

SECOND CASE OF EXCELLENCE

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"NEUTRAL SPACE" SERVICE CENTER FOR MALTREATED CHILDREN AND FOR CARE OF FAMILY CRISES

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PREMISE

In light of considerations that emerged from work already completed, it was decided to focus the discussion on the concept of **interests of minors**, a theme recognised and widely referred to both by the Italian laws and by the United Nations 1989 Convention.¹

For our laws the maturing individual is surely the bearer of subjective rights, whose enjoyment should be guaranteed and whose promotion should be stimulated. It is however fundamental that such rights be recognised and activated so as to allow the minor to really construct his own personal and social individuality. It should be recognised that the growing subject is not just a child of a family, property of parents, but an autonomous person whose fair expectations and attitudes should be recognised and respected. The minor cannot be considered as an unformed "thing" who should be shaped by the adult, but as a human being having an autonomous personality, even if still unfinished, to be potentialised and valorised. The minor should be viewed as a richness to be developed.

To carry out adequate protection for minors, recourse to the mere notion of subjective rights can be insufficient, because it is too narrow and sometimes deviant. The notion of interests is in this case a necessary criteria for evaluating and specifying concrete ways of exercising a recognised right.

The criteria of the minor's interests should be strictly tied to the particularities of the actual case, should be changeable over time, should be related to the subject's age, to their prior situation, and to the characteristics of the individual personality. In other words, it should be the instrument for adapting this right to the particular and unrepeatable characteristics of the widely diverse needs of single subjects, whose rights are to be protected and promoted.

Above all, when the minor finds himself in difficult family situations, it is not enough to work only in terms of evaluating subjective rights. It is indispensable to resort to "mediation" of the idea of interests. Thus, faced with a situation of abandonment, the minor should always be placed in a substitute family with characteristics that the law specifies as the best. Similarly, with the breakdown of the family community, on the basis of which criteria is it decided that the child should stay with one or the other parent?

We wanted to present a "case" that would put the interest of the minor at the centre of its objectives, tending to offer a flexible and specific service that took account all the needs and requirements of the child, going outside rigid and generic schemes and considering the individuality and non-repeatability of diverse needs of individual subjects.

INTRODUCTION: THE C.B.M.

The Centre for Maltreated Children and for Care of Family Crises (C.B.M.) was created in 1984 as a co-operative. It was made up of nine founding members, psychologists, social workers and educators. In 1985, in agreement with the directives of the European Parliament, the City of Milan gave the C.B.M. the responsibility of organising and activating a free, specialised public service to intervene on behalf of maltreated minors and families in crisis.

A specialised team works at the Centre. This team, which has had many years of experience in caring for and curing children who are victims of violence and abuse and their families, is composed of family psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, infant neuro-psychiatrists, pediatricians, social workers, teachers and educators. The Centre operates in strict contact with institutions, regional services and the Tribunals, with the objective of establishing intervention strategies that can assure the protection of the child together with the psychological treatment of the family, integrating juridical needs with social-assistance needs, overcoming the dangerous dichotomy of the mere criminalisation of the parent and indifference towards victims of abuse.

Presently the C.B.M. offers the following services:

- **Telephone Hot Line**, for reporting by private citizens or social and health services, active day and night throughout the year.
- **Two communities for immediately receiving** minors who are temporarily distanced from parents by order of judicial authority.
- **Specialised teams** for evaluation, diagnosis and therapy (individual and family) in situations of physical or psychological maltreatment, neglect and sexual abuse.
- Technical and scientific observatory for the demonstration, research and identification of the most advanced techniques of psycho-social intervention. The service carries out activities of **training, consultancy, supervision and technical-scientific documentation**, monitoring maltreatment phenomenon through quantitative and qualitative analysis of reported cases of maltreatment and abuse.
- A **neutral space** for parent-child encounters. This is a meeting place at the C.B.M. for parents and children who have already been received at the centre or signalled by Central Neutral Space Service of the Province of Milan. The service has the objective of offering a protected and appropriate place for evaluating, establishing or re-establishing the parental/minor relationship.
- **Unit for care and research in sexual abuse (UCRAS):** the service offers specialised interventions for identification, revelation and investigation of cases, management of the crisis of sexually abused children, individual and family diagnosis and therapy, which qualify as varying stages of a global team responsibility.

