

Educational interventions targeted at minors in situations of grave social vulnerability and their families

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Abstract The aim of this article is to outline and assess an educational intervention programme targeted at improving the skills of families and the personal and social development of children living in situations of grave social vulnerability. The sample comprised 10 families during the first phase of the intervention and six during the second. The design, intervention and assessment process of this study was carried out in two phases over a period of a year and a half. For both phases, three different groups—of men/fathers, women/mothers and children—were established. Study variables (parenting skills and children’s personal and social development) were evaluated before and after the intervention in every group, as well as during the entire process. The results, taking into account the improvements reported by all the participants (social workers, group monitors, fathers, mothers, children) show that inter-professional involvement and coordination at all phases of the intervention is vital in order to achieve small but significant improvements.

Keywords Minors · Social vulnerability · Maltreatment · Interventions · Families · Programme · Education

Résumé Interventions éducatives destinées aux mineurs en situation de grande fragilité sociale et à leurs familles – Cette étude avait pour objectif de concevoir et d’évaluer un programme d’intervention éducative, visant à améliorer les compétences des familles et le développement sociopersonnel des enfants vivant dans des situations de grande fragilité sociale. L’échantillon comprenait dix familles pour la

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première phase de l'intervention et six pour la seconde. La procédure de conception, d'intervention et d'évaluation de l'étude s'est déroulée en deux étapes sur une période de 18 mois. Pour chacune des deux phases ont été formés trois groupes distincts – hommes/pères, femmes/mères et enfants. Les variables de l'étude (compétences parentales et développement sociopersonnel de l'enfant) ont été évaluées avant et après l'intervention dans chaque groupe, ainsi que pendant toute la procédure. Les résultats, qui intègrent les améliorations signalées par tous les participants (travailleurs sociaux, animateurs des groupes, pères, mères et enfants), établissent que l'engagement interprofessionnel et la coordination de toutes les phases de l'intervention ont été décisives pour apporter des améliorations modestes mais déterminantes.

Zusammenfassung Sozial stark benachteiligte Minderjährige und ihre Familien als Zielgruppe von Bildungsinterventionen – Ziele dieser Arbeit sind die Konzeption und Bewertung eines Bildungsprogramms zur Verbesserung der Familienkompetenz und der sozialpersönlichen Entwicklung von sozial stark benachteiligten Kindern. Die Stichprobe umfasste 10 Familien in der ersten und 6 in der zweiten Phase der Intervention. Konzeption, Intervention und Bewertung dieser Studie wurden in zwei Phasen über einen Zeitraum von eineinhalb Jahren durchgeführt. Für beide Phasen wurden drei verschiedene Gruppen – Männer/Väter, Frauen/Mütter und Kinder – gebildet. Die Variablen der Studie (Elternkompetenz und die soziopersonliche Entwicklung der Kinder) wurden für jede Gruppe vor und nach der Intervention wie auch während des gesamten Prozesses evaluiert. Die Ergebnisse, unter Berücksichtigung der von sämtlichen Beteiligten (Sozialarbeiter(inne)n, Gruppenbeobachter(inne)n, Vätern, Müttern, Kindern) gemeldeten Fortschritte, zeigen, dass berufsübergreifende Beteiligung und Koordination in allen Phasen der Intervention unabdingbar sind, um kleine, aber signifikante Verbesserungen zu erzielen.

Resumen Intervenciones educativas enfocadas en menores y sus familias que se encuentran en situaciones de grave vulnerabilidad social – El objetivo de este trabajo es diseñar y evaluar un programa de intervención educativa, orientado a mejorar las competencias de familias y el desarrollo socio-personal de niños que viven en situaciones de gran vulnerabilidad social. La muestra abarcó 10 familias en la primera fase de intervención y 6 en la segunda. El proceso de diseño, intervención y evaluación de este estudio tuvo lugar en dos fases a lo largo de un período de un año y medio. Para ambas fases se establecieron tres diferentes grupos: de hombres/padres, de mujeres/madres y de niños. Las variables el estudio (competencias parentales y desarrollo socio-personal de los niños) fueron evaluadas antes y después de la intervención en cada uno de los grupos, al igual que durante todo el proceso. Bajo consideración de las mejoras informadas por todos los participantes (trabajadores sociales, monitores de grupo, padres, madres, niños) los resultados muestran que la implicación y coordinación interprofesional en todas las fases de la intervención es vital para lograr mejoras pequeñas, pero importantes.

Резюме – Образовательное вмешательство, направленное на помощь несовершеннолетним в условиях серьезной социальной незащищенности, и их семьи – Целью данного исследования является разработать и оценить образовательные программы, направленные на развитие отношений в семье и социально-личностное развитие ребенка, живущего в условиях серьезной социальной незащищенности. На первом этапе исследования примером стали 10 семей, на втором - 6. Планирование, вмешательство и оценка в данном исследовании проводились в два этапа на протяжении полутора лет. На каждом этапе было сформировано по три группы – мужчины/отцы, женщины/матери и дети. Переменные величины в исследовании (умение воспитывать детей и социально-личностное развитие детей) были оценены до и после оказания помощи в каждой группе, а также на протяжении всего хода исследования. Учитывая положительные изменения по мнению всех участников (социальных работников, наблюдателей в группах, отцов, матерей, детей), результаты данного исследования указывают на то, что межпрофессиональное участие и координация на всех этапах являются крайне важными для того, чтобы получать небольшие, но существенные изменения.

