Family relationships and environmental factors of children in social vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyze the dynamics of family relationships and environmental factors in children in situations of social vulnerability and violence served by an educational institution. This is a descriptive-exploratory study, with eight families served by a non-governmental institution located in a municipality in the Southern Region of Brazil. Semi-structured interviews were applied to fathers, mothers and/or guardians for the analysis of the Comprehensive Assessment Synthesis Instruments (ISAC). The results showed averages close to 3.0 (from 1 to 5) in ISAC, which conceives situations in which there are strengths, but also vulnerabilities in families, especially socioeconomic factors. It was also identified difficulty in accessing health services, education, employment and adequate food. Therefore, health promotion actions should be encouraged, seeking to develop a culture of peace, reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen support networks.

Keywords: Domestic Violence; Health Promotion; Parenting.

INTRODUCTION

Families in situations of vulnerability and violence face multiple challenges and stress factors throughout their lives. They go through numerous difficulties, of an economic, educational, and cultural nature, but should also be recognized for their potential and resources in the face of the changes imposed on them, and can be characterized as multi-challenged families. According to Alarcão (2006) cited by Gomes (2021), in the structure of these families, constant changes in their composition, the presence of ruptures, and reconstitutions create unique genograms, in which roles in the family relationship may change and be reformulated.

In Brazil, the social vulnerability of families has been increasing due to the rise in financial difficulties, violence, and hunger, driven in recent years by Covid-19. Social vulnerability is characterized by the lack of access to material goods, healthcare services, education, work, and well-being, which prevent quality of life (Azevédo; Silva; Magalhães, 2019). It occurs when there are insufficient resources to confront the social structures that generate exclusion.

According to Lazar and Davenport (2018), unemployment, limited access to consumer goods, services, information, and basic citizenship rights are factors that contribute to the increase of intrafamily violence. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2021), families may experience risk and protective factors in different ways, depending on economic factors, personal experiences, and the cultural context in which they develop. Therefore, the implementation of strategies for prevention, protection, and the promotion of mental health, as well as care for vulnerable children, must be carried out through an understanding of the particular context of each child and their family.

Social support networks in communities work to strengthen the health of families in situations of social vulnerability and violence, as they represent the sum of institutions and people whom the individual perceives or feels as significant within the relational environment in which they are inserted (Azevédo; Silva; Magalhães, 2019). This support network is composed of family members, neighbors, and friends, as well as schools, basic health units, and psychosocial care centers, which tend to help the family face risks and vulnerabilities. In this way, when these bonds are healthy, they contribute to the development of strategies to cope with vulnerabilities (Azevédo; Silva; Magalhães, 2019).

In light of this, this article sought to analyze the dynamics of family relationships and environmental factors in children in situations of social vulnerability and violence served by an educational institution.

METHOD

This is a descriptive study and also qualifies as a case study, as it was conducted with the families responsible for children aged 6 to 12 who are supported by a single non-governmental institution.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Cesumar University, with CAAE: 36451320.7.0000.5539 and opinion no. 4.311.624.

Research Setting

The institution where the research was conducted is a non-governmental educational organization, operating as an after-school program, of the "Lar Escola" type, founded in 2003, located in the southern region of Brazil. It serves 120 children aged 6 to 12 years during after-school hours, with 60 children attending in the morning and 60 in the afternoon.

The goal of this institution is to provide a space capable of assisting in the development of creativity and learning for children in situations of social vulnerability. It also aims to contribute to reducing school failure. The institution is supported by the solidarity of individuals or companies, as well as government subsidies from the local city administration, to fund the activities offered.

Participants

Data collection took place in November and December 2020, with mothers, fathers, and/or guardians of children served by a non-governmental educational after-school institution, known as Lar Escola.

Eight families of 13 school-age children (6 to 10 years old) participated, selected by the institution's managers and social educators, identified as being in situations of psychosocial risk or danger associated with intrafamily violence. Among the 13 selected

children, some were siblings (n=9), forming four families. Children with a history of adoption were excluded.

Of the 13 children, seven were male and six were female. Five children were aged six or seven, five were aged eight or nine, and three were 10 years old. Seven of the children were in the 1st and 2nd grades of elementary school, five were in the 3rd and 4th grades, and one was in preschool.

Regarding the parents' education levels, three had completed high school, followed by two who did not disclose, one with completed elementary school, and one with incomplete elementary education. Regarding the education of the mothers of the children participating in this study, three had completed high school and three had completed elementary school, followed by two who did not disclose and one mother with incomplete elementary education.

