



Parent Education Programs: (Co)construction with Parents

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Abstract

The parent education / training programs that have been developed for the last two years at the Family Support and Parental Counselling Centre of NÓS were developed for and with parents of children and youth at risk as a strategy to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect. The weekly multi focused 3 hours sessions specifically target the parent's response to the child or youth's needs previously evaluated according to the Framework Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000). As so, each program is unique and its duration depends on the group's characteristics. Parents chose several themes like "Child Development and Discipline", "Family-School Relationship", "Children Protection and Safety" and "Children and Domestic Violence", which are developed with a multidisciplinary team that includes psychologists, a social worker, a lawyer and a social-cultural animator. Through a developmental perspective and a strong ecological and systems approach, these collaborative programs are designed to respond to the needs of the participants, fathers and mothers, aiming to enhance their knowledge, skills, resources and strategies, promoting a safe and stimulating healthy environment for the children and youth, through positive parenting practices. The strategies of intervention and preliminary qualitative data about the programs are discussed, as well as the future orientations.

Keywords: *Parent education / training, children / youth at risk for abuse or neglect, ecosystemic approach, CAFAP*

Introduction

The social welfare service known in Portugal as CAFAP – *Centro de Apoio Familiar e Aconselhamento Parental* – in English "Family Support and Parental Counseling Centre – has been recently implemented in several Portuguese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NÓS – *Associação de Pais e Técnicos para a Integração do Deficiente*, an NGO that works with the population of two counties of the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon, Barreiro and Moita, has its own CAFAP since 2006. This CAFAP's main goal is to prevent and reduce risk or danger of maltreatment for children / youth and their families within their environment by promoting their well-being. Child abuse or maltreatment is defined as "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (World Health Organization, 1999).

CAFAP's ultimate purpose is to prevent children from being removed from their homes. Therefore, the emphasis is on families as the primary social context for children to develop, one of the fundamental principles according to Minuchin, Colapinto and Minuchin (2007) to work with families and service systems. Its conceptual framework is based on Belsky's (1980, cited in Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's

ecological theory of human development (1979, cit. in Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005) to child maltreatment. As underlined by Minuchin et al., it is more effective to plan and implement services once understood the context where people live, the involvement of others and the resources available within the family's informal and formal social network.

The guiding principles "family centered", "strengths-based" and "cultural responsiveness" (Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005) are integrated into the ecosystemic assessment and intervention inspired in the Framework Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000). Assessing the needs, as well as the strengths and difficulties, is a core assignment of CAFAP's ecological team (i.e., psychologists, a social worker, a lawyer, a social-cultural animator and volunteers) and its local community partners (e.g., social welfare service, child protection service, schools) to determine with the family whether a child is in need and how that child and family might be better helped. Assessment should take account of three domains: (1) the child's developmental needs; (2) the parents' or caregivers' capacities to respond appropriately; (3) the wider family and community factors (Department of Health, 2000). Once established whether or not a child is in need, an intervention plan is designed with the family. Besides individual and family intervention, CAFAP may invite the parents to participate in a parent education program (see Figure 1). This multilevel and integrated approach is

fundamental to many of these families who in their path to a better parenting encounter several services that instead of being perceived by the family as community resources (e.g., child protection services) are perceived as a source of family stress. It is, therefore, fundamental to search for a systemic

“services delivery” equilibrium (Alarcão, 2002). At CAFAP’s programs, these families, defined by Alarcão (2008) as challenged families, have the opportunity, in an initial interview, to express their expectations and their suggestions.

