
PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT GROUP: EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF HEARING-IMPAIRED CHILDREN WHO USE COCHLEAR IMPLANTS

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ABSTRACT. This study aims at understanding the experiences of parents of hearing-impaired children who use cochlear implants, members of a psychosocial support group of the Cochlear Implant Program at the Audiology Research Center/Cochlear Implant Section of the Hospital for Rehabilitation of Craniofacial Anomalies of the University of São Paulo. We interviewed ten parents who were participating in the psychosocial support group; the analysis of the interviews was based on the phenomenological method, with the following guiding question: how do you feel about participating in the psychosocial support group? As a result, six thematic categories emerged, namely: **exchange of experiences**, which unfolded into two subcategories: **learning and clarification of doubts**; and **motivation, emotional support, sense of belonging, feeling with others and reflection process**. The conclusion is that the psychosocial support group is a relevant care strategy for family members of children with cochlear implants. It is therefore expected that this research can bring contributions to science and professional practice by enabling the comprehension of the importance of support groups.

Keywords: psychosocial support group; parents of hearing-impaired children; cochlear implant

GRUPO DE APOIO PSICOSSOCIAL: EXPERIÊNCIAS DE PAIS DE CRIANÇAS COM DEFICIÊNCIA AUDITIVA USUÁRIAS DE IMPLANTE COCLEAR

RESUMO. O presente estudo tem como objetivo compreender a experiência dos pais de crianças com deficiência auditiva e usuárias de implante coclear ao participar de um grupo de apoio psicossocial do Programa de Implante Coclear do Centro de Pesquisas Audiológicas/Seção de Implante Coclear do Hospital de Reabilitação de Anomalias Craniofaciais da Universidade de São Paulo. Foram entrevistados dez pais que participaram do grupo de apoio psicossocial e a análise das entrevistas baseou-se no método fenomenológico, permeada pela questão norteadora: como tem sido para você participar do grupo de apoio psicossocial? Emergiram, como resultado, seis categorias temáticas, sendo elas: **troca de experiências**, que se desdobrou em duas subcategorias: **aprendizagem e esclarecimento de dúvidas**; **motivação**; **suporte emocional**; **sentimento de pertencimento**; **sentir com o outro**; e **processo de reflexão**. Conclui-se que o grupo de apoio psicossocial constitui relevante estratégia de cuidado oferecida aos familiares de crianças com implante coclear. Espera-se,

portanto, que esta pesquisa possa trazer contribuições à ciência e à prática profissional por possibilitar a compreensão da importância do grupo de apoio.

Palavras-chave: grupos de apoio psicossocial; pais de crianças com deficiência auditiva; uso do implante coclear.

GRUPO DE APOYO PSICOSOCIAL: EXPERIENCIAS DE PADRES DE NIÑOS CON PROBLEMAS DE AUDICIÓN QUE UTILIZAN IMPLANT COCLEAR

RESUMEN. Este estudio tiene como objetivo comprender la experiencia de los padres de niños con problemas de audición e utilizando implantes cocleares para unirse a un grupo de apoyo psicossocial que pertenece ao Programa de Implante Coclear del Centro de Investigación Audiológica/Sección de Implante Coclear del Hospital de Rehabilitación de Anomalías Craneofaciales de la Universidad de São Paulo. Fueron entrevistados diez padres que participaron del grupo de apoyo psicossocial y el análisis de las entrevistas se basó en el método fenomenológico, permeada por la pregunta orientadora: ¿cómo ha sido para que usted participe en el grupo de apoyo psicossocial? Surgió como resultado, seis categorías temáticas, que son: el **intercambio de experiencias**, que se dividió en dos subcategorías: **aprendizaje y aclaración de dudas**; **motivación**; **el apoyo emocional**; **sentimiento de pertenencia**; **sentir con el otro**; y **proceso de reflexión**. Llegamos a la conclusión de que el grupo de apoyo psicossocial es estrategia de atención relevante ofrecido a las familias de niños con implantes cocleares. Por ello, esperamos que esta investigación puede traer contribuciones relevantes a la ciencia y la práctica profesional, permitiendo la comprensión de la importancia del grupo de apoyo.

