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ACT Program: Learning experiences of mothers about their parenting practices and child behavior

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Abstract: This study aimed to characterize the learning experiences of mothers who completed the ACT Program regarding their parenting practices, maternal involvement, and child behavior. Seven mothers of children aged 2 to 8 years participated in the study. After completing the eight sessions of the ACT Program, participants were invited to a focus group. Guiding questions were used to facilitate the discussion, which was audio and video recorded. The discussions were transcribed and organized into thematic categories. Four thematic categories were established: (i) Seeking the ACT Program; (ii) Contributions of the ACT Program to Parenting; (iii) Maternal Involvement; (iv) Importance of Group Interaction in the ACT Program. The mothers highlighted that the ACT Program enabled them to acquire knowledge about parenting practices and child behavior, which facilitated their engagement with their children and provided a group space for listening and support regarding the anxieties experienced in motherhood.

Keywords: parental practices, maternal involvement, child behavior.

Programa ACT: Aprendizagens de mães sobre suas práticas parentais e o comportamento infantil

Resumo: O objetivo do presente estudo foi caracterizar as aprendizagens de mães, concluintes do Programa ACT, em relação a suas práticas parentais, envolvimento materno e comportamento dos filhos. Participaram do estudo sete mães de crianças com idade de 2 a 8 anos. Após a conclusão dos oito encontros do Programa ACT, as participantes foram convidadas para participar de um grupo focal. Perguntas norteadoras foram utilizadas para guiar a discussão, que foi gravada em áudio e vídeo. Os relatos dos encontros foram transcritos e organizado em categorias temáticas. Foram organizadas quatro categorias temáticas: i) Busca pelo Programa ACT; ii) Contribuições do Programa ACT para a parentalidade; iii) Envolvimento Materno; iv) Importância da interação do grupo no Programa ACT. As mães destacaram que o Programa ACT possibilitou a aquisição de conhecimentos sobre práticas parentais e comportamento infantil, facilitando o envolvimento com os(as) filhos(as), além de ter sido um espaço grupal de escuta e apoio sobre às angústias vividas na maternidade.

Palavras-chave: práticas parentais, envolvimento materno, comportamento infantil.

Introduction

Recognized as a predictive factor for human development is the presence of parents in a child's life (Boonk, Gijsselaers, Ritzen, & Brand-Gruwel, 2018). (Boonk, Gijsselaers, Ritzen, & Brand-Gruwel, 2018). The interactions between parents and children establish the initial emotional bonds, cognitive frameworks, and relational structures essential for the child's development (Russo, Rebessi, & Neufeld, 2021).

Research confirms that the parental roles assumed by caregivers are fundamental for the comprehensive development of the child (Coe, Dallosa, Stendomna, & Rydin-Orsinb, 2021; Schmidt, Gomes, Bossardi, Bolze, Vieira, & Crepaldi, 2019).

Regarding the maternal figure, despite the social, economic, and cultural changes over the years, the mother continues to shoulder a significant portion of the responsibility for the care and education of the children, besides her paid work (Garcia & Viecili, 2018). The mother remains the primary caregiver and companion, fulfilling cultural expectations of providing comprehensive support for the child (Milkie, Bowling & Denny, 2015).

Direct maternal involvement in childcare yields positive outcomes for a child's development. In this context, employing appropriate parenting practices boosts the child's sense of security, encouraging greater exploration of their environment, which enhances opportunities for robust cognitive development and the acquisition of social skills. However, disruptions in the mother-child interaction can detrimentally affect the child's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Alvarenga, Malhado, & Lins, 2014).

Given the complexity of the *parent-child* relationship and its crucial role in fostering important skills and managing behavioral issues, there is significant investment in Parent Training Programs. These programs are designed to enhance parenting practices and skills, thereby preventing developmental problems and mitigating challenging child behaviors (Homem, Gaspar, Seabra-Santos, Azevedo, & Canavarro, 2013). Furthermore, these programs equip parents with new knowledge and skills necessary to prevent child abuse and neglect, reduce the risk of maltreatment, and achieve favorable outcomes in reducing parental aggression toward children and improving overall parental behavior (Santini & Williams, 2016).

The ACT Program (an acronym for Action) - whose original name was Adults and Children Together (ACT) Against Violence Parents Raising Safe Kids program - was Developed by the American Psychological Association (APA). The aim is to help parents and caregivers enhance their parenting techniques and prevent child maltreatment (Silva, 2009). The program educates professionals and families about children's behavior across different developmental stages, highlighting the need for parents to adopt a positive role to monitor and guide their children's actions without resorting to violence (Silva & Williams, 2016).

