

## EARLY INTERVENTION

# Routine-based interview in early intervention: professionals' perspectives

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The Routine-Based Interview is a promising method to collect information in Early Intervention, since it focuses on all members of the family and their routines, while seeking to highlight what parents consider a priority in the intervention. For that reason, in this paper, we aim to analyse the kind of benefits and difficulties that may be found in the Routine-Based Interview's implementation process. The present research comprises the qualitative interview method, according to which semi-structured interviews were carried out by eight Portuguese professionals enrolled in the Portuguese System for Early Intervention. The professionals highlight the benefits of the Routine-Based Interview as a way to clearly and objectively evaluate and identify the concerns and priorities of the family, as well as the child's competencies and the functional goals that will be included in the intervention plan. All participants stress the need for more training in the Routine-Based Interview process.

**Key words:** early intervention, routine-based interview, assessment, routines, professionals.

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## Introduction

According to the Division of Early Childhood (DEC, 2014), one of the main forms of support provided by Early Intervention (EI) professionals should be to promote the child's and the family's concerted participation in culturally meaningful learning experiences in their natural settings' daily routine.

According to Almeida *et al.* (2011), the learning process of young children does not rely solely on intensive interventions during a specific time period of about one hour per day, one or two days per week. On the contrary, it requires, continuous daily learning, along with the affective comfort provided by the main provider's care in the child's routine moments.

Family routines are generally considered positive experiences. However, for families with children with special needs, changes in family routines are often necessary. As a result, these changes can lead to an imbalance in the family's daily functioning, which may be subtle, when families have strong networks of support and resources, or significant, when families have few networks of resources and support (Spagnola and Fiese, 2007).

For that reason, when daily routines are disrupted, the family's balance and cohesion may be at risk, seeing that routines play an important role in maintaining the physical and emotional structure of family life. In this sense, Routine-Based Interviews (RBI) can be considered the core of the EI support process, as they are an important instrument to plan and evaluate the process of understanding a family's functioning, its concerns and priorities, as well as to evaluate a child's development in regard to routine moments (Woods and Lindeman, 2008; McWilliam *et al.*, 2009; McWilliam, 2012a, 2012b).

EI professionals focus on a child's daily routines as a means to understand, plan and evaluate what activities and routines the child is regularly involved in, what she can do in those routines and what skills the child needs to learn in order to be successful in each routine in terms of independence, involvement and social relations (McWilliam *et al.*, 2009; McWilliam, 2012a).

Independence refers to the child's ability to act with and in the environment independently, requiring the minimum of support to learn the skills required for the actions that she intends to perform and develop within that environment. The

child's level of involvement in the routine is an indicator of her level of interest, and refers to the amount of time that the child interacts actively within that environment in an appropriate and efficient manner. Social relations concerns the child's ability to interact effectively with other people who are present in their environment (Almeida *et al.*, 2011; McWilliam, 2012c).

The basic structure of the RBI encompasses a set of questions about the daily routines, which enable the EI professional to grasp the child's levels of participation, namely their level of involvement and independence, and the social relations they establish, as well as the degree of family satisfaction in each moment of the routine (McWilliam *et al.*, 2009).

In the light of the above, the RBI is not only an instrument to collect information regarding family concerns and priorities, but also a method to assess the family's quality of life, by addressing their satisfaction with the child's routines and her adjustment to such routines. As a result, the family plays an active role when developing the RBI, as it provides information about the child and her daily life, while reflecting and sharing their concerns and priorities and decisions about the intervention (McWilliam *et al.*, 2009).

The RBI is considered an essential and powerful instrument for EI support, since it focuses on routines, and increases the effectiveness of professionals in responding to the individual and cultural variations of families, thus ensuring the quality of the adjustment between the demands of daily routines and the interests of children and their families (Boavida *et al.*, 2014).

In this sense, it is important to value the active role of the family in promoting a child's development and learning, as well as natural contexts as a source of learning and development opportunities for children and their families (Pereira and Serrano, 2010; Dunst *et al.*, 2012).

