

PSYCHOLOGICAL REPERCUSSIONS ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AFTER PATERNAL ESTRANGEMENT DUE TO CONJUGAL VIOLENCE: MATERNAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to unveil the psychological repercussions perceived by mothers on children and adolescents after paternal estrangement due to conjugal violence.

Method: this is a descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach developed with mothers in legal proceedings for conjugal violence at the 2nd Domestic and Family Violence Court of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Data collection took place between September and November 2021 through interviews carried out using a virtual meeting application, guided by a semi-structured form. Interviews were recorded with authorization, and later converted to a written version with the support of Microsoft Word. Data were organized through thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin.

Results: this research was carried out with eight women/mothers aged 29 to 39 years, mostly self-declared black, evangelical, single and with complete high school. At the time of the interview, women had been separated from six months to a year and a half; lived with the father of children and children aged 7 to 15; and most of them had a single child, whose age ranged between 5 and 15 years. As results of the interviews, Emotional, Behavioral and Psychological categories emerged.

Conclusion: the study reveals that, after paternal estrangement resulting from protective measures for mothers with a history of conjugal violence, children and adolescents experience emotional, behavioral and psychological repercussions. The study can contribute to strengthening the psychological care of children/adolescents who have experienced violence, providing professionals with support to outline preventive strategies.

DESCRIPTORS: Child. Adolescent. Domestic violence. Psychological distress. Family separation.

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REPERCUSSÕES PSICOLÓGICAS EM CRIANÇAS E ADOLESCENTES APÓS AFASTAMENTO PATERNO POR VIOLÊNCIA CONJUGAL: NARRATIVAS MATERNAS

RESUMO

Objetivo: Desvelar as repercussões psicológicas percebidas por mães em crianças e adolescentes após o afastamento paterno por violência conjugal.

Método: Estudo de caráter descritivo-exploratório e abordagem qualitativa desenvolvido com as genitoras em processo judicial por violência conjugal junto à 2ª Vara de Violência Doméstica e Familiar de Salvador, Bahia, Brasil. A coleta de dados ocorreu entre setembro e novembro de 2021 através de entrevista realizada por aplicativo de reunião virtual, sendo guiada por formulário semiestruturado. As entrevistas foram gravadas, mediante autorização e, posteriormente, convertidas para a versão escrita com apoio do Microsoft Word. Os dados foram organizados por meio da análise de conteúdo temático, proposto por Bardin.

Resultados: Esta pesquisa foi realizada com oito mulheres/mães na faixa etária de 29 a 39 anos majoritariamente autodeclaradas negras, evangélicas, solteiras e com ensino médio completo. No momento da entrevista, as mulheres tinham de seis meses a um ano e meio de separadas, tendo convivido com o pai das crianças e adolescentes de 7 a 15 anos e, na sua maioria, tinha um único filho, cuja idade variava entre 5 e 15 anos. Como resultados das entrevistas emergiram três categorias: Emocionais, Comportamentais e Psíquicas.

Conclusão: O estudo revela que, após o afastamento paterno decorrente de medida protetiva às mães com história de violência conjugal, crianças e adolescentes apresentam repercussões de ordem emocional, comportamental e psíquica. O estudo pode contribuir no fortalecimento do cuidado psicológico de crianças/adolescentes que experienciaram a violência, munindo profissionais de subsídios para traçar estratégias preventivas.

DESCRITORES: Criança. Adolescente. Violência doméstica. Sofrimento psicológico. Separação da família.

REPERCUSIONES PSICOLÓGICAS EN NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES TRAS LA SEPARACIÓN PATERNA POR VIOLENCIA CONYUGAL: NARRATIVAS MATERNAS

RESUMEN

Objetivo: revelar las repercusiones psicológicas percibidas por las madres en niños y adolescentes luego del alejamiento paterno por violencia conyugal.

Método: estudio descriptivo-exploratorio con enfoque cualitativo desarrollado con madres en procesos judiciales por violencia conyugal en el 2º Juzgado de Violencia Doméstica y Familiar de Salvador, Bahía, Brasil. La recolección de datos se realizó entre septiembre y noviembre de 2021 a través de entrevistas realizadas mediante una aplicación de reuniones virtuales, guiadas por un formulario semiestructurado. Las entrevistas fueron grabadas, previa autorización, y posteriormente convertidas a versión escrita con soporte de Microsoft Word. Los datos fueron organizados a través del análisis de contenido temático, propuesto por Bardin.

