

Good professional practices for promoting positive parenting and child participation in reunification processes

ABSTRACT

Professional support of families that are under temporary protection, with the goal of reunification, is necessary for helping families re-establish their family dynamics. Without this support, the conditions that contributed to child abuse and neglect will likely persist. In this context, the attitude of professionals towards positive parenting and child participation is a decisive factor. The quantitative study presented here contributes knowledge regarding these two variables. The study was conducted with 106 professionals who work in the child protection system. The results show a high degree of consensus among professionals regarding the following practices: a) incorporating positive parenting into family reunification processes; b) training the biological parents in parenting skills; and c) promoting the active participation of children in foster care and reunification. Regarding the latter point, the study found that older and more experienced professionals are more open and inclined to promote participation in family reunification processes. The practical implications of the results invite us to review attitudinal competencies training for professionals working in child protection services, focusing on encouraging a positive attitude towards the parental competencies of the biological family and the active participation of children in foster care and reunification. These professionals' attitudes are a key factor in mediating the process of family reunification.

Keywords

Family reunification; good professional practices; positive parenting; child participation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the qualitative understanding of parenting has changed. This change has been fostered by recent European policies such as Recommendation no. 19, advanced by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2006), which defines positive parenting as follows: “*Parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child, which aims to care for and empower the child and is non-violent and provides him or her with recognition and guidance by establishing a set of benchmarks that promote his or her full development*”.

The focus on positive parenting implies an unequivocal commitment to aiding the professionals who work with families daily (Rodrigo *et al.* 2015). The Council of Europe’s Recommendation (2006) indicates the importance of good professionals and services for supporting parents in parenting. The parenting focus signals an important change in the mentality of professionals who work with families, as it embraces a considerably more positive and participatory vision of families. This change is even more apparent when professional work is performed with families that are in the child protection system and that have a prognosis of family reunification. We define reunification within the child protection system as the process whereby a minor returns to live with their family of origin following a period of separation from their parents that was prompted by abandonment, neglect, or abuse. Reunification is the chief objective when child protection measures are taken that involve the temporary separation of the child from the nuclear family, resulting in the child being placed with a foster family and/or in provided residential care (Balsells *et al.* 2015a).

In such cases, when temporary protective measures are implemented with the goal of family reunification, intervention and support for the biological family (parents and children) are crucial to help ensure the conditions that led to the abandonment do not persist (Balsells *et al.* 2013).

An analysis of the research literature allows us to identify good practices of professionals and their attitude towards positive parenting and child participation as two fundamental aspects of family reunification processes.

Good professional practices for promoting positive parenting in family reunification processes

Rodrigo *et al.* (2015) note a few good practices that adopt a parenting focus in work with families. Among these practices, they emphasize actions such as the following: giving families a

greater role; promoting their participation in the process; maintaining a positive vision of their parenting skills; conducting an evaluation with an ecological and systemic perspective; enhancing families' strengths and recognizing the opportunities afforded by their environments; establishing a work plan that is realistic and that the family agrees on; and combining modalities of family intervention.

Some good practices in the promotion of positive parenting require professionals to possess certain abilities and attitudes that help them establish ties with families, which, in turn, facilitate an effective reunification. These practices include establishing open and honest communication (Yatchmenoff 2005), ensuring family participation in the process (Rooney 2009; Regional Research Institute for Human Services 1998), showing commitment to the family (Cheng 2010; Schofield *et al.* 2011), being respectful and empathetic (Forrester *et al.* 2012), building trust with the family and involving both parents and children in the process (Keddell 2011), and establishing a collaborative rather than a controlling relationship (Dumbrill 2006; Balsells 2007).

Some authors note the importance of this professional support throughout the entire process, particularly in the moment of the child's homecoming (Farmer & Wijedasa 2013; Balsells *et al.* 2016b).