## Methodological approach

This study is based on a qualitative methodology, as it aims to examine the perceptions of professionals concerning the benefits and difficulties resulting from the use of the RBI to support families in EI. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2010), the qualitative methodology is used to understand and document in detail a phenomenon in its context, as well as its significance to the

subjects in this context. In this sense, two research questions supported this study: (1) What are the benefits that result from the use of the RBI to support families in EI? and (2) What difficulties do professionals perceive to result from the use of the RBI in supporting families?

The selection of participants was intentional and aimed at maximising our understanding about the phenomenon under study, as defended by Stake (2007). The participants in this study were eight special educators in early childhood working in different local EI teams in the north of Portugal. These professionals had a work experience ranging from five to 16 years (Table 1), and were trained in the RBI structure and specific interviewing behaviours. This training was carried out as part of a research-action-training project ‘Early Intervention: Practices based on routines’, funded by Fundação Luso Americana under the guidance of Professor Robin McWilliam, in partnership with Universities of Aveiro, Minho and Porto (Almeida *et al.*, 2011).

Participants chose a fictitious name by which they wanted to be identified in the study, and also the day, time and place for the interview, according to their work schedule and proximity to their area of residence or work.

A semi-structured interview was used as a data collection instrument containing in-depth questions formulated to enable the subject to express her own thoughts, tendencies and reflections on the themes presented in the study. This particular technique of collecting descriptive data in the language of the participant was used to understand how each subject interprets a certain issue that is intended to be examined thoroughly (Stake, 2007; Bogdan and Biklen, 2010).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of professionals

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years of experience</i>
Beatriz	43	7
Daniela	45	5
Eva	46	8
Helena	36	10
Isabel	42	16
Joana	29	7
Paula	47	10
Cátia	32	8

Prior to the interviews, a script was analysed by an expert in EI and by two EI professionals who met the criteria for inclusion in the study, but who did not take part in the study as participants. According to the guidelines provided by the expert and the two EI professionals, changes were made to the structure of the script, the language used and the type of questions. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2010), this script validation procedure allows the researcher to evaluate the language that is used, to gain an understanding of the questions that are made and to analyse the need to change or incorporate new topics in the original script. The interview was then recorded with the participants' informed consent.

## Analysing the data

Data analysis started with the transcription of all interviews, in order to assure the collection of recording units that would translate the necessary and pertinent content according to the research goals and the theoretical framework of the research, and which represent the basic units for the categorisation of data (Bardin, 2009). In this phase, we searched for regular patterns in the information that had been collected, with the aim of defining coding categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 2010).

The system of categories used in this research followed an inductive and deductive analysis (Bardin, 2009). Two categories were previously defined: benefits and difficulties in the use of the RBI. From the category related to benefits emerged three subcategories: Family Concerns and Priorities; Child Competencies; Functional Goals (Table 2).

In the course of any qualitative research, the concern with rigour should be one of the central aspects (Bogdan and Biklen, 2010; Coutinho, 2011). Therefore, a set of techniques was used to safeguard the reliability of the criteria used in this study, namely: credibility, through the technique of peer debriefing; validation,

**Table 2.** System of categories and subcategories

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1. Category: Benefits	1.1. Subcategory: Family concerns and priorities
	1.2. Subcategory: Child competencies
	1.3. Subcategory: Functional goals
2. Category: Difficulties	

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through member checks; conformability, through a reflective journal; and transferability, through a detailed description of all the particularities of this empirical study.

## Findings and discussion

Data will be presented by crossing the perspectives of the different participants on the grounds of the two research questions, according to the categories defined previously.

### ***Benefits of using the RBI to support families in EI***

All participants consider that there are definitely benefits in using the RBI to support families in EI. They perceive it as an accessible way of knowing the routines of the families they support since ‘parents are more at ease and usually talk about their lives and their concerns’. They also note that the RBI ‘is an accessible way to ... know things about children’s routines’.

