

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 

Risk factors for the development of children and young people referred at a commission for the protection

Fatores que colocam em perigo o desenvolvimento das crianças e jovens referenciados às comissões de proteção

Factores que ponen en peligro el desarrollo de los niños y jóvenes remitidos a la comisión de protección

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Abstract

Background: Helping children at risk or in danger requires careful assessment to make a sustained and coherent decision.

Objectives: To identify caregiver-related risk factors that jeopardize the lives of children and young people referred to a Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People (CPCJ).

Methodology: This descriptive exploratory study with a qualitative approach was conducted between October and December 2018 with a sample of 20 case files of children/young people referred to a CPCJ. The information collected from the case files was analyzed using Bardin's technique.

Results: The majority of caregivers are the parents (54%). Neglect was the most common problem among the children referred to the CPCJ. The following risk factors were highlighted: the family's financial conditions; needs inherent to the child's development; discipline methods; communication problems; mental health problems; lack of extended family support; and family relationship patterns.

Conclusion: Risk factors were identified that could contribute to the development of an instrument for a concerted assessment adjusted to the families' needs.

Keywords: caregivers; danger; risk; protection; children; young people

Resumo

Enquadramento: Assistir crianças em situação de risco e/ou perigo exige uma avaliação criteriosa, que conduza a uma decisão sustentada e coerente.

Objetivos: Identificar os fatores de risco dos cuidadores que colocam em perigo as crianças e jovens referenciados à Comissão Proteção de Crianças e Jovens (CPCJ).

Metodologia: Este estudo descritivo de abordagem qualitativa, realizado entre outubro e dezembro de 2018 teve como amostra 20 processos de crianças/jovens referenciados a uma CPCJ. A informação recolhida dos processos foi analisada através da técnica de Bardin.

Resultados: Como cuidadores surgem os progenitores (54%), sendo a negligência a problemática mais elevada das crianças sinalizadas à CPCJ. Quanto aos fatores de risco, destacam-se as condições financeiras da família; necessidades inerentes ao desenvolvimento da criança e os métodos de disciplina; problemas comunicacionais; problemas de saúde mental e a ausência de suporte da família alargada, seguida dos padrões de relação familiares.

Conclusão: Identificaram-se fatores de risco que poderão permitir a construção de um instrumento para uma avaliação concertada e consequente medida adequada às necessidades das famílias.

Palavras-chave: cuidadores; perigo; risco; proteção; crianças; jovens

Resumen

Marco contextual: Asistir a los niños en situaciones de riesgo y/o peligro requiere una evaluación cuidadosa, que conduzca a una decisión fundamentada y coherente.

Objetivos: Identificar los factores de riesgo de los cuidadores que ponen en peligro a los niños y jóvenes remitidos a la Comisión de Protección de los Niños y los Jóvenes (CPCJ, por sus siglas en portugués).

Metodología: Este estudio descriptivo exploratorio de enfoque cualitativo, realizado entre octubre y diciembre de 2018, tuvo como muestra 20 casos de niños/jóvenes remitidos a una CPCJ. La información recogida en los procesos se analizó mediante la técnica de Bardin.

Resultados: Como cuidadores surgen los progenitores (54%), y es la falta de cuidado el mayor problema de los niños remitidos a la CPCJ. En cuanto a los factores de riesgo, cabe destacar las condiciones económicas de la familia; las necesidades inherentes al desarrollo del niño y los métodos de disciplina; los problemas de comunicación; los problemas de salud mental y la falta de apoyo de la familia extensa, seguida de los patrones de relación familiares.

Conclusión: Se identificaron factores de riesgo que podrían permitir la construcción de un instrumento para una evaluación concertada y la consiguiente medida adecuada a las necesidades de los hogares.

Palabras clave: cuidadores; peligro; riesgo; protección; niños; jóvenes

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Received: 15.04.20

Accepted: 16.11.20



How to cite this article: Simões, A. C., Lopes, S., & Dixe, M. A. (2021). Risk factors for the development of children and young people referred at a commission for the protection. *Revista de Enfermagem Referência*, 5(6), e20046. <https://doi.org/10.12707/RV20046>



Introduction

Violence against children and young people is a serious problem that requires identification and intervention by experienced professionals specialized in childhood and youth. In recent decades, child protection has been gaining importance in developed countries' policies, with the creation of several institutions with these responsibilities. The system for the protection of children at risk has several lines of action. The Local Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People (*Comissões de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens*, CPCJs) are a second-line structure that work in close collaboration with the other structures (National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People - *Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens* [CNPDPJ], 2019).

