



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



María Pía Santelices*, Chamarrita Farkas, Marcela Aracena

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

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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

* Corresponding author at: Psychology School, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Ave. Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul, Santiago, Chile.

E-mail addresses: msanteli@uc.cl (M.P. Santelices), chfarkas@uc.cl (C. Farkas), maracena@uc.cl (M. Aracena).