

# PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARENTING STYLES AND COPING RESPONSES OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS REGISTERED WITH THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM<sup>4</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Families registered with the Child Protection System tend to have poor parenting methods, which, in turn, lead to inadequate ways of coping with stress. This makes them highly vulnerable families. These shortcomings tend to be more prevalent among fathers than mothers. By identifying these shortcomings and analysing them, specific strategies can be developed to overcome them. The aim of this paper is to analyse differences between the parenting styles and coping responses of mothers and fathers registered with the Child Protection System, as perceived by the professionals*

## Key words:

Child Protection System; parenting styles; coping responses; mothers and fathers; professional perceptions

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*from the said service. A cross-sectional study was carried out based on the perceptions of professionals attached to the Child Protection System. The findings show that the professionals deem that there are significant differences between maternal and paternal parenting models and ways of coping with stress. The mothers were viewed as having more components of appropriate parenting, while the fathers tended to use physical punishment more often. As for coping methods, the professionals observed that the mothers have more previous experience of conflicts, they spend more time preparing to tackle a problem, and they have a greater sense of being able to take possible advantage of the situation. The results point to the need to reinforce and specialize in training strategies for parents. This is because co-parenting has a positive impact on child development and boosts family functioning.*

## INTRODUCTION

Families with associated risk factors and families who are deemed to be vulnerable are characterized by a high number of stressors (Pérez, Menendez and Hidalgo, 2014.). This is the case of families registered with the Child Protection System, who are often also characterized by difficulties in caring for their children, child neglect or situations of child abuse (Padilla, Álvarez-Dardet and Hidalgo, 2014.; Summersett et al., 2019.). More specifically, these families are admitted to the Child Protection System because a risk situation involving a minor or a case of child neglect has been identified. This neglect can be caused by a situation of financial hardship or by shortcomings in parental upbringing patterns. For this reason, the main objective of the Child Protection System is to intervene in family dynamics, training parents in the aspects of parenting. The families registered with the Child Protection System usually also suffer from associated stressors, such as financial problems, situations of violence or negative events of some kind.

Families are the main agents of socialization for young people, and the values, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs that they acquire are based on observed parental models (Al-Halabí et al., 2009.; Negreiros, 2013.). In fact, as Baumrind (1971.) says, a link has been identified between inefficient child-rearing styles and the development of anti-social behaviour or risk behaviours in young people. According to Ren, Hu and Song (2019.), parenting styles influence the acquisition of healthy routines, which, in turn, play a key role in children's social and emotional development. As a result, if a child experiences poor parenting at an early age, this could have a direct influence on their psychological and emotional development (Kumpfer and Alvarado, 2003.; Sánchez-Prieto et al., 2019.). Poor or negative parenting styles refer to the use of inadequate parenting components. From the model of parenting styles developed by Baumrind in 1978., inappropriate components are the ones with negative developmental consequences. For the author, strict discipline, com-

munication problems, an absence of negotiation (typical of authoritarian styles), a lack of supervision and absence of limits (typical of permissive styles) are negative components. For Kellerhalls and Montandon (1997.), who developed a new theoretical model on parenting styles, inadequate components are linked to an absence of communication, less emphasis on emotional self-regulation, the application of strict discipline and close control of children's behaviour. In fact, insufficient parental supervision and control are risk factors in the development of problem behaviours, such as alcohol consumption (Kumpfer, 2014.).

If these shortcomings in parenting skills go hand in hand with stressful or aversive situations and these situations are poorly managed, the risk factors for the children will evidently be even higher (Lee et al., 2018.). Coping strategies consist of a general mind-set or attitude that conditions a person's way of thinking or behaviour when dealing with stressful situations (Calero et al., 2017.). González, Bakker and Rubiales (2014.) classify ways of dealing with stress by using the following categories: method, focus and activity. According to the said authors, the method can be active, passive or avoidant. In the first case, direct control over a problem is exercised by taking certain steps. As for the focus, a person might choose to centre their attention on the emotional aspect (emotional management or regulation), on their initial assessment of the problem, or on the problem itself (trying to resolve it). In the case of the activity, the intervention might be behavioural or cognitive.

