

**Insufficient parental care versus parental neglect: discussions and theoretical propositions****Cuidados parentais hipossuficientes *versus* negligência parental: discussões e proposições teóricas****Cuidados parentales hipo suficientes *versus* negligencia parental: discusiones y proposiciones teóricas****Received: 07/01/2019****Approved: 20/05/2019****Published: 07/10/2019****Hivana Raelcia Rosa Fonseca<sup>1</sup>**  
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Parental neglect is the situation in which the family, with the necessary resources, do not properly use them in the care of children and adolescents under their responsibility. There are still many discussions about the implementation of this concept, being common the confusion between neglect and poverty. The aim of this paper is to discuss the quality of care and the effects on developing in parental neglect contexts and in situations where there is unavailability of care resources. It is a reflective theoretical essay, aiming to contribute to the characterization and distinction of parental neglect and situations in which there is no availability of resources for care, here called hyposufficient care. Understanding and coping with these situations should be differentiated, since the subjective and psychosocial production in both contexts are crossed by different phenomena.

**Descriptors:** Negligence; Family; Poverty.

A negligência parental é a situação na qual a família, dispondo de recursos, não os utiliza adequadamente no cuidado com as crianças e adolescentes sob sua responsabilidade. Ainda existem muitas discussões acerca da operacionalização desse conceito, sendo comum a confusão entre negligência e pobreza. O objetivo desse trabalho é discutir a qualidade do cuidado e os efeitos no desenvolvimento em contextos de negligência parental e em situações nas quais há indisponibilidade de recursos de cuidado. Trata-se de um ensaio teórico reflexivo que visa contribuir com a caracterização e distinção da negligência parental e situações nas quais não há disponibilidade de recursos para cuidados, aqui chamado de cuidados hipossuficientes. A compreensão e o enfrentamento dessas situações deve ser diferenciada, tendo em vista que a produção subjetiva e psicossocial nos dois contextos são atravessadas por fenômenos diferentes.

**Descritores:** Negligência; Família; Pobreza.

La negligencia parental es la situación en la que la Familia, disponiendo de Recursos, no los utiliza adecuadamente en el cuidado con los niños y adolescentes bajo su responsabilidad. Todavía hay muchas discusiones acerca de la operacionalización de ese concepto, siendo común la confusión entre negligencia y pobreza. El objetivo de este trabajo es discutir la calidad del cuidado y los efectos en el desarrollo en contextos de negligencia parental y en situaciones en las que hay indisponibilidad de recursos de cuidado. Se trata de un ensayo teórico reflexivo que pretende contribuir con la caracterización y distinción de la negligencia parental y situaciones en las que no hay disponibilidad de recursos para cuidados, aquí llamado de cuidados hiposuficientes. La comprensión y el enfrentamiento de estas situaciones deben ser diferenciadas, teniendo en cuenta que la producción subjetiva y psicossocial en los dos contextos son atravesadas por fenómenos diferentes.

**Descriptorios:** Negligencia; Familia; Pobreza.

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## INTRODUCTION

The care with children and adolescents is culturally and legally first responsibility of families. It is considered that families are a potentially more protective space and appropriate to development. Thus, the community and the state appear as complementary protection institutions, as required by Brazilian law.

The words "potentially more protective" reflects that, although there is an expectation regarding the care offered within families, it is also known that this is not always an effective protection space, but, frequently, this scenario is configured as violation space of the rights.

Violations are diverse and multiple: physical, psychological, sexual, abandonment and neglect. Neglect is the most commonly reported violence and the one that motivates most the removal of children and adolescents of their family context<sup>1</sup>.

Parental neglect can be defined as the omission in the care when the existence of protective resources, reflecting in one or more areas of development, such as physical, emotional development, education, nutrition, safety and shelter<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, there is a key mediator for characterizing a situation of neglect: the availability of care resources. And, when the resources for parental care are absent or limited?

