

## Paternal Engagement as an Adjustment Factor of Aggressiveness in Preschool Students<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to investigate paternal engagement as a factor related to aggressiveness regulation in four to six year old children. Fifty fathers answered questionnaires regarding their involvement with their children and sociodemographic data and 26 teachers answered questionnaires about the social development of the children. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed. It was found that the fathers were engaged with their children and more frequently performed activities related to emotional support, discipline and physical games. The fathers with more working hours were less engaged and the more the father involved himself in the basic care and household tasks, the less his child presented externalizing problems. Policies and programs to support paternal involvement are essential for the transformation and consolidation of male responsibility in relation to children and the prevention of persistent aggression.

**Keywords:** involvement, fatherhood, father child relations, aggressiveness, preschool students

## O Engajamento Paterno como Fator de Regulação da Agressividade em Pré-Escolares

**Resumo:** Este estudo teve por objetivo investigar o engajamento paterno como fator de regulação da agressividade em crianças de quatro a seis anos de idade. Cinquenta pais responderam a questionários sobre seu engajamento com os filhos e dados sociodemográficos e 26 educadoras responderam questionários acerca do desenvolvimento social das crianças. Foram realizadas análises descritivas e inferenciais. Constatou-se que os pais estão engajados com seus filhos e realizam com maior frequência atividades referentes a suporte emocional, disciplina e jogos físicos. O pai com maior jornada de trabalho é menos engajado e quanto mais ele se dedica aos cuidados básicos e às tarefas de casa, menos os filhos apresentam problemas de externalização. Políticas e programas de apoio ao envolvimento paterno são essenciais para a transformação e consolidação da responsabilidade masculina com relação aos filhos e para a prevenção da agressividade persistente.

**Palavras-chave:** envolvimento, paternidade, relações pai-criança, agressividade, pré-escolares

## La Participación del Padre como Factor de Ajuste de la Agresividad en Pre-Escolares

**Resumen:** Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar la participación de los padres como un factor en la regulación de la agresividad en niños de cuatro a seis años de edad. Cincuenta padres respondieron cuestionarios sobre su relación con sus hijos y datos sociodemográficos; y 26 profesores respondieron cuestionarios sobre el desarrollo social de los niños. Se realizaron análisis descriptivo e inferencial con la ayuda del software SPSS. Se encontró que los padres están comprometidos con sus hijos y realizan con más frecuencia actividades relacionadas con apoyo emocional, disciplina y juegos físicos. Los padres con más horas de trabajo son menos comprometidos y, cuanto más se dedican a la atención básica y a las tareas domésticas, menos problemas de externalización tienen sus hijos. Políticas y programas para apoyar la participación de los padres son esenciales para la transformación y consolidación de la responsabilidad masculina respecto a los niños y la prevención de la agresividad persistente.

**Palabras clave:** involucimiento, paternidad, relaciones padre-niño, agresividad, pre escolares

Longitudinal studies that have followed children over the preschool period to the end of infancy and adolescence offer

consistent evidence for the stability of the externalization indicators, such as aggressiveness, impulsiveness, opposition and delinquency (Crick et al., 2006; Pihlakoski et al., 2006; Roseth, Pellegrini, Bohn, Van Ryzin, & Vance, 2007). Therefore, children with persistent aggressive behavior have a high chance of becoming aggressive and antisocial adults (Côté, Vaillancourt, Barker, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2007; Gallo & Williams, 2005; Gomide, 2003; Mercer, McMillen, & DeRosier, 2009; Pacheco, Alvarenga, Reppold, Piccinini, & Hutz, 2005), as there is a high probability of engaging in

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an escalation of deviant behavior such as substance abuse, violence, conflict with the law and delinquency (Tremblay, Gevais, & Petitclerc, 2008).

The notion that persistent aggressiveness in childhood can become violent behavior over time justifies the need for it to be recognized early (Dessen & Szelbracikowski, 2006) so that, where necessary, appropriate intervention can be performed as soon as possible to promote child health (Pihlakoski et al., 2006). With regard specifically to children, the concern with controlling and minimizing aggressive behavior in order to avoid future behavioral problems is increasing. This concern is strengthened by study results that indicate aggressiveness as abuse prevalent in schools and care services for children and youths, mainly in relation to males (Santos, 2006; Souza & Castro, 2008).