Parental coping strategies and parents' perceptions of stressors will influence how they interact with their children (Calero et al., 2017.). Conrad-Hiebner, Paschall and Johnson (2019.) identify the existence of a link between long-lasting financial instability (continued stress levels) and severe parenting styles. Calero et al. (2017.) find that higher levels of education in mothers are correlated with lower stress levels because the mothers see themselves as being more competent and able to provide a good parenting model to the children with development disorders. A carer's physical or psychological decline will also act as a risk factor in poor parental care (English and Graham, 2000.). Numerous studies also find there to be a link between poor coping and parenting styles and the emergence of possible disorders or pathologies (Nikolaev, Baranova and Petunova, 2016.). Dixon et al. (2016.) study the possible onset of gambling addictions. They confirm the relationship between gambling and coping styles, explaining that inconsistent parental discipline acts as a risk factor. Compas et al. (2010.) find that poor parenting styles and inadequate coping strategies can contribute to disorders like depression. As for the difference in maternal and paternal coping methods, Dabrowska and Pisula (2010.) point out that mothers are more likely to use coping strategies based on emotional management and social support networks. As explained, emotionally-based coping models normally fail to solve a problem, alleviating it in the short term, but not managing to tackle it.

González, Bakker and Rubiales (2014.) state that important gender-based differences have been identified in parenting styles now. Endendijk et al. (2013.) highlight the fact that, in general terms, society still expects mothers to be the main carers and fathers to play an important role as a disciplinarian. For these authors, scientific evidence shows that gender continues to be a predictor of parenting styles. Authors like González, Bakker and Rubiales (2014.) suggest that a higher percentage of mothers are responsible for supervising their children's everyday practices and activities. Emotional bonds are also more often forged with mothers. This is a key component since it could be a predictor of responses to adolescent distress or a factor in emotional regulation (Jones et al., 2014.). However, authors like Panter-Brick et al. (2014.) also insist that the father's involvement is a key factor in ensuring that co-parenting relationships impact positively on family dynamics.

Despite the importance of research into parenting styles and coping strategies, most studies are only descriptive and theory based (Pérez et al., 2014.), and they are always conducted from the parents' perspective. The assessment process should be complemented with external evaluations by specialists in the field. Indeed, the key informants able to offer a more comprehensive insight are the professionals from the Child Protection System. They are the ones with a closer understanding of the capabilities of families as they are the professionals who work directly with them.

The aim of this study was to identify whether there are differences in the parenting styles and coping responses of mothers and fathers, as perceived by the professionals attached to the Child Protection System who carry out interventions with these vulnerable families. In order to meet this goal, the following hypotheses were posed:

1. There are differences between maternal and paternal parenting styles in the perception of the professionals.
2. The professionals expect the mothers to score better than the fathers in appropriate parenting components.
3. There are differences in the coping responses of the mothers and fathers in the perception of the professionals.
4. The professionals expect the mothers to score better than the fathers in appropriate coping responses.

## **METHODS**

### **Design and procedure**

A cross-sectional study was carried out, based on a quantitative methodology. A non-probability sampling system was used, made up of key informants; that is interlocutors who are both familiar with and involved in the situation under study.

The main advantage of using key informants is their capacity to reflect on a situation in which they are directly involved and for which they have the necessary skills and experience, hence guaranteeing more efficient appraisals (Galeano, 2003.). The professionals were from the Balearic Child Protection System in Spain and the key informants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

- a) Professionals involved in the Child Protection System's whole management process, from the moment the initial file is opened to the minor's emancipation or until there is a reduction in associated risk factors.
- b) Professionals whose duties cover the three phases involved in child protection: 1) assessment, 2) intervention and 3) administrative or advisory management tasks concerning the families (see Table 2.).

All professionals were invited to fill out the questionnaires in the same place and at the same time. The ethical criteria established by the University of the Balearic Islands were followed and the professionals signed a consent form guaranteeing confidentiality.

## Participants

The sample was made up of 70 professionals, with a clear predominance of women ( $n = 63$ ). The mean age of the participants was  $M = 43.26$  ( $SD = 9.565$ ), with a higher percentage in the 40 to 49 age bracket (46.8% of the female sample and 28.6% of the male sample) (see Table 1.). All the participants had a university education and 44.28% also had a postgraduate degree. Most had studied in the fields of social work (37.1%) or psychology (27.1%).

