

NEST: The Innovative Response to Child and Family Needs

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Abstract

NEST is an initiative to tackle child educational poverty in four main Italian cities - Rome, Naples, Bari and Milan - through the creation of local educational hubs for families with children aged 0 - 6 who live in vulnerable situations. It has been designed out of a long-standing experience of cooperation and synergic work achieved by all its implementing partners.

The NEST project adopts an integrated methodology approach between the socio-health and educational sectors and places the overall care of the child and his family at the base of the intervention.

The goal is to improve the well-being of the nucleus through the multidisciplinary integration of interventions.

Keywords: NEST; Child; Family

Introduction

The project NEST (an acronym for Nido Educazione Servizi Territorio, "Nursery, Education, Services and Territory") was launched on April 2018 as a three-year initiative to tackle child educational poverty in four main Italian cities - Rome, Naples, Bari and Milan - through the creation of local educational hubs for families with children aged 0-6 who live in vulnerable situations.

NEST develops an integrated methodology approach - educational and socio-health - and through educational activities for children, services for families and parenting support actions, it promotes inclusion and sociability. The project was promoted by the social enterprise Con i Bambini and financed by its Fund to tackle child educational poverty (Fondo per il contrasto alla povertà educativa minorile).

A strong partnership firmly rooted in the territory

NEST has been designed out of a long-standing experience of cooperation and synergic work achieved by all its implementing partners. The Nest outcome of a participated planning process has been devised and carried out in 4 Italian cities by a group of 21 partners of non-profit organizations, local administrations, schools and research and cultural bodies of which the Pediatricians Cultural Association is part. Such partnership has been created to offer a prompt and effective response to the individual needs of each member of the families in vulnerable conditions reached by the project. This is possible through the simultaneous and coordinated activation of integrated interventions: care and direct reception, involvement of local services, strengthening of parenting skills, income support and job search. The active involvement of local actors is also aimed at improving sustainability for each intervention and developing long-term good practices.

The educational hubs

NEST set up an educational hubs in the target cities involved in the project, in particular the most social disadvantaged areas. In each of these hubs educational activities are carried out by an equip made of different professionals such as educators, psychologists, social operators, welfare workers, experts of maternal and child health. All interventions can thus be multidisciplinary (involving different professional skills at the same time) and integrated (providing cooperation with several local actors), offering to each family personalized development plans responding to its specific needs.

Pediatricians and educators help to define specific interventions of accompaniment and support for parents to strengthen their role and skills as caregivers, while social and welfare workers support families in job searching and facilitate their access to measures of income relief. Educators and psychologists carry out activities and workshops for children 0 - 6 years old, offering them (and their parents) early educational opportunities in a crucial phase of their development.

The NEST innovative methodology approach

The NEST project adopts an integrated methodology between the socio-health and educational sectors and places the overall care of the child and his/her family at the base of the intervention.

The goal is to improve the well-being of the nucleus through the multidisciplinary integration of interventions.

The project therefore aims at keeping united and coordinated the educational, cultural, social and health aspects of the action.

For this reason the intervention areas are declined on different aspects:

- Analysis and assessment of needs in the most vulnerable households;
- Activation of differentiated and integrated care measures (local health services, social services, targeted projects, prompt reception, etc.);
- Provision of “material supports”, interventions to support the most vulnerable families to deal with emergency situations (food, housing, health, education). Action that during the Covid-19 has been intensifying;
- “Empowerment” actions for parents (language training, accompaniment to work, support for family economy management, strengthening of skills, etc).

From the beginning of the project more than 300 families with children from 0 to 6 years old, were supported by the four NEST hubs.

The Nest's answers in the Covid-19 time

The COVID-19 emergency situation led to the immediate activation of all the teams of the Nest hubs in Milan, Rome, Naples and Bari. All service operators and activity coordinators have reorganized the weekly schedule of appointments with children and families through the use of tools and methodologies suitable for overcoming physical distance and the wall of domestic isolation.

As in all emergency situations of whatever nature, children are the most vulnerable also in relation to the stress and anxiety that can be transmitted to them by their parents or adults. The increasing decline towards poverty and the alarming news related to infections and the spread of the virus, have generated fears and uncertainty for the future. This, albeit unintentionally, has not spared the little ones, especially where they have been forced to say goodbye to their loved ones without having the possibility to see them for the last time.

The most difficult challenge was being able to re-establish an everyday life, made up of different times and spaces, of the intimacy of the relationship between educator/child and parent/educator violated with the need to be saved and reported on different communication channels.

The weekly programming of the hub activities has been “reconverted” into online mode, enriching itself with creative ideas and attractive initiatives for young and old:

- Early distance learning: Workshops and playful-educational activities for children 0-6 and their families;
- Support for the most vulnerable families by an accompaniment which decompresses short term primary needs: Food expenditure; the payment of utilities such as energy, electricity and gas; the payment of the rent;
- Parental support: Many mothers reported the difficulty of living with the new fear of COVID-19 contagion and so they were emotionally and psychologically accompanied and supported;
- Telephone follow up for the most fragile cases: Situations with a high risk rate of exposure to domestic violence continued to be monitored constantly through periodic daily contact and the availability of Nest staff guaranteed 24 hours a day;
- Resilience of local communities: Together with the emergency intervention, it was essential to promote, foster and accompany the capacity for positive reaction, the development of resilience of people and of the community as a whole [1-3].

Conclusion - A Look towards the Future

Getting out of the emergency means leveraging the strengthening of the “educating community”, so as to give a concrete response to the needs of children and families. Networking between local services - schools, scholastic and extracurricular educational centres, third sector associations, counselling centres, associations of professionals and freelancers, social services, institutions - must be the resilience tool for containing situations of greater vulnerability and critical issues.

Networking and actions to strengthen territorial relations at the heart of the Nest project will help reweave the network support of civil society more quickly and effectively. The alliance between public, private and third sector, which the project is grounded on, will be able to guarantee a systemic and structured restart starting from the good operating practices implemented in these two years of the project, before the onset of the corona emergency virus.

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