



“Learning together, growing with family”: The implementation and evaluation of a family support programme



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ABSTRACT

The “Learning together, growing with family” programme is targeted to at-risk parents and children from 6 to 11 years old, with a preventive focus on promoting positive parent-child relationships. In this study, we examined the quality of the programme implementation and its influence on the programme results in a sample of 425 parents and 138 facilitators drawn from the first trial. Mixed methods were used, consisting of: parental self-reports on parenting dimensions, professionals' records on parental attendance and appraisals on six topics of the implementation process, and focus group discussions in which facilitators reported on the initial steps of the implementation. Results showed a high quality of implementation with respect to the group facilitator and the programme organization factors, followed by the coordination with services and the support facilities offered to participants and, finally, by the factors of fidelity and prior organization steps. Results of the focus groups confirmed that the prior steps were challenging and offered the more effective strategies. Better quality in the implementation factors predicted better parenting styles and parental competencies after the programme, as well as a higher attendance rate. In sum, this study demonstrates the importance of good implementation in at-risk contexts and provides some clues as to the key elements that moderate programme effectiveness.

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“Aprender juntos, crecer en familia”: la implementación y evaluación del programa de apoyo a la familia

RESUMEN

El programa «Aprender juntos, crecer en familia» está dirigido a familias en situación de riesgo psicosocial con hijos de 6 a 11 años, mediante un enfoque preventivo y de promoción de relaciones positivas entre padres e hijos. En este estudio, se analizó la calidad de la implementación del programa y su influencia en los resultados del programa en una muestra de 425 padres y 138 facilitadores. La metodología fue mixta y consistió en el uso de autoinformes sobre dimensiones parentales, registros de asistencia y evaluaciones sobre 6 temas de la implementación que fueron posteriormente factorizados. También se realizaron grupos de discusión en los que los facilitadores informaron sobre el proceso de implementación. Los resultados indicaron una alta calidad de implementación en relación con los factores de

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facilitador del grupo y organización del programa, seguido de los factores de coordinación con los servicios y los recursos de apoyo a los participantes y, por último, de los factores de la fidelidad y organización previa. Los resultados de los grupos de discusión confirmaron que los preparativos de la implementación resultan fundamentales y ofrecen las estrategias más eficaces para el desarrollo del programa. Una mayor calidad en todos los factores de implementación predijo mejoras en los estilos y competencias parentales después del programa, así como una tasa de asistencia más alta. En resumen, este estudio demuestra la importancia de una buena implementación en contextos de riesgo y proporciona algunas pistas sobre los elementos clave que modulan la efectividad del programa.

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Introduction

The CaixaProinfancia Programme is an initiative of “La Caixa” Foundation, a non-profit body that belongs to the financial entity CaixaBank, aimed at facilitating the promotion and integral development of childhood and families in situation of poverty and vulnerability. Studies of childhood poverty indicate that children who live in this situation have a greater probability of having learning difficulties, health problems, low school performance, premature pregnancies, and fewer job prospects (Brewer, Browne, Joyce, & Payne, 2011; UNICEF, 2007). In this context, the “Learning together, growing up in family” parenting programme (Aprender juntos, crecer en familia, in Spanish) was created (Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos, & Pastor, 2011; Amorós, Rodrigo, et al., 2011; Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Molina, et al., 2011; Amorós, Kñallinsky, Martín, & Fuentes-Peláez, 2011), co-authored by researchers from four Spanish universities (Barcelona, La Laguna, Lleida and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) and with the promotion and funding of the Area of Social Integration of the “la Caixa” Foundation. The programme is aimed at promoting well-being and family coexistence in those families with children aged 6–12, by means of increasing the positive relationships between parents and children, according to the core principles for exercising positive parenting (Rodrigo, 2010).

Today, parent education programmes (Amorós, Kñallinsky, et al., 2011) are oriented towards fostering family communication between parents and children and learning coping skills against adversities through positive and resilient parenting (Gómez & Kotliarenko, 2010; Walsh, 2004). Decreasing risk factors, promoting protection factors and strengthening family capacities are the best points of reference for a parenting intervention (Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Molina, et al., 2011; Amorós, Palacios, Fuentes, León, & Mesas, 2003; Balsells, Amorós, Fuentes-Peláez, & Mateos, 2011). A growing body of evidence suggests that the improvements in the quality of parenting children receive can contribute to reducing child problems and can enhance positive development (e.g., Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; O'Connor & Scott, 2006; Rodrigo, Almeida, Spiel, & Koops, 2012).

The “Learning together, growing up in family” programme responds to a holistic view of a development process for family life in 3 dimensions: the emotional dimension, which aims to help manage emotions, the behavioural dimension that helps to face situations competently, and the cognitive dimension, which facilitates a better comprehension of the family life (Amorós, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos, & Pastor, 2015). The programme contains 14 weekly structured sessions aimed at parents and children separately and 14 joint sessions. In six modules and 1 follow-up module (each module has 2 sessions for parents, 2 sessions for children, and 2 sessions for the family) the programme is aimed at promoting the affective links in the family, the negotiated compromise about rules and values, the improvement in family organization and chore sharing, communication and resolution of conflicts, strengthening healthy habits and positive lifestyles, use of Internet at home,

and the joint participation in family leisure activities. As for the methodology, participants had the opportunity to engage in activities following group-oriented didactic strategies and techniques, such as role-playing, group work, guided fantasy, brainstorming, case studies, and the use of audio-visual resources (videos and animated stories). A set of materials and resources for parents and children and for the facilitators was also provided for the adequate application and evaluation of the programme.

Since the launching of the programme, the increase in the groups and the families who have been able to participate has been notable. In the year 2011–2012, there were 1270 participants, which grew to 1764 in 2012–2013, to 2234 in 2013–2014, and to 3678 in 2014–2015. In total, 8946 family members (4262 adults and 4684 children) have participated over the course of these 4 years, delivered through a wide network of NGOs under the coordination of the CaixaProinfancia Programme. Each trial of the programme has been rigorously evaluated according to the premise of evidence-based programmes (Rodrigo, 2010). In particular, in the first trial an RCT design was applied for the evaluation of the programme involving 1834 participants, of whom 1270 (609 parents and 661 children) completed the programme, and 564 (296 parents and 268 children) were randomly assigned to the control group. The results showed that after the programme, and in comparison with the control group, the strict (authoritarian) style, the permissive style, and the use of criticism and rejection had significantly decreased and parental affection and communication had increased. There was also an increase in family leisure activities, satisfaction with family life improved and there was greater community integration for the families, as self-reported by parents and children and by focus groups performed with parents, children, and professionals (Amorós, Balsells, Buisan, Byrne, & Fuentes-Peláez, 2013).

In this study, 138 facilitators and 53 collaborating bodies of CaixaProinfancia in 12 Spanish cities reported positively on the impact of the programme on their professional development as a means to assure the programme sustainability over time (Rodrigo, Martín, Mateos, Pastor, & Guerra, 2013). Following a quantitative and qualitative methodology, the results indicate that after the application of the programme the facilitators considered themselves as most competent in the interaction with the families, in the organization of the work, in the coordination of the programme with other services and in the relation with other professionals as well as they have positively valued the impact of the programme on the families.

In the present evaluation study, also performed with the data from the first trial, we addressed the study of the implementation process. The implementation of the programme is crucial to understanding which factors make a programme work when applied in real-life conditions (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). It is important to define the conditions and human and material resources that allow the programme to function properly with the greatest possible guarantee, as well as its impact on programme outcomes (Rodrigo, Máiquez, & Martín,

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