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics

Characteristics	N	%	M (SD)
Professionals	70		
Men	7	10	
Women	63	90	
Age			43.26 (9.565)
Training			
University graduate	70	100	
Postgraduate	31	44.28	
Type of studies			
Social education	12	17.1	
Pedagogy	2	2.9	

Psychology	19	27.1	
Social work	14	20	
Humanities	1	1.4	
Don't know/No answer	22	31.4	
Years working with families			12.64 (9.067)
Less than 5 years	16	22.9	
5 years or more	53	75.7	
Don't know/No answer	1	1.4	
How long has the person worked for the Child Protection System			9.23 (8.281)
Less than 5 years	23	32.9	
5 years or more	38	54.3	
Don't know/No answer	9	12.9	

The professionals working with the families had extensive experience: 75.7% of the participants had worked with families for 5 years or more, and the mean number of years for the group was  $M = 12.64$  years ( $SD = 9.067$ ) (see Table 1.). 54.3% had worked specifically for the Child Protection System for 5 years or more and 32.9% had worked there for less than 5 years, leading to an overall average of  $M = 9.23$  years ( $SD = 8.281$ ).

The informants carried out widely assorted duties, in accordance with the aforementioned inclusion criteria (see Table 2.). 19.4% of the informants carried out assessment or monitoring duties, 69.6% were involved in interventions with families or minors, and 62.9% carried out administrative management or advisory duties relating to the families.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2.** Types of duties and related years of experience in percentages

Experience	Type of duty	Less than 5 years	5 years or more
Initial assessment process & emergencies	Assessment	3.2	8.1
Support for minors taken in by an extended family member	Interventions	6.5	9.7
Support for adopted minors and their families	Interventions	6.5	8.1

5 It is important to bear in mind the fact that numerous informants carried out duties from more than one category ("assessment, intervention or management") and that some did not specify their related category ("others").

Preparation, support and monitoring of the emancipation of young people in situations of vulnerability, tutelage or guardianship	Interventions	6.5	6.5
Socio-educational services for children and families	Interventions	3.2	6.5
Supervision of family visits to vulnerable minors	Assessment	6.5	1.6
Labor integration and socio-educational intervention programs for vulnerable youths	Interventions	3.2	4.8
Support in residential care homes	Interventions	6.5	1.6
Administrative management or legal support	Administrative management of families or advice	3.2	3.2
Coordination and management of professionals	Administrative management of families or advice	6.5	12.9
Case officer	Administrative management of families or advice	16.1	21
Don't know/ No answer		25.8	14.5

## Instruments

### Evaluation of Parenting

The professionals' evaluation of the mothers' and fathers' parenting skills was based on the theoretical framework of the Strengthening Families Programme (SFP) (Kumpfer and Alvarado, 2003.; Kumpfer et al., 2010.; Spoth et al., 2002.; Orte et al., 2021). The SFP is an empirically validated programme for the prevention of risk factors that cause disruptive or problematical behaviour in children. The SFP validated the parenting components outlined in the introduction as being key variables in positive parenting. The programme is based on the Social Ecology Model of adolescent vulnerability (Kumpfer & Turner, 1990.; Kumpfer, 1998.; Kumpfer, Alvarado and Whiteside, 2003.). This model upholds the protective value of positive family relationships, parental supervision, effective discipline, and parental norms or values in mitigating risk factors (Kumpfer, Alvarado and Whiteside2003.). Similarly, it

is argued that family supervision and high levels of family cohesion act as mediators in risk factors like substance use (Kumpfer, Alvarado and Whiteside 2003.; Kumpfer et al., 2008).

The data was gathered using self-administered questionnaires. A questionnaire was developed based on 10 items, and assessed using a numerical scale. A numerical scale was chosen because Likert scales could be biased in this type of study (the number of positive responses tends to be higher than the negative ones) (Pai-tán et al., 2014.).

The purpose of the questionnaire was to quantify how professionals attached to the Child Protection System rated the level of development of the mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. The questionnaire featured questions on the subject of key components of parenting: 1) communication, 2) involvement, 3) supervision of activities, 4) use of discipline, 5) affectivity, 6) setting clear rules, 7) forging emotional ties, 8) conflict management and 9) the application of physical punishment. An item was also added related to the consumption of illegal substances by parents, since this was considered to be a negative variable also contemplated in programmes and in the assessment of the said programmes. Each item had to be answered separately for the mother and father of each family.

**Table 3.** Items for the parenting components

Number	Parenting components	Items
<b>Adequate parenting components</b>		
1.	Communication with their children	Do the fathers/mothers use assertive language to communicate?
2.	Involvement with their children	Are the fathers/mothers involved with their children?
3.	Supervision	Do the fathers/mothers supervise the activities of their children?
4.	Discipline	Do the fathers/mothers use adequate, consistent discipline with their children?
5.	Setting limits	Do the fathers/mothers set clear limits with regard to their children's behaviour?
6.	Emotional ties	Do the fathers/mothers have an emotional bond with their children?
7.	Affection	Do the fathers/mothers express their affection for their children?