Aggressiveness is usually seen as a social maladjustment, however, it is often part of adaptive and functional behavior, and can not therefore be considered an indication of antisocial behavior (Pellegrini, 2008; Roseth et al., 2007). This indicates that aggressiveness should be distinguished as a state or a capability and that the aggressive behavior should be observable objectively; i.e., it is necessary to comprehend to what point and under what circumstances the aggression is maturative and adaptive for the individual. In this sense, studies on the development of aggressive behavior have sought to evidence the importance of differentiating between transient aggressive manifestations and stable manifestations (Picado & Rose, 2009).

According to the life cycle perspective, all children present aggressive behavior in a given phase of their lives and the tendency is that such behavior is modified and decreased over time (Bee, 1997). With the intensification of the process of individuation, at around two years of age, the feelings of anger and aggressiveness increase in intensity and frequency, motivated by the conflict between maintaining attention for themselves and the need to become independent (Szelbracikowski & Dessen, 2005). In most children, the use of aggression begins to decrease as soon as they acquire certain skills, such as the ability to control their emotions, to communicate through language and to express their frustrations more constructively (Szelbracikowski & Dessen, 2005; Tremblay et al., 2008). However, in some cases, this process of change and decrease of the aggression does not occur, so that, from an early age, some children intensely and consistently present aggressive behavior, manifestations of disproportionate anger, challenging behavior and a refusal to be obedient (Tremblay, 2000).

Externalization problems have been widely investigated in the end of childhood and adolescence development stage. However, the clinical relevance of externalization indicators presented by children under six years of age as predictors of possible future difficulties has only recently started to be considered (Tremblay, 2000). The preschool years constitute a crucial period during which children learn aggression

substitution strategies. Throughout the human development, it is the period between two and six years of age where the greatest decline in physical aggression can be observed (Tremblay, 2000; Tremblay et al., 2008), where there is also a marked increase in social competence (LaFreniere et al., 2002; Tremblay, Hartup, & Archer, 2005).

From the understanding of the family as the system that most influences child development in early childhood, this can be comprehended as both an environment that promotes protection and as a risk factor for the development of emotional and behavioral problems (Dessen & Braz, 2005). The family system constitutes a protective factor when parents are sensitive, attentive and create a structured environment, as this behavior is more likely to raise children who are well adapted in both the social and affective planes (Tremblay et al., 2008). Regarding the social development of the child, studies indicate that the father has a specific and more active role in relation to the mother, in the socialization and control of aggression during early childhood (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Paquette, 2004; Paquette, Carbonneau, Dubeau, Bigras, & Tremblay, 2003).

According to the Activation Relationship Theory (Paquette, 2004), the paternal and maternal roles are complementary and allow the child to develop in a typical way, for example, developing competition skills in the contact with the father and cooperation skills in the contact with the mother. According to this model, the father is the best placed to teach the children, particularly boys, to socialize (regulate) their aggressiveness; that is, to develop skills and confidence in themselves in competitive situations, resulting from risk-taking simulations, discipline and father-child fighting games (Paquette et al., 2003).

In this sense, paternal engagement, understood here as direct interaction, accessibility and accountability of the father in relation to the care of the children (Dubeau, Devault, & Paquette, 2009), seems to be associated with better psychosocial adjustment in adolescence and in adulthood (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Such data are endorsed by the study of Cia and Barham (2009), which demonstrated that the highest involvement of the father with his child is associated with the lowest perception of hyperactivity and externalized behavior problems in the school-age child. In addition to the positive repercussions for the children, high degrees of intensity and reciprocity in the father-child interaction also generate greater development for the father, as dyads are reciprocal development systems, because when one member goes through a process of development, then all involved develop themselves (Bronfenbrenner, 1996).

