

Characteristics of children and families receiving preventive and protective services

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INTRODUCTION

There is controversy about the complexity of needs and problems of children and families receiving services from prevention-oriented institutions and those receiving services from protection-oriented institutions. The results of research comparing the differential profiles of children and their families from high-risk samples and of those who are the subject of substantiated or unsubstantiated reports, show similarities but also differences. The results obtained by Casanueva et al. (2008), Moreau et al. (2001) and Hussey et al. (2005) show that the development of children in high-risk groups does not differ from that of children who are followed by protective services. It seems that what especially distinguish high-risk samples from those in protective services are the degree and accumulation of personal and social needs, including poverty, under-education, number of children, parental mental health and substance abuse, domestic violence, history of parental childhood maltreatment, and lack of cooperation with government services (Casanueva et al., 2008; Kotch & Thomas, 1986; Moreau et al., 2001; Trocmé & al., 2009 & Turcotte & al., 2005). Furthermore, the presence of certain protective factors, in particular, access to extended family support and to regular child care, reduces the likelihood of children being subject to substantiated reports (Kotch et al., 1997).

The results presented are derived from secondary analysis of data collected as part of an evaluative research study of an innovative social project in the area of intervention among children with complex needs and their families.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) Present the data collected from children and their families recruited in the research project.
- 2) Identify what distinguishes children followed by protective services from those receiving preventive services.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

N = 185 children recruited
 - reside in Québec, Canada
 - aged from 0 to 9 years
 - family situation of concern
 - living with birth family

Preventive services
 8 Health and Social Services Centres (*Centre de santé et de services sociaux [CSSS]*)
N = 81 children

Protective services
 2 Youth Centres (*Centre jeunesse [CJ]*)
N = 104 children

Descriptive analyses

Student t-test and Khi square

Data collection at residence of child

Participant	Measurement	Dimension	Instrument
Child	Tests in the form of games	Cognitive/language, motor, and emotional development	Development Assessment Tool (Grille d'évaluation du développement [GED]) Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)
Family environment of the child	Observation	Quality of the family environment	HOME
Parent	Home-made questionnaire	Socio-demographic characteristics; services received in the last year	Informations about the family
	Standardized questionnaires	Emotional and behavioural problems of the child	Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
		Adaptation of parental figures to their role; fulfilment of parental responsibilities toward the child	Parenting Stress Index (PSI), Family Support Inventory (FSI)
		Victimization of the child	Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI)

LIMITS OF THE STUDY

Some vital information has not yet been compiled and which could differentiate the two groups, in particular, issues related to the parent as an adult, including mental health, substance abuse, violence and marital conflict, and history of maltreatment. Data on parents will be collected from other sources, including administrative data from the institutions in which the participants were recruited and from the child needs analysis tool completed by the practitioners working with the children and families who made up the study sample.

RESULTS / DISCUSSION

There are almost as many similarities as differences between parents of both groups

Similarities

- ★ Compared to the general population, children from both groups present far more serious developmental delays requiring an immediate referral to specialized services.
- ★ The results of children five years old and younger followed by preventive services do not differ from those of children followed by protective services.
- ★ The level of social risk is as significant for families receiving preventive services as it is for those receiving protective services.
- ★ The families of both groups receive many government and community services. They also receive more services from the organizations in which they were recruited.
- ★ Compared to the general population, parents of both groups express more distress in their parental role and have a general feeling of lack of support from their environment (formal and informal networks).

Differences

- ★ Three times more children older than five years who are receiving preventive services have delayed cognitive development compared to those receiving protective services.
 - ★ Families followed by protective services are more often blended families and are more often excluded from the workplace.
 - ★ Families who receive protective services have twice as much access to the services of preventive institutions than vice versa.
 - ★ Families in protective services more often receive assistance from three or more organizations and are more likely to rely on government services.
 - ★ Children in preventive services attend more subsidized child care facilities and receive more specialized services in schools.
 - ★ Parents in preventive services express significantly more difficulties in their relationships with their children, whom they perceive as being more difficult.
- ☞ Casanueva et al. (2008) also found that compared to children subject to substantiated reports, at-risk children had more significant developmental delays at the beginning of the study. However, the children in their study were much younger (0-36 months).
 - ☞ A greater occurrence of blended families among children followed by youth centres was also observed by Turcotte et al. (2005). Increased poverty among these families was also noted in studies by Casanueva et al. (2008), Moreau et al. (2001), Turcotte et al. (2005) and Wulczyn (2009).
 - ☞ Preventive services also provide universal services and meet some of the needs of families followed by protective services, while protective services are more specialized and are provided in the context of an exception law.
 - ☞ The needs and difficulties of families in protective services are significant. Yet these families feel that they receive less support from the formal network than do families in preventive services. This apparent contradiction may be attributed to the protective context and to the obligations imposed by the interventions (feelings of being threatened or judged, climate of non-cooperation).
 - ☞ Presence of better protocols of access between preventive services and the community; greater reluctance to integrate families who are followed by protective services; reluctance of these families to share their role as caretakers.
 - ☞ Parents in protective services may be more reluctant to express their parental distress since they must obligatorily improve their parenting skills so their government case file can be closed. Interventions by protective institutions whose focus and expertise lie in improving parenting skills may yield positive results.



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