

# Providing a “life project” for young children

## Implementation of a state-of-the-art practice<sup>1</sup>

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Recent studies have emphasized the importance of a secure emotional bond with a parent or other significant adult to the child’s personal and social development.<sup>3</sup> This bond or attachment is formed through a series of comforting exchanges wherein a parent figure responds appropriately and consistently to the child’s needs, beginning from birth. If, on the other hand, the adult has difficulty recognizing the child’s needs or rejects or ignores them, the child’s development—or “life project” — can be compromised.

### A life environment that promotes child development

Continuity of care for a young child can be affected by individual factors (e.g., stress, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence) and social factors (e.g., poverty, lack of social support). These difficulties can hinder the creation of a reassuring emotional bond, because they generate stresses that distract the parents’ attention from the child. The child’s life project may be further compromised if the child protection system cannot step in and assist the parents when necessary. Child welfare workers also need to facilitate the child’s emotional attachment to a parent figure by ensuring that the child has a permanent, stable life environment in the birth family or foster family. With this in mind, the Centre jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire (CJM–IU) implemented a pilot project in 2001, called *À chaque enfant son projet de vie permanent* [a permanent life project for every child]. The program is for all children from birth to 5 years of age whose life project, in the case-workers’ estimation, is in danger of being compromised. This assessment is based on the history of the placement, the family situation, and the parent’s ability and willingness to take care of the child.

### Effectiveness and speed

The general objectives of the project are to:

- unerringly detect situations where the child’s life project is in danger of being compromised,
- quickly decide between keeping the child with his or her birth family (with caseworker support) or placing the child in a foster family or an institution,
- assist in the development of parenting skills when the child remains with the birth family.

Toward a structured approach

The program is designed to quickly detect children at risk and to implement an effective intervention. Intervention objectives are to:

- detect, within 20 days of the file’s being assigned, any situation where the child’s life project is in danger of being compromised,
- use benchmarks to identify, within 45 days, the family’s problems and the factors that contribute to these problems and then analyse the situation,
- formally set out the program’s intentions with respect to the child’s or the parents’ life project,
- draw up an intervention plan,
- systematically follow up on any change in the situation,
- react quickly when necessary,
- describe the situation articulately in court so that the legal authorities can understand the reasons for the recommendations and rule on the basis of credible evidence,
- develop knowledge of the issue by analysing the information gathered (data monitoring).

## From assessment to intervention

Caseworkers use different tools to assess clients and develop an intervention approach. These tools include the *Grille de dépistage pour les situations à risque de dérive du "projet de vie"* [a chart used to detect situations where the life project is in danger of being compromised],<sup>4</sup> the *Guide d'évaluation des capacités parentales* (based on a parenting assessment guide developed by Dr. Paul Steinhauer)<sup>5</sup> and, if necessary, the Q-Set<sup>6</sup> or Q-Sort<sup>7</sup> to assess a parent's sensitivity to the needs of the infant or child.

Caseworkers also use intervention guides that deal with the development of parenting skills, the development of the child's identity, the emotional bond, and making decisions to remove a child from the birth family. In addition, a "book of life" for children is being developed, as well as early stimulation workshops and activities to develop parenting skills.

If it is decided that the child should remain with the birth family, intervention focuses on improving parenting skills. If it is necessary to move the child to a foster family, a suitable placement must be found as quickly as possible and intervention focuses on supporting the new family placement.

## Conclusion

*À chaque enfant son projet de vie permanent* is structured to effectively detect risk situations and allow quick intervention to provide young children with a stable, permanent life project. After the pilot project ended, the program was extended in 2004 to all the teams serving the CJM-IU clientele under six years of age. An evaluation of its implementation will be completed in 2005.

- 1 This information sheet was peer reviewed by experts in the field of child welfare.
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- 3 Paquette, F., & LaFrenière, P.J. (1994). Relation mère-enfant, cultures et socialisation. In *Revue Canadienne de psycho-éducation*, 23(1), 17–41.
- 4 Paquette, F. (2004). *À chaque enfant son projet de vie permanent. Un programme d'intervention*. Direction des services professionnels et de la recherche. Montreal: Centre jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire.
- 5 Paquette, F., Rainville, S., Gauthier, L., Desjardins, de Rancourt, L. & Bouchard, L. (2003). *Adaptation du Guide d'évaluation des capacités parentales de Steinhauer*. Montreal: Centre jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire.
- 6 Waters, E. (1987). Attachment Q-set (Version 3). Retrieved December 6, 2004 from [www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/measures/content/aqs\\_items.pdf](http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/measures/content/aqs_items.pdf)
- 7 Pederson, D.R., Moran, G., & Bento, S. (1999). *Maternal Behaviour Q-sort Manual*. Version 3.1. London, ON: University of Western Ontario.

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