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Impact of the “Learning Together, Growing In Family” Programme on the Professionals and Attention to Families Services

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Abstract

The group programmes of parental education are important in the intervention with families in situations of psychosocial risk in order to promote parental competences and the positive development of the children. These programmes must be sustainable in time, which requires the professionals to value positively the introduction of this type programme in the service. The aim of this study is to discover the changes in the professional development and the service reported by the facilitators of the groups after the implementation of the “Learning together, growing in family” programme. Taking part were 138 facilitators and 53 collaborating bodies of CaixaProinfancia who have attended to 1,270 families (609 parents and 661 children) in 12 Spanish cities. The programme contains 14 weekly sessions directed at parents and children separately and both groups together. Following a quantitative and qualitative methodology, the results indicate that after the application of the programme the animators considered most competent in the interaction with the families, in the organisation of the work, in the coordination of the programme with other services and in the relation with other professionals. These changes are modulated by age, qualification and years of experience in group dynamics. In the results of the focus groups we see that the

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facilitators have used many skills in attracting the participants, in the rigorous evaluation of the programme, the suitable development of the sessions and they have very positively valued the impact of the programme on the families and on their professional development.

Keywords: professional competences, professional development, attention to families service; parental education; positive parenting.

Introduction

The CaixaProinfancia Programme is an initiative of the “la Caixa” Foundation that facilitate the promotion and integral development of childhood and families in situation of risk and poverty and vulnerability. In this context, the “Learning together, growing in family” programme was created, with the aim of promoting wellbeing and family coexistence in those families with children aged 6 to 12, by means of the promotion of positive relationships between parents and children. In particular, in sessions aimed at parents and children separately and in joint sessions, the programme promotes the affective links in the family, the negotiated compromise about rules and values, the improvement in family organisation and chore sharing, communication and resolution of conflicts and the joint participation in family leisure. All these aspects coincide with the principles for exercising positive parenting (Rodrigo, 2010). Consult the article by Amorós, Buisan, Balsells, Byrne and Fuentes (in this issue) for a more detailed description of the programme and the article by Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos & Pastor (2011).

The positive exercising of parenting requires the provision of support for all the families and very particularly those in situation of social vulnerability. According to Recommendation (2006) 19 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to the Member States about Policies of Support to Positive Exercising of Parenting, the member states must create “*the conditions necessary for the promotion of the positive exercising of parenting, ensuring that all those people who have to educate children have access to the suitable resources (material, psychological, social and cultural) and that the attitudes and most extended social patterns are adapted to the needs of families with children and to the needs of the parents*”. Recommendation (2006)19 itself points out the importance of having good professionals and services in order to undertake the task of supporting the parents and parental figures in general, in order for this exercise to be guaranteed. With the aim of achieving this purpose, some guidelines are proposed for both the professionals and the services, highlighting among them the principle of equality and accessibility; the principle of alliance and collaboration with parents which represents a recognition of their experience and of the knowledge of their own children; the favouring of cooperation and interdisciplinary coordination

between entities, facilitating sharing means and working in an interdisciplinary network; avoiding creating an excessive dependency of the families on the service, increasing their self-confidence; undertaking interventions based on promoting the strengths and resources of the family; facilitating the children to communicate their feelings and needs; finally, ensuring the initial and continuous training of the interested professionals and ensuring the continuity and evaluation of the actions they carry out in their respective services.

The need to promote positive parenting from family public policies means that both the professionals and the organisation of the family support services must adapt to this new focus. This is leading to the development of new local and international policies of support to positive parenting (Cojocarú & Cojocarú, 2011a). These policies not only focus their actions on attention to the most serious family cases but also to a large number of family situations with diverse levels of need with a preventive aim and for promoting competences (Rodrigo, Máiquez & Martín, 2010a; Balsells, Amorós, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos, 2011). To deal with this new focus of positive parenting it is important to examine the competences of the professionals of family support services so that they guarantee the appropriate attention to them. For Rodrigo, Máiquez, Martín & Byrne (2008), the set of knowledge and skills that the professionals who work with families need refers to the following aspects: a) the construction of the professional context within its legal ambit of work, b) the knowledge they must possess about evaluation and intervention procedures, c) the capacity to plan, run and evaluate the different actions, and d) the development of interpersonal relations with other professionals and with the users. In fact, professional knowhow is not only based on knowledge of theories and techniques, but also requires thought by the professional about the action, and this is why it is essential to know and delimit what their skills are and know how to apply them in the appropriate situation (Schön, 1998).

