

CHILDREN'S THERAPEUTIC GROUP AND MEDIATION OF EMOTIONS IN CHILDHOOD: AN EXPERIENCE REPORT

*GRUPO TERAPÊUTICO INFANTIL E MEDIAÇÃO DAS EMOÇÕES NA INFÂNCIA:
UM RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA*

*GRUPO TERAPÉUTICO INFANTIL Y MEDIACIÓN DE LAS EMOCIONES EN LA
INFANCIA: UN RELATO DE EXPERIENCIA*

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ABSTRACT

Childhood, as a phase of emotional development, finds in the therapeutic group an essential tool for strengthening social relationships and learning through play. This study aimed to present the experience of observing the work of psychology in a children's therapeutic group, through an experience report. The results addressed the interactions between the children, highlighting the importance of the group in forming bonds and emotional strengthening. In the discussion, aligned with development theories, issues related to childhood, emotions, violence and experiences lived in a group were articulated. The article highlighted the role of play and the role of psychology in mediating the dynamics, presenting the group as a powerful strategy of expression. The relevance of the text lies in the discussions about the need for therapeutic groups in childhood, considering them spaces for expression and subversion of culturally violent patterns.

Keywords: *Group Therapy; Childhood; Psychology.*

RESUMO

A infância, como fase de desenvolvimento emocional, encontra no grupo terapêutico uma ferramenta essencial para o fortalecimento das relações sociais e do aprendizado por meio do brincar. Este estudo teve como objetivo apresentar a experiência de observação da atuação da psicologia em um grupo terapêutico infantil, por meio de um relato de experiência. Nos resultados, foram abordadas as interações entre as crianças, destacando a importância do grupo na formação de vínculos e no fortalecimento emocional. Na discussão, alinhada às teorias do desenvolvimento, foram articuladas questões relacionadas à infância, emoções, violência e experiências vividas em grupo. O artigo evidenciou o papel do brincar e a atuação da psicologia na mediação da dinâmica, apresentando o grupo como uma estratégia potente de expressão. A relevância do texto reside nas discussões sobre a necessidade de grupos terapêuticos na infância, considerando-os espaços de expressão e subversão dos padrões culturalmente violentos.


Descritores: *Terapia de Grupo; Infância; Psicologia.*

RESUMEN


La infancia, como fase del desarrollo emocional, encuentra en el grupo terapéutico una herramienta esencial para fortalecer las relaciones sociales y el aprendizaje a través del juego. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo presentar la experiencia de observación de la actuación de la psicología en un grupo terapéutico infantil, a través de un relato de experiencia. Los resultados abordaron las interacciones entre los niños, destacando la importancia del grupo en la formación de vínculos y fortalecimiento emocional. En el conversatorio, alineado con las teorías del desarrollo, se articularon cuestiones relacionadas con la infancia, las emociones, la violencia y las experiencias vividas en grupo. El artículo destacó el papel del juego y el papel de la psicología en la mediación de la dinámica, presentando al grupo como una poderosa estrategia de expresión. La relevancia del texto radica en las discusiones sobre la necesidad de los grupos terapéuticos en la infancia, considerándolos espacios de expresión y subversión de patrones culturalmente violentos.

Descriptores: *Terapia de Grupo; Infancia; Psicología.*

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a period full of discoveries and the development of fundamental skills, such as the recognition of emotions and the formation of social bonds. Children seek out elements in their environment to develop themselves as individuals, nourishing themselves emotionally through social relationships. In this context, the role of adults, especially parents and educators, is essential to support and facilitate this development. However, the lack of knowledge and sensitivity of adults can compromise child growth, resulting in motor, linguistic and emotional deficits. Thus, the importance of careful monitoring by all those involved in childcare is reinforced¹.

In this context, a therapeutic group experience^{2,3} can enhance a rich field of experiences, in addition to providing spaces for play and communication, allowing children to work on emerging issues during this period of development. This article aims to share the experience acquired through a field project carried out as part of a university course, focused on the investigation of psychologist techniques and practices in the context of child group psychology.

The group's organizers developed the project in response to the growing demand for children for individual therapy, but who face financial constraints, as well as a shortage of places in public services. They proposed a more accessible group therapeutic experience, democratizing access to health. Motivated by an interest in understanding child processes and the impact of group practices on socioeconomically vulnerable children, they sought to explore how these processes occur in the group context and the opportunities they offer to promote the healthy development of children.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research based on an experience report^{2,4}, combined with field research and non-participant observation⁵ to explore the dynamics of a children's therapeutic group. The experience report, conducted by the author as a non-participant observer, details his field experience when following the experiences of the children in the group. The observation, structured by the Moscovici script⁶, highlights key elements of group functioning, such as objectives, motivation, communication, decision-making process, relationship, leadership, and innovation. The qualitative approach deepens the understanding of experiences, revealing the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the importance of a structured environment to address emotional issues, generating valuable insights into the potential of the therapeutic group as a safe space for expression, social development and strengthening of bonds.

