



AFTER-SCHOOL SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

The perspectives of children and professionals working in these services

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WHAT DID THE RESEARCH PROJECT CONSIST OF?

The research project 6 Mirades wanted to know and analyse the perspective of children and adolescents in contexts of social risk through their participation in after-school socio-educational services in Catalonia. These are services (i) providing socio-educational and socio-emotional support to children living in contexts of social vulnerability; (ii) offering support to children and their families, with a particular emphasis on the prevention situations involving risk of maltreatment; iii) focusing primarily on educational leisure activities while also fulfilling an important social function; and iv) prioritising academic support and educational reinforcement for children experiencing social vulnerability. The research project has been carried out between 2024 and 2026, and its objectives have been to study:

- the characteristics of the children and adolescents who participate in these services;
- their life satisfaction as well as their needs and aspirations;
- the assessments made by children and professionals in relation to these services;
- the role of these services in the prevention of situations of abuse and the actions carried out with families;
- the compensatory and preventive function of these services in the face of educational inequalities;
- proposals for improvement from these community resources.

WHY THIS RESEARCH?

In the midst of the process of rethinking the role of the daily after-school care services, we propose a research project to learn about the perspectives and opinions of the main protagonists: the children and adolescents who attend these services, with the aim of contributing reflections and proposals for socio-educational practice and public policies.

METHOD

The research had the participation of children and adolescents from the beginning through the creation of **5 groups of experts made up of boys and girls between 9 and 17 years old** from different services¹. There has also been an Advisory Council made up of representatives of some organizations². In addition, advice has been received from an Advisory Group of Experts from the universities of Groningen, Porto and the UNED in Madrid.

A quantitative study **has been carried out** through the administration of a questionnaire prepared jointly with the 5 groups of experts, aimed at **children and adolescents** between 9 and 17 years old who attend these socio-educational services and the **professionals** who work there.

The following questionnaires were collected:

1.249

children

465

professionals

A population-based sample was obtained by inviting all services to participate, achieving a participation rate of 41.2%. Also, the **qualitative data** collected in the different groups of experts and advisors have been analysed, as well as in the open questions of the questionnaires (some verbatim quotations are shown).

¹ SIS del Consell Comarcal del Tarragonès, SIS del Consell Comarcal del Solsonès, Centre Obert AEI Raval, Centre Obert Llagostera, i Esplai diari Can Vidalet Pubilla Cases.

² FEDAIA, Proinfancia, Fundació Pere Tarrés, Fundació Catalana de l'Esplai, Fundació Champagnat, AEI Raval, Ivàlua, DGPIIA, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Ajuntament de Girona i Ajuntament del Prat de Llobregat.

MAIN RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

01 What are the services like, the children who participate in them and the professionals who work there?

Services involved in the research project:

- **190 services** in Catalonia: 34.4% by local authorities and 65.6% by **entities NGOs**.
- **133 municipalities**, of which 31.2% have fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.
- 83.7% work through **group care**. Most children go there **two afternoons a week**, but the range of responses ranges from one to five days a week.

