


## Experience Report: Praxis


## Parental Guidance Groups: an experience report

## Grupos de Orientação Parental: um relato de experiência

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**ABSTRACT** | The family is one of the biggest influences on the child development process, so that studies focused on parenting practices have scientific, academic and social generation. Thus, the article aims to report the experience of conducting Parental Guidance Groups over a three-year period in a city on Santa Catarina state, Brazil. This is a Descriptive and Cross-sectional study of the Experience Report type. 49 parents participated, who were divided into six groups during the three years of application, with weekly meetings. Therefore, when superimposing Group Practices with Parent Orientation, it became evident that the benefits of group care are diverse, considering that this format favors opportunities for learning, greater support among members, reducing stigma and increasing autofocus. However, the challenges for therapists are many and the development of certain characteristics is necessary to achieve the expected results. This assertion notably characterizes the importance of Mandatory Internships, and can be an important opportunity for the acquisition of these competences, in the same measure that makes it possible to take an important step in the process: applying the theory in practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Parental Guidance. Orientation Groups. Family.

**RESUMO** | A conjuntura familiar é uma das maiores influências no processo de desenvolvimento infantil, de modo que, estudos voltados às práticas parentais possuem significativa relevância científica, acadêmica e social. Dessa forma, o presente artigo objetiva relatar a experiência da realização de Grupos de Orientação Parental no período de três anos em uma cidade de Santa Catarina. Trata-se de um estudo Descritivo e Transversal do tipo Relato de Experiência. Participaram 49 pais, que foram seccionados em seis grupos no decurso dos três anos de aplicação, com encontros semanais. Por conseguinte, ao sobrepor Práticas Grupais com Orientação para Pais, evidenciou-se que os benefícios dos atendimentos em grupo são diversos, considerando que este formato favorece oportunidades para aprendizagem, maior apoio entre os membros, redução do estigma e aumento do autofocus. Contudo, os desafios aos terapeutas são muitos e o desenvolvimento de determinadas características profissionais necessárias para o alcance dos resultados esperados. Essa asserção caracteriza notadamente a importância dos Estágios Obrigatórios, podendo ser uma importante oportunidade para a aquisição dessas competências, na mesma medida que possibilita aplicar a teoria na prática.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Orientação Parental. Grupos de Orientação. Família.

## Introduction

Considered one of the main human group activities, the family conjuncture is instituted as a primary source that guaranteed the survival and adaptation of the species over the millennia, extending to contemporary times. Parallel to this conjuncture, and supported by multiple researches, studies are consensual to denote the influence of multifactorial aspects in the course of the Human Development (HD) process, and family remains as one of the fundamental factors (Teixeira, Bardagi & Gomes, 2004; Pereira et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2004; Macarini et al., 2010).

Furthermore, so that the understanding of the influence and importance of the family conjuncture became achievable at the practical level, over the years several theorists have resorted to systematic and interdisciplinary approaches, which resulted in the conception of two models commonly used to investigate phenomena concerning HD, and consequently of the family conjuncture: the Bioecological Model of Human Development and the Parental Investment Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2002, Leme et al., 2016).

According to the Bioecological Model of Human Development (BMHD), the individual is inserted in concentric systems, that is, contexts in which the process of development is the product resulting from the interaction between the individual and the environment where it inserts itself, from the family environment, the school environment, the neighborhood, to the parents' workplace, the political, religious and ideological systems. In general, the model postulates that the individual is conceived from interactional processing of itself with these multiple environments, which are composed of other people, symbols, objects, adapting and changing in a space-time continuum (Bronfenbrenner, 2002; Benetti et al., 2013). The Parental Investment Theory, on the other hand, as a model based on an evolutionary perspective, proposes that the skills referring to the parental strategies of the human species were selected during the evolutionary period for providing a greater possibility of adaptation and survival. Thus, the family system is governed by practices given by the parents to their children: communication, emotional support, care, protection, affection, among others, as guarantees of offspring survival (Manfroi, Macarini & Vieira, 2011; Bossardi & Vieira, 2011).

