1
Positive parenting support during family reunification

2

3   **Abstract**

4   This article presents the results of a qualitative study that explores parenting skills
5   when a child returns home after a period of foster care in the child protection system.
6   There were a total of 135 participants, including 63 child protection professionals, 42
7   parents and 30 children and adolescents. The data were analysed using content
8   analysis submitted to peer review.

9   Triangulating the voices of children with the input of parents and professionals
10   rendered it possible to identify needs for the consolidation of family reunification in
11   five dimensions: adjustment of parenting skills, adaptation to the needs of the child,
12   social support, more accurate perception of one's role, and parental self-efficacy.

13   These findings suggest particular characteristics in the development of both generally
14   applicable skills and skills specific to positive parenting that can improve the chances of
15   a successful reunification process.

16

17
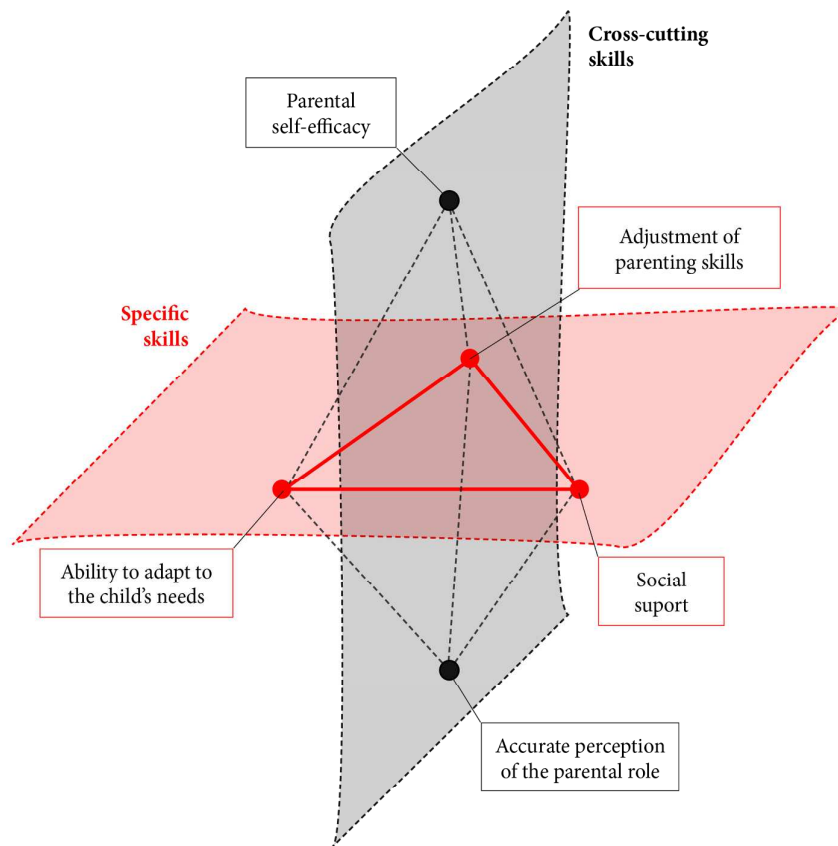
18   **Keywords:** positive parenting, family reunification, child protection, parenting skills,
19   social support, parental self-efficacy

1

1 **Positive parenting support during family reunification**

2 In the Child Protection System, family reunification refers to the process by which
3 children who have experienced abandonment, neglect or abuse return to the home of
4 their birth families after a mandated separation period. The reunification process
5 begins the moment the child is separated from his or her parents. Removal and
6 reunification decisions are particularly relevant to children because of the short- and
7 long-term influences on their lives (Farmer, 2014). When the child returns home,
8 research emphasizes the importance of understanding the reasons behind and the
9 process of family reunification (Balsells et al., 2014), consolidating the changes made
10 by the entire family and ultimately, providing the support necessary to ensure the
11 success of the child's return home. Emerging data indicate that including in-home
12 supports post-reunification may reduce re-entry risk (Cheng, 2010).

13 According to official statistics, in 2015, there were 628 cases of children in the child
14 protection services in Spain, and approximately 16% of these left the child protection
15 system to return to their families of origin (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2017). In other
16 countries, the percentages are higher, with as many as 51% of the children leaving the
17 child protection service to return to their parents or primary caregivers (Mainey, Ellis,
18 & Lewis, 2009).

19 However, the return is not always successful. In Spain, there are no statistics on how
20 many children "re-enter" the child protection system; however, the international
21 statistics available indicate that the numbers vary depending on the place and the year
22 examined (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009). Wulczyn (2004) observed that
23 although failed reunifications are declining, 25% of the children who begin the process
24 of family reunification return to the child protection system within a year. With regard
25 to the United Kingdom, Farmer and Wijedasa (2013) indicated that between 37% and
26 65% of the children reunited with their families eventually re-entered the child
27 protection system.

28 Working with the family of origin to ensure good parenting is a key element in
29 consolidating the process of reunification. Positive parenting provides us with a new
30 framework to highlight the substantive elements that interact to allow reunited
31 families to acquire the skills necessary to ensure success. The Child Welfare
32 Information Gateway (2011) recommends post-reunification follow-up and training
33 programmes offered by the child protection services as a key element and
34 recommends training programmes to empower these families. Various authors
35 endorse this recommendation, calling for the implementation of socio-educational
36 programmes to teach parenting skills (Arranz Freijo et al., 2017; Balsells et al., 2013;
37 Gobierno de España, 1996; Rodrigo, Máiquez, Martin, & Byrne, 2008). Other authors
38 broadened this view to support training not only in parenting skills but also in specific
39 educational needs for each stage of the reunification process (Balsells, Amorós,
40 Fuentes-Peláez, & Mateos, 2011; López & Del Valle, 2013; Palacios & Amorós, 2006).
41 An analysis of the scientific literature suggested five topics relevant to families' specific
42 needs during reunification to consolidate appropriate parenting: (a) an accurate
43 perception of the parental role, (b) parental self-efficacy, (c) ability to adapt to the
44 needs of the children, (d) social support, and (e) adjustment to exercising parenting
45 skills.

