

Parent Group: ACT Program participants new learnings**Grupo de pais: aprendizagens de participantes do Programa ACT****Grupo de padres: aprendizajes de los participantes del programa ACT**

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to identify the new learning of participants of an ACT Program parent group. This psychoeducational intervention aims to assist in the development of positive parenting practices, providing children safer, healthier, more stable environments, without violence or abuse. Data were organized according to thematic categorical analysis. The results indicated that participation in the ACT Program enabled learning about parenting practices, the recognition of emotions of the adults and children, understanding about parenting styles, the importance of parental involvement for child development, and learning about child development and aspects related to exposure to electronic media in early childhood. As a contribution to the ACT Program research, this study presented a qualitative analysis of specific aspects concerning the content learned in the sessions and results of groups that included the participation of fathers in the Brazilian context, differing from previous studies with only mothers.

Keywords: parent-child relations, parent training, parent group, parenting, ACT Program.

Resumo: O objetivo deste estudo foi identificar as aprendizagens de participantes de grupos de pais do Programa ACT, intervenção psicoeducativa que visa auxiliar no desenvolvimento de práticas educativas parentais positivas, propiciando às crianças ambientes mais seguros, saudáveis, estáveis, sem violência e maus-tratos. Os dados foram organizados de acordo com a análise categorial temática. Os resultados indicaram que a participação no ACT possibilitou aprendizagens sobre práticas educativas parentais, o reconhecimento de emoções dos adultos e das crianças, a compreensão acerca dos estilos parentais, a importância do envolvimento dos pais para o desenvolvimento da criança, além de aprendizagens sobre desenvolvimento infantil e aspectos relacionados a exposição às mídias eletrônicas na primeira infância. Este estudo apresentou como contribuição às pesquisas do Programa ACT uma análise qualitativa de aspectos específicos concernentes às aprendizagens realizadas nas sessões e resultados de grupos que incluíram a participação de pais (homens) no contexto brasileiro, diferenciando-se de estudos anteriores apenas com mães.

Palavras-chave: relações pais-filhos, treinamento de pais, grupo de pais, parentalidade, Programa ACT.



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Resumen: El objetivo de este estudio fue identificar los aprendizajes de los participantes de los grupos de padres del Programa ACT, intervención psicoeducativa que tiene como objetivo ayudar en el desarrollo de prácticas parentales positivas, proporcionando a los niños entornos más seguros, saludables y estables, sin violencia y abuso. Los datos se organizaron según el análisis categórico temático. Los resultados indicaron que la participación en el Programa ACT permitió aprender sobre prácticas educativas, el reconocimiento de las emociones de adultos y niños, la comprensión de estilos parentales, la importancia de la participación de los padres para el desarrollo infantil, así como el aprendizaje sobre el desarrollo infantil y los aspectos relacionados a la exposición a los medios electrónicos en la primera infancia. Este estudio presentó como contribución a la investigación del Programa ACT un análisis cualitativo de aspectos específicos del aprendizaje realizado en las sesiones y resultados de grupos que incluyeron la participación de padres (hombres) en el contexto brasileño, diferenciándose de estudios previos solo con madres.

Palabras clave: relaciones padres-hijos, formación de padres, grupo de padres, crianza, Programa ACT.

Received: 09/03/2019

Accepted: 11/26/2020

How to cite:

Oliveira, J. L. A. P., Fiorini, M. C., Guisso, L., Vieira, M. L., & Crepaldi, M. A. (2021). Parent Group: ACT Program participants new learnings. *Ciencias Psicológicas*, 15(1), e-2392. doi: <https://doi.org/10.22235/cp.v15i1.2392>

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Parents play a crucial role in the child's development, as they are primarily responsible for creating basic conditions for survival, protection, socialization and affection (Dessen & Polonia, 2007). In an ideal context, they should act as the main providers of protection mechanisms, satisfying the child's needs in terms of affection, care and stability, factors that compose positive parenting (Linhares, 2015; Pereira, Goes, & Barros, 2015). The interactions between parents and children, characterized by parental involvement, have been widely studied, especially, in recent decades, the parent-child relationship, with a view to modifying their participation in relation to child care (Barbeta & Cano, 2017; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Schmidt et al., 2019).