Among the professional skills required for working with families, following the National Occupational Standards of the United Kingdom (NOS, 2011), they would be the following: constructing and maintaining positive and effective relations with the families, colleagues and the community; promoting the capacities of the parents to educate the children and their skills in facing their problems; updating professional knowledge and reflecting on their own practice and supporting the knowledge and practice of their colleagues; promoting services for families in accordance with the values and principles of work of the corresponding sector (e.g. mental health, disability, protection of minors); creating and promoting cohesive, inclusive and safe atmospheres for the families; planning and developing family support services that are innovative and of quality; influencing and contributing to the development of policies and strategies of action that create opportunities for family support services (Cojocarú, Cojocarú & Ciuchi, 2011); and finally maintaining in good working order the services that ensure their quality. All these contribute to creating a climate of collaboration between the families

and professionals which is key for the good functioning of the service (Davis & Day, 2010; Rodrigo, Máiquez & Martín, 2011).

The incorporation into the services of group programmes that promote positive parenting, such as the “Learning together, growing in family” programme, is a fine opportunity to practice the majority of skills that are mentioned for the work with families. For this reason, the aim of this study is to discover pre and post changes occurring in the competences of the professionals who work as facilitators of the groups. Additionally, it involves analysing the final impact of the programme on the professional development of the facilitators as well as the impact on the service. If the changes are positive in both cases, the “sustainability” of the programme in the service will be more ensured. Sustainability refers here to the extent to which an intervention becomes institutionalised or part of routine organisational policies and practices of an agency (August, Bloomquist, Lee, Realmuto, & Hektner, 2006). In this study, we forecast that the participation in the programme as facilitators of the groups is an opportunity to improve their professional capacities. According to Martín et al., (2009), the professionals recognise that they do not usually take on the role of facilitator of the group dynamic but rather that of experts. Therefore, it gives them a new perspective on seeing themselves as another member of the group who brings ideas, alternative practices as well as help in the reflection of the parents about their own beliefs and practices and favours the search for consensus (Máiquez, Rodrigo, Capote & Vermaes, 2000). This is the case of the programmes based on experiential methodology such as the “Learning together, growing in family” programme. Moreover, we forecast that the organisation could experience changes due to the incorporation of the group modality that is not so frequent in family support services such as the individual attention modality (Rodrigo, Byrne & Álvarez, 2012). It should be taken into account that the incorporation of the programme requires strategies of attraction and of maintenance of the participants in the groups (Cojocarú & Cojocarú, 2011b), of development of the sessions, as well as skills to undertake a suitable evaluation of them, according to the group programmes of parental education based on evidences (Davies, 2004; Pastor, Amorós, Molina & Balsells, 2008; Rodrigo, Máiquez & Martín, 2010b).

In this study, we have chosen a methodological focus in the evaluation of programmes, which consists of the combination of the quantitative and qualitative methodology (Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos & Pastor, 2011). The mixed method is a process of investigation that compiles, analyses and links quantitative and qualitative data, as well as its integration and joint discussion, in order to achieve a broader and deeper perspective of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2005; Hernández, Fernández y Baptista, 2008; Mertens, 2005). To do this, in the design of the evaluation there are instruments to evaluate the change in the professional competences (before and after the programme) and to evaluate

the change in the professional development and impact on the service (at the end of the programme). We have also used the technique of the focal group as a complementary strategy for compiling information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2008; Krueger, 1991). There are two essential elements in this technique: the list of questions to trigger off the discourse and selection of the participating people to pick up their perception, attitude or feeling about a specific subject responding to the objective of the investigation. In this case, the participants have been the facilitators of the groups and the list of questions compiles the dimensions of selection and attraction of the participants to the programme, the evaluation process, the development of the sessions of the programme and the use and valuation of the programme. In all these aspects, we have analysed the group discourse in search of the specific professional skills that the facilitators have set into motion.

To sum up, this study examines what changes have occurred in the competences and professional development of the facilitators of groups, and also analyses the impact of the programme on the service. Although it is not common to evaluate this type of impact, from our point of view it is important to analyse to what extent the programme contributes to not only the change in the families but also the change in the professional sphere if we want to progress in the development of quality services for families.