2

1   Parental agency, understood to be the set of skills that reflect how parents perceive
2   and experience their parental role, allows parents to feel like active, capable actors
3   who are satisfied with their parental role (Máiquez, Rodrigo, Capote, & Vermaes,
4   2000). Upon family reunification, two of the skills that compose parental agency are
5   relevant: *accurate perception of the parental role* and *parental self-efficacy*.

6   An accurate perception of the parental role enhances understanding of the reasons
7   that led to the separation and the changes that occurred to achieve reunification. A
8   factor contributing to success is that the family perceive the changes that have led to
9   reunification with regard to three distinct areas: (a) changes in the family context, the
10 social support it receives and environmental factors; (b) changes in parenting skills to
11 respond appropriately to the children's needs; and (c) changes related to improvement
12 in the children's quality of life and well-being. Balsells et al. (2013), determined that
13 this role perception is acquired gradually throughout the process of foster care and
14 reunification. At first, families blame contextual aspects for the separation; in the
15 reunification stage, however, they begin to realize how their improved parenting skills
16 are among the factors that render reunification possible. This provides a glimpse into
17 how a progressive awareness of the problem occurs (López & Del Valle, 2013; Palacios
18 & Amorós, 2006).

19 Lietz and Strength (2011) believed that during the reunification stage, parental self-
20 efficacy implies that the parents have a clear awareness of the progress that has
21 enabled their children to return home. Those authors posited that families recognize
22 the changes that have rendered reunification possible and that they have feelings of
23 positive reinforcement regarding those changes (a positive view of the situation). In
24 this sense, Osterling and Han (2011) spoke of the families' perseverance throughout
25 the process as a factor that strengthens the reunification as well as their self-
26 assessment and personal determination to preserve the gains once they are reunited.
27 Similarly, according to Rodrigo and Byrne (2011) on the factors that develop positive
28 parenting, enhancing certain factors such as the level of internal control and self-
29 efficacy helps families acquire a greater awareness of progress and a sense that these
30 factors rely, in part, on their own efforts. According to Lietz and Strength (2011), the
31 meanings families attribute to their experiences strengthen them and give them
32 confidence in themselves. To this end, families must transform their initial fear and
33 view their experience as positive and as an opportunity to improve the situation. Self-
34 confidence and the recognition of their own worth and the worth of other family
35 members add a sense of identity to the family and help preserve the family unit as it
36 strives to remain together (Del Valle, Bravo, & López, 2009; Del Valle & Fuertes, 2007;
37 Osterling & Han, 2011; Thomas, Chenot, & Reifel, 2005).

38 Another factor identified in the literature as key to the success of reunification is that
39 parents must become re-acquainted with their children again to adapt to their
40 changing needs. Stephens et al. (2017) observed that returning children were
41 described as being 'new people' whom the parents needed to learn about. This
42 newness was sometimes connected to the length of time their children spent in foster
43 care; at times, their children returned to the home at a different developmental stage
44 from when they left, with new standards and daily routines. Actively involving the
45 children in this process is another need identified by research: giving sons and
46 daughters a greater voice and a more prominent role in the process of family

3

1   reunification engenders better adjustment and adaptability in their parents (Balsells
2   et al., 2013).

3   Social support is another key element in the process of reunification, particularly
4   during this phase of the child's return home. The amount of support different family
5   members receive to positively address this new period of becoming re-acquainted and
6   re-establishing family life is associated with lower rates of return to the child
7   protection system (Farmer & Wijedasa, 2013). Kimberlin et al. (2009) observed that
8   lack of social support is a risk factor for successful reunification (Barth, Weigensberg,
9   Fisher, Fetrow, & Green, 2008). Lin (2014) reinforced these ideas, demonstrating that a
10 lack of different types of support hinders caregivers' ability to care for the children and
11 prevents the children from achieving permanency outcomes. Thomas, Chenot, and
12 Reifel (2005) noted the importance of support because negative effects may present a
13 risk to family stability, particularly for children.

14 Finally, the literature described differing aspects of parenting skills among parents at
15 the time their sons and daughters return home. Festinger (1996) observed that there is
16 a relation between the success of family reunification and parents' skill at managing
17 communication with their sons and daughters, understanding the developmental stage
18 they are negotiating, and establishing balanced discipline. Because inadequate
19 communication between parents and children can create conflict, it is essential that
20 the various family members learn and adjust their communication skills. Both mothers
21 and fathers acquiring and having parenting skills to meet the needs of their children
22 during the reunification process and other characteristics related to the child (young
23 age, need for protection, etc.), to the biological family (psychosocial characteristics,
24 parenting skills), or to the foster care or protective services (type of foster care,
25 economic aid, duration of foster care, etc.) help guarantee long-term family stability
26 (Kimberlin et al., 2009).

27 The academic literature has highlighted the key role of certain elements in
28 strengthening parenting in the reunited family; parents' and children's voices and
29 perspectives are rarely observed during the reunification. Although they compose one-
30 half of this vital caretaking equation, their needs, concerns, and expertise from their
31 perspective surrounding reunification remain largely unheard. Effectively silenced,
32 parents and children lose the opportunity to participate in an area that concerns those
33 most important to them (Stephens et al., 2017).

34 This article presents the results of a study that explores parenting skills at the time of
35 family reunification through the voices of the protagonists. To hear the voices of those
36 directly involved, an effort has been made to include the input of adolescents and
37 young people because of their ability to discuss these topics, to inquire about their
38 childhood and foster care experiences, and to triangulate these data with the input of
39 parents and professionals.

40

41 **METHODOLOGY**

42 **Qualitative research**

43 The design of the investigation is qualitative with descriptive and explanatory
44 purposes. The perspective focused on parents, children and professionals as experts in

4

(Stolz, Brandon, Wallace, & Roberson, 2013) the reunification process and essential to its improvement. This methodological design was deemed necessary to deepen and better understand the role of social support in the processes of families in the child protection system (Lin, 2014). The design is based on conducting focus groups and semi-structured interviews to multi-informants: professionals, parents and children.

