

«Almost perfect parents» in Viareggio. Promotion in infant care service for children aged from 0 to 3 years

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«Almost perfect parents» is the evocative and explicit name – from Bruno Bettelheim’s book, 1987 – of the global project of promotion and support to parenthood function in infant care services of the municipality of Viareggio. A project which is performed in nurseries and in all educational services for children aged from 0 to 3 years, a project that is realized and articulated in many different paths and ideas, in many synergies and partnerships with other institutions; at last, a project aimed for different users and that, above all, has the ambition to represent, for all of us that *inhabit* it, a public and administrative service of strong reflection and attention for the family, an integrated and systemic approach to the welcoming, caring and inclusion of the so many parents, of the many and different families but also of single individuals that with their children attend our services. From now on, I underline these last words, care, inclusion, welcoming and diversity, as purposeful and meaningful of the project, words that I will return to further on through the flow of this report.

I would like to circumscribe and wrap up this report – like if it was some kind of frame or background – among thoughts of care pedagogy, believing that it is precisely the care, like an anthropological dimension, the essence of the relationship that includes all the practices of listening and reciprocity. «And “care” began even more and more embodying the idea of a society. To the fascist “I do not care” Don Lorenzo Milani opposed the American “I care”: I tend to, I take care. Today a shift from a well-being society to one of just care is much debated and theorized». (Rodotà, 1995, p. 103)

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In the perspective of “inhabiting” I would like to call the attention to a first thought. “Almost perfect parents” may have maybe been so called in a reductive way with the name of the project; in reality, the programs that identify and explain the global experience that through almost eight years characterize it, identifies itself more to an existential dimension, not a programmed one, of the public system of Viareggio of infant care for children aged from 0 to 3 years. Its roots can be founded in the historical experience of the nurseries of our city and recall the first experiences of family participation, the first parents laboratories in the 1980’s, when a differentiated participation of the family was already tried to put in act in relation to the institutional and formal context of social management. In this perspective, our project surely is the result of those experiences and of those thoughts; but more than that it is the way of conceiving care services for nurseries, pre-school and in general additional and care services, fields of social belonging, of cultural and pedagogical reflection on the many ways of caring, of educating and of being a parent. In short, a way of representing and interpreting the social role of the services but also of parent function which is, within all its rights, making the family the main character, together with its child, of the educational, cultural, social, emotional and, I would like to say ecological, experience of the nursery (Catarsi, 2002). Therefore, the word *inhabit* as the “other” condition in relation to the also important participation. *Inhabit* as a “not transitory and not exceptional” dimension of the everyday life of the family experienced in the day care service. As a dimension of *being within* and not only of *having to do with*, our project has as object the realization of experienced contexts for adults and children which are now truly and really *places of encounter* (Baldini, 2008). Not by chance that it is the name we gave to the system of services for children aged from 0 to 3 years in Viareggio; a complex system, diversified in so many types of services, articulated in different propositions and offers but interactive, communicating and integrated between public and private services (Baldini, 2004). Activate services truly “serving the community”, where it is possible to include different or plural perspectives, the many and different cultures of origin, not only geographically, a pluralism that by now characterizes our community and certainly, among these, ours from Viareggio.

Almost perfect parents, therefore, is also a *metaphor of the possible*, a metaphor of a name that already indicates the inevitable mediation and imperfection that are present in the relation of care and the social exchange, maybe the more elevated, more important and ethical one: that between parents and sons (Savater, 2007). An imperfection conscious of

its own being, always and anyway achieved as a construction of sense, as a journey of cultural and human affiliation. Metaphor also of being *parent in transformation*, of a new way of sharing the educational experience with its doubts and fragilities; at last, metaphor of a culture of *exchange and of ethics* as an anthropological condition, in a society that should be inclusive of the construction of identities more than identities themselves (Del Buono, 2002). Therefore, talking about metaphors, permit me to introduce the project with some reflections that only apparently may seem marginal to this report but that are instead founding and fundamental to illustrate it.