The C.B.M. uses two **operating units**:

- 1) the **psycho-social unit**, which carries out the tasks of:
 - a) undertaking cases noted by regional services staff, tribunals or private citizens in strict collaboration with regional organisations and services, and in co-ordination with these.

- b) Psycho-diagnostic evaluation and therapeutic treatment of the entire family unit and of the minor, victim of violence and of sexual abuse.
- 2) **the emergency reception unit:** whether emergencies or not, in situations where minors are temporarily distanced from the family by order of the magistracy because they are victims of physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse, neglect or "serious compromise" they are received in two communities. These communities receive a maximum of ten children each and, where necessary, can also house a parent. The stay lasts the time necessary for formulating a prognosis about the parents' ability to recover their capacity to adequately carry out parental functions. At the end of the evaluation the minor can re-enter the family or, if the prognosis of his original family is negative, can be placed in alternative environments judged by the courts or other competent organisations as appropriate for his harmonious development.

For every minor received, a specific and individualised pedagogical program of recovery is established. Children who attend school are accompanied each day by educators to the scholastic complexes in which their parents enrolled them before the period of separation, in order to not influence their normal school attendance or their network of friendly relationships.

THE "NEUTRAL SPACE" EXPERIENCE

The "**Neutral Space**" service was created in 1993 as an experimental project, according to the wishes of the Social Service Sectors of the city administration and the Province of Milan, with a focus on **the theme of parenting**. The objective, in this first phase, was that of building an environment aimed at facilitating the re-establishment of relationships and emotions between parents or adults of reference and children who had undergone, or were undergoing, interrupted relationships, determined by gravely conflictual internal dynamics within the nuclear family.

This call for designing a qualified container, an external space, a specified period of time, a third place, a territory that would not belong to any of the contenders, where encounters could take place; an environment where the presence of adequately trained staff who would take on the function of emotional support to the child and would facilitate the creation of conditions for a positive encounter, emphasising, according to the situations, the aspect of protection, observation or support.

The experimental phase, conducted from 1993 to 1995, persuaded the directors of the Social Services Sectors of the city and Province to take the decision to institute the service, defining its objectives and tasks.

The service reached the C.B.M. in 1997, when the need to be able to have meetings between parents and children even in difficult cases, as in suspected **abuse and maltreatment**, was revealed.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION AND METHODOLOGY

"Traditional" neutral space service

It is possible to identify **two typical situations for which the Neutral Space is resorted to**: on the one hand, cases in which, during psychological work, the couple is divided and the children are entrusted to one of the two parents, with the other one still having the opportunity to meet with them in a protected place; on the other hand, situations in which the children have been entrusted to

another family unit, with a decree that authorises the meetings (monitored through the presence of an educator) with one or both of the parents.

The educator appointed for the management of the meetings becomes part of the therapeutic team and participates in the project concerning the family unit, in a climate of transparency in terms of the family and other staff.

The intervention is characterised as an act of transition that leads towards re-acquisition of a more functional family relationship:

- allowing this to happen in a reassuring, welcoming and safe space of meetings between the child and the parents;
- making this experience materially possible in a framework of neutrality and suspension of conflict in the presence of the child;
- favouring the establishment of the sense of parental responsibility and of the capacity to organise meetings independently.

For situations regarding parents with serious pathologies or deviancies, the intervention is aimed at obtaining respect for the prescription allowing the visit, and therefore maintaining the relationship.

The range of interventions to be carried out in this regard is extremely wide and therefore illustrative:

- a) supporting the maintenance and reconstruction of the relationship with non-custodial parent in situations of conflictual separation;
- b) reconstruction of the relationship with one or both parents, following removal prescribed by the magistracy, with consequent interruption of relationship;
- c) maintenance of the relationship with one or both parents in situations where minors are at risk;
- d) construction of the relationship with a parent one has never known, for a late recognition, or for other particularly complex family occurrences;
- e) return of the child to the natural parents, after long periods of absence, following removal of a minor and/or kidnapping;
- f) return of the minors to their natural parents following recourse to the declaration of adoptability for minors, taken into pre-adoptive custody by the Tribunal for Minors, in presence of non-definitive sentences.