Participants

The total sample included 135 people and comprised 42 parents in child welfare plans or recently reunited (for less than one year), 63 childcare professionals and 30 children and adolescents who had undergone a foster process, whether kinship or residential.

Focus group participants were selected according to different criteria. For parents, the criteria were a) families who were already reunited with their children or expecting a return in one or two months, b) families who fulfilled or were fulfilling a reunification plan, c) willingness and collaboration with professionals, and d) different characteristics of age and family structure. For professionals, the criteria were a) working in child protection services, b) representing different disciplines that composed the professional teams: psychologists, teachers, social workers, educators, and c) experience in residential foster care or kinship care. For children and adolescents, the criteria were a) being between 12 and 20 years and belonging to selected biological families, b) spending at least a year in care (foster care or residential care) or in kinship care, and c) having no physical, mental or sensory disability and to be able to follow the focus group.

Of the final sample, 76.2% of the parents were women and 23.8% men. Thirty-four of them represented reunited families, and four were not reunited. Of the childcare professionals, 20 were social educators, 10 were pedagogues, 20 were psychologists and 13 were social workers. Of the professionals, 74.6% were women and 25.4% men; 25.80% were between 25 and 35 years old, 45.16% between 36 and 45, and 29.04% over 46 years old. Of these, 33 worked in biological family intervention, 16 in residential foster care intervention, and 5 in kinship care intervention. Of the children and teenagers, 21 were reunified, and 9 were not reunified; 53.3% were girls, and 46.7% were boys; and 17% were between 6 and 12 years old, 56% were between 12 and 18 years old, and 27% were adults.

Focus group procedure

To gather the data, the focus group technique and semi-structured interviews were used according to written criteria. This technique has been considered appropriate for use with vulnerable population groups (Ayón & Quiroz Villa, 2013), particularly families in the child protection system (Balsells et al., 2011) as well as with professionals who work with families (Stolz et al., 2013). Three tools were used to gather the data: (1) identification card with the participant's basic data, (2) guidelines for questions for the development of the discussion group or semi-structured interview, and (3) a summary card for the discussion group in which aspects related to the development of the group were registered: date, duration of foster care, place, motivation, cohesion, atmosphere, group dynamics and how the questions worked.

Eighteen interviews and 22 discussion groups were conducted. Two researchers from the team travelled to each office of the social services experts; one researcher was the

5

1   moderator, and the other was in charge of logistics and recording the discussion
2   according to the written criteria. Each discussion group and interview was recorded
3   with the agreement of those present and included a confidentiality agreement.

4   **Data analysis**

5   The analysis focused on five dimensions: (1) adjustment of parenting skills, (2)
6   adapting to the child's needs, (3) social support, (4) accurate perception of the
7   parental role, and (5) parental self-efficacy that are considered important for a
8   successful reunification process as their children return to the home. Content analysis
9   was used to analyse the information by the preparation of codes to be evaluated by
10   different judges.

11   Bottom-up content analysis was applied: the first stage of analysis was textual,
12   selecting paragraphs, fragments and significant quotes from the transcription papers.
13   The second stage was conceptual, identifying categories and subcategories that could
14   be inter-related. Both stages were subjected to peer review, and categories and
15   subcategories were defined when data reached saturation. The categories are
16   considered saturated when: (1) no new data that emerge in a category, (2) the
17   category is well developed and shows variation and (3) the relationship between the
18   categories are established and are validated.

19   The software Atlas.ti 6.0 was used for the qualitative data processing. A Hermeneutic
20   Unit Editor was created in which the literal transcriptions of the focus group and
21   interviews (primary documents) were included. Each category was assigned a code
22   (code), and textual notes were included (memos). A conceptual network (network)
23   was created to analyse the data as a basis for the connections established between the
24   codes of the hermeneutic unit.

25

26   **RESULTS**

27   The richness of the results stems from the ability to record the direct voices of
28   adolescents and young people recounting their childhood experiences with foster care
29   and triangulating their input with that of parents and professionals. The results of the
30   research are around the five dimensions that favour the process of family
31   reunification. We can observe the relationship between the specific dimensions
32   (adjustment of parenting skills, ability to adapt to the child's needs and social support)
33   and the cross-cutting skills (accurate perception on the parental role and parental self-
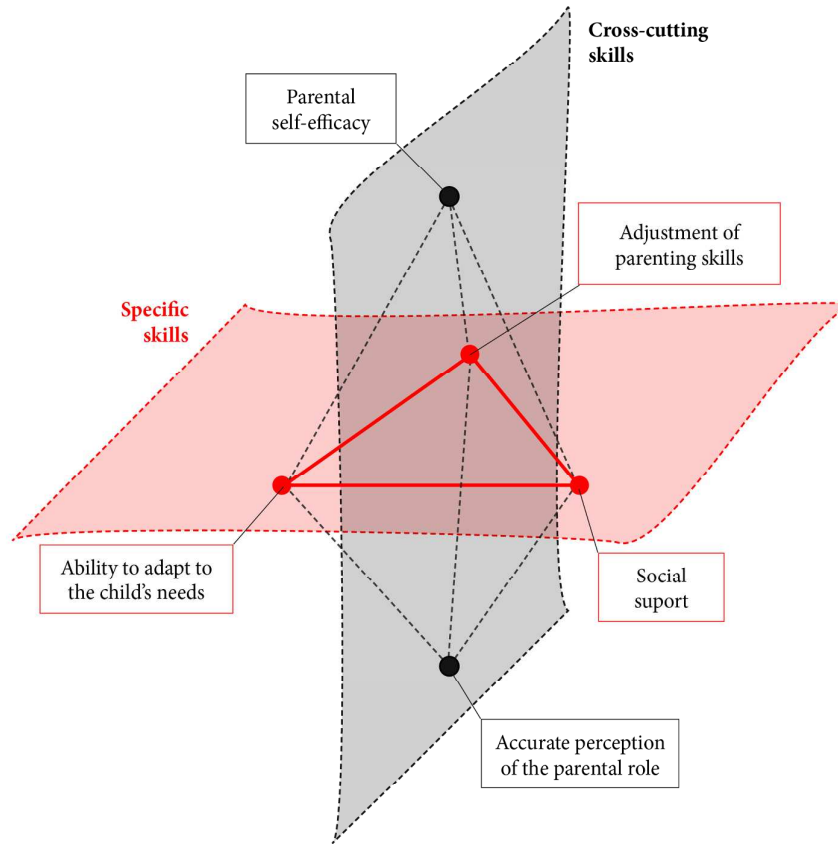34   efficacy) represented in the figure 1.