These commissions decide based on the assessments made by their commissioners/technicians (of which nurses are an integral part). These assessments should include information necessary to provide an appropriate response to situations that jeopardize children and young people's development. As health representatives in CPCJ, in the same way as other technicians, nurses lack specific training in this area, requiring supervision when diagnosing both caregivers and children/young people. This study aims to identify caregiver-related risk factors that jeopardize the development of children and young people referred to CPCJ.

Background

The concept of family is changing, and abuse at home poses special problems to child protection systems (CNPDPJ, 2019). Jurisdictions vary as to the degree of judgment between the competing values of the parents' right to raise their children according to their convictions, on the one hand, and the child's right to be protected, on the other hand. There is considerable social importance in ensuring that, within limits, parents have the freedom to educate their children in accordance with their values and beliefs. However, legal systems vary in how they regulate family life and, in particular, how they allocate powers and duties to parents and determine the circumstances in which family privacy can be overridden (Schreiber et al., 2013).

Although it is not a guarantee of success, a full assessment of the family context can increase the likelihood of appropriate support within a reasonable deadline and improve the relationships between CPCJ technicians/commissioners, children, and caregivers (Ward et al., 2014). A paradigm shift is necessary to improve child welfare outcomes, recognizing children's and caregivers'/families' rights and the importance of their participation and engagement. Professionals need methods that help them enhance their competence and confidence in effectively engaging children and families in promotion and protection processes, including assessments, because performance has implications for their interventions'

outcomes (Toros et al., 2018).

In recent decades, social systems to protect children and families have changed from a care perspective to a perspective focused on family preservation and strengthening. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the adults' life trajectories, their interpersonal relationships, and contextual circumstances, not only to further explore the family dynamics but also because the effectiveness of the interventions depends largely on their level of adjustment to these families' needs.

Factors such as single parenthood, low educational level, economic deprivation, and living in an unsafe area make it difficult to be a parent. These family contexts are referred to as families at psychosocial risk because the adversities they face - economic and job insecurity, domestic violence, stressful life events, among others - often undermine their ability to ensure their children's health and development without, however, achieving a sufficient level of severity to justify putting parental rights at risk.

Parental behavior is directly or indirectly related to children and young people's behavioral problems, so programs aimed at developing caregivers' social and educational skills can minimize or even prevent the changes observed in them (CNPDPJ, 2019).

The lack of specific guidelines on assessment, risk thresholds, and definition of levels and types of intervention makes the decision-making process susceptible to subjectivity, with different interpretations by several technicians. Decision-making in the protection system has been characterized as a complex, ambiguous, and error-prone process.

Research question

Which caregiver-related factors jeopardize the development of children and young people referred to CPCJ?

Methodology

In this descriptive and exploratory study, CPCJ's active case files were subject to content analysis following Bardin's method.

Population and sample

The study sample was based on a CPCJ's active case files in 2018, which, according to the database, were 242. These case files include the information regarding the child and the caregivers' situation. In each CPCJ, active case files are all open cases, regardless of the phase: referral, diagnostic phase, or when a measure of promotion and protection was applied. The latter is subject to a decision and follow-up by the case manager, for which reasons it was considered a sample selection criterion.

In 2018, 56 active case files were opened or reopened between January and June, with a promotion and protection measure applied and follow-up by a case manager, taking into account that the diagnostic phase lasts for 6 months. The selected case files were those that described evaluations of several caregivers, in a total of 20 case files.



Data collection

Data from the 20 selected case files were collected between October and December 2018, after obtaining a favorable opinion from a Health Ethics Committee (Opinion No. 8710/CES/2018), as well as authorization from the CPCJ's restricted committee. The researcher and the CPCJ president analyzed the information collected in the diagnostic evaluation phase and included in the case files, for example, interviews with caregivers, reports of the schools attended by the child, clinical reports, official reports of the authorities, and all relevant documents collected, for validation purposes. The case files were analyzed in compliance with Article 89 of the Law for the Protection of Children and Young People in Danger (LPCJP) about the consultation of case files for scientific purposes.