The context of the interventions always has a **coercive** connotation: the sentence on the part of the magistracy defines it and specifies eventual limits to parental authority (in the case of consignments by the Tribunal for the minors, in relation to articles 330 and following of the civil code). In the case of civil procedures of divorce or separation (Civil Tribunal) or of separation within a "di facto" family (Tribunal for Minors), it indicates the regulation of meetings with the non-custodial parent.

The forms of intervention that the service undertakes should thus take into account these presuppositions and spell out, as a result, both the terms of the relationships existing between the service and the magistracy and the role that the organisation eventually assumes in respect to the minor. Here we are referring specifically to protection, custody to the city, and removal.

For some of the cases, therefore - those which undergo rulings by the Tribunal for Minors limiting parental authority - the Neutral Space works in strict collaboration with the Family Social Services of the City of Milan, responsible for the global intervention project for minors and for their family.

The focus is placed on recognising the child's need for protection of the affective and educational relationship with both parents, as this best guarantees the prospective of healthy and balanced growth and acquisition of an adequate adult identity.

Evaluation of the resources that progressively emerge within the child and within his adults becomes the basis on which strategies and objectives of the intervention itself are re-defined.

The final objective, therefore, for the correct and punctual application of the institutional mandate, decree or sentence is modulated and updated through the child's awareness and the resources of his adults.

Carrying out the intervention calls for an initial phase of awareness and orientation. Meetings are held with parents (or adults of reference) separately, and the child is received. The child can then explore the service, to know the worker and the space where the meetings will take place. The worker approaches the child, meeting him either through the parents or directly, giving him space, giving him voice, through listening, playing, drawing. Desires, fears, anxieties, astonishment, gestures that tell of distancing, regrets, desire for nearness, anger, major disappointments, take form.

The **worker** approaches the child and the child begins to have confidence in him. He discovers that with the educator he can face his experiences freely, without betraying any of those he loves. The worker tries to take in and welcome the child's point of view and emotions, re-elaborating them and re-presenting them in a way that is understandable and bearable. In the first meetings, the worker speaks with the child about his story, explaining that he, the child, is not responsible for these happenings between adults.

Contemporaneously, the work with the parents is developing. The adults that join the service bear, in varying forms and attitudes, the results of a profound discomfort. What can initially present itself is an attitude of refusal and recalcitrance, the recounting of a situation that cannot be changed, persevering obstinacy of hatred, rage, desire to cancel out the other, sense of powerlessness for imposed distance, fear of losing a child or grandchild seen exclusively as one's own. All the stories share a sense of the impossibility of evolution and change. Behind the accents of aggressiveness can always be seen the sign of suffering. In encounters with adults, the worker tries to establish a contact, a tie, welcoming the suffering and problematical aspects, allying with the more positive ones, gradually bringing out the image that the parent has of his own child. The first fundamental step is that of establishing a relationship, beyond contents that are sometimes saturated with aggressiveness. A parent who, even if induced by coercion, has arrived at the service, has come to accept speaking, is a parent with whom one can try to work. On the other hand, every signal of interrupted communication is the object of attentive analysis on the part of the worker.

It is fundamental to recall that **the intervention initially develops from an injunction by the magistracy**, and not from the subjective recognition of a need, or even an uncertain availability for confrontation or for a period of reflection.

The coercive decision can become an unmistakable and authoritative signal of the need to draw back from parental behaviours that are not adequate and are damaging to the right of maintaining the relationship with both parents. Still, for this right to be actually respected, it is not always enough that the judge has sanctioned it. The service, granted a mandate, is placed in this framework as a third party that can initiate a change in the dynamics among the adults, drawing out potentialities and helping to bring about a more adequate parental relationship. Up to now, the experience in situations of serious conflict where the child is involved and used as an instrument for the fight, with no apparent possibility of a truce, seems to suggest that when the law is effectively

imposed, a psychological process of maturation can begin to operate in some subjects. This permits them to progressively integrate the obligatory character with the decisional character.

