

Parents' perception of the use of the ACT Program during the COVID-19 pandemic

Percepção dos pais da utilização do Programa ACT na pandemia da Covid-19

Percepción de los padres con relación a la utilización del Programa ACT en la pandemia de COVID-19

Perception des parents sur l'utilisation du Programme ACT pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

 10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i3.e14098

Fabiana Halberstadt Garcia

Psicóloga, formada pela Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (2022), pós-graduanda em Neurociência do Comportamento pela faculdade FaCiencia. Atua como psicóloga clínica, 100% online, através da Terapia Cognitivo Comportamental.

Suane Pastoriza Faraj

Graduada em Psicologia pela Universidade Luterana do Brasil - ULBRA - Campus Santa Maria (2007). Doutorado em Psicologia pelo Programa de Pós Graduação em Psicologia da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (2021). Mestrado em Psicologia pelo Programa de Pós Graduação em Psicologia da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (2014). Pós- Graduação lato sensu, na modalidade a distância, em Especialização em MBA em Gestão de Recursos Humanos junto a FATEC Internacional (2008). Pós-Graduação em Criança e Adolescente em Situação de Risco junto ao Centro Universitário Franciscano - UNIFRA (2011). Tem formação em Psicologia Escolar. Atua em Instituição Escolar e no Centro de Reabilitação Física e Intelectual.

Aline Cardoso Siqueira

Psicóloga, graduada pela Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM), Mestre em Psicologia com ênfase em Psicologia do Desenvolvimento pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da UFRGS e Doutora em Psicologia pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da UFRGS, com estágio sanduíche na University of Connecticut. É membro da equipe de pesquisadores do Laboratório de Análise e Prevenção da Violência (Laprev/UFSCar), realizando pesquisas relacionadas à maternidade, adoção, institucionalização de crianças e práticas educativas parentais. Tem experiência na área de Psicologia, com ênfase em Psicologia do Desenvolvimento Humano e Psicologia Social e Comunitária, atuando principalmente nos seguintes temas: institucionalização, adolescência, parentalidade e maternidade. Atualmente, atua como docente do Departamento de Psicologia da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria/RS e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia/UFSM.

Abstract

Parenting skills improvement programs have been used as a strategy to prevent violence against children, helping parents acquire knowledge and forms of education through positive parenting. The ACT Program was developed by the American Psychological Association for parents and caregivers of children ages 0 to 8, and it seeks to empower families to improve their parenting skills. This qualitative study aimed to understand the perception of parents participating in the ACT Program, carried out in 2019, regarding the program's learning use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 15 parents who participated in the ACT Program in 2021. The data were analyzed qualitatively, and the results indicated that parents used strategies of emotional regulation, positive discipline, and monitoring of the use of electronic media. Learning about the quality, content, and time children spend with electronic media was cited as crucial when screen time increased due to the pandemic. Based on the participants' reports, it is considered that the ACT Program helped manage the situations faced during the pandemic since the strategies used by parents were aligned with the objectives of the ACT Program. The results also give the ACT Program external validity since learning was maintained after two years of intervention and in a natural environment. Therefore, it becomes necessary to offer violence prevention programs to parents and caregivers.

Keywords: *violence, intervention, parenting skills training, prevention.*

Resumo

Os programas de aperfeiçoamento das habilidades parentais vêm sendo utilizados como estratégia para prevenção da violência contra a criança, auxiliando pais a adquirirem conhecimento e formas de educação, por meio da parentalidade positiva. O Programa ACT foi desenvolvido pela Associação Americana de Psicologia, para pais e cuidadores de crianças de 0 a 8 anos, e busca fortalecer famílias a melhorarem suas habilidades parentais. O presente estudo qualitativo objetivou compreender a percepção dos pais participantes do Programa ACT, realizado em 2019, quanto à utilização das aprendizagens do programa durante a pandemia da Covid-19. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas on-line, com 15 pais que participaram do Programa ACT no ano de 2021. Os dados foram analisados de maneira qualitativa e os resultados indicaram que os pais utilizaram as estratégias de regulação emocional, disciplina positiva e monitoramento do uso das mídias eletrônicas. As aprendizagens sobre a qualidade, conteúdo e tempo das crianças com as mídias eletrônicas foram citadas como cruciais em um momento em que o tempo frente às telas aumentou em decorrência da pandemia. A partir dos relatos dos participantes, considera-se que o Programa ACT auxiliou no manejo das situações enfrentadas na pandemia, uma vez que as estratégias utilizadas pelos pais estavam alinhadas aos objetivos do Programa ACT. Os resultados ainda conferem ao Programa ACT validade externa, uma vez que a aprendizagem se manteve após dois anos da intervenção e em ambiente natural. Dessa maneira, torna-se necessário oferecer programas de prevenção à violência aos pais e cuidadores.

Palavras-chaves: violência, intervenção, treinamento de habilidade parentais, prevenção.

Resumen

Los programas de perfeccionamiento de las habilidades parentales están siendo utilizados como estrategia para prevención de la violencia contra el niño, ayudando padres a adquirir conocimiento y formas de educación, por medio de la parentalidad positiva. El programa ACT fue desarrollado por la Asociación Americana de Psicología, para padres y cuidadores de niños de 0 a 8 años, y busca fortalecer familias a mejorar sus habilidades parentales. El presente estudio cualitativo objetivó comprender la percepción de los padres participantes del Programa ACT, realizado en 2019, cuanto a la utilización de los aprendizajes del programa durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Fueron realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas on-line, con 15 padres que participaron del Programa ACT en el año de 2021. Los datos fueron analizados de manera cualitativa y los resultados indicaron que los padres utilizaron de regulación emocional, disciplina positiva y monitoreo del uso de medios electrónicos. Los aprendizajes sobre la calidad, contenido y tiempo de los niños con los medios electrónicos fueron citados como cruciales en un momento en que el tiempo delante de las pantallas aumentó debido a la pandemia. A partir de los relatos de los participantes, se considera que el Programa ACT ayudó en el manejo de las situaciones enfrentadas en la pandemia, ya que las estrategias utilizadas estaban alineadas con los objetivos del Programa ACT. Los resultados todavía confieren al Programa ACT validez externa, una vez que el aprendizaje se mantuvo pasado dos años de la intervención y en ambiente natural. De esta manera, se torna necesario ofrecer programas de prevención de la violencia a los padres y cuidadores.

