

Professionals and parents in play

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Nowadays, the words *family* or *families* bring to mind people and their numerous subjective outlooks, people who in their unique situations move along the pathways of complex, “mobile” lives, that are often not fully or properly shared as they were intended. Often, rapid changes are “imposed” within time limits (of daily life and all other manner of reasons), so, for nearly all of us, we feel *rushed* and this leads to a sense of widespread and undefined discomfort which has now become normal in today’s society. Because this is so commonplace it leads us to believe that we cannot ask for help on which to base purpose-built actions and/or specific services. However, this widespread and undefined discomfort, that often finds expression in identity crises, psychosomatic disorders and difficulties in relationships and so on, runs the risk of turning into a more serious uneasiness; a slow, constant imbalance of one’s mental and emotional wellbeing that must be safeguarded in one’s “normal” spheres of action.

That is why the Tuscan project actions for family education are so important in their role as structured educational services for early childhood. The project can, and must, become a place in which the education of the young goes hand in hand with training for parents. By its very nature this is an education in how to change and develop oneself and adapt to the circumstances in which we live, the capacity to transform alongside other people.

The actions have been planned and implemented as an integral part of the education services. The family education actions are aimed at so-called normal families (but do exclude those with disabled children, those with social difficulties etc). The actions are planned by consultants (educators, pedagogical coordinators, pedagogues, psychologists, paediatricians etc.) working in concert and parents. The plans have been

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made by people rather than professionals with particular roles and are useful in the recognition (that leads to the improvement and enrichment) of educational skills of each parent and family. In addition, the network that is setup is a valuable source of exchange that helps overcome the isolation of modern families and provides reciprocal support.

Reciprocity and exchange help in the recognition of cultural stereotypes and move focus away from the “internal family” of each participant. Through these processes family education develops the ability of reflection that can provide support, in the different phases of one’s life, to ensure that people formulate schemes for their life and how these schemes can and must be negotiated (yet never in a way that is final). The skills acquired help define what is feasible, in real situations in which people find themselves and with whomsoever they will need to interact. Negotiation, between couples, parents and children, original families and extended families is of fundamental importance, partly because roles, that include spheres of influence and the power of each role, are not definitive. Consequently, the internal and external equilibrium of each family system is defined and redefined by the (re)conciliation of the differences between all those involved.

Negotiation is an art that must be developed using passion and reason, whilst accepting the conflict and mutual “convenience” that guides us when finding the right distance that allows us – this is true both for Schopenhauer’s hedgehogs as well as the members of every family – to live “intimately” avoiding any mutual reciprocal harm. Negotiations need respect and understanding; these are derived from listening to oneself and others, from listening to ways of being – that also includes our deepest desires and darker side – with everyone making sense of desires and of actions; assuming responsibilities (resulting from desires and choices) is also a part of negotiation. This is a “hot” topic for today’s families who often express bewilderment towards parental responsibilities that are usually only seen as advocating the expressing of desires. In those families where individuals stand out because of the identities of their individual members (which parents express needs, motivations, and desires whilst encouraging their children to do likewise) the educational model is fundamentally based on self-fulfilment. The refusal of parental responsibility, in terms of relational obligations, is less common in contemporary families and can also be seen in undertakings towards society as a whole. The approach is to provide intensive support to children who are also involved in their dealings with the “us” that is the couple, which also requires time, energy, mediation, and integration into the

educational model of the ethics of self-fulfilment, combined with creating a sense of responsibility which presupposes providing behaviour that satisfies both communicative and regulatory requirements.

Naturally, we must remember that today families find themselves unravelling complex educational relationships against a social and cultural background that is crisscrossed by *educational meteorites* that younger parents, in particular, (who are especially adverse to educational models they have experience due to intergenerational conflicts) risk chasing after like *comets* on well-marked paths in a society identifies a person's value and well-being with their wealth and success. Yet because many people experience the *sirens* of this "degraded ecology" (to use Bronfenbrenner's words) in their daily lives it becomes essential to come across and experience situations that promote the approval of others and oneself in all those places in which one lives one's life.

