

MATILDA PROJECT

Family Mediation as the place for social interventions supporting the minor's right to have two parents.

THIRD CASE OF EXCELLENCE S.P.A.P.I. - EMERGENCY RECEPTION SERVICE FOR THE CHILDREN OF THE PROVINCE OF ROME, SERVICE FOR MINORS

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The Matilde project intends to proceed towards a comparison of experiences in several European countries regarding laws, social services already underway and interventions promoted by the voluntary sector in terms of family mediation. The present contribution to the research is intended to identify a specific situation of need related to the minor's right to have both parents and to analyse the type of response offered by a Public Office and by the Voluntary Sector in order to indicate good practices and suggested lines of action.

The aspect that is to be highlighted is that of the mediation experiences in a general way and in particular some interventions of excellence promoted by local entities, in collaboration with subjects in the private social sector, intended to favour parental continuity in situations of prejudice for children.

A range of specific interventions in this area of difficulty will be examined and an attempt will be made to outline the context of need in which this operates, to enumerate the possibilities for reacting in terms of prevention and support, emergency and resolution of needs.

The structure that we intend to refer to is the SPAPI, Emergency Reception Service for Children of the Province of Rome, Service for Minors.

In terms of the context of reference, we intend to demonstrate the experience and specific contribution of the Voluntary Associations. As is well known, this involves people of the private social sector, particularly active in supporting poor people and immigrants, and able to act in the region in a flexible and efficient way regarding social marginalisation. Furthermore, the uniqueness of their intervention constitutes an added value to the typical services undertaken by the Public Administration and can contribute in a significant way to the interpretation of the reality in terms of needs and resources, prevention of difficulty, and possible responses, also at the level of experimentation and work within a network.

A case of excellence

A Public Service has been chosen as a point of reference for the analysis, to view the experience of family mediation in a general way, as a service extended to favour parental continuity in situations of prejudice for children.

To analysis this theme in more depth, and to include it within the wider viewpoint of prevention of the violence of conflicts and spreading the culture of mediation, it is useful to refer to the social context in which the condition making the social intervention indispensable has matured. For this reason, we have chosen to use the in-depth knowledge of marginalisation that is precisely within the scope of the Voluntary Sector.

Finally, in defining the critical junctures and at the same time the strong points that are considered of excellence, reference is made to the experimentation carried out within both of the realities involved and, above all, the positive potential than can arise from their intersection.

The SPAPI is a service directed to minors in serious conditions of difficulty, taken into charge until the time that they can be re-inserted into the family, in cases where this is possible. Where the first solution cannot be carried out, in order to guarantee the right of the minor to have both parents, alternative solutions such as custody or adoption are specified. Regarding Volunteerism, we intend to analyse in particular the aspects of need and difficulty that characterise this reality, to specify risk factors and possible innovative routes of intervention. Therefore it has been decided to refer in particular to the experience of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which for many years has operated with particular effectiveness in the area of social marginality.

Our analysis intends to highlight these aspects:

- a) factors contributing to the creation of difficulty
- b) responses undertaken that tend to favour support for dual-parenting (case of excellence)
- c) analysis of the factors of success or failure of the intervention
- c) indication of some plans for an intervention that would operate with the aim of prevention and of creating networked services and full synergy between public and private sectors.

Part I

Analysis of the factors that create difficulty

To proceed to a deeper analysis it is necessary first of all to take note of the basic themes relating to the causes that risk jeopardizing the minor's right to both parents. The brief and schematic analysis that follows makes reference to a universe of poverty and difficulty that often is a determining factor (even if certainly not exclusive) of family break-up, which at the same time functions as cause and/or effect of such a break-up, starting a vicious circle of marginalisation.

The data and the situations to which we refer to describe such a phenomenon are the fruit of direct observation carried out at the welcome centre of the Sant'Egidio Community. A series of services are aimed at this sector of people in difficulty, including:

- meals (distribution of about 1200 meals a day)
- "Abraham's Tent" (a reception centre housing about 50 immigrants)
- welcome centre for the homeless and for foreigners (oriented towards emergency shelter, legal assistance, health assistance, distribution of food and clothing)
- the "Louis Massignon" school (Italian courses, beginning, intermediate and advanced levels; course in cultural mediation for foreigners)
- the People for Peace Movement for the defence of rights and promotion of multi-culturality

Such a network of services and interventions, ranging from emergency to the promotion of a stable insertion into society, and involving in the city of Rome alone more than 10000 emigrants each year, permits a continuous monitoring of the phenomenon and offers an exhaustive panorama of the phenomenon.

An overview of this universe of people who, at various levels, can be defined in difficulty, both socio-economically and in terms of social relationships, seems indispensable, because it is precisely in this phase that, statistically, there is the largest concentration of situations at risk or of single-parent families taken into the care of the SPAPI Service, or who reach the Social Services.

In terms of the typology of user of the service being studied, it should be specified that they are minor children of a marital bond in temporary or permanent phase of dissolution, in many cases for extrinsic reasons such as emigration.