Palabras-clave: grupo de apoyo psicossocial; los padres de los niños con discapacidad auditiva; implante coclear.

There are countless scientific and technological advances that contribute significantly to improve the quality of life of people suffering from some form of disability, whether sensorial, motor or intellectual (Magalhães, Pérez-Ramoz, Neme, & Yamada, 2007). With severe or profound hearing loss as focus, we can mention the cochlear implant as a technology able to bring relevant contributions to the development of hearing and oral language.

The cochlear implant (CI) is a biomedical, biocompatible and durable electronic device that was developed to perform the function of hair cells that are damaged or not present in people with severe and/or profound sensorineural hearing loss and who do not benefit from personal sound amplification products (PSAPs), enabling access to the sound world and development of the oral language of children who have lost their hearing at birth or early age (Bevilacqua, Moret, & Costa Filho, 2011). Better known as "bionic ear", this electronic device is composed of an internal and an external unit. The internal component is surgically inserted in the mastoid bone, and the electrodes in the cochlea. The external component is formed by the speech processor, which receives and sends information captured by the device's microphone and by the transmitting antenna capable of sending electrical signals transmitted by radio frequencies through the external antenna (Costa Filho and Bevilacqua, 2006).

The Audiology Research Center (CPA) of the Hospital for Rehabilitation of Craniofacial Anomalies of the University of São Paulo, established on Bauru Campus (HRAC/USP, better known as "Centrinho") since 1990, works with cochlear implants. The Cochlear Implant Program [*Programa de Implante Coclear*] (PIC) of the CPA develops activities to serve the population with hearing disability, using research and extension activities, which helped it to become a reference center in this field throughout the country. The team is interdisciplinary, counting with a minimal staff of three otolaryngologists, thirteen speech-language therapists, three psychologists, a social worker and other professionals from the outpatient clinic of the HRAC/USP (general practitioner, pediatrician, neurologist,

nurses), as well as the participation of residents of the Medical Residency in Otolaryngology and the Multi-Professional Hearing Care Residency, involving the fields of Speech-Language Pathology, Psychology and Social Work (Yamada & Valle, 2014).

According to Yamada and Bevilacqua (2005) and Yamada and Valle (2014), the psychologist's role in the Cochlear Implant Program is to act together with the interdisciplinary team before and after surgery. His/her intervention is part of the psychological assistance during the following stages: handling of new cases; psychological evaluation of patients and of family dynamics; assistance for the decision-making as to whether a surgery should be performed; psychological preparation for surgery; follow-up during hospitalization; the first activations of the cochlear implants; and individual/or group psychological monitoring of patients and relatives throughout the habilitation/rehabilitation process.

Yamada, Bevilacqua and Costa Filho (1999) stated that "the psychologist is part of an interdisciplinary team, in a broader context, of a philosophy that permeates the Centrinho Hospital" (p. 95), highlighting warmth and humanization in the services provided. With this statement it is possible to see the importance of the activity of this professional in healthcare, specifically in the work of an interdisciplinary team of a Cochlear Implant Program, which comes to comply with the doctrinal principles of the Brazilian Unified Health System [*Sistema Único de Saúde*] (SUS) – universality, equity and comprehensiveness in the healthcare of the Brazilian population (Brazil, 2000).

The psychosocial support group is one of the services offered to patients and families since 2004; its creation was based on a study that observed the exchange of experiences in waiting rooms between family members, and on evaluations of individual services (Ribeiro, Yamada & Silva, 2008). The group is coordinated in partnership between Psychology and Social Work professionals, characterizing an interdisciplinary work. Its activities happen twice a week, lasting one hour and fifteen minutes, and the number of participants can vary from four to fifteen. For being characterized as an open group, emerging contents are discussed in a single meeting, considering that those who participate will form a new group, at each return, with new considerations and experiences (Yamada & Valle, 2014).