The actions of family education in educational services acts as a first line of defence. The actions are arranged to include a multifaceted team of consultants who do not paper over gaps in knowledge during the exchanges between professionals and parents and raises a proper awareness of infancy and helps to identify the *fireflies* (of educational trends) from the *lanterns* (of scientific principles). It is fundamental that the team of professionals shares the experiences of the *project group* (that makes up the action), the *group work* (to help provide an understanding of the processes that involve everyone), and of *targeted training* that includes psychodynamic support – since each family has its own history. Using these principles, not only can the team of consultants guarantee a range of proposals that are capable of satisfying a number of needs, interests and idiosyncrasies of the varied families, but, by playing with the diversity of personal and professional stories it can act as a mirror for "the multiplicity of perspectives" that are necessary when working with different family situations.

The experience of family education has also highlighted the importance of involving a multifaceted team of professionals, its *involvement with* parents (even if the professionals *are not* themselves parents). In this mutual exchange there is no particular teacher but everyone imparts something; by acting and observing and reflecting on the significance of consequences, the different ways of *being* with children, other adults and above all, oneself. For this reason, it is appropriate to develop courses for small stable groups of parents and their children and the consultants with actions that promote the initial *doing* and *observing*. These actions start with real experiences which emerge from what has been shared and

lead to the educational models that are often implicit in each situation. In this way, we have a clear playing field that is equally shared and which stimulates pleasure and enjoyment whilst avoiding subordination. Space is also given to *analogical languages* which often communicate more than verbal utterances and promote listening to differences before feeling emotions that inevitably exist and which act as *the breakthrough* to taking onboard different skills, abilities, cultures and origins (which nearly always exist). The moment of reflection that follows the moment of *doing*, supports the observation of oneself and thereby provides emotional decentralization through comparison and paragons. The reflections also helps rebuild the significance of educational choices which are the basis of the ties of one's family relationships. During encounters it is inevitable that parents tell stories, bring photos, objects and memories from their own childhood and unknowingly compile their own *educational biography* drawn from autobiographical introspection. This is particularly the case when the courses include creative writing such as, daily diaries, marginal notes, message and letter boxes etc.

It is the task of the project team to plan for the space, time and different approaches for these encounters, for example 6 or 7 encounters per month. These meetings are a significant source of situations on which to reflect, they typically comprise the following stages: the welcoming of parents and children to the periods for games for young and old (with the involvement of at least 2 consultants) lasting for about an hour (play and observation), to the separation (that might include a short break for food) of parents and children (who are entertained by their educators with other games and activities), the meeting of just adults (during which the consultants have the task of facilitating *words for expressing* the emotions, feelings and thoughts that accompanied the moments of *doing* with their children) before the reunion of parents and children and finally goodbyes.

To facilitate participation the projects/courses for family education may take place against a backdrop of themes; the most simple of these is spontaneous play. This has also been the most "fruitful" (in terms of wealth and variety) as it enables parents to discover the emotions that a child expresses whilst playing as well as the emotions aroused in the parents themselves. Parents also find that children reveal themselves (the developmental stage they are passing through) and its is a foil for others, particularly the most important adults that the child has around him or herself and how they are perceived by the child (which corresponds to how they are inside) and not how they wish to appear.

In this setting our work as professionals is to help parents pay attention to the details of children's behaviour and emotions and so understand the underlying dynamics of the complex network of interaction that comes into play each time. The varied composition of each group was an important factor for this. For example, a group comprising 15 parents, with children ranging from about 17 months to three years of age and including a mother with a well advanced pregnancy, saw the establishment of a game, during the first encounter, in which a ferry (built by the pregnant mother's husband) transported cars from a garage to a pier that lead to a number of roads. The game developed (with cars, piers, one-way and return routes) and was repeated during the subsequent meetings and increasingly absorbed the children, whose concentration and time spent on the game surprised the parents. The children made a connection with the "big tummy" and birth - and separation (*We come out of their and go where? What do you find? Can you go back?*). The group were enthusiastic about this unexpected discovery that made sense of other less comprehensible games, played by the children, even those played at home that revolved around the themes of being in or out, of distancing oneself and drawing close of being big or little.