In various applications of the ACT Program, findings have demonstrated its effectiveness in altering parenting methods and fostering positive parenting practices. Notably, the program has been successful in reducing physical discipline and decreasing instances of psychological and verbal violence toward children (Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011). Additionally, participation in the ACT Program has expanded parents' understanding of child development and the application of positive discipline techniques (Porter & Howe, 2008). Considering the above, this study aimed to characterize the learning experiences of mothers who completed the ACT Program, in terms of their parenting practices, maternal involvement, and their children's behavior.

Method

This qualitative study is part of a larger project titled “*ACT – A Parent Training Program for Parents of Children Aged Two to Eight Years.*” The program comprises eight group sessions addressing: (i) Children's behaviors; (ii) Violence in children's lives; (iii) How parents can understand and control their anger; (iv) Understanding and helping children when they are angry; (v) Children and electronic media; (vi) Discipline and parenting styles; (vii) Discipline for positive behaviors; (viii) Integrating the ACT Program into your home and community.

Participants

Seven mothers aged 35 to 42, with children aged two to eight years, participated in this study. Four mothers had daughters, with the average age of the focus child being five years. All participants had completed higher education. The average family income was R\$ 14,000.00. Three participants had two children, while the others had one child each. In Table 1, the profile of each participant is presented. For presentation of the results, the mothers were designated as P01 to P07.

Table 1

The sociodemographic profile of the study participants (continua)

Participant s	Age (years)	Educational level	Marital status	Child's age* (years)	Child's gender (**)	Family income (R\$)
P01	42	Completed higher education	Divorced	7	F	5,000

P02	40	Completed higher education	Married	8	F	15,000
P03	39	Completed higher education	Married	3	M	35,000
P04	39	Completed higher education	Married	3	M	7,000
<i>The sociodemographic profile of the study participants</i>						(conclusão)
Participant s	Age (years)	Educational level	Marital status	Child's age* (years)	Child's gender (**)	Family income (R\$)
P05	39	Completed higher education	Married	3	F	5,000
P06	40	Completed higher education	Married	7	M	25,000
P07	35	Completed higher education	Married	5	F	7,500

* When the participant had more than one child, she was asked to talk about her learnings from the ACT Program with one of the children - the one she believed had the most difficulties to deal with - to evaluate what has changed due to her participation in the ACT Program.

** Male (M); Female (F).

The sample was selected based on convenience, focusing on mothers who had completed at least six of the eight sessions of the ACT Program. This inclusion criterion was chosen because of the significant knowledge that mothers gained during the group meetings. Each participant was assigned a number, labeled as P01, and so forth.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using focus group techniques, aimed at capturing the perceptions, opinions, and feelings about a specific theme within an interactive environment (Trad, 2009). Researchers contacted the mothers by phone, inviting them to participate in the study. During the focus group, facilitative questions were posed to stimulate dialogue among the participants.

To record the discussions, a video camera and two smartphones were strategically positioned in the room to ensure high-quality recordings. An external observer, knowledgeable about the research theme, was present to take notes on group dynamics, following the recommendations by Trad (2009). Observations revealed that there was significant integration and collaboration among the participants, reflecting the various insights from the ACT Program. The mothers' participation was voluntary, underscored by a commitment to their anonymity and their signing of an Informed Consent Form. Data collection was carried out in a location that guaranteed confidentiality and the privacy of all participants.

Data Analysis

The Human Research Ethics Committee of a federal university in the southern region of the country approved this research (CAAE: 86396218.4.0000.0121). We adhered to the ethical guidelines for Research with Human Beings in the Humanities and Social Sciences as outlined in CNS Resolution 510/16 (National Health Council, 2016). Data were organized using ATLAS.ti software version 8.0 and analyzed using the thematic categorical analysis method of Bardin (2011). Two psychologists who served as family psychotherapists evaluated the categories through a judge analysis process. The agreement formula used was adapted from one typically employed in observational studies (Fagundes, 1999). The agreement rates achieved among the judges were 75%, and with the researcher, 82.1%. This calculation was based on the number of agreements divided by the sum of agreements and disagreements, then multiplied by 100 to produce a percentage.

