

CHAPTER NINE

Research-Practice Partnership in Developing Services for Neglect

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INTRODUCTION

Child neglect constitutes the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in Canada, as well as throughout North America and Europe. Child neglect is not only the form of maltreatment most reported and investigated (Trocmé, MacLaurin, Fallon, Daciuk, Billingsley, Tourigny et al. 2001; Trocmé et al. 2005), but also characteristic of the substantial numbers of families receiving community and education assistance. For example, Miron and Lacharité (2003) conducted an extensive study of hundreds of daycare workers in Quebec and noted that they reported that 3-7% of all children under their care had displayed problems directly linked to parental neglect (significant lack of proper hygiene or clothing, medical care, and guidance or stimulation). Within the context of daycare services, issues of this type are at least five times more frequent compared to other forms of child maltreatment. As such, it can be concluded that, in Canada, efforts to protect children who are, or who are at risk of being, victims of maltreatment rely mainly on the prevention, detection, reporting, evaluation, and targeting of child neglect by social care organizations.

Child neglect is mainly defined as the failure to meet the basic needs of children, a chronic failure to protect them from threats to their physical and psychological well-being, and a major lack in providing parental supervision and meeting educational needs.

The issue of child neglect plays a paradoxical role within the field of youth protection for two reasons. First, in wealthy, developed countries such as Canada, a social problem of this type conveys an embarrassing

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Suggested citation:

Lacharité, C., & Fafard, G. (2011). Research-practice partnership in developing services for neglect. In S. Léveillé, N. Trocmé, I. Brown, & C. Chamberland (Eds.), *Research-community partnerships in child welfare* (pp. 193-208). Toronto, ON: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare/ Centre d'excellence pour la protection et le bien-être des enfants (www.cecw-cepb.ca).

acknowledgment of the failure of social programs to provide access to proper living conditions for families and to promote and sustain responsible parenting. Second, child neglect is the least understood form of maltreatment because it is the least studied (Becker et al. 1995; Dufour and Chamberland 2003; Éthier and Lacharité 2000; Gaudin 1993; Klapper and Lacharité 2003; Sullivan, 2000). Other “new” forms of maltreatment (psychological abuse, exposure to domestic violence) appear to be a stronger focus for researchers and practitioners (Dubowitz 2007; McSherry 2007). Decision-makers and practitioners in the youth protection system constantly have to incorporate services to address an ever-increasing number of cases of child neglect; yet, there remains a discrepancy between the logic behind the services and the characteristic complexity of the issues. Eliminating the paradoxical nature of the situation (notably by developing more effective programs, either preventive or curative, to address child neglect) requires a better understanding of child and parental adaptation to personal, social, and economic hardships, as well as an increased knowledge of the institutional and social challenges brought about by such issues within our western society.

Another major point to help understand this paradoxical situation is that child neglect, as a social issue, is particularly difficult to grasp within a strongly “mediatic” society such as ours (Lacharité 2005, 2006). This issue does not mainly rest on broadcast *events* conveyed in words and images meant to arouse emotional response (within the public and among government decision-makers) and on the impression that there are specialists in place who will provide concrete solutions. Rather, child neglect rests more on *conditions* that, when described, are viewed basically as trivial and boring and for which it is tedious to conceive of prefabricated, one-dimensional, and targeted solutions. Moreover, a number of studies (Dubowitz 2007; McSherry 2007) suggest that protective service providers might be inclined to view issues of neglect as less serious than issues of physical and sexual abuse. Considering the lack of agency resources combined with the major complexity in evaluating situations of reported child neglect, it is no surprise that more attention is paid to situations that are perceived to be of immediate risk, to the physical safety and well-being of a child (rather than short, medium, and long-term development), and to situations where there are clear facts.

Another challenge in child neglect is that the social nature of the issue can neither be explained nor understood in strict terms (for example, by stating that children are victims of neglect because they have bad parents

and, in particular, a bad mother). Publications by Swift (1995a, 1995b) are particularly eloquent on this issue. Explanations of child neglect must address, *a priori*, related distal causes at the socio-cultural, economic and political levels, and the developmental history of individual children (Lacharité, Éthier and Nolin 2006). It is not an exaggeration to suggest that short-sighted or unrealistic frameworks that try to explain child neglect contribute to the obstacles that hinder the development of a coherent and exhaustive understanding of the issue.

