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Positive Parenting: Lessons from Research

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Abstract

This article is a literature review that describes an innovative approach to work in positive parenting and family resilience from an eco-systemic approach, which takes the family into account in a holistic manner. After the initial foundation in which the general theoretical roots for working with the family are revealed, this study presents concrete socio-educational proposals to be developed with children, parents, and the home environment. It concludes with a series of key ideas that are fundamental to developing best practices for the promotion of positive parenting and family resilience in the three axes of intervention proposed.

Keywords: positive parenting, family resilience, parenting skills, socio-educational intervention, good practices.

Introduction

The eco-systemic perspective as a framework for socio-educational intervention

This article shows how a socio-educational intervention can be performed with the family based on comprehensive work along three axes: children, parents, and the family environment. The intervention of socio-educational professionals who work with families must be based on a holistic perspective that includes both

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a specific intervention with family members (children, parents) and an intervention with parents and children as a whole and with the environment that surrounds them. This intervention can be performed with families in different situations and contexts, and its theoretical roots are grounded in the eco-systemic perspective of the family. The eco-systemic perspective of the family posits that the family is a system that is subject to external influences that can strengthen it or make it more vulnerable, and it is composed of subsystems (marital, parental, and fraternal) that are interconnected; thus, a change in one part affects the others (Adolfi, 1984). External influences that affect the family system are composed of other systems of different amplitudes (from close friends all the way to society in general) that have a social, cultural, and historical influence on the family and on each of its members (Bronfenbrenner, 1987). In this article, research contributions were reviewed and organized into three axes of intervention. The first axis concerns work with children, understanding them as subjects with an essential and influential active role in family dynamics, far from being conceived as passive minors. The second axis of intervention concerns the promotion of the parenting skills of the parents by the group programs in parental education based on an experiential methodology. Finally, the third axis of intervention is based on working with the family and its environment via the proposal of shared family leisure.

Positive parenting and family resilience: the foundations of socio-educational work with families

The increased interest in working with families and parenthood is considered, in part, a response to demographic and social changes that have occurred in recent years. Smith (2010) argues that the increase in family diversity (single-parent, reconstituted families, among others) has been linked in some studies to the increase in unsuitable behaviours in children and youth, which has led to the design of parental support interventions. Parenthood is perceived in many ways, and there is no global agreement on its definition (O'Connor, 2002). The most widespread definition at a European level views parenthood as the deployment of the functions of care and education of children assigned to fathers and/or mothers (Consejo de Europa, 2006). From this perspective, when to the term parenting we add the adjective positive, we refer to the fact that the behaviour of parents is directed to the full development of children through non-violence, care, recognition, guidance, and the establishment of limits (Consejo de Europa, 2006). We are facing a tendency to change the concept of parenthood in terms of authority to refer to the parental responsibility of ensuring the welfare and protection of the child (Daly, 2012).

At the European level, Recommendation Rec (2006) 19 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the policy to support positive parenting has been inspired by the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it has been key to highlighting the importance of the different institutions that provide adequate support, via policies, legislative measures, and specialized and support services, so that families can adequately develop the upbringing and education of their children. Despite these general recommendations, each state develops the family and positive parenting policies in a specific manner according to the peculiarities of the sociocultural context (Boody *et al.*, 2009).

Another pillar of intervention very closely related to positive parenting is family resilience, defined as “healthy family functioning in situations of adversity” (Walsh, 2003, p. 1). The concept of positive parenting is a broad concept that includes the parenting skills of all families in general, whereas the work based on the perspective of resilience is more focused on families with difficulties or in a vulnerable situation. Thus, working from the perspective of family resilience also implies working from the perspective of positive parenting.