The aim of this article is to reflect on the quality of care and the effects on developing in parental neglect contexts and in situations in which there is unavailability of care resources.

## METHOD

It is a reflective theoretical essay, aiming to contribute to the more refined characterization of what parental neglect is and its distinction in relation to situations in which there is no availability of care resources, here called "hyposufficient Care".

## RESULTS

The quality of care is directly reflected in the development of children and adolescents. To assess this quality of care, however, it is important to distinguish two situations in

parenting: when parents, having resources, do not exercise care; and when the parents do not exercise care because of hyposufficient resources.

In this sense, care productions in parenting are discussed, the conceptual parameters in three lines: *Care and Culture Production, Conceptual Parameters of Parental Neglect* and *Hyposufficient Care*, based on 14 references of the area with critical clippings from the authors.

## DISCUSSION

### *Care and Culture Production*

Parenting practices are crossed by the need to care for, educate and promote the development of children, appearing as a characteristic set of behaviors or parenting<sup>3</sup>. These behaviors have strong socio-cultural influences and are constructed in a particular way in every family.

The Brazilian people are marked by a great diversity arising from the influence of the Portuguese settlers, indigenous peoples of different ethnic groups and peoples of African countries, as well as several other groups that were making the Brazilian culture even more complex and diverse<sup>4</sup>. This directly impacts the parenting built in Brazil, since the various parts of the country have ecological, cultural, economic and social specificities.

In this sense, even considering parenting in the Brazilian context, it is still necessary to specify all the elements that involved and influence parenting care produced in each ecological context.

Furthermore, the parameters of which is a quality care varies among cultures and subcultures of a society, as well as is modified over time. In every time and place, therefore, there is general expectations regarding the care of children and adolescents. These expectations represent expected patterns of parental behavior on the quality of care production and is directly associated with what is known about human development.

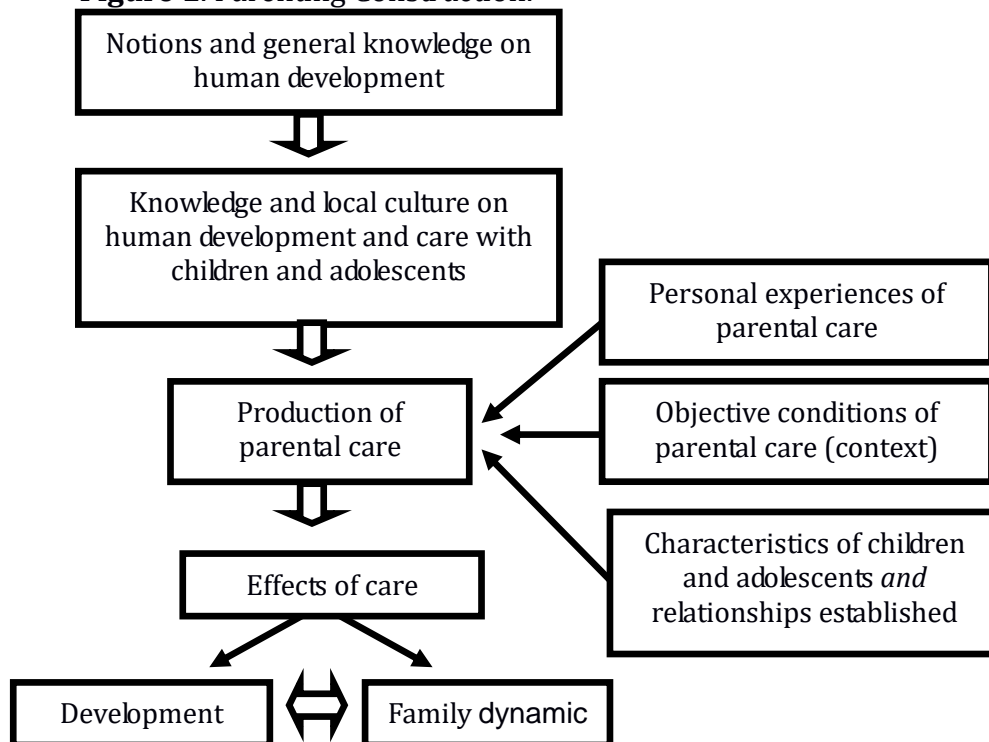
There is no homogeneity in care, since these references go through the cultural and subjective scrutiny of people. The parenting in families is built from socio-cultural elements. From the socio-cultural perspective<sup>5</sup>, it is

