

PATERNAL BOND: PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER¹

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ABSTRACT. Among the most studied atypical development conditions currently, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) stands out. In the context of parenting children with ASD, mothers have been the focus of research over the years, and little has been reported on the paternity of these children from the perspective of the fathers themselves. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the perceptions of fathers regarding the paternal bond in the exercise of paternity of children with ASD and its implications for child development. Fifteen fathers of children between six and nine years old, diagnosed with ASD, who lived with their fathers participated in the research. The sample was given for convenience, from the dissemination of the research on social networks. Data were collected through videoconferences with the participants, using a semi-structured interview script. Data treatment prioritized the content analysis method. The results showed that the participants have a positive perception of the bond they establish with their children, and emphasize their conceptions about the paternal bond, mainly in the sense of involvement in the child's life. Regarding the implications of the paternal bond for child development, fathers highlighted its importance for the emotional well-being of their children, to guide the child's behavior, and to influence children's perception of the social and moral roles of the male figure. The results of this study contribute to the scientific knowledge about the exercise of paternity of children in the context of ASD, a topic still little explored in the literature.

Keywords: Autism; parent child relations; paternity.

VÍNCULO PATERNO: PERSPECTIVA DE PAIS DE CRIANÇAS COM TRANSTORNO DO ESPECTRO AUTISTA

RESUMO. Entre as condições de desenvolvimento atípico mais estudadas atualmente destaca-se o Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA). No contexto da parentalidade de crianças com TEA, as mães têm sido o foco das pesquisas ao longo dos anos, e pouco se tem relatado sobre a paternidade dessas crianças da perspectiva dos próprios pais. Diante disso, este trabalho teve por objetivo investigar as percepções de genitores masculinos quanto ao vínculo paterno no exercício da paternidade de crianças com TEA e suas implicações para o desenvolvimento infantil. Participaram da pesquisa 15 pais de crianças entre seis e nove anos, diagnosticadas com TEA, que coabitavam com seus pais. A amostra se deu por conveniência, a partir da divulgação da pesquisa nas redes sociais. Os dados foram coletados por meio de videoconferências com os participantes, tendo por instrumento um roteiro de entrevista semiestruturado. O tratamento dos dados priorizou o método de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados evidenciaram que os participantes apresentam uma percepção positiva quanto ao vínculo que estabelecem com seus filhos, e enfatizam suas concepções sobre vínculo paterno principalmente no senso de envolvimento na vida do filho. Sobre as implicações do vínculo paterno para o desenvolvimento infantil, os pais ressaltaram sua importância para o bem-estar emocional dos filhos, para orientar a conduta da criança, e para influenciar a percepção infantil quanto aos papéis sociais e morais da figura masculina. Os

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resultados desse estudo contribuem para o conhecimento científico sobre o exercício da paternidade de crianças no contexto do TEA, tema ainda pouco explorado na literatura.

Palavras-chave: Autismo; relacionamento pai-criança; paternidade.

VÍNCULO PATERNO: PERSPECTIVA DE LOS PADRES DE NIÑOS CON TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA

RESUMEN. Entre las condiciones de desarrollo atípico más estudiadas en la actualidad, destaca el Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA). En el contexto de la crianza de niños con TEA, las madres han sido el centro de la investigación a lo largo de los años y se ha informado poco sobre la paternidad de estos niños desde la perspectiva de los propios padres. Por lo tanto, este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar las percepciones de los padres varones sobre el vínculo paterno en el ejercicio de la paternidad de los niños con TEA y sus implicaciones para el desarrollo infantil. Participaron de la investigación quince padres de niños entre seis y nueve años, diagnosticados con TEA, que vivían con sus padres. La muestra se dio por conveniencia, a partir de la difusión de la investigación en redes sociales. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de videoconferencias con los participantes, utilizando un guión de entrevista semiestructurada. El tratamiento de datos priorizó el método de análisis de contenido. Los resultados mostraron que los participantes tienen una percepción positiva del vínculo que establecen con sus hijos, y enfatizan sus concepciones sobre el vínculo paterno, principalmente en el sentido de involucramiento en la vida del hijo. En cuanto a las implicaciones del vínculo paterno para el desarrollo infantil, los padres destacaron su importancia para el bienestar emocional de sus hijos, para orientar el comportamiento del niño e influir en la percepción de los niños sobre los roles sociales y morales de la figura masculina. Los resultados de este estudio contribuyen al conocimiento científico sobre el ejercicio de la paternidad de los hijos en el contexto del TEA, tema aún poco explorado en la literatura.

