

## **Parenting support programmes. Pistoia's "Lo Spazio Piccolissimi" Children's and Families' Center**

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### **Abstract**

I programmi di sostegno alla genitorialità si sono sviluppati nel corso degli ultimi trent'anni grazie all'attenzione della Pedagogia verso la famiglia. In generale lo scopo prioritario degli interventi di educazione familiare è sostenere la genitorialità da un punto di vista educativo e dunque promozionale, ma anche preventivo, ossia prima che nascano le difficoltà nello sviluppo dei figli e nella relazione tra i componenti della famiglia. Il contributo presenta uno studio comparativo condotto in Italia e in Spagna sui Centri per i Bambini e Famiglie (CBF), rivolgendo un'attenzione privilegiata all'indagine realizzata nel "Centro Piccolissimi" dell'Area Rossa Bambini del Comune di Pistoia. Dalla ricerca emergono alcuni aspetti significativi caratterizzanti il servizio, tra cui la figura del professionista come promotore di una genitorialità positiva, la cornice ecologica accogliente che si fa contenitore dell'esperienza adulto-bambino e al contempo la provoca e l'orienta, un tempo allungato capace di restituire valore e significato alle azioni compiute.

**Parole chiave:** sostegno genitoriale, ECEC, educazione familiare, Italia, Spagna.

### **Abstract**

The parental support programmes have developed during the last thirty years, thanks to the attention that the Pedagogy has paid to the family. Usually, the main aim of the family education interventions is that of supporting parenthood from an educational point of view. These interventions are thus both supportive and preventive, meaning that they are designed to be enacted before difficulties in the development of the children, and in the relationships within the family, may arise. This essay presents a comparative study carried out in Italy and in Spain in the Centers for Children and Families (CCF), paying a special attention to the survey conducted in the "Centro Piccolissimi" in the Area Rossa Bambini of Pistoia's Municipality. From this research some significant features and aspects which characterize this service emerged. Among them, there is the figure of the professional as a promoter of positive parenthood, along with the welcoming ecological

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framework which becomes the repository of adult-child experience, and stimulate and orientates it at the same time, and a prolonged time which is able of giving back value and significance to the actions.

**Keywords:** parental support, ECEC, family education, Italy, Spain.

## 1. *Introduction*

The historical moment we are living in shows us the family as a multiform and ever-changing institution. For this very reason, it is no longer possible to think of it as a stable and defined-by-absolute-standards entity, which was a dominating trend until a few years ago. On the contrary, the family must now be observed and studied inside the framework of the political, cultural, and economic mutations, which our society has lived and is still living through. Attention towards families is born from the necessity to answer the many questions arising from the socio-demographic and structural changes, which inevitably also affect relationships in families. In recent decades, we have gone from a patriarchal kind of family, which has characterized traditional society, to a mononuclear kind of family, typical of modern society. We then settled on the different family units which characterize today's society, such as single-parent, foster, adoptive, rejoined, "rainbow" and immigrant. Rightly so, nowadays we no longer speak of "family", preferring the term "families". This is so as to consider and above all recognize all of the kinds of families that have come to be. This new family look is due to the many factors that have developed starting from the second half of the last century: first of all, an increase of inflation and unemployment have nurtured a social malaise that has also had a negative influence in the family setting; secondly, the change of women's place in society has activated various and different reflections, such as the double-presence concept and the balancing between work-time and time off, which in turn has influenced the relationships inside families; thirdly, the spreading of female employment has delayed the age for child bearing, which in turn has contributed to the birth of another new phenomenon, that of the only-child; as a fourth point, the wedding as an institution has entered its own crisis, with an ever-growing number of separations and divorces (Catarsi, 2008). In this framework, disoriented parents have manifested a need for support because, today more than ever, they are finding themselves inside a process of privatization and individualization (Beck, 2006).