Theoretical framework

It has often been stressed that extreme conditions of vulnerability are responsible for the maladjustment of children during their development (André and Lelord 1999; Hoffmans-Gosset 2000; Barudy 1998; Diéguez and Noguerol 2007; Torres 2001). When parents have grave personal and social problems (poverty, unemployment, alcohol or drug addictions, mental illness), their ability to respond to their children's basic needs is drastically reduced. The truth is that the lack of a stable framework of adult relations which provides both affective security and stability as regulating limits, disrupts the possibilities for healthy personal and social development.

Child Protection Services aim to alleviate these family situations, foster parenting skills, promote children's personal and social development, and help them to construct a positive parenthood model to help prevent problems in their future family life. This study presents the assessment of an educational intervention carried out in collaboration with diverse child protection service professionals working to achieve this purpose.

Some studies on Family Preservation and Support programmes run by Child Protection Services have questioned the effectiveness of certain services, such as home visits or parenting training programmes, in preventing maltreatment (Chaffin et al. 2001). Other studies, however, confirm that said family education programmes have proved effective as regards reducing child maltreatment rates and improving psychosocial aspects in both children and their parents (Constantino et al. 2001).

Far from wanting to give the impression that there is little anyone can do to improve these highly complex situations, we believe that when working with so-called "difficult" families, it is crucial to explore and make use of the possibilities for tertiary prevention and educational improvement (Barudy 2001, 2005; Barudy

and Dantagnan 2005; Sunderland 2004; Zay 2005), rather than restricting oneself merely to the possibilities offered by social work. In this sense, sufficient data exist to sustain a positive, educational approach, based on a model of family education which encompasses the perspectives of prevention, resilience and positive development (Small and Memmo 2004), and which should meet at least three conditions:

1. In relation to the perspective of prevention, interventions should be designed to tackle the complexity of contexts of social vulnerability, bearing in mind the contributions of the ecological-systemic perspective. Firstly, it is important to emphasise maltreatment contexts, instead of focusing on abusive behaviour in an isolated manner (Belsky 1980, 1984, 1993). In this sense it should be stressed that risk and protection factors can be found both in individuals and in contexts, thus avoiding “blaming” parents and channelling everyone’s energy towards finding solutions. And secondly, as this perspective has highlighted, the aim is to provoke small-scale changes which may facilitate changes throughout the system as a whole.
2. In relation to the perspectives of resilience and positive development, it is important to offer both children and the adults responsible for their care resources to enable them to find ways out of their situation, and to encourage and help them not to give into the extreme vulnerability and loneliness in which they exist, but rather to take advantage of all positive possibilities. No one living in a world of impotence and frustration needs to be reminded of their difficulties. Rather, they need to be offered alternatives with their corresponding contexts, in order to enable them to experience other possibilities. In this sense, research into resilience (Cylrunik 2002; Barudy 2001, 2005; Barudy and Dantagnan 2005; Grotberg 2006) offers guidelines and strategies regarding how to carry out an intervention. Some studies assessing the effectiveness of family education programmes targeted at fostering active participation and improving both the quality of care provided by parents to their children and the children’s social development, have concluded that group meetings may constitute an effective method for involving families with high levels of stress in these programmes (Constantino et al. 2001).
3. It is important to set up and manage collaboration networks to ensure that any multidisciplinary intervention (social workers, psychologists, educators, etc.) is truly effective (Birchall and Hallet 1995, Farmer and Owen 1995; Corby 1999). The quantity of economic and human means and resources obviously deployed in these interventions is clearly insufficient when each person works in isolation (Ott 2003). It is all too easy to fall into a set routine and to become dispirited, especially when working with extremely difficult human and social situations. In this sense, diverse studies analysing the probabilities of child maltreatment recurrence during Child Protection Service interventions suggest that involving families in an aid alliance and encouraging them to accept and receive resources may reduce the probability of future maltreatment (DePanfilis and Zuravin 2002).

Objectives

The general aim of this study was to design and assess an educational intervention programme targeted at improving the parenting skills of families and the personal and social development of children living in situations of grave social vulnerability. Three specific objectives were identified:

1. To design the coordination, training and supervision procedure for all the stakeholders involved (facilitators working with the parent groups, parents, children and professionals from the Family Advice and Treatment Association, ARGABE: family workers (FWs), family supervisors and coordinators), both for the launch of the intervention programme and for its assessment.
2. To design one educational intervention programme for parents and another for children.
3. To implement the intervention programme for all of these groups and assess the results in order to answer the following questions:
 - Have the parents' parenting skills improved?
 - Have the children's personal and social skills improved?

Sample

The sample comprised children living in situations of grave social vulnerability, and their families, characterised by complex problems (social exclusion, psychiatric problems, unemployment, etc.) which interfere with their parenting abilities. 18 people from 10 families (six fathers, six mothers and six children [two boys and four girls]) participated in the first phase of the intervention. 15 people from six families (three fathers, five mothers and seven children [three boys and four girls]) participated in the second phase.

Method

The design, intervention and assessment process of this study was carried out in two phases over a period of one and a half years. Firstly, an initial assessment of the process was carried out, followed by a final assessment of the first phase of the intervention. Based on the results obtained, several improvements were proposed. During the second phase, the research-action model was followed to allow the various stakeholders involved in the intervention to play a more pivotal role. Priority was given to the qualitative analysis of the process and to the study of the evolution of each of the cases (Stake 2003). In both phases, five fortnightly 2-h sessions were held and a group format was used to make the intervention more dynamic. Three different groups were established: a group of men/fathers, a group of women/mothers and a children's group.