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### Poor parenting components

8.	Conflicts	Do the fathers/ mothers have clashes with their children?
9.	Physical punishment	Do the fathers/ mothers physically punish their children?
10.	Illegal substance use	Do the fathers / mothers take illegal drugs?

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The reliability analysis of the items in the questionnaire on the mothers' and fathers' parenting styles suggests a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of 0.79. A Cronbach  $\alpha$  of between 0.70 and 0.90 points to a good internal consistency (Oviedo and Campo, 2005.).

### Coping responses

To assess the parents' coping responses, the Spanish version of the Coping Responses Inventory-Adult Form (CRI-A) was used (Mikulic and Crespi, 2008.). The aim of the study was to analyse what coping styles the families in the sample use, according to the key informants. Each item had to be answered separately for the mother and father of each family.

The questionnaire comprised 10 items, answered using a Likert scale with four possible responses: 1) Very probably not; 2) Generally not, 3) Generally yes and 4) Very probably yes. More specifically, the items were based on Moos' transactional model (2002), which analyses responses to stressors. The model explains that people use behavioural or cognitive resources to cope with stressors. Management of these resources leads to a good adaptive ability (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984.). The questionnaire focused on analysing the following coping-related categories:

Previous experience of problems associated with the children and the possible anticipation of new situations. There were 3 items in this category, including "Have you had to deal with a problem like this before?"

Types of coping responses, which explored whether a problem was perceived as being a threat (risk) or a challenge (opportunity). There were 2 items in this category, one of which was: "When the problem arose, did you regard it as a challenge?"

The cause of the problem, distinguishing whether it was associated with an internal/personal stimulus or an external one. There were 2 items in this category, one being: "Was that problem caused by something the mother or father did?"

The current state of affairs, aimed at determining whether the parent responded adequately and whether the problem was successfully tackled (3 associated items). The following item belonged to this category: "Has the problem or situation been overcome?"

The reliability analysis of the items in the questionnaire on the mothers and fathers' coping responses suggests a Cronbach  $\alpha$  of 0.70.

### Data analysis

The data analysis process was based on the student's t-test for paired samples to test for the existence of differences, as perceived by the professionals, in the mothers' and fathers' parenting styles and coping responses.

## RESULTS

### Differences between the mothers and fathers' parenting styles

The mean ratings of the parenting components awarded to the mothers and fathers were low and not sufficient to be deemed adequate. (The professionals were given instructions on the rating process, with ratings below 5 being deemed as insufficient.) The components can be classified into two categories according to the Social Ecology Model of adolescent vulnerability (Kumpfer and Turner, 1990., Kumpfer, 1998; Kumpfer, Alvarado and Whiteside, 2003.): a) adequate parenting components and b) poor parenting components.

In the case of the adequate parenting components, based on the perceptions of the professionals, the mothers achieved higher mean scores than the fathers for several components. This confirms hypotheses 1 and 2.

In the ratings awarded to the mothers and fathers by the professionals for parental engagement in activities with their children and in the latter's interests and concerns, there were statistically significant differences ( $t(63) = -8.11, p < .01$ ), with a high effect size (Cohen's  $d = .905$ ) (see Table 4.). This variable assessed the time the mothers and fathers spent with their children on a day-to-day basis, providing attention, dedication and care.

Significant differences were also detected with regard to the existence of a bond between the mothers and fathers and their children when this was assessed by the professionals. The professionals judged the mothers to be more affectionate with their children, with significant differences being identified ( $t(63) = -6.77; p < .01$ ) and a high effect size (Cohen's  $d = .765$ ). The same was true of the development of emotional ties. The professionals gave higher ratings to the mothers than the fathers ( $t(63) = -6.40; p < .01$ ), with a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .613$ ). They gave the mothers a mean rating of  $M = 6.19$  ( $SD = 2.03$ ), as opposed to  $M = 4.94$  ( $SD = 2.13$ ) for the fathers (see Table 4.), which was insufficient in this second case. Emotional ties allude to a bond that is developed between a child and their parents. Similarly, significant differences were found for the communication variable. The mothers obtained higher ratings than the fathers, with a difference in means of  $t(63) = -5.20$  ( $p < .01$ ) and a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .478$ ). Communication

refers to bilateral dialogue between the mothers or fathers and their children, where the parents act both as speakers and active listeners.