The **meetings between the child and the non-custodial parent** take place according to two different methodologies and organisations. For more complex and problematic situations, in the presence of provisions that limit authority, of pathologies, where the child seen to be exposed to a situation of higher risk, meetings between parent and child take place within one of the equipped rooms, in the presence, sometimes constant, of a staff member. The context thus is changed to welcome one single family situation in the presence of the referring staff member.

Experience up until now has demonstrated that the **length** of treatment should have a certain flexibility in terms of the initial conditions and of the objectives that realistically can be reached. These can become further clarified during the course of treatment.

Excluding some special situations, identified by length and pathology with particularly restrictive measures on the part of the magistracy, the length of the treatment is established **between one or two years**, with a very high range of variability.

Once the possibility of maintaining the relationship has been re-established, the magistracy will define appropriate regulations, which can be developed outside of the service. In these situations the impossibility of exercising visiting rights has been overcome. However, areas of difficulties and conflicts among the adults remain, so that an agreement between the parties is still not possible. The team of workers (presently ten) has multi-disciplinary competencies, in terms of the psycho-social and educational area (social worker, educator, psychologist, psycho-therapist). All the workers have prior experiences in the area of personal services and in particular in the minor and family area.

The diversification of professions and experiences is a highly qualifying factor, in that it guarantees a richer and more articulated approach, able to gather and manage all the diverse implications, problems, potentials, that nowadays are expressed throughout the vital cycle of a family, which is itself very wide and diversified. The reflection and functioning come to be self-sustaining, then, in this innovative intervention in our society. In fact, the team of workers sustains the reflection that is continually reformulated around the changing relationships among individuals and workers.

The **evaluation of resources** that gradually emerges in the child and in his adults becomes the basis upon which **the strategies and objectives of the intervention are re-defined**. For some cases this work is also carried out in larger meetings, which include the participation of workers from other services co-responsible for the case management.

Intervention with maltreating families: "Protected" Neutral Space

In 1997 the City of Milan, within the scope of the agreement with the C.B.M., defined the start of a second pole of service, to better respond to requests by the Tribunal for Minors regarding exercise of visiting rights in family situations characterised by maltreatment, serious neglect and abuse.

The proposal immediately seemed promising in that already some of the families under the care of the centre attended the "Neutral Space" with the aim of reconstructing the relationship between parents and children in situations of conjugal separation. The collaboration with the service staff present in the Milan region was stimulating and productive.

As we have seen, other experiences with the Neutral Space oriented this service above all to families in operative phases and furnished elements favourable for reaching a better exchange in family relationships and in maintaining the child's fundamental ties.

The C.B.M. asked itself whether this objective could have been reached using this instrument with maltreating and abusing families as well.

The traditional neutral space, aimed originally at guaranteeing visiting rights and giving the child the possibility to have contacts with his parents, had as a presupposition that the relationship between parent and child was not "damaging in itself" but needed effort in order to develop positively, because it was constantly attacked and invaded by the inappropriate attitude of the other parent. The space of the visit thus clearly had to be formed as "neutral" from the pervasive and invasive conflict between the two adults. Adopting the point of view of the child, it is clear that here a situation of serious suffering existed (the parents are divided and fighting). Still, it is possible to think of a course of assistance that proposes to "safeguard" the ties with one parent at a time.

The route appears more complicated in situations of abuse and maltreatment. In these cases, in fact, the child can always be seen "positioned" at the intersection of two significant relational ties, but both, though in different measure, are inadequate: a directly maltreating relationship (understood in its varying meanings: from sexual abuse, to physical aggression, to neglect) with one of the two parents and a relationship characterised by absence of a sufficiently protective behaviour regarding the violence or maltreatment by the partner.

