CHILD WELFARE AND SUCCESSFUL REUNIFICATION: UNDERSTANDING OF THE FAMILY DIFFICULTIES DURING THE SOCIO-EDUCATIVE PROCESS

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Abstract

Family reunification, in terms of the system of infancy protection, is the process by which a child returns to his/her biological family after a period of temporary foster care. The scientific literature and the new social policies share the understanding that socio-educative action with the biological family is an essential requisite for family reunion. Despite this agreement, socio-educative processes during family reunification have received little attention up till now. This paper presents the results of an investigation conducted by the GRISIJ group concerning one of the most important elements in the process of reunification: the ability to gain understanding into a family's difficulty, which is known as "insight". This investigation collects information from 135 people, 62 of which are child welfare professionals in the Spanish territory, 42 are fathers and mothers who have experienced a process of reunification and 30 are children and adolescents who have been through a foster care situation; all distributed in 13 focus groups and 20 interviews. Qualitative results have been analysed using the technique of analysis of content. The results show a gradual process for the acquisition

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of this skill, which involves different aspects: awareness of the problem (understanding and assimilation of the reasons that caused the removal); understanding of the reunification, comprehension of the reasons for the reunification; comprehension of the reunification process; awareness of the changes made and awareness of the progress in consolidating family reunification.

Keywords: temporary foster care; biological family; family protection; insight; reunification.

Introduction

The care of children in an unprotected situation is, nowadays, a political commitment of the Spanish State and of the Autonomous Governments and, at the same time, it is a commitment of the citizens and the social and professional institutions connected with infancy. Furthermore, all this goes in parallel with the 21st century European society that has the new challenge of emerging from a global questioning of protection measures and of a new evaluation of the biological families; the European Council adopted the 19 (2006) Recommendation of the Ministerial Committee of the State Members concerning support policies towards the positive exercise of parenthood: *"to provide parents with enough support mechanisms for them to be able to take over their responsibility for the bringing up and education of their children".* In the case of parental exercise in social alienation or in risk of social alienation it is advised to support the parents and allow them to acquire the necessary skills to carry out their responsibilities towards their children. When a child's needs are not met or his/her safety is at risk (physical, psychological, emotional, etc.), is when a way is made for the family intervention programmes (Balsells, Amorós, Fuentes-Pelaéz & Mateos, 2011).

There are various alternatives for the welfare of children and adolescents at risk in Spain. When a child is found in a situation of ill treatment or abandonment there is the possibility of remaining with the biological parents (who are then monitored) or the removal from the biological family. In the latter case the alternatives are fostering in residential homes, foster care (in kinship or non kinship families) or adoption. In the first two cases the removal from the family nucleus is expected to be a temporary measure (temporary foster care). However, in the third case (pre-adoptive fostering and adoption) the recovery of the biological parents is not expected so the legal process for the permanent removal of the child from his/her family is started.

Family reunification, in terms of the child welfare system, is the process by which a child returns to his/her biological family after a period of temporary foster care triggered by a situation of abandonment, negligence or abuse. Reunification is the most common target when given a temporary foster care measure.

Working with the biological family is a key condition when applying a temporary protective measure with family reunification prognosis, because without this intervention, the causes of abandonment are very unlikely and difficult to disappear.

Family reunification

Resilience in a family reunification process

National and international research in the field of child welfare and the ecological study of psychosocial risk factors, have enabled a better understanding of the causes of a situation of vulnerability: Family functioning is influenced by personal resources (developmental history, personality), characteristics of the child (temperament, health, development status, age), and sources of stress and contextual support (marital relationship, social network, job) (Belsky, 1993; Belsky and Vondra, 1989; Quinton and Rutter, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). On the other hand, the lack of external resources, unemployment, inadequate housing and marginal situations are considered risk factors that may affect the quality of parenting (Elder and Caspian, 1988). Drug problems generally coexist with mental health, parental skills, criminal activities and domestic violence problems, thus, all these factors reduce the reunification probabilities (Choi & Ryan, 2007; Maluccio & Ainsworth, 2003; Marsh, Ryan, Choi & Testa, 2006; Miller, Fish, Fetrow & Jordan, 2006; Brook & McDonald, 2007). Recently, family attention is beginning to be considered from a resilience point of view, understood as a potential perspective instead of a deficit one. Thus, it is not only about looking for the risk factors that place the family in a position of parental "incapability", but also about finding the factors that identify the skills and strengths that many of these parents have (Amorós et al., 2010; Balsells, 2007).

