

## DEVELOPMENT OF COPING RESOURCES IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

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### Resumen

El presente trabajo muestra la importancia de las relaciones primarias, en el desarrollo de recursos positivos para afrontar la amenaza y que las interacciones durante la niñez y la temprana *adolescencia* reflejan patrones aprendidos dentro de la familia. Cuando los niños se sienten aceptados por sus padres les resulta más fácil adaptarse, mientras que las relaciones percibidas como inapropiadas, particularmente si son experimentadas como distantes, se asocian habitualmente con *afrontamientos* desadaptativos, tales como la inhibición. La relación negativa más común entre la madre y el niño parece ser el distanciamiento de la primera; en el caso del padre, una vez que su influencia se vuelve más significativa, es además del distanciamiento, la hostilidad. Por último, las interacciones sociales primarias parecen tener una influencia importante, especialmente sobre la impulsividad, la conducta agresiva y la falta de atención en los niños. Aparentemente, parece bastante claro que la influencia de los padres, en particular de la madre, interactúa con la de los pares en la determinación de la conducta de los niños. Finalmente, las relaciones con una madre con un estilo permisivo que propicia la autonomía, defiende a los adolescentes de sentimientos de profunda *soledad*.

*Palabras clave:* Afrontamiento - soledad - relaciones interpersonales - infancia - adolescencia.

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## Abstract

The works here presented show the importance of primary relationships in the development of positive resources to cope with menace and that interactions with peers during *childhood* and early adolescence reflect patterns learnt within the family. When children feel accepted by their parents they find it easier to adapt; while a *relationship* which is perceived as inappropriate, particularly if it is experienced as distant, is usually associated with non-adaptive *coping*, such as inhibition. The most common negative relationship between mother and child seems to be the former's distancing; in the case of the father, once his influence becomes more significant, there is hostility as well as distancing. Lastly, social primary interactions appear to have a remarkable influence, especially on impulsiveness, aggressive behaviour and lack of attention in children. Apparently, it seems quite clear that parents' the mother's in particular, and peer perception interact to shape the child's behaviour. Finally, the relationship with a mother with a permissive style which fosters autonomy, defends adolescents from feelings of deep loneliness.

*Key words:* Coping - loneliness - interpersonal relationships - childhood - adolescence.

Parents-children relationship was traditionally seen as one of the most important factors determining the development of children's personality and behaviour (Ausubel et al., 1954; Slater, 1962).

More recently, peer interaction has been proved to play an indispensable multi/causal role in the process of socialization (Johnson, 1980).

Empirical research has proved the positive influence of peer interaction in socialising aggressive impulses (Hartup, 1978), and in cognitive development (Rardin, & Moran, 1971), socio-cognitive, linguistic (Bates, 1975), gender roles (Fagot, 1977), and moral development.

Scarcely accepted children have limited chances of relating positively with their peers and are partially deprived of opportunities to learn adaptive modes of social behavior and knowledge. These children can thus become

more vulnerable to problems and must be seen as children at risk (Parker, & Asher, 1987).

It has been stated that the most important source of information on the parents-child relationship is the child himself. And also that this behaviour only affects the development of the child's personality in so far as the child himself perceives it (Ausubel et al., 1954). The child's perception of his parents behaviour will influence his adjustment far more largely than their actual behaviour (Schaefer, 1965).

A study on threat perception and support provided by parents of 6, 9, and 12 years old children (Richaud de Minzi, 1991) found that the greatest source of threat perception during infancy comes from lack of support from parents, which children experience as an inadequate relation with their elders. This work studied 250 children, divided into four groups:

- 1.- Children with a positive perception of their parents or substitute-parents (grandparents, foster parents), and who had experienced situations normally considered threatening (parents' divorce, serious illnesses or accidents, serious illness or death of one of the parents).
- 2.- Children with a negative perception of their parents, and who had undergone experiences normally seen as threatening.
- 3.- Children with a positive parent-perception, and who had not undergone threatening events.
- 4.- Children with a negative perception and who had not undergone threatening events.