Resultados: esta investigación se realizó con ocho mujeres/madres de 29 a 39 años, en su mayoría autodeclaradas negras, evangélicas, solteras y con educación secundaria completa. En el momento de la entrevista, las mujeres llevaban separadas entre seis meses y un año y medio, y vivían con el padre de los niños y adolescentes de edades comprendidas entre 7 y 15 años y, la mayoría de ellos, tenían un solo hijo, cuya edad oscilaba entre 5 y 15 años. Como resultados de las entrevistas surgieron las categorías Emocional, Comportamental y Psíquica.

Conclusión: el estudio revela que, después del alejamiento paterno resultante de medidas de protección a madres con antecedentes de violencia conyugal, niños y adolescentes experimentan repercusiones emocionales, conductuales y psicológicas. El estudio puede contribuir a fortalecer la atención psicológica de niños/adolescentes que han vivido violencia, brindando apoyo a los profesionales para trazar estrategias preventivas.

DESCRIPTORES: Niño. Adolescente. Violencia doméstica. Distrés psicológico. Separación familiar.

INTRODUCTION

Marital violence is present in many homes, affecting everyone involved. In Brazil, in 2019, this phenomenon affected 27% of Brazilian women and, worldwide, the World Health Organization estimates that around 736 million women suffer from violence, most of whom have children¹. It is in this scenario of conflicts and violence that children and adolescents are inserted, suffering and/or witnessing the problem at a time in their lives when they are in full development. Staying in this environment can have short, medium and long-term repercussions on children's and adolescents' behavioral, affective, social and physical aspects².

When they find themselves in a situation of violence and understand that such an environment is not healthy for themselves or their children, some women break off the relationship and report the aggressors. As a result of this act and with the aim of protecting women's integrity, the courts issue Urgent Protection Measures, which do not necessarily extend to children³. Even if there is no inclusion of the offspring, based on the understanding that the father and son contact is not harmful to children/adolescents, it is common for parents to end up moving away due to conflicts involving the judicial proceeding⁴ and, consequently, causing losses or difficulties in continuity of bonds established in the father-son dyad.

Emotional bond is a way of relating to another in order to remain emotionally connected to them. In this regard, parental relationships can directly modify and influence children's and adolescents' basic psychological processes as well as impact the acquisition of autonomy and self-regulation⁵. An international study reinforces the importance of parental bond in acquiring skills for a balanced maturational development of children and adolescents⁶. On the other hand, literature data show that, when children and adolescents do not experience an environment of affection and exchange, these absences can lead to difficulties in relationships and/or poor school performance, adoption of risky behaviors, generating significant emotional damage⁷.

In addition to this, the care provided to children and adolescents in situations of violence involves several obstacles that have made this population even more vulnerable. A review study found that, for the most part, health professionals face difficulties in identifying child violence, such as a lack of time, preparation and staff as well as fear of reporting abuse⁸. It is noteworthy that, although multidisciplinary actions aimed at children and adolescents immersed in the context of violence are recommended in Law 11,340/2006, known as Maria da Penha Law³, these protection and care services for women require greater coordination with public actors in order to strengthen integration between policies that guarantee full protection for children and adolescents.

In this regard, the Child and Adolescent Statute recognizes the importance of paternal role in child development and also the responsibility to protect this group from rights violations. However, in situations of divorce, especially permeated by violence, in which the breakup occurs in a conflictive manner, the exercise of paternity can be compromised. Scientific literature, in turn, is limited to understanding aspects involved in the breakup and outlining strategies to strengthen bonds and/or promote the exercise of paternity, without considering the influence of intra-family violence on the impact on children and adolescents⁹. Therefore, it is necessary to study and understand the repercussions that children and adolescents have experienced with paternal estrangement in the context of violence.

Given the need to care for this public and understand the repercussions, this study can contribute to the coping network in the creation of strategies. Strategies aim to minimize and manage the impacts arising from the experience of violence as well as guide mothers to find viable ways to deal with demands arising from a broken relationship. In this regard, this study aimed to reveal

the psychological repercussions perceived by mothers on children and adolescents after paternal estrangement due to conjugal violence.

METHOD

This is a descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach, which allows to identify participants' experiences and subjective knowledge. Therefore, considering the objective of understanding the impacts of paternal estrangement from the maternal perspective, it is believed that such an approach is pertinent.

