Experiences of families of adolescents in a bond-strengthening program

Experiências de famílias de adolescentes num programa de fortalecimento de vínculos

Experiencias de las familias de adolescentes en un programa de refuerzo del vínculo afectivo

DOI: 10.55905/revconv.17n.5-203

Originals received: 04/19/2024
Acceptance for publication: 05/10/2024

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ABSTRACT
Adolescence is a time of significant changes and health risks, highlighting the importance of family and bond-strengthening programs, such as the Strengthening Families Program 10–14
(SFP10-14), to prevent risky behaviors. Objective: to analyze the experiences of families of adolescents participating in a program to strengthen family bonds (SFP10-14). Method: a qualitative exploratory study with an interpretative approach was performed, using generic qualitative research as a methodological reference, where 19 parents and 15 adolescents participating in the program were interviewed, focusing on the thematic analysis of their experiences, and the data were analyzed through thematic categorization. Results: From the participants’ speeches, four thematic categories emerged: Perception of parental roles; Conversation and assertive communication; Strengthening family bonds; and Influence of religious practices on children’s education. Final considerations: The use of the SFP 10-14 is effective in strengthening family bonds and preventing risky behaviors among adolescents, suggesting the inclusion of this instrument in public policies and preventive programs focused on this population.

**Keywords:** adolescent, family, family-based intervention, parenting.

**RESUMO**

A adolescência é um período de grandes mudanças e riscos à saúde, destacando-se a importância de programas de fortalecimento familiar e de vínculos, como o Strengthening Families Program 10-14 (SFP10-14), para a prevenção de comportamentos de risco. Objetivo: analisar as experiências de famílias de adolescentes participantes de um programa de fortalecimento de vínculos familiares (SFP10-14). Método: foi realizado um estudo qualitativo exploratório com abordagem interpretativa, tendo como referencial metodológico a pesquisa qualitativa genérica, onde foram entrevistados 19 pais e 15 adolescentes participantes do programa, com foco na análise temática de suas experiências, e os dados foram analisados por meio de categorização temática. Resultados: A partir dos discursos dos participantes, emergiram quatro categorias temáticas: Percepção dos papéis parentais; Conversa e comunicação assertiva; Fortalecimento dos vínculos familiares; e Influência das práticas religiosas na educação dos filhos. Considerações finais: A utilização do SFP 10-14 é eficaz no fortalecimento dos vínculos familiares e na prevenção de comportamentos de risco entre adolescentes, sugerindo a inclusão desse instrumento em políticas públicas e programas preventivos voltados para essa população.

**Palavras-chave:** adolescente, família, intervenção familiar, parentalidade.

**RESUMEN**

La adolescencia es una etapa de importantes cambios y riesgos para la salud, lo que pone de manifiesto la importancia de los programas de fortalecimiento familiar y vincular, como el Programa de Fortalecimiento Familiar 10-14 (SFP10-14), para prevenir conductas de riesgo. Objetivo: analizar las experiencias de familias de adolescentes participantes en un programa de fortalecimiento de vínculos familiares (SFP10-14). Método: se realizó un estudio cualitativo exploratorio con enfoque interpretativo, utilizando como referencia metodológica la investigación cualitativa genérica, donde se entrevistó a 19 padres y 15 adolescentes participantes del programa, centrándose en el análisis temático de sus experiencias, y se analizaron los datos a través de categorización temática. Resultados: De los discursos de los participantes surgieron cuatro categorías temáticas: Percepción de los roles parentales; Conversación y comunicación asertiva; Fortalecimiento de los lazos familiares; e Influencia de las prácticas religiosas en la educación de los hijos. Consideraciones finales: El uso del SPP 10-14 es eficaz en el fortalecimiento de los lazos familiares y en la prevención de comportamientos de riesgo entre
adolescents, sugiriendo la inclusión de este instrumento en políticas públicas y programas preventivos enfocados en esta población.

