

# The Role of the Relationship between Parents and Educators for Child Behaviour and Wellbeing

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Literature shows that family/school partnership leads to a better school experience (Marcon, 1999; Arnold et al., 2008; El Nokali, 2010; Powell et al., 2010). Building good relations is important especially during infancy. However, few studies examine the role of family-school partnership in early years. This study aims to investigate the quality of parent-teacher relation and its link with child's behaviour and wellbeing. The research involved 193 families of children (12-42 months), attending 11 day-care centres, and 51 educators. Parents completed a questionnaire assessing their children's temperament and psychological wellbeing, their own attitudes toward the day-care services, and the quality of parents/educators relationships. Educators filled in a questionnaire evaluating job satisfaction, children's behaviour and quality of parent-educator relation. The frequency of parent-educator contacts, the parents' perceived support, the educational value attributed to the day-care experience and the quality of the day-care entry are positively associated with the quality of parents-educators relationships. The parent-teacher involvement is positively associated with the child's wellbeing, social orientation, emotionality and learning and with her day-care adjustment. The child's behaviour improves along the school year, while no changes were found in the parents-educators partnership. Implications for future research and intervention in home-school relationship are discussed.

*Keywords:* Parent-teacher relationship, child-care, child's adjustment.

## Introduction

Parental involvement in children's schooling has been attracting increasing attention in developmental psychology. The parent-teacher partnership has been identified as having an important role in children's development. Child development can be best conceived within a set of inter-related systems that simultaneously exert their influence on children; thus, the child's development does not depend exclusively on individual factors, but also on the systems of interaction within the child's life environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to an ecological perspective about human development, the meso-system created by the links between the child's most proximal socializing contexts - home and school - can facilitate the child's development by enhancing continuity between his/her life contexts and providing a coherent educational environment.

This theory predicts that the parent-teacher relationship should impact on the child's experience in both the school and the home environment (Shpancer, 1997). A number of studies have confirmed this prediction: parental involvement in children's schooling appears to be associated with a range of positive outcomes, including fewer behavioural problems and better social conduct (El Nokali et al., 2010; Mashburn et al., 2011; Powell et al., 2010), lower dropout rates (McNeal, 1999) and higher student achievement (Arnold et al., 2008; Marcon, 1999; Powell et al., 2010). Literature generally shows that parent-teacher contact and parents' participation in school activities improve social and academic outcomes. Most of these studies have been focused on school-aged children; however, the relationship between school and family emerges as a relevant theme since early childhood, in particular when the child attends a child-care centre (Shpancer, 1997). In fact, recent studies point strongly to the importance of the earliest years of a child's life as a critical period for developing the basis for further

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learning. A study by Marcon (1999) demonstrated that the children's preschool experiences can be the basis of their future academic success. The results of Arnold et al. (2008) support the hypothesis that parents' preschool involvement is related to children's pre-literacy development. The study by Pirchio et al. (2011) showed that a good relationship between parents and day-care educators is associated with the children's day-care adjustment and psychological wellbeing. However, further research is needed to investigate this meso-system and its role in the child's development in infancy.

In Italy, Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEC) widely recognize that the relationships with the parents is a central issue to guarantee the quality of children's experience (Musatti, 2004) and that educating a child means sharing the project with her/his family (Guerra et al., 2010). The ECEC matured over a period of time, a change in their pedagogical practices, suggesting that welcoming a child concerns his family too and resulting in a paradigm of close interdependence of parents, children and educators (Fustini, 2007). However, the role of the relationship between parents and educators for child's development and wellbeing is relatively un-explored in infancy and early childhood. Therefore, the current study contributes to the existing literature by examining the variables related to the parents-educators relationships, explores the parents' and educators' perceptions of the quality of their relationships, and makes the assessment of the link between this relationship and children's adjustment and wellbeing.

## Method

### Participants

The research has been conducted in 11 child-care centres in Rome and in the provinces, whose coordinators agreed to participate in the study. Four of these centres were private, four were public and three were operating in co-operation with the municipality.

The study involved 193 families of 103 boys and 90 girls aged between 12 and 42 months (mean age at the beginning of the study of 25, 71 months) attending the day-care, and 51 educators. All the educators were women, their mean age was 36, 57 years ( $SD = 10, 23$ ). Most of them unmarried (41, 2%), with no children (47, 1%) and had a specific high school diploma

(70, 6%). Their level of professional experience ranged from less than 1 to 40 years ( $M = 11, 5$  years). They were generally quite satisfied with their job, except for remuneration ( $M = 2, 31$  for a maximum score of 4) and training opportunities ( $M = 1, 88$  for a maximum score of 4).

