

# Promotion and Protection of Childhood and Adolescence - The “Child Contact Centre”

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## Abstract

This paper wants to study in deep one of the existing services to help and to improve the parent-son's relation: the “child contact centre”. This centre is a place where children can meet their parents after different family problems, from parental conflicts until violence and abuses. It's very important that each child could have the possibility to continue to live with his family as reported by the “UN Convention of childhood and adolescence's rights” (1989). The history of these meeting centres is very recent and, in the same way, also the role of the social workers. For this reason, research of peculiarities of this place and the rules of the operators involved is very important. In particular, the history moment where we are living today with the “Covid-19” spread all over the world, has caused many problems in the families and it has compounded family situations already compromised. The choose of this theme is also born from the need of study in deep the organization and the functioning of a child contact centre. This is one of the services most complex and heterogeneous and that's why even today again it doesn't exist one guideline that is the same in each contest. Finally, the paper wants to describe this service and, mostly, it wants make some proposals about the best practises or operations that could improve it.

**Keywords:** promotion, protection, childhood, adolescence

## Introduction

### The child's evolution in the story of pedagogy until the UN Convention

In the story of pedagogy, the child has changed different visions from the society and the government. Particularly, in the Middle Ages parents considered their sons as manpower in the family workers as agriculture, farm and home care. In 1989, with the “UN Convention of childhood and adolescence's rights”, children have got their rights until today, although not in the same way all over the world. The Convention defines the child as “*every human being under the age of eighteen, unless he has reached maturity earlier by virtue of the applicable legislation*”.<sup>1</sup> However, it's necessary to take

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<sup>1</sup> UN Convention of childhood and adolescence's rights, 1989, in <https://www.standup4humanrights.org/en/>

a look at the past in order to observe and analyse all the phases that have characterized this path of growth and consolidation of the figure of the child. In fact, in the Middle Age and in the Modern Age, the religious institution possessed great power of influence in the society so as to be able to spread its negative view of the child, that is, it supported the belief that every new-born was corrupted by original sin and for this, if it had not been “corrected” by the adult with violence, it would have spoiled. The maternal figure took care of the physiological care of the child without devoting himself to the relational and playful aspects: the game was considered a waste of time rather than an added value to the parent-child relationship and to a moment of wealth and entertainment for the child himself. As soon child reached such maturity that he could already start working, he followed his father in the chores so that he could contribute to the family well-being. Between the 1700’s and the 1900’s, the attention of the children’s theme grew more, even if very slowly. Mainly, what changed was the mentality of society: the female figure was valued, infant mortality decreased, marriage was seen as a free choose and not an imposition, also thanks to the introduction of separation and divorce. Romanticism and Enlightenment greatly influenced a new vision of the couple and the family. The age of Enlightenment was relevant in the development of pedagogy since at that time, various scholars and doctors began to take an interest in the subject. Among these, we remember Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his work “L’Emilio” (1722) and later, also Jerome Bruner with his work “The role of tutoring in problem solving” (1976) published in the “*Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*”.<sup>1</sup> Only from the 1900’s the child got a deserving consideration and, for this reason, the name of “century of children” is attributed to this period, a concept coined by Ellen Key with the publication of her volume<sup>2</sup> (1906’s), in which the author addresses parents as those points of reference who should get as possible to children, so as to be able to know them and support in their growth.

A lot of authors studied the child as a human with rights and deserving to receive love and cares by his family and society. Between these, there was Philippe Ariès that with his work “Father and children in medieval and modern Europe” (1981), he investigated the concept of “enfant” and that of “sentiment” as the feeling that developed towards childhood from the Middle Age to the Modern Age.

From the United States, the representative of these psychoanalytic studies was Lloyd deMause who, with his work “*The history of childhood*” (1983), provided his contribution to argument: “*The story of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further one goes in history, the lower the degree of attention for the child appears, and more frequently it falls to him the fate of being*

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<sup>1</sup> Bruner J., The role of tutoring in problem solving in *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, Vol. 17, 1976, pp. 89-100

<sup>2</sup> Key E., Ellen Key and the Birth of a new Children’s Culture in *Journal of theories and research in education*, Vol. 11 No.2, 2016, pp. 1-26

*murdered, abandoned, beaten, terrified and subjected to sexual violence. Our task here is to see how much of this childhood story can be recovered from surviving testimonies”.*

There was the need to differentiate the childhood from the adult age, as two different life stages, characterized by different needs and abilities but both deserving to receive the due attention. In this way, between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, we begin to consider the child as a “real child” and no longer as a “representation of the adult”. It is very difficult to outline a coherent and precise childhood story, as the continuous changes in society and in the vision of things have hindered the recovery of an acceptable historiography. In the middle of the 1900’s, the image of childhood, underwent a change: the sentiment of childhood did not improve but changed compared to before. The child came more, integrated into the family life and considered as a being not separated from the adult but remained not free to be himself but continuously influenced by the adult’s requests.