Method

Participants

In the implementation of this “Learning together, growing in family” programme there were 138 facilitators and 53 collaborating bodies of CaixaProinfancia who have attended to 1,270 families (609 parents, and 661 children). The collaborating bodies are distributed among the 12 Spanish cities that take part in the Caixa Proinfancia programme of the “la Caixa” Foundation. As can be seen in *Table 1*, the facilitators mainly come from qualified studies in Social Education, Social Work and Psychology, with an average age of 33.7 and an average of 7.4 years of professional experience; moreover, 93.4% had previous experience in group dynamics with families. It is therefore a group with a high level of experience in working with families. The facilitators attended to a total of 58 groups, which in the majority were mixed (61.7%), made up of families at psychosocial risk and more normalised families, just as indicated in the recommendations for forming the groups.

Table 1: Socio-demographic variables of the professionals who implemented the programme

	M (DT) or %
Age	33.69 (8.80)
Qualifications	
Psychology	24.6
Pedagogy	5.7
Social work	25.4
Social education	32.0
Psycho-pedagogy	3.3
Teacher	9.0
Years of professional experience	7.44 (8.18)
Experience in group dynamics	
Without experience	6.6
With experience	93.4

Instruments

Questionnaire of valuation of professional competences (Rodrigo et al., 2012). Produced ex professo for this programme, it is made up of 19 items that describe different competences which evaluate the importance given to them and to what degree they possess this competence. After a factorisation undertaken for this study two factors were shaped: a) competences for interaction with the families made up of 10 items (e.g., “ability to listen and show empathy to the families in their situation”; “personal ability to show assertiveness in communication with the families”) with a high reliability (importance: $\alpha = .85$, competence: $\alpha = .89$) and b) competences for professional development made up of 9 items (e.g., “ability to implement a group programme of parental education”; “capacity to express oneself in public”), with high reliability (importance: $\alpha = .83$, competence: $\alpha = .78$)

Dossier of changes in professional development and service (Byrne, 2010). This instrument consists of a series of questions answered by the mediator themselves regarding their professional development and the changes in the service. The questionnaire is organised around 5 blocks of changes: 1) changes in the way of perceiving and acting with the families from the application of the programme; 2) changes in the way of organising the work with the families in the service; 3) changes in the coordination of the programme with other support programmes or services; 4) relation established with professionals from other services; and 5) valuation of the joint training sessions that they have undertaken in the programme. All the items were valued on a scale of five points (0 = Nothing, 1 = Little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a lot, 4 = A lot).

Procedure

For the implementation of this programme it is fundamental that the facilitators are well trained, not only in the contents, but also in experiential methodology and group dynamics techniques. To achieve this they undertook a total of 12 courses in the different cities that collaborate with the CaixaProinfancia programme and with a high participation of professionals that were going to implement the “Learn together, growing in family” programme. As well as finding out about the focus of positive parenting, the contents, objectives and strategies of the programme, the professionals were equipped in the use of the strategies and techniques for developing the activities of the programme and in the skills for correctly carrying out the process of its implementation and evaluation. At the beginning of the training courses, the questionnaire about professional competences was passed round and again at the end of the programme’s final module. On the same lines, only at the end of the programme the dossier of changes in professional development and service was passed to the professionals. As regards the discussion groups with the professionals, they were done by the training team in all the entities in the middle of the implementation of the programme, between its third and fourth session.

Results

Firstly we will comment on the results of the changes observed with the quantitative instruments, relating to the changes in professional competences and changes in professional development and the service (sections a and b) and secondly the results obtained in the focus groups (section c).

Perception of professional competences

The pre and post differences in professional competences regarding their relative importance have not been significant. This shows that the professionals have not varied in their appreciations about the relative importance of some competences over others, placing more emphasis on the competences of dealing with the families than those specifically relating to the undertaking of their profession (see *Figure 1*).