The single-parent relationship

The single-parent relationship is in fact a problematic condition because of its unbalanced nature in terms of parenting, the overburdening of responsibility for caring roles, singleness of models reference for affection and identity, and organisational and economic responsibilities connected to the work dimension.

Young single mothers in fact experience various difficulties because they bear the exclusive burden of the parental role, both in terms of the responsibility of looking after and caring for the children, and in terms of the lack of job opportunities reconcilable with their condition as mothers.

The term young single mother evokes a series of possible variables, from single mothers to the ever-widening sector of divorced and separated women, to widows, to the growing number of foreign women with children present on the national territory. Each of these realities presents its own distinctive character. These should not be categorised, in order to guarantee that specific needs are focused on and that planning is aimed at interventions capable of preventing the creation of uncomfortable relationships.

At this point we intend only to emphasize the conditions of general difficulty that strongly impinge upon the right to have both parents, thus creating a prejudicial situation for the children.

Conditions of risk

The principle factors creating conditions of risk are many and are often interconnected, creating a vicious circle of marginality:

- emigration
- families in condition of extreme marginality (for example without a fixed home)
- women with psychiatric disorder
- drug dependency

Emigration

The motives that influence an individual to emigrate are many and are tied to factors intrinsic to countries of origin, such as uprisings or permanent situation of conflicts and the need to seek refuge for political reasons. However, they are also tied to conditions of extreme necessity, such as poverty or absence of even the most minimal occupational prospects. However, what should be emphasised in this context are the results of such forced migration at the level of family makeup, and in particular of the right of the child to have two parents.

The person emigrating in fact is usually a single member of a family. In this regard, some researchers have noted a different gender makeup depending on country of origin, noting a higher presence of males coming from countries to the South, and, on the other hand, a prevalence of females coming from Eastern European countries.

In many cases, emigration has as its protagonists young women who, at the moment of exercising their full right to maternity, find themselves in a particularly difficult position on the social and economic level, and particularly exposed psychologically. This is motivated also by occupational conditions, which usually involve care of individuals or domestic help, a sector of employment which is totally private and often hidden, and as a result scarcely protected.

The single-parent unit shows itself, also in this case, to be extremely vulnerable both for the socio-economic difficulties that are always present and for the implications connected to transplantation into a different socio-cultural reality. Often we are dealing with women who are poor in means, relationships and information that would allow them to orient themselves in the receiving country.

Besides, we must be aware that single foreign mothers find themselves completely alone when confronted with the tasks of raising children, which in their country of origin would otherwise be shared with the rest of the family and the entire parental network. The woman finds herself living through pregnancy and birth without a mother alongside to guide her, or a partner to hold her. Worth considering, then, are the different values that pregnancy and maternity assume in societies different from ours because of tradition, culture and religion.

Families in conditions of extreme marginality

These are family units in situations of absolute poverty or serious difficulty, or in situations of single parenting, due also to the repercussions of difficult situations on the processes of establishing the family, and the probable absence of stable ties.

These are people for whom the experience of difficulty is structured in a substantially stable way, who live on the margins of society without having access to the economic and labour circuit. Connected to this context are the phenomenon of deviance, the experience of prison confinement, as well as alcoholism and the condition of having *no fixed residence*. Women with children are particularly at risk and sometimes are objectively unable to manage the situation, from an economic or housing perspective. Here too there are uncertain or unstable family ties, with the difficulty of establishing a family unit that is truly adapted to receiving the minor. Even access to services is often problematic. These are people who live within the circuit of social assistance or voluntary services, whom it is necessary to offer support.

Special comment is called for regarding the conditions of *nomads*, who share this situation of extreme difficulty but normally make up a family network and clan that is protective in nature. This is, furthermore, a sector that is particularly significant in terms of numbers, because in general it has a larger infant population compared to the Italian context.

The risk factor is related, above all, to the widespread practice in nomad communities of entering marriage at a very early age. In fact these are sometimes child-brides (even under 16) and husbands who are barely out of adolescence and who, therefore, are not mature enough to manage a family situation autonomously.

The socio-economic difficulty of the nomad community, typically tied to a condition of extreme marginality, makes it difficult to manage a family unit, for various reasons. Above all the impact of urbanisation on this generation of gypsies has contributed, in fact, to the dispersal of many of the typical characteristics of the culture. Among these, we note the extreme fragility of the family structure, which is ever less able to confront the blows of urbanisation. These are families that, while living in the city, do not manage in any way to become a part of the cultural, employment or economic fabric of the city. They are communities that live on the periphery of large cities, in campgrounds that usually lack facilities, subject to continual displacement with enormous difficulties for insertion into school and work, but also into society. It is easy in such a context for a division to be created between the nomad camp and the surrounding environment, a division fed on the one hand by the existence of prejudices of which the nomads are easily victims, and on the other hand by the difficulty of entrance into the nomad community itself. In this objectively difficult climate, ever more often there is a dissolving of the family and clan fabric, a fabric that has always constituted a principle characteristic of the social structure of nomads, offering to its members a deep-rooted sense of belonging and a strong social cohesion.