Data were collected through systematic observations carried out with a therapeutic group and weekly collective supervisions, which took place between August and November 2023. The groups were led by two interns, while a teacher in charge led the supervisions, facilitating a detailed analysis of the observed aspects. We participated in two supervisions and four meetings.

It is worth mentioning that all the necessary ethical precautions were respected. The visits were carried out only with the appropriate authorization. The considerations

were used only for academic purposes, without exposure by any participant in the group.

RESULTS

The total group was composed of 40 students from a public school, divided into four weekly subgroups, organized by grade and shift, in a room at the university. Meetings lasted an hour and took place after school hours. The group was made up of 10 children from the 2nd and 3rd year of elementary school. Mediation was done by two interns, with weekly supervision by an undergraduate professor. This group is identified by the facilitators as therapeutic, but also integrates psychoeducational and psychosocial activities.

Group meetings took place in a common classroom, which was adapted to accommodate the children, with the removal of the chairs, the use of a speaker, the arrangement in a circle on the floor and the use of audiovisual resources and playful materials provided by the interns. The planning of activities was structured weekly.

The activities carried out were of a therapeutic nature, stimulating the space of speech and the search for meanings through play. Throughout the observations, tools such as UNO, Jenga, Detective, Game of Emotions, Toru and warm-up dynamics were used. Contact with caregivers still happened slowly, through the school and with a WhatsApp group. In addition, two meetings were also held (one in each month) as an attempt to integrate the parents, the children who are part of the group and the project organizers.

At the beginning of the meetings, warm-up dynamics were always carried out, promoting cooperation and interaction among the participants. During the activities, it was possible to observe different postures and interactions in the group, evidencing individual and collective aspects. Some children showed greater initiative and leadership, while others needed more time to insert themselves in the activities. The facilitators respected individual rhythms and made adaptations when necessary, ensuring a safe and welcoming environment for everyone.

One of the meetings began with a dynamic with chocolates, followed by playful activities such as the Toru game. During the dynamics, it was observed that two students stood out in the group, and the discomfort with competitive games was notorious. At other times, two other children had difficulties in dealing with the frustration of defeat, leading to the departure of a member of the group. Throughout activities, mediators stimulated reflections on competition, cooperation and meanings attributed to playing.

On the next day of the group, there was a game of hot potato, in which emotional issues were addressed. The children reported experiences of punishment, physical punishment, and their perceptions of love and discipline. The view that "he who loves punishes" was expressed by some children, with the idea that those who love impose discipline, sometimes aggressively, such as wearing slippers. Some reported situations of violence they suffered, and this was later discussed with the mediators, so that further work could be carried out with the family.

In spontaneous moments, during the meetings, speeches about anger and ways of dealing with emotions emerged. The group became a space where children could solve issues that happened between them at school. One of the children, for example, despite expressing feelings of anger and sadness in a humorous way or avoiding talking about them, found in the group environment a welcoming and safe space. The influence and support of the other children allowed her to discuss and face her emotions in an open way. This dynamic also facilitated the discussion of everyday school situations that impacted their relationships, promoting a deeper understanding of their experiences.

In another proposed activity, each child had the task of praising a classmate, which resulted in various forms of recognition and manifestation of affection. Compliments arose such as the artistic talent of one, the funny way of another, the joy brought by a colleague and the intelligence of another, who perceived himself as intelligent even without getting good grades. During this process, the mediators also received praise from the children, being valued as reference figures who demonstrated attentive listening and welcoming.

In general, the adaptations in the dynamics allowed each participant to explore their role in the group, reflecting on their interactions and on how to deal with challenges and frustrations. In this way, the group consolidated itself as a space for meaningful exchanges, in which children could explore emotions, develop social skills, and strengthen bonds, always respecting their singularities and promoting an environment of mutual growth.

The work in this group provided a rich and valuable perspective not only for the children, but also for the facilitators and observers. Each meeting was an opportunity to see the theory being put into practice, allowing us to reflect on how the children dealt with their emotions and daily challenges. The power of the group, as a safe space to resolve emotional and relationship problems, was evident.