CHILD NEGLECT: PROBLEM THEORY AND ACTION THEORY

The reorganization of the social and agency response to issues of child neglect implies “problematizing” the phenomenon in a different manner. There is a consensus drawn from studies undertaken in the last decade on the necessity to adopt an ecosystemic model that focuses on an analysis of the various needs of children at all stages of development and on various forms of behaviour within their environment in responding to these needs, rather than focusing strictly on parental behaviour (Dubowitz et al. 2005a, 2005b; English et al. 2005; Lacharité, Éthier and Nolin, 2006; Stowman and Donohue, 2005). From this perspective, child neglect, in its clinical definition within youth protection services, is not characterized by concrete, visible acts that run contrary to parental responsibility (as in cases of physical, psychological and sexual abuse), but rather by the *omission of behaviours viewed as intrinsic to responsible parenting within a given society*. In western-world culture, child neglect can be characterized ecosystemically as the result of a twofold breakdown: 1) a breakdown in child-parent relationships characterized by significant difficulty, for immediate caregivers, in manifesting emotional responsiveness to the basic needs of the children and, as such, hindering their physical well-being and/or their development at various levels (physical, cognitive, emotional or social); and 2) disrupted interaction between the family and the local community, characterized by the isolation of family members and a lack of suitable alternatives for adequately meeting, or substituting for children’s needs in the face of temporary or long-term probable limitations or failures by the caregivers. The main components of an ecosystemic model are outlined in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Ecosystemic Theory of Child Neglect

Systemic level	Children	Parents
Ontosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations (neuropsychological, cognitive and affective) that neglected children must possess in order to cope with the difficult and unpredictable environment to which they are exposed • Traumatic reaction by children to situations of neglect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental overload in the form of personal problems directly linked to parental characteristics and/or their own problems (mental problems, traumatic events, substance abuse, cognitive problems, etc.) • Acquisition of coping strategies in assimilating related information which interferes with the capacity to pay attention to and be available to meet the needs of the children
Microsystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships that give rise to fear and confusion in children and interfere with their ability to function at the behavioural, academic and social levels • Relationships that emotionally and socially isolate parents from existing and potential sources of support in their parental role (conflicts, violence, etc.) • Relationships such as these are also responsible for intergenerational distress within the families 	
Mesosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Troubled relationship between the family and other social groups in which the children and parents are actively implicated • Restrictions in normal development affecting both children and parents 	
Exosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A major gap in living conditions compared to middle class living conditions in the dominant culture • Constant presence of authority figures creating, both for the children and the parents, an institutional spotting and tagging • Institutional practices that decontextualize issues faced by children and parents and selectively focus on the behaviour and capability of mothers 	
Macrosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social organization of childhood with an accent on objective knowledge related to child development • Social organization of parenting with an accent on the individualistic character of parental responsibilities 	

Problematizing child neglect in this manner calls for a re-evaluation of the principles on which support of responsible parenting and of child development regarding these issues must be based. This type of re-evaluation clearly affects professional practices in various service sectors. The challenge is to do whatever is required for child neglect to no longer be considered an issue under the sole responsibility of youth protection system, but rather to be more broadly defined as an issue of public health. Within child neglect as a broad public health issue, complex and multi-determinant phenomena include the ability of caregivers to provide their children with needed attention, and to understand and respond to their needs as they change with child development stages. Figure 1 illustrates the main components of an ecosystemic theory of intervention in response to situations of child neglect.

A theory of coherent action along with an ecosystemic theory on child neglect is based on an interlocking of goals or targets at all systemic levels. Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of these goals. Ultimately these goals aim to bring forth normative opportunities of development for neglected children, as well as to provide corrective developmental experiences for children displaying problems of a clinical nature (e.g., complex traumatic reaction). However, these kinds of goals can only be feasible if we have assurance that the caregivers responsible for the well-being of the children (in particular, their parents or other parental figures such as a foster family) are adequately supported in their ability to consider the consequences of their actions on their children (reflective function), and in their capacity to forge functional social links with other adults in their networks (relay function). Providing support to parents and parental figures must clearly result from an analytical approach focused on the developmental needs of the children in which the caregivers and professionals both take active parts. This type of analytical approach will have little effect if it does not stem from concerted socio-institutional efforts to establish a conception of child development and parental responsibility that illustrates the complexity of situations of child neglect.

