

The role of parent-teacher involvement in child adjustment and behaviour in child-care centres

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Many studies have shown that parent-teacher collaboration results in better school performances and social skills (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008; Comer, 1984; 1988; Izzo & Weissberg, 1999; Kohn & Zellman, 1994; Marcon, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Taylor & Machida, 1994). The role of the relationship between parents and educators in the child's development and wellbeing is relatively unexplored in infancy and early childhood. This work investigates the relationship between the child's behaviour, the parent-teacher relationship and the parents' satisfaction with aspects of care and provision in day-care centres. The study involved 100 families of children (48 boys; average age 27.7 months) attending 5 day-care centres, and 29 day-care educators. A questionnaire was given to the parents to assess their child's temperament, attitudes toward the day-care activities and services and parent-teacher involvement. Day-care educators filled in a questionnaire on job satisfaction, children's problematic behaviour and parent-teacher involvement. Results show that parents' satisfaction with material features is associated with their satisfaction with educational features of the day-care. Parent-teacher involvement assessed by parents is negatively associated with parents' age, education and satisfaction with the day-care services, and is positively correlated with the child's social orientation, emotional development and motor activity.

Keywords: Parent-teacher involvement, Child behaviour in day-care.

Introduction

Parent - teacher relationships are currently of great interest for psychology researchers. Home-school communication aims at planning and taking shared decisions in order to avoid misunderstandings and to help parents understand how they can foster their child's learning at home (Christenson & Sheridan 2001). Many studies have demonstrated that through collaboration between parents and school personnel, pupils acquire higher social skills (Arnold et al., 2008; Comer, 1988; Epstein, 1991; Izzo Weiss-berg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999; Reynolds, 1992).

Specifically, parents' involvement in their children's schooling seems to be associated with children's positive achievements, fewer behavioural problems (Comer, 1984) and a lower percentage of marginalised pupils (McNeal, 1999).

Other studies have investigated the relationship between home-school collaboration and the children's attainment at school. These studies suggest the importance of parental involvement for the promotion of academic abilities from an early age (Christenson, & Thurlow, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2000).

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The ability to recognise and form letters and phonological awareness appear before the child begins primary school and constitutes the basis for learning to read (Adams, 1990; National Research Council, 1998). A study on the evaluation of the parent-teacher relationship in preschool and the academic development of preschool children found that parental involvement in the preschool activities is associated with assessment by the teacher of the child's language development and early academic abilities (Marcon, 1999). This means that the children's experiences in preschool can be the basis of their future success in school.

The theme of parent-teacher relationships seems to be of great importance even before the age of three, when the child attends a child-care centre. The two educational contexts – family and child-care – are reciprocally influential, and the extent to which teachers can interpret the child's behaviour, taking into account his family background, will affect their educational practices and render them more effective. From this standpoint children's development does not depend only on their individual characteristics, but importantly also on the systems of interaction that include the children, where they learn social behaviours, and develop their cognitive and language abilities.

In Italy a rich practice of education and direct observation of child behaviour has been developed over the last forty years, and this has brought about changes resulting in a paradigm of close interdependence of educators, parents and children (Panzeri, 2001). The dissemination of the results of these practices has created a new culture of collaboration, based on the interaction between the educational know-how of child-care educators and parents, which in turn are influenced by the involvement and abilities of the child (Restuccia, Saitta, & Saitta, 2002). The peculiar – and, initially, quite revolutionary – nature of the early years educational project implies that child care means first of all accepting parents, creating opportunities to share an educational project, and creating an educational team, characterised by a reciprocal exchange of views in order to build together an educational route which will allow children to identify both the familiar and comfortable elements of their family situation as well as the stimulating and evolutionary features of social life in the child-care environment. The child-care centre is an institution where children can experience a variety of social relationships and activities in close

association with their primary caregivers. Activities and programmes planned by educators mean that links between child-care and family are much stronger in the early years than parent-teacher relationships in the school years.

However, less attention has been devoted by psychology research to the issue of educator-parent relationships in infancy. The aim of the present study is to investigate the perception of parents and educators about their reciprocal relationship, and to assess the link between this relation and parental satisfaction with the child-care service on one hand, and with child behaviour on the other.

We will investigate the nature of the relationship between parents and educators and the frequency of their contacts, identifying the variables influencing communication between parents and educators. To that end we will explore and discuss the relationship between parents-educators contacts and relation and the child's behaviour.

Participants

Research has been carried out in five child-care centres in the Rome area, whose coordinators agreed to participate in the study. Three of the centres are private; two are operating in agreement with the municipality. Families pay the same fee as in public child-care and children are allocated a place in a centre by the municipality, but the staff are subject to the same rules, requirements and training as in public establishments, and salaries are paid by the centre.