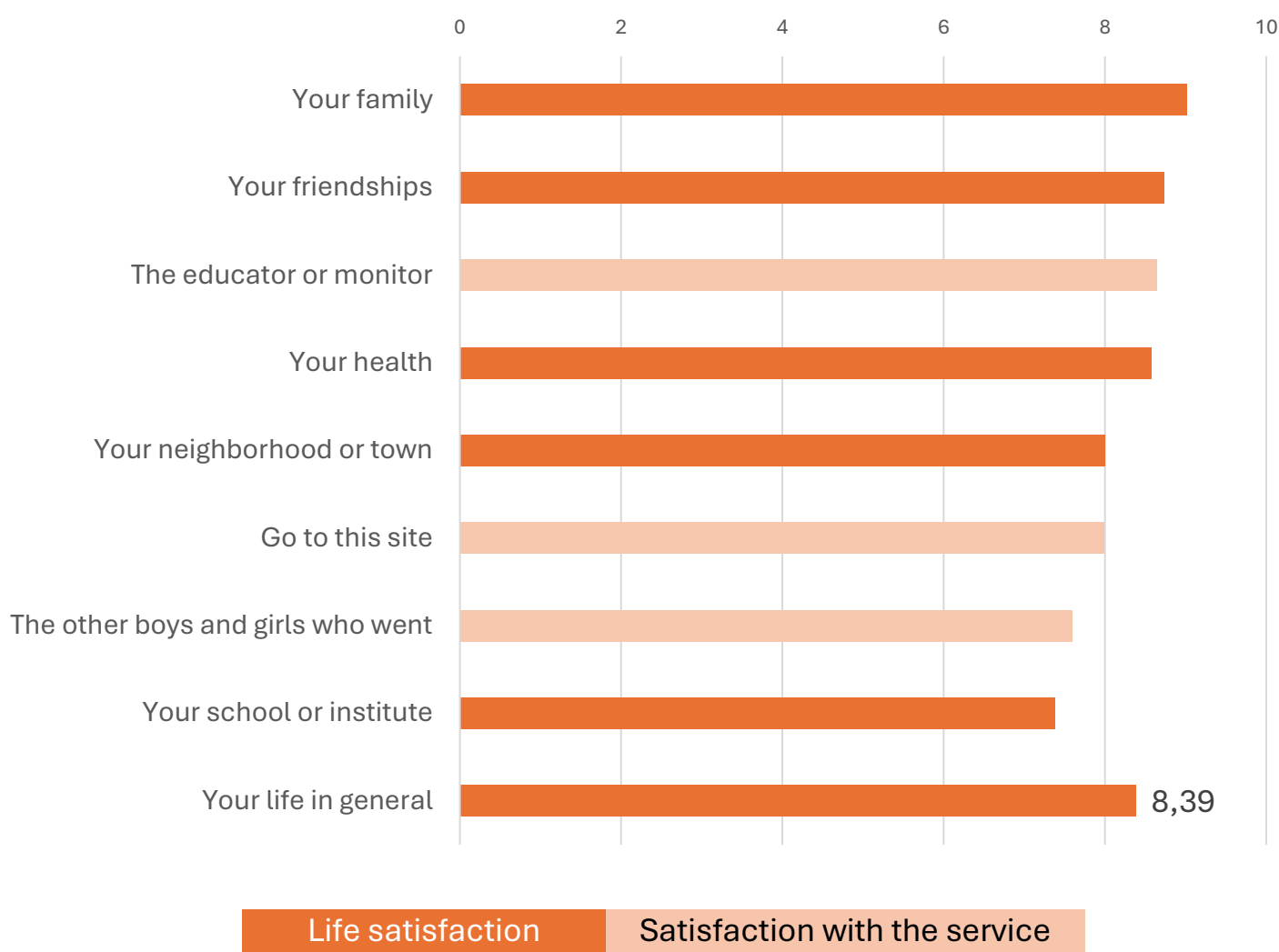
Children and adolescents. Of the 1249 who answered the questionnaire:

- They were between **9 and 17 years old**.
- 47.1% were in primary education and 52.9% are in secondary education.
- 68.9% of the children were born in Spain and 69.5% were children of parents born abroad.
- The professionals stated that most of them come from family and social contexts with socioeconomic vulnerability and have needs for socio-emotional and academic support, but **they also highlight many positive aspects**. They say that children are:

"Energetic", "restless", "active", "fun", "grateful", "resilient", "sensitive", "creative", ...

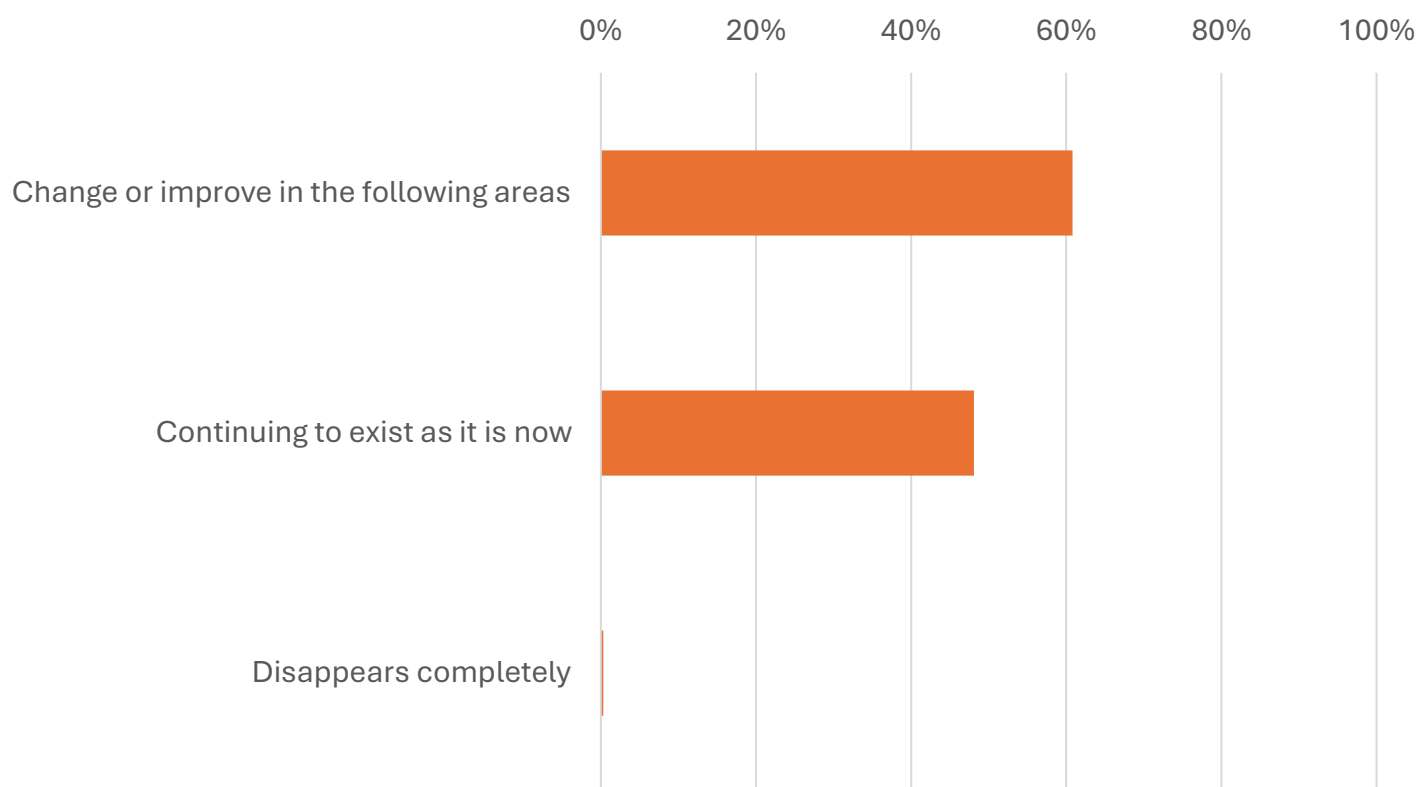
- Half of the children say they **go there because their family has told them** to, and few recognise the referral of social services, contrary to what professionals' claim.
- The children's evaluations of the **place, the materials, the schedule and the frequency of the service in general are positive.**
- Children's **life satisfaction** is high and similar to the rest of the population at these ages. Satisfaction **with the service is also high**, especially with educators (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Children: How satisfied you are with: (Mean)