The study was developed with mothers in legal proceedings for conjugal violence at the 2nd Domestic and Family Violence Court of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil (2nd DFVC). The 2nd DFVC constituted a favorable scenario for the development of this research as it is already a partner of the research group to which this study is part. Courts are responsible for analyzing processes and judging cases of women who had their rights violated by an individual with whom they had an intimate relationship and/or situations of violence that occurred in a domestic environment. Furthermore, it applies protective measures and referrals for health care, when necessary, but does not provide specialized care for women's children.

Regarding the inclusion criteria, women followed by the 2nd DFVC, who had children with men related to the legal proceeding with marital separation, participated in the research. Emotional instability on the day of the interview was adopted as an exclusion criterion, with this criterion being assessed by a psychologist linked to the project. The number of participants was defined following saturation, which consists of stopping the addition of new participants as information begins to repeat itself, no longer altering the understanding of the phenomenon.

Women were approached through telemonitoring, which aimed to monitor cases, associated factors and impacts of COVID-19 on women and men whose rights were violated. Invitation to participate in the research occurred through telephone contact with researchers who have experience in the study of violence. The objectives of the study, possible risks of emotional discomfort and rights to not participate in the research without any harm were explained to participants, respecting the principles of bioethics in health contained in Resolution 466/2012. Those who accepted signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). It is noteworthy that the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Nursing School, *Universidade Federal da Bahia* (UFBA), under Opinion 4,933,325.

Data collection took place between September and November 2021 through an interview carried out using a virtual meeting application, guided by a semi-structured form with closed-ended questions to compose sociodemographic characterization and the following guiding question: Did you notice any changes in your children's behavior after of the judicial proceeding for violence? Interviews were recorded with authorization, and later converted to a written version with the support of Microsoft Word.

Data were organized through thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin. This consists of applying a set of techniques divided into three stages: pre-analysis; material exploration; treatment of obtained results and interpretation¹⁰. The first phase is characterized by material organization, with foreground reading of interviews, bringing the initial research objectives closer. In the material exploration phase, hypotheses are formulated and indicators are constructed for final analysis. The third phase encompasses the transformation of raw results into categories¹⁰. For the categorization stage, emotional repercussions were considered to be experiences that arise from an affective nature and that generate psychological changes; as behavioral repercussions, the expression of this emotion; and as psychological repercussions, emotions that resulted in distress and physiological changes.

RESULTS

This research was carried out with eight women/mothers aged 29 to 39 years, mostly self-declared black, evangelical, single and with complete secondary education. Five of them declared an income of less than two minimum wages; two reported being unemployed; and one in an internship. At the time of the interview, women were separated from six months to a year and a half, having lived with fathers of children and adolescents aged 7 to 15 years, and the majority had a single child, whose age varied between 5 and 15 years. As results of the interviews, Emotional repercussions, Behavioral repercussions and Psychological repercussions categories emerged, as shown in Figure 1.

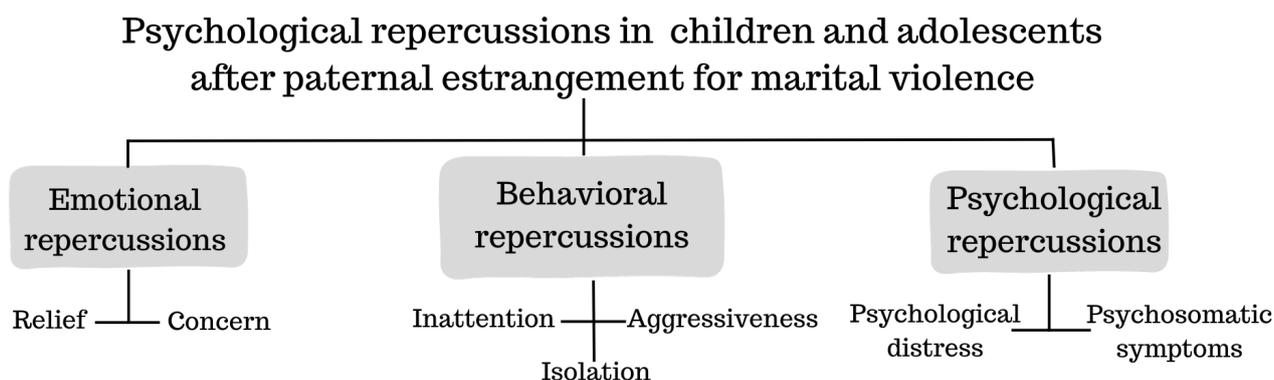


Figure 1 – Illustrative diagram of psychological repercussions divided into categories.

