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ADAPTATION OF INFANTS TO THE CONTEXT OF DAY CARE: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONAL GRAMMAR

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Abstract

Day care has a socio-educational nature that should be provided to children as it leads to their overall development and well-being. Enrolment of an infant in this context provides access to situations which differ from those within the family setting. This calls on resources of adaptation on the part of small children, families and professionals. In the nursery, the infant's day is organized around educational experiences and permanent care that are unique moments to promote didactic interactions and diversified learning. The aim of this research is to identify the strategies and procedures used in the context of the nursery to promote infants' adaptation and well-being. Interactions between infants (aged 6 to 11 months) and two professionals (at reception, departure and during routine care and education), as well as with family members (upon arrival at the nursery and on returning home), were observed. The professionals were also inquired regarding the strategies used for infants' adaptation in this context with a view to promoting their well-being. It is a qualitative and exploratory study with recourse to direct observation and semi-structured interview. The strategies used to promote adaptation which emerged from the observations made were triangulated with the results of the interviews. The following results as regards valued strategies have been highlighted: *emotional literacy* (the professional's adaptation of responses to the infant's individuality, the professional's socio-affective skills); *communication with the family* (the exchange of information, harmony of procedures, transactional objects) and *type of communication* (verbal and nonverbal). The results show the importance of using a *communicational grammar* to safeguard the infant's adaptation process to a new socio-educational context nature, consequently helping to promote well-being.

Keywords: *Day care, infants, adaptation strategies, communication.*

1. Introduction

Day care is as an educational and social response where situations appropriate for children's overall development and well-being should be provided (Pinho, Cró, & Dias, 2013). Young children's education involves two complementary and inseparable processes, care and education (Bujes 2001, CNE, 2011). As advocates the National Education Council (CNE, 2011), Day care centres must have an educational purpose and create the conditions for children to undertake activities that will develop them. For Portugal (2011), Day care is an exciting context which promotes autonomy; where levels of well-being and children's involvement must be high; where attention is paid to the child's experience. For this, quality in the care provided is required. It is generally agreed that educational care provided to children at these ages is vital and has a real impact on their future development. Therefore, quality in this context has increasingly been considered a priority in all Western countries (Pimentel Carreira, Gandres, & Barros, 2012).

The child's first days in Day care are recognized as fundamental, as are the experiences and strategies promoted to promote their adaptation. According to Rapoport and Piccinini (2001), studies have shown that mothers and educators report that the first weeks of enrolment in this context are particularly stressful for infants and small children. In these early days, they will face an unfamiliar environment, food, new routines, people who are not family; all of this creates new social and emotional demands (Rapoport & Piccinini, 2001). The Day care centre will thus enable new contacts to be established, new experiences and personal resources (Amorim, Vitoria & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2000). So, enrolment in this context allows infants and their families to be inserted into a completely new physical, social, ideological and symbolic environment. It is therefore essential to take into account how receiving children and their families is carried out, in order to foster mutual knowledge and trust. It is also important to understand what the role of professionals in this process is, in order to favour the adaptation of infants and to establish ties with the family.

2. Purpose of the study

To recognize the relevance of the child to Day care adaptation processes, this investigation proposes to identify strategies and procedures used in the context of Day care to promote the adaptation of infants.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This qualitative and exploratory study was held for seven months and involved direct contact with a Day care centre (more specifically a nursery room) located in a northern district of Portugal. This is a qualitative investigation such that the data is collected directly in the natural environment, which means it is rich in “descriptive phenomena related to people, places and conversations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994, p.16).

3.2. Participants

Three girls, aged between six and eleven months, were observed specifically interacting with professionals within the scope of the following situations: reception, being returned to their parents, and daily routines. Selection of the infants resulted from the fact that they were enrolled for the first time in the nursery which allowed us to follow the procedures and strategies for throughout their adaptation. The two adults observed have educational training and have worked for more than twenty years in the field.

3.3. Instruments for data collection

We used direct observation, an essential method “subordinated to the service of the subjects and their complex process of assigning real intelligibility, providing the empirical data needed for further critical analysis” (Dias, 2009, p. 176). Naturalistic observation protocols were used for registration purposes. The survey by interview technique was also used, to allow us to collect descriptive data “enabling the researcher to develop an idea intuitively of how subjects interpret aspects of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994, p.134). The semi-structured interview script used in this study included eight questions divided into two topics; *i*) procedures and strategies in infant adaptation and *iii*) adaptation and interaction with the infant. To process the data collected in the naturalistic observations and interviews we used emerging categorical content analysis.

