

**Moments of co-presence between a child in out-of-home care, the biological parent, and a professional based on ordinary activities: a productive (albeit hard to inhabit) apparatus for helping to maintain parent-child bonds**

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**1. Background. The importance of parent-child bonds in a field in a state of tension**

From as early as the Second World War, a series of studies (Bowlby, 1969; Spitz, 1945) documented the consequences for child development and intra-familial bonds of separating mothers and babies. In their wake, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), signed in 1989 and ratified by Switzerland in 1997, stipulated that “States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests” (art. 9.3). Maintaining parent-child bonds as far as possible (within the imperative for protection) is now a recognized requirement in child protection (despite the identified risk of creating an ideology of family ties, Berger, 2004). In this article, we argue that, in order for practice to fulfill this requirement and its clinical stakes, it is critical to find ways (at certain times, at least) of not setting it against the other imperatives that weigh upon this evolving field. The issue is particularly salient in the case of compulsory assistance measures targeting families with a child in a long-term placement where there are documented and proven psychological disorders and numerous vulnerabilities, but without extreme violence or repeated acts of abuse or neglect.

**1.1. Towards increased participation from children and parents and towards new perspectives on parents, becoming a parent, and children in vulnerable situations**

In line with movements encouraging empowerment, a body of studies argues that public service users should be able to participate in decisions that concern them (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013). Participation is understood as more than simply intervening in a situation with pre-established rules with a view to achieving imposed common goods (Zask, 2011). The fundamental

argument in favor of such participation is that it is a way of implementing both the democratic ideal and the principle of citizen equality.

Within the field of child protection, participation is defined as making joint decisions about/contributions to care plans, expressing criticism, being present at overview meetings, discussing regulations, and so on. It also enables professionals to obtain information and have their decisions accepted (Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015). The importance of parents and children participating in the decisions that concern them is well-documented and supported by various arguments. These include the fact that it increases children's self-esteem (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Thomas, 2011) and heightens their sense of control (Bell, 2002; Munro, 2011), whilst also enabling better collaboration with parents and more effective decision making (McLeod, 2007). In this field, this broad change in political outlook has gone hand-in-hand with changes in the places ascribed to parents (to the process of becoming a parent) and to child vulnerability.

Following Benedek (1959) and Erickson (1959), studies taking analytical approaches to the stages of psychological development have emphasized that the process through which an individual becomes a parent is not spontaneous, identifying the transformations and types of support required. These studies also underline the evolution and undermining of normative points of reference (Neyrand, 2019) involved in this transformation, as well as the weakening of its sources of support (potential and relational vulnerabilities resulting from socio-economic conditions, Soulet, 2013). While practices supporting parenthood have long-standing and varied roots in each national context, they have developed along these lines in Europe, the United States, and Australia since the 1990s (Daly, 2007; Martin, 2012).

Perspectives are also changing on the consequences for children of situations of abuse, of parental inadequacy, and of difficult living conditions more generally. Work on resilience—considered as the capacity to develop effectively in the face of difficult living conditions, destabilizing events, and sometimes even severe trauma (Hagerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1997)—criticizes the predominance of a psychopathological model of vulnerability that refers to the after-effects of traumatic experiences, to risk factors, and to post-traumatic psychological disorganization. Approaches focused on resilience emphasize, instead, internal and external resources, as well as the fact that living conditions are not all determining. However, while individuals' interactions with their environment and the people around them do produce resilience, it is never total nor acquired once and for all. The child's suffering should not be considered as eliminated (Anaut, 2002).

In this field, these international trends (Nett & Spratt, 2012), which are present throughout the European Union (Corbillon, Hellincks, & Käch, 1994), have resulted in children being recognized as subjects of law and as actors in their own right when it comes to their care (art. 12 of the UNCRC). They have also produced changes in practices supporting parenthood through subsidiarity (Fablet, 2010; Messmer, Fellman, Wetzel, & Käch, 2019), attaching increasing importance to the parents' suffering and potential (Clément, 1993), as well as to their involvement in the daily lives of their out-of-home children (Join-Lambert, Euillet, & Boddy, 2014).

Currently, when fulfilling the requirement to maintain parent-child bonds as far as possible, it is also necessary to respect the imperative for greater participation from parents and children, as well for supporting parenthood, whilst pursuing the best interests of the child (BIC). Various methods and points of reference have been developed to try to meet these challenges.

## **1.2. Developing new methods and points of reference**

Moving from an approach identifying difficulties to one based more on identifying families' potential (Ausloos, 1995) and empowering them (Le Bossé, 2003) means shifting from a logic of expert assessment and assistance to one of building partnerships between professionals, parents, and families.

Mediation and participation methods have been developed within interview- or meeting-based apparatuses (Hardy, 2012; Lacharité, 2015; Seron & Wittezeale, 2009; Volckrick, 2007); these aim to achieve greater parental participation and involvement in placement decisions concerning their children (although research has shown that this participation remains limited in reality; see section 1.3.) More broadly, several distinctions serve as points of reference and show that these changes have had an impact on the notion of child protection and of the BIC.

A distinction has been drawn between child protection and child welfare models (Fargion, 2014; Waldflogel, 1998). The former are rooted in a medical and forensic culture, and emphasize risks that are assumed to be objectively observable. Procedures and instruments restrict professionals' discretionary power as much as possible and their subjectivity is viewed as an interference. The aim is to protect the child by preventing and reducing risk, whilst remaining focused on the child and viewing the need for protection as distinct from other needs (Munro & Calder, 2005). The interests of the child and those of the family are considered separate and sometimes even opposed, and a distinction is made between protecting the child and supporting the family.