In that direction, we can say that we have gone from exclusively analysing the vulnerability of households to analysing their resilience, understanding that resilience is a dynamic evolutionary process, which involves a positive adaptation of the individual despite exposure to risk situations. Progress made in the field of family and parental resilience, indicates which factors and what processes make them protective factors in a family in crisis and in a context of risk and vulnerability. Different studies show that families are able to generate positive relationships that generate resilience (Whalsh, 2002; Kalil, 2003.)

When referring specifically to the process of family reunification, it is observed that a family who successfully regains custody of their children has gone through different phases in which they had to use different strategies. Some studies are also trying to find those protection factors that help in the success of the reunification process. The aim is to find the strength and abilities that allow families to

lead a successful life: the social support, the flexibility, the communication, the attitude and the capacity to interpret their own difficulties, the initiative to meet the family's needs, the willingness and the spirituality (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Lietz, 2006, 2007; Balsells et al., 2011; Cojocaru, 2009). There is a particularly relevant factor in family reunification: Lietz & Strength (2011) analyse a group of families that have achieved successfully their objectives for the reunification and observe that commitment and willingness to accept and carry out the necessary changes in order to regain their children's tutelage, as well as the family's unquestionable commitment and willingness to live together again are very important for the reunification. In this respect, the importance of attitude has been highlighted, the awareness of the problem and the motivation for the change of the vulnerable families in any working process for the improvement of parental skills. (Rodrigo et al., 2009; Rodrigo et al., 2008; Balsells, 2007, Balsells et al., 2011; Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). Authors like Schofield et al. (2011) and Ellingsen (2011) also have highlighted the role of insight in a resilient process of family reunification: the importance of parents being aware of the situation, aware of the problem and understanding the reasons that have led to the removal.

Dimensions involved in the process of family reunification

Valuing a family, from the point of view of their ability for the return of their children, involves giving special attention to new dimensions related to care skills and interaction with their children (Budd and Holdsworth, 1996). The identification of areas of competence and positive aspects is a previous step to take in order to make an intervention with these families (Amorós et al., 2009). The eco-evolutionary model of family development allows us to analyse these situations broadening the perspective to three different levels - the context, the needs of the children and the parenting skills -, putting the welfare of the child at the centre of the attention.

The most recent models of child welfare are using this interpretative model, since it allows the evaluation of the performance of parenting skills to make decisions about whether a child should stay at home or a protection and removal measure should be applied. The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families (Department of Health, 2000) is the Anglo-Saxon proposal that sets from this conceptual framework, a model for the assessment and decision-making in the child welfare system; provides a systematic method for analysis, understanding and compilation of what is happening to children and teenagers within their families and the wider context of the community in which they live. It focuses on a thorough understanding of the developmental needs of children, the ability of parents or caregivers to respond appropriately to those needs and the impact of extended family and environmental factors on the ability of parents and children. The areas assessed are: a) the developmental needs of

children (health, education, emotional and behavioural development, identity, family, social representation and autonomy), b) parental skills (basic care, safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, boundaries and stability) and c) environmental and family factors (family history, extended family, housing, employment, income, social integration and community resources).

This model has inspired in turn, other international experiences such as the "Program of intervention for the prevention of institutionalization" (PIPPI) driven by the General Directorate for Inclusion and Social Rights of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Italy (Milani, Serbati, & Lus, 2011; 2013) in Italy, and the Canadian initiative AIDES (Inter-sectorial Action for childhood development and security) driven by the Canadian government (Leveille, & Chamberland, 2010; Chamberland et al., 2012). Along the same line, works promoted by the Ministry of Health and Social Policy to encourage positive parenting stand out in Spain (Rodrigo, Máiquez, & Martin, 2010; Rodrigo et al., 2009).