Professionals. Of the 456 who answered the questionnaire:

- Average age: 33.2 years.
- 85.3% are women.
- 95.9% were born in Spain.
- 40.9% work as social educators.
- Only 32.1% work full-time.
- Half have been working in the service for a maximum of 3 years, and 20% have been working for 10 years or more.
- Professionals want to continue working there and their **job satisfaction** is high (7.9 on average on a scale of 0 to 10).
- They think that the **service should continue to exist** as it is or introduce improvements but not disappear (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Professionals: I think this service should...

02 The socio-emotional support of socio-educational services

Children and adolescents value the services very positively. They feel **happy, listened to, respected, welcomed and safe**. They also emphasize that they do not feel judged, taken into account and given solutions. They value that they have built **affective bonds** of reference based **on trust** and, above all, value **the fact of 'talking' with the educator**.

"Without pain or shame, I would like to find more centers like I'm here. The educators and classmates are very good people; they help you and treat you as if you were one of their family." (Boy, 17 years old)

There are those who express that due to their **physical appearance, cultural origin or religion, they feel discriminated against at school, but not in the socioeducational services**. The aspect of physical appearance can be related to cultural origin, but also to the pressure to follow certain aesthetic canons.

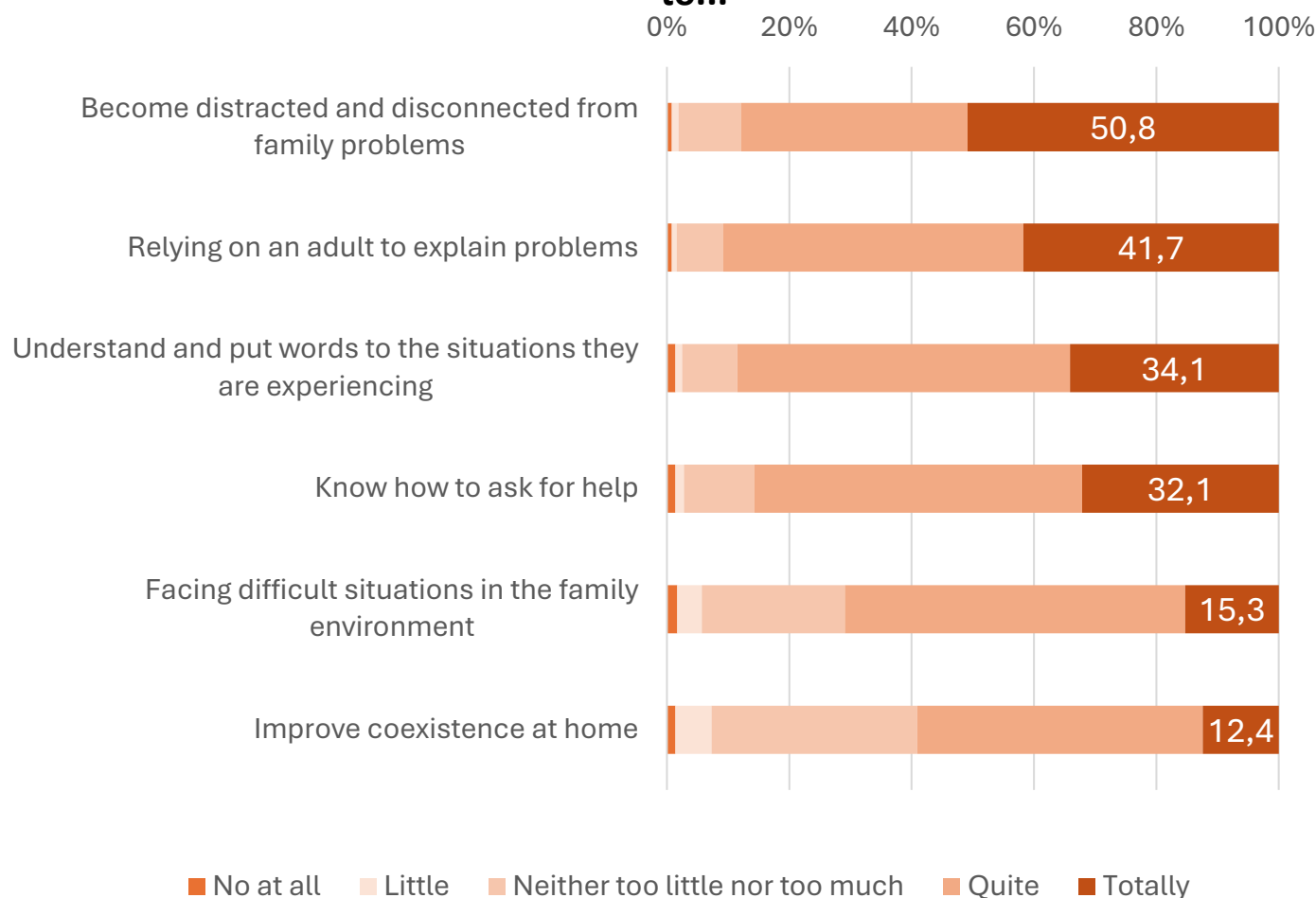
Children and adolescents express the desire to continue going. Almost half would like to go there for more days. Children would recommend the service and **would not want it closed**.