**Palabras clave:** adolescente, familia, intervención familiar, crianza.

1 INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of biological, cognitive, emotional and social changes, marked by greater autonomy, independence from the family and new experiences for adolescents. Nevertheless, many of these experiences become risk factors for health, such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption, inadequate diet, physical inactivity, among others (Malta et al., 2014).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence is divided into three phases, namely: pre-adolescence (from 10 to 14 years old), adolescence (from 15 to 19 years old) and youth (from 15 to 24 years old). Article 2 of the Brazilian Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA, as per its Portuguese acronym) states that “for the purposes of this Law, a child is considered to be a person up to twelve years of age, while an adolescent is considered to be a person between twelve and eighteen years of age” (Brasil, 1990; 2007).

Adolescence is a complex period in which young people are undergoing physical and psychosocial development. Due to the transformations and uncertainties inherent in this period, factors that induce risk behaviors, such as reckless sexual relationships, violence, alcohol abuse, tobacco and illicit drug use are more prominent (Kersey et al., 2023). With regard to the latter two, the pertinent literature points out that alcohol and other drug abuse among adolescents is a public health problem that crosses continents (Stefanek et al., 2022) and has the following consequences: problems at school, such as interrupted studies; chronic and serious health problems; lifetime addiction; delinquency; fragmented relationships; and participation in other risky behaviors (Kersey et al., 2023; Stefanek et al., 2022).

It is important to underline that, for a long time, the etiology of illicit drug abuse by adolescents was strongly linked to the peer group, that is, the influence of friend groups; however, recent studies show that family dynamics can be much more decisive (Paiva; Ronzani, 2009). Accordingly, the family acts in two ways, depending on its structure, since it can either lead to abuse or act as a protective factor for this behavior (Paiva; Ronzani, 2009; Murta et al., 2018).
Thus, in several countries, governments have adopted programs to strengthen family bonds as a means of preventing such public health problems, among them the Strengthening Families Program 10-14 (SFP10-14), developed in the United States, which is based on Family Systems Theory, Social Learning Theory and Social Ecology Theory (SEGROT et al., 2021). This approach focuses, among other things, on promoting parenting, encouraging responsibility, strengthening family cohesion, as well as problem-solving values and resources. Its methodology involves adolescents and their parents or guardians and consists of seven two-hour meetings a week. In the first hour, parents and adolescents are separated and attend different sessions; in the second hour, they attend a family session together. Studies show that the primary outcomes of SFP10-14 include a reduction in child maltreatment, substance abuse, delinquency and school failure. Secondary outcomes include improvements in parenting practices and in the quality of the parent-child relationship, as well as in the development of effective parenting practices (Murta et al., 2018; Segrot et al., 2021).

In the Brazilian context, substance abuse by adolescents is also an established public health problem, and one of the approaches included in the National Program on Drugs is SPF 10-14, which has been applied since 2013 and has expanded to all five regions of the country, targeting vulnerable families that are part of cash transfer programs (Abdala et al., 2020). Accordingly, in the Brazilian scenario, studies have been conducted in order to measure the short-term effects of the SPF 10-14 program (Murta et al., 2021; Pinheiro-Carozzo et al., 2021) and the success of its application due to cross-cultural adaptation (De Menezes; Murta, 2021), besides checking its barriers and facilitators in the different regions of the country (Abdala et al., 2020). Nonetheless, there is a gap in participants’ perceptions of this approach.

In view of this, this study had the objective of analyzing the experiences of families of adolescents participating in the Strong Families Program, which is linked to an extension course at a Brazilian public university and uses the SPF 10-14.
2 METHODS

2.1 STUDY DESIGN

This is an exploratory and qualitative study, with an interpretive approach (Merriam; Tisdell, 2016), which used generic qualitative research as its methodological reference (Caelli; Ray; Mill, 2003; Percy; Kostere; Kostere, 2015; Kostere; Kostere, 2021). This methodological line is characterized as a qualitative investigation that seeks people’s reports on attitudes, beliefs or reflections on their experiences. Aiming for methodological rigor, the study followed the recommendations of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Souza et al., 2021).