To Valle (2004), psychosocial support groups have a non-scripted operation, that is, participants have a space where they can express themselves as they feel; therefore, the discussion flows according to what is meaningful to the participants. The goal of said groups, according to Ribeiro, Yamada and Silva (2005), is to offer quality listening, to encourage exchange of experiences, to intervene promptly in reflective questions, besides providing guidance and information.

Sampaio, Damada and Yamada (2011) found that the most common emerging themes in the meetings of said group of parents were: hearing impairment, cochlear implants, family relationships, school life and parenting practices in relation to limits. Therefore, the work of the professionals in the group is to deal empathetically with these and other considerations so that the group can flow in a meaningful way for the participants and assist them when they have doubts in their everyday routine. Counseling is configured as a support tool not only used by the group's head, but also and mainly by part of the participants, because the advice of another member of the group has a more significant effect, given that it comes from someone who has been through something similar and managed to overcome and face the difficulty (Yalom & Leszcz, 2006).

The head of the group has the role of an integrating and facilitating agent. To Luteran (1999), this agent should have an empathetic and friendly attitude, knowing that he/she deals with emotionally-shaken people, accepting parents as they are and as they present themselves, and trying to put himself/herself in their shoes to understand their lives. The environment, to Souza (2011), should enable the growth of the group members, leading to a deeper and wider content exploration. Therefore, a friendly configuration and a warm environment are important for family members of hearing-impaired patients to express their experiences.

Bochelli and Santos (2005) point out that, in a psychotherapeutic group, members may seem hesitant at first, remaining silent, but then they become more involved, sharing ideas and offering support to each other spontaneously. They gradually cease to seek solutions in the therapist and begin to reflect on their own person. The therapist respects the individual's decisions, evidencing the individuality, the responsibility and the autonomy of everyone in the group.

A model that reflects well the contemporary group psychotherapy, according to Souza (2011), is the existential humanist approach, in which existential questions are of great relevance. In the

understanding of Garcia (2002), group experience, from the existential humanist perspective, has been a strategy to rescue the possibility of experiencing the “self” and “otherness” through an existential encounter with the other, within the dimension of exchange of experiences and, thus, such an encounter occurs not only with the psychotherapist or the group’s head, but, and mainly, with their peers.

Valle (2004); Ribeiro, Yamada and Silva (2004); Yalom and Leszcz (2006); Luterman (1999); Souza (2011); Bochelli and Santos (2005); Garcia (2002) advocate the importance and benefits of support groups. In this sense, this study aimed, through interviews, to investigate how parents feel about the experience of participating in the psychosocial support group of the Cochlear Implant Program. It is expected that this study can enable the understanding of what perception parents have about the group, whether such support tool is really positive and beneficial, and whether the exchange of experiences helps families deal with their conflicts, fears, anguish and common situations before the hearing impairment and cochlear implant of their children. In this way, the aim of the study was to answer these questions, allowing the comprehension of parents’ experiences in the psychosocial support group of the Cochlear Implant Program of the HRAC/USP.

Method

The research took place at the Audiology Research Center/Cochlear Implant Section of the Hospital for Rehabilitation of Craniofacial Anomalies of the University of São Paulo (HRAC/USP), on Bauru Campus, which offers the psychosocial support group service. With approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the HRAC/USP (Legal Opinion No. 441.632), the parents of children with cochlear implants were invited to participate in the study. After their acceptance and the clarification of procedures by the researcher, they signed an informed consent form and a registration permission form.

The participants were eight mothers and two fathers aged between 31 and 47 years old, who accompanied their children for the routine care of the latter, meeting the inclusion criteria – parents of children with at least one year using cochlear implant, which means that they have participated at least two to three times in the psychosocial support group. The determination of number of participants occurred during the interviews and was not guided by a sampling criterion, but by the criterion of “repeatability that expresses the operation of the phenomenon in its essence”, signaling the end of data collection (Boemer 1994).