Palabras clave: Autismo; relaciones padres-niños; paternidad.

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a widely studied topic in academia and a heavily emphasized issue in society. This is mainly due to the increased prevalence of diagnoses, which have risen from 1 in 54 to 1 in 44 children (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC); see Maenner et al., 2021).

An autism diagnosis disrupts families' regular social activities and generates a wide variety of feelings, such as sadness, guilt, frustration, stress, and depression (Fontana et al., 2020; Pereira, 2017). Family dynamics are also affected, resulting in many demands and readjustments for all family members as they cope with a chronic condition for which there is no cure (Smeha, 2010).

Numerous studies in the literature have investigated the impact of the diagnosis, the challenges of parenting, and the coping strategies adopted by caregivers of children with ASD, often from the maternal perspective. In contrast, fathers are underrepresented in research samples that address these topics (Aguiar & Pondé, 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2018).

A systematic literature review published in 2012 identified 90 national and international studies on fatherhood in the context of special needs. Of those, fewer than 25% involved only the father in the sample, occupying a central role in the investigations. Only 13 studies covered fatherhood among individuals with ASD (Henn & Sifuentes, 2012).

Since that review was published, there has been an increase in publications on fatherhood in the context of ASD. These publications mainly focus on investigating the impact of a child's diagnosis on parents' physical and mental health, as well as identifying these parents' coping strategies and needs (Frye, 2016).

Although research involving fathers more broadly is expanding, a gap remains in the literature regarding the socio-affective relationship between fathers and their children with ASD (Pereira, 2017; Pereira et al., 2018; Jorge et al., 2021). This research is especially relevant given the impairments

associated with ASD, which primarily affect communication and social interaction. These deficits can affect a child's ability to reciprocate parental investments, leading to recurring feelings of frustration for parents and impacting the quality of the relationship in the dyad (Perzolli et al., 2021; Smeha, 2010).

Despite the stigma of being secondary caregivers, fathers are an integral part of the parental dyad. Their experiences, actions, and choices are important in themselves and reflect a series of relevant outcomes. Therefore, they need to be investigated (Burrell & Unwin, 2017).

As Henn and Sifuentes (2012) point out, the father's role should be analyzed within the family and in an interrelational way since his role as a parent is important for a child's development, and brings unique contributions that differ from those of the mother.

In light of these considerations, this study aimed to investigate male parents' perceptions of the paternal bond in the exercise of fatherhood and its implications for the development of children with ASD.

Method

Participants

This was an exploratory-descriptive, qualitative study aimed to observe, describe, explore, and generate interpretations of an understudied experience (Gil, 2002).

Fifteen fathers (male parents) of children aged six to nine years with a medical diagnosis of ASD participated in this study. All of the participants cohabited with and interacted daily with their children. The participants had an average age of 42 years, ranging from 32 to 57 years. Seven participants had completed higher education, another seven had completed high school, and only one had not completed high school. Eight participants had only one child; five had up to two children, and two other fathers had four and nine children, respectively. Most of the children diagnosed with ASD were male ($n = 12$), and only two participants were fathers of girls (who were their only children). Only one father was the parent of more than one child of both sexes with a confirmed ASD diagnosis. Eight fathers reported an early diagnosis for their children at up to two years of age, and 11 reported a mild ASD classification. Most participants ($n = 13$) had an income higher than three minimum wages, while only two had an income lower than one minimum wage.

Instruments

For data collection, a semi-structured interview script was developed, which was based on Pereira (2017), Smeha (2010), and Souza (2015), with the aim of verifying the participants' perceptions regarding the paternal bond and its implications for child development.

Procedures

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Espírito Santo, under the number CAEE 32947220.1.0000.5542, the remaining stages of this study were carried out.

