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Problematic solutions in a school context

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Good morning everybody.

The example I want to give you this morning is an example of intervention that begins in the family and then moves to the school context. In the evolved strategic model, as we have already applied in clinical and organizational contexts, we have developed consulting and coaching interventions which aim at strengthening educational capabilities and the skills of parents and teachers.

Now... since we have reached the last day of the conference and, therefore, we need to also release some of this seriousness otherwise we risk not getting to the end... I have a picture of Linus which was given to me by a colleague. Sometimes I use it to build the relationship that our colleagues have been talking about throughout this conference, the relationship with parents who find themselves completely exhausted by problems caused by their children. In fact, those of you who have worked with children, or those of you who are parents like me, know that children and parents, as Linus says, are always disputing about something. Children, however, I don't know about yours but my daughters always have an advantage: they can wear out their parents because they always have extra strength.

This is why working with families and teachers led us to being more efficient and more efficacious, to help and support those people who are either incapable or, sometimes, have some capabilities acquired in repeatedly solving problematic situations or in attempting to escape certain spirals, vicious circles that are sometimes created by the interaction between adults and children. This is because there are some children, as in the case of the children I'll be describing this morning, who although don't have particularly highly invalidating pathologies, are capable of wearing out parents, as well as teachers; and the parents, in these particular situations, probably suffer more than other parents do. A wearing out that is some way generated, and I happen to observe it very frequently nowadays, because the parent is subjected to a range of cultural influences, including mass media, being today, perhaps more than a decade ago, subject to many stimuli. The first thing that usually happens to parents is to ask themselves: "am I doing well? Will it be right to do this instead of that? Should I stop my son or shouldn't I? Because the teacher tells me this, because the psychologist tells me that. Because on television they say that if we do this then it could happen that...". Sometimes, doubt and uncertainty generate a series of questions in the parent. Obviously, when the parent faces more problematic or more pathological situations

the doubt is also “is it normal or is it not normal? Is he sick or is he simply vulnerable?”. And sometimes, depending on the age of the people we intervene on, we are able to prevent worst outcomes and thus unlock difficulties that may develop into more serious problems, or we intervene on already consolidated problems. Given the short time available I won't explain it, because I think you are all aware of: the interaction circle of initial difficulties, the attempted solutions that we repeat and that don't solve the problem but often complicate it. This is what happens in the family context. Therefore, the strategic intervention in the age of development aims at guiding parents to unlock those critical situations, but also, and above all, to support them so that they can recover their capabilities and thus produce significant changes within the family system. Obviously, when possible, it is also important to transfer this in educational contexts so to increase the teachers abilities to handle children's difficulties in the class group.

With the strategic intervention we also try to recognize and manage the difficulties of children and students, obviously with a particular attention, as suggested by the speakers during the first-day, Loriedo, Nardone and others, to avoid giving diagnosis, but attempting to give an operational guidance so to prevent the worst outcomes.

The idea of the strategic intervention in both the clinical and organizational areas, but even more importantly during development phases, is that parents and teachers are the agents of change. And in this context I believe it's important to underline it because we live in times where parents have been put under observation, have been considered to misuse their educational abilities. Usually, when they arrive to our office they expect to be attacked and to find someone who will tell them what they should do, things that they know and that they haven't been able to put into practice. Being able to establish with them an interaction where the goal is to develop their capabilities, not to give them solutions or recipes, makes our intervention even more effective and efficient. Also because, from my experience over the past ten years, I have very rarely come across parents who are actually incapable. Of course I work in a private setting and perhaps those of you who work in the public sector witness different situations; the parent arriving in the private setting is not completely incompetent, the problem is that he thinks to be so. Therefore, helping parents and teachers to recognize those that have been failing attempted solutions is not a way to accuse them, but to facilitate them in searching for more flexible and more effective personal modalities; it helps reinforce and build what we call operational awareness. That is: I know what I should do because I tried it, because I verified it, I have built it therefore I know how to use strategic modalities that become my tools to solve difficulties or problems at different levels.

It is important to say that the techniques we use in this strategic evolved model, therefore also with families, with teachers, are essentially the last three techniques you have seen published in our books “The strategic dialogue”, “The strategic coaching” by Professor Milanese and Paolo Mordazzi, and “The strategic problem solving”. These three techniques allow us to implement an intervention that helps us transform peoples limits in to resources.