The words “Parental Support” refer to the family education field. On a terminological level, they may seem to imply the idea of the parents’ lack of competence concerning their children’s care and upbringing and – consequently – of the parents’ need for a sort of “crutch” (Giovannini, 2007), but the parental support interventions activated in our Country deny this interpretational misunderstanding, since:

When talking about support, we mean help, on the one hand of an educational kind, offered to parents or future parents so that they may establish their life as a couple on a solid and reflective basis, and on the other hand help of the professional kind, in the measure within which competent professional figures are made available to turn to, to resolve the difficulties that may arise in the life of the family unit (Silva, 2016, p. 43).

Actions to support parenthood aim to develop the base competences of the parents, and to promote their reflective skills and stimulate their autonomy, recognizing the relational and affective dimension of the family world. All this may be summed up in a word: empowerment. Empowerment is a process of growth based on an increase of self-esteem, of self-efficacy and of self-determination, which leads to the emerging of latent resources and helps the individual to consciously take a hold of his or her own potential (Catarsi, 2006). Family education activities contribute to promoting the psychological serenity of parents, putting them in the best situation to manage their relationship with people in general and with their children in particular. As such, these activities are functional to the development of the child, of his or her growth and scholastic success, but also to the “well-being” of society. In fact, working with families not only answers to the new educational needs expressed by the parents but also the many necessities manifested by citizens as a whole. Family education interventions have a strong civic characterization and, consequently, they do not influence just the personal level. The increased awareness of parents concerning the educational connotation of their role enriches the quality of the relationships in the community as well. As stated by Nimal, Lahaye, and Pourtois:

Family education activities are a real social and citizenship-wise project, which tends to make the individual more autonomous both in the construction of his or her own identity and in the context of the socialization process. As such, interventions which favor the families cannot be conceived without an axiology centered on a social project sometimes defined as a “solidarity state”, which commits us as citizens (2000, p. 62).

## 2. *Children's and Families' Centers*

The institution of the family has become more complex in time, but it has also shown to possess an essential and dynamic adjustment capability. Over the years, a patchwork of family units has developed, but the family as an institution has given proof of strong endurance, thus always seeming to be a place of educational culture (Cadei, 2004). Today, thanks to a re-evaluation of the themes bound to the values of the person, paths of parenthood support have been developed. In these interventions, theory and practice are joined and reinforce each other, finding themselves in a dialectic situation of debate and exchange: theory allows one to study themes of family education from a theoretical point of view, while practice favors the categorization of experiences and thus the building of a new theory (Milani, 2001; Iori, 2001; Silva, Riera, 2016; Formenti, 2000; Catarsi, 2008; Simeone, 2008; Rossi, 2015). As Enzo Catarsi wrote,

this way, Family Pedagogy legitimizes Family Education itself, saving it from the danger of spontaneity and of extemporaneousness, without giving up the frankness and the naturalness of educational relationships (2008, p. 48).

Pedagogical knowledge and didactic instruments allow us to go from theory to practice in a conscious and reflective way. Paul Durning defined family education as

the action of educating one or more children, usually done in family groups by adults who are parents of those very children, but also as the whole of the social interventions made to prepare, support, help, sometimes even take over the role of the parents in their educational duties towards their children [...]. Among the social interventions, one may distinguish the parental education and socio-educational interventions directed to parents (1995, pp. 41-12).

Thus, family education is about both educational relationships inside the family and the ones dedicated to it. As such, from this point of view family education is configured at the same time as a parental activity and as a social activity. The first is characterized by an "intra-family" perspective, while the second by an "extra-family" perspective (Milani, 2001). The main aim of family education is that of supporting parenthood in an educational sense. It thus has a promotional characterization but also a preventive one, which means intervening before children's development or family relationships problems may arise.

