Parenting challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The pandemic scenario, added to social isolation, resulted in the emergence of news demands on the family and the needed to reorganize this system. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to investigate the challenges of parenting during the pandemic from a retrospective view of the parents. For this, 83 fathers and mothers participated in the survey by answering an online questionnaire with closed and open questions. Through thematic analysis, six challenges were identified and classified into categories: online learning, use of digital screens and online games, conciliate time in the face of demands, leisure and relationships beyond social contact, handling emotions and challenges related to parenting practices. It is perceived the potential impact of the pandemic on parenting and on the mental health of children and parents. Faced with this context of stressors, it is concluded that it is essential to offer support to parents in the search for strategies to face these challenges that can impact the relationship between parents and children.
Key-words: COVID-19 pandemic, parenting, family.

Desafios da parentalidade na pandemia de COVID-19

Resumo: O cenário pandêmico, somado ao isolamento social, acarretou no surgimento de novas demandas à família e necessidade de reorganização desse sistema. Diante disso, esse estudo qualitativo teve como objetivo investigar os desafios da parentalidade no período da pandemia a partir de uma visão retrospectiva dos pais. Participaram da pesquisa 83 pais e mães, respondendo um questionário online com perguntas fechadas e abertas. Por meio da análise temática, foram identificados seis desafios, classificados nas categorias: aprendizado na modalidade online, uso de telas digitais e jogos online, conciliação do tempo diante das demandas, lazer e relacionamentos para além do contato social, manejo das emoções e desafios relativos às práticas parentais. Foi percebido o potencial impacto da pandemia no exercício da parentalidade e na saúde mental das crianças e dos pais. Frente a esse contexto de estressores, conclui-se como fundamental a oferta de suporte aos pais na busca de estratégias para enfrentar esses desafios que podem impactar a relação entre pais e filhos.
Palavras-chave: pandemia COVID-19, parentalidade, família.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the infection of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2020). Given this scenario, the social isolation policy was implemented as the main control strategy for

the non-dissemination and contagion of the population with the coronavirus (PAHO, 2020).

This coping measure led the families to remain at home, which brought new challenges to the family system, such as: routine change, withdrawal from daily activities, transposition of work to home office, organization of the environment to accommodate demands of each family member, online classes, overload of household chores, excessive use of technologies, longer coexistence with family members, among others (Duan et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Linhares & Enumo, 2020). In addition, there are specific situations caused by this pandemic, such as instability at work, unemployment, financial difficulties, separations, family conflicts, and higher rates of domestic violence (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Linhares & Enumo, 2020; Rosenthal & Thompson, 2020), added to the personal risk and that of close people contracting the virus and suffering complications, including the risk of death.

While social isolation has been necessary, it is accompanied by side effects, added to the changes entailed and situations described. Particularly in relation to children, there is a compromise in mental health, family relationships and the contexts in which they are inserted (Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus, 2020; Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang, & Jiang, 2020; Xie et al., 2019). Thus, a paradoxical context arises in which children are protected from contamination and at the same time faced with changes and uncertainties that can be considered a risk factor for healthy development (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020).

The children are in a particularly vulnerable phase of the life cycle. Thus, in this context of uncertainty, specialists had already identified an increase in problems related to higher levels of irritability, fear, worries, and distraction, as well as excessive proximity to caregivers, anxiety, and depression symptoms (Brooks et al., 2020; de Souza et al., 2020; Haleemunnissa, Didel, Swami, Singh, & Vyas, 2020; Imran, Zeshan, & Pervaiz, 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2019). However, the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) reiterates that the way children cope it, and the severity of the problems will depend, in part, from previous exposure to emergency situations, characteristics of the child, socio-economic and cultural context, and support from the family environment (CDC, 2020).

Concerning the family context, common challenges are observed in the face of the changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic period (Imran et al., 2020; Linhares & Enumo, 2020). The exercise of parenting, for example, changed since parents were

faced with more time spent at home with family members, dividing time and space between household chores, work and family demands (Navarro, Livy, & Chagas, 2021; Oliveira, 2020). One study found that, in the face of social isolation, the time that parents spent taking care of their children at home increased by four hours a day (Park, Park, & Jin, 2021). Thus, adaptations were necessary in the routine of families with children, such as: reconciliation of work and family organization, division of family functions, adjustments in cases of visits by separated parents, and management in the face of excessive use of technologies by children for online classes, games, and social networks (Imran et al., 2020; Oliveira, 2020; Sonnenschein, Grossman, & Grossman, 2021; Souza, 2020).