From these movements, inquiries about what are the most effective ways to educate children, established themselves as guidelines for scientific research since the beginning of the 20th century, so that several concepts were developed with the objective of categorize and organize scientific findings about family, among them the concepts of parenting, parenting educational practices and parenting styles (Ribeiro, Gomes & Felizardo, 2015; Macarini et al., 2010).

The concept of parenting is more general, and can be understood as the result of applied parenting educational practices and the adopted parenting style. It is characterized mainly by the relationship between two generations in which the parents have the purpose of providing for the child care, protection, education and integration with other family or institutional networks, with the ultimate goal of constituting childhoods that are adaptive, healthy and promising in adulthood (Bossardi & Vieira, 2011; Gaspar & Matos, 2016; Hoghughi, 2004; Manfroi; Macarini & Vieira, 2011; Ribeiro; Gomes & Felizardo, 2015).

Parental educational practices are strategies used by parents to achieve purposes in different spheres such as school and social media, and are characterized by the set of behaviors and values presented by parents who act in the reGENCY and largely in the consolidation of the child's identity. Usually, parental educational practices are the ways in which parents educate and teach their children about the world, and they can involve multiple categories: positive monitoring, moral behavior, relaxed discipline, negative monitoring, physical abuse, inconsistent punishment and negligence. Positive monitoring consists of an establishment of rules, supervision of parents regarding the child's activities and maintaining assertive and empathic communication. Moral behavior concerns adapting to group rules and how much parents educate their children based on such rules. Relaxed discipline is the lack of rules and inconsistent punishments. Negative monitoring is characterized by out-of-context instructions of the consequences and the conservation of a hostile coexistence environment. Physical abuse and neglect are the absence of attention and affection, physical and psychological violence and the abandonment of the child (Hoghughi, 2004; Mondin, 2008).

Parenting styles are basically an extension of educational practices and are reflected in the way in which parents present themselves in terms of attitudes and instructions on the performance of these practices. Essentially, it's the emotional climate in which the relations between the two occur, translated in the tone and pitch of the voice, body language, instructions on ways of perceiving and acting in the world and mood swings. They are classified into four categories based on care and comprehensive attitudes, characterized by: authoritarian parents, who use coercion as a disciplinary form; authoritative parents, who do not use coercive discipline and assume the principle of assertive communication; negligent parents, who do not exercise the role of parent and progressively decline in maintaining the parent-child relationship; indulgent parents are characterized by maintaining practices aimed at reinforcing any children's behaviors, without imposition of limits or rules (Ribeiro, Gomes & Felizardo, 2015).

Parenting educational practices, as well as parenting styles, can be configured as risk factors in child development (Patias, Siqueira & Dias, 2004). Among these multiple factors, one of the primary and indispensable aspects to be intensely discussed is preventing child violence. Despite diversified public policies and actions of protection agencies aimed at children, estimates of mistreatment and abuse have high rates and indicate that 22% of adults worldwide have suffered physical abuse in childhood, 36% have suffered emotional abuse and 16% suffered neglect, with no significant differences between genders (Gonçalves & Vieira, 2018).

Yet, studies carried out in the last decades in Brazil also showed negative consequences arising from coercive parenting practices, in which they maintain positive correlation with regard to adulthood with a higher prevalence in transgression of social norms, less social support, less resilience, low self-esteem and low tolerance to frustration (Brasil, 2005; Weinfurter, 2015). Other studies confirm the thesis that children show greater emotional suffering and difficulty controlling their emotions when exposed to negative emotional expressions and the maintenance of coercive practices by parents, with positive results when guidance for parents on the use of theory of positive reinforcement for maintaining adaptive behaviors is implemented (Mondin, 2008).

At the interventional level, a systematic review carried out recently on Parental Guidance Groups in Brazil resulted in the reduced number of five articles on the theme between 2014 and 2018. In the qualitative synthesis, the authors emphasize that the legitimacy of studies on internal and external validity covered only two studies, using pre-test and post-test. One of the studies used questionnaires and two studies did not carry out any evaluation process. Regarding the sample number, a study had a maximum sample of 97 participants, another had an average sample of 22 participants and the remaining studies had a sample below ten participants (Gonçalves, Oliveira & Delvan, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned review denoting two quasi-experimental studies with positive consequences regarding effectiveness, in general, these results are still incipient, with the addition that the rest of the studies were not experiments, which predicts the need for research with greater empirical rigor in view of the effectiveness of the practice of parental guidance groups (Neufeld, Godoi & Propais, 2014).