The professional's attitude towards the parents' parenting skills influences both decision-making and the intervention process (Portwood 1998; Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty 2008; Cheng 2010). A positive relationship between professionals and the family favours the latter's commitment to achieving family reunification (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). For this reason, professionals must assume a positive stance regarding families' skills, centring their intervention on not only families' difficulties but also their potentialities (Balsells 2007; Amorós *et al.* 2010; Balsells *et al.* 2015b). A good intervention practice goes beyond analysing families' vulnerability to consider their resilience as well (Balsells *et al.* 2013), so it is necessary to recognize both these families' potentialities and difficulties. The family's progress will depend partly on the viability of the set goals (Balsells *et al.* 2015b).

By the same token, the family (parents and children) must be familiar with and participate in the process (Balsells *et al.* 2014; Mateos *et al.* 2017). Family reunification is possible after the family has undergone sufficient change to allow the children to return home. The family's commitment, willingness, and desire to accept and make the necessary changes are

key factors in its reunification and resilience during this process (Lietz & Strength 2011). This initial recognition of the changes required for reunification implies an awareness that the family gradually acquires in the period between separation and reunification (Balsells *et al.* 2013).

Authors such as Balsells (2007) and Planella (2008) note the necessity of making changes to the professional support model such that the professional does not act on or intervene in the family, but rather, acts with the family. They propose a shift of focus to a partnership model. This professional model attempts to extend the focus of practice beyond deficiencies to highlight potentialities and adopt a more holistic focus that assumes the collaborative involvement of all actors, i.e., professionals, fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters (Balsells *et al.* 2016a). Family empowerment is important in the moments preceding children's homecoming (Balsells *et al.* 2014) and can only occur if we change the form in which the family is supported, opting for a more holistic and less hierarchical approach.

Child participation in family reunification processes

The positive parenting focus also implies a considerably more participatory view of childhood and adolescence. This perspective is particularly relevant in situations of childhood vulnerability (Mateos *et al.* 2017) for the purpose of facilitating the family reunification process. To cultivate an understanding of the implications of these separation processes for families, children must be active agents in the process and in decision-making, both in the separation from their family and in their homecoming (Mateos *et al.* 2017).

Cossar *et al.* (2014) find that children's participation remains a complex area of practice. However, Nybell (2013) notes that within social services, an increasingly significant movement supports giving "voice" to children and young people, enabling them to express their views and to have those views considered in matters affecting them. Goodyer (2014) demonstrates that neither children's nor adolescents' perspectives are considered in decision-making, nor are they informed of the measures that will be implemented and the changes that will occur in their lives. Studies in the Spanish context corroborate this absence of children's voices (Montserrat 2014; Mateos *et al.* 2017). Barnes (2012), Mcleod (2007), and Schofield & Beek (2005) agree that listening to and informing children ensures more positive and effective results in implementing protection plans.

Rigorous studies are emerging that identify age (Holland & O’neill 2006; Cossar *et al.* 2014), support (Lietz *et al.* 2011; Lee *et al.* 2012), and emotional management (Nybell 2013; Balsells *et al.* 2015b; Mateos *et al.* 2017) as variables to consider in encouraging this participation in family reunification processes.

In Spain and Portugal, the child protection service enacts temporary protection measures (for families with a favourable recovery prognosis) to facilitate family reunification. Both the Spanish (Law 26/2015, of July 28, on the reform of the protection system for children and adolescents) and Portuguese (Law n° 142/2015, of 08/09, art. 4) laws on child protection indicate that the interventions should promote the child’s best interest, helping parents to exercise or promote their parental role. In both legal systems, the processes of family reunification have become challenges, requiring in-depth knowledge of the elements that assist these processes. Some studies note the importance of the attitude, position, or role of professionals in facilitating successful family reunification. In certain cases, professionals favour the reunification process, whereas in others, they prolong it with their risk evaluations and intervention recommendations (Benbenishty *et al.* 2015; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty 2010). In brief, the research literature has revealed how the professional’s role and attitude regarding positive parenting and child participation affect family reunification processes.