Palabras claves: violencia; intervención; entrenamiento de habilidad parentales; prevención.

Résumé

Les programmes d'amélioration des compétences parentales sont utilisés comme stratégie pour prévenir la violence envers les enfants, en aidant les parents à acquérir des connaissances et des méthodes éducatives grâce à une parentalité positive. Le Programme ACT a été développé par l'Association Américaine de Psychologie, pour les parents et les soignants d'enfants âgés de 0 à 8 ans, et vise à renforcer les familles afin d'améliorer leurs compétences parentales. La présente étude qualitative visait à comprendre la perception des parents participants au Programme ACT, réalisé en 2019, concernant l'utilisation des enseignements du programme pendant la pandémie de Covid-19. Des entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés en ligne avec 15 parents ayant participé au Programme ACT en 2021. Les données ont été analysées qualitativement et les résultats ont indiqué que les parents ont employé les stratégies de régulation émotionnelle, de discipline positive et de suivi de l'utilisation des médias électroniques. Les apprentissages sur la qualité, le contenu et le temps que les enfants passent avec les médias électroniques ont été cités comme cruciaux à un moment où le temps passé devant les écrans a augmenté en raison de la pandémie. Sur la base des récits des participants, on considère que le Programme ACT a aidé à la gestion des situations rencontrées lors de la pandémie, puisque les stratégies utilisées par les parents étaient alignées sur les objectifs du programme ACT. Les résultats confirment encore la validité externe du Programme ACT, puisque l'apprentissage s'est maintenu deux ans après l'intervention et dans un environnement naturel. Ainsi, il est nécessaire d'offrir des programmes de prévention de la violence aux parents et aux soignants.

Mots-clés : violence, intervention, formation aux compétences parentales, prévention.

Violence as a way of caring for and educating children has been used throughout history and is considered a global public health problem (Krug et al., 2002). As a result, scientific studies are increasingly helping to put this practice behind us, highlighting its negative consequences for children's development (Krug, et al., 2002; Reis & Prata, 2018). Rather than showing the effects of violence, whether physical, verbal, psychological, sexual or even neglect, it is necessary to move towards preventing violence against children and adolescents (Krug et al., 2002).

Parenting skills improvement programs have been used as a strategy to prevent violence, helping parents to acquire knowledge about child development and parenting strategies in a loving way, so that they can develop a positive role for children and ensure healthy development (Altafim & Linhares, 2022). The promotion of a safe and healthy environment for the child, which includes adequate dialogue, the expression of emotions and affection, allows for better interaction between family members, enabling the child to apply it in other relationships, reducing behavioral problems (Kusiak et al., 2019).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were closed, face-to-face cultural activities banned and social distancing advocated, thus changing families' way of life and reducing parents' support network. The study by Parente et al. (2020), carried out with 45 children and their families, found significant changes in routine. The authors identified that parents and caregivers had some difficulties, including providing adequate stimuli for children, mediating children's behavior and reconciling childcare with other activities (domestic, home office). The exploratory study by Salvador et al. (2020), carried out with five families, identified the following as relevant stressors during the pandemic: parents' difficulties in helping to carry out school activities online, overload of activities (for both children and parents) and financial problems. The data from the study also pointed to an increase in the time children spend using electronic media.

According to Heilborn et al. (2020), in times of social isolation and in the absence of domestic helpers, daily tasks and care have been intensified, leading to a greater amount of activities for family caregivers, which also extends to moral and affective support. It is important to consider that social support, i.e. the availability of significant people and/or institutions (Samuelsson et al., 1996), plays a role in mediating the impact of risk (Griep, 2003), reducing needs in the face of adverse situations and enhancing the development of family members (Azevedo et al., 2019). Thus, it is believed that parenting programs can be an alternative for the participation of parents and caregivers in the development and promotion of mental health, both child and the family itself, especially in an adverse period such as the pandemic.

According to Mikton and Butchhart (2009), parenting programs promote parents' knowledge of child development, improving their parenting skills and encouraging positive child behavior management strategies, enabling effective prevention of child abuse, mistreatment and neglect. Adequate parental intervention creates excellent opportunities to improve levels of information and parental educational skills, contributing to the promotion of safe and healthy child development (Porta et al., 2021). According to Abreu-Lima et al. (2010, p. 9), "focused on promoting and strengthening families, such interventions seek to provide more information and aim to promote more skills, more responsibility and more decision-making power among parents of children with various problems or at risk of development".

One of the proposals for a universal parenting program is the ACT (Adults and Children Together) Program for raising children in safe environments. The intervention was developed by the American Psychological Association in 2001 and is aimed at parents and caregivers of children between the ages of zero and eight. The ACT Program aims to prevent violent parenting practices at an early stage, empowering families to improve their parenting skills (Silva, 2011).

The program has eight sessions covering different topics: child development, positive discipline, anger management, conflict resolution and the effects of the media and electronics on childhood. Based on the content - which is based on developmental psychology, cognitive-behavioral theory, children's fundamental rights and current studies on the impact of violence on children, as well as the exchange of ideas and experiences between participants - the intervention aims to help parents and caregivers improve positive parenting skills in order to enable healthy development and promote children's health (Pontes et al., 2019).