Turning our gaze to current events, it is clear that the conception of childhood and child still exists characterized by strong ambiguity despite the various successes achieved in this regard. Even today, in fact, there are episodes and behaviours that are detached from the desire to consider the child as a being deserving and worthy of his own serenity. Every day, from multiple sources, reports of abuse, mistreatment, abandonment and paedophilia are very frequent. Moreover, outside Europe, cases of refugee and militarized children still occur today. Even if globalization has tried to homogenize the whole world and make it as similar as possible, on the subject of childhood, still today there are still strong differences and discriminations. Several years passed before the child received a deserving consideration, perhaps the cause would be attributed to the absence of a juvenile right recognized and inviolable? At the international level, the first steps taken towards the child were taken in England, where the Child’s Charter was born in 1888, aimed at protecting and controlling the working conditions of minors in English fireplaces. To denounce this condition was the writer Charles Dickens who, in his work “*Oliver Twist*”<sup>1</sup> (1837), described the exploitation and poverty that those children were forced to carry out.

Then, was enacted the “Declaration of Geneva” (1924), adopted by the League of Nations, which was developed through five articles:

*“The child must be given the means necessary for its normal development, both material and spiritual;*

*The child who is hungry must be fed, the sick child must be treated, the child whose development is backward must be helped, the minor offender must be recovered, the orphan and the foundling must be housed and rescued;*

*The child must be the first to receive assistance in times of misery;*

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<sup>1</sup> Dickens C., *The adventures of Oliver Twist*, Ticknor and Fields, London, 1868

*The child must be put all in conditions of earning a living and must be protected against forms of exploitation;*

*The child must be raised in the awareness that his talents must be put at the service of other men”<sup>1</sup>.*

After lots of conventions and declarations about children’s rights, in 1989, in New York, was approved the “New York’s Convention” by the United Nations Assembly in September 20<sup>th</sup>. The United Nations (Un) included all the other peace-loving states which accept the obligation of this Statue and which, in the opinion of the Organization, are capable of fulfilling it. The rights of the child enshrined in the New York Convention concern their well-being, its autonomy, the right to education, the right to rest and recreation, the right to cultural and artistic participation, the freedom to associate, gather, express oneself, seek, receive, disseminating information, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the freedom to be heard and to express their opinion on any issue that interests them. Family relationship of the children are recognized as optimal where they are built on adequate care. The Un Convention represents the goal of consideration for many years deserving of the child in society and, for this reason, the 20<sup>th</sup> of September of each year is celebrated the “International day for the rights of children and adolescences.

Protecting and safeguarding a minor means staying away from the shadow of silence and making visible all those situations in that minor could experience in a context of discomfort and prejudice. Reporting to the judicial authority, social service, school or trusted people is the first step towards obtaining serenity and well-being in the child. The right of the child to live in his or her origin’s family is one of the most debated topics in recent years, a theme characterized by lights and shadows, family rights and the rights of the child that do not always appear on the same wave line. The child must be free to live in his own family context but to do it, he must receive the right care and attention.

### **The evolution of social services**

Before analysing the characteristics of child protection services, it is necessary to take a step back and look at changing societies from the point of view of assistance. In order for a welfare society to develop, it is essential that there is a society the is open and willing to accept welfare and help in all its forms. The term “charity” comes from the Latin “caritas” which means “dear to whom one attaches great interest, to whom one feels bound” and differs from love and friendship since charity is acted upon towards people who do not, they are part of their family. The first welfare state interventions emerged through welfare, charitable, religious and philanthropic forms: the welfare state is the type of state that provides services and regulations aimed at protecting the rights of citizens, including health care, public education, family subsidies, defence of the weak and the environment, etc... The religious aspect

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Nations, Declaration of Geneva, 1942, in <https://www.savethechildren.org/>

has significantly impacted the issue of assistance as priests were recognized as protectors of the weakest, orphans and the sick.