Cross-cutting
skills

Parental
self-efficacy

Adjustment of
parenting skills

Specific
skills

Ability to adapt to
the child's needs

Social
suport

Accurate perception
of the parental role

1

Figure 1: dimensions that favour the process of family reunification

3

Adjusting parenting and educational skills to the new family circumstances

Upon the child's return home, there is a need to adjust parenting skills to achieve optimum development for the child, primarily with regard to education, establishing rules and boundaries, and coexistence based on communication and affection among family members. These are specific parenting and educational skills that render it possible to re-establish daily life.

Family accounts relate how after a period of separation, parents have a greater awareness that the reunification will require knowing how to establish rules, speak in a more relaxed tone, adjust their parental roles, spend more time with their children, communicate and play with them more, be more understanding, be less reliant on them, and have better communication with their schools.

Of all of these skills, communication between parents and children is the most indispensable element to generate positive responses to potential conflicts that may arise.

> *For parents, that they be more understanding and know how to listen, and when there's a situation to discuss, that they let us talk. (*Children's discussion group)

Adaptability to the children's needs

7

1 Changes in the children upon their return home may be observed in two areas:
2 changes in their habits and routines learned in their foster family or centre and
3 developmental changes.

4 While separated from their parents, the children lived with other people and were
5 exposed to different rules, customs, lifestyles and dynamics of daily life. The results
6 indicate how aspects related to order, meals, the division of tasks, schedules, etc., are
7 part of the daily life to which children have become accustomed and that require
8 realignment and acceptance by all family members to restore a positive dynamic.

9 In addition, children and adolescents' developmental stages and, consequently, their
10 needs changed since they were separated from their biological families and entered
11 the child protection system.

12 *You're in the centre and you have your schedules, and of course, you get back*
13 *home (...) and you don't go to bed at 9:30 anymore because you're with your*
14 *mother who has never been with you and you try to convince her to let you go to*
15 *bed later.* (Children's discussion group)

16 The results demonstrate how, depending on the children's age, parents must adjust
17 their parenting skills in the process of consolidating the family reunification. Parents of
18 younger children must make an even greater effort to adapt; older children participate
19 in the adaptation process, gradually taking on a leading role.

20 *Preparation* [is needed] *because they were seven years old when they left, and*
21 *when they come back home, they are fourteen, but you still think they are* seven.
22 (Parents' discussion group)

23 **Social support**

24 A recurring point in the discussion of all participants was the need for support and
25 monitoring by the formal network of the child protection system and the formal
26 network of community services during the process of family reunification. Several
27 areas of need were identified: formal assistance in developing parenting skills,
28 overcoming personal difficulties, and resolving structural needs.

29 It has been observed that after a period of separation, readjusting child-raising skills to
30 fit changes in the children and the new family circumstances can pose a challenge
31 during this phase of reunification. All participants believed that there was a need for
32 formal support in responding to these adjustments.

33 With regard to personal difficulties, parents' addictions and other problems have often
34 been overcome by the time the child returns home although the fragility caused by
35 personal difficulties and the critical moment of the homecoming warrant formal
36 support from the health, psychological, social, educational and employment services.

37 Finally, the results indicate a need for support to ensure a stable and secure
38 environment for children because families often face ongoing employment, housing
39 and economic difficulties.

40 *Proyecto Hombre is like a home to me; it has helped me in every way, and even*
41 *now, if I have a problem I can call them for support*. (Parents' discussion group)

8

Help from the school has been tremendous. He kept attending the same school while in foster care. I took him out a year early and put him in a school with a family-like environment, and they sure have helped me very, very much. I'm really grateful to them. (Parents' discussion group)

It is important to see reunification as a continuum, not as something isolated. The current view is to see it as a rupture. (Professionals' discussion group)

For needs of a structural nature, the results indicate how participants also resorted to the informal network, particularly to the extended family.

In the same manner, having a partner provides support in the face of personal and emotional difficulties; it also promotes co-parenting and stability for the return home.

My partner, because if I hadn't had her, they would never have returned the child to me, since I work in the hotel industry more than 12 hours a day. (Parents' discussion group)

Accurate perception of parental role to understand the changes that enabled family reunification

Perception of the parental role developed gradually; families gradually came to understand and assimilate their responsibility for their child's welfare, the improvements needed in their own skills, and the changes in the psychosocial context. Their perception of their own parenting became clearer throughout the process. The results indicate how parents evolved from focusing on the contextual difficulties to admitting shortcomings in their parenting skills and in their ability to meet their children's specific needs. Notably, the study observed that children tended to remain invisible in some of the parents' accounts, which emphasized their own improvements as parents but not their children's improvements.

My fear is not now because he are 12 years old and I can still handle him as I want, but when he will be older, the situation might be different. So I want to prepare myself psychologically and I want help, to see how I can do it better. (Parents' discussion group)

Expectations with regard to family interaction play an important role in shaping that interaction. When parents and children have an accurate perception of their roles, it is easier to pass through the various stages of the homecoming: the honeymoon, the crisis and the stabilization. An accurate perception of roles thus appears to be a specific need during this stage.

