

PERCEPTION OF FATHERS AS FOR THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN ACTIVITIES WITH THEIR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory, descriptive study with a quantitative approach and the aim to identify the perception of fathers regarding their children's needs; strategies used by fathers to get closer to their children as well as to analyze the influence of household chores and children's education in their fathers' lives. Study subjects were 92 men with six-year-old children, residing in the city of Rio Grande, state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS). The results revealed fathers who are more engaged in activities with their children, valuing confidence, safety, as well as proximity to family as children's main needs, having prioritized the progress children make as well as attention to listening and conversation. Children's education does not aggregate more problems than they imagined, managing to plan life the way they seek to. These findings show that, in the sample studied, fathers have been able to develop more affectionate actions aimed at being more involved with their children.

Descriptors: Nursing. Father-child relations. Family. Paternity.

RESUMO

Trata-se de um estudo descritivo exploratório com abordagem quantitativa, que buscou identificar a percepção do pai em relação à importância das necessidades do(s) filho(s); as estratégias utilizadas pelo pai para aproximar-se do(s) filho(s); analisar a influência das tarefas domésticas e da educação do(s) filho(s) na vida do pai. Os sujeitos foram 92 homens com filhos de idade até seis anos, residentes na cidade de Rio Grande, RS. Os resultados apontaram um pai mais participativo nas atividades com os filhos, que valoriza a confiança, a segurança e a proximidade com a família como principais necessidades da criança, e que priorizaram os progressos dos filhos bem como a atenção para ouvir e conversar. A educação dos filhos não agrega mais problemas do que imaginavam, permitindo-lhes planejar a vida como gostariam. Esses achados mostram que, na amostra estudada, o pai está conseguindo desenvolver ações mais afetivas e direcionadas para o envolvimento com o(s) filho(s).

Descritores: Enfermagem. Relações pai-filho. Família. Paternidade.

Título: A percepção dos pais frente ao seu envolvimento nas atividades com o(s) filho(s).

RESUMEN

Es un estudio descriptivo exploratorio con abordaje cuantitativo buscando identificar la percepción del padre con relación a la importancia de las necesidades de su(s) hijo(s); las estrategias utilizadas por el padre para aproximarse del hijo y analizar la influencia de tareas domésticas y educación del hijo en la vida del padre. Los sujetos fueron 92 hombres con hijos de edades hasta seis años, residiendo en Rio Grande/RS. Los resultados apuntaron un padre más participativo en actividades con sus hijos, valorando confianza, seguridad y proximidad con la familia como principales necesidades para el niño, y priorizaron los progresos del hijo bien como atención para oír y conversar. La educación de los hijos no agrega más problemas que lo imaginado, consiguiendo planear la vida como les gustaría. Estos hallazgos muestran que, en la muestra estudiada, el padre está consiguiendo desarrollar acciones más afectivas y dirigidas a la participación con su(s) hijo(s).

Descriptores: Enfermería. Relaciones padre-hijo. Familia. Paternidad.

Título: La percepción de los padres en su compromiso en las actividades con su(s) hijo(s).

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INTRODUCTION

A family stands out as the ultimate result of the essential relationship context between parents and children. Such relationship is crucial to the development of children, as it provides them with protection and promotes their self-esteem⁽¹⁻²⁾. Additionally, it influences the socialization process, which stimulates the cognitive development that will be later reinforced in other environments, such as the school and the community⁽³⁾. Concurrently, the family can also be the scenario of conflicts originated from a lack of conciliation between family and professional issues, a feature that often leads to family breakdowns.

The global social, cultural, political and economic changes that took place in the last decades have been reverberated in the family unit. Such process causes parents to reestablish and adapt to new roles regarding the care and education of their children, and also in the distribution of home tasks, implying a reorganization of the personal, marital and parental life⁽⁴⁾. Bearing in mind that, in general, both mothers and fathers are inserted into the job market, such adaptations may bring along tensions, as parents try to harmonize tasks and share roles in the family environment.

Literature shows that since the insertion of the woman into the job market, most men have taken the responsibility for a more participatory role in raising their children⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾. Men have been progressively becoming more than only the provider of the family in order to share with their spouses activities such as education, leisure and attention to the children⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that society still displays the strongly rooted idea that the woman should be responsible for domestic affairs and care for the children⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾.

