

## CHALLENGES OF PARENTING IN THE FIRST MONTHS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** Social distancing is one of the measures recommended by health authorities to contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2. The imperative of domestic confinement has unleashed profound changes in the routine of families, imposing new challenges to the exercise of parenthood. Mothers have suddenly found themselves responsible for the schooling of their children in the domestic setting, simultaneously with the maintenance of their work remotely. This study aims to understand the repercussions of the confinement caused by COVID-19 on parenting and childcare practices. Individual interviews were conducted by digital means with 20 mothers aged 29 to 45. The findings were grouped and categorized by thematic analysis. We conclude that global health crisis precipitated new demands for school-age child care. Ruptures and (dis)continuities in the routine affected the family members in different ways, generating psychic suffering in mothers and children amidst a scenario of diffuse threats and uncertainties regarding the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; social isolation; parenting.

## DESAFIOS DA PARENTALIDADE NOS PRIMEIROS MESES DA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

**RESUMO.** Distanciamento social é uma das medidas preconizadas pelas autoridades sanitárias para conter a disseminação do SARS-CoV-2. O imperativo do confinamento doméstico desencadeou profundas alterações na rotina das famílias, impondo novos desafios ao exercício da parentalidade. Mães se viram, repentinamente, responsáveis pelo acompanhamento escolar dos filhos no cenário doméstico, simultaneamente com a manutenção de seu trabalho por via remota. Este estudo tem como objetivo compreender as repercussões do confinamento provocado pela COVID-19 sobre a parentalidade e as práticas de cuidado de crianças. Foram realizadas entrevistas individuais por meio digital com 20 mães de 29 a 45 anos. Os dados foram agrupados e categorizados por meio da análise temática. Concluímos que a crise sanitária global precipitou novas demandas de cuidados dos filhos em idade escolar. Rupturas e (des)continuidades da rotina afetaram de forma diferenciada os membros da família, gerando sofrimento psíquico em mães e filhos em meio a um cenário de ameaças difusas e incertezas em relação ao futuro.

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**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; isolamento social; parentalidade.

## **DESAFÍOS DE LA PARENTALIDAD EN LOS PRIMEROS MESES DE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19**

**RESUMEN.** El distanciamiento social es una de las medidas recomendadas por las autoridades sanitarias para contener la propagación del nuevo coronavirus. El imperativo del encierro doméstico ha provocado profundos cambios en la rutina de las familias, imponiendo nuevos retos al ejercicio de la paternidad. Las madres se han encontrado de repente con la responsabilidad de la asistencia escolar de sus hijos en el ámbito doméstico, simultáneamente con el mantenimiento de su trabajo a distancia. Este estudio pretende comprender las repercusiones del confinamiento provocado por el COVID-19 en las prácticas de crianza y cuidado de los niños. Se realizaron entrevistas individuales por medios digitales a 20 madres de entre 29 y 45 años. Los datos se agruparon y clasificaron mediante un análisis temático. Concluimos que la crisis sanitaria mundial precipitó nuevas demandas de atención a los niños en edad escolar. Las rupturas y (dis)continuidades en la rutina afectaron a los miembros de la familia de diferentes maneras, generando sufrimiento psíquico en madres e hijos en medio del escenario de amenazas difusas e incertidumbres respecto al futuro.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; aislamiento social; cuidado parental.

### **Introduction**

The escalating spread of the virus SARS-CoV-2, the etiologic agent of COVID-19, has led to intense and sudden changes in daily life since 2020. It is a highly contagious and poorly understood infectious disease for which there was initially no vaccine to protect the population or drugs with proven efficacy in treating its symptoms (Barlett et al., 2020; Sola et al., 2023). COVID-19 is not limited to a health problem, given its systemic repercussions (Oliveira et al., 2020a). It is considered an unprecedented shock to societies and economies, triggering a crisis that affects vulnerable groups (Sola et al., 2024). The entire population, albeit disproportionately, was affected. Women in particular were at the center of pandemic response efforts (United Nations Women, 2020).

