

# Open for a trusting relationship: Portuguese Parents representations regarding Day Care

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## **Abstract**

It is well established that parental involvement is a key factor for the effectiveness of Day Care practices. However, in Portugal, parental participation in Day Care is mostly passive. Indeed, parents are rarely invited to take part in school planning or being active partners in activities. Thus, we decided to collect parents' opinions on Day Care aims, practices and effectiveness. For that purpose, a questionnaire was developed and applied to 170 parents (80% private schools, 62% first born, 57% girls). Our findings indicate that parents from this sample value: affectional relationships, good facilities, good material conditions/spaces, and adequate educational practices. Furthermore, parents consider Day Care as an educational



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setting that promotes child development, and they wish to have an open and trusting relationship with teachers. Factors such as type of school (private vs. public), and parents gender affected parents opinions. Our results suggest that parents aim to have greater involvement in their child's school and wish an open communication with teachers. These findings were later shared with teachers. Teachers expressed their surprise with some of the results and stated that in future they will create more opportunities to involve parents.

**Key words:** Day Care, parents, parents-school relationship, parents representations

**Abertos para estabelecer uma relação de confiança: estudo sobre as representações dos pais portugueses acerca da Creche**

**Resumo**

A investigação tem indicado que o envolvimento dos pais é um fator crítico para a eficácia das práticas em creche. No entanto, em Portugal, a participação dos pais no dia-a-dia das creches é, na maioria dos casos, passiva. Embora sejam dadas informações e convites para a participação nas iniciativas realizadas na creche, os pais raramente são convidados a participar do planeamento ou a ter um papel ativo na dinamização das atividades na creche. Quisemos, então, investigar as opiniões dos pais sobre os objetivos, práticas, relação pais-educadores e o impacto da creche no desenvolvimento da criança. Desta forma, desenvolveu-se um questionário aplicado a 170 pais (80% de escolas particulares, 62% de primogénitos, 57% de meninas). Os nossos resultados indicam que os pais valorizam: relacionamentos afetivos, boas instalações, boas condições / espaços, materiais e práticas educativas adequadas. Adicionalmente, os pais consideram a creche como um ambiente educacional que promove o desenvolvimento da criança e, portanto, querem ter um relacionamento aberto e de confiança com os educadores. Os fatores como o estatuto da escola (privado versus público) e o género dos pais afetaram as suas opiniões. Os nossos resultados sugerem que os pais procuram ter um maior envolvimento na escola dos seus filhos e desejam uma comunicação mais aberta com os educadores. Estes resultados foram discutidos mais tarde com dois grupos de vinte educadores, em sessões de focus group independentes. Os educadores expressaram a sua surpresa com alguns dos resultados e afirmaram que no futuro vão criar mais oportunidades para envolver os pais

**Palavras-chave:** Creche, pais, relação pais-escola, representações dos pais

**Ouverts pour établir une relation de confiance: une étude sur les représentations des parents portugais au sujet des crèches**

**Résumé**

La recherche montre que la participation des parents influence l'efficacité des pratiques en crèche. Cependant, au Portugal, la participation des parents dans le quotidien des crèches est passive. Bien que les parents soient informés et invités à participer aux initiatives mises en place dans les crèches, ils sont rarement invités à participer à la planification scolaire ou à

avoir un rôle actif dans les écoles. Donc, nous voulions en savoir plus sur les opinions des parents au sujet des objectifs, pratiques et relations avec les parents et l'impact de la crèche sur le développement de l'enfant. Ainsi, nous avons développé un questionnaire appliqué à 170 parents (80% dans des écoles privées, 62% de premiers-nés, 57% de filles). Nos résultats indiquent que les parents valorisent: les relations affectives, les bonnes installations, les bonnes conditions/espaces, le matériel et pratiques éducatives appropriées. De plus, les parents considèrent la crèche comme une ambiance éducationnelle qui favorise le développement des enfants et, donc, ils veulent avoir une relation ouverte et de confiance avec les éducateurs. Les facteurs comme le *statut* de l'école (privée *versus* publique) et le sexe des parents influencent leurs opinions. Nos résultats suggèrent que les parents veulent plus participer dans l'école de leurs enfants et ils souhaitent une communication plus ouverte avec les éducateurs. Ces résultats ont été discutés plus tard avec deux groupes de vingt éducateurs, en sessions de *focus group* indépendantes. Les éducateurs ont exprimé leur surprise face à certains résultats et ont affirmé que, dans l'avenir, ils allaient instaurer plus d'occasions de faire participer les parents.