To recruit potential participants, a digital invitation was created containing the research objectives, inclusion criteria (being the father of a child with ASD between six and nine years old who resides with them), and ways to contact the researcher. Potential participants indicated their interest in contributing to this research by contacting the researcher. After verifying their eligibility, the researcher scheduled a virtual meeting via videoconference according to each participant's availability to collect data. This strategy was adopted in compliance with social isolation measures established worldwide to control community transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, since this stage occurred during the height of the pandemic (Aquino et al., 2020).

Prior to the scheduled meeting, participants received the Informed Consent Form in digital format to better understand the research objectives, identify possible risks and discomforts, guarantee confidentiality, and explain the benefits of their participation, allowing them to ask any questions, which would be promptly clarified by the researcher. Given the impossibility of social contact imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided to obtain verbal consent from the volunteers to formalize their participation in the research during the scheduled videoconference, before the start of the actual interview.

For the video conference, a free online platform was used, with no time limit for up to two users per meeting, and which allowed the recording of the meetings in audio and video. In this way, the interviews were recorded in video format and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data obtained through the interviews were analyzed qualitatively, using the content analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011), specifically thematic analysis, which involves “[...] discovering the core meanings that make up the communication, and whose presence or frequency of appearance may signify something for the chosen analytical objective” (Bardin, 2011, p. 135). This analysis model has three main stages, beginning with pre-analysis, followed by exploration of the material, and finally the treatment of the results, which includes inference and interpretation.

Results and discussion

The content analysis yielded three thematic categories, namely: conception of paternal bonding, changes in bonding after diagnosis, and the implications of paternal bonding for child development. Within each of these categories, additional subcategories were identified. These are presented below, highlighted in italics, based on the frequency with which the theme was observed in the participants’ discourse. Therefore, the order in which the subcategories appear in the text reflects the perceptions most commonly reported by the fathers.

First, the participants described their conceptions of paternal bonding, determining the first category. Above all, most fathers (n=9) defined paternal bonding as attitudes/actions of involvement in the child’s life, demonstrated through availability and concern (care) for the child’s needs. The use of the verbs *to be* and *to give/donate* marked the participants’ statements in this subcategory, as exemplified in the statement of Father 4.

I think it’s about care, right?! Like, the strongest paternal bond I put there is care. Care for my own children. Being there and trying to protect them as much as possible. Helping them as much as possible. Knowing what’s going on. Being there for them in any difficult situation that arises (Father 4).

Another dimension of the paternal bond addressed by the fathers in this category concerns affectivity, evidenced in the statements of three participants, and can be exemplified by the following account.

I personally think that bonding is the emotional relationship between my daughter and me, right? [...] Bonding is the affective relationship between her and me. It’s about showing affection and me being able to pass that on to her, and her understanding. I think that’s what it would be like today. Before, that didn’t exist. We would pass it on, but she wouldn’t understand (Father 3)

On a smaller scale, two participants referenced the transmission of values when discussing their views on paternal bonding, as explained in the speech of Father 5. One participant defined paternal bonding as “[...] *an unconditional love* that moves you to fight for what you believe is best for your child (emphasis added).

[...] to be able to give my children a good upbringing, not in material terms, but in terms of values, you know? So, I think that, for me, the paternal bond encompasses all of that. It’s [...] passing on values and preparing your children for the future. So that they can have a prosperous life too. Not just in terms of money, you know? (Father 5).

In general, the participants’ perceptions of the paternal bond construct reveal an understanding based on their responsibilities toward their children. These conceptions reflect an attentive and concerned stance in identifying and satisfying the child’s needs, whether material, emotional, affective, or moral, with the aim of fostering their integrity and development.

This understanding of a practical paternal bond, established through the fathers’ attitudes toward their children’s needs, brings the participants’ perceptions closer to the paternal involvement model proposed by Lamb and colleagues in 1985, revised by Pleck in 2010. The model identifies three primary components that define paternal involvement in activities of positive engagement:

emotional warmth/affection, responsiveness, and control. The model also includes two other auxiliary domains, namely indirect care and process responsibility (Pleck, 2010).