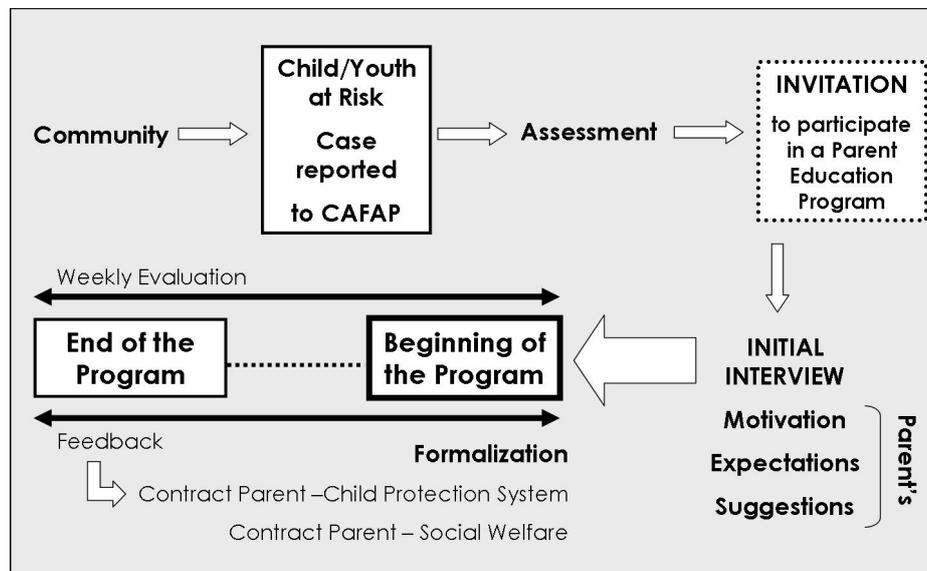


Figure 1: From case reporting to parent’s participation in a parent education program.

Each program described in this paper is guided by the “good enough” (Winnicott, n.d.) parenting principle and it is a “non-fit them all” solution addressing multiple risk factors (Schwartz, 2002), valuing each parent idiosyncrasies, thus enhancing parent’s motivation to participate in the program by making them co-authors of the program’s design. Parent’s participation may be formalized in the shape of a written agreement with the local child protection service (i.e., *Comissão de Protecção de Crianças e Jovens*) and/or with the local social welfare service as part of the social insertion plan, to whom is given frequent feedback about parent’s attendance, participation and parenting competencies development. This paper main goal is to unveil *what works* through the evaluation of the programs execution along with the perceived impact of the parent education programs, thus exploring its characteristics and outcomes.

Method

The development of document content analysis of all the materials of the three groups of the parent education programs developed by CAFAP between 2006 and 2008 allowed the gathering and crossing of information about its implementation. This analysis was based on the programs files and archives, containing planning documents, schedules, session’s resources, individual evaluations and attendance sheets (see Table 1), regarding the participation of 40 parents/caregivers (38 mothers, one father and one grandfather).

CAFAP’s third parent education program was more thoroughly evaluated by Ferreira (2008), as part of an integrated master thesis. Following a qualitative approach which also contained a quantitative section, this study was carried through the guiding principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003), with a major focus on strengths and skills.

Twelve parents participated in this study (Ferreira, 2008) – all who completed the program – and the participant’s sample illustrated the general characteristics of the population served by CAFAP. There was also a professional sample, composed of the CAFAP’s team members who participated in the program sessions. The data was collected through two major strategies: 1) appreciative interviews – before and after the program, both to team members and to program participants, which accessed the positive expectations about parenting and about the program, focusing on strengths and positive change – that results on a transformational inquiry and 2) the Portuguese version (Pedro, Carapito, & Ribeiro, 2008) of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) developed by Robinson, Mandlco, Olsen and Hart (1995, 2001), which accesses three parenting factors (authoritative, authoritarian and permissive).

Results

As a result of the document content analysis, Table 1 illustrates the comparison of three groups of parents that participated in the programs, regarding attendance, evaluation strategies and session themes.

The typical weekly session lasted 3 hours, with a 30 minutes pause, and had the following organization: 1) short motivational activity; 2) introduction to the theme; 3) processing the information (e.g., brainstorming, written exercises, role-play and games); 4) applying the information to known and to new situations.

The content analysis of the final evaluation questionnaires and interviews provided information about the participant's most important gains,

including personal and professional development, improved self-esteem as a parent and empowerment of their social network.

Concerning the cumulative weight of each of the focus areas referred in the Framework for the Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000), some differences between the three parent education groups are revealed (see Table 1). While the number of sessions focusing on the child development needs is stable across all groups, on the third group there was a marked increase on the focus on community and family resources. On all three groups, more sessions were focused on the caregiver than on any other area.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Groups / Programs

