

Abstract

In the last 20 years parental involvement has had an increasing interest in Catalunya leading to changing the ECEC setting's practices and in the promotion of research in this field. International and national research evidenced the importance of parental involvement with their children to promote a healthy development and success in education as well as in family services and schools. For this reason, the ECE curricula includes the importance of working in collaboration with parents, but still there are some challenges to achieve a significant partnership, such as improving teacher training at university level and also changing some conceptions about the teacher's role with the families. This chapter focuses on the laws, the main family support services to promote parental engagement with the community and the parental involvement in the schools. Some successful strategies are highlighted together with a more detailed project to improve parents-school meetings.

Running Head Right-hand: Parental involvement in early childhood education in Catalunya, Spain

Running Head Left-hand: Sílvia Blanch Gelabert, Ana María Forestello and Gabriel Lemkow-Tovias

21

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CATALUNYA, SPAIN

Sílvia Blanch Gelabert, Ana María Forestello and Gabriel Lemkow-Tovias

0000-0001-5397-7892

0000-0001-7860-8233

0000-0003-2324-9389

Introduction

In the last 20 years Catalunya has experienced an increased interest towards parental involvement, thus leading to a change in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings, practices, programmes and the promotion of studies in this field. International and national research showed the importance of parental involvement in schools and other programmes to promote a healthy development and successful learning in children. For this reason, the ECE curriculum emphasises the importance of working in collaboration with parents, but there are still some challenges in order to achieve a significant partnership, such as improving teacher training programmes in Catalan universities and also changing some concepts about the teacher's role and relations with the families.

Local research has been recently developed around the families' institutional involvement. Most of these studies have been developed by the Spanish Government, Universities, Family associations, Foundations, and others. Some of their main results are presented below:

- **Most vulnerable families don't have access to nurseries (0–3 years).** Only 38.4% of children aged 0 to 2 years in Catalunya are schooled (Ferrer, Rivas, & Tobalina, 2019). In addition, research focused on Barcelona's population shows that the lower income districts have a significantly lower percentage of

schooling, and only 7% of the foreign population have access to ECE services (Institut Infància i Adolescència, 2019). For this reason, it is necessary to widen the nurseries' offer for more children to be able to attend and to increase the families' support services through them (Blasco, 2016).

- **The socio educational playgroups for families with children younger than three favour a responsive upbringing.** Different research (Blanch, 2010; Ferrer, 2008) shows that family support programmes promote an upbringing improvement and more educational involvement in families.
- **Expectations, home environment, and family communication are key aspects for the educational success** (Blasco, 2018). The families' expectations towards their kids are related to the opportunities, interest and facilities given by the parents. The materials, such as books, a space to read or play, are key aspects for the children's learning. Also, school life is important, especially the parents' interest towards it. The family-school communication processes help children to connect both contexts and to boost their development. Parent involvement in the school facilitates conversations about the school at home, and this is one of the key elements for the children educational success.
- **Support groups between parents favour responsive upbringing** (Blanch & Badia, 2015). Evidence from national and international programmes show how families going to activities with other families, and with the accompaniment of professionals, reinforce the parenting capacities and promote the development of supporting networks.
- **Families demand acknowledgement for their role in schools** (Comas, 2018). Families are increasingly demanding a voice in the decision-making processes of education centres, at both pedagogical and organisational levels. However there is still some resistance in schools (Blanch, Gimeno, & Careta, 2016). This may be because it is still difficult to move from an educational model based on experts/clients to one based on real partnership based on distribution of roles.

The research shows that the collaboration between families and schools becomes essential for the children's academic performance at schools and summer programmes (Alegre, Todeschi, & Segura, 2018; Blanch, Duran, Valdebenito, & Flores, 2013; Park & Holloway, 2016). Moreover, parents are central for the children's upbringing and education processes within a communitarian development context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, it is essential to point out the importance of acknowledging parents and finding different ways to engage with them.

In this sense, this chapter will focus on different ways to support families through different programmes and successful parental engagement experiences at school.

Parental social perspective: policies to promote parental involvement

In this section, we will emphasise the key-steering documents that promoted this paradigm shift, favouring the parental role in ECE, in nurseries, preschool settings, and other kinds of services to support families with young children. Previous research shows that, from a cognitive, social, emotional and physical standpoint, families play a central role in the children's global development (Blasco, 2018). Due to this, the latest regulations provide support for a paradigm shift towards the strengthening of the social upbringing vision, where society is responsible for accompanying the parents in their children's education so that they can develop holistically and with educational success.