2.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 19 parents and 15 adolescents (aged between 10 and 14) enrolled in the SFP 10-14 (Strong Families Program) activities from October 2021 to July 2022.

The participating families were selected based on social vulnerability criteria applied by the municipality’s social assistance reference centers, namely: compromised income, lack of family structure, precarious housing and lack of basic sanitation.

The following selection criteria were adopted: families in a situation of social vulnerability, with joint participation by adolescents aged between 10 and 14 in at least 75% of the program’s activities.

Nineteen parents and fifteen adolescents who agreed to participate in the research were interviewed. Of the 60 families enrolled in the SFP 10-14 activities during the research period, 50 families were invited to participate, with a refusal rate of 12%. The reasons for refusal involved the unavailability of time to accomplish the interview.

2.3 SETTING

The research setting was a municipality in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. This state is located in the Mid-West region of the country and has high rates of social vulnerability.
and risk situations among adolescents: sexual violence (Justino et al., 2015), alcohol (Raizel et al., 2016) and drug abuse (Aguiar et al., 2021), pregnancy (Martins et al., 2014), suicide (Fernandes et al., 2020), sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Aguiar et al., 2021), among others.

2.4 DATA COLLECTION

For data collection, a semi-structured interview was used, constructed by the researchers, containing the following open-ended questions: (1) “What meaning do you attribute to being a ‘adolescent’ or being a ‘parent/guardian of an adolescent’?”; (2) “Since you have been in the program, have you noticed any changes in your relationships and behaviors in your family environment?”; (3) “What has changed in your behavior in the family context?”; (4) “What changes can be attributed to the program? Please explain”.

Participants were invited to be interviewed after a process of clarification and consent. The interviews were conducted and recorded in person at the program’s meeting venues, at prescheduled times, from April/2022 to September/2022, lasting an average of 30 minutes.

2.5 DATA ANALYSIS AND PROCESSING

The content of the interviews was transcribed in full and returned to the participants for validation. The speeches were coded numerically. The transcripts constituted the corpus of the research, where the thematic content analysis approach was used for in-depth analysis (Bardin, 2011). The content of the speeches was grouped and associated according to thematic affinities, which were identified inductively, that is, based on the data and not considering the frequency of the units of analysis.

For this process, the following steps were followed: 1- a database was created with the full transcript of the recorded interviews, which were separated into one for the parents and one for the adolescents; 2- reading of the transcribed material, accompanied by notes of comments and impressions in a field diary, made by one of the researchers; 3- identification of the units of analysis, through thematic affinity, according to the motivations and purposes of the study; 4- coding of the material; 5- categorization, by grouping the meanings highlighted in the content of
the reports (Bardin, 2011). Table 1 shows the path to categorizing the themes. The interviews were analyzed and coded individually by the researchers.

Table 1. Thematic categorization path, 2024.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Have you noticed any changes in your relationships and behaviors in your family environment as a result of your experience in the program?”</td>
<td>I: “I learned a lot on the program, especially about love, how it should be shown, my father never said he loved me, he just gave me a hug on my 12th birthday and I didn’t know how to do that either, I don’t know how to show love to my children and, sometimes, they feel abandoned because of that, now we hug, kiss, and it was at the meeting of letters that this happened, it was so good.”.</td>
<td>Strengthening bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What has changed in your behavior in the family context?”</td>
<td>I: “I think the experience of the Strong Families Program was very important, because I think it is very essential in the family that you have time to talk to your children. We have so many things to carry out on a daily basis, and we can’t take the time to find out how they are doing and how we can be better parents.”. I: “Now I can eat with my mother without having my cell phone by my side, because we eat each one with a cell phone in hand, and there was no topic with her, we didn’t even have anything to talk about, because there was no topic.”.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What changes can be attributed to the program? Please explain”</td>
<td>I: “The Strong Families Program helped me a lot in terms of raising my children, because I didn’t know what affection, attention and respect were and I was always in doubt about how I was doing.”. I: “I learned that, in order to be a good mother, I need to praise, demand, set limits, but love above all.”.</td>
<td>Identification of the parental role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I: "Through the course, I became able to observe how important religion is to help me to take care..." | Religion |
of my family. Before, I used to charge my son, I saw several of my bad habits, which include shouting, talking loudly, which are my faults, and the process that was supposed to be a learning process turned into shouting, but I passed this image on to him, but I learned that, in addition to following the teachings of the course and following my religion, they say things in common that allow me to be much more successful in what I do.”.