What kind of institutional system is able to address the various challenges faced in forging social innovations to prevent and reduce child neglect? This question was the focus of a work by a team of practitioners and researchers within the youth protection network in Quebec. Activities designed to address this question by a research-practice team – notably the creation of programs targeting neglect – formed the structure around which a research-practice partnership was put in place to develop an ecosystemic plan of action against child neglect.

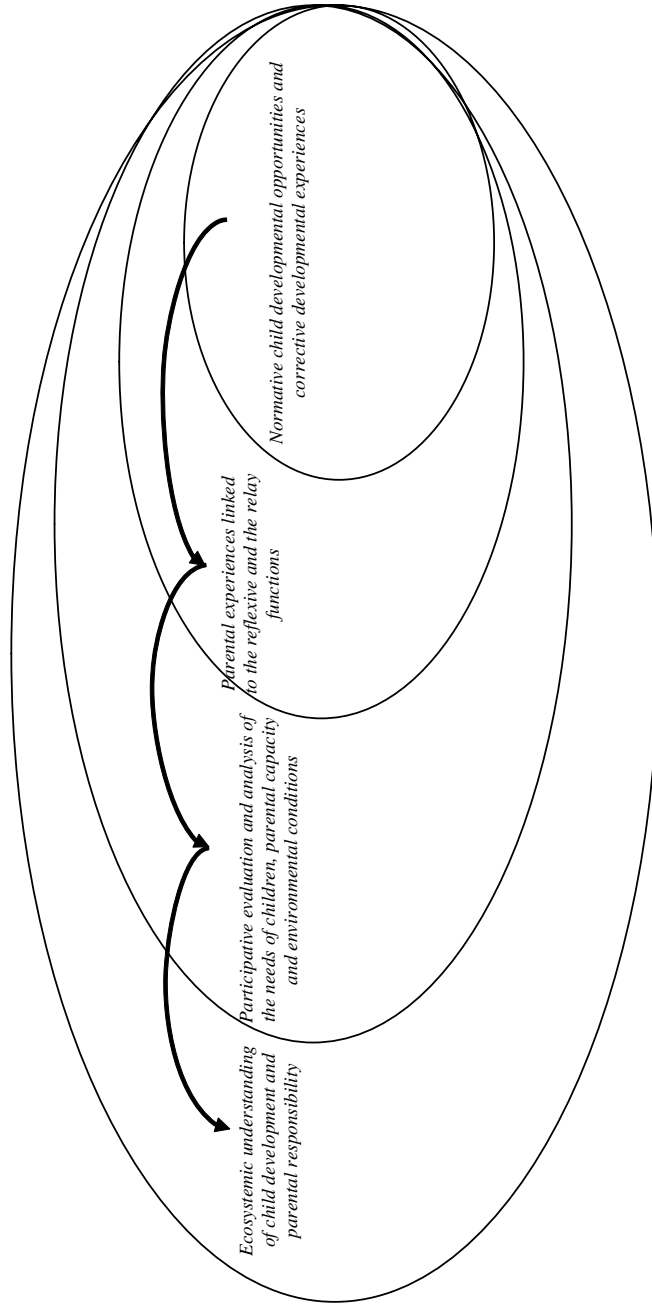


Figure 9.1. Theory of action in situations of child neglect.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Objectives

A concerted effort by the research team generated three objectives. The first was to *establish a research-practice partnership* to address the challenges inherent in dealing with families faced with issues of child neglect or families that were at risk. The second objective, within the framework of a research-practice partnership, was to *develop an ecosystemic model of intervention* aimed at allowing targeted children to eventually live and interact with adults who are able to provide them with the attention they require and to meet their developmental needs (based on their individual characteristics). In addition, the adults in the children's lives would come together to share the responsibilities and work together to ensure their well-being and optimal growth. The third objective consisted of the *implementation of this model of intervention within the framework of the pilot project in three Quebec regions and monitoring ongoing progress and effect*.

