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How to support birth parents?

Giulia Barbero Vignola, Cinzia Canali
Fondazione Emanuela Zancan onlus
Padova (Italy)

Return home

An expanded view of family reunification emphasizes the importance of family ties and a more flexible definition of success that aims at *“helping each child and family to achieve or maintain, at any given time, their optimal level of reconnection – from full reentry of the child into the family system to other forms of contacts, such as visiting, that affirm the child’s membership in the family”*

(Warsh, Maluccio and Pine, 1994)

Literature

“It is surprising that little attention has been given to research or to the exposition of practice theory on skilled work with parents of children in care.

It is not possible to separate the protection for a child from wider support for families. The needs of the child and his or her family are often inseparable”.

(H. Laming, 2003)

Strong connections

“I want to live with my mum but I like the school and that ...And mum couldn't pay for the school, so I'll live here, but I probably want to live with my mum” (male, 12 years)

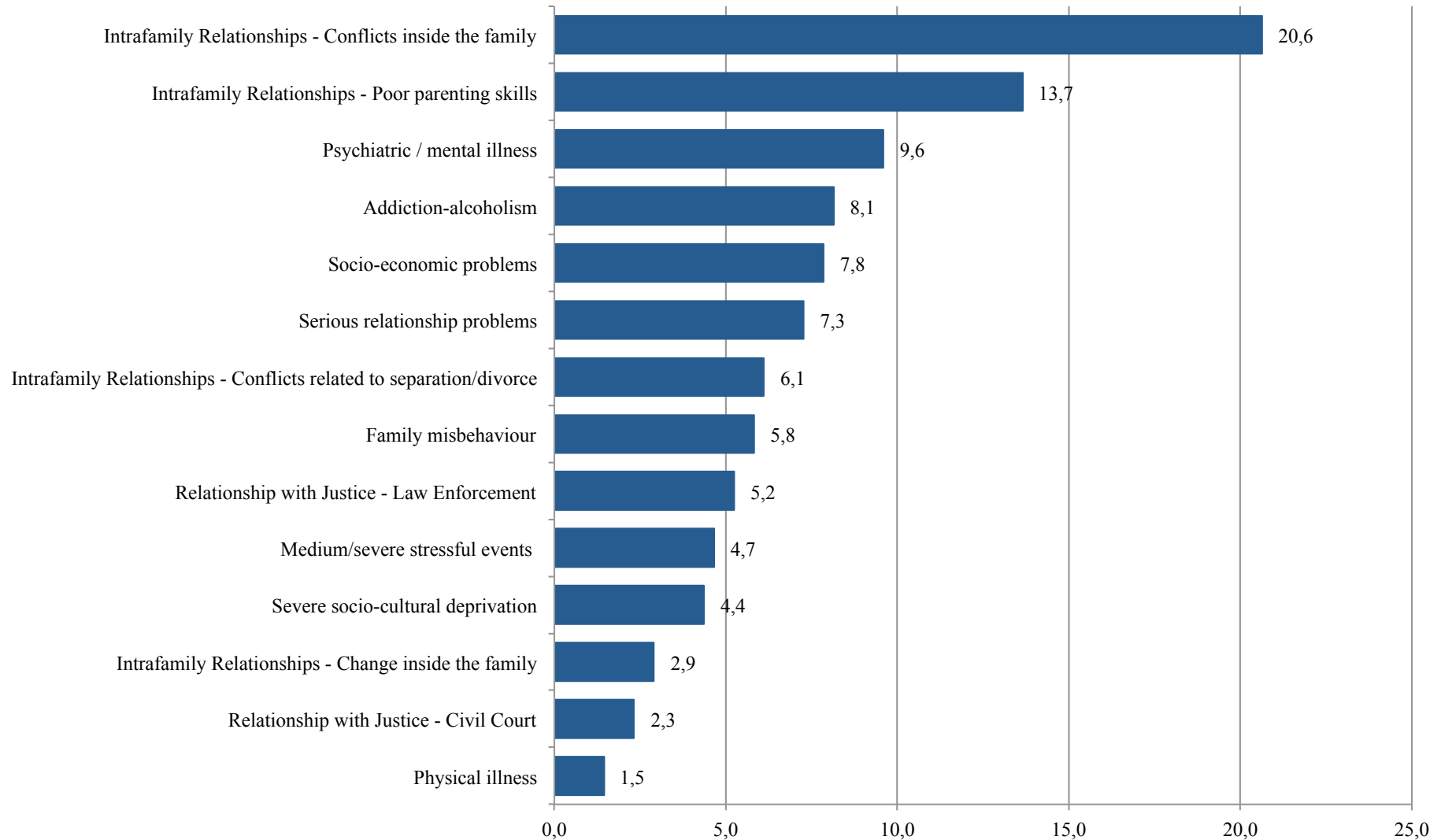
“I'm always missing my mum. It doesn't happen that much now, cause I see her every month” (male, 13 years)

Fernandez, 2010

With parents...

