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PROMOTING FAMILY CONTINUITY – PERSPECTIVES FROM ITALY

Anthony N. Maluccio

*In this essay I review a recent research study from Italy, “Le Radici nel Futuro – La Continuità della Relazione Genitoriale oltre la Crisi Familiare,” edited by Paola Dallanegra (2005). The contributors focus on “Spazio Neutro,” a multi-purpose child welfare agency in southern Italy that facilitates parent-child visiting and relationships between children placed in out-of-home care and their families. They delineate and illustrate, through comments from family members, selected principles and strategies for maintaining such continuity throughout the out-of-home placement.**

The emphasis on promoting continuity in the relationships between young people in out-of-home care and their birth families, particularly the parents or other significant parental figures, has long been a hallmark of child welfare services – in Italy as in other countries. However, implementing such a feature in the reality of practice can be complex as well as challenging.

The contributors to this volume address this challenge by focusing on establishing “*Radici nel Futuro*” – or “roots in the future” – for children and youths who come to the attention of the child welfare system in Italy. By the above phrase they mean maintaining and promoting continuity between birth parents and their children throughout their brief or long-term separation from each other. Paola Dallanegra, the editor, is a social worker who directs *Spazio Neutro*, an agency established in the early 1990s by the city and province of Milan (Italy) explicitly for the purpose of facilitating parent-child visiting and relationships between young people in out-of-home care and their birth families.

The principal contributors to *Le Radici nel Futuro* are staff members and consultants in the above-noted agency or its affiliates. Following a comprehensive review of Italian laws, policies and regulations pertaining to the rights and responsibilities of parents and children, in the opening chapter Dallanegra describes the functions and experiences of *Spazio Neutro*. Of special interest is the evolution of its focus – from initial emphasis on birth parents to extensive consideration of the needs and roles of members of the extended family.

In subsequent chapters the contributors describe and analyze diverse aspects of parental and family continuity. In this regard, they rely on apt quotes from parents, young people and others; on direct observations of family functioning; and on review of the impact of social work intervention by staff members. The quotes are fascinating, and the contributors analyze their significance through references to psychological and sociological perspectives and studies. Building on varied case examples, the contributors

* In a related volume, Gramaglia (2005) describes his study of the perceptions of families regarding health and social services offered through their children’s schools. The respondents emphasize, among other aspects, that most parents expect – and use – such services as they seek to cope with their multiple life challenges.

delineate valuable principles and suggestions for coping with the many practical as well as emotional demands on staff members.

In the final chapter, the editor and her associates assess the effects of services on the young people and their families. Their evaluation focuses on the individual and family characteristics of the subjects and the reasons for their placement in out-of-home care; the process and quality of services that were provided; the perspectives of children and the adults responsible for them; and the outcomes of intervention.

In conclusion, Paola Dallanegra and her associates offer pertinent recommendations for ensuring that young people in out-of-home care can continue to have – and profit from – ongoing connections with their families of origin. In conjunction with American studies such as those by Martin (2000) and Webb (2003), this volume contributes much of value to child welfare practitioners, administrators and researchers in the U.S.A.

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