As a result, by overlapping parental guidance practices with current theories of group practices, these are possible because they mainly have the characteristic of homogeneity. At the same time, the meetings are structured and based on pre-established protocols and schedules, but that, inversely, based on the contextual demands of the group, the meeting can be conducted in a dynamic and flexible way even when linked to protocol, aiming at the effective adaptation of the group (Neufeld et al., 2017). The meetings rely on the establishment of a contract with well-established criteria already in the initial meetings, which allude to the permanence of the participants, as well as pre-test and post-test procedures. These initial meetings are based on the principle of rapport between the parties, usually being reinforced through dynamic. Meetings include tasks, and these should be reviewed at the next meeting in order to consolidate and evaluate learning, as well as to encourage engagement in the proposed exercises (Neufeld et al., 2017).

In the case of group practices with content related to parenting and child development, it is worth mentioning the ACT Program to Educate Children in Safe Environments, intervention protocol developed by the American Psychology Association (APA).

The Program has been framed both in the level of promotion of the mentioned therapeutic factors as well as in the level of prevention of child violence, since its main objective is to incorporate interventional methods to prevent violence against children in advance and insert the perspective of protection in the community and enable families to create safe, stable and healthy environments throughout child development (Weymouth & Howe, 2011; APA, 2009).

The Program, named ACT, was supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a non-profit association in the United States that represents early childhood teachers, educators, principals of centers, coaches, college educators, young children's families, policy makers and advocates and was based on experimental results from prevention of violence in childhood. ACT addresses and helps professionals and families to deliberate on appropriate child behaviors to each stage of the development, emphasizing the importance of parents playing a positive role for the child in the sense of monitoring and conducting behavior through aversive practices to the detriment of violence (Silva et al., 2016).

In view of the above, it is possible to highlight the strong influences that the environment and parental practices exert on human development, from cognitive-behavioral, psychosocial consequences to cultural consequences, which highlights the social, scientific, academic and health relevance that studies on parenting practices are conducted in order to promote the quality of life of families. Still, the importance of interventional models aimed at guiding positive parenting practices is emphasized, models that aim to provide parents with the ability to offer a quality development/learning process for children, so that it assists them to insert themselves into the environments and contexts in an assertive way, through positive interactions and aiming at a promising adult life. Considering that many parents lack skills to maintain minimal educational practices, group practices with focus on parental guidance, supported by evidence-based research, fit as effective methods for the occurrence of new learning about the adequate way to educate children (APA, 2009).

Thus, this article aims to report the experience of applying Parental Guidance Groups in the period of three years in a coastal city of Santa Catarina, describing the meetings held and the themes addressed, as well as the results of the interventions.

## Method

It is an experience report of the application of Parental Guidance Groups, from 2015 to 2018. Parental Guidance Groups took place over three years and included the participation of 49 parents, with weekly meetings distributed according to availability of the participants' schedules, according to the ACT Program.

## Results

### Description of Meetings held with Parent Groups

The first meeting with the parents was aimed at Understanding the Behavior of Children, which specifically addressed the process of human development, crossing physical, brain, cognitive-behavioral and psychosocial differences as the child grows. Concomitant to description of the most prominent differences, conceptual frameworks about the human learning process were included and, consequently, how the way children behave in environments is entirely linked to their process of development and learning (Martins, 2014). The impact that the first years of life have on child development was discussed, since they are the first interactions that they fix for several other answers they will give to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2002). It was highlighted that parental educational practices can be configured as risk factors in the development (Patias, Siqueira & Dias, 2004; Brazil, 2005; Weinfurter, 2015), the importance of the mediation of the parents was also discussed during the process of learning, in which they are crucial for orientation, shaping and modeling concerning the expression of adaptive behaviors (Caleiro & Silva, 2012).

