

Review

The Potential of Networks for Families in the Child Protection System: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: There has recently been increased interest in the potential for formal and informal networks to aid interventions with biologic families in helping them achieve reunification in the context of the child protection system. When group support is provided to families, the creation of a network of social support seems to be a consequence. The article analyzes the conceptualization of social support in order to create social support networks and the benefits on the intervention with families in the framework of the child protection system through a systematic review. From a wide search 4348 documents, finally 14 articles were included in the reviews. Results show that social support is considered a process by which social resources are provided from formal (professional services and programs associated with those services in any off the protection, health of educational systems) and informal (extended family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances) networks, allowing the families to confront daily moments as well as in crisis situations. This social support is related to emotional, psychological, physical, instrumental, material and information support that allow families to face their difficulties. Formal and informal networks of child protection systems contribute to social support, resilience, consolidation of learning and the assistance of families to social intervention programs.

Keywords: family support; child protection; group intervention

1. Introduction

Family reunification in child protection systems refers to the experiences a child has when they return to live with their family of origin after a temporary separation as a result of a measure of protection of foster care and/or residential foster care (Balsells et al. 2016a). However, the process is more complex than this definition, since it is important to understand reunification as the set of considerations, strategies and actions necessary to achieve the return of the child to the home and family safely (Nager 2010), which involves resolving conflict situations, maintaining the emotional ties of the children and their parents, improving their parental skills and, especially, ensuring that the family provides a stable, safe and affectionate environment.

To achieve stable family reunification, a series of interventions and resources are launched, such as the provision of economic, social, school, home or even therapeutic support if there is a problem of mental health or substance addiction, in addition to a possible intervention of socio-educational character aimed at improving parental skills (Balsells et al. 2016a). Facilitating birth parents' access to the full continuum of services and integrating them into the overall case plan is crucial to resolving concerns to ensure the child's safety and eventual reunification (Fernandez 2014).

In this way, programs that seek to support the specific parental competencies that families have to develop in a process of reception and reunification represent a necessary strategy for the improvement in the exercise of parenthood (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011).

The group methodology offers professionals and families a new way of addressing learning situations in a more satisfactory and effective way (Amorós et al. 2009). This intervention format offers important opportunities to help families through the significance of their strengths, to reduce stigma and the sense of social isolation, in addition to increasing the training and social support of families (Balsells et al. 2016a). In the same way, group work allows the creation of support dynamics among group members that help fathers and mothers feel more valued and more comfortable (Balsells 2006).

These support dynamics can involve the creation of a social support network, understood as the process by which social resources are endowed from formal and informal networks in everyday moments, as well as in crisis situations. This social support is related to emotional, psychological, physical, instrumental, material and information support that promote overcoming the difficulties families encounter (Lin and Ensel 1989). The benefits of having or receiving support from various sources are associated with the prevention of relapses, the strengthening of the capacities of the family system and the maintenance and improvement of family functioning (Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2014).

In the welfare system formal networks connect with informal ones to cause effects on those targeted. Agents of the formal network are understood to be those institutions and services in charge of the social and educational intervention with families, as well as those that do paid professional work within those institutions, including everyone from the professionals working directly on the intervention to those working on management of it, offering services of coordination and organization of the service and as supporting agents of the informal network, families, groups, communities or family community or social surroundings of the people receiving the social intervention.

In terms of building resilience, social support enhances well-being and health, as social relationships provide the individual with a set of identities and positive evaluations (Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2014). In this sense, combined social resources, formal and informal support networks, help families to cope from day to day or in crisis situations (Lin and Ensel 1989).

These social support networks, whether formal or informal, represent an important resilience factor for families in situations of social vulnerability (Lietz and Strength 2011), as they help to deal with stressful life situations (Armstrong et al. 2005), improve well-being and health, reduce the rates of depression and emotional distress after traumatic events, while providing a different perspective on the intervention of professionals working in the child protection system (Lietz et al. 2011).

2. Methods

This review aims to know the elements of the group methodology that promote social support in the development of group intervention programs in the protection system and child welfare.

2.1. Search Strategy

In order to respond to this objective, we decided to do a systematic review by searching in different databases. Anglo-Saxon, Hispanic and French databases were selected (PsycINFO, Educational Resource Information Center—ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, Dialnet and Francis). However, no articles were selected from the Hispanic and French databases. The following keywords were used to perform the search (a) group intervention, (b) social support, (c) social network and family reunification. The Table 1 shows the results of the search. It describes the results by the databases and the keywords used.