Results

The results were organized into four categories: (i) Search for the ACT Program; (ii) Contributions of the ACT Program to Parenting; (iii) Maternal Involvement; (iv) Importance of Group Interaction in the ACT Program.

i) Search for the ACT Program

This category explores the reasons mothers participated in the ACT Program, organized into two subcategories: *Content of the ACT Program* and *Knowledge about Child Development*.

Content of the ACT Program: This subcategory addresses the participants' need to learn effective strategies for educating their children. The mothers expressed a desire to receive practical tips and tools to manage child behavior effectively. They emphasized their interest in learning how to modulate their own behavior to foster positive interactions with their children.

Knowledge about Child Development: This subcategory focuses on the mothers' pursuit of understanding child development across different stages. Mothers reported educating themselves about key developmental milestones, as illustrated by one mother's

statement: *“I feel the need to read more about the developmental phase of five years, seven years. What to expect from this phase of the child (P07).”*

ii) Contributions of the ACT Program to Parenting

This category encompasses the insights mothers gained from participating in the ACT Program, which focused on enhancing their strategies for managing their children’s behaviors. The insights were organized into several subcategories: *Understanding Children's Emotions; Understanding One's Own Emotions; Child Development; Parenting Practices; Violence in the Lives of Parents and Children; and Exercise of Parenting.*

Understanding Children's Emotions: This subcategory captured the mothers' learning about regulating emotional states in children. The mothers noted the ACT Program equipped them with effective tools to manage their children’s anger, an emotion they found particularly challenging to handle during interactions with their children.

Understanding One's Own Emotions: This subcategory includes the insights mothers gained about expressing and regulating their own emotions. Participants recognized improvements in identifying their anger, exemplified by one mother's reflection: *“But of course, after this [referring to the sessions], I was able to see what irritates me about them (children). What makes me so angry? Well, I could really see it clearly (P01).”*

Child Development: This subcategory captures learning about the typical behaviors exhibited by children at various stages of their development. The mothers discussed their understanding of children's cognitive, physical, and emotional growth. They acknowledged their role in providing enriching life experiences that could prevent future traumas.

Parenting Practices: This subcategory encompasses learning about caregiving and educational strategies for children. Mothers shared insights gained during the ACT Program, such as the importance of observing and engaging with their children’s play, staying informed about their children's school experiences (as sometimes issues experienced in that context can reflect on behavior at home), and collaboratively problem-solving with their children. One mother illustrated this approach by saying, *“So I stop and say: let’s find a solution! What can we do [referring to her daughter]? Then we lay out various options for her to solve. Within that, I try to create something with her to improve (P02).”*

Violence in the Lives of Parents and Children: This subcategory addresses the recognition of violence experienced in the participants' childhoods and its lingering effects into adulthood. Mothers discussed how shouting is perceived as an aggressive act and noted that they sometimes use this method to capture their spouse's attention, hoping it will prompt him to assist with the children. This is reflected in one mother's account: "*Often it's with the husband that I want to shout. Because he's inside watching his game, and I am in the living room needing help with the kids—one clinging here and another needing help with homework (P01).*" They also recognize the discomfort caused when their spouse shouts at the children and have discussed this issue with their partners, urging them to understand the impact of shouting on children's well-being and education.

Exercise of parenting: This subcategory focuses on the knowledge acquired about effective parenting practices, relevant to both the participants and their spouses. The mothers noted that their involvement in the program empowered them to adopt new approaches with their children. It also facilitated various exchanges and interactions with their spouses, which helped them envision more effective behaviors and interactions with their children.

iii) Maternal Involvement

This category explores the mothers' roles in the psychosocial development of their children and their perceptions of their spouses' involvement in both childcare and household duties. It is divided into the following subcategories: *Activities Provided for and with the Child*; *Perception of Activities Performed by the Spouse with the Child*; and *Perception of the Spouse's Participation in Domestic Activities*.

Activities Provided for and with the Child: These activities involve playing with the children. The mothers often recognize their own limited patience for play, as illustrated by one mother's comment: "*Playing patty-cake. Two rounds for each. That ends the game (P06).*" Another mother expressed: "*Because I don't have the patience to play. Sitting down to play dolls is just unbearable for me (P05).*" When they participate in play, they sometimes feel like entertainers rather than participants, as described by one mother: "*I get home and it's dimly lit with the kids lying down in the living room watching a little TV. Then I open the door, and they take off; it's like the circus has arrived! I open the door and here come the kids: mommyyyyy (P01)!*"