Services and families. A pedagogy of services that in the last forty years, slowly has become pedagogy of the family and of care. There is no doubt that the story of the infant care service, like it has been done in the many local realities and for the reflection which it has up sprung, from the 70's until today, has been – and will always be – a pedagogy of strong attention to the family. The nurseries, more than any other educational context, contributed to help grow awareness of the need of a strong bond between the school and the family and on the fact that the latter should be included with all its rights in the day-to-day of the service and in its planning. In this way the difference between the world of services and of compulsory education should be evidenced. Compulsory education still doesn't promote ways of non conventional and truly effective participation of families. That constant attention that the infant care service pedagogy has shown in relation to parents, from the phase of first acclimatization to the research of a constant communicational synergy that should build around the child a strong and reciprocal educational intention, gave life to a pedagogy that is called today family pedagogy and which is founded above all on the awareness of reciprocal listening and social participation which are the educational strategies to promote parenthood function and conceive the many and different ways to interpret it (Catarsi, 2003).

The services as a community of civil affiliation. So, in virtue and merit of this experience, the social role of the services has been consolidating and taking shape in time, being understood as a context of social and cultural promotion. Crossroads of cultures by now so different supporting parents that express diversified needs, but that also should be supported and sustained in a diversified modality. This, in my opinion, seems to be the grand mission of public infant care services: organize educational paths to build a possible collective identity that knows how to put the children in the center of its own interests and make them *assume the practice of care and reciprocal promotion as a strong and irre-*

nounceable value choice of the human existence (Boffo, 2006). Pedagogy and ethics. Supporting the changes to make everybody the main actor of its own citizenship, in social, cultural and generational integration and interaction. *Meeting places because they are public forums, places for democracy, dialogue and equal opportunity exercises*; how and with what intensity infant care services will be able to promote all this, and in what measure the educational process and pedagogical reflection will be able to englobe the parenthood prospective, is to realized through a policy of inclusion of ideals and realities, of education, of value and integrated communities. We are convinced of this. Finally a welfare community that knows how to conjugate the ethical dimension with the economical, global and specialized one, in a unique vision of development bond to culture more then to the market (Baldini, 2007).

This culture of difference with its moral implications, which were mentioned before, probably is the one that permits not only the continuous renewal of the way of being a family but also of the living together of realities and situations apparently contradictory between them. We prefer to see them under a sign, a positive and ambivalent one: the meaning of family doesn't go in crisis but on the contrary seems to be strengthened while the founding on which the most traditional family image seem to hold on to are progressively and rapidly eroding... families on the other hand... Make culture (Mapelli, 2010, pp. 84-85).

Certainly all this is refers to the reflection over the family institution. The big social and economical, cultural and geopolitical transformations in the last years have produced a *changed representation* of the family institution, of infancy and of the reference, emotional and educational values that the family or that the parent condition express even though in an implicit way. Not strange to this changing process are certainly women's working condition, local and national welfare policies, even if badly executed, the commitment to achieve equal rights between genders and, at last – certainly not least – the consistent phenomena of mass immigration from other non-European cultures (Fortunati, 2002). Today we can add to this the international social crisis, caused by the worldwide economical and financial recession, which puts in discussion jobs, especially for women, and creates an unstable economy which also causes social fragility and lack of future prospectives. A fragility that generates insecurity and also incapacity for future programming of having children, of thinking on self as a family. The birth rate of the western world repositions once again the considerations about the family (Catarsi, 2009). The considerations that only yesterday compared the nuclear family of the

industrial and urban society, not self-sufficient, needy of services and of a strong social state, to the enlarged and multigenerational family, self-sufficient and subsidiary in its internal roles are maybe obsolete. The composition and family typologies break up always more and more, being extremely non homogenous among themselves because of their economical capacity, educational competence and cultural and social understanding. The family concept is substituted by the reference to the families, understood as complexity and difference (Catarsi, 2008).

I think that these two references deserve a reflection: *complexity and difference* (Baldini, 2009). Lets try to define both of them. Complexity as family structure, not necessarily composed of members bond by blood and/or law ties. This necessarily involves and implies in a different economical and social incidence, also in terms of explicit and implicit needs, equal citizenship, the practice and the protection of the parenthood function. Therefore, a pluralism of family structures, within which the roles modify themselves, the partnership among the members, complicates or modifies the parenthood function and, with this, the educational function of the family itself.

The changes in the family structure, together with all the modifications in the life cycle, in the role of male/female and of mother/father, in the growing period of young adults, in the redefinition of the relationship with the family of origin, in the relationship between generations, have changed the parenthood problems. What's more, with the increase of marital separation, of single-parenthood, of lonely people, the many situations of new parenthood comprehend private and public dimensions and are placed in the difficult balance of the mediation between ones own "private" problems and the obligation to share them "socially" (Iori, 2006, p. 51).