Most of the families involved were Italian, only 8 immigrant families participated in the study. Mothers were younger and more educated than fathers. Most of the families (47, 2%) had more than one child. 42% of families chose the child-care mainly for organisational reasons; both parents were responsible for looking after the child before and after the child-care day or when the child was ill indicating that they did not have a family support network.

### Procedure

Data was collected from parents and educators twice during the year: the first between November and January, and the second in May and June.

We contacted coordinators from each ECEC and obtained permission to ask for parents' and educators' participation. A letter was sent to inform the parents about the study and invite them to participate. In each ECEC we agreed on a system of codes in the questionnaires to guarantee the privacy of all participants and to couple the questionnaires completed by parent and educator on the same child, and those of the first data collection with those of the second.

### Measures

Parents completed a questionnaire composed by: The Child Behaviour Checklist 1<sub>1/2</sub>-5 (Frigerio et al., 2006): this scale is a widely-used method to identify problem behaviour in Italian children from 1<sub>1/2</sub> to 5 years. The checklist consists of 99 items that describe specific behavioural, emotional and social problems that characterize preschool children. Items are scored on 7 syndrome scales; items are also scored on 5 DSM-oriented scales. Some syndromes are further summed to provide scores for internalizing and externalizing problem scales. A total score from all questions is also derived. We used CBCL with some children ( $N = 15$ ) younger than 18 months, but without reference to diagnostic labels.

The QREG (*Questionario sulla Relazione Educatore-Genitore*)/Parent's Version: a questionnaire especially designed to gain information from parents about how they interact

with educators. It is a 26-item measure to assess the amount and types of contact that occur between parents and educators, parent's interest and comfort in talking with the educator, parental expectations to and satisfaction with children's child-care and educator, and parent's degree of involvement in the child's education. Responses are recorded on a likertscale.

The QGN, an adapted form of the '*Questionario per I Genitori del Nido*' (Scopelliti et al., 2009): a measure of parents' attitudes towards the day-care activities and service. This scale, based on the Italian child-care culture, comprises of four dimensions: the child and his family, the child's day life, the child's attendance at child-care centres, and the parent's evaluation of the child-care experience.

An Italian scale of temperament (QUIT, Axia, 2002): which measures the child's temperament from 1 month to 11 years of age, by assessing the child's behaviour on 6 dimensions: social orientation, resistance to change, motor activity, positive and negative emotionality. This scale provides 4 temperamental profiles: *Normal temperament*, showing a prevalence of positive emotions; *Emotional temperament*, showing a high rate of emotional reactivity; *Calm temperament*, showing a low emotional reactivity; *Difficult temperament*, showing a prevalence of negative emotions.

The educators completed a questionnaire composed by:

A demographic form that includes questions about their educational level, marital status, employment status, job experiences and job satisfaction.

QREG/ Educator's version: a scale, specifically designed for the current study, on the parent/teacher relationship. It is a 21-item gauge to assess the amount and type of contacts that occur between parents and educators, their relationships, and the educator's perception on the parental expectations and behaviour.

The QBN ('*Questionario del bambino al nido*'): a scale derived from a questionnaire used in prior research on the same issue (Pirchio et al., 2011) to assess the child's behaviour during a typical day at the child-care centre. For the purpose of the study, we modified the prior questionnaire by selecting 9 elements regarding the arrival at the child-care centre, play, exploration, socialization, attachment to the educator, routines of eating

and sleeping, and the reunion with parent at the end of the day.

At time 1 (T1: November-January), parents completed CBCL and QREG; at time 2 (T2: May-June), they completed QUIT, QGN and QREG. Day-care educators completed the demographic form only at time 1, while QREG and QBN were filled out at both times.

## Results

We explored the variables related to the quality of the parent/teacher relationships (table 1).

The quality of the relationship for parents is measured by adding the scores of 7 items of the QREG/Parent version (e.g. "Do you feel comfortable in talking with your child's educator?"), and for the educator by adding the scores of 5 items of the QREG/educator version (e.g. "Do you think this parent trusts you").