**Table 4.** Student's t-test of the parenting components for the mothers and fathers

	Fathers		Mothers		t (63)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
<b>Adequate parenting components</b>							
Communication with their children	3.59	1.883	4.56	2.031	-5.200	.000	.478
Involvement with their children	3.25	1.952	5.23	2.188	-8.117	.000	.905
Supervision	3.27	1.935	4.84	2.362	-5.778	.000	.665
Discipline	3.23	1.909	4.14	2.137	-4.839	.000	.426
Setting limits	3.97	2.130	4.25	2.132	-1.473	.146	.131
Emotional ties	4.94	2.132	6.19	2.039	-6.400	.000	.613
Affection	5.10	1.881	6.54	1.882	-6.775	.000	.765
<b>Poor parenting components</b>							
Conflicts	6.02	2.240	6.29	2.296	-1.141	.258	.118
Physical punishment	4.82	2.132	6.19	2.039	3.783	.000	.672
Illegal substance use	4.15	2.750	3.30	2.558	4.244	.000	.332

Supervision refers to the parents' capacity to control and review their children's activities and to safeguard them from possible dangers or risks. The professionals awarded more positive ratings to the mothers for supervision, although they were still inadequate ( $M = 4.84$ ;  $SD = 2.36$ ), with a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .665$ ). A statistically significant difference in means was found ( $t(63) = -5.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The same applied to the discipline variable, where although the professionals judged there to be significant differences between the mothers and fathers, the mean rating for the mothers was also insufficient ( $M = 4.14$ ;  $SD = 2.13$ ). More specifically, an assessment was made of discipline coherent with the children's actions, their stage in development, and the seriousness of their acts. The result of the t-test was  $t(63) = -4.83$ , which proved to be statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) with a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .426$ ).

However, despite the difference between the mean rating for the mothers ( $M=4.25$ ;  $SD = 2.12$ ) and that of the fathers ( $M=3.97$ ;  $SD=2.13$ ) awarded by the professionals, it was not significant for the setting limits component ( $t(63) = -1.47$ ;  $p = .146$ ) (see Table 4.).

As for the inadequate parenting category, significant differences were deemed to exist by the professionals in the physical punishment component, where the fathers achieved a higher mean rating than the mothers, with  $M = 4.82$  ( $SD = 2.53$ ) for the fathers and  $M = 4.24$  ( $SD = 2.20$ ) for the mothers. This means that the professionals viewed the fathers as resorting to more physical punishment than the mothers, with a statistically significant difference in means of  $t(63) = 3.78$  ( $p < .001$ ) and a medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .672$ ). Physical punishment is construed to mean deliberately exposing the children to physical pain in order to discipline them or modify their behaviour. On the other hand, the professionals gave the mothers a higher mean rating for the conflicts component ( $M = 6.29$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ) than the fathers ( $M = 6.02$ ;  $SD = 2.24$ ), although the difference was not statistically significant ( $p = .25$ ) (see Table 4.).

In the case of the component that dealt with substance use, the professionals awarded the fathers higher ratings than the mothers, with a statistically significant difference in means of  $t(63) = 4.24$  ( $p < .001$ ) although the effect size was small (Cohen's  $d = .332$ ).

### **Differences between the mothers and fathers' coping responses**

To calculate the differences between the mothers and fathers, student's  $t$  tests were conducted. In general, the professionals deem the mothers to have more adequate coping styles than the fathers. This confirms hypotheses 3 and 4.

However, significant differences in the professionals' perceptions of the mothers and fathers were only identified in three variables on coping styles (see Table 5.).

The largest effect size was obtained for the Prior experience of conflicts variable (Cohen's  $d = -.453$ ), whose value was average in size. The difference between the mothers and fathers was significant, with the professionals judging the mothers to have more prior experience of conflicts ( $t(51) = -3.88$  ( $p < .001$ )).

Secondly, the professionals rated the mothers more highly for the Time spent preparing to deal with a problem variable, with significant differences being found between their perceptions of the mothers and fathers ( $t(51) = -2.66$ ; ( $p < .01$ )).

In the case of this variable, the effect size was low (Cohen's  $d = -.350$ ). Thirdly, significant differences were also identified concerning the "perception that possible advantage can be taken of the situation" variable ( $t(51) = -2.10$ ; ( $p < .05$ )). A low effect size was also obtained (Cohen's  $d = -.279$ ).