Social distancing was adopted by health authorities in countries affected by the pandemic, including Brazil, and resulted in the abrupt closure of schools, stadiums, accommodations, suspension of work and non-essential business, and the cancellation of flights and travel, with significant restrictions on the movement and circulation of people (Oliveira-Cardoso et al., 2020). In the domestic scenario, family interactions intensified with the suspension of classes and the adoption of home offices in most formal labor markets. In education, remote teaching was adopted in the primary and secondary levels, and the responsibility for monitoring and facilitating classes and teaching tasks was transferred to the family. Thus, the shared domestic space began to concentrate work activities of adults, education and studies of children, and leisure time, creating tensions in family life, especially in parent-child relationships (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021), overburdening women who are primarily responsible for care.

### **Psychoanalytic reflections on parenthood**

Parenthood is a fruitful field for reflecting on the subjective impact of the pandemic. This construct has been used in the psychoanalytic field in France since the 1960s to define the experience of becoming a father or mother (Gorin et al., 2015). The psychic construction of parenthood articulates the projects constituted in parental imagination about children, the affective relationships established during their development, and the social and economic issues that shape the construction of bonds. Thinking about the experience of parenthood in the context of the pandemic requires a reflection on the different singularities that families experience in the current scenario to understand their importance in the processes of subjective constitution, a theme that runs through the work of Freud and contemporary authors. Regarding the bond with the maternal figure, Freud (1996) considers that the mother is “[...] established throughout life as the first and strongest object of love and as the prototype of all subsequent relationships” (Freud, 1996, p. 202). Interwoven with the reflections presented in this text, the theories of the Oedipus complex and narcissism have contributed to the understanding of the process of subjective constitution and of how early experiences have consequences in adult life, in addition to reverberating in the relationship that the subject establishes with external reality and in the bonds established throughout their life path.

The psychic constitution of the subject is based on the initial bonds and the particular way in which the child is inserted into the family context. From the very beginning of the formation of the conjugal bond between the loving couple, the child permeates the imagination of the parents and is already part of family psychism before the child's arrival (Lebovici, 2004). In the construction of the parent-child bond, the foundations of interpersonal relationships are established; this bond acts as an organizer of the child's psychism, serving as a support network and of conscious and unconscious subjectivities that determine the child's psychic constitution. Thus, the “[...] family psychism aims to help the child build their own psychic experiences, to better process their anxieties, and, above all, to enable and contribute to the constitution of their internal world” (Scholz et al., 2015, p. 17).

When dealing with parenthood, it is necessary to consider that maternal and paternal figures play different roles in the subjectivation process, each through the exercise of their functions, which are equally relevant and complementary to the constitution of the child's psychism (Simões & Santos, 2021). The harmonious exercise of these functions allows the construction of a bonding fabric in which the child can feel supported to ‘be in the world’ (Winnicott, 2021). Care is offered in an intersubjective space that configures the family environment, which in turn is inserted into the macrosocial context with its weaves, nuances, and characteristics. However, the child is not a passive reservoir of the parental care they receive but an active individual in interaction with the parents and the world.

Parental care is an articulating element that intersects the past of the family heritage, the lived experiences of the present, and the expectations of the future, configuring the unique experiences of parenthood and filiation. The parental psychic apparatus precedes the subject, who from birth is already inserted in a group and the game of bonding that precedes it, as heir and bearer of the group's desires and ideal of continuity, and reciprocally, the whole is the plot that sustains the symbolic place to be occupied by the child (Kaës, 2011).

## **Parenthood and the pandemic: weaving reflections in the heat of the moment**

During the first wave of the pandemic, the younger population was at a lower risk of developing complications from exposure to the novel coronavirus. Despite this apparent lower susceptibility to the most severe manifestations of COVID-19, children and adolescents are among the most vulnerable populations to the emotional impact of traumatic events that disrupt their daily lives. This situation reinforces the importance of the parental role in coping with health crises within the family sphere (Bartlett et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to take into account the degree of latent suffering of children and young people that is triggered and/or exacerbated by disruptive changes in family routines and social dynamics (Oliveira et al., 2020b, 2020c).