Finally, the literature review allows us to see how few investigations recognize the influential role of children in the process of reunification; although they often locate risk factors linked to their psychosocial problems. At the same time, few studies provide a participatory and active approach, which can establish which guidelines could be valid and applied to involve the children in the reunification. Lansverk's approach (1996) is especially relevant, since it tests how certain characteristics of children may influence the decision of reunification, by recognizing the influential role of the children and the feed-back between parents and children as an element of stability and family climate. This active vision of children allows observation of greater self-protection and self-care possibilities; Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin (2009) consider that the relationship found between age and reunification - the older, the less likely to "re-entry" – takes place because they are more capable of protecting themselves as they require less supervision. Another variable studied is that of the role of the caregiver child (Ellingsen et al., 2011), a child that performs and assumes family responsibilities exchanging family roles with their parents. This makes reunification difficult and action must be taken with the parents so that they assume their parental responsibilities (Cojocaru, Cojocaru & Ciuchi, 2011); and children and adolescents should understand that they need a development that is appropriate to their age and should be sought by their parents, not neglecting their own responsibilities, however they will have to be suitable to their age.

With these elements in mind, as well as the eco-systemic view of the family, there is a need to deepen the recognition of relevant aspects in the process of family reunification. To this end, we suggest the following working assumptions, which will be answered throughout this article: what is the level of problem awareness of children and parents when a measure of temporary foster care is posed? How does this awareness of the reasons for the removal have an impact on the reunification process? What is the protagonists' awareness regarding the needs

of the children, the context and the parenting skills? What elements facilitate a process of better understanding of the reasons for removal and reunification? What is the role of the children in this process? Which role does awareness of the problem and the accomplished changes in the consolidation of a process of reunification play?

Research Approach

In order to answer these questions, the GRISIJ (Research Group on Child and Youth Social Educative Interventions) group carries out a study for the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology to identify socio-educative processes in situations of family reunification. The findings of the analysis of the evolution of the ability of parents and children to understand family problems in a process of reunification will be presented below. The design of the investigation is qualitative with descriptive and explanatory purposes. It is based on conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews to multi-informants: professionals, parents and children.

Participants

This research involved a total of 135 people. Participants are divided into 63 childcare professionals, 42 parents in child welfare plans or recently reunited and 30 children and adolescents who have undergone a foster process, whether kinship or residential. The main feature of these participants is their multi-informant character, which has allowed the caption of relevant aspects from different per-spectives. In the case of the childcare professionals, 20 were social educators, 10 were teachers, 20 were psychologists and 13 were social workers. 74.6% were women and 25.4% men. 25.80% were between 25 and 35 years old, 45.16% between 36 and 45 and 29.04% over 46 years old. Of these, 33 work in biological family intervention, 16 in residential foster care intervention and 5 in kinship care intervention. The selection criteria were: a) professionals who worked in infancy protection services b) who represented different disciplines c) with experience in residential foster care or kinship care.

Of the parents, 76.2% were women and 23.8% men. 34 of them represented reunited families and 4 of them were not reunited. The criteria for selecting the parents were: a) families who were already reunited with their children or expec-ting a return in one or two months b) families who have fulfilled or were fulfilling a reunification plan c) with willingness and collaboration with professionals and d) with different characteristics of age, family structure....

Of the children and teenagers, 21 were reunited and 9 were not reunited. 53.3% were girls and 46.7% were boys. 17% were between 6 and 12 years old,

56% between 12 and 18 years old and 27% were adults. For children and adolescents the criteria were: a) between 12 and 20 and belonging to selected biological families, b) at least a year in foster care facilities or in kinship care c) No physical, mental or sensory disability.

Data gathering tools

To gather the data the focus group technique and semi-structured interviews were used and issues related to kinship foster care were dealt with following written criteria. The tools used to gather the data were three: (1) identification card with the participants basic data; (2) guidance of questions for the development of the discussion group or semi-structured interview; (3) summary card for the discussion group in which aspects related to the development of the group were registered: date, length, place, motivation, cohesion, atmosphere, group dynamics and how the questions worked.

Process and analysis

20 interviews and 13 discussion groups were carried out. Two researchers from the team travelled to each office of the experts of the Social Services; one researcher had the role of moderator, while the other was in charge of the logistics and recording the discussion following the written criteria. Each discussion group and interview was recorded with the agreement of those present and with a confidence agreement. The process used to analyse the information was the content analysis by the preparation of codes to be evaluated by different judges. Bottom-up content analysis was applied: the first stage of analysis was textual, selecting paragraphs, fragments and significant quotes from the transcription papers. The second stage was conceptual, to identify categories and subcategories which could be inter-related. Both stages were carried out and subjected to peer review and categories and subcategories were defined when data reached saturation. The software Atlas.ti 5.0 was used for the qualitative data processing. A Hermeneutic Unit Editor was created in which the literal transcriptions of the focus group and interviews (primary documents) were included, each category and subcategory was given a code (code) and textual notes were also included (memos). A conceptual network (network) was created to analyse the data as a basis for the connections established between the codes of the hermeneutic unit.