Table 1. Results of the search.

	PsycINFO	ERIC	Web of Science	Scopus	
"group intervention" AND "social support"	368	2393	441	498	
"group intervention" AND reunification	6	0	2	1	
"social support" AND reunification	47	11	51	51	
"group intervention" AND protection	73	13	30	247	
"group intervention" AND "social network"	68	9	15	24	
Total	562	2426	539	821	4348

2.2. Exclusion Criteria

To be included in the review, studies had to be published after the year 2000 in a journal with impact factor. On the main theme, the articles had to refer to group intervention. It was decided to exclude those articles in which the group intervention was therapeutic. It was decided to include only the articles that studied the group intervention with families or children who were in a vulnerable situation or in the child protection system.

Figure 1 reflects the articles selection process. The total search involved reviewing more than four thousand article titles, of which 201 were selected. After reviewing the abstracts, we selected 74 articles to read completely. The final selection is composed of 13 articles. Finally, we decided to include one more article that was suggested by the experts.

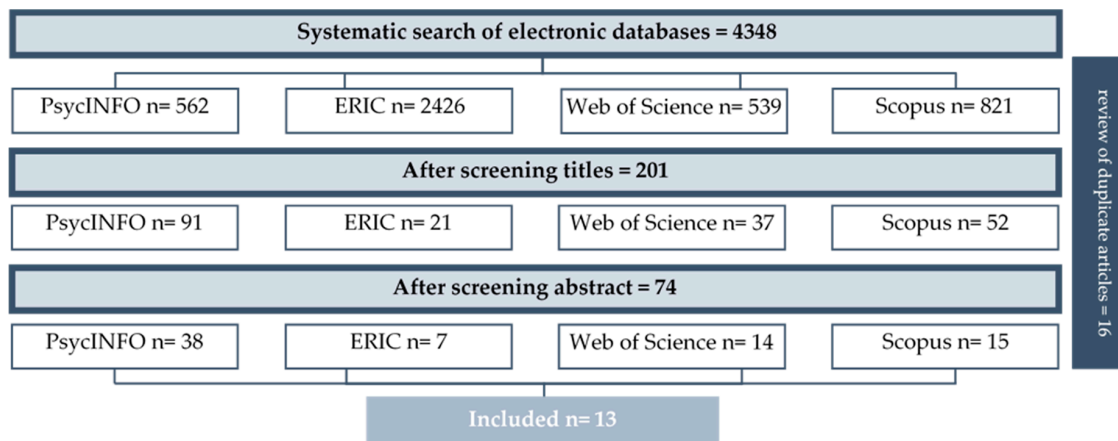


Figure 1. Selection process.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Studies Used in the Review

Table 2 summarizes the principal characteristics and results of the selected studies. Specifically, the country in which the research is carried out, the objective and methodology of the article, the sample and the main results obtained are presented.