Despite the recognition that, in Western societies, the father plays an important role in child development and even though the transformations through which the ideal of fatherhood is passing have paved the way for research in the area (Souza & Benetti, 2009), there is lack of studies that aim to investigate the specific aspects of child development

in which the paternal figure exerts significant influence. Furthermore, although some studies indicate an association between paternal behavior and childhood aggressiveness, there is still no clarity on what the activities in which the father engages are that actually help regulate the aggressive behavior of the children.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate paternal engagement as a regulating factor for aggression in children of four to six years of age. It is hypothesized that children of fathers more engaged in their care are less aggressive in the interaction with their peers, compared with children whose fathers are less engaged.

This study is part of a broader project conducted in partnership between the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQÀM) and University of Montreal (UM) entitled: "The intergenerational transmission of violence: the relationship between marital and parental conflict and aggression among children aged four to six years of age". Accordingly, instruments and the methodological criteria relevant to the above mentioned project were used.

## Method

This was a cross-sectional, exploratory and descriptive study. It was characterized as correlational and a quantitative approach to the data was chosen, which enables previously established hypotheses to be tested, as well as offering a more specific focus on the phenomenon points (Sampieri, Collado, & Lucio, 2006).

### Participants

The participants of the study were 50 fathers that constituted two-parent families, formed by the couple and at least one child between four and six years of age. The father, biological or not, should have been living with the mother, biological or not, of the child focused upon for at least one year and only fathers who were 18 years of age or over at the birth of the focal-child were included in the sample. Additionally, 26 teachers of the children participated as, according to Javo, Ronning, Handegard and Rudmin (2009), teachers are considered better informants than parents to detect externalization and attention problems, as they witness the relationship of the child with their peers. It is important to highlight that some teachers responded for more than one child.

The recruitment of the participants took place simultaneously, between the months of June and August 2010, in thirteen educational institutions, seven private and six public, of four coastal cities of the state of Santa Catarina. Of these cities, one is characterized as having a population over 420,000 inhabitants, the other has about 210,000 inhabitants and the other two have less than 180,000 each (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE] 2010).

### Instruments

The following instruments were used for the data collection:

*Sociodemographic Questionnaire*: Formulated by the researchers in order to characterize the participants and identify correlations between the sociodemographic variables, the engagement of the father and childhood aggressiveness.

*Paternal Engagement Questionnaire (PEQ)*: Constructed by the ProSPère team and validated in Canada. It enables the characterization of the paternal involvement and consists of 56 items that form seven dimensions: Openness to the World, Basic Care, Discipline, Evocations, Physical Games, Emotional Support and Household Tasks. It uses a *Likert* type scale ranging from "never" to "always" to evaluate the frequency with which the father performs certain activities with their children (Paquette, Bolté, Turcotte, Dubeau, & Bouchard, 2000). The PEQ must be answered by the father and the Cronbach's Alpha obtained in this study was 0.89, demonstrating the reliability of the instrument.

*Preschool Social Behavior Scale - Teacher Form (PSBS-T)*: This scale was constructed by Crick, Casas, and Mosher (1997) to evaluate the social behavior of preschool children. It consists of 25 items divided into four dimensions: Relational Aggression, Overt Aggression, Prosocial Behavior and Depressed Affect. The instrument also includes two items related to the peer acceptance of the preschool aged child: one refers to the acceptance by peers of the same sex and the other refers to acceptance by peers of the opposite sex. It uses a five point *Likert* type scale, ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). The instrument should be answered by the teacher of the focal-child and the Cronbach's Alpha obtained in this study was 0.72.

*Child Behavior Checklist for ages 1 ½ to 5 years - Report for Teachers (TRF - Teacher Report Form for Ages 1 ½ - 5)*: This instrument is included in the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA), which is constituted by a set of instruments developed for the empirical evaluation of diagnostic syndromes that offer standardized evaluations of various aspects of the emotional, behavioral and social functioning of children and adolescents. In this study the version of the TRF used had been translated into Portuguese by the staff of the Laboratory of Behavioral Therapy of the University of São Paulo, Institute of Psychology. The TRF is organized into two total scales, the Internalization Scale and the Externalization Scale. In this study, only the last scale was used, which consists of two subscales: Attention Problems and Aggressiveness Problems. The respondents are asked, based on their observations concerning the child over the previous two months, to respond to 99 items on a scale that uses three variables: statement not true; statement somewhat or sometimes true; statement very true or often true. The question numbered 100 asks the respondent to report any issue that was not covered by the other items and