Emotional repercussions

Relief felt after paternal separation

The study revealed that changes occurred in children's feelings and behavior after their fathers' leaving. At times, this fact seems to make the environment more comfortable for children, letting them feel looser, which appears in lightness and joy, leading to a feeling of relief.

After my son's father left, he became happier, more relaxed. Before all that happened to us, he felt more withdrawn, he felt suffocated. He says that today he is breathing because he didn't like the way his father treated us. (M6, son – 15 years)

My children's behavior has improved after separation; they talk to me more. (M8, son – 8 years, daughter – 12 years)

Concern for the presence of fathers

At other times, children show a feeling of concern, because with fathers' leaving the situation of violence intensifies. This is specified by the fear of being alone and going out to places frequented by fathers.

After separation, my ex-husband broke into our house, my son was very scared [...] he doesn't even go to the front of the house alone and just wants to go out with me. (M1, son – 6 years)

After separation, my son's father took him without my consent and, since then, the child has been afraid of his father. When we pass places his father has been to before, my son is afraid he is there and wants to kill me. (M7, son – 6 years)

Behavioral repercussions

Expressed inattention in everyday life without the presence of a father

Imbued in this context, young children, according to their mothers' perception, demonstrate inattention also expressed by agitation and lost gaze. Furthermore, children/adolescents decreased social interaction, which in the study is evidenced by restricted communication about paternal memories.

When his father left the house, I noticed that my son became inattentive and agitated: he was walking all the time, hitting himself and breaking things wherever he went (M4, daughter – 8 years and son -13 years)

My daughter looked lost. When she sees something that reminds her of her father, she tells me, but then she goes back to her own world (M3, daughter – 9 years)

Aggressiveness when interacting with others

Another aspect highlighted in the research was aggressiveness, which manifested itself in children's behavior, especially at school, with their peers and, above all, when it comes to insults against girls.

At the beginning of separation, my daughter changed and started using aggressive words and gestures [...] *with spikes in aggression.* (M3, daughter – 9 years)

My oldest son became aggressive after separation, especially at school. When he witnesses a girl being mistreated, he acts as a defender and goes up to beat his classmates. (M2, sons – 6 and 7 years)

Isolation as a defense mechanism

This study also shows that, with paternal absence, children prefer to be alone, thus adopting isolation behavior which has intensified over time. This situation adds to the non-verbalization of the situation experienced and affects their health, since they also do not eat properly. These aforementioned constructs are expressed in the following statements:

After their fathers' leaving, I notice my children are very quiet, they don't like to talk about what they've experienced, either with others or with me, they isolate themselves and keep to themselves a lot. (M7, son – 6 years)

When her father left, she started to play alone, staying isolated in the corner. It wasn't like that before, it's getting worse. [...] she doesn't eat properly and that's why she lost weight. (M5, daughter – 5 years)

Psychological repercussions

Psychological distress expressed through depression and suicidal behavior

Mothers' speeches reveal that paternal absence combined with previous experiences of violence had caused mental illness, including leading to disorders such as depression. This could also be perceived by suicidal ideation and behavior practiced by children.

My son has his moments of depression. Sometimes he says he wants to die and doesn't want to live anymore. (M6, son – 15 years)

After everything we experienced before and even today with the threats, my son has suicidal ideas. He already tied a sheet around his neck, sat at the window and said he was going to kill himself. (M4, daughter – 8 years, son – 13 years)

Psychosomatic symptoms presented through nocturnal enuresis and diarrhea

The study also reveals that paternal estrangement resulted in psychosomatic symptoms, causing the suffering of the soul to affect the body, generating impacts on children's and adolescents' physical health, expressed through physiological needs as a result of the weakened emotional state after paternal estrangement, according to the following narratives:

My son spent time wetting the bed after the breakup. (M1, son – 6 years)

My son couldn't go out anywhere because he was scared of diarrhea [...] it was a very complicated time. When I went out with him, I carried several clothes in my bag, because he defecated all the time. He said leaving was bad. (M7, son – 6 years)

DISCUSSION

According to mothers' perception, their children expressed a feeling of relief and joy at their fathers' separation from conflicting relationships. These feelings were revealed through changes in children's/adolescents' behavior who previously appeared withdrawn and mentioned feeling suffocated. A study with school adolescents brought narratives of feelings of sadness and isolation during the experience of intra-family violence¹¹.