Considering the behaviors that distinguish these five dimensions of paternal involvement, it is assumed that the views of most participants on paternal bonding are based on the component of *process responsibility*, which involves taking the initiative and monitoring the child's behavior, activities, and other aspects of their life. This dimension verifies whether the child's needs for the previous four involvement components are being met, and can be described as parental awareness that recognizes and fulfills a need (Pleck, 2010).

The second category that emerged from the participants' discourse concerns the impact of the ASD diagnosis on their bond with their child. The participants were unanimous in positively evaluating the bond they currently establish with their children, and most (n=8) reported positive changes in the dyadic bond after the diagnosis. These changes were evident in the way parents viewed their child's behavior, their increased emotional investment, and their greater positive engagement with their child.

This finding aligns with the belief of Silva et al. (2017) that father involvement tends to be greater in situations of atypical development than in situations of typical development. The following accounts exemplify the improvements identified by the fathers.

Look, the only thing I can say that has improved is that we understand each other better now, right? Before, we didn't, like [...] Many times I didn't understand him or his suffering, you know? Sometimes I saw him suffering a lot, and I didn't know how to solve it, right (Father 6).

Look, I think so. The first thing I discussed with C. (the child's mother), when we found out about the autism—which worried me a lot—was preventing this aversion to contact. I had this image of autistic people as individuals who don't allow themselves to be touched. So, I told C.: *C., it's too late now! We're going to have to pick up this boy, kiss him, and hug him. He can't have the slightest chance of not wanting to be touched.* So, I think I ended up developing a very physical relationship with R (Father 8, emphasis added).

After the diagnosis, I believe I became even more present. We were together more, did more things together, and I was always interested in what he wanted to do and say (Father 15).

In general, the positive changes identified in the participants' statements are related to adaptations in parental behavior that compensate for, minimize, and prevent the progression of deficits characteristic of ASD. These changes are related to the adjustment period and acceptance of new family circumstances and the future needs of their child (Brown et al., 2021).

These results are consistent with the studies by Pereira et al. (2018) and Brown et al. (2021), who also observed positive shifts in paternal behaviors and in their self-perceptions of roles and responsibilities in the face of the confirmation of their child's ASD diagnosis.

Furthermore, as revealed in the statements of some parents (Fathers 4 and 6), the improvement in the relationship with their child after the diagnosis stemmed from their understanding that some of their child's behaviors resulted from the disorder itself and were not intentional. This result was also found by Pereira et al. (2018) and Rafferty et al. (2020) in male parents of children with ASD. Rafferty et al. (2020) also observed that some of their participants experienced a sense of relief after receiving an ASD diagnosis because they gained a better understanding of their children's behaviors. This resulted in changes in their parenting style and level of involvement.

The absence of change in the father bond was also mentioned, according to the accounts of four participants, and is exemplified in the statement of Father 13.

I don't think so, because the diagnosis was very early, right [...] But, day to day, we started living in this world of therapy and clinics, and so on. That was the big change, right? But not my relationship with C (Father 13).

In this subcategory, it can be inferred that the participants based their responses on the affective dimension of the paternal bond, since they did not notice any changes in the way they related to their son. In the study by Rafferty et al. (2020), the absence of changes after the diagnosis of ASD was also mentioned by some participants, who reported that they did not detect changes in

various aspects of their lives after the diagnosis and that they were as involved in their children's lives as they had hoped, reinforcing the hypothesis that the absence of change mentioned by these two parents concerns the socio-affective relationship itself, especially concerning paternal investment in relation to the child.

Some fathers reported no changes in their relationships with their children. However, they revealed adaptations in other areas, such as adjusting their perspectives regarding their children's futures and adjusting family routines and dynamics to include long-term therapeutic treatment.

Regarding the adaptation of father perspectives, Brown et al. (2021) found similar results when reviewing the literature and stated that changes in fathers' attitudes and expectations are the result of a re-signification of their aspirations regarding their children's lives. This attitude is configured as a coping strategy resulting from the cognitive reassessment/planning process, adopted by parents in the face of their child's irreversible diagnosis, which will accompany them throughout their lives (Aguiar & Pondé, 2020).