The study variables were as follows:

1. Parenting skills, in accordance with the dimensions of (a) democratic parenting style, (b) stimulation, (c) family planning, (d) teaching and role models, (e) discipline and (f) positive communication.
2. The children's personal and social development, based on (a) personal and social skills, (b) emotional difficulties, (c) relational difficulties, and (d) behavioural difficulties.

The assessment instruments used were as follows:

1. Fortnightly records maintained by family social workers regarding the personal and social development of the children and the parenting skills of their mothers and fathers.
2. Reports by group facilitators on the participants and the holding of the group sessions.
3. Initial, interim and final assessment reports by family social workers on the evolution of the families.
4. Personal and social Skill Questionnaires (Maras 2005) for children, parents and family social workers, respectively.

One education programme was designed for the parents' groups and another for the children's group.

The educational programme for children

A fun programme based on narrative was designed for the children's group, along with *Stories from the Collection* by Sunderland (2004), and a series of ice-breaking and cooperative games. The tales were written for children with serious social and emotional difficulties. Each helps to address a different problem: "A Niffleloo called Nevermind" (for children who bottle up their feelings), "Ruby and the Rubbish Bin" (for children with low self-esteem), "A Wibble called Biple" (for children who have hardened their hearts or become bullies), "The Frog Longed for the Moon to Smile" (for children who yearn for someone to love).

The tales were used in this intervention with the general aim of bringing the children closer to the world of emotions without feeling threatened. Furthermore, they also served as the structural basis for other types of activities centred on them, such as expressive or manual activities, and were used to provide a way into the home exercises set within the framework of the basic activities, and to make them more compelling for the children.

Games were used as educational elements with two aims. Firstly, games were designed which served both to foster the cohesion of the group and the personal and social development of the participants. Thus, for example, during the first session, a series of introductory games were played, such as "this is my friend" (in which each participant introduces a fellow group member) and a rule-establishing game called "The Nest" (in which participants are presented with a large board on which some boxes have already been completed with the basic rules, and the participants need to add further rules to the empty boxes). During the second session, trust games

(“Nose to Nose”) were played to foster physical contact through non-verbal communication and to provoke laughter. We also played peer communication and relationship-building games (“The Magic Book”, “Silhouettes of Esteem”). From the third session onwards, cooperative games were introduced (“Music”, “Travelling Shoes”, “Find the Tail” and “Gymkhana”).

Secondly, we used games designed to foster a relaxed atmosphere, which were systematically introduced more or less halfway through the session, and which lasted around 15 min each. We tried mainly to use games involving physical activity and, right from the start, priority was given to those games suggested by the children themselves. In the majority of cases, the games were traditional, well-known ones.

The educational training programme for parents

An adapted and simplified version of the “Active Parenting Today” programme (Spanish version) by Popkin (1999) was used for the parents. The modifications introduced were as followed:

1. *Contents, practical exercises and the video*: The contents focus on the principal parenting skills which this intervention aims to improve, namely:
 - *Democratic style* Employing a proactive, democratic parenting style.
 - *Motivation* Positively stimulating children.
 - *Teaching* Assuming the role of educators.
 - *Discipline* Setting limits and rules and teaching children to respect them.
 - *Support* Improving communications and expressing love and affection.
 - *Family planning* Improving the organisation of family life, in order to respond better to the children’s needs.

We also used the programme video to introduce parents to more positive parenting models and to carry out practical exercises during the session.

2. *Materials*: Given the fact that some parents have difficulty reading, the reading of the Parents’ Handbook from the Popkin programme was optional. Simple summaries were written of the concepts, educational resources and home activities. These materials were laminated to ensure they remained in optimum condition.
3. *Home activities*: In order to put the education resources presented during the group sessions into practice, and to guarantee their learning, regular use and general use in the home environment, 4 basic and 4 complementary types of home activities were selected for participants to engage in at home with their children.
4. *Procedure for the sessions*:
 - Initial greeting of the family.
 - Introduction and welcome to the group session.
 - Supervision of the home activity.
 - Presentation of the aim of the day’s session.
 - Exchange of experiences.

- Carrying-out of practical activities based on the video sequences, with “correct” and “incorrect” parent reactions.
- Use of role-play to practice the educational resources presented (“How I would tell my child...”, “What I would do to...”, etc.).
- Explanation of the general activity to be carried out in the home (for example, “have fun with my child”).
- Individualised guidance for each participant, specifying the activity to be carried out at home with their family (for example, “playing cards with my child”)
- Summing up of the session.
- Assessment of the session using the graduated satisfaction scale (1–10).