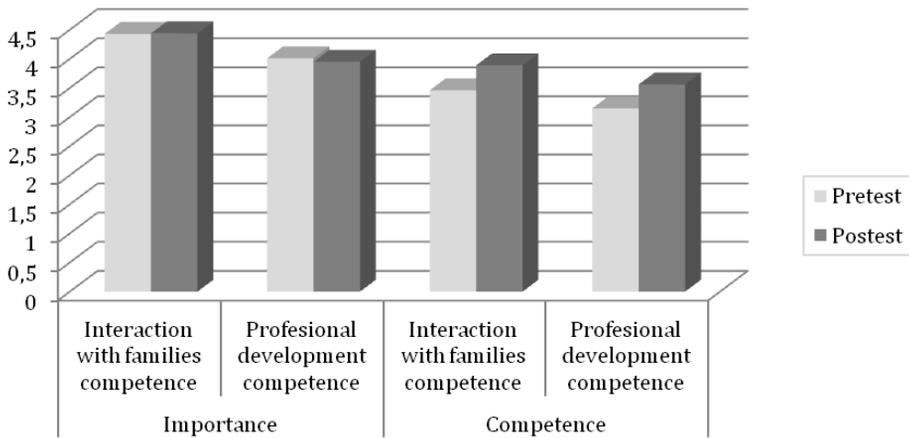


Figure 1. Changes in the perception of the importance of professional competences and the perception of personal competence after the programme

Nevertheless, we have found significant differences in regards to the perception of improvement in the professional competences. On ending the programme the professionals report that that they have improved competences for interaction with the families, $F(1,352)= 153.22; p<.001$; this represents better skills for family support and for strengthening their collaboration (Figure 1). On the other hand, we have also found significant differences in the perception that the professionals have about the improvement in competences for professional development, that is, to undertake teamwork, improve the organisation of the service and increase their coordination and cooperation skills, $F(1,352)= 97.46; p<.001$.

Perception of the changes in professional development and in the service

At the end of the programme we also asked the facilitators to report on the improvements perceived in their professional work and the impact on the service. Table 2 illustrates the results. As we can see, all the results are above the “quite a lot” category which shows, after the programme, a high degree of valuation of their improvement in the professional sphere. In particular, the areas where the changes produced have been most important are: the organisation of work, integration of the programme in other services and the training received.

Table 2. Improvements perceived in professional development and of the service reported by the facilitators.

Improvements in professional work (0-4)	M (DT)
Improvement in way of perceiving and interacting with the families	3.22 (0.44)
Improvement in organisation of work with the families from the service	3.79 (0.56)
Improvement in coordination of the programme with other services	3.69 (0.82)
Improvement in relations with other professionals	3.47 (0.68)
Valuation of the training received	3.50 (0.49)

The variables of the facilitators that modulate these perceptions are age, qualifications and experience in group dynamics. Regarding the improvements in the way of perceiving the work with families (Figure 2), the professions aged under 35, compared with the older ones, perceive more improvements in the work with the families, $F(1,69)= 5.03; p<.05$. Similarly, according to the qualifications of the facilitators, significant differences were found in the way of perceiving the work with the families, $F(4,66)= 10.48; p<.001$. According to the post hoc tests, the psychologists perceive more improvements in the way of working with the families than the social workers ($p <.01$) and the psycho-pedagogues ($p<.001$). Similarly, the psycho-pedagogues have increased more their perception about the work with families than the social educators ($p<.001$) and the teachers ($p<.001$). Finally, we have also found differences regarding the experience in group dynamics. The facilitators without experience in group dynamics reported more improvements in the way of perceiving the work with families than those that have more experience in group dynamics, $F(1,69)= 5.73; p<.01$.

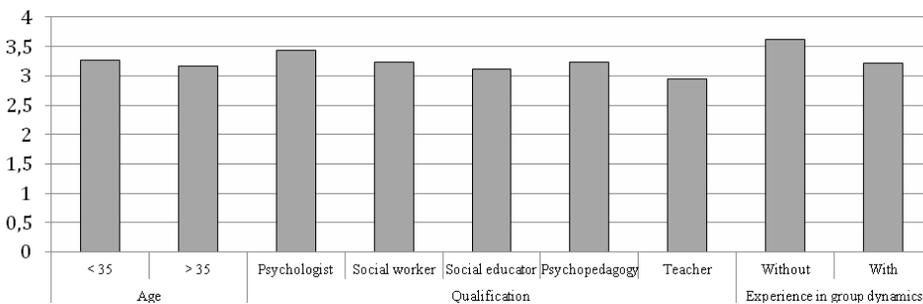


Figure 2. Improvements in the way of perceiving the work with families according to age, qualifications and previous experience of the facilitators in group dynamics

