

Psychosocial intervention in child protection

Introduction

Our colleague Ferrán Casas has referred to the “statistical invisibility” of childhood (especially the most vulnerable type) in our society, while some time ago Jorge Barudy gave one of his works on child abuse the title “The invisible pain of childhood” (*El dolor invisible de la infancia*). Undoubtedly, if we were to ask a member of the general public if they knew how many children were in care as a consequence of suffering abuse, or how many are living in children’s homes, the effects of this invisibility or lack of information would be borne out.

Thus, in Spain today, child protection is not considered a social problem, insofar as it lacks a component of collective awareness of the urgent need for something pertinent to be done. Indeed, for society in general, child abuse is represented as an occasional phenomenon, reflected in the odd news item about children with serious injuries as a result of beatings, left alone in cars or in bars, or found alone at home, unattended by their parents. Such social representation corresponds to media interest in only the most newsworthy and extreme cases – in fact nothing more than the tip of iceberg –, and for which society demands punitive measures. Little if anything is known of the 30,000 children in care throughout Spain, the majority of them with a background that scarcely resembles those few that attract the glare of media coverage: cases of negligence or inadequate attention to children’s needs, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and the more recently-studied phenomena of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and child-to-parent violence by adolescents.

Whilst authorities find that they have to allocate more and more resources to child protection, and professionals’ working environment becomes increasingly stressful –given the emergence of difficulties for which the system is not prepared and an ever-increasing caseload – to wider society the problem remains largely unknown. Moreover, this invisibility is reflected in the low priority afforded to research in this area; I am not referring, of course, to any lack of will or effort on the part of those of us who work in the field, but rather to the scarce resources allocated to it compared to the cases of other social problems. This special section offers a fine opportunity to consider some of the most relevant aspects of child protection, with regard not only to its organization but also its professional and research contexts.

One of the foremost objectives of this section is to analyze from various perspectives the evolution and development of the public child protection system, parallel to that of the social services, and which has just celebrated its 20th anniversary. 1987 saw the introduction of legislation which created a new framework for child protection that finally distanced itself from charity-based care and the large institutions predominant until then, bringing new principles, procedures and instruments. This legislation not only dejudicialized intervention in this area, but also decentralized it so that it came to depend on the public authorities in each Autonomous Region. This was followed up in 1996 by the Constitutional Child Protection Law, which further consolidated principles based on children’s rights and their interest as paramount, and focused on the need to provide responses allowing children permanent protection and the right to be brought up in the context of a family. In turn, the Autonomous Regions themselves have legislated in the field of child protection, with measures relating to childhood in general and regulations on more specific issues. It can indeed be said that the legal framework in place offers great potential and sets down highly appropriate criteria.

However, and as the articles here will consider, there are many outstanding issues, and in many cases the impression of those of us who began working in this field more than 25 years ago is that our expectations at that time have failed to be met in a range of important areas. We believed the new legislative framework and the new principles for intervention would spark off a genuine revolution, bringing the trends for our child protection system into line with those that had begun decades earlier in European countries. Readers can judge for themselves, in the light of the material presented here, the extent of the changes that have occurred.

Secondly, this special section sets out to review basic questions related to, for example, the structure of the child protection system itself and the processes and phases involved in child care intervention, as well as examining the current state of the principal prevention measures

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and programmes: intervention with families, residential care, foster care, and adoption.

The first article, by J. de Paúl, is a comprehensive and critical analysis of intervention in the area of child protection, focusing largely on the problems relating not to the children themselves, but rather to administrative organizations. It clearly reveals how many of the problems encountered in our interventions derive not from the severe needs of the children, but from the continuing lack of effective coordination between agencies, especially at the levels of basic and specialist social services. The division between risk cases and cases of abuse or neglect, and the corresponding division of responsibility for them between basic and specialized services, respectively, creates enormous problems. The lack of a common language in this sector of child protection, and indeed of procedural guidelines (though this author's research group has extensive experience in their preparation in several Regions) are other problems in urgent need of solutions. Finally, following the author's line of work, the article stresses the importance of matching resources to the needs of children and their families (as indeed do the rest of the articles in this section).