Participants stress that, with the RBI, the families are able to participate in the entire support process, and in an optimised way, showing a greater co-responsibility for the results that are aimed. One participant mentioned that ‘parents/caregivers collaborated throughout the process, thus increasing participation and accountability for the results’.

Another participant reinforces the idea that the RBI allows the professional to gain a greater knowledge about the family and its functioning: ‘we get to know the family, understand how it works, to go to the essential’. Participants reported that during the RBI the families discuss their concerns, open up to the EI professionals, laugh, and share the good and less good moments of their lives. As a result, the RBI is considered an easy way for professionals to get to know families and win their trust. In this sense, a professional reinforces that ‘some intimacy is created (...), which results in the broadening of relationships’.

In the light of the above, the RBI is a fundamental tool to collect information about the activities, events and routines of the family, providing fundamental elements to obtain positive results that make a difference in the lives of these families (McWilliam, 2005; Trivette and Dunst, 2005; Woods and Lindeman, 2008).

Based on the overall analysis of the many benefits expressed by the participants in this study, they can be divided according to three subcategories, namely: family concerns and priorities; child's competencies; and functional goals.

### ***Family concerns and priorities***

According to all participants, the identification of family concerns and priorities is an integral and primary part of the family support process in EI. They further emphasise that it is the family that must define and prioritise its concerns based on the evaluation made of each moment of their routine. In this sense, one participant says that 'it is important for the family to define and choose what is most urgent, most necessary, and what is considered a priority'.

Dunst (2005) states that family concerns enclose most of the aspects and situations that will subsequently depict the goals of the intervention plan.

Another participant points out that 'the identification of family concerns and priorities allow for a greater respect for the family and its routine moments, and helps to plan the goals of the intervention'. Ridgley and Hallam (2006) assert that families should benefit from opportunities to share their concerns and priorities in an environment of respect, in order to ensure that each family is provided with the kind of support it needs.

The participants' perspectives regarding the importance of family participation to identify their priorities are based on the family-centred approach, which advocates that families are the main context for the promotion and development of the child. Moreover, this approach conveys the respect for the family's choices and decision-making processes, the appreciation of the family's competencies, and also, the collaboration between the family and the EI professional (DEC, 2014; Pereira and Serrano, 2014).

### ***Child competencies***

The identification of the child's competencies in terms of independence, involvement and social relations is also one of the aspects considered to benefit from the use of the RBI. According to McWilliam (2012a), the child's participation in routines at home and in the community, the independence the child reveals during those moments, and the social relations established in this scope emerge as three transversal domains in the child's development.

Participants stress that with the RBI they are able to assess the child's competencies and understand what the child is capable of doing, as well as how the child relates to each moment of a given routine. One participant claims that 'inside the routine ... I ask ... what the child does in that (...) if the child collaborates, if he/she helps (...) how he/she behaves ... how the child relates'.

According to McWilliam (2003), a well-designed interview can help gather important information about the child's level of development, and also, about her physical, cognitive, communication, emotional social and adaptive capacities. However, this same author points out that intervention may be jeopardised if a child's evaluation does not take into account her behaviour in the context of daily routines.

Furthermore, one of the participants points out that the RBI allows him 'to get to know the child better, his/her routines, ... carry out a better evaluation ...'. This perspective is in line with the recommended practices for evaluation, which recommend that evaluation and intervention are performed in the context of the child's and the family's daily activities, regular routines and natural environment (DEC, 2014). Therefore, a child's evaluation should take place in the natural contexts of that child and her family, with people who are familiar to the child, and using materials which exist in these contexts. Also, this evaluation should be done by focusing on the functional competencies needed in these same contexts (Grisham-Brown and Pretti-Frontczack, 2011; Serrano and Pereira, 2011).

### **Functional goals**

The definition of functional goals is an essential and unifying element binding evaluation, planning and intervention. The quality of these goals can determine, or at least contribute to, the effectiveness of EI support (Boavida *et al.*, 2010, 2014).