Methodology

The project unfolded in three stages. The first stage focused on establishing an ecosystemic understanding of child neglect (Objective 2), led by a committee of researchers and professionals. The committee also organized a number of forums that allowed approximately 10 researchers from Quebec, France, Brazil, and more than 100 practitioners and managers (from youth protection, social services, community services, education, and health sectors) to come together and discuss their experiences and knowledge of child neglect, and to identify the main characteristics surrounding the issue. The second phase consisted in the creation of a model of intervention (targeted clientele; the type of rapport with them; strategies and methods for intervention; measures related to program implementation) carried out by the same committee (Objective 2). The third and last phase consisted of implementing the program within three pilot regions of Quebec (Objective 3).

The research project included an assessment of the innovative research-practice partnership and procedures (Objective 1). The assessment revealed four challenges associated with this type of partnership: 1) power relations between researchers and practitioners; 2) the role of practitioners in the development of evidence-based knowledge; 3) the boundaries of the partnership, notably in terms of the people involved

and their active role; and 4) the objectification of neglected children and their parents. An assessment of the research-practice partnership process was based on participant observations at each of the three phases of the project: the problematization of neglect (15 committee meetings and six researcher-practitioner forums); program development (10 committee meetings); and program implementation (coordinating committee meetings in each of the three pilot regions). Data collected were subjected to a thematic analysis based on conceptual categories. It is to be noted that specific results for this phase of the program constitute a major section of the latter half of the chapter.

The research initiative also made it possible to assess the quality of the *Programme d'aide personnelle, familiale et communautaire* (PAPFC) that included a program implementation evaluation (Objective 3) and an evaluation of intermediate program effects in all three pilot regions (Objective 3). The methodology used in the implementation assessment was based on a multiple cases study design, with each region identified as one case. Local coordinating committees were required to produce an annual report on the program implementation in their separate regions using a systematic framework (Fafard and Lacharité 2006). An assessment of the intermediate effects stemmed from a study of the effects of intervention, mid-way through the intervention, of 89 children and their families. Data taken from youth centre client files served as the basis for the study (Fafard et al. 2007).

Results

Results of the research-practice partnership assessment are the focus of the next section of this chapter. Findings from the implementation evaluation, in turn, reveal major challenges in modifying current practices related to child neglect, particularly pertaining to parents. First, the difficulty in establishing a collaborative bond between the practitioners and the parents remains the single most challenging aspect in implementing of the model of intervention. The second major challenge in modifying existing practices stems from the difficulty in putting into place and sustaining at the institutional level the needs of child victims of neglect within contexts where the parents themselves have numerous needs as human beings. The weight of the psychosocial context in cases of neglect often draws away the attention and availability needed to address developmental issues faced by children.

It is estimated that within a period of 6 to 12 months, approximately half of the model of intervention components were implemented in

the pilot regions. This suggests that the time period required in order to implement this type of model will be at the very least two to three years.

Results on the intermediate effects (in the course of the intervention and in view of partial exposure to various components of the program) on children and their families (paired with a comparative group of 89 children victims of neglect and who received services from the same establishment and on the same territory) suggested two things. First, although only a portion of the program components were implemented, notable gains were made in attaining specific intervention plans and service goals. Second, there was a change in the number of re-reported children under intervention (notably a reduction in the number of retained cases for new reports).

PARTNERSHIP: VIEWS OF THE AUTHORS-RESEARCHERS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Nature of the Research-Practice Partnership

Within the framework of the program described, the partnership is the result of a formal agreement between the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and the Centre jeunesse de la Mauricie et du Centre-du-Québec. The Mauricie et Centre-du-Québec health region has approximately 500,000 inhabitants living in five medium-sized urban areas (the major one being Trois-Rivières with 141,000 inhabitants), and a number of rural areas within a territory similar in size to Belgium. The latter region has approximately 65,000 families with children 17 years of age and under. Its socio-demographic profile resembles that of the province of Quebec as a whole.

The partnership agreement was ratified by management at the agencies in question. It is, as such, an alliance that stretches beyond the implementation of specific projects. An alliance of this type is based on a joint structure of management that promotes the direct involvement of practitioners in outlining research projects, the implementation, the appropriation of research findings and, eventually, the creation of “products” that directly meet their needs.