Table 2. Characteristics of the studies.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
1 McDonald et al. (2009)	Canada	Evaluate the program in relation to (1) engaging the teenage mothers into a socially inclusive experience that may challenge the social disapproval they often experience, (2) enhancing the mother–infant bond while increasing her feelings of parental efficacy and (3) reducing stress, social isolation and intergenerational family conflict for the young mothers.	It is a mixed-method approach. Quantitative outcome evaluation used a repeated measure, nonexperimental design with two raters (the teenage mothers and the grandmother) and qualitative data included both written responses to open-ended questions and a service–user panel at the end.	The participants were 17 groups of six people from different areas of Canada.	(1) Stress reduction. There were statistically significant reductions in stress levels of mother and grandmother, social isolation and intergenerational family conflict. (2) Increased support. They also reported significant increase in tangible support, meaning, help from other people to get things done and in total support scores. (3) Protective factors. Multi-family groups provide an opportunity to address the risk factors of relationships with conflict and social isolation, while also building the protective factors of social inclusion and social connection within the family and across families.
2 Berrick et al. (2011)	California (USA)	Understand the mechanisms by which mentors may be effective in promoting positive outcomes for parents who have their children in the child welfare system.	It is a qualitative approach through discussion groups and interviews with those parents who could not attend the group for work.	Seven focus groups were conducted with parents who worked with a peer mentor. In total, 25 parents participated, including 21 women and 4 men.	(1) Value of shared experience. Parents referred to the notion that their peer mentor was capable of helping them because they “had been there” and could fully understand and appreciate the parents’ experiences of having their child removed. Three prominent subthemes emerged: encouragement, trust and hope. (2) Communication. Peer mentors’ particular style and process was another major theme that repeatedly surfaced during the focus groups. The communication was made easy by its clarity, availability and frequency. (3) Support. Parents suggested that they felt supported by their peer mentor, particularly in times of need. This support included: emotional support, specific support, support in developing self-reliance and support regarding substance abuse.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
3 Lietz et al. (2011)	Arizona (USA)	Examine the strengths families found helpful in the process of achieving and maintaining reunification.	Qualitative methods framed in the narrative tradition were used to address the research question.	The participants were 15 families that had a child removed due to child maltreatment and they had achieved reunification and remained intact functioning well for at least one year after the children were returned.	<p>(1) External social support. Families spoke about the value found in relationships outside of their immediate family unit. Participants suggested external social support came from five sources. These included extended family, friends and neighbors, support groups, members of a faith community and people associated with child welfare social services.</p> <p>(2) Intrafamilial social support. Families also highlighted the importance of intrafamilial social support, referring to the encouragement and practical help that comes from within the family unit.</p> <p>(3) Receiving vs giving of social support. These narratives included the role that giving social support or helping others played in maintaining healthy functioning post reunification. As families moved past the crisis of removal and the transition of reunification, many discussed their desire to give back or contribute in some way to helping others.</p>
4 Wei et al. (2012)	Taiwan	Examine the effectiveness of support groups for people caring for family members with intellectual disabilities, with the goal of improving their physical—psychological health and social support.	An experimental, preintervention control group design was used in this study. The experimental group received intervention consisting of eight weekly support group meetings.	72 participants were enrolled in the study. Of these, subjects were randomly assigned to experimental groups by permuted block randomization, each group consisting of 12 people and 36 people serving as controls.	<p>(1) Social support. After the support group, the experimental group scored better than the control group on measures of social support (positive social interaction, emotional, informational and material social support). At the four-week follow-up, the differences between the two groups persisted except for positive social interaction support, suggesting a continued positive effect of the support group on caregivers of family members with intellectual disabilities.</p> <p>(2) To have something in common. The support group provided a sense of having something in common with others, validation of the caregivers' experiences and opportunities to give and receive help.</p>