To consider the subjective conditions of children and parents living with the unprecedented experience of a pandemic, it is essential to take into account the historical construction of the family and to pay attention to the fact that the reactions triggered by the exceptional nature of the pandemic reflect the place occupied by the crisis experience in the family's psychic apparatus (Kaës, 2011). Family institutions have undergone profound transformations in recent decades, in line with the social and cultural changes that have affected the world of work and scientific knowledge. There is also a process of transformation of bonding experiences that affects how the parent-child bond is subjectively configured in contemporary times.

Some socio-historical markers are crucial for understanding this process, such as the control women gain over their bodies through the regulation of contraception with the birth control pill, the right to divorce, and the massive insertion of female labor into the labor market. In Brazil, women make up two-thirds of the labor force engaged in paid care work (Santos et al., 2020a).

The recent context of transformations in the organization of the family has led to an increase in the protagonism of the maternal figure and the concomitant weakening and decline of the paternal figure (Simões & Santos, 2021). Faced with many mutations, the contemporary family can be considered a place of decentralized and horizontal power based on the contemporary values of individualism, generational indifference, and consumerist logic (Roudinesco, 2003). These phenomena have changed the modes of caregiving, making family bonds more fragile and unstable, and resulting in new contours of subjective constitution.

Given these considerations, this study aimed to understand the consequences of confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on parenthood and childcare practices.

## **Method**

This was a cross-sectional, qualitative, descriptive, exploratory study.

### **Participants**

The research corpus consisted of 20 adult women, mothers, and workers, aged between 29 and 45 years, from different cities in the interior of São Paulo. The eligibility criteria were as follows: mother of at least one child up to the age of ten, having an active employment relationship, and working from home during the first months of the pandemic. Women who worked only part-time from home or were unemployed were excluded. Data collection was interrupted when saturation was reached (Fontanella et al., 2011). Of the total sample, 13 women were married and lived with their husbands, two were single and living with their parents, and five were divorced and responsible for full-time childcare. The number of children ranged from one to three, and family income ranged from R\$ 3,000 to R\$ 25,000.

## Instruments

The socio-demographic data form consisted of items such as age, education, religion, occupation, income, marital status, number and age of children, and family structure.

Open interview: started with the trigger question 'Tell me about your family experiences with social isolation due to the pandemic.'

## Procedure

Data were collected between April and July 2020. Interviewees were recruited using a sampling procedure known as the snowball technique, which begins with an initial referral from a third party. After the first interview, more names of the participants were suggested (Maia, 2020).

The interviews were conducted through a digital platform or video/audio call on a smartphone app with an average duration of 90 minutes, respecting the preferences of the participants. The data were digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

Data analysis was based on the proposal for thematic content analysis, according to the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include a detailed process that goes from the pre-analysis and exploration of the material to the treatment of the results obtained, based on the theoretical framework adopted. Thus, the interviews were thoroughly read and reread in search of recurrences in the content. After this exploratory phase, the data were organized into units of meaning, which resulted in thematic categories. These categories were constructed based on the intersubjective consensus of three researchers and allowed for the visibility of the perspective of mothers with children in the early stages of development during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The focus was on the meanings attributed to the effects of the COVID-19 confinement on parenthood and childcare. Based on the theoretical framework and the objective of the study, the analysis involved the articulation between the categories obtained and the scientific production on the topic of motherhood in contemporary times, at the confluence of psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives, having the theories of the Psychoanalysis of Bond Configurations (Kaës, 2011) as an organizing axis.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee (CAEE 30248920.8.0000.5401).

## Results and discussion

The thematic analysis allowed the development of two categories that summarize the challenges of parenthood during the pandemic and their impact on childcare practices and family relationships.