Questionnaires were given to the parents of 190 children; 100 of them responded. Thus, 100 families, each with one child attending a child-care centre, participated in the research (52 girls and 48 boys; mean age 27.7 months) and 29 child care educators (mean age 30.08 years). All the educators were women.

Seventy-three mothers (mean age 35.9) and 6 fathers (mean age 38.31) filled in the questionnaire. Twenty-one questionnaires were filled in by both parents.

Procedures and Measures

Parents completed a questionnaire composed by:

an Italian measure of temperament (*QUIT*; Axia, 2002); this scale measures the child's

temperament - from 1 month to 11 years of age – defined as the set of biologically-based individual differences observable in the behaviour, that emerge early in the life and show a certain stability in the course of the development (Rothbart, & Bates, 1998). The *QUIT* measures child behaviour on 6 dimensions: social orientation, resistance to change, motor activity, positive and negative emotionality.

A measure of parents' attitudes towards the day-care activities and services (Scopelliti, Musatti, Di Giandomenico, Picchio, & Sposetti, 2009). This scale, produced on the basis of the Italian child-care culture, comprises four dimensions: 1) the child and his family, 2) the child's daily life, 3) the child's attendance at child-care centre and 4) the parent's evaluation of the child-care experience.

An adapted form of the *Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire-Parent's version* (PTIQ; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995). This scale assesses the quantity and the type of school-family contacts; the parents' involvement in the school activities; the quality of the family-school relationship; the level of stimulation about the school's activity at home; parental satisfaction with the school. We modified the questionnaire removing three elements that did not apply to the Italian school context, thus administering a 23 item questionnaire. Answers to this scale were computed in two indices: the frequency of parent/educator contacts, and the quality of parent/teacher relations.

Educators completed a questionnaire comprising:

an adapted form of the *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL; Achenbach, Rescorla, 2000). For the purpose of the present study the Italian version of the educator's scale from 1 ½ to 5 years (Frigerio et al., 2006) has been modified by selecting from the original 100 problematic behaviours 20 elements which would be likely to apply to the children aged between one and three years participating in the research.

An adapted form of the *Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire-Teacher's version* (PTIQ; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1995). For the parents' version, answers to this questionnaire were computed in two indices: the frequency of parent/educator contacts, and the quality of parent/teacher relation.

A 5-item measure of job satisfaction plus a section measuring sociodemographic characteristics.

Results

Half of the families consist of two parents and one child; 40% have two children, and the other 10% have three or more children. Forty-eight percent of mothers and fathers have a high school diploma and 37% of mothers and 31% of fathers have a master's degree. Most of the parents (97% for mothers and 99% for fathers) are working, 71% of the families have an annual income of between 10,000 and 50,000 Euros, 9% between 50,000 and 70,000, 5% between 70,000 and 90,000, 5% over 90,000, 5% less than 10,000 and 5% did not answer. Fifty-two percent of parents choose the child-care mainly for educational reasons but even the remaining 48% who chose organisational issues as their primary motive recognise the educational purpose the child-care, not just its child-minding function. Either the mothers or the father or both parents are responsible for looking after the child after the child-care day or when the child is ill. Six families report being able to leave the child with grandparents after child-care and 13 families in the case of child's illness.

Sixteen educators out of 29 are 30 years of age or less; 20 of them are single and 22 have a high school diploma. They are generally quite satisfied with their job, except for remuneration ($M = 2.42$ for a maximum score of 4) and training opportunities ($M = 2.81$ for a maximum score of 4).

Concerning the parental satisfaction with the educational service provided by the child-care, parents are generally satisfied with either the environmental / material features of the service and the care and education delivered to the child. These two measures of satisfaction are also strongly associated ($r = .83, p < .001$).

As table 1 shows, the frequency and quality of parent-teacher contacts correlate, but reports from parents and teachers do not correlate. That is, parents and teachers perceive the frequency of their contacts and the quality of their relation in different ways.

PARENT – TEACHER INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD-CARE CENTRES

		PTIQ-teacher relation quality	PTIQ- teacher contact frequency	PTIQ-parents relation quality	PTIQ-parents contact frequency
PTIQ-teacher quality	relation	1	.441 **		
PTIQ-teacher frequency	contact		1		
PTIQ-parents quality	relation			1	.229 *
PTIQ-parents frequency	contact				1

Note: Only significant correlations are displayed; * p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 1 Bivariate correlations between the frequency of the parent/teacher contacts and the quality of their relations as perceived by parents and educators

Both parents and educators reported verbal informal contact as the more frequent type of parent/teacher contact: for example, the exchanges between adults when the child arrives or leaves the child-care.