The child welfare model does not separate protection from other needs. The aim is not only to protect children from certain risks but also to provide them with the material and social conditions to enjoy sufficient opportunities to develop their potential (Cradock, 2004). The goals and limitations of the intervention emerge from an interactive process between professionals and parents (in which help is also provided to parents). This model emphasizes the importance of professional autonomy and involvement, as well as the intersection between different perspectives. Within this framework, there is no conflict between protecting the child and supporting the family.

More recently, since 2010, Gilbert (2012) has identified a trend in certain countries towards a third path in which these two orientations converge in mixed systems where child development is framed as the ultimate goal.

These studies show that in order to meet these new requirements, it is necessary to broaden the notion of protection, drawing on families' resources and participation as well as on the discretionary power of professionals.

### **1.3 Mixed results: insufficient responses that have to contend with the specificity of compulsory assistance and of the families assisted**

Today, while there is a consensus about the need to combine participation, support for parenthood, and the maintenance of family bonds, all with a view to ensuring the BIC, it is also well-documented that, despite the changes underway, the overall picture of how these requirements are incorporated in practice remains mixed (Boucher, 2015; Cottier, 2017). A range of difficulties and issues subsist, delaying the implementation of changes in the field. A non-exhaustive summary includes: parental involvement that can run counter to the duty to protect the child (Berger, 2000); sometimes unrealistic expectations regarding parental capacities that fail to take into consideration their political and social circumstances (Neyrand, 2011; Tabin et al., 2006); the apparent self-evidence of parenthood as a notion and yet concomitant difficulty in defining it without naturalization (Bachmann, Gaberel, & Modak, 2016); the desire not to place inappropriate levels of responsibility on the child's shoulders (Sanders & Mace, 2006); the difficulty of assessing the truth of statements made by children (also caught up in conflicts of loyalty, Ducommun-Nagy, 2012); a tension between the child's immediate and longer-term interests (Sanders & Macy, 2006); the risk of assuming resilience where in fact there is simply a denial of trauma (Manciaux, 2001); the right to secrecy and to a form of self-protection that must also be respected (Lacasa, 2019); relationships between

children and professionals that are supposed to go beyond child-object/child-subject dualities (Lacasa, 2019) but that are not described; the lack of opportunities for participation, information that is only partial, and participation that is mainly of the order of response and does not alter decisions (Boutanquoi, Ansel, & Bournel Bosson, 2014).

Studies in this field also recognize that for some families the requirements of these methods and apparatuses are difficult to meet. Furthermore, the necessary changes in professional stance and the skills these demand remain to be specified and made operational (Lacharité, 2015; Le Bossé, 2003).

We also wish to stress that responses to the new requirements are also undermined by certain features inherent to compulsory assistance measures. The latter come into effect when a situation has been flagged up or the parents have requested help (more or less under duress), and when a threat to the child's development has been identified and the parents have been deemed unable to rectify it alone. State intervention can be experienced as disqualifying the parents and encouraging participation that is submissive, feigned, or adversarial. Moreover, when children have been placed out-of-home, parents are disconnected from their day-to-day lives. Given that the duty of protection and care is assigned as a priority to the parents, the aim of these measures is to succeed as far as possible in not supplanting them and to be subsidiary, proportional, and complementary (art. 301 of the Swiss Civil Code). Compulsory assistance measures are also affected by issues that can run counter to the child's welfare: conjugal violence, impairing of bonds, contesting of the apparatus, illness, etc.

In long-term placements, a key issue when dealing with the families is opening up/seizing new possibilities within scenarios that seem to have been written in advance (numerous documented vulnerabilities, psychopathological explanations for psychological suffering (Boutanquoi, Bournel Bosson, & Minary, 2016; Minary, 2011) and that can lead to a feeling of resignation among professionals, parents, and children (Stroumza & al, 2020) when the process is no longer directly aimed at ending the placement. These apparatuses can also prevent situations from evolving, or perhaps even make them worse when the responses provided by different actors converge to fuel a self-perpetuating cycle in the placement dynamic. All these factors place in jeopardy the relevance and the meaning of arranging contact between children and their biological parents, posing a threat to all attempts at organization and involvement.

#### **1.4 Moments of co-presence between a child, a parent, and a professional: a productive avenue for encouraging parent-child ties**

In the current state of the field, we suggest that there are three main difficulties when it comes to responding to the requirement to maintain parent-child bonds as far as possible: 1) combining this with greater participation from parents/children and with supporting parenthood; 2) maintaining the focus on the BIC, especially in terms of protection; 3) dealing with the specificities of compulsory assistance and the risks of self-perpetuating cycles/resignation in long-term placements.

Considering these issues within a work analysis approach (based on films), we conducted an initial study looking at an apparatus for “mediated visits” aiming to maintain or restore the bond between a child in long-term out-of-home placement (in a foster family or residential home) and the biological parent when, for various reasons (neglect, abuse), it has been decided that the parent should only see the child in the presence of a third party (Stroumza & al, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Most of the families involved have had a civil or penal measure imposed upon them. The apparatus focuses on moments of co-presence between the child, the parent, and a professional, based on ordinary activities (talking, eating, playing, going for a walk) for one or two hours per week or per fortnight, depending on the situation. There are also short interviews with the parent between visits, often by telephone, as well as a car journey with the child and contact with the foster family (or residential home) when the professional goes to pick up and take back the child. Our research revealed a new mode of action that differs from the one at work in interview- or meeting-based apparatuses and that is conducive to maintaining parent-child bonds in difficult family situations where those bonds remain fragile as a result of having been damaged, impaired, or loosened (sometimes the children and parents barely know one another).