**Mots-clés:** Crèche, parents, relation parents-école, représentations des parents

## OVERVIEW OF DAY CARE IN PORTUGAL

In Portugal, "Center-based Child Care" or Day Care provides care and learning experience for children between 4 months and 3 years of age. Portuguese Day Care are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security, unlike the rest of Portuguese educational services that are under responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Thus, according to Portuguese law Day Care is a social response for children whose parents work or for some reason and cannot provide them care during a certain period of time a-day. For that reason, there are no state schools for children under three years of age in Portugal, only private (paid by parents) or semi-private (partially funded by the Portuguese State and many with a religious background). Moreover, there is no official curriculum for Day Care. The general legislation includes aims and missions of Day Care, general guidelines, and finally specifications on safety, building, hygiene and others.

The absence of national curriculum can be an opportunity for each school to create their own identity, to innovate, and to plan according to their population (e.g., culturally, socially). However, there is a lack of guidance to support school's efforts on this behalf. Another problem with Day Care being under the responsibility of the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security is that Day preschool are in a higher disadvantage when it comes to teacher career opportunities in comparison with Pre-school teachers that work for the Ministry of Education. Thus, many well trained and experienced preschool teachers prefer to work in kindergartens with children above 3 years old.

Nevertheless, Day Care services are required by families, and the coverage rate increased from 5.8% in 1984 (Vasconcelos, 2008) to 30.2% in 2008 (INE, 2010). Indeed, about 70% of

Portuguese mothers with children less than 2 years old are employed (INE, 2010). However, these services can be very expensive. Semi-private or state funded Day Cares may request fees around 300 euros a month, but some families pay a lot less according to their income and number of children. Private schools in main cities can be very expensive for Portuguese standards, requesting up to 500 (or more) euros a month (higher than Portuguese minimal salary).

According to the National Committee of Education, funded early educational services are still insufficient in number (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2011). Trying to provide a solution to this problem, and guided by economic reasons, a recent legislation increased the ratio of children per adult in Portuguese Day Care (Portaria n.º 262/2011). For children under one year old, one non-trained educator to take care of 10 infants is allowed. Two adults (one trained teacher and one assistant without pedagogical training) can take charge of a class of 14 toddlers between 12 and 24 months or 18 toddlers between 24 and 36 months.

If only 30% of the children, under 3 years old, attend Day Care services where are others when parents work? Traditionally, grandmothers help in the task of taking care of their grandchildren. Other families use private nanny services that receive children in their own homes (generally 4 to 6 children for one adult) or nannies work on the families' houses (much more expensive). Most of these practices are illegal and not supervised. Nevertheless, over the last decade, there was been an effort to provide some training and supervision to nannies and to help them to achieve legality. After training and systematic coaching, nannies in these programs achieved good quality (Marques, 2010; Pimentel, Carreira, Gandres & Barros, 2012).

In concerning the services quality, studies performed in Portugal (in the Oporto Metropolitan area, Setúbal and Lisbon) indicate very good to poor quality in Day Care services and in most cases Portuguese Day Care have good quality (Barros, & Aguiar, 2010; Tadeu, 2012). One major problem is the lack use of open spaces whereas Portugal has a pleasant climate. Also, there is abundant use of plastic or synthetic materials determined by Portuguese legal norms (Tadeu, 2012).

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

It is well established that very good practices in Day Care have a positive impact on infants' development and well-being (e.g., NICHD, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg, et al., 1999). Quality of early education and care is related to higher: quantity and quality of teacher's training and experience, positive teacher-child relationships and positive parent-provider relationships (e.g., NICHD, 1996; NICHD, 2001; Sousa, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his "ecological" approach of human development underlie the importance of coherence among children life contexts (like home and school). Owen and colleagues (2000) found that partnership between parents and providers predicted more sensitive, supportive and stimulating interactions with children. Others studies indicate that parent-teacher communication

(Endsley & Minish, 1991) and mutual support (Van IJzendoorn et al., 1998) affected the quality of Day Care centers.