My parents changed a lot, I saw that during the weekends, when I was going [at home] and all the things were better than before (Childrens' discussion group)

Parental self-efficacy enables a positive experience with awareness of progress

The results indicated how families had different levels of parental self-efficacy, understood to be the awareness of progress and the feelings of positive reinforcement that progress provides. A majority of the families were aware of the changes and progress they made throughout the process. They indicated progress in the development of parenting skills as well as changes to contextual aspects that favoured a more stable environment for their children. With regard to parenting skills, parents reported learning a great deal and demonstrated changes related to the establishment

9

1 and monitoring of child-raising standards, skills of assertive communication, shared
2 responsibility for raising the children, recognition and satisfaction with the parental
3 role, capacity for self-assessment, and shared leisure time with the family. There were
4 contextual factors such as better organization of housework or greater job stability.

5 *I've reflected, I've seen my failures, and I've done a lot to fix them. I mean, look, I*
6 *try a little harder at work, I've focused more on my son, I've shared more with*
7 *him, I spend more time with him...* (Parents' discussion group)

8 However, in some cases this awareness of progress was not valued as a result of family
9 efforts. Sometimes, families were not as aware or did not value their role as
10 protagonists in the changes made, attributing them to external factors such as religion,
11 luck, or even forgetting what occurred.

12 *After the homecoming, it seemed like absolutely nothing had happened.* (Parents'
13 discussion group)

14 *See...I leave everything in God's hands...and may God prevail.* (Parents'
15 discussion group)

16 Another finding was associated with the children's role in the awareness of progress. A
17 common practice in the child protection system is to exclude small children from
18 decisions and information relating to the progress of their families, presumably for
19 their protection. In this sense, a two-way interpretation of parenting questions
20 practices that fail to include children as active participants in this type of process. In
21 the same manner, awareness of family progress requires the involvement of all family
22 members, regardless of their age, rather than only the adults.

23 *One has to take into account that after a certain age, the child also has to be*
24 *included as a participant.* (Professionals' discussion group)

25

26 **DISCUSSION**

27 Parenting skills are an essential element of family reunification. Authors such as
28 Delfabbro, Fernandez, McCormick and Kettler (2013) cited these skills as a predictor of
29 family reunification. However, this study contributes to the literature in different ways:
30 the parenting approach highlights a broader view of skills. This approach underscores
31 the influence of children on parenting and the influence of social and contextual
32 support as well as integrating the ecosystem levels of the family with parental
33 practices. This is particularly relevant because it demonstrates that "the situation of
34 vulnerability is not an anomaly for some parents, but the result of improper parenting
35 practices" (Rodrigo, 2015).

36 This study includes the perspectives of all those involved in the process of family
37 reunification (parents, children and professionals). This triangulated view contributes
38 to broadening knowledge and sharpening the focus on the specific needs identified,
39 particularly the importance of giving children a voice both in the processes of
40 protection and in studies that affect them. Children must be able to express
41 themselves and convey their points of view (Goodyer, 2014; Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells,
42 & Ponce, 2017; Nybell, 2013).

10

1 Although the positive parenting approach remains nascent in the child protection
2 system, the results of this study enable an examination of situations of abuse, neglect
3 and abandonment from a less "pathological" perspective and an understanding that
4 situations of distress are also the result of improper parenting practices. The findings
5 demonstrated a series of general or training skills, such as caring for and interacting
6 with sons and daughters (Budd & Holdsworth, 1996) as parenting skills that are
7 required for mothers and fathers to render homecoming and reunification possible
8 (Austin, Anthony, & Kimberlin, 2008; Maluccio & Ainsworth, 2003).

9 In this manner, the need to acquire parenting skills to provide affection, control or
10 stimulation for one's children is associated with the prevention of abuse and neglect
11 but also with teaching parents the skills required to raise their children well. According
12 to Festinger (1996), there is a relation between the success of family reunification and
13 parents' skills in managing communication with their children, understanding the
14 developmental stage the children are undergoing, and establishing balanced discipline.
15 Communication between parents and children is essential. The needs associated with
16 communication can increase at the moment of homecoming because a long time has
17 elapsed during which the family has not lived together.

18 With regard to parental agency, the findings suggest substantive and differing aspects
19 in the development of skills for the consolidation of the family, the restoration of
20 family life, and the natural balance of relations. The findings have demonstrated that
21 in the final state of family reunification (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea,
22 2015), the accurate perception of the parental role and parental self-efficacy were
23 associated with awareness of the changes that rendered the homecoming possible.
24 Concurring with the contributions of Lietz and Strength (2011), Schofield and Ward
25 (2011) and Ellingsen (2011) underscored the importance of all family members
26 understanding the family situation so that as each member perceives his or her role
27 more accurately, the likelihood of successful reunification increases.

28 The significant commitment of the family also emerged as a key element in the process
29 of reunification. Thomas et al. (2005) observed how the positivity, adaptability,
30 confidence, security, and autonomy of the parents related to positive processes of
31 reunification. All of this suggests adjustments in how parents perceive their role, and
32 this factor must be considered for its practical implications in family interventions.
33 Intervention with these families should focus on improving and consolidating this
34 awareness of change. It follows from this that it is necessary to focus on self-efficacy,
35 internal control, and parents' awareness of their skills (Arranz Freijo et al., 2017;
36 Rodrigo & Byrne, 2011). This is key to exercising positive parenting in contexts of risk
37 and severe risk. In short, perception of the parental role is a crucial aspect in parenting
38 and includes the perception that changes depend on oneself (internal control) and a
39 perception that one is capable of making these changes (Rodrigo & Byrne, 2011) as
40 well as personal determination to preserve the changes following reunification
41 (Osterling & Han, 2011).

