

Aware parents. Weaving relationships between families and childhood services

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The local context

Prato is a city with widespread social and cultural wealth, a city which has always made up of communities and cultures, with a tradition of active participation of the local authority in educational events for people in all stages of life, to offer a wide range of training opportunities; Prato has a strong tradition of solidarity, a vibrant civil society, several cultural, social and leisure associations.

Prato is getting less homogeneous, both in terms of economic wealth that the presence and composition of families and activities: there are backgrounds and different cultural, linguistic and social appearances, making it a complex city; more, the population increases in the children range, due to immigration, and the crisis in the textile manufacturing has led to the impoverishment of families.

The effort to which families are called in an attempt to arrange the working times with the child care can lead to experience isolation and stress, decreasing range of relationships, poor opportunities to share experiences of parents and children.

To a complex reality we must fit a model of services articulated and able to put in evidence relationships and connections among experiences, skills, different individual and collective subjects to answer to the diversified needs.

There are some milestones for the work of the City of Prato to state its responsibilities and its role as a public institution:

- ensuring that families have access to educational opportunities for their children from the age of three months onwards;

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- accompanying and supporting families in difficulty in some critical moments of the path;
- ensuring and sustaining the quality of services within an integrated public and (private agreement);
- keeping the cost-effectiveness of public intervention.

CiPi. Città Prato Infanzia

The name “Città Prato Infanzia” indicates the system of services and educational initiatives, which include nursery schools, kindergarten, non-traditional educational services, and other educational projects addressed to children, characterized by an emphasis on quality and a great interest in experimenting new types of service and innovative educational programs.

This system of educational services to children is supported by the “Educational Services” through the Pedagogical and Organizational Coordination Office, which deals with educational activities for children, projects, training of staff involved in educational processes.

The numbers of educational services in the Municipality of Prato

Our actions are targeted on parents of children attending private and communal crèches, GiocaCipi (play centers, centers for children and parents), municipal infant schools, and, in (more limited way, State and independent infant schools).

We present a summary (not exhaustive) of numbers to which we refer.

Educational services for 0-3 children

Municipal management:

- crèches (12 with 508 places);
- supplementary services (8 with 298 places);
- private management in the integrated public-private educational services for young children;
- private accredited crèches (33 with 999 places, of which 609 in agreement);
- authorized crèches (2 with 58 places);
- supplementary services (216 places).

The total places are 2079, 1565 in crèches and 514 in additional services with a coverage of 32%.

Educational services 3-6

Municipal infant schools (8 with 700 places).

Educational initiatives for 0-6 children

- Promoting and managing project networks with managers of independent accredited infant schools for a widespread and homogeneous quality, involving 4 years children in 18 schools for over 500 children;
- promoting and managing laboratory activities addressed to state schools (three kindergarten sections, 3 sections for 150 children and families of the primary school, refresher courses for teachers);
- promoting a widespread culture of attention to childhood, through the design, organization and management of specific projects, events, conferences, dissemination of good practices to increase and qualify our childcare services, and to qualify Prato as an educating city.

Aware parents

Aware parents: why we give this title to interventions aimed at parents?

Taking care of children means dealing with many issues of parenting. Increasingly, our society focuses on childhood, knowing that this has become a scarce resource, and then to be followed and treated with care and diligence, building new forms of parental relationships and educational styles.

The occurrence of nuclear families, reconstituted, single-parent, of different cultures is growing, and they have few opportunities to socialize, and often feel alone in dealing with the growth of children, and still have a few network resources.

This situation increases anxiety for new parents, aspiring to become “almost perfect parents” and live the need to redefine their role in building new family relationships, no longer based on slavish repetition of their experience and models coming from the past.

If this process of redefinition of the parental role is not supported by discussions and joint research, we risk to produce educational incoherence or children negligence, exposing them to privation and confusion.

Aware government

For the municipal administration children are very young citizens rights holders and bearers of special needs. They and their families are entitled to a *quality service*, while respecting their need to play, to receive enough attention, to grow and to be respected over time.

It is important that the local government, together with other educational agencies that deal with childhood and child rights, is present in the work of parenting support, also conducting regular meetings between parents, encouraging “self-help” experiences to facilitate thinking and the coming out of parent craft. An aware government staff looks at parents as collaborators and co-educators, puts care and attention to relationships with parents, develops initiatives to support the parental role, and offers them in a stable and continuous way.

The Educational Services

The Municipality of Prato, through the “Educational Services”, works to promote conscious and aware parenting, starting from the following assumptions:

- recognizing to each parent the primary objective and “natural” desire for the welfare of the child and his full, harmonic growth beyond prejudices and stereotypes that may occur to those parents who show little coherence with this goal;
- recognizing the parent as a resource, knowing that equipped with appropriate tools becomes ally for educators and services in the pursuit of educational project;
- parents and families are natural holders of an educational function, and therefore are to be involved in promoting a culture of attention to childhood, that recognizes children as rights holders, competent on their needs, bearers of a specific subjectivity to be taken into account in the construction of society we want.

The Educational and Organizational Coordination Office

The Educational and Organizational Coordination Office works to:

- weave connections between educational services and families to build a meaningful relationship;
- weave relations between operators of educational services and parents to raise awareness of parents and experts of their role by offering various tools and moments of reflection;
- accompany parents to transform the “threat” of growth of the children in challenge.

Aims of the “Aware Parents” project

- Increasing and spreading the awareness and the culture of childhood and thus raising the awareness of parents and professionals in the importance of quality of time spent at this early stage of life. Live well at this age creates personal resources to boys and girls needed to deal effectively with future experiences;
- creating networks between parents as places of exchange of their positive and negative experiences;
- promoting the development of a conscious and active parenting.