Moreover, when one of the two parents is recognised as having a certain adequacy, such that he or she remains responsible or in custody of the child, this person still needs to be stimulated and supported to develop a protective attitude in terms of the child and helped to re-build a relationship of confidence with him. The literature about this affirms that the function of workers regarding visiting rights is not possible in cases of suspected abuse or violence on the part of a parent. It was therefore necessary that the service make some changes, marking also some distance. This different point of departure had an ever more profound influence and displayed some critical loosening up in terms of the neutral space as it was traditionally understood.

The first step was to clarify what we were creating: a "protected" as well as a neutral space, that is a space in which the child was guaranteed the possibility of encounters with one or both parents, who voluntarily or involuntarily had behaved in a way directly damaging to the child.

In establishing and carrying out the Neutral Space service, the maturing awareness of the C.B.M., developed during years of work with maltreated and abused families, was used.

Giving the centre an extremely clear and connotative name in terms of type of use was at the beginning undervalued, in that it seemed able to reassure the families, on the one hand explaining to them that the C.B.M. made a locale available at the request of the city, and on the other hand underscoring that the intervention of the Neutral Space could nevertheless re-enter into activities that concerned the second part of the centre's objective: curing the family crisis, a definition that families should have been able to relate to without difficulty.

In reality many parents didn't accept this proposal for the reading of the acronym. This put the workers in an extremely dangerous position: all the families were invited precisely because in some sense they were maltreating, abusing or seriously suspect families.

In this way the "minimisation" was abandoned, to redefine the service as a centre specialised in themes regarding family violence and abuse. The message sent to parents was thus even more explicit: these were invited to the centre because their relationship with the children or the other spouse had been, or still was, crossed with problems of this kind.

A multidisciplinary team of workers was organised, composed of social workers, psychologists and educators with experience working with children from maltreating families.

How neutral space functions

The city's central headquarters carries out the role of "filtering" various requests and privileging situations already undertaken by the Centre, sending those family units whose history is defined by suspected abuse and maltreatment. The service follows a path analogous to that of the traditional Neutral Space, finding its identify in terms of the particular cases that are referred to it.

The situations in which the Neutral Space is called to intervene can be organised in three typologies:

1) Families marked by **suspected maltreatment or sexual abuse**

In a situation marked by a suspected maltreatment or sexual abuse, when the Tribunal adopts a protective measure and distances the minor from the family, parents still have the right to meet their own children. The Neutral Space offers this opportunity within a few days. The objective of the Neutral Space is that of observing the child's relationship with one or both parents, in order to gather elements necessary to the **survey** or social investigation.

2) Families that are undergoing an **evaluation of recoverability of parental functions** through other services or through the C.B.M. itself.

At the Neutral Space they are asked to gather a series of elements and information that will be added to the outlines of the psycho-diagnostic evaluation. During the encounter the worker collects observations, which will constitute significant material for working with families, to be organised and furnished by other services. The encounter in Neutral Space responds, therefore, to the need of complementing the evaluation of possibilities of change and recovery for parents, with new and different information.

3) Families that have **concluded the evaluation period** regarding the recoverability of parenting functions.

At the end of the evaluation period a decree of the Tribunal intervenes, requesting the organisation of protected meetings between parents and children. If the diagnosis has been positive and parents are recoverable, the meeting represents a help for renewed contact with the child. On the other hand, if the parents are not recoverable and if they are moving towards separation, Neutral Space becomes the place in which it is possible to accompany the detachment.

Regarding these three typologies, it emerges that **only in the first group**, and in particular in families that have had a positive outcome regarding recoverability of parenting, **can the clear and pure mandate of the Neutral Space be carried out**. This is the support and reconstruction of inter-generational relationships, to reach autonomy in meetings between parents and child. In this situation the educator is a "facilitator" of the relationship between adults and children and tends to propose experiences of exchange that gradually become more autonomous.

In other situations the aspect of vigilance and protection predominates. Control is directed toward making the meeting "practical," making a non-maltreating relationship possible, but at the same time explaining to all interested subjects that the meeting in itself cannot and should not be confused with diagnosis/evaluation or therapy.