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results	
5	Byrne et al. (2012)	Spain	Examine how the form of social support (informal or formal) and the time frame in which it is provided (at the start or end of the program) influence parental outcomes on the “Apoyo Personal y Familiar” (APF) program for at-risk families showing inadequate child-rearing practices.	There were 4 tools used (1) Sociodemographic and family questionnaire, (2) Scale of personal and social support, (3) Parental questionnaire on child development and education and (4) Parental questionnaire on parental agency.	496 parents who attended the Personal and Family Support program from 2006 to 2009, throughout the nine provinces of the Autonomous Community of Castile and Leon (Spain); 247 parents were referred by the municipal social services and 249 were non-referred parents.	(1) Informal network. Parents sought support more in the informal network and were more satisfied with the informal than with the formal support, irrespective of their risk status. (2) Informal social support. After the program, parents reported significant increases in the overall use of informal sources of support, the program made participants aware of other alternative sources of support that were less activated at the start of the program, such as older siblings, parents and neighbors. (3) Formal network. They also increased the use of those sources of support that were rarely used at the beginning of the program: police, neighborhood associations, child protection services and other institutions, which means that they were activating a supplementary network of resources from the community. (4) Program effectiveness. Enjoying a personal network at the start of the program as well as enhancing it over the program contributes to the effectiveness of the APF program. This particular finding illustrates the benefits of increasing positive and supportive relationships with the nuclear and extended family and the community to prevent child abuse and neglect. This relational satisfaction may have promoted the participants’ changes during the program by providing a variety of role models, opportunities for receiving and giving help and advice to others and multiple occasions to reflect upon their ideas and practices.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
6 Jones and Bryant-Waugh (2012)	UK	The aim of piloting the skills and-support group intervention was to test the following hypotheses: mothers of children with FP would have clinically significant levels of anxiety, depression and parenting stress and would show reliable and clinically significant reductions in anxiety, depression and parenting stress following the intervention; mothers would show reductions in parenting concerns and maladaptive behavior related to feeding following the intervention; mothers would find the group supportive, feasible and acceptable.	On the one side, participants were asked to record weekly significant events related to their child, themselves or their family in order to detect significant behaviors or change and track events external to the study which may have an effect. On the other side, there were 4 tools used: - Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale - Parenting Stress Inventory - Behavioral Pediatrics Feeding Assessment - Parenting Concerns Scale	Of 24 mothers invited to take part in the study, fifteen indicated an interest in taking part, yielding a response rate of 62.5%. Ten mothers met criteria and gave consent.	(1) Emotional relief. Participants valued the opportunity to express difficult emotions and reported a sense of relief at this emotional expression. (2) Emotional support. Participants reported a sense of being supported by one another and of having their feelings validated; this had a positive effect on mood even between sessions. (3) Reduction of guilt and self-blame. Participation appeared to alleviate feelings of guilt in relation to mother–child interactions. (4) Competence and relaxation. Participants reported feeling more relaxed, competent and aware of their own behavior. (5) Shared experience and reduced isolation. Participant’s comments suggested that the opportunity to talk with others was more helpful than any specific topic. All participants commented on the powerful effect of realizing that they were not alone in struggling to cope and were not “neurotic” or “mad”.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
7 Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2014)	Spain	The main aim is to know what kind of social support, formal and informal, the kinship foster families had before and after participating in a specific support program called 'Kinship Foster Care Families Training Program'.	The study is based on 147 semi-structured interviews, 85 interviews before the families took part in the LPKFF program and 62 interviews after the same families had participated in the program. In addition, eight focus groups took place 6 months after the families had participated in the LPKFF.	The sample of 62 kinship foster families to participate in the LPKFF was recruited by the child protection social services. The families came from four distinct areas of Spain.	(1) Formal support. The perception of formal support improved considerably after participating in the program. Families taking part in the program have a better understanding of formal support on offer. On completion of the program the families were able to rely on a formal support network and to make regular use of it. They are able to ask for help when they need it and to seek support regularly. (2) Informal support. In comparison with formal support, informal support changed less as a result of the program. There remained a considerable number of families who could still be described as poorly integrated and socially isolated at the end of the program. Results indicated that the LPKFF program increased the levels of informal support from extended family moderately. However, the families valued the LPKFF program as a source of informal support. (3) The families made a link between formal and informal support. They transformed the program into a forum of informal support where they could share experiences with those in a similar situation. The bonding of the families who participated was a key factor of the program, sharing experiences reassured them that they were not alone.
8 Gesell et al. (2016)	California (USA)	This study examined the relationship between social network ties and group cohesion in a group-based intervention to prevent obesity in children.	The data reported are process measures from an ongoing community-based randomized controlled trial. Two measures were collected: a social network survey (people in the group with whom one discusses healthy lifestyles);	305 parents with a child (3–6 years) at risk of developing obesity that were assigned to an intervention that taught parents healthy lifestyles.	(1) Group cohesion. Cohesion increased from 6.51 to 6.71. Network nominations tended to increase over the 3-week period in each network. Number of new network nominations at week 6 was positively related to cohesion. (2) Social network and group cohesion. Being able to name new network contacts was associated with feelings of cohesion. Network changes affect perceived group cohesion within a behavioral intervention. Given that many behavioral interventions occur in group settings, intentionally building new social networks could be promising to augment desired outcomes.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
9 Balsells et al. (2015)	Spain	This article presents the results of research with the goal of using the voices of the protagonists to examine the needs of parents who are susceptible to a positive family intervention that contributes to the consolidation of family reunification.	This study is qualitative, with descriptive explanatory goals. It includes an exploratory design using discussion groups and semi structured interviews with multiple informants.	This study drew on a total of 135 participants. Sixty-three were professionals who worked in the children's protection services, 42 were parents either recently reunified or with plans for reunification and 30 were children or adolescents who had passed through a process of either family or residential care.	(1) Emotional management. The results show that although there are feelings of happiness and responsibility, feelings related to insecurity and fear predominate. The family has been separated for a period and the parents feel insecure because they see their children as strangers with whom they will have to learn to live. (2) Helping other families. Most of those interviewed comment that they would like to participate in group activities that would allow them to spend time with other families. Professionals agree, noting the need for space in common with other people, preferably people who have experienced the same situation, who can give advice and explain what to expect. Furthermore, professionals believe that such a space would be interesting not only during reunification but also during the entire process. (3) Social support after returning home. Once a family has been reunified, continuity of assistance requires parents and children to continue thinking of professionals as a source of support. However, Spain's child-protection system does not stipulate either a tracking time or supervision after returning home. According to professionals, the tendency is to see reunification as an end, as a closure.
10 Aschbrenner et al. (2016)	New Hampshire (USA)	The purpose of this study was to explore peer-to-peer support among individuals participating in a group lifestyle intervention that included social media to enhance in-person weight management sessions.	A mixed method study design was used to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of support from other group members during a 6-month group lifestyle intervention.	Twenty-five individuals with serious mental illness reported their perceptions of the peer group environment and social support during the intervention. Seventeen of these individuals also participated in focus group interviews further exploring their experiences with group members.	(1) Group participation. More than 80% of participants agreed that other group members were trustworthy and dependable and 92% reported a high level of shared purpose and active participation in the group. (2) Group support. Participants described how shared learning and group problem-solving activities fostered friendships and provided essential support for health behavior change. (3) Different kinds of support. Sharing information, personal successes and challenges and "being in the same boat" as other group members were key features of peer-to-peer support. (4) Collaborative learning. Findings from this exploratory study suggest that participants enrolled in a group-based lifestyle intervention for people with serious mental illness experience peer-to-peer support in various ways that promote health behavior change. These findings highlight opportunities to enhance future lifestyle interventions with collaborative learning and social network technologies that foster peer support among participants.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
11 Balsells et al. (2016b)	Spain	The aims of this study were (1) To evaluate the skill development of the professionals involved regarding establishing a supportive relationship with the families, management skills and group dynamics and knowledge and personal social skills to work in kinship fostering. (2) To observe the changes in the practice of professionals who have been leaders in support groups for kinship foster families and have taken part in the process of cooperative action-research.	The study adopted a complementary methodology. Quantitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire about professional skills and qualitative data were collected from the discussion groups.	39 professionals from the Child Protection System from different regions of Spain participated in the study. Of the professionals involved, 83.8% were women and 16.2% were men. The professionals who applied PFAFE were mostly psychologists and social workers, while a smaller number were social educators and educators.	(1) Competences. Data show an improvement in the development of the competences necessary to establish a supportive relationship with families, management and group dynamics. (2) Crystallization. These findings highlight the crystallization of attitudinal changes in professional practices.
12 Karjalainen et al. (2019)	Finland	The purpose of this study was to research the effectiveness of the structured, group-based parenting program on children's behavioral problems and parenting practices in families involved with child protection and other family support services.	Randomized controlled trial was conducted in seven municipalities across Finland, representatives of which were invited to participate due to their experience and knowledge of the IY parenttraining intervention.	The participants were 102 children with behavioral problems and their parents, from seven municipalities in Finland. Families were currently clients of child protection services or clients of social services indicated to need support in parenting.	(1) Positive parenting. The results suggest that the parent training intervention increased positive parenting and reduced child behavioral problems in these families with special needs. (2) Reduction in children's externalizing behavior. The results regarding the effects on child externalizing behavioral problems are in line with the theoretical approach. IY intervention studies conducted in child welfare services, social services, families reporting a history of child maltreatment and families in child welfare services receiving Triple-P intervention have also all shown a reduction in children's externalizing behavior.