As for the other variables, the professionals rated the mothers better than the fathers in coping styles. However, the differences were not significant.

**Table 5.** Student's t-test of coping responses for the mothers and fathers

	Fathers		Mothers		t (51)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Prior experience of a conflict	2.08	1.169	2.62	1.191	-3.886	.000	-.453
Anticipation of the problem	2.63	1.172	2.83	1.150	-1.322	.192	-.174
Time spent preparing to deal with the problem	2.15	1.055	2.52	1.057	-2.660	.010	-.350
Perceiving the problem as a threat	2.75	1.135	2.96	1.204	-1.045	.301	-.174
Perceiving the problem as a challenge	1.75	1.027	2.00	1.155	-1.638	.108	-.216
Personal cause	2.53	1.255	2.67	1.244	-.943	.350	-.113
External cause	2.00	1.114	2.00	1.149	.000	1.000	.000
The perception that possible advantage can be taken of the situation	2.24	1.153	2.56	1.146	-2.100	.041	-.279
Solution of the problem	1.84	.925	1.96	.937	-1.287	.204	-.128
Current state of affairs with regard to the problem	1,80	.843	1.83	.803	-.274	.785	-.037

## DISCUSSION

Families who are registered with the Child Protection System tend to be highly vulnerable. There are numerous possible reasons for this vulnerability although two factors should be taken into consideration. On the one hand, parenting styles are often inappropriate or insufficient, with poor supervision, the inadequate application of limits, insufficient communication, etc. Secondly, the parents usually have to deal with associated stressors or problems, and often they lack clear coping methods to overcome situations of this kind (Padilla et al., 2014.; Pérez et al., 2014.).

However, parenting styles and the way families overcome problems are key factors in children's psychological and emotional development. In fact, families are the main agents of socialization for children at an early age (Al-Halabi et al., 2009.; Kumpfer, and Alvarado, 2003.; Negreiros, 2013.; Sánchez-Prieto et al., 2019.). Pa-

renting models may have a direct influence on children's psychological vulnerability, positively or negatively affecting their mental health and well-being and even the emergence of behavioural problems (such as experimentation with drugs or drug use) (Baumrind, 1971.; Kumpfer, 2014.; Jones et al., 2014.; Ren, Hu and Song, 2019.).

Consequently, parental influences are not to be underestimated: quite the opposite, since parents need to foster parenting styles that can act as protective factors for children (Darling and Steinberg, 1993.; Kumpfer and Alvarado, 2003.). Furthermore, the way parents tackle aversive or stressful situations will also affect parent-child interactions (Calero et al., 2017.; Conrad-Hiebner, Paschall and Johnson, 2019. ; Solem, Christophersen and Martinussen, 2011.). Hence, evaluating whether the parenting styles of families attached to the Child Protection System are sufficient or adequate is an important factor in the children's emotional well-being and their psychological development. Likewise, evaluating parents' coping responses to stress is important since it impacts on their interaction with their children (Lee et al., 2018.; Nikolaev, Baranova and Petunova 2016.).

This study compares professional perceptions of the mothers and fathers registered with the Child Protection System. Its aim is to find out whether there is a difference between professional perceptions of the mothers' and fathers' parenting styles and coping responses to parental problems. The professionals are key agents in interventions with families and external observers. This point is relevant because information could be obtained through other assessment techniques (observation methods).

The results that were obtained in this study show that there are significant differences in the professionals' perceptions of the group of mothers and the group of fathers registered with the Child Protection System, especially in terms of parenting. The professionals view the mothers as having more adequate components of parenting skills. More specifically, the mothers are more aware of their children's interests and concerns and they are more involved in their activities. Other studies also indicate that the mothers are more interested in their children's needs (Waizenhofer, Buchanan and Jackson-Newsom, 2004.). Similarly, there is more maternal involvement than paternal involvement according to some reviews (Connell et al., 2007.; van Ryzin, Fosco and Dishion, 2012.).

Studies have shown that a similar affective bond and sense of attachment are possible in both parents during the first months of a new-born baby's life (Figueiredo et al., 2007.). However, according to the perceptions of the professionals in this study, the mothers attached to the Child Protection System forge a greater affective bond and sense of attachment than the fathers. This affective bond and sense of attachment play an important role in child development, influencing a child's sense of self-esteem, self-concept and identity. Jones et al. (2014.) associated a greater affective bond and sense of attachment in the mothers with a greater capacity for

emotional regulation in their children (strongly related to higher levels of anxiety). In the case of communication, the professionals deemed the mothers to communicate more with their children. This coincides with the studies such as the one by Cava et al. (2008), which indicated that children's trust in their parents and communication with them could vary according to the parents' gender.

