

## Chapter #12

### **SELF-REVIEW OF PARENTING STYLES: Experiences in a group of socially vulnerable mothers in Northern Brazil**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study presents a group intervention with mothers of children from six to twelve years old in a situation of social vulnerability. We aimed to encourage the participants to identify the parenting style they adopt and alternatives for action, to test changes in behavior between group meetings and to evaluate the results of their efforts. The field research described corresponds to one of the focus groups created in 2018 in the context of an action research implemented at the University of Amazônia (UNAMA), Belém, located in northern Brazil. We selected five participants who were present in at least 60% of the ten weekly meetings. Verbal exchanges in meetings and individual interviews supported the formation of analysis categories corresponding to three parenting styles: authoritative or democratic, authoritarian, and permissive. The Social Skills Rating System - Brazilian version (SSRS) and a second individual interview were applied at the end of the meetings. We have verified changes towards the adoption of an authoritative parenting style, which generated positive impacts on family relationships. Social skills led to developments in the behavior of children at school, indicating that it is a way to overcome the situation of social vulnerability in which they find themselves.

*Keywords:* social vulnerability, parenting styles, non-coercion, social skills, resilience, group interventions.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Situations of social vulnerability have specific features depending on the social contexts evaluated. Thus, the inequality of opportunity between different sectors of the population is not limited to the so-called Global-South. According to Fischer and Fröhlich-Gildhoff (2019), even in the case of Germany, a country that represents the Global North or the West very well, foreigners and their descendants are considered socially vulnerable, being the focus of different interventions since starting preschool.

Childhood is usually seen as a fundamental period for individual development. Longitudinal studies started in the 1950s on Kauai, an island in Hawaii, explain the importance of protective factors for the healthy development of children. Even when exposed to risk factors since birth, the presence of a significant adult in childhood, supporting and trusting them, favors the development of resilience and the overcoming of different challenges throughout development (Werner & Smith, 1982).

Protection and risk factors are being studied in different contexts (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2017; Fischer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2019). In this work, we highlight those related to parenting styles, considering that the way parents act to educate their children can have predictable positive and negative effects, although not always by themselves.

Parental styles were differentiated considering two dimensions of disciplinary practices - responsiveness to children's needs and parental demand. One of the styles is considered the most appropriate, as it represents the presence of the two dimensions (authoritative style). In the others, therefore, there is absence of both (negligent style) or the most striking presence of one of them, such as responsiveness (indulgent style) or demand (authoritarian style) (Weber, Prado, Viezzer, & Brandenburg, 2004). It is worth noting that Baumrind (1966) previously categorized only three parenting styles. Indulgent and negligent styles are a development of what he identified as permissive style.

On the other hand, aggressiveness, passivity and assertiveness are broad classes of interpersonal performances (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2011; Sigler, Burnett, & Child, 2008) that allow the establishment of the following statements: authoritative parents would be more assertive, while authoritarian parents would tend to be more imposing and even aggressive, and indulgent and negligent parents would be closer to passivity regarding their children's wishes and demands.

We consider this reasoning useful to evaluate parental behavior, to understand the educational style adopted in their families and, consequently, the degree of coercion in the family relationships. Therefore, we aimed to encourage the participants to watch the children and their family relationships, identifying the parenting style adopted and alternatives for action, test changes in behavior between group meetings and evaluate the results of their efforts.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

Coercion and non-coercion are opposite terms. The former describes where punishment and the threat of punishment exists, and thus, escape and avoidance. Aggressivity tends to generate passivity over time or, on the other hand, mimicry of violent stances. The emotional effects are obviously negative. It is difficult to learn and apply self-control within a social relationship in which obedience is achieved with shouting. Creativity, spontaneity, self-confidence and trust in others are often compromised and, with them, the development of self-care and critical sense. On the other hand, non-coercion is present in the relationships in which all the involved parties have the right to speak and listen, as when the parents adopt an authoritative education style, with assertive stances (Sidman, 1989).

There is vast literature that highlights the value of assertiveness for the quality of interpersonal relationships and even for the quality of life. The assertive individual would be better able to express his thoughts and feelings, respectfully sharing his internal world. Being assertive also involves gathering words and acting consistently with them, favoring an alliance between understanding and being understood (Bolsoni-Silva & Loureiro, 2018; Sigler et al. 2008). According to Teixeira, Del Prette, and Del Prette (2016), one of the most widely used theories concerning assertiveness define it as an "ability to express feelings and desires appropriately, defend one's own rights and respect those of the other" (p. 57).

