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EXTRACT FROM A PROGRAM PROMOTING RESILIENCE IN CHILD WELFARE:

working on emotional functioning as a protective factor (PF).

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AIMS OF THE STUDY

For the purpose of a current doctoral research, we have created and implemented an experimental program to promote resilience for child welfare workers.

ORGANIZATION

The intervention is addressed to 14 professionals working with children aged 6-13 in a placement situation.
This involves two sessions :

First session: Six annual meetings focusing on six topics (resilience definition and five PF identified as dominant in our population) were conducted by two psychologists. Practical tools were provided at each meeting.

Second session: Six annual meetings conducted by duos of professionals of the first session. They had to revisit the topics and tools already studied in order to assimilate them more; and to create new practical tools, or to adapt existing tools, in order to develop the PF being studied.

AN EXAMPLE: WORKING ON THE « EMOTIONAL FUNCTIONING » PF

During the meeting concerning emotional functioning, we studied how emotional awareness and emotional regulation (those of professionals, children and parents) could be PF and how to develop them in daily work.

This meeting enabled to put words on emotional functioning already known by professionals but badly defined.

The professionals seemed to enjoy and were particularly interested in the question of emotions at work.

Awareness of the importance of working on emotion has occurred (What does this child/his behavior create in me? Which answer should I provide to this child to help him/her deal with his /her emotions? How can my own feelings be used as working tools? Etc.)

The tools proposed during the first session are exercises which aim to help children question themselves on primary emotions (fear, joy, anger, sadness, etc.); to help them to identify how and where emotion is felt in his/her body; to define how this emotion is expressed and, if necessary, how it could be expressed differently, etc.

Professionals' feedback about this meeting is as follows:

There is a real difficulty to discuss about emotions with young children. The Tools used during the session allowed to mediate educational relationships and enabled an approach to emotions in a manner consistent with the children's age.

About tools :

- They are useful in the long term because they are integrated in daily care (ex: I have the impression that you are angry, is it true? And, consequently, what did we agree to do when you feel anger coming on? Etc.).
- They enable to go back over the question of emotions within the children's group because all of the children are familiar with these tools and this make a common reference for discussion about emotions.
- They provide an easy, straight forward and mediated manner to talk about emotions with parents.

Theoretical input and tools about emotional functioning allow for a new perspective on work on parent-child relationships.

Several changes were observed in both children and professionals:

Concerning the children

- Less emotional overflow.
- Less conflicts between children in everyday life for the group.
- Greater emotional awareness and more verbalization of emotions in everyday life.
- An increased capacity to ask for help with emotions regulation (to find way to calm anxiety, to avoid outbursts of anger, to deal with sadness, etc.).

Concerning the professionals :

- Better team dynamics (a more convivial and warm atmosphere, more laughs, more mutual support).
- Stabilization of the team. An important turnover was observed in the first session (more than half of the team has changed). No change during the second session. Our hypothesis is that this stabilization is linked to better regulation of emotion in daily work. Greater emotional awareness helps to deal with negative feelings and to provide greater attention to positive feelings.

Professionals often refer to this meeting, especially to "jokes" they have made, which, in turn, reminds them daily of the content of this meeting.
Finally, the tools used have allowed to unleash the professionals' creativity: they develop collective games about emotions, tools for the self-evaluation of emotional state for children (emotional calendar or emotional weather), etc.

CONCLUSION

Most of the PF studied in this intervention are already known by the professionals but everyone has their own definition and representations (frequently unclear) about them. The first step was to enable them to build a common culture, to redefine theoretical basis essential to their daily work and to offer them practical tools. The second session, more maieutic, has strengthened considerable changes in their daily work and allowed for a significant evolution in children's development.

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