		Group I	Group II	Group III	
Participants					
	N _{total}	14	12	14	
	N _{attendance average}	7	5	7	
	Drop out	4	4	3	
Evaluation					
	Initial Interviews	-	×	×	
	Final Interviews	-	-	×	
	Psychological Assessment Instruments	Parenting	Educative Styles	Parenting Styles and	
		Scale	-	Dimensions Questionnaire	
	Weekly Individual Evaluation	-	-	×	
	Final evaluation questionnaire	×	×	-	
Session Theme					
Focus on	Child	Child Development	2	4	2
		Nutrition	1	1	1
		Child Safety	1	2	1
		Health	1	1	2
		Children and Domestic Violence	1	1	1
		N	6	9	7
	Caregiver	Creativity and Imagination / Playing	-	2	1
		House and Financial Management	1	1	1
		Parental Stress and Parenting Models	-	1	1
		Child Behaviour Management / Discipline	2	3	2
		Self-Awareness	2	1	1
		Life Story	2	4	1
		Personal projects and development	2	-	2
		N	9	12	9
		Family & Community	Family Rituals	1	1
	Family and School Relationships		1	1	1
	Child Day-care and Alternative Education Solutions for Youth		-	-	1
	Child Protection System		-	-	1
	Social Insertion Income and other social benefits		-	-	1
	Employment		-	-	1
N	2		2	6	
Program organizations and evaluation		2	4	4	
Sessions					
	N _{total}	19	27	26	

The best practices of the programs, also gathered from this analysis, encompassed a focus on a variety of child maltreatment risk factors, a professional's

depowerment that brought out parents expertise, and a smaller group format, which allowed increased sharing.

Preliminary results of the third group evaluation indicate that, through the program, the parents showed major changes in child behaviour management strategies, social support, parenting skills and emotional management, while the professionals referred mainly the positive development of the in-group leadership and social support (see Ferreira, 2008, for complete data).

Discussion

What is the best

The discovery of what is a “good practice” in parent education programs, one of the aims of this study, is only possible through evaluation. Programs have been “delivered” in different ways (Bolen, McWey & Schlee, 2008) by several formal and informal groups, but it remains urgent to adopt systematic evaluation practices (Long, 1997). As stated by Dufour and Chamberland (2003), program evaluation contributes to a better decision making in the process of adapting the programs to the target population.

Building on CAFAP’s evaluation practices, there has been a considerable evolution in its programs since 2006. It has moved from a service “delivery” posture to a more collaborative one, involving caregivers and other community resources in the construction and implementation of the programs. This *evolution through evaluation* is illustrated in this study by the marked increase on the focus on community and family resources present on the third group. This change surely contributed to a visible increase in autonomy and empowerment as elicited through the interviews. As an example, it was important to capacitate parents for job searching by activating community resources, thereby raising their autonomy level, while also preventing against child maltreatment, which is strongly correlated with poverty (UNICEF, 2007).

What is a best practice

One of the most remarkable features in the last CAFAP’s parent education group was the focus on the promotion of in-group management and leadership, which valued each parent’s competence by enabling them to share new strategies for, as an example, dealing with a child’s behaviour. This professionals’ depowerment posture that elicits participants’ competence is also referred by Shannon (n.d.), as a main practice on parent education programs aimed at preventing child abuse, and by Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) as one of the best practices in working in community. The reflexive evaluation of the third program by Ferreira (2008) also revealed that many of these families are well aware of their own capacities and skills, even when they get contrary information from professionals that still carry a deficit-based attitude.

Also, Bolen, McWey and Schlee (2008) argued that more attention should be given to the parents’ perception of what is a good parenting practice. This

may be a strategy to overcome the contextual factors that impair the notion of “good enough” parenting (Winnicot, n.d.).

In the third program, these perceptions, along with the motivations and suggestions, captured by the initial interviews, allowed CAFAP to adapt the implementation to the group’s needs and characteristics (Ferreira, 2008).

The raw information gathered through the weekly sessions posed as a reality check for CAFAP’s systematic program review and adaptation (allowed by the program’s flexible length), functioning as a calibration procedure for the integration of participants’ and professionals’ perceptions. This process allowed increased flexibility in procedures, such as the referred focus on superior ecological levels activating social and personal resources, and the connection with community partners (as an example, inviting Employment Department speakers). This major focus on a larger ecological view is an urgent need in all community actions, instead of a limited focus on the less comprehensive ecological levels (Peirson, 2005). However, narrowing CAFAP’s focus to these levels has its importance due to individual and family risk factors. As an example, there was an investment in the caregivers’ realistic expectations about child developmental milestones, improving their notion of “good enough” parenting (Winnicot, n.d.) and preventing child maltreatment (Scannapieco & Connel-Carrick, 2005).