observed that each culture has implicit models for the exercise of parenting.

Specific parents beliefs arise from this, which, in turn, filter and elect what makes sense in their family. These beliefs are

mediated by intervening factors, such as characteristics of parents and children, and cultural aspects, forming the parenting practices. Figure 1 below shows these constructs of parenting and parental care.

**Figure 1.** Parenting Construction.



**Source:** Authors. Teresina, Brazil, 2019.

The general notions of development come from more general advances in science, particularly in health, generating theoretical and practical subsidies about the necessary care for children and adolescents and the most appropriate ways to respond to these demands. These general notions add up to local knowledge and cultures on the development presenting some variations among societies and times as the care production with children and adolescents.

The production of parental care comes from this framework and is crossed by at least three elements: a) experience of caregivers parental care; b) the context and objective conditions of care; and c) the characteristics of children and adolescents and the established relationships.

Regarding the parental care experience, there is a strong tendency to reproduce the experienced parenting practices<sup>6</sup>. What was experienced and especially the meaning given to what was experienced, is a highly relevant

factor in the definition of parenting practices that will be built.

A person who has experienced absent/distant responsible persons and understood it as freedom and autonomy promotion tends to a parental practice filled with this absence/detachment. A person who has experienced absent/distant responsible persons and understood it as emotional neglect tends to build parenting practices with more close and loving relationships. All of this tends to create a propensity of behaviors, not always expressed in a manner consistent with the assigned meanings.

The family living context offers them objective conditions of care. Poverty itself is a stressor factor<sup>7,8</sup>. Moreover, a situation of scarcity of material resources affects the lives of all family members, as well as in family dynamics and interactions that are established. The lack of material resources makes families seek alternative strategies of

survival and it also implies the production of parental care.

The characteristics of children and adolescents, and the relationships that are established between them and the caregivers, which also goes by the characteristics of the caregivers, may result in specific development demands, whether in function of the personality characteristic or by living with disorders, illnesses or disabilities.

The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (TBDH) helps to understand this process. The TBDH proposes the reading of the development process from four elements: process, person, context and time<sup>9</sup>. The process is the engine of the development and refers to direct, reciprocal and continuous interactions that are established. It is through these interactions that the development will be processing.

The person must be understood from at least three types of characteristics: demand, that is, what he requires from the environment and people; resource, what he brings with him; and availability, which is related to temperament and personality<sup>9</sup>.

The context can be analyzed from four levels: microsystem, that is the direct context of interaction and development, in which development processes occur. Throughout life people are part of different microsystems, such as family, school, and others. The set and the interaction between these microsystems is called mesosystem<sup>9</sup>. There are still some developmental contexts in which the person is not directly inserted, but that affect their development process. Another context level is called macro system that comprises the broader cultural context, made up of ideologies, customs, among others<sup>9</sup>.

The fourth element is time. In this sense, it is important to consider that the development is marked by historical events and the own history of people's life. Reproductions of care received, for example, is a major marker in parenting.

Thus, the elements persons, processes, context and time interact in a way to produce development and also care. It is important to consider that although children and adolescents are at a particular stage of

development, their caregivers are also people in development and the care they produce is dynamic.

This care produced will be classified as the quality from the social and cultural parameters of time and place, as well as from the effects it produces in development. Those behaviors that are not in harmony with some level are often labeled negligent.