Difference/s, instead, meaning families that internally and consequently, externally carrying and exporting different, ethnical, religious and cultural values in the society, in the community. Simply different choices of value and culture. I refer to our Italian society, already multicultural but also destined to a still more evident diversity. Still, in this case, because of these differences, the educational function will find different ways of being or will propose itself in different models, will fulfill itself in family contexts extremely different between themselves (Poderico, Venuti, Marcone, 2003).

[...] the parenthood function is to be conceived not in a uniform way but always in reference to the peculiarity of the communicative relationship inter-

laced by the single man and the single woman, to the specificity of their being a couple, to their very original way of assuming a common relational alphabet to write the future biography of their family. The result is that husband and wife become the main actors of the definition of their being parents: it's up to both of them to define common rules of communication and make them evolve in time and space (Pat, 2005, p. 85).

Certainly, everything contributes to more wider reflections: what is the family nowadays? Is it a parent community or just an emotional community? Is it a parenthood project and therefore, is so when it completes an educational intent towards the children or is it also so when it doesn't perform a parenthood role? And can the single parenthood, outside the heterosexual couple, be in charge of educational commitments other than emotional ones?

I don't think I have the answers. However, I think that the project falls within a correct context, that is, an *adequate time and place* to also reflect about the questions mentioned above. Permit me to make an incursion into a popular weekly magazine where, in one of its columns, Umberto Galimberti called the attention to the need of philosophy as a way to find one's bearing in the world. This would permit us to associate "our world" and avoid confusing it – as we frequently do – with "the world". And already in this process of a relative association and of starting a reflection on the multiculturalism of our future, the thoughts proceed and induces to continue to think (Galimberti, 2007).

Parenthood education and parenthood feelings. Parenthood feelings today has been transformed according to the social-cultural changes mentioned above. Women's role within the couple certainly has been one of those changing factors. The birth of a child is followed by a radical redefinition and restructuring of one's own personal identity, also of the couple, of the family and of behaviour modifications such that «today, young people see in procreation their entrance into adulthood and the parenthood condition is experienced as the first moment of irrevocable responsibility» (Iori, 2001, pag.112). The true watershed between youth and mature age for young couples is not identified in the marriage and/or cohabitation but in procreation. As Catarsi (2003, pag.15-16) also remembers,

[...] the elevation of the cultural level of the Italian population, together with the always more widespread consciousness regarding the importance of the first years of life, in fact have determined a more responsible and meditated attitude in front of the decision of procreation and raising children. More in general, the emotional investment of parents towards their children today is

such that it deserves greater attention because it clearly presents itself as a big new social need.

The desire to be a parent and, in particular, to be a good parent, collides with responsible practice that lacks of clear educational reference models so that the parenthood commitment is frequently accompanied by the feeling of not being sufficiently competent and with the supposed need of acquiring new competence. With the widespread sensation of relativity and frailty. Then, in the other direction, there are the new borders of surrogated parenthood beyond the biological and chronological limits: a need to be a parent so strong to cross the borders of moral itself, questioning oneself even more about the meaning of raising children.

How to answer and to correspond to the change itself with deep significations, with non temporary values, with meaningful interventions?

The service roles should be *called once again*, in my opinion, as educational aspirations par excellence. Their social function of inclusion and cultural meeting should be underlined in my opinion. Last, they should be places of discovery and social questioning. *Places of vicinity and habitation closeness*. Infant care serves as a way and as a philosophy of life. *Intentional and reflexive reciprocity as care practice*. This seems to me the meaning of any parenthood promotion project, especially ours.

The meaning of the word parenthood education (Contini-Manini, 2007). It can't be evidently understood as a transmitting capacity. There aren't any unreasonable historical times, of service frequency, operational teaching, areas of recuperation of competence and lost parenthood capacity. Instead, parenthood education means the taking back of time and space to talk about oneself and about childhood. Not necessarily a habilitating practice but a reflexive one which is testimony of the care pedagogy that the infant care services in Viareggio want to put in practice (Mortari, 2006).

On the other hand, we think that reflecting on the areas and on care means to reflect not only on the parenthood art but also exploring not necessarily biological taking care feelings and parenthood feelings. If caring, as we believe, is a way of being together, then the programs of parenthood consciousness become a rediscovering of another human being and also of a deeper sense of existence as a community (Donghi-Preta, 1995).

I'd like to quote the "Vita autentica" of Vito Mancuso: «I think that from what men say about life it is possible to guess what life would say if it could talk. Discovering this speech about life (this logos pronounced

by the bios) is fundamental because only in this way it is possible not only to construct a bio ethics but above all to foresee the criterium of the authentic life» (Mancuso, 2009, pp. 25-26)

This is the *fil rouge* that unites all the programs of this project and identify the experience for the children aged from 0-3 years in Viareggio.