Child perception of the relationship with their parents was evaluated through an Argentine version of Schaefer's CRPBI and the state of helplessness, through the development of the locus of control judged as one of the most important resources in coping with stress. The locus of control was evaluated through a multi-dimensional scale (Richaud de Minzi, 1991), which allows for attributing control when facing either success or failure, and, separately, internal/external dimensions of control. Results showed that:

- 1.- Regardless of whether events normally judged as threatening did actually take place or not, the kind of perception of the relationship with parents determined changes in belief of control. In view of such

findings, we wonder if the relationship with parents buffers threat, or, should it be inadequate, it constitutes a threat in itself.

2.- Children with a negative perception of their parents witness a negatively altered notion of control compared to what could be expected at their age. Although the internal dimension still predominates over the external, the latter nears the former and shortens the differences found in children with a positive perception, where attribution to the internal dimension is clearly greater than to the external. On the other hand, the increase in the external dimension observed in children who perceive a negative relationship with their parents is due to an increase in fatalism, which points to feelings of helplessness.

3.- Children who have a negative perception of their parents do not take responsibility for their failures, which are attributed either to the actions of others or to bad luck. This curtails any corrections of their own mistakes and the chance of turning them into potential success.

Briefly, the quality of their relationship with their parents is of crucial importance in establishing attribution of control, which is one of the most important resources for coping with stress.

On the other hand, a three-years study of 100 small children between 5-7 years of age (Richaud de Minzi, & Sacchi, 1997) was carried out to study child's perception of his relationship with his parents and peers, and how such perception was connected to his behaviour. It also expected to illuminate the connection between the child's perception of acceptance by his parents, his behaviour, his perception of peer-acceptance, and subsequent deviant behaviour.

The inventory on children's perception of their relationship with their parents was administered in four successive occasions with a 10-months interval (Richaud de Minzi, in press), a peer-sociogram, a reflex sociogram and an inventory of peer behaviour.

In the first place, we noticed that distancing, shown as *Hostile Rejection* in the mother and *Hostile Distancing* in the father, is the most crucial variable in the child's behaviour. In three occasions, there was a significant correlation between *Hostile Rejection* by the mother, and *Inhibition* in the child. Besides, in the first occasion there is a negative relationship, although it is only a tendency ( $r = -.21$ ;  $p .06$ ), between *Hostile Rejection* and *Impulsiveness*, which indicates the same psychological process as the previous ones.

As regards the father, there is usually a less marked relationship between the child's perception of father behaviour and the child's behaviour. Nevertheless, in the fourth occasion, the most relevant relationship is that between *Hostile Distancing* of the father, and *Inhibition* in the child ( $r = .43$ ;  $p .007$ ).

As regards perception of parents' acceptance, only in the first occasion it is negatively related with *impulsiveness* and *self-aggression*. It would seem that a greater tolerance, and protection, both in the father and mother, lowers uncontrolled behaviour in the child. This would happen only while the child is still very young and little socialized. This seems to indicate that an adequate acceptance contributes to a better adjustment to the school group.

The connection between the behaviour of father and son is only noticeable at the end of the second year; that is, when the child is older (7 years). Apparently, the father figure becomes more important at that stage. Besides *Hostile Distancing* mentioned above, there is another relevant variable, *Hostility*, connected to a form of inhibition, such as *Self-aggression*.

It seems clear enough, then, that a relationship based on acceptance facilitates adjustment, while a bad relationship, especially if marked by distancing, is connected to non-adjusted coping, such as inhibition, in this case. It is also worth noting that the most common negative relationship between mother and child is distancing; in the case of the father, distancing is coupled with hostility once his influence has become more relevant.

There is a significant connection between the child's perception of his relationship with his parents and his perception of peer-relationship. We also find a significant connection in the child's distortion about feeling chosen or rejected by his peers, except at the beginning of the first year. These results would underscore the previously mentioned scarcer influence of the father when the child is younger. In fact, the father has no influence in the first occasion neither in connection with the child's peer perception, nor in the distortion of such perception.