The frequency and the quality of parent-teacher contacts, as perceived by parents and educators, are positively correlated, in both administrations. The parents' perceived support was significantly associated with the parents' perceived quality of the partnership with educators; that is, the more the parents receive support from teachers, the more they judge positively their reciprocal relationships. As expected, the educational value attributed by the parent to the day-care experience is positively related with the parents' perceived quality of the parent/teacher relationship. Furthermore, we found a significant positive correlation between the parents' perceived quality of the day-care entry and the quality of their relation with educators.

No significant differences were found in the quality of the family - day-care relationship, depending on the parents' or the educators' socio-demographic characteristics. Moreover no significant differences emerged in either the frequency of contacts or the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, as assessed both by parents and educators depending on the child's age or gender. Conversely, we detected a difference in the quality of the relationship depending on the status of the child-care centre. As figures 1.1 and 1.2 show, in the ECEC of a private status we found a better parent-educators relationship as perceived by parents (in Time 1:  $F_{(2,165)} = 4,287$ ;  $p < .05$  and in Time 2:  $F_{(2, 162)} = 6,147$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

Table 1 - Pearson’s bivariate correlations among the quality of the relationship, the frequency of contact, the quality of entry and the educational value of child-care.

	Quality of the relationship- Parents T1		Quality of the relationship- Educators T1	
	T2	T1	T2	T1
Frequency of contact- Parents	.506**	.441**		
Frequency of contact- Educators			.257**	.308**
Parent’s Perceived Support	.689**	.768**		
Educational Value attributed by parents	.438**	.454**		
Quality of child-care entry- Parents				.595**

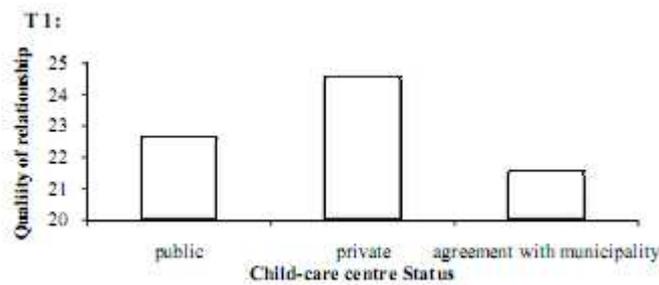


Figure 1.1: The quality of the relationship assessed by the parents in the three types of child-care centres, at the Time 1 of the study

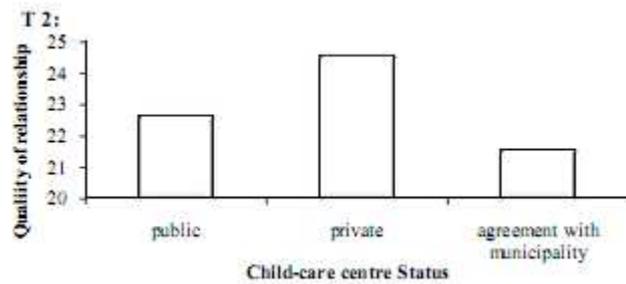


Figure 1.2: The quality of the relationships assessed by parents, based on the child-care status, at the Time 2 of the study

We have investigated the link between the quality of parent-educator partnerships and the child’s behaviour and adjustment. The parent-educator involvement assessed by parents is positively associated with the child’s day-care behaviour in both administrations (table 2) and it

is strongly related with the child’s adjustment, learning and psychological wellbeing; that is, the high quality of the relationship between parents and educators was related to low levels of the child’s problematic behaviours, in particular internalizing problems ( $R = -.205; p < .01$ ),

whereas the correlation between the quality of the caregivers' relationship and the child's externalizing problems approached statistical significance ( $R = -.150$ ;  $p = .052$ ). On the other hand, the quality of the relationship evaluated by the teacher is positively associated with the child's day-care adjustment. Regarding child's temperament, 81% of children showed an adaptive emotional profile indicating a prevalence of positive emotions. We found that the parents' perceived quality of parent-teacher partnerships is positively related to positive emotionality ( $R = .239$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and negatively associated to resistance to change ( $R = -.226$ ;  $p < .01$ ). No significant differences emerged in the frequency of contact or the quality of parent-teacher relationships, as perceived by educators and parents, depending on the child's temperamental profile. However, the one-way ANOVA revealed a difference that approaches statistical significance ( $F_{(1,161)} = 3,574$ ;  $p = .060$ ) in the quality of the parent-teacher relationship assessed by parents, depending on the child's emotional profile: the quality of the parent-teacher relationship is better when the child has an adaptive emotional profile.