Table 2. Cont.

Reference	Country	Purpose	Method	Respondents	Main Results
13 Balsells et al. (2018)	Spain	This article presents the results of a qualitative study that explores parenting skills when a child returns home after a period of foster care in the child protection system.	The design of the research is qualitative with descriptive and explanatory purposes. The perspective focused on parents, children and professionals as experts in the reunification process and essential to its improvement. The design is based on conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews to multi-informants: professionals, parents and children.	The total sample included 135 people and comprised 42 parents on child welfare plans or recently reunited (for less than one year), 63 childcare professionals and 30 children and adolescents who had undergone a foster process, whether kinship or residential.	(1) The results of the research highlight five dimensions that favor the process of family reunification: adjustment of parenting skills, adapting to the child's needs, social support, accurate perception of the parental role and parental self-efficacy. (2) The study shows that there is a relationship between the specific dimensions of parental skills (adjustment of parenting skills, ability to adapt to the child's needs and social support) and transversal skills (accurate perception on the parental role and parental self-efficacy).
14 Chambers et al. (2018)	California (USA)	This research study explored a program that included three core components: Family to Family program model, reduced worker caseloads and caseworker continuity. The study aimed to answer three research questions: how the program was envisioned, created and implemented, what were staff members' experiences implementing the program and what were parents' experiences receiving services from this program.	A mixed method study design was used. Interviews were conducted with staff members and surveys were distributed to parents who had previously or were currently participating at the time of the survey. In addition, written documentation, such as policies, procedures, manuals and job descriptions for staff were collected and analyzed.	Thirteen members of staff participated in semi-structured interviews that were conducted individually and face-to-face at an agency office. On the other hand, a standardized family satisfaction scale was used to collect data from seventeen parent participants.	(1) Perceived effectiveness. Findings indicated that the implementation of the pilot program was consistent with the original program design. Both staff and parents perceived the program to be valuable and effective. (2) Perception of formal support. Participants highlighted how the program's unique structure helped families reunify, especially by fostering trusting relationships between caseworkers and parents and close collaboration between the child welfare agency and the local community. (3) Recommendations. Results from the study offer recommendations regarding alternative approaches to achieving family reunification or permanency for children. Implications for child welfare practice, policy and research are provided.