To understand the experience of parents of children with cochlear implants, who participate in the psychosocial support group offered by the Audiology Research Center/Cochlear Implant Section, an open interview with the following guiding question was conducted, “how do you feel about the experience of participating in the psychosocial support group?” The interviews were voice recorded and occurred after the participation of the parents in the group, between November 2013 and February 2014. The time for the reports was free so that the interviewees could talk about the subject openly and the interviewer made herself available for individual psychological assistance, if necessary, that is, when the participant felt some discomfort, strong emotion and anxiety when speaking of tough situations.

Later, after each recorded interview, the material was fully transcribed for the analysis of the reports, in accordance with the steps suggested by Martins and Bicudo (1989) and Bruns and Holanda (2003):

- Understanding of the sense of the whole: a general reading of each transcribed interview for an overall comprehension of each interviewee’s experience.
- Units of Meaning Breakdown: a careful reading was carried out for the identification of units of meaning by the researcher while he/she questions the phenomenon.
- Transformation into psychological language: it consists of turning every unit of meaning found in the testimonies into the researcher’s psychological discourse, that is, the researcher expresses the psychological meanings contained in the testimonies.

- Convergences and divergences between units of meaning, configuring thematic categories: it consists of locating repeated themes, seeking for the essence, the meaning and the structure of the phenomenon.

- Summary of units of meaning: it consists of synthesizing all the units of meaning, integrating the meanings contained in them and constructing a consistent proposition of the structure of the phenomenon.

The intention was, therefore, to describe an experience that involves feelings and thoughts about the experienced reality and the perception of such reality inserted into a context and composed, in this case, of the psychosocial support group, which led to a reflection on its meanings and impact on the existence of the person interviewed (Martins & Bicudo, 1989; Bruns & Holanda, 2003; Holanda, 2006).

Through the parents' words, it was possible to reach the target of the investigation, that is, the meanings attributed by the participants to the researched situation, that is, the understanding of the phenomenon as it presents itself to the research participants. In order to summarize this meaning, at the end of each interview the participants were asked to define, in one word, the meaning of the group for each one of them. The researcher was not concerned about the reported facts, but about the meaning of the events for the subject, that is, what the experience of participating in the psychosocial support group means to him/her, and the relevance and meaning of this experience (Martins & Bicudo, 1989).

Phenomenology aims to access the meaning of reality and the world for a certain subject, the latter being regarded as the protagonist of his/her own experiences. The phenomenological researcher has his/her focus on uniqueness, on individuality, to understand the essential qualities of the phenomena studied, not to explain them (Rossi, 2006).

Results and Discussion

According to the methodological model proposed for the analysis and understanding of what it means for parents to participate in the psychosocial support group, six thematic categories were found: 1) **Exchange of experiences**, which resulted in two subcategories: **Learning** and **Clarification of Doubts**; 2) **Motivation**; 3) **Emotional Support**; 4) **Sense of belonging**; 5) **Feeling with the Other**; and 6) **Reflection Process**.

The thematic categories found describe, in short, the experience lived by parents in the psychosocial support group. They emerged through the phenomenological research that sought for the essence of the phenomenon, in the interviews (Martins & Bicudo, 1989, Yamada & Valle, 2014). Other studies will be presented below, providing theoretical foundation for the thematic categories and showing relevant points of the support groups.

Nobre, Montila and Temporini (2008), when researching about the therapeutic contributions of a support group for mothers of children with visual impairment, found that 95% of them believe that this type of work is a process that make it easy for them to meet other mothers facing similar difficulties, as it allows them to exchange experiences with each other. Therefore, for mothers who go through similar situations such exchange of experience helps with a more comfortable expression of feelings, which contributes to the finding that the parents interviewed mentioned that the psychosocial support group is an instrument that facilitates and promotes **exchange of experiences**.