We then conducted a second study examining these moments of co-presence in a placement apparatus where maintaining parent-child bonds was not the primary goal. This placement apparatus concerned children aged 6 to 15 and involved moments of co-presence that were not central but were being developed at the time.

While these moments of co-presence are a productive means for strengthening family bonds, we shall see that they are difficult to inhabit for professionals, but also for parents and children, especially in the placement apparatus.

The two apparatuses we studied are both located in a Swiss Canton (Vaud), where the constraints and imperatives of the field in general, as outlined above, can all be found and where placement is defined as the measure of last resort (COPMA 2017). More specifically, rehabilitating parental skills is one of the goals of socio-educational policy (SEP and LPromin). It is recognized that in order to strengthen parental presence within residential institutions, particularly by developing visitation rights, the parameters of these visits must be defined, as well as the terms of their organization and the educational stances at work. The Federal Justice Office also requires institutions for minors and young adults to define and give a prominent role to collaboration with families.

Both our studies aimed to model what happens in these moments of co-presence that resemble ordinary, natural moments and, more specifically, to describe how the professionals intervene. Our intention was to make visible and to reinforce a professional way of inhabiting these moments in order to encourage the child-parent bond as much as possible while also meeting the other demands of current practices in the field. The heuristic dimension is therefore central to what we wish to understand about these practices: something happens in these moments of co-presence and the aim is for the researchers—but also the professionals, parents, and children involved—to identify and grasp this.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research subject and theoretical framework**

In our research, we adopted a work analysis approach (Barbier & Durand, 2017), which examines real activities, considered as more than simply the result of applying theory or directives, and as being not only about reflection but also about “practical” intelligence (experiential know-how, Mezzena, 2018). In these studies, the relationship between action and situation is considered to be a constituent and not a secondary factor (Theureau, 2004), i.e. the situation is not viewed simply as a passive backdrop against which a previously thought-out action takes place according to a means-end logic on the premise that people control their bodies and act independently of their surroundings and peers (Joas, 2001). Following on from these studies, and enriching this approach by drawing conceptually on both pragmatism and phenomenology, we consider that responses (of a singular nature) are only produced with—and within—the situation through the attention paid to the things that do or do not emerge during

the action. The dynamic at work involves both exploring and transforming the environment so that the activity can meet all the prescribed requirements in the local conditions in which it takes place. Approaching the situation in the line developed by Dewey (1938) allows us to understand what serves to constitute the activity as more than simply an environment composed of a set of constituents in isolation with which the professional engages and instead as an experienced environment, a contextual whole referred to as a “situation” (Mezzena, 2018; Ogien, 1999; Quéré, 2006). Dewey’s “situation” is qualitative in that it possesses its own specific features that lend it its unique and unduplicable configuration. It is immediately sensed as a whole and it also has an orientation. For Dewey, a situation is open to an investigation/practical transformation that he labels “inquiry” because its constituents do not hold together. Producing a situation that is a unified, balanced whole is what controls the process of inquiry and directs its development over time. The professionals attempt through action to (re)construct and maintain a certain orientation within the situation, by adjusting to what happens (adapting and changing), with a view to obtaining certain effects linked to their brief. We refer to this orientation as “perspective” (Mezzena, 2018) and use the term “model” to refer to the description of this orientation, thanks to points of reference (de Jonckheere, 2010). To use Waldenfels’ terms (1994), this response to a situation within a situation is unavoidable. It partly escapes the professionals’ control, insofar as they do not know exactly what they are responding to when they respond, and “that to which [they respond] will always remain to some extent irreducibly alien [to them]” (Pittet, 2019, p. 10). In the very act of responding, professionals are at a remove from themselves. Their actions and feelings are caught up in a movement that is both passive and active, with a form of strangeness but also a depth: they are called upon in different ways and can orient the action in different directions, and their response is always delayed (insofar as the movement that prompted it has already passed and may have changed).

More specifically, four concepts will be useful for our analysis here: directives as constraints; a way for professionals to inhabit the apparatus; modes of existence; building a shared world.

**Directives as constraints.** Stengers’ (2010) notion of constraint offers a heuristic way of understanding the difference between prescribed work (an institution’s mission; legal or political imperatives) and real work, moving away from an applicationist conception of action. According to Stengers, a “constraint must be satisfied, but the way it is satisfied remains, by definition, an open question. A constraint must be taken into account, but it does not tell us how it should be taken into account” (2010, p. 43). The meaning of a constraint—explaining, after

the event, what has happened—only emerges in the very process through which the response is produced and determines this meaning. It is by analyzing practices and looking at how they construct and stabilize modes of response that we can define these terms. A constraint is neither a prohibition nor an imperative imposed from without, i.e. to which one is subjected. Stengers distinguishes the notion of constraint from rights and duties, arguing that in respecting the latter there is “no event” but “an institution that should instigate acceptance, the loyalty of heart and mind” (Stengers, 2010, p. 52). Public policies and legal requirements do not provide conceptual definitions of the terms used, which are mostly subject to theoretical debate. The legal notion of the child’s interests, for example, is considered to be juridically indeterminate and something that must be given concrete existence in the situation itself (COPMA, 2017). Maintaining parent-child bonds insofar as possible, encouraging the participation of parents and children in interventions that concern them, or protecting the child’s development and supporting parenthood are all directives that do not explain how these things should be done nor exactly what should be understood by the terms participation, protection, support, or quality of bonds. The notion of constraint underlines the extent to which responses are constructed in light of events and in concrete ways. It is in a specific situation, with a specific child, in a specific family and a specific society that something like the child’s wellbeing, for example, is given concrete expression. In producing solutions, what were previously considered to be contradictions can be transformed (Stengers, 2016). Another important point, as we have seen, is that professionals must construct actions that respond to a set of constraints.