Imbued with the general aspects of child development, human learning and the role of parents as mediators of such processes, the second meeting was aimed at psychoeducation about the impacts of Child Exposure to Violence. Emphasis was placed on describing how children can be exposed to violence and how it can harm them. There are three ways in which children can be exposed to violence: as victims, as aggressors and as witnesses, in which they can occur through physical, verbal, or sexual abuse and also through negligent. Bearing in mind that the first years of life are a crucial period in child development, exposure to any form of violence can have harmful consequences for children (Goulart et al., 2015).

Violence as an educational practice is a violation of the right of the child insofar as it increases the risk that the child involved will suffer serious consequences, including death (Martins, 2010; Rates, 2015). In the last years, multiple studies have described the reverberation of marital conflicts in the child's development, and despite the differences in the level of consequences of a child to another, there is consistent evidence denoting strong correlations between marital conflicts and behavioral problems, in different age groups (Benetti, 2006; Goulart et al., 2015). Implicitly, the marital conflicts witnessed by the child, in addition to being characterized as potential risk factors throughout the development process, present themselves as violent models of learning (Weinfurter, 2015).

The third meeting was on the topic of Understanding and Controlling Anger, aimed specifically at parents. First, a case flowchart was drawn up with situations where children make their parents angry and how often these parents deal with it. From these data, psychoeducation about the cognitive model was made, that is, how the relationship between thoughts, emotions and behaviors. In the case flowchart, it was discussed the appropriate way to control anger, and how it primarily involves identifying thoughts when dealing with situations in which children make them angry, and thus seek not to act impulsively. According to Knapp & Beck (2008), there is an interrelation between cognition, emotion and behavior. A certain situation can activate some thoughts in the individual, which generates emotions and behaviors. This relationship is important to understand anger because, most of

the time, the sensitivity in relation to the situation occurs precisely by its cognitive interpretation. Having knowledge of this, parents can identify which thoughts occur when experiencing certain situations with their children, examine the evidence of reality and, with this, correct any distorted content in such thoughts, resulting in more functional behaviors towards their children (Neufeld & Rangé, 2017).

Progressive relaxation was used to reduce sympathetic system activities and provide a feeling of relaxation, and, concomitant with body scanning, allowed the preparation for exhibition via imagination. Body scanning is an activity often used in mindfulness training and consists of maintaining full and open attention, at the present moment, for body members progressively (Germer, Siegel & Fulton, 2016). This activity seeks to increase the level of awareness of the perceptions of the senses, thoughts and feelings, and helps reduce stress (Neufeld & Rangé, 2017).

Based on the premises of the cognitive model explained in the previous meeting, the fourth meeting was on "How to Teach Children to Deal with Anger". Children, like adults, feel anger from three basic orders: biological, ontogenetic (learned) and socio-cultural. Children have feelings like anger for adaptive issues, and it is the parents' job to teach their children to control such feelings. So, to help children deal with anger, it is important for parents to control their own anger and, above all, avoid violence. This attitude can generate two important and essential results: learning through modeling how to control feelings and the development of assertive educational strategies (Barbato, 2010).

Although parents often still mirror the education they received, usually strict and based on the concept of "right and wrong", this style of parenting practice does not apply to the contemporary family, due to the complexities presented by it. Physical punishment, in its almost totality, does not produce the expected effects and can undermine the relationship between parent and child, harm self-esteem and pose serious risks to the child's physical and psychological health (Ribeiro, 2007). Nevertheless, children have conflicts with adults and other children as they are in different developmental stages and their reactions are not meant to bother the parents, but

are necessary behaviors for children to develop and adapt to the environment. Children who obtain secure internal models are more likely to present a greater knowledge of their own emotions, however, for this to happen, it is necessary that parents have positive practices, sharing feelings, their causes and consequences, consistent with the principles of shaping and modeling (Martins, 2010). Positive parenting practices contribute to children's social and emotional functioning, which demonstrates the importance of parents and/or caregivers engaging in observing and guiding children's social interactions, as well as their emotional expressions (Rebelo, 2012).