Despite these results, some Day Care teachers report daily difficulties in interacting with parents (Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). In Portugal, parents report difficulties and prefer to not share their concerns with teachers (Fuertes, 2010). Increasing the communication difficulties between parents and teachers, some Portuguese Day Care do not allow parents to enter in the classes rooms or to walk the child to their class. In fact, in these settings parents have to leave their children at the lobby with school staff. Thus, these parents have no contact with preschool teachers except with a scheduled appointment. Additionally, many preschool teachers have lack of training in working with families (CNE, 2011).

Little investigation has been produced on Portuguese parents representations regarding Day Care. One quantitative study indicated that Portuguese parents reported high levels of satisfaction, even in schools with low quality (Assis & Fuertes, 2014; Barros, 2007). In this study, the authors claim that more qualitative information is necessary to understand parents satisfaction.

### **Our study**

To study parents' representations concerning Day Care, aims, benefits, quality and parents' participation in school, a questionnaire was applied to 170 mothers or fathers. Subsequently, the results were debated with pre-school teachers. Learning more about parents' representations is essential to promote teachers and parents' collaboration and positive interactions.

### **METHODS**

In order to investigate parents' representations regarding Day Care aims and practices, a preview qualitative study was performed. In this study, 20 parents were interviewed about their knowledge, preferences, choices and concerning with Day Care. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes and the same questions were applied in all interviews. In this qualitative study, interviews were transcribed and analyzed by content analysis.

The parents opinions were used to organize a questionnaire with four main categories:

- Representations about Day Care aims and practices;
- Preferences in choosing their children's Day Care;
- Relationship with Day Care teachers;

- Factors related with Day Care quality.

The questionnaire was tested in a preliminary sample of 40 parents and was statistically validated. Factors with less statistical relevance were excluded and 25 items were gathered in a final questionnaire ( $Z = \pm 2.62$ ; Alpha Cronbach = .859).

The scores ranged from 1 (not relevant) to 10 (totally relevant) and 4 items were presented in reverse. All questionnaires with contradictory scores in reverse items were excluded from the study. Other reasons for excluding questionnaires were missing information or mistakes in filling. A total of 30 questionnaires were excluded from the study.

The information was collected by an independent researcher. The researcher had no previous professional or personal relation within the schools where the study was developed. All parents were informed about the research aims and participation rights. Confidentiality was guaranteed. Parents agreed to participate in this research and signed an informed consent form. About 20% of the parents rejected to take part in the study.

Concerns about confidentiality were carefully attended. Parents answered the questionnaires in private rooms and alone (one parent at a time). After answering to the questionnaire, parents were instructed to introduce the questionnaire into a packet, close it, and insert into a sealed box. The box was only opened after all questionnaires had been collected in each school. One female researcher supervised and conducted all the data collection.

## **SAMPLE**

The participants were 170 families (134 mothers and 36 fathers) recruited in 5 Center-based Child Care facilities (3 private schools and 2 funded schools) in the Lisbon District.

Infant ages ranged from 8 to 32 months old ( $M$  age = 21.46; 72 girls; 98 boys, 112 first born) living with their mothers ( $M$  age = 33.31 years;  $SD$  = 4.45) and their fathers ( $M$  age = 35.59 years;  $SD$  = 5.49).

All parents completed primary education (9 years) and a large majority had completed high school (12 years). Participants were primarily Portuguese Caucasian from middle-class socio-economic backgrounds (from very low middle class to upper middle class) living in urban areas.

## RESULTS

### Parents agreement on items

From the 25 possible Items, parents reported an agreement of more than 9-points (10 points maximum – totally agree) in nine statements (see table 1):

Table 1 – Mean and standard deviations of parents scores in items with more than 9-points on average

	M	SD
Item 19 - The Day Care offers a suitable affective environment together with good facilities and good material conditions	9.54	1.212
Item 24 - I value my relationship with my Day Care and I hope to have an open and trusting relationship	9.54	1.137
Item 15 - The ratio of children per classroom and per adult is an important factor for the welfare and development of children in Day Care	9.52	2.729
Item 3 – The well-being of my child in the Day Care depends on how he/she is respected and treasured	9.50	1.302
Item 18 - I am worried about the quality of my child's Day Care and I stay informed	9.37	1.451
Item 2 - I consider it important that the teachers listen to and respect my opinions as a parent	9.36	1.478
Item 1 - I choose to introduce my child to Day Care because I believe that Day Care practices are often beneficial to children's development.	9.24	1.311
Item 4 - I prefer to have trained teachers take of care my infants than non-trained staff	9.18	1.665

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Item 22 – Increased educative projects and planned activities are important factors in raising the quality of Day Care	9.14	1.5 92
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Although the items in table I are presented in order of preference, there are no significant differences in parents scores since the range of differences is low (the largest difference is 0.4 on a scale of 0-10 points for item 19 and 22).

