



Evaluation of the effectiveness of a pilot program that promotes sensitive response in the educational staff of Chilean nursery schools



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the sensitive response of the caregiver and the formation of secure attachments in infants has been widely studied. It is within this framework that the present investigation examined the effect of an intervention that promotes sensitive response in nursery school caregivers. The intervention took place in early education centers for children between 0 and 2 years of age, from a low socio-economic background and identified as being at psychosocial risk. Using the Care Index (Crittenden, 1985), 53 nursery school caregivers were evaluated at the beginning, middle and end of the intervention. The results indicate a significant increase in the sensitive response of the participants as much at the middle as at the end of the intervention. This study discusses the implications of the results for early childhood education, especially, in cases where the child is identified as being in psychosocial risk.

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1. Attachment formation and early infancy

As a result of the theoretical contributions of John Bowlby (1969, 1980, 1995, 1997, 2003) and the empirical studies performed by some of his followers, such as Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), Mary Main (2000) and Peter Fonagy (1999a); Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002), among others, the relevance of early relationships and their influence on the quality of the bond established between the child and the caregivers (as well as between adults), has earned an important place within developmental psychology. The work of these experts confirms the theory that children's socio-emotional and mental development have their roots in early infancy and that the quality of these areas in adult life depends on the quality of this foundation.

Attachment theory refers to the tendency of human beings to establish intimate emotional bonds with specific individuals or significant figures and it is a basic component of human nature that is found to be present in a rudimentary form in the newborn and that lasts over the course of adult life through old age (Bowlby, 1995). During infancy, bonds are established between the child and the parents (or significant adults) to whom the child looks to for protection, consolation, and support (Bowlby, 1995) especially if care begin during first year of life, include a good portion of the child's day activities and the relationship is

maintained over time with some consistency (Ainslie & Anderson, 1984).

Studies agree on the importance of the attachment bond formed in early relationships and its relevance to the future well-being and mental and physical health of the individual (Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999; Sroufe, 2005). In the case of securely attached children, it is possible to predict healthy development in regard to their self-esteem, social competence, capacity to face stressful situations (Grossmann et al., 2002; Sroufe, 2005; Valdés, 2002), identity, and educational success, among others (Fonagy, 1999a). If the attachment relationship is characterized by anxiety and insecurity, the child is forced to develop defensive strategies that exclude painful information and surroundings, thus, affecting his future ability to establish gratifying relationships, impeding identity formation, and making him mentally and physically vulnerable to stress and to the development of various psychopathologies (Dozier et al., 1999; Fonagy, 1999a; Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2001; Sroufe, 2005).

Thus, promoting secure attachments in children is an important way to prevent future problems and pathologies. At the same time, promoting secure attachments contributes to the shaping of future generations by nurturing the autonomy, emotional development, identity and self-esteem of the individual. This background draws attention to certain characteristics of early infancy caregivers and significant figures, as well as to interventions oriented to promote their sensitivity.

2. Caregiver sensitivity and children's attachment

Sensitive caregiver response refers to the behaviors the caregiver uses to respond to the demands of a child or infant. The sensitive

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response of the parents or significant caregivers involves their capacity to notice the child's signals, interpret them appropriately and respond (affectively and behaviorally) in a quick and appropriate manner (Bowlby, 1969, 1980, 1995, 1997, 2003; Marrone, 2001). Likewise it is also important to consider that at present this concept implies the importance of the adult behavior to allow the child to explore without inhibition or exaggeration of negative affect (Crittenden, 2006).

The above implies the activation of affective-cognitive processes based on the suitable internal operating models of the parent or significant adults in conjunction with the capacity of these adults to understand their own mental states, as well as those of the child (Fonagy, 1999b; Fonagy et al., 2002; Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). Nevertheless, Crittenden (2006) has emphasized the caregivers' sensitivity with the infant as a dyadic construct where child's and adult's characteristics influence the relationship. Thus adult behavior is not adequate or inadequate per se, but depending on the temperamental features and present state of mind of the infant (Santelices, Olhaberry, Perez-Salas, & Carvacho, 2009).

The sensitive response of the significant adult and its relevance for the formation of attachments in the infant has been widely studied, primarily in familial contexts (Atkinson et al., 2000; de Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Lucassen et al., 2011; Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001). Overall, research shows that appropriate sensitivity on the part of the caregiver during the child's first year of life is a significant predictor of early attachment security and healthy development. More specifically, adequate sensitive response has been associated with the child's secure attachment style (Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers, & Wang, 2001; Coppola, Vaughn, Cassibba, & Costantini, 2006; Van IJzendoorn & de Wolf, 1997; Isabella, 1993; Smith & Pederson, 1988; de Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Ward & Carlson, 1995); positive emotional and social development (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Miller-Loncar, 2000; Kivijärvi, Riihã, Kaljonen, Tamminen, & Piha, 2005); appropriate cognitive development (Landry et al., 2000); and obedience between the age of 15–31 months (Lehman, Steier, Guidash, & Wanna, 2002). On the contrary, low caregiver sensitive response has been associated with poor cognitive development and a low symbolic capacity in the baby (Feldman, Eidelman, & Rotenberg, 2004).