The changes in the organisation of the work with families are seen modulated only by the qualification of the facilitators, $F(4,66)= 11.04; p<.001$. The psychologists perceive more improvements in the way of organising the work than the social educators ($p<.001$) and the psycho-pedagogues ($p<.01$). The changes in

the coordination of the programme with other services are seen modulated by age, qualification and experience in group dynamics (Figure 3). The facilitators aged over 35 in comparison with the younger ones, perceive more improvements in this coordination, $F(1,69)= 32.30$; $p<.001$. According to the qualification of the facilitators, significant differences were found regarding the changes in the coordination of the programme with other services, $F(4,66)= 34.58$; $p<.001$. The psychologists perceive more improvements in this coordination than the social workers ($p<.001$), the social educators ($p<.001$) and the psycho-pedagogues ($p<.01$). Finally, the facilitators without experience in group dynamics perceived more improvements in the coordination of the programme with other services than those who have more experience in group dynamics, $F(1,69)= 6.51$; $p<.001$.

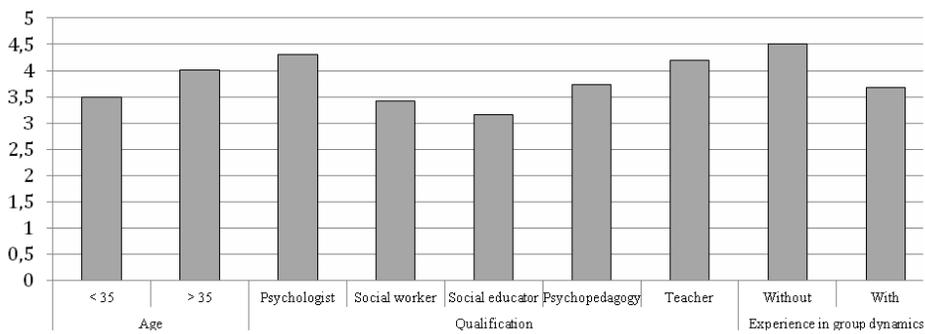


Figure 3. Improvements in the integration of the programme in other services according to the age, qualifications and experience in group dynamics of the facilitators

The relations with other professionals were seen modulated by age, qualification and experience in group dynamics (Figure 4). The facilitators aged over 35, compared to the younger ones, perceive more improvements in the relations with other professionals, $F(1,69)= 6.60$; $p<.01$. According to the qualifications of the facilitators, significant differences were found in the relations with other professionals, $F(4,66)= 6,50$; $p<.001$. According to the post hoc tests, the social workers improve more the relations with other professionals than the social educators ($p<.01$) and the teachers ($p<.01$). The facilitators without experience in group dynamics perceived more improvements in the relations with other professionals than those with more experience, $F(1,69)= 9.28$; $p<.01$).

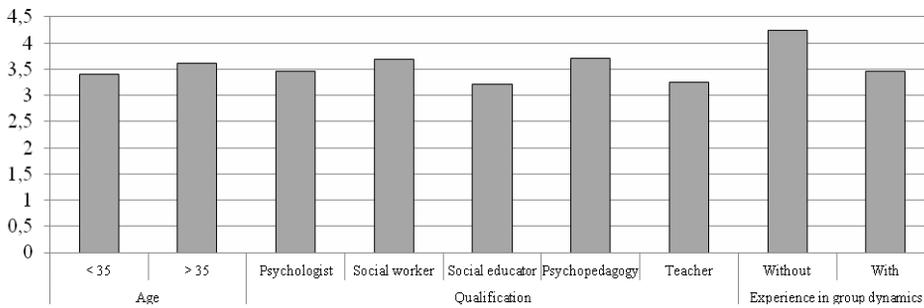


Figure 4. Improvements in the relations with other professionals according to age, qualifications and experience in group dynamics

Results of the discussion groups

Literal transcriptions were made of the contents of the discussion groups (one per collaborating entity) with the professionals that had animated the groups. For the analysis of the content we used the Atlas Ti 6.2 computer programme. The prior analysis of the bibliography in the promotion of positive parenting enabled us to elaborate, prior to the analysis of the textual information, some initial categories of reference. In the first stage of textual analysis paragraphs, fragments and significant quotes in the transcription documents of the discussion groups were selected. The second stage, of a conceptual type, consisted of the construction of the categories and their relevance which, later on, were interrelated and with the categories of initial reference. These two stages were in continuous relation with the process of analysis. This has enabled us to modify the degree of significance given at any time of the process of analysis to a quote or paragraph, and go deeper into the level of conceptualisation. *Table 3* shows a summary of the categories taken from the analysis of the discourse of each of the dimensions studied.