This pleasant game that was shared, together with the unpredictability of children, put the parents and consultants in the here-and-now of the children and situations where they do what they can/are able to do. In this way, it was far easier for the consultants to help the parents reflect on the inappropriateness of certain attitudes and behaviour by the parents, such as the situation that involved three-year-old Elena and her parents. Whilst seated between her parents the child "filled in" the centre of a canvas in brown. Her father painted a blue sky above and her mother the sea below. The child enlarged her brown area which the parents partially covered with extensions of their sky and sea (they seem to be fighting for space). Elena moves away and starts painting on another canvas, her parents follow her and the scene repeats itself. Elena stops painting and looks around, her father urges her, «come on let's do it together» and her mother starts another drawing on a sheet and says to Elena, «look how lovely, you finish it!». Elena goes to the play house where there are another two girls and changes game completely. When speaking to the other parents, Elena's mother and father say they are upset that girl stopped playing with them («lots of parents complain about having to play with their children but we'd like to...»), this gives us the opportunity to see how a children's move towards autonomy is nourished by personal space and time, by the possibilities to express

and depict their internal world (not necessarily made up of a blue sky). It also enables us to reflect on how, sometimes, the parents' need to help and facilitate the growth of their children may cause them not to see the children but treat them as *white canvasses* to fill in with bright colours. The parents seemed to be struck by this view and a mother emotionally stated that she is actively involved with her children's play because «nobody ever played with me and I was always left alone...». We make a reference to Winnicott to show that a child who plays in his mother's presence but without her attention does not feel alone, on the contrary, particularly from three years of age onwards the child may experiment in a safe context with an initial sense of independence. Elena's parents are "reassured" and conclude that, «in that case, if she's not upset with us, that's OK». They had thought that their daughter's behaviour was a sort of "reprisal" for an inadequacy on their part that they were trying to overcome by being more involved with their child.

Many parents in the group displayed a certain difficulty in dealing with behaviour that was derived from their children's developmental needs and desire to affirm themselves. The children's "NOs" and constant requests were seen as "incomprehensible capriciousness" to which parents reacted by falling into tiring "power plays", some of this behaviour was even seen as being aggressive. For example, at the first meeting 28-month-old Daniele runs around trying to spill the containers from various games, his mother runs after him, tells him off and stops him, when he spills the basket containing animals he chooses the ferocious ones and he makes them fight and hit each other, his "distressed" mother asks, «why are you doing that?» and when he gets excited she says, «stop the game!», Daniele is holding a large tiger tightly and runs around the room roaring at his mother. From the play-fighting with animals, the adults comment on the connection of apparently similar behaviour and different areas of exploration, affirmation and opposition and breakdown, we also discuss aggression and its functions according to the stages of development. Finally, we all try to play *Signornò*: This is a game in which the children must do the opposite of what the teacher/educator says. Symbolically it is a sort of authorisation to disobey instructions and lightens the tension that a child may feel as a result of natural urges to oppose adults on whom he is dependant in terms of emotions and upbringing. When the child presents his opposition he is afraid that the adult no longer loves him. During this game more than a few parents found it difficult to oppose the "doctors".

Generally once it has been suggested to parents that their children's behaviour is not derived from unchangeable character traits but is an expression of how a child deals with a specific stage in his development. This then leads parents to question themselves which in turn arouses memories of their own childhood (compared to that of their children) and the relationships they had with their parents when young. Their parents are now their children's grandparents and the relationship is very different, many of the young parents have mentioned how they feel suspended between being children and parents in search of their own identity just as their children are.

Understanding the difficulties of the adults and accompanying them along their difficult path of parenthood was a fundamental step for putting them in touch with their children in a sphere other than that of carer, a sphere that makes it possible to discover the incredible capacity that children have to take onboard not only what their parents do not say, but also the emotional states that the latter may barely be aware of.

This family education project, that benefits from the participation of professionals within the group, gives the opportunity of providing valuable communication concerning the behaviour and play of children thereby making parents aware of the dynamics, the expectations and conflicts (both conscious and unconscious) that intertwine the emotional ties with the child. These dynamics, the expectation and conflicts, if not understood in their symbolic and communicative light can lead to barriers in the relationship that cause discomfort in both the child and parent.

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