The disqualification of the poor families in their ability to exercise parental care is a historical phenomenon. The idea that poor families had no "moral" to take good care of their children resulted in indiscriminate removal actions of children and adolescents from their family context for educational institutions.

Poverty alone was reason for institutionalization of children and adolescents for a long time. Currently, this is an illegal practice. The Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) establishes in Art. 23 that lack or shortage of material resources is not sufficient grounds for the loss or suspension of parental authority. However, a phenomenon observed in research on institutionalized children is that the record of neglect as a reason for fostering has grown at the expense of characterization of poverty as motivated from the distance of the family life living. The literature has often reported that confusion between poverty and neglect<sup>10-12</sup>.

### ***Conceptual parameters of Parental Neglect***

Neglect refers to the failure to meet basic needs, including lack of interest, affection and responsibility in relation to children and adolescents. According to the World Health Organization, neglect includes isolated event or a stable standard of care in time, by parents or other family members, who fail to provide the development and well-being for children, when they would have conditions to do it. This aspect can be seen in one or more areas: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe conditions<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, the beacon element of existence or not of negligence is the availability of care resources<sup>12</sup>.

Although this definition be shared by the area, there are difficulties in the operationalization of parental neglect

parameters. In case it is not done the proper distinction of the elements in the neglect configuration, one can fall in erroneous assessments of what parental neglect is.

In the analysis of neglect situations, it is necessary to understand what are the conditions and resources that the family has for the care and how they employ these features. Many situations named negligence actually reflect the broader context in which families are inserted, often permeated by a structural violence and State neglect in terms of access to services, benefits and right exercise<sup>12,13</sup>.

This distinction becomes even more difficult in countries like Brazil, where poverty and inequality are markers in the lives of many families:

*It is essential to differentiate whether the family really abandoned the child or if it is the victim of an extreme situation of socio-economic crisis [...]. We can in these cases consider the family as directly responsible for the lack of status of their children? (P.82)<sup>11</sup>.*

In this sense, to evaluate parental neglect situations it is necessary to take into account three elements: 1) identification of parental care conditions; 2) quality of care invested; 3) real or potential damages in the development of the child or adolescent.

This effort in the operationalization of neglect concept of reflects the urgent demand that one can understand neglect, not only at the cognitive and subjective level, but use minimally objective parameters that can distinguish it from other living conditions.

### **Hyposufficient care**

Hyposufficient is a legal term that refers, according to the dictionary, to a person of scarce economic resources, who is not self-sufficient. The ban of this term to the quality of the discussion of parenting care seeks to distinguish two situations quite often confused: the first is when a family, having resources, omits itself in the care of children and adolescents, in order to limit or not promote their development; the second is when a family, due to its conditions (hyposufficient), has no care resources, be they economic, cognitive, social, educational

or emotional and, from that, limit or do not promote the development of children and adolescents under their care.

The lack of care resources are not configured as parental neglect. However, it must recognize that the developmental effects exceed this discussion or classification. Thus, one must understand that even when there is no parental omission and that, on the contrary, within their limitations families exert more protective care possible, yet such care cannot be sufficient to promote a healthy development. This is what are here called hyposufficient parental care.

This situation arises, in general, from the expressions of social issues in the lives of the families, especially through poverty and impoverishment, of the difficult and inadequate access to rights and services, as well as cognitive and educational limitations, such as situations in which the family (or the responsible carer/caregiver) suffers mental disorders or mental disability or when the access to information and educational processes is so limited that affects parenting exercised<sup>8</sup>.

The social issue affects parenting and parental care exercised. A family that experiences countless shortages situations and does not have access to services and rights creates survival strategies that do not always is able to produce the necessary care to children and adolescents<sup>8</sup>. This care fleeing the standards of a given society is assessed as inadequate and often labeled neglect.