the inventory also has three open questions. The evaluation of the instrument also offers scales guided by the DSM-IV and the results are obtained in terms of a standard score or T score. These scores determine the categories: normal (T score below 65), borderline (T score between 65 and 70) and clinical (T score above 70), for the behavioral scales (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). In the Portuguese version the same cutoff points (T score) suggested by the original instrument were maintained. Furthermore, the results are analyzed following standardization of the test according to the gender of the child. The TRF should be completed by the regular caregivers or teachers who interact with the child between 1 ½ to 5 years of age in groups of at least 4 children.

The PEQ and PSBS-T instruments, which have no validation study for the Brazilian context, passed through a semantic evaluation process and through the translation procedure and, after the modifications indicated by the judges were carried out, the instruments were backtranslated to the original language in order to verify the equivalence with the Portuguese version.

## Procedure

**Data collection.** The families were recruited in 13 Preschool Education Institutions, seven schools belonging to the private schools network and the other six, to the public. The interviews took place in the homes of the families, where the time to implement the instruments was negotiated with them, always prioritizing their routine and available time. Regarding the data collection carried out with the teachers, they were contacted only after the participation of the father of the child.

**Data analysis.** The data analysis was quantitative, using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results were tabulated and subjected to formal analyses, with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18. To calculate the scores for the TRF instrument the Assessment Data Manager (ADM) software was used, which generates profiles (in the form of graphs) of the evaluated child that situates their scores in all the scales of the completed instrument, in relation to the normative sample (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Regarding the classification Clinical, Borderline and Normal, the percentages of children who presented these classifications were verified. The results of the TRF offered by the ADM and obtained in terms of T score (standard score) were analyzed using the SPSS program.

## Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), under protocol number 520/09. All the participants signed the Terms of Free Prior Informed Consent and were informed about the voluntary nature of the participation and the possibility of withdrawing at any stage of the study.

## Results

### Sociodemographic Characterization of the Sample

The mean age of the fathers was 37.20 years ( $SD = 9.39$ ) and the mean years of education was 11.25 ( $SD = 3.14$ ). Regarding the income of the father, this ranged between 510.00 and 8,000 reais, the mean being 2,092.40 reais ( $SD = 1,360.61$ ). Although variables such as income, education and age were not adopted as inclusion or exclusion criteria, the sample was characterized by fathers with relatively high education and income, and over 30 years of age.

The majority of the fathers (92%) reported working outside the home and worked up to 40 hours per week (54%), while 38% reported having a workload of more than 40 hours a week. The majority of the men (78%) constituted nuclear families with the biological father and mother of all the children. In relation to the number of children, 32% of the participants reported having one child at the time of data collection while 68% had more than one child. Concerning the focal-child, the sample consisted of 29 boys (58%) and 21 girls (42%).

### Paternal Engagement

The mean of the general engagement of the father was 4.07 ( $SD = 0.49$ ) on a scale from 1 to 5. By analyzing the paternal participation in relation to the specific spheres of care (dimensions) it can be seen that the father is more involved with greater frequency in activities related to Emotional Support ( $M = 4.48$ ;  $SD = 0.44$ ), followed by Discipline ( $M = 4.17$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ), Physical Games ( $M = 3.92$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ) and Evocations ( $M = 3.78$ ;  $SD = 0.82$ ) than in activities that relate to Basic Care ( $M = 3.55$ ;  $SD = 0.89$ ), Openness to the World ( $M = 3.39$ ;  $SD = 0.66$ ) and Household Tasks ( $M = 3.10$ ;  $SD = 0.74$ ).