42 One of the factors cited by Kimberlin and others (2009) to consolidate family
43 reunification is parents' acquisition of parenting skills to meet the specific needs of
44 their children. This coincides with findings that suggested that educational practices
45 can be adapted to the new needs of the children, closely related to the developmental
46 changes that the child has undergone during the period of foster care. In addition to

11

adapting to these changes, there is a need to adjust to the new customs and routines that the children adopted in the foster family or residential facility (Balsells et al., 2013). These processes of adjusting and adapting educational competencies to the children's new needs require new types of support. Rock, Michelson, Thomson, and Day (2015) indicated the diversity of social support and the benefits of integrating formal and informal support as strategies necessary to respond to the needs of parents and children during this stage. Giallo, Treyvaud, Cooklin, and Wade (2013) observed that parents in poor quality relationships and with greater social support needs may have fewer personal resources available to engage in play and learning activities with their children. In turn, Coyl, Newland, and Freeman (2010) previously noted that parents who sought social support, particularly family support, were more likely to be involved with their children and were less likely to use physical punishment as a discipline strategy with their children. Families require support and monitoring during reunification (Balsells, Pastor, Molina, Fuentes-Pelaez, & Vázquez, 2016; Berrick, Cohen, & Anthony, 2011; Lee, Hwang, Socha, Pau, & Shaw, 2012) because they require assistance developing parenting skills and overcoming the personal difficulties and structural challenges posed by the new stage. Ongoing formal and informal support is an important element of assistance during the family reunification and homecoming stage to ensure its success and prevent cases of re-entry into the child protection system (Lietz, Lacasse, & Cacciatore, 2011). In this sense, there is an obvious need to change the perception that reunification marks a closure or a break in the view of the participants. Connection to social support networks is one of the elements that promotes success in reunification; the networks are a safety system that works to prevent relapses and strengthens the capabilities of the family system (Lee et al., 2012).

Implications for practice

The complexity and uniqueness observed in parenting skills during a child's return home after a period of foster care suggests important implications for practice. First, it is apparent that in addition to specific parenting skills at each stage of this process (Balsells, Pastor, Amorós, et al., 2015), it is advisable to combine this intervention with programmes of more general parenting skills to address child-raising skills and include families in general support (Álvarez, Padilla, Byrne, Máiquez, & Rodrigo, 2015; Amorós, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateos, & Pastor, 2011; Martín-Quintana et al., 2009; Oliva et al., 2007; Rodríguez, Martín-Quintana, & Rodrigo, 2015). A second implication for practice is the use of group methodologies to teach skills. This methodology helps develop parental agency (Rodrigo, 2012) and offers a space for strengthening the formal and informal networks through which the family shares experiences and spaces with others undergoing similar situations (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, et al., 2015).

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the difficulty for children to talk about their experiences. First of all because children do not always have enough maturity or verbal skills to talk about complex ideas, especially if it is about their process of fostering and family reunification. Second, because sometimes it is emotionally hard experiences. Therefore, when children talk about these experiences with people they do not know, it can lead to blockages when they have to explain certain personal circumstances

12

during an interview or discussion group. In this sense, methodological data collection strategies such as arts-based participatory research can help children's participation.

Despite this fact, the voices of children, parents and professionals allow us to identify needs during foster care and reunification process in five dimensions (adjustment of parenting skills, adaptation to the needs of the child, social support, more accurate perception of one's role, and parental self-efficacy) to favour the consolidation of family. Findings suggest this dimensions are on two different levels cross-cutting skills and specific skills. However, future research should analyse deeply the relationship among this dimensions, in order to know better parenting skills involved in reunification processes.

REFERENCES

Álvarez, M., Padilla, S., Byrne, S., Máiquez, M. L., & Rodrigo, M. J. (2015). Crecer felices en familia: un programa de apoyo parental para el desarrollo infantil. En *Manual práctico de parentalidad positiva* (pp. 91-110).

Amorós, P., Fuentes-Peláez, N., Mateos, A., & Pastor, C. (2011). *Aprender juntos, crecer en familia.* Barcelona: Obra Social "la Caixa".

Arranz Freijo, E., Olabarrieta, F., Manzano, A., Barreto, F. B., Roncallo, C. P., Sánchez Murciano, M., … Garcia, M. D. (2017). Assessment and preventive education for families, based on the principles of positive parenting. *Early Child Development and Care*, *4430*(August), 1-10. http://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1344234

Austin, M. J., Anthony, E. K., & Kimberlin, S. E. (2008). Foster Care Re-Entry: Evidence and Implications. *BASSC. Evidence for practice*, *11*.

Ayón, C., & Quiroz Villa, A. (2013). Promoting Mexican Immigrant Families' Well-Being: Learning From Parents What Is Needed to Have a Strong Family. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *94*(3), 194-202. http://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.4315

Balsells, M. À., Amorós, P., Fuentes-Peláez, N., & Mateos, A. (2011). Needs analysis for a parental guidance program for biological family: Spain's current situation. *Revista de cercetare si interventie sociala*, *34*, 21-37.

Balsells, M. À., Pastor, C., Amorós, P., Fuentes-Peláez, N., Molina, M. C., Mateos, A., … Vázquez, N. (2015). *Caminar en familia: programa de competencias parentales durante el acogimiento y la reunificación familiar*. Madrid: Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad. Centro de Publicaciones.

Balsells, M. À., Pastor, C., Amorós, P., Mateos, A., Ponce, C., & Navajas, A. (2014). Child Welfare and Successful Reunification through the Socio-Educative Process: Training Needs among Biological Families in Spain. *Social Sciences*, *3*, 809-826. http://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3040809

Balsells, M. À., Pastor, C., Mateos, A., Vaquero, E., & Urrea, A. (2015). Exploring the needs of parents for achieving reunification: The views of foster children, birth family and social workers in Spain. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *48*, 159-166. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.12.016

13

1   Balsells, M. À., Pastor, C., Molina, M. C., Fuentes-Peláez, N., Vaquero, E., & Mundet, A.
2   (2013). Child Welfare and Successful Reunification: Understanding of the Family
3   Difficulties during the Socio-Educative Process. *Revista de cercetare si interventie
4   sociala*, *42*, 809-826. http://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3040809

5   Balsells, M. À., Pastor, C., Molina, M. C., Fuentes-Pelaez, N., & Vázquez, N. (2016).
6   Understanding Social Support in Reunification: The Views of Foster Children, Birth
7   Families and Social Workers. *British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(3), 812–827.
8   http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw049

9   Barth, R. P., Weigensberg, E. C., Fisher, P. A., Fetrow, B., & Green, R. L. (2008). Reentry
10   of elementary aged children following reunification from foster care. *Children and
11   Youth Services Review*, *30*, 353-364.
12   http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.10.002

13   Berrick, J. D., Cohen, E., & Anthony, E. (2011). Partnering with Parents: Promising
14   Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care.
15   *Journal of Family Strengths*, *11*(1, article 14), 1-13.