According to Franco (2009), fathers of children with disabilities or severe developmental disorders need to go through the process of re-idealizing their child, as this will give way to the real child and allow parents to become emotionally involved with them. Otherwise, they become functional fathers who are only involved at an instrumental level with therapeutic and educational resources. They care for their child out of responsibility, not an emotional bond (Franco, 2009).

Regarding the need for adjustments in routine, the constant visits to specialized (re)habilitation centers and the changes to the family's daily life to meet the child's demands can overwhelm caregivers and cause stress for fathers (Duarte, 2019). Not to mention the impact on the family's economic situation, as frequently one parent (usually the mother) leaves the work to care for the child (Cunha et al., 2018).

Conversely, two participants reported a negative change in the dyadic bond and observed changes in the child's affective behavior. This may be related to regressive autism, a condition in which symptoms are preceded by a period of seemingly typical development followed by the loss of previously acquired skills (Boterberg et al., 2019).

I'll say that [the bond] did change, because in the beginning [...], there was that issue of the bond when she was very little, that when she grew up, as I told you, up to one year and seven months she was completely normal. And then she was very affectionate and everything. Then it decreased a lot! It stopped [...] we could see that she liked us, but it seemed like she didn't care, you know? It got to the point where I would travel for almost a month, and she wouldn't miss me at all. (Father 3).

These parents' negative perception of changes in their bond with their child is related to shattered expectations of an idealized child and the resulting grief (Duarte, 2019). While grief is common when experiencing the loss of a loved one, the same stages occur when facing any type of loss, including chronic illness or a medical condition (Frye, 2016).

Approximately 50% of children with ASD show suggestive signs during the first year of life, and 80% do so by the second year (Frye, 2016). However, in cases of regressive ASD, children show apparently typical development until around two years of age and then abruptly lose previously acquired skills. This has a very painful and even traumatic impact on parents (Boterberg et al., 2019). This effect is evident in the accounts of the participants, who experienced regressive autism in their children.

After discussing the personal bonds they established with their children, the fathers expressed their perceptions about the importance of the paternal bond in child development, which determined the third category. The participants' responses generated six subcategories.

Four participants mentioned the importance of the paternal bond for the development of the child's sense of security, as demonstrated in the following account.

Look, I believe it's all about the sense of security. Receiving love from a father. I also think it's something that brings you security in life, you know, it strengthens you. People who know they are loved tend to be stronger and more resilient, like that. And if you have a father and a mother supporting you, I think life becomes easier. You have the confidence that, even when you can't cope, your father will be there to support you until you can cope on your own (Father 8).

The theme raised by these participants suggests a connection with Attachment Theory, proposed by Bowlby, which conceptualizes attachment behavior as a person's actions to achieve or maintain proximity to another individual, clearly identified and considered more capable of dealing with the world – who is called an attachment figure, and has as its basic premise the understanding that the first attachment relationships, established in childhood, affect the individual's attachment style throughout life (Dalbem & Dell'Aglio, 2005).

Based on this theory, the self-perception of attachment figures for their child is implicit in the discourses of these parents, whose main role is to offer support in all areas and stages of life, generating in their children the confidence to explore the circumstances and challenges ahead, based on the certainty that they will have their father's support in case of any unforeseen events that they are not yet prepared to deal with independently. Attachment ensures closeness between children and attachment figures and, therefore, protection, while exploration ensures the acquisition of environmental knowledge and adaptation to environmental variations (Paquette, 2004).

In reference to attachment theory, Paquette (2004) suggests using the term activation relationship to describe the attachment bond that fosters children's openness to the world, and also advocates using this term to distinguish the attachment relationship of the father from that of the mother. This concept forms the basis of the Father-Child Activation Relationship Theory, which posits that while fathers and mothers perform different functions, they complement each other to promote the child's development. Thus, the concept of the father-child activation relationship aligns with the fathers' perceptions reported in this study since it considers the paternal bond responsible for encouraging the child to overcome limits, take risks, and discover their abilities in contexts where they feel protected from potential dangers. This allows the child to explore their environment, develop a positive self-image, and trust the father (Paquette, 2004).

Fathers also considered the importance of bonding to establish a male figure reference for their sons. This theme appeared in the discourse of four participants and is represented by the following statements.