Since the Children's Rights Convention (UN, 1989, November 20), there has been a change in conceptualising the child as a person endowed with full rights. This convention was also endorsed by the Catalan Parliament in March 1991. In this document, some policies regarding Childhood were promoted, some of them taking into consideration the parents' upbringing role, the child's right of growing up with its family and its right to be protected in case of family negligence.

Departing from this different approach, at a national level different laws regarding parental responsibility were promoted and regulations were set up for the creation of new meetings and support for parental spaces with the professionals' accompaniment. An example is the Law of Family support 18/2003 that was partially deployed in Catalonia through ordinance 151/2009, regarding complementary services and help for families with special attention for single-parented and large families.

Another important regulation is the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation (REC-19, 2006) which supports a social upbringing view where the child is the centre and the community should provide support to the parents so that they can provide positive and responsive parenting.

In relation to ECE, we could highlight the Catalan decree 101/2010 that regulates school and family partnership: an initial contact between parents and educators before the child's incorporation for the first time in the nursery, which takes the form of a day of open doors before summer holidays; in September, before the infant joins the nursery. An interview is set up with each family; daily contact during entry and exit at nursery are encouraged; regular meetings with the families of the same group of infants are also established. At least two annual written reports are guaranteed to families and one at the end of the ECE (3 year old) reflecting the assessment of the progress and difficulties observed, the evolutionary and personal aspects of the infant, and the complementary strategies or resources that may have been adopted, related to educational and learning processes.

Teacher training: parental involvement in the ECE teacher higher education degree programmes

The 0–6-years-old period in Spain is currently being carried out as an educational period, non-compulsory, and free for children from 3 years old, under the LOMCE (Organic Law for the improvement of educational quality) law. In order to enhance quality, the professionals who work in ECE need to hold specialised studies at university to work with children in nurseries, preschools, and other ECE services. In that sense, it is important to include in the teacher's initial training parental involvement contents.

Although there were previous studies and teacher training at university since 1845 in Barcelona, in 2009–2010, in the context of the ECTS European credits, a new 4-year ECE degree was created. Today, seven faculties offer the ECE Degree in Catalunya. As well as this, high schools offer ECE courses on National Vocational Qualifications to work as an assistant teacher in schools, especially in nurseries (0–3-years-old children).

At university level, in some of the ECE degree curriculum for the 0–3 and 3–6 periods there are references to the family's importance in the children's upbringing although still in a very general way and not always taking into consideration the different socioeconomic and cultural specificities of families (Lemkow-Tovias, 2018). So, a challenge for universities is to search for strategies to bring students and families together to learn from relevant situations. For example, in Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona there are courses that

address this in a practical way for students and families. There are also essays in which students must interview a mother or a father; they record some moments of family games or encourage family participation during their school internship. Also families and teachers are invited by the university to give talks, among others.

However, parental involvement awareness in the ECE degrees is still pending due to its general treatment in the curriculum and it is often the professors' decision to give more or less importance to families.

In addition, the students' school internships allow them to approach families in an important way. However, BA students are allowed to attend the parents' meetings or interviews, so it is difficult for future teachers and practitioners to learn how to engage with families without participating in real situations.

Families' services to support families with young children

In the previous section we showed how the international and national legislations have been long promoting policies from a social standpoint that support actions to enhance the parents' competences, to contribute to the positive responsive parenting in favour of a holistic development of children.

These policies are essential to develop support services for the families because Early Childhood is a key period for their development and health (Bueno, 2019). In this sense, different support programmes to the families have been created, with the aim of strengthening their ability to support the children's upbringing and education, as well as to promote a culture of parent's engagement with the community.

Below, some of the ECE services in Catalunya are presented, in which the parents' involvement becomes a central aspect through the following categories (Àngel, 2004):

Socio educational playgroups

Socio educational playgroups are groups conducted by professionals with different backgrounds, mostly from Psychology, Education or Pedagogy, to provide emotional, social, and educational support to the families' upbringing and education processes regarding their children. In this program they can find appropriate information and training, share experiences with other mothers or fathers and have some time for themselves. Examples of these are the Family Group and Playgroup programmes such as the *We already have a child* programme and the *Babygroup* programme designed for the first year of the child's life. The parents always come with their children and the professionals provide the families with adequate conditions for their educational involvement (De Febrer, 2003). Families can also enrol to programmes for children from three to seven years to support the family health and logistics, especially for families with disabled children.