Basic home activities

With the aim of putting what had been learned during the group sessions into practice and assessing the result, four fortnightly Home Activities were planned for both parents and children (see Table 1). The first phase focused only on basic activities, while the second focused on both basic and complementary activities. These were established for all groups (fathers, mothers, children), while the complementary activities were only set for the parents’ groups (see Table 1). During the first session, the basic home activity was “having fun”, and parents were asked to (1) make a list of the fun things they would like to do and (2) ask their children what they would like to do. In the children’s group, a “notice board” was built

Table 1 General characteristics of the education programme

Objectives	Session contents		Fortnightly home activities	
	Parent s’ group	Children’s group	Basic	Complementary
(1) To foster children’s personal and social development	(1) Active and democratic parenting	(1) Children’s needs	(1) Sharing activities	(1) Proposing/selecting alternatives
(2) To develop parenting skills	(2) Stimulation and self-esteem	(2) Self-esteem	(2) Focusing on positive aspects	(2) Improving family organisation
	(3) Discipline and development of responsibility	(3) Responsibility	(3) Teaching how to be/being receptive	(3) Putting the consequence method into practice/ assuming responsibility
	(4) Support and cooperation	(4) Being affectionate and learning to care	(4) Showing affection	(4) Listening to each other
	(5) Improvements in family life	(5) Party		

which could be hung in a place where it would be seen by all the family. The children then painted, coloured and cut out ideas which expressed ways of having fun as a family, using the brainstorming technique. Next, they are asked to choose the activity they would most like to do with their parents and they wrote it on the notice board.

The second session focused on the basic activity “focusing on the positive”. After explaining the importance and meaning of telling their children that they have done something well, parents practice with different ways of expressing this sentiment (“it’s obvious you’ve made a real effort to...”, “I really like how you...”). With the children’s group, a tale is used to highlight the importance of recognising the positive things about others in their peer group and family. The activity used here was the game “Silhouettes of Esteem”, in which they painted and cut out a paper silhouette and others made positive comments. For homework, they were asked, following a brief brainstorming session, to decide upon something nice to say to their mother/father. In the third session, the group worked on the home activity, “responsibility”. In the parents’ groups, the importance of teaching children something (tidying away their toys, how to cook a particular dish) was highlighted. Specific activities were decided upon for each child. Similarly, in the children’s group, participants were asked to think of ways in which they could help out at home.

The basic activity for the fourth session focused on “cooperation”. In the parent’s groups, obstacles to communication were analysed along with the importance of gestures of affection/esteem when trying to gain children’s cooperation. In the children’s group, participants were asked to make a postcard to give to a special person (mother/father) and the work was shared out, so that the cooperation of the whole group was needed in order to succeed. The gifts were then put aside to be given to their respective recipients in session 5, which concluded the first part of the programme.

To a large extent, the fifth session was designed as a party, in which the children decorated the room ready to receive their parents and gave them the postcards they had made for them. Afterwards, a “gymkhana” was held with four meeting points (red—having fun, green—focusing on the positive, yellow—developing responsibility, and blue—cooperation), each of which referred to one of the central themes of the home activities carried out in both the parents’ and the children’s groups. It was a cooperative game in which everyone earned points which were then exchanged for a small gift.

Results

The following are the results of the assessment carried out at the end of the second intervention phase.

Parenting skills

The FWs reported a positive evolution in the majority of families, although this evolution was qualitatively different in each. Some families, for example,

underwent a more pronounced improvement in the support provided (being affectionate, listening, etc.), while others improved in relation to control (planning, teaching, setting limits and rules, natural and logical consequences, etc.).

Some differences were also found between fathers and mothers, with mothers gaining increased insight and engaging in more activities in the home. Fathers, on the other hand, while gaining a better understanding of the activities presented, nevertheless experienced more difficulties putting them into practice in the home environment.

While family workers reported a certain degree of improvement in relation to the parenting skills they were attempting to develop in the children's mothers and fathers, they also highlighted certain limitations.

In relation to fathers (see Table 2), they mainly highlighted improvements in the following skills: (1) responding to their children's needs, (2) understanding their needs, (3) being familiar with the democratic parenting role, (4) sharing activities with their children, and (5) focusing on the positive and stimulating their children. However, improvements were not always detected, and in the case of F4 and F5 (who failed to attend), no improvements were observed.

In relation to the group of mothers, improvements were observed in the following skills (see Table 3): (1) learning to set limits and control their children's behaviour, (2) developing communication and listening skills, (3) understanding the democratic parenting role, (4) sharing activities with their children, (5) developing self-control, (6) supporting their children and (7) understanding their needs. In the case of two mothers, M3 and M4 (who only attended during the second phase), hardly any improvement was detected.

It is also worth mentioning other positive results reported by the FWs, such as certain improvements in the personal and social development of mothers, specifically as regards self-esteem and self-confidence in their relationship with their children.

The assessment is very positive. We believe that this family has benefited greatly from the work carried out in the parent group. M11 seems very happy, more self-confident in her actions and now has slightly higher self-esteem. This is very important, especially considering the characteristics of this mother (FW12).

In the case of fathers, a number of improvements were also reported as regards their view of themselves as competent parents.

This year, he has been more involved in the activities carried out with his daughter, and this has had a positive impact on his idea of himself as a father. He now sees himself as more competent and capable with his daughter (FW3: F3. Phase II).

On the other hand, the FWs also highlighted some difficulties found with both fathers and mothers, such as a lack of consistency in relation to the home activities, an undervaluing of the contents of the programme and failure to attend some sessions. In the fathers' group, difficulties were also found in relation to listening, expression, emotional recognition and awareness of the needs of their children.