"I wouldn't like them to close the space because it's part of my life and the childhood of many children, and because it's a space where children who have problems at home have a space to have fun and be with friends" (Girl, 16 years old)

They also identify some limitations in services. They perceive that some rules are exaggerated, that educators make them talk too much about emotions, that some activities are too childish, and to a lesser extent, that sometimes there are conflicts and fights.

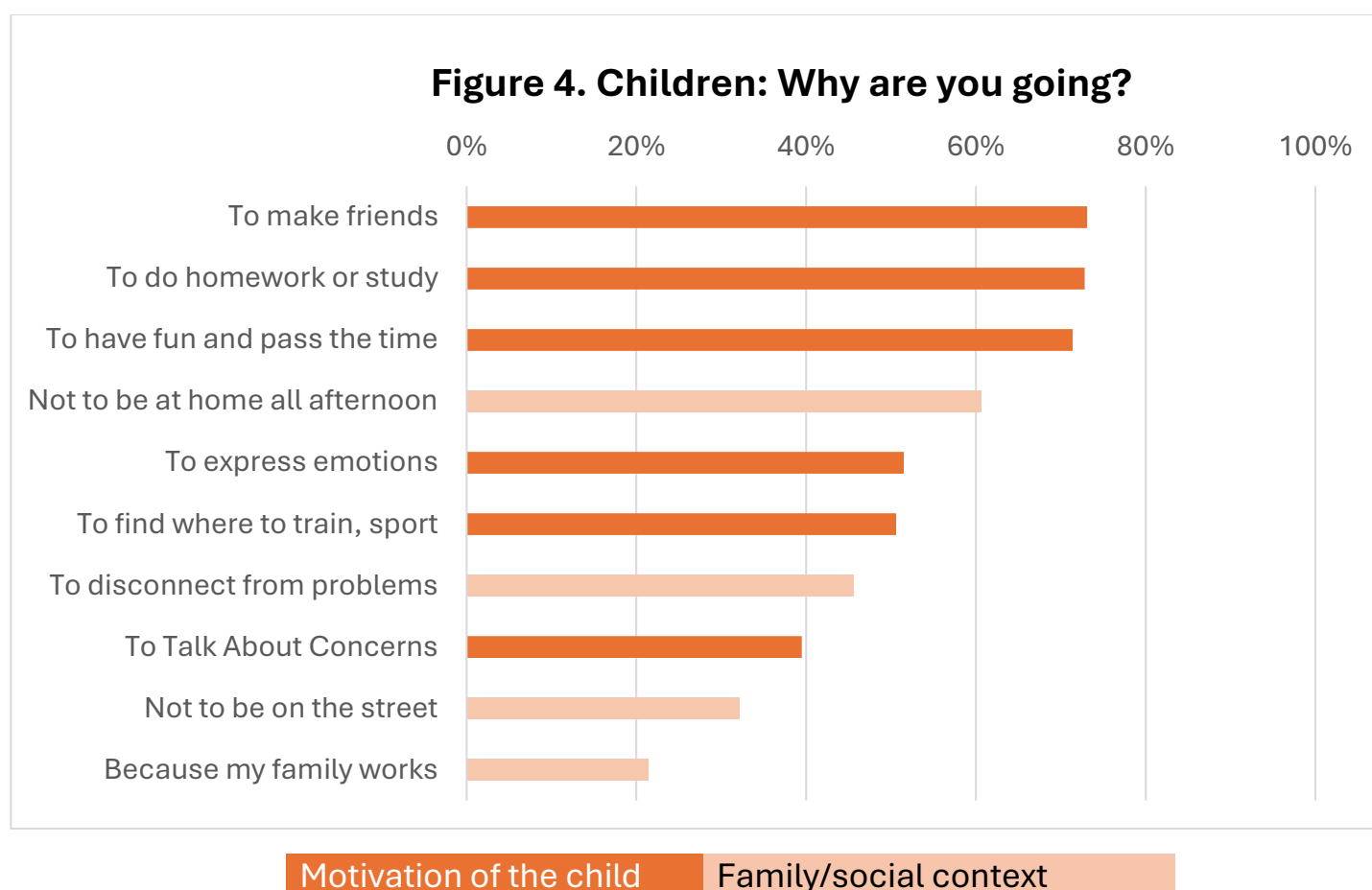
Professionals play a key role in emotional support. They think that the service **helps children and adolescents to disconnect from problems, to trust, to put words and to ask for help.** To a lesser extent, facing difficult situations and improving coexistence at home (Figure 3). Children also express that it helps them talk about emotions (but they don't want it to be a compulsory activity (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Professionals: That children or adolescents who live in difficult contexts of adversity participating in the service learn to...