The analysis code recognised dimensions: (1) awareness of the problem (comprehension and assimilation of the reason that fuelled the removal); (2) understanding of the reunification: (2.1) understanding of the grounds of reunification; (2.2) understanding of the reunification process; (2.3) awareness of the accomplished changes and (3) awareness of the family progress in order to consolidate reunification.

Results

Problem awareness: Which is the process of comprehension and assimilation of the reason for the removal?

The moment when it is communicated to the family that the children will be temporarily removed from home, is a critical and painful time for all family members. Parents go through this stage in a state of shock that disables them from understanding or assimilating information and from having awareness and understanding of the problem to help them recognize and assimilate the real reasons why a removal measure has been taken. In the initial moments of removal, parents are not psychologically or emotionally prepared to accept or understand the problem, and for this reason many do not initially understand the grounds for the removal. Both families and professionals involved in this research share the understanding that awareness and comprehension of the problem is acquired through a gradual process that begins moments after the removal. This is in line with literature about the different phases that families in a reunification process go through (Lietz, 2011). Parents are initially in a "survival phase", a period of crisis, in which their understanding of the situation is rather poor. Later, they proceed to an "adaptation phase", which is a phase in which families would make the necessary adjustments, both personal and in context, to suit the situation. Parents who successfully make emotional and conceptual adjustments to suit the situation are those who reach the "acceptance phase", where the family values their involvement with the changes as an improvement for its functioning, rather than changes that must be made by order of the protection system.

The discourses of the professionals show that not all parents reach the end of this gradual process of awareness and understanding of the problem, consequently not assimilating the real reasons for the removal after years.

> *"We have long development foster cases, children who have been in foster care for 10 years, whose mothers still think they did the right thing and after 10 years they are still incapable of recognising any type of negligence."* *(Professional)*

With regard to understanding the causes of the removal, parents, especially in the first stages of the measure, emphasize contextual factors: joblessness, homelessness, lack of help... The comments made by fathers and mothers do not usually expose a view of the child's deteriorating situation, nor of their difficulties in the development of parenting skills. In such cases, there are parents who, as a result of not understanding or not being aware of their responsibility in the problem, put the blame of the situation on the children or professionals:

"I don't feel guilty, because there was no need for them to take away my child." (Father)

"Many families feel betrayed when they get to the infancy team, some with more reasons than others. They say: I've spoken to the social worker, I've gone here and there and now they make me come here, but I've done a thousand things, I've gone to all the interviews." (Professional)

Gradually, during the removal process, this perception is overcome and parents then consolidate the adaptation phase to reach the "growth and development phase" described by Lietz (2011). At this point, which is close to reunification, families recognize and have successful experiences and positive reinforcement for the changes that they have been able to incorporate into their family dynamics; the results of this investigation expose how parents redefine the reason of the removal in these later stages of the process. In fact, as the time of reunification is getting closer and they are given the opportunity to explain the changes acquired for the child to return home, the parents can look back and redefine the reasons for the removal. Along these lines, if during the period of removal, the families mainly attributed the reasons for the removal to contextual factors (job, housing, etc..), at closer stages to reunification, families begin to attribute the reasons for reunification not only to the context but also to the acquisition of parenting skills (imposition of rules, boundary setting, etc..).

"I've thought about it, I've seen my mistakes and I've corrected them quite a lot. I thought, look, try a bit harder at work, I pay more attention to my son trabajo, I share more things with him, spend more time with him…" (Father)

However, there continues to be a lack of understanding towards how the child's needs are covered; an improvement in the physical, emotional and psychological care of children and adolescents does not emerge in the interviews. Drawing on the three levels of eco-systemic model, it is observed that the awareness of the changes are placed in the context and parenting skills, but a visibility to the "before" and "after" of the child's needs is not yet given.

In this gradual process that has emerged from the analysis of the content, a third phase appears, where the degree of problem awareness is now consolidated. It is the moment when the family is back together again after a period of removal. Most of the interviewed families find that, after going through a child welfare case plan, they often tend to be more aware of the necessary factors for family stability such as having a job, fixing the house, knowing how to set rules, speaking in a more relaxed tone, adjusting their parental roles, getting involved and making greater efforts, having more contact with the school, seeing things from another perspective, recognising mistakes, spending more time with their children and

being more aware of them, communicating more, playing more with them and being more understanding with their children.