The ACT Program has been developed in different countries, applied and evaluated in various contexts, such as health services, education, the justice system, among others (Silva & Williams, 2016). The studies by Portwood et al. (2011) and Knox et al. (2013) investigated the effects of the ACT Program through randomized clinical trials with parents/caregivers participating in the intervention. The authors found that the ACT Program showed positive results in different factors reported by parents/caregivers of children, including: an increase in positive practices and a decrease in the use of violence (physical and verbal). The authors considered that the intervention is a primary prevention strategy for violence against children that can be implemented in different contexts.

Many studies have been carried out in Brazil using the ACT Program as an object of interest (Altafim & Linhares, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pedro et al., 2017; Pontes & Brino, 2022; Ramos et al., 2019). The study carried out by Pedro et al. (2017), for example, based on a sample of 64 Brazilian mothers of children aged three to eight and from different socioeconomic levels, found that the ACT Program had positive effects on the following aspects reported by mothers/caregivers: monitoring of electronic media by caregivers; improvement in maternal educational practices; reduction in children's conduct problems; and increased pro-social behavior in children. The research showed that ACT is an important tool for protecting children in adverse contexts. In this same perspective, Altafim and Linhares (2019) evaluated the effects

of the ACT Program, based on an intervention group with 40 mothers and a waiting list control group with 41 mothers; and 67 informants on children's behavior. In the intervention group, the data showed an improvement in mothers'/caregivers' perception of their parenting practices and a reduction in children's behavioral problems. The results were maintained three to four months after the end of the intervention.

Pontes and Brino (2022), using a randomized pilot study, evaluated the effectiveness of the ACT Program. The study included 10 parents, divided into experimental (EG) and control (CG) waiting groups, and used observational measures of parent-child interaction and parental self-report. Participants underwent pre-test, post-test and follow-up measures. The data showed an increase in the self-reported problem-solving skills of parents in the experimental group compared to participants in the control group. A significant increase in knowledge about the content of the ACT Program (parenting styles, child development and parental behavior) was also identified in the experimental group after the intervention.

Ramos et al. (2019), through a qualitative study that aimed to identify the perspective of Portuguese parents on the experience and participation in the ACT Program, found that there were more appropriate expectations for the stage of development of the children, increased awareness of parental behaviors, increased emotional self-regulation of parents, expansion of positive parenting practices, among others. Oliveira et al. (2021), also using a qualitative approach, aimed to identify the learning of parents who participated in the ACT Program. The authors' findings included: parents learning about positive parenting practices and positive discipline strategies; increased knowledge about child development; and increased understanding of the damage caused by exposing children to situations of violence.

Based on the application of the ACT Program for Raising Children in Safe Environments in 2019 and given the increase in parenting challenges presented in the midst of a pandemic, researching parents' perceptions of the strategies learned in a parenting program is important to identify how participation in the ACT Program contributed to their experience during the pandemic. Thus, this research aims to understand the perception of parents participating in the ACT Program, held in 2019, regarding the use of the program's learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method

Design and Participants

This is a descriptive and exploratory study using a qualitative research approach. The study included 15 parents/caregivers of children aged between zero and eight (the age of the children at the time the program was implemented) who had completed the ACT program in 2019. The group consisted of mothers, fathers and caregivers who had a stable job, at least completed secondary school and were motivated to improve the way they raised their children. These parents also had children between the ages of zero and eight, with no previous diagnosis of a developmental or behavioral disorder. The inclusion criteria for this study were: having attended at least 70% of the ACT Program meetings in 2019 and having experienced the Covid-19 pandemic with their children.

Of the 15 participants who agreed to take part in the study, 13 were female and only two were male. All the participants were fathers or mothers of the children and were aged between 35 and 52 ($M=39.46$; $SD=4.32$). In addition, 13 participants were married or in a stable union, one was single and one was divorced. Individual income ranged from R\$1,000.00 to R\$9,000.00. Family income was around R\$10,000.00. The participants had between one and two children, aged between zero and eight. As for their level of education, two parents had completed high school, one had completed higher education, and 12 had postgraduate degrees in progress.

Instruments

This study used a semi-structured interview script, drawn up by the researchers (authors), which included: questions about the challenges of the pandemic in the life of the family; and questions about the use/application of the content learned in the ACT Program during the Covid-19 pandemic in the family context. The interview script was a guiding topic, providing guidance for the interviewer and allowing the moment to remain free, pleasant and comfortable. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for qualitative data analysis.

Procedures and Ethical Considerations

This study is part of an umbrella project entitled Educating Without Violence: Evaluation of the ACT Program for Educating Children in Safe Environments, submitted to and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of a federal university, under CAAE number 01903118.0.000.5346. Based on this project, the research group, from the psychology course at a federal university, carried out three applications of the ACT Program with parents and caregivers of children

aged zero to eight in 2019. For this study, which is the result of a project approved in 2019, this stage of data collection was evaluated through the submission of an amendment, which was approved with opinion number 5.219.704.

Contact with the participants was made by telephone, based on the contact details collected using a sociodemographic form during the period when the ACT Program was being applied in 2019. It should be noted that 29 parents completed the ACT Program with 70% attendance and were contacted for the new invitation. The availability and interest of the parents and caregivers in taking part in the study was thus verified.

The participants were introduced to the research, informed about the objectives, methods and procedures, as well as advised that their participation was voluntary, with the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any time. They were also informed of the possible risks and benefits of their participation, as well as being assured of their commitment to the confidentiality of the data obtained in the study, which was disclosed anonymously. After the participants had agreed to take part in and record the interview, they were presented with the Informed Consent Form (ICF). This presentation took place online, via a digital link with the option of clicking "I agree to take part in this research" at the end of the reading and saving a copy of the form for themselves.

The interviews were scheduled according to the availability of the interviewees and were carried out in November 2021. The interviews were conducted using the Google Meet app and audio-recorded, with the prior authorization of the participants, and then transcribed for data analysis. The interviews lasted around 50 minutes.

This research met the fundamental ethical requirements established by the Guidelines and Regulatory Norms for Research Involving Human Beings - Resolution 510/2016 and 466/2012 of the National Health Council - and was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings of a Federal University. The material will be stored for five years in the office of the researcher responsible for the study. After this period, the material will be destroyed, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the data and the participants. This was ensured by the Data Confidentiality Agreement.