Gómez and Kotliarenco (2010, p.124) conducted a general review of the definitions of family resilience and came to the delimitation of the concept as “the set of processes of the reorganization of meanings and behaviours that enable a family under stress to restore and maintain optimal levels of functioning and well-being, balance resources and family needs, and take advantage of the opportunities of its environment”. This concept indicates that work based on the perspective of family resilience must take as its starting point the coping skills of the family when faced with adversity, i.e., putting the focus on strengthening the family's skills and protective factors and not focusing solely on its weaknesses or risk factors. However, these authors believe that the systematic application based on evidence of resilience has been more the exception than the rule. This situation is why it is considered necessary for this concept, which is widely rooted in the literature, to also be transferred to the practice of professionals in the socio-educational field with parents, children, and the family as a whole.

Next, according to the purpose of this article, three different levels of intervention (the children, parents, and the family and its environment) are presented to foster a comprehensive intervention based on an eco-systemic perspective of the family and based on work performed by means of positive parenting and family resilience.

Social-educational work with families in all three levels of intervention: children, fathers/mothers, and the family in its environment. On the basis of the grounds established above, we understand the eco-systemic model as providing the best insight into the family as a whole and as part of a community. Positive parenting and family resilience also help focus socio-educational work with families. Accordingly, below, we show some tips and examples of socio-

educational practices stemming from the review of the scientific literature that aim at promoting family resilience and positive parenting at the three levels of intervention (Figure 1).

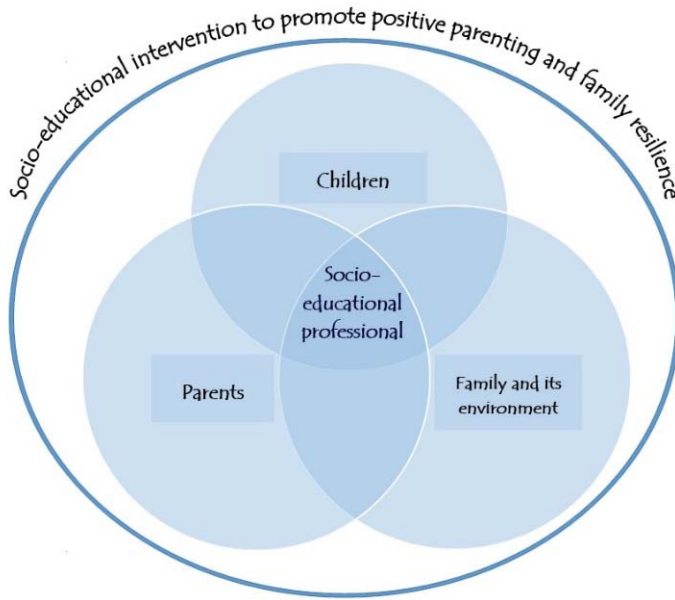


Figure 1. *Axes of socio-educational intervention with families.*
(Author's own elaboration, 2015)

The first axis of intervention: social-educational work with children

The eco-systemic model (Bronfenbrenner, 1987) states that intra-family interactions and the response of children have an impact on parental management. From this approach, it is considered necessary to take into account the perspective of children and their involvement in family interventions (Balsells *et al.*, 2013).

Socio-educational work with children lies firmly within the current view of children's rights and the new challenges of family intervention (Schofield, 2005). The objectives to be pursued fit along this line: on one hand, enhancing their active and participatory role within the family context and, on the other hand, promoting their individual resilience, in turn feeding family resilience. Different authors have established the elements that support resilience. Masten (2015) states the following factors: having guaranteed care from caregiving figures, close relationships, problem-solving skills, self-control, self-efficacy, motivation for success, life expectancy, effective schools, and communities that protect children. In this sense, two of the most interesting aspects and with consensus agreement in

the literature stand out. The first is the ecological and multidimensional perspective of the construct, which places three levels of intervention that consist of the following: the individual, the family, and the community context. Second, there is the social perspective, which emphasizes the importance of significant figures who help to promote resilience. Many authors have paid special attention to the role of significant relationships as a factor that promotes resilience. For example, Barudy and Dantagan (2005, 2011) and Cyrulnik (2005) take this figure to be a resilience guardian, whereas Beltman *et al.* (2006) and Gilligan (2000) call it a resilience mentor. This significant relationship can be established with different actors in the context of the child, both in an informal context (the child's natural environment, which includes family, friends, etc.) and in a formal context (the network of professional resources). From this perspective, we place the professional of socio-educational action in a promising position, which leads to the question regarding how he/she should focus his/her intervention to develop the role of the guardian of resilience.