According to the participants in this study, the intervention goals are selected according to what parents consider a priority at that moment in time, taking into account the child's daily development, and the functioning of the child and her family. In this sense, one participant states that the RBI allows 'to select the goals that parents consider to be the most important priorities at the time and also what is important for them for daily functioning and for the child's personal development'.

Another participant points out that the RBI allows the EI professional to help the family select the goals that will be worked on first. According to this professional,



‘the family is who defines and prioritizes the goals that will be included in the intervention plan’.

Participants point out that the RBI makes it possible to accomplish set goals. As one professional stated, ‘goals are defined using a basic language that is clear and comprehensible to the family, and framed within the routine moments that the family considers a priority, so no changes are made to their daily functioning’. In this sense, McWilliam *et al.* (2009) state that the use of the RBI translates into the definition of more functional goals.

However, Boavida *et al.* (2010) report that goals are poorly described, lacking functionality and measurement capacity, and that there is an insufficient focus on the family’s natural/daily routines. These same authors also conclude that set goals lack quality since they do not meet the criteria of functionality, failing to assure the centrality of time and space in the natural/daily routines.

Furthermore, according to Boavida *et al.* (2014), it is fundamental to use the RBI, so that the intervention goals intended for the child and her family are described and implemented with a greater degree of quality.

### ***Difficulties encountered when using the RBI***

The greatest difficulties encountered by the participants in the implementation of the RBI arise essentially in situations such as: not always having another professional available to implement the RBI; being considered a time-consuming process; and professionals having to find the most appropriate day, time and place, according to the availability of the family, to conduct the interview. One participant says that ‘not always having another professional available ... to make the application ... being sometimes a little time consuming’. Indeed, several studies and authors consider that the presence of two professionals is important during the RBI, so that the second professional can support the professional interviewing the family through additional questions, notes, interruption management, etc. (McWilliam *et al.*, 2009; McWilliam, 2012a).

Another valid aspect refers to the difficulty in scheduling the day and place for the RBI, considering the availability and the lifestyles of each family. In this sense, a professional says that ‘it is difficult to define a period of time for the family to collaborate in the realization of the RBI’. Another participant stresses this idea by

stating that ‘the time when parents are available to come to meet me ... talk to me ... is very hard to find’.

Another difficulty highlighted by the participants is the need for more training in conducting the RBI. Most of the participants consider that the training they receive is complete and adequate, and yet, they also focus on the need for additional training so they can update their knowledge, clarify doubts and exchange experiences. One participant adds that ‘it is very important that we have more training ... there are always a lot of doubts ... if only there was someone who could explain things to us, help us to reflect ...’.

Here, Pereira and Serrano (2010) defend the urgency for adequate training, and highlight the need for professional development in EI. Also, the authors claim that this kind of additional training should be a constant and permanent process, starting with initial or basic training and extending throughout the professional’s career.

## Concluding remarks

The RBI is a promising method to collect information, seeing that it provides a rich and detailed description of the functioning of the child and family members in their daily lives and contexts. Furthermore, it helps to establish a positive and proactive relationship between the family and EI professionals (McWilliam, 2012a; Boavida *et al.*, 2015).

The RBI is also considered to be one of the key-elements for EI professionals to succeed in supporting families in EI, as it focuses on all family members and their moments of routine, and seeks to highlight what parents consider a priority in the intervention (McWilliam, 2005; McWilliam *et al.*, 2009).

For these reasons, the RBI is an essential tool for the development of a functional and family-centred intervention plan focused on daily routines, which responds to the concerns and priorities of the family, thus enabling the development of the child (her independence, involvement and social relations) and, simultaneously, the promotion of the effective participation of family members throughout the EI support process (McWilliam, 2010; Boavida *et al.*, 2015).

Boavida *et al.* (2014) consider that the RBI is an instrument that provides advantages in establishing positive relationships with the family, and in assessing

their real concerns and priorities, and also, in the development of functional goals.