A study developed in the city of Rio Grande (RS) with 92 couples having children of up to 6 years old showed that the woman is weighed down concerning the distribution of home tasks and an unequal distribution of parental roles, thus causing her to be overloaded with activities⁽⁹⁾. Similar data were found in France and Sweden by an investigation regarding the conciliation of professional and family life, which pointed out the dissatisfaction of mothers concerning the lack of participation of their mates in daily tasks⁽¹⁰⁾.

On the other hand, in search of ways to conciliate the professional lives of couples, research-

ers indicate that men wish they had reduced work schedules in order to be able to dedicate more time to their families⁽¹⁰⁾. Similarly, a Brazilian study performed with couples with small children showed that the search for conciliation between these two worlds is associated with the low amount of time available to the family as a result of the obligations and schedules of the parents' work⁽⁹⁾. Such results reveal that conflicts may arise between the spouses due to the overload of domestic tasks to the woman, as well as the lack of time men have to dedicate themselves to their families due to work assignments.

Within this context, a relevant field of work with families is identified to the Nursing practice. The nurse may carry out actions focused on the daily activities of parents, helping them to identify resources and potentials they have to conciliate and adapt to the parental roles regarding the care and education of children, and the distribution of domestic tasks. Taking into account that it is critical for the relationship between parents and children that the father acknowledges the significance of his role to the development of the child, and that the lack of such knowledge may restrict a more affective and participatory relationship with their children, nurses should become more aware of these family inter-relationships. Such inter-relationships cause the father to seek support bases toward the exercise of his paternity and to the recognition of the relevance of his role in the child's development process⁽¹⁾.

While, on the one hand, social transformations engulfing the family call for a restructuring of roles and the adaptation of family members to new demands, on the other hand there is a need for building knowledge that is capable of grounding the family practices carried out by nurses. Hence, the aim of the present study was to identify (1) the perception of the father on the relevance of his children's needs; (2) the strategies used by the father to approach the children; and (3) the influence of domestic tasks and the education of children in the life of the father.

METHODOLOGY

This study derives from a project entitled "Family and professional life: the responsibilities and demands faced by parents in the contemporary

society”, which investigates the strategies used by parents with small children in order to conciliate their family and professional lives. The exploratory, descriptive study had a quantitative approach and was initiated by a group of European researchers (FAMWORK). It has also been developed in other nations, including Brazil. In Rio Grande (RS), all 92 couples who participated in the study met the following criteria: a) have at least one child of up to 6 years old; b) both spouses/mates are inserted into the job market; c) both spouses/mates live in the municipality where the study was carried out; and d) fully agree to take part in the study by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). Families were located and selected from the population at large based on information and observation of the characteristics deemed to be inclusion criteria, particularly in places such as schools, day care centers, and neighborhood associations, among others.

Data were collected by means of an all-embracing questionnaire (female and male versions) addressing issues related to occupation, distribution of tasks, family life, strategies toward conciliation, personal life, common life, and sociodemographic data. The original version of the questionnaire, elaborated in 2003 by the researchers of the original project, was adapted to the local reality in 2006, so that its social, economic, political and cultural specificities could be safeguarded. The questionnaire was carried out in the families' homes at a previously appointed time, mostly on weekends, between 2007 and 2008.

The research proposal was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande under protocol number 23116.003244/2008-16. All recommendations of Resolution 196/96 were observed and the couples were deemed to be participants of the study only after signing the Free and Informed Consent Form.

The present article employed only the responses of men related to the perception of parents on the relevance of the needs of their children, strategies used by the father to approach the children, and the influence of domestic tasks and education of children in the life of the father. The questions were answered through the Likert scale, with variations between 0 and 5, expressing radically opposed opinions. The data analysis process employed the SPSS program, version 16.0.

RESULTS

Characterization of subjects

Among the 92 men integrating the sample, age ranged from 20 and 59 years old, with a predominance of 20-39 (n= 39; 42%) years old; 46 (50%) had over one child of less than six years old and had been living with their wives (or mates) for a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 25 years. From the total amount of interviewed men, 34 (36.9%) had finished high school; eight (8.7%) had an undergraduate degree; five (5.4%) had a graduate degree; and the others had not finished elementary school. As for their occupations, employed men amounted 54 (59%); six (6.5%) were assistants in the business sector; four (4.3%) were teachers; three (3.3%) were federal civil servants; three (3.3%) were security guards; and three (3.3%) were drivers; among others.