The partnership agreement also promotes regular contact between researchers and frontline workers and, in return, the contacts have a direct impact in identifying issues for research projects by taking

into account the concerns of practitioners. The regular presence by researchers in the service areas of partnership agencies allows them to become more attuned to the needs and constraints in these agencies at both the management and intervention levels.

The partnership agreement also promotes the development of a shared view and common language in addressing the various challenges faced by researchers in conducting their research and by frontline workers in fulfilling the missions and mandates entrusted to them.

Advantages and Drawbacks of the Research-Practice Partnership

Forging partnerships between practitioners (and their social work environment) and researchers (and their scientific world) is likely the most promising way of developing social programs that rely on an ecosystemic understanding of child neglect. The encounter (and confrontation at times) of the two worlds may, under some circumstances, result in *effects of perspective* that lead to a broader and more in-depth vision of the situations faced by children and their parents affected by child neglect, and to a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding their situations.

This being said, the creation of research-practice partnerships on child neglect is not without pitfalls. Experience has shown us that at least three components must be considered in forging these types of partnerships, and that these must also be monitored on an ongoing basis.

To begin with, and based on our experience, there are major gaps between the “symbolic capital” of practitioners and researchers (Lacharité 2005). Researchers usually have a symbolic capital that confers “privilege” in terms of their opinion on issues as compared to practitioners. This type of situation creates circumstances that do little to promote discourse and reciprocity between researchers and practitioners or the integration of their points of view.

Within a context where the “voice of authority” conferred on researchers is not challenged, the weight of their opinions dominates the points of view of practitioners and cancels the effect of perspective obtained in the partnership. Within such a framework, although all participants may work well together and their efforts may be well coordinated, practitioners often remain restricted to the role of expeditors of researchers’ ideas. Because they base their work on conceptual categories and thinking, researchers often overlook the wealth of field experience of practitioners and the local knowledge they develop from it.

Within a context where the researcher's position of authority is challenged, attention often veers towards a sterile debate over individual contribution and action that does not allow for integrated points of view. Within this framework, the partnership becomes a collision course leading to a power struggle that determines the outcome of decisions made. The partnership becomes "territorialized" meaning that the key players will strictly rely on it during forums of exchange (formal meetings, reports, memorandums). All that stretches beyond the official territory is considered little or not at all as being within the partnership.

As part of our initiative focused on developing an ecosystemic model of intervention against neglect, and on implementing the model, considerable attention was given to the place of researchers within the partnership. For one, efforts were made to first and foremost clearly acknowledge the expertise of practitioners on the issue of child neglect and the complementary role of their knowledge and experience with that of the researchers. Many opportunities for group reflection were set up, some very formal at the local or regional level or as office meetings, while others were more informal (and much more numerous) such as talks over coffee, a meal, or while driving in the car.

One guiding principle for researchers has always been to assume a "de-centred" position within the partnership – to actively seek to enrich and complement the point of view of practitioners. It is not about researchers setting aside their knowledge and point of view, but rather it is a question of combining their perspective with that of practitioners. For the practitioners, this decentered position of researchers is not familiar but it allows them to share in more detail and depth their field observations, the knowledge they put to use and their actions. In addition, this type of approach allows researchers to have a better understanding of the point of view of practitioners and to introduce new components that, in return, allow practitioners to have an increased sensitivity to the meanings of researchers. Within this context, diverging ideas or disagreements take on a new meaning. They are no longer a source of confrontation, but rather a source of innovation. Experience has taught us that diverging points of view must explicitly be addressed as they emerge and that time and energy must be invested in finding solutions prior to moving on to other issues.