16   Budd, K. S., & Holdsworth, M. J. (1996). Issues in the clinical assessment of minimal
17   parenting competence. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, *25*(1), 2-14.
18   http://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp2501_1

19   Cheng, T. C. (2010). Factors associated with reunification: A longitudinal analysis of
20   long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*, 1311-1316.
21   http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.04.023

22   Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2011). *Family Reunification: What the Evidence
23   Shows*. Washington, DC.

24   Coyl, D. D., Newland, L. A., & Freeman, H. (2010). Predicting preschoolers' attachment
25   security from parenting behaviours, parents' attachment relationships and their
26   use of social support. *Early Child Development and Care*, *180*(4), 499-512.
27   http://doi.org/10.1080/03004430802090463

28   Del Valle, J. F., Bravo, A., & López, M. (2009). El acogimiento familiar en España:
29   Implantación y retos actuales. *Papeles del Psicólogo*, *30*(1), 33-41.

30   Del Valle, J. F., & Fuertes, J. (2007). *El acogimiento residencial en la protección de la
31   infancia. La atención residencial basada en las necesidades que tenga el niño
32   según el programa de integración estable*. Madrid: Ediciones Pirámide.

33   Delfabbro, P., Fernandez, E., McCormick, J., & Kettler, L. (2013). Reunification in a
34   complete entry cohort: A longitudinal study of children entering out-of-home care
35   in Tasmania, Australia. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(9), 1592-1600.
36   http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.06.012

37   Ellingsen, I. T., Shemmings, D., Størksen, I., & Storksen, I. (2011). The Concept of
38   'Family' Among Norwegian Adolescents in Long-Term Foster Care. *Child and
39   Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *28*(4), 301-318. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-
40   011-0234-0

41   Farmer, E. (2014). Improving Reunification Practice: Pathways Home, Progress and
42   Outcomes for Children Returning from Care to Their Parents. *British Journal of*

14

1   *Social Work*, *44*(2), 348-366. http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcs093

2   Farmer, E., & Wijedasa, D. (2013). The Reunification of Looked After Children with
3   Their Parents: What Contributes to Return Stability? *British Journal of Social*
4   *Work*, *43*, 1611-1629. http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcs066

5   Festinger, T. (1996). Going Home and Returning to Foster Care. *Children and Youth*
6   *Services Review*, *18*(4/5), 383-402.

7   Giallo, R., Treyvaud, K., Cooklin, A., & Wade, C. (2013). Mothers' and fathers'
8   involvement in home activities with their children: Psychosocial factors and the
9   role of parental self-efficacy. *Early Child Development and Care*, *183*(3-4), 343-
10   359. http://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2012.711587

11   Gobierno de España. Ley Orgánica 1/1996, de 15 de enero, de Protecció Jurídica del
12   Menor, de modificación parcial del Código Civil y de la Ley de Enjuiciamiento Civil,
13   Pub. L. No. 15 (1996). España: BOE.

14   Goodyer, A. (2014). Children's accounts of moving to a foster home. *Child & Family*
15   *Social Work*. http://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12128

16   Kimberlin, S. E., Anthony, E. K., & Austin, M. J. (2009). Re-entering foster care: Trends,
17   evidence, and implications. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *31*(4), 471-481.
18   http://doi.org/10-1016/j.childyouth.2008.10.003

19   Lee, B. R., Hwang, J., Socha, K., Pau, T., & Shaw, T. V. (2012). Going Home Again:
20   Transitioning youth to families after group care placement. *Journal of child and*
21   *Family Studies*, *22*(4), 447-459. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9596-y

22   Lietz, C. A., Lacasse, J. R., & Cacciatore, J. (2011). Social Support in Family
23   Reunification: A Qualitive Study. *Journal of Social Work*, *14*, 13-20.

24   Lietz, C. A., & Strength, M. (2011). Stories of Successful Reunification: A Narrative
25   Study of Family Resilience in Child Welfare. *Families in Society*, *92*(2), 203-210.
26   http://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.4102

27   Lin, C.-H. (2014). Evaluating Services for Kinship Care Families: A Systematic Review.
28   *Children and Youth Services Review*, *36*, 32-41.
29   http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.10.026

30   López, M., & Del Valle, J. F. (2013). The Waiting Children: Pathways (and Future) of
31   Children in Long-Term Residential Care. *Bristish Journal of Social Work*, *7*(June), 1-
32   17. http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct130

33   Mainey, A., Ellis, A., & Lewis, J. (2009). *Children's Views of Services: A Rapid Review*.
34   *National Children's Bureau*. London.

35   Máiquez, M. L., Rodrigo, M. J., Capote, C., & Vermaes, I. (2000). *Aprender en la vida*
36   *cotidiana. Un programa experiencial para padres*. Madrid: Visor.

37   Maluccio, A. N., & Ainsworth, F. (2003). Drug use by Parents: A challenge for family
38   reunification practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *25*(7), 511-533.
39   http://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409(03)00042-2

40   Martín-Quintana, J. C., Máiquez, M. L., Rodrigo, M. J., Byrne, S., Rodríguez, B., &
41   Rodríguez, G. (2009). Programas de Educación Parental. *Psychosocial Intervention*.

15

1 Mateos, A., Vaquero, E., Balsells, M. A., & Ponce, C. (2017). 'They didn't tell me
2   anything; they just sent me home': children's participation in the return home.
3   *Child & Family Social Work*, *22*(2), 871-880. http://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12307

4 Ministerio de Sanidad, S. S. e I. (2017). *Boletín de datos estadísticos de medidas de
5   protección a la Infancia (Datos 2015)*. Madrid.

