



# Announcements

International congress **“In the best interests of the child: Cross-cultural perspectives”**, 9-12 April 2003, Leuven (Belgium)

The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Section of Orthopedagogics), the Université de Mons-Hainaut (Department of Family and Community Development), the European Scientific Association for Residential and Foster Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF) and the International Association of Training and Research in Family Education (AIFREF) want to join together their forces and jointly organise an international congress from 9 to 12 April 2003 in Leuven (Belgium). Host of the congress will be the University of Leuven.

The title of the congress is: “In the best interests of the child: Cross-cultural perspectives”. Why this theme? The reasons are abundant. We will name some of them hereafter.

A first reason is related to societal upheavals. Today multiple changes affect all the spheres of life, from the most institutionalized to the more intimate. The education of children does not escape from these changes. The child’s place in the family and in society has appreciably changed. This evolution is not without consequences for the child’s development. How to take into account the impact of these changes?

A second reason, in the pace of the preceding one, depends on the fear, the distress and the suffering of many parents vis-a-vis increasingly difficult rearing tasks, for they cannot any more draw support neither from former traditions nor from the certainties of the modern world. Rearing children becomes much more difficult for single parents, parents from (ethnic) minorities, socially deprived families or for those who have a child with a handicap. How to be a “good enough” parent or a “good enough” teacher and how to face conditions that threaten parenting in our complex, “postmodern” world?

A third reason, always under the influence of the current societal context, results from a shift which has been taking shape for several decades and which has been highly accentuated these last twenty years, namely the de-institutionalization of the couple and the stress on the private character of family life. As a consequence the position of the child is weakened. How can the well-being and the quality of the child’s development be best ensured when the number of divorces is steadily increasing?

A fourth reason owes to the fact that, for some time, the concept of “maltreatment” has been the subject of intense concern of both researchers and experts as well as of society as a whole. But how to define maltreatment if we do not have references of what is “good parenting”? Apart from that, the growing attention that is paid to maltreatment provokes much tension and many dilemmas: must we protect children and adolescents by placing them out of their homes in residential or foster care settings or must we help families by offering them parenting support at home and by stimulating reunification?

Finally – fifth reason – this concept of “good parenting” takes different directions according to social backgrounds and cultures. Throughout the world, one can see a wide variety of parenting practices, styles and processes. So, would it not be a tantalizing and somewhat surrealist task to look for a gold standard of “good parenting”? Moreover, it appears that no parenting practices, styles or processes are without deficiencies. These deficiencies need to be compensated by family, child or environmental resources. Overcoming difficulties and imbalances makes it possible for families to evolve and for

children and parents to develop. The child's identity is shaped by the ways the environment tries to meet his needs. The environment may favorably or unfavorably respond to the child's needs. Crises and sufferings cannot be dissociated from life, and may certainly add in a positive way to the formation and reorganization of identity. Consequently, how to approach the complex interplay? And how to handle severe crises and sufferings that threaten the parenting process and cannot be compensated by child, family or environmental resources?

Today we know a lot about the best practices to help children, parents and their environments. However, it is not always easy to realize this knowledge. For this reason, we ought to feel obliged to consider continuously important issues related to our field, such as the early detection of risks on child maltreatment, the new tendencies in residential care, foster care and its alternatives, the provision of help to families from ethnic minorities or to socially deprived families, and the help to children with specific needs (for instance, children with a handicap, gifted children).

We are aware that we have chosen a difficult theme for this congress. Parenting is a process with many determinants, where fragility and assets of families and individuals meet in a complex interplay. Furthermore, it is extremely impregnated by our standards and ideologies. This was the reason for inserting the cross-cultural perspective into our debates. Finally, parenting is the main research topic of many different disciplines: psychology, pedagogy, sociology, ethnology, law, ... After all, isn't the theme dealing with the future of our society, and therefore, is it not worth our joint efforts?

We believe that it is very important to disconnect the debates about "good parenting" from emotions and to free ourselves from simplistic definitions which cause a normative vision that may lead to the hasty denunciation of non-normative practices and question the rights of parents to rear their child. Scientific research may help to realize this. Further, in order to optimize our efforts to support parents and to implement best practices, we must take into account parents' and children's rights and positions, take care of their social networks and establish empowerment. Progress, in the fields of science as well as of practice, will only be made when we create sufficient possibilities for people to present their research results, to discuss the implementation of their experiments, and to talk about their views, visions, hopes, and doubts. Such is the ambitious goal of the congress we are pleased to announce.

More information (call for papers, programme, registration) can be found on the congress' website (<http://www.aifref-eusarf-2003.org>) or on EUSARF's website (<http://eusarf.cjb.net>). The e-mail address of the congress is [aifref-2003@eusarf.cjb.net](mailto:aifref-2003@eusarf.cjb.net).

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Congress' presidents