

Accompanying families in the process of reconfiguration: representations attributed by parents who were former participants "oficinas de parentalidade"

Acompanhando famílias em processo de reconfiguração: representações atribuídas pelos genitores egressos das "oficinas de parentalidade"

Acompañando a las familias en el proceso de reconfiguración: representaciones atribuidas por los padres egresos de los "*oficinas de parentalidade*"

Received: 03/09/2019 Approved: 05/06/2020 Published: 29/07/2020 Laís Macedo Costa¹ Liniker Douglas Lopes da Silva² Alice de Oliveira Fagundes³ Luciana Maria da Silva⁴

This study aimed to report representations attributed by parents to the interventions carried out in the "Oficinas de Parentalidade" ("Parenting Workshops") extension project after two months of participation. This is an empirical study supported by the qualitative research approach, in which structured interviews were carried out between 2016 and 2017. The responses issued by the 126 parents who participated in the study were analyzed using Bardin's content analysis technique, resulting in three categories: Impacts of "parenting workshops" on the lives of participants and their children; Reassessing concepts regarding former spouses and reconstituted family; and Learning from the Group. Most of the interviewees reported that their participation in the workshops was positive and that they reflected on how to act with their younger children and with their former spouse after marital dissolution, which indicates the possibility of growth and learning from the group experience, as well as the realization of important reevaluations in the sphere of interpersonal and family relationships. This can provide protection for children and adolescents from possible psychosocial damage resulting from conflicts experienced after divorce.

Descriptors: Family; Parenting; Divorce.

Este estudo teve por objetivo relatar as representações atribuídas pelos genitores às intervenções realizadas no projeto de extensão "*Oficinas de Parentalidade*" após dois meses da participação. Trata-se de um estudo empírico amparado na abordagem qualitativa de pesquisa, no qual foram realizadas entrevistas estruturadas entre 2016 a 2017. As respostas emitidas pelos 126 genitores que participaram do estudo foram analisadas via técnica de análise de conteúdo de Bardin, resultando em três categorias: : *Impactos das "oficinas de parentalidade" para a vida dos participantes e seus filhos; Reavaliando os conceitos a respeito de ex-cônjuges e família reconstituída;* e *Aprendendo com o Grupo*. A maioria dos entrevistados relatou ser positiva a participação nas oficinas e que refletiu sobre a forma de agir com os filhos menores e com o ex-cônjuge após a dissolução conjugal, o que indica a possibilidade de crescimento e aprendizagem com a experiência em grupo, bem como a efetivação de reavaliações importantes na esfera dos relacionamentos interpessoais e familiares. Isto pode gerar proteção as crianças e adolescentes de possíveis danos psicossociais decorrentes dos conflitos vivenciados após o divórcio.

Descritores: Família; Poder familiar; Divórcio.

El objetivo de este estudio fue informar sobre las representaciones atribuidas por los padres a las intervenciones realizadas en el proyecto de extensión "*Oficinas de Parentalidade*" (Talleres de Parentalidad) después de dos meses de participación. Se trata de un estudio empírico basado en el enfoque cualitativo de la investigación, en el que se realizaron entrevistas estructuradas entre 2016 y 2017. Las respuestas emitidas por los 126 padres que participaron en el estudio fueron analizadas mediante la técnica de análisis de contenido de Bardin, lo que dio lugar a tres categorías: *Repercusiones de las "oficinas de parentalidade" en la vida de los participantes y sus hijos; Reevaluando los conceptos relativos a los ex cónyuges y la familia reconstituida; y, Aprendiendo con el Grupo.* La mayoría de los entrevistados comunicaron que su participación en los talleres fue positiva y que reflexionaron sobre la forma de actuar con sus hijos más pequeños y con su ex cónyuge después de su disolución matrimonial, lo que indica la posibilidad de crecimiento y aprendizaje de la experiencia del grupo, así como la realización de importantes reevaluaciones en la esfera de las relaciones interpersonales y familiares. Esto puede generar la protección de los niños y adolescentes contra los posibles daños psicosociales resultantes de los conflictos experimentados después del divorcio. **Descriptores:** Familia; Responsabilidad parental; Divorcio.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of divorce and/or dissolution of stable union brings about considerable changes in the family structure and, at times, can be troubled, with conflict of interests in regards to child custody and financial issues. Even though it is a frequent phenomenon in Western societies, divorce represents a time of great demand in terms of social and psychological adaptation of different elements of the family².