### Reviewing priorities and ideals: new challenges of parenthood amid the pandemic

Dealing with the critical situation triggered by the health crisis challenged some ideals and the way they were configured in families until the outbreak of the pandemic. In the participants' reports, we found that the family nucleus was organized around work, school, and some values related to the search for personal fulfillment. Much of the mother's investment was focused on obtaining financial gain to meet the material ideals of consumption to ensure the family's comfort, while the care of young children was delegated to others in the personal social support network - nannies, grandparents, and older siblings - or to support institutions such as schools and daycare centers. This organization demarcates the experience of parenthood. By fulfilling the family's desire for financial support, parents concretize certain values and ideals and seek to be recognized as *good*

*parents*. With the advent of the pandemic, some mothers began to suspect the fragility of the ideals on which their way of life was based.

The pandemic has begun and upset our plans. From one day to the next, there was no school, travel, or visits to grandparents. We were left alone, locked up at home, with the responsibility of protecting ourselves, our children, and also making sure that they got through this experience without any major damage [...] (Beatriz, 45 years old, visual artist).

Other mothers summarize the subjective resonances of this peculiar moment for families: “[...] the children and I are together practically 24 hours a day” (Maíra, 35 years old, bank manager). “I see how important I am to her. How I need to hold on tight, so as not to show that I am afraid. I have to give her security and joy” (Talita, 37 years old, teacher).

A relevant piece of information for understanding the emotional impact of the pandemic on families is the alarming unemployment rate in Brazil. Economic stagnation has led to a rapid deterioration in the economic situation of families. Considering that 87.4% of Brazilian families are single-parent families (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2014) and that mothers have to work outside the home, the sudden closure of schools and daycare centers has left the interviewees in a situation where they have no one to leave their children while they work. At the same time, they found that they were not always able to help them adequately with distance learning.

Thus, when discussing the pandemic in Brazil, it is important to take into account that the country's social inequality scenario has repercussions on health inequalities, putting economically disadvantaged families at greater risk, since issues such as employability, income, access to basic sanitation, and quality food have a direct impact on health. Under these conditions, parenthood becomes even more challenging for mothers in paid employment, as the systemic crisis highlights preexisting inequalities. In some cases, parenthood can be seen as a daily struggle for survival, as mothers try to ensure the material conditions for their children to meet their basic needs and remain safe while they work, since it is their role in providing for the family's subsistence. In this scenario, the closure of schools was an obstacle to continuing their work with the safety they had before.

Zanetti and Gomes (2011) point to the ‘weakening of parental functions,’ referring to the impasse experienced by parents in the contemporary era. Crossed by the pressures of cultural discourses, behavioral models, professional prescriptions, and social imperatives, mothers find themselves absorbed by a myriad of demands that generate insecurity and difficulties in exercising caregiving functions. They often seek guidance from educational and health professionals regarding how to deal with their children.

In a contemporary scenario marked by consumerism and individualism, the weakening of the father figure and patriarchal power, the mother figure feels overwhelmed: “I feel overwhelmed with all the tasks, old and new” (Paula, 36 years old, lawyer). “[...] sometimes I feel overwhelmed, hopeless, and very worried” (Lívia, 39 years old, merchant). “I feel distressed, exhausted” (Laura, 38 years old, accountant). This situation has become even more complex with new demands that have arisen during the pandemic. ‘New tasks’ (caring for children full-time, without external support) are introduced by force of circumstance and accumulate with ‘old tasks’ (household chores) that were already part of the family routine.

Restrictions on movement have led to the centralization of childcare in the family environment. Participants reported that the excess responsibilities in their hands made them feel insecure and anxious. They realized that because they had always worked outside the home, their children tended to become excessively autonomous, prematurely imbued with

responsibilities, and demanding. This 'role reversal' is another hallmark of childcare today: children 'mature' earlier, develop self-sufficiency, as if they have 'made it on their own,' often because they are left to their own devices, and in this idealized scenario, they tend to be seen by adults as embodying the idealized source of knowledge and power.

Mothers' accounts suggest that this social situation, prevalent in advanced capitalism, has been exacerbated in the exceptional times in which we live, requiring a renegotiation of the rules previously agreed upon by parents and children, given the urgency to survive the emergency crisis and strengthen themselves in the face of adversity. As Beatriz mentioned, parents try to be figures of trust and security for their children; in addition to protecting them, they feel the need to spare them from possible traumas and "[...] make sure that they get through this experience [pandemic] without major damage."