As a way of promoting positive parenting practices, the World Health Organization - WHO highlighted the importance of parental participation in intervention programs that seek to expand knowledge about child development and encourage healthy family relationships (Pereira et al., 2015; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). A literature review by Altafim and Linhares (2016) identified 16 different universal parental training programs. Three of these programs present greater evidence of effectiveness (Linhares, 2015) and are recognized by the World Health Organization - WHO: the Triple P Program (Sanders, 2008), the Incredible Years Program (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Hammond, 2001) and the ACT Raising Safe Kids Parenting Program (Silva, 2011). Participants in the aforementioned intervention programs are the people that are legally responsible for the care of the child, as investing in safe and positive interactions between parents and children is the basis for healthy childhood development (Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014).

The ACT Program, the focus of this study, was developed in the United States in 2001 by the Violence Prevention Division of the American Psychological Association and is directed toward parents of children aged zero to eight years (Silva, 2011). The main aim of the ACT Program is to assist parents in the development of positive parenting practices, providing children with safer, healthier, more stable environments, free from violence and abuse (Knox, Burkhart, & Howe, 2011; Silva & Williams, 2016). The program seeks to improve parenting practices through the transmission of knowledge about childhood development, teaching emotional regulation strategies and positive discipline, in addition to encouraging participation in community efforts regarding the prevention of violence (Altafim, 2017; Silva, 2011).

Although the implementation of the ACT Program is expanding worldwide, there is still little scientific research related to the intervention. Among international studies, the results of quantitative studies have mainly demonstrated the effectiveness of the ACT Program in reducing negative parenting practices (Knox & Burkhart, 2014; Knox, Burkhart, & Cromly, 2013; Knox, Burkhart, & Hunter, 2010; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson 2011; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). The findings of Brazilian quantitative studies involving the ACT Program indicate the expansion of positive maternal parenting practices (Altafim, 2017; Altafim, Pedro, & Linhares, 2016; Camargo, 2016; Pedro, 2016; Pontes, 2015; Silva & Williams, 2016), the reduction in the use of abusive and/or violent negative practices by mothers and caregivers (Altafim, 2017; Altafim et al., 2016; Pedro, 2016; Silva & Williams, 2016), and the decrease in children's behavior problems (Altafim, 2017; Pedro, 2016).

There is a consensus among the findings of studies developed so far, especially with regard to the positive impact of the ACT Program on parenting practices. However, in the Brazilian scenario, as well as internationally, there are still limited results regarding the qualitative evaluation of the ACT Program. The investigation by Pontes (2015), which used observational procedures of parent-child interaction as part of the investigation, found no significant differences in the observed frequency of positive or negative behaviors between parents and children before and after the application of the ACT Program. However, the author observed an increase in parents' knowledge about childhood development and parental behavior.

Studies in Brazil have prioritized groups of mothers (Altafim, 2017; Altafim et al., 2016; Pedro, 2016; Silva & Williams, 2016) and to date only one study had a father as a participant of the program (Pontes, 2015). Therefore, studies that include fathers and caregivers are relevant in the Brazilian scenario.

Accordingly, in addition to the quantitative data obtained by the investigations, results that qualitatively demonstrate the perception of Brazilian participants in relation to their learning with the ACT Program represent relevant sources of information to assess whether the aims of the program are being achieved at the national level. It is also important to comprehend how the participation of fathers in the ACT Program influences their care and upbringing strategies for their children.

In view of this scenario, the aim of the present study was to identify what was learned by participants in ACT Program groups, based on one of the activities carried out during the program's sessions. The use of the term 'learning' in this study is based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). According to the author, skills are learned through observation and direct experience, and maintained or altered according to their social consequences. The learning development process therefore results from the interrelationship between external stimuli (social and environmental factors) and internal stimuli (cognitive processes). In the context of the ACT Program, parents are expected to learn new skills by observing the content and behavior of other participants, as well as applying these skills within the family environment. As the ACT has been applied in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts, identifying the learning evidenced by the participants is a way of improving the intervention, so that possible adjustments/improvements

can be considered for the Brazilian reality, in addition to supporting public policies aimed at families with young children.