Table 2 Types of improvements in fathers' parenting skills detected by FWs after the two phases of our intervention

Responding to basic needs	Understanding the democratic parenting role	Understanding their children's basic needs	Sharing activities with their children	Focusing on the positive and stimulating their children
<p>(F3) (Phase II) This year he has been more involved in activities carried out with his daughter..., this has resulted in him playing a greater role in his daughter's life, not just in covering basic needs (food, hygiene, etc.)</p>	<p>(F2) (Phase I) Greater awareness of some of the difficulties involved in parenting, especially as regards developing children's self-esteem and the importance of teaching-learning processes</p> <p>(F3) (Phase II) Repeating the course has had an enormously positive impact, since he now feels more secure in the group and more secure as regards assimilating the contents. His attitude now is much more open to learning. All this means he now plays a more central role in his function as a parent</p> <p>.... He is more aware of the role he should be playing with his daughter to ensure that she learns certain skills. As a result, he has been more consistent with her, trying to get her to acquire certain habits and routines (personal hygiene, tidying her bedroom)</p>	<p>(F5) (Phase I) The course is proving a very positive experience for him and he is trying hard to engage in the activities set. He seems to be very willing and is more aware and tuned into his children's problems and needs</p> <p>(F5 and M5) (Phase I) They are more aware of the negative influence that their behaviour may have on their children</p>	<p>(F2) (Phase II) Through the tasks carried out at home, he has been able to get closer to his son during their leisure time</p> <p>(F3) (Phase II) This year, he has been more involved... engaging in leisure activities with his daughter</p>	<p>(F2) (Phase I) He has a more positive idea of his son H2P140; he has a more realistic idea of his son H2P110</p> <p>(F2) (Phase II) ...and, even more importantly, it forces him to direct his attention towards the positive aspects of his son, and to verbalise them. We believe this is very positive, since they are experiences that his son has not had before. ...It is also striking how surprised his son was when F2 started to highlight positive things about him, which in turn made F2 think to some extent about whether it was really something he had only very seldom done until now</p>

Table 3 Types of improvements in mothers' parenting skills detected by FWs after the two phases of our intervention

Understanding the democratic parenting role	Understanding their children's basic needs	Sharing activities with their children	Developing parental self-control	Providing support	Developing communication and listening skills	Establishing limits and controlling behaviour
(M5) (Phase I) She sees that the things she can teach her children are important... She is better able to...adopt a more critical and thoughtful attitude to her role as a mother (M12) (Phase II) It offers her alternatives and helps her take decisions	(M5) (Phase II) Although it is only something occasional, rather than a stable, ongoing occurrence, this mother is now more in touch with and sensitive to her children's needs. This is linked to the work carried out as part of the programme and the positive experience of the past year	(M5) (Phase I) In the way in which she uses her free time (M5) (Phase II) The family atmosphere has improved (less shouting, more time spent engaging in activities with her children)... and this in turn has encouraged them to play more games with their mother (M12) (Phase II) She understands the importance of sharing leisure spaces with her children	(M5) (Phase I) She has a calmer attitude when meeting the demands of her children... she is more aware of her limitations, and able to ask for help in order to avoid losing control (M5) (Phase II) The family atmosphere has improved (less shouting)	(M5) (Phase II) She transmits more affection to her children	(M5) (Phase I) She has begun to empathise with her children more than before, using active listening techniques (M11) (Phase I) There is greater communication between mother and child (M12) (Phase II) Her ability to listen has improved, and she is more aware of what her daughter is thinking and feeling	(M5) (Phase I) ...she is able to highlight the positive results obtained from imposing limits in certain situations (M11) (Phase I) She does not enter into arguments with her son as she did before, Partly because the consequences are now established beforehand and both try to respect them. The mother is learning to negotiate with her son (M11) (Phase II) She acknowledges that she has had difficulties imposing limits and laying down rules, but little by little she is putting what she has learned into practice and feels good about it (M12) (Phase II) She is better now at imposing limits and rules...She uses reward and punishment appropriately

In the mothers' group, the FWs highlighted difficulties controlling impulses and laying down rules.

Children's personal and social development

Changes occurred to differing degrees and at different levels, as shown in both the table (which also includes the indicators that guided the records) and the reports. The most striking change was that observed in H2P12, a 12-year-old boy undergoing both pharmacological and psychological treatment who was seriously behind in his schooling, and who had been assigned a special needs teacher. His severe attention difficulties and problems with impulsiveness and self-control were apparent during the whole first phase of the intervention, accompanied by behaviours indicative of extreme anxiety.

Anarchic, disobedient, uncontrolled. He requires constant supervision and attention or else he resorts to continuous manifestations of force, kicking balls hard, entering rooms in which he is not allowed, taking things he cannot use, etc. He does not or does not want to engage in any scheduled activity, everything has to be his idea. He talks constantly about his brothers and the things they teach him, rude words, dirty jokes, words related to sex, etc. He finds it very hard to concentrate and talk about something. He really has to make an effort to do so, and making an effort to achieve something is not something he can or indeed has any interest in doing. As far as I can tell, he engages in very few activities with his father; the activities he has engaged in recently were with his brothers and a group of friends.

He needs someone by him constantly. He loses control easily, either to attract attention or due to behavioural difficulties. He eats biscuits compulsively, giving himself stomach aches (Session 2 monitor report. Phase 1).

During the second phase of the intervention, very significant changes occurred. The progress made becomes evident when we consider the scores obtained on the record scale, at all levels, both as regards rules and limits and in relation to interactions from the third session onwards (see Table 4).

I detected difficulties mainly in the two first sessions... as the sessions progressed, he became more and more relaxed, so much so that he seemed like a completely different child. From being isolated, having a short attention span and little control and losing concentration easily..., he has become focused and attentive, and has begun to relate to others... He is a generous and sociable child, and we feel we have uncovered his true self during this second phase of the programme. He is able to relate to others in a group situation and he likes to lead the sessions... Having learned how, he has now become very involved in the group and with his monitor. On many occasions he has suggested games to play and has enriched the larger group, the smaller group and the educators themselves. He is willing to accept suggestions made to him. If he does not like something, or wants to do something else, he has no trouble saying so (Final monitor's report. Phase II).