Young nomad families often find themselves more alone in managing the impact of the establishment of a new family unit, without sufficient means in terms of economics and housing. In fact, the young age of many parents and their consequent immaturity in terms of parental attitude (which is added in some cases to other problems typically linked to conditions of marginality such

as alcoholism or deviance), can bring about situations of risk for minors, as well as the rupture of fragile family ties.

Drug dependency

This is a factor of high risk and jeopardy for minors that normally is linked with that already mentioned, creating situations of total instability or rupture of family ties, discontinuity in relationships, impossibility of responsibly managing situations in the long term, and serious problems from a clinical and psychological point of view, such as being sero-positive.

In recent years there has been a notable, though slight, reduction in the social impact connected to drug dependency.

Still, the number of people who are drug-dependent and for whom the quality of life has been compromised in a definite way because of such dependency has remained constant. These are above all cases of drug dependants who have not accepted access to protective or rehabilitation services or who have experienced failure in the past, with unsuccessful attempts to escape from using drugs. When minors are present in this context the situation of risk is clear and difficult to resolve with the creation of a stable family context.

In most cases, the situation leads to abandonment of the minor, who is taken into custody by the services and directed towards adoption. Yet there are cases in which the presence of a minor creates conditions that set off a recuperative mechanism and the desire to exit from the circuit of drug dependency and marginality. The support in this case is not easy, nor is the solution immediately present. This path must be supported without creating a situation prejudicial to the growth of the minor. The institution of family custody in some cases has been a positive solution, even though it is not easy to manage. The custodial family, in fact, finds itself in the condition of taking into care not only the minor it welcomes, but also the relationship between the minor and the natural family, which continues to have the right to meet the child. Generally these are protected meetings carried out in a "neutral" space; other times even occasional meetings tied to weekly encounters of a residential nature (for example the child can spend Saturday and Sunday with the family of origin). Sometimes there is legal custody for those at risk, which can thus evolve into a real adoption.

On the other hand, it may be that, with the positive evolution of the family context that the minor has come from, if a certain stability and parental competence can be demonstrated, re-entry into the family may occur after a relatively long period of custody in another family.

This type of other-family custody can also be carried out in a residential structure (such as the SPAPI), which that takes the minor into its care until the family can reunite. This requires first making opportune checks of the appropriateness and adequacy of the social-environmental situation and of the parental attitude demonstrated by the couple (or only the mother, in the absence of a stable paternal figure) who manage to positively overcome their difficulties in caring for the minor.

Psychiatric difficulty

This is an area that is particularly critical both for the seriousness of the problems connected to it as well for the particular lack of services, above all in terms of flexible services modelled upon the real therapeutic needs of the person and not just the containment phase. Regarding affective relationships and in particular family relationships (above all mother-daughter), very often there are pathological ties, evidently connected with the psychiatric pathology underway.

In terms of the Italian context, the failure to create territorial structures and residential models as called for by existing legislation has often left a void of assistance and cure, without any concrete solutions in terms of rehabilitation for people with psychic disturbances. This area, in fact, suffers from an obvious lack of services, above all flexibly adapted so as to help people with psychiatric

difficulty to not become permanently settled into the condition, offering concrete support and the possibility of recovering some of the functions of daily life, and of relative autonomy.

In cases where this condition of difficulty affects a minor, the prejudicial factor is tied to various other factors, above all to the impossibility of the subject managing the parental role in an autonomous way. Furthermore, in many cases this clear impossibility is not perceived as such by the subject, because of the difficulty of being aware of their own condition of psychiatric illness. Not uncommonly this creates a maternal relationship that is very intense, with a perverse connection having pathological connotations, very rooted at the emotional level, both on the part of the mother and the minor.

The forced separation that normally occurs in these cases is the cause of great suffering for all subjects involved, above all if the relationship is developed over a long period and with connotations of strange and morbid intensity.

Part II

Presentation of the experience

The Service of excellence to be outlined is a service managed by a Public Agency connected to the Minor Section of the Province of Rome.

Historically the Province of Rome, since 1927, has had specific competencies in terms of assistance to minors, in particular those exposed to abandonment or those recognised only by the mother. The activity of this agency has included the direct management of the orphanage, nursery care of the children, assistance to single-parent families (made up of single mothers or of children recognised only by women) and families with minors ranging in age from 0 to 6 who are in conditions of difficulty, residing in the provincial territory, connections with hospital maternity wards, with educational and assistance facilities and with the Juvenile Court.

All this has allowed the accumulation of a unique and precious storehouse of knowledge, in this complex, multi-faceted sector of births that are psychologically and socially at risk.

The Province of Rome represents, therefore, a privileged observatory of a social reality that over the years has undergone great transformations (families with psychiatric problems, drug dependency, women alone, foreigners, etc.) and which constitutes a terrain that continues to be a priority for investing resources in terms of prevention and taking into care.

The Province of Rome is therefore, by institutional competency, in charge of unrecognised or exposed minors, minors recognised by single mothers, and those recognised by both parents who are in conditions of particular difficulty.