At the same time, the professionals believed that the fathers tended to supervise their children less than the mothers. Supervision is a protective factor for young people in risk situations (Kumpfer, 2014.; Waizenhofer, Buchanan and Jackson-Newsom, 2004.).

Supervision of everyday practices and activities also fosters a sense of security in children (González, Bakker and Rubiales, 2014.). The study by Cookston (1999.) also confirmed that, in single-parent homes with just a father, there tends to be less supervision. It also added that this tends to lead to the development of problematical behaviours, including delinquency and drug use.

From the ratings awarded by the professionals, the fathers achieved lower means than the mothers in the application of coherent, properly-justified discipline. On the other hand, they achieved higher mean ratings for setting limits, albeit not to a statistically significant level, as well as for the physical punishment component. Nonetheless, other research studies were also identified where the mothers used more physical punishment than the fathers (Lee et al., 2015.). The repercussions of physical punishment are clear (Gershoff et al., 2018.). Studies like that of Mendez et al. (2016.) confirm that using physical punishment with two-year-olds leads to the externalization of behavioural problems one year later. The fathers also obtained higher ratings than the mothers from the professionals for drug use.

Fewer significant differences were identified in the evaluation of their coping responses.

More specifically, the professionals rated the mothers more highly in the prior experience of dealing with conflicts and in the time spent preparing to deal with them. In other words, they regarded the mothers as being more responsible for coping with problems related to their children and with family conflicts. The mothers also devoted more time and more resources to trying to overcome these problems. Hence, the professionals considered the mothers to have more pro-active coping styles, focused on solving the problem in hand, coinciding with coping styles that tend to be more effective (González, Bakker and Rubiales 2014. ; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984.). The results are not coherent with studies like the one by Dabrowska and Pisula (2010.), which showed that the mothers use emotionally-based coping styles, which are ineffective in the long term.

Lastly, through the higher mean ratings that they awarded, the professionals also regarded the mothers as being more capable of appreciating the advantage that can be taken of tackling problem situations. In other words, they were more likely to view problem situations as something that can be benefitted from or as

learning curves. According to González, Bakker and Rubiales (2014.), this type of focus is a more positive one.

As explained earlier, the way parents handle stress can also interfere with their children's emotional development. Parents must therefore be taught to opt for action-based coping styles so as to overcome the problem and eliminate any stress (Lee et al., 2018.; Nikolaev, Baranova and Petunova, 2016.).

It was thus confirmed that, in the opinion of the professionals, differences do exist between both sets of parents: the mothers have better parenting styles and some better coping responses. Even so, the results point to the need for further efforts to be made to involve parents in parenting strategies and to improve their coping responses. The challenge for the Child Protection System is to reinforce parenting and to motivate parents in co-parenting strategies. According to Le et al. (2019.), positive co-parenting helps to strengthen parents' emotional ties with their children and to reduce child behaviour problems. In addition, positive co-parenting will have a positive impact on family dynamics (Panter-Brick et al., 2014.).

Similarly, interventions with families in vulnerable situations should be aimed at overcoming their problems and at equipping them with the right skills and tools to learn to tackle these problems by themselves (Calero et al., 2017.). As explained by English and Graham (2000.), inadequate stress management has an emotional impact that will affect parenting. Consequently, parents should be trained in both parenting skills and coping methods for dealing with stress in order to cope with general everyday problems efficiently.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Child Protection System aims to provide parents with skills that will positively influence the emotional development of their children. This is because coping responses and parenting styles have a direct effect on the development and well-being of children (Calero et al., 2017.). It is thus absolutely essential to identify and analyse the weaknesses of vulnerable families in order to establish which skills and competences they need to learn. In addition, as Karreman et al., (2010.) point out, this analysis should be individually conducted for the mothers and fathers. According to the authors, mothers and fathers do not act in the same way in the family upbringing system. As García and de Guzmán (2017.) explain, the current trend is for mothers to be the main caregivers, while fathers play a particularly important role in discipline. With the above goal in mind, this study analyses the differences between the parenting and coping responses of the mothers and fathers registered with the Child Protection System, as perceived by a group of professionals.