These sensations of suffocation translate into mental fatigue, in which instinctual energy is directed towards an object, leading to a destructuring or structuring of the ego, depending on the guidance given by individuals¹². The relief expressed by children/adolescents can then be attributed to the probability of happiness arising from marital interaction rupture, previously permeated by conflicts, which brought them indirect or direct suffering. Studies show that children need a harmonious and welcoming environment. Children being in a stressful and conflicting place is not beneficial for their development¹³.

These changes demonstrated in children's and adolescents' behavior, in addition to causing positive feelings, also had an impact on improving the relationship between mothers and children. A study that brought together data from Boston, Chicago and Santo Antônio showed that, during exposure to violence, women had higher rates of parental stress, which in turn culminated in a lack of interest in relationships with children¹⁴. It is noteworthy that social interaction, associated with family and peer support, contributed to acquisition of children's and adolescents' individuality and identity. Furthermore, strengthening family ties enhances healthy psychological development. In this way, after paternal leaving and cessation of routine violence in the domestic environment, children/adolescents feel freer to talk to their mothers, which influences individuals' formation and consequently their way of interacting with the world.

Despite paternal separation, there are still situations in which spouses maintain contact with children and these relationships are permeated by violence and verbal aggression. A study in Hungary showed that visitation to children by separated parents in the context of violence can mean the perpetuation of marital abuse. These were meetings used as a means to maintain control over the ex-partner through verbal aggression and parental alienation¹⁵. Hence, several behaviors adopted by parents after estrangement as a form of retaliation, mainly directed at women, cause children to feel fearful, as evidenced by the statements. In this study, mothers reported that their children went through situations such as home invasion and kidnapping, which potentially could have accentuated their concern as it involved extreme violence. Behaviors assumed by children and adolescents are consistent with those presented by people who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as hypervigilance and remembering situations experienced. These are emotional reactions to experiences of violence¹⁶. Although statements are not determinants of PTSD, an investigation into behaviors

assumed by children and adolescents must be considered in order to intervene as early as possible, always aiming at the egoic structuring of the subject.

In addition to these feelings associated with paternal leaving, other behaviors were observed by mothers, such as inattention, agitation and lost gaze. In literature, these behaviors come together as characteristics of distraction, defined by active overconcentration directed to a content or object, but without reflection on this act and with difficulties in perceiving one's surroundings¹⁷. These feelings can be associated with any context of family dynamics, experiences that cause fragility in cognitive development and violence that causes PTSD. These consequences of this violent environment can have repercussions, bringing adversity to children's school, social and adult lives¹⁸. A similar situation was observed in a study carried out in Ribeirão Preto with children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 years who demonstrated a decrease in school performance due to disruptions in family dynamics¹⁹.

Furthermore, there is also the agitation mentioned by mothers, which is an indicator of emotional restlessness experienced by these individuals, showing that accumulation of thoughts and detachment from reality can represent ways of dealing with the experience. The literature shows that, to adapt to adversity, mental and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands are necessary, a situation that may be generating intense demand¹². Therefore, amid the agitation felt by children, it is *sine qua non* to welcome, inform and guide to enable behavior that contributes to this process of mental flexibility, considering that children have low cognitive ability²⁰.

Therefore, in the absence of this mental ability, children may experience difficulties in establishing changes in thoughts that are capable of charting new paths, and these obstacles may culminate in aggressive behavior, as evidenced by this study. Such aggressiveness was expressed through gestures and words, demonstrating an inability to deal with conflict in a functional way. In this context, it is important to increase children's ability to deal with adversity and provide an environment where they can develop protective social skills²¹.

According to maternal narratives, children are reproducing violent behavior with their peers at school. This aspect may possibly be related to the testimony of conflicts that persist even after separation, culminating in the learning of violence as a way of relating. It is noteworthy that, in the domestic environment, the relationship took place vertically, highlighting the power of adults over children/adolescents, a situation that did not allow for defense. In the school environment, a horizontal relationship can facilitate the adoption of violent behaviors²².