Data were collected on the child's age, the number of referrals and case reopenings, the event that triggered the referral, and the identification of risk factors that jeopardize children and young people.

Data analysis

Considering data on caregiver-related risk factors that put children at risk, a corpus was defined and subject to Bardin's (2015) three-step content analysis technique: pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment and interpretation of the results. The analysis started in the properties of the text with the identification of meaningful units of text. Each recording unit could be a simple or compound sentence. For the enumeration rules, the frequency of the recording units was considered. Through analytical procedures, the recording units were grouped and classified into dimensions and categories resulting from the review of the literature available on this topic. The principal investigator performed these analytical procedures with the collaboration of the CPCJ president and the other researchers validated them

so that the same data were analyzed by different analysts (researchers) (Bardin, 2015). The three researchers discussed and resolved the coding divergences.

Results

Of the 20 case files in this sample, six had been reopened. It should be noted that the cases can be reopened whenever necessary. The children's mean age was 12 years. Of the 20 children, 14 children had only one referral, three children had two referrals, two children had three referrals, and one child had four referrals. As for the main caregivers, both parents were mentioned in 32% of the cases, followed by the mother in 24% of the cases, with a higher percentage than any other family member. Regarding the problems of the children referred to CPCJ, neglect was the most frequent, followed by risky behaviors, school dropout, and antisocial behaviors. Drug use, exposure to risky behaviors, and domestic violence had the same frequency, as well as the cases of physical abuse, exercise of parental responsibility, and sexual abuse.

Risk factors were grouped into four dimensions: Social and economic interaction patterns (three categories); Exercise of parenthood (four categories), Caregiver characteristics (five categories), and Family characteristics (eight categories). Table 1 refers to the dimension of Social and economic interaction patterns. It shows that the most frequent category was the family's financial conditions and the most frequent subcategory was family with members without job stability. Health hazards (garbage, odors, vermin, disorganization) were the most frequent subcategory regarding the living conditions. The most frequent subcategory in the social support networks category was not having access to help from friends/neighbors.

Table 1

Categories, subcategories, and enumeration units concerning the social and economic interaction patterns

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>EU</i>
Living conditions	
Children share the room with couples who are not part of their family	2
Children share the room with family members	1
Children have no place to sleep	2
Health hazards (garbage, odors, vermin, disorganization)	5
Family's financial conditions	
Family with members without job stability	8
Familie with members who receive social benefits	3
Familie without employed members	2
Illicit activities/severe legal problems	3
Social support networks	
No access to help from friends/neighbors	4
Frequent change of residence in the past three months	2
Total Enumeration Units	32

Note. EU = Enumeration Units.

The dimension Exercise of parenthood, in Table 2, reflects how the caregivers' resources correspond to the children's needs for a harmonious development. This dimension demonstrates, by the prominence of the registration units in relation to the other dimensions, the impairment of parental skills. In the category Needs inherent to the child's development, the lack of a healthy relationship between siblings is highlighted, followed by lack of attention paid to the child and their needs. With

the same number of enumeration units is the category Caregivers' behavioral patterns, with the subcategory No dialogue between caregivers standing out from the other subcategories. Next are the discipline methods, with the most frequent subcategory being Discipline is excessive, punitive, and inappropriate. The fourth category refers to the Supervision patterns in which the lack of child routines (bedtime, school work, hygiene care) stands out.

Table 2

Categories, subcategories, and enumeration units concerning the exercise of parenthood

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>EU</i>
Needs inherent to the child's development	
Lack of attention paid to the child and their needs	12
Caregiver's inability to cope with the child's behaviors	4
The child does not have a balanced food plan	7
Lack of a healthy relationship between siblings	15
Unequal treatment of the child in relation to his/her siblings	7
Supervision patterns	
Lack of child routines (bedtime, school work, hygiene care)	9
The child is left to herself/himself	4
Discipline methods	
Discipline is excessive, punitive, and inappropriate	11
Discipline is too permissive	1
Reacts violently, which may or has caused injuries to the child	7
The child/youth does not have limits and/or routines	4
Caregivers' behavioral patterns	
Caregivers send contradictory messages to the child	4
No dialogue between caregivers	21
Caregiver neglects the child	9
Child (emotional and sexual) abuse	5
Problems in accepting responsibilities	3
Child exposure to frequent partner change	3
Total Enumeration Units	126

Note. EU = Enumeration Units.