The emotional consequences of this process can extend to all members of the family, especially to underage children. There are possibilities of creating psychic sequelae in those involved, based on changes in family relationships and, mainly, by conflicting behaviors and communications between parents. Such situations generate great and serious sequelae, relationship difficulties and harmful behaviors to family relationships³.

Much is discussed about alienating actions and behaviors of the ex-couple towards their children, which have serious emotional consequences for children and adolescents and affect all aspects of their lives. Parental alienation consists of behavior, usually after divorce, in which one of the parents disqualifies or demoralizes the ex-partner in front of the children, and it is considered violence against children and adolescents. Such emotional abuse can have serious psychological implications for those involved and, in litigious divorces, the chances of such behavior are much higher. The litigious divorce occurs when the couple disagrees on one or more issues pertinent to the divorce, such as property sharing, alimony, child custody, or even because one of the parties does not want a divorce. It is a judicial process and is decided by a Judge of Law⁴.

There is also a debate about unpreparedness of parents and children to deal with the process of adaptation and construction of the new family configuration. In these cases, there is a need for actions that help the former couple to try to overcome, or at least alleviate, these situations. That is, teaching ways to understand and transform conflicts into opportunities to improve the quality of personal and family relationships. Such instruments act to pacify relationships, which helps parents to protect their children from the harmful effects of a destructive approach to their conflicts, thus reducing traumas that come from changes in family relationships^{5,6}.

Based on demand identified by the 8th District Attorney of Uberaba, in the state of Minas Gerais, regarding difficulties present during divorce proceedings, the extension project entitled *Oficinas de Parentalidade* ("Parenting Workshops") was structured. This project, initially developed by the Court of Justice of São Paulo (TJ-SP) with the support and monitoring of the National Council of Justice (*Conselho Nacional de Justiça - CNJ*), was implemented in the District of São Vicente, in the state of São Paulo with the name "*Oficina de Pais e Filhos*" ("Parents and Children Workshop"). The intention of the CNJ is for it to be a national project and, in the state of Minas Gerais, the implantation in the Uberaba District is the second experience in the state and the first outside of a capital¹.

The project is a partnership between the Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro (UFTM) and the 8th District Attorney of Uberaba/MG, implemented in this town in September of 2014, which aims to be a pedagogical instrument in favor of healthy practices for the benefit of families in reconfiguration process. This is based on the literature on the effects of divorce and the importance of parents and other family members looking for healthy ways to deal with the end of marriage, as well as, in the experience of other countries, in carrying out educational programs aimed at people going through family reorganization⁵.

Just as it is necessary to work with this demand in order to contribute with nonadversarial ways of solving psycho-emotional conflicts, it is also extremely necessary that this type of intervention is constantly evaluated and reframed. Thus, a subsequent contact with the parents who participated in the workshops is justified in order to obtain positive or negative feedback from the interventions and to analyze the impact of the interventions on the relationship of the new family, from the perspective of the fathers and mothers². The constant analysis and evaluation of practices carried out with parents can enable new models of psychosocial intervention by the family in the process of divorce, in addition to contributing to society in general. Former couples who manage to cope positively with separation guarantee to their children a welcoming environment and help them not only survive, but deal positively with new post-divorce experiences. The insertion of the moment of evaluation after the participation in the "Parenting Workshop" contributes to the redefinition of the proposed practices and makes it possible to think of a performance with the reconfigured family beyond judicialization⁵.

It should be noted that the term reconfigured family aims to counter the pejorative idea that considers unstructured families after divorce, since, after marital dissolution, the family undergoes reconfigurations both in structural terms and in terms related to dynamics of the family system, not becoming unstructured; on the contrary, every form of being a family is valid and must be respected (single-parent, binuclear, recomposed, expanded, same sex couple, among others)⁵.

That said, the objective of this work is report representations attributed by parents to the interventions carried out in the extension project "Parenting Workshops" after two months of participation.

METHOD

This is a qualitative study developed through interviews. The qualitative method is the most appropriate way to understand a social phenomenon and allows description of complexity of a given problem, as it delves into the world of meanings. The adoption of qualitative methodology provides greater freedom for the researcher and the interviewee, as it allows for several philosophical conceptions, enabling investigation strategies, methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation⁷.

Fathers and mothers participated in one of the "Parenting Workshops" between June of 2016 and November of 2017. The parents agreed to be contacted after sixty days of participating in a workshop and left their contacts on the evaluation form answered at the end of the meeting. This form is included in the workshop support material, proposed by the CNJ. In it, parents express their opinion about the work done and have the option of leaving a phone number in case they want to be contacted bimonthly from the date of the workshop.