Different authors have identified socio-educational strategies to work with children and promote their resilience (Barudy & Dantagnan, 2011; Gilligan, 2000; Grotberg, 2003; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Muñoz & De Pedro, 2005). Most have done so from the perspective of individual intervention; thus, we want to highlight the pioneering proposal of Barudy and Dantagnan (2011), who propose a group therapeutic-educational approach. Henderson and Milstein (2003) develop the model of the resilience wheel, illustrating three aspects related to mitigating risk factors – enriching connections, setting clear limits, and teaching life-skills – and three aspects related to the building of resilience – providing affection and support, establishing and conveying high expectations, and providing opportunities for significant participation. Gilligan (2000) also notes the importance of promoting contact with people who are important to the child and promoting pro-social skills, encouraging positive experiences in school, and promoting interests, talents, conflict resolution skills, and children's ability to reason. Muñoz and De Pedro (2005) emphasize the establishment of a personal relationship based on respect, considering the needs, capabilities, limitations, and expectations of each individual and highlighting their positive aspects. They stress the importance of setting limits, providing security and trust, and conveying values and norms. As qualities of the professional, empathy, active listening, understanding, and consistency are highlighted. Grotberg (2003) focuses his proposal on the balance between autonomy and support, considering dialogue as a means for setting limits, accepting responsibility, encouraging flexibility, and increasing relational abilities. As professional qualities, the author highlights empathy, unconditional love, trust, and optimism.

In the contributions highlighted here, we see a) the content of socio-educational work, which takes into account the ecological perspective and the active role of the child; and b) how the professional develops this work. These observations are

consistent with other contributions that outline the importance of the relationship between learner and teacher as one of the most important elements of social intervention (Fryd, 2011) in promoting resilience (Barudy & Dantagnan, 2005) and for the promotion of the participation of children (Schofield, 2005). In short, we note the importance of paying special attention to the professional and his or her gaze into the child because we believe that the impact of the intervention will be greatly mediated by the quality of the educational relationship. Some of the qualities that have been described as favourable in the socio-educational intervention for infancy include the following: unconditional love, trust and optimism in the child and in his/her actions, respect, empathy, active listening, understanding, sincerity, consistency between what is said and done, and professional commitment.

The second axis of intervention: working with parents

Professional work with parents to promote positive parenting and family resilience is crucial to the well-being of parents and their children. In this respect, interventions that support fathers and mothers in developing positive parenting skills are effective strategies for improving children's behaviours (Shaw, Dishion, Supplee, Gardner, & Arnds, 2006) and the mental health and parenting skills of fathers and mothers (Barlow, Smailagic, Huban, Roloff, & Bennett, 2012).

Parenting skills are the set of capabilities that allow parents to adaptively address the vital task of being parents, according to the developmental and educational needs of the children and in line with the acceptable standards of society, seizing the opportunities and support of the systems of family influence to deploy these capabilities (Rodrigo, Máiquez, Martin, & Byrne, 2008). Barudy and Dantagnan (2005) consider that the development of these capabilities is a key strategy in promoting family resilience. The family eco-evolutionary model allows for situating the role of these parenting skills, not merely the risk factors and parental weaknesses in the socio-educational intervention (Balsells, 2013).

There are various strategies for encouraging parents to develop these skills. Byrne (2010) considers that the forms of intervention for family support that are the most common and with the greatest evaluations regarding their effectiveness are the social-educational programs of home visits and group care. We would like to highlight group socio-educational programs because they are growing, especially in central and southern Europe, and show proven strengths (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2008). These group programs are interventions aimed at improving the parental role, increasing the knowledge, skills, and confidence in the abilities of the parents in childrearing (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012). Given that, the objective of this article is to identify the factors that characterize the good work of socio-educational professionals in the promotion of positive parenting and family resilience, this study focuses on the methodology of parental socio-educational group programs.