The phenomenon we are dealing with is characterised by the distinctive features of the events connected to it and the effects that result from it. It is revealing that during the year 2000 alone, 80 minors were taken into the care of the SPAPI Service and the Guardianship Service of the Provincial Administration, which works in the maternity area, by mandate of the Juvenile Court. These represent only the tip of an iceberg that hides a much wider submerged universe. Often in fact births that come into situations of social, environmental and psychological risk are not noted either at pregnancy or at birth. After the birth, mother and child are often “dismissed” together with their problems, until a future event exposes an experience of difficulty and the consequent decision to take charge of the minor.

Within the sphere of its specific competencies, the Provincial Administration carries out interventions such as:

- economic assistance to mother-child groups in conditions of difficulty, with income below the defined parameters
- welcome into protected structures for minors or mother-child groups
- same-family or other-family custody
- hospitality in terms of residence.

Typology of the intervention

This jurisdiction includes the Emergency Reception Service for Children (SPAPI), which is under examination. This is a residential structure of emergency reception for minors between the ages of 0 and 6, whether or not they are undergoing proceedings of the Judiciary Authorities for Minors, which necessitates reception for a temporary period, also at the direct request of the parent. It is a specialised service that intervenes in situations of separation and/or rupture of primary affective ties. It deals with minors recognised only by their mother or signalled because of relevant problems in the family unit to which they belong (above all problems of the mother's drug dependency, psychiatric illness or serious social-environmental discomfort); of minors who, after having lived in family for a certain period, have been separated because they have undergone violence or because a situation of risk has been revealed; of minors recognised by both parents who, for diverse reasons, nevertheless are not able to carry out their parenting functions alone, and need some support, at least initially, from the service.

For all the children received, the stay in the Structure is functional in defining a project that may aim at re-entry into the original family unit, or if this solution seems unlikely, into alternative solutions such as hetero-familial custody or adoption. The project begins with observation of the child and of his or her relationship with the mother, of analysis of the parents' or the family unit's personal resources, exploring in particular, when the possibility of involving the father exists, the possibility of ***the minor recovering the right to have both parents***, through forms of support and psychological accompaniment in the activation of parental attitudes.

By virtue of its institutional competency, the Service, intaking charge of the minor, should activate an evolving process in the parent, aimed at maturation of a conscious choice connected to parenting. In fact it is not possible to take a child into care without taking into care his or her family history, and along with this the nuclear family they come from.

In the experience of the Service, a common denominator among all the mothers treated is the state of solitude in which women find themselves, determined certainly by their condition as single mothers but also, often, by the absence of adequate parental figures to refer to (frequently these themselves bear analogous problems) or by the presence of highly dysfunctional family systems, because of the lack of valid models for identification, of evident conflictuality, involvement and collusion.

Profile of the user

In terms of the users who comes to the Service, the SPAPI Structure of Emergency Reception for Early Childhood received between 1990 and 2000 a total of 253 minors, especially between the ages of 0 and 6 months. An attentive analysis of the data, carried out on a sample consisting of minors welcomed by the structure between 1990 and 1995, shows the following socio-demographic characteristics: The child welcomed by the SPAPI is female in 59.4% of the cases, between 0 and 6 months in age (64.1%), of Italian nationality in 65.6% of the cases and foreign for the remaining 34.4%. 11.1% come from nomad families. This trend of the presence of minor foreigners continues to grow. In 2000 a net inversion of the tendency was registered: the number of foreign children exceeded that of Italian children (70 and 30%).

Most of them (48.4%) are recognised by the mother alone, as opposed to 40% recognised by both parents and 9.4% with no recognition.

Most of the admissions are at the request of the Tribunal for Minors or the Prosecutor (80.3%). In other cases they occur by referral from the territorial services or the police (14%). In the remaining 4.9% there has been an explicit request by the mother of the child. The reason that has determined the legal authority's action or the request for admission is in most cases (31%) the state of abandonment of the minor, but weighing equally heavily are housing inadequacies of the family unit (22.4%) and psycho-affective-relational inadequacy (22.4%). 20% of the children examined have had a preceding institutionalisation.

The average length of stay in the structure is about five months and 75% of the sample has remained for a period of over a month, 10% for more than a year.

In terms of the characteristics of the children received by the structure, and in particular the social and family context of origin:

The maternal figure is present in over 80% of the cases; in the remaining 20% she is considered absent, including both cases of failure to recognise the child as well as cases in which the mother makes herself impossible to find even though she has legally recognised the child.

The age is usually between 21 and 30 (50%) and includes mostly Italian women, but also foreigners, who are in continual increase (66% Italian 34% foreigners), single in 43% of the cases, with a work occupation (72%), or with just occasional work. The paternal figure is considerably less significant, but not absent. In over half the cases he is entirely unknown. In the cases where he is known, the majority is of Italian nationality and only 55.8% live with the natural mother of the child. Still, from the figures that emerge, the paternal figure seems to be socially more integrated compared to the maternal figure. The percentage of unemployment is minor (37% compared to 72% for women) and even the housing conditions are better.

The number of visits made by the father or the mother of the young guests during their stay at the SPAPI has been registered and it is shown that 39% of the mothers made visits, while the fathers (referring to the small group from which it was possible to acquire information) visit their own children with a percentage equal to 50%.