Regarding online classes, in the study carried out by Sonnenschein et al. (2021), parents were involved in different ways in their children's online school tasks, including monitoring, teaching, communication, and emotional support. Still, it was necessary to organize a suitable place for the child to take the class through electronic devices, which included having a minimum of distracting stimuli and checking internet connections and physical materials so that follow-up was possible (Lunardi et al., 2021).

The experience of these above-mentioned issues, resulting from the pandemic period and social isolation, can be considered a stressor (Rosenthal & Thompson, 2020) and, thus, be associated with an increase in stress level in children and caregivers (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2020). Simultaneously with that, there are concerns, feelings of insecurity and loss, and lack of a support network and social contact that can influence the way parents cope with these challenges and impair the quality of family interactions and, consequently, child development (Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Linhares & Enumo, 2020; Oliveira, 2020).

Understanding that the changes that occurred during the pandemic and the imposition of social isolation generated new demands on the family environment and relationships between members (Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus, 2020), this study aimed to investigate the challenges of parenting in that period from a retrospective view of parents. The study will use the word 'parents' to refer to mothers and fathers. The relevance of the study stands out, especially in the Brazilian context, in which little scientific production is observed on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships.

Method

This is a qualitative, descriptive and cross-sectional study (Gil, 2002).

Participants

Eighty-three fathers, mothers, or guardians of children aged 4 to 12 years participated in this study, of which 95.9% were biological mothers or fathers, with an average age of 38.71 (± 6.68) years. Most are female (88.3%) and are married to the father or mother of the child (67.9%). The study found a higher percentage of parents who resided in the state of Rio Grande do Sul and classified in economic classes A and B (74%). Regarding the children, the average age is 7.47 (± 2.64) years, and the highest percentage of males (54.4%).

As inclusion criteria, parents should have children aged between 4 and 12 years and agree to participate in the research through the acceptance of Informed Consent (IC), in addition to answering the questions regarding the challenges perceived about the exercise of parenting during the pandemic.

Instruments

Researchers created a questionnaire to collect general data from participants such as age, education, and marital status, among others. In addition, it used the Brazil Economic Classification Criteria (Brazilian Association of Research Companies [ABEP], 2018) to evaluate socioeconomic aspects from the survey of household characteristics and classify participants in the following strata: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, D, E .

Towards investigating the challenges in the role of father/mother, as well as the relationship with children during the pandemic, the study organized an online quiz with multiple choice and open questions. The closed ones investigated the need for parents to talk about challenges in parenting, asking, for example, if parents perceive as necessary a space to exchange and learn with other parents and, in a multiple choice question, indicate what subjects they would like to address in a group for parents. And in the open questions there was space for parents to write on perceived challenges and changes in family and relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as "What were the

biggest challenges experienced by you in your role as a parent with your child during the pandemic?".

Data collection procedure

Data collection was carried out from June to September 2021 in the online format through a form created in Google Forms. At first, participants were invited to respond to the survey through invitations on social networks. At the beginning of the research, participants needed to consent to the IC and mark the item "I agree to participate" to follow up on the form with the questionnaires. All participants were encouraged to submit the link of the research to other candidates who fit the inclusion criteria, constituting a sampling by snowball (Sampieri, Collado, & Lucio, 2013). After completion of collection, access to the link was terminated and started the analysis of the data .

This study is part of a larger project, which obtained a favorable opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of a higher education institution under identification number 46087121.2.0000.5344. This research ensured the confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary nature of the participants.

Data analysis procedure

The study performed a descriptive analysis to characterize the participants in relation to the sociodemographic profile. It used the thematic analysis method to identify, analyze, and delimit the themes in the face of a large number of data to respond to its objective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, the researchers read the participants' responses in detail and noted the key elements. Afterward, they grouped data according to similarity. From this process, they defined six themes that correspond to the challenges identified by the participants in the relationship between parents and children during the pandemic. They are: 1) "learning in the online modality," which consists of parents' answers about the challenges involved in the process of accompanying classes and the children's learning itself; 2) "use of digital screens and online games," which involved responses about excessive use of screens, parental concern about handling, and difficulty in seeking activities other than screens; 3) "reconciliation of time in the face of demands" which encompasses parents' responses on the challenge of adapting the tasks of family members at home 4) "leisure and relationships beyond social contact"

corresponded to responses about seeking entertainment activities when activities and physical contact with other children were suspended, 5) "emotion management" involves how parents report having dealt with their own emotions and those of the children in addition to the concern to make the moment more peaceful, as far as possible, and 6) "challenges related to parenting practices" was related to the responses about the strategies used by parents to relate to and educate children during this period, considering the guidelines and safety measures.