For professionals, apprehending directives as constraints means, in a given situation, creating appropriate modes of response, thus opening up the possibility for them to do so in contact with, and alongside, parents and children. If the placement measure or mediated visit has been mandated (with goals that are often defined in very general terms), then its meaning and more specific goals—in other words, how parents, children, and professionals will respond to it and make it their own—remain open. Creating this meaning and achieving these goals is a challenge that remains to be conquered.

**Inhabiting an apparatus.** In order to meet these constraints, teams develop concrete models and ways of inhabiting apparatuses. By apparatus, we are referring to a set of heterogeneous elements (materials, spatial and temporal organization, directives, ideas, values, and so on) that are linked together to give an orientation to the actions that will be taken (de Jonckheere, 2010). They include visible and invisible components, and, to use Deleuze’s terms, machinic assemblages and assemblages of enunciation that are of the order of knowledge and power.

Apparatuses open up and close down possibilities of action, encouraging certain effects and discouraging others. Moments of co-presence are themselves a “small” apparatus embedded in a broader apparatus, which also includes other moments (interviews with parents, car journeys, or daily moments with children).

For the purposes of our argument, we will differentiate between three levels of description of the apparatus:

- The apparatus as it is defined within a professional field (an apparatus referred to as mediated visits or as a placement). This level is independent from specific legislative or institutional conditions, and from the way in which teams or professionals make them operational.
- The apparatus as it is put into practice within an institution and a singular context: in response to more local policies, within a particular institutional network, with the specific institution’s way of organizing work, and with given educational ideas and conceptions of participation and protection. It is a matter of how a team of professionals inherits its mission (de Jonckheere, 2010) within specific local conditions.

The “model” describes the reliable and stable elements that provide points of reference to a team in action. It does not describe the concrete ways in which they work but rather an orientation, a way of construing the problems addressed by the intervention (de Jonckheere, 2010), that serves to guide a team in creating concrete solutions and that defines how these small apparatuses will be connected together or integrated into the overall apparatus. The apparatus defined by the professional field may be configured differently depending on the teams and local conditions.

- A third level describes how, in the course of their activities, professionals inhabit the “small” (and “large”) apparatus at a given moment: what are they aiming to do, to what are they attentive, what do they feel, perceive, see? This is the level of the professionals’ own bodies’ engagement with the people they are assisting (Pittet, 2015; Waldenfels, 1994), the level of what does or does not happen in the course of their activities. At this level, a range of elements come into play: the imperatives and the general mission of the apparatus, but also, for each individual family situation, their life story, a specific brief, a particular way of organizing moments of co-presence in advance, what has happened at other moments in the apparatus, events in each person’s daily life, coordinated sessions with other actors, as well as the movements of their own bodies . This level describes how everyone, on a concrete level, at

each moment in time, experiences the exposition, exploration, confrontation, and transformation of the world as oriented by the model.

The third level is oriented, although not predetermined, by the other levels. What happens at a given moment within a “small” apparatus is not independent of the overall apparatus, nor of what has occurred before. It is oriented by the model. However, it is not predetermined, because these elements do not dictate what will happen next nor the concrete ways in which the professionals, parents, and children will act or experience the apparatus (Despret, 2009). The professional (but also the parent and child) will work upon the presence and importance of these other moments/events within the moment of co-presence itself. The third level functions relatively autonomously from the other two insofar as the effects that the professional tries to encourage within a “small” apparatus at a given moment in time are not necessarily the same effects sought by the apparatus as a whole.

This unpredictable and event-reactive way of inhabiting the apparatus is thus influenced by a set of elements (the problems that led to the measure, the measure’s brief, the political context, the viewpoints of the network or the family, the spatial configuration, the timing, etc.) as well as by educational ideas, the professional’s own body, and the singular ways in which the other people present inhabit the apparatus. It is at this level that, in the case of a given family, a way of appropriating the measure (or not) and a way of coming together (or not) take on concrete forms.

**Encouraging modes of existence.** In general, we consider that educational intervention aims to encourage parents’ and children’s modes of existence and that the professional gives concrete form to the intervention by inhabiting the apparatus in a particular way. In other words, the modes of existence of the parent and child are received and transformed partly thanks to the modes of existence of both the professional and the apparatus.

The notion of mode of existence (Stengers & Latour, 2016) allows us to move away from understanding “being” in terms of substance or identity (being parents or not, being competent or not, etc.)—where the continuity of existence in time and space is ensured by the underlying presence of this substance or one’s own sense of identity—and instead to develop a conception of “being” as including a measure of indeterminacy, with an existential incompleteness. This is a form of existence not in itself nor through the self but rather in and through something other; a form of existence that emerges based on the situation (a relationship to oneself, to others, and to the environment) and cannot be dissociated from it; a form of existence for which continuity remains to be achieved. What is happening is still fluctuating, singular, and by definition

lacking in fixed boundaries; its existence remains fragile, fleeting, labile, or even imperceptible. These concepts are therefore productive for our approach, which aims to grasp what is in the process of happening, what is in the process of becoming, and what is being transformed—for which continuity remains to be achieved—by looking at how this can be based on the apparatus and the professional’s way of inhabiting it.