I feel very pressured, I feel scared, anxious, and without support, and I still think all the time about the impact this will have on my son's life. I want to be the best mother for him during this period, but I don't know if I can. I feel fragile, as if I've turned into a crystal or even jelly [nervous laughter]. (Beatriz, 45 years old, visual artist).

Lúcia tells of her unbearable suffering: "[...] I'm stressed, I have daily crying fits, the pandemic seems to intensify everything, and I'm afraid they'll catch the virus. I put hand sanitizer on everyone, on everything, it's even funny [...]" (Lúcia, saleswoman, 35 years old).

With more time spent with the family, children's demands, worries, doubts, and curiosity have become more acute. In this context, the pressure on mothers is doubled, leading them to reevaluate their commitment to raising their children.

I feel that I have the opportunity to be closer to my son. Does this make me feel insecure? Very much so! But at the same time, there are details that I can notice now that I didn't notice in my daily life. They hug me and say, "Is everything going to be okay, Mommy?" And I cry. I cry out of fear, I cry out of anguish because I don't give them confidence, but at the same time, I'm aware of my role as a mother. I feel that I have to be strong, that I have to hold the fort for them, and that our closeness gives me the strength to carry on (Bruna, 37 years old, lawyer, emphasis added).

The pandemic has led to changes in social and professional roles. It is observed that mothers are positive about the opportunity to look at relationships differently, creating openings in their daily lives to give new meaning to their relationships. There are many concerns, but there is also hope that the new challenges can strengthen them and that they can remain "whole", as one mother expressed. The current situation has created an opportunity to change their understanding and to reposition their reference point in the family, which gives rise to a desire for more flexible roles and the possibility of giving new meaning to the parental role and of fulfilling it with greater ease. Mothers report that they have come to value more the attitude of openness to dialogue and affection as a means of mitigating the negative effects of confinement on the child's development.

Research points to the impacts of confinement on the mental health of the population (Moura et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2020a; Souza et al., 2020). Symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress can be exacerbated by the restriction of freedom, lack of control over events, and lack of perspective for resolving the crisis. The data show that mothers feel overwhelmed and vulnerable to manifestations of suffering. This is evident in their poignant statements that the pressure ('demand') is increasing and they perceive that the support they receive is inadequate, which increases negative feelings, such as anguish and fear of not being able to meet all the demands.

As the health crisis continues and restrictions on movement and social interaction persist, families' stress and burden tend to increase (Oliveira et al., 2021). Most participants

reported some complaints, mainly related to anxiety symptoms. To try to reduce the emotional impact and 'control their nerves', mothers resorted to stress-reducing strategies such as relaxing, walking, praying, and seeking out pleasurable activities.

### **Weaknesses and (dis)continuities of attachment in the context of social distancing**

Some weaknesses in attachment, which may have already existed, were brought to light or made explicit by the lockdown situation. The closure of daycare centers and schools has placed an enormous burden on mothers who are already overworked. On the other hand, the situation of crisis and anomie has revealed certain problems that the production system usually keeps hidden. Women's domestic work continues to be undervalued and shrouded in a cloak of invisibility, which helps to perpetuate the oppression to which women are subjected in their daily lives. With the global outbreak of the pandemic, this scenario takes on new contours and dramatic expression, with women exhausted in their efforts to supervise their children's school activities, in the same spaces and times in which they work at home, taking care of the house, food, health and clothing for the family, usually alone. Beatriz summarized the impasse created by the overlap of multiple roles and functions: "I feel very pressured and afraid, I feel anxious, without support [...]."

Looking at the expansion of women's work in recent decades, it is clear that women have begun to experience a growing accumulation of roles and functions that have been added to the traditional domestic responsibilities that have always been theirs. Women's entry into the labor market has widened gender asymmetries and disadvantages in the face of male privileges (Braga et al., 2020). Women have begun to take on the role of workers and share the responsibility of supporting the family; they continue to perform activities related to the private sphere alone. The social division of labor remains unfair and deepens gender inequalities.