On the other hand, we found that at the beginning of the first year neither the perception of the mother nor the father are connected to the child's peer-perception. This leads us to presume that, up to a certain point, when the child answers about his peers it is mere guess work, since he has just joined the group (beginning of pre-school) and he does not know his companions well.

We also found that there is a significant connection between peer-description of the child's behaviour and their willingness to share activities with him or not.

Lastly, we also noted a significant influence of primary social interactions on the child's behaviour when evaluated by the teacher. This is particularly the case with impulsiveness, aggressive behaviour, and lack of attention or distraction. We also remarked a mutual connection between parent -and peer-perception in determining the child's behaviour. We remarked, yet again, the weight of the mother's influence over the father's, particularly in this case when we only worked with younger ages (first and second occasions).

As regards adolescents, we presume that as they have to face the typical hazards of that age (vital crisis), coping styles developed during infancy surface once more. Such styles may undergo various changes in view of the coping resources available at that period in their lives. At the same time, these are basically related to the way in which interaction with parents and peers has evolved during that stage.

The parent-child relationship does not lose its importance after the primary school days. As it evolves, it can meet certain needs of the adolescent: needs for attention, assistance, encouragement, activation and confirmation. Yet as children grow older, opportunities for conflicts and for insufficient understanding increase, because parents do not always succeed in adjusting their parenting practices to the development of autonomy in the older child or the adolescent (Marcoen, & Brumagne, 1985).

Gutierrez (1989) has highlighted the role of the family as the main group for handing down socially acceptable values and rules. Klimkiewicz (1996) has noted that parents, especially mothers, indirectly influence their children's choice of peers through their upbringing patterns. In this particular area, monitoring or supervision of offspring seems to be beneficial but the opposite may be the case with excessive parental control (Fulgini, & Eccles, 1993). Parental supervision might be connected with a better adjustment in adolescents (Dombush et al., 1987). Musitu, and collaborators (1990), and Holmes, and Robbins (1987) have further shown that coercive techniques in upbringing are associated with emotional and behavioural problems in children. Parents and adults at large are viewed as less accepting and more prone to act as experts or in an authoritarian style which hinders a reflection process. Youngsters prefer to discuss their emotional problems and their fears with their own friends.

The importance of peer relationships during adolescence as a source of social support has been posited by many researchers who have studied these links and its coincidence or opposition to various social, emotional, cultural and other traits. Corsaro, and Eder (1990) say that adolescents get handle information from the adult world creatively and produce their own unique peer cultures. Interaction with peers plays several causal roles in socializa-

tion (Parker, & Asher, 1987). Therefore, being accepted or rejected by the group has relevant consequences since it affects the adolescent's possibilities of learning models of adaptive social behaviour. Rejection limits the range of social alternatives for the youngster as well as having negative effects on social cognition, social image and self-esteem.

According to Bullock (1991), some of the parents' abilities provide the child with an array of skills and behaviours which are essential for a positive interaction with peers. As the range of social options widens (entering secondary school, group outings and the like) adolescents gradually leave the family circle which drives him to establish relationships with other people. However, allegedly these interactions follow patterns learnt within the family.

Since relationships with parents and peers provide life long support, it is highly probable that people who have trouble in interpersonal relationships risk developing inadequate resources to face stress. These individuals tend to view the world as exceedingly menacing and hostile and they feel it must be faced aggressively or avoided through evasion or widespread inhibition. Social support referred basically to the kind of interaction which occurs in social relationships, particularly as regards the individual's assessment of the quality of such support, has proved an important resource when coping with stress (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984).

It seems obvious that children who lack parental or peer support are at risk due to feelings of deep loneliness and/or depression.

Little empirical research has been done on feeling of loneliness among children and adolescence (Brennan, 1982; Elison, 1978; Ostrov, & Offer, 1978). Weiss (1973) made a distinction between loneliness due to emotional isolation and loneliness due to social isolation. The former appears in the absence of a close emotional attachment, whereas the latter appears in the absence of an engaging social network. The family and the peer group are the two most important social networks and parents and peers are important attachment figures (Marcoen, & Brumagne, 1985). Relationships with parents and with peers constitute different social contexts within which loneliness may arise.

