Social Support Perceived by Portuguese Children and Its Relation with Emotional and Academic Adjustment

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Introduction
Social ecological models (e.g., 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 providing risks and opportunities (Cauce, Reid, Luterman, & Gonzales, 1992).

Constructs
Scales
Items
Response

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

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 measured through the Portuguese version (Fonseca & Canavarro, 2003) of the scales used by Harter (1995). The scales assess the perceptions of the children about their social support by family members, parents and siblings, as well as by friends and teachers. The scales consist of a structured interview with 34 items.

2.2. Emotional and academic adjustment
Scales
Items
Response

Results
1. Satisfaction with social support from different support providers
Results show that Portuguese children perceive different support profiles according to the support provider. Mothers and fathers receive the highest ratings on the four support types. The other support provider type ranks high in one of the four support types. Parents are support-giving, while siblings, friends and teachers are support recipients.

2. Gender differences in satisfaction with support from different support providers
Concluding gender differences are less evident with social support, although there is a significant interaction between gender and type of support. Girls more than boys reported higher satisfaction with multiple support providers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001), mothers (F(1,322) = 4.6, p < 0.05) and friends (F(1,322) = 4.6, p < 0.05). Parents more than siblings receive higher satisfaction with emotional support (F(1,322) = 161.3, p < 0.001).

3. Satisfaction with support from different support providers and its relation with emotional and academic adjustment
Children who perceive higher social support from different support providers report lower emotional internalizing problems (β = -1.85, p < 0.001). Boys perceive significantly more conflict with siblings than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Boys perceive higher conflict than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001).

Discussion
This study characterized social support in a sample of Portuguese children. Consistent with other studies (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), boys perceive significantly more conflict with siblings than girls with fathers (F(1,322) = 11.7, p < 0.001). Mothers and fathers are the most important figures in the provision of different types of support in childhood. These results also support the existence of a generalist and specialist support profile in children's social networks. Also, in other studies (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), children perceived a 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 tension.

Additionally, there are gender differences concerning the support and conflict perceived, and some of them are consistent with the results of other studies (Bee & Resler, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). These results show 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 limited significant effects, although relatively small. Most of the support and conflict variables are not significantly and consistently related to emotional and academic adjustment in children's social relationships with close family members, parents and siblings.

References