The instrument used was a structured script with open questions, that is, a prefixed list of questions, whose order remains unchanged for all respondents. Among the main advantages of using this instrument are its speed and the fact that it does not require exhaustive preparation from researchers, which implies relatively low costs⁸. The open question scripts lead the respondent to answer with phrases or sentences; the researcher is not interested in anticipating answers, they just want a greater elaboration of the interviewee's opinions⁹. The questions asked can refer to what people know, think, expect, feel or what they do about a given subject⁸.

The script consisted of open-ended questions regarding the type of relationship between the father and mother and their children before and after the experience in the workshops, such as, for example, if there was an improvement in affective contacts between members, if any child had behavioral and/or affective problems as a consequence of conflicts still poorly resolved, if there was an improvement in the coexistence of the former couple, if there is a desire and/or need for psychological intervention for any family member, among other issues.

The parents were approached and interviewed by telephone after a minimum of two months of participation in a parent workshop. This time was recommended by the CNJ and stipulated by the national booklet, as previously described⁵.

A call was made from a room at the 8th Prosecutor's Office in Uberaba, a partner of the project, which had adequate equipment, light and an environment, allowing the confidentiality of information. The interviewer underwent previous training, given by the project coordinator,

REFACS (online) July/Sep 2020; 8(Suppl. 2)

with a view to adapting the vocabulary, posture and welcoming necessary for the different demands that the parents could present, in addition to appropriating the instrument to be used; after all, badly pronounced words, difficulty in hearing or dictating words can result in damage, since people respond to what they hear¹⁰.

In the morning (between 8:00 and 11:00 am) parents who showed availability and interest in answering questions (which was initially verified by telephone) were interviewed. All responses were handwritten on the script's own form simultaneously with the interviews⁸, in scripts separated by participant and typed later.

The data were considered according to the content analysis technique¹¹, which is a set of communication analysis techniques that uses systematic and objective procedures to describe the content of the messages. (p. 40)

Among the methodological procedures of content analysis used from a qualitative perspective, the following stand out: categorization, inference, description and interpretation. The phases of content analysis are organized chronologically into: pre-analysis, material analysis and the treatment of results (inference and interpretation). These phases lead to the construction of interpretative categories that will be analyzed and interpreted in accordance to the theoretical framework⁷.

The project that originated to this study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' home institution (Protocol no. 52670716.5.0000.5154), and is supported by Resolution No. 466, of 12/12/2012 of the National Health Council.

RESULTS

126 fathers and mothers present in one of the workshops participated. Based on the responses, the participation of fathers and mothers in the "Parenting Workshops" project was perceived as positive. Most respondents reported changes in their lives, said they were able to reflect on how to act with young children and how to deal with existing conflicts.

Most of the interviewees remembered contents worked on the workshop, including when listing topics such as parental alienation, violent communication, emotional consequences of divorce, among others. The theme "*parental alienation*" emerged as one with the potential to bring more psychological damage to the children, according to the participants. The clippings of the interviews below portray this fact:

It helped a lot! My ex and my son are talking more. It needs to be calm for the child to understand (...). Participant 01 Yes, I liked it a lot. It made me calmer in the face of the situation, more aware. Participant 33

Yes. It helped me a lot. Before the workshop, I did things with my children that I didn't know were harmful to them and didn't realize what I was doing. Participant 37

Yes of course! You cannot use children to reach another part. We should always treat them better and do our best for them. Participant 13

Very much! I thought my daughter was obliged to visit me and now I know that she only comes if she wants to. Participant 20

Yes, see more of my children's individuality and listen to them more. I try not to forbid them from being with their father and stepmother. Participant 33

87% of participants stated that the workshops helped to reflect on the former spouse. Also, it was possible to verify statements of participants that said the workshops helped them to understand and accept the presence of their ex's current partner:

Yes [...] Before, I used to get more involved with their father and his girlfriend, sometimes we are selfish, but now I see my children's side more, I make them more comfortable [...] Before, with my ex, we didn't fight anymore, but now we are more united in relation to the children [...] Participant 27

Yes, because the view in relation to the ex has changed, today I see that we both made mistakes and not only her, as I used to think. Participant 42

Yes. I see that nobody is obliged to be with anyone [...] She has free will to choose with who she wants to be, today I understand that more. Participant 49

REFACS (online) July/Sep 2020; 8(Suppl. 2)

Some participants reported that they learned to deal with conflicts in their process with others who participated in the workshops and had problems similar to their own. This fact can be identified in the following excerpts from interviews:

Yes. It was all new, I was not prepared to face the problems of the process that was going on. Today I am more prepared, seeing how other people who are going through this act. Participant 07 Yes [...] I learned from the experience of other people who participated, today I separate the issues of adult and child.