Source: the authors

2.6 ETHICAL ASPECTS

The study was evaluated and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the institution under CAAE: 52451221.2.0000.0021. Parents were asked to sign a Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) and adolescents were asked to sign a Free and Informed Assent form (FIAF).

3 RESULTS

3.1 SAMPLE CHARACTERIZATION

A total of 19 parents/guardians and 15 children participated in the study, 67.30% of whom were female.

Among the guardians, mothers were the most present at the meetings (80%), followed by grandmothers (15%) and, less frequently, fathers (5%). The age range was 30 to 62 years, 70% had completed elementary school, 15% had completed secondary school and 15% had not completed higher education, 98% were female and 2% were male. In terms of income, 60% earned between 600 and 1200 Brazilian reais, 20% up to 600 Brazilian reais, 15% between 1200 and 2500 Brazilian reais and 5% over 2500 Brazilian reais. With regard to religion, 95% were Christians, 3% atheists and 2% did not state their religion.
The following thematic categories emerged from the participants’ speeches: Perceptions of parental roles; Conversation and assertive communication; Strengthening family bonds and Influence of religious practices on children’s education.

3.2 PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTAL ROLES

This category emerged from the statements of 88% of parents about the impact of the program on a better understanding of parental roles, as shown in the speeches below:

P-01- “The program was very important for my relationship with my children, now we can talk without fighting, I was able to see that my role as a mother is to help my son with his choices, I am doing the lesson with him, and it was something I couldn’t keep up with.”.

P-15 “The Strong Families Program helped me a lot in terms of raising my children, because I didn’t know what affection, attention and respect were and I was always in doubt about how I was doing.”.

P-2 “I learned that, in order to be a good mother, I need to praise, demand, set limits, but love above all.”.

The speeches showed the program’s influence on understanding the parental role in care, encouragement, love, education, setting limits and preparing adolescents for the challenges and opportunities of present and adult life.

3.3 CONVERSATION AND ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

This category represents the statements of 95% of participants related to the program’s contributions to a better understanding of the importance of conversation and assertive parent-child communication, free from authoritarianism.

P-15- “[...] then they showed me that, sometimes, I was on the wrong path and couldn’t see and that I have to listen to my son, I came from an upbringing where children don’t have a voice, when I was going to talk to my parents, I couldn’t, I didn’t have that right, I just obeyed and now things have changed.”.

P-05- “I think the experience of the Strong Families Program was very important, because I think it is very essential in the family that you have time to talk to your children. We
have so many things to carry out on a daily basis, and we can’t take the time to find out how they are doing and how we can be better parents.”.

F -10 “Now I can eat with my mother without having my cell phone by my side, because we ate each one with a cell phone in hand, and there was no topic with her, we didn’t even have anything to talk about, because there was no topic.”.

The parents expressed the influence of their family experiences in reproducing family practices based on authoritarianism. They also pointed out the importance of organizing time for conversation with their children and the challenges faced with daily chores. Another challenge to assertive conversation was the influence of technology as a hindrance to communication.

3.4 STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS

This category included 87% of the participants’ comments about the strengthening of family ties that came from their participation in the program.

F-06 “I didn’t tell my mother what I wanted to be, what I liked, now she knows. That was very important to me.”.