The notion of mode of existence describes the movement through which people take up/are taken up by a situation; what is important to them, what they bear and can endure, what is viable for them; how they try (or not) to recreate possibilities of existence and action in ways that are expressed, explored, tested, and perhaps even transformed by the action itself. This is something that can fail. In the practices we studied, succeeding in being a parent, a child, or a professional, together, in a compulsory-assistance apparatus is not a given.

**A shared world.** In addition to the level of perspective, we also distinguish another level of quality of practices so as better to include the participation of parents and children. This level defines individual moments marked by each person present adopting the same perspective, as well as by the intensity of “world/activity” and “person/activity” (engagement) relationships—an intensity that sustains modes of existence and gives them substance. We have therefore added to the Deweyan concept of situation the notion of a “shared world” that results from (and supports) these individual moments. This shared world is something that must be continually constructed throughout the activity (Despret & Galetic, 2007), especially for people who do not (or who no longer) share their daily lives.

## **2.2. Methodological and ethical apparatus**

From a methodological point of view, considering directives as constraints means that we do not analyze professional practices based on any *a priori* definition of these terms, in order then to see whether or not the practices in question respect/apply these notions or how they combine them through compromises between predefined directives or logics (for example assistance/control or welfare/security). Given that, from our theoretical perspective, know-how is experiential (and non-propositional) our analysis does not entail asking professionals directly how they understand these terms. On the contrary, the meaning of the constraints emerges through analysis of the activities themselves.

In order to understand how professionals inhabit this moment and what model guides them, we used the tried and tested methodology of work analysis (Barbier & Durand, 2017), rather than remaining limited to prescribed or declared work, which would have presented some well-

identified drawbacks (generalization, idealization, justification, and difficulty in accessing barely perceptible embodied phenomena). The way professionals inhabit the apparatus is not something that can be stated, seen, or inferred. In order to understand it, it is therefore necessary to combine several types of data (observations, sometimes films, and particular interview mechanisms, Theureau, 2010) as well as to draw on modeling based on all that data. In our case, we chose to use films and self-confrontation interviews (SCI) conducted while watching a film of the activity and trying to grasp what is happening in it. This apparatus made it possible to (re)view the details of the action and to try to discover what the researchers' and professionals' different perspectives (as well as their necessarily limited attention) revealed to them but also did not necessarily allow them to perceive.

**Video recordings.** Depending on the spatial configuration and the families' situations, the videos were filmed using either a handheld camera or a camera placed on a tripod (without the researcher needing to be present). The frame was in principle as wide as possible.

**SCI.** Filmed sequences were chosen that seemed emblematic and/or enigmatic and/or critical from the point of view of what was happening in those moments of co-presence, for the researchers and/or the professionals (and if possible the parents and children). The questions in the SCI focused on the attentional, intentional, and emotional dimensions of what was playing out in the activity being viewed and what escaped the understanding of the researchers and was of interest to the professionals. It was less a question of making the professionals explain what they knew they were doing (to avoid being too quick to transform know-how into propositional knowledge) and more a question of confronting them with the films and the researchers' (and parents' and children's) perspectives, of making them react (with astonishment, laughter, etc.), so as to bring out and allow us and them to discover together what was happening in the filmed activity, what was important about it, and in what ways.

The SCI were organized as soon after the filmed moment as possible, with the professional and then with the whole team (CollSC). The option for the parent and child to participate in the SCI was strongly encouraged but, for various reasons, was only possible on one occasion (sometimes the professionals had reservations, sometimes the parents were unavailable, in some instances the interview would not have been in the BIC, etc.)

Our analysis of the written directives, the observation notes, and the statements made in the SCI aimed to grasp what was happening in the filmed activity. We modeled this using constitutive data triangulation. In order to understand the meanings of the words used (in the texts or SCI), it is necessary to understand the situations (according to an instructional

conception of meaning, Ducrot, 1991); and in order to understand what is important in the films (and how) it is necessary to understand both what the professionals say in the SCI and the directives. Any irreducible deviations between data were interpreted as signaling different levels of comprehension and discussed within the team to develop further our individual understanding of the issues. The intermediate results presented in the CollSC were then enriched on the basis of these discussions, with the constraint for us, as researchers, that the team had to agree on the results and any continuing disagreements had to be flagged up.

**Research ethics rules.** The families could refuse to participate in the research and could withdraw at any time, without needing to justify their decision. The films and any SCI with parents/children could be ended at any point if the professionals considered they were against the BIC. Signed consent was required from legal guardians, parents, and the placement department (depending on the situation). Signed agreement was also requested from the children/youths depending on their age and their mental capacity.

After the SCI, the professionals filmed had to give consent for a sequence of the film (and/or an excerpt from their SCI) to be shown to the rest of the team. The films and SCI will all be destroyed at the end of the research.

For the mediated visits apparatus, we carried out: 16 films, 22 SCI, and 4 CollSC; with 6 professionals and 7 families, 1 SCI with a professional, parent, and child.

For the placement apparatus, we carried out: 4 films, 3 SCI, 3 CollSC, with 3 families and 3 professionals.

### **3. Results**

Our research on the mediated visits apparatus allowed us to model a new mode of action thanks to four points of reference. Together, these points of reference shape the orientation of the team's response to the imperatives determining their practices. This orientation is the one that professionals attempt to construct and to maintain throughout their activities.