Children and family services at social risk

Services are addressed to families with social and structural complex situations, such as the Technical Service Meeting point, to help communication between children and parents. Also, the Mothers in Prison Unit facilitates the coexistence of children from 0 to 3 years with their mothers while they are in jail. Another example of service for families at social risk is the *Raval Infant House*, where vulnerable families are

welcomed and accompanied in coordination with other communitarian agents from the third sector, to provide better global support to these families.

Leisure services

Playhouses for early childhood offer stimulating play proposals for children that are accompanied by an adult and supervised by qualified personnel, provide families guidance and promote nursery schools' groups to attend, in order to enhance playing with different resources. Such is the case of the municipal network of toy libraries in the city of Lleida-

Cultural services

Children's libraries (from 0 to 6 years old) with rooms specifically designed for children, such as Can Butjosa Library in Parets del Vallès, also play an important role for families. The aim is to promote interest in children, through family engagement, towards literature. Some of Barcelona's Art Museums (Picasso Museum and Fundació Miró) offer activities addressed for children (0–6 years) and their families and educators. Also, theatres such as LaSala Miguel Hernandez (Sabadell city) offer similar types of family activities.

Science and technology services

Some Science and Technology centres have specific areas for children and their families. Examples of these are the Science Nest in the Barcelona's Natural Science Museum and the Lab 0_6: Discovery, Research and Documentation Centre for Science Education in Early Childhood in Manresa, located in the Manresa's University.

Different strategies to promote parental engagement and collaboration at school

The research shows that the partnership between families and kindergartens is essential for children's success, but many of the programmes are often aimed at families that have a favourable cultural and environment with stimulating experiences. However, not all families can have such positive realities and thus schools must facilitate accompaniment strategies during schooling. For instance, some nurseries and preschools promote the creation of social networks between families in order to stimulate their confidence and encourage their mutual collaboration. In this sense, the design of learning environments will be central to create comfortable spaces, that could offer quality time for parents and also to boost positive relations between parents and their children.

Different families have different contexts, geographical, and cultural origins, as well as vulnerable and complex, permanent or temporary situations and this should be taken into account. Moreover, some families seldom participate due to specific issues, such as linguistic difficulties or cultural realities that become labelled by others.

In this respect, schools try to offer different family-school types of collaboration at a different level. Some successful examples of family-school initiatives are described in Table 21.1.

Table 21.1 *Successful examples of family-school initiatives*

[Note to author: Tables are better viewed when changing your 'MS Word settings' to 'Web view'].

At home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes for the promotion of linguistic competences with parents • Programme for the promotion of mathematics with parents • Support with homework
Education system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representative institutions (school council)
In school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom/school direct participation • Family associations (AFA/AMPA/FAPAC etc.)/Representative (School Council) • Mixed commissions (Parents & Teachers): gardening; school contents; events; infrastructures; lunch time; leisure activities etc. • Groups of parents (pedagogical coffee, positive upbringing . . .) meetings • Workshops chosen by teachers and parents • Social educators accompanying families within the school. • Volunteers to support activities • Parent Governors • Mothers acting as a link with members of minority groups • School promoters (e.g. for/with Roma Community)
Communication issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity: documents, panels, apps, web, blog, social networks . . . • Course meetings • Interviews • Meeting opportunities: children's arrival and collection.
With the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls and Video Calls • Formal and informal networks (only families, families with teachers, and families & others) • Families or mixed conferences/workshops • Community programmes

How can we redesign the parent-teacher conferences?

In this context, in which the families' support is basic, we will present a specific example: the initiative "Redesign the parents conference" (*Redissenyem la reunió amb famílies*) promoted by the Jaume Bofill Foundation to boost the parental involvement starting from the initial meeting (with the teacher at the beginning of the course) to act as a lever to favour the relations between families and teachers. This initiative is based upon the international initiative "How can we redesign parent-teacher night" from the Teachers Guild (IDEO & RSA).

To modify family meetings, a guide to guide schools was published, based on the design thinking process. The process includes creative instruments that go beyond the usual ideas, through brainstorming processes, journey plot activities, and the creation of prototypes before action.