We found that the continuity between the home and the day-care contexts, as assessed by the parents, is positively related with the child's day-care behaviour only at the first time of the data collection. The day-care - home continuity, assessed by the educators, is positively associated with the child's day-care conduct, at both time 1 and 2 of the study and with the child's adjustment. The child's behaviour is more strongly associated with the continuity perceived by the educators than by the parents. We found a low correlation between how parents and educators evaluate the continuity (at time 1:  $R = .177^*$ ,  $p < .05$ ; at time 2:  $R = .191$ ,  $p < .05$ ): parents tend to overestimate the continuity in respect to the teachers.

Moreover, results show that the quality of the child-care entry is positively associated with child's behaviour, learning and adjustment; in other words, the quality of the first entry is strongly associated with the quality of the child's following day-care experience in the child's behaviour throughout the school year, as assessed by educators ( $F_{(1,137)} = 4,251$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (figure 2); on the contrary, there were no

significant changes throughout the school year in the quality of parents-educators partnerships. As the table 3 shows, parents and teachers perceive the quality of their relationship in the same way, in both the phases of the research.

## Discussion

Since little is known about the quality of the relationship between parents and educators in the child-care centre, we have tried to expand our knowledge of the variables related to the quality of these relationships, and to better understand if the quality of the home/day-care relationship may be directly linked with children's developmental outcomes. This discussion summarises the current study's main findings.

### *Parents and educators factors*

Recent surveys carried out in Italy show that in the last 30 years there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of new births (Catarsi, 2006; Musatti, 2004). Contrary to expectations, most of the families involved in the present studies have more than one child. Consistent with many recent studies, the parents generally have limited family and social support (Gigli, 2010; Pirchio et al., 2011) and the families involved in this study chose the child-care centre mainly for organizational purposes. Parents and educators appear to be the only responsible figures for their children's education and development, as other figures, such as the grandparents, which in previous studies emerged as being a valid support in children's caring, are not available in the metropolitan area context explored, (Contini, 2007; Musatti, 1992; Musatti et al., 2005). Contrary to findings in previous research, in the current study we did not find any differences between the quality of parent-educator partnerships in relation to the parents' age and education; this can be due to the educational setting studied here, since parental involvement can become a problem for less educated parents in higher levels of the education system. The educators involved in the present study are mostly young women, unmarried, without children, with a high school diploma, and quite satisfied with their jobs, except for the remuneration and training opportunities, similar to the findings of a previous study carried out in some other child-care centres in the Rome area (Pirchio et al., 2011).

Table 2 - Pearson’s bivariate correlations among the features of home - day-care partnerships and the child’s behaviour

	T1		T2		
	Child’s day-care behaviour	Behaviour Problems	Child’s day-care behaviour	Adjustment	Learning
Quality of the relationship- Parent	.233**	-.203**	.291**	.514**	.419**
Quality of the relationship- Teacher	.389**	-.017	.264**	.138	.063
Continuity- Parents	.156*	-.074	.154	.114	.115
Continuity- Teacher	.308**	-.029	.377**	.201**	.148
Quality of day-care entry			.328**	.544**	.522**

\*\* : p<.01 \* : p<.05

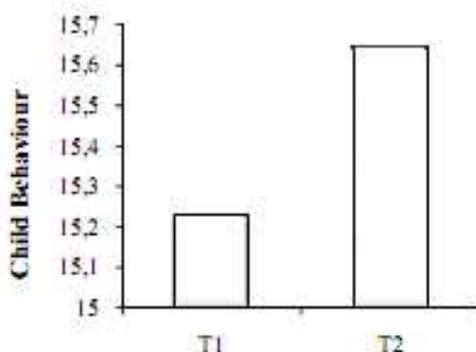


Figure 2: The child’s behaviour, perceived by the teacher, throughout the school year

Table 3 - Pearson’s bivariate correlations between the qualities of the relationships assessed by parents and by educators

	Quality of the relationship-Educators	
	T1	T2
Quality of the relationship- Parents	.308**	.259**