Method

Participants

Six ACT Program intervention groups were carried out, four in public institutions (daycare centers and schools) and two in a private company, from October 2017 to December 2018, in a city in the south of Brazil. The total number of participants at the start was 69, however, 45 people concluded the program. Only parents that participated in at least six sessions of the ACT Program, as well as the pre-meeting, were included in this study, totaling 32 participants (27 women and five men).

Procedures

This qualitative study is part of a broader project called “ACT - Parental training program for parents of children from zero to eight years of age”, approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Subjects of the Federal University of Santa Catarina, under the Authorization No. 2.766.095. The procedures followed the ethical parameters on Research with Human Subjects in the Human and Social Sciences, of Resolution CNS 510/16 (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2016). The parents’ participation was voluntary, supported by the guarantee of their anonymity and by signing a consent form. The intervention groups were facilitated by three psychologists, doctoral students from a Psychology Graduate Program, duly certified as facilitators of the ACT Program, with the help of Psychology undergraduate students, trained as co-facilitators.

The ACT Program intervention is structured in a pre-meeting, followed by eight weekly sessions. Each meeting lasts two hours and has pre-defined themes. The intervention group should contain between six and twelve participating parents (Silva, 2011). The meetings are held in the following sequence: 1st meeting: Pre-meeting of the Program; session 1: understanding child behavior and development; session 2: violence in children’s lives; session 3: adult anger management; session 4: how to help the child with emotional regulation, including anger management; session 5: the influence of electronic media on children’s behavior; session 6: parenting styles and discipline; session 7: discipline focused on positive behaviors; and session 8: the role of parents, with respect to promoting safe environments for children. The ACT Program meetings are interactive, combining content exposure, reflections, discussions, group dynamics and tasks.

This study presents the results of the analysis of one of the program’s activities, carried out between sessions 1 and 7 of the program. This activity consisted of the following process: at the end of each meeting, the participants received a small leaflet with the question: “*What are two things/tools that you have learned today and that will be useful in achieving your goals for your children?*” (Silva, 2011). The parents then had a few minutes to respond and placed the completed leaflet in an individual box. All of these responses from the participants were transcribed and resulted in 342 sentences, resulting from the six groups performed.

Data analysis

The data were organized using the ATLAS.ti software version 8.0 and analyzed according to the thematic categorical analysis of Bardin (2011), which includes three phases: 1. Pre-analysis; 2. Exploration of the material and 3. Treatment of the results, inference and interpretation. In the first stage (pre-analysis), the data were thoroughly read, the body of analysis was defined. In the second stage (exploration of the material), the data were classified into 457 record units, based on extracts of the participants’ phrases, including fathers and mothers, which resulted in 16

subcategories, synthesized into 6 categories. In the third phase, the treatment of results, inference and interpretation was carried out.

The system of categories constructed was submitted to the analysis of two judges, who were researchers and family therapists. The inter-judge agreement rate was 87% and from this procedure some adjustments were made to the system of categories.

Results

The results were organized into six categories, as shown below, along with their respective frequencies: i) Learning parenting practices (160); ii) Recognition and control of emotions of the parents and child (100); iii) Parental involvement (70); iv) Comprehending parenting styles (47); v) Control of the use of electronic media (43); and vi) Comprehending the child's development (37).

Learning parenting practices

This category refers to the strategies of discipline, guidance, care and socialization learned by the participants during the parental intervention. Parents' reports on the importance of positive discipline were recurrent, highlighting the need to place clear rules and limits on the children, without the use of punitive strategies. The parents also wrote expressions that represent the appreciation of their children's positive behaviors, with an emphasis on praise and rewards, such as, for example, "*I learned to appreciate the qualities and not focus only on the defects*". The relevance of constructing an affective relationship with the children, with respect, love, affection, kindness, empathy and care, was also evidenced in phrases, such as "*being affectionate and giving a lot of love*"; and "*more respect for the children, giving them more affection*".

