

Topic of the European Association of Developmental Psychology

The development of an integrative strategy to prevent child maltreatment in Europe based on the framework of positive parenting

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Child maltreatment is defined as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (WHO, 1999). Child maltreatment is a serious public health problem with extensive short- and long-term health consequences (US DHHS, 2008). In addition to the immediate physical and emotional effects of maltreatment, children who have experienced abuse and neglect are at increased risk of adverse health outcomes and risky health behaviors in adolescence and adulthood, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, smoking, multiple sexual partners, suicide, and chronic disease (Gilbert, et al., 2008; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007). The frequency of the problem and the seriousness of its consequences have led to growing concern about the importance of taking preventive actions to reduce it (WHO & ISPCAN, 2006).

The positive parenting framework involves a focus on the empowerment of parents by increasing their competences and providing them with social and psico-educational support to adequately perform the parenting task. This is especially crucial for families experiencing negative psychosocial conditions (e.g. marital violence, low

educational background, poverty, lack of social support, substance abuse) that eventually lead to child maltreatment. Therefore, the positive parenting initiative recommends the use of parenting programs as an important source of social support to promote parents' capabilities to raise children under these circumstances.

In the context of the EADP the framework of positive parenting has been used to develop and integrative strategy to child maltreatment prevention. This strategy consisted of three lines of action aimed at building up the relationships between researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

1) Impact on research on parenting programs: Identifying evidence-based parenting programs in Europe that fits with the principles of the prevention science applied to the social domain. Throughout invited symposiums and posgraduate schools we have identified sound research in Europe on the evaluation of parenting programs and consequently we have developed recommendations for researchers to design, implement and evaluate adequately their programs to promote positive parenting as well as ideas of how to disseminate the research results into practice. In the way we have demonstrated that the use of these programs is worthwhile as not only decrease the likelihood of child maltreatment in at-risk families but also produce a positive impact on the family and children wellbeing, and empower the communities were these programs are implemented.

2) Impact on professional best practices: Disseminating among professionals working at the local social services in Spain through on-line courses and documents a positive view of at-risk families and the work with families, that not only considered the dark

side of these families but also their assets and strengths. We have demonstrated that the best practices are those devoted to the strengthening and empowering of at-risk families and children in the context of families-services partnerships. Simply characterizing these families as “dysfunctional”, “disorganized”, or “multi-problematic” does not help in the design of preventive actions. We are also implementing parenting programs in several Spanish communities as a way to innovate their work with families.

3) Impact on family policies: We have worked the previous actions following a partnership schema with the Universities, Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality, the child protection agencies from Spanish autonomous governments, and the Spanish network of municipal social services.

Two important outcomes: 1) Recent approval by the Spanish Congress of Deputies of a proposition urging the Government to take actions to promote the principle of “Parentalidad Positiva” (6th June, 2011), in coordination with the Autonomous Communities, local municipalities and social agents.

2) All these initiatives have attracted the Council of Europe attention and we are invited to present them very soon in Monaco during the workshop "Children's Rights start at home: strong families for strong children" to prepare the next conference on the Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child. This is a good example that good research can produce impact on real world settings if we involve professionals and policy-makers in our actions.