\*\* : p<.01

**The parents – educator’s relationship factors**

The quality of the parents - teacher relationship is measured in terms of mutual trust and respect, willingness and ease to communicate and cooperate. The frequency of home-school contacts is strongly associated to the quality of the relationship between parents and day-care educators perceived by the parents. Previous

studies that explored the frequency of parent-teacher contacts (Rizzo et al., 1999; Parched et al., 2011) found that the daily parent-teacher brief conversations (when the child arrives at or leaves the child-care centre) promote home-school partnerships. More frequent and positive parent-teacher contacts allow parents and educators to create a good relationship, founded on a true mutual knowledge. Furthermore,

family-school contacts provide an opportunity for parents and educators to better understand what occurs within both environments. By having more contact with parents, teachers learn more about the child's needs and habits; it will help the teacher to understand the child's special situation and daily life. A number of pedagogic researchers (Gabardine, 2003; Guerra et al., 2010) strongly point to the importance of planning regular contacts with families in the child-care centres, because building successful home-school partnerships require daily contacts. A recent study (Aubrey et al., 2011) shows that parents believe that their relationship with teachers will improve by increasing communication. Also, our results confirm the findings of studies showing that parents are more collaborative when the school involves them in their educational decisions and activities (Pianta et al., 1999): the frequency of contacts is strongly associated to the quality of the parent-educator relationship, as is also in teacher's perception. Evidence suggests that good parent-teacher relationships increase the wellbeing in the child's education and generate dialogue and mutual understanding among caregivers (Guerra et al., 2010). Building home/day-care partnerships produce mutual benefits and meet the needs of both parents and teachers. In line with the findings of a recent study (Kohl et al., 2000), we can assume that there is a bi-directional influence between frequency of home-school contacts and quality of home-school partnerships.

The parents' perceived support was strongly correlated with their perceived quality of the relationship with educators. This finding suggests how important the relationship is with the educators as a source of support where not many other sources are available to parents; in fact, in the last thirty years the structure of the family has changed considerably from the traditional model, and parents currently lack a traditional support network and therefore experience a feeling of isolation in the carrying out of parenting responsibilities (Catarsi, 2006; Fustini, 2007; Mantovani, 2006). The more the parents positively evaluate their reciprocal relationship, the more they perceive the support of educators. As families face many challenges, these require that day-care educators expand their role of caregivers of young children to include support to the children's families.

We also found that the more the parents attribute a greater value to the day-care experience, the more they positively assess the relationship with educators. Prior studies show that parents who perceive themselves as important agents in the education of their children and place a greater value on education, become more involved in their children's schooling (Jensen et al., 2007; Mendez et al., 2007). We can argue that parents are more involved and more interested in their children's day-care experiences if they attribute to child-care an educational value to the child's social and psychological development. Nowadays, parents allocate a greater value to their children's day-care experience, due to a new awareness of the educational needs of children. In fact, in the last years there has been a change in the perspective of the ECEC, towards the recognition of this institution as an educational environment where the child can learn and develop (Musatti, 2004).

The strong correlation we found between the quality of the child-care entry and the quality of the parent-teacher relationship might suggest the attribution of great importance to the entrance to child-care within the educational service, considered as a fundamental moment for creating good relationships with the families. The child-care entry is a complex event that makes important emotional demands not only on the child but also on the parent, and has consequences on the quality of parent-teacher relationships throughout the following years (Guerra et al., 2010). First meetings with parents and first personal contacts set the tone for the subsequent relationship (Bergeron et al., 2011). This is consistent with another result: we have found no difference in the parent-teacher relationship along the school year. Studies suggest that the trust is built over time and may be improved with positive communication; nevertheless, it seems that the development of reciprocal acquaintances over time is not necessarily accompanied by a growth in the perceived quality of the relationship.

Exploring the variables related to the parent-teacher relationship, we found better parent-teacher relations in private child-care centres; this might indicate that parents who pay for their children's care expect more than other parents, so the private day-care centres provide all the services to their users, based on this awareness.

### **The parents-educators relationships influences the children's outcome**

We found that the quality of the parent-teacher relationship assessed by parents is strongly associated with the positive outcome of their children. Also, the educators' perception of a positive relationship with parents is strongly associated with their ratings on the children's classroom behaviour. Many studies have investigated this topic. Our findings support the hypothesis that the parents-teacher relationship is associated with children's wellbeing and adjustment. These results suggest that creating a relationship in which both parents and educators feel they are working together towards the same goals should benefit the child's developmental outcome. In fact, the high quality of family-school connections can facilitate children's development, by providing opportunities for a bi-directional exchange of information that helps align parents' and teachers' goals (Mashburn et al., 2011; Shpancer, 1997). There might be a two-way influence: the quality of the home-school partnership influences the child's behaviour and this in turn affects the relationship with the caregiver. In the current study, the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, assessed by parents, was associated with lower behavioural problems, higher positive emotionality, lower resistance to change and higher classroom adjustment. Previous studies (Pirchio et al., 2011; Shpancer, 1997) found evidence to support this positive association. However, it is impossible from our correlation data to ascertain the causal direction of this association. We cannot determine if the good relationship between caregivers results in the child's better adjustment and wellbeing, or if the child's positive adjustment make it easier for parents and educators to interact in a positive way to create a good relationship.