The statements with lower scores were “If I could, I would have stayed at home to take care of my child” ( $M= 5.65$ ;  $SD= 3.57$ ) and “I wish my son had stayed with relatives or with a private nanny” ( $M=2.34$ ;  $SD=2.94$ ).

#### **Impact of demographic factors on parents opinion**

Several factors like child gender, child age, parents’ age, number of siblings, parents’ education, parents profession, localization, curriculum were analyzed and none had a significant impact on parents’ opinions. Only the type of day Care and parents’ gender affected the results.

#### **Differences in parents opinion according to the type of Day Care**

There were clear differences in parents’ opinions according to the type of school. Indeed, parents whose children attended private Day Cares were more concerned with the ratio of children per class than parents whose children attended semi-private Day Care (state funded schools) [ $M$  for private school= 9.64;  $M$  for funded schools = 7.86;  $t(166)=4.693$ ,  $p<.001$  item 9]. Parents from private Day Cares scored higher than other parents that Day Care promotes child development and well-being [ $M$  for private school= 9.37;  $M$  for funded schools = 7.85;  $t(166) = 3.546$ ;  $p<.005$  item 20]. Moreover, these parents gave higher scores to the statement that Good facilities, safety and hygiene are major contributors for Day Care quality. Parents whose children attended funded Day Cares scored higher than other parents that school profits infant’s socialization [ $M$  for private school= 7.18;  $M$  for funded schools = 8.37;  $t(165) = -2.591$ ;  $p<.05$  item 10] and tolerance (acceptance for diversity) [ $M$  for private school= 6.81;  $M$  for funded schools = 8.45;  $t(163) = -3.243$ ;  $p<.005$  item 14]. Furthermore, parents from funded Day Cares would score higher than other parents that they would prefer that their infant stayed with relatives or with a private nanny [ $M$  for private school= 1.94;  $M$  for funded schools = 3.05;  $t(165) = -2.342$ ;  $p<.05$  para o item 17].

#### **Differences in parents opinions according to parents gender**

In this study mothers and fathers had different views on Day Care. Mothers scored higher than fathers in item “I desire that teachers listen to and respect my opinion” [ $M$  for mothers=



9.57;  $M$  for fathers= 8.80;  $t$  (157)=-2.533,  $p<.05$  for item 2)]. Moreover, mothers scored higher than fathers that “Educative projects and planned activities are important factors in raising the quality of Day Care” [ $M$  for mothers= 9.64;  $M$  for fathers= 7.88,  $t$  (156)=-2.725,  $p<.01$  for item 22]. Finally, mothers were more likely to believe that Day Care contributes in children’s development and well-being [ $M$  for mothers= 9.29;  $M$  for fathers= 8.36;  $t$  (157)=-2.00,  $p<.05$  for item 20].

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The first two years of children life are marked by sudden and major developmental changes (motor, cognitive, socio-emotional and language) together with neuronal complexification (reviewed in Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These gains depend largely on the experiences provided to the child, as well as environmental factors (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). In this process, Day Care plays an important role. When programs have high quality, Day Care will benefit the child’s development, autonomy, socialization and psychological well-being (e.g., Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney & Owen, 2007; Burchinal, Roberts, Riggins, Zeisel & Bryant, 2002; Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Alva, Bender, Bryant et al, 2007; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005, 2007; Levental, Brooks-Gunn, McCorninck & McCarton, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan et al., 2001). It seems that the participants of our study were aware of these benefits. Indeed, parents were aware of this relevance, evidenced by them considering that Day Care can be advantageous for children’s development and well-being.

According to the literature, the quality of early education and care is related to higher: quantity and quality of teacher’s training and experience, positive teacher-child relationships and positive parent-provider relationships (e.g., NICHD, 1996; NICHD, 2001; Sousa, 2009). In our study, parents expressed their opinion according to these factors. Indeed, they preferred trained teachers to non-trained staff. Concerning teacher-child relationships, parents valued a suitable affective environment and believed that their child’s well-being in Day Care depends on being respected and treasured. Finally, they valued their relationship with the Day Cares staff, and desire an open and trusting relationship where they opinions are respected.