03 Socio-educational action and academic support

Children and adolescents **value the educational support they receive positively**. Most say that one of the reasons they attend is to do homework or study (Figure 4). Educational support spaces become reference spaces for children, and nearly half say that going to the service helps them to **do better at school** (Figure 6). There are services that do not offer this space and support, but children would like to have it because they cannot do it at home.

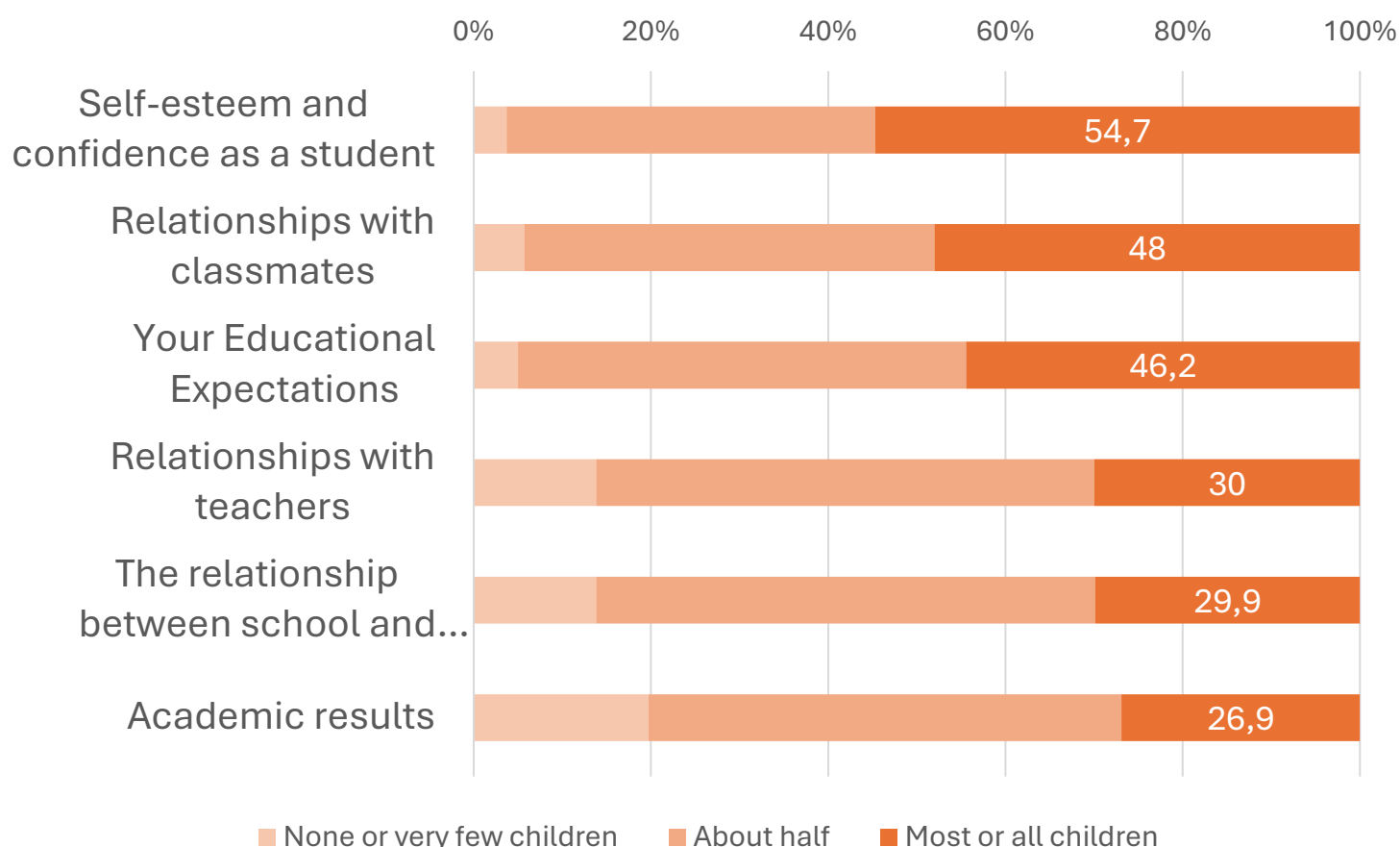


The professionals state that one of the main objectives of the service is to combat **educational inequalities**, and that the service achieves improvements related to self-esteem as students, relationships with classmates and educational expectations (Figure 5).

On the other hand, **coordination with schools is uneven**: some of them point to the coordination and networking they do as a strength, while others see that there are a lot of room for improvement.