Thus, for the participants of this study, the group is a physical, emotional and historical space where they can meet other parents, the routine of families with their children, their difficulties and victories, enabling, therefore, the exchange of experience between them. Parents with more time of experience can help others, who are in the beginning of the child's habilitation/rehabilitation process, and the difficulties overcome by a father or mother can be the same that others are facing. Such exchange is considered by them as something positive and a help tool:

"...the experience of participating is great. There are many experiences of which you can take advantage..." (Débora, Flávia's mother).

“...what I did and did not work out in my daughter's life can serve as an experience for other parents to do different...”; “... this allows us to take care of our children better... the exchange of experience...” (Lucia, Luzia's mother).

“... other parents share experiences with us and, it has been good for us: experiences about how to deal with the child when something wrong happens with the device, how the implants of other children are working, this has been helping us a lot...” (José, Lucas' father).

Therefore, it can be considered that the group benefits both those who offer help and those who receive it: those who help others have the opportunity to feel useful as someone capable of helping; for those who receive assistance, the exchange of experiences is rich as well because sometimes it is easier for parents of children with visual impairment to accept the considerations of other parents who have gone through similar experiences than those of a psychologist.

Besides mentioning the exchange of experiences as an interaction between the experiences shared by each father/mother, some of them, when speaking of this theme, pointed its outcomes, which were translated into thematic subcategories: **learning and clarification of doubt**. Such subcategories can be understood as consequences of the exchange of experiences, as illustrated in the reports below:

“... every time we come there is something new: you learn new things and can pass them on. I have a lot of experience to pass on... In this group you always learn and you share what you learn with somebody else...” (Rosa, Pedro's mother).

“... the group, it helps with the experiences of those with implants for a longer time, who, sometimes, have already gone through the same things we have...” (Cíntia, Lara's mother).

“... I have been learning, I learn every time I participate.” ...” (Lucia, Luzia's mother).

“... they share their story. I tell them about the experiences I had with my son, especially the difficulties and solutions. This type of thing has been shared within the group many times, contributing with information for people who are coming and people who do not have that experience yet” (Henrique, Mauro's father).

“... today it was all news: doubts I had, many doubts, and the parents clarified all of them through a simple report; what I wanted to know happened to be what the other wanted to share, so I got the answers I needed”. (Rosa, Pedro's mother).

The reports above reveal that, in addition to obtaining the clarification of many questions with the aid of other parents, for the research participants the group means continuous learning constructed at every moment. Regarding the learning promoted in the group through the exchange of experiences, Bochelli and Santos (2005) state that groups allow their members to observe the behavior of the other participants and, even if they remain silent, without active participation, members can learn from group interaction. Therefore, according to Souza, Santos, Moura, Campos-Brustelo and Savioli (2010) and Santos, Oliveira, Munari, Peixoto and Barbosa (2012), the emphasis of groups is put on the learning derived from the exchange of experiences, and on production of knowledge that is collectively created and transformed and which, at every contact between the experiences of the participants of the group, is enriched. Thus, what a father or mother expresses as something already experienced in relation to the cochlear implant can stimulate other parents to seek new ways of doing things.

Another thematic category found in the reports was **motivation**, which appears in the parents' testimonies on how they acted in a given situation, achieving positive results and, thus, stimulating, encouraging and making other parents more motivated and willing to look for other ways out and solutions:

“... at a certain point you end up losing strength, even wanting to give up. When we participate in groups like that, with other parents, we see that we do not have to do that, that we have to fight, to

keep walking... I have decided to fight: that is what I am going to do now so our son improves as much as the others have" (Clara, Luís' mother).

"... when a parent speaks we pay more attention because that person is going through that. So we do what the person is saying. Sometimes we listen to a professional, but the parents' or the patients' words weigh more in our heads..." (Lúcia, Luzia's mother).

"... I believe that those reports can help because we have had some victories. If we say that we made it they can fight for it too. Maybe they make it. That is why the group is important" (José, Lucas' father).