Data Analysis

Bardin's Content Analysis (2006) was used to analyze the data. This refers to a set of methodological tools applied to discourse, which analyzes communications, breaking them down and listing categories. The analysis was carried out independently by two researchers (the first and last authors), and any differences were resolved by consensus. Initially, a detailed individual analysis of each interview was carried out by one researcher. Next, the material was explored, both at the individual level of the participants' speeches and in its total content. From this, common information found in the content of the transcribed speeches was cut out, allowing categories to be constructed. At the end of the analysis process, three categories were constructed a posteriori, bringing together significant content on the learning that had been constructed and applied. The categories were (1) Parents' emotional regulation of themselves and their children; (2) Child development, positive discipline and communication; (3) Parents' monitoring of their children's use of electronic media. The nomenclature of the categories comes from the relationship between the participants' statements and the themes that make up the ACT Program.

Results and discussion

The results are presented below according to categories and subcategories. The participants have been identified by the letter "P" in the word Participant and numbered according to the order in which they were interviewed.

1. Parents' emotional regulation of themselves and their children

This category is made up of three subcategories. It brings together parents' statements about learning to recognize and regulate their own emotions and behaviors in the face of the challenges faced during the pandemic; learning to encourage the recognition and regulation of emotions in their children; as well as learning to seek to strengthen social support to enhance parental self-regulation. As for the first subcategory, the importance of recognizing, controlling and expressing the emotions of parents/caregivers during the Covid-19 pandemic was noted: "Understanding when we were most stressed, taking a breath, waiting a bit to talk, and also understanding what the children were feeling, because it was also difficult for them" (P3); "That our mood, our day, how we were in that situation also influenced (. ... it was very useful to learn from the course" (P5); "We tried very hard to use this, you know? As I said, we went out to relax, to calm down, so as not to take it out on them. The key to this construction is us, not the child. It's looking at ourselves" (P6).

Self-regulation represents the subject's ability to regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviors to adapt to the demands presented or achieve a goal (Linhares & Martins, 2015). Parents' emotional regulation skills help them to find new ways of dealing with and managing the challenges they face, both in their own lives and in guiding their children

towards appropriate responses to the environment. It is important to consider that the increased emotional self-regulation of parents/caregivers who participated in the ACT Program was also found in another study (Ramos et al., 2019).

Still on the subject of parental self-regulation, the participants showed that understanding their feelings of anger and the search for a healthy management of these emotions enables them to learn about their behaviors, signaling an understanding of the increased challenges of parenting in the midst of the pandemic: “And on my part it was really understanding that one thing was going to be left aside sometimes, another time another, that I couldn’t handle everything in this very challenging period that it was” (P1); “The differential of the ACT Program was the issue of anger, our anger, which we feel, self-control, self-care (. . . that’s where the leap is. Our anger, not their anger” (P7).

The participants’ statements show that the parents’ perception is in line with one of the ACT Program’s objectives. In the meetings on managing parents’ and children’s anger, the content presented in the intervention seeks to help parents understand and control anger, recognizing that sometimes the child is the target of negative emotions from a situation prior to the here-and-now situation. The ACT Program also discusses the fact that children, as developing human beings, are learning to deal with their own emotions, so the intervention helps parents to identify their children’s feelings of anger and to manage the moments when children feel angry, teaching them about this feeling and looking for strategies to deal with it (Silva, 2011).

The second subcategory was made up of statements about parents’ attitudes towards helping their children recognize and deal with their own emotions. The participants’ reports that they tried to calm down and take deep breaths helped their children to deal with negative emotions. In addition, they were also able to remove themselves from the problem situation they were experiencing to find a better way of coping, as well as demonstrating the importance of self-regulation put into practice at a time of stress due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The following speech illustrates this analysis:

Being able to help him name a feeling. Saying “maybe you’re not sad because of this and let’s try something else “or” what do you suggest?” This gives autonomy. “ (...) how can I help you?”, ‘what do you think will make you feel better?’ (P10).

Parents need to understand how children express their emotions, helping them to understand what they are feeling, naming emotions and encouraging children to assess which reactions would be most appropriate for each situation they face. It should be noted that an environment with an adequate standard of dialogue, affection and expression of emotions fosters better social interaction between family members, causing children to replicate this in other relationships, reducing the chances of behavioral problems (Kusiak et al., 2019).

The third subcategory reflects the parents’ learning about relying on other people to manage the challenges of parenting. Parents said that they took turns caring for their partner, which boosted self-regulation. The importance of being able to count on social support in caring for the children, but especially in managing their own emotions, was a notable factor in the participants’ statements, as shown in the following: “When one of us was more stressed, then the other would take care of the children, deal with the situations (...) not overloading the one who is more stressed, and not taking it out on the children” (P2); ‘When I couldn’t take it anymore, when I wasn’t well or lost my patience, he would take over, and vice versa (...) and that’s how we’ve been doing it, the pandemic was a good example of this, because there were many difficulties at the same time’ (P3).

Social support refers to the existence or availability of significant people and/or institutions that can be trusted (Samuelsson et al., 1996). Studies have indicated that the perception of social support is associated with health, indicating that it is a protective mechanism for individuals. In times of stress, social support may increase in importance, as it plays a moderating or mediating role in the impact of risk (Griep, 2003). The support network, made up of significant people, provides assistance to parents and caregivers, whether in the administration of routines or in the dimension of emotional support. With the distancing measures imposed by the pandemic, families had their support networks modified (Heilborn et al., 2020; Parente et al., 2020) and needed fathers and mothers of children to enjoy a reciprocal relationship to help each other. The quantitative study by Azevedo et al. (2019), carried out with 120 parents, indicated that if the support between the parental couple is reciprocal, the family may experience a reduction in needs in the face of stressful situations, valuing and enhancing the development and interaction between all members.