#### **3.1. Attention to event- and experience-based details: exploration and transformation**

This first point of reference concerns the attention paid by the professionals, in the moment itself, to what is important both to them and to the others, but also more broadly to what is viable for the individuals in question (what is important but also what they bear and endure)

and what can be shared. *In this gesture from the parent to the child, what is important, what form of parenthood is delineated, or asserted? How is this gesture perceived and experienced by the child? How does the child respond to it? And what movement of response does it produce within the professional?* This attention draws on knowledge, diagnoses, the history of the individuals in question, and the vulnerabilities present in the families—it does not ignore these facts, which preexist the moments of co-presence and are taken into account when organizing the visits beforehand, however it does not give them authority either (Stengers & Debaise, 2017). These facts/this knowledge do not determine what happens in the moment of co-presence, ensuring that the relational and potential dimension of vulnerabilities are maintained, as well as the non-determinism of living conditions, the non-positivism of psychological disorders, and so on. This attention paid to the lives of others does not reduce their lives to their suffering nor does it reduce the people in question to what they happen to show of themselves in that given moment. It is an attentiveness of vigilance (and not of focus, Depraz, 2014) that is open to “adventure” (Diamonds, 1985). It is a matter of being able to grasp the singularity of what is happening in front of the people present without their necessarily seeing it themselves: new possibilities emerge, which must be seized and supported. This is where the heuristic value of the apparatus lies.

This mode of action brings with it, and is brought about by, a particular attention to the details of what happens in moments of co-presence. Details are not understood, here, in the objectivist sense of facts that exist in and of themselves (a world that is already a given, *without us*) and are considered significant according to certain principles/criteria (ethics, risk factors, and so on). Rather, these details have an experience- and event-based nature insofar as they are not dissociated from how they matter or do not matter to people. From the perspective of pragmatic realism, the relationship between any living being and the world is a relationship of interest, a relationship to what matters (Despret & Galetic, 2007). It is about considering that the world/the living exist independently and that their qualifications (their mode of existence), and more broadly their salient details, are the result of their relationships. From this perspective, consciousness is neither the origin nor the foundation of what is important to someone.

This does not, however, make them subjective details in the sense of projections or clues to a deeper subjective reality (a world that exists *through us*), which would simply be banal and anecdotal and hold no value beyond that of revealing an underlying reality that supposedly underpins and organizes what appears on the surface and is held to be the object of the educational activity.

The details to which attention is paid are also those that are important to people who are not physically present (the network, the family, etc.), as well as the details of each person's daily life. This is an attention to details in their event- and experience-based aspects, details that are real (a world that exists *with* us), the importance of which is felt and transformed for each individual as a result of the action, along with their viability and reality. Their mode of existence and their presence in the moment of co-presence is worked upon on the basis of the orientation given by the various points of reference taken as a whole.

This mode of action is thus an opportunity for their importance to be revealed, transformed, and asserted through engagement in the action. The importance is not immediately or necessarily conscious, nor is it ready to be explained or openly avowed in a discussion. *I am touched and surprised by this mother; she's discovering herself by exploring a new way of being with her child, who seems to perceive this and yet at the same time resist it. He cannot (yet) follow this movement that is being suggested to him. The moment has passed, it wasn't able to be shared as much as was hoped; but there was movement.*

By considering this attention to detail as attention to events and to the movements of the people present, as perceiving and understanding the reality in the way it was experienced/made concrete by each person (including themselves), and as how each person tried to recreate possibilities of existence and action, the professionals' attention tries to capture the concrete points of view of the parents and the children (as opposed to reading their actions in nosographical terms). Movements are understood as resulting from, conveying, expressing, and authorizing ways of managing to be a child, a parent, or a professional, together in the moment and under these conditions—they are delineated, explored, and asserted. Within the apparatus of compulsory assistance, preserving and recreating possibilities for action (Goldstein, 1939) and for “being” is not self-evident. These movements are thus understood as a form of participation that goes far beyond simply participating in placement decisions. Professionals either prohibit them (“we won't get there this way”) or support them by pursuing them or reorienting them but not prescribing them (there are no predefined pathways to being a parent, to being a child, or to achieving a moment of encounter).

In a context where predictive models of risk management prevail (Voll, Jud, Mey, Häferli, & Stettler, 2010) and where medical and social diagnoses are established, this attention represents an important stake. Without it, professionals risk not seeing and/or not grasping the movements of participation of all concerned, and thus missing their potential but also any suffering or violence that comes from failing to recognize them or from the apparatus itself, with particular

risks for the BIC. In these moments, professionals have to move away from conceiving of protection as based on teaching behaviors they know and consider safe, as well as from viewing uncertainty as something to be reduced as far as possible (with safety considered a non-event [Flandin, Poizat, & Durand, 2017]). Instead, they have to be attentive to what is being expressed and what is making itself felt as an excess (of suffering, of violence). As we shall see, a different conception of protection is therefore at work in these moments.

The professionals' attention is necessarily (physiologically) limited during the moment of co-presence and it is oriented by what happens, but also by ideas about protection, education, and so on. It is oriented by the mode of action defined by these four points of reference, bringing to the fore certain details and not others. The professionals say to us: *“Ah look, the child is backing away, what is the child responding to by doing this? What did I not see that was happening before my eyes? I missed something that was important to the child or perhaps that the child could not bear, could not endure. Watching the film, I'm discovering expressions that I hadn't perceived in the moment, or hadn't seen, or at least hadn't retained as being important.”*

This attention explores details in order to grasp, and if necessary transform, their importance for the various people involved, so that what is important to each individual can be shared: emotions, gestures, attitudes, or words through which ways of being a parent, a child, the daughter of, the son of, etc. are expressed and explored, along with the requirements that underpin the brief. That which is important to one person (including the professionals and the network) needs to try to find a way of becoming important to others, on their terms. It is not a matter of constructing an identical world in which details matter in the same ways to all concerned, but rather of perceiving and capturing this reality as conceived by the individuals present in order to allow these details to enrich one's own world (Alloa & During, 2018) and thus to try to build a shared world.