According to Kimberlin et al. (2009) the fact that both parents have and acquire, during the process of reunification, parenting skills to meet the needs of their children, is configured as a factor which, along with others related to the characteristics of the child (young age, protection needs, etc..) with the biological family characteristics (psychosocial characteristics, parenting skills) or with the characteristics of foster care or child welfare system (type of foster care, financial assistance, long foster care stays, etc.) guarantee the stability of long-term reunification.

The relevance of this gradual process of awareness and understanding of the problem is evident in the work towards the reunification, drawn out as a catalyst for parents to collaborate, so that they are motivated to perceive foster care positively and to take responsibility:

> *"The most important thing is problem awareness, and if there isn't, subsequent work is going to be difficult and it won't be possible to assume fostering from a positive perspective." (Professional)*

In the case of children, it is observed that the awareness of the problem differs depending on the situation that has led to the removal. Thus, the results indicate there are two very different situations: when the removal is motivated by an unsustainable family dynamic (partly because of adolescent behaviour problems), and when the causes of homelessness lie in the neglect and/or abuse to young children. In cases where the problem is linked to the behaviour of teenagers, they usually show awareness of it, as they can identify those elements in their behaviour, which have produced difficulties.

> *"When I first entered the centre I didn't speak to my mother for like two weeks, and I couldn't go out, and I didn't see her in like a month. And that made me think a lot, and I don't know, it also helped me think about the mistakes I had made and everything." (Child)*

In the other situations that refer to children who are in an appeal for family issues, most of them ignore the grounds of the removal, thus hindering their possible understanding and assimilation of the situation:

> *"We know from the comments and they put things that are not relevant. I never asked but I'm curious about why they blame my mother for things that were not true." (Child)*

> *"At the centre where my sisters were, they did show them how to do things. They thought my mother had put them in the centre because she didn't love them, then, my mother told them what was going on." (Child)*

However, in cases where children do know the family situation, they once again place the causes of removal on aspects related to the social and family context, but they rarely express as reasons their own deteriorating physical, mental and/or emotional situation, nor the lack of competences of their parents.

"Then my mother recovered, she had a problem with alcohol." (Child)

"No, I do know the reason, the reason is that my mother drank too much alcohol and now… may she rest in peace… it wasn't my fault, because I have never had a trial or any problems." (Child)

The work done to make the children understand the grounds of the removal, by adjusting explanations to the evolutionary level of a child, is essential to reduce anxiety levels thereof, and to reduce the feeling of guilt that is common both to children and adolescents:

"That they could work, that they can understand, within the difficulty, that they can have the time, all the time necessary for them to minimally accept it, to understand why this is done." (Professional)

"Anabel wrote a letter and she said to them: 'What did my brother and I do, for you to remove our mother's affection from us? We are locked up and on top of that I can't see my brother'." (Father)

Finally, note that it has been corroborated how, children are often left out of the information on the reasons of the removal. Therefore, it is found that, in many cases, children and teenagers are still considered as an object of protection rather than as a subject of rights, capable of understanding the situation and committing to it. All this contrasts with the evidence that shows that their priorities revolve around knowing their family problems, the characteristics of the protection appeal and the changes it can produce in their lives (Balsells et al., 2010; Mateos et al., 2012; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013, in press).

"Parents should be more understanding, understand us better and know how to listen to us and when there's a situation to talk about, they should let us talk too because we have a right to be listened to like we have to listen to them when they are shouting." (Child)

Understanding of the reunification

When the family is ready for reunification, a period of preparation to return home is started. It is a stage in which visits are increased and the return is prepared by making the children spend progressively more time at home: one day, a weekend, a school holiday.... The complexity of comprehending what reunification means for a family has made three subcategories emerge in the analysis of content: understanding of the reasons of reunification, understanding of the reunification process and awareness of the achieved changes.