The recognition of the harmful effects of negative parenting practices was also observed through statements, such as, "*avoiding physical and verbal aggression*"; "*not hitting*"; "*not screaming*"; "*not making the child feel bad when he does not behave well*" and the understanding of the negative consequences of these practices throughout the child's life cycle was also reported by one participant, "*violence of all types causes marks and scars that don't go away*".

In addition, the parents' notes showed the denaturalization of violence, that is, the perception that neglect and psychological violence are as harmful as physical violence, as in the following sentences "*I can avoid different types of exposure to violence*" and "*violence is not just physical*". The importance of helping children in conflict resolution was also present in the participants' reports, "*I must propose solutions for my children to deal with conflicts*", "*helping the children to solve conflicts*". The participants stressed the importance of identifying the cause of conflicts with their children and/or between their children, as well as the emotions involved in the situation and constructing alternative solutions together with the child.

The parents highlighted the importance of dialogue between them and the child, for example the phrase "*knowing how to listen to my child in order to help him*". In addition, the participants placed dialogue as a fundamental tool in different situations with the child, expressing that "*dialogue is always the best option*" and "*to teach how to dialogue, I need to dialogue*".

Recognition and managing the emotions of the parent and child

This category included extracts related to the recognition of the importance of the identification, control and expression of emotions and feelings in the relationship with the child, for both the adult and the child. The participants' notes highlighted the terms "*calm down*" and "*patience*", which seem to demonstrate an understanding of the importance of parents' emotional regulation in managing their children: "*I learned to be more calm and patient, to think before I react*". Another notable aspect in the records was the consideration of learning to deal with their

own emotions: *“to control anger (my state of anger)”*; *“to deal with anger better, to adopt strategies to be able to deal with it”*.

The records evidenced the acceptance and naturalization of anger as an emotion that is part of human nature, which can be identified through physical (accelerated heartbeat, sweat, etc.), cognitive (thoughts) and behavioral signs: *“to be attentive to the signs that the body gives before we explode”*; *“to feel how my body reacts when I’m angry”*; *“helping the child to better understand their emotions through conversation, after calming down”*. The understanding about the importance of expressing emotions such as anger, in a healthy way, was also recurrent among the extracts: *“I learned to deal with angry feelings, mainly to understand the feelings, to listen to each other”*.

The reports also highlighted the recognition of the importance of the adult in helping the child to use words to express what they feel assertively, without aggression or violence. They also showed how the parents are emotional co-regulators of the child and how much they are involved in the emotional learning process: *“anger is a normal feeling and we should teach children how to deal with it and learn about it”*.

Parental involvement

This category includes the records related to the support and engagement of parents in carrying out tasks, activities and games that contribute to the child’s psychosocial development. In the learning described by the parents, there was recognition of the importance of dedicating quality time to their children, understanding the different phases of childhood development and qualifying the participation of the father figure. The understanding regarding the relevance of the father’s involvement in the care of children can be observed in the following sentence, written by a male parent *“the importance of observing and sharing, that is, before leaving my daughter to drift in information and conflicts, to experiment, reflect and then show; as well as enjoying it with her”*.

Parental engagement in tasks and activities with the children, as well as sharing experiences and games, appeared in the participants’ reports, when they indicated, *“to help with studies”*, *“teach to share”*, *“the importance of monitoring and watching films, doing drawings and playing games together with the children, and talking about this”*. In addition, the parents highlighted the relevance of playing in the child’s learning process: *“I learned to play with them and to respect them”*.

Comprehending parenting styles

This category aggregates the records of the parents regarding the different parenting styles used in the care and upbringing of the child, as well as the factors that influence the adoption of these styles. The participants showed that they comprehended that their behavior in different situations and in their relationship with their children was a reference for the child, as they tend to reproduce the same behaviors. The phrases *“we are the mirrors of our children”* and *“children tend to reproduce what they have experienced”* highlight the parents’ learning about the fact that children learn through models, imitating the behaviors of adults.