While most studies have focused on maternal and paternal sensitivity, it is important to also consider the dynamics of other significant caregivers' sensitivity and its impact on the attachment and development of children. For instance, research suggests that one of the best predictors of later adaptation in children is the quality of the additional care received during their first year (Anderson, 1992; Howes, 1990) and there has been a significant increase in the percentage of children attending nursery and preschool centers at early infancy especially at poorer economic sectors (CASEN, 2013; Santelices et al., 2009).

In relation to the above, and being possible to consider nursery caregivers as figures with which infants show a tendency to establish attachment relationships, in recent years the study of their potential influence on the development of infants has taken relevance (Buyse, Verschueren, & Doumen, 2009; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). In the United States, for example, complete daycare programs have shown significant short- and long-term effects in various areas of the child's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Beeber et al., 2007; Brookes, Summers, Thornburg, Ispa, & Lane, 2006). Further on, in high social risk families, the relationship between the child and caregivers/teachers is of special relevance, since this link can be a protective factor, reducing the probability of problematic results in their development and contributing to the development of affective and cognitive skills (Burchinal, Roberts, Nabors, & Bryant, 1996; Phillips, McCartney, Scarr, & Howes, 1987).

An analysis of the specific characteristics of attachments within the context of multiple caregivers emerges as a particularly relevant area for the improvement of services proffered in nursery schools, kindergartens and other systems of early childcare. Overall, studies on the matter suggest that children attending centers or day-cares were not necessarily more insecurely attached than children cared for at home (Burchinal,

Bryant, Lee, & Ramey, 1992; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo, & Myers, 1988) and, even, children who were insecurely attached to their mothers were able to establish secure attachment relationships with their additional caregivers (Howes et al., 1988). More recently Anher, Pinquart, and Lamb (2006) conducted a study to analyze how caregivers' sensitivity can affect children's attachment, finding that group-related sensitivity was a reliable predictor of secure caregiver-child attachment at child care centers.

In general, the literature suggests that the type of care and interaction most sensitive to the characteristics, needs, and signals of the child is linked to secure attachment relations (Howes, 1999). Evidence supports the hypothesis that attachment formation in the context of child daycare would develop in a singular form, displaying qualities analogous to the child-mother relationship. In the same way that a child bonds with parental figures, he or she is also capable of bonding with non-familial caregivers. As a result, the literature emphasizes caregivers' needs in terms of support and specialized training, particularly, in areas related to the sensitivity and appropriateness of the care and the quality of the interaction (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007).

3. Early attachment interventions founded on caregiver sensitivity

Early interventions are defined as multidisciplinary preventative and therapeutic measures that extend from pregnancy to the 3-year-old child. They are designed to increase the competencies and abilities of the caregiver with the goal of promoting secure attachment formation in the child. It is possible to categorize the various kinds of early interventions according to their focus. Some interventions are centered on the manifest behavior of the child, others are centered on parental representation and others focus on the bonds and interactions between the caregiver and the baby (Stern, 1997). All of these approaches agree on the importance of strengthening the sensitivity of caregivers by helping them to understand and interpret the non-verbal language of the child, thus enabling them to provide an appropriate response to the child's needs.

The programs described in the literature, overall, focus at the following areas: improving the quality of the relationship between the child and the parents or significant adults; supporting at-risk families; fostering strength and diminishing the vulnerability of the child; preventing mental and behavioral disorders; and supporting the community resources for children and families (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2005). A meta-analysis that compared more than 70 preventative interventions on attachment formation showed that the most effective one was based on fostering a more sensitive response in the caregiver, understood as being more attentive to the needs of the child and providing an adequate response to these needs (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2005). The analysis also found that the most positive changes were observed in children who displayed insecure or disorganized attachment formation. It has also been determined that the earliest interventions have significantly better effects than interventions that take place later in the child's development, especially, if psychopathology has emerged in the child (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2005).

Regarding the effectiveness of specific interventions addressing child care professionals to improve the quality of child care, their interaction skills, and child social-emotional development, a meta-analysis found that interventions are, overall, effective (Werner, Linting, Vermeer, & Van IJzendoorn, 2016). More particularly, the study found that targeted interventions for child care professionals were moderately effective regarding classroom quality, caregiver interaction skills and, to a lesser degree, child behavior. The authors concluded that the implementation of targeted interventions addressing child-care professionals is a promising area that may lead to higher child care quality and, thus, better social-emotional development for children (Werner et al., 2016).

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