Perception of the father on the relevance of their children's needs

Fathers were questioned about the relevance assigned to certain needs that, according to literature, are inserted into the parents/children relationship, such as caress and attention, independence/autonomy, proximity with the family, and clear rules. The Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not relevant) to 5 (extremely relevant) was employed.

Table 1 shows the predominance of responses concentrated on levels 4 and 5 for all above-mentioned needs, pointing out that the fathers considered caress and attention (n= 85; 92.4%) dedicated to their children as relevant and very relevant issues, followed by independence/autonomy (n= 49; 53.2%), proximity with the family (n= 85; 92.4%), and need for clear rules (n= 80; 87%). On the other hand, the percentage of responses at levels 0, 1 and 2 shows that for two (2.2%) fathers, caress and attention, as well as proximity with the family, were not deemed to be relevant. Similarly, 23 (24.9%) fathers expressed that the independence/autonomy and six (6.5%) fathers, the need for clear rules, were not relevant aspects (Table 1).

Approach strategies between father and children

As for the strategies used by fathers to approach their children, the study questioned them

Table 1 – Degree of relevance assigned by fathers to the needs of children – Rio Grande, 2008.

| Needs Variation | Caress and attention | Independence/ autonomy | Proximity with family | Clear rules |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| Not relevant | | | | |
| 0 | - | 06 (6.5) | - | - |
| 1 | 01 (1.1) | 05 (5.4) | - | 02 (2.2) |
| 2 | 01 (1.1) | 12 (13) | 02 (2.2) | 04 (4.3) |
| 3 | 03 (3.3) | 18 (19.6) | 02 (2.2) | 04 (4.3) |
| 4 | 14 (15.2) | 22 (23.9) | 17 (18.5) | 17 (18.5) |
| 5 | 71 (77.2) | 27 (29.3) | 68 (73.9) | 63 (68.5) |
| Extremely relevant | | | | |
| Did not respond | 02 (2.2) | 02 (2.2) | 03 (3.3) | 02 (2.2) |
| Total | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) |

Source: Research data.

Table 2 – Strategies used by fathers to approach their children – Rio Grande, 2008.

| Ways Variation | Play with | Caress | Talk to | Stimulate | Listen to |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| Never | | | | | |
| 0 | 02 (2.2) | - | - | - | 01 (1.1) |
| 1 | 02 (2.2) | 02 (2.2) | 02 (2.2) | 02 (2.2) | 04 (4.3) |
| 2 | 14 (15.2) | 06 (6.5) | 08 (8.7) | 02 (2.2) | 04 (4.3) |
| 3 | 16 (17.4) | 12 (13) | 12 (13) | 13 (14.1) | 18 (19.6) |
| 4 | 24 (26.1) | 28 (30.4) | 27 (29.3) | 24 (26.1) | 19 (20.7) |
| 5 | 32 (34.8) | 40 (43.5) | 40 (43.5) | 47 (51.1) | 43 (46.7) |
| Often times | | | | | |
| Did not respond | 02 (2.2) | 04 (4.3) | 03 (3.3) | 04 (4.3) | 03 (3.3) |
| Total | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) |

Source: Research data.

about how often they played with, caressed, talked to, stimulated, and listened to their children. The Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (often times), was used. Results show that fathers often played with (n=56; 60.9%), caressed (n= 68; 73.9%), talked to (n=67; 72.8%), stimulated (n= 71; 77.2%), and listened to (n=62; 67.4%) their children. It should be highlighted that variation levels 0, 1 and 2 showed fathers that never or rarely played with

(n= 18; 19.6%), caressed (n= 08; 8.7%), talked to (n= 10; 10.9%), stimulated (n=4; 4.4%), and listened to (n= 8; 9.7%) their children (Table 2).

Influence of domestic tasks and education of children in the life of the father

The fathers were asked to express their degree of agreement with the following affirmatives: (1)

the education of my children hinders me of doing things I deem to be important for me; (2) because of my children, I am not able to plan my life as I would like to; and (3) the education of my children brings me more problems than I thought it would. The Likert scale, ranging from level 0, "totally disagree", to level 5, "totally agree", was used.

Table 3 shows many responses concentrated at levels 0, 1 and 2, pointing out that the vast majority of fathers (n= 84; 91.3%) considered the education of their children as an impediment to develop important activities, such as planning their lives as they would like to (n= 81; 89%), and that the education of their children did not bring about more problems than they thought it would (n=85; 92.4%).