Questions such as the following arise here: What are Spanish and Portuguese professionals’ attitudes towards family reunification? Do they approach parental and child participation with a positive attitude? What limitations can be identified that impede family reunification processes? These research questions underpinned our study of whether professionals in Spain and Portugal, who work with families in processes of reunification adopt attitudes and positions that support a focus on positive parenting and the promotion of child participation. The study formed part of a Research and Development project designed to implement and evaluate the “Walking together as a family” programme are presented (Balsells *et al.* 2015a). Through analysing the attitude and position of professionals, we sought to identify barriers to good practice and develop practice guidance in relation to family reunification processes.

METHOD

Participants

The large sample was composed of 106 professionals from three Autonomous Communities of Spain (Catalonia, 33; Castile-la Mancha 28; Balearic Islands, 20) and two regions of Portugal (Braga, 10; Porto 15).

Of the 106 professionals, 81.13% were women (86), and 18.87% were men (20). The average age of the participants was approximately 42.5 years. Additionally, 53.8% of the professionals worked in the public sector; 25.5%, in residential care associations; and 20.8%, in family placement associations. Regarding the type of interventions performed by professionals, 81.1% worked in direct intervention, 5.66% worked in institutional management, and 13.21% performed a combination of tasks linked to institutional management and direct intervention. The type of sector or organization in which the professionals had worked, as well as the type of interventions that they have experience applying, are not exclusive categories, so their combined percentage exceeded 100%. The sample comprised professionals with a long work trajectory, who have worked an average of 12.74 years. Regarding basic training, the sample consists of professionals from different disciplines, corresponding to the multidisciplinary nature of services performed in family reunification processes. The professional profiles of most participants are psychology, social work, social education, and pedagogy.

Research methodology

Quantitative methods were used. Given the importance of improving the quality of interventions and encouraging innovation in family support services (Rodrigo *et al.* 2011; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2015), we determined that a self-evaluation model using an assessment rating would be effective for detecting good practices. A scaled questionnaire about good professional practices was administered to favour work with families in foster care and reunification. An identification sheet was used to gather the socio-demographic and professional data of the participants.

Measuring tool

Two instruments were designed for the study: a) an identification sheet for noting the professionals' socio-demographic characteristics and b) an ad hoc questionnaire for capturing good professional practices to favour work with families in foster care and reunification processes, based on the Best Practice Guide of positive parenting (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2015).

The identification sheet collects both socio-demographic and professional information, specifically, socio-demographic data (e.g., sex, age), contact information, professional experience, the type of methodologies and interventions performed in work with families, and the type of information received.

The second instrument, the questionnaire of good practices, was designed to determine participants' agreement with the statements on good professional practice presented with regard to the two variables studied. The positive parenting variable consists of four statements. The child participation variable consists of two statements. Agreement with the statements was assessed on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "I completely disagree", and 5 indicates "I completely agree". See Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire was conducted by seven independent experts with considerable experience in this area of investigation. The seven experts comprised four professionals and three researchers. The experts appointed a value to each statement for clarity and relevance, namely, optimum, high, low, or zero (points ranging from 3 to 0, respectively). Clarity indicates how clear the meaning of the statement is, e.g., whether a statement is unambiguous and has only one possible interpretation. Pertinence indicates whether the statement is relevant based on the group of people for which it is intended. In this evaluation, participants could also suggest improvements for bolstering the effectiveness of the questionnaire.

Procedure

Both instruments, the identification sheet of the professionals' socio-demographic characteristics and the ad hoc questionnaire regarding good professional practices to favour work with families in foster care and reunification processes, were provided to the professionals (n=106) such as the staff of the child protection services in Spanish and Portuguese regions. Both instruments were completed either online or on paper, according to the preferences of each participant. Finally, both instruments were to be completed in the first and second quarter of 2017. A single completion date for all participants could not be set because, depending on the region (i.e., Spanish Autonomous Communities or Portuguese regions), the provision of the instrument

hinged on how the teams of professionals and researchers planned to facilitate its use in a training environment.