3.2. Data from Studies Selected for Systematic Review

The authors identify different elements of group intervention that favor the possible creation of an informal support network. It was decided to divide these elements into five large groups: (1) Changes in participants, (2) Changes in the development and results of the program, (3) Changes in the perception of formal and informal support, (4) Desire to offer support to other families in the same situation and (5) Evaluation. Table 3 summarizes the elements identified according to the emerging categories mentioned.

Table 3. Elements identified in the selected articles.

Emergent Categories	Elements of Group Intervention That Favor the Possible Creation of an Informal Support Network	Articles
Changes in participants	Reduction of stress and social isolation	
	Reduction of feelings of guilt and shame and improvement of self-esteem	McDonald et al. (2009) Berrick et al. (2011)
	Improvements in the sense of social inclusion	Jones and Bryant-Waugh (2012)
Changes in the development and results of the program	Communication improvements	
	Positive assessment of “shared experiences” (they do not feel judged, they feel understood)	Berrick et al. (2011) Wei et al. (2012) Jones and Bryant-Waugh (2012)
	Collaborative learning among group members improves the effectiveness of the socio-educational intervention program.	Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2014) Aschbrenner et al. (2016) Karjalainen et al. (2019)
Changes in the perception of formal and informal support	Perception of support, especially emotional and instrumental, particularly in times of crisis or need	McDonald et al. (2009) Berrick et al. (2011) Lietz et al. (2011)
	References to intrafamily support (from the nucleus or family unit) and external (from the extended family, neighbors, support group, aid associations, etc.)	Byrne et al. (2012) Jones and Bryant-Waugh (2012) Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2014) Chambers et al. (2018)
	Change of view of formal support	
Desire to offer support to other families in the same situation	Importance of not only receiving but also being sources of support for other families, which in turn promoted family resilience	Lietz et al. (2011) Balsells et al. (2015)
Evaluation	Most studies use traditional techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and discussion groups. That is, quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Often combining both methodologies	Gesell et al. (2016)
	Gesell et al. (2016) introduce Social Network Analysis as a method for the evaluation of the group intervention program with families	Gesell et al. (2016)

4. Discussion

In the cases where support networks have been built, research shows that the families expressed significant reductions in stress levels and social isolation (McDonald et al. 2009). Participation in group intervention programs also appeared to alleviate feelings of guilt and self-blame associate to the situation of neglect or abuse that originates the enter in the child protection system. The support

group provided a sense of having something in common with others (Berrick et al. 2011; Jones and Bryant-Waugh 2012).

In reference to changes in the development and results of the program, Karjalainen et al. (2019) alluded to the effectiveness of the intervention being likely to be associated with the context of the group intervention.

Parents stated that the other families were capable of helping them because they “had been there” and could fully understand and appreciate the parents’ experiences of having their child removed (Jones and Bryant-Waugh 2012). They also stated that communication was made easy by its clarity, availability and frequency. In this sense, families suggested that the opportunity to talk with others was more helpful than any specific topic (Berrick et al. 2011). In some cases, parents transformed the program into a forum of informal support where they could share experiences with those in a similar situation. The bonding of the families who participated was a key factor of the program (Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2014). Finally, studies show that collaborative learning among group members seems to have improved the effectiveness of socio-educational intervention programs (Wei et al. 2012; Aschbrenner et al. 2016).