Thanks to the “Aware Parents” project” in 2008, the Municipality of Prato received the award “Il Comune Amico della Famiglia (Municipality as Friend of the Family)”, promoted by the Ministry of the family.

Our projects

To promote family participation in educational opportunities for their children, the Pedagogical and Organizational Coordination Office offers a range of proposals in different ways, timing, content and type, to allow each parent to choose the scope of participation he prefers.

The scopes identified are:

- participation in non-formal initiatives, and projects for parents;
- educational information and documentation;
- formal participation;
- supporting foreign parents;
- “Servizio Cipi H”. Supporting parents of children with disabilities.

The office is responsible for programming and promoting actions, activities, (encouraging the involvement of parents and families), through participation both in the institutional life and in educational value events (open workshops, courses related to the age ranges, training initiatives...):

Participation in non-formal initiatives, and projects for parents

- “First Meeting”, “Meeting in common” initiatives to support conscious parenting;
- workshops for parents and children to share a quality time.

Educational information and documentation

- Small guide, “Informagenitori”: paper and online information on educational opportunities and services for children and families, translated into several languages;
- conferences, study days, Cipì-notes, Cipì-on-line; benchmarking and thinking activities on emerging issues concerning children.

Formal participation

- Institutional bodies of educational services for children (crèches and infant school);
- steering committee of educational services for children at city level.

Supporting foreign parents

The project “Il Comune Amico della Famiglia” supports the information, communication with foreign parents in various stages of their approach to the services, namely the first information on offered services, participation in workshops, through both translations and work of specially trained mediators.

In this communication we wish to emphasize the:

“Servizio Cipi H”

The “Servizio Cipi H” aims to give children with disabilities and their families high standards of quality and flexible training and educational offerings, promoting linkages with other public authorities working in the disability sector. Particular attention was paid to support families involved in the growth and care for their disabled children in the 0-6 years age group.

Particularly we have foreseen the following actions:

1. supporting inclusion of children with disabilities and welcoming their families through direct knowledge of children and parents;
2. observation of possible new cases reported by teachers and parents and assistance of parents to run an evaluation;
3. talks of presentation of the child with disability, passing to an higher order of school, planned together with parents;
4. there was a three-year trial of a new form: DPF/DFP and PIS/EIP (Diagnosis and Functional Profile and Educational Inclusion Plan);
5. before installing the new form in all schools of the Province of Prato, the Municipal Nursery School and day nurseries, were subject “experimenters” with the intention of involving social and health workers, teachers and families in a joint responsibility and sharing objectives and actions to be implemented. This new form gives parents a central role;
6. workshops to enhance the knowledge of the child with a disability in different contexts and relationships in order to train the “facilitators” and minimize the obstacles.

Parents participation re104/16sults

- School meetings = 80%;
- school council and town meetings = 90%;
- quality control commissions = 70%;
- focus group on crèche quality = 90%;
- participation in non formal activities (courses) = 20%;
- participation in non formal activities (workshops) = 70%.

At certain stages of the process it is essential to support low responses, such as shown for courses, because even few people can express strong needs.

Quality results

We detected an increased emphasis in the relationship families-Municipality through:

- the feedback of parents who congratulated the attention that the City has to them;
- the feedback of the education staff that emphasizes that the Coordination Office is visibly proactive to build relationships with parents;
- the lowering of conflict between families and services in dealing with problematic situations, because the educational contribution of parents and teachers is viewed more as dialectical and less as a battlefield;
- increasing the number of workshops by team for parents in the usual periods (Christmas, Carnival, final party), led by teachers themselves.

The idea of a parent as a resource has certainly helped to increase parental involvement by operators of educational services.

Criticality - areas for improvement

- • Difficulties in identifying non-formal needs in this age group directly from parents with usual tools (interviews, meetings...); the use of other more accurate tools is required,
- • difficulty in measuring the effects of our actions over time;
- • need to strengthen the alliance with the teachers, who impact a lot on the participation of parents;
- • chance to enhance the role of teachers and education experts in raising children;
- • ability to withstand the disappointment of Coordination Office and service when they have low results, because even minimal responses are part of a wider path;
- • problems of communication and information (dissemination, content, headlines, message boards...); we have to find and discover new ways to inform and communicate.

The guidelines of the Educational and Organizational Coordination Office

Pedagogy in parental education, in recent years, has focused on self-education, i.e. on the ability of each child, or adult, to control the events, solve problems, to be protagonist of their own history. The parent is a resource, a competent partner, not a passive recipient of educative action while the professionals (teacher, pedagogical coordinator, facilitators...) are catalyst of parent resources.

Starting from the resources rather than from the difficulties of families is more productive and allows people to grow and have the tools to solve the difficulties with the goal of true prevention.

There is not one kind of parent, but different parents with hopes, lifestyles, morals, attitudes and interests that must be heard and valued, facilitating the development of knowledge of the parent.

It becomes important to raise awareness of the parental role through a range of different tools and moments of thinking, describing the relationships between parents, educators, children: there is no growth without thought and a steady education. In this context, we imagine the child with a thread tied to his kite-parent lifted by the wind of coherence, and educators, who have the role of promoters and builders of the culture of childhood, attend and channel this action.

Educational coherence between teachers and parents, between services and families is crucial because we know that the inconsistent education is a high risk factor for children. Through a constant and thought relationship, it could be argued the importance of educational continuity and managed discontinuity: experience fragments are reassembled, reconnected and stitched through the consistency of educational behaviours.

The parent's skill has an effect on the harmonious growth of the child, developing his autonomy, competence and identity. The stability, continuity and variety of offered meetings and the participation of parents create a canvas that, highlighting every thread, woven between warp and weft, reveals a sense of belonging and meaningful connections.