, high tables; but it is also very different because it has a community appearance, rich in evidence that emphasizes the presence of many families and characterized by a documentation, planned by the teachers in such a way as to guide the adults' gaze and thoughts to the value of the care of small children as well as to their capabilities. The documentation, which is an inviting account of what happens at the Centre, is very much oriented to make the parents aware of the children's experiences and introduces them to a richer knowledge of childhood.

That is why the Centre's walls speak out, because they are enhanced by photographic documentation, which effectively manages to transmit the numerous resources which are peculiar to children and which are revealed by their gestures and their expressions. In particular the aim is to bear witness to the desire, even of very small children, to explore and get to know things, to reveal the pleasure they get from interacting with other children and the intensity of their emotions.

In order to strengthen the message of the importance of giving attention to small children's needs, the documentation exhibited in the various areas also contains adults' comments of the images, thereby enriching their meaning and emphasizing how each child needs the presence of an adult who knows and appreciates him in order to grow up. And the professional attention given to the arrangement of the whole Centre is an expression of the value of growing up.

The central theme is the sense of care and attention put into relations, but also into the upkeep of the various areas, in order to consolidate in the parents a caring attitude towards children.

Each area is characterized according to its function. The entrance hall has a particular calling: pleasant and welcoming, it contains positive messages which clearly express the whole sense of the service and which invite new arrivals to be active protagonists.

Apart from the areas set aside to be shared with the children, with soft corners and materials to play together, there are also areas reserved specifically for adults to allow them to converse and receive information on reading material and services offered by the city of interest for the child's specific phase. There is also a kitchen available to prepare snacks and drinks in order to encourage conviviality.

Of course, the educators play a fundamental role in the organisation of the Centre and it is thanks to the atmosphere they manage to create in the various areas that parents feel supported and encouraged to accompany their children in the adventure of growing up.

The educational skill is expressed in the very creation of a physical and social context rather than in direct action on the individual children and their parents.

The experience proposed in this Centre promotes careful thought and attention which begins when the child is small, but which will be useful for the whole period of growth and may lead the parents to more targeted and mindful educational choices, for example concerning the value of play and the importance of the quality and quantity of the toys they make available for their children.

Over the years the areas have been progressively enhanced, thus expressing the ability and the pleasure of the educators in sensing it as an area full of life where those who pass through it leave their mark. The play material is also periodically renewed and always carefully arranged in an orderly fashion, placed in such a way as to make it enticing.

Daytime at the Centre

The Centre is open all morning, but everyone arrives in their own time, respectful of their child's needs. Entry is free.

Great care is put into welcoming the arrivals – it is as personalized as is possible and never hurried. The adults are mainly mothers, but there are also some fathers and many grandparents. The family type is very varied both from a sociocultural point of view and as far as family size is concerned: there are families with only-children ranging up to families with four children.

The day has a mid-morning ritual when tea is served. Normally it is drunk alongside the children but sometimes it turns into an opportunity to leave the children with the teachers for a short while in order to talk with the other adults around a table.

Sitting around the children, who are attracted by the games and the other children, it is possible to talk and tackle subjects that arise spontaneously, giving examples, relating experiences and asking questions. These conversations are of great value because it is a manner of communicating which puts everyone at ease and allows everyone to be at the centre of attention. Periodically experts are invited, upon request of the parents, in order to gain more knowledge of subjects which arouse most interest, but this presence does not alter the informal atmosphere. The experts discreetly join the group in a friendly manner simply to enrich and encourage their reflections, acting as a leading force rather than an authority who gives out advice and instructions. They are able to guide and stimulate an awareness of one's own parental task and above all they are well-integrated with the teachers whose strategies and methods they share.

Leaving, like the arrival, is gradual; not dependent upon the Centre's opening hours, but only upon the child's pace and the adult's needs.

The role of the educators

The educators are central to the creation of an atmosphere of good relations which involves listening to and satisfying the needs of the fami-

lies whether expressed explicitly or implicitly.

They therefore play a decisive role in creating a context which facilitates communication, mutual acquaintance and exchanges between adults and children. Each and every adult-child couple must feel welcome and appreciated and as far as this is concerned the teachers' attitude is fundamental.

Previous professional experience in a crèche is vital in order to be able to work in this centre, complemented by extra abilities to give the psychological support needed by the parents.

Specific training courses have been set up over the years for the educators involved in these new services and the whole experience is accompanied by periodic assessment and abundant documentation.

The ability to observe, be hospitable, support, and let oneself be observed as a positive model, implies a professional maturity gained through specific training which consents reflection upon what happens in the centre, both regarding proposals for the children and relations with the parents. This training is common to all the teachers involved in this new type of service, having the delicate task of supporting and accompanying the parents in their educational responsibilities.

Family education activities

The Centre offers specific activities for parents which are divided into three types and which have different characteristics: knowing about children; doing things with children; reading for children.

The activities take place in structured encounters over a period of two months in the afternoon or after dinner. They are informal and the advantage comes from being alongside other parents and thus being able to share feelings and experiences and perhaps create a network of relations. These activities offer opportunities to small groups of mothers and fathers to learn about the different stages of development and to encourage reflecting upon various critical moments of growth, giving particular attention to transforming information into awareness which helps improve the relationship with the child. The presentation of books for parents has also proved interesting since time dedicated to reading is time invested for personal enrichment, even if, in this case, it is reading for the benefit of one's relationship with one's child.

Thematic workshops are periodically organised to offer opportunities to do something together and to produce something: a toy, decorative el-

ements, preparations for a party, but also to cooperate in the realization of a group event such as a choir or a show. In these cases, central to the experience is the pleasure of doing something, the satisfaction of sharing an ability or a vocation, the desire to share an experience with others.

So participants reflect upon the condition of being a parent, and at the same time develop a positive attitude towards personal activities which become collective ones.