The parenting styles and coping responses of the parents attached to the Child Protection System were viewed as being deficient by the professionals. The latter

also identified differences between the mothers and fathers in parenting styles and coping responses. In the first case, the professionals from the Child Protection System rated the mothers more highly in adequate parenting components like: a) involvement with their children, b) affection, c) emotional ties, d) communication with their children, e) supervision and f) discipline. On the other hand, they believed that the fathers opted for more physical punishment and that they had a greater tendency to use illegal substances. With regard to the parents' coping responses, significant differences were identified in three components of coping responses: a) prior experience of conflicts, b) time spent preparing to deal with the problem and c) the perception that the situation could be used to good advantage. The professionals awarded higher ratings to the mothers in all three components. Hence, in the opinion of the professionals from the Child Protection System, the mothers' and fathers' parenting styles and coping methods are insufficient, with more shortcomings in the case of the fathers. This reinforces the main idea that techniques should be developed aimed at training mothers and fathers in parenting and at teaching them strategies to deal with stress effectively. It also highlights the need to place special emphasis on training for the fathers registered with the Child Protection System.

As Panter-Brick et al. (2014.) explain, adequate co-parenting has a positive impact on child development and it positively affects family dynamics. In fact, as demonstrated by Karreman et al. (2010.), co-parenting contributes more effectively to child development than individual parenting practices by just the father or mother. In addition (Le et al., 2019.), when both parents take advantage of training in co-parenting, better family functioning is also demonstrated. In terms of the policy-related and management implications, it is important to take into account that fathers tend to have the biggest shortcomings. Tailored training should therefore be provided to promote an awareness of the importance of parenting, coping with stress, and taking advantage of training sessions (Scourfield et al., 2016.; Wilson et al., 2016.).

## Limitations

By using key informants (professionals), a first-hand insight can be gained into the reality of the situation under analysis (Galeano, 2003.), identifying common shortcomings and deciding how to focus interventions. This external perspective is a source of information that must be promoted, as in this study.

However, the study should include a more extensive participant sampling and should control for gender bias in the evaluation of mothers and fathers. In subsequent research, the professionals' perceptions must be combined with the assessments by the mothers and fathers. This combination will offer a more holistic

vision of the parenting styles and coping responses of the parents registered with the Child Protection System. From the results, it will be possible to establish what needs the parents have from the perspective of the mothers and fathers themselves, and what measures must therefore be taken to meet these needs.

The sample that was used is representative of the region where the study was conducted. However, to generalize the results, quota sampling should be used, involving different professionals throughout the whole of Spain.

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## **PERCEPCIJA STRIČNJAKA O RAZLIKAMA U RODITELJSKIM STILOVIMA I NAČINU SUOČAVANJA SA STRESOM OČEVA I MAJKI REGISTRIRANIH U SUSTAVU ZA ZAŠTITU DJECE**

### **SAŽETAK**

Obitelji registrirane u sustavu za zaštitu djece obično imaju slabe roditeljske vještine koje zauzvrat vode do neadekvatnih načina za suočavanje sa stresom. To ih čini jako ranjivim obiteljima. Slabije roditeljske vještine rašireniji su među očevima nego među majkama. Identificiranjem i analizom tih nedostataka, mogu se razviti specifične strategije za njihovo otklanjanje. Cilj je ovog istraživanja analizirati razlike između roditeljskih stilova i načina suočavanja sa stresom majki i očeva registriranih u sustavu za zaštitu djece na temelju opažanja stručnjaka iz spomenutog sustava. Transverzalno istraživanje uključilo je percepcije stručnjaka zaposlenih u sustavu za zaštitu djece. Rezultati pokazuju kako stručnjaci smatraju da postoje značajne razlike između roditeljskih stilova i načina za suočavanje sa stresom majki i očeva. Smatra se da majke pokazuju više komponenti prikladnog roditeljstva, dok su očevi češće koristili tjelesno kažnjavanje. U pogledu metoda za suočavanje sa stresom, stručnjaci su uočili da majke imaju više prethodnih iskustava sa sukobima, provode više vremena pripremajući se za rješavanje problema i imaju izraženiji osjećaj sposobnosti za moguće iskorištavanje situacije. Rezultati ukazuju na potrebu za jačanjem i specijalizacijom strategija osposobljavanja roditelja. Razlog tome je što suroditeljstvo ima pozitivan učinak na razvoj djeteta i potiče funkcioniranje obitelji.

**Ključne riječi:** sustav za zaštitu djece; roditeljski stilovi; načini suočavanja sa stresom; majke i očevi; percepcija stručnjaka



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