In Italy, family and parenting support programmes have gradually strengthened over the past three decades. The most fertile ground for the implementation of such programmes is represented by early childhood education and care services. In these services, support programmes are developed both within nurseries as specific activities for parents, and within services specifically made for parents and for their children, the so-called “Centers for Children and Families” – CCFs (Musatti, 2015). It is safe to say that an impulse for the activation of this service was given by some laws that acknowledged the many changes that have taken place in recent years, which have thus defined the profile of the activities to support parenthood and have given funds for their actuation. It was in the Italian law 285 of 1997 where the premises for more organic politics – based on an empowerment viewpoint rather than on a welfare-like one – concerning family support were born. In fact, with this law, the focus was not concentrated on just distress and reparatory interventions, but also on normalcy and on a preventive approach. The framework is one of a long-term programming and a synergy between family, services and local authorities which aims at the creation of a network capable of answering to both distress situations and the real needs of the families. In the same way, law 328 from 2000, which gave families the role of an active entity and of planning partner, drew the coordinates in which to design the actions and the interventions dedicated to the families themselves, starting from the needs expressed in a situation of normalcy. A family, in this law, is considered as plural, which means that it is considered in the variety of its configurations and that it is also thought of as a resource involved in the services supplied by socio-educative private subjects (Silva, 2016).

Today in Italy there is a large number of kinds of services for parenting and family support but the CCFs are the ones currently most popular and widespread. CCFs were recently subjects of two international studies. The first was conducted by the National Research Council in Rome in collaboration with the University of Milan “Bicocca”, and with some foreign partners (Japan, France and Belgium): the results were published both in issue number 20 of December 2014 of the «Journal of Parenting, Childhood, Families and local Territories» («Genitorialità e Infanzia, Famiglie e Territorio» – GIFT), now available online, and in issue number 2/2015 of the «Italian Magazine of Family Education» («Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare» – RIEF). The second study was conducted by University of Florence in collaboration with the University of Pavia, the University of the Balearic Islands and the University

of Barcelona, and was published by the publisher Franco Angeli (Silva, Riera, 2006).

In our Country, CCFs can very well be considered the only continuative intervention dedicated to parent support (Milani, 2008). Their spreading varies from region to region and from province to province, according to the policies concerning childhood and families. It is possible to see their progressive diffusion mainly in Northern and Central Italy: in 2001, 423 CCFs were active, almost all of them distributed in the 12 north-central Regions; 9 times out of 10 these CCFs were public, even half of them were given to private bodies to manage, thus confirming the mirror-like evolution of the ECEC (Musatti, 2015). The characteristic of the CCFs, as written by Tullia Musatti, is that of «welcoming the children along with a member of their family, [and this] distinguishes them from all of the other services which welcome small children taking on the responsibility of watching over them» (2015, p. 14).

CCFs represent a place where children are able to socialize with their peers, and an environment in which parents can meet and exchange opinions:

the latter have the chance to directly interact with their children, rediscovering play skills they forgot they had and getting to know the child in an environment which is different from that of the family. In this case, the educational service is seen as a place to educate the children by involving their parents: an educative alliance is built, a pact which identifies the parents as active partners and valuable allies in the co-education process, which is one of the aims at the base of the educative project of the educational services for childhood (Mantovani, 2001, p. 160).

In Italy, CCFs have developed in a perspective characterized mainly by an educative viewpoint. This differs from other realities in which a mainly social perspective has been privileged (Anolli, Mantovani, 1987; Andreoli, 2002; Jackson, 2013).

### 3. *The “Spazio Piccolissimi” of the Area Bambini Rossa*

As far as the comparative study between Italy and Spain regarding CCFs is concerned (Silva, Riera, 2016), the research group from the Educational Sciences and Psychology Department (Dipartimento di Scienze

della Formazione e Psicologia – SCIFOPSI) of Florence<sup>3</sup> has examined a CCF in the municipality of Pistoia. Inside the municipality-managed educational services' net present in the territory of Pistoia, there is the Area Bambini Rossa, an educative service which hosts a space dedicated to play. "La Casa degli Orsi", for children between 18 and 36 months of age, and the "Spazio Piccolissimi" CCF, which welcomes children between 0 and 18 months of age, along with their parents.

