

SOCIAL SUPPORT PERCEIVED BY PORTUGUESE CHILDREN AND ITS RELATION WITH EMOTIONAL AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

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Introduction

Social ecological models (eg. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasize the importance of social contexts in which the child is embedded. Children's social worlds consist of a rich network of close relationships: mothers, fathers, siblings, relatives and school personnel (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). These social contexts can affect development by presenting risks and opportunities (Cauce, Reid, Landesman & Gonzales, 1992). In this line, the social network perspective is important to capture the complexity of children's social worlds. Social support is particularly important during childhood, because this developmental period is characterized by a higher social vulnerability and physical dependence from others (Pereira, Canavarro, Mendonça & Cardoso, in press). Ironically the impact of social networks and social support has been studied far more frequently among adults than among children (Belle, 1989).

Objectives

- To characterize social support and conflict perceived by portuguese children in terms of the support provider (mother, father, siblings, friends, family and teacher).
- To analyse gender differences in the perception of social support and conflict with different support providers.
- To analyse the relations between social support and conflict with different support providers and children's emotional and academic adjustment.

Method

1. Sample
Participants were 549 Portuguese children (261 girls and 288 boys), aged from 8 to 11 years. The children were all Caucasian, from different geographic areas and from different socio-economic status.

2. Measures
2.1. Social Support
Social support was evaluated through the Portuguese version (Pereira & Canavarro, 2003) of *My family and friends* (Reid & Landesman, 1992). It consists of a structured interview with 12 dialogues concerning the availability of and satisfaction with 4 types of social support - emotional, informational, instrumental and companionship - from each person in a child network. In addition, one of the twelve dialogues evaluates the conflict perceived with the different support providers. This instrument allows a multidimensional evaluation of social support and includes the evaluation of social support provided by different persons - mother, father, siblings, friends, family, teacher.



Fig 1: Material used in 'My family and friends' interview

2.2. Emotional and academic adjustment

Table 1. Adjustment Measures

Constructs	Scales	Items	Respon.	
Adjustment	Children Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991a). Port. Vers. Fonseca et al., 1995			
	Emotion Behavior Problems	Internalizing problems Externalizing problems	33 items 33 items (5 point scale)	Parents
Academic Compet.	Teachers Report Form (TRF) (Achenbach, 1991b). Port. Vers. Fonseca et al., 1995	Internalizing problems Externalizing problems	34 items 34 items (5 point scale)	Teachers
	Academic Competence Scale (SPCC) (Zimmerman, 1995; Port. Vers. Faria & Fontaine, 1995)	Academic Competence Scale	3 items (5 point scale)	Children
Self-concept	Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1985)	Academic Self-Concept	6 items (4 point scale)	Children

● Procedures
Children were interviewed individually in the school. The interview took about 30 minutes for each child. Parents and teachers filled the questionnaires autonomously.

Results

1. Satisfaction with social support from different support providers

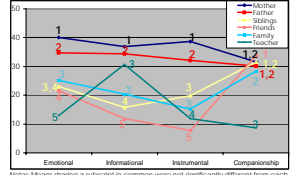


Fig 2: Anova repeated measures - mean satisfaction with support type from different support providers

Results suggest that Portuguese children perceive different support profiles for different support providers (interaction - $F_{114, 3506} = 161.3, p < 0.001$). Mothers and fathers received the highest ratings on the four support types. The other support providers punctuate high in one of the four support types. Parents are support generalists, while siblings, friends and teachers are support specialists.

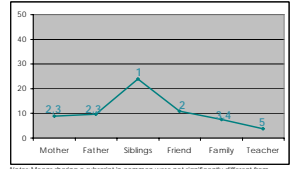


Fig 3: Anova repeated measures - Mean conflict different support providers

The results show a difference in perceived conflict in relation to the different support providers ($F_{4, 12370} = 109.0, p < 0.001$). Siblings received the highest ratings on conflict.