The methodological orientations of these programs are manifold. On one hand are the more informative programs that want parents to acquire specific skills. On the other hand, there are programs focused on techniques for changing the behaviours of children. Finally, we identify interventions focused on experience, in which parents build their knowledge and skills based on concrete situations and implicit theory (Amoros, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos, & Pastor, 2011). Currently, different studies and systematic reviews show the effectiveness of learning that is connected with one's own experience and with other practical experiences, both during childhood (Schreuder *et al.*, 2014) and during adulthood (Dacey, Kennedy, Polak, & Phillips, 2014). The case of parents is no stranger to these findings. Parents have many life experiences and often need to connect their own learning process with the immediate context. Programs based on receiving guided practice and peer feedback have shown higher satisfaction, acquisition, and implementation of parenting skills across multiple social profiles (Amorós, Balsells, Buisan, Byrne, & Fuentes-Peláez, 2013).

Finally, we identify a few elements that a group program of parental education should have to be effective, based on the proven experience in parental education programs in different English-speaking countries. These elements help guide socio-educational professionals to effectively promote positive parenting and resilience with fathers and mothers. Small, Conney, and O'Connor (2009) propose 12 indicators that are needed to ensure an effective parent education program. These indicators are divided into five areas: program design, content, target population, implementation, and evaluation.

Regarding the design of the program, it is important, first, to have an empirically grounded theoretical perspective. Second, the dose should be sufficient. Third, the environment of the families and the different risk and protective factors surrounding them should be taken into account. Regarding the contents of the program, it is recommended to limit the use of fear and punishment, using active learning techniques. Regarding the target population, programs should take into account the stage of child development and the social and cultural characteristics of the participants and encourage families with a certain predisposition to change to participate. Regarding implementation, such interventions should promote positive relationships, and the professional facilitators must be adequately trained. Finally, regarding evaluation, it is recommended to properly document the entire process of design, implementation, and evaluation and to contemplate the evaluation and improvement from the outset of the implementation of the intervention.

The third axis of intervention: working with the family and its environment

The third level of intervention presented here, based on the eco-systemic family perspective, is the level that works on the basis of the interrelationships of the family as a system, i.e., the relationships of each of its members with each other and of the family together with society as a whole. In this sense, the goal is an intervention based on leisure shared in the family as a good practice of socio-educational intervention. The relevance of an intervention via experiences based on leisure is justified by multiple authors because it is considered an indicator of quality of life (Somarriba & Pena, 2010), a social and personal value (Aristegui & Silvestre, 2012), a human need (López, 2008), and a fundamental right (UNICEF, 1989). Regarding shared family leisure, it is part of the parenting skills of parents (Rodrigo, Martín, Cabrera, & Máiquez, 2009) and is a protective factor in situations of social risk, a trait of resilient families, and a characteristic of positive parenting.

The benefits that family leisure contributes can be divided into three levels: the individual, the familial, and the social. Here, we are especially interested in those at the household level, of which Cuenca (2005) highlights the following: family leisure facilitates the elimination, avoidance, or reduction of negative emotions or feelings; it encourages interaction and communication, establishing ties based on taste and free will; it offers the opportunity to experience new ways of family relationships; it encourages each family member to show who he or she really is, while the others perceive this reality; it develops emotional ties, which affect family cohesion and its development; it reduces isolation in parents, allowing authority to become closer; and it increases self-esteem and well-being among family members, among other benefits.