Considering that the authoritative parenting style results in relationships between parents and children (Weber et al., 2004), children who live with parents adopting it have assertiveness models at home since the beginning of life. Closing the argument, the positive

exchanges would favor social skills, the support, and the confidence necessary for the development of resilience.

Resilience is a term that can be opposed to vulnerability, although social vulnerability implies disadvantages that are widely distributed to a certain segment of the population. Such people are exposed to the continuation of the underprivileged situation in which they currently find themselves - and beyond, in the case of their descendants (Fischer & Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2019; Silva, Cunha, Ramos, Pontes, & Silva, 2021; Wünsche & Fischer, 2020). Although strengthening individuals is not enough to reverse generalized social injustices, it is easy to see the doubly destructive effect of both social vulnerability and emotional fragility, especially in the family environment, where the protection of children's healthy development should be based.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are worth mentioning. As a source of the development of problems of all kinds, they reflect conflicts experienced in the family that can be directly related to the educational style adopted by parents, whether authoritarian or negligent. According to Overstreet and Chafouleas (2016), "children with higher numbers of adverse family experiences were more likely to have higher numbers of mental health diagnoses, and those with higher numbers of diagnoses were less likely to be engaged in school and more likely to be retained" (p. 2).

ACEs also correspond to situations of vulnerability that result from precarious access to social rights of all kinds (Woodbridge et al., 2015). In Brazil, differences between socioeconomic classes are considered natural and reproduced across generations. As well as among people, there are also differences between the regions of the country, with the north being a place of great poverty and helplessness (Almeida, 2010; Bertonecelo, 2016).

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to consider that the occurrence of vulnerability or even of coercion - with domestic violence being one of its most cruel faces - is restricted to the lower social classes or even to Brazil because it constitutes a serious problem at a global level that has become even more frequent in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic. While nature was able to restore itself, in the absence of human beings, the home space has often become violent, with demonstrations of strength and power from the strongest to the most fragile in the most varied countries (Marques, Moraes, Hasselmann, Deslandes, & Reichenheim, 2020; Sánchez, Vale, Rodrigues, & Surita, 2020).

Social dilemmas are difficult to reverse, but given the serious situation of domestic violence against women and also against children and teenagers, we are investing in research that seeks strategies to favor non-coercive social relationships, with emphasis on the family context. Social relationships are human creations, so that personal changes can have broad effects (Brito, Zanetta, Mendonça, Barison, & Andrade, 2005; Sidman, 1989).

With this field study we describe procedures that are being investigated and refined in an action research that combines non-coercion, social skills and resilience. We present group interventions with mothers in situations of social vulnerability. In the action research the procedures used are evaluated and improved to allow future advances.

### **3. PRESENTING THE RESEARCH WITH A GROUP OF MOTHERS**

This field study corresponds to a group of mothers formed at UNAMA's school-clinic of psychology (CLIPSI) in 2018 in the context by a research implemented at the Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA), in Belém, in northern Brazil, entitled "Experiential Groups and Life in Society: An Interdisciplinary Intervention" (Darwich & Garcia, 2019). The activities regarding the group of mothers were initially described by three researchers, Psychology students (Braga, Santos, & Santos, 2018).

Fifteen mothers made up the group described in this study, selected from their children's enrollment form at CLIPSI. They agreed to participate in weekly exchanges and reflections with other mothers, via telephone communication, under the coordination of two psychologists and support from psychology students. Details of the research were also passed on to them.

Those families are considered poor and are therefore in a situation of social vulnerability. This implies that they live on about one minimum wage and that children attend public schools where the failure and dropout rate is high, while the probability of accessing professions that would guarantee an improvement in purchasing power is low. According to Fornari (2010), school failure and dropout are a social problem because they represent exclusion. The absence of mothers at group meetings is indicative of the difficulties they face on a daily basis. None of them had 100% participation.

### **3.1. Methods**

Five mothers out of a group of fifteen participated in the study. The inclusion criterion was an attendance in at least 60% of the ten weekly meetings held. The mothers had a total of six children, as two of them were siblings (two boys, 10 years old and 12 years old). The mothers' ages ranged from 20 to 40 years and the children's, from 6 to 12 years.

The participants' identification is made by the letter "B" or "G", meaning respectively "boy" or "girl", accompanied by the child's age. So, we have B6, G7, B9, B10, B11 and B12 (just one girl). As needed, we use B10/12 to indicate a sibling's mother.