Aiming to verify more broadly how the education of the children can influence the lives of fathers, they were questioned about an eventual overload in the distribution of domestic tasks, the behavior of children, and the lack of time to relax. In this issue, level 0 in the scale corresponded to "never" and level 5 corresponded to "often times".

Table 4 shows the concentration of responses at levels 0, 1 and 2 of the scale. It can be noted that 66 (71.7%) fathers responded that they never or seldom felt an overload resulting from the distribution

of tasks, and 73 (80.3%) referred to the behavior of children. As for the lack of time to relax, however, there was no concentration of responses at any level of the table.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that most fathers deemed the major needs of children up to six years old, such as caress, the attention dedicated to the children, the proximity with the family, and the need for clear rules, to be relevant. In the same way, a research carried out with families composed of a father, a mother and pre-school children pointed out such values as being the most significant traits to be transferred to their children⁽¹¹⁾. Nevertheless, several aspects deemed to be needs may vary, in accordance with the expectations and cultural/contextual possibilities of the families.

Hence, it can be observed that while the fathers that composed the study sample considered that their children very often needed caress, attention, trust, security, proximity/connection with the family, and clear rules, other fathers living in the neighboring cities of Brazil's Federal District expressed that stronger attention should be given to the teaching of moral values and the stimulus to the

Table 3 – Influence of domestic tasks and education of the children in the life of the father – Rio Grande, 2008.

| Situation | Degree of agreement | The education of my children hinders me of doing things I deem to be important for me | Because of my children, I am not able to plan my life as I would like to | The education of my children brings me more problems than I thought it would |
|------------------|---------------------|---|--|--|
| | | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| Totally disagree | | | | |
| 0 | | 56 (60.9) | 54 (59.3) | 66 (71.7) |
| 1 | | 14 (15.2) | 19 (20.9) | 11 (12) |
| 2 | | 14 (15.2) | 08 (8.8) | 08 (8.7) |
| 3 | | 04 (4.3) | 06 (6.6) | 04 (4.3) |
| 4 | | 03 (3.3) | 04 (4.4) | 01 (1.1) |
| 5 | | - | - | 01 (1.1) |
| Totally agree | | | | |
| Did not respond | | 01 (1.1) | 01 (1.1) | 01 (1.1) |
| Total | | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) |

Source: Research data.

Table 4 – Father’s overload – Rio Grande, 2008

| Overload Variation | Problems with the distribution of domestic tasks | Problems with the behavior of children | Lack of time to relax |
|-----------------------|--|---|-----------------------|
| | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| Never | | | |
| 0 | 22 (23.9) | 35 (38.5) | 10 (10.9) |
| 1 | 24 (25.1) | 26 (28.6) | 16 (17.4) |
| 2 | 20 (21.7) | 12 (13.2) | 15 (16.3) |
| 3 | 20 (21.7) | 10 (11.0) | 15 (16.3) |
| 4 | 03 (3.3) | 03 (3.3) | 21 (22.8) |
| 5 | 03 (3.3) | 04 (4.4) | 14 (15.2) |
| Often times | | | |
| Did not respond | - | 02 (2.2) | 01 (1.1) |
| Total | 92 (100) | 92 (100) | 92 (100) |

Source: Research data.

study and educational activities of their children⁽¹¹⁾. Although these families came from differentiated contexts and cultures, it is worth highlighting that the needs prioritized by the fathers participating in the present study and the fathers living in the Federal District entangle a set of abilities and parental care that are very relevant to the development of the children.

Other supporting aspects to the development of children that can be highlighted in the results of the study were the family proximity/connection and the need for clear rules. In family relationships, it is essential that parents be able to impose limits to their children and get to know how to deal with the infringement of rules. A study on parental and marital relationships showed that the inadequate use or the lack of limits and rules to children stand out as a practice condemned by the majority of parents, as it characterizes a misbehavior of children⁽¹¹⁾.

The fathers who did not deem caress, attention and proximity with the family to be children’s needs must also be highlighted. These men did not point out the need for clear rules and the search for independence/autonomy as being relevant to the development of the children, either. Despite showing a lower score in the Likert scale, such results deserve to be highlighted, as the lack of significance of these needs points to the lack of knowledge of the father on the importance of his

children’s needs toward physical, cognitive, social, and cultural development.