We include some examples of transcriptions that illustrate some of the categories of *Table 3*, relating to the dimensions analysed. Regarding the elements that have influenced in attracting the families the facilitators mentioned the difficulties faced to achieve the commitment to attend by the families: small children, socio-occupational questions, learning or reading-writing difficulties of the participants. The facilitators showed concern for the lack of time to undertake an individualised recruitment in all the cases.

Table 3. Summary of the categories taken in the analysis of the focus groups with the facilitators

Dimension	Variable	Category	
Selection and attraction of the families	Elements that influence in the selection and attractions of the families.	Previous experience	
		Direct relations	
		Time adaptability	
		Criteria of selection	
		Diffusion of the programme	
	Strategies of attraction and motivation	Language barrier	
		Home visits	
		Telephone contact	
		Informal meetings	
Process of evaluation	Advantages and benefits of the evaluation process	Knowing the families	
		Reflection on practice	
	Inconveniences and difficulties	Slow process	
		Complexity of content	
		Difficulty in reading and language	
	Strategies for the undertaking of the evaluation	Help in filling out questionnaires	
		Individual application	
		Group application	
Development of the programme	Elements that have influenced	Composition of the groups	
		Language and cultural diversity	
		Personal conflicts	
		Gender differences	
	Strategies for the sustained maintenance of participation	Time flexibility	
		Weekly sessions	
		Home tasks	
		Afternoon break	
		Prior preparation of activities	
	Adaptation of the contents and strategies in the development of the sessions.	Needs of adaptation of contents	
		Adaptations to the maturity level of the sessions with children	
		Change of strategies in specific activities	
	Use and valuation of the programme	Elements of the programme that have been of help for the families	Learning to reflect on their educational practice
			Strengthening of relations, informal supports and accompaniment
Creation of a shared space for the family			
Awareness of parental role and functions			
Elements of the programme that have been of use to the facilitators		Improvement of the knowledge and diagnosis of the families	
		More positive expectations of the families	
		Creation of a favourable climate to deal with certain subjects	
		Change of the professional model from expert to facilitator	

“Attraction requires more time than was given. To be able to do it well, to take your time with each family, to coordinate with the other professionals, etc... (we had to extend the time). I agree with her, at least the two previous months I would take more time to be able to attract the families. Moreover, the time does not always depend on us, but the families because sometimes they do not show up on the day they should because they could not or because they tell you another commitment arose.”(Professional)

Regarding the strategies for attracting families the majority of the facilitators opted for individualised strategies such as formal or informal interview, or a telephone call. In this first contact the possibility of participating in the programme would be offered.

“We did not have a meeting to offer the programme but went to the specific family. It was offered to them as an opportunity, explaining to them that their family had been selected, and the response of the families was very good.” (Professional)

“Making the most of them coming to the centre we mentioned it to all of them, but apart from those we believed needed it more, we gave a more personal presentation of the workshop, more in individual interviews.” (Professional)

There was also a group that called on a grand scale to the families and in a group meeting the programme was explained; but this was a minority strategy:

“What we did was, just after doing the training, had an initial meeting with the families to inform them of the activities. We made the selection looking at the most suitable profile because we have a lot of people who are already being worked with in other places. We made the selection, called the families, told them about the programme, in general there was a good response and they made the commitment.” (Professional)

Regarding the process of evaluation of the programme, the facilitators highlight that making an evaluation has enabled them to know the families better, detect situations they were unaware of in these families or these children, and even be able to make interventions beyond the actual sphere of the child.

“We very much like doing it individually because we were able, through a series of questions, to capture a case of violence that was not reported. There was a part of the questionnaire that asked about maltreatment, violence, etc. As the mother answered, when she had to speak about her current situation it came out. We are now making an intervention with this woman. She had never

reported it and her son aged 19 had also received maltreatment by the man with whom they were living. I liked it because if this had been done together with other parents we might not have known this information.” (Professional)

Additionally, the process of evaluation of the families has represented an opportunity to reflect on their practice. Thus the facilitators mention that it is necessary to do this type of action because it helps the families verbalise what they feel and later reflect. And it helps them come closer to the families, as well as a chance to introduce the subjects that they will later cover in the programme.