6 Nybell, L. M. (2013). Locating "youth voice:" Considering the contexts of speaking in
7   foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(8), 1227-1235.
8   http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.04.009

9 Oliva, A., Hidalgo, V., Martín, D., Parra, Á., Ríos, M., & Vallejo, R. (2007). *Programa de
10   apoyo a madres y padres de adolescentes*. Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía. Consejería
11   de Salud.

12 Osterling, K. L., & Han, M. (2011). Reunification outcomes among Mexican immigrant
13   families in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 1658-
14   1666. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.020

15 Palacios, J., & Amorós, P. (2006). Recent Changes in Adoption and Fostering in Spain.
16   *British Journal of Social Work*, *36*, 921–935. http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch363

17 Rock, S., Michelson, D., Thomson, S., & Day, C. (2015). Understanding Foster
18   Placement Instability for Looked After Children: A Systematic Review and
19   Narrative Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence. *British Journal of
20   Social Work*, *45*, 177-203. http://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct084

21 Rodrigo, M. J. (2012). Educación parental para promover la competencia y resiliencia
22   en las familias en riesgo psicosocial. Recuperado a partir de
23   https://web.oas.org/childhood/ES/Lists/Recursos Estudios e
24   Investigaciones/Attachments/27/20. Educación parental para promover.PDF

25 Rodrigo, M. J. (2015). *Manual práctico de parentalidad Positiva*. Madrid: Síntesis.

26 Rodrigo, M. J., & Byrne, S. (2011). Social Support and Personal Agency in At-Risk
27   Mothers. *Psychosocial Intervention*, *20*(1), 13-24.
28   http://doi.org/10.5093/in2011v20n1a3

29 Rodrigo, M. J., Máiquez, M. L., Martin, J. C., & Byrne, S. (2008). *Preservación familiar:
30   Un enfoque positivo para la intervención con familias*. Madrid: Piramide.

31 Rodríguez, E., Martín-Quintana, J. C., & Rodrigo, M. J. (2015). Vivir la Adolescencia en
32   Familia": Un programa de apoyo parental en la adolescencia. En *Manual práctico
33   de parentalidad positiva* (pp. 131-150).

34 Schofield, G., & Ward, E. (2011). *Understanding and Working with Parents of Children
35   in Long-Term Foster Care*. Jessica Kingsley Publisher. JKP.

36 Stephens, T. N., Parchment, T., Gopalan, G., Burton, G., Ortiz, A., Brantley, T., … McKay,
37   M. (2017). Assessing the Needs of Reunified Families from Foster Care: A Parent
38   Perspective. *Child Welfare*, *94*(6), 9-37.

39 Stolz, H., Brandon, M. D., Wallace, H., & Roberson, P. (2013). Understanding and
40   Addressing the Needs of Parenting Educators: A Focus Group Analysis. *Families in
41   Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *94*(3), 203-210.
42   http://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.4318

16

1 Thomas, M., Chenot, D., & Reifel, B. (2005). A resilience-based model of reunification
2   and reentry: implications for out-of-home care services. *Families in Society*, *86*(2),
3   235-243.

4 Wulczyn, F. (2004). Family Reunification. *The Future of Children*, *14*(1), 95-113.
5   http://doi.org/10.2307/1602756

6

7

8 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

9

10 **DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

13
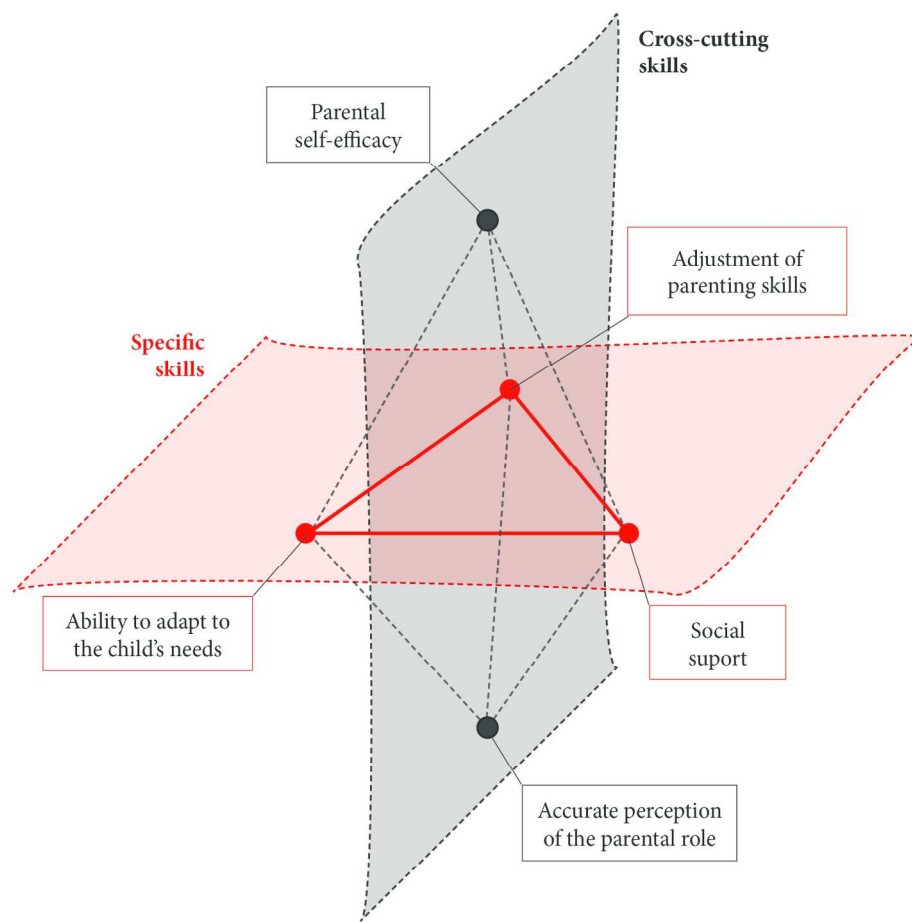
Abstract

185x185mm (300 x 300 DPI)