In view of the crucial nature of the RBI and given the lack of national studies focused on this subject, the main purpose of this research was to explore and examine the perspectives of professionals involved in local EI teams in the north of Portugal about the benefits and difficulties perceived when using the RBI.

In relation to the benefits of using the RBI to support families in EI, the participants highlight the fact that it allows an easy identification and prioritisation of the real concerns of families, based on the functioning of each member in the family's daily routine. This data is consistent with the findings of Jung and Grisham-Brown's (2006), who state that the information obtained from interviews based on routines and observations in the natural contexts of the child and the family allows the professional to define contextualized concerns and priorities, which can be directly translated into goals for the intervention plan. This is particularly important since that, according to Hanft and Pilkington (2000), an intervention designed in response to the family's priorities and concerns co-supports the family to promote the development of their child.

Ridgley and Hallam (2006) also argue that opportunities should be created for families to share all their concerns and priorities in an environment of respect, in order to ensure that the support provided is appropriate for each family. In this sense, it is extremely important to try to establish and guarantee effective communication, and to create opportunities for informal dialogue, as well as to properly recognise and value the child's and the family's qualities, which should underlie the development of the intervention plan (McWilliam, 2012). Therefore, gathering information from families to understand their needs and priorities is the foundation to provide quality EI (McWilliam, 2005; Trivette and Dunst, 2005).

All participants emphasised the importance of the RBI to assess children's competencies. In this sense, Crais (2003) argues that by asking the family to describe their daily routines, how they happen, the behaviour and participation of the child in them, and the adaptations that the family members have to make, the professionals are being provided with an explicit image of the role played by each family member in the process and results. Such a contribution offers valuable and useful information, which is usually not available through the use of traditional assessment tools.

Bagnato (2007) considers that it is extremely pertinent that the evaluation of the child takes place in natural contexts, since, this way, it is possible to obtain authentic information about the child's competencies, as well as about the resources, competencies and priorities of the family. This perspective is embodied in DEC (2014), which argues that multiple components and sources of information should be used in the assessment of children using different methods, including observations and interviews to collect data from family members, caregivers and other significant people in the child's life.

Another aspect that must be highlighted in this study is the importance of the RBI for the definition of functional goals. Boavida *et al.* (2014) conclude that the constant use of the RBI can be a crucial element in raising the quality of the goals of the intervention plan. This perspective is also conveyed in a study by McWilliam *et al.* (2009), who show that the use of the RBI translates into the definition of more functional goals.

Considering that the success of the intervention will be dependent of the way goals are defined, and considering the difficulties that professionals may encounter in the elaboration of such goals, Boavida *et al.* (2010) argue that it is extremely important to implement measures to support professionals in the development of meaningful, measurable and functional family-centred goals. The relevance of training at this level is supported by the studies carried out by Jung and Baird (2003), and Boavida *et al.* (2014), who found that this in itself was a statistically significant predictor of the quality of the goals of the intervention plans.

Regarding the difficulties in the implementation of the RBI, participants emphasise the need for training so that there are moments of reflection, which may lead to the improvement and adequacy of the entire process of implementing the RBI. Boavida *et al.* (2014) consider that a review or update of training is essential in order to strengthen the needs of the professionals, and to promote the creation of more learning opportunities over time.

McWilliam *et al.* (2009) also focus on the need for the RBI, not only for research purposes, but also for the training of professionals, the development of materials that are necessary in the acquisition and training of skills related to this instrument, and also, in the definition of the implementation of the criteria. Parlakian (2002) reinforces the need for more and better training so that professionals can be invited to share, reflect and articulate their knowledge and practices in search of quality commitments in the care of families in EI.

In the light of the literature (Bruder and Dunst, 2005; Boavida *et al.*, 2014; Pereira and Serrano, 2014), the need to invest in different formats of training and research to promote and build knowledge, acquire skills, adapt attitudes and qualify professional performance is pressing, if we want to improve the quality of the services and support that are provided to families in EI.

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