This understanding can be perpetuated throughout their social interactions, causing the formation of new aggressors. A study carried out with male perpetrators of violence shows that the experience of domestic violence in childhood contributed to their becoming perpetrators today, including assuming behaviors similar to those carried out by their parents²³. Violence transgenerationality is a phenomenon that has roots in social construction and that makes men and women vulnerable, creating disharmonious and conflicting relationships.

Mothers reported noticing their children's isolation after fathers' leaving, as children stopped talking to them and played alone. This social isolation referred to by the distance from family and friends characterizes a situation of uncertainty and moments of internalization. Research has been studying ways of dealing with avoidance, which is characterized by distancing oneself from relationships with others as an attempt to deny the occurrence of events²⁴. In this way, children and adolescents in our study may assume isolation as a way of not accepting their father's leaving from home. Despite the perspective of domestic violence between spouses, the presence of a father towards children is very symbolic and representative, because the meaning of the fathers' presence still brings important aspects to children's life and formation⁴. When not exercising paternity, children and young people

can feel unprotected, helpless, insecure and sad, and these elements can trigger depression, as expressed in this study by isolation. Corroborating, research carried out in southeastern Brazil with 22 children between six and eleven years old who were going through the divorce process and/or custody dispute shows that situations of fights and paternal withdrawal left children with feelings of sadness, guilt and abandonment²². Furthermore, not verbalizing what they have experienced or their feelings can cause emotional damage and increase suffering.

Thus, mothers identified that paternal leaving caused intense suffering to the offspring, in which they expressed thoughts of taking their own lives. Suicidal ideation is a risk factor for suicide, and these thoughts can occur due to severe depression and inability to see the solution to their problem¹⁸. Hence, it can be understood as a way to alleviate suffering due to the recurring anguish they experience. In another national study, an increase in suicide in the age group of 15 to 24 years stands out, highlighting the lack of support from relatives and violence as factors related to this event²⁵. Considering that these are constructs involved in the lives of the children and adolescents in this research, it is clear that the suffering felt and the risk they present for suicidal behavior are exacerbated.

Permanence in this suffering can lead to trauma, causing these children to develop depressive signs and symptoms, which appear in response to interaction with the dysfunctional environment, as they are alone immersed in their own thoughts. In a study carried out in Rio Grande do Sul with four children who experienced a shared custody agreement, they demonstrated the predominance of loneliness and sadness²⁶. Wrapped in thoughts, children can develop plans and attempt suicide, as observed in mothers' statement that their children used a means to kill themselves. In view of this, it is urgent to implement means that enable the exercise of paternity even with the dissolution of the marital couple and to create coping strategies, reception spaces so that children and adolescents who suffer due to the results of conflicts between their parents are safeguarded and protected.

Psychological impacts, narrated by mothers, were also noticed on the bodies of children and adolescents. This psychosomatic phenomenon occurs due to fragility and the inability to psychically represent experiences, discharging the trauma created onto the body²⁷. It was noticed, in a survey carried out in North Carolina, United States, that adolescents who experienced traumatic situations are 1.2 times more likely to develop mental disorders²⁸. This reality increases the search for health services with the aim of solving physical problems, but which have a psychological basis, which reinforces the importance of services being attentive to signs of violence and with professionals prepared to identify the problem²⁹.

Despite being limited by not having given voices to parents and children and adolescents, not having used other methods, such as quantitative research, in which validated instruments and longitudinal studies could be used, the study can contribute to strengthening the psychological care of children/adolescents who have experienced violence, providing professionals with support to outline preventive strategies.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that, after paternal estrangement resulting from protective measures for mothers with a history of conjugal violence, children and adolescents experience emotional, behavioral and psychological repercussions. Maternal narratives point out that while children feel relief due to their paternal separation, they become concerned about the possibility of rapprochement and the possibility of new aggressions.

This fact possibly caused children and adolescents to develop inattention as an escape from thinking about what happened, thus generating aggression towards peers and isolation. As they

cannot find a solution on their own, they end up suffering in silence and somatizing their experience, expressed, for instance, by symptoms of depression, diarrhea and nocturnal enuresis.

Thus, the need to provide emotional support to mothers is highlighted so that they can exercise parenting and help give new meaning to what these children and adolescents experience. In this regard, health professionals are extremely important to be aware of health demands of children and adolescents arising from situations of violence so that, in addition to the visible, help in the coping network to mitigate the suffering experienced by these children.

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NOTES

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