The "Spazio Piccolissimi" was born in 1996 from a reflection about the changes that have involved families in recent years. Its aim is to facilitate meetings between parents: it is the place where «adults and children meet to share thoughts, feelings, and emotions, where the experience of everyone is enriched by that of others» (Cappellini, Gelli, Giovannini, Pugliese, 2016, p. 171). As far as time schedules and access modes are concerned, the "Spazio Piccolissimi" is a service with a flexible organization. It is open three days per week: two mornings between 9:00 am and 12:00 am, and one afternoon between 3:00 pm and 6:30 pm. Such programming «allows moms, dads, and grandparents to cut out the time of day that best fits their needs» (*ibidem*). The "Spazio Piccolissimi" is free of charge, but subscription to an annual badge is required which has the symbolic value of making the families feel part of the group. The choice of not having compulsory enrollment, nor compulsory attendance, means that the group changes at every meeting, getting richer because of the new arrivals which integrate with the people who are already participating: «changing the composition of the group, not only new interests are manifested, but also different ways and sensibilities of being together» (*ibidem*).

For children, these centers represent real opportunities to become progressively more autonomous. At the same time, they are the first places to socialize both with peers and with unfamiliar adults (Vanderbroeck *et al.*, 2009). Also, for families and parents, these services represent relevant opportunities for meeting, and sharing models and educational styles. They are educational places located outside the family, so that they may be considered real 'actions' of and for parenting support (Geens, Vanderbroeck, 2014). CCFs represent great opportunities for families to ease tension in the relationships with their children, and at the same time to observe and learn from educational interventions carried out by professional educators.

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase was written in the entrance of Pistoia's *Area Bambini Rossa*.

#### 4. *The research*

The study was realized using a participative approach. Through this approach, tight collaboration was promoted between the research unit from the Educational Sciences and Psychology Department of the University of Florence, together with the Pedagogical Coordination from the Municipality of Pistoia and the staff of the Area Bambini Rossa – also in Pistoia. All of these people undertook together the path of co-construction of meanings, which the study meant to build: a “pact” which began a few years back with Enzo Catarsi (Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, University of Florence), and which today appears even more solid and productive. The synergy between the University and private and public bodies is, indeed, one of the aspects that characterizes the so-called Tuscan Approach to children’s education and care:

The alliance between services and Universities is growing more and more intense. On the one hand the educational [and scholastic] services have become an extraordinary “observatory” of the development processes of the children and of the socio-cultural transformations, allowing scholars to focus on new questions on which to work and make new hypotheses to verify; on the other hand the research offers the educational personnel reflection and new learning, allowing them to live their work more consciously and with more educational intent (Freschi, 2016, pp. 155-156).

The involvement of the operators has activated a one-to-one correspondence between the quality and reflective capabilities of the personnel, which has positively influenced their day-to-day practice (Urban *et al.*, 2011).

The methodology adopted was that of focus groups, a group interview used for the first time by the American sociologist Robert King Merton in 1941. A focus group is a data-gathering technique for social research, and is based on a discussion inside a group of people, moderated by a host and focused on a topic, which one wants to study in depth (Corrao, 2010). It is a strategy that can activate a strong interaction between the participants, a feature which positively influences their reflective skills. It does so surely much better than the classic “face to face” interview because the synergy and dynamics of the group influence the production of the group itself (Acocella, 2008). A focus group, indeed, is a technique planned to obtain information on a specific topic of interest, and it pans out as a group interview – from four to twelve people – conducted by a moderator who, following a more or less structured



plan, offers inputs and solicitations to the participants who gather at an established time and place (Krueger, 1994; Zammuner, 2003; Morgan, 1998). The moderator's role is fundamental since (s)he must support the discussion, and rekindle and coordinate it with a plan which must be adapted to the specific situations involved. Thus, the moderator must favor not the conversation between him/herself and the participants but the one between the participants themselves. If the moderator is to ask questions and more in-depth analysis, he or she must do so not to a single person but to the whole group. The moderator is the facilitator of the communication inside the group, the one who must try to put together intention and flexibility. He or she must always remember the aim of the research, but must not influence the interventions of the participants, encouraging them to deepen their thought by using active listening, mirroring and suspending judgment (Rogers, 1951; It. Transl. 1970).