The second component to consider within a research-practice partnership is in regard to institutional mandates and emergency situations faced by practitioners and, in particular, the fact that these issues constitute the main determinants that affect their position on

child neglect. Paradoxically, our work has indicated that the practitioner point of view has little to do with their field experiences with children and parents (“what they experience and what they do”), but rather is based on normative guidelines that provide outlines or scenarios on the experiences, (“how to apply them” and “how to deal with the situations”). The depth and wealth of experience that practitioners are reputed to bring to the partnership is not always made evident. Consequently, the inclusion of a perspective with regard to a researcher’s point of view is not truly complete. It should be noted that, within the framework of partnerships in youth protection, the researcher’s point of view is not only more abstract (compared to that of the practitioner), but also tends to be just as normative as that of the practitioner, with scientific arguments being major standard setting mediums and researchers being major standard setters (notably pertaining to child development and parenting). Research-practice partnerships often fall into a trap of excluding practitioner field experiences and emphasizing various concepts of norms related to neglect. Partnerships of this type remain horizontal and superficial. However, when researchers assume a more de-centered role, they can actively support practitioners in refocusing on their direct experiences with children and parents they work with, and in examining the real effects of the norms (social, cultural, scientific) on the nature and quality of their experiences. Within the framework of our initiative, “inter-vision” group activities have been organized to allow practitioners directly involved in implementing the program to cast a new light on their everyday experiences. The activities are not about clinical supervision. They are usually led by a researcher who has no supervisory role. Within an inter-vision context, researchers may also assume the role of participant who has enough direct experience with children and parents targeted by the model of intervention (e.g. if they have had qualitative or clinical contact with the people within the framework of their research).

The last component to consider is that, in discussing parents and children within the partnership, researchers and practitioners may give the impression that they have a better knowledge of family experiences (their everyday life, how they make sense of events, the obstacles they face, issues of identity and so forth). Such partnerships may function to the detriment of the main people actually involved in child neglect. Professionals often state that “services are user-centred.” A statement of this type is “formulaic” in nature as it only superficially acknowledges the point of view of parents and children. For their part, researchers rely on methodological, analytical and interpretive practices based on a segmented

portrait of the life of the participants in their research. Professional and scientific practices of this type often result in a manufactured, flattened and unrealistic image of children and parents of concern to practitioners and researchers. Giving the impression of being open to other points of view, these partnerships may also become systems that further alienate professionals and researchers from the everyday experiences of children and parents living in a situation of neglect.

Partnerships should never be defined as dyadic (practitioners versus researchers), but rather as triadic (users versus practitioners versus researchers). The virtual and, if possible, real participation of children and parents should be a core dimension of this type of partnership that has as its mission to provide innovative forms of assistance and support adapted to the challenges faced by families. Again, experience has shown us that the last component is likely the most complex to incorporate into the partnership. For one, it requires an ethical foundation that differs from the one that currently exists within research-practice partnerships. In addition, it includes major operational challenges. How do we proceed to include children, mothers and fathers as true partners in new approaches such as these? Within the new proposed partnership, our work is in its early stages, and we are therefore unable to present findings at this time. It will remain the main target of our plan of action over the course of the coming years.

Conclusion

The components just outlined may serve as guidelines in forging ahead with research-practice partnerships that are both promising and rewarding. In keeping with a concerted effort to develop an innovative plan of action to deal with child neglect, a partnership of this nature has led to the creation of three distinct yet interrelated programs. The first (Leg-Up) program entitled “Faire la courte échelle” aims to put into place integrated services to prevent and combat child neglect (Lacharité et al. 2007). The second program, the PAPFC² (Programme d’Aide Personnelle, Familiale et Communautaire – Nouvelle Génération), aims to offer services to parents and children faced with issues of child neglect (Lacharité et al. 2005). The third program, IACDW (Intersectoral Action for Child Development and Welfare), aims to introduce a frame of reference and a procedure that allow for the participative evaluation of the developmental needs of children (Chamberland et al. 2005). The three programs have been implemented in various regions throughout the province of Quebec. These innovative “social” advances probably

would not have seen the light of day if not for a sound, active, and committed research-practice partnership. Assessments are currently underway to report on the effectiveness of the programs and their impact on the services network and child neglect in the province of Quebec. The partnering nature of the program has resulted in an evaluation based on a close collaboration with the various agencies.

Furthermore, the partnership has had a major effect at the research level. Increased knowledge on the issue of child neglect is due in great part to the contribution of practitioners and their day-to-day experiences. The usual distance between the researcher, producer of knowledge, and practitioner, producer of action, has largely diminished within our partnership, resulting in new possibilities in the social organization of knowledge on child neglect. The next step will be to create the conditions needed for the persons most concerned by child neglect, the children and their parents, not only to be the focus of the partnership, but also to make their contribution within the social framework of advanced knowledge.

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