“We have come across families that say that since we did the interviews they have not stopped thinking or wondering about things and feel that even with the interviews alone they have learnt a lot.” (Professional)

Regarding the development of the programme, the professionals value positively the diversity in family composition, gender and age and in sociocultural characteristics. Diversity helps the participants feel more comfortable because it does not label them negatively. An important nuance is that the programme develops better when there are one or two families among the participating families whose parenting is more suitable. The language and cultural diversity is valued initially in some cases as a difficulty due to the reticence by the participants, although this same difficulty is later valued positively, once the group has come together.

“We had the lamb festival with the Arab families, and two of the local families who also came to the programme went due to the connection made with the Maghreb mothers. That was really good.” (Professional)

In some cases, the excessive diversity has caused difficulties in development because the distance between the participants was too great to find elements in common:

“We believe that this is because they are all very different. The families did not know each other, some did from the neighbourhood, but in general no. The causes may be due to the cultural different, or for economic differences. On another occasion we will endeavour that the selection criteria are more similar so that the groups function better.” (Professional)

One of the most important aspects for the professionals is ensuring attendance is maintained and constant by the participants. The profile of families at risk is often characterised by a certain irregularity in attendance extended to the services; constancy and punctuality are two of the aspects the professionals highlighted

most as possible drawbacks. In the discussion groups the facilitators mention the strategies they have followed to overcome these obstacles.

“We have not used any specific strategies but I think that it is very important to create a group. The families have a time and a space to talk amongst each other and see that they are not the only ones with problems. I think that the fact of going week after week motivates them and between them they form a solid group.” (Professional)

“I think that the change we made to the afternoon snack has gone very well. In the beginning we prepared the snack and left it all ready so that they only had to arrive and eat. Then we proposed a change that it would be the mums who had to prepare the snack, from what we would offer them. And from that moment, it was much better because they formed more of a group, spoke more and even on more than one occasion have seen a mum prepare a chocolate spread sandwich for children that were not theirs. And this forms part of the care that we are also working on.” (Professional)

As regards the contents and strategies of the programme, we consider that the experiential orientation of the programme, instead of the academic or technical one, is one of the keys to its success. It brings dynamics to the group that enable them to express themselves, reflect and have a good time, breaking with the more classical tradition of “schools for parents” and it is very well accepted by both participants and facilitators.

“I think that the methodology is good, because it combines what is the dialogue with more dynamic activities such as role playing, watching a video, playing in family, etc.” (Professional)

A matter of concern for the facilitators is the adaptation to the evolutionary needs of the children. It is pointed out that in the children’s sessions, there is a large dispersion of age, and adaptations must be made in terms of the maturity level of the participants.

“I wanted to say, with regard to the children, I love the material, I like how it is developed I like the activities, etc. But the children in our group are of very different ages, so that we have had to adapt to the ages. It is working quite well at the moment and they love the drawings, stories, etc...” (Professional)

Finally, regarding the use and valuation of the programme, the professionals have highlighted the creation of a positive working atmosphere; when a good link between the professionals and the participants is established, as well as there being among the participants a climate of mutual support that favours the

development of the activities. To achieve this more informal spaces are used, such as the arrival, the coffee break or the meeting between parents and children.

“In our case there is much complicity between the families, they help each other a lot and they seem to be very happy with the rest of the group.” (Professional)

“They have really serious problems, this is a “mini” step towards something better, although while the programme is ending, just trying to channel things. It is helping us greatly to channel things, for example, having a space to be able to give their opinion about questions, is very important. They learn skills as parents, not only from the programme, but also from what the other parents talk about, I think it’s great. They see that other families have the same problems, so they don’t see their problems as something out of the ordinary, so they can talk about it.” (Professional)

The programme has created a shared family space, which until now was not something common in these vulnerable families. In the programme the families experience spending time together and making alliances. The family sessions are valued very positively by the facilitators, both for the methodology used and for being an element of shared family space and motivation.

“Personally what I value, and I believe it is what the children appreciate most, is having their parents one day a week with them, playing with them and also taking them to the sessions, what they value most is this part.” (Professional)

The facilitators have also commented that there were improvements in the way of perceiving and knowing the families; in this sense they have discovered how the families have a greater disposition to improve their reality, more than was initially forecast.