The Tuscan research group moved methodologically through the following phases (Sharmahd, Freschi, Daddi, 2016):

- Making of the video “A normal day” by the educators of the Area Bambini Rossa inside the “Lo Spazio Piccolissimi” service;
- The researchers from the University watched the videos made in the four services involved in the research;
- Analysis of the videos through 4 focus groups at which the Florentine researchers participated;
- The researchers produced an analysis grill of the videos in which the following aspects were highlighted:
  - documentation
  - time management
  - the position of educators in space
  - role of educators (director or protagonist)
  - verbal and non-verbal communication
  - educator's attitude at the time of acceptance
  - educator's attitude at the time of leave
  - educator's attitude in the management of activities within the service
  - educator's attitude in handling possible “critical” situations
  - management of the time devoted to the conversation among parents
  - exchanges among educators
  - presence of fathers
  - furnishings and furniture of spaces

- The educational professionals from Pistoia watched the videos;
- The making of 5 focus-groups with the professionals from Pistoia (video from Biella – 1 focus group; video from Castellfidels – 1 focus group; video from Xiaif – 1 focus group; video from Pistoia – 2 focus groups), while both a moderator and an assistant – both researchers – were present;
- Critical analysis of the focus groups;
- Sharing of the results with the other research units that were part of the study and with the participants of the focus groups.

### *5. Results*

In order to conduct and enrich self-training relationships with parents, it emerged that professionals must possess specific skills and be fully aware of their role. At the same time, they must possess practical knowledge. As far as competences are concerned, the most important ones are: communicative competences, based on the ability of empathic listening and of resolution of any conflicts; emotional balance, which allows one to contain the emotions of parents; systemic thinking skills about the relationships that take place within the services, to ensure the effectiveness of interventions by professionals; an ecological approach to the relationship with others, and a systemic “reading” and interpretation of the family.

Regarding the role of the professional who works in a CCF, he or she must:

- be a mediator or “facilitator” of the relationship, being able to ensure parenting support and to effectively use empowerment methodology at the same time, in order to enhance individual resources and skills;
- take on the role of leader and conductor of the group, in order to prevent and manage all possible conflicts;
- focus his/her attention on the parents and their problems, promoting a practice of self-help among parents themselves;
- be a researcher, able to analyze practical work and to highlight the strengths of the experience.

Regarding more specifically practices, the focus group highlighted certain elements of CCF professionals’ work. We focus here on: welcoming, activities and organization of spaces, and exit from the service. The welcoming moment is a circumstance that professionals must manage with great care and attention, both towards children and towards

adults. Upon arrival of the couple adult/child, the educator meets them and accompanies their entry into the service addressing them both while talking. Furthermore, we specify that Pistoia CCF consists of one large room, furnished with carpets and seating for both children and parents, in order to create a very cozy atmosphere. As far as the activities and organization of spaces are concerned, all materials used for play and for educational activities are designed to attract children, to stimulate them cognitively, but also to offer the parents a possibly different way to organize domestic spaces for their children. On the walls, there are pictures and portraits of children and parents who are protagonists of the activities carried out in the service. Lastly, exiting from the service is a delicate time of the day, and as much care and attention is paid as at the time of welcoming. Children and parents are warmly accompanied out of the room, and the educator prepares the child while the parent puts on his/her shoes and jacket. Time is not overlooked in any of its aspects, and a constant and encouraging conversation with the children and the parents accompanies the delicate gestures of the educator. All the time that is necessary to this particular situation is truly dedicated, respecting both subjects without strain: on the contrary, the educators empathically listen to the needs of both the parents and the children.

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