The arrival of capitalism then meant that welfare was halfway between the religious and the secular as several owners of land and industries began to hire needy people as a workforce. A first attempt in favour of the welfare state was made by England which, starting from the fifteenth century, began to introduce forms of assistance to the poor on a welfare level thanks to the "Poor Law" promulgated in 1601. The turning point came when these activities ceased to be simply voluntary commitments and became real professions. The rationalization of welfare works towards the poor has consequently promoted the rationalization of social work. The "Charity Organization Societies" (COS), developed in London in 1869 and founded by Mary Richmond<sup>1</sup>, had the purpose of bringing together all the associations that offered help to the needy; to follow, in 1877, they also developed in New York. Alongside the Cos, another concrete intervention was implemented by the "settlement" phenomenon, that is, housing settlements of rich people in poor areas of the city. In this way, the proximity between people of different social classes would have caused rejection reactions in the face of inequalities and consequent reduction of social distance. The first "settlement" born in the United States was the "Hull House", founded in 1899 by Jane Addams in Chicago after being spread to Great Britain; its importance in history is evident from the fact that the subject "Settlement's work" was present within the first school of social work, founded in Amsterdam in 1899. The "working houses", on the other hand, represented a more concrete aid intervention towards fragile subjects: from the "poor law", in Great Britain, real houses were established to host people in difficulty, helped in education to work and in improving one's status. The first schools of social work were founded following a conference held in Paris in 1928, among which we find the "International Association of Schools of Social Work", the "International Council on Social Welfare" the "International Federation of Social Workers "; in 1983 the "IFSW" inaugurated the international day of "social work" which is celebrated every third Tuesday in March. In order to try to spread the foundations of social work all over the world, in 2000 the main international schools organized a convention that will be held every two years in a different country, creating a "global social Agenda" on which to place all future events.

The importance towards the child, as we well know, has gone through centuries before obtaining the relevance it deserves. Thanks to the contribution of studies in the humanities already present and the construction of the welfare state, new interventions were experimented in favour of children such as foster care, educational communities and home and territorial interventions. Interventions in favour of children can be of two types: those in the spontaneous context and those in the judicial context. In the first case, the request for help comes from the family itself,

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond M., Social Work Pioneer, Administrator, Researcher and Author in Social Welfare History Project, in <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/social-work/richmond-mary/>

from parents in particular who are aware of being in a precarious or prejudicial situation and accept the help of operators to improve themselves. In the second case, however, the social workers receive an assignment from the Judicial Authority and, without family consent, activate interventions with the aim of protecting a minor in a situation of hardship. The interventions can be activated on minors living in their family such as home and territorial educational interventions and the activation of monitored and protected meetings with the non-custodial parent. In the case of meetings monitored by operators, one of the main objectives, in addition to the protection and protection of the child, is to promote change by supporting the recovery of the parent-child relationship. These meetings are held within a "neutral space", that is called "the child contact centre" that it is neither the home of the minor nor that of the parent.

### **The story of the child contact centre**

The child contact centre has its roots not so long ago and, for this reason, unlike other services already active for some time, it has some peculiarities probably not yet well defined and clear. It is as if there was a surface of doubts and non-words that make this service still not too concrete and clear. Hence the intention to analyse its history, in order to bring out its deepest peculiarities as well as its purposes. From an international point of view, there is talk of a "protected encounter" in France, through the implementation of the "espaces-rencontre" or meeting spaces, born around the end of the 1900s. The different models depended on the four great strands that revolved around the concept of the child contact centre. The first is the legal one, which focused on the aspect of marital separation, parental custody and the right of access of the minor. The second is the psychological one which was concerned with the effects of parental separation on the minor and on the emotional ties with the custodial parent and with the non-custodial parent. The third is the social one which investigates how to support minors and families in which there has been a parental separation and how to deal with the issue with them, promoting the well-being of the nucleus. The last aspect is the protectional one conceived as the protection of the minor from a non-custodial parent who has acted prejudice against him and, consequently, in approaching him, must be protected. In this way, subsequently, it was decided to unify all these intentions in a single model that was the result of the sum of the four strands listed above. This is how in France the child contact centre became a space in which the purpose was to guarantee the continuity of ties, in which the operators involved provided the service for both the minor and the parents and guaranteed protection for the child. The new "single" model provided for the presence of social workers, social workers, psychologists, family mediators and lawyers; a way to make the four fundamental aspects that revolve around the child contact centre exist at the same time.