Perception of Activities Performed by the Spouse with the Child: This subcategory includes the types of games fathers play with their children, as reported by the mothers. The participants noted their partners tend to engage in more physical and rough-and-tumble play, such as video games, building forts, fishing, and football. They observed these activities are more active and outdoor-oriented, as one mother highlighted: *“He plays [referring to the spouse]. But with dolls, I have never seen him playing” (P05).*

Perception of the Spouse's Participation in Domestic Activities: This subcategory relates to the tasks performed by the children's fathers within the household. The mothers recognize the men's contributions to household chores, as one mother detailed: *“He cooks, washes dishes (P05).”* However, they also noted that their partners are still adjusting to fully integrating into these tasks, as demonstrated by an anecdote: *“The other day I told him [referring to the spouse]: the groceries are arriving... I didn't say ‘pick them up and put them away’ because usually, what would happen is he would receive them, and the groceries would just stay there on the floor waiting for someone to put them away. Then he decided to put them away. When I opened the refrigerator later, there were two Minions shampoos in there (laughs) (P01).”*

vi) Importance of Group Interaction in the ACT Program

This category underscores the learning opportunities that arose from interactions during the group sessions of the ACT Program. The mothers shared their perceptions and insights gained from engaging with other participants. They reported these interactions allowed them to assimilate new knowledge and behaviors applicable to their relationships with their children. Listening to other mothers, they found common ground in their anxieties, particularly when their children displayed challenging behaviors. Additionally, they related to each other over the struggles of balancing professional responsibilities with motherhood.

Discussion

This study aimed to characterize the learning experiences of mothers who completed the ACT Program regarding their parenting practices, maternal involvement, and child behavior. The findings revealed significant insights related to knowledge

about child development and parenting practices, particularly in understanding and managing emotions like anger (both their own and their children's), and in recognizing various forms and practices of violence involving children.

Data analysis indicated that mothers understood the necessity of acquiring knowledge about child development to better navigate each stage of their child's life. Enhancing this knowledge bolstered the mother-child bond and acted as a protective factor for maternal health, as the mothers gained deeper insights into their children's needs, were better equipped to fulfill them, and felt more competent in their maternal roles (Shah & Lonergan, 2017). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that appropriate cognitive stimulation of children offers significant benefits for their mental health and development (Stein, Pearson, Goodman, Rapa, Rahman, McCallum, Howard & Pariante, 2014). In this regard, the ACT Program helped participants improve their knowledge and understand that each developmental stage of their child requires new knowledge and skills on their part.

Another notable finding is the participants' recognition of the need to adopt new strategies for managing their children's behavior, which aligns with the program's goal to foster healthier parenting practices and prevent child mistreatment (Silva, 2009). The knowledge of parenting practices and their application has led to improvements in parental confidence in upbringing, reduced parental stress, and increased psychosocial well-being of parents (Sanders, Ralph, Sofronoff, Gardiner, Thompson, Dwyer & Bidwell, 2008). Revisiting how these parenting practices were learned, developed, and can be reorganized serves as a protective factor for healthier child development.

Children depend on their parents' support to express and understand emotions in themselves and others (Mendes & Ramos, 2020). This study found that the participating mothers closely monitored the expression of emotions (particularly anger) and developed strategies to help their children manage these emotions autonomously. A related study by Criss, Morris, Ponce-Garcia, Cui, and Silk (2016) demonstrated that adolescents who received parental guidance in managing anger and sadness were more adept at regulating these emotions themselves. Engaging parents in this emotional regulation not only benefits children in the present but also contributes to their long-term emotional and psychological health, fostering healthier human development (Power, Beck, Garcia, Aguilar, Hopwood, Ramos, Guerrero, Fisher, O'Connor & Hughes, 2020).

The participants recognized they exposed their children to violence when they shouted at them, at their partners, or when observing their partners shouting at the children. Importantly, they realized that this was not only an educational strategy used with their children but also the same method they had been subjected to as children. Such findings indicate that violence against children often involves an asymmetric relationship, which can manifest in various forms across different economic and social groups (Malta, Mascarenhas, Bernal, Viegas, Sá & Silva Junior, 2012). Parents who experienced violence in childhood are more likely to employ strict disciplinary strategies, including physical and verbal abuse, thereby reducing their use of positive parenting strategies in caregiving and interaction (Marin, Martins, Freitas, Silva, Lopes, & Piccinini, 2013).