"The socio-educational accompaniment, which is what the service is about, and the school review, which on the one hand hook up with children and adolescents and families and on the other hand help their school performance." (Professional)

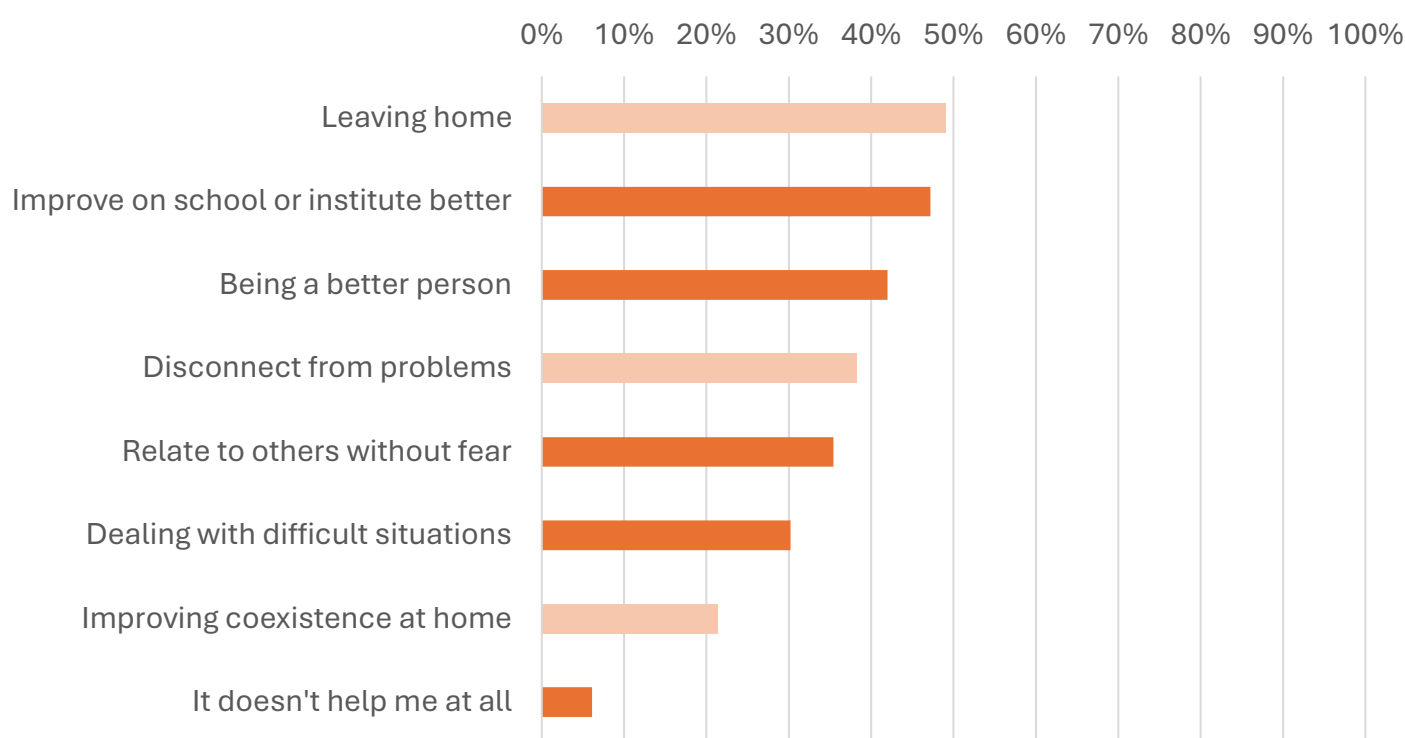
Figure 5. Professionals: From the service we manage to improve their situation in terms of:



04 Education in leisure

Children and adolescents **say that they go there to have fun and make friends and positively value the educational leisure activities that are carried out there.** The internal organization of the services has a strong component of leisure activities that from the voice of its participants is valued. The boys and girls express that they make friends, that they **leave the house**, that it **helps them to be a better person** (Figure 6) and that they have fun participating in organized activities, workshops, board games, crafts or excursions. The professionals report that they carry out activities to improve their social, cognitive, emotional and creative skills.