2. Child development, positive discipline and communication

The second category consisted of three subcategories. This category brought together the statements of participants who indicated the presence of precursors and founding concepts of positive discipline, such as a sensitive view of children and a unique conception of childhood. It also included examples of the different educational actions of positive discipline in raising children and in resolving conflicts by the participants. Finally, an openness to communication directed at children was noted.

The parents’ statements highlighted their commitment to understanding childhood as a stage of development and learning for their children, in addition to considering the child’s behavioral and emotional aspects and the impact of the pandemic:

I remember those questions from the course, the tantrums, and then when they were more nervous, I always tried to listen to what they were feeling, you know, to understand what they were feeling, and help them (...) I learned more about how their bodies worked, how they understood things (P1).

The course reinforced even more this need to bring love, affection, care, understanding of children, who are children, human beings who are in formation, and the way that modeling clay is molded, when they are little, will reflect when they are adults (P13).

The data corroborate the findings of other studies on the ACT Program, which demonstrated the acquisition/expansion of knowledge about child development (Oliveira et al., 2021; Pontes & Brino, 2022). It is noteworthy that ACT meetings elucidate children's emotional and social development, so that parents have expectations adjusted to the child's conditions. The conception of childhood as a time of formation is highlighted in the intervention, conveying to parents that the child is in formation, so that their behavior reflects this process and not a fixed characteristic (Silva, 2011).

The participants also highlighted the use of educational actions from positive discipline, giving rise to the second subcategory. The main positive strategies used by participants during the Covid-19 pandemic and mentioned in the interviews were: explaining logical and natural consequences, offering choices, and setting boundaries. The following statements illustrate this analysis:

We made sure, so they could have entertainment, a distraction, to do an activity, a routine, the habit itself, to have tasks to do. Because we had no idea when things would return to normal" (P1); "Explaining to him that it's not always how he wants (...) he really likes to play those little games, my husband explains to him that there's a time for activities, a time to play... that he has to play, do his tasks, and then he ends up understanding. (P9)

The participants' behavior toward their children was non-violent, respectful, firm, consistent, and kind, making "agreements" with the children that had to be followed and including them in decisions, demonstrating empathy and tolerance, even with the increased challenges faced. Boundaries and consistency in discipline were presented with respect, trust, and affection, accompanied by leading by example:

I remember the part about not using violence, especially understanding better what a child is (...) that they need more and more patience, that a child's interpretation of what not to do is different from ours (...) that saying no to a child isn't so simple, that they don't have the discernment to understand that no. So it really helped develop patience, doing things carefully and with a lot of affection. (P2)

The parents' statements were consistent with the use of positive discipline toward their children, as addressed in the ACT Program. The objective revolves around teaching parents and caregivers to prevent difficult behaviors, seeking positive forms of discipline for children, given that caregiving and parenting affect children's behaviors throughout their lives (Silva, 2011). Studies on the effects of the ACT Program for parents/caregivers have demonstrated an increase in positive parenting practices, as well as a reduction in the use of physical and verbal violence in child-rearing among parents and caregivers who participated in the intervention (Altafim & Linhares, 2019; Knox et al., 2013; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pedro et al., 2017; Portwood et al., 2011; Ramos et al., 2019).

Another aspect identified in the analysis was the participants' openness to communication with their children. It was clear that parents valued dialogue. In this sense, talking, explaining, and making themselves available for the child to express their feelings and the challenges they faced - especially regarding the changes and losses experienced during the pandemic - were frequently highlighted during the interviews:

Sometimes I notice he's not okay, so I call him and ask, "What's going on? Mom noticed you're acting differently, not like your usual self." Then he starts talking. (P14)

We explained to him, you know, that it wasn't possible right now, that we had to take care, stay home more (...). The routine of using hand sanitizer, wearing a mask, being careful. We told him things would go back to normal, but we had to wait (...) until the vaccine was available, and he understood just fine. (P10)

Furthermore, the statements show that parents helped their children seek alternative ways to resolve conflicts:

We always make a habit of talking things through with him—even when I need to scold him or something, I say, 'Son, come here, let's go to the room,' and then we talk. 'You saw what happened, you did this, you did that (...) You could have done this, could have done that. (P9)

By presenting concrete alternatives for how to act positively when disciplining children, the ACT Program strengthens the child's ability to build a social, cognitive, and emotional repertoire that is competent for dealing with life's challenges. These actions, such as "time out", explaining natural and logical consequences, setting limits, distracting attention, eliminating privileges, among others, are recognized as components of inductive educational practices, already exhaustively

described in the literature as being related to positive results of the Program (Oliveira et al., 2021; Porta et al., 2021). By consistently using positive educational practices with their children, using their own example, parents are preparing their children to deal with the challenges of different contexts, teaching them how to solve problems and find competent alternatives for this. In addition, it is expected that such engagement reflects a high level of involvement of these parents with their children's development, leading to the inference that the bond of affection and trust can strengthen and foster solid family relationships.

3. Parental monitoring of electronic media

This category, which consists of three subcategories, gathered the parents' statements related to the use of electronic media, such as television, cell phones, and video games, regarding the beginning of their children's exposure to different media, the increase in screen time by children, and the monitoring of content and time. It also included reports of the usefulness of electronic devices in helping parents to perform professional activities that now take place at home, as well as household chores. Participants reported different learning experiences applied in this area, considering the familiarity and frequency of the family and the child with different screens, for different purposes.