“... the most powerful theme was that of **managing loss** ... There was always a fear of losing the identity and role of parent completely. Parents felt that, with a few exceptions, social workers did not and could not understand what it was like for them as parents of children growing up in care... In contrast, social workers talked of being aware of the parents’ distress and loss, but often not having the time to see parents, because they were focussing on work with and for the child, or simply not knowing how to help parents” (Ward, 2011)

Life events for parents



Different goals in different services

Services sometimes are ... “not only far but often ‘against’, as if the goals of each service are opposed to the other: services for adults and services for children, those that take care of the birth family and those involved in foster care, in the juvenile court, in the the school and in the network of services for supporting the child and the family (rehabilitation service, family counselling,...)”

Our study

Our study involved 114 children and their families in 6 Italian regions and almost 100 professionals, mainly social workers and psychologists.

We were looking at the risk of placement and how to reduce it.

Study in collaboration with the
Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

Investing in changes

We had to deal with some problems:

- the difficulty of involving parents and to build an alliance between parent and professional,
- the lack of integration between different services, each one dealing with a "small piece of the family",
- the lack of tools that help appropriately to define expected results.

... but we found a key point: the need to understand the level of changes that the family can reach (we call them "expected results").

The approach we are experimenting

Fragmentation can be overcome using an approach that implies an integrated vision, otherwise each service will have its own goal, its own field to cultivate.

Our way for overcoming this fragmentation is using the approach called SP/FO.

Quali-quantitative approach: one based on measurement instruments (called S-P approach) and another one based on “observable factors” (called F-O approach) as defined by professionals who know the child and the family and are able to define the changes they are expected to attend in order to reach their goals.

Process and outcomes: together

In our study we connect the **PROCESS**, i.e. organizational conditions and professional skills to address the needs of children and families, with the **OUTCOMES**, that means to have a network of “effective services” focused on the wellbeing of children and families.

A shift

Thinking in terms of process and outcomes (together) represents a new paradigm, that can make the difference in terms of theory, methodology and strategies

But

At present, are there the conditions for a paradigm shift?

What do we have to consider?

- 1) Outcomes in terms of changes (i.e. differences over time)
- 2) Tools and methods for facilitating a global and integrated vision
- 3) Joint consideration of needs and outcomes
- 4) Multifactor outcomes (pertaining to different domains: cognitive, behavioural, physical, relational...)

The Z.O.O.M. approach

Zooming on

Outcome and

Output

Measures

“Starting from a integrated and global vision of needs and strengths, professionals are asked to define the observed situation at T_0 , the expected condition at T_1 , and to observe and measure the new condition at T_1 and at following times, after their interventions. This implies to measure small changes that can occur with children, parents....”

(Vecchiato, 2012, in press)

Changes over time

The capability of “zooming” into different stages of need, during the care process, facilitates professionals in comparing, measuring and understanding differences.

“This model gives to us the possibility to think about our decisions and to ‘image’ the care pathways that it will be monitored and assessed in its development”

Veronica and Michela

What changes can we observe in (birth) parents?

Examples of “observable factors”

Interventions	Observable factors
Interview with father	The father smells of alcohol
Interview with parents	Conflicts between parents during the interview
	Ability to listen
Care competence of the mum	The mother asks about the child to the teachers
Relationship between child and mother	The mother allows the child to do things alone (dressing, bathing ...)
Educational home care	The mother is learning to prepare breakfast every morning

Conclusions from research - Strengths

- 1.** The ZOOM approach facilitates the information sharing among professionals of different disciplines
- 2.** It allows a global vision of the child obtained through measurement tools
- 3.** It helps professionals in taking decisions if they monitor and document correctly the care pathways: this means that the “reunification process” can start at some point
- 4.** It helps to highlight the effectiveness of work

Current developments

1. We are implement this approach (quali-quantitative approach) in different need areas (children at risk, parents in difficulties, young adults with severe disabilities, families with multiple problems...)

2. We work with groups of professionals interested in developing such an approach in a multisite platform called PersonaLAB (“**P**ersonalised **E**nvironment for **R**esearch on **S**ervices, **O**utcomes and **N**eeds **A**ssessment”) for comparing problems and solutions.

Towards new evidence

- A “ZOOM approach” allows to deepen the determinants/conditions for *effectiveness* (what works, why, under some conditions...)
- In a logic of *sensitive outcomes and movement outcomes* (see Ezell-Spath, 2011; Berry et al. 2007 about family centres)
- It is a promising way for outcome-based practices for identifying 1) what professionals can do and 2) but also what people in need can offer, as a necessary *added value*, for obtaining better outcomes (engaging and involving parents in the care process)

Contacts

cinziacanalifondazionezancan.it

giuliabarberofondazionezancan.it

<http://www.fondazionezancan.it>

Padova, Italy

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