The sample is inconsistent in terms of family relationships, gender and children's and mother's age because of two factors: mothers were invited to participate because they needed free assistance for children and because a more consistent sample would mean including mothers who participated in a small number of meetings. Thus, we present the intervention that was possible, valuing, above all, the participants' need for help.

We also believe that a group of mothers is a much more favorable alternative than subjecting their children to individual psychotherapies, not least because the waiting list is a reality that can make people wait for long periods. Only one of the fifteen mothers in the larger group remained in favor of child therapy.

Before the beginning of the meetings, the mothers were submitted to an individual, semi-structured interview where they were asked what types of behavioral problems they identify in their children.

During the meetings, the conversation circle started with the shared reading of a poem, followed by reflections on themes brought up by the participants, such as general information on the positive effects of assertiveness and coping with problems through dialogue; negative effects of punishments, escapes and avoidances; relationships between actions, thoughts and feelings; and how to favor self-esteem and self-confidence (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2017; Guilhardi, 2002; Sidman, 1989, Skinner, 1965). Reading poems together turned out to be a form of greeting from which a first question was derived, initiating the exchange of impressions and information. Moreover, a conversation script was prepared in advance, based on the literary text and allowing reflection on the participants' life context.

Using the content analysis methodology (Bardin, 2011), three categories of analysis were created, corresponding to the authoritarian, permissive and authoritative parenting styles. In order to analyze the results, we considered that such categories represent, respectively, the adoption of mainly aggressive, passive and assertive attitudes in disciplinary practices, according to examples that are presented in the results section.

After the meetings, the Social Skills Rating System - Brazilian version (SSRS) was used with the mothers. It is a tool for reporting social skills, behavior problems and academic competence in children produced by Gresham and Elliott (1990), with translation and semantic validation into Portuguese (Bandeira, Del Prette, Del Prette, & Magalhães, 2009). It is worth mentioning that this version was submitted to validation processes through the “Principal Components” data reduction method (Freita, Bandeira, Del Prette, & Del Prette, 2016). In addition, a second semi-structured interview was applied, this time focusing on the behavioral changes of the children and themselves and on the contribution of the focus group to behavioral changes. Both instruments were applied individually.

### **3.2. Results**

In response to the semi-structured interview conducted prior to the start of the meetings, the mothers reported four types of behavioral problems of their children: aggression (always in the presence of disobedience), difficulty in studies, difficulty in socializing, and anxiety and sadness. The types of problems presented by the children correspond to demands that led the mothers to seek help in a psychology clinic. They did not add specific difficulties in educating their children that resulted from their own problems or deficiencies. However, as they accepted to participate in a group of mothers, we believe that they have recognized themselves as part of the solution to the problems faced with their children - even though they still did not perceive themselves clearly as parts of such problems.

When the meetings started, four out of the five participants described attitudes typical of the authoritarian parenting style, with several examples of aggressive posture and difficulty regarding responsiveness, also pointing out situations in which they showed little empathy towards their children’s demands. The reports can be exemplified as “he only obeys when I shout” and “I have no patience with him because he doesn’t want to study”. One of the participants, G7, on the contrary, adopted the permissive parenting style, being frequently passive towards child’s demands, according to reports like “she only does what she wants” and “I can’t keep insisting”. Only at the end of the meetings was it possible to identify the adoption of the authoritative style through reports such as “I explain the rules better and I can talk to him in a friendly and peaceable manner” and “we are much closer to each other”.

Figure 1 shows children’s behavioral problems before and after the mothers’ participation in the group, their social abilities and behavioral changes, as well as mothers’ behavioral changes. The data were collected through the initial and the final interviews, and of the standardized instrument (SSRS).

Figure 1.

Behaviors	B6	G7	B9	B10	B11	B12
Children's problems (initial interview)	Aggression	Aggression; difficulty in studies and in socialization	Aggression; difficulty in studies	Aggression; difficulty in socialization	Aggression; difficulty in studies	Aggression; difficulty in studies; anxiety and sadness
Children's problems (SSRS)	Average	Above upper average	Above upper average	Above upper average	Above upper average	Above upper average
Children's social abilities (SSRS)	Above average	Way below average	Above average	Below average	Below average	Below average
Children's changes (final interview)	More sociable; attentive to rules	More sociable; improvement in studying	More sociable; improvement in studying	More sociable	More obedient	More sociable
Mothers' changes (final interview)	Positive	Positive	Slightly more positive	Positive	Positive	Positive

According to the mothers, all children showed aggression and disobedience, four of them showed difficulty in studies (children of G7, B9, B11 and B12) and two of them, difficulty in socialization (children of G7 and B10). The 12-year-old son of B12, already entering adolescence, was the only one reporting anxiety and sadness. His case, along with that of the only girl participant, were the most serious, with a total of three types of problem. Furthermore, only one type of problem was identified by B6's son, the youngest child (aggression and disobedience).