The dimension Caregiver characteristics, in Table 3, reflects the profile of the adults who contact directly with the child, whose attributes influence parental skills and the socioeconomic status of the family members. These aspects characterize the profile of the adults who are responsible for

the child's educational process at various levels. The category that stands out is related to health problems, and the most relevant subcategory is the presence of a mental illness. Next are communication problems, with the subcategory regarding the difficulty to communicate with the child.

Table 3*Categories, subcategories, and enumeration units concerning caregiver characteristics*

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>EU</i>
Psychoactive substance use problems	
Caregivers with substance abuse problems	4
Communication problems	
Caregivers are unable to communicate with the child	11
Health problems	
Impairment of caregiver's emotional resources	7
Diagnosed mental illness	10
Existence of disabling physical diseases	2
Perpetuator of mistreatment	
History of abuse of other children	4
Nature of the contact and involvement with others	
Inability to maintain stable and lasting relationships	2
Total Enumeration Units	40

Note. EU = Enumeration Units.

The dimension Family characteristics in Table 4 holds in its genesis a social prodigy present in all societies. The family is intended to be one of the first environments in which individuals socialize, serving as a cultural standard, model, and influence, with a set of norms, practices, and values that contribute to characterizing the profile

of adults who have responsibilities in the child's educational process at various levels. The emerging category is family relationship patterns, where the subcategory the family cannot protect the child stands out. The category extended family support has only one subcategory - lack of extended family support – that has a high incidence.

Table 4*Categories, subcategories, and enumeration units concerning family characteristics*

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i>	<i>EU</i>
Intervention-resistant family	
Does not accept help from services (resources in the community)	2
Family history	
Lack of positive adult models	2
Use of available health care	
No pregnancy surveillance	1
Domestic violence	
Assault in the presence of the child	1
Family relationship patterns	
The family cannot protect the child	8
The family does not control the child's behaviors	2
Parents are aware of their children's drug use	4
Young people use drugs because they have access to drugs at home	1
Family with sexual offenders	
The sexual offender is someone very close to the child	4
The family recognizes that young people use substances	
Parents are aware that their children use substances	4
Young people use drugs because they have access to drugs at home	1
Extended family support	
Lack of extended family support	12
Total Enumeration Units	42

Note. EU = Enumeration Units.

Discussion

According to the CNPDPCJ report (2019), the mother is the main caregiver of children and young people with measures applied in 2018, which is in line with this sample. The most frequent danger situations reported in 2018 were neglect, followed by domestic violence, risky behaviors, and right to education (CNPDPCJ, 2019). The results found in this study are in line with the report of the national commission, where neglect, risky behaviors, and school dropout were the most common problematic situations. The information in the case files of the children referred to CPCJ is in line with the literature (Goltz et al., 2014; Loman & Siegel, 2015) concerning the factors that jeopardize the development of children and young people. Regarding the family context, the resources available, and how they are integrated into the community where they work and live, the collected data do not differ from those in the literature. For Duffy et al. (2015), there is comprehensive literature on the risk factors for abuse and neglect in the four major risk domains, one of which is social characteristics (U.S. Department of Health &

Human Services, 2019), including violent neighborhoods, police involvement, and feeling of insecurity (Fuller et al., 2015). The scarce economic resources and lack of job stability in the sample of this study are corroborated by several authors (Benbenishty et al., 2015; Glad et al., 2014; Schneiderman et al., 2012) who consider that poverty, unemployment, and economic deprivation are predictive factors that jeopardize children and young people's lives. The exercise of parenthood reflects how the caregivers' resources correspond to the children's needs for a harmonious development. Regarding the exercise of parenthood, the appropriate parental skills to respond to children's behaviors are called into question, which corroborates the information collected during this study. Malo et al. (2016) found that parents' absence causes in children feelings of indifference and emotional rejection and role reversal by exchanging responsibilities with other caregivers. These circumstances expose children to psychological abuse in an indirect but no less serious way (Francisco et al., 2016). The lack of a healthy relationship between siblings and the lack of child routines are evident in the studies carried out to assess family functioning (Goltz et al., 2014), with

the lack of a healthy relationship between siblings being one of the risk factors reported in the case files consulted. The lack of dialogue between caregivers (21 references), as well as excessive, punitive, and inappropriate discipline (11 references) are in line with studies that establish an association between family dynamics and childhood/adolescence problems (Schneiderman et al., 2012).