Results and Discussion

Based on the objective of this study, the six thematic axes identified will be presented and discussed with the previous literature: learning in the online modality, use of digital screens and online games, conciliation of time in the face of demands, leisure, and relationships beyond social contact, management of emotions and challenges related to parenting practices.

Online learning

In Brazil, after a period of interruption of face-to-face school activities, the school dynamics was adapted to the format online (Brazil, 2020), requiring the adaptation of families so that participation in classes was possible (Dong, Cao, & Li, 2020). Parents reported challenges related to the stimuli in the home environment that interfered with the time of classes, as observed in the responses:

"Keep focused during online classes"

"As my daughter stays with my parents and my nephew who is young and ends up disturbing, she cannot take the online class"

The process of experiencing online classes was also particularly challenging due to the didactic adaptation and monitoring of the tasks by the parents. In the face of school tasks, on the one hand, there is support and support for children and, on the other, difficulties related to how parents can provide help. Many parents report challenges facing the modality online, presenting negative beliefs about the benefits of remote classes and difficulties due to lack of time and knowledge on how to assist the learning process (Dong et al., 2020). This research noticed reports associated with the role of parents in school activities online. The following narratives exemplify that it was challenging:

"Guide in online classes"

"He cannot do the online class properly, so when I arrive home, we have to do and resume all the subjects"

"Keep calm to be able to educate him without going to school"

"Teach him to read and write"

"Last year was very challenging (...) we had to teach them (...) but we managed to achieve the goal which was to make them literate"

In this sample, parents perceive the need to resume classroom content and exercise the role of teachers, which requires professional knowledge about didactics to assist in the school routine and, in some cases, carry out the literacy process. These statements denote the mixing of the role of parents and teachers, which may be associated with a higher level of stress in parents due to increased parental demands (Fontanesi et al., 2020).

Use of digital screens and online games

The parents who participated in this study allude to the use of excessive screens as a challenge present during the pandemic:

"Get him out of front of the television, tablet, and mobile"

"It was hard to keep him away from video games"

"She spent a lot of time alone, exceeding her time with computer and cell phone."

From the statements, the study questions the reason for the excessive use of screens by children in this period, which may be a strategy to relieve to the stress generated by spending more time at home and facing moments of insecurity, as well as the feeling of connection with friends (Orben, Tomova, & Blackmore, 2020; Park et al., 2021). The following reports can show it:

"It is a challenge to limit the use of screens, especially because they were games that allowed social interaction, considering the isolation that lasted. As a result, I noticed a demand from friends to spend hours playing"

At the same time there has been an increase in the use of screens explained by the parents in this research, it observed their desire to reduce their use. It seems explicit when reading about the challenges involved in pursuing other forms of entertainment:

"Find activities to replace contact with friends without involving screens"

"Have activities keep them away from electronics sometimes"

"Create habits without electronics, regain her enthusiasm"

The data of the present study confirm that the use of electronic devices to conduct classes online influenced the increase in the use of screens by children and young people (de Souza, 2020). However, the increase in the level of children and adolescents exposed to technology is also due to exposure to games and other activities online (Duan et al., 2020; de Souza et al., 2020).

Conciliation of time in the face of demands

The caregivers' statements explain the challenge of reconciling time with different demands:

"Combine attention, take care of everything else, study, work, take care of the house"

"Difficulty with daily tasks such as work, managing homework, and the demands of children without a support network"

"Organization of time to reconcile maternity and work"

"Remote work together with son at home and remote class"

"Take care of all demands, home, child, work, leisure"

Family dynamics needed to be readapted. It also involved, in some cases, increasing responsibilities to account for their demands from work and childcare.

With the appropriate adaptations and the need to be closer to the children to deal with school demands, families became closer, which may have been a positive point, strengthening affective ties in the family (Fontanesi et al., 2020). On the other hand, the overload of parents can also have an impact on the relationship with their children since tiredness and stress can result in parents being less emotionally available to live quality time with them (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020). Given this, the accentuated coexistence brought challenges of reconciling different demands and accommodating the needs of all family members, boosted by the decrease in the support network, exemplified by the responses of parents:

"We had no one to leave our daughter with."