Yes [...] I learned from the experience of other people who participated, today I separate the issues of adult and child. Participant 49

It was also noticed that the reflections made during workshops resulted in a greater recognition of the importance of the psychologist's work:

[...] I looked for a CRAS [Centro de Referência de Assistência Social] psychologist, after all I believe that the child needs a psychologist because of the process [...] Participant 01

Yes, a lot. We even went to a psychologist and she said that we are fine. It improved a lot, according to the judge more than 50%. Participant 56

[...] He is going to therapy, we both are in fact, because I am also going [...]. Participant 57

DISCUSSION

The responses issued by the 126 participants were analyzed qualitatively in their content. From this, three categories of analysis were arrived at, namely: *Impacts of "parenting workshops" on the lives of participants and their children; Reassessing concepts regarding former spouses and reconstituted family;* and *Learning from the Group*.

Impacts of "parenting workshops" on the lives of participants and their children

For some time it was believed that any divorce caused trauma to children, but studies have shown that this is not true. After all, it was noticed that exposure to parents' conflicts is more damaging to children than the divorce itself. High levels of conflict between parents result in emotional, physical and self-esteem problems for their children⁵.

As a result of the fact that divorce can represent a period of emotional and psychological destabilization, intervention programs have emerged, with the purpose to help families face challenges brought about by this marital dissolution. These programs seek, on the one hand, to reduce destructive behaviors and relationships and, on the other hand, to promote the creation of new relational limits, new frontiers and reorganization of emotional bonds².

The "Parenting Workshops" constitute one of these intervention programs that represent a welcoming and learning space in which participants are led to reflect on their attitudes and forms of communication, similar to other intervention programs with the same purpose, such as , for example, groups that foster reflections and dialogues between divorced fathers and mothers developed at universities or even in the judiciary system^{12, 13}. In these workshops, participants who exercise parenting are instructed that it is up to them to offer an appropriate, safe and affectionate environment for their children, since with the new family reconfiguration, the family will continue to exist in different ways, especially for children or adolescents involved¹.

Investigations conducted on the effectiveness of these programs have shown, in general, that the interventions are valid and have positive results, such as balance and psychological well-being of parents, reduction of risk factors and patterns for children, strengthening of protective factors through parental empowerment and the weakening and dilution of parental conflicts, verifying the children's developmental needs¹⁴.

According to the study by Silva et al.¹: the workshops provided a moment for reflection and identification of parents with the topics discussed, as well as a space for them to talk about the conflicts that are involved. (p. 23)

It should be noted that Parenting Workshops promote empowerment for parents, which is essential for them to manage their conflicts with responsibility and respect, for the healthy emotional development of their children⁵.

Reassessing concepts regarding former spouses and reconstituted family; and Learning from the Group

Currently, there is often a hostile relationship in society between formerly married people, representing various types of inappropriate conduct, which makes it difficult to reconstruct the integrity of each spouse and their children. It is possible to verify former spouses who have a friendly behavior, but what has been seen most of the time are people exchanging various insults and involved in prolonged discussions⁶.

In the course of divorce proceedings, it is observed the difficulty of parents in dealing with the change in the family structure and in exercising their parental responsibilities. Therefore, the parents must think about parenting and not just the dissolution of conjugality, aiming to guarantee the children's well-being after separation.

According to the study by Silva et al.¹: the biggest advantage that can be obtained from participating in the workshop is the family's awareness that the breakup phase, although delicate, can be overcome without the destruction of the family, and the children have the right to live with both parents on equal terms. (p. 25)

The encounter of people who experience similar problems, in interventions similar to the workshops, makes it possible to see their own situation differently, enumerating new alternatives, paths and possibilities other than the simple confrontation with the former spouse. In the study by Brito e Silva², it was seen that there were important reflections capable of reformulating thoughts, including promoting an improvement in dialogue with the former partner.

Since the project was implemented in the city of Uberaba, it was noticed that many lawsuits resulted in agreement. It is also noticed that many former couples who went through the Parenting Workshop go to court hearings with concepts absorbed by this experience¹.