Most study participants reported that, until the pandemic, their children's routines did not include electronic media, especially when the child was a preschooler. It was possible to observe an increase in the use of media, or even the beginning of the relationship with the use of screens. This data was evident in statements such as:

A very difficult part of online it was the issue of electronics, because the kids didn't have much access to that, they didn't have their own phones, those things. And with online classes, they needed to have frequent access to that. (P3)

During the pandemic, it was certainly something that increased the frequency of their use, not to the point of staying on all day (...) but TV and cartoons increased a little more during the pandemic. What they used to watch once a day, they now watch once in the morning, once in the afternoon, once at night. (P1)

The participants' statements are in line with the findings of scientific literature, which show the increase in screen time among children during the pandemic (Marin et al., 2020; Nagata et al., 2020). The data also demonstrate that the greater flexibility on the part of parents, in the face of this new pandemic scenario, may be related to the attempt to meet the demands of work, as well as household chores. Furthermore, it can be considered an attempt at normality within a pandemic context (Marin et al., 2020).

Parents' care regarding limits on screen use, supervision of the content watched and the quality of the content offered was notable, aspects highlighted and discussed in one of the ACT Program meetings:

We have managed to hold on, to watch what they are seeing too (...) that it's not just anything they'll watch (...), so it's setting the time, what they'll watch, it was like that. (P2).

Everything he's going to watch, see, is passed through my sieve first, it doesn't stay like that free, light and loose. I'm at home, so I can follow him. Everything he sees, follows everything he watches, the channels he accesses, I can have this follow-up on everything. (P11)

Furthermore, the parents' statements demonstrate that they understood the risks and harms that screen use poses:

We saw that it wasn't enough to just turn on the online class and leave it on with them alone (...) there has to be a follow-up (...) because it's new for the children too, right? (P3)

There has to be care with what the child is watching, and the time too, you can't give them all the time, the course brought that a lot, right, about the risks (...) the damages. And the course talked about this moderate use, about the use with a certain quality, with control (...) it's also no use putting little time and bad content for the child. (P7).

Electronic media has been used frequently by increasingly younger children for distraction and entertainment, in addition to the possibility of calming them down. Media can have positive effects, such as the possibility of teaching, working, and communicating with others (Nagata et al., 2020; Santos & Barros, 2018). However, excessive use of technologies can cause several difficulties in relation to communication, social isolation, emotional connections, and mental health problems, according to other studies (Ellis et al., 2020; Lopes, 2020). In addition to the irritability present in children, problems related to sleep, aggressive behavior, and even substance use can also be noticeable in children with increased exposure to electronic media (Marin et al., 2020; Rocha et al., 2021; Brazilian Society of Pediatrics [SBP], 2020).

According to participants, the ACT Program helped them deal with the harmful effects of increased use of electronic media, suggesting that parents could balance this screen time with other activities carried out in the company of one or

both parents and/or family members, focusing on the quality of the experience. According to some parents: “The activities that we did ourselves reduced the use of the phone, the need to use it, in this case” (P2); and

It depended a lot on our creativity to do other activities, to propose other activities that didn't involve screens. When we were able to go out for a while, we went outdoors, with masks, everything, taking all the necessary precautions (...) we set up a routine, times for activities, meals, baths, cell phone time. It was something for their mental health, and for ours. (P3)

The data presented in the study are related to one of the objectives of the ACT Program regarding the use of screens and electronic media in childhood, which aims to encourage parents and caregivers to become more aware of the risks and impacts of electronic media on their children's behavior, in addition to discussing tools for conscious and responsible use. Parents noted an increase in the use of electronic media, but it was also possible to observe that they understood the precautions to be taken, such as screen time, age rating, and the quality of the content presented to children. This factor shows that the program's content is effective despite the adversities presented during the pandemic in relation to this topic. The ACT Program intervention, according to the perception of mothers in another study, was effective in helping them in the important task of monitoring their children's access to electronic media (Pedro et al., 2017).

Finally, the third subcategory included content that indicated that media were used to enable parents' homework and the execution of household chores. It was possible to verify that electronics emerged as a form of child entertainment, as an aid for parents to carry out their own tasks. The following statements illustrate these aspects: “Sometimes we are full of things to do and I leave him, I confess that I leave him in front of the television, on the videogame” (P12); “There were times when we had to use screens to be able to handle the other things at home, there was a lot to handle” (P14).

Thus, in the pandemic period, although parents encountered difficulties in reconciling daily demands and in using electronic media, it is essential to emphasize the importance of supervision in children's use of technology, in addition to family commitment in the search for other activities, games, listening and welcoming children (Marin et al., 2020; SBP, 2020). In this sense, it can be ascertained that the intervention enabled the expansion of parents' knowledge, thus promoting more skills in the face of challenges, as well as the expansion of decision-making power with parents in children's education (Abreu-Lima et al., 2010; Mikton & Butchhart, 2009).

In general, parents' statements proved to be consistent with the objectives of the ACT Program, which seeks to strengthen positive parenting and prevent violence. The intervention has a history in Brazil with research, demonstrating efficacy and effectiveness in improving parental practices, reducing behavioral problems in children in different contexts and preventing situations of rights violation (Altafim & Linhares, 2022; Pontes et al., 2019).

Final Considerations

This study aimed to understand the perception of parents participating in the ACT Program held in 2019, regarding the use of the program's learnings during the Covid-19 pandemic period. From the study, it was possible to identify the strategies used by parents in the face of the challenges presented during the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of parents' emotional regulation was identified as a way to verify and control the emotions they felt in this adverse moment, enabling adaptation to the new context and the management of the challenges faced.

Furthermore, it was possible to perceive that emotional regulation strategies were also a helping tool regarding children's emotions, since parents were open to understanding children's emotions, helping them to understand these emotions and to find the most appropriate management for the situations. Also, the importance of being able to count on social support among the family presented itself as an evident aspect. The participants' statements show that in moments of greater stress, participants could count on the support of their spouse to take the lead in situations, making a kind of rotation between them. In this way, social support can assist reciprocal self-regulation, in addition to minimizing the devastating effects of the difficulties faced in a pandemic

Another tool used by parents during this period was the use of positive discipline, which aims to use positive parenting practices to educate their children. The parents' statements, in this context, demonstrated their commitment to seeking an education without violence, understanding the stages of child development and the feelings and emotions of children during this period. The parents used the principles of firm and respectful communication, seeking to use dialogue as the main positive tool, in addition to actions that demonstrate affection and empathy.