"It is challenging to live together for longer as he cannot go to his father's house because of the pandemic"

Families with parents divorced also needed to readapt, seeking a functional choice for caregivers and children to preserve the health of those involved. In this scenario, a possible choice was for the child to remain with only one of the caregivers for a longer time to avoid exposing the family to the risk of contagion. It results in the

child's estrangement from the other caregiver, which can have repercussions on the child's emotional health and overload for the other caregiver. (Lebow, 2020; Souza, 2020).

Leisure and relationships beyond social contact

In this sample, there are challenges to the stay-at-home rule. Parents are concerned about entertaining children in the face of the pandemic because of the suspension of the routine and many extra activities. Thus, some parents reported that it was challenging to seek entertainment activities in the face of social isolation:

"Find entertainment in the period that would be in school"

"There seemed to be a lack of entertainment resources in the daily routine"

"Being able to pay attention, you can't do anything different, just stay at home"

Despite the existence of different families in different contexts, to some extent, all had to reorganize leisure activities in the face of the pandemic (Souza, 2020; Oliveira, 2020). These changes in routine, reduced contact with extended family and friends, and a decrease in entertainment activities beyond the family environment were identified as challenges, reflected in the responses:

"It is an adaptation of the child without school, distancing from friends, keeping him indoors in the most critical periods because the recreation areas were closed"

"It was challenging to reconcile his willingness to play when the adult has to work and study"

"She misses the activities that she used to do and that she still can't do again"

"Not being able to go to grandparents, uncles and friends and also not being able to go out"

These changes may have brought new demands to the family system, generating challenges for accommodating them. Faced with this situation, parents needed to manage their own emotions and the emotional and behavioral reaction of children to the pandemic scenario.

Managing emotions

Parents and children manifested their emotions in different ways as a mean of adapting to the pandemic scenario, according to the statements of caregivers:

"The biggest challenge was the anxiety and fear that we both developed for sure"

"Very high stress level and also impatience"

"There was a lot of anguish, sadness, and boredom"

"Dealing with the anxiety and fear of the child was challenging"

"A huge challenge, the need to work, the fear of illness"

"Emotional, behavioral challenge... I had to seek help to understand my emotions."

This pandemic context is a major stress trigger for children and relatives (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2020). Because it is a situation with a worldwide impact, both parents and children experience losses and insecurities about this moment, which can result in uncontrolled or aggravated emotions for people of all age groups (Brooks et al., 2020; Haleemunnissa et al., 2021).

According to Imran et al. (2020), young people can perceive their parents' stress and demonstrate concerns and annoyances so that their caregivers may interpret it as bad behavior, defiant posture, tantrums, or lack of control. According to Park et al. (2021), factors associated with increased stress in children relate to staying at home a much longer time than usual, staying socially distant, and the challenges with online classes. As a response to stressful situations, children may present some predominant emotions and reactions, such as fear, anxiety, irritability, and restlessness (Imran et al., 2020).

The literature points out that social isolation and school closures may have potentiated effects on children's mental health, given that they drastically decreased their interactions with other children and adults (Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus, 2020). Corroborating these data, Jiao et al. (2020) present data that children can experience emotions such as irritability, increased distraction, and fear. Added to this, children may be more restless and find it difficult to focus and engage in games, as well as present aggressive behaviors (Imran et al., 2020). The parents' statements confirm these data, demonstrating that they identified challenges in dealing with:

"Irritability of the child due to lack of activities outside the home and little patience because the exhaustion due to increased parental activities"

"Keep children protected from Covid at home and deal with the negative psychological consequences caused by lack of contact with other children and outdoor play"

"It was challenging to deal with anxiety. The lack of coexistence with his schoolmates made him more anxious and angrier"

"It seems that the lack of interaction generated greater aggressiveness in her"

"Dealing with the frustration of not being able to go out freely and meet friends/family"

The Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus (2020) emphasizes the importance of normalizing reactions to this pandemic scenario. It involves understanding the behaviors that children present as responses to the emotions they feel. At the same time, a search by parents to make the moment lighter was perceived, as evidenced:

"Leave the house in a light mood even with the chaos outside"

"Tolerate the uncertainties of life and produce a space full of life when the context was death"

"I tried hard to keep him entertained, cheerful"

The literature highlights that the reality of the pandemic context leads to psychological effects on children in the short and long term, bringing consequences for child development (Imran et al., 2020; de Souza et al., 2020). Given this, parents must be aware of children's behaviors that may denote suffering (Jiao et al., 2020). At the same time, it is necessary to monitor over time what losses the children and young people will present (Brooks et al., 2020) since it may have impacts on the child and relationships, especially between parents and children.