If this is not enough, the weakening and decline of patriarchal power has led to an increase in the rates of domestic violence against women and the registration of feminicides (Oliveira et al., 2020b). Globally, one in three women has experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence (Hirata, 2015), which invites us to reflect on the extent to which male domination contributes to defining the ways in which women enter the labor market, which is characterized by the devaluation of female labor, reflected in lower wages and the naturalization of the feminization of activities related to care, including the education of children (Braga et al., 2020).

When these ideas are articulated in the context of the pandemic, there is no doubt that the acute experience of the crisis helps make explicit the fractures and fragility of the bonds in the current form of advanced capitalism (Santos et al., 2020b). This is evident in an excerpt from an emotional speech by one of the participants:

[...] The pandemic is like a personal "pay attention" message: "Hey, look at life, you have to be strong, there is someone who depends on you, get frustrated, shut down, look at everything around you." Wow, that's so hard to do right? We see how small we are and how we have no support whatsoever to go through these situations. But who can we count on? Wow, everything we are going through is really hard... without prospects, without knowing what will become of us from now on. Wow, how scary! (Lúcia, 35 years old, saleswoman, emphasis added).

The emotional tone that pervades this testimony is repeated in all interviews and points in the same direction: the pandemic has opened up a horizon of uncertainty, and women who have children to raise feel the magnitude of their responsibilities more intensely. They reported difficulties in exercising the role of restraint, empathy, and solidarity with the pain of others, skills that are inherent to the work of strengthening the bond in which the



subject needs to feel supported to be able to truly trust the world and the future, especially in times of crisis (Kaës, 2011). On the other hand, critical reflections suggesting the transformative potential of the pandemic are encouraged. Some mothers wonder if humanity is facing a unique opportunity to reflect on the fate of the planet, human relationships, management of work, and affection. The unsettling experience of the pandemic can also be seen as a lever to question the production of “normality” that had existed until then, and therefore as a call to reflect on a fabric of connections that is full of holes (Benghozi, 2010), with the weakening of the role of parental figures who structure the child's psychism. The crisis has made it possible to look at the parental role and warn of the urgency of filling it with other meanings, redefining the meaning of intergenerational legacies.

One mother used the term “calling” in her report in light of the current demands of her children. She realized that even though she was frightened and anxious about the future and life, she had to remain firm and available to her children because she was a figure of security for them, and “being together” proved to be more important than ever in maintaining family cohesion. This mother felt that she was able to reorganize herself by managing her time in the face of her busy life and the days that came and went, often unnoticed. Even though she could not yet clearly distinguish between her children's demands and her own, the demands that emanated from this mother-child relationship organized her subjectivity.

In this report, as in others, it is clear that the pandemic, with its tragedy announced in the context of multiple social traumas, can be understood as a 'summons,' a call for a loving, caring, shared and supportive presence, highlighting the importance of the revelatory encounter with a parenthood that can be experienced as a power of care, attention, trust and creativity in an attempt to secure the line of continuity of being in the world (Winnicott, 2021). The experience of the pandemic calls for mothers and children to occupy different places of connection in possible ways of reinventing themselves in their own ways of bonding and being mothers.

The advances made in recent decades have indeed provided opportunities to question the historically constructed places in the patriarchal family model and have imposed the need to reorganize domestic tasks and the roles played by the parental couple, which in theory would contribute to greater horizontality in the relationship between partners. However, despite the changes in the place occupied by women in the private sphere, the participants in this study showed that the sharing of domestic tasks by men in the middle class was still timid, as the overload of responsibilities that fell on the female gender even before the pandemic was blatant. This finding is consistent with the literature (Braga et al., 2020; Macêdo, 2020; Souza et al., 2020) and points to a vulnerability dimension that needs to be addressed by public policies.