This multiplicity of benefits to the family makes leisure a powerful tool for social and educational professionals working with families. Its effectiveness has been proven, for example, in the Spanish program “Learning Together, Growing Family”, which is aimed at at-risk families and implemented by socio-educational professionals. The program showed that leisure, being one of the parental responsibilities in the program that produced higher crystallization, significantly improved socially at-risk families (Amorós *et al.*, 2013). The performance of shared family leisure poses different challenges to implementation for both professionals and families themselves, for example, reconciling work and family life (Carrera, 2009). To meet these challenges, numerous authors have suggested several strategies for leisure. Thus, we find authors such as Cuenca (2002), who proposes education to gain knowledge concerning the attractions that are available across the community (what they are, where they are, and how they are used) and to recognize each experience as valuable in itself and as the ratio of leisure and improving quality of life. Similarly, Horse (2009) states that leisure practices

must evolve from a passive to an active leisure entertainment, from leisure with a short-term goal to leisure with long-term goals. The socio-educational professional has to accompany families in achieving goals that have a complex acquisition. However, one should not forget the importance of intervening and beginning from the family and for its sake. A crucial aspect that the working professional must take into account regarding the question of shared family leisure is the family's characteristics and preferences. Not all leisure activities can be successful with all families. In this sense, Silva, Raphael, and Dos Santos (2006) highlight the importance of taking into account the potential of the family and its social and personal development.

Finally, it is considered appropriate to highlight that professionals and families must also consider the aspects that may hinder leisure practices, for example adjusting leisure expectations to reality and knowing how to identify and overcome barriers and obstacles to family leisure (Cuenca, 2002).

Conclusions

Currently, family interventions often focus on a segmented labour instead of integrating a global vision of the family, with its various interrelationships, and the environment in which it is embedded. This situation is why a change is necessary in view of socio-educational intervention. Family interventions should have as a goal work that is directed, first, at the individual level, then at the group level, and finally at the community level.

The analysis of the scientific literature presented throughout this article, first, allows highlighting the need to work on the basis of an eco-systemic family perspective to promote positive parenting and family resilience. Second, it locates some theoretical bases for the socio-educational professional to emerge as a driver of this work, given the proven role of the formal support he or she has in the promotion of family resilience (Walsh, 2003).

Accordingly, it is considered essential for the socio-educational professional working for the joint triad of children, parents, and the family/environment to move away from obsolete views of parenthood and obsolete resilience or from views that are blind to the interactions inside of the subsystems of the family. This threefold work is positioned as something that is indispensable at the levels of both theory and the practical experiences that are proving to be effective (Milani, Serbati, Ius, Di Masi, & Zanon, 2013). The professional best practices described in this article are consistent with these experiences and help strengthen the construction of a road map for holistic socio-educational work with families.

This roadmap stresses that the socio-educational professional must work from the principle of equality, partnership, and collaboration with parents and children,

also enabling communication between them. He or she must recognize the experience of parents, rely on family autonomy, and enhance this resource. Similarly, cooperation and coordination with other professionals and training itself are essential.

These basic principles are focused on three areas of intervention (parents, children, and the family in its environment) through multiple best practices. In this study three proposals are described.

The first is the importance of taking children into account as active subjects with a participatory role within the family system. Their active role and resilience should be promoted through a perspective that guides the educational content along this line and an educational relationship that promotes the development of these elements. Thus, we understand this professional figure to be a guardian of resilience.

The second proposal aims at promoting parenting skills through group socio-educational programs based on an experiential methodology. They are a valuable strategy for the socio-educational professional in promoting positive parenting and family resilience. To ensure their effectiveness, quality indicators with regard to design, content, target population, implementation, and evaluation have been collected.

Finally, the third proposal shows how shared family leisure is an ideal strategy for intervention with the family, at the group level and at the community level, through work based on the family as a unit and as a system in relation to its surroundings. Shared family leisure brings multiple benefits to members. Among them, it increases the quality of life of individuals and is a driver for integration in the community and family resilience.

In short, we can conclude by asserting that socio-educational work with different members of the family as a unit and taking this unit in interaction with its environment promotes positive parenting and family resilience. This is possible not only theoretically; there are specific recommendations and strategies that can guide and facilitate the implementation of this type of intervention. This article marks only the beginning of a compilation of best practices for promoting positive parenting and family resilience, blazing a trail for guiding and establishing social educational work from the perspective of comprehensive intervention.

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