The attention required by this mode of intervention is prompted by the co-presence and has the effect of rendering everyone involved more present in the situation and more aware of what is happening in the here and now, for all the people involved.

### **3.2. Focusing on the present to facilitate acts of becoming**

The second point of reference specifies the temporal frame of this attention. In moments of co-presence, the professional's focus is on the present and on the quality of engagement (the intensity of world/activity and person/activity relationships). These moments are not experienced as instruments, methods, or sources of information for future work (Stern, 2004).

While, in the context of child protection, the educational contributions of ordinary activities tend to be understood in such terms (e.g., Fustier, 1993; Rouzel, 2015), this encourages sacrificing the present (Stern, 2004) for a future external goal, which poses a risk to child protection and increases the likelihood of missing opportunities for participation. In this mode of action, moments of co-presence are taken to be capable of influencing the (relationship to the) past and the future (Debaise, 2017) and of encouraging modes of existence. The present is something to be grasped as an act of becoming rather than as the manifestation of past or underlying schemas or as a means through which to achieve a better future. In these moments of co-presence, managing to be involved in and to grasp what is happening in the moment poses a challenge: compulsory assistance tends to assign a place to each person and to express truth and normativity as general terms, often prompting reactions of defensiveness, withdrawal, or submission without any genuine involvement.

Focusing on the present by means of the attention described above has the indirect effect of transforming the relationship to existence into something made up of curiosity, hope, and dignity, which requires that places not be assigned and that all possibilities be left open. This is necessary in order to encourage and establish a quality encounter between parents and children.

### **3.3. Transforming the relationship to constraint**

This third point of reference sketches out the requirements/expectations produced by this mode of intervention. In this mode of action, the constraint of the apparatus of co-presence is not directly related to an expectation or requirement to talk about the problems that produced the measure or that are encountered during the measure (unlike, for example, in Lacharité, 2015; Seron & Wittezeale, 2009). When there is speech, it remains focused on the present of the encounter. The constraint that parents, children, and professionals do share (and they all experience it in their own way) is having to spend time together (in a way that is viable for each person and if possible shared). The conditions of speaking, presence, and attention to others are worked upon to enhance the quality of this time spent together, drawing on an immanent assessment, in the present, of the effects of a particular behavior rather than submitting to the meaning of an internalization. The substance and persistence of this assessment is then confirmed during car journeys observing and talking with the child, as well as in discussions with the foster family, the school, and the broader network, all of which can confirm (or not)—but also suggest revisions or reorientations to—the family case history. Such assessments may lead the visits to be temporarily suspended or even stopped altogether.

The artificial nature of the apparatus requires its participants to construct/find new ways of being together, all three of them. The co-presence of these people for a predetermined length of time and at a predetermined frequency is a driving force—through the pleasure it can bring the child and the parent—but also, at the same time, the focus of their attention and the intrinsic goal of the process. Constraint, artificiality, co-presence, and predetermined lengths and frequencies together make up the features of the apparatus, which henceforth provides the basis for this mode of action encouraging the encounter.

### **3.4. From categorizing the parent to finding practical solutions to shared problems: the everyday as focus and foundation**

This fourth and final point of reference describes how this attention is sustained by, and in turn sustains, concrete activities of an everyday kind (playing, eating, going for a walk, talking, and so on). For the professionals, it is a matter of effecting a practical transformation of the situations from which they start (which involve parents who have been diagnosed/judged and a professional who was not involved in the situation that prompted the measure and is there to help the parent and child). They do this by creating a situation in which they are also involved and in which parent and child can both act with dignity. This transformation is achieved in particular by working together to resolve something framed as a shared practical problem within an everyday activity (Stroumza & al, 2020).

These ordinary, everyday activities are shared and thus encourage moments of encounter by orienting attention towards the concrete situation in the present. They allow those involved to draw on habits (established outside the apparatus and its stakes) as well as on a specific organization (stages, length, etc.) and they are able to provide pleasure in and of themselves. They therefore both sustain and are sustained by engagement and transformation.

At times, these practices therefore take on the tone of conversations (no predefined topic, drawing in positive ways on uncertainty, symmetry in speaking positions, etc.)—conversations about school, play, events experienced in their daily lives, and so on, with all the freedom and vitality that bring these moments closer to ordinary life within (and drawing on) an artificial apparatus. Within this lived experience, the obligations of compulsory assistance are transformed into ordinary obligations (and provide a basis for this transformation). By shifting the question from “what is happening?” to “what are we doing together?” (Hennion, 2015), this mode of action produces equality (Stengers, 2013) and involves all those present in a way that confers dignity and makes them actors engaged in solving a problem.

This way of inhabiting the moment of co-presence does not foreground the explicit dimension to language (with its normative requirements for statements that are either fully expressed or not expressed at all, that are evident and openly avowed, Ducrot, 1991). Instead, it emphasizes the implicit and experiential dimension to language (Auchlin, 1998) considering that its use involves something of the order of an event, of what happens (or does not happen), that extends beyond people's intentions and both expresses and constructs a relationship to the world, with an orientation. This is an experience-based relationship to the world, which has depth (says things without saying them, implies, presupposes...) and numerous movements. Existential, vital processes are both bound up and at play in this event: for the person speaking and the person listening, something is being experienced in the present. There is, indeed, both an event-based and an experience-based dimension to the present of enunciation. In this depth and complexity, something is explored, transformed, asserted, and tries to become shared. This conception offers a way of understanding participation in its broadest sense and of respecting in real time the duty of protection without the normative demands of an ethics of discussion.