The enactment of violence by parents toward their children can also be linked to marital satisfaction. A study by Wang, Xing, and Zhao (2014) found that the use of corporal punishment was more prevalent among partners who were less satisfied with their marital relationships. Conversely, parents were less strict with their children when they communicated positively with their partners (Schofield, Conger, & Conger, 2017). This observation is supported by the testimonies of the mothers in this study, who mentioned that they shouted at their children primarily when they sought their partner's attention to assist in caregiving. Therefore, addressing the issue of violence in childhood with parents represents a crucial investment in public health prevention, given that the consequences—such as emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, impaired working memory, mental disorders, substance abuse, and obesity—of such exposure can be severe and long-lasting, affecting individuals from childhood into adulthood (Ziobrowski, Buka, Austin, Sullivan, Horton, Simone & Field, 2020). Experiencing positive parenting profoundly influences child development. Factors such as parental supervision, parent-child involvement, quality family relationships, expression of emotions, and consistent family rules significantly enhance the *parent-child* relationship (Kerr, Capaldi, Pears & Owen, 2009). Participants in the ACT Program reported improved interactions with their children and observed similar improvements in their children's behavior toward them. Additionally, they engaged in reflective discussions with their partners about developing effective parenting strategies. Given the complexities of parenting, and based on the findings of this study, it is evident that

parents with greater knowledge and skills are better equipped to manage the upbringing and interactions with their children.

Research indicates that societal expectations often designate women as the primary caregivers of their children (Carrillo, Bermudez, Suarez, Gutierrez, & Delgado, 2016; Craig & Mullan, 2010). However, this study revealed that participants noted increased involvement from their partners in childcare compared to their own fathers' involvement during their childhoods. They reported their partners were more engaged in household tasks than previous generations. Nevertheless, the mothers acknowledged that the division of labor is still unequal, with women bearing a greater burden in managing household and childcare responsibilities, corroborating findings by Bossardi, Gomes, Vieira, and Crepaldi (2013).

Regarding the involvement of mothers and fathers in playing with their children, Paquette, Bolté, Turcotte, Dubeaud, and Bouchard (2000) noted potential differences in each parent's engagement. The authors observed fathers tend to engage in more intense and vigorous play than mothers, often encouraging children to explore new environments and face challenges. This study's findings confirm these observations, as mothers reported that fathers more frequently engaged in active play with their children. The mothers noted such activities were typically more boisterous, and they identified a lack of "patience" for engaging in similar play themselves. It is evident from the reports that "playing or gaming" with the children remains a distinctive aspect of paternal involvement (Lima, Serôndio & Cruz, 2011).

Lastly, the mothers recognized the importance of the knowledge provided by the ACT Program. The efficacy of training programs like the ACT Program hinges on the parents' involvement in modifying their own behaviors, which in turn reduces risk factors and enhances protective factors. The participants highlighted that being part of a group during the ACT Program sessions served as a crucial motivator to continue attending weekly meetings and helped them address and support their doubts and anxieties concerning the challenges of motherhood. Kirby and Sanders (2012), who emphasize the importance of program developers engaging with the target group, support this observation. Such engagement not only improves the quality and relevance of the program but also boosts participant engagement by ensuring that their needs and feedback are considered.

Final considerations

This study effectively characterized the learning experiences of mothers who completed the ACT Program, focusing on their parenting practices, maternal involvement, and children's behavior. The knowledge imparted by the ACT Program proved vital, enabling participants to reflect critically on their upbringing and the replication of parenting practices in their children's education. Notably, changes in the mothers' strategies, as reported, facilitated a reassessment of their behaviors, helped them understand the origins of these behaviors, and supported the development of new strategies to foster closeness and collaborative interaction with their children.

The group dynamic helped to maintain the mothers' engagement with the ACT Program. It provided a robust support network, allowing participants to share and explore their doubts and anxieties about motherhood, ensuring they felt recognized and understood by peers facing similar challenges. Hence, investments in parental programs like the ACT Program are acknowledged as effective tools in establishing protective mechanisms for a healthier childhood experience.

However, the study faced limitations, particularly in the difficulty of engaging fathers in the ACT Program meetings. Fathers often felt that their partners had a greater right to participate or did not view the sessions as relevant to their parent-child relationships. It is crucial to develop new strategies to increase fatherly involvement in such programs and to conduct further research on paternal participation. Addressing these issues can provide insights into why caregiving responsibilities typically fall more heavily on mothers. Additionally, the homogeneity in income and education levels among the participants suggests the need for the ACT Program to reach mothers from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who are less advantaged, to broaden the scope of its strategies and enhance its role in the universal prevention of violence against children.

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