Data analysis

The data were analysed with the statistical software program SPSS v.18. First, a descriptive study was conducted. Then, the central tendency and dispersion measures were calculated. The Pearson's coefficient of variation was calculated to facilitate a more in-depth analysis of variance.

To study the instrument's consistency and reliability, the Cronbach's alpha of the different dimensions that configure the scale was calculated. Particular attention was given to the results relative to the two dimensions presented in the results: positive parenting and child participation.

The sum of the Cronbach's alphas (0.915) indicated that the coefficient is outstanding according to the classification of George and Mallery (2003, p. 231). Therefore, we can confirm that the instrument is consistent and reliable. Reviewing the results by dimension, if we were to remove the items of the "positive parenting" and "participation" dimensions, then the Cronbach's alpha would worsen. Therefore, within the total scale, both dimensions are coherent and pertinent.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Levene tests were performed to determine which tests could afford a more in-depth analysis of the data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test result for child participation is 0.084, indicating that the results follow a normal distribution in this dimension. The significance level in this variable is greater than 0.05. In the positive parenting dimension, the result is 0, indicating that the data do not follow a normal distribution.

In the Levene test, the results are significant for both the positive parenting (0.998) and the child participation (0.112) dimensions. This finding indicates that the data do not follow a normal distribution for these two dimensions and, therefore, that studying these dimensions requires non-parametric tests. For a more in-depth descriptive analysis, correlations (Spearman's test) between dimensions (indices) were determined for gender, level of education, professional rank, age, and years of professional experience. The aim was to determine whether the differences in scores could be attributed to some of these identifying variables.

RESULTS

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the two variables analysed, the professionals' attitudes towards positive parenting and child participation, are presented next.

The professional's attitude towards positive parenting

The following table presents the median (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (SD) of each item configuring the positive parenting dimension.

Table 2 shows a high level of agreement among professionals concerning the necessity of a sensitive attitude towards positive parenting when working with families in the protection system that are undergoing reunification. Such an attitude integrates a systemic and ecological perspective, considering parenting skills, children's needs and the context (SD=0.47; \bar{x} =4.45). As shown in the table, the participants' responses exhibit a high degree of homogeneity, indicating a consensus among the professionals surveyed in their recognition of the necessity of incorporating positive parenting in reunification processes (SD=0.47; \bar{x} =4.45).

[INSERT TABLE 2]

The professional's attitude is determined by their belief that parenting skills, children's needs, and context are influential elements in work with families in foster care and reunification processes. Nearly all participants (96.2%) indicated their agreement (19.8%) or complete agreement (76.4%) with this assertion, as reflected by the homogeneity of the data (SD=0.53; \bar{x} =4.73).

Professionals clearly realize (80.2%) that work with families should include learning to manage the resources found in their environment and in the context in which they live. A high level of professional consensus was observed (SD=0.78) regarding practices to enable families to develop in their environments.

Professionals exhibited a high and homogenous degree of agreement regarding the importance of promoting parenting skills in families (SD=0.68; \bar{x} =4.49), with the responses concentrated in the highest scores, i.e., in agreement and very much in agreement (94.3%).

Similarly, most of the professionals surveyed (93.4%) consider that work with families in foster care and reunification processes should be based on the premise that fathers and mothers are aware of their sons' and daughters' needs. The professionals' responses showed a high level of homogeneity (SD=0.69; \bar{x} =4.57).

Professionals' attitudes towards child participation

The following table reports the median and standard deviation of each item constituting the child participation dimension.

Table 3 presents the results with respect to professionals' attitudes towards child participation in foster care and family reunification processes. Professionals consider that child participation is a fundamental dimension of working with families in a foster care and reunification process. Their responses show homogeneity ($SD=0.71$), with a median score of 3.90.

[INSERT TABLE 3]

The data show a positive trend (66.9%) in professionals' attitudes towards children's ability to express and manifest their developmental and educational needs in the contexts of foster care and family reunification. Only 9.4% of the professionals' responses diverge from this trend. Homogeneity in the responses is unequivocal, with a standard deviation of 0.98.