The high score in the Emotional Support dimension reveals that the father is frequently involved in activities such as childcare, ensuring that the house is safe, calming the children, watching when they play in the street, providing first aid, soothing them, comforting them, saying "I love you" to them, and encouraging and intervening when the children presents some difficulty or discomfort. The Discipline dimension also obtained a high score indicating that it is the father that performs activities such as correcting the behavior of the children, scolding and punishing them when they do something wrong. The paternal figure also appears to be involved in Physical Games with the child, i.e., the father often engages in play fighting, tickling the children and making them laugh.

It was not possible to verify correlations between the age and schooling of father and their engagement with their children, however, regarding the relationship between paternal engagement and working hours, the Mann-Whitney test revealed that paternal engagement is usually

significantly higher when the working week of the father is up to 30 hours ( $z = 2.78; p < 0.01$ ) compared to fathers who work 40 hours or more. Thus, the lower the workload of the father, the more he performs emotional support ( $z = 2.61; p < 0.01$ ), openness to the world ( $z = 2.58; p < 0.05$ ) and evocations ( $z = 2.73; p < 0.01$ ).

The descriptive analysis showed that the paternal engagement is different according to the gender of the child because fathers seem to be more involved with their sons ( $M = 4.15$ ) than with their daughters ( $M = 3.95$ ). However, when comparing the means of the dimensions of the paternal engagement according to gender through the Mann-Whitney test, the only significant difference was found in the Discipline dimension, i.e., the fathers discipline their male children more ( $z = 2.12; p < 0.05$ ).

### Social Behavior of Preschool Children

The mean scores obtained for each dimension of the PSBS-T instrument, on a scale of 1 to 5, were as follows: Relational Aggression = 1.98 ( $SD = 0.71$ ); Overt Aggression = 1.67 ( $SD = 0.76$ ); Prosocial Behavior = 4.00 ( $SD = 0.59$ ); Depressed Affect = 1.92 ( $SD = 0.63$ ); Acceptance by the Same Sex = 4.36 ( $SD = 0.83$ ); Acceptance by the Opposite Sex = 4.18 ( $SD = 0.98$ ).

When calculated according to the gender of the child, the means presented small differences in relation to those mentioned above, in that the comparison of the means of boys and girls by dimension of the PSBS-T, using the Mann-Whitney Test, did not show significant differences. Therefore, according to the teachers, boys and girls present similar behavior and are only slightly aggressive, because both the physical and relational aggression presented low scores.

Through the TRF instrument, it was found that the mean of the T score of the Externalizing Problems scale was 53.02 ( $SD = 7.56$ ). The mean of the Attention Problems dimension was 54.98 ( $SD = 5.94$ ) and the mean of the Aggressiveness Problems dimension was 55.04 ( $SD = 5.45$ ). Regarding the DSM-IV guidance for the scales offered by the instrument, only one child, a boy, was within the clinical range in the Externalizing Problems scale and also in the Aggressiveness Problems dimension. One boy was in the borderline category in the Externalizing Problems scale, as well as in the Aggressiveness Problems and Attention Problems dimensions. One girl and two boys were in the borderline category in Externalizing Problems scale and in the Attention Problems dimension.

With the help of the Spearman Correlation Test, it was possible to ascertain significant correlations between almost all the dimensions of the PSBS-T instruments and the TRF externalization scale, indicating their reliability. The indices of significance are presented in Table 1.

Therefore, the higher the score in Externalizing Problems, the higher the scores in Relational Aggression and Overt Aggression and the higher the scores in

Aggressiveness Problems and Attention Problems, the more the children demonstrate physical and relational aggressive behavior. Furthermore, the higher the scores in Externalizing Problems and its two dimensions, Aggressiveness Problems and Attention Problems, the lower the prosocial behavior of the child and their acceptance by peers of the same sex and the opposite sex.

