

**Title: The home as a privileged context and object of systemic assessment and intervention practices with multi-challenged families**

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Our communication draws from our work with the Integrated Family Assessment and Intervention Model (IFAIM). It is based in our experience of developing, implementing and evaluating a corresponding training program for Portuguese interdisciplinary teams working in family support centers.

Assessment and intervention with multi-challenged families, particularly poor families with at-risk, maltreatment or neglected children can be quite complex and demanding. In-home family-focused services are often recommended for such cases, either focused or multi-systemic and integrative ones.

Working with multi-challenged families in their homes presents many advantages but also challenges, different from the ones therapists have to deal with in traditional settings, and for which specific competencies are required.

Some studies indicate that the relationship between workers and multi-challenged poor families is frequently characterized by misunderstandings and incomprehension. While the former may be primarily concerned about satisfying basic and material needs and increasing resources, practitioners are often more focused on relational dimensions and structural changes. It is our consideration that the home may be the proper context for a useful integration and fit of these different, but inter-related needs. If one assumes that in cases of multiple challenges and particularly in contexts of poverty, the family's physical, environmental and social contexts create significant constraints and opportunities in regard to the dynamics of its internal relationships, its social inclusion and relation with external systems then, addressing each one of these

dimensions, should be accompanied by an integrative systemic understanding of how other areas of the family's life may be affected, and either improved or additionally constrained, by changes in one given dimension. Working in the family's home may, on the one hand, help practitioners better understand the family's perspectives of their needs and concerns and, on the other, better position them to invite the family to anticipate and rehearse relational/structural changes which may be facilitated or, on their turn, facilitate changes projects with a material/instrumental focus. Practitioners may also find it easier to co-construct a useful systemic and integrative understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with the multiple challenges present in the family's life when working in its home.

In this sense, the home may be considered as a privileged instrument and resource to facilitate the emergence of meaningful and relevant information for assessment and intervention with multi-challenged families. Working in the families' homes may also facilitate the identification and amplification of their competencies and strengths as well as their recruitment to address more vulnerable aspects of the families' life.

Professional support in the family's home may also be needed when the home constitutes a significant object of the intervention (as in situations of poor housing conditions or organization). It may also represent an appropriate choice of context to work with hard-to-reach families.

In all of these cases professionals must master skills which allow them to facilitate the family's involvement, to take advantage of the home context in regard to assessment and intervention purposes and to avoid the risks associated with this choice of context, such as those related to boundaries' dilution.

The training program of practitioners to implement the Integrated Family Assessment and Intervention Model is outcome orientated and focused on the acquisition and development of distinct sets of theoretical and practical skills, the latter being evaluated with a corresponding set of rating scales. It includes components which target practitioners' skills to appropriately take advantage of the opportunities and minimize the risks of choosing the home as an object or facilitating context for intervention. They include the following abilities:

- a) To kindly ask the family's authorization to move and act in its home
- b) To clearly state the visit's objective

- c) To avoid substituting the family or becoming diluted, maintaining a balanced complementary position
- d) To compliment something in the family's home or some positive event in the its members' interactions and to make social conversation
- e) To greet and bid farewell to the family in a friendly way
- f) To share the control of the session with the family while keeping a focus on the objectives.

IFAIM' training program also targets skills concerning related to the use of the home environment and the family's actions in it as instrument and resource for the emergence of meaningful information concerning assessment and intervention objectives. The following skills are included:

- g) To help the parents deal with the children's behavior in order to maintain their authority and control during the interactions
- h) To reflect back possible positive aspects of the family members' interactions and to question them about associated meanings
- i) To positively reframe fragile dimensions of the organization of the family relationships in the home or of the material/physical organization of the home and its impact on family relations
- j) To discuss with the family how the organization of their home influences or is a reflection of the organization of the family's relations.

IFAIM's training program is currently being evaluated in a doctoral research project and although preliminary results indicate there are some vulnerabilities that need to be addressed in the future, and adjustments to be made to the training process, there is some evidence that practitioners' have improved their skills to conduct in-home sessions during the course of training.

Future research is welcomed and will be developed in regard to the evaluation of in-home sessions' skills and their relation to different systemic assessment and intervention practices, the improvement of teaching and supervision methods in regard to in-home work skills as well as the distinctive characteristics and advantages of

conducting assessment and intervention processes with multi-challenged families in their homes.

We hope to share some of these projects and their results with you in the future. Thank you for your attention.