In terms of family structure, five of the eight participating families were composed of heterosexual couples, two were single mothers, and one was a same-sex couple.

Instruments

The Comprehensive Assessment Synthesis Instruments (ISAC), according to Melo and Alarcão (2015), were applied in the form of interviews, with the aim of understanding the dynamics of family relationships, parental capacity, and the environmental and social factors affecting the families.

The ISAC allows synthesizing the results of the comprehensive assessment and integrates: (a) the Synthesis Instrument for Parental Capacity Assessment, (b) the Synthesis Instrument for Assessing Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity, and (c) the Synthesis Instrument for Assessing Environmental and Social Factors.

The Synthesis Instrument for Parental Capacity Assessment includes items related to key areas of parental capacity/competencies. The Synthesis Instrument for Assessing Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity includes factors related to family functioning, particularly dimensions associated with family resilience processes such as: family beliefs/narratives/identity (e.g., positive family identity, optimism, and hope) (2 items); interaction patterns/family life structure/organization (cohesion and unity) (2 items); communication/flexibility/adaptation and problem-solving capacity (2 items).

It also includes other factors that are not direct indicators of parental capacity but may affect it, such as dimensions related to the quality of the marital relationship (2 items), developmental history (1 item), and other characteristics of caregivers, including self-perception (1 item); parental satisfaction (1 item); substance abuse (2 items); psychopathology (1 item); individual functioning patterns (3 items); and motivation for change (1 item).

The Synthesis Instrument for Assessing Environmental and Social Factors includes an assessment of factors related to housing quality (4 items), employment/financial resources (3 items), the quality of family social integration and the community environment (4 items), and financial and household management (2 items) (Melo; Alarcão, 2015).

Responses were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, according to the criteria for each point established by the Manual developed by Melo and Alarcão (2015). Ratings of 1 and 2 correspond to areas of vulnerability/poor functioning that could theoretically create dangerous circumstances for the child. A rating of 3 reflects situations in which there are strengths but also vulnerabilities within the family, corresponding to psychosocial risk factors that, at the time of the research, were not associated with immediate danger to the child. Ratings of 4 and 5 correspond to clear levels of competence/strength/protection. A score of 4 represents situations of quite satisfactory competence, while a score of 5 reflects the family's ability to develop autonomously.

Procedures

To select the children, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four social educators from the educational assistance institution. The Social Educators identified children aged six to ten who had been enrolled in the institution for at least one year and who had reported situations or showed signs of intrafamily violence through conversations, drawings, aggressive behavior, and the child's family history.

The comprehensive family assessment interviews were conducted by the researcher, a psychologist. In total, nine families were contacted, eight of whom agreed to participate in the study and signed the informed consent form. The assessments took place within the educational assistance institution, in a classroom setting. The interviews were recorded.

The ISAC was evaluated by three psychologists trained in administering the instruments as recommended by the manual. The evaluators were trained through the reading and discussion of the Support Manual (Melo; Alarcão, 2015).

First, the evaluations were conducted by two evaluators (the researcher and a psychology professional), who filled out the forms and assigned scores individually, as indicated by the manual, based on the interviews with parents and social educators. Once the averages were assigned, the two evaluators discussed their individual scores and reached a consensus for each category. In cases where there was disagreement, the third psychologist provided a third opinion.

The data were analyzed quantitatively using the statistical program EXCEL, with the mean, median, and standard deviation of the ISAC scores calculated.

RESULTS

The results regarding the evaluation of the parental behaviors of the guardians from the eight families are presented in Table 1 and include everything from providing basic care in terms of feeding to personal hygiene and health care.

Table 1. Average of the Parental Capacity Assessment Synthesis

Parental Capacity	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Care Provision	3,84	4,00	0,17
Physical and Domestic Safety and Protection from Others	3,25	3,25	0,06
Affective Safety	2,33	3,00	0,00
Stimulation	2,92	3,00	0,29
Guidance and Setting Limits	2,83	3,00	0,58

Source: Prepared by the authors

Regarding "Care Provision," the overall average obtained by the families was 3.84 (SD±0.14). This subcategory refers to factors such as providing food that meets the child's nutritional needs, supervising meals, ensuring hygiene, providing appropriate clothing for the weather in good condition, and regular medical check-ups and mandatory vaccinations.