Contrary to most studies where methods derive from a model or theoretical framework, we decided to organize the questionnaire based on parents’ views. With this in mind, we started by interviewing parents to organize the questionnaire, whilst attempting to not bias their opinions. Perhaps for this reason the scores of some items are so high (above nine points) and there are high levels of agreement. It may be that parents are identifying their opinions with items because they were achieved on first hand other parents’ opinions.

Interestingly, mothers and fathers have different concerns regarding Day Care. Previous research found differences in mothers’ and fathers’ parenting styles, child care responsibilities, and attachment (e.g., Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers, & Wang, 2001; Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992; Fuertes, Faria, Lopes-dos-Santos, & Beeghly,

2016). Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982). Some studies indicate that Portuguese mothers tend to spend more time with their child and therefore provide more care (e.g., hygiene, feeding, taking to school, playing) when compared to fathers (Faria, Fuertes, & Lopes dos Santos, 2014a, 2014b). In this study, it was mothers rather than fathers that considered Day Care as an educational setting with a positive impact on children's development and well-being. Furthermore, mothers were more aware that educative projects and planned activities are important factors in raising the quality of Day Care. On one hand, Mothers were more optimistic about Day Care benefits than fathers. On the other hand, mothers claimed to want to be heard and to have their opinions respected. We wondered if mothers took their child more often to school and therefore had more opportunities to observe teacher's work and school activities. In fact, one major limitation of our study is that we have no information regarding what parent leaves and picks up their child from school.

Although our study is not about parents' opinions about their children's Day Cares, and instead is about their general perception about Day Care as an educative caregiving setting, nevertheless it seems that parents' experience in Day Care affected their opinion. Indeed, our findings indicate differences in parents' perspective about Day Care between according to school type (private or state funded schools).

Probably because social and cultural diversity is higher in semi-private or funded school, parents whose children attended these schools believed that this experience profits their child's socialization and increase their social tolerance (acceptance of others). In contrast, parents from private schools were more likely to believe that Day Care promotes child development and well-being. In turn, parents whose children attended semi-private schools (state funded) if they had the opportunity were more like to choose another child care for their children or stayed with them at home. In sum, it is clear in this study that parents from private and parents from semi-private schools have very different representations about Day Care. Parents from private schools have more possibility when it comes to choosing their child's school (choosing a school according to their beliefs and interests). In turn, private schools probably are more concerned with meeting parents' requirements. We believe that more research is necessary to better understand this factor, and subsequently the degree to which parents are satisfied with both types of school.

These results were presented to two separate groups, with 20 Day Care teachers each, and discussed using focus group methodology. Most professionals were surprised by the results, particularly, with respect to parents' representations concerning the significance of Day Care has in their child's development and well-being. More specifically, professionals did not expect that parents would:

1. Appreciate Day Care as an educational setting,
2. Believe Day Care is beneficial for their child's development;

3. Value teachers practices, planning and training;
4. Wish to engage in open and trusting relationships with teachers and want their opinion to be heard and considered;
5. Be worried about adult-child relationships.

We hope that this work will offer some perspective into understanding a parents main concerns and expectations regarding Day Care. The information collected can be used by teachers to enhance their relationship with parents. According to past studies, these relationships are the most important (Tyler & Horner, 2008). Thus, one may speculate that if teachers know that families respect and value their work, they may feel more confident to communicate and to share some responsibilities with parents, as well as being increasingly open to hearing parents worries.

Finally, researchers and teachers agreed on performing focus groups gathering teachers and parents to discuss strategies to improve mutual knowledge, communication, and help (Tomlin, Sturm & Koch, 2009). It is important to note that children learn to value their family and school experiences when teachers and parents establish a constructive and trusting relationships, and when teachers incorporate the materials and activities of family life within the school context (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995).

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Although this study provides insight into Portuguese parents' representations about Day Care, it has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The number of school participants is limited for a quantitative study. Our sample does not represent Portuguese society with respect to parents' education, SES or cultural diversity. Moreover, there is a larger participation of mothers rather than fathers.

Also, in future studies, the questionnaire needs improvement particularly because some sentences introduce more than one interpretative dimension. Despite these limitations, it is our hope that our study provided a small step forward in the understanding of parents' representations about Day Care and contributed for a broad cultural research about the relationship between parents and early childhood education services. In Sameroff's (2010, p. 7) words, child development is "both child and parent, but also neurons and neighborhoods, synapses and schools, proteins and peers, genes and governments".

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