One of the results is that the families change their perception of formal and informal support after having participated in the group intervention programs. The families are able to identify instrumental and emotional support provided by other families (Berrick et al. 2011). On the other hand, families refer to the informal external support they receive as extended family, friends and neighbors, etc. Families also highlighted the importance of intrafamilial social support, referring to the encouragement and practical help that comes from the family unit (McDonald et al. 2009). Families taking part in group programs had a better understanding of formal support (Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2014). They were able to ask for help when they need it and to seek support regularly. They also increased the use of those resources of support that were rarely used at the beginning of the program: such as police, neighborhood associations, child protection services and other institutions (Lietz et al. 2011; Byrne et al. 2012).

The studies emphasize, not only the support that families receive, but the support they can offer. These narratives included the role that giving social support or helping others played in maintaining healthy functioning post-reunification. As families moved past the crisis, many discussed their desire to give back or contribute in some way to helping others (Lietz et al. 2011; Balsells et al. 2015).

The study of support networks was mainly carried out with traditional techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. That is, quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Often combining both methodologies. However, Gesell et al. (2016) introduce Social Network Analysis as a method for evaluating the group intervention program with families.

The Social Network Analysis is a tool to measure and analyze the social structures that arise from the relationships between different social actors. In this sense, network analysis pays special attention to the study of social structures, paying more attention to the understanding of interactions between individuals than to what individuals can or cannot do.

As a summary, the provision of support to biologic parents is viewed as a legally mandated responsibility of Child welfare agencies as these services are aimed at the preservation of families or to work towards reunification (Barth et al. 2005). Lack of support from extended family or neighbors is associated with higher risk of return failure (Thoburn 2009). For this reason, support during the initial months of reunification is important for the stability of the reunification. In this sense, support groups reduce the isolation of caregivers and allow newer parents to seek practical advice from more seasoned parents (Sauls and Faheemah 2015). These support systems provide parents with emotional, material and financial support, helping them to create stability, which is important for family reunification (Potgieter and Hoosain 2018).

5. Conclusions

Studies of family resilience discover that families are capable of generating positive relationships, which help to optimize their possibilities and resources (Walsh 2002). Social support is considered a protective factor for families in a social risk situation (Balsells et al. 2016b).

Regarding informal support, although such support is considered to be indispensable to the reunification process, various studies have found that families at risk (Rodrigo et al. 2007; Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2014) and families under the care of the protection system typically have a poor, insufficient network of informal support to call on when addressing the difficult circumstances and changes to which they must respond.

After participation in the group intervention programs, the studies show that the support received from the new informal support networks is mainly instrumental (like accompanying other members of the group with transport difficulties) or emotional (making them feel understood and not judged) (Berrick et al. 2011).

Furthermore, we can see that there is a change in the way the families view the support offered by the formal network services. Although the studies do not show differences between the support received at the beginning and the end of the group intervention programs, the families have a much more positive view of the help that these services can offer them. In some cases, the families started the programs facing the formal networks due to measures that these services have taken (for example the removal of their children) (Lietz et al. 2011), and by the end of their participation in social intervention programs, they are able to understand the circumstances that lead the professionals to separate the family. In other cases, the families increased the use of the services of the formal network that they did not intend to use at the beginning of the intervention program, such as police, neighborhood associations, child protection services and other institutions (e.g., mental health services, Red Cross) (Byrne et al. 2012).

These changes can also be seen in the effectiveness and the results of the group intervention programs with the families. The families feel listened to and not judged which makes them more open to talking about their stories and working on them (Berrick et al. 2011; Balsells et al. 2016b). Moreover, collaborative learning among group members improves the effectiveness of the socio-educational intervention program (Aschbrenner et al. 2016; Karjalainen et al. 2019).

The authors not only emphasize the importance of families receiving the formal and informal support offered to them, they also come to be seen as sources of informal support in themselves for the rest of the group (Balsells et al. 2015). This change of perspective may be a factor of family resilience.

Scientific evidence demonstrates that group methodology favors this type of support, promoting the development of support networks and mutual help. In this sense, it seems necessary to continue studying the methodologies that favor these networks. This review also shows that these networks can be studied, not only with traditional methodologies, but also with other methodologies such as social network analysis.

6. Limitations

One of the key limitations of the revision was finding research that refers directly to group intervention for family reunification. Furthermore, not all of the articles present the same information, which has made it difficult to compare the studies. Another limitation was not being able to search French and German databases. Finally, it is possible that other sources of social support exist and that have not been considered, for example support via technological tools.

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