Correlation analyses show that for the parents the quality of their relationship with the educators is associated with the frequency of verbal informal contacts with the educators (r = .20; p < .05) whereas for the educators the quality of the relationship with the parents is associated with both the frequency of the informal contacts (r =

.42, p < .01), and with the frequency of other types of contacts, such as written communications (r = .30, p < .01) and exchanges in formal occasions (r = .26, p < .01).

The frequency of parent/teacher contacts reported by educators is also positively associated with the child's age (r = .31; p < .01).

The frequency of parent/teacher contacts reported by parents is negatively associated with the age and education of parents, with the family income and with the parents' satisfaction with the child-care service, and it is positively associated with the child's age (see table 2).

	Child's age	Mother's age	Father's age	Mother's educatio n	Father's educatio n	Family income	Satisfactio n - material	Satisfactio n - education
Frequency of contacts	,204*	-,226*	-,222*	-,287**	-,273**	-,228*	-,288**	-,274**

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 2 Bivariate correlations between the frequency of parent/educator contacts reported by parents and parent's sociodemographics and satisfaction with childcare service

Furthermore, the frequency of informal verbal communication reported by parents is negatively associated with their satisfaction with the care provided to the child ($r = -.20$; $p < .05$) while the communication in formal occasions is negatively associated with their satisfaction with the material features of the child-care ($r = -.23$; $p < .05$). In sum, it seems that different types of contacts serve different functions of the parent/teacher communication; it is then arguable that parents could try to improve their satisfaction with the child-care experiences by increasing their involvement in specific types of home/school contact.

The frequency of the parent/educator contacts is also positively associated with how long the child attended the child-care for both parents ($r = .23$; $p < .05$) and educators ($r = .24$; $p < .05$). In other words the increasing familiarity and reciprocal knowledge seem to facilitate the contact between parents and teachers.

Regarding the child's temperament, 90 children showed a normal emotional profile indicating a prevalence of positive emotions. No significant correlation emerged between the temperamental scales and either the frequency of the contacts or the quality of the relations between parents and teachers, as perceived by educators. On the other hand, the quality of the relations evaluated by the parents is positively associated with the child's social orientation ($r = .22$; $p < .05$) and emotionality ($r = .25$; $p < .05$) and negatively associated with the child's motor activity ($r = -.20$; $p < .05$).

No significant correlations were detected between the parent-educator involvement (either in terms of frequency of the contacts and quality of the relation) and the presence of problematic behaviours.

Discussion

The results of this study give a first and preliminary picture of the variables involved in the family-educators relationships in early infancy. Most of the previous researches on this topic were carried out with older preschool children. Most of the children in our study are only children or have one sibling; they are from middle-class families: their parents have a permanent work position and a high school diploma.

The children in our study are almost exclusively cared for by their parents (most of all mothers) and by the child-care educators, showing that

other figures (e.g., grandparents) which in previous studies emerged as being a valid support system for young families (e.g., Attias-Donfut & Segalen, 1998; Leprince, 2003; Phillips, 1991) are not available in the environmental context investigated, a large metropolitan area.

This situation makes the issue of parent-educator relationships crucial, as these are the two main educational contexts experienced by the child and therefore responsible for his wellbeing and development. Parents are aware of the educational purpose of the child-care centre, and send their child in order to give him an opportunity to learn, acquire skills and socialise with other adults and children. This confirms a shift in the perception of a child-care centre as just baby-minding to one of an educational institution where the child can develop, and learn how to live with others in a rule-based community socialising with educators and other children in a safe and supportive place (Musatti, 1992).

On the other hand, the educators involved in the present study are generally young women with high school education, quite satisfied with their job, except for remuneration and training opportunities.

Parents are generally quite satisfied with the material features of the child-care (i.e. quality of the physical environment, health and safety) and with the quality of the child's educational experience (i.e. the range of activities offered and the interaction between adults and other children). These two types of satisfaction are associated. They may indicate that child-care centres devote the same amount of attention to these different aspects of the child wellbeing, and meet equivalent quality standards. It should be noted that child-care licensed by the Rome municipal authorities must meet certain quality standards that satisfy material and educational criteria; moreover, especially in the last 10 years, there have been many improvements owing to training for educators and managers.

How is the relationship between parents and educators built? Parents and educators reported that the frequency of contacts increases with the child's age. This finding contrasts with the existing literature on this topic (Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman, & Zhang, 2005). However, these studies were conducted on older children (3 to 6), and may indicate that adults need to communicate more frequently when the demands made to the child about learning and socialisation increase. Therefore the adults in the

two contexts might need to share common educational strategies in order to communicate about the child's new learning or difficulties, and to report potentially relevant events that occur at home and at school that the child herself is not yet able to report.