The participants also showed that they comprehended that they can choose the best parenting style, through their perceptions about the importance of the balance between authoritarianism and permissiveness in raising their children. The participants highlighted the desire to become parents with authority, as shown in the following notes: *“to use authority without being authoritarian”* and *“for me to become a mother in the style of the behavior of a parent with authority”*. The parents also evidenced the recognition that their parenting style was influenced by the way they were brought up themselves. Accordingly, they highlighted the pertinence of creating awareness about their parents’ parenting styles, seeking to change negative aspects and emphasize

positive factors. The phrase *“reflecting on my traumas, I can avoid a lot of mistakes”* portrays this comprehension.

Control of the use of electronic media

This category contemplated the parents’ reports related to the monitoring of the content and exposure time of the child to electronic media (television, cell phone, tablets and video games), as well as to the positive use of these media in their children’s upbringing. The participants showed that they comprehended the relevance of the monitoring, both of the length of time of access to the electronic media of the child, and of the content accessed by them. The phrase *“we should reduce the time he is exposed to TV and be careful with what he is watching”*, for example, highlights the parents’ concern about the length of time their children are exposed to electronic media and the content they watch. Notes such as *“providing moments of play without the use of media”*, which denote the need to replace electronic media with other activities in the child’s daily life, should also be highlighted.

The positive use of electronic media was also emphasized, through conversations with the child about the content of the media and the differentiation between fantasy and reality. The report *“showing children that there is fantasy and reality, that they have to play more and leave the electronic world aside”* expresses the participants’ learning about establishing a mediation about what the child accesses, explaining that certain situations observed on the television, cell phone or video games do not represent reality. Finally, the note *“the importance of monitoring and watching movies, doing drawings and playing games together with the children, and talking about this”* is an example of the parents’ perception that electronic media, if used well, can be configured as a moment of exchange of experiences with children, especially if they involve educational content.

Comprehending the development of the child

This category grouped reports regarding the parents’ comprehension of the childhood development process, including the factors that characterize the child’s behavior and emotional process in different age groups, in addition to the particularities involving temperament and contextual aspects. The records showed the parents’ comprehension that the child goes through several stages of psychosocial and cognitive development, according to age, so that each one requires specific behaviors and strategies of care and upbringing by the parents. The aspects mentioned can be observed in the following reports: *“to research/understand the child’s developmental stage”*, and *“to understand that each age goes through a phase/behavior”*. The importance of information sharing between parents and children in different age groups was verified, for example: *“The fact that I am learning about the theory and the examples of my colleagues regarding the phases to come help me prepare for how to establish healthy limits now”*. The participants also mentioned their perception that the way the child deals with and expresses emotions tends to change throughout their development, as in the statements *“how anger manifests itself at different ages”* and *“children express anger in different ways, according to age”*.

Finally, the data analysis showed that the participants understood that certain behaviors are expected of the child and are part of the developmental process, varying according to temperament and other contextual issues, not just age. The parents indicated this learning in the following sentences: *“Each child has their time and develops in different ways, we must respect each one”* and *“I need to respect the limits of my children, as each one has a particular development”*. The participants highlighted the care with the expectations placed on the children, such as: *“always analyze: what expectations am I putting on my son (and, eventually, frustrating me)”*. They also indicated the comprehension that *“a tantrum is a child’s rebellion usually due to an unmet expectation”* and that it is essential *“to understand the child’s language: what he wants to indicate with his behavior”*.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the learning of participants of ACT Program groups. In general, the participants' records were consistent with the main aims of the program, which include the dissemination of knowledge about the child's development process, the influence of parenting practices and parental style on the development of children, the emotional regulation of both parents and the child and the impact of electronic media on their children's lives (Altafim, 2017; Silva, 2011). When observing the names of the resulting categories and subcategories, it can be highlighted that the participants' reports faithfully portrayed the contents worked on during the intervention.

In accordance with the findings of quantitative studies carried out in the context of the ACT Program, the parents' perception of the need for improvement in parenting practices was observed (Altafim, 2017; Knox & Burkhart, 2014; Knox et al., 2010; Knox et al., 2013; Pedro, 2016; Portwood et al., 2011; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). Also in agreement with previous studies, it was possible to identify comprehension regarding the importance of the use of positive parenting practices, involving increased affectionate behavior (Knox & Burkhart, 2014; Knox et al., 2013; Portwood et al., 2011), as well as learning positive discipline (Altafim, 2017; Altafim, McCoy, & Linhares, 2018). The participants' recognition of the negative effects of negative parenting practices has also been evidenced by other investigations with the ACT Program, which have shown a reduction in psychological and physical violence in the upbringing of children (Miguel & Howe, 2006; Knox et al., 2010, 2013; Porter & Howe, 2008; Portwood et al., 2011). In this study, despite the analysis of the data showing that parents assimilated this understanding, it cannot be said that they reduced negative practices with their children.