The final document analysis of the weekly individual evaluations sheets – which also allowed the programs’ permanent flexibility – as well as the final interviews’ results (Ferreira, 2008), showed that the most important gains were outcomes that are referred by Shannon (n.d.) as best practices in programs aiming at preventing child abuse, namely improved self esteem and emotional management of caregivers through a constant sharing, personal and professional development and empowerment of their social networks.

Based on the systematic reflection on the evaluation results (Ferreira, 2008), the main intervention clues for future programs started to unveil. These clues included: 1) a focus on the co-construction of the program which comprised both professionals and parents; 2) enhancing the self-management and leadership of the parents group through the professionals’ posture of depowerment (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005); 3) a more structured continuity of the sessions through the construction of shared projects and objectives in order to increase participation; 4) a deeper investment on male parenthood participation, starting as soon as the initial family assessment and also in the adaptation of the session’s activities and tasks; 5) an increased focus on promoting the informal social support and

networks of the parents; 6) a renewed approach to the parents' emotional management strategies; 7) prioritizing practical and *hands-on* tasks activities during sessions; 8) a higher connection and exchange with community resources; 9) the promotion of significant rewards per session and 10) creating a major emphasis on the sharing strategy between parents, especially regarding child behaviour management.

Limitations and Challenges

Due to the target population day to day reality, to CAFAP's programs characteristics and its implementation procedures, this study also faced some challenges and limitations which CAFAP tried to overcome with new strategies, thereby introducing feedback to better (co)construct future parent education programs.

Some of the most important constraints in the program's implementation are also known limitations of other intervention strategies like home visiting, namely poor maternal mental health (e.g., depression), maternal substance use and partner violence (Duggan, Caldera, Rodriguez, Burrell, Rohde & Crowne, 2007), thus reinforcing the need to promote a multilevel and multimethod strategy to work with these families.

Parents' mandatory participation is also one of the constant limitations; however, the focus on the previous engagement with CAFAP's intervention (i.e., parents are invited to participate and get involved on the program's design) and activities resulted on a non compulsory posture in many parents. Another important way to overcome family resistance is to make the sessions fun and comfortable to parents (e.g., social gatherings, relaxation exercises, outside activities, etc.) as well as promoting personal competence and valuing parents' aspirations and perceptions. The low involvement of male caregivers represented another limitation and this may be related to the well known female majority (Sousa, 2005) in multi-challenged contexts.

Another program's implementation challenge was the fact that the schedule was mainly accessible to unemployed parents, which narrowed CAFAP's population, and the low attendance of parents facing financial strain (e.g., occasionally had no money to buy a bus ticket) and single parenthood (e.g., lack of support in case of child sickness). However, on the first program CAFAP managed to provide some bus tickets, on the second a bus from NÓS frequently gave a lift to some parents, and on the third program, there was a babysitting service on-site.

Through the evaluation process, the small samples resulting of the above limitations led to a limited generalization of the results. Adding to this idea, the absence of an external evaluative commission may result in some evaluator bias in the results analysis.

New directions

When Ralph P. Bridgman presented the future directions of parent education programs almost 80 years ago, these programs were by then "a toddling movement" (Bridgman, 1930). Although much has been accomplished in the last decades, it remains actual his urge to scientifically study the programs' effectiveness, to share what works (and what does not work) with whom and how. The evaluation and exposure of parent's education programs might contribute to develop best practices guidelines for future programs. Nonetheless, the prevailing focus should not be on the "one size fits all" attitude since it limits the matching between child-family needs and intervention, thereby reducing the intervention spectrum (Schwartz, 2002). Therefore, it is CAFAP's intention to diversify its strategies (e.g., more quantitative evaluation instruments, using video interaction guidance strategies), to develop a follow up study and a meta-analysis to compare these programs with others. Moreover, we need to identify the specific contribution of different variables to the program's implementation and outcomes, like the characteristics of both professionals and caregivers. Furthermore, as it may overcome the reduced number of Portuguese investigations (Coutinho, 2004), it must be emphasized the positive initiative that several universities and the Portuguese Welfare System are developing regarding a comparative study of parent education programs with a national sample (Almeida, Pinto, Gaspar, Brandão & Ribeiro, 2008).

It may also be positive to design specific programs with parents of younger children. That is, in a primary prevention perspective, parents could be engaged in this kind of programs from pregnancy and the program focus could be, as suggested by Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens and Onghena (2004), on child's development and on the development of the infant-parent dyad.

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