According to these statements we have studied in a sample of 300 adolescents, of both sexes, 13, 14, and 15 years old if the style of the relationships with parents and peers established during infancy, is put into effect in adolescence. We have evaluated how the adolescents perceive the relationships with his parents and peers and how the former influences the other and how the type of perception the adolescent has of his parents and peers influences his own feeling of loneliness.

In order to assess how adolescents view their relationship with their parents we used an abridged version (Richaud de Minzi, 1998a) of the Argentine adaptation of Schaefer's (1965) CRPBI (Klimkiewicz, 1996).

Peer relationships were studied with the help of a 28-item version (Richaud de Minzi, 1998b) of the Argentine Questionnaire on Peer Relationship Perception (Klimkiewicz, unpublished manuscript). Loneliness feelings are studied through the Argentine adaptation (Richaud de Minzi, & Sacchi, in press) of the Rokach and Brock Loneliness Questionnaire (1995), and Marcoen and Brumagne Loneliness Scale (1985).

Results show that the adolescent's view of his relationship with his mother and father influence his perception of his peer relationships as far as hostile, anxious and extreme control or possessiveness are concerned. Adolescents who consider that their friends try to control them by punishing them through separation, distancing, mocking and the like (hostile control) typically describe their mother as imposing a pathological control over them, compounded with an extreme control from their fathers. *Pathological control* is defined precisely as aiming at imposing itself through distancing, punishment, concern and making others feel guilty. Extreme control, on the other hand, implies possessive and intrusive behaviour and checking that things are done as commanded. Also, adolescents who feel that their peers try to impose themselves making them feel guilty and pointing at future trouble brought about by their behaviour, also say that their mother holds a pathological control, and their father imposes an extreme control over them. Lastly, when the youngster feels that his peers are possessive and meddling with him, he also considers that his father holds a pathological control over him, through feelings of guilt, anxiety and distancing.

In general, it seems that the way adolescents relate to their primary figures affects their interaction with peers which backs up those theories which suggest that the primary interaction pattern surfaces in other interactions during adolescence.

As regards the feeling of loneliness caused by personal inadequacy, the sole influence is the view that the mother grants stressed autonomy; therefore, a greater autonomy entails lower feelings of personal inadequacy. On the other hand, a lower stressed autonomy and lax discipline on the mother's side produces a deeper feeling of loneliness caused by developmental deficit. Finally, these same traits connected with interaction with the mother affect the possibility of overcoming loneliness caused by changes or significant separations (moving home, losing friends, etc.) which means that a lower autonomy, and scarcely strict discipline make it more difficult to overcome relevant separations.

Generally speaking, it seems that the mother-child relationship is the only one connected to feelings of not being backed and helped and, in this sense, it is better to have an excessively permissive mother rather than one who holds an immoderate control. Since the mother is the first one to provide attachment, she will later throw a heavier weight on the child's perception of loneliness. Besides that, it seems that the use of coercive discipline in order to control children and turn them submissive, favours a tendency towards social isolation.

In short, the works here presented show the importance of primary relationships in the development of positive resources to cope with menace and that interactions with peers during childhood and early adolescence reflect patterns learnt within the family. When children feel accepted by their parents they find it easier to adapt; while a relationship which is perceived as inappropriate, particularly if it is experienced as distant, is usually associated with non-adaptive coping, such as inhibition. The most common negative relationship between mother and child seems to be the former's distancing; in the case of the father, once his influence becomes more significant, there is hostility as well as distancing. Lastly, social primary interactions appear to have a remarkable influence, especially on impulsiveness, aggressive behaviour and lack of attention in children. Apparently, it seems quite clear that parents', the mother's in particular, and peer perception interact to shape the child's behaviour. Finally, the relationship with a mother with a permissive style which fosters autonomy, defends adolescents from feelings of deep loneliness.

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