“One of the things we feared was that they would not want to participate because they did not receive anything in exchange, but in general, the acceptance was very good (...) Another thing that it has brought me is being able to observe the spontaneous family dynamics. The family sessions have been very useful to me.” (Professional)

Discussion

In this study we have been able to show, following a mixed method, that the application of the “Learning together, growing in family” programme has produced significant changes in the way that the facilitators deal with working with families. The implementation of the programme has enabled them to perceive improvements in their competences for interaction with the families showing, in particular, improved skills for supporting the families and to strengthen their collaboration. The facilitators have also reported positive changes in their professional development, that is, in those skills for undertaking teamwork, for organising the service and for the coordination and cooperation with other services.

These changes may be due to the type of setting and relations created between families and professionals in the group programmes with an experiential orientation (Máiquez et al., 2000). In these programmes an important alliance is gradually built between families and professionals (Escudero, 2005). Throughout the sessions this good relationship is evident in the way that the families become involved and take part more in the sessions, negotiating objectives, undertaking tasks and above all, in the way that the professional recognise the improvements in the families. The professionals also gradually acquire discursive skills that produce an atmosphere of trust and support for the families. As Egan points out (2010), diverse tools are at play in the communication with the families such as active listening, empathy, negotiation and comprehension.

The experiential group programmes in which knowledge is gradually and jointly built up (Amorós, et al., 2010; Amorós et al., 2005), means that the professional can change not only the vision they have of the families, but also learns to put into practice creative dynamics that enable the parents to achieve the objectives proposed in each session (Rodrigo et al., 2010b). This is why at the end of the programme the facilitators have reported positive changes in the way they have of perceiving working with families. We think it is most indicative that it is the youngest professionals and with less previous experience in group dynamics who have perceived to a greater extent these improvements through the implementation of the programme. That means that early professional motivation and good training for the programme are important conditions for the positive long-term effects on professional development (Beidas & Kendall, 2010).

On the other hand the new group working model has meant an improvement in the organisation of the work with families from the service, since contact has been more frequent and within the model both parents and children have taken part. Having weekly access to the families enables, among other things, the better management of time dedicated to the families. Another improvement in pro-

professional competences involves the skills for coordinating the programme with other services. There are many obstacles along the way in achieving good coordination: unsuitable mentality of the heads of services, not very flexible organisational structures, professional ideologies in conflict, problems of communication, difficulties in comprehension of the roles, responsibilities and mistrust among the professionals, among other aspects (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). Here it is the older professionals who have learnt most, perhaps due to their greater professional experience, on connecting the programme with other programmes that they may be undertaking in different services. Similarly, it is the psychologists, social workers and teachers, as well as those that do not have experience in group dynamics who report more improvements in the coordination of the programme with other services.

It is also important to have an interdisciplinary knowledge of the working methods of the other professionals to understand their functions and what they might contribute and to what extent is collaboration possible between them (Rodrigo et al., 2008; Rodrigo et al., 2011). In this sense the facilitators report that they have managed to improve the relation with other professionals, which is a good basis for collaborative work and networking which requires the intervention with families in situation of psychosocial risk. The younger professionals with less experience in group dynamics strategies are those who have benefited most in this aspect of professional development. According to Rodrigo et al., (2011), one of the fundamental competences of the professionals is that of knowing how to update professional knowledge and reflect on their own practice supported by the knowledge and practice of their colleagues. All these results are relevant since changes in the organisational context of the services form one of the bases of evidence-based social practice, according to a survey performed in the UK social services (Morago, 2010). The existence of a university-private agency partnership, like the one supporting the programme, is also considered as a facilitator of the effective implementation of evidence-based programmes in practice settings (Belamy, et al, 2008).

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of the discourse of the facilitators during the focus groups has made it possible to illustrate with more detail the professional skills developed throughout the process of implementing the programme. Just as we expected, the incorporation of a group programme into the service involves many things to learn in order to undertake the selection, attraction and motivation of the families as well as their accompaniment during the sessions. Learning processes for the evaluation of the programme so that the effectiveness of this professional situation can be rigorously demonstrated. Learning for the good development of

the sessions, the adaptation of the materials when deemed necessary and the structuring of group time so that it is motivating and useful for the family. Finally, seeing the families in action with their strengths and weaknesses offers first-hand information to know them better. Practicing the modality of group intervention provides the professionals with multiple opportunities for reflection about the practice and, in particular, to practice the role of accompaniment and support as well as of supervision and control. To sum up, the incorporation of the group programmes of parental education in family support services contributes to introducing the culture of innovation, good practices and the permanent search for quality of service in the sphere of psychosocial intervention with families.

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