Table 4 Monitor record (Phase II)

Monitor record for children in Phase II	H2P120	H3PM9A(1) ^a	H4PM6A	H4PM50	H5PM50 ^b	H5PM7A ^c
<i>Limits and rules</i>						
Respects the rules in games and activities	3 3 4 4 4	4 4 4 4	2 3 3 3 3	2 2 2 2 2	2 3 3	2 2 2
Respects turns	3 2 3 4 4	4 4 3 3	2 3 3 3 3	3 2 2 2 2	2 3 3	2 2 2
Respects educators' instructions	3 3 4 4 4	4 4 3 4	2 2 2 2 3	2 2 2 2 2	3 3 3	3 2 3
<i>Interaction skills</i>						
Peers						
Relates to peers spontaneously and without withdrawing	2 3 4 4 4	4 2 3 3	4 4 3 3 3	3 2 3 3 3	2 2 2	2 2 2
Relates to peers without losing control or becoming overexcited	2 3 3 3 4	3 3 3 3	1 2 2 2 3	2 2 2 2 2	3 3 3	2 2 2
Collaborates and cooperates with peers, helping and suggesting ideas	1 1 3 4 4	3 2 2 3	3 3 1 3 3	2 3 2 3 3	2 2 2	2 2 2
Adults						
Relates to adults spontaneously and without withdrawing	2 3 4 4 4	3 3 3 3	4 4 3 3 3	3 2 3 3 3	1 2 2	2 2 2
Relates to adults without losing control or becoming overexcited	2 3 3 3 4	3 3 3 3	1 2 2 2 3	2 2 2 2 2	3 3 3	2 2 3
Collaborates and cooperates with peers, helping and suggesting ideas	2 3 3 4 4	3 3 2 2	3 3 1 3 3	2 3 3 3 3	2 2 2	2 2 2

^a H3PM9A(1): Did not attend the last session

^b H5PM50: Did not attend the first or third sessions

^c H5PM7A: Did not attend the first or third sessions

He tends to be much calmer in recreational activities. (F.R. by FW)

Indeed, during the two-first sessions, the monitor's reports recounted episodes of isolation and non-collaboration, and even rudeness on occasions. A key part of the progress observed involved putting a stop to these situations, maintaining a certain degree of closeness at all times, employing "accompaniment" strategies and offering him the opportunity to "help" other youngsters, making him feel useful when he did it properly. Finding contexts which enable cooperation and help is one of the programme's aims, and we believe that these contexts constitute one of the reasons for the changes observed. In this case, the educational intervention facilitated a context in which the child was able to realise and reinforce his potential in a gradual manner.

His relationship with other children is correct, but he finds it difficult to approach people, and if others approach him, he finds it hard and withdraws, even moving away unconsciously on many occasions (Session 1).

He was rude to a fellow participant at one point, and we stopped that behaviour immediately. Also, he has sometimes used some inappropriate words to explain his ideas, but when asked to speak nicely, he changed tone immediately (Phase II-M. Session 2).

If he sees that one of his comments annoys another child, he withdraws and, in his own way, apologises... Today, he has been very calm in general. He has been more receptive than ever to the needs and moods of others... He has been very collaborative with everyone (Phase II. Session 4).

His relationship with the other children is improving all the time, becoming more natural and spontaneous. In this session, he has interacted a lot. He has been caring and affectionate, especially with the little ones. (Phase II-Session 5-M)

The other changes observed were less dramatic, for example in the case of H4PM50, a 5-year-old boy with psychomotor difficulties and relational problems, and his sister, H4PM6A, a 6-year-old girl with cognitive and emotional difficulties. Like the child described above, both children attended all the sessions.

As shown in the table, in the case of the brother, difficulties with rules and limits persisted throughout the second phase of the intervention.

The difficulties are always centred on a failure to respect the rules established in the group. He listens carefully to everything said in the group, but at certain moments he loses control, creating disorder and disruption among his peers. These attention and control difficulties have been apparent from the first to the final session. Despite constant reiteration of the rules, no progress has been made in this sense (H4PM50, final monitor's report from Phase II).

On the other hand, as regards collaboration with both peers and adults, the child improved significantly after starting the course with fairly serious problems in this area.

As the sessions progressed, he began to show greater trust in his peers, and to collaborate with them... Having said that, he still loses control sometimes and efforts have to be made to draw his attention to what he is doing. Today, he has been more receptive to our indications. He has been very calm and was affectionate towards his sister, his fellow group members and his monitors. (Session 5: M. Phase II).

There has been a notable difference between the first session, in which he was merely accepting of what was happening, and last Saturday, when the trust built up prompted him to participate and made him feel more at ease. Over the sessions, he has gradually come to trust both the group and the adults, so much so that he has made himself very popular with everyone (Final monitor's report).

The case of his sister is slightly different. She is described by everyone as a friendly, funny girl, very protective of her brother and very independent, but with an excessive tendency to want to do things by herself. She therefore has enormous

trouble accepting her own mistakes, and on some occasions even loses control totally in response to such a situation. The records reflect a slight improvement in relation to rules and limits, which took place very quickly (by the second session), as well as an improvement in self-control in relation to both peers and adults. An improvement was also detected in her response to instructions given by the educators. She scored well for spontaneity in relationships and cooperation right from the start, and no major changes were detected there, with the exception of a drop during the third session as the result of a greater level of conflict within the family during that fortnight.