Thus, the process is organised through four relevant moments explained below:

- 1 **To explore.** Creation of a promoting group (ideally mixed between teachers, families and, if possible, also students). In this phase it is important to know the teachers' voice, but above all, the families' voice in order to have a better idea of what they think about the initial conference and their expectations. Activities are proposed to promote empathy, to listen to the families' and their expectations
- 2 **Cocreation.** Definition of the challenge, for example, by promoting more participatory conferences. Once defined, a brainstorming process is promoted and finally an idea is selected following three criteria chosen by the promoters, if these are realistic and sustainable.
- 3 **Prototyping and action.** The team prepares a creative prototype, either through the use of video, sculpture . . . and tests it in order to validate the proposal with a small group of people (families, teachers . . .). Further changes can be done if required. After this, a new meeting is set.
- 4 **Assess.** Once each parent conference is finished, the community gathers to assess how the meeting went and which changes are proposed for the next ones.

Some facilitating aspects in these meetings are:

- **Calendar.** Having all the programmed meetings from year to year so that everyone has the meetings set up in their respective calendars (e.g. during the first Monday of October every year is reviewed).
- **Schedule.** To check which schedule fits better for the families, some schools or nurseries do them in the morning, others at noon, and most in the afternoon.
- **Meeting announcement.** To be creative with the meeting announcements, create surprising situations by involving the children through videos, invitations notes, voice recordings, etc.
- **Space.** The meeting can provide an opportunity to better understand the different spaces in the school, by suggesting walking itineraries and activities that can take place in different learning areas.
- **Teaching staff participation.** Presence of all the teaching staff involved in the children's activities, both specialist teachers and tutoring teachers and the management team, helps out in getting to know them and providing confidence to the families.
- **Activities:** Create some activities so that parents can meet and get to know each other, if the families have an opportunity to talk and meet each other, they can start establishing links and networking amongst themselves.
- **Information.** To help out in providing information through the use of different media. Everything that would make reference to the pedagogical aspects can help in providing closer experiences such as organising different spaces and materials so that they can walk and experiment as well as ask and understand better how their children work in school.
- **Students.** Think about how they can express their worries, how they can take part of the decision-making processes, either during the scheduling process, with the material used for the meeting, etc.

- **Leisure moment.** To include food or a breakfast snack helps during informal moments to talk, to know each other, etc. These are key ingredients for establishing a cooperative spirit with the school.
- **Assessment.** Listening to families, students and teachers helps in adjusting the next meetings programmed.

This process can be adapted to the individual meetings, a more accurate term than the “interviews” still being used in many nurseries and preschool settings.

Redesigning the family meetings allows progressing towards a more democratic school. To do so, spaces, time, and activities for the mutual encounter are conceived to create complicities and to promote the global development of children, even though teachers and parents may play different roles.

Challenges on parental involvement

After detailing some of the policies, research and services available for families, it is possible to observe the current positive context of involving and accompanying families in the schooling process. But why is it difficult to put this into practice?

In Catalonia many families with children are unable to cover their basic needs. For the FEDAIA, a platform that connects children, adolescents, and families at risk, it is required to implement and develop actions, programmes, services, and policies that could empower them and that could focus on the children’s care. That is the challenge is to invest in the 0–3 education period in those most neglected environments through services such as Family Educational Playgroups and other annual programmes in the schools that are long-standing, better conditions could also be covered in formal education, leisure spaces, free time, culture and sport services, thus guaranteeing that the health and living issues are being appropriately taken care of.

There are many programmes to support the parents in bringing up their young children, but they often depend upon different administrations, for example some belonging to the Education Department and others to the Social Services Department. This increases the difficulty in providing an appropriate coordination and an offer made for the families’ needs. Sometimes these programmes don’t even have enough family demand, maybe because they are not tailor-made to the parents’ needs from this or that community. Moreover, the absence of dissemination and budget creates barriers for family participation, due to lack of information or to the uncertainty of not knowing how the activities will be developed.

On the other hand, to improve parent involvement it’s important to start analysing our own beliefs, that is, those ideas regarding the “other”, because it is one of the biggest barriers for including and approaching families in the school life. This belief promotes expectations that relate to one’s own actions; therefore it’s important (Blanch, 2010). Many teachers are afraid of the family participation, because they will be observed and thus, parents can become critical to their working habits or pedagogical strategies. In reality, there are no relevant problems in the schools being open to the families. The aim is that families become the centre and can be guided through the process to allow them to empower themselves towards a positive and responsive children upbringing process.