4. Results

From the twenty-eight direct observations carried out during different times; receiving the infant, returning the infant to parents and routine care and education (rce), we were able to observe the emergence of the following categories: *emotional literacy*, *communication with family*, *type of communication* (shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Results of naturalistic observations: procedures used in adaptation.

Categories	Subcategories	Example of indicators
1. Emotional Literacy	1.1. To each infant's individuality	The professional walks about holding the infant in her arms (rce)
	1.2. Socio-affective skills (listening, availability)	The professional sat in a chair holding the infant in her arms (rce)
2. Communication with the family	2.1. Mutual information (before the enrolment, beginning and end of the day, digital communication)	The professional asks what time the baby was fed and registers that (reception) During the day the professional registers the infant's feeding and baby cleaning (rce)
	2.2. Harmony in procedures (timetable, feeding, sleeping)	
3. Type of communication	3.1. Verbal (tone of voice, songs)	The professional walks about holding the infant in her arms, speaking in a calm tone of voice and sings to it (rce)
	3.2. Non-verbal (touching, hugging, changing location)	The professional picks up the infant, hugs it and then places it on her mother's lap (returning)

Secondly, it was possible to triangulate the data shown in the naturalistic observations using the interviews. It is worth noting that they reinforce the existing categories. Thus, besides the confirmation of the above categories with the additional new evidence/indicators, two new subcategories were included; *knowing how to read the child* (in the *emotional literacy* category) and *transitive object* (in the *communication with the family* category), neither of which were captured in the course of direct observations (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of the interviews: procedures used in adaptation.

Categories	Subcategories	Example of indicators
1. Emotional Literacy	1.1. Knowing how to read the child	If we look at the child, it is very easy to read it at first (when they enrol we need approximately a week and very little to be able to do it) There are children who really need to be near us, to feel our warmth, to feel our skin, to feel the beating of our hearts; there are others who do not
	1.2. Adapting responses to the individuality of each infant	Attention, which is fundamental, affection, touch, speaking softly, or reassuring them and being very patient at feeding time
	1.3. Socio-affective skills (listening, availability)	Every day we make computer records of how the child spent the day, if it slept well, if did not eat well
2. Communication with the family	2.1. Mutual information (before enrolment, at the beginning and end of the day, digital communication)	They must be given lunch at that time, until they are cleaned up
	2.2. Harmony in procedures (timetable, feeding, sleeping)	Another key thing it is to bring something from home with the mother's scent
	2.3. Transitive object (nappy, teddy bear, etc.)	The best way to talk to children is first of all never to talk loudly
3. Type of communication	3.1. Verbal (tone of voice, songs)	It is to provide attention, cuddle and hold
	3.2. Nonverbal (touching, hugging, changing location)	

5. Discussion

Under the procedures and the nursery's adaptation strategies, our results show the importance of *communicational grammar*, which can be defined as a set of rules, and principles that facilitate communication and without which interactions do not produce the desired effect from the standpoint of educational intentionality (promotion of learning). These rules indicate the professional's communication skills (portrayed in the categories of *emotional literacy* and *type of communication*) as essential for adaptation to occur, or rather so that communication materializes and the educational relationship can be established effectively. Both categories have relational demands that require specific training of the professionals. These are skills associated with implementing the educational relationship, expressed in the empathic understanding of the infant's needs. It is about understanding these basic needs and being able to provide structured and consistent responses (of a verbal and nonverbal nature), which act as catalysts of the relationship. If the infant at this age (6 to 11 months) has not spoken (oral language), it is crucial that the educator understands the signals it uses to express itself, in order to meet the *Alpha* function, proposed by Bion, of support for the organization of thought (Fochesatto, 2013). The professional thus places communication and development at the heart of their work with infants simultaneously respecting natural learning strategies.

6. Conclusions

The results of this research show the importance of communication in the infant's process of adaptation to the Day care centre and in particular, what we have called *communicational grammar* to appreciate the teacher's specific skills in this process.

In Portugal, Day care centres and other solutions for children under three years of age depend on the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity. As such, curricular and pedagogical guidelines for this age group do not exist at the time of this communication, since the Ministry of Education does not oversee the work

performed in this area. One way to ensure and sustain the quality of education in these contexts involves defending pedagogical reference mechanisms that, in terms of backing practices to be developed, support a common language among professionals in the defence of quality interactive processes to foster the rights of small children to learn (Ribeiro, 2013). It also involves, as we have seen, ensuring conditions essential to the educational relationship, valuing the role of professionals working in the field and understanding them as key to safeguarding the processes of adaptation.

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