A family whose livelihood comes from free trade, for example, and that, by not having whom to leave the children with, takes the children, may be acting in the most protective way possible within their reality, although it is known that children's exposure to early work and/or a prolonged stay in these environments can expose children to risks, as well as having negative effects on their development. Is it possible to label this parental behavior as neglect?

The family that has no necessary food quantity and quality and is unaware of alternative means of food can be considered negligent in providing the children food of low nutritional value or with high levels of sugar,

sodium, fat, preservatives and others? The family that, in the absence of other alternatives, leave a child in the care of people who are not fully able to care (due to age, health or social status) to work, can be labeled negligent?

These questions do not minimize the risks to development that these and many other behaviors can generate. Rather, it is important to be aware that not always what is "possible" at any given time for the family is "sufficient" in terms of care for the development of children and adolescents.

The challenge is to recognize where lies the limitation effectively and what the source of the potential harm to development is: whether in the negligent behavior of the family or in situations of hyposufficiency to exercise care. And, from that, undertake responses to these situations, in order to promote and protect the development of children and adolescents and their families.

The various expressions of social issues go through the lives of families and limit parenting, being worsened and intensified from the very evolution of capitalism. Its foundations are the inequities produced by the capitalist system that expropriated the worker of the production methods and makes it more and more, hostage to the market<sup>14</sup>. Some of the social expressions that most affect parental care are poverty, unemployment and/or low insertion in the labor market, the low quality of public services, and others.

The care can be hyposufficient not just by expressions of social issues, but also by limitations of general or mental health. A person with mental illness may not have sufficient conditions to exercise parental care, without this being characterized as neglect, since there would not have resources (even temporarily) to exercise care.

Moreover, issues related to education and access to information can also limit the exercise of parental care with quality. The understanding of what a child needs or what is good for him influences the care exercised. If this knowledge is limited or erroneous it may have detrimental effects on development,

without, however, be characterized as neglect. Again, the limitation was about resources.

Hyposufficient care, therefore, can be understood as situations in which the care and development demands are not sufficiently answered by the responsible persons due to limitations or lack of care resources. These resources can be economic, cognitive, social, educational and cannot be disregarded in assessing a parenting exercise situation.

## CONCLUSION

The quality of care should be evaluated from the context of people's lives. It is observed many difficulties as regards the concept of parental neglect, which is often attributed to contexts in which care is hyposufficient but that does not derive from the failure of those responsible for the care, but the unavailability of resources for its exercise.

The distinction between these two situations is critical in the monitoring process to the families for several reasons:

1. Need for a break of the historical disqualification of the poor families about the care of children and adolescents;
2. The subjective and social production in the families in both situations is different, even though both have significant effects on the development of children and adolescents;
3. The accountability of the family in parental neglect situations serves to ratify children and adolescents as persons of rights;
4. The responsibility of families in situations of hyposufficient care makes natural the failure of the State and the situations of family rights violations;
5. The construction of a protective environment of access to rights for children and adolescents necessarily has to protect and facilitate rights of the whole family.

In this sense, it is important that both researchers and professionals engage themselves, to strengthen families without indemnify the State, besides building protective environments without ignoring that everyone in the family, including those responsible, are people of rights and need to be seen as such.

Hyposufficient care, as well as neglect, have effects on the development; however

come from different causes thus requiring different forms of intervention. Labeling of negligent families with hyposufficient situations would once again blame the families for their living conditions. Precluding, however, these effects, is to neglect the development of children and adolescents whose families do not have enough care resources.

The disconnection between neglect and poverty must be a theoretical and practical commitment. In this sense, the limitation of this work, as it is a theoretical essay, is also the final recommendation: one need to empirically and broadly research how the parental neglect is evaluated in Brazil.

There is no more space for analysis and homogeneous labeling, being fundamental attention and unique analysis in relation to parental care and interventions committed to the family.

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#### CONTRIBUTIONS

**Hivana Raekia Rosa Fonseca** contributed to the conception and writing. **Maria D’Alva Macedo Ferreira** participated in the guidance and review.

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