Figure 6. Children: Going to this place in the afternoons, helps me to:



Learning of the child

Family/social context

Almost half of children and adolescents **do not usually participate in extracurricular activities or sports**, but express that they **would like to do so**, especially the youngest (8 to 12 years old).

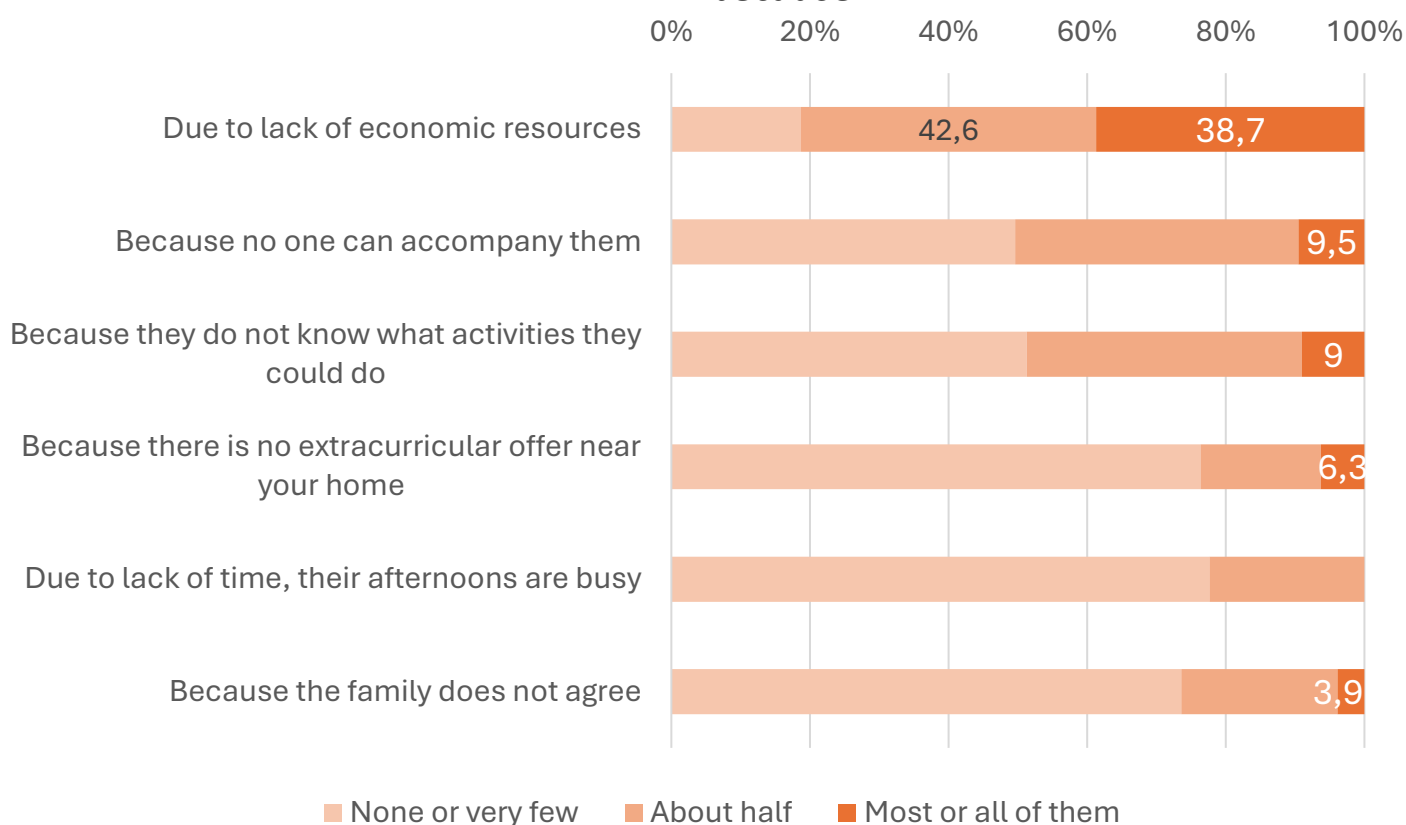
Among the activities they would like to do is sport, especially football, but also others such as boxing or gymnastics in the case of boys, and dancing, skating and music, in the case of girls.

Only 4% participate in the scout movement during the weekend.