She sometimes gets overexcited and loses control when it is time to do drawing or cutting... She wants to do everything and perform her task as well as her fellow group members. She is very independent as regards engaging in activities and does not listen, because she always wants to do everything her way, but she is always willing to help both adults and peers (Session 2. Monitor's report. Phase II).

She is always ready to collaborate, but in one of the sessions (3) she was a little absentminded, supposedly as the result of P4's new job, which affected her. This only happened once, and was not repeated (Final monitor's report. Phase II).

We should also highlight the case of another two siblings who, despite attending only three sessions, nevertheless underwent various changes. The children in question are H5PM40, a 4-year-old boy, and H5PM7A, a 7-year-old girl. The boy is described in the background report by the FWs as intelligent, affectionate and charming, but with difficulties respecting rules and limits, and a tendency to resort to tantrums to achieve his ends. His sister also has problems respecting rules and limits, and, moreover, demands constant attention from adults. She receives psychological treatment and support in the classroom. The lack of limits regulating her behaviour is one of the problems identified by the FW as a possible area of improvement.

In the case of the brother, the numerical records (see Table 4) suggest an improvement in scores (from 2 to 3) for respecting rules, limits and turns, and for interacting with adults. No changes were observed in any of the other aspects, mainly due to poor attendance.

He finds it difficult to fit into the group, due to lack of continuity in the sessions. No development is evident. He participates fairly well but limits himself only to carrying out the activity. He does not cooperate too much with his peers (Final monitor's report).

Nevertheless, in their reports, the FWs identify some improvements and state that he is keen to attend the sessions.

Significant changes have been observed (Process I report by FW during Phase II).

Like his sister, he knows the group offers him positive things and he attends happily. Both children felt disappointed on the days they could not attend

because their father did not take them (Process II report by FW during Phase II).

In the case of the sister, the pattern is more or less identical, except for a slight, almost inappreciable, improvement in self-control in her relationships with adults (i.e. not getting overexcited). Monitors were surprised at her individualism and at how difficult she found it to adapt to working with both her peers and adults.

She has trouble working as part of a team and cooperating with peers and adults. She functions independently, and has fairly individualistic reactions to other people's proposals. When she cannot do what she wants, or doesn't like the activities, she loses control, becoming easily overexcited and fleeing from any kind of conflict. She loses concentration fairly easily, and has trouble focusing on a specific task. She is always demanding new activities (Final monitor's report).

The case of H3PM9A is quite different from those described above. H3PM9A is a 9-year-old girl who initially scored very highly in the reports. She is described by the FWs as intelligent and sociable with good verbal expression skills, but excessively adult, with a lot of power in the family, "since it is she who decides what time everyone has dinner, goes to bed, etc."

She has no trouble respecting limits, turns and rules, and responds positively to the instructions issued by the educators. She collaborates with both peers and adults. She is calm, sociable and communicative. She participated actively in 4 sessions, although she failed to attend the last session (Final monitor's report).

She tends to withdraw during interactions with peers and adults when she is worried. The personal circumstances of F3 and M3 influence the way in which she interacts in the group, and there is a certain tendency towards isolation and a reduction in communication (Final monitor's report).

The child attended the group sessions quite happily, seems excited about them and talks about them with the FW. She collaborates more and is more respectful of her peers. Similarly, she respects rules and limits more and collaborates more, especially with adults (Final report by Family W.).

The FWs also mention other relevant improvements, such as the children being happy that their parents were "learning to look after them".

She attends the sessions willingly, although she finds it difficult to verbalise what takes place there. She is delighted that her father is more involved in doing things with her (H3PM9A, FW3 report).

Like his sister, he knows the group offers him positive things and he attends happily. Both children felt disappointed on the days they could not attend because their father did not take them (H5PM40 and H5PM7A, FW5 process report, Phase II).

She seems very happy to attend, and says she now has a second school (FW13).

She continues to be very interested in participating. She was not happy that they did not participate in the last session. H4MP8A is delighted that her parents attend the group meetings to “learn to look after her better”. Since her parents have been attending the course, they convey positive messages to her more frequently and she is very happy about that (H4MP8A, FW4 process report, Phase III).

Children as agents of change in the family

Focusing on home activities from both the parents’ and children’s perspectives is one of the most important aspects highlighted by the FWs responsible for monitoring the evolution of these families in their everyday lives. There are two areas in which the effect of joining forces in this way becomes most apparent.

Firstly, the initial activity, i.e. having fun, made an impact on all families, although the degree of initiative and frequency with which said activities are engaged in varies.

It is worth mentioning, as a positive point, that H2P120 has, with the help of the educator, made specific requests to his/her father regarding the activities he/she would like to do with him, thus prompting the father to actually engage in the first activity proposed (FW process report on H2P120).

The FWs highlight the fact that, in all cases, efforts have been made to carry out this activity. This has given rise not only to an improvement in the way children perceive their relationship with their parents, but also to a greater motivation among parents, who witness the positive response of their children.

While engaging in the shared game and fun activities, etc., the little girl really enjoyed herself, especially with her father, since he rarely engages in such activities (FW Phase I report on H3PM9A).