Furthermore, more than half of the professionals (58.5%) either agree or strongly agree that children in foster care and the family reunification process are capable of identifying the parenting skills that their fathers and mothers must improve to assume a positive parental role for fostering their development. The data for this item show homogeneity in the participants' responses ($SD=0.95$), with a median score of 3.65. Finally, 31.1% of professionals assume a neutral position (a score of 3 on a scale of 1-5).

Child participation is related to the ability of children in foster care and the reunification process to identify the type of formal and informal support they might find helpful. With respect to children's ability to identify necessary support, the responses present a high degree of homogeneity ($SD=0.98$), though compared with 49% of professionals who consider that children have this ability, 34.5% are neutral on this point, and 16% consider that children are incapable of identifying which supports (formal and informal) might help them.

An overwhelming majority of professionals (94.3%) show a high level of agreement regarding the necessity of children's active participating in the foster care and family reunification process. The data exhibit homogeneity in this respect, indicating consistency in the participants' responses ($SD=0.66$; $\bar{X}=4.64$).

The correlational study of the questionnaire's different dimensions indicated that all dimensions exhibit a significant correlation. Specifically, the correlation coefficient (0.4) between both the dimensions that are the focus of the results presented here, that is, "positive parenting" and "child participation", is significant.

Neither of these two variables shows a significant correlation with gender, confirming no difference between men's and women's responses. No difference between genders was also found for the dimensions of education level and professional rank.

However, a positive correlation was observed between the participants' age and their attitude towards child participation, with a coefficient of 0.317.

The number of years of professional experience is also positively correlated with the child participation dimension, with a coefficient of 0.209.

Therefore, we can report that the older and more experienced the professional is, the more he/she favours the promotion of children's participation in the family reunification process.

DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The existing research literature in this field reveals the importance of incorporating into professional practice a favourable attitude towards positive parenting (Portwood 1998; Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty 2008; Cheng 2010; Balsells *et al.* 2013, 2015b, 2016a) and child participation (Balsells 2007; Mateos *et al.* 2017) in processes of family reunification. These two dimensions are critical for good professional practice in these types of child protection processes.

The main challenges of this study with respect to the first variable, professional attitude towards positive parenting, concern the high degree of consensus among professionals regarding the necessity of incorporating positive parenting into family reunification processes and the belief in the importance of managing resources found in the context. A high degree of consensus was observed regarding the necessity of a professional attitude that encourages work with families in foster care and reunification processes through specific training and promotion that aims to provide fathers and mothers with skills for developing positive parenting. Such positive parenting helps to ensure appropriate development of all family members, particularly children.

Child participation must be active participation, requiring, among other conditions, that children be informed; that they be able to express their opinion, needs, fears, and preferences; and that they be able to accompany their fathers and mothers in the family reunification process.

Professionals consider parenting skills and children's needs as two mediating elements in the family reunification process. Accordingly, Balsells *et al.* (2017b) note the importance of orienting formal support towards the development of parenting skills and adaptation of changes made by family members during foster care.

The findings of our study show that professionals tend to offer this training and formal support to families during the reunification process. The necessity of establishing relationships of trust between professionals and families, including children, becomes apparent (Keddell 2011; Nybell 2013; Cossar *et al.* 2014).

This contrast between what professionals deem good professional practice and the formal support that families receive is linked to elements such as commitment, participation, and the development of a support model that is more participatory, more holistic, and more centred on potentialities (Balsells 2007; Planella 2008; Keddell 2011; Farmer & Wijedasa, 2013; Balsells *et al.* 2017b; Mateos *et al.* 2017).

Following the family reunification process, family dynamics and family life must be re-established. Doing so requires promoting parenting skills that help parents to identify the changes that their sons and daughters underwent following the provisional separation to ensure they have resources for adapting norms, routines, and family roles in the new family stage. To re-establish the family dynamic and guarantee that children's needs are adequately satisfied, formal and informal support, in addition to the promotion of parenting skills, are useful for consolidating the changes that occurred during the intervention processes.