To Kunst, Machado and Ribeiro (2014), the reports of the participants of a group reflect common contents, with suggestions of alternatives for the solution of problems. In this way, parents can contemplate coping possibilities in the face of adversity and feel more motivated to continue the treatment of their children (Bochelli & Santos, 2005).

Some parents feel anxious about their children's speech development and discouraged when the long-awaited and dreamed positive result takes too long. For an effective result, several factors are involved, such as how long the child has been sound deprived, the age at which he/she underwent the cochlear implant surgery, his/her individual characteristics, access to specialized speech therapy, and engagement of families and schools in the habilitation/rehabilitation process (Bevilacqua, Moret, & Costa Filho, 2011). Contact with other families can make parents become aware of the importance of the family's role during habilitation/rehabilitation. The family's participation is a motivating factor for parents to continue to engage in the treatment and seek strategies with the objective of assisting the development of children with cochlear implants.

Santos, Scorsolini-Comin and Gazignato (2014) analyzed therapeutic factors in a support group for people with eating disorders and used the term "instillation of hope" to refer to the development of another perspective for the problem. Thus, in a support group people can see possible solutions. There is, therefore, hope and confidence to continue treatment, which can be related to the motivation that develops in parents of children with cochlear implants through their participation in a support group.

Joining a support group is important because it is a source of encouragement, listening and safety in which participants feel welcomed and strengthened, which was also observed by Alvarez, Gomes, Oliveira and Xavier (2012); through interviews, the researchers showed that support groups are great care strategies for drug users' families. The opportunity to share experiences, to be able to express feelings, to overcome some fears and to deal with difficulties can be considered a source of **emotional support**.

Silva, Paiva and Silveira (2012), when analyzing a support group for mothers of children with hearing impairment, observed that anxiety and fear caused by having a disabled child and not knowing how to help him/her decreases as they found a therapeutic space in which they elaborated their distress and worries through contact with other mothers. The parents' testimonies show that this type of **emotional support** happens in the psychosocial support group in question:

"... I have found encouragement in the course of the meetings; the experiences of the other parents calmed us down; that anxiety we used to feel about wanting for things to happen fast, we saw that it was not like that... the experiences of other parents made us lose this fear. So, in many ways, anxiety went away..." (Rosa, Pedro's mother).

"... Everything is new in the beginning, and we go stronger with the group" (Maria, João's mother).

"...when the child receives the implants, we feel very anxious, with lots of expectations, with fear too. Then we connect with the group, which makes us less anxious. It also helps improve our expectations and we begin to notice and see advantage in participating in the group... it is really valid emotionally speaking: we go home a little bit... with our soul cleaner..." (Cíntia, Lara's mother).

"...the experience of other patents, different from mine, ends up giving us greater confidence" (Henrique, Mauro's parents).

For these parents, each day participating in the group was meaningful in that they could strengthen their feelings during the journey that the habilitation/rehabilitation process of their children requires. Much of this strength was acquired through contact with other families in the support group; therefore, it can be considered that there is support in this teamwork.

Another thematic category identified is **sense of belonging**, which is manifested in homogeneous groups, as in the group of parents of children with cochlear implants, in which all of them go through the same situation – that of being a family with a son who uses cochlear implant. The participants of such a group are therefore faced with similar problems and share a common language. Many live in cities and/or attend schools where their children are the only ones with a cochlear implant. Participating in this type of group makes them feel welcomed, respected and, above all, understood.

Bochelli and Santos (2004) and Santos, Scorsolini-Comin and Gazignato (2014) claim that groups with participants suffering the same problems are an instrument that facilitates identification, which favors support to peers as they set common goals seeking for the solution of similar situations. Some parents illustrate these statements with their testimonies:

“... we know we are not alone: there are more people in this fight with us” (Rosa, Pedro’s mother).

“... in the group we see that it is not only you, but many people are going through that, and you see that your child is fine” (Maria, João’s mother).