Table 1  
*Correlations between the Dimensions of the PSBS-T and the Dimensions of the TRF*

PSBS-T / TRF	Attention Problems	Aggressiveness Problems	Externalizing Problems
Relational Aggression	0.39**	0.61**	0.61**
Overt Aggression	0.32*	0.62**	0.63**
Prosocial Behavior	-0.45**	-0.40**	-0.52**
Acceptance by the same sex	-0.34*	-0.49**	-0.52**
Acceptance by the opposite sex	-0.40**	-0.53**	-0.59**
Depressed Affect	-0.15	0.03	0.03

Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

### Relationship between Paternal Engagement and Social Behavior of the Children

The Spearman correlation between the dimensions of the PEQ and TRF instruments revealed some statistically significant correlations, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Correlations between the Dimensions of the PEQ and the Dimensions of the TRF*

PEQ / TRF	Attention Problems	Aggressiveness Problems	Externalizing Problems
Emotional support	-0.03	-0.06	-0.04
Discipline	-0.09	0.15	0.06
Physical games	0.27	0.08	0.23
Evocations	-0.09	-0.09	-0.08
Basic care	-0.24	-0.33*	-0.29*
Openness to the world	-0.07	0.08	0.03
Household Tasks	-0.29*	-0.27	-0.31*
PEQ General	-0.25	-0.19	-0.12

Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

It was noticed that the more the father carries out household tasks, the less the child presents attention problems and externalizing problems. Also, the more the

father performs basic care, the less their child presents aggressiveness problems and externalizing problems.

The correlation test between the PSBS-T and PEQ instruments indicated that, with regard to pre-school males, there was a statistically significant negative correlation between Relational Aggression and Basic Care ( $p < 0.05$ ) and a statistically significant positive correlation between the Acceptance by the opposite sex dimension of the PSBS-T and general paternal engagement ( $p < 0.05$ ). Therefore, relational aggression is higher in male children whose parents are less dedicated to their basic care. Furthermore, the higher the general engagement of the father, the more the boy is accepted by female peers. Considering the girls, the Spearman correlation test showed a significant negative correlation only between Physical Games and Prosocial Behavior ( $p < 0.01$ ), i.e., the less the father performs physical games with the girl, the greater her prosocial behavior.

### Discussion

The data of this study evidenced that the father was involved with his children, since the general engagement score was high. It was found that the father was most frequently involved in activities related to emotional support, discipline and physical games, respectively, rather than with activities involving evocations, basic care, openness to the world and household tasks. Attention is drawn to the fact that the Emotional Support dimension achieved the highest score, even greater than the general engagement score, as it was expected that activities related to discipline, physical games and openness to the world would be the ones most commonly performed by the father, as indicated Lamb (1997), Paquette (2004) and Prado, Piovanotti and Vieira (2007).

The transformations through which the family dynamic is passing, especially driven by the increased participation of women in the labor market, have led to the need for reconfigurations in the parental roles, which include the requirement of a father to be more involved in the care provided to the children (Jablonski, 2010; Perucchi & Beirão, 2007; Staudt & Wagner, 2008). Accordingly, the finding that the father is more involved in activities related to emotional support and discipline demonstrates the transition process through which the exercise of fatherhood is passing, in which there is a blend of the traditional model of the father (disciplinarian) with another more current model that covers affective functions (Freitas et al., 2009, Staudt & Wagner, 2008).

It was verified that the workload interferes in the paternal engagement, i.e., fathers who work longer hours are less involved with their children. This finding corroborates the results of the studies of Bronfenbrenner (2005), Souza and Benetti, (2009) and Turcotte and Gaudet (2009), in which the authors concluded that the participation of the father in family life is related to the number of hours he spends working and, therefore, the father needs time to construct his paternity. Thus, the more the father invests

time and energy in his work, the less he actively engages in the lives of his children. Furthermore, the finding that the work of the father interferes with his paternal function emphasizes the notion that the level of paternal engagement is multidetermined, i.e., it results from the dynamic interaction of factors, such as the characteristics of the social and familial contexts of the father, the characteristics of the children and his own characteristics.

According to the descriptive analysis, the father seems to be more involved with sons than with daughters, which confirms a widespread idea in the literature (Goldberg, Clark-Stewart, Rice, & Dellis, 2002; Pleck, 1997). However, the difference between the engagement of the father with male and female children was statistically significant only in relation to the Discipline dimension, i.e., the father invests more in disciplining boys than girls. The finding that the father is involved in the same way with the children, regardless of the gender of the child, can be explained by the idea that the new generations of girls are more interested, due to the stimulation of the environment, in play that is performed by the paternal figure, which aims to activate autonomy and control of risk-taking in the exploration of the physical and social environments (Paquette, 2004). Thus, the trend toward a greater proximity between father and son as a result of sexual identification would be mitigated by the attitude of the girls towards an interest in playing, previously more associated with the male universe.