Marital dissatisfaction is reflected in problems external and internal to the child, such as inadequate, punitive, and unstable educational practices (Pelton, 2015). Among those caregivers at high risk of child abuse and neglect are those who have a history of substance use and abuse (Laslett et al., 2014), which is also one of the factors influencing the overall effectiveness of follow-up programs (Goltz et al., 2014).

The fact that the caregiver has an unrealistic expectation toward the child can lead to the non-recognition of their behaviors and needs. The combination of other family risk factors creates a favorable situation for child abuse and neglect (Schneiderman et al., 2012).

For Duffy et al. (2015), there is comprehensive literature on risk factors for abuse and neglect, and one of the four major risk domains identified – parental characteristics – includes maltreatment during childhood. As revealed in this study, the presence of a mental illness in the caregiver is a risk factor that puts the child at risk (Glad et al., 2014) and leads to abuse and maltreatment when ignored (Jenkins et al., 2018). Family relationships and lack of extended family support found in this study are confirmed by other authors (Benbenishty et al., 2015). Regarding family characteristics, domestic violence, substance abuse, history of trauma suffered by the parents (maltreatment and institutionalization), and low socioeconomic status are associated with an increased risk of several referrals to child protection services (Pelton, 2015). Even if the family does not experience poverty, but the family lives in a high poverty rate neighborhood, the risk of child abuse increases (Davidson et al., 2019). The data collected in this study are in line with the literature. Research in this area is scarce and scattered and does not bring together the entire context of intervention of all CPCJs. As far as nursing is concerned, information is almost non-existent. Both in their intervention in first-line institutions (Primary Health Care) and the CPCJs, nurses are confronted with abuse and maltreatment situations that put children and young people at risk. Therefore, the existence of guidelines for their interventions should contribute to a rapid and reasoned assessment of families and their contexts. These findings are expected to encourage the development of consistent research in this area of the promotion of the rights and protection of our children. A limitation of this study was that it was conducted in only one CPCJ.

Conclusion

The dimensions built from the literature, which was complemented with the content analysis of the case files, comprise the entire structure of analysis that is intended to be logical and objective for an easy interpretation of the

results. Categories emerge as caregiver-related risk factors to consider in the assessment of the child at risk. This study aimed to expose the reality of a service for the promotion of the rights and the protection of children and cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. It integrates research findings on children's issues, as well as the environments favorable to the occurrence of the several problems foreseen in the LPCJP. The following main conclusions can be drawn: parents are the primary caregivers of children who are referred to CPCJ, whether in traditional, reconstituted, or single-parent families; the main sources for data collection from the case files are the interviews conducted by the technicians when assessing the caregivers, the security forces, and the educational institutions; regarding the events that triggered a referral to the CPCJ, neglect was more frequent, followed by risky behaviors, school dropout, and antisocial behaviors; as for referrals, educational institutions and security forces stand out.

Concerning risk factors, in the dimension Social and economic interaction patterns, the family's financial conditions stand out; in the Exercise of parenthood, the most frequent subcategory was the caregivers' behavioral patterns, followed by the needs inherent to the child's development and the discipline methods; in the Caregiver characteristics, communication problems and mental health problems stand out; in the Family characteristics, the lack of extended family support stands out, followed by the family relationship patterns.

The risk factors identified in this study compromise the best interests of the child. The identification of these risk factors is expected to contribute to the development of an assessment instrument addressing these risk factors clearly and concisely to help the technicians/commissioners in CPCJ restricted teams, of which nurses are an integral part. There is an urgent need for a concerted assessment that enables the application of a promotion and protection measure appropriate to the families' needs while promoting their well-being and harmonious development, considering that it is clear to all those involved in this area that the child's time is not the adults' time.

Author contributions

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