Understanding of the grounds of reunification. Concerning the understanding of the grounds of reunification, professionals suggest that it is important to show parents and children that the reunification process is not predetermined and set by the system, but that the rhythm is determined by the capabilities and the changes that each of them may make. The family must be aware that the changes necessary to restore the family dynamics are not external to them, but on the contrary, they depend on their actions and progress. Understanding reunification implies knowing what changes have made it possible and what implications common coexistence will entail once reunited. Reunification is more likely to be successful in those families who have acquired this realistic awareness of the changes. This is because awareness of changes gives perspective, objectivity and motivation, which translate into an indicator of success in the reunification.

The findings reveal how in most cases children receive little information about the evolution of the process and the reasons that lead to reunification. When children have not yet reached adolescence, a lack of information regarding the evolution of the process can be perceived and the children themselves state that they feel uninformed. In some cases children know that there have been changes but they do not know specifically what these were or what they have exactly meant for the evolution of the process. Again, it appears that the support is made from a protectionist perspective, considering children as objects of protection and not subjects of rights, because they are kept uninformed for the whole process. In this particular aspect, it is necessary to work with children to make them conscious of the reasons of reunification by providing them with continuous information about the process, the changes in the three levels and of all matters related to reunification, thus giving an active and involved role.

> *"Well I needed… I needed many things. We were not really informed about anything and if we were, it wasn't done in the best way. What were you not informed about and you think was important? I think who should have informed me was my mother, for example, and that she should have told me "look, I'll be leaving tomorrow", I don't think the nun should have come and told me "your mother is coming tomorrow, you'll be this amount of hours with your mother, your mother will be here after school." (Child)*

The case of adolescents may be different when their behaviour has been one of the causes of removal. In these cases they are aware of the changes that they have conducted. So, first they give you like rules in the unit, and then you have to learn them and this thing you learn, then you have to take it home. For example cleaning and all that stuff, you have to take that home and then with the intervention professionals they tell also the parents to do this and don't do that, to act this or that way and that has helped a bit.

"They give them guidelines on what to do and when to do it… And do you think that's good? Yes, that's why I have also improved. Well, you and especially them, because I guess that it was more of a family issue. Both ways…" (Adolescent)

The reunification process. Touching on the comprehension of the process of reunification, there are two important aspects: first, all participants agree that this process will involve parents and children to "meet again." Hence, parents need to be aware of the evolutionary changes that their children have experienced during the removal period in order to adapt their answers to their children's evolutionary needs; accept that they left their children at a certain age and that it has changed along with the child's needs. But also the changes and acquisitions that have taken place during the removal period regarding habits, routines and schedules will have to be recognised.

"A preparation, because you leave them when they are seven and they give them back to you when they are fourteen and you think they are still seven" (Father)

"Because it's what she says, they expect them to have followed the rules while in the unit, but when they go back home they expect everything to be as it was. They think they can go back to doing whatever they please." (Professional)

Secondly, there is the need to inform children and adolescents about how the reunification process will go and its implications. Often children are not aware of the process and frequently the decision that they will go back home is communicated to them within a short period of time (days), so there is no time for them to prepare. It is important that this process takes place as some of the children reveal that they feel a little strange at home because they have not had time to get used to the idea. It is worth noting that in most cases there have been changes in the family context and at home that trigger these feelings of discomfort.

"Uncomfortable, strange, I didn't expect it. I, I was told; they made me pack my stuff and the day after we went to my mother's house and I felt uneasy. – If you live with your grandmother for years and then they send you to your parents', you feel a bit weird; you don't feel for your parents the same affection that you feel for your granny, it is a different treatment. – I also felt strange, the house was smaller, it smelled different, father was older, and everything was very different." (Child)

Professionals point out and corroborate the need for formation and information, but they also find that, in most cases, the different implications that returning home can have are not discussed with the child. For example, doubts and questions about the process, which are not resolved at the time of going back home.

Change awareness. Finally, being aware of the changes made by different members of the family to achieve reunification involves going beyond the objective point of view. That is to say, not only is it important to know the changes that have taken place which justify the reunification, but also the members of the family should be proud to have achieved such accomplishments, by recognizing individual merit and that of the rest of the members of the family, feeling as a unit. This self-reinforcement and from others, added to a sense of family identity, are protective factors of families in the sense that they help preserve family unity, because when a family feels as such, it strives to keep itself together (Thomas, Chenot & Reifel, 2005; Del Valle and Fuertes, 2007; Del Valle, Bravo, Lopez, 2009).

"What else helped you during the process? –Being more united, planning something together." (Father)

Awareness of family progress in order to consolidate reunification.

