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EDITORIAL

The impact of the observation of the young child on his care

Through this special Monthly Review, the ISS intends to promote resorting to the observation of the young child, which places the latter and his needs at the heart of any process aimed at his protection. An overview of various experiences is offered, highlighting the cultural and ethical implications of this increasingly widespread practice.

The observation of the young child within his family or in any other alternative care environment constitutes a true revolution in terms of children's rights. Thanks to pioneers, such as Melanie Klein, Mary Ainsworth and her paradigm of the 'strange situation'¹, or Esther Bick (see p. 11) and Emmi Pikler (see p. 8), who, each in their own field, developed methods of observation of the young child, professionals and society as a whole started taking a fresh look at the young child, thereby recognising his full status as a person, with great abilities and numerous skills. The ISS, without having a preference for one method or another, considers the concept of observation to be fundamental, insofar as it is a considerable step forward in matters of alternative care for children deprived of a family.

Benefits and framework

Whether within his family or in a variety of care facilities, the observation of the young child is a less expensive method, thanks to which professionals may better understand the child in his environment, prevent potential difficulties linked to his physical or psychological development, and identify, more precisely, his needs. Indeed, when the child is cared for

elsewhere than in his family (institution, foster care or other), framed and periodic observations prove to be a key tool to assess his immediate and long-term care needs and allow for the strengthening of team work. Thus, observation enables the cross-referencing of the professionals' perspectives; it promotes exchanges within multidisciplinary teams and provides the professionals with an opportunity of working on their own responses to issues. Furthermore, observation enables to contribute to and enhance the child's file – which will be submitted to his (prospective) family or prospective living environment. One day, the child will also have access to his file and will then be able to realise the reflection and steps that were undertaken to identify his needs and to best respond to them.

Whilst the need to have a framed observation is not subject to discussion, its ethical, professional and legal framework is essential. The child's periodic observation therefore requires an adapted framework (see p. 3) as well as the training on one or several methods for numerous professionals of the relevant social and medical field (see p. 11). Furthermore, the child must be respected in the observation process: the number of observers must be restricted, the



child's rhythm must be taken into account, the child must be able to move freely and naturally within his environment and must be informed, irrespectively of his age, of the presence of the observer. Finally, observation should not result in set and final appraisals of the child.

Practical applications and cultural implications

The child's observation is at the heart of the project led by the ISS called 'A better future is possible for children living with disabilities in institutions', aimed at promoting the access of disabled children, who are placed in institutions, to family care options. In the framework of this project, the ISS raises the awareness of staff at care facilities as to the importance of viewing the disabled child in his daily care (spontaneous observations), by highlighting the latter's resources, potential and progress. Moreover, it is also a matter of supporting staff in institutions in their use of framed observation, thanks to an observation grid and by supporting team work (see p. 9). This stage is vital to better understand the child, and is the basis for the psychosocial assessment undertaken prior to the preparation of an adapted life project (reintegration in his family or extended family, foster care, domestic or intercountry adoption, change of facility, etc). For example, the child's adoptability cannot be determined without a comprehensive knowledge of the child. This is also applicable to the matching process: the more precise the child's profile, the better the adoption actors will be able to find an appropriate family for the child. In addition, once a child proposal has been communicated to the prospective adopters, a detailed file about the child – in which notes on the observation have been included – will make their decision-making easier, and will enable them to anticipate a future with the proposed child. This is even more important for children with special needs, who currently represent a majority of those children proposed for intercountry adoption. Finally, observation may also play an essential role in the development of the parent-child bond (see p. 5).

Furthermore, whilst observation methods were born mainly in Western Europe, observation is a universal technique, which requires, however, being adapted to very different socio-cultural environments. The aim, in this process, is for each culture to claim ownership of these methods, in order for the latter to become a tool that respects traditions, that is relevant and that is easy to use on a daily basis (see p. 7).

The observation of the young child therefore has a major impact on the child's life. It contributes to monitoring his development and progress, to identifying potential difficulties linked to his development, to refining the understanding of his needs and to adapting his care. The following testimonies demonstrate, not only its usefulness, but also its expansion at legal, cultural, geographical and multidisciplinary levels. Quoting Anne Frichet's words, 'time has now come to make of the young child a universal ambassador of our humanity. It appears to us that if 'woman is the future of man', as the poet would say, as for the young child, he is the future of humankind'.

The ISS/IRC team,
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