Through this study, it was also possible to understand that the COVID -19 pandemic brought with it, in addition to the challenges of social distancing, an increase in the use of electronic media in families. The present study showed that the ACT Program helped parents define safe, reliable and realistic parameters for the use of electronic media by their children.

Technology has become even more present in family life, as social distancing has meant that children's classes and parents' work have become remote, in addition to allowing communication with family members. Furthermore, the flexibility of media has allowed parents to help organize the demands presented by the pandemic, especially in the context of work and household chores. It is therefore understandable that despite the benefits of the pandemic in this context, parents have shown

that they recognize the risks that screens present, seeking ways to be careful about screen time limits and the quality of content presented to children during this period, in addition to seeking other activities that do not involve the use of technology

These strategies and tools used by parents during the pandemic period proved to be consistent with the content worked on in the ACT Program. Thus, it can be understood that the participation of parents in parental programs, such as the ACT Program, can be an important tool to assist in facing the challenges encountered during an adverse period, such as the pandemic. Furthermore, it is possible to recognize that, since the ACT Program was given in 2019 and that the study participants brought founding elements of the course used in the natural environment of families in the interviews, the ACT Program gains evidence regarding its external validity. Thus, the contribution of the study can be confirmed.

Some limitations can be observed in this study in relation to the sample selection, since the participants belong to a specific profile that has high education and family income. Thus, studies are needed to understand how other socioeconomic profiles of parents who participated in the ACT Program faced the challenges of the pandemic. Another suggestion for future research is the investigation of what strategies were used in the pandemic, by parents, who did not participate in parental programs.

Finally, this study indicates that interventions such as the ACT Program, focused and based on evidence, can be implemented by professionals in the field of psychology, since they help families and protect children. It is important to highlight that, to implement the Program, the professional must complete training offered by the APA (usually free of charge). Furthermore, the Program has a low dissemination cost, as well as low or no cost for participants (in most locations, it is provided free of charge) (Knox et al., 2010). From this, we understand the need to implement parenting programs at the national level, since parenting programs can serve as a strategy to strengthen positive parenting and prevent violence.

References

- Abreu-Lima, I. M., Alarcão, M., Almeida, A. T., Brandão, M. T., Cruz, O., Gaspar, M. F., & Santos, M. R. (2010). Avaliação de intervenções de educação parental: Relatório 2007-2010. Universidade do Porto, Universidade, Universidade do Minho. <https://www.cnpdpcj.gov.pt/documents/10182/14804/Avalia%C3%A7%C3%A3o+de+Interven%C3%A7%C3%B5es+de+Educa%C3%A7%C3%A3o+Parental/3adb734e-d851-40d0-bebd-12de4da307e9>
- Altafim, E. R. P., & Linhares, M. B. M. (2019). Preventive intervention for strengthening effective parenting practices: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 62, 160–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.03.003>
- Altafim, E. R. P., & Linhares, M. B. M. (2022). Programa de parentalidade: Da evidência científica para a implementação em escala. *Revista Brasileira de Avaliação*, 11(3), 111-122. <https://doi.org/10.4322/rbaval202211011>
- Azevedo, T. L., Cia, F., & Spinazola, C. C. (2019). Correlação entre o relacionamento conjugal, rotina familiar, suporte social, necessidades e qualidade de vida de pais e mães de crianças /com deficiência. *Revista Brasileira de Educação Especial*, 25(2), 205-218. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s1413-65382519000200002>
- Bardin, L. (2006). *Análise de conteúdo*. Edições 70.
- Porta, D. D., Wottrich, S. H., & Siqueira, A. C. (2021). Intergeracionalidade no contexto das práticas educativas de mães de crianças pré-escolares. *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão*, 41 (spe3), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-3703003205488>
- Ellis, W. E., Dumas, T. M., & Forbes, L. M. (2020). Physically isolated but socially connected: Psychological adjustment and stress among adolescents during the initial COVID-19 crisis. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural*, 52(3), 177–187. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000215>
- Griep, R. H. (2003). *Confiabilidade e validade de instrumentos de medida de rede social e de apoio social utilizados no Estudo Pró-Saúde [Tese de Doutorado, Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública]*. Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações. https://bdtd.ibict.br/vufind/Record/CRUZ_768dc374339c3d143fb79c13c9791727
- Heilborn, M. L. A., Peixoto, C. E., & Barros, M. M. L. de. (2020). Tensões familiares em tempos de pandemia e confinamento: Cuidadoras familiares. *Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva*, 30(2), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0103-73312020300206>
- Knox, M., Burkhart, K., & Hunter, K. (2010). Act against violence parents raising safe kids program: Effects on maltreatment-related parenting behaviors and beliefs. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x10370112>