These results may be justifiable, as the father has always taken the position of being the family’s provider, leaving mothers responsible for the affective relationships with the children. In this sense, the activities performed by both parents used to be differently established, and such differences must be taken into account by researchers, educators and other professionals involved in children and families’ health promotion and development processes, as these aspects are directly related to the sociocultural context in which fathers are inserted⁽¹¹⁾.

As for the strategies employed by fathers to approach their children, results showed that the majority of them used to play with, caress, talk to, stimulate and listen to the children. Nonetheless, a considerable group of fathers reported that they did not seek to get close to their children, affirming that they never or rarely played with, caressed, talked to, stimulated, and listened to their children. According to the researchers, such interaction is crucial for the child to achieve a satisfactory educational development and a healthy social relationship, as well as it enhances the child’s self-esteem⁽¹²⁾.

The difficulty many men have getting closer to their children and seeking more affective relationships are expressively based on the historical and cultural context in which that father is represented

and comprehended⁽¹⁾. Many fathers do not occupy an active place in the lives of their children, thus generating feelings of insecurity and emotional instability in the children⁽¹³⁾. A research on the parental involvement in the educational performance of children showed that, in a general perspective, the higher the interaction level between fathers and children, as well as the participation of fathers in educational, cultural and leisure activities of the children, the more significant the children's educational performance will be.

Another favorable factor toward the development of children is the conciliation between the parents' professional and family lives. The results of this study point out that fathers are able to promote such conciliation, as the education of their children clearly do not add more problems to their personal lives, a feature that helps them to plan their lives the way they want to. It is worth highlighting that studies dealing with the conciliation of roles and parenthood evidence a clear difficulty shown by both the woman and the man toward coping with family and professional roles, an aspect that may reflect on an unequal distribution of home tasks⁽¹⁴⁾. In this sense, the study also investigated the overload of the father regarding the distribution of domestic affairs, pointing out that although fathers did not feel overloaded by the distribution of tasks, the majority of them were not able to find time to relax.

Professional and family assignments generate overloads and cause many fathers to seek different strategies in order to deal with demands such as mutual emotional support between the couple, positive attitude toward the multiple roles and the double employment condition in the family, use of personal characteristics, professional abdication, and employment of institutional support. These strategies provide fathers with the possibility of conciliating family and professional tasks⁽⁶⁾.

In addition to the conciliation strategies used by couples to establish harmonic professional and family ambience, a social environment is able to provide them with support. Structures such as day care centers made available by companies or the support of other family members that can share the responsibility of taking care of the children, especially the small ones, can strongly contribute to the conciliation between family and professional life⁽¹⁵⁾.

Furthermore, most fathers did not feel overloaded with the children's behavior problems.

Literature shows that, whenever present, such overload can be often unleashed by the excessive permissiveness of parents regarding the children and the lack of limits, which can lead children to misbehaviors⁽¹⁶⁾. These behavioral problems may be minimized by means of attention, caress, harmony in the family, and a balanced relationship between the fathers and their children. In this sense, children tend to be less resistant to cooperate with their parents, besides being more affective, thus contributing to a satisfactory social interaction status⁽¹³⁾.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Acknowledging the way fathers realize the needs of their children, their interactions in the family and how the education of children can really influence their personal lives stand out as a relevant support to both the family and the work of nursing professionals, as these intervention proposals directed to parents may be built based on the fathers' conceptions, needs and subjectivities, thus promoting an improved relationship between fathers and children.

The data of the present study pointed out that fathers have been increasingly participating in the activities of children, valuing trust, security and proximity with the family as essential needs of children, as well as prioritizing the progress of children and the attitude of listening and talking to them.

These findings show that fathers began to prioritize different values aiming at the development of their children. They are aware that their family role is not only bound to provide for the family, but also to get involved with the education of their children, therefore becoming more able to establish affectionate relationships, which favor the well-being of the whole family.

It must be highlighted that this study does not allow for generalizations of results, as the needs of children and the way fathers get involved in the offer of care may vary in accordance with cultural/contextual expectations and possibilities of families.

Another factor that needs to be taken into account is that the results present only a sample composed of male participants, which does not allow for comparisons with the perspective of mothers

concerning the needs of children. Hence, it would be a critical step to investigate the influence and the interdependence among family members regarding the parents' different roles (wife and mother, husband and father), as well as family, marital and parental subsystems, as the complexity of such influences and their consequences may directly interfere in the fathers/children relationships.

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