When it comes to the behavioral problems identified through the application of the standardized instrument, only B6's son showed an average result. The balance between resources and deficits in such items and subscales was an indicator of the need for preventive care by those responsible (parents and teachers). The other children showed results above the upper average, suggesting serious problems and the need for social skills training. Considering the percentiles, the oldest son of B10/12 is below the son of B6, yet with a reasonable result when compared to the others.

Still using the standardized instrument, regarding social skills, the children of B6 and B9 obtained results above average, indicating an elaborate behavioral repertoire, while the other children obtained results below average, indicating the need for social skills training. The lowest result, considered much below average, was obtained by the girl.

Thus, the children of B6 and B9 obtained good results in terms of social skills, but only the son of B6 obtained a better result than the other children in terms of behavioral problems. On the other hand, although with similar results to most children in terms of behavioral problems, G7's daughter differed negatively from all other children in terms of social skills.

In the final interview, in a situation of spontaneous speech, an important contradiction was perceived in relation to results achieved through the standardized instrument, as it was possible to identify positive changes in the behavior of all children, regarding even social skills. In addition, mothers reported positive changes in their own behaviors. The disparity

between the information draws attention to the use of standardized instruments with participants not familiar with the use of Likert scales.

The comparison between the mothers' responses in the two interviews shows that the behavior problems that B6's son had initially presented, he overcome, as disobedience and aggression gave way to the adoption of a more sociable posture and greater attention to rules. In the case of G7's daughter, the problems were also solved, as greater sociability at home and with colleagues constrained the postures of disobedience, aggressiveness and socialization deficits initially pointed out, in addition to the improvement in studies. B9's son did not have relationship problems with other children, but otherwise his case was like that of the girl, just as his advances became. B10's son also had problems similar to the girl's, but without the difficulties in studies so his advances occurred in two problem areas, of family interaction and with children. B11's son had the same problems as B9's and, despite having become more obedient, did not improve in his studies. The older son of B12 does not seem to have overcome emotional problems, such as sadness and anxiety, nor his difficulties in studies, but he has become more sociable, which can be considered as an important step for the realization of other changes, mainly when one takes into account that the family context has changed positively with the advances of the mother and brother.

As for the behavior changes of the participants, B6, initially authoritarian, reported to have adopted the authoritative style. B9, although giving examples of less aggressive and more assertive exchanges with her son, still shouted at his son when being disobeyed. The other participants, two of which with previously aggressive posture (B10/12 and B11) and one with passive posture (G7), started to talk more with the children, reproducing the dialogue and the assertive reflections characteristic of the group's meetings.

It is worth pointing out that, despite having the same mother, the 10-year-old child presented more positive results than the 12-year-old, which may be due to the fact that the mother described, in the beginning, more generalized and profound problems in the case of the older child.

A short case study of a child concerning parenting style of the mother before and after the intervention is added in order to provide an overview of the results of behavior changes in the family. B9's son was chosen because he surpassed the group's results in SSRS in reference to the high score both in social skills and in behavior problems. His mother was also the one who most oscillated between assertive and aggressive attitudes in relation to her son at the end of the interventions, but this represented a significant improvement over her initial aggressive postures.

Initially, B9 indicated that her son had problems such as aggressivity, disobedience and difficulty in studies and, at the end of the meetings, pointed out his advances in these areas. According to her, the child has communicated and interacted better with her and his friends. For example, at a birthday party, he served another child a piece of cake, something he had never done before.

The son's results seem to reflect the mother's results. B9 became more assertive - and so did he. However, he still disobeys her, and in those situations, she continues to react with screams. Thus, it became easier for him to be assertive in his relationships with friends and, moreover, with himself, in the sense of greater investment in the school area, where he started to show more interest. He even learned to read.