“... we realize that we are not alone: other people are having the same experience too” (Cíntia, Lara’s mother).

“... I like it because sometimes you think that only your daughter has got problems; then you come and see that there are other things... you hear the other problems and see that you are not the only one there, that other mothers are going through the same things” (Roberta, Luiza’s mother).

When realizing that other families live similar situations, in addition to the feeling of not being facing the problem alone, the study participants showed sensitivity to the other’s suffering and put themselves in his/her shoes, enabling the formation of bonds between the other members of the group, characterizing the latter as a space for mutual support. In this sense, **feeling with the other** was another thematic category identified:

“I put myself in their shoes, I think: ‘wow, what if that had happened to me’? I think that we even get emotional because we put ourselves in the other’s place. So it touches me” (Maria, João’s mother).

“... and we also relate to their insecurity: we went through that too... I used to be like them” (Débora, Flávia’s mother).

“... I see them as family... sometimes I feel like those patients’ mother: what that mother is living today I have already lived” (Lúcia, Luzia’s mother).

“...just like that mother who was talking about, in the beginning, how she felt: then I get ‘a lump in the throat’. We remember everything we have gone through. My eyes still water when I see it. We live the same situation. We go back in time and remember everything...” (Ana, Flávio’s mother).

These reports reveal how the parents of children with cochlear implants experience the “feeling with the other”, managing to perceive the suffering of their fellows, proving to be sensitive mothers and fathers, wondering how they have gone through that and reliving a past in which they were insecure about the future of their children. Therefore, in such situations, it is common for parents to be moved by the other’s testimony, to cry together and, at the same time, to offer a word of support and strength because they identify with the same emotion.

The last thematic category found is **reflection process**, which takes place during the meetings of the support group. Some studies, such as those by Nobre, Montila and Temporini (2008) and Kunst,

Machado and Ribeiro (2010), point out that support groups help in changing and/or widening perception in relation to the problem in the group, promoting new meanings to complaints and feelings. Parents begin to reflect and discuss on prejudice, overprotection, shame caused by other people seeing the external unit of the cochlear implant, and the development of the child with hearing impairment, leading them to expand and change their perceptions about people with disabilities. The following reports illustrate the **reflection process** concerning prejudice and overprotection:

“... I had this concept, that I had to keep my son protected. I do not have to protect him! I have to prepare him for life... participating in the meetings gave me support to say: ‘I have to prepare my son for life...’” (Rosa, Pedro’s mother).

“... today a person from the group told me that my son will always be different... and that someone who has lost his/her hearing has greater difficulties than one who was born deaf. I did not agree. I want to prepare my son for this type of thing, so he can know how to deal with that, not to feel ashamed, not to get excluded...” (Maria, João’s mother).

Rosa believed that she should keep her child safe, revealing her prejudice against the disabled person as if he/she was “incapable of facing life without help”, an historical belief because of which people who had some sort of disability used to be excluded from social life, and actions targeting this group used to be basically assistance-oriented (Bernardes, Maior, Spezia, & Araújo, 2009). Participating in the group provides a new meaning for the concept of protection, excessive care aimed at the child with hearing impairment, that is, it brings about a new, broader and comprehensive perspective.

In Maria’s case, she feels comfortable in the group, freely expresses her opinion, and the questions discussed lead her to reflect on the future of her son and how he will face adverse situations. It can be said that, as parents participate in the group, the experiences accumulate, allowing them to expand their horizons and understand what they did not understand in the past.

Nobre, Montila and Temporini (2008) and Santos et al. (2012) emphasize that the therapeutic space of groups facilitates this reflection process, as it is a moment of encounter between people with common interests. The discussion of various subjects leads parents to reflect because, even though they have things in common, the families, the habits and the beliefs of people are different; therefore, it is natural that some opinions diverge, which does not mean something negative; this rather promotes new reflections because, according to Bochelli and Santos (2005), even when participants do not agree on certain matters they can benefit by proposing themselves to reevaluate their own ideas, emotions and the way to expose their thoughts.