Simultaneously with the French situation, Child Contact Centres developed in Great Britain by the National Association of Child Contact Centre (NACCC) founded in Nottingham in 1991. *"To keep children in contact with parents after separation in a safe environment because*

*parenting should not end when relationships end”*<sup>1</sup> is the mission of the NACCC association. Furthermore, the focus of the association is neutrality that must be respected both in the environment or in the context offered but above all among the operators who, for this reason, are different from those of the other services involved in the network. It is precisely in Nottingham that, in 1985, the first "Child Contact Centre" was born thanks to the intuition of a magistrate, Mary Lower, who, observing a son who met his father weekly at the McDonald's in the city, managed to create an informal space that it could be entirely used for those family gatherings. Initially, within these centres there were religious volunteers who took care of mediating in the relationship and during parent-child meetings. Subsequently and thanks to the spread of these centres in many other countries, the NACCC association began to invest in its human resources, offering training courses for the operators of this service. The "Child Contact Centres" have spread to other countries such as Ireland and Wales, reaching a total of 350 parent-child meeting centres. In Great Britain, there are two types of "CCC": the first deals with promoting and supporting family gatherings; the second, on the other hand, focuses more attention on the protection and protection of the minor who is in a relationship with a prejudicial parent. The English experience, unlike the French one, placed greater importance on the aspect of protecting the minor rather than maintaining the family bond. In this way, the perspective changed and the focus shifted from the adult and his relationship with the child to the minor himself. For this reason, a new way of viewing the meetings was being developed which drastically changed the view by ensuring that in parallel with the "Child Contact Centres" there were also the "Supervised Child Contact". The peculiarity of these supervised meetings referred to the fact that the meeting place was held inside the family home so that parents felt more comfortable in getting involved in front of specialized operators. With a view to the protection and protection of the child, meeting places that approached the English ones were spreading in America and Canada. In 1992, in the face of a strong spread of abuse and maltreatment of minors, Anne Reiniger, founder of the "New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children" gathered specialists from all over the world at a conference in order to find a way to meet safe for all those children who had suffered injurious acts. Unlike the French and English experience, the American protected encounters had the sole purpose of protecting the minor from inadequate adults; for this reason, most of the children who were present in these meetings came from parents with conflictual separation or were victims of crimes committed by the parents themselves. With this vision, the "Supervised Visitation" was founded whose key concept was expressed in this ideology: *"the service provider can provide parents and guardians with information and help to ensure that children have safe, comfortable and satisfying visits. Following the rules and guidelines of the service is the first key to this. Foster parents / guardians should be positive and encourage children to enjoy their visit. After the visit, they should be willing*

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of Child Contact Centres in <https://naccc.org.uk/>

*to listen if the children want to talk about the visit, but they should never ask the child for information. The visiting party should be prepared to have fun within the limits set by the service provider. Children seek displays of love and acceptance; the other factors are not that important to them*"<sup>1</sup>. After analysing the various historical and geographical phases, we intend to focus on the peculiar characteristics of work within a child contact centre. To address the characteristics of a child contact centre service, it is necessary to identify the focus and main purpose of the same which, thanks to historical and experiential sources, we can trace back to the protection and protection of the minor during meetings and the promotion of the parent-child relationship. In some cases, the neutral place team is created within a social service, selecting operators who take care of that particular service. In other cases, and especially more recently, it happens that the public body entrusts this service to an external cooperative or association. In both cases, however, the continuity and monitoring by all the operators involved in the situation represent the driving force behind the intervention in support of that family unit. A first feature to consider is the user. Social changes occur repeatedly and so rapidly as to create confusion and bewilderment in personal services; this happens because social change is brought about by people who, in the same way, change quickly and consequently their problems and needs also change. The users who come to a child contact centre are varied and heterogeneous: you may encounter prejudicial parents who have abused that child, parents with many parental skills but very fragile, who abuse alcohol or drugs. You could also meet people with psychiatric diagnoses who struggle to manage their children or even with parents who, following separation, cannot find a meeting point to be able to peacefully continue their life and that of their child. What unites the people who find themselves within a service like this is almost always the sending by the judicial authority: it is the Judge who, by issuing a provision, orders the start of the meetings in a child contact centre. Another common component is the amount of trouble existing in the lives of such people which on the one hand affects adults but, almost certainly, goes to rage in the daily lives of the little ones. The reaction to being sent to this service is always linked to resistance and rejection: adults tend to belittle the situations their children are forced to live in or do not realize the importance of being able to recover and improve the parent-son relationship. The other side of the coin is the reaction of the children to this measure: some of them may experience that meeting positively but many others do not, for fear of that parent or for the concern of hurting the foster parent. A second feature concerns the operators involved and, as has already been reported, the child contact centre is a recent service with respect to the evolution on the subject in history, in the same way the role of the operator involved within the aforementioned service is also a novelty. The heterogeneity of the functioning of the child contact centre also affects the organization of the work of educators. However, there are "best practices" or good practices, key points or guidelines useful for carrying out the task of an operator within a neutral space. We