P-11 “I learned a lot on the program, especially about love, how it should be shown, my father never said he loved me, he just gave me a hug on my 12th birthday and I didn’t know how to do that either, I don’t know show love to my children and, sometimes, they feel abandoned because of that, now we hug, kiss, and it was at the meeting of letters that this happened, it was so good.”.

P-15 “The Strong Families Program helped me a lot in terms of raising my children, because I didn’t know what affection, attention and respect were and I was always in doubt about how I was doing, so they showed me that sometimes I was in wrong path and I couldn’t see and that I have to listen to my son, show him love and affection.”.

The speeches show that participation in the program was essential for strengthening bonds, as the program helped parents and children to show more affection, love and affection in the family environment.
3.5 INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES ON CHILDREN’S EDUCATION

Although the program itself did not include any religious aspects, 70% of participants expressed the importance of religion in strengthening parental roles, including: education, love, care and setting limits.

P-15 “My religion also helps me to educate my children in the ways of God, as the Bible is fundamental to educating a child, if you read it and follow it, your child will be successful.”.

F-11 “[...] helping each other, supporting each other and today we are like that, we are strong, we use the Bible and try to practice what is written, which is why it has helped us a lot.”.

P-09 “Through the course, I became able to observe how important religion is to help me to take care of my family. Before, I used to charge my son, I saw several of my bad habits, which include shouting, talking loudly, which are my faults, and the process that was supposed to be a learning process turned into shouting, but I passed this image on to him, but I learned that, in addition to following the teachings of the course and following my religion, they say things in common that allow me to be much more successful in what I do.”.

In the participants’ speeches, the influence of Christian religions on strengthening parental roles was noted, considering that most of the participants professed a Christian faith.

4 DISCUSSION

The perceptions and experiences of the parents who participated in the program were shown in the four categories presented in the results. These are (1) Perceptions of parental roles, where they identified and strengthened the role of parents in relation to their children, as well as the importance of the program in this process; (2) Conversation and assertive communication, where they reported improved communication between parents and children; (3) Strengthening family bonds, where the program is seen as a facilitator of closer bonds between family members and, finally, (4) Influence of religious practices on children’s education, whose speeches attribute successful practices in strengthening family ties to religious foundations.

Accordingly, the first thematic category (Perceptions of parental roles) points to parents’ perceptions of their parental roles and how the Strong Families Program has contributed to a better understanding of them. The pertinent literature highlights the importance of positive
parenting in promoting the healthy development of children, involving behaviors like affection, communication and setting limits (Lorence et al., 2019; Keizer et al., 2019). In this sense, the results of the study corroborate the literature, showing that the program helped parents to understand the importance of these behaviors for their children’s development (de Menezes; Murta, 2021; Segrott et al., 2021). In addition, parents highlighted that the program helped to clarify their doubts about the parental role and encouraged them to become more present and active in their children’s education.

Definitions of parenting styles are relevant to the discussion. Among them is the authoritarian style, which is characterized by parents who encourage their children’s freedom and autonomy, are responsive to their needs and opinions, and set clear limits and rules. This style has been associated with the development of psychosocial competence, positive self-esteem and psychological well-being in children (Pinquart; Gerke, 2019). The authoritarian style is characterized by parents who are highly demanding and slightly responsive, establishing strict rules and imposing control over their children’s behaviors. This style can be associated with negative consequences, such as lower psychological well-being in children (Garcia; Fuentes, 2020). The indulgent style refers to parents who are highly responsive, but they have low demands in relation to their children’s behaviors. This style can result in lower psychosocial competence in children, but it can also be associated with greater psychological well-being. Finally, the neglectful style is characterized by parents with low responsiveness and low demands. These parents are negligent in fulfilling their parental responsibilities, showing little interest in their children’s well-being. This style has been associated with problems in their children’s psychosocial development, including a higher incidence of risk behaviors (Garcia; Fuentes, 2020). Thus, according to the participants, the program helped them to practice the authoritative style.