The paternal bond serves this purpose for both girls and boys. It establishes a reference point for what it means to be a man. The man and the father. It is the paternal bond that defines a good man versus a bad man. Do you understand? It gives you a reference point for what is good. It's the "how" we see things. It's your father figure. It's your reference point for people and men. Because I see that this influences so much in the choice of a husband, in accepting [...] in tolerating what a man does to you, how a man acts, what is right, what is wrong. I think the paternal bond initially shows this (Father 3, emphasis added).

Ah, it's because I believe that despite him being autistic, if he is seeing the father figure there [...] I say this even because of my father, right? When a father is a present father, and you have someone to inspire you, someone who inspires you to be a good father, a good head of the family, a good professional, and an honest person, right? (Father 14).

The account of Father 3 reveals his concern about setting a positive example for his children regarding masculine behaviors. From the father's perspective, establishing this benchmark for a son acts as a prism through which he can judge the masculine behaviors he observes in others while exploring the world as he develops. Therefore, the father's intention to influence his son's decisions about which social and moral behaviors to incorporate into his own conduct is evident. Literature classifies this parental practice as positive, generating prosocial behaviors because it uses examples to teach values that help children discriminate between correct and incorrect behaviors (Santos & Wachelke, 2019).

From another angle, the speech represented by Father 14 also reveals an expectation that his son will reproduce roles traditionally attributed to the male sex, such as the role of provider, entertainer, and authoritarian figure. This conception suggests that these fathers fulfill their parental roles based on the examples they had in their own childhoods, and they agree with these examples and want to perpetuate them (Campeol & Crepaldi, 2019).

When considering the fatherhood of girls, the application of this parental practice is protective in nature. The desire to be a male role model for their daughters stems from the fear that they will become

involved in unsuccessful marital relationships in the future that will threaten to them. This concern was also observed in the paternal discourse in Silva and Piccinini (2007).

A third theme raised by three other fathers regarding the importance of father bonding for child development relates to the previous subcategory and concerns conduct guidance, as Father 4 states below.

[...] To demonstrate situations that went wrong in my life, you know. I try to present myself as a man, a father, and a responsible person to instill those qualities in them. So that they can grow up to be citizens, you know. [...] As citizens, as men, they will be in the future. To show character. People who can help, who can contribute, who cannot be selfish (Father 4).

The participants' discourses refer to their sense of responsibility in guiding their children's conduct. For these participants, the paternal bond plays a fundamental role in shaping the children's character and enabling them to live in society by transmitting social and moral values.

This perception is supported by literature affirming the importance of fathers in helping children internalize rules, limits, and concepts of right and wrong (Paquette, 2004; Campeol & Crepaldi, 2019). These authors also emphasize that adequate interaction between father and child contributes positively to greater competence, social skills, and a lower incidence of externalizing problems, such as difficulty controlling impulses, hyperactivity, aggressiveness, anger, and delinquency.

The theme of discipline also marked the paternal discourse and is related to the father's role in guiding the child's conduct. The reference to this theme can be found in the speeches of Fathers 7 and 15.

Because sometimes she does certain things with my wife that I don't like, so I'm much stricter. So, I think my bond with her I think it's to give a little more security, like this – No, you do it this way, that's right. Do it this way, that's right [...] Don't do it that way, that's wrong (Father 7).

The child needs the paternal figure, right? A figure that imposes limits. Of determining obligations. Especially this issue of limits, of rules. To truly have security, to have protection, to have that person you can count on [...] whether it's to hear good things, to hear bad things, but that will help you evolve in life (Father 15).

Although the participants' accounts on this topic were brief, there is evidence of positive parenting, possibly referencing the authoritative parenting style. This style is characterized by balancing demands and monitoring, corrections and rewards, affection and responsiveness to children's needs, clear communication, openness to dialogue, and encouraging freedom and autonomy (Santos & Wachelke, 2019). The literature indicates that authoritative parents adopt inductive parenting practices through which they explain their values, actions, and methods of discipline to their children (Santos & Wachelke, 2019). These two participants mentioned the issue of affective closeness and responsiveness to the needs of children at other times, which reinforces the hypothesis that both fathers adopt the authoritative parenting style in disciplining their children.

