



## DIALOGUES

### **Children and the experience of migration: constraints and resources**

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The article of Montecchi and Bufacchi (2009) is a very interesting and comprehensive analysis of the risk factors involved in the phenomenon of immigrant children.

The condition of migrant involves several individual and relational changes, which form the basis for the development of psychopathology or a risky behaviour.

Opera San Francesco for the Poor in Milan looks at factors which may somehow cause hazardous conditions for children too. Often they either live with one of their parents or are entrusted to relatives, distant from their native families and friends. This involves a mourning for those people who remained in their native country, because of the need to adapt quickly to life conditions, for example changing of way of life and landscape (often they move from the countryside to metropolitan cities where there are dangers and crime).

The way they dress or act, learned in their native country, is not appropriated in Italy: this involves continuous disqualifications upsetting the identity and personal worth. Children are therefore obliged to learn new rules, often very different from those imposed by their native families. This often creates a rift in the identity that is also confirmed in relation with the institutions: often the children lend themselves as cultural mediators in the relationship between parents and Italian doctors, but in this way they can become aware of health situations even too serious, from which a child should be protected. This adds to the concern for parents, fear to stay alone in a

foreign country.

School also creates difficulties: migrant children face a greater effort to be at the same level with their peers, and they are often older than their classmates. Learning a new language and developing links with other children takes time and effort. This makes them similar to their new friends but skin color and features constantly remind them that they are different. Often parents because of their fears, prevent children from leaving home in the afternoon or evening, so they do not have the chance to experience as well as their peers. So the position of these children is more difficult than their peers', each context requires a different application you must adapt to taking on different roles. The search for their own identity will be complex, because their membership is built like a bridge between the native culture (represented by the family) and the host culture (which arises mainly at school). In this way children play an equal or even higher role in their family relationship.

For this purpose the position of cultural mediator of children may also facilitate their integration in the host country: they can maintain the link with tradition and develop trade and relations with Italian people (teachers, schoolmates, etc.). On the opposite, parents often remain in the position of separation or marginality and they can prevent a deeper connection with the host culture. For children the result may be assimilation and hence rejection of parents' traditions. Moreover, in some cases the relationship with the institutions (Health Services, School, Administrative Offices and other institutions) requires children to take a parental role with respect either to mum or dad, while outside of the described context parents continue to maintain power by imposing education according to their cultural canons. In this way growth is not linear, the child being considered old or young, depending on the context in which he is and the role that he is requested to play.

In conclusion, as a consequence of the above described dynamics, the institutions should promote the integration of migrant children, transforming the constraints in resources, difficulties in new opportunities and skills (multilingual knowledge, new adaptive strategies, and so on).

#### REFERENCES

Montecchi FR, Bufacchi C. Psychopathological risks in children with migrant parents. *Dial Phil Ment Neuro Sci* 2009;2:15-23.