Finally, our findings show the importance of the parent-educator partnership in giving continuity to care. There is a greater association between educators' perceived continuity, rather than parents' perceived continuity, and the child's classroom behaviour, maybe because the teacher is the main responsible for the child's day-care adjustment and its assessment. Moreover, a greater association emerged between home - day-care continuity and the child's behaviour in the first phase of the study rather than in the second. This is due probably because the continuity is more relevant to the child's

adjustment at the early stage of the child's day-care experience, when the day-care setting represents a new and unfamiliar environment and the child's needs are more in becoming acquainted to the educational setting, while the continuity becomes gradually less as the child adapts to his/her new environment.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study extends the research to focus on the parent-teacher relationships in older children. However, the present findings must be considered preliminary and interpreted with caution due to the following limitations. Firstly, the questionnaire used to assess the parent-educator relationships was specifically drawn up for this research, and its validity and reliability should be specifically measured. Furthermore, this study is based on self-reporting methods: various biases may have affected parents' and the teachers' answers, including social desirability. Moreover, the children's behaviour and developmental outcome have been measured exclusively on the basis of the parents' and the teachers' perceptions: teachers may have rated the day-care behaviour of the children, with higher involved parents, than those of children with less involved parents; on the other hand, parents might have wanted to give a picture of their children as being more adjusted than in reality.

Another limitation of this study relates to the self-selection of participants: the parent who completed the questionnaire might be more motivated and involved than the parents who chose not to participate. Specific strategies to get data from non-involved parents should be found in future studies.

The correlational design of the study impedes any assumption to causal relations among the measured variables. Finally, the data collected was restricted to Rome and its provinces and this constitutes a potential limitation to the generalization of the findings.

An important area of future research should comprise the use of multiple measures of both family-school relationships and the children's outcome including a direct assessment of the children's behaviour and the parent-educator relationship.

Importantly enough, given the social and ethnical composition of the school context, future research should extend these findings by

investigating the quality of the parent/educator relationship in different geographical areas, taking into consideration cases of children with special needs or from immigrant families. Different cultures may have different views regarding parent-teacher relationships, parenting and schooling, thus the cultural diversity between parents and educators should be a relevant issue to consider. As in previous studies, different forms of parent involvement were identified, future research should explore which of these forms is more beneficial for the children's positive outcome and which strategies, planned by ECEC to engage and communicate with the families, are the most beneficial to establish good relationships. As we have found a better parent-teacher relationship in private child-care centres, further studies should explain why and how the private child-care centre fosters better parent-teacher relations.

### **Implications for practice**

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the present study gives a valuable contribution to the area of ECEC research. Our findings have some relevant implications for the child-care education and the parent-educator relationship. We have found that the frequency of family-school contacts is strongly associated with the quality of parent-teacher relationships. Thus, the child-care centres should engage in a specific effort towards providing a variety of activities and frequent opportunities to fully engage parents at the beginning of their educational partnership. Of course this is not simple, especially with families who have more than one child, full time working parents, who have no other family support, as well as the living in big cities where travelling

from home-school-work is in itself a challenge. In this context a school or ECEC that offers a flexible timetable for parents to get involved and a "personalized" form of involvement, such as individual conversations, classroom meetings, parties and school events should be a real resource for families in the creation of a positive and supportive meso-system for their child's development. Of course, this would mean that educators should not to be discouraged by the lack of participation by parents, but work on this issue to understand the reasons for this behaviour and contribute to change it. Even the possibilities provided by technology and ICT could be used by educators to involve the parents in school activities and the sharing of information, by e-mail, newsletters, social media, and a ECEC blog or website.

The strong relation between parents' perceived support and quality of the parent-teacher relationship is an indication that a high quality parent-teacher relationship may be an important source of support for parents. Educators should and could support in the promotion of adequate parenting; tested good practices could be implemented as a standard educational tool (e.g. Musatti, Picchio, 2005) and new practices should be experimented.

Finally, results of this study might suggest the importance of the quality of parent-teacher relationships for children's early development. However, the good relationship between family and school should never be taken for granted and cannot be improvised. Building the home - day-care partnership is a process that demands time and commitment from both partners.

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