The activities that the parents proposed served to introduce new elements that the children really liked and which they got a lot out of (borrowing books from the toy library, doing jigsaw puzzles) (Final FW report on H4P5A-H4P4O).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that witnessing these small changes and their impact on the family, made the FWs aware of the importance of this very basic element; so much so, in fact, that they said they would incorporate it systematically into their future work.

Secondly, the sessions prompted children to start doing their bit towards improving the situation and atmosphere in the home, assuming responsibilities which, furthermore, help boost their own self-esteem, since they feel they are contributing positively and feel that their efforts are being recognised.

One of the tasks established as a result of the work carried out by parents in the school was encouraging the children to help lay the table and clear up their

plates after dinner (an activity they themselves proposed to improve the family organisation) (Final FW report on H4P5A-H4P4O).

Similarly, the fact that the children were asked to take their work home with them also, as a reminder of the activities carried out in class, encouraged (in some cases) their parents to take them into account more.

The activities carried out with them have been agreeable. There have also been improvements in the home: more children's decorations, drawings hung on the walls, etc., all of which have a positive effect on the children (FW Phase I report on H4P5A-H4P4O).

Other aspects, such as saying positive things, proved more difficult for some parents. However, the fact that the children were also encouraged to try and say positive things to their parents ("This food Mum cooked is lovely") proved very important.

The example below shows how a father, with an enormous effort, started saying positive things to his son and then realised, from the reaction and surprise shown by that son, that he had not done so sufficiently until that moment.

...and, even more importantly, it forces him to direct his attention towards the positive aspects of his son, and to verbalise them. We believe this is very positive, since they are experiences that his son has not had before. ...It is also striking how surprised his son was when F2 started to highlight positive things about him, which in turn made F2 think to some extent about whether it was really something he had only very seldom done until now (F2, Phase II).

They also highlight that some children encourage their parents to carry out the home activities together with them, and that improvements were observed in the parent-child relationships related directly to their participation in the programme.

She is a girl who likes to do and share things with her mother. Since the experience is proving very positive, she now demands to do these things, which in turn motivates her mother even more (H12M5A, FW12 Report).

The relationship between the mother and her children is improving. The course provides her with the resources and strategies she needs to be an effective parent. This is another of the areas in which I feel the course is helping (FW5).

The children have attended the sessions willingly. Improvements have been observed in their relationship with their mother (FW5).

Final reflections

The nature of the study conducted does not enable us to draw generalised conclusions, although it does allow us to detect possible variables which may explain the improvements observed and reported by those involved in the project, as outlined below.

First, the “family” experience is extremely gratifying. The programme provides a set of optimum conditions for families to “organise themselves” and “share” in an activity together, and for children to see the whole thing as a family leisure activity.

Second, the educational intervention not only contributes towards ensuring that children living in situations of grave social vulnerability feel hopeful that their parents “are learning to look after them”; it also sows the seeds for a positive concept of parenthood. Minors are made aware of their parents’ inability to look after them, but at the same time, they realise that they are making an effort to learn and improve. As Barudy (2001) points out, children’s recognition of their parents’ failure as parents absolves them of the feelings of guilt so frequently experienced in their family situation. The relevance of this is that it contributes to avoiding cross-generational learning of inappropriate parenting patterns. Feeling happy or thankful that their parents are participating in these group sessions is a sign of children’s awareness of their parents’ need for training and, as one FW pointed out, the recognition of parents’ inability to function adequately is the first step towards working with their children.

Third, the informal settings and moments of the sessions (breakfast, coffee break, 30-min welcome period prior to the start of the sessions) improves the group dynamics and helps establish satisfactory relationships between all participants.

Fourth, children’s input and the fact that they motivate their parents to undertake activities in the home facilitate change. Children see the effort being made by their parents and contribute to it with a receptive and active attitude, especially when prompted to do so by the programme. In fact, they proved themselves to be perfectly capable of encouraging their parents to engage in gratifying shared activities, making proposals, verbalising positive thoughts and contributing by assuming minor responsibilities in the home, etc. The children’s enthusiasm and satisfaction at attending the sessions in turn motivates their parents to attend.

Fifth, the gender-based composition of the educational groups contributed to the improvements observed and was highlighted as extremely positive by the FWs. The difference in the way mothers and fathers see parenthood, and the way in which they parent, justifies the gender-oriented design and development of these programmes.

Sixth, inter-professional involvement and coordination at all phases of the intervention is vital. Although FWs and group monitors collaborated constantly right from the beginning, greater enthusiasm and an increasing involvement were observed when discussing improvements, compiling the records and reports and engaging in coordination work. Some FWs see the programme as a complementary tool, a kind of “springboard” for their work in the home. So much so, indeed, that in some cases they have even incorporated elements of the programme into their everyday activities. We believe that this, without doubt, is one of the key aspects responsible for the improvements achieved, and is also an unmistakable sign that work continues to be carried out on the objectives, even after the end of the programme itself. As a next step, such inter-professional collaborations could be instigated with school staff.

Seven, we should also mention that the study carried out only measures the short-term effects of the intervention; hence, an extended assessment should be

considered in order to analyse the scope of the improvements achieved in the families in the longer term.

Finally, we would like to point out there are a number of considerations that all interventions concerning minors in situations of grave social vulnerability and their families should bear in mind. Interventions of this kind require a great deal of effort and a lot of human and material human resources in order to achieve small yet significant changes within the families involved. Our involvement in this particular study made it clear just how significant a role is played by educational programmes targeting such families in facilitating primary and secondary prevention.

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