The observation and participation in the group raised reflections on the dynamics of children's therapeutic groups and their impact on children's development. The interactions observed among the participants, as well as the responses to the different activities proposed, revealed the complexity of interpersonal relationships in this age group and the importance of a structured but flexible environment to address emotional and social issues.

The way the children dealt with themes such as competition, frustration, expression of emotions and recognition of the other, through praise, demonstrates the potential of the group as a social microcosm, allowing important skills to be developed. The facilitators' approach, respecting individual rhythms and adapting activities as needed, seems to have been instrumental in creating a safe space where children felt comfortable exploring their emotions and behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Play, as a central therapeutic tool in the group's activities, proved to be a powerful catalyst for emotional expression and the collective construction of meanings. This approach not only highlighted the importance of play in the symbolic formation of

children's reality, but also provided a safe space for children to elaborate their desires and experiences^{2,7}.

In the group dynamics, it was observed that children assumed several roles, demonstrating the fluidity of this process. At the same time, a significant evolution in children's interactions was observed, in line with the Piagetian theory⁸, which postulates the progression of coactivity relations towards mutual cooperation. Initially, unilateral respect prevailed, characteristic of hierarchical relationships, but, with the development of activities and continuous coexistence, it gradually moved to a model of mutual cooperation. This process proved to be fundamental to foster the development of cooperation and the collective construction of shared norms⁸.

A striking example of this evolution was observed when one of the participants verbalized the importance of respect for others, even in situations of victory, illustrating the development of social and moral learning, in which concepts such as justice and empathy began to be consolidated^{8,9}. This progression in interpersonal relationships demonstrates how the group environment can catalyze children's social-emotional development¹, promoting a deeper understanding of social dynamics and strengthening essential skills for healthy and constructive interactions³.

The difficulties faced by one of the participants in dealing with defeats are understood by the childhood phase of alternation between diligence and inferiority, which is essential for the development of self-image⁹. While he showed signs of frustration, another participant demonstrated a search for recognition through competition, evidencing differences in subjective experiences of self-efficacy.

The discussion about punishment and parental violence demonstrates how children internalize perceptions about discipline and love, reinforcing the negative impacts of coercive punishment on children's emotional development. The statement of one participant of "who loves punishes" reflects a culturally rooted conception, which associates discipline with suffering¹⁰. In addition, the reports of normalized violence and the mediators' perception of the need to intervene with the families reinforce the concern with the negative effects of this approach¹⁰.

One of the participants found it difficult to openly express complex emotions, often resorting to humor or avoiding the subject. This behavior denotes the need to develop emotional competences, as contact with emotional issues becomes a challenge, indicating the use of defense mechanisms, such as avoidance, to deal with difficult feelings¹. This phenomenon can be understood as an attempt to regulate to minimize emotional discomfort, protecting oneself from possible vulnerabilities¹⁰. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to promote more effective therapeutic interventions, which safely and gradually explore genuine contact with one's own emotions.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the coordination of the group was of paramount importance for the success of the therapeutic dynamics, ensuring a safe and welcoming environment, allowing the children to feel comfortable to express themselves, exchanging experiences and feelings^{2,3}. The facilitators demonstrated essential values such as ethics and respect, combined with emotional balance, in addition to having the cognitive and communicative skills necessary for interactions. Acting as a transferential figure and identification model, they facilitated the formation

of positive bonds among the participants. The integration of playful elements was carefully implemented, facilitating a more natural and pleasurable engagement of children in the therapeutic process. In addition, their ability to adapt to the individual needs of each student ensured that everyone felt included and respected, creating a space conducive to emotional empowerment and genuine expression.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The experience gained through group observation offered a deep insight into the stages of planning and executing therapeutic interventions, revealing the group as a central space for children's verbal and emotional expression. This environment favored open communication, fostered empathy, and facilitated the formation of bonds, while providing a structured setting for the exchange of emotions and challenges. The use of Moscovici's script was fundamental in the systematization of the data, enriching the interaction between facilitators and participants and improving the understanding of group dynamics.

However, the time constraint of follow-up restricted the observation of long-term progress, highlighting the need for future studies with broader scopes. The scarcity of specific literature on psychotherapeutic groups for children underlines the importance of further research in this area. Experiences like this are essential in the training of psychologists, promoting the construction of fundamental skills such as qualified listening, professional posture and ethical conduct, in addition to preparing them for a more effective and humanized practice.

We conclude with the conviction that the positive impact of these interventions goes beyond the immediate group environment, potentially affecting school performance, family dynamics, and the individual development of each participating child. This experience has not only enriched our professional training but has also reaffirmed the value of providing safe and nurturing environments that promote children's growth and free expression.

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