The frequency of contacts with educators reported by parents diminishes according to parents' education and family income. More educated parents (with a master's degree) feel less need to be involved in the child-care activities and to communicate with educators: this could indicate a more autonomous educational position and possibly the higher parental effectiveness of these parents. Previous studies with elementary children found low levels of parents' involvement in school activities by parents with low levels of education (e.g., Kohl et al. 2000). It should be noted, however, that the type of involvement expected in elementary school (involving also parental support with homework) is very different from the participation demanded in child-care. In the latter case, educators may often fulfil the function of educational consultants for young parents with limited social support networks (Musatti & Picchio 2005).

For both parents and educators the most frequent type of contact was informal conversation at the beginning or at the end of the child's school day. These findings can be consistent with the idea that these contacts have the function of communicating about home or school events and activities, and of updating the adults' knowledge about the child. These conversations could also provide opportunities to complain or discuss any problems perceived in the quality of care provided to the child, as the negative association between the frequency of this type of contact and the parents' satisfaction with educational issues seems to indicate. On the contrary, formal face-to-face encounters could be the context for discussing problems and aspects of the environment of the child-care centre.

The frequency of home-school contacts is associated with the quality of the relationship between parents and educators: the more frequent the contacts, the more collaboration and positive relationships can be fostered. These results confirm the findings of previous research that informal exchanges and brief and frequent contacts make parents more involved in the children's life, and that parents are more collaborative with the school when the teachers

involve them in the educational decisions and activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999).

It is worth noting that even if face-to-face encounters may be the occasion for complaining and dealing with problems and issues, they also contribute to building relationships between parents and educators. In fact, the more frequently they meet the more positively they evaluate their relationship.

It is also worth noting that while for the parents the quality of relationship with educators is associated only with the rate of informal verbal contacts, for the educators we also found a positive association with the frequency of other types of contact with parents (e.g., written communications or formal face-to-face meetings). This finding could indicate that educators consider several forms of their involvement in the child-care activities when evaluating the quality of their relationship with parents.

The parent-educator relationship is built within the contacts they have in the course of the year and these contacts increase with the number of months spent by the children at the child-care centre. However, the development of acquaintance and reciprocal knowledge is not significantly associated to a growth in the perceived quality of the relationship.

Finally, what is the relation between parents' involvement in the child-care and the temperament of the child? Our data indicate that more socially oriented children, with a higher positive emotionality, and with a lower motor activity have parents and educators with a better mutual relationship. It is impossible from our correlational data set to ascertain the causal direction of this association: is it the creation of an educational team by parents and educators that provides a social interaction context designed to foster the goodness of fit between the child's individual dispositions and the requirements of his social community? Or, alternatively, is it the child's positive adjustment which makes it easier for parents and educators to interact in a positive way and to create a good educational relationship? Both these arguments might be valid, and they are compatible with each other. According to the theoretical perspective of the developmental challenge model (Hendry & Kloep, 2002), the individual's development is made possible by the interaction between his resources (i.e. individual disposition and social competence and network) and the developmental task he is facing. If the resources are adequate for their purposes, the

individual could develop in a positive way adding new resources to his stock of resources. Different kinds of resources interact at every moment of the individual life and the stock of resources is continually changing. In our case, we can say that the child's temperament and the social resources created by collaboration between parents and educators function in a cyclic mode, and the movement of this interaction modifies the child's temperament (i.e., facilitating or impeding the child's adjustment) and the relationship between the caregivers (i.e., making it easier for them to communicate about the child's developing skills and general progress on the one hand, and the challenges and difficulties he is experiencing on the other). This might, in turn, create a benign or a vicious circle.

The quality of the home-school relationship and the educational partnership influence the child's behaviour and this, in turn, influences the relationship with the caregivers. Family and child-care centre are the most relevant life contexts for the children. The positive feelings of parents about the educator and vice-versa, as well as the reciprocal trust and esteem create a meso-system that provides children with important resources for their development and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Some limitations in this study should also be acknowledged for future research. First, we took into account a limited number of child-care settings, and this might have resulted in a limited variability in the quality standards. Furthermore, we assessed the parent-educator relation by adapting a scale originally formulated for older children, in a different cultural context. It is possible that relevant features of this relationship for infants and in the Italian cultural context have been missed. Therefore, a replication of the present findings with a higher number of child care settings and infant-specific measures could give further support to our findings. In addition, we collected no information about the presence of immigrant families in the child-care centres involved in this study: the cultural and linguistic diversity between parents and educators could be a relevant issue to consider.

Future studies should also incorporate the good practices in child-care services developed in the last 30 years in Italy. Finally, considering the content of parent-educator communications as well as the frequency of their contacts could deepen our understanding of the specific educational functions of different types of parent-teacher contact.

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