Part III

Factors of success and failure

The experience carried out in the area of Social Services confirms ever more the necessity of operating in a network and of concentrating forces for interventions of prevention with the aim of avoiding the exponential increase in problems tied to poor adaptation and the inevitable social repercussions of situations of difficulty. For this reason, the need to think of interventions that substitute the logic of repairing damage with that of prevention, through early diagnosis and immediately taking responsibility for conditions of difficulty with a timely articulation of interventions appears ever more evident.

Still, the scenario in which we work and the organisation of personal services managed by the Local Authority does not permit carrying out a fully-integrated intervention, with levels of interaction and of connection with all the subjects involved. In terms of the Italian legislative context, the difficulty of collaboration in the areas of social and health intervention, as well as the overly sectarian approach to social problems that usually deals with people having various and interrelated problems, is typical.

In the case of the right of the minor to two parents, the approach of the Social Services suffers too often from a particular rule or objective limitation.

In the case of multi-problematic family units, this difficulty comes from the theoretical area of the planning and experimentation of the services and becomes, in fact, a serious limitation to the possibility of success of the social intervention.

Services that divide

It can happen, for example, that in the typology of intervention carried out by the Social Service in response to a complex need, the choice, made “obligatory” by the current structuring of services aimed at individuals, is that of taking into charge a single member of the family, often separating this person from the context. The action from the operative point of view thus becomes the separating the minor from the problematic family unit (psychiatric problems, drug dependency, social marginality, foreigner without resident visa, etc.).

The insertion of the minor in a structure, can then function as one of the typologies of intervention put into action. On the one hand, it constitutes a plan of intervention for resolving problems in terms of protecting the minor, on the other hand can have grave repercussions on the personal level in terms of suffering and psychological damage both for the minor and for the parents.

In terms of the experience of the case of excellence under consideration, a **first statistical framework of the factors of success and failure** of the intervention can be drawn. Among the factors considered unsuccessful, above all the stay of the minor in the structure is cited, while among positive solutions reference is made to the support of his or her right to a family.

Factors influencing the stay in the structure

Two factors have been identified that influence the stay of the child within the structure: ethnic group and health problems.

In terms of the second factor, it is more difficult to find a rapid placement for bearers of physical or psychological handicaps or for sero-positives, who normally remain in the structure for over a year. Regarding the origin of the family group, and in particular of the mother, the sample was subdivided into Eastern European (including all the nomads), outside the European Community, and Italians. The children who have mothers from countries outside the European Community are included in the medium to high level of stay (50% between 6 and 12 months and 25% over a year). The motives are various. The cases of foreign minors are more difficult to deal with also because of the legal authority, because of difficulties in finding information regarding both the family unit and the family context.

Besides, in many cases these are situations in which the abandonment of the minor is derived from conditions of lack or of objective difficulties (social-economic or legal) more than by the express will of the mother to not take care of the child.

Factors determining the definition of the project in favour of the minor

Of minors received, 39% go into adoption, 38% return to their own parents (one or both), 9.3% are taken into the care of other families and 7.5% into the care of their own families. The remaining percentage refers to cases placed in other structures of reception. It is clear that the adoption or custody arises precisely to favour the right of the child to both parents, and as such can be considered a favourable result. Still, in this area we would like to emphasise the possibility of the re-entry of the minor into the family, because it can be a complete solution in that it considers not only the right of the minor to both parents, but also to the full parenting of the original family unit.

The civil status of the mother seems to condition the placement of the minor in a determinant way. We observe in fact that cases of minors with single mothers are generally taken into adoption (37%), while those with mothers living with someone or having a de facto union remain more often

in the family (31%). The presence of a male figure seems therefore to have a determinant role. This is demonstrated by the fact that in cases in which the father is unknown, the minor is more often placed in an adoptive family (58%), while in cases in which the father is present the minor returns to the family of origin.

As we will see in the following section, the presence of the paternal figure is only one initial condition from which to operate. The re-unification of the family is not an easy path or easy to propose. It presupposes on the contrary a task of education and psychological support. The activation of the parental capability of the father, his assuming of responsibility and the decision to take charge of the child are usually the point of arrival of an effective action of support and promotion carried out by the Service itself, as is the smoothing out of family conflicts and the reconstruction of a whole family system around the minor.

The critical points of the SPAPI project

The SPAPI residential structure takes in, as we have already shown, the tip of the iceberg, of a difficulty that is extreme enough to be a prejudicial factor to the right of the minor to both parents. The intervention carried out by the Service under examination is directed precisely at this sector, with the aim of guaranteeing above all the full accomplishment of this right of each child to have a family.

For each family group that was followed, an individual project was formulated, with the aim of ordinary and extraordinary interventions aimed at allowing, through the promotion of the person, the acquisition of a gradual condition of family autonomy.