Regarding the social behavior of the preschool children, the scores in the Relational Aggression and Overt Aggression dimensions were low and, conversely, the scores in prosocial behavior were high indicating that the children were perceived as only slightly aggressive by the teachers. This fact is highlighted as one of the limitations of this study, since the families of children identified as aggressive were probably not included in the survey because their parents or guardians refused to participate.

The results of the present study evidenced a relationship between paternal engagement and aggressive behavior in preschool children, as the children presented fewer externalizing behavior problems when their fathers participated in the household tasks and were dedicated to their basic care. Specifically in relation to male children, the more the father performed basic care, the less the sons practiced relational aggression with their peers. Furthermore, the higher the general engagement of the father, the more the son was accepted by female peers.

It was concluded that the father who becomes more involved in family life, performing more household tasks and basic care, also spends more time with his child due to having a lower workload and may therefore be more intensely involved with the child. The study by Cia and Barham (2009) corroborates these findings, as it indicates statistically significant correlations between paternal involvement and the externalizing behavior of school-aged children. A higher frequency of communication between father and child and

greater participation of the father in the childcare and school, cultural and leisure activities, leads to a wider repertoire of social skills and a lower rate of externalizing behavior problems of the child.

A high involvement of the father in activities of emotional support for the children contributes to constructing a caring family environment that promotes prosocial behavior and the socialization of aggression, which may explain the low aggressive behavior scores presented by the children. According to Bohanek, Marin, Fivush and Duke (2006), a caring environment provides an adequate communication pattern between parents and children, which in turn supports better social interactions of the children with peers and lowers the probability of them presenting behavior problems.

Studies emphasize that the positive engagement of both parents may be a protective factor towards the resolution of the aggressiveness of the child (Szelbracikowski & Dessen, 2005; Tremblay et al., 2008). With regard specifically to the father, this study demonstrated that his involvement in activities related to basic childcare and household tasks affects the development of the children helping them to modulate aggressiveness and present fewer externalization problems. Furthermore, the participation of the father in family life is directly linked to his workload. Therefore, it is important that the father has time available so that he may establish quality relationships with his children.

### Conclusion

Studies regarding the contribution of the father in specific child development aspects direct attention toward the importance of the paternal figure in family life and encourage society to include the father in matters concerning children. Results of studies on paternal engagement enable the increase of public policies to support the involvement of fathers with their children and may be the basis for community action proposals to encourage their participation in family routines and favor the consolidation of male responsibility in relation to their children.

It should be recognized that there are many variables involved when researching the relationship between family and child development, and therefore it is considered that the influence of the father in the development of the child must be understood, taking into account the interrelationships of the contexts, the characteristics, and the active role of the developing child. In this regard, the need to broaden the diversity of contexts of study is emphasized, as well as the importance of exploring other variables which may interfere with paternal engagement, such as the conjugal relationship, the perception of the wife regarding the paternal role and her attitude regarding the participation of the father in the childcare.

Longitudinal studies with larger samples are suggested in order to monitor the influence of the paternal engagement pattern on the socialization of aggressiveness throughout the different stages of child development. Furthermore,

it is recommended that the factors that contribute to the modulation of aggression in contexts of social vulnerability are investigated in families without the presence of a paternal figure and in two-parent families where the father is only slightly engaged.

This study, which aimed to focus on the father-child dyad in the family context, showed that the contemporary father is involved with his children and that this involvement has repercussions in the modulation of childhood aggressiveness. These findings contribute to enrich the body of knowledge related to the effective participation of the father in family life, and also evidence the importance of the paternal figure in the socialization process of the child. The identification of the types of activities in which fathers are involved and that have implications for the development of their children enables the design of quality interactions in the father-child relationship contributing to child development.

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