#### **4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

It is necessary to investigate the parallel formation of groups of mothers and groups of children, as well as the formation of groups of parents and, to establish closer relations with schools, groups of teachers and with the technical staff. Besides investigating parenting educational styles with a focus on adult reporting and interpretation, procedures should be designed to conduct data gathering directly with children.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, we have decided to hold focus groups meetings via internet, with the participation of parents. The composition of groups of children, however, was not possible, as they needed to be accompanied by parents. This way, direct exchange between children and researchers became unfeasible. However, we developed family intervention strategies, with the creation of storytelling videos, available on the YouTube platform, accompanied by Google forms with conversation scripts. When parents watch videos together with their children and then talk to them about the impact of stories on them, both parties can establish fun and non-coercive exchanges. Contact with parents through groups formed on WhatsApp and privately allows researchers to monitor established family relationships. Advances and problems that arise and persist are also the focus of dialogue.

“Quero colo!” is an example of a video created based on a children’s book (Barbieri & Vilela, 2016) that is available in our playlist “Lendo com os Grupos Vivenciais” (“Reading with the Experiential Groups”). As the images correspond to different places and cultures, the reading was performed by eight people, two from each of the following countries: Portugal, Germany, Mexico and the United States.

A possible future direction of research is the realization of both types of meeting, in person and online, in the context of the formation of focus groups. The contact with the stories can also favor the pleasure of reading and thus, more directly the children’s school activities, as pointed out by Peres, Naves, and Borges (2018).

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The participants in this research were encouraged to observe their children and to report their behavior to identify the impacts caused by the way the children treated them. The perception of oneself through the perception of the other is important for the understanding that relational problems can be solved when one of those involved takes the initiative to review and change himself or herself. In cases of relationships between parents and children, being aware of the parenting style may favor the adoption of attitudes that correspond to the description of rules and limits in an empathic and flexible way. Prior to the group meetings, all mothers were far from adopting an authoritative parenting style. By the end of them, they have reversed that.

It is important to note that in all five cases there was more dialogue and flexibility in the families, and also less shouting, more attention, greater affection, and a greater focus on the child, accompanied by praise. We verified that only one participant managed to change towards the adoption of the authoritative style because in her case there was a clear balance between the assertive presentation of rules and limits through active listening to the child and flexibility. In other cases, rules and limits continued to be imposed in a less flexible or less consistent manner, although the positions adopted have become more affectionate and all participants have reported important advances in the quality of the family relationship.



In other words, with the exchanges established in the meetings and the gradual construction of greater self-knowledge and sensitivity in the face of different perspectives, changes towards the adoption of an authoritative parenting style were observed in varying degrees among the participants. If adults are role models for children, they are also for other adults. Thus, the focus group became a place of speech and care; being part of it meant an opportunity to listen and be heard, to agree and disagree, and to receive the necessary support to apply the knowledge acquired in the family's daily life. According to Bethell et al. (2017), "advances in human development sciences point to tremendous possibilities to promote healthy child development and well-being throughout life by proactively supporting safe, stable and nurturing family relationships (SSNRs), teaching resilience, and intervening early to promote healing the trauma and stress" (p. 51).

It is worth mentioning the "domino effect" of the changes the participants have made. Assertiveness and empathy in the family environment generated positive impacts on the children's school life. The new attitudes of mothers also tend to encourage children to develop resilience. Altogether, we can foresee the encouragement of personal resources construction, with necessary social consequences in the fight to overcome the situation of social vulnerability in which a large portion of the population of Brazil finds itself.

Procedures designed for groups of mothers in a situation of social vulnerability in northern Brazil through face-to-face or internet-mediated meetings can be a starting point for future research in other states and even in other countries. We made use of poems and other literary texts, as well as stories for children that can be read to them or watched in a family setting with the aim of valuing the beauty in literature and, thus, encouraging both pleasure in reading, as well as reflections on one's own life history. We believe that the instruments used in the meetings can be adapted to the peculiarities of each other group, since the original idea of our research is precisely to develop interventional technology adapted to our region, and remaining open to exchanges with other cultures.

As an example, in one of our studies we used six storytelling videos for children, three of them included text in Portuguese and in German. We use the foreign language as a way of causing strangeness and then the possibility of reflection about what represents everything that we initially do not know and classify as "different from us".

Another possible development corresponds to building a transnational understanding of social vulnerability in international research groups (Darwich, Fischer, Souza, & Costa, 2019; Waldis & Duff, 2017). Research groups have a great challenge: to continue forming alliances and strengthening perspectives that favor the struggle against the global perspective of oppression and estrangement between countries and people.

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