The critical points identified in carrying out the projects refer especially to:

- excessive separation and bureaucratisation of the intervention
- lack of networked resources for carrying out integrated interventions
- activation of interventions aimed at caring for a single family member and not the family unit in its entirety
- lack of interventions supporting the right of the minor to both parents, and in particular supporting and involving the paternal figure
- lack of sufficient structures for receiving expectant mothers, able to guarantee an informed choice in terms of parenting
- lack of structures for receiving mother-child groups, equipped with therapeutic aims, able to offer an adequate parental model and to allow a maturation process for the mother, also in terms of parenting
- absence of protected paths, alternatives in structures of receptivity, for those situations in which the mother brings with her a sufficient level of autonomy
- support to the mother-child unit from other family units, when the family of origin lacks internal resources
- need to set up facilitated procedures for finding housing and work, in order to ease the path towards autonomy for the family unit.

Part IV

Prospectives for a more effective intervention: from services that separate to services that reunify

Considerations of a psycho-pedagogical and socio-political nature seem to lead, in the present planning of services directed towards the individual, to the choice of not spending resources on a collective social environment, but rather spending them on the dimension of the family unit.

Such a choice seems to want to entrust to the dimension of emotions and primary relationships the bringing about of a condition of social change, through the prevention of individual, family and social difficulties. The line that has guided the policies carried out by the Minister of Social Solidarity has in fact been that of increasing the resources destined for supporting the family, recognising for the family unit a role in the formation of the individual and the bringing about of social cohesion that cannot be substituted by others (Ministerial Degree 15 July 1999, n. 306 “Regulation concerning arrangements for maternity payments to the family unit”; the law n.53/2000 known as “law concerning parental leave”; and more generally laws concerning support to the family, contained in law 328 of 8 November 2000, to reform assistance and social services).

In this regulatory framework and with the tendencies of the social policies in our Country, that in this aspect come closer to the legislation of other European Countries, the need of supporting the new legislation with intervention that can sustain the fragile family unit increases, above all in situations of risk of marginalisation or of family break-up, to support dual-parenting and children in situations of risk.

The passage from an assistance viewpoint to a new type of service more centred on interpreting needs and activating resources calls above all for specifying forms of active participation of the individual during the process of assistance. This demands substituting, in the design of social politics, the logic of individualised projects and pre-planned services, introducing the concept of flexibility, intended as experimentation/ verification, in constant connection with the dimension of re-planning.

For this to take place it appears fundamental that there be a correct interpretation of needs, which should always come first in the planning of services.

This way of proceeding can in particular allow the activation of real forms of prevention of difficulty, and indicate solutions that take into account the possibility of multiplication of resources by working within a network.

This is considered fundamental for confronting this phenomenon and to sustain the right of the minor to both parents.

Through the guidelines deriving from the experience, some elements have been identified that can help in the cure of dysfunctional family relationships. These are on the one hand putting into action more resources to carry out educational support to parenting, and on the other hand to carry out a serious activation and promotion of resources to support the concrete needs tied to dual-parenting, above all directed toward the condition of family break-up for extrinsic motives such as emigration.

Support to dual parenting

Among the critical points revealed in carrying out single approaches that promote the individual, we intend to bring attention to the following points, that we consider can be transformed into points of strength for carrying out an effective action of rehabilitation on the social and psychological levels:

- Parent education

Among the points mentioned in carrying out single approaches for promoting individuals, are informed choice and acquisition of one’s own parenting competencies, which are then put into practice. Institutional attention should be directed towards promotion of the culture connected to exercising the parental function and role.

The service of *parent education* is aimed at those who exercise the parental function, whether biological or not, and is gathered in a dimension of education, prevention, diagnosis and cure.

Its established aim is the restitution of the necessary attention to the parenting function, in terms of recovering a competency at times not fully recognised or assumed, at times excessively delegated within the family itself.

It involves carrying out various elements and professional skills to allow the activation of the parental attitude also when this seems gravely compromised.

Not always, in fact, does the legal recognition of the minor coincide with recognition of the child as an individual in his own right. More often legal non-recognition arises from difficulties in recognising the child as subject to needs and rights different from those of the adult.

This appears evident cases where conditions of extreme deprivation occur, often connected to the experiences of early and prolonged institutionalisation, or at any rate of a condition of psycho-affective immaturity, a block in the adolescent phase that creates obstacles to the process of maturation towards adulthood.

As far as the experience of the SPAPI, in most cases characterised by a favourable outcome with the re-entry of the minor in the family, it has been shown to be important to put into action a strategy of preparation of the family in view of their re-unification, through directed paths of parent education articulated through:

- *the active observation of the mother/child and father/child relationship*
- *the creation of neutral moments dedicated to the exploration of such attitudes on behalf of the subjects concerned*
- *psychological support to attain the competence and trust of both parents and the appreciation of their role*
- *work of mediation of conflicts to improve family relationships*
- *parental education through meetings and comparisons of themes related to caring for the child emotionally*
- *perfection and evaluation of interventions within the family*

- The activation of the paternal resource

The intervention of family mediation or support to dual parenting of the minor should, above all, foresee the presence of a paternal figure who chooses, if supported, to become involved with the minor. As we have already pointed out, this remains absent in the majority of the cases and is one of the major factors of prejudice for the minor.