The second article, by I. Arruabarrena, offers an excellent examination of the progress made in some Regions in the drawing up of procedural manuals and the setting of criteria for intervention in child protection cases. In its comprehensive overview of consensus on the stages involved in the procedure and the essential aspects of each one of them, it faithfully reflects current approaches to intervention in child abuse in our country. Of particular interest in this work is the part dealing with the criteria for drawing up case plans and for recommending certain measures.

The article by R. Trenado, G. Pons and M.A. Cerezo is the first of those dealing with viable intervention programmes. And it is not merely by chance that it comes first, since this is the order in which things should actually occur, always beginning by attempting to support families that are incapable of taking adequate care of their children, helping them to recover their parental functions, trying to avoid their separation from children, or giving them the chance to recover them when the separation has been for the sake of a child's safety and well-being. More specifically, this article examines an approach constantly hindered by substantial limitations and lack of experience: preventive programmes with families. Prevention, always a pending issue, is explored through some programmes that have shown their effectiveness in rigorous assessments of their results.

The article by J.F. del Valle, A. Bravo and M. López deals with foster care, without doubt the measure that most of us would like to see become the principal option for vulnerable minors, especially the youngest of them. The work reviews the development of foster care over the years in this country, since its inception as a new alternative after the 1987 legislation, in contrast to the cases of other countries, which have traditions in this area dating back many decades. The national statistics, apart from being incomplete and somewhat unreliable, give cause for concern: the principal form of foster care is that which depends on the initiative of the extended family, and only one in ten children separated from their family is able to benefit from care in an unrelated foster family. In spite of the total consensus on the advantages of foster care, it is currently nowhere near becoming the principal child protection measure. The article sets out to provide figures and analysis in an attempt to explain this situation.

The work by A. Bravo and J.F. del Valle reviews the current situation of residential care, an area currently in serious crisis in the face of new child protection profiles that need attention (some of them exclusively, such as the case of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, of which the rest of the protection system is scarcely aware). The article considers the developments of these last twenty-odd years and the transition that has taken place in child protection models (more implicit than explicit), with special attention to these new profiles and to how the system tries to adapt its resources to new needs. Conclusions are drawn, and the authors present data from their experience in consultancy and research work over the last two decades with numerous agencies.

The article by J. Palacios on adoption deals with an issue which tends to have greater public impact, given that, as the author astutely observes, those most concerned with the problems of international adoption are indeed adults themselves, with all their demands and all the media exposure this entails (i.e., it is an issue that craves attention from policy-makers). But apart from these characteristics, national and international adoption today is an enormously complex matter, requiring interventions of an intense nature; the days are long gone when once a child had been adopted by its new parents the system took no interest whatsoever in the way things worked out. The article presents the most relevant figures on adoption and reviews both the work of psychologists in adoption programmes and what has been revealed by research in the area.

This special section attempts to offer a detailed overview of the sector for those with limited knowledge of it, but most of all it sets out to provide a critical review which, on the one hand, considers in a balanced way all that we have been able to achieve in 20 years starting almost from scratch, and on the other, reflects a critical and almost combative spirit. Those of us who have worked longest in this field are beginning to feel that some reforms, based on criteria and principles clearly laid down in law, and shared practically throughout the professional and research communities, are taking too long to arrive. We started out a long way behind other countries and we have made great progress, but some measures still fail to give an adequate response to children's needs. Readers will become aware of the nature of such shortcomings through the articles presented here.

Finally, and bearing in mind that this journal is published by the Spanish Psychological Association, psychologists will be well aware of the amount of professional and research work contributed to the child protection system by our discipline. The complexity and importance of specialized psychological work in this area comes through in all the articles, and as the reader will see, the bulk of research in this context is carried out by groups from Psychology. I think we psychologists can feel proud of our efforts, not forgetting that our research takes place within a multidisciplinary framework also involving social and community workers, social educators, sociologists, lawyers, and so on. It is our fervent hope that this special section helps to make children – all those vulnerable children – a little more visible.

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