The prospective that has come out is that of a program “with” the families and not “about” the families. The maternal and paternal formation programs are inspired on the principle of empowerment, to the need of aiming the interventions of family education as being the protagonists and on the communication and reflexive competence of the families themselves. The reference is to a promotional formative approach of potentializing resources and the competences present in the couple and in the single parent, of development of the educational consciousness. Supporting parents in their own formation role means to make them express and promote their own energies, recognize their own specificities, finding educational solutions which no external service could offer autonomously. *The place of encounter* or of the initiative tries to become, from time to time, *a time of being, of parenthood identification, of an almost Proustian memory*, where the service educator offers him/herself as a *partner* to the reflection and dialogue, at most as that of a communication facilitator.

Bringing back communication to its caring function, of cultural mediation, to its being *pedagogical substance*. Making so that *the private fact of parenthood of each one becomes a social one because shared in an inclusive space of each single life experience. It is re-understood in a long time of word and relation dimension. An ecosystem pedagogy that knows how to understand the family unit and the social interactions in a cultural project for the family and for childhood* (Di Nicola, 2002).

Not by chance the project is sustained by a working group, internal to the services offered and having a referent educator for every structure; it is performed in programs – the time – but also in services and initiatives – the spaces- that are offered to different users, always and anyway from and with a service educator. With the conviction that the professionalism to aim at is that of the service educator, that surely does and will do the semantics of communication with the parents a research field of deep and systematic formation in service. I'll briefly indicate some *operational instruments of communicative mediation* that have had a positive effect in all levels of participation and which use will be systematic and rooted from this year on in the everyday life of infant care services.

This is also a way to explain and to correspond to the meaning *inhabit the services*. Containers, simple objects that with their use were transformed in communicational intentions, in participation gestures, in ideas and purposes. It was really worthwhile to use the metaphors to indicate them. Why not use cinema or television language?

The suitcase of dreams (La valigia dei sogni) is a container where all the parents from all the services from time to time can find things to ponder on, documents to read, articles, in short, suggestions written by the working group that occupies itself of the project and that wants to give everybody time and attitude, according to their needs, not necessarily only to those that want to follow or participate in specific initiatives; a way to reflect and share a theme about childhood, culture, being a parent.

The postman (Il postino), as the name evokes, are the everyday short letters, sentences, thoughts about oneself, parts of the everyday life of the services, but also criticism, suggestions that starting this year we incite users to write and hope to receive abundantly. In this way, we hope to help the hurried or timid or insecure ones in terms of participation and dialogue, widening and giving a sense to the dimension of the family perception that until now was codified and done at the end of the year through the complete and in-depth questionnaire on all the aspects of the system and services, survey done within the complex quality monitoring program known as costumer satisfaction.

Amarcord instead, is a autobiographical diary of the parents that has been proposed only to those that attend child and adult centers and all the services destined to adults, that in our reality are many and very frequented. From this year on it will be an instrument to activate also in the laboratories or in the future word groups. Sure that this instrument can also represent a further – certainly more challenging and involving – way of inhabiting one's own parenthood in the reality of infant care services for children aged from 0-3 years.

I would like to underline the experience in the child and parent centers as being the heart of our complex intention of parenthood promotion; I think it's from the reflection of this kind of services, characterized by sharing with the parents the everyday experience of caring and playing, areas of doing and of staying also in relation to words or thoughts, that we have consolidated the project hypothesis of parenthood; an experience and an observation to which we owe a lot.

Last and to conclude, not by chance this project and its many users isn't specialized or doesn't identify itself only in the experience of the word or meeting group which, as mentioned before, will start from this

year on. It's not a coincidence that we talked about this project in the beginning of the report as a way of inhabiting infant care services for children aged from 0 to 3 years in Viareggio, services of exclusive care and of care shared with the parents. The project identifies itself with this idea because it develops within itself the many dimensions of parenthood.

Briefly, the programs and the spheres of interests.