Nevertheless, it is attempted because bringing such a figure closer to the family unit can be sustained precisely by the mediation work carried out by the Service. In some cases of success (for example the re-entry of the child into the family unit with both parents) precisely the activation of a relationship of trust and respect on the part of the workers when dealing with the male figure has been shown of crucial importance.

-Support for the extended nuclear family

The presence of an extended family unit, which includes other family members besides the natural mother and father, can constitute a resource to be activated in managing the child's problems and those of the parental couple. This presupposes an intense job of family mediation extended in a larger sense to the entire unit, to reduce motives of conflict, incomprehension and rupture that sometimes constitute roots of difficulty motivating abandonment of the minor or family break-up. Here too it is indispensable to bring together all members of the family, sometimes restructuring the entire family system to frame the relationships in respect and reciprocal support.

- ***Activation of an informal network of intervention***

In this area, the activation of roles besides those of parents, who can be some friendly points of reference, can be of particular importance.

The role of the Voluntary sector constitutes a fundamental resource for containing and supporting the situation of difficulty, but also for activating a web of informal relationships and for constituting an effective safety net around the problematic family unit. This work of support triggers a mechanism of self-promotion that is precious for activating internal resources as well.

In terms of positive parameters of the Service put into work, and in particular in reference to the specific characteristics of the social service granted by the public Agency, the following operative points have been specified, which could lead to the determination of effectiveness:

Personalisation of the intervention

Personalisation of the intervention, and in particular greater flexibility in accompanying the family unit at risk, for example through the phase of dismissal from the structure and re-insertion in the family, has been shown to be a factor of its success. The Service, placing itself as a stable point of reference also after releasing the minor, has contributed to re-uniting the family unit, to reinforcing the self-esteem and parental attitudes of the couple, and to smoothing out the various difficulties that subsequently arise.

The sectoralisation of the intervention, often typical of the Public Service, and the excessive bureaucratisation, sometimes constitute motives for interrupting the supply of the service itself or for the brusque passage from one service to another, in a logic more related to the jurisdictions than to the personalisation of the intervention.

Increased availability of services

There are still many cases of difficulty in terms of access to services, above all for more marginal sectors, not only because of cultural difficulties normally characterising the condition of social marginalisation, but also because of lack of information or real accessibility (hours, dispersion in the territory, etc.).

Increased flexibility of services

This involves putting into the field innovative services that do not operate in a fragmented way (also in terms of competencies), for example by separating, in practice, the problematic family unit and offering solutions to only one element. Rather it supports the resources of dual-parenting. Overly standardised responses may lead to institutionalisation of the minor, who is separated from the mother, or to offering family-type hospitality (almost family-homes), which are destined only for mother-child pairs with absolute exclusion of the paternal figure.

Potentialising the service of family mediation

It is necessary to potentialise the services of family mediation themselves, still too scanty in numeric terms and not widely distributed in the territory, in order to contribute to calming or resolving conflicts within the family unit (aiming at containment and re-elaboration of conflict also through the development of a separation plan that is satisfactory to the children). This can be

further achieved through experimentation with new professional figures.

For this it appears fundamental to intervene in terms of the visibility of this type of service, still overlooked in terms of communication and information, and therefore able to reach a limited number of users in the territory. This involves carrying out an effective promotional intervention in terms of assistance policies, of workers in these services, of associations of interested families, and of public opinion, to predispose attention specific to this type of innovative service and to facilitate access by users.

Experimental forms of economic support for the family

This type of support, already attempted in various sectors and indicated as a particular form of the new law about assistance (n.328/01), is centred on activating the family resource itself. It constitutes an interesting field of experimentation. The economic contribution, in fact, can be well channelled, undergoing continued verifications and conditioned by favourable interventions to maintain the minor at home, constituting a factor that prevents the dissolution of the family unit, when this generated not so much by motives of internal conflicts, as by socio-economic difficulty.

Working in a network: the art of co-ordination

At every level within public institutions themselves and together with Volunteerism and the private social sector, a local map is constituted, to perfect the services we have mentioned and to especially to ease moving from one service to another, depending on modifications in the specific needs of the family unit in situations of difficulty, also through the flexible activation of all informal and formal resources available (family, neighbours, volunteers, etc.).

Finally it seems necessary to put into practice initiatives of wider influence, to favour support for the growth of a culture of family mediation. In particular this means carrying out *forms of publication of initiatives* already established in this area, that not only give more visibility to the service, but also can broaden the debate on these themes, triggering formal and informal processes of activation of resources and experimentation with new models of intervention, also through the acquisition of new profession competencies.

It seems necessary to work on the level of service planning, also by activating *comparisons among different models of intervention, also on the European level.*

Services more focused on prevention: how to help the immigrant family

In the area of analysis carried out, some indications have emerged that are particularly aimed at re-considering the role of individual services, inserting them into a wider context of social policies.

Among the directives that seem worthy of development, to confront the theme of promoting parental continuity in situations of prejudice for minors, we intend to face in particular the issue of the migratory phenomenon and to the right to have both parents.

In the course of the research, in fact, the necessity to face this question in broader terms emerged, carrying out a reading of the reality in terms of needs and resources, and planning a social intervention conceived not in terms of damage reduction, but rather of prevention of difficulty.