The case I would like to introduce is made of different phases.

It's a case of coaching for a mother who came to me when her son finished nursery school.

I also saw the father later in a meeting. This happened after 5 sessions with the mother, therefore mainly an intervention with the mother. The father was involved to share the changes obtained by the mother and to carry out a more unitary and coherent educational style.

Third phase of the intervention was the involvement of the first grade teacher, after the first month of class, through two meetings.

Last fundamental phase, necessary and indispensable, the verification and consolidation of the achieved results.

Through this case I would like to sum up, even if very briefly, how you can turn limits into resources.

Let's talk of Andrea's behavior.

Although I know there are many colleagues here who will immediately refer to the diagnostic criteria of DSM, I would like to remind you how: when we observe through the words of a mother, as my colleagues have said in these days, when we look at a behavior through the eyes of a mother, we must try to stick to that reality. Only after we can use identification criteria. This is very important, otherwise situations can become misleading or situations with difficulties can become actual problems.

What was Andrea's behavior, who was five and a half years old, when he began this intervention? Hyper-kinetic: a typical child that never stays still, who his mother described as motorized. He seemed tireless, untiring. Easily distracted by any stimulus, except than from television. This is a behavior that I, very frequently, observe in many children. The average child is quite restless, you put them in front of the television and they seem hypnotized. Unfortunately, us mothers, and I'll confess of doing it too, when we are completely exhausted and worn out, we use the television as a sort of hypnotist who keeps our children quiet and peaceful for a while, but also producing a series of other effects that you all understand well.

Andrea would go from one activity to another without carrying through anything, games or anything else; we would often oppose to the requests of adults, whether parents, grandparents, or any other adult. He would scream and shout until receiving what he wanted.

He had difficulty in playing quietly. His mother told me: "Since he was born he's had a hard time sleeping peacefully. I think the first years he didn't sleep, and neither did I". The effect of these behaviors is a wearing out of the adults: firstly the mother, because she was the one who was with him the most; also the father, although he spent less time with him; and grandmothers and teachers.

By investigating which “paths” this mother had already followed it emerged that, as by commonsense, she would ask him to be good, and of course he wouldn't; Explanations requests: why do you do it? And he didn't know what to answer.

Therefore, scolds, yells and shouts to the point of repeated requests to sit still, to stop doing anything. Even the simplest things, like brushing his teeth or getting dressed in the morning, required an infinite amount of time because for each of the mother's requests he would be opposing, and the mother would repeat them, repeat, and he would refuse. They would take an hour and a half to get ready.

Shouting, anger and spankings. The mother actually came to me because during an escalation of anger with Andrea, after screaming and yelling she severely hit him. Of course, the father was now worried and, seeing as he was already accusing her of not being able to educate the child, after the severe beatings he said: “You need to seek help because we can't go on in this way”. But she confessed to me: “I also came because I was a special education teacher”, she saw in the son's behaviors the possibility of an increase in difficulties with the beginning of school, and she was right. “How will he manage? He never stays still, he never sits. He'll be starting school in a few months. I'm afraid that these behaviors will worsen”. Another thing the mother realized being completely ineffective, and actually nourishing Andrea's negative behaviors, were the not always coherent punishments.

By working on how we could have worsened the situation, because it actually seemed as if there couldn't be a worse, but these situations, evolutionarily speaking, can transform into even greater adolescent disorders.

How to worsen? The mother obviously realized that the loss of control, the escalations of anger, both by her and by her husband, would have certainly worsened the behavior. The screams were totally ineffective because there were days when the mother was yelling from morning till evening without any results. Requests to be still and calm were absolutely useless and counterproductive. An interesting and salient aspect was that the mother began understanding that the fact that Andrea was so hyper-kinetic and had no regularity, and that the family had adapted to his requests, resulted in an absence of regular rhythms in the house. Andrea would wake up, do what he wanted, meals weren't always at the same time, as weren't play and rest periods.

Another thing would have worsened the situation: the continuous demanding, the orders to conform, and communicating to him disappointment and discredit: “Why don't you behave?”, “You should behave!”, “You've disappointed me...”.