One of the topics of greatest interest and doubts occurred at the fifth meeting, which dealt with the Impact of Technology on Children's Lives. These doubts corroborate the questions that society has asked as well as researchers in the area of human development, in view of the prolonged period that children and young people spend with Information and Communication Technologies (video games, computers, television, cell phones, tablets). At the same time, children are inserted in a world based on social relationships, maintained via computer networks, as well as computerized learning processes, without physical contact with people or the environment (Paiva & Costa 2015; Barbosa et al., 2014; Momo, 2014). However, this exchange model has multiple implications for the human development process in addition to the psychosocial and psychomotor aspects, corroborating a study specifically focused on the relationship between children and cartoons conducted in Brazil by Miguel and Contino (2013), in which they showed a high allusion of children to the characters and their behaviors, often through reliable and violent imitations, results that favor the care and monitoring that parents, as guardians, must have with the period and the contents that their children consume through electronic means.

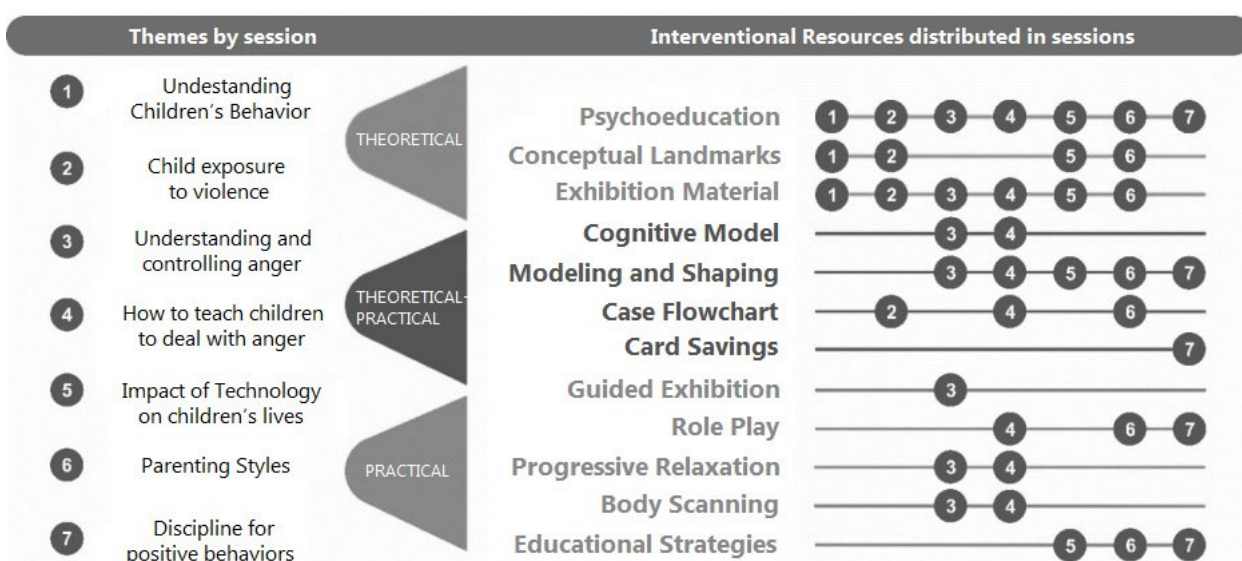
How we learn to behave as parents, what parenting styles are most popular and its implications for their children's lives, were the themes of the sixth meeting. Parenting styles can be classified into four categories based on care and comprehensive attitudes, characterized by: authoritarian parents, who use coercion as a disciplinary form; authoritative parents, who do not use coercive discipline but use the principle of assertive communication; negligent parents, who do not play the role of parent and progressively decline in maintaining the parent-child relationship; indulgent parents, characterized by maintaining practices aimed at reinforcing any behavior of their children, without imposing limits or rules. Parenting styles are indicators that make it possible to assess the quality of parental educational practices within a family, bearing in mind that, depending on the expressed parental educational practices, it defines the parenting style connected to each parent (Ribeiro, Gomes & Felizardo, 2015).