With regard to learning strategies for analyzing and resolving conflicts with the children, the results are consistent with the international study by Gulliford, Deans, Frydenberg and Liang (2015) and the national study by Pontes (2015), which found a significant increase in the ability to solve problems with the children after the parents participated in the ACT Program. Another important aspect highlighted by the participants was the importance of dialogue with children, in agreement with the data revealed by Gulliford et al. (2015) and Altafim et al. (2018), regarding the improvement of family communication among participants of the ACT Program.

Considering the recognition and management of emotions, the analysis of the data suggests that the participants broadened their comprehension of emotions and, above all, understood that anger is a natural emotion, felt by all individuals and that when recognized in this way, they were able to develop learning about emotional management. The data suggest that the parents understood that emotional regulation skills can be developed and they can thereby become good emotional co-regulators for their children. There is evidence that emotional awareness is related to effective regulation of the emotions (Boden & Thompson, 2015) and previous studies with the ACT Program have highlighted improvements in the emotional (Altafim et al., 2018; Weymouth & Howe, 2011) and behavioral regulation (Altafim et al., 2018) of the participants.

In relation to the parental involvement, there was a perception by the parents regarding the concern with the frequency and quality of interactions established with their children, with regard to games and daily tasks. The relevance of strengthening the relationship between parents and children and their influence on the child's psychosocial development were emphasized by the participants of this study, corroborating the findings of Trahan (2018). In addition, it is essential to highlight the opportunity for paternal participation in the ACT Program, in some intervention groups in this study. The male participants were able to express their doubts, being recognized and valued by others in the experience of fatherhood. This data confirms the importance of including fathers in the intervention (Benczik, 2011; Manfro, Macarini, & Vieira, 2011), since national studies have only covered mothers (Altafim et al., 2016).

It was possible to observe that the parents understood the importance of the parenting style, from the contents worked on during the intervention. The participants were able to recognize that their own behavior in different situations ends up becoming a reference for their children. This result is highly relevant, as it is in accordance with the principles of the ACT Program, which conceive children's learning as a process that depends on the social context and occurs through observation, imitation of models and direct experience (Knox et al., 2011; Silva, 2011; Silva & Willians, 2016). The parents also identified the relevance of adopting the parenting style *with authority*, which presupposes the establishment of limits, however, without the use of authoritarianism and/or punitive/violent practices, corroborating findings from previous investigations (Knox & Burkhart, 2014; Pedro, 2016; Pontes, 2015; Silva & Williams; 2016).

Another important finding of this study was that the participation of fathers in the ACT Program helped in the understanding that the formation of the parenting style is the result of a series of factors, which encompass the cultural and socioeconomic resources to which they have access, the relationship with the child's other parent, the parenting style of their own parents, and the specific characteristics of each child (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). Therefore, the contents of the program and group discussions provided participants with the opportunity to realize that, in some cases, they were unable to provide a sufficiently satisfactory environment for their children's healthy development due to the family history issues in their different spheres. There was, therefore, an exoneration process by participants of the ACT Program, as they understood parenting to be a very challenging task (Pereira et al., 2015), which probably will contribute to the expansion of their psychosocial well-being (Barlow, Smailagic, Huband, Roloff, & Bennett, 2012) and consequently the well-being of their children (Sanders, 2008).