At the same time, it highlights that a third of children and adolescents **say they do not know why they do not do extracurricular activities or sports**, but professionals are clear that the main barrier is economic (Figure 7). There are few who would prefer to do only extracurricular activities and not go to the socio-educational service, but the majority express **that they want to combine the two activities**.

"I would like all children to be given scholarships to go to the sport or extracurricular activities they want, since not everyone can afford it." (Girl, 13 years old)

Figure 7. Professionals: They do not do other activities because...



05 Social risk prevention and working with families

The main activities that characterise the work that these services do with **families** are, above all, **interviews, often without the presence of their children**. However, the role of the children is different depending on the service: there are boys and girls who express that they are told what is decided in the meetings, while others do not usually know when they meet or what is being discussed.

In general, most professionals value that the relationship they have with their families is good and continuous, and that **they help them carry out procedures, inform them and accompany them**. Some services give examples of the work they do with families, often focused on parenting skills and emotional and educational support:

"Active listening without judging, emotional support, accompaniment..." (Professional)

"Carry out training workshops with families and children on positive parenting, where the family and the educators involved can interact" (Professional)

Organizing activities and parties shared with families, assemblies or excursions is a minority practice.

Among professionals, there is a strong consensus that one of the objectives of the services is the **prevention of child abuse, and that children and adolescents should be listened to more in their family matters**. At the same time, there is a disparity of opinions on whether the prevention actions that are promoted manage to reduce the risk of abuse. Educational teams cannot know whether attending the service improves or worsens the family context or coexistence, but they do consider that it **provides the children with tools to cope with it and gives them the confidence to explain their problems** (Figure 3).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

These recommendations are intended to be respectful and at the same time transferable to the plurality of services, some aimed at children's policies, others at professional practice or both.

- **To politically and socially recognise the public function carried out by afterschool socio-educational services.** They are services supported with public funds, free of charge for families, and contribute to the deployment of public policies for children that improve the well-being of children and their social inclusion from the family and community environment. Therefore, it is necessary to continue **to strengthen the presence and work** of these socio-educational services, respecting their diversity and context.
- Children and professionals consider them **unique and useful** on many levels. The **playful component and positive experience** contrasts with the vision that is often seen from the outside, considering them to be highly **stigmatised services**. We must all contribute to changing the way we look at things.
- At the same time and in addition, it is necessary to recognise and generate conditions of possibility for these services **to guide children and young people towards extracurricular and leisure activities of their interest**. This orientation must be conceived as one of its functions of accompaniment, seeking strategies to assume the cost of participation, and providing support both in the processing of scholarships and in the subsequent accompaniment to ensure continuity.
- Children **and adolescents must be listened** to make decisions with their voice: what to do with these services and their leisure time is a matter that directly affects them. It must be a commitment of everyone to make their participation effective.

- With regard to working with families, it is necessary to strengthen **parental skills and skills for quality coexistence and treatment**, promote **support networks** and promote **educational co-responsibility**. In this sense, it is also interesting to promote the involvement of families in leisure activities, especially **spaces shared** with their children, outings with the participation of families to strengthen ties and shared experiences, or informal meetings between families to create links and shared knowledge.
- Respect the different rhythms and interests that may involve working with families and accompanying children, **without linking the evolution of the intervention with the family to the child's assistance or continuity in the socio-educational service**. Children need stability in the activities they carry out, and it is necessary to accompany them, individually or in groups, in their development, in the discovery of their interests and in the identification of extracurricular, cultural or other activities that are related. Therefore, the service should **continue to accompany the child regardless of the result of the work with the family and the social risk assessment that is carried out**.
- Maintain stable **coordination with schools** and other services in the community network (health, social services, etc.). It includes building a shared sense of coordination, formalizing periodicity, sharing relevant information and promoting educational coherence between the two educational contexts. Also to **promote communication with the school in situations of discrimination expressed by children and adolescents**. It is necessary to conceive that spaces for dialogue within the service are necessary to accompany children and adolescents and prevent it from being considered an isolated situation or one that only affects the child or adolescent who suffers from it.

- **To open services to the community and other profiles of children.** Specifically, on special days or on the occasion of a festival, organizing activities for the community, or participating in the organization and attendance at activities of the municipality.
- Enable a reference space where children and young people receive **academic support when they need it**, especially when they do not have this space or support at home. It may include the reservation of time slots for homework or educational reinforcement.
- An express request from children and adolescents is to **avoid exposing personal or emotional experiences that may violate their privacy**. It is advisable to prioritize individualized spaces to address personal situations and thus avoid the obligation to talk about emotions in pre-established group spaces.
- For the sustainability of the above points, it is necessary:
 - a) **increase the work hours of professionals** (so they can work full-time), so that it means more recognition and support, and more stability of the workforce. It is also necessary to expand the service where there is more demand and adapt it where there is none;
 - b) **establish a continuous training plan** - updating of work in areas such as mental health, work in situations of violence or poverty;
 - c) **Increase resources to address diversity.**

We appreciate all children, young people and professionals who have participated in the project.