

## **“ReViraVolta” Project (2023-2024)**

**Dr. Adriana Bastos Dias, Bruna Ferreira, Ricardo Saraiva, and Patrick Tomlinson**

The "ReViraVolta" project was designed to address concerns related to the possibility of offering the families of the children and young people staying at Lar Nossa Senhora do Livramento, a residential care home, proper and consistent support, so that they could make the necessary changes to fulfil the conditions needed for a reunification process or, if not possible, an increase in healthy relationships between the various elements of the family system. Ultimately, this healthier relationship pattern would serve as a significant protective factor for the better development of children and young people.

It was therefore necessary to assemble a team with expertise in Family Intervention, who were available and technically prepared to develop individual intervention plans that could meet the specific needs of each family situation, to initiate processes of change that would guarantee the mitigation or eventual resolution of the problems and risk factors that had led to the children's removal, while also giving the professionals involved greater certainty about the decisions they had to make. On the other hand, the aim was to reduce the possibility of children and young people returning to residential care, which would have clear negative consequences in terms of their emotional adjustment due to having to "go back and forth" in their life projects.

The "ReViraVolta" project, financed by the Prémio BPI Fundação "La Caixa" Infância, was implemented between February 2023 and February 2024. It included a 3-month period for the Family Intervention Team, comprising three psychologists - Adriana Bastos Dias, Bruna Ferreira, and Ricardo Saraiva, to design a Family Intervention Program with features that fit the intended objectives, which was then followed by 9 months of actual intervention.

The design of a program of this kind, built on scientific and empirical evidence, used an eclectic approach, but fundamentally ecological-developmental and systemic, with a focus on family and individual resilience processes, on the strengths and competencies of family systems, moving away from an approach centered on deficits and the position of a specialist, but closer to collaborative work. This was done to enhance the potential for change and to develop the empowerment of families to be the authors of their life trajectories.

The planned methodologies included: intervention primarily in the families' everyday settings (at home and community); a tiered intervention that allowed for an appropriate selection of families to take part in the project, supported by specific criteria that determined how ready the family systems were for a program of this scale; an assessment of their specific needs (evaluated both from the point of view of the professionals monitoring the family's situation and from the families' own point of view); intervention with clear objectives co-constructed with the families, tailored to their needs, which were continually examined and, if necessary, adjusted according to their progress; a gradual promotion of the families' autonomy without a breakdown of the support provided to them; ongoing discussion of all the processes, establishing comprehensive systemic hypotheses appropriate to each situation, along with supervision and intervision to develop the professionals' personal and technical skills; the construction and implementation of a System for Evaluating the Impact of the intervention, carried out by external professionals, in order to determine its effectiveness.

It should be noted that, throughout the project, it was essential to make a continuous effort to discuss the work carried out, both in terms of methodologies and direct intervention, by discussing cases. Constant and dynamic discussion of the hypotheses regarding each situation proved to be a key tool for therapeutic practice. To this end, weekly supervision work was carried out with Patrick Tomlinson, a specialist in Residential Care and Professional and Organizational Development in Organizations for Children and Young People at Risk.

A Technical and Scientific Committee was formed, comprising 4 members from entities such as the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People, Universidade do Porto (Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação), and Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Porto), to meet on a bi-monthly basis to review the progress of the project's conceptualization and implementation process. Additionally, various theoretical and practical aspects were discussed, providing a space for mutual sharing, reflection, and learning, which enabled challenges to be resolved, ethical issues to be raised and theoretical knowledge to be deepened, using dialectical questioning to enrich the process of implementing a Pilot Project.

**The implementation of the Family Intervention Program included a 5-phase protocol:**

- Phase 0 - Referral (identifying and referring families to develop initial systemic hypotheses).
- Phase 1 - Reception (reception of families who have been previously selected, and who have agreed to meet with the Family Intervention Team to be introduced to the Program and to make a final decision regarding their participation; co-construction of a preliminary Individual Intervention Plan with each family).
- Phase 2 - Preparing for Reunification (a comprehensive assessment is carried out with each Family, addressing a set of previously defined topics, considering the applicable scientific literature, and using the appropriate tools and methodologies for this purpose).
- Phase 3 - Reunification (ongoing family intervention with similar methodologies and frequency (weekly sessions), but with the added caveat that the child/young person is already integrated into their home environment, requiring increased monitoring).
- Phase 4 - Follow-up (monitoring of Families after the end of the intervention, holding sessions after 1, 3, and 6 months).

Direct and individual intervention was carried out with 9 Families (10 Families started intervention, but one dropped out halfway through the process), between May 2023 and February 2024. The Families were residents of the Porto District, mostly from the metropolitan area of Porto (70%). The remaining 30% lived in rural areas of the district. As far as typology is concerned, 30% were single-parent families, 30% were hetero-parental nuclear families, 20% were reconstituted families and 20% were extended families (with two different generations living together).

In addition to the individual intervention with each family, two Multifamily Intervention sessions were planned and carried out, attended by several of the participating families. The group sessions aimed to address the common challenges and issues encountered in the reunification process. Sharing of the same emotional experiences proved to be a potentially very therapeutic element, due to the manifestation of strengths and skills that could be "absorbed" by others.

Furthermore, an intervention was developed with the Caregivers of the Residential Care Home, as it was considered that all those involved should be aligned in their perspectives regarding working with Families, but also gather specific tools that would allow them to deal with the challenges in their relationship with the Families. The intervention with the Caregivers covered topics such as building a collaborative relationship with the Families, the role and importance of all the relevant

adults for the Children and Young People, recognizing their individual resonances as a result of their developmental path, dealing with processes of loss, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, communication, and conflict management, and support for the Children/Young People in the various stages of residential care (preparing the reunification process, validating and deconstructing children's emotions, ...).

Throughout the intervention developed with the families, several qualitative changes were observed that led to an increase in a pattern of healthier relationships among the elements of the system. Throughout the project, the focus on the concept of a "healthy relationship" became more and more prominent, as it was found to be an essential basic factor for families to be able to meet the conditions, in the short-term or long-term, for eventual reunification. It was observed that, in several Families, it was not possible to fully achieve family reunification since the time needed for the families to achieve change did not match the Project's (too short) intervention period, which means that projects of this nature should be implemented on a more permanent basis.

Nevertheless, in most of the families involved, it was possible to observe that the children and young people were getting closer to their families, both emotionally and in terms of the amount of time they spent together, thus pointing to a potential reunification in the medium term.

It should be highlighted that, from the outset of the project's conceptualization, effective reunification was never considered to be the most pressing indicator of the intervention's success. A better understanding of what could be the best life project for the child/young person would ultimately be the best outcome. Families' better awareness of their weaknesses led, in several cases, to a self-assessment that seemed to be heading in a negative direction of change. However, it is this greater self-awareness that has allowed Families to discard an idealized vision of themselves and undertake actual processes of change or make decisions to support other life projects that do not entail effective reunification. The co-construction of these alternative projects (which occurred in some of the Families) might then lead to the Children/Young People being kept in an institutional setting, achieving gradual autonomy, while at the same time maintaining close ties and healthy interaction with their families.