Learning from the Group

When a person is part of a group, they can both learn and teach content to other participants, since, in addition to effectively providing support to the needy person, it broadens their personal and relational horizons, leading them to an internal reflection¹. It is believed that, in working with groups, there are aspects that contribute to promote learning and changes in subjectivity and, as a consequence, reduce the trauma caused².

The meetings provided by the workshops do not, at first, have a therapeutic perspective, but it comes close to this, as they have a welcoming character, providing a space in which people can relate, promoting exchanges and reframing experiences, with the ethical guarantee of confidentiality of information that is made available during the workshops¹.

The "Parenting Workshops", in addition to taking the person to the necessary reflection on their behavior towards their children and former partners, also intend to present resources, such as non-violent communications, empowerment of participants about their rights and attitudes, as well as the promotion dialogue between the parties involved. Thus, participants are presented with healthy ways of resolving conflicts, demonstrating that marital dissolution does not indicate the end of family relationships, and seeking to provide alternatives that enable a less destructive divorce, helping families in reconfiguration processes².

CONCLUSION

It was noticed that the majority of respondents reported that the workshops promoted positive changes in their lives and in living with their children and with the former spouse. There were many reports that, after participation, the relationship between parents and children improved and themes once considered harmless are now seen as harmful, such as, for example, parental alienation. Another type of relationship that showed improvement was between the former spouses, who started to respect each other more in order to guarantee the well-being of both, as well as their children. There was the possibility of growth and learning from the group experience, including important reevaluations in the sphere of interpersonal and family relationships, in order to protect young children from possible psychosocial damage resulting from the conflicts experienced.

In addition to judicialization, comprehensive care for families in the process of reconfiguration implies new challenges for professionals who are faced daily with the implications of a destructive divorce in family relationships. Thus, projects like this foster discussions about the pressing contemporary social needs and propose practices in favor of protecting the family, increasingly envisioning the creation and improvement of public policies that favor the continuity of parental relationships and the inhibition of alienating practices after the end of the conjugal union.

It is understood, however, that the results obtained can collaborate to stimulate initiatives that help families in reconfiguration, as well as foster the improvement of existing interventions. In this sense, studies that include different members of the family group such as fathers, mothers and children should be encouraged.

Furthermore, in view of the diversity of judicial, psychological and social demands arising from the marital dissolution and faced daily by the teams that fight for family well-being, it is also suggested to build research involving professionals who work with families in processes of divorce/marital dissolution and that employ methods that stimulate the creation of spaces for dialogue, support and reflection about their own practices, thus supporting the construction of strategies that help professionals in their training and have repercussions on an increasingly more work effective for the benefit of families.

In view of the complexity of the phenomenon of marital dissolutions and their repercussions on the relationship between parents and children, the limitation is the impossibility of generalization, since it only covered the representations of parents about the workshops. On the other hand, the contribution in terms of improving the relations of the parents and the possibility of repeating such activity in other regions is provided.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Lais Macedo Costa contributed with writing, data collection, data analysis and data interpretation. **Liniker Douglas Lopes da Silva** participated in data interpretation and data analysis, writing and revision. **Alice de Oliveira Fagundes** worked in data collection and revision. **Luciana Maria da Silva** contributed to the orientation, conception and revision.

How to cite this article (Vancouver)

Costa LM, Silva LDL, Fagundes AO, Silva LM. Accompanying families in the process of reconfiguration: representations attributed by parents who were former participants "*oficinas de parentalidade*". REFACS [Internet]. 2020 [cited in *insert day, month and year of access*]; 8(Suppl. 2):711-718. Available from: *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

How to cite this article (ABNT)

COSTA, L. M.; SILVA, L. D. L.; FAGUNDES, A. O.; SILVA, L. M. Accompanying families in the process of reconfiguration: representations attributed by parents who were former participants "*oficinas de parentalidade*". **REFACS**, Uberaba, MG, v. 8, p. 711-718, 2020. Suppl. 2. Available from: *insert access link*. Access in: *insert day, month and year of access*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.

How to cite this article (APA)

Costa, L.M., Silva, L.D.L., Fagundes, A.O., & Silva, L.M. (2020). Accompanying families in the process of reconfiguration: representations attributed by parents who were former participants "*oficinas de parentalidade*". *REFACS*, 8(Suppl. 2), 711-718. Retrieved in *insert day, month and year of access* from *insert access link*. DOI: *insert DOI link*.