The directives that emerged, in terms of proposals and wider reaching in scope, are the following:

Support for re-uniting immigrant families

This is a delicate area but it has been shown to be ever more necessary to face in terms of social legislation and service planning. At present, re-uniting families is a very difficult path to take. Besides the application of regulatory aspects (that already exist in part), this involves bringing into practice real forms of support to the foreign family unit, to prevent the de facto separation that almost always accompanies the primary phase of migration.

In Italy, unlike other European countries, a consistent female presence has emerged among immigrants, almost equal to 45%. The reasons for this phenomenon, that furthermore is a historical characteristic, have their roots in problems related to access to the work market, that is characterised as domestic help, in its various forms (fixed *colf*, or female collaborator, home assistance for the elderly and the ill, baby-sitting). These are always characterised as typically female jobs.

The consequences of this composition on the immigrating population present on Italian soil are the large presence of foreign minorities, in proportion to the number of immigrants: the ISTAT data confirm that, of 1,280,000 foreigners regularly present on the national territory, 170,000 are minors. The first stage of immigration in general sees only one member of the family as protagonist. In many cases this is a young single man. But cases are not rare in which the immigration involves a family split: in cases where the immigrant has already established a family unit in his country of origin, the beginning of the migratory path is in fact a break-up of the family. This break-up in many cases involves minors.

As soon as the condition of residence in the new acquired country has been established, with the achievement of a job, a home and a minimum economic resource, the immigrant begins the procedures for re-unification of the family.

Our legislation allows the use of this institution, which in recent years has regarded an ever-larger number of families and of foreign minors. Still, the difficulties are many. To obtain such re-unification the immigrant should be able to demonstrate the following conditions:

- the presence of a regular job (of at least a year)
- the living situation – not only should one be able to show a housing document, but also possess enough space to welcome one's own family. The parameters are established on a regional basis according to criteria of public housing. Lazio calls for a minimum of 60 square meters for two people and 15 square meters more for each person (for example minor). This constitutes a difficulty that is often hard to overcome, considering the chronic demand for the availability of housing located in the urban zones, and in particular the demands of the market available to foreigners.

Another point relative to supporting immigrant families is the possibility of attaining *Italian citizenship*. This allows the effective equivalency of the foreigner to the Italian citizen. According to present laws in our Country, the condition for obtaining such a right for minors is tied to the fact that the parents are proper residents on Italian soil for at least seven years. If it also seems unthinkable, in the European context, to guarantee such right at the moment of birth (as occurs for example in the United States), a path towards citizenship for minors born in Italy to foreign parents or who arrived through family re-unification can be studied, allowing for example the possibility of shortening the period of residence of the parents (to only two or three years) or the possibility of becoming Italian citizens (when born in Italy) at the moment of enrolment in school.

Finally it seems necessary to motivate the structures of *support for early childhood*, to allow foreign women with children to keep their children with them. Access to some services, such as nursery care, is facilitated in the case of regular citizens and when both parents work in a stable and documented way. In the case of foreigners, very often this involves a single-parent relationship. Even when dealing with the dual-parent family, it is difficult for both parents to have this condition

of work stability. This problem becomes much more consistent when the immigrants cannot count on an enlarged family network.

All the *economic supports* to the family, assured by law, are available only in cases where there are the same conditions of stability (at least five years of residence and of regular work). It is evident that, on the other hand, it is precisely where there is a condition of lesser stability that there is a greater risk of family break-up.

Presence within the Services of a cultural mediator (for foreigners)

The weakness of the foreign subject is measured also in relation to awareness of their rights and to the ability to exercise them correctly and effectively. At this level the figure of the cultural mediator is taken as a concrete reference, especially in the context of greater risk of marginalisation. The cultural mediator is a figure already defined by Italian legislation, but still such professional figures are of scarce availability and services that make reference to them are lacking.

The first aim of potentialising this institution is to guarantee the real accessibility of services for foreigners, above all of recent immigration. But this is a more complex and exceptionally effective service, capable of creating a connecting bridge between the user and the services, through the work of cultural “translation” and of offering a real possibility of inserting the foreign individual, carrying out the process of full citizenship.

The figure of the cultural mediator seems particularly useful above all if inserted into all the points of contact between the user and the social services, above all where immigrant women come to the Public Service bringing their needs without knowing the real possibilities offered by our legislation and by the various services put into practice to favour support for the family unit.

Typical is the case of single foreign mothers who come to the Social Service of the Province of Rome asking to have their own child temporarily kept in a structure while waiting to find a stable living and working situation that will allow them to keep the child with them. The procedures for family custody, while being the best solution for the child, create confusion and distrust, in the fear that this means in fact the definitive denunciation of the minor and denial of parental authority. On the contrary, an institution such as family custody is informed of its role and of the confines of its intervention. It can offer concrete support – not uncommonly with a custody that is also one of affection, besides logistical and economic support – for the young foreign mother, usually alone and without a family on which to depend. The figure of the cultural mediator involved at this level can offer the work of translation, explanation of terms, help, real support in the encounters not only between the two families, but also between the two different cultures of which these are the representatives.