An other aspect that the mother realized was worsening the situation was that the parents were not in agreement. There was a continuous accusation: “It's your fault because you're never home!”, “It's your fault because you're not educating him well”, which was also amplified by grandparents, friends and acquaintances who, in one way or the other, more or less openly, accused them of not being able to raise this boy.

Of course, carrying on this situation, of being unable to manage him, before the start of school was another way of worsening it all.

The agreed goals were:

- Avoid worsening the situation;
- Act to gradually reduce Andrea's exhausting behaviors;
- Prepare Andrea to accept rules and discipline before the beginning of school.

In the action plan with the mother: introduction of regular rhythms and predictable activities. The mother committed to decide when wake up time was, when meal times were, to respect these times, and to do the same for all other activities, ludic and sport activities.

This rather quickly created a greater tranquility in Andrea, because strongly hyper-kinetic children need to have rules, it's as if they need to find some sort of guidance. If we keep following them in their continuous motion, they are unlikely to find a self-regulation. The mother also realized, and it was agreed in the action plan, not to ask: "Why do you do it?", seeing as Andrea was not a bad boy, and seeing that most of the time Andrea's intentions were good, because he wanted to be a good child; Andrea actually started being sorry when not able to be good, because he couldn't be as we wanted. Avoiding to ask "Why do you do it?" was another factor that improved the interaction between mother and child. Obviously, from a communicative point of view it was also very important that the mother would replace and better specify terms: instead of saying "You're bad" say "You've done this wrong" or "You didn't do it right" with "You didn't do it correctly", so to define a concrete action plan rather than a generic "be good" that didn't have great significance for Andrea.

An important point, however, regarding the mother's incapability and her escalation of anger, was to have the mother communicate to Andrea, whenever she felt worn out and close to the limit, before getting angry, before the violent outburst. I asked her to declare "Be careful because I'm getting angry". Or, when the mother wasn't so angry she could have used what you have already read in our books, a prescription of paradoxical behavior: "Well, Andrea, I want you to roll in front of me for 30 minutes!". These two maneuvers created a different kind of interaction compared to the highly disturbing behaviors, and especially with regard to the mother's feelings. She began perceiving that this anger could have been accepted but it needed to be channeled into other kinds of actions, rather than continuing repeating an escalation that only led to an exacerbation of the situation.

Another important thing was to have both the mother and the father start marking Andrea's positive and negative actions on a board, using some pluses and minuses and with small weekly prizes, we had agreed on, achievable with at least two positive marks. But also clear and proportionate punishments when needed.

What I believe brought the mother to better understand what she was feeling and to express her resources, was an evocative image. The very important evocative image was: at some point I said: "You know, the behavior you are describing makes me think of the situation

faced by some horse riders, when they have to tame thoroughbred horses. Those who know how to ride also know how horses need to be understood, they have a different language, they have a different way of behaving, but there are some fundamental rules that all good riders should know and should use as quickly as possible. Firstly to respect diversity, but also understand that when a horse is being tamed, and they put reins on him, perhaps because of some particular smell or some other feeling the horse gets, it can suddenly decide to start galloping. The experienced rider doesn't get scared if the horse starts galloping, he knows he should avoid doing two fundamental things: pulling the reins too strongly and violently, or leaving them too loose. And, in fact, something similar happens even with us parents, when confronted with children who, at least in the initial phases, might be a little untamable. At least in our perspective, sometimes we run the risk of making this mistake: we are either too hard, too rigid, or we are too soft. The avoidance of these two positions sometimes leads us to the greatest results.

This was an evocative image that incredibly helped the mother recognize and change Andrea's bad behaviors, to transfer them on the image, which she later described to grandparents and friends... "My son is a thoroughbred horse". An image which greatly helped her get out of embarrassing situations where Andrea would do strange things in public, when he would roll, when he was restless and everyone would say: "Aren't you going to stop him?", "My son is a thoroughbred horse". It also helped her recover enough resources to say "Now that he has started I have two possibilities: either I ride him, the paradoxical half hour, giving him space, or I improve my ability to understand when he's about to start so to prevent his impetuous onset".

My time is up and I would like to conclude with one of Seneca's sentences, seeing as working with children and parents is certainly possible, but it has its difficulties: "It's not because things are difficult that we dare not do them, but because we dare not do them that things are difficult".

Thank you.