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<sup>1</sup> Supervised Visitation in Supervised Visitation Network in <https://www.svnworldwide.org/>



speak of an "educational relationship" when it comes to sharing of daily life, from the recovery and educational enhancement of the meanings of routine activities, from the use of unexpected events and uncertainties, from the interpretation and processing of events. An educational relationship exists only if there is therefore an interaction between two people that must be supported by a well-structured structure aimed at pursuing objectives. In this case, we speak of "educational planning" when the educator, together with the beneficiary of the intervention, stipulate a project with one or more objectives to be pursued to improve the current situation. To draw up an educational project, it is important to recognize what are the needs of the beneficiary and what are the resources available to offer in order to work together on the pursuit of the objectives. The child contact centre's operator usually works both as a team and individually. Teamwork is useful for discussions between professionals in view of the development of the project to be implemented, in parallel with the networking that unites the various operators involved in the case. The educator then works individually on direct work, or on the location of the parent-child meeting. In parallel to the educational project, there is the consent that the parent undertakes to sign as a sort of "pact" or "contract", regardless of whether the activation of the child contact centre has been ordered by the court or is desired by a free choice. The four main functions that an educator should perform within a child contact centre are:

- Promoting change
- Control and observation
- Relationship support
- Function of building a daily life

The role of the educator in the child contact centre service can therefore be defined as flexible, heterogeneous and variable. In addition to the external functions expressed above, there is the internal dimension, that is, that of all the personal and transversal skills that an operator could possess. Among these, listening, attention, availability, welcome, openness to others, the ability to adapt and above all empathy can be emphasized. To ensure that the aspects related to one's professionalism remain and improve over time, it is essential to offer the educator a training course and a supervision course. Furthermore, the educator must possess the skills for a profitable and structured network work that can become a strength in achieving the objectives. The child contact centre's operator collaborates, in taking charge, with the other professionals involved such as the Social Services, the Courts, specialist services such as the drug addiction service, the health service, psychology and neuropsychiatry services, etc... Despite the presence of various social workers who may have a certain situation in a load, the social actor with whom the educator must interact more frequently and with whom he must collaborate for the success of the project is the family. For this reason, the educator should be trained on issues related to family mediation, the evolution of family models in history, clinical work with pathological families and with immigrant families.

In addition to the "best practices" detailed above, there are several techniques, some still on an experimental basis, to be implemented within a CCC to promote and facilitate the parent-child relationship. These techniques do not represent guidelines to be followed as their use is determined by the type of organization of that service and by the choice to activate or not activities to support the relationship. Among these techniques we find the "*Photovoice*"<sup>1</sup>, that is a method of investigation that, through photography, directly involves the subjects, inducing them to reflect on specific issues and on the ways to produce a change. The photographed image constitutes the synthesis of concepts that could be in some cases, or for some groups of subjects, difficult to express through traditional communication channels, such as speech and writing. Furthermore, the image is able to synthesize stories, emotions and ideas and uses an easily understandable language. The photovoice was used to carry out needs assessment, programs with participatory methodologies and to communicate requests and proposals to decision makers. In this sense, the technique lends itself to being used as an educational method, and therefore for empowerment, as it is able to activate the subjects in the expression and in the search for solutions to their problems (Wang 1998).

## Conclusion

This paper wants to do a time travel and to investigate the evolution of the child's vision. Unfortunately, today, despite the different results obtained, child doesn't still have the value he deserves. The society still thinks that the child doesn't deserve to be value and listened; so, the social workers should mostly work with families to convey the importance of considering him as a precious being. Also in the child contact centre, the main function of the educator is that to promote change. Each change can involve suffering and pain but it is from that pain that something magnificent can happen!

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