Another way to confront the fears towards the family meetings and to improve the confidence with them would be to promote experiences in the teachers’ initial training and during their lifelong learning courses. For example, by facilitating meeting places such as Edhacks or Edcamps, where teachers, families, students

and other professionals/experts can take part and meet one another to suggest or develop solutions to the potential challenges encountered.

Schools have the main responsibility to encourage parent's engagement offering different channels of participation and co-creating to resolve the challenges they have agreed together.

References

- Alegre, M. A., Todeschini, F., & Segura, A. (2018). *¿Puede un programa de verano mejorar las oportunidades educativas del alumnado? Evaluación de impacto del programa Èxit Educatiu*. Madrid: Fundación Ramón Areces.
- Àngel, C. (2004). *Lliçó magistral-comiat. Visió panoràmica de l'atenció educativa a la petita infància dins un marc europeu*. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Departament de Psicologia Bàsica, Evolutiva I de l'Educació.
- Blanch, S. (2010). *Expectatives parentals i pràctiques socioeducatives familiars. Influència mútua* (Tesi doctoral), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona.
- Blanch, S. (2017). *Redissenyem la reunió amb famílies*. Retrieved from www.educaciodemacat/crides/Families/redissenyem-la-reunio-amb-families
- Blanch, S., & Badia, G. (2015). *A criar fills se n'aprèn*. Barcelona: Fundació Jaume Bofill.
- Blanch, S., Duran, D., Valdebenito, V., & Flores, M. (2013). The effects and characteristics of family involvement on a peer tutoring programme to improve the reading comprehension competence. *European Journal of Psychology Education*, 28(1), 101–119.
- Blanch, S., Gimeno, X., & Careta, A. (2016). *Territoris d'intersecció entre els centres educatius i les famílies. Un estudi en l'etapa de l'educació infantil*. Bellaterra: ICE UAB.
- Blasco, J. (2016). *De l'escola bressol a les polítiques per a la petita infància*. Barcelona: Fundació Jaume Bofill.
- Blasco, J. (2018). *Els programes per fomentar la implicació parental en l'educació serveixen per millorar el rendiment escolar?* Barcelona: Fundació Jaume Bofill.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Trad. Cast.: La ecología del desarrollo humano. Barcelona, Ediciones Paidós, 1987).
- Bueno, D. (2019). Genetics and learning: How the genes influence educational attainment. *Frontiers in Psychology*. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01622
- Comas, M. (2018). *La veu de les famílies en el sistema educatiu: Aposta pel bé comú o estratègia de clausura?* (Tesi doctoral), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona.
- De Febrer, V. (2003). Més enllà de l'escola bressol. *Revista de Girona*, 216, 76–81. Retrieved from www.raco.cat/index.php/RevistaGirona/article/view/94907/155176
- Edubaròmetre.cat. (s/f). Retrieved from <https://edubarometre.cat/resultats/>
- Ferrer, A., Rivas, E., & Tobalina, G. (2019). *On tot comença. Educació infantil de 0 a 3 anys per igualar oportunitats. Annex Catalunya*. Save the Children. Retrieved from www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/imce/docs/donde_todo_empieza_cat.pdf
- Ferrer, M. (2008). *Suport a les famílies en la primera infància. Estudi de cas d'un programa socioeducatiu* (Tesi doctoral), Universitat de les Illes Balears, Palma.

- Institut Infància. (2014). *El baròmetre de la infància i les famílies de Barcelona*. Retrieved from <http://institutinfancia.cat/mediateca/barometre-infancia-families-barcelona/>
- Lemkow-Tovias, G. (2018). The Catalan case: Cultural diversity and pedagogical practices in ECE contexts. In *The intercultural needs of educators in early childhood services*. Italy: MECEC+ Project, European Commission.
- Park, S., & Holloway, S. (2018). Parental involvement in adolescents' education: An examination of the interplay among school factors, parental role construction, and family income. *School Community Journal*, 28(1). Retrieved from www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx
- Recomendación Rec 19. (2006). *Comité de Ministros a los Estados Miembros sobre políticas de apoyo a la parentalidad positiva*. Retrieved from www.mscbs.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/parentalidadPos2012/docs/informeRecomendacion.pdf