Challenges to parenting practices

The parenting exercise occurs using different strategies called parenting practices (Gomide, 2006). These practices can be positive, such as basic care, demonstration of affection, welcoming, clear instructions and explanations of rules or negative, such as humiliation, inconsistent punishment, excessive monitoring, inadequate instructions, coercive attitudes, use of physical force and neglect. When evaluating the responses of this category, the study noted that parents mentioned as challenges in the pandemic the need to educate their children about the pandemic situation and the measures adopted:

"Make understand hygiene issues to avoid contamination of the virus"

"Control social distancing situations"

Parents can use positive or negative practices to transmit information to children about the pandemic in a scenario with doubts, fears, and losses. Added to this, the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of parents, the context of uncertainties, the feeling of insecurity, and the increase in family demands at home can impact the

relationship between parents and children (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Nucleus, 2020; Navarro et al., 2021; Oliveira, 2020), as exemplified by the phrases:

"Difficult to limit screens time since I need to clean the house, work,..."

"Patience with the limits and difficulties of each one inside the house"

The literature indicates that there are individual, contextual, and family factors that can harm the relationship between parents and children through the use of negative practices (Barros, Goes, & Pereira, 2015; Fontanesi et al., 2020; Rosenthal & Thompson, 2020). There is evidence that parental stress, imminent fear of death, and the need to reorganize routine and demands may be associated with the more frequent use of punishment and verbal hostility (Fontanesi et al., 2020). At the same time, parents can adopt a posture of oscillation between the way of relating to the child, as was perceived in this research:

"It was difficult to keep the house rules, I had to relax and be calmer with some behaviors"

"I had moments of oscillation between permissiveness and authoritarianism"

It is hypothesized that this oscillation occurs because the choice of one way of disciplining children over another is associated, in part, with the emotional state of the parents (*United Nations Children's Fund* [UNICEF], 2017). Thus, in times of higher stress, parents can both remain more permissive and, as a result of emotional dysregulation, use more authoritarian practices related to inconsistent punishment (Barros et al., 2015).

In addition to the data described from the open questions on the challenges of parenting, the study observed that 99% of parents point out that it is important to have space to talk to parents about the exercise of parenting, stating interest in interventions that work on different themes that involve raising children and relationship, such as learning ways to manage their own emotions (64%) and how to help children manage theirs (92.7%), in addition to learning how to act in challenging situations with complicated behaviors (84.8%). These results may indicate the need for parents to have a space for interaction and, especially, support in the face of the challenges encountered in parenting. The implementation of parental education programs can meet this need since the challenges reported in the different categories influence the way parents educate and relate to their children and can lead to emotional and behavioral symptoms in children. (Gurwitch, Nelson, Salem, & Comer, 2020). Thus, intervention can be

valuable considering different factors that influence the relationship between parents and children, such as emotional regulation, parental self-care, knowledge about stages of child development and use of positive parenting practices.

Conclusion

The study noticed that the parents' difficulties inherent in the parenting process were exacerbated in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study that aimed to investigate the challenges of parenting during the pandemic from a retrospective view of parents, identifies reports regarding the adaptations and difficulties of learning in the online modality, the increase in the use of screens, the challenge and the need to reconcile demands of family members, the search for entertainment beyond screens considering the suspension of activities and classes, the way emotions were managed by children and parents and the use of different parental practices to cope with the pandemic. Thus, the study concludes that there is a need to intervene with parents to favor the use of positive parenting practices, through support and information to them, especially in this pandemic context.

This study presents limitations mainly related to the sample, in which most participants are classified as mothers and have a high socioeconomic status. If other informants responsible for the child answered the questionnaire on the parenting challenges in a pandemic context, different results could be found, considering the proximity and involvement with the child. In addition, other studies must assess the challenges of other strata of the population.

Although there are limitations, this article contributes to the scientific literature and the current context by presenting relevant themes that should be considered in studies that include children, parents, and families. Future intervention research must be carried out including fathers and mothers from different contexts, serving as support to assist parents in the face of individual, family, and contextual challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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