- Knox, M., Burkhardt, K., & Cromly, A. (2013). Supporting positive parenting in Community Health Centers: The ACT raising safe kids program. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(4), 395-407. <https://doi:10.1002/jcop.21543>
- Kusiak, G. S., Mello, L. T. N., & Andretta, I. (2019). Empatia e práticas parentais: A importância dos pais se colocarem no lugar dos filhos. *Aletheia*, 52(2), 1-13. <http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/pdf/aletheia/v52n2/v52n2a02.pdf>
- Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B., & Lozano, R. (Eds.). (2002). Relatório mundial sobre violência e saúde. World Health Organization.
- Linhares, M. B. M., & Martins, C. B. S. (2015). O processo da autorregulação no desenvolvimento de crianças. *Estudos de Psicologia*, 32(2), 281-293. <https://doi.org/110.1590/0103-166X2015000200012>
- Lopes, A. C. (2020). Associação entre o tempo de uso de mídias eletrônicas e funções executivas: Um estudo de crianças de 7 a 11 anos durante a pandemia da COVID-19 [Dissertação de Mestrado, Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie]. Adelpa Repositório Digital. <https://dspace.mackenzie.br/items/ae04c1c9-d197-45c3-8800-f91b9cf4b0e2>
- Marin, A. H., Andrada, B. C., Schmidt, B., Melo, B. D., Lima, C. C., Fernandes, C. M., Ventura, C., Pereira, D. R., Serpeloni, F., Katz, I., Silva, I. R., Lopes, J. C., Manara, K. M., Moysés, M. A., Abelson, M. I. R. S., Rosa, M., Kadri, M., Magrin, N. P., Almeida, P., ... Assis, S. G. (2020). Saúde mental e atenção psicossocial na pandemia COVID-19: Crianças na pandemia COVID-19. *Fiocruz*. <https://www.arca.fiocruz.br/handle/icict/41713>
- Mikton, C., & Butchart, A. (2009). Child maltreatment prevention: A systematic review of reviews. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87(5), 353-361. <https://doi:10.2471/blt.08.057075>
- Nagata, J. M., Magid, H. S. A., & Gabriel, K. P. (2020). Screen time for children and adolescents during the Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. *Obesity*, 28(9), 1582-1583. <https://doi:10.1002/oby.22917>
- Oliveira, J. L. A. P., Fiorini, M. C., Guisso, L., Vieira, M. L., & Crepaldi, M. A. (2021). Grupo de pais: Aprendizagens de participantes do Programa ACT. *Ciências Psicológicas*, 15(1), 23-92. <https://doi:10.22235/cp.v15i1.2392>
- Parente, B. A. V., Mariano, D. R. H., Lima, G. M., Carvalho, M. D. S., Santos, M. S. (2020). Saúde mental de crianças e seus cuidadores diante da pandemia da COVID-19: Um relato de experiência a partir de vivências de uma equipe de residência multiprofissional em um CER II. *Trabalho Interprofissional em Saúde*, 1(5), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.51723/hrj.v1i5.14>
- Pedro, M. E. A., Altafim, E. R. P., & Linhares, M. B. M. (2017). ACT raising safe kids program to promote positive maternal parenting practices in different socioeconomic contexts. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 26(2), 63-72. <https://doi:10.1016/j.psi.2016.10.003>
- Pontes, L. B., & Brino, R. D. F. (2022). Programa Parental ACT: Um piloto com medidas observacionais da interação cuidador-criança. *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*, 38, e38313. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e38313.pt>
- Pontes, L. B., Siqueira, A. C., & Williams, L. C. de A. (2019). A systematic literature review of the ACT raising safe kids parenting program. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 3231-3244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01521-6>
- Portwood, S. G., Lambert, R. G., Abrams, L. P., & Nelson, E. B. (2011). An evaluation of the adults and children together (ACT) against violence parents raising safe kids program. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 32(147), 147-160. <https://doi:10.1007/s10935-011-0249-5>
- Ramos, F., Pereira, A. I., Marques, T., & Barros, L. (2019). Parents' perspectives about their experience in the ACT-raising safe kids program: A qualitative study. *Análise Psicológica*, 37(3), 285-300. <https://doi.org/10.14417/ap.1571>
- Reis, D. M., & Prata, L. C. G. (2018). O impacto da violência intrafamiliar no desenvolvimento psíquico infantil. *Psicologia*, 1(1), 1-20.

- Rocha, M. F. A., Veloso, W. G., Bezerra, R. E. A., Gomes, L. A., & Marcolino, A. B. L. (2021). The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on child-youth health: A cross-sectional study. *Brazilian Journal of Health Review*, 4(1), 3483-3497. <https://doi.org/10.34119/bjhrv4n1-271>
- Salvador, A. P. V., Souza, A. M., Nardielo, A. F. B., Senkiv, C. C., Almeida, J. M. G., Rampasso, L. A. M., Jesus, L. S., Jambersi, M. M., Tarui, M. S., Zucchi, P. M., Develis, R. R. J. S., Salvan, T. C., & Lima, T. C. (2020). Impactos do distanciamento social na relação pais-filhos e reflexões sobre possíveis intervenções. *Cadernos de Psicologias*, (1), 1-13. <https://cadernosdepsicologias.crppr.org.br/impactos-do-distanciamento-social-na-relacao-pais-filhos-e-reflexoes-sobre-possiveis-intervencoes>
- Samuelsson, M., Thernlund, G., & Ringtrom, J. (1996). Using the five field map to describe the social network of children: A methodological study. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 19(2), 327-345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016502549601900206>
- Santos, C. C., & Barros, J. F. (2018). Efeitos do uso das novas tecnologias da informação e comunicação para o desenvolvimento emocional infantil: Uma compreensão psicanalítica. *Psicologia.pt*, 1-25.
- Silva, J. (2011). Programa ACT para educar crianças em ambientes seguros. American Psychological Association. (Trabalho original publicado em 2007).
- Silva, J. A., & Williams, L. C. A. (2016). Um estudo de caso com o programa parental ACT para educar crianças em ambientes seguros. *Temas em Psicologia*, 24(2), 743-755. <https://doi.org/10.9788/TP2016.2-19Pt>
- Sociedade Brasileira de Pediatria. (2020). Manual de orientação. <https://www.sbp.com.br/imprensa/detalhe/nid/sbp-atualiza-recomendacoes-sobre-saude-de-criancas-e-adolescentes-na-era-digital/>

How to cite:

Garcia, F. H., Faraj, S. P., & Siqueira, A. C. (2024). Parents' perception of the use of the ACT Program during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Revista Subjetividades*, 24(3), e141098. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i3.e14098>

Mailing address

Fabiana Halberstadt Garcia
E-mail: fabianahalberstadtgg@gmail.com

Suane Pastoriza Faraj
E-mail: suanef@yahoo.com.br

Aline Cardoso Siqueira
E-mail: alinecsiq@gmail.com



Received: 10/04/2022
Revised: 05/10/2024
Accepted: 10/26/2024
Published: 11/29/2024