Two themes appeared only once in the participants' statements, and they refer to the importance of the paternal bond in establishing communication with the child (Father 2) and in learning/cognition (Father 1).

[...] But this bond is important because the child will never listen to you or pay attention to you if you don't have this bond. [...] An example: if something happens to me today, if I were to die, right, if [...] anyone from the [extended] family tries to get close to one of them, tries to be with them, they won't pay attention. They won't even look. Why? Because they don't see that person, they don't see that person's face at home all the time, they don't see them playing with the child all the time... there's nobody there (Father 2).

Father 2's statement highlights that communicative exchanges with a child with ASD depend not only on coexistence but also on the responsiveness and attunement of the interlocutor. These constructs are generally employed in the context of parenting, with equivalent meanings, and can be understood as the ability of parents to be sensitive to their children's signals, to understand them, and respond appropriately by adapting to their needs (Di Renzo et al., 2021). Therefore, a responsive and attuned paternal bond to the behaviors of a child with ASD opens channels of communication between them. Di Renzo et al. (2021) state that attuned parents can recognize and repair moments of attunement failure in

the interaction, in addition to being able to act as regulators of their child's emotions when the child is unable to do so alone.

Regarding the subcategory of learning/cognition, Father 1's statement conveys the idea of practical learning based on observing and imitating his behaviors, which contributes to the child's autonomy in daily life activities.

[...] because sometimes, many of the things he learns come from what he sees in his daily life. Our bond is like that, our daily lives, conversations, games [...] That's how it builds up, and he develops (Father 1).

The importance that this participant attributes to the paternal bond in child development is close to the precepts of Vygotsky's social interactionist theory (1988), which postulates that cognitive development occurs through social interaction, and takes place in the zone of proximal development, which corresponds to the distance between what the subject already knows (actual knowledge) and their potential knowledge. In which *the other* mediates the approximation between real and potential knowledge, until the child internalizes the new learning and converts the potential knowledge into real knowledge (Rego, 2013).

Final considerations

Based on the resumption of the proposed objectives, it is possible to conclude that the fathers who participated in this study emphasize their conception of paternal bonding in terms of involvement in their children's lives, which translates to concern for and availability to meet their children's needs. This view aligns with the concept of process responsibility, a domain in Lamb-Pleck's model of paternal involvement that involves monitoring activities and aspects of the child's life to ensure the other components of involvement are met (Pleck, 2010).

The participants unanimously evaluated their current bond with their children positively and reported positive changes that occurred after the diagnosis. These changes were reflected in how they began to see and treat their child's behaviors, their increased affective investment, and their increased positive engagement with their child.

Regarding the implications of paternal bonding for child development, parents emphasized its importance for the child's emotional well-being and sense of security. Furthermore, participants considered the paternal bond important for guiding the child's behavior, developing a sense of right and wrong, and shaping perceptions of the social and moral roles of male figures.

Our results contribute to scientific knowledge about fatherhood in the context of ASD. This topic has received little attention in the literature but has recently been the subject of research (Jorge et al., 2021).

Although these results cannot be used for comparison due to the size and representativeness of the sample and the methodological approach adopted, they are relevant because they prompt reflection on how fathers perceive their bond with a child with ASD and its implications for the child's development. This reflection is especially important for professionals who work directly with children with ASD because it offers a different perspective on these fathers and challenges the stigmatized image of the uninvolved father. Furthermore, it contributes to clinical practice insofar as it can foster greater commitment from professionals working with children with ASD to connect with fathers. This connection is achieved by considering their needs, perspectives, and potential, which gives parents greater visibility and relevance in their children's therapeutic and educational processes.

Additionally, the interview itself provides fathers with an opportunity for self-reflection, enabling them to connect with the feelings, ideas, and perceptions that influence their parenting. It can be a useful clinical tool to promote father involvement by raising awareness of their role. It can also provide therapists with valuable information about parenting practices that can be adjusted in a personalized, respectful manner to achieve therapeutic goals, promoting gains in the child's development and strengthening the father-child bond.

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