In these cases frequently the undergoing of the procedure in Neutral Space is not determined by the family, but **by judicial means.** A revelation that abuse has taken place, or the outcome of a sentence, can close the family's access to the service. **This calls for, therefore, a clear explanation to the family: the space is an opportunity given to them, but it is available only in the presence of a network of services that authorises and defines it within a period of time.**

Initially the meetings, appear very difficult for everyone, because both children and parents exercise strong control over the situation. Furthermore, certain situations demonstrate how much **the Protected Neutral Space is influenced by external events, typically judicial ones.** Especially where penal procedures are underway, there is a strong risk that the encounter will be damaging and counter-productive not only for the child, who can be submitted to pressures and a sense of guilt, but also for the parent, who may not be sufficiently prepared and protected from the delicacy and difficulty of the encounter. In fact, situations which involve the penal Tribunal are the most complex to manage and to position in a non-contradictory way. Generally, for all these reasons, at the end of each meeting and whenever requested, it is possible to speak separately with "the big people" and "the little people," to placate anxieties, sufferings, angers and fears that could have arisen during the visit.

The need to pay attention to the arrangement of the context, as well as to how the meetings are conducted, has led to involving two workers in every situation: one more dedicated to co-ordinating the network and the other to supervising the visit.

The meeting between workers (usually the social service worker charged with custody of the minor and one or more psychologists) has the aim of bringing out and making explicit and shared the meanings that each one attributes to the experience of the visits, confronting them with what the Tribunal has requested and understanding what "use" each one can make of the material that comes out of the encounters, within the scope of his own specific intervention, to facilitate the path of assistance and well-being for the child and other people in the family.

The meeting with the services is precious also for defining how and through whom the passage of information will take place after meetings. At the end of the meeting, the workers reach agreements about who communicates what to whom. Normally it is the social worker of the custodial service who bears the task of informing adults and children of the meetings' outcomes, of their significance and of the main rules. In regard to children and their parents, it is important to offer clarity and transparency.

Finally, it is useful that the activation of the Neutral Space be inserted within a context of broader psychological and social intervention.

The experience is too recent for offering conclusive comments; still the practical experience has raised some sources for reflection and problematic tangles that it would be useful to point out. The intervention model put into action with maltreating and multi-problematic families has led the team to specify **three different objectives in requesting the Neutral Space,** in the work of the regional services and the Tribunal. It has therefore become fundamental to organise an attentive analysis of the request with the custodial services for minors, to establish and above all to share with clarity the

objectives of the intervention, in order to better utilise observations and relationship exchanges that the educators note during the meetings. For now it seems possible to subdivide into three groups the situations which have been worked upon in the Neutral Space, beginning with analysis of the mandate received either from the Tribunal for minors or from the social services for the custody of minors.

The **first group** is made up of families who have already concluded the evaluation regarding recovery of parental capabilities. The outcome of such a procedure can be positive or negative, but what is the same in either case is the **decree of the Tribunal, which calls for organising protected meetings between parents (or only one of the two) and children**. These are the clearest situations in which activating the educator to help re-build relationships or separations appears pertinent and appropriate for parents and children. What is substantially different is the objective of the work in Neutral Space: in situations where diagnosis has been positive, the effort is to give impetus to the protected path of rapprochement between parents and children. The interrupted or previously tedious relationship should find a new equilibrium. The space of encounter becomes a precious occasion for achieving significant steps in continuing as parents in changed relational contexts. On the other hand, if the conclusion of the evaluation is negative and the parents are therefore judged to be non-recoverable, the Neutral Space becomes the place in which it may be possible to accompany the separation between parents and children.

Certainly in these two different situations the educators' interventions are brought together in different ways: in the first case they are focused on the parents, who are sustained and encouraged to come nearer to their children and to communicate with them. On the other hand, particular attention to the child's reactions and thoughts is called for in situations in which gradual detachment is expected.

The **second group**, on the other hand, is identified with a **mandate strictly connected to the evaluative phase on the part of staff who work in other contexts with the parents**. The encounter in Neutral Space responds to the need to fill out with new and different information the evaluation of the possibilities for change and recuperation of the parents.