It is a matter of not experiencing these moments as primarily and from the outset serving an external goal but rather of drawing on ordinary activities to produce a form of lightness and gratuitousness. These activities help unblock everyone concerned, allowing the circulation and transformation of emotions, of what is important to each person present, and enabling them (at least for a time) to escape and to overcome movements of resignation and powerlessness. In these artificial apparatuses, "the ordinary" should be constructed, legitimized, and grasped; it is an effect both of the apparatus itself and of the way in which each person "inhabits" it, rather than a sign of the absence of any apparatus.

In order to ensure child protection, professionals attempt to avoid any undesirable events by organizing visits in advance and redirecting what occurs during the visits as it unfolds. At the same time, they also draw on that which develops, that which is sought, the movements through which parents, children, and professionals attempt to recreate possibilities of action and existence. These are vital existential moments lodged in and based on the ordinary, movements that sustain and are sustained by the heuristic dimension of the apparatus and this mode of action. Because this conception of protection encourages and reinforces ordinary activities, it contributes in concrete ways to promoting and producing child welfare (and reinforcing resilience, Flandin, Poizat, & Durand, 2017).

#### 4. Discussion

We again encountered the mode of action described above in the moments of co-presence examined in our second study, this time in a placement apparatus (Stroumza & al, 2021a, 2021b). However, it could not simply be transposed and applied in this context. The features of the apparatus play a determining role in how the mode of action can be embedded within it and developed so as to allow each person (parent, child, and professional) to inhabit it in a way that encourages the maintenance of parent-child bonds. There may be several reasons for this:

- In the placement apparatus, moments of co-presence were not central to the measure or its mission; they occurred on the margins and were not immediately—or even necessarily—identified as important. This is all the more salient given that these moments of co-presence relate to the ordinary and seem so natural and banal as not to require preparation or prior discussion with the parent and child, nor any follow-up afterwards. In order to grasp the importance of what is taking place it is, first, necessary to acknowledge its professional dimension and to avoid denying the existence of the compulsory assistance apparatus; second, as we have seen, it is also necessary to describe in other ways how these ordinary activities contribute to education, i.e. not considering that they offer access to an underlying reality (which will be the object of a future educational activity) followed by an attempt to transform that reality. In the present of the moment of co-presence, each person's modes of action and existence are already being explored, expressed, AND transformed.

- Its importance tends not to be recognized or noticed because it is hard to identify in activities that seem so routine and ordinary, for example preparing a meal, doing homework, or going for a walk. Their professional dimension seems to disappear, to the extent that the role of the compulsory assistance apparatus is itself denied (whereas, according to our modeling, this ordinariness is precisely one of the effects of both the apparatus and the mode of action). Our initial results, as we have said, suggest that this encourages neither their preparation nor their follow-up. This distorts any continuity with the day-to-day of the placement and makes it harder for professionals to draw on their experience and expertise in working with the children in the day-to-day, therefore preventing these moments from contributing to the BIC. As a result, it also becomes hard for what plays out in these moments to be fully integrated into the rest of the apparatus. What was able to be experienced, asserted, and perhaps even shared in these moments struggles to transform the rest of the apparatus, and therefore contributes to parents and children feeling resigned, powerless, and assigned to a particular role: the modes of

existence created do not last and their continuity has not been achieved. The other spaces and time of the apparatus cannot serve as a basis for the child, the parent, and the professional to find ways of inhabiting these moments, which are so very particular because of their indeterminacy and their hesitancy (as demanded by this mode of action).

We also wager that the importance of these moments will also be better recognized by grasping the fact that they respond not only to the imperative of maintaining the parent-child bond as much as possible, but also to the imperatives of increasing participation of children and parents and supporting parenthood. This mode of action offers a way of combining these responses rather than opposing them, which is in the higher interests of the child. It is another way of considering participation and protection that proves heuristic for the families accompanied by these compulsory assistance apparatuses.

More than aiming to allow participation in a placement decision that is seen as a measure of last resort, this mode of action allows the meaning of that placement to be worked upon. By trying, in these conditions, to be parents, children, and professionals together, conditions of existence (informed by the constraints of the measure and the artificiality of the encounter) are tested, constructed, and transformed.

## **5. Limitations**

The way in which the mode of action at work in moments of co-presence interacts with other moments in the apparatus being studied remains to be analyzed. How can the specificity of these moments be preserved, in order to draw the most benefits from their heuristic dimension, whilst at the same time embedding them in some form of continuity within the rest of the apparatus, and within the lives of the children and parents, in order to promote the BIC? How can the right conditions be created to allow the other moments of the apparatus to provide a basis for the parents, children, and professionals to inhabit this moment of co-presence? This will be the subject of our next study.

## Conclusion

Analyzing what happens in moments of co-presence involving a parent, a child, and a professional based on ordinary activities has allowed us to show how it is possible for a mode of action not only to encourage parent-child bonds but also to respond to other requirements (participation, supporting parenthood, protection). This mode of action is different from the one at work in interview- or meeting-based systems, which come with other imperatives (with regard to types of response, the central role given to what is explicit, etc.)—imperatives that are often difficult for some families to meet, at least at certain points in the placement measure.

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