The inclusion of the theme regarding electronic media is considered one of the differentials of the ACT Program, when compared to other intervention programs that do not address content on electronic media (Altafim & Linhares, 2016; Knox et al., 2011). The participants' reports made it clear that they were aware of the care taken regarding the content accessed through electronic media by their children, as well as the control of the length of time of exposure to electronic media. This result is in agreement with quantitative studies, which revealed increased knowledge about the effects of electronic media on child behavior and development (Altafim et al., 2016; Camargo, 2016; Pedro, 2016; Porter & Howe, 2008; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). It can be concluded, therefore, that the inclusion of the theme of electronic media in the ACT Program demonstrated positive effects on the perception of the participants.

Regarding the comprehension of childhood development, the parents showed interest in better understanding childhood development in its different phases, as highlighted in previous studies (Knox & Burkhart, 2014; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). It can therefore be emphasized that the closer look at the particularities of childhood development on the part of the parents constitutes an important emotional and cognitive resource, which directly influences the bond between the parents and children, as well as the child's behavior, contributing to the child establishing gratifying relationships throughout life (Zuzarte & Calheiros, 2010). In this way, the parents had the opportunity to learn that certain behaviors considered difficult (such as tantrums, for example) are expected in typical childhood development, given that children are in a continuous process of learning behaviors, gradually understanding how people and the world work (Burkhart, Knox, & Brockmyer, 2013; Knox & Burkhart, 2014).

It should be noted that this study included fathers and mothers, with some groups being mixed (men and women), however, it was found that most of the people that completed the program were mothers. This data corroborates studies carried out with the ACT Program at an international level that also highlight the predominantly female participation in the program (Knox et al., 2011; Knox et al., 2010; Weymouth & Howe, 2011). Although studies indicate greater paternal participation in raising children, mothers continue to assume much of the responsibility for caring for and raising their children, in addition to performing paid work (Dessen & Ribeiro,

2013). Therefore, investments are needed in relation to the roles of the parental figures in the child's upbringing and the impacts of the participation of both parents for full childhood development, with the intervention program being one of the spaces for interaction and learning (Milkie, Bowling, & Denny, 2015).

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the learning of participants in parent groups of the ACT Program, a psychoeducational intervention aimed at parents and caregivers of young children, with the aim being the universal prevention of child abuse. The analyses indicated that participation in the ACT Program helped in: i) learning positive parenting practices; ii) learning positive discipline strategies; iii) the recognition of negative parenting practices; iv) comprehending the effects of the exposure to violence on children's lives; v) the emotional management of the parents and children; vi) understanding parenting styles; vii) comprehension of the importance of parental involvement in the children's psychosocial and emotional development process; viii) increasing knowledge about childhood development; and ix) knowing the importance of controlling children's use of electronic media.

Accordingly, the relevance of psychoeducational interventions with parents and caregivers of children can be highlighted, especially parenting programs that expand knowledge about childhood development, teach positive strategies for managing children and encourage stable, safe and harmonious family relationships. This study shows that the ACT Program participants perceived the most important aspects of the interventions and understood their relevance. As a contribution to research on the ACT Program, this study also presents a qualitative analysis of specific aspects concerning the learning carried out in the sessions and shows results from mixed groups (fathers and mothers) in the Brazilian context, unlike previous studies with mothers only.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it should be highlighted that only the reports of the participants at the end of the program sessions were analyzed, as well as the limited participation of fathers in the groups. The participation of fathers in parental programs is still an important challenge to be overcome. It is suggested that, longitudinal studies are carried out in the future, which include interviews and focus groups after the conclusion of the program and, also, follow-ups, to verify whether the learning referred to in the reports is maintained over time. New ACT Program studies could be performed with mixed groups or with just fathers in order to encourage paternal participation and promote the father's involvement in the children's cognitive, emotional and behavioral development.

It is considered that studies on parenting interventions can support public policies that help families in the challenging task of parenting, due to the numerous aspects that influence it. In addition, they could support the professional practice of psychologists, educators and social workers who work with families with young children.

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Authors' participation: a) Conception and design of the work; b) Data acquisition; c) Analysis and interpretation of data; d) Writing of the manuscript; e) Critical review of the manuscript.

J. L. A. P. has contributed in a, b, c, d, e; M. C. F. in a, b, c, d, e; L. G. in a, b, c, d, e; M. L. V. in a, e; M. A. C. in a, e.

Scientific editor in charge: Dra. Cecilia Cracco