To assist the participants, it was decided to develop potential educational strategies to help them change their parenting styles, given that most of them, and linked to the "right" or "wrong" culture, the most frequent parenting style was authoritarian, with the use of coercive practices as a disciplinary means. It was intensely reinforced that, in general, young children misbehave because they are learning things, and that it is important for parents to understand and accept children as they are, not expecting them to behave like adults (Caleiro & Silva, 2012). Still, according to Pasquali et al. (2012), research shows that parenting styles are related to several aspects of the psychosocial development of children and adolescents, such as, for example, self-esteem, social adjustment, psychopathology and school performance, being also related to stimuli in children for discipline, independence, autonomy and responsibility at the same time in which they model behaviors considered socially appropriate by parents.

The seventh meeting focused on the importance of parents paying attention to children's behaviors and attitudes in all their interactions, that is, how to maintain the Discipline for Positive Behaviors. Role play was used as a means of demonstrating to the parents how much more attention is given, in the vast majority, to conflict situations and behaviors than when children are behaving properly (Ribeiro et al., 2007). Bearing in mind that physical punishment still is an intrinsic behavior in Western culture, as it is generally contextualized as educational practice, a concept passed from generation to generation, assisting in the construction of the parental style of most of the parents (Ceconello, Antoni & Kolller, 2003), psychoeducation about the differences between punishment and discipline becomes important to prevent punishment from being seen as an educational practice. It is the responsibility of the family to teach the child what appropriate behaviors should be presented and know how to value them. According to Pasquali et al. (2012) and Benchaya et al. (2011) family is considered the main support for the individual in childhood. It's in the family environment that children initially build their beliefs, values, rules, attitudes, culture, including behaviors that are considered appropriate in this culture.

Lastly, in figure 1, it is possible to observe the outline of the meetings.

Figure 1. Outline of the meetings, distributed based on the themes



Source: The authors (2019).

### Conclusion

Professional practice in Psychology requires diverse skills and capacities that are learned, refined and improved in the course of academic life, such as learning about group practices aimed at the family. The benefits of group assistance are diverse, considering that this format favors opportunities for learning, greater support among members, reducing stigma and increased autofocus. However, the challenges to therapists are many and the development of certain characteristics are necessary for the achievement of the expected results (Neufeld & Range, 2017). This assertion notably characterizes the importance of Mandatory Internships, which can be characterized as an important mediator for the acquisition of these competences, to the same extent that it makes it possible to take an important step in the process: applying theory to practice (Gonçalves, Oliveira & Silva, 2018).

One of the observed limitations is that the ACT Program to Educate Children in Safe Environments, because it was elaborated and carried out with American samples, has its focus on preventing child violence and contains tasks that are often of difficult apprehension by Brazilian participants, notably related to their level of schooling. This difference required facilitators to adapt the form of presentation of the themes, to the same extent that they needed to learn to master techniques beyond verbal reporting, to assist in the participation of low-verbal parents.

Notwithstanding, though the present study is an experience report, it is emphasized that the gathering of information with the parents participating in the groups allowed observing pertinent data on parental science. Furthermore, it is concluded that the Parental Guidance Groups were an important experience to prepare for the professional practice. Implicitly, after observing three years of application, the need for programs elaborated from Brazilian samples is highlighted, so that interventions are organized based on the real needs of the target audience, and that, across the board, experimental studies should be orientations aimed at parents and/or caregivers, can effectively assist them in the task of being parents.

### Author contributions

Gonçalves JC participated in literature reviews on the topic, conducting parental guidance groups, evaluation of interventions, and writing of the scientific article. Delvan JSA participated in guidance on literature reviews on the topic, supervision of the conduction of the groups, guidance on evaluation of the interventions and final correction of the scientific article. Oliveira AJ, Abbud AS, Loos VN and Bortolatto MO participated in the literature reviews on the topic, conduction of parental guidance groups and evaluation of interventions.

### Competing interests

No financial, legal or political conflicts involving third parties (government, companies and private foundations, etc.) were declared for any aspect of the submitted article (including, but not limited to grants and financing, participation in advisory board, design study, manuscript preparation, statistical analysis, etc.).

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