2. Gender differences in satisfaction with support from different support providers and in conflict with different support providers

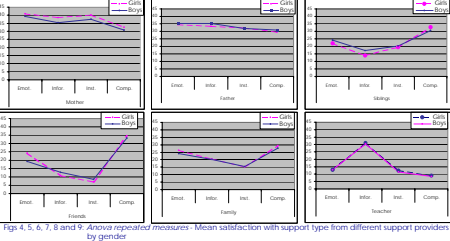


Fig 4: 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9; Anova repeated measures - Mean satisfaction with support type from different support providers by gender

Concerning gender differences of perceived satisfaction with social support, results show a significant interaction between gender, support type and support provider ($F_{114, 35278} = 2.2, p = 0.009$). Girls are more satisfied than boys with the informational ($F_{1, 109} = 4.3, p = 0.040$) and instrumental ($F_{1, 109} = 4.2, p = 0.042$) support from mother and more satisfied with the emotional support ($F_{1, 109} = 8.8, p = 0.003$) from friends.

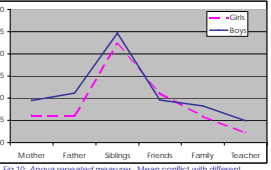


Fig 5: Anova repeated measures - Mean conflict with different support providers by gender

Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers ($F_{1, 109} = 11.7, p = 0.001$), mothers ($F_{1, 109} = 5.9, p = 0.016$) and teachers ($F_{1, 109} = 5.4, p = 0.021$).

3. Satisfaction with support from different support providers and its relation with emotional and academic adjustment

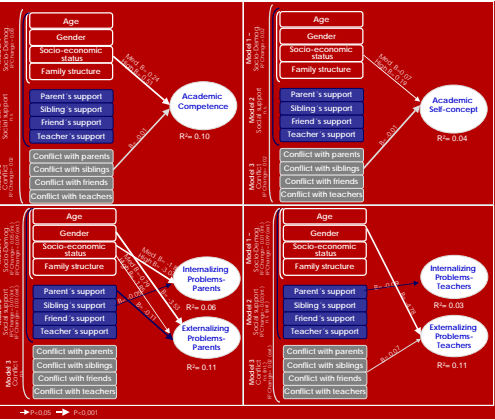


Fig 14: Multiple regression of socio-demographic variables (Model 1), social support variables (Model 2) and conflict variables (model 3) on the Internalizing Problems and Externalizing Problems perceived by teachers and academic competence (R²). Internalizing Problems and Externalizing Problems perceived by children (CBCL), and Academic Competence perceived by children (SPCC)

Globally results suggest that both support and conflict variables are significant predictors of academic and emotional adjustment, although the variability explained by the models is relatively small. Conflict with siblings predicts significantly academic concept and competence. Sibling's support predicts significantly internalizing problems reported by parents and parent's support is a significant predictor of externalizing problems perceived by parents. Finally, parent's support predicts internalizing problems perceived by teachers and conflict with friends predicts externalizing problems perceived by teachers.

Discussion

This study characterized social support in a sample of Portuguese children. Consistent with other studies (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Reid, Landesman, Treder & Jaccard, 1989) mothers and fathers are the most important figures in the provision of different types of support in childhood. These results also suggest the coexistence of generalist and specialist support figures in children's social network. Also, like in other studies (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) children perceived an higher conflict with siblings. Children show some ambivalence toward their siblings, that are simultaneously an important source of support, but also an important source of conflict and competition. Additionally, there are gender differences concerning the support and conflict perceived, and some of them are consistent with the results of other studies (East & Rook, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). These results stress the importance of considering gender when studying the social support and networks in childhood. Finally, the results concerning the impact of social support and conflict on the emotional and academic adjustment, reveal statistical significant effects, although relatively small. Most of the support and conflict variables that are significant predictors of academic and emotional adjustment concern relationships with close family members, parents and siblings. This result stresses the central role of the family in children's adjustment. Conflict with siblings predicts significantly academic concept and competence and sibling's support predicts significantly internalizing problems reported by parents. Parent's support predicts significantly externalizing problems perceived by parents and internalizing problems perceived by teachers. Finally, friendship relationships, and concretely, conflict with friends, predicts significantly externalizing problems perceived by teachers.

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Acknowledgments

This research was financially supported by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian and by Escola Superior de Educação João de Deus.
This research was also supported in part by a grant from Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portuguese Science and Technology Ministry) conceded to the first author.
We gratefully acknowledge the directions, teachers, parents and students of the school participating for their cooperation in making this study possible.