This is undoubtedly a situation that hides quite a few difficulties: observations gathered by the educator, in fact, make up significant material for working with families, which should thus be organised and guaranteed by other services. Parents and children are aware of such passage of information and therefore perceive of the meeting as a testing ground in which a certain savoir faire should be demonstrated. Such a feeling at first renders the situation very artificial, and only after many encounters does the climate become relaxed. To reach the defined objective it is fundamental, in this case, that the network of services be activated, that the evaluation be effectively underway and that therefore someone gather what has occurred during the meeting in Neutral Space. The organisation of the meetings in Neutral Space, in fact, prevents the educator, who manages the visit, from knowing the feelings of the child before and after the meeting, from knowing with which messages he was accompanied and then welcomed back, what he thought about what transpired - and it is thus fundamental that others gather up these threads and connect them to indicate the future path.

In working with this second group of families, the educator carries out a function primarily of observation and protection of the child. His interventions are few, but his presence is constant.

The length of the evaluation phase should have a clear conclusion, a definite deadline both for the parents and for the children.

The **third group** is identified by situations marked by **suspected maltreatment or sexual abuse**. The aim of the meetings in the Neutral Space is that of observing the relationship of the child with one or both parents, in order to gather elements necessary for revealing the situation or for the social inquiry.

In such situations, the request is that of watching attentively over meetings in which, a penal procedure having already been opened, non-protected contact between parents and children is considered inadequate and dangerous. The situations of this third group are the most complex and difficult to manage, in that the development of the work appears uncertain from its beginning (the suspension of relationships or arrest of the presumed abuser can in fact arrive unexpectedly).

Furthermore, what the team is studying is how to render these meetings really meaningful for the children. Often in fact the impression is given of guaranteeing parental visiting rights, putting in secondary position the need for clarity and transparency for the children, who need to place themselves into the family story that they are living.

These extreme situations propose, in an extremely clear way, problems regarding the use of Neutral Space for this type of case. They show the danger that such an intervention may guarantee to adults the right to meet with the children, at the price of putting the children's needs into second place.

It is important that reflection about the continuity of relationships between parents and children in situations where children are at risk, find and show paths that can respond to the needs of all the members of the family system. The opening of such meetings therefore requires an important work of preparation, with all members of the family recognising the importance of this place for the assistance and protection of the relationships.

If in fact Neutral Space can guarantee the survival and care of parental ties, contributing to the understanding and acceptance of a story and a human being, even when marked by fatigue and pain, it should also be a training ground, so that parents have a way of constructing new patterns of communication with the children, who can then verify that the parents can be different.

The experience of Protected Neutral Space is useful even for children who are victims of maltreatment and abuse, but the greater complexity and multiple problems in these situations require a wider articulation and assumption of tasks on the part of the services involved in the psychological and social work that is necessary with all the members of these families.

SOME DATA AND INDICATORS OF THE "NEUTRAL SPACE" SERVICE

The indicators that have been noted for evaluating this service are distinct from those proposed for the services of family mediation (as, for example, for the "ALFID") because they must be adapted to a service that calls for an involvement that has been coerced by the Tribunal. This leads to an "imposed" participation.

Thus, in terms of the level of achievement of objectives that the service sets up for itself (**indicator of effectiveness**), it is notable that the service manages to guarantee the possibility of protected meetings between parents and children and at the same time manages to be instrumental in observation and evaluation of family relationships and for the possibility of change and development of parental capabilities.

The number of "cases" taken on by the "Neutral Space" service from the time of its creation until now are approximately 70. This represents almost all of the cases signalled to the C.B.M. (**indicator of equity**). Among the criteria used for taking on a family group, the willingness of the family to go ahead with a course of psychotherapy at the same time is determinant. Besides this, the team also evaluates, using the indications of the social services as well, whether the service is able to guarantee appropriate assistance and protection to the people involved.

The C.B.M. does not call for an instrument for revealing the **satisfaction** of the user. For some situations the precocity of the intervention may guarantee not so much the right of the adult as the respect and interest of the child, who would need more time and more guarantees before being able to face this important moment.