Other subjects that are part of the **reflection process** develop in the group, such as thoughts and feelings related to the disability and to the shame caused by other people seeing the external unit of the cochlear implants, which is expressed by the parents as shown in the reports below:

“... what am I supposed to do with my disabled son?... everyone has some limitation,... a disability... nobody is efficient in everything. So this brought me light: even our existence as humans, not only as mother and father of a disabled person but also as humans” (Cíntia, Lara’s mother).

“...This is what I think: if they want to hide, that is something parents pass on to their children. There is no reason to be ashamed or not to show it. I think it depends much on the family.” (Roberta, Luzia’s mother)

Initially, Cíntia questioned the development possibilities that her “disabled son” had. Later, she seems to have been able to perceive him as a person with a “limitation”, a “disability”, but capable of living experiences in his context, as every human being does, who also has his/her limitations. Thus, as a member of the group she was able to reflect on the human being, on his/her capabilities and limitations, beyond disability.

To Roberta, the fact that a child is ashamed of the external unit of the cochlear implant is transmitted by the family. She understands that prejudice is present in the family that has trouble accepting the external unit of the cochlear implant, which is visible and people can see. This type of argument is common in group discussions; parents talk about prejudice in different contexts and the difficulties of dealing with such situations, stimulating reflection among the group participants.

From the emerging thematic categories we sought a comprehensive synthesis of the parents' experience of participating in the psychosocial support group and the meanings attributed by them to such an experience. The reports showed the importance of the group as a moment for exchange of experiences between families, favoring the learning of how to handle situations of the everyday life of children with cochlear implants. The group, according to these parents, clarifies doubts, motivates them to participate in the habilitation/rehabilitation process of their children, and proves a therapeutic space in which they could receive and offer emotional support and share similar situations, becoming more sensitive and putting themselves in the other's shoes.

The group configured as an important awareness tool, favoring the reflection process with regard to hearing impairment and use of cochlear implants. Thus, the meaning of the group for the participants of this study can be summarized with the following words: support, help, wisdom, exchange of experiences, knowledge, interest, advantage, enlightenment, family and hope. Words which give meaning to the experience of participating in the psychosocial support group of the Cochlear Implant Program of the HRAC/USP.

Final considerations

It is worth highlighting the purpose of the psychosocial support group developed at the Audiology Research Center, according to Ribeiro, Yamada and Silva (2005): a proposal to offer qualified listening, to encourage exchange of experiences, to intervene promptly in reflective questions, in addition to providing guidance and information on emerging issues. According to the results of the interviews with the parents participating in this study, it was possible to conclude that this work has been effectively fulfilling its proposal.

The group has been a support for parents who come every meeting with various themes they would like to share with their peers, whether about their suffering and difficulties, whether about their achievements during the habilitation/rehabilitation process of their children. It is a space for learning with each other, to acquire knowledge about the challenges that the use of cochlear implants brings, to express their thoughts and feelings, to feel welcomed and supported by the other members of the group who share similar situations.

Given their central role in the habilitation/rehabilitation process of children with cochlear implants, families must be considered as partners that demand care actions due to their daily experiences imposed by the hearing impairment and by the cochlear implant. In this way, the psychosocial support group is an important support strategy for families and a useful tool for the interdisciplinary team.

The support group as a therapeutic resource can contribute to a humanized and welcoming assistance practice, being a beneficial aid tool (Nobre, Montila, & Temporini, 2008; Santos et al., 2012; Alvarez et al., 2012; Santos, Scorsolini-Comin, & Gazignato, 2014) when used by a team that needs to master such technology in order to contribute to the habilitation/rehabilitation process of children with cochlear implants. Thus, it is expected that this study can bring scientific contributions concerning the theme of support groups for parents and serve as inspiration for future studies that might complement the results herein exposed. Furthermore, considering the benefits of the support group, it should be included in different healthcare services in which patients and families could benefit from it.

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