With regard to the second thematic category (Conversation and assertive communication), the speeches highlight the importance of conversation and assertive communication in the relationship between parents and children. Studies (Buehler, 2020; Kapetanovic; Skoog, 2020) have shown that family communication can have a positive or negative influence on the cognitive, emotional and behavioral development of children and adolescents. Assertive communication, which is characterized by expressing feelings and thoughts clearly and objectively, without disrespecting the other, has been indicated as an
effective strategy for strengthening the family bond and preventing mental health problems (Hamadhan et al., 2019; Aires; Vieira; Gedrat, 2023). In addition, parents’ willingness to listen and consider their children’s opinions has been associated with developing a relationship of trust and mutual respect, favoring joint decision-making and conflict resolution (Kapetanovic et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, the influence of technology on family communication has been pointed out as a challenge to practicing this skill (Smetana; Rote, 2019), as the participants in this study have pointed out. The pertinent literature points out that excessive exposure to technology can damage the quality of dialog between parents and children, affecting mutual understanding and the development of social and emotional skills in children and adolescents (Chen; Shi, 2019; Smetana; Rote, 2019). In this sense, the program’s approach to the importance of conversation and assertive communication can help to promote healthy communication practices and reduce the negative effects of technologies on family communication (Segrott et al., 2022).

Strategic actions like the Strong Families Program mainly emphasize education and skills development, with the objective of mitigating risk factors and promoting elements of protection and resilience (Kumpfer; Alvarado; Whiteside, 2009). In an evaluation of the program, the results indicate that it has the capacity to strengthen family relationships, as perceived by all the interviewed groups. This is particularly evident in the reduction of stress levels, cases of intra-family aggression and the promotion of open communication and stronger ties between family members (UNIFESP; UFC, 2022).

Through the participants’ statements, the category “Strengthening family bonds” demonstrates the significant impact on improving family relationships brought about by participation in the program, promoting greater communication and closeness between family members. The pertinent literature (Umberson; Thomeer, 2020; De La Torre-moral et al., 2021) points out that the lack of family bonds can contribute to emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents. This is why strengthening these bonds is so important for the well-being of the family as a whole. In addition, the lack of emotional support in the family can contribute to the practice of risky behaviors, such as the use of alcohol and other drugs. Thus, promoting healthy bonds in the family is fundamental to preventing such behaviors and promoting a healthier life (Pinheiro-Carozzo et al., 2020).
The testimonies of the program participants cited in the fourth thematic category (Influence of religious practices on children’s education) indicate that religion can be a relevant tool in the formation of parental roles. This indication is in line with the literature, according to a systematic review study that sought to measure the influence of religious beliefs in adolescence, where it was described that this can be an important factor in promoting family cohesion and commitment, as well as providing a set of norms and values that can guide parents’ behavior towards their children (Hardy et al., 2019). Participants mentioned the importance of reading the Bible in raising children and promoting values like love, care and limits. In addition, religion was described as an important factor in promoting family unity and mutual help between members. Similarly, religion can provide a source of emotional and spiritual support, helping parents to deal with the difficulties of family life (Mahoney; Boyatzis, 2019; Pearce et al., 2019). These findings suggest that, although the program itself does not include religious aspects, the participants found religion to be a valuable source of guidance and support in the formation of parental roles.

5 CONCLUSION

In short, the results of this study indicate that the SFP 10-14 can be an effective intervention for strengthening family bonds and, consequently, preventing risky behaviors among socially vulnerable adolescents. The intervention proved to be important for strengthening family bonds, improving communication between parents and children, learning skills to deal with risk situations and recognizing the importance of the program. These findings reinforce the need for intersectoral public health protection policies and effective preventive programs in Brazil aimed at this population. Limitations of the study include the small number of participants and the subjectivity of the analysis of the speeches due to the interpretation of the researchers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the families who participated in this study and the social assistance services and professionals involved in organizing the meetings.
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