

2nd to 5th October 2018

EUSARF 2018 PORTO

Families of Children in Residential Care: Characteristics, Obstacles and Facilitators to Intervention in the Perspective of Professionals

Thursday, 4th October @ 17:30: Poster Sessions & Coffee Break (Venue: Salão Nobre)

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Family centred models are increasingly recognized as best practice in residential care settings (Affronti & Levison-Johnson, 2009). In fact, engaging and intervening with the family within the context of residential care is paramount, may it be in order to enable reunification, or may it be just to ensure positive involvement with the youngsters growing in care. In Portugal, in the last few years, demands of intervening with families are increasing in child residential care contexts. Family centred models require the ability to partner with parents and work side by side towards the child's best interest, which involves a perspective of family strengths, resourcefulness and ability to change, and upholds principles of respect and empowerment of families (Alpert & Britner, 2005; Madsen, 2007; Michalopoulos, Ahn, Shaw & O'Connor, 2012).

This study analyses the representations of 44 residential care professionals about the characteristics of families of children in care, and also about the obstacles and facilitators of intervention with these families. Data were collected as part of training exercises carried out with the professionals.

Results show a strong predominance of negatively-laden characteristics attributed to families (97,5%), reflecting a view of the family as tangled in its problematic history, part of the problem, poor in resources and unable to commit to change. In the same manner, obstacles to intervention are mostly attributed to families (71,6%), and only a minority attributed to professionals (19,4%) or institutions (9%). Contrastingly, facilitators are more commonly attributed to professionals (62,7%) and only a minority is ascribed to families (31,3%) or institutions (6%).

This description is not aligned with the assumptions of the family centred models; it reflects the tenets of the deficit model that still seems to prevail and guide professional practice in child welfare contexts in Portugal. It seems to correspond to a view of families as the problem and the job in residential care facilities as protecting children from maltreating parents (Root & Madsen, 2013).

As some authors point out (e.g. Alpert & Britner, 2005 ; Root & Madsen, 2013) changing to a family development approach, to shared power paradigm, and to a vision of the job as partnering with parents to protect children from problems requires the acceptance of a whole new paradigm. Though this can be demanding for professionals, it is certainly critical for effectiveness of intervention efforts, and particularly important in a country as Portugal where 88% of looked after children enter residential care (ISS, 2016). The results of this study call for massive support to professionals, through training and supervision, to allow their capacity building to intervene with families of children in care, so they can better unravel the ever-present tension of having to simultaneously protect children and empower family.