The complexity of implementing interventions with families within the child protection framework requires the incorporation of the biological family, i.e., parents and children, into the educational processes, as well as support to achieve reunification. All family members must be aware of the changes that arise at these three levels corresponding to the interpretative, evolutionary, and ecological family model, namely, children's needs, parenting skills, and context (Balsells *et al.* 2014).

Socio-educational practice can contribute tools to help the entire family become capable of orienting its perspective to these three levels, while remembering that the focus of any intervention is the improvement of the children's wellbeing. A professional focus that makes childhood the subject of socio-educational action, not merely the object of protection, can

facilitate an understanding of the family's difficulties and possibilities and thus make reunification a reality (Balsells *et al.* 2014).

This approach to intervention is adopted by innovative socio-educational programmes for family reunification, such as the Walking together as a family programme (Balsells *et al.* 2015a). Such programmes approach intervention with a positive vision of parenting, based on a family resilience approach and the involvement of the three agents implicated in the process: the professionals, the parents, and the children.

In relation to the second variable, child participation in family reunification processes, there was a professional consensus in favour of children's participation in processes that affect them, such as foster care and family reunification. The existing research literature, however, consistently notes the rarity of children's participation within the child protection system (Mitchell *et al.* 2010; Goodyer 2014; Montserrat 2014), so there is a lack of congruence between what professionals aspire to do and what is actually achieved. Some studies emphasize that children must be able to participate and that they be heard (Mateos *et al.* 2017) because in socio-educational practice that adopts a positive parenting focus, the most resistance to change is encountered in this dimension.

Despite, at least theoretically, professionals holding a positive perspective on the necessity of children's participation, few professionals in this study believed that children can identify their needs with regard to parenting skills.

The results of our study show little consensus among professionals concerning children's ability to identify their needs with respect to formal and informal support. One implication of our research is that this professional belief could condition their attitude towards children during the intervention process. Of relevance here are studies such as Mateos *et al.* (2017) note the feeling of not being listened to that is expressed by children and adolescents in the protection system.

Also worth emphasizing is that, contrary to our initial assumption, the results show that the older and more experienced the professional is, the more he/she is inclined to display an attitude that promotes positive parenting and child participation in family reunification processes. We consider this finding significant, one that should be considered particularly in training younger professionals. One possible explanation is that this correlation between age, professional experience and a more favourable attitude towards promoting parenting and child participation might arise because professionals with more experience tend to be senior professionals who are

more secure in their professional practice and more autonomous in their intervention. However, this can only be conjecture at this stage. The result opens avenues for further analysis in future studies.

To conclude, we highlight the contribution of this study in terms of its practical implications. Some studies recommend revising the skills training offered to professionals who work in the field of child protection (Balsells *et al.* 2016a). The skills most in demand concern ethical commitment, personal abilities, teamwork, and social responsibility (Durán-Aponte & Durán-García 2012). These skills add human warmth and a sense of social justice to professional practice, which accords greatly with the commitment assumed by professionals in the field of child protection (Balsells *et al.* 2016a). The findings of our study confirm that professionals tend to show a favourable attitude towards positive parenting and children's active participation in the processes in which they are involved. However, despite this acceptance and positive trend, resistances persist in practice that derive from the functioning of the child protection system. Curiously, professionals who have spent more time practising in the child protection system, seem more open to overcoming this resistance to change in the professional model. This openness may result from their mastery of their professional practice. In terms of practical implications for professional development and good practices, training for professionals in the field of child protection, particularly younger professionals, should consider cultivating this openness to help foster family reunification.

Finally, our study indicate the necessity of promoting favourable professional attitudes towards reunification and towards training for and participation by the entire family. Only by doing so will the skills identified in this study as fundamental for this new approach be developed to work with families in the child protection system. This approach involves accomplishing the following: collaborating with the parents, helping them to understand the changes they must make to achieve family reunification; designing socio-educational action based on the parents' strengths (resilient perspective); showing sensitivity; and explaining the consequences of violating agreements and the benefits of complying with them (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; Ward *et al.* 2012).

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