With the discontinuity of institutional life, families no longer have the support and protection network offered by childcare institutions, which increases the likelihood of parental overwork. The literature on parenting in situations of conflict, war, and natural disasters points to the importance of parenting skills in fostering open and honest communication with children and strengthening family bonds through support, monitoring, and guidance in studies, leisure, food, and other activities (Bartlett et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). However, parenthood is an open process, an interwoven link in the history of the parental couple with the birth of their children, inserted into the socio-family context outlined by each culture, and deeply marked by these characteristics.

The challenges of parenthood during the pandemic encourage reflection on the crisis of care in a scenario of instability and uncertainty, aggravated by the lack of knowledge about the reality that challenges the human capacity to deal with conflicts. For example,

almost nothing is known about the possible effects of COVID-19 and its consequences on the development of affected children (Barlett et al., 2020). Another aspect worthy of attention is that the pandemic highlights the need to think about the self-care of middle-aged women who are mothers as a way of mitigating conditions that make children more vulnerable through the creation of supportive and emancipatory practices, affirming the production of care as a space of respect for life. Thus, it is necessary to problematize the subjective impact of care practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the right to protect women (Souza et al., 2020) in subjective demands, with a view to caring for those who care for them.

### **Articulating the results obtained**

The compulsory closure of schools has deprived children of regular contact with friends and teachers. This, combined with parents' concerns about the health of their loved ones, financial losses, and possible tensions in relationships, creates uncertainty and fear about the future. The extension of restrictive measures on social contact and the unpredictability of returning to regular activities, such as face-to-face classes, add to the scenario of instability. Faced with such experiences, parents are challenged to increase their sensitivity to their children's new emotional demands and to provide support more often and more intensely than they were previously.

Studies have shown that the increased burden of domestic work and the accumulation of care tasks for family members, such as children, the elderly, and the sick, has fallen almost exclusively on women (Braga et al., 2020; Macêdo, 2020; Souza et al., 2020). In addition, restrictive measures to access regular social groups have prevented women from interacting in external spaces of exchange and fully benefiting from their social support networks. However, there is still little data available to assess the impact of gender and ethnic/racial markers on the dissemination of the pandemic among vulnerable groups (Braga et al., 2020).

The imperative of confinement has led families to suddenly turn their attention to the interior of their homes in a centripetal movement that removes investment from external objects. Domestic spaces have become a hybrid, multiple, and shared territory, intersecting different scenarios that were previously separate (work, school, socialization, rest, leisure), resulting in an accumulation of household and food care tasks (Braga et al., 2020; Macêdo, 2020). The asymmetrical distribution of family roles means that the effects of this experience are not proportional and are much less egalitarian. The excess of domestic tasks disproportionately burdens the lives of working women, straining the division between public and private spaces that has always permeated the construction of female identity. With the new reality, the difficulties of fulfilling the superegoic ideals of what a 'good mother' and a 'good professional' would be expose women to situations of conflict and suffering, exacerbating the feelings of guilt and anguish associated with these experiences (Rocha-Coutinho, 2011). The desire to do their best was expressed by several mothers, such as Beatriz, one of the interviewees, who said: "[...] I want to be the best mother for him during this period, but I don't know if I can." However, women's work and its relationship with motherhood were socially constructed as antagonistic, as if one impeded the other. Self-demands, which seem to be exacerbated in times of pandemic, contribute to the weakening of women, as seen in the expression used by Beatriz: "[...] I feel distressed [...] fragile [...] it feels like I've turned into crystal."

Thus, we conclude that the unusual experience of the pandemic seems to reactivate latent conflicts, exposing the contradictions that mothers face daily in the exercise of their

multiple roles, generating tensions that sometimes lead to the desire to silence children, to ignore their existence to focus on work issues and maintain employment, or even to establish a supposed hierarchy and choice between one “or” another role, since work configurations are sexist and do not take into account the specific demands of women's work.

The transformations of contemporaneity have produced important ruptures in the frameworks on which psychic life rests, “[...] community affiliations, shared beliefs that provide certainties, alliances based on fundamental prohibitions” (Kaës, 2011, p. 20). Parenthood, as the primary bond in the family context, has already undergone intense changes throughout the historical process that has affected its organization, altering the place and functions performed by mothers and fathers in each era. Kaës points to the failures observed in metapsychic functions. These functions affect the structuring and development of psychic life, since they act as a framework for psychic life to develop according to the investments and places determined by the family group for each of its members.