The process of restoring family cohabitation involves some very positive and some negative turning points until a natural balance of family relationships is reached. Preventing the latter from affecting and demotivating the families is essential to maintain and promote its good reunification development. At this stage, according to Lietz et al. (2011), the recognition and reinforcement experienced by families regarding the changes they have achieved so far, appears to be the main strength. Most of the interviewed families believe that they indeed are aware of the changes and achievements they have made throughout the process. They feel stronger and well and happy for it all.

"I learned a lot form this experience." (Father)

"I have reconsidered it, I've seen my mistakes and I have fixed most of them. I say look, I'll make a greater effort to be good at my job, I have focused more on my son, I have shared more things with him, we spend more time together… - and you feel better – Yes." (father and professional)

"I feel happy that they took my children away in that situation, because I wasn't providing for them then, now I do because I have my own house, a job." (Father)

Transforming the initial fear and appreciating their experience positively, as an opportunity to improve the situation, is essential to reunification consolidation. When this change occurs, families are strengthened and feel empowered to make decisions and raise their children. This self-confidence allows them to recognize the changes and the factors that have eased them.

"They already have children, stop messing around, stop drinking alcohol, do not go so much to the bar, care for them, take them to school, they have already suffered, they don't need to suffer no more". (Child)

"Not to do what they did last time, because if they do, they are going to take them away again". (Child)

"It changed a lot, it could be seen at the weekends when I went there and things were better. I knew how to do my things (clean up my room, make my bed…) I took responsibilities for things which I didn't take responsibility for before entering the centre; that's what I learned." (Child)

The needs analysis confirms that despite the fears that these families face in various stages of family reunification, having the experience of other families who have gone through the same situation is of essential support. For families who are in such process, support by others prevents feelings of loneliness, frustration, misunderstanding and isolation. Moreover, they are able to identify real examples of overcoming the situation, which fuels their motivation to change adverse situations around them.

"Cases in which the return has been a success and they can explain how they did it it to other families who are at this point, what they experienced, what fears they had. It would be good to reduce the anxiety of the reunification."(Professional)

It is important to underline how the consolidation of this reunification process and the strengthening of the awareness of progress, can be reinforced when these families move on to support other families. According to the approach of Lietz et al. (2011), the last stage in a process of family resilience in reunification cases

will come when these families are able to give "social support" to other families who are going through similar situations. These families are helped promoting family strengths by feeling useful helping other families and they feel comforted by having overcome the situation. Participation in this type of process can serve as a protective factor against re-entry, for the development of professional skills, as well as socio-emotional well-being, such as self-confidence and self-efficacy (Leake, Longworth Reed, Williams and Potter, 2012). With the necessary support, they can move from being recipients of aid to be transmitters of resources (Serbati and Milani, 2012) and be active agents in their process of reunification. They can go from being helped families to helping families.

Conclusions

The results of the investigation show how the ability to understand the family difficulties has a key role in the process of family reunification. The gradual process of interpreting and understanding their own difficulties is fundamental to the socio-educative approach towards a temporary foster care measure. If, during the first stages of the protection measure, the awareness of the problem is focused on the contextual causes, when work progresses with the family and the children the role of parenting skills is also assumed. The content analysis has also made it evident that the child's needs are those which are mentioned least in these stages.

The complexity of intervening in families in child protection measures requires learning processes for the biological family – parents and children- and offering them support to make family reunification possible. It is very important that all members of the family are conscious of the changes produced in these three areas, corresponding to the interpretative eco-evolutionary family model:

- *Needs of the child:* the changes relating to the child's needs are those which improve his/her situation: health, education, emotional stability, self-esteem… The question here is what the children are like now compared to before.
- *Parental skills:* the changes here are the acquisition of skills to perform the role of adequate parent to the children and take care of them properly, including setting down norms and boundaries, taking them to school, providing a balanced diet, giving emotional stability..
- *Context:* changes in context are those related to increasing income, organizing the household, using social support to help the family situation.

Social-educative work can provide ways to help the whole family focus on these three aspects, without forgetting that in the centre of this situation is the wellbeing of the children. According to the results it is also important to give more visibility to the children, not only to express their situation by needs analysis,

but also by giving them a more active and participative role in the whole process. By looking at infancy as a subject to socio-educative protection and not just an object of protection, can help to understand the difficulties and the possibilities the family have of being successful in family reunification.

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