Presently the team is made up of ten workers with multidisciplinary competencies, referable to the psycho-social and educational areas (social worker, educator, psychologist and psychotherapist). The variety of professionals allows establishment of an integrated approach. Furthermore, two workers are present in every situation: one more dedicated to co-ordinating the network (social worker or psychologist), and the other to the supervision of the visit (psychologist or educator) (**indicator of appropriateness**).

The Tribunal decides about the length of treatment and attendance at meetings. The average period of attendance at the service is between one and two years, even though each case is evaluated in terms of specific needs. In fact the service providers can advance their own evaluation of the case and as a result modify the way meetings are managed.

There are no waiting times for using the service, given that undergoing the intervention is imposed coercively by the tribunal (**indicator of accessibility**).

The service is well connected and integrated in the network of services. Periodic encounters are planned with various subjects who are caring for the nuclear family being followed. The network that is activated involves the social service charged with the custody of the minor, one or more psychologists, and workers internal to the C.B.M. This allows the best co-ordination of the intervention with the family unit (**indicator of process**).

The Neutral Space service, having been recently established, has not yet activated a systematic survey of the data relevant to the activity carried out. Therefore, regarding some of the adopted indicators (as for example that of **effectiveness**), the C.B.M. cannot furnish the information needed to complete the evaluations.

SOME FIRST CONCLUSIONS

From meeting with C.B.M. staff, some aspects that perhaps more than others define this experience can be clearly gathered: on the one hand enthusiasm and tenacity in bringing forward a new idea and approach to the problem of the family, on the other hand the difficulties and obstacles that this service has encountered.

The methodology used by the service takes into consideration the positive potential for recovery existent in the family unit. It considers maltreating parents as people strongly worn down by emotions and conflicts who are therefore unable to read the needs of their own children and to manage the resources that they still have. The intervention offered by the C.B.M. is presented as a direct opportunity to activate changes within the family, in order to start up a process of change and

recovery of more adequate parental functions. It is desirable that the family change with its own resources: left to itself, the family will re-establish unique models of functioning that it knows and that it has consolidated over time. On the other hand, if helped and sustained externally in a global re-definition and re-elaboration also of the more painful events, it can try to explore the path towards constructing relationships that are more satisfactory and evolving. The intervention is not limited to moving along a plan of assistance; it becomes a way of evaluating resources and possibilities for change.

This approach today seems communicable and worth sharing. When the service was created it offered an innovative and courageous response to the problem of the family and of maltreatment. Even the choice of establishing itself as a form of co-operative with limited responsibility, at the initiative of a group of psychologists, social workers and educators that over the years matured a specific teamwork experience in interventions for protection and treatment of maltreated children and their families, denotes the desire to assume a spirit particularly open to the development of solidarity. It was difficult to manage the presence of volunteers within the welcoming structure, first of all because volunteers do not guarantee the continuity of presence absolutely necessary for the children living there. Besides this, it was also difficult to guarantee specific training for them.

The service still encounters some difficulties and confronts some encumbrances that are natural to the system in which it is asked to operate. Undergoing the program is not determined by family actors, but by judicial procedures. The revelation of abuse undergone, or the result of a sentence, can close the family's access to the service. But even "management" of the meetings is conditioned by the Tribunal's decisions: the decree or sentence determine and direct the lines of intervention, furnishing indications about approaches, defining not only the subjects admitted to the meeting, but also their frequency and their duration.

Protected Neutral Space therefore is strongly influenced by external events, typically those of a legal nature, which makes the possibility of furnishing flexible responses more difficult. The impossibility of adapting the intervention to situations arising from time to time (given that it is not possible to ignore the Tribunal's pre-established conditions) contain the inherent risk that it will not be possible to fully follow what is in the best interest of the child.

To successfully create these Neutral Spaces, therefore, it is fundamental to construct a well-organised, well-managed network. The meeting between the services involved becomes precious for creating coherence and giving global sense to all the meetings, to prevent them from reacting in an excessively divided and disconnected way.

The C.B.M. distinguishes itself precisely because of its capacity to build functional communicative networks both among workers within the service and among other subjects involved (social-health services, civil judicial system for minors, penal judicial system), even though these diverse institutional systems speak "different languages" and sometimes display difficulty in reciprocal understanding.

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