Since parenthood occupies a privileged place in children's first investments and organizes sexual life and fundamental cultural prohibitions within the family, in the context of the pandemic, parental functions assume a prominent place in the face of the crisis triggered by losses and ruptures that have affected homes and weakened the family group. Children, trapped under the same roof with their overwhelmed, anxious, and threatened parents in the face of the insecurities and disruptive forces that emerge in the new everyday life, need more than ever the investment and, above all, the narcissistic support of their parents to face the crisis.

The interviews conducted indicate that metapsychological functions had begun to weaken before the onset of the pandemic. As the crisis unfolded, mothers found themselves not only overwhelmed but also feeling a sense of helplessness in meeting the challenges required to effectively support their children. Furthermore, mothers, children, and families were not insulated from the social context, which is often characterized by consumerist and individualistic values—a situation that has been fundamentally challenged by the pandemic. In light of the existing vulnerabilities within parental roles and the difficulties parents encounter in establishing necessary symbolic boundaries to maintain a position of asymmetry in the domestic scenario, along with maternal overload and paternal disappearance, it is evident how these factors further exacerbate pre-existing weaknesses. The interplay of these absences and burdens, coupled with the sometimes authoritarian influence of institutions in family life, intensifies the difficulties that families encounter, which were already present before the pandemic.

In the contemporary scenario of the search for and intensification of individualism, in its various manifestations, it is crucial to think about strengthening institutions and collective belonging, so that they can function as sources of support for bonds and families at a time when they need to rebuild themselves to resist turbulence. It is necessary to learn how to get the best out of this unprecedented crisis in recent history. In this way, the specific scenario of the pandemic could be used to strengthen bonds and renew institutions, reinforcing the alliance between families, schools, health institutions, and their professionals, in addition to collective groups and social and community organizations, which must function in a way that allows for shared elaboration of experiences of suffering, loss, and mourning.

At a time of compulsory withdrawal of social contact, it is necessary to invest in the creation of spaces of exchange, where resources can be shared (for example, through the mediation of TIC), so that the ruptures and changes caused by the unique experience of the current generation can be symbolically elaborated. Many participants expressed hope and

confidence regarding the possibility of change. As stated by Kaës (2011), families and institutions constitute an unconscious psychic organization that results from the collective agency that precedes the subject, imposing the relationships that maintain identities and keep members together, based on agreed psychic agreements and collusions, providing continuity for networks and intersubjective groups.

## Final considerations

This study aimed to understand the consequences of confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on parenting and childcare practices. The results provided an understanding of the initial emotional impact of confinement and new demands on mothers who suddenly found themselves responsible for both maintaining their paid work remotely and monitoring and caring for their children in the domestic context.

The pandemic triggered a structural crisis in the macrosocial space that spread to the microsocial sphere of the family, causing disruptions in routines and experiences of the known world and reverberating in relationships with people, institutions, and places previously occupied - school, work, and social groups. To respond to adversity, mothers seek support and inspiration from their family history, passed down through the intergenerational chain, and develop resources to deal with the consequences of the crisis. They face a winding journey filled with anxiety and fear of not being up to the challenges. They try to remain strong and steadfast to reassure their children, offering support and the necessary containment to strengthen parental and parent-child relationships. However, the perception of being alone, without being able to count on sufficient support from other family members and institutions to carry out the tasks of maintaining the home and supervising the children, increases the feeling of helplessness, making them feel fragile and 'isolated within isolation,' which raises the need to think about spaces that offer supportive interventions to accommodate the psychological suffering of these mothers.

Although it is difficult to predict the long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental health of mothers and children, this study emphasizes the importance of attention and ongoing monitoring. The challenges to the health of the mother-child binomial are maximized in the context of instability and disruption, especially with the weakening of social protection networks. The data underscores the importance of focusing on support for maternal mental health, providing mothers with information, recommendations, and guidance that can help mitigate the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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