The adventure starts, is a cycle of meetings destined to families that for the first time attend the services. The first impact, that precedes other moments, proceeds gradually more into detail, decreasing in number of parents to which it is addressed, until the individual interview. They are conducted by the service educator, accompanied by the educators of the parenthood project. It's the first contact between the system and the family, a sort of official presentation even though informal, a way to receive the first informations, make the first necessary introductions, the first occasion for parents, educators and the pedagogical coordinator to meet themselves. An alternative way to the big assemblies that happen before summer and that enabled us to maintain our goals concrete and organized, accompanying them instead to a slower and closer modality not dispersive, to the need of meeting and reciprocal acquaintance for the new parent couples. Along with the child and adult centers, I would like to underline the experience of the intercultural laboratory "*Paroleperdire*" (Wordstosay), a space for adults, alone or accompanied by their own children, reversing in this way, not only metaphorically, the perspectives of the children and adult centers where the children are accompanied. A space where all the educational imprinting is based on the cultural and generational encounter, users and non, with children not necessarily under 3 years of age, therefore also coming from other local experiences or from other school experiences.

Tata sicura (Secure babysitter) is a register for professional educators that for obvious reasons of supporting families policies takes place, meets and constitutes itself thanks to the educators of infant care services for children aged from 0-3 years and totally share the pedagogical experience, in the formation as in the network communication: its head office is the *Parenthood education center* (Centro di educazione genitoriale).

La casa di Sirio (Sirio's house), a containing place, headquarters of some services, of the pedagogical coordination, of the documentation center, of specific theme meetings place with families and of numerous other initiatives. The visible, the topos – if I have the permission to use this language – of the many logos of the families and for the families. Also of the many partners and of the many professions that an inclusive

and integrated family policy necessarily puts together: it's the head office of the foster center "*Seconda stella*" (Second star), of the psychological listening center "*Il vaso di Pandora*" (Pandora's vase), services that together with the listening boot of the pedagogical coordination represents an important synergy between the sectors of the social services and that of the public educational services, which the above mentioned services belong to. In this way, I would like to call the attention to the partnership with the Asl (Azienda Sanitaria Locale: Local Health Authority), with the midwives for the preparation to birth courses and the collaboration with paediatricians to accompany and support the parent couple in the first year of life, in a program that is centered on monitoring not only the somatic growing aspects but also the social-pedagogical aspects of children, as well as supporting young couples in the fragile period of waiting and of that, maybe even more critical, of the first year of life. They are themselves "young and fragile" programs that still have to achieve the consciousness of parents but that deserve big emotional, administrative and political investment. We believe in these collaborations, which find accomplishments and meanings in the ethics of care as cross cultural anthropology, in other words, the whole philosophy that originated the project and that supports it has the ambition to be the first but also important component of politics, of prevention and of attention towards the family. For example, the permanent working table of the social service operators and the foster center, to manage the necessary communications in relation to the urgent and emergency situations. A policy accompanied also by the listing of charges that foresees exemptions and substantial pay terms for disabled children or in temporary fostering.

Among the many ways to involve families, *Confrontiamoci* (Let's confront ourselves) is certainly the most structured and familiar. It consists of reflection and/or action meetings which characterize the actual experience of the "consolidated and historical" parent laboratories. With the more or less veiled pretext of doing, the constant involving in time of the family user takes place, such that they even participate in administrative programs like the admission ranking lists editing and the educational co-planning work. Their suggestions regarding safety aspects also include food. There is a parent group that monitors the procedures in the canteen.

Particularly, I'd like to call the attention to the program *Unodinoi* (Oneofus) and the periodical meetings with the team and the parents of disabled children, which are also called to a ritual communication and extra meetings and not excluded of other participating programs.

I'll simply state as other family inclusions programs for non users,

meetings and specific evening seminars or “*L’ora della fiaba*” (Fairytale time) a theatre occasion, reading out loud or fairytale telling in synergy and collaboration with the library kids’ place and therefore with the families that are users of that service to hybridate with reciprocity programs of recreational affiliation and interaction. In order for playing to become a possibility of united formation between educators and parents, I announce that formation programs and recreational united experiences connected to the body as an instrument of narration, to music, to the manual experience expressed in papier-mâché are scheduled this year.

At last, two latest but fundamental reference narrations. *Papà rock caffè* is the program for fathers which was successfully activated for the first time last spring. I won’t enter in details but I invite everybody to attend the specific communications that will be given by my colleague within this convention.

In January, instead, with the scientific counselling of prof. Enzo Catarsi, the experience, maybe more common, of a series of meetings for parents, structured traditionally as word groups, will start in our municipality. In this way, we think to further enrich our project with a pedagogical challenge: the by now inevitable cultural inclusion. A proposal that certainly demands great consciousness from the parents but also from us operators.

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