In the "Physical and Domestic Safety and Protection from Others" subscale, which covers parental behaviors related to ensuring the physical and social safety of the child, the overall average obtained by the families was 3.25 (SD±0.06). This subscale refers to the ability to create conditions that ensure safety in relation to protection from objects, substances, or circumstances that may threaten physical safety, and the ability to protect the child from contact with adults or other children who may pose a risk to their safety.

The "Emotional Security" subscale evaluated parental behaviors related to the ability to provide security for the child, allowing them to feel safe to explore their world and develop, by providing care, comfort, security, and love. The overall average obtained in this subscale was 2.33 (SD±0.00).

Regarding the "Stimulation" subscale, the overall average observed was 2.92 (SD±0.29). This refers to the families' ability to provide security, support, and encourage the child's exploration of the physical and relational world in a way that promotes autonomy and a sense of competence, as well as their ability to promote the child's emotional competence and provide opportunities for them to form bonds with various important figures and contexts, maintaining regular contact with them.

The "Guidance and Setting Limits" subscale evaluates parental behaviors related to creating conditions for the child to develop pro-social behaviors and learn to regulate their behavior and emotions. The overall average obtained by the families in this subscale was 2.83 (SD±0.58).

Table 2 presents the averages of the synthesis of the Evaluation of Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity, organized into two subscales.

Table 2. Average of the Synthesis of Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity

Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Family Dynamics	3,15	3,00	0,08
Personal Contributions of Caregivers to Family Functioning	3,00	3,00	0,08
Marital Relationship	3,25	3,50	0,23
Disturbance in Caregiver Functioning	4,50	5,00	0,43
Facilitators of Change	3,38	3,25	0,05

Source: Prepared by the authors

Regarding the "Family Dynamics" subscale, the average score obtained by the families was 3.15 (SD±0.08), which relates to a clear positive family identity with distinctive traits maintained through family rituals and beliefs that offer uniqueness, a shared sense of strength, future orientation, optimism, and hope, coherence, transparency, and spirituality; good disposition, cohesion, unity, and family involvement.

The "Personal Contributions of Caregivers to Family Functioning" subscale evaluates the impact of caregivers' developmental history on their parental roles and family functioning. The average score obtained was 3.0 (SD±0.08). This dimension explores factors related to open, clear, and functional communication, the degree of satisfaction in exercising parenthood, emotional and behavioral regulation, and aggression.

In the "Marital Relationship" subcategory, the families' overall average score was 3.25 (SD±0.23), indicating satisfaction with the marital relationship and the quality of the couple/caregivers' relationship.

Regarding "Disruptions in Caregiver Functioning," related to alcohol consumption, psychoactive substance use, psychopathology, and delinquency/criminal history, the average score was 4.50 (SD±0.43). The final subcategory of Table 2 presents "Facilitators of Change," linked to cognitive development and motivation for change, where the families scored an average of 3.38 (SD±0.05).

Table 3 presents the average scores for the synthesis of the evaluation of Environmental and Social Factors based on the responses from the caregivers of the eight

families participating in this study. The analysis shows the environmental factors affecting parental capacity.

Table 3. Average of the Synthesis of Environmental and Social Factors

Environmental and Social Factors	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Housing	3,43	4,00	0,32
Financial Management	2,83	3,00	0,07
Social Integration and Support	2,63	2,50	0,20
Employability	2,88	3,00	0,12

Source: Prepared by the authors

Regarding the "Housing" subcategory, the families' overall average was 3.43 (SD±0.32). This is related to the organization of spaces and the adequacy of the housing to the size of the household, its state of conservation, comfort, sanitation, accessibility conditions, tidiness, hygiene of indoor and outdoor spaces, and the quality of the surrounding community environment.

For Financial Management, the families scored an average of 2.83 (SD±0.07), related to the adequacy of income to meet the family's basic needs, financial management concerning basic expenses, and domestic management.

In the Social Integration and Support subcategory, the families' average was 2.63 (SD±0.20), which relates to the quality of the informal social support network, involvement in leisure activities and/or community activities, awareness of social rights, formal support resources, existing community services, and effective use of community resources.

Regarding "Employability," the families' average was 2.88 (SD±0.12), which is linked to satisfaction with employment and professional/academic trajectory, and the ability to maintain employment and employability. The instrument manual indicates that adults in the family with this result may have low academic qualifications and limited professional experience.

Thus, it is clear that family relationships are also influenced by socioeconomic factors, which can prevent or limit families' access to health services, education, employment, and adequate food, factors that impact and challenge family dynamics.

Overall, it is noted that averages close to 3.0 prevailed, which indicates situations where there are strengths but also vulnerabilities in the families, corresponding to the possibility of psychosocial risk factors (Melo; Alarcão, 2015). At the time of the study, these factors were not associated with immediate danger to the child.

DISCUSSION

The parental capacity assessed in this study refers to the potential of parents, responsible for caregiving, to fulfill their role in contributing to the development and quality of life of their children (Pereira; Alarcão, 2015). The evaluation of this capacity revealed greater difficulties for parents in being responsive to their children's behavior and emotional disturbances, as well as in promoting emotional competence.

Regarding Emotional Security, the results indicated that the families seem to ensure a minimum level of emotional security for their children, being reasonably attentive to emotional signals and expressions and their needs. Caregivers tend to respond to the child's demands, but sometimes their responses may be abrupt, aggressive, expressionless, rejecting, or distancing.

A study conducted by Maia and Soares (2019) compared the perception of parenting practices of fathers and mothers with the perception of their children regarding these practices. In the neglect dimension, parents' perception had the highest and most favorable averages, followed by mothers and children, who had lower and less favorable averages. The authors state that neglect involves little emotional involvement, and that distancing from the task of monitoring and setting boundaries causes difficulties in affection and protection for the child (Maia; Soares, 2019).

In the subcategory Guidance and Establishment of Boundaries, the results indicated that the interviewed parents allow their children to participate in activities that promote their development and assign tasks and responsibilities appropriate to their developmental

level. However, the results also suggest that parents may use harsh forms of physical and verbal or situational punishment.

According to Pereira and Alarcão (2015), four fundamental parental capacities provide a good quality of life for the family: the ability to bond with children and respond to their needs, to perceive the needs of others, to understand and meet children's needs by protecting, educating, and ensuring their socialization, and the ability to participate in community life, providing and receiving social support.

In the Assessment of Family Dynamics and Factors Affecting Parental Capacity, greater weaknesses were observed in the lack of open, clear, and functional communication, linked to emotional and behavioral instability, indicating aggression in family dynamics. These results are relevant for understanding intrafamily violence; however, they must be interpreted with caution, as the psychosocial vulnerability experienced by families affects their dynamics.

The families participating in this study demonstrated that their daily lives are relatively organized, with tasks, schedules, time, spaces, and responsibilities more or less defined, though some areas may be fragile. When related to caregivers' personal contributions to family functioning, participants reported difficulties in communicating openly, potentially showing confusion, distortion, disqualification, violence, rejection, and paradoxes.

The eight families interviewed reported experiencing psychological vulnerability related to intrafamily violence. Such manifestations in communication can be characterized as violence, understood as any action or omission that harms the well-being, physical or psychological integrity, freedom, and right to the full development of another family member (Miura et al., 2018).

Intrafamily violence arises from dynamics of power and affection, involving relationships of subordination and domination. In relationships between men and women, parents and children, or different generations, the authority figure may exercise their role rigidly and austerely, creating a unique dynamic that varies among family groups (Miura et al., 2018).

Conflicts generally leave the environment tenser and more inflamed, which can escalate into actual violence. Children's exposure to violence can occur in various ways,

such as witnessing the violence, hearing but not seeing it, observing the consequences (seeing bruises on the mother, broken furniture), becoming aware of the violence (being told about it), or living in an environment where violence occurs, but the family members are unaware of these events (Walker-Descartes, 2021).

According to Milani and Loureiro (2008), during a report of intrafamily violence, recurring parental discord is the most frequent, characterized by the intensity and severity of the conflict. This type of discord in the daily lives of families establishes an aggressive environment that can contribute to the development of psychopathologies such as anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders in children and/or family members.

Regarding change facilitators, the results indicate that the interviewed families recognize the need for behavioral change. They are aware of the problems affecting them, feel uncomfortable with them, acknowledge the consequences of change and no change, and see themselves as partly responsible for the problem and the need for change, seeking individual and family well-being.

According to Favaretto and Munhoz (2019), creating a Culture of Peace is a way to contribute to problem-solving through dialogue, negotiation, and mediation, making war and violence unviable. Thus, it involves creating opportunities for coexistence, solidarity, respect for life, and strengthening bonds, fostering actions that promote conflict mediation, guaranteeing human rights, reducing violence, and building peaceful and supportive practices (Chrispino; Dusi, 2008).

It is possible to understand that family dynamics are linked to factors that interfere with the parental capacity to provide care and quality of life for their children. Responsibility for this vulnerable state does not lie solely with the family but also with society, due to the lack of social and health support networks that could contribute to health promotion and violence prevention.

The results of the Environmental and Social Factors Evaluation subcategory show the greatest weaknesses among the families participating in this study, attributed to the lack of a nearby community environment, financial impacts from basic and essential expenses, the lack of an informal social support network, involvement in community activities, and the difficulties family heads face in maintaining employment.

When addressing housing, the results show that families live in homes with few rooms, often sharing spaces and functions. The houses meet most of the minimum living conditions—piped water, electricity, sewage systems, kitchen, and bathroom—indicating basic functionality but reduced comfort, according to an analysis conducted using the Manual developed by Melo and Alarcão (2015).

The community environment near these families is marked by some poverty and disorganization, with potential violence and crime. It shows signs of deterioration and impersonality, and neighbors may be hostile, with some declared conflicts or threats but no violent acts. There are few community support services and resources in the vicinity, and transportation is difficult. There is a relationship between poverty and urban violence, showing that in areas with precarious housing, there is a higher likelihood of the population suffering greater economic and social impacts, as well as high homicide rates (Paula, 2021).

In the Financial Management and Employability subcategories, the families demonstrate an income that can meet basic needs, although some are in debt and struggling to meet payment agreements. There are few savings habits, even when possible. The results show the caregivers' difficulty in maintaining formal employment.

Six of the eight families revealed during interviews that they experience financial instability, meaning they struggle to pay bills, feed their families, or even buy medicine for their children. It is worth noting that many Brazilian families face financial difficulties in maintaining basic care. According to the IBGE, in 2022, the unemployment rate was 8.7%, corresponding to 9.5 million unemployed people in Brazil (IBGE, 2018).

With the high unemployment rate, informal jobs have grown in the country. Men are more likely to work without a formal contract or be self-employed. In this situation, women have sought jobs to help the family and now make up almost the entire informal domestic work sector, meaning without a formal contract.

Thus, unemployment has affected families, generating various social, educational, health, and quality of life consequences. In addition to unemployment, data reveal an increase in reports of intrafamily violence among families living in situations of social vulnerability, impacting not only health but also human development and family relationships (Lazar; Davenport, 2018).

The difficulty families face regarding community and support services further exacerbates their vulnerabilities due to limited access to basic services, requiring a focus on the families' territory and the institution where this study was conducted. The community plays an important role in the development of people and their families, as it provides access to relationships and basic services that help improve well-being and quality of life (Oberg, 2018).

In the Social Integration and Support subscale, the results indicate that families have a very limited informal network, possibly consisting only of relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, or colleagues. The network is not very effective in providing any type of support and is very scattered. Family members have very limited involvement with the local community, whether in organizations, political groups, associations, churches, or local groups. However, they have some knowledge of the existing services and resources in the community.

A study by Érnica and Batista (2012) aimed to investigate the effect of the social vulnerability of the territory on educational opportunities in schools located in São Paulo. They found that the higher the levels of social vulnerability around the school, the more limited the quality of educational opportunities offered tends to be. In addition, Sá and Marques (2017) emphasize the contribution of educational institutions in promoting interpersonal relationships and strengthening support networks, which are essential in reducing family vulnerabilities.

In this sense, Oliveira, Oliveira, and Barlem (2021) conducted a study aimed at reflecting on family vulnerability, considering the human condition perspective of Hannah Arendt. The study highlights the importance of developing human capacities within families and the resources of their territory to strengthen them in facing the vulnerabilities surrounding them (Oliveira; Oliveira; Barlem, 2021).

This study provided contributions to understanding family dynamics and the environmental factors that impact parental capacity through the ISAC. These instruments may be recommended for future research, as they facilitate the planning of health promotion and prevention actions, aiming to reduce harm caused by vulnerabilities and intrafamily violence.

CONCLUSION

The study examined family dynamics, parental capacity, and the environmental and social factors affecting children in social vulnerability associated with violence, who were served by a non-governmental educational institution.

At the time of the research, the participating families were in a vulnerable situation, facing difficulties in family relationships and financial struggles to meet basic needs, which also contributed to emotional instability and aggressive behavior. The results indicated both strengths and vulnerabilities within the families, with a focus on socio-economic factors that limit access to healthcare, education, employment, and adequate nutrition. These factors impact parental capacity, family dynamics, and the strengthening of the families' support networks.

In light of these findings, this study encourages a more in-depth examination of the municipality's territory, aiming to